

## **Race Travels: Care Packages from Trinidad to Chicago and Back Again...**

**Conceived & Directed by Meida Villafana-McNeal**

**Performance Review by Kathryn Farley**



Figure 1: ThickRoutes Performance Collage of Chicago  
(Photo courtesy of Meida Villafana-McNeal)

*A collaborative performance project between ThickRoutes Performance Collage, a Chicago-Based experimental performance ensemble, and Noble Douglas Dance Company Inc., a Trinidadian-based dance company. Presented November 6th and 7th in the Hal and Martha Hyer Wallis Theatre of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.*

In forging new directions in contemporary experimental art, practitioners from the fields of music and dance have led the way towards embracing technology as an integral component of live performance. In a majority of projects, media integration processes have been the focus of artistic exploration, representing the desire to examine everyday tools and behaviors within a creative environment, and to bring varied understandings about modern life inside a performance space.

In the case of *Race Travels: Care Packages from Trinidad to Chicago and Back Again...*, a provocative new collaborative work by members of ThickRoutes Performance Chicago and Noble Douglas Dance Company Inc. of Trinidad, video-conferencing technologies served to facilitate a cross-cultural dialogue concerning ethnicity, history and corporeality. In the piece, the tracings of race and racial identity were both literally and figuratively written on the body, as permanent reminders of communal

and individual markings of difference, on one hand, and solidarity on the other. Rather than merely facilitating an important cultural exchange, technology also recorded the groups' collective discoveries, and in doing so, wove together a thick and multi-layered tapestry of lived experience.

The piece was structured according to themed vignettes, or movements, which flowed smoothly between the separate Trinidad and Chicago stages. In a gesture of respect and deference, the two groups of dancers allowed each other "take the floor" according to a pre-determined order, so that the attention of the audience was never divided. Some movements in the work were more exciting and forceful than others. I was particularly struck by "Sold" which situated painful historic events within a contemporary context. Another vignette, "Home Stories" physicalized racist events and beliefs in a viscerally-striking fashion. Movements such as these point to the strength of the work: its ability to delve into and dramatize the slippery liminal boundaries of culture-where the contradictions, complexities and nuance of memory overlap- in accessible and enticing ways. Similarly, I found the most compelling stories were often the most personal and specific.

In terms of creating an open and evolving conversation about race, I would have liked to see more simultaneous activity on the two stages (when the separate groups would perform either together or at the same time). As it stood, the movement-based dialogue felt unnaturally regulated, at times resembling more of a staged theatrical soliloquy than a free-flowing conversation. Beats between movements provided ample opportunity to dramatize transitions, but they were seldom explored to their full potential. Also, some aspects of the performance (including the musical score, scattered props, not to mention the sometimes meandering narrative) could have benefited from stricter editing and a steadier directorial hand.

As frequently happens when dealing with such a complex technical operation, small glitches did occur, but they were dealt with honestly and expediently by the stage management team. Regarding the use of technology, the collaborators might have more effectively incorporated the artistic applications of media, as an enhancement of its documentation and facilitation abilities. What I mean by this is the possibility of experimenting with the ways in which video-conferencing media might more imaginatively build upon the story being told on stage. To do this, the performers would have to consider how technology can be viewed as a cultural body itself-one which is inscribed by and responsive to a user's input. Like racial identity, technology is a culturally-determined product, a construct that is given physical life via a complex set of human interactions-not so different, in other words, from the concept of race that emerges from the piece. I was left to wonder how the work could have

utilized technological tools to mediate and interrogate questions of human experience, rather than simply transmit them.

In sum, a more thorough engagement with the technical instruments of expression might lift *Race Travels* from the ranks of “provocative” to “truly unique”.

### About the Author



Kathryn Farley is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University where she has taught undergraduate courses that explored the performance of contemporary drama, the adaptation of fiction and the integration of technology into live theatre practices (such as the picture of the *Multimedia Improvisation* course on the left indicates). Kathryn is the 2004-2005 recipient of the

*Northwestern Alumnae Association Dissertation Recognition Award*. Her work has been published in such interdisciplinary periodicals as *Body, Space and Technology* and *Crossings: Electronic Journal of Art and Technology*. A digital portfolio of Kathryn's artistic and academic work can be found at

<http://www.kathrynfarley.org>.