Charles Kuralt's North Carolina: Lessons from a Journalist Geographer

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The death of Charles Kuralt on Independence Day, 1997, marked the end of an era. The North Carolina native had long-charmed audiences with his home spun stories of places made real by the lives of ordinary folk. His images of individual simplicity, goodness, and hard work were interwoven with nostalgia and a strong sense of community, to produce images of place that clearly had mass appeal. And soKuralt, the master journalist, was a master geographer. This paper addresses a particular work byKuralt – the film *North Carolina is my Home* – as it reflects the intersection of his talents and perspectives, a real place, an intended audience, and a prevailing complex of social and cultural strictures. A detailed examination of this film reveals a unique representation of place that resonates with some Carolinians and not others. The film's population is concentrated in idyllic rural and small town settings, and is overwhelmingly white, with a smattering of black people and no Asians or Hispanics. An assessment of this failure to recognize black North Carolinians as part of our state's culture may tell us something about Kuralt, but it may offer yet more important lessons about the nature of places, the ability of media to construct them, and the power of the prevailing social order.

Charles Kuralt died on July 4, 1997, at the age of 62 and was buried four days later on the campus of his beloved University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Millions mourned him. A master journalist, Kuralt was known for his ability to weave yarns, tell tales, and describe stories of everyday America and his home state of North Carolina that somehow touched individuals as if they were a part of some larger script. He rekindled a sense of nostalgia -- a longing for times that were good, people who were fair, and a world where one's word was valued. Simplicity, respect, and honesty were blended into images of hard work, family, and community. Kuralt's reflections stressed the ordinary and the goodness in us all. And yet, he was neither controversial nor judgmental. When the moment arose, Kuralt would deliver his soliloquies with the certain calm, deliberate, and folksy charm of the Southern orator, providing us images, thoughts, and reflections that we sensed were intentionally less complex than the man. His physical demeanor -- bald, slightly rotund, and less-than precise in dress and diction -- only added to the feeling that he was one of us. It was from the heart, and Americans tended to believe. And to the North Carolinian he was even more; to many he was reminiscent of the native sons Sam Ervin and Terry Sanford, and he was no less respected.

But Kuralt was also a master geographer. His portrayals reflected a careful weaving of physical settings, individual accounts, and larger histories into a fabric of place, while at the same time he understood that a careful arranging of the many symbols that are ingrained within these elements of place is the key to creating a particular image. He knew that each symbol had to be clearly identifiable for the audience so that the requisite emotions would be correctly evoked. Indeed, he was a craftsman of representing place. And nowhere is this more apparent than in his images of North Carolina.

The same skills Kuralt relied upon to charm a nation he used often to describe North Carolina to its own people. The same kinds of stories, people, and settings that elicited emotions about the home nation were replayed in the same cadence for the home state, or the Old North State as he called it, and with which we could so clearly identify. The symbols were different but the technique was the same. And so his representations of the state have been richly meaningful for many. There are a variety of examples within a number of different media that could be shown, but this essay now turns to one of his most recognizable and popular works, a documentary film

called, *North Carolina is My Home*. The specific purpose of this essay, then, is to explore this film within two somewhat neglected aspects of place while answering the question: What lessons can we learn from our fellow geographer, Charles Kuralt, in his representation of a place called North Carolina?

Clearly, the range, richness, and nature of meanings that comprise place make it a powerful force in our lives, while the symbols, values, and general discourses used to reinforce these meanings become part of a common lexicon. So, there is always a social group that understands these meanings and that understanding allows for a collective identity. This link between place and group often becomes powerful so much so, in fact, that place identity and self identity may become inseparable. It is the task of the individual who represents place to understand these connections, so when s/he presents an image, someone will identify with its nature.

Before we proceed to *North Carolina is My Home,* I would like to introduce two seemingly self-evident and yet often ignored axioms that will become apparent as we examine the film. First, *a portrayed place may resonate with one group of people and yet be meaningless to another.* We will find that the North Carolina of the film is a place with which some people identify but others have little or no affinity. The implication is that the commonly accepted "essence of place" concept is of quite limited value (for an interesting crtitique of this concept, particularly in terms of representation, see Selby and Dixon, 1998). The features of place chosen for portrayal recognize and reflect the nature of a select group of people who can identify with their meaning, while others who can't claim such identity are excluded. North Carolina is more than one place. This essay will focus, however briefly, upon a particularly neglected population, black North Carolinians, for whom there is no place in the portrayed North Carolina.

The second axiom is that *a place is a construction that can never mirror reality* (Barnes and Duncan 1992). Someone had to decide what information to include, ignore, emphasize, and distort, and someone had to state - no matter how implicit - an overriding theme and principle that helps to create the place's represented form. The intentions, inclinations, skills, and experiences of the portrayer, then, are quite important in understanding the nature of a constructed place. An important corollary that should be noted as counterpoint, however, is that the *construction of a place should always be viewed in terms of a complex range of prevailing social and cultural strictures* (Duncan and Ley, 1993). The essential point is that the nature of a portrayed place is never totally constructed by the conscious decision making of the individual, and so one can begin to understand an image only through an assessment of the underlying social and cultural forces of the moment. The North Carolina of this film is a place that has been constructed by one man within the context of these times.

These two axioms and the corollary are presented as background considerations for any representation of place, be it a novel, photograph, painting, textbook, or film. A detailed exploration of their relevance to understanding *North Carolina is My Home* is well beyond the scope of this essay, but their general value as context should not be forgotten. Most studies of the representation of place would benefit, then, from a careful consideration of these axioms *as well as* the nature of the individual who is directly responsible for creation of that representation. And so we turn to Kuralt's *Home.*

North Carolina Is My Home

North Carolina is My Home is an enormously popular one-hour film that weaves music, images of people and places, and narratives by Charles Kuralt into a, "lively, touching, and occasionally humorous portrait of the Old North State (Kuralt and McGlohon, backcover, 1991). Kuralt's friend, Loonis McGlohon, conducted the original music. The project began in the mid-1980s in response to a request by Governor Hunt to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the original settling of North Carolina. It first included a musical score, then a book, and then a film that was released in 1991. The Broyhill Foundation and the Public Broadcasting Corporation

supported the making of the film.

North Carolina is My Home is comprised of thirteen titled segments, each with a different context, flavor, and character, although ultimately they are tied together by a few common themes. The segments generally run from three to five minutes. The composite result is an hour-long music video comprised of fleeting images, home spun music, and folksy dialogue with an overall effect suggestive of an extended Lawrence Welk-like MTV video. A discussion of some of these major segments in the film follows.

Introduction

The opening segment is a 29-image three-minute music video. All but a handful of images are explicitly rural: a covered bridge, a tobacco barn framed by a corn field, old houses, ponds, creeks, and a variety of wild and domestic animals. Only six of the images include people: a little boy playing in the garden; two children on a swing; an adult walking through a garden; a child framed by an American flag and flowers; a child on a bike; and an old man being in a cart being pulled by a mule. All of the people are white. In essence, then, this introductory segment sets the tone for the next hour in terms of its nature as music video, its nostalgia, its emphasis on rural and small town settings, and its focus on white North Carolinians.

Carolina History

The second segment, *Carolina History*, begins with Kuralt sitting in a 16th Century rowboat that's headed toward a sailing ship. He's informally dressed in civilian clothes while the others are in period garb. He looks to the camera and talks about the original settlers at Roanoke, the birth of Virginia Dare, and the eventual and mysterious disappearance of the community, which left behind the solitary and infamous "Croatan" inscribed on a tree trunk. "We know their names," saysKuralt a few moments later as he stands on the beach, "Christopher Cooper, John Bright...they are names like our names, Margaret Lawrence, Rose Payne..." He then concludes, "Settlers at Jamestown years later heard stories of English families living with Indians in the back country. I believe they lived on. I believe their blood lives in our veins."

While this introduction to North Carolina's past depicts an often-noted historical curiosity, it doesn't serve as a suggestion of, or introduction to, any subsequent migrations, be they free or slave, that gave North Carolina its current character. Further, "their blood" and "our veins" constitute a rather restrictive view of the current status of race and ethnicity in our state. Those of us with no British ancestry may feel a bit excluded from such a view, while those with Indian ancestors from the "back country" may wonder if British blood runs in their veins.

Carolina Country

Six of the thirteen segments can be placed in a category called *Carolina Country*, because they are almost exclusively rural in character. The first of these, "Tar Heel Places," is comprised of music, dialogue, and a sequence of shots that tend to focus on signs that identify small towns. The more unusual the name, the better, and so names like Lizard Lick, Lick Log, Pole Cat, and Possum Trot are offered the viewer. White faces are seen at several junctures, but blacks are seldom seen. Three of these six segments are strongly nostalgia based. "Down Home" offers a series of images of country life, including four black teenagers fishing along a creek bank. "My Home Town" focuses on small town and country settings, with twenty two of its twenty nine shots focusing on people, including eighteen of white people, one small town street scene with whites and blacks, two with unidentifiable race, and a three second shot of two black boys riding their bikes. Finally, "Nobody Home" is comprised of a song that follows the camera around an abandoned homestead. No people are shown.

The other two country segments promote a yet more unabashed white nostalgia framed within music and dialogue by Kuralt. "Mountain Sampler" includes a series of creeks, trees in fall splendor, craggy hill sides, log cabins, a country church, an abandoned still and several old white mountain men. Kuralt refers to the nature of

their local humor when he says, "Oh yes, I've got religion. I believe it's a sin to feed chickens on Sunday; I feed mine on corn." Finally, "The Farmer" is implicitly about his grandfather and includes a series of rural buildings (usually abandoned) and settings, a set of photographs from a white family, and concludes with an old white man walking slowly down the dirt road. Blacks are not seen in either of these segments.

Carolina People

The first of two segments in the *Carolina People* category is called "North Carolina Jazz." The segment opens with a black man playing a saxophone with white men on bass, piano, and drums. The camera then shifts back and forth from the combo, to a multi-racial nightclub audience, to photos of North Carolina's jazz alumni, such as John Coltrain, Roberta Flack, and Thelonius Monk, while the combo's music and Kuralt's dialogue provide background. This is the only segment of the film in which blacks play a major role, although in the case of the combo only the saxophonist is black. The second segment, "...and the Strong Grow Great," is a listing of famous North Carolinians, complete with photos and brief comments about their origins and lives. Such notables as Ava Gardner, Billy Graham, Daniel Boone, O' Henry, and Chief Manteo are noted, along with two black men, "Dr. Billy Taylor of Greenville," and Michael Jordan of basketball fame, who is shown dunking the ball as a Chicago Bull. In essence, then, this segment says that most of the black people of North Carolina who can qualify as being important contributors to our history are either jazz musicians or basketball players, which could readily be interpreted as unfortunate stereotyping at best.

Carolina Culture

The "Carolina Culture Category" is comprised of one segment on food and the other on religion. The first of these, "Barbeque Blues," is a silly little song that is a white man's lamentation that he can't get country food in New York, which alternates with a scene of a large white family gathered around the dinner table as it passes around and eats country food. Many of the mainstays of such food, from butter beans to biscuits to fried chicken, are shown on screen and in song. The omission of black North Carolinians, then, explicitly ignores a culture of food that has a unique and historically based character, and which can readily be tied to a distinctive culture. The second segment, "Dinner on the Grounds," is comprised of a song that refers to the meal that is taken on church grounds after Sunday services. Singing, dialogue, and a series of church services and "dinner on the grounds" are shown in a lighthearted tone. The heart of the piece refers to Baptists as the primary source of religious culture, although Moravians, "modest" Quakers, Anglicans, and Methodists are noted. But Catholics, Jews, and non-Christian groups are never suggested, and most important, there is not one sign of blacks, even though they constitute most of the *other* Baptists as well as a considerable number of other Southern and North Carolina-based Christian groups.

Kuralt has chosen food and religion as two obviously important aspects of North Carolina culture. The omission of black food and religion, then, could be considered as more than the neglect of discrete pieces of culture, but instead a rejection of something far more comprehensive: that is, the beliefs, family, traditions, and ways of life of others who call North Carolina home.

Carolina Memories

The concluding segment, "Carolina Memories," is the longest and mostcomplex of the thirteen. The 102-camera shot sequence opens with a pondering and philosophic Charles, replete with suspenders and rusted farm equipment on which he leans, and ends with a camera zooming over trees toward the Biltmore Mansion to the final refrains of the song, "North Carolina is my Home." In between, there are a range of conflicting visions of small town and country settings and, for the first time, images of the city. With only a few minutes left in the film, Kuralt briefly and reluctantly acknowledges negative aspects of the state's history, when he says, "The reality of any place is what it's people remember of it and there's much memory in these songs and stories. We've left a lot of things behind us and nobody misses some

of them, the ignorance, the pellagra and tar paper shacks that are also a part of our past," whereupon he immediately returns to the bright side with, "But I will always be glad I have seen the shrimp boats leaving Beaufort with the sun coming up and the night coming early...to the mountains, while the ridges above were still bright with day." The music and pace of the early part of this segment are slow and calm, but at the 18th shot everything intensifies dramatically. The camera shifts to the skylines of Charlotte and Raleigh, integrated pedestrian traffic, three policemen (two white one black) standing outside the mens' toilet, hospitals, imploding and exploding buildings, and a Charlotte Hornet dunking the ball. The pace then slows to a crawl as the camera shifts to Kuralt on pre-Fran Wrightsville Beach, which serves as an introduction to the final forty shots of a primarily rural vision of North Carolina. Clearly, anything associated with the city means a faster pace, integration, and the many negatives of the urban setting, while the good, calm, and sensible is associated with the (white) rural and small town setting.

Finally, as my VCR hits click number 1,916 of the film's 1,976, black religion is shown for the first time. Four black people, including a bride and groom, are shown leaving church, and on 1,943 we see an old black man riding a bicycle through an urban setting. He is the first and the last aged black person to make the screen.

North Carolina is Your Home

If someone unfamiliar with North Carolina were to view *North Carolina is my Home* and judge the state by the reality of the film, the following would quickly become apparent:

1. The population is concentrated in idyllic rural and small town settings, although there are a couple of cities that can be distinguished by being integrated and having standard urban problems;

2. Abandoned buildings and agricultural implements dot the landscape;

3. The people are almost exclusively white, with a smattering of black people and no Asians or Hispanics;

4. Aged white men and white children dominate the demographic profile, while there are younger white men and women. There are a few black men, although virtually no black women;

5. Religion, food, music, family, and a variety of other standards of culture and history are white-Anglo based and are likely preferred over others.

Returning for a moment to our axioms of place, it becomes apparent that, indeed, the place of this film resonates with some North Carolinians and not with others. Further, the film is clearly a construction that does not reflect any sense of *reality* regarding North Carolina, and obviously doesn't even attempt to do so. Finally, much of this film is intentionally self-reflective on the part of Kuralt himself, but it is also a statement about the nature of North Carolinian society in the 1990s. I shall let the reader fill in those details.

A representation must stand on its own merit. *North Carolina is my Home* must be judged on the basis of its portrayal independent of any intentionality that Kuralt or others responsible for its production may have had that were never reflected on the screen. It is important to say, however, that Charles Kuralt was not a racist and, in fact, has long been known as a champion of minority populations in this state. He has made many explicit statements decrying racism, those who preach it, and those conditions that foster it. His failure to include black North Carolinians under the umbrella of his home, therefore, is all the more confusing, and, perhaps, all the more disturbing.

References:

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