

2011

"Don't Let the Sun Set on You!": Performing Racial Histories in Retelling Sundown Town Stories

Elena Esquibel

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, kalscopejrn1@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope>

Recommended Citation

Esquibel, Elena (2011) "'Don't Let the Sun Set on You!': Performing Racial Histories in Retelling Sundown Town Stories," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*: Vol. 10 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol10/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

“Don’t Let The Sun Set On You!”: Performing Racial Histories in Retelling Sundown Town Stories

Elena Esquibel

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

elena_esquibel@yahoo.com

In this paper, I explore performances of race as community members share stories about sundown towns. A sundown town consists of organized jurisdiction that sought to exclude African Americans or other minorities from living within the community, and was purposefully predominantly White. I compare and contrast racial performances in two oral history interviews from a 70-year-old African American male and a 67-year-old White male, and their experiences of growing up in and among sundown towns. I argue that their narratives reveal how the history of sundown towns produces particular performances of race, and in turn, such racial performances reproduce and reinvent this history.

Sundown towns are communities with organized jurisdiction that for decades excluded African Americans or other groups after dark and are predominantly White on purpose. Behind the label “sundown town” was the idea that people of color were only allowed in town during the day and had to leave by dusk, allowing only Whites to live within city limits. Communities started to develop sundown towns over a century ago often through means of violence, and the creation of sundown towns continued through different measures up until the 1970s. Although extreme acts of violence mostly belong to the past, some communities continue to produce a history of sundown towns, most noticeably through remaining alarmingly White. Thus, this history continues to plague American communities today. Loewen’s (2005) research reveals hundreds of sundown towns in the state of Illinois. As a resident in southern Illinois for four years, I began to notice that several towns in the area shared a sundown town legacy, and I realized that the history of sundown towns continues to manifest in new and nuanced ways.

This essay is based on over two years of critical ethnographic and oral history research I conducted on sundown towns in southern Illinois. From engaging in this research, I noticed the many binaries that surround sundown town discourse, a discourse that belongs to both the past and the present and remains largely trapped between Black and White racial dynamics. In order to explore how sundown towns continue to manifest today, I examine the

Elena Esquibel earned her Doctoral degree as this issue was going to print. She would like to thank John Warren, Ron Pelias, and Nilanjana Bardhan for their feedback during the writing of this manuscript. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers. This essay was first presented at the 2011 Western States Communication Association Conference in Monterey, CA.

performative dimensions of racial embodiments in the retelling of community members' sundown town stories. Specifically, I analyze two ethnographic interviews and approach them from a performing oral history methodological perspective. According to Pollock (2005), performance is at the heart of oral history: "insofar as oral history is a process of *making history in dialogue*, it is performative" (p. 2). I investigate the racial performance of a 67-year-old White male resident who was born, raised, and currently lives in a town with a strong sundown town past. I also explore an interview with a 70-year-old African American male, a southern Illinois native who has been surrounded by and excluded from sundown town communities throughout his life. Although I conducted 30 oral history interviews with community members, I purposefully investigate the stories from these two community members to provide in-depth analysis and understanding. In this way, I do not see the two community members as representative of their racial group; rather they are representative of trends, patterns, and contradictions in my fieldwork. Thus, the community members as racialized bodies are part of the history of sundown towns; they do not represent the entirety of their racial groups' history and experiences.

I begin this essay by discussing the relationship between oral history and performance. Next, I briefly summarize the history of sundown towns and specifically address details of this past in southern Illinois. Finally, I explore the two interviews and strive to let them unfold as they would in a performance. I also incorporate my own experience of the interviews to illuminate the implications of the narratives from the two community members. According to Madison (2008), such an approach "embraces the emotions and sensuality of what is being described and how it is being described—the telling and the told—to illuminate the textures, smells, sounds, tastes, and sights being rendered within the content of the told and within the form of the telling" (p. 228). This approach contextualizes the oral history interview in a way that understands such interactions as performative events. Ultimately in this essay I seek to explore performances of race as two community members retell the past, and to explore the possibility of dialogue across difference through facing the history of sundown towns.

At first glance the two interviews appear to fall neatly into their Black and White racial binary, but underneath the surface, I began to find more similarities than differences. These men come from different educational and class backgrounds, yet they both have rich racial experiences in the context of sundown towns. Although the levels of racial power remain dramatically different between the two community members, stereotypes of the Other, as well as logics of perceptions, were vigorously reciprocal. I argue that these performances of race are produced by and continue to produce a history of sundown towns. Additionally, I realized I could not separate my own positionality from the interviews, as I was caught in between the racial binary as a Latina ethnographer.

Performing Oral History

According to Madison (2005), oral history is the “recounting of a social historical moment reflected in the life or lives of individuals who remember them and/or experienced them” (p. 26). Oral historians are interested in gathering narratives that recount, recreate, and remember the past. Pollock (1998) advocates understanding history in terms of performance, where the combination of performance and historical methodologies yield substantial new insights in exploring cultural productions. Approaching performance and history from this positionality, they become an inexorable dyad with a reciprocal relationship: history is performance and performance is history. The only difference is that “official” history has forgotten its performative roots, and oral history cannot live without performance. Although the tie between performance and history may take on many names—performing oral history, oral history performance, performance history, performing history—a central interest is an investment in meaning making and making meaning. Performance in this sense is seen as doing, something that is done, an embodied practice that creates (Pollock, 1998). History becomes separated from its traditional “fact” and “objective” roots, and becomes another story that stands outside a hierarchical realm of facts (Trinh, 1989). History in this sense does not stand alone, but stands among the many stories or performances that create it. According to Merrill (2006), “performance history, then, like other forms of historicizing, involves the performative act of telling a story—literally calling it into being” (p. 65). Just as every speech act demands its own materiality, performative acts contain within them their own desired audiences. Oral histories, then, collect the many stories that make communities.

This space of scholarly activity takes on diverse forms of representation (Madison, 1993; Rouverol, 2005; Willink, 2007). Scholars mix and combine tools to create interdisciplinary investigations through which genres often blur and blend into one another. For the purpose of this essay, I refer to this area of study as performing oral history. Although I understand performance as a continuum, anywhere from the page to the stage, I pay particular attention to everyday life performance in the context of the interview. I am interested in the engagement of performance that involves understanding interviews as performative events in and of themselves (Stucky, 1993). I argue that this entry point is crucial to my research because sundown towns were maintained by the oral tradition that community members lived by. The lens of performance enables me to further explore the role of oral history narratives as community members perform race and continue to reproduce the history of sundown towns. Pollock (2005) supports this position:

Understood as performance . . . the oral history interview is an ignition point, charged by and charging its historical moment, giving so many oral histories the sense that the

occasion of the interview—[is] no more and so much more than an ordinary conversation . . .” (p. 3)

Thus, oral history enables me to explore, from a historical perspective, (racial) performative embodiments that inform these performances and simultaneously reproduce history. Merrill (2006) argues that “performance historians are particularly well-positioned to examine the connections between spectatorship and the power relations . . . so as to explore how dominant ideologies were constructed, resisted, and disturbed in spectatorial processes in a given time period (p. 66). Given that the history of sundown towns has mostly persisted within oral traditions, performing oral history documents how systems of power, privilege, oppression, and resistance are able to manifest in the everyday. It is within this space of performative cultural politics that I wish to enter this dialogue.

Sundown Towns: A Brief History

Sundown towns began around 1890. About 25 years after the Civil War and during the peak of the Reconstruction Era, Whites segregated communities across the nation. Historian Rayford Logan (1954) coined the phrase “the Nadir of race relations” to describe the time period between 1890 and the 1930s, when things grew worse and worse for African Americans. *Plessy v. Ferguson* passed in 1896 declaring segregation legal, several states implemented Jim Crow laws, and lynching rose to an all time peak during this time span. Although it was about twenty-seven years after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and African Americans were no longer slaves, people of color faced violent and severe forms of racism and segregation. Stereotypes also grew strong with minstrel shows and films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (released in 1915). White supremacy penetrated American culture to the point that “Whites all across America asked, ‘Why even let them [Blacks] live in our community?’” (Loewen, 2005, p. 44). These circumstances describe the harsh racial climate in which sundown towns surfaced.

Town by town, and sometimes even county by county, communities adopted sundown practices whereby African Americans were only permitted in town during the day, and were expected to be gone by nightfall. The motive behind these rules was the idea that because African Americans were only allowed in town during the day, they were prohibited from living within such communities. Each town has its own story of how it became a sundown town and of how it continued to enforce these regulations. Some towns took more violent approaches by raiding and driving African Americans out through violence. Jaspin (2007) describes several incidences of what he refers to as “racial cleansings” that emptied entire counties of African American populations. Other communities implemented ordinances, restrictive covenants, or freeze-outs in order to expel Blacks (Loewen, 2005).

Sundown towns were more popular in the North and West than the traditional South. For example, Loewen (2005) estimates that there were

about 456 sundown towns in Illinois, and about 6 in Mississippi, historically speaking. Several sundown towns congregate in the southern part of the state of Illinois. From my own fieldwork, community members mentioned fourteen communities with a history of sundown town practices in southern Illinois, yet Loewen (2005) names several more. The naming of sundown towns by community members points to the importance of oral history in investigating sundown towns, as little to no research exists on this history with the exception of Loewen's work (2005). Additionally, most community leaders deliberately destroyed any documents of sundown legislation. Nevertheless, sundown towns were largely maintained through oral tradition. The collection of oral histories from White residents from sundown towns and corroboration from African Americans from nearby interracial towns become crucial in understanding this history. While Loewen's (2005) work provides an in-depth understanding of the development of sundown towns across the U.S., he does not ground his research in oral history or how these narratives function. Yet, Loewen (2005) conducted extensive research in Illinois and his research corroborates my fieldwork. In the following section, I explore two examples of performing oral history interviews that contribute to the White/Black racial binary of sundown towns in southern Illinois.

Sundown Town Stories: Investigating Racial Performances

Gary's Past and Present Sundown Stories

It is July 2009 and I am just beginning my fieldwork of interviewing community members from sundown towns and those who have been excluded from them. I am driving on Highway 13 headed east to the small town of Herrin—in Williamson County, southern Illinois—to conduct my first interview. It takes me about fifteen minutes to make the drive from Carbondale, and I am nervous the entire way. I am interviewing my friend's father, and was warned earlier in the week by another friend, "You know Anthony's Dad is a racist, right?" My first interviewee's racist reputation preceded him. I arrived and met Gary and his wife for the first time. They had a very nice home and the air conditioning was a relief from the humidity outside. Gary and I sat in the living room. I felt like the oversized and expensive furniture swallowed me up as I sat down on the couch. Gary sat in *his* recliner, put his feet up, and laid back. I shared with him the story of how I first heard about sundown towns and explained that an acquaintance of mine had linked the absence of swimming pools in southern Illinois to desegregation (Johnson, 2008), when White communities closed their pools after they were forced to allow Blacks to have access to them. At some point, with his southern accent (to my ears), Gary chimed in:

Johnston City had a swimming pool. That was about one of the only public swimming pools around. And, then Herrin

eventually got a pool at the park. Most of the towns now have swimming pools at their, city parks. But uh, back in my youth—I'll be 67 come September—if you wanted to go swimming other than a pond or a lake, you were going to the public swimming pool in Johnston City. And when we went to high school there in Herrin I was in a class with uh—57 was my freshman year—back then, in the city of Herrin, we had no Blacks. They weren't allowed to live in the city limits. They lived west of Herrin in the little town of Colp. And I don't remember it, but uh, I can remember people talking about it, that there used to be a sign in Herrin, and the sign read "Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Set on You in Herrin!" And I had a fella, a friend of mine who just passed away, he used to be on the police department, and they used to, if a Black was caught in town, after dark, they took them to the city limits and said get out of town, don't come back until the sun comes up.

Gary's account of his hometown serves as a prime example of a sundown town. Sundown towns like Herrin were often located near interracial communities. It was also not unusual to have signs like the one Gary mentioned to mark sundown town communities. Additionally, from the research I gathered, community members acknowledge that the police held more authority in the past, and it was the police who enforced sundown town regulations. Gary continued to explain how sundown town residents responded to Blacks who ignored sundown rules:

Carterville, over here, for example, I lived there at one time and I can remember them talking about when the first Black family came over there, and uh, I can't remember whether they had bought the home or just rented a home. And they, the person telling me the story, was the person who was the fire chief, and he talked about the family moving their furniture and they moved-in in a pickup truck and were going back to their second pickup truck load. While they were gone, their house was set on fire. They called the fire department, and they had the fire chief who volunteered in the department and he told the story about getting in the fire truck and startin' it up, he starts out the door, he reaches up and pulls the choke out on the truck, so that it got out to the street and it died. Finally, got it started because it had plugged itself, finally got it started, started up the street, of course it was just west of the bank. By the time he got to the four way stop he pulled the choke out on it again, it plugged again. By the time he got to the house, it was burned down.

And that sent a message to the Blacks, don't move into Carterville, because they will burn you out. And for another twenty years or so, no Blacks moved to Carterville, because they knew that if they did they would be burned out.

I learned from Loewen's (2005) research that Carterville has a long history of hostility towards African Americans. In 1899, White coal miners went on strike and drove African American strikebreakers out of Carterville. Even before this incident, Carterville had pushed the envelope of sundown towns by not letting African Americans in town during the day. A long time resident from Loewen's (2005) oral history interviews corroborates the fire in Carterville that Gary remembered. Nevertheless, Gary did not witness the sign in Herrin or the fire in Carterville. Instead, he points out that people *told* him of the sign, and his friend *told* him about the fire. It seems the fire really did occur, but whether there was a sign up and for how long does not matter. Both of these stories perform the history of sundown towns, and "whether or not [they] '[are] true,' the story told and retold, remembered in the community, exerts a powerful force on the way the community thinks about itself . . ." (Willink, 2007). In fact, I had already heard both of these stories from Gary's son.

Not only was Gary born and raised in southern Illinois, but as an insurance salesman for over thirty-five years, he also traveled all over the southern part of the state. He shared with me an interesting experience:

I worked in Cairo, as an example, back during the time that they had all the problems, down there, and I've had some of my White customers, had asked me, you know, "why are you here after five o'clock? White people don't go out after dark down here. This is a good place to get killed." And I'd tell them, "well, you know, this is the only time I can catch ya, after you come home from work." And they said, "you don't have to come here to catch me, you just drop me a note in the mail, I send you a check. Don't be down here after dark."

While I can question the political differences between Gary's experience and a general understanding of a sundown town, the experiences of fear and danger in his story function in a similar way. Yet, Gary's narratives function to minimize the violence that sundown towns perpetuated against people of color by retelling experiences where he faced similar "circumstances." Gary explained the incident above occurred in the late 1960s, and about ten years later, he had a similar experience in East St. Louis. Gary attempted to collect money from a policyholder who had moved from southern Illinois to East St. Louis:

I can remember very distinctly getting out of my car. I located the house, getting out of my car. And it was like

an apartment building, going up to the apartment building and being approached by five Blacks and wanting to know “hey, White boy, what are you doin’ here. You’re not allowed in this part of town, get your ass in the car, and get on outta here.” I did what they told me. I didn’t want trouble, so I got out. But that’s the way that southern Illinois was. This section, for example, from oh we’ll say Effingham, south, would have been just like it would have been if you were living in Birmingham, Alabama. You had very much, very distinct, segregation.

Although Gary’s experience in East St. Louis happened about thirty years ago, he continues to carry and perform these beliefs. I shared with Gary that a couple months prior I visited St. Louis for a conference. Gary explained to me that even today he would still not go to East St. Louis or even St. Louis at night:

Gary: I wouldn’t go there, no way. That I would go, get out of my car and walk across the parking lot...

Elena: (I interrupted) Really? You really wouldn’t go to St. Louis at night?

Gary: Not in East St. Louis. Let me tell you something. And a big part of St. Louis is the same way . . . But again, if I went there, I wouldn’t go in the night. I’d have to go in broad daylight and get out of town before dark, because I wouldn’t feel safe.

Although it is not explicit in our conversation, underneath the surface of our dialogue Gary was warning me about the “dangers” that I should be aware of. In this sense, “danger” stood in for potential situations of being taken “advantage” of by African Americans. Gary didn’t say this to me, but it was evident in his performance, a performance of Whiteness. It felt like Gary took on the role of a conservative father figure and was offering a somewhat enthymematic proposal, where I needed to fill in what was left out: if Gary doesn’t even go there, then I shouldn’t go there, because St. Louis (and other predominantly Black areas) is/are not safe at night. In order for Gary to make these sentiments apparent, our dialogue unfolded upon a certain level of assumed Whiteness. Although I am Latina, I held a certain amount of privilege or Whiteness in Gary’s eyes, because I am not Black, and, therefore, subject to “Black crime victimization.” To a certain extent, Gary and I engaged in what Sleeter (1994) calls “White bonding”:

I began to pay attention to what I will call “White racial bonding” processes White people engage in everyday . . . These communication patterns take forms such as inserts into conversations . . . Often they are so short and subtle that they may seem relatively harmless. I used to regard

such utterances as annoying expressions of prejudice or ignorance, but that seems to underestimate their power to demarcate racial lines and communicate solidarity. (p. 8)

My “solidarity” with Gary was pushed further as our conversation continued, and it grew more uncomfortable for me. Gary explained to me that time and time again, after African Americans moved into a town, the property value went down and White flight went up. When I asked him why he thinks this is, he replied:

Because the Blacks are trashy, the biggest majority of them. I mean I'm prejudice, but I'm prejudice because I've seen what they've done. You know, you have, and I mean, you've seen it, same as I have. Uh, you got a lot of people that are, you know, they're very good hard workers and all that, but for everyone of them you've got ten that don't give a shit. Won't take care of property, won't, you know, try to teach their kids the right way to go.

Gary carried on and talked about slavery, Native Americans, and so on. It was difficult for me to sit and listen, as I also engaged in my own “performances of Whiteness,” where I adopted a specific ethnographic persona (Supriya, 2001) for the purpose of the interview. In this moment, I trespassed into Whiteness as I nodded my head and listened to Gary's stories. At times he would ask me what I thought, and I tried to explain systematic oppression and disenfranchisement, but Gary did not seem to buy into anything I said.

After about two hours of conversation, as our interview came to a close, I finally asked Gary about how the history of sundown towns continues to impact communities today. He said sundown towns are no longer present and “*pretty much*” history. At the same time, he acknowledged the presence of this past in a hypothetical story:

But like I said, if, if I were a Black person I wouldn't want to be in, uh, West Frankfort [a sundown town], you know, after dark. If you were in West Frankfurt after sundown, where would you normally be anyway? There's nothin' there, but a few taverns that would be open other than the convenient stores and uh, if I were a Black man, I wouldn't want to walk into one of the taverns there unless I was 6'8", you know, had a gun on his hip. [Gary chuckles]. That's uh, you know, they say it's the way it is, the way it was. Like I said, it's not, not very prevalent anymore, it's part of history.

The irony of this story is paradoxical. Gary performs a hypothetical story that is clearly embedded in performances of race that are produced from a history of sundown towns. At the same time, according to Gary,

sundown towns are a part of the past and are no longer present. However, this history continues to haunt these communities. Gary's stories complicate my face value reading of sundown towns. Not only does Gary carry with him prejudices, his experience of sundown towns and fear of certain communities after dark illustrate the power of these racial discourses. These stories reveal performances of race that are *produced* by a past history of sundown racial relations, as well as performances that *re-produce* a present manifestation of sundown town histories.

Dr. Bardo's Side of the Story

About a month into conducting fieldwork interviews, I scheduled a meeting on campus with Dr. Bardo, a professor of medicine. I was told that Dr. Bardo was well connected and well known in the Carbondale community. I was especially excited because Dr. Bardo was the first person of color that I interviewed. It was Wednesday, and I arrived early to make sure I found the right building. I was greeted by Dr. Bardo's secretary and told to wait in the sitting area. A few moments later, Dr. Bardo greeted me, "*Elena, come on back.*" I followed him into his office. Dr. Bardo ushered me to sit on a small couch next to his desk, and he took one of the two chairs in front of his desk and faced towards me.

After getting situated, Dr. Bardo asked me to tell him about myself and wanted me to explain my interest in sundown towns. Dr. Bardo's questions continued, and my role as an interviewer quickly switched to interviewee. This part of our conversation was not recorded, but the following is an excerpt from my field journal that I wrote later that day:

Before the actual interview, I was answering all of the questions because Dr. Bardo was basically interviewing me. He asked me what my understanding of a sundown town was. He asked me why I was doing this research. He asked to tell him a little about myself as a person. He asked about how I identify racially and ethnically. He asked me all types of questions. I was caught a little off guard, but intrigued that he was putting me on the spot. This is something that has not happened to me as an ethnographer. Looking back, his questions helped me articulate the purpose of my research and my position as a researcher. During this discussion my positionality as a "Brown" person became interrogated. He asked me if I feel comfortable driving in these so-called sundown towns or if I worry for my safety. He asked me if I got pulled over or ran into car trouble, if I thought people would help me. Another point that stood out was his question about the fact that sundown towns in southern Illinois are a Black/White

thing, and although I am a “Brown” person, he wondered why African Americans are not doing this research. In this moment I felt like the White person using critical race theory, or a queer ally studying queer theory. I didn’t like that feeling, but also understand Dr. Bardo’s point.

I answered Dr. Bardo’s questions to the best of my ability, but this incident clearly illustrates questions of my research positionality, or what Alexander (2006) refers to as “ethnographic authority.” In our discussion, Dr. Bardo made certain that I identified as a “Brown” person, and thus, I was an “insider.” At the same time, although I identified as “Brown,” I am not Black, so I was an “outsider.” As Alexander (2006) tells me, ethnographic authority closely intertwines with cultural authenticity: “ethnographies of performance in/as everyday life are research and cultural engagements in which the complexities of identity politics complicate issues of membership and authority” (p. 69). In this moment as a researcher I felt like an insider-outsider who ultimately did not belong. Nevertheless, Dr. Bardo accepted my responses—or my performance as researcher—and enabled the interview to continue:

Elena: *Do you want to maybe start with where you grew up again?*

Dr. Bardo: *Yes, I can do that. I was born and raised in a community called Sparta, Illinois. Which is only about 50 miles from here . . . The population was only about 3,200 people, but we did have African Americans and no other ethnic groups, other than Caucasians and African Americans.*

Elena: *And what year were you born?*

Dr. Bardo: *1939, and so I left Sparta in 1957. That’s when I graduated from high school, but I played on the basketball team and we were members of what’s called the Southwestern Egyptian Conference and we played communities in and around Sparta. [Dr. Bardo lists several communities that had populations of African Americans and communities that did not.] So this university is surrounded by towns that were completely one ethnic group, um, primarily Caucasian . . . There were no people of color living in those communities. So, most of my experiences have been traveling and playing in all White communities, like Pinckneyville, for example. And you hear stories passed on about these communities from older people, in your own community, in, in your, in your own ethnic group about “well, you better be out of there*

by sundown.” And that’s the time, the first time that I heard that term, sundown towns. You had to be out of the community by the time the sun went down or else something bad would happen, what that meant I don’t know, in terms of being bad, but I assumed it meant incarcerated or something of that sort.

Dr. Bardo reveals that he learned about sundown towns from stories that were passed down to him. Although the consequence of defying sundown town expectations seems somewhat nebulous, the rules were crystal clear. As Dr. Bardo explains, “*you just never did venture into communities like that.*” At the same time, the question of athletics serves as an interesting and somewhat subversive practice that violated sundown regulations. The topic of sports also came up in the interview with Gary, where sporting events were one of the only exceptions to allow African Americans in sundown towns at night. Likewise, Loewen (2005) notes “interracial schools [had] to take measures to shield their [B]lack teammates and cheerleaders from harm in some sundown towns,” sometimes to the point of cancelling a game (p. 307). A late 1960s graduate from Pinckneyville High School, in Loewen’s (2005) oral history research, specifically corroborates the tension between Sparta (Dr. Bardo’s hometown) and sundown towns like Pinckneyville.

Dr. Bardo continued his story and tied performances of race, specifically incidences of being the target of racial slurs, to the history and experience of sundown towns:

You know, when you went to places like that the kinds of comments that you get sometimes here, and fortunately I can say I didn’t hear that very often, I don’t know why, but maybe the school administration got together and told the school administrators that that behavior would not be tolerated. And there were some, I’ve talked to people in other communities, where that word was used a lot. And when my children played in those communities I heard that word, it, it happens. That’s my only experience with sundown towns.

I find it interesting that initially Dr. Bardo locates experiences of sundown towns to these specific moments of racism. Perhaps, as a research participant, he assumed that I was interested in finding concrete experiences that dealt with sundown towns. In the interview I probed further, and asked Dr. Bardo to explain these incidences in more detail in terms of playing a game in a sundown town verses an interracial community:

I don’t think, uh, as I recall that I experienced...any differences in playing as an athlete. I mean once a game started, it was just guys playing a game. But the community, was what was of concern. The fans that came

to the game, and the places you stopped to eat, and those kinds of things. That was what the concern was.

[Moments later in the interview, Dr. Bardo returned to the notion of feelings upon entering sundown town communities.]

But there was a difference when, if you say, um, in feeling when you got to these communities because you knew there was not a place to go, or safe, psychologically or physically. If something happened, you were there and there was no escape and you were subject to the whims of the people in the community. Psychologically, that was, was stressful.

Thus, Dr. Bardo's experience of sundown towns did not stop with a few incidences of racial slurs, but extended to unique forms of feelings and experience in these communities. Dr. Bardo went on to explain cautionary steps that were taken when he was younger and traveled with his family:

It's been a long time since I was a child, it's been a long time [chuckles], so I can't remember exactly what my parents told me. I don't know if they told me that verbally or they told me that by their actions, um [about traveling through sundown towns]. If we were in the car and we went through these communities, we didn't stop for anything, we just kept going, hopefully, kept going.

The evidence of stories and practices regarding sundown towns passed down through generations serves as an interesting process of preserving this history. Dr. Bardo reveals how he learned about sundown towns through stories and actions when he was younger. Similar to Gary, Dr. Bardo admits that "*things have changed,*" and sundown towns are not what they once were. However, like Gary, this history continues to impact Dr. Bardo. Dr. Bardo said "*it's been a long time since I was a child;*" yet he continues to carry and perform these beliefs. I asked Dr. Bardo if he still continues to practice similar travel precautions today, and he said, "*absolutely, I still think about where I'm going, when I'm going, what I might encounter.*" These stories and experiences of sundown towns reveal how this history has changed over time, and through Dr. Bardo's stories, we can see how this past perpetuates the present and continues to influence racial performances.

Finally, my interview with Dr. Bardo took an interesting twist at the end and brought up questions that, for now, resist conclusions:

Dr. Bardo: I am reminded, this may not have any bearing on what we are talking about at all, but if you go from here to Pinckneyville. You ever been on the 13 [highway] from here to Pinckneyville? Have you seen that sign on the

side of the road as you gradually approach Pinckneyville called the “coon club”?

Elena: Yes, what is that?

Dr. Bardo: Yeah, what is that? You have no idea?

Elena: I have no idea, but I’ve seen it and I’ve thought... what is that?

Dr. Bardo: Well you know that was a derogatory term for some African Americans, “coon.” And I hope that this coon club, I don’t know what it is, but I hope that what it is, is that it signifies a group of hunters who hunt raccoons. And raccoon hunting is done at night, likewise that’s when most of the damage was done to people of color, it’s uh, sundown, you know if you are in town after dark then they hunt “coons,” “coon hunting.” You know, I don’t know what it means, but it has bad connotations for, for me, for example. And it could just be a group of hunters, but they have decided that it is a “coon” club, you know it could be “raccoon” club, but it’s not. So, it just gives you an idea of where you are. It gives me an idea. My kids would pass that sign and never even think about it, but I would, and people of my generation would.

Two days before my interview with Dr. Bardo I traveled to St. Louis and noticed the sign in Pinckneyville, and I was definitely curious about what it meant. I did not connect the sign to raccoon hunting, but I knew the derogatory term and wondered if the sign referred to racial beliefs. The town of Pinckneyville at one point was considered a sundown town, and even today remains predominately White. In Loewen’s (2005) research, a Pinckneyville native remembers a sign at the city limits that said “No Coloreds After Dark,” during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Could Dr. Bardo be right? Is this a new version of a sundown sign? Like Dr. Bardo, I don’t know. At the same time, it would not be a stretch to see this rhetoric as a present performance of a past that is and is not history. The past history of sundown towns continues to manifest in the present and continues to perpetuate particular performances of race.

The Implications of Making Sundown Towns Go

According to Pollock (1998), the union of performance and historical methodologies enables for scholars possibilities of understanding “how performance makes history go” (p. 1). Hamera (2006) adds to this notion and argues that “performance-based historians are particularly attuned to the complex interplay or remembering and forgetting that makes history go, whether as lived experience or as monument” (p. 138). Performance

gains its materiality from strategic remembrances of the past. To construct a story worth telling some things must be forgotten. Thus, performing oral history invites historical analyses that put both identities and histories on the move. The everyday performances from Gary and Dr. Bardo show how the history of sundown towns influences cultural performances of race, and in turn, how these performances produce and re-produce histories of sundown towns. As Alexander (2006) explains, “cultural performance is socialized embodied practice, influenced both in the specific moment of its engagement and in the wake of histories that narrate the life scripts of those involved in the encounter” (p. 53). I do not wish to deny the racial differences that Gary and Dr. Bardo face in southern Illinois. Although their stories contribute to sundown discourses, they walk very different paths, and the sign in Pinckneyville points to these differences. Yet, the performances of race in my conversations with Gary and Dr. Bardo were both produced by particular racial histories in southern Illinois that continue to perpetuate these racial discourses in dynamic and complicated ways. These performances were also influenced by the specific moment of the oral history interview, when I could not separate my role and the presence of my body in this dialogue.

In order to more fully engage the oral history encounter, Hamera (2006) reminds me that, “critical performance scholars recognize and acknowledge that they too are enabled and constrained as bodies in history” (p. 138). Given the liminal space I occupied as a Latina ethnographer, my positionality both enabled and disabled the discussions I had with Gary and Dr. Bardo.¹ I was able to coexist differently, as a racially situated researcher, in the worldviews of both my participants: with Gary I shared Whiteness, and with Dr. Bardo I shared Brownness. I shared different racial space in the interviews that provided a way in, but I was never a full racial insider. Even though I fell in between the Black/White binary as a liminal Latina, I was still outside of it, and my outsider status most likely disabled my research in ways that I will never know. Nevertheless, there was dialogue, performative dialogue to be exact, which extended far beyond the walls of the interview.

Willink (2007) calls for performances of memory located within desires of intimacy, where historical performances “open possibilities for racial justice in a present that we have yet to imagine” (p. 38). As oral histories from community members remember the past, they simultaneously maintain the possibility for moments of disruption that recreate, reinvent, and reinterpret a history that we can learn from in the present. Although my interviews took place with Gary and Dr. Bardo at different times and in different spaces, I argue that the three of us engaged in a performative dialogue across

1 I received consent from Gary and Dr. Bardo to use their real names. I was introduced to them as “Gary” and “Dr. Bardo” and this is why I refer to them in this way in the essay.

difference. This dialogue emerged from the possibilities and unique offerings of the oral history interview and its intimate connection with the past and present. Pollock (2005) speaks to the uniqueness of oral history:

The [oral history] interview involves its participants in a heightened encounter with each other and with the past, even as each participant and the past seem to be called toward a future that suddenly seems open before them, a future to be made in talk, in the mutual embedding of one's vision of the world in the other's. The interviewer is [herself] a symbolic presence, standing in for other, unseen audiences . . . The oral history interview lifts what might otherwise dissolve into the ephemera of everyday life onto the plane of ongoing exchange and meaning making, infusing it with the power of shifting relationships among tellers and listeners (and listeners who become tellers to tellers who become listeners) near and far. (p. 3)

As Pollock describes (2005), the oral history interview is a theoretical stew that mixes past and present, self and Other, present audiences and absent audiences, and listeners and tellers. As I was a listener in the interviews I conducted with Gary and Dr. Bardo, I was also a teller of my own views and theirs. I was able to represent the racial Other in my conversations with Gary and Dr. Bardo or represent them to one another. It is within this imagined space that the three of us cultivated our performative dialogue across difference. This dialogue does not stop with my role as a medium, but includes Gary and Dr. Bardo's willingness and awareness that their stories would live beyond the walls in which they told them. To some degree, they were willing to share their stories with Others and the Other because they were willing to share their stories with me, and knew I would become a teller of their experiences.

Gary and Dr. Bardo are not anomalies in their experiences of sundown towns. Rather, their performances are illustrative and representative of this history. Their stories are systematic and not singular illustrations of cultural practices (Vaught, 2008). Gary and Dr. Bardo serve as examples of how the history of sundown towns produces trends in racial performances, and how these performances continue to reconstitute sundown towns in new ways. Warren (2001) argues that looking at everyday performances or "the generative power of performativity—the potential of locating race in its own process of reiteration—offers us the possibility of interrupting the discursive process of racial formation" (p. 105). These particular oral histories, retold by Gary and Dr. Bardo, illustrate everyday manifestations of racial sedimentations and grant insight into the possibility of disruption. Through investigating performances of race, we can see how the historical processes of sundown towns make both performance and history *go*.

References

- Alexander, B. K. (2006). Telling twisted tales: Owning place, owning culture in ethnographic research. In J. Hamera (Ed.), *Opening acts: Performance in/as communication and cultural studies* (pp. 49–74). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Griffith, D. W. (Producer & Director). (1915). *The birth of a nation*. [Motion picture]. United States: Epoch Film.
- Hamera, J. (Ed.). (2006). Interrogating histories: Introduction. In *Opening acts: Performance in/as communication and cultural studies* (pp. 136–140). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jaspin, E. (2007). *Buried in the bitter waters: The hidden history of racial cleansing in America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Johnson, M. (2008, July). *A history of swimming pools from 1949-1975: How racism has impacted municipal space*. Paper presented at the McNair Scholars Program Research Symposium, Carbondale, IL.
- Loewen, J. W. (2005). *Sundown towns: A hidden dimension of American racism*. New York: Touchstone.
- Logan, R. (1954). *The negro in American life and thought: The nadir*. New York: Dial.
- Madison, D. S. (1993). “That was my occupation”: Oral narrative, performance, and Black feminist thought. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 13, 213–232.
- Madison, D. S. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Madison, D. S. (2008). “Narrative performance and performative interventions.” In N. K. Denzin & M. D. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry and the politics of evidence* (pp. 221–249). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast.
- Merrill, L. (2006). Performance history: A politics of location. In D. S. Madison & J. Hamera (Eds.), *The sage handbook of performance studies* (pp. 65–71). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pollock, D. (Ed.). (1998). Introduction: Making history go. In *Exceptional spaces: Essays in performance and history* (pp. 1–45). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Pollock, D. (Ed.). (2005). Introduction: Remembering. *Remembering: Oral history performance* (pp. 1–17). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rouverol, A. J. (2005). Trying to be good: Lessons in oral history and performance. In D. Pollock (Ed.), *Remembering: Oral history performance* (pp. 19–43). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sleeter, C. (1994). White racism. *Multicultural Education*, 39, 5–8.
- Stucky, N. (1993). Toward an aesthetics of natural performance. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 13, 168–180.

- Supriya, K. E. (2001). Evocation of and enactment in Apna Ghar: Performing ethnographic self-reflexivity. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 21, 225-246.
- Trinh, T. M. (1989). *Woman native other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Vaught, S. E. (2008). Writing against racism: Telling White lies and reclaiming culture. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 566–589.
- Warren, J. T. (2001). Doing Whiteness: On the performative dimensions of race in the classroom. *Communication Education*, 50, 91–108.
- Willink, K. (2007). Domesticating difference: Performing memories of school desegregation. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 27, 20–40.