

field note *ellen c. berrey*

the drive for diversity

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN, March 31, 2003—In 14 hours the U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments for what the *New York Times* calls “the most important affirmative action case in a quarter-century,” and the sidewalk in front of the University of Michigan Student Union is hopping. A caravan of 13 tour buses—carrying 750 students—is preparing to depart for the overnight ride to Washington, D.C. to join thousands of people for a pro-affirmative action march. Cell phones ring. Organizers yell into bullhorns. People call out to each other: “Are you going to D.C.?” “No, I have play rehearsal!”

Tomorrow morning, lawyers for the plaintiffs will tell the justices that the university can legally account for “all kinds of different diversity,” but it cannot consider an applicant’s race. The university will respond that “educational benefits... flow from a student body that is diverse in many ways, including with respect to racial and ethnic diversity.” Students learn from students of other racial backgrounds.

I am here to investigate the many ways that people interpret the plastic concept “diversity.” Standing in a sea of bodies swaddled in scarves and padded with pillows, the legal arguments seem abstract, almost irrelevant. The crowd is racially mixed, with minority students in the majority. Hundreds of students need to be assigned to buses. The student organizers run around with clipboards, trying to figure out where to assign people who have already separated themselves into small, racially homogeneous clusters of friends.

Who sits on which bus matters. The leaders decide that friends should sit with friends. Such a long ride needs to be fun. They also want to let members of the same student organizations sit together. At least 20 campus organizations—from pro-choicers to Asian-American student associations—have mobilized. Many want to use the trip to strengthen their solidarity. As a white male activist told me, “You wouldn’t want the young, budding leaders of those groups sitting next to people they don’t know or political opponents. The idea is to create an environment where you can foster leadership and get to know everybody in your community very, very well.” But most of the groups are racially homogenous, and the organizers know that their “diversity” is under a glaring public spotlight. Reporters have been combing campus for months. A news crew for a national television program plans to document the journey on one bus. So, the activists agree that only about 70 percent of the riders on a bus should be from the same organization.

The black, white, Asian-American, and Latino students in this informal coalition have overcome their often simmering ideological, gender, and ethnic differences enough to present a united front. They can agree on two common positions: they are the University of Michigan’s “student voice,” and they support affirmative action. As a Latino activist said at a campus rally earlier today, “[F]or the first time in a long time, we have to sing the same song. We all need to sing in the gospel of our church. We all need to become mariachis. We all need to sit around the drum and sing together.” In response, the roaring, 500-person crowd chanted, “Unity! Diversity! A better university!”

As I wait in the undergraduate registration line, I keep tripping over the fragile scaffolding of this unity. I try to mingle with only moderate success. Most of the students show little interest in a nose, white 20-something stranger. They would rather talk to their friends, or on their cell phones. I am not clear about where I fit in or which bus I should get on. It dawns on me why the leaders care so much about riders’ social agendas and anxieties: I cannot possibly be the only student unnerved by the social pressures and uncertain about the ambiguous ethnic and racial boundaries.

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Feeling ignored, too white to cross racial divides and too old to party, I call some friends on my cell phone. That helps. A bit later, I approach a student leader and ask if there is space on a graduate student bus. He looks at me soberly and says yes, but as a fellow ethnographer, he really thinks I should travel with the undergraduates. I sheepishly agree and wander back to the line.

As I get closer to the crowded registration table, I strategize about how to get on Bus Number 9, sponsored by three black student organizations. From conversations around me, it seems many African-American students think it is the place to be. One complains that he is not riding on Bus 9: "A bus full of black people with movies? What could be better than that?!" I find an African-American activist I know hurriedly passing out assignments. She writes "#9" on a few cards and deliberately hands them to black students. Then she scrawls "#11" on a white woman's card and hands me a "#11," too. I cautiously ask, "Can I ride on Number 9 instead?" She pauses, staring at me curiously, and changes my number.

I dart over to the slowly moving line in front of Bus 9. Almost all the riders inside are African American. They look like they know each other and are laughing, chatting, enjoying themselves. I get the cold shoulder when I try to talk with a black woman in front of me. I feel decidedly out of place and weigh my options: Do I push my comfort zone and get on? Am I supposed to respect the riders' apparent preference for racial solidarity and stay off? Where are the limits around what a white ethnographer can learn?

It is getting late. Some white organizers hurry by, saying that there is space on other buses. I have been worried about securing any seat at all; I am not guaranteed one because I am not a Michigan student. I decide to switch to Bus 11 and an Asian-American woman standing nearby says that she'll join me. We dash over to Number 11 and get on. As we elbow our way down the aisle, we pass a white couple, an African-American pair, and a Filipina American. We settle in behind an outgoing black freshman and a quiet white man, across the aisle from five talkative black friends. We are an eclectic bunch, in part because of happenstance and in part because no one on Number 11 is very concerned about who else is on the bus.

By 10 p.m., the caravan takes off for Washington. At the final hour, the news crew announces that it will skip the bus ride and meet us in D.C. On Bus 11, we are a haphazard collection of couples, cliques and loners. Bus 9 is following close behind—I will learn about that ride after the fact, secondhand, if at all. ❧

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