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passing girl: riverside—An Essay on Camera Work. 1997, A video essay by Kwame Braun. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources

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I first screened this video at the American Information Center in Accra, Ghana during my research into Ghanaian "video features" in the summer of 1998. The screening was brought to my attention by a friend who knew my interest in Ghanaian made films. The newspaper announcement for the screening provided little background information. We were under the impression we were going to screen video work by a Ghanaian film maker. And we did, sort of.

passing girl: riverside — An Essay on Camera Work is a reflexive, autobiographical video essay by Kwame Nathan Braun, a Ghana-born son of American medical missionaries, who returned to Ghana as a filmmaker-researcher. In this video he examines his personal identity, position and motives, as well as the broader ethics of documentary and ethnographic film making.

The video opens with images and accompanying explanation of a festival in the Central Region of Ghana. Braun, the narrator, explains that the event is not related

Video capture from *passing girl: riverside*. (DER)

to their specific research interests but that it is "colorful and lively"; worthy, nonetheless, of videographic documentation. As the procession continues, he and anthropologist Catherine Cole are invited to a balcony for a clearer vantage of the event. As he continues to shoot the passing crowd, his camera captures an "anonymous" girl with her mother amidst the celebration. The girl acknowledges his gaze, addresses him with as light scowl, then greets him with a bright smile, a wave, then loses interest as Braun refocuses his camera on other participants.

The video record of this brief exchange is the springboard for a reflexive examination of his research, film making and personal relationship with Ghana and the many Ghanaians encountered during his project. At this point he turns his attention to the ethical implications of footage he has collected and the responsibilities of documentary and ethnographic filmmakers. We see the eleven second clip replayed several times in slow motion, with digitized close ups and dissolving frames, as he ponders what was going through the young girls mind as they made their exchange. As he deconstructs this video clip, Braun narrates:

> What concerns me here is the imbalance inherent in the shot, the license I take in using it: I have control of the shot and she doesn't. This disparity is nothing new to documentary film making, but its new to me. I don't know my legal rights regarding 'fair use' of this footage, nor, frankly, what the current thinking is among my documentary and ethnographic film making colleagues. I suspect most Americans wouldn't waste any time fretting about it; after all, its a simple, in consequential tourist's shot with a cute little girl who smiles and waves. It doesn't reinforce negative stereotypes of Africans; its relatively meager content seems to hold little potential for misinterpretation and it is highly unlikely it will expose her to harm.

His stated concern over usage is intriguing because his manipulation of this clip, his abstraction of the girl/image (girl's image, or better, image of the girl) acts as a heuristic objectification which establishes his thesis.

After raising these initial set of concerns, Braun attempts to explain the local perceptions of how video is to be appropriately used. He draws a parallel to popular attitudes towards photographic practices in Ghanaian society. His experience suggests that photography is most widely used for formal portraiture and event documentation. Rarely is it used for recording casual, candid moments of daily life. He finds video used in much the same way; for covering weddings, festivals, funerals, and other significant events. The examples presented support his findings on common practices but he fails to examine why photographs and video are reserved for such formal usage. One wonders how these practices fit into the broader picture of Ghanaian society. Can the formalism attributed to the use of these mediums be, in part, attributed to the financial expense and limited access of the mediums?; the historical use of photographic equipment and photography by colonial administrators, missionaries, anthropologists, and elites to record local events and culture? or the local prestige which has been ascribed to it as expensive, foreign technology?

At this point Braun introduces his experiences with Ghanaian apprehensions over outsiders videotaping activities which can be used to perpetuate negative rural images of an undeveloped Africa. In addition, many Ghanaians see photographers', film makers', and researchers' activities as financially profitable endeavors. His response is a self-conscious examination of his motives, and a conscientious research program; one which demonstrates his and Catherine Cole's strategies for achieving equitable arrangements over research, videotaping, and fair usage rights with Ghanaian concert party performers.

In this, the most successful section, he offers their research experiences and protocol as an example for developing frank and mutual relations between researcher and informants. During their work with Ghanaian concert party performers they enacted a number of approaches to reach conscientious and mutually beneficial arrangements between themselves and numerous parties. Their negotiations included the exchange of video services for the production of a "Ghanafilm"; the furnishing of honoraria for interviews; payment for rights to performances; the sponsoring of a conference; and the payment of dues to the concert party performers' union. Although these can be viewed as formalized business negotiations, the film maker asserts that this process helped to communicate their respect towards their contacts and their contacts' profession. In many instances these gestures of trust lead to increased access and promoted a spirit of

collaboration.

The final section is the most problematic. Braun introduces the next set of issues by juxtaposing his desire for unhindered camera access and freedom with his identity as a Ghana-born son of American missionaries. He tells viewers:

> Ghana is not just my field, its my birth place: I lived here for most of the first eighteen years of my life, and I want to lay claim to the images of my childhood; images that are the foundation of my sensibility and vision.

What follows is a brief personal history and a description of the relationships between his parents and the local community of Tongu-Ewe. His position is complicated. In most situations he is marked as a *yevu*, a white person whose motives must always be scrutinized. However, his parents' legacy in the region enables him to move about and videotape with little interference. His purpose is not openly questioned.

He then recounts a recent visit to the village of Mafi-Tswala where he was instructed by the local chief, Bosumfo Ahorga, a family friend, to video tape an ongoing consecration ritual. As Braun videotaped the event, he was directed by a village member to record those present at the ceremony. After fulfilling this responsibility he was free to cover the event as he chose. Braun uses this episode and subsequent events to illustrate how the local chief had turned the tables; how the chief had appropriated Braun and his camera for his own purposes, to record the consecration ceremony and those in attendance. Thus, for Braun, Bosumfo integrated them into his world. Braun makes the charge:

> In our self-absorbed resolve to defuse charges of cultural domination and paternalism, our guilt becomes a sort of pride and the charges self-fulfilling. We create an imbalance by assuming an imbalance. So convinced are we of our disproportionate power and privilege that we fail to notice that others do not recognize this inequality, and continue to be have as though they in fact are the ones who can afford to be accommodating.

There are obvious discrepancies within this statement and position. For instance, his synchronic appraisal of his personal history and his connection with Ghana and Ghanaians neglects the dialectical implications of the impact of colonization and current global political and economic conditions on his being in Ghana. He fails to place himself, as a researcher, film maker, and Fulbright grantee as a marker and agent of American society, whereby, part of what he seeks from Ghana and Ghanaians is influenced by interests defined by the United States' place in a historical and global arena. The fact that the luxury item of a camera has to travel several thousand miles, in the hands of the film maker-researcher, to end up in a Ghanaian village, at the service of a local chief, who cannot make or distribute his own images is endemic of larger political and economic proportions.

Braun readily admits he is a film maker and not an anthropologist, and in recent correspondence, writes he has only recently considered how his ideas and concerns can address issues relevant to anthropology and cultural studies. Since the film is highly reflexive and autobiographical in nature, the task for anthropologists is not to fault the video's lack of anthropological analysis, but to use the issues raised to generate critical discussion concerning identity politics, research methodology and ethics, the ethics of film making, and modern Ghanaian photographic and video graphic practices to list a few. Again, the major strength of this film is the section outlining Braun and Cole's conscientious approach to their fieldwork and the impressive measures they take to develop respectful, equitable, and mutually beneficial partnerships with their contacts among the community of concert party performers in Ghana. Anyone who has attempted field research and anthropological film making with similar methodological challenges and ethical concerns appreciates the difficulty in this aspect of their work.