

Teachers' Corner: Doing Collaborative Ethnography

by Luke Eric Lassiter

On a cold afternoon in early January 2003, a group of Ball State University faculty and students gathered at the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry to talk about beginning a collaborative ethnography, *The Other Side of Middletown*—the brainchild of retired seventy-seven year old Indiana state legislator, Hurley Goodall. After making some introductions, I asked Hurley to talk about the work that lay ahead.

"I'm Hurley Goodall," he began. "I'm a native of Muncie, and that's one of the reasons I'm extremely interested in what you're doing. On behalf of the community, I'd like to thank you . . ." Hurley pulled out a piece of paper from a folder that sat on the table in front of him and began reading from a paper he had written: "In 1929 Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd [published]. . . what they called an 'objective study' of American society. The method they used was to come and live in that American community, observe the people, the institutions and forces that made the community work. The choice of the Muncie community was determined, in part, by population . . ." Hurley looked up from his reading, saying "this is the part I'm interested in," and then quoted the Lynds' description of Muncie. . . "a homogeneous native born population,' with a 'small foreign-born and Negro population' that could basically be ignored."

"That was the standard the Lynds set," said Hurley after a short pause. "So, in essence, the African American community here . . . was completely ignored by that study. And, hopefully, some of the things you'll be doing will fill that void."

Muncie and Middletown

When Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd first published *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* in 1929, it was immediately heralded for its unprecedented survey of a "typical" American city. With few exceptions, social scientists had never attempted an American-based study so broad in its scope. Influenced by anthropologists such as Clark Wissler (who wrote the book's foreword), the Lynds used anthropological research methods to organize their fieldwork, including long-term participation and observation in one locality. To organize their writing, the Lynds used the theoretical approaches to culture in use among the day's social anthropologists, splitting their study into the six broad cultural categories that were often used to describe human behavior cross-culturally: Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Using Leisure, Engaging in Religious Practices, and Engaging in Community Activities. At a time when anthropology had its sights set on non-Western tribal peoples, *Middletown* became a sociology classic and remains so today. It has never gone out of print.

The Lynds chose Muncie because they perceived it to be a relatively homogeneous community. And in many ways it was. In the 1920s, Muncie was a medium size city, "large enough," as the Lynds put it, "to have put on long trousers and to take itself seriously, and yet small enough to be studied from many aspects as a unit." It was relatively self-contained and not "a satellite city" of a larger metropolis, and it had, again in the Lynds words, "a small Negro and foreign-born population." Although Muncie's black population was indeed a small percentage of the overall Muncie population, the Lynds missed that Muncie's black community was growing at a faster rate and was indeed larger, as a proportion of overall population, in Muncie than such major cities as Chicago, New York, or Detroit.

One can almost excuse the Lynds for missing this, especially because, in recognizing their omissions of "racial change" in lieu of their focus on the larger "base-line group," they acknowledged that they were ignoring significant heterogeneities such as race, and thus

encouraged in their Introduction to *Middletown* that “racial backgrounds may be studied by future workers.” Several researchers took up the Lynd’s call, focusing on different minority groups in Muncie, including its African American population.

But even still, when one reads the corpus of Middletown literature—and this literature is much larger for Muncie than for any other town of its size—one is still struck by how the contributions of African Americans to the larger Muncie community are so often categorically ignored, even dismissed. For those like Hurley Goodall, such omissions of the African American community and its contributions continue to forcefully echo “the standard the Lynds set.”

Hurley Goodall

With these omissions in mind, several decades ago Hurley began collecting community photographs, church histories, newspaper clippings, and individual narratives. In addition, he began writing about Muncie and the African American experience to fill the void left by the Lynds. Then, in 2001, Hurley and I began to discuss combining his research and writing with an ethnographic perspective through a Ball State University seminar that would bring a student-based and ethnographic perspective to Hurley’s work. I proposed the project to Ball State’s Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry—a unique and innovative educational program that allows Ball State faculty and students to design a community-based project on which both students and faculty focus solely for one semester (with no other course commitments for both faculty and students). With the Center’s blessings and generous support (in addition to the support of several other community organizations), Hurley and I together designed a collaboratively-based project to involve local experts, ethnographers, and BSU students.

Collaborative Methodology

On that January afternoon, when Hurley reminded us why we had come together in the first place, the faculty and students first met to learn about what lay ahead of us. That evening the 14 students and 12 community advisors met each other for the first time. After introductions, the students and advisors split up into six student advisor groups, each of which worked together through the entire semester to produce six student-written chapters about Muncie’s African American community—patterned on the Lynd’s original six chapters in *Middletown*.



Hurley and Fredine Goodall. Photo by Danny Gawlowski.

We acknowledged early on that having the students research and write fully exhaustive chapters of Muncie’s African American experience (including all of its social, economic, and political dimensions) was an impossible task for one semester’s work. Recognizing that the student-advisor teams were established along lines of common interest, we wanted the groups to delimit their subjects for study: they were to focus, within their respective topic areas, on those parts of Muncie’s black experience that interested them the most.

Using these initial discussions as their guide, the student-advisor teams began to define the issues that they thought were most important to explore. The community advisors led the

students to other consultants, who, like the community advisors, had topics and issues of their own that they thought were important to the study. Over time the student-advisor teams began identifying themes to explore, and developing directed research questions about the topics and issues that were emerging in their conversations.

Participant Observation

The students' interviewing methods, then, were simple, but time-consuming: the students asked community advisors about the topics they thought were most important for them to explore; they developed research questions along these lines; they structured interviews around these research questions, which led to new topics and issues to explore, which in turn led to new questions around which to structure additional interviews. In the end, the students conducted over 150 hours of interviews with well over 60 people, including their community advisors and other consultants (about two-thirds of these interviews/conversations were tape recorded, logged, and archived). That the students completed this many interviews in one semester's time is an amazing feat in and of itself!

The students' intensive interview agenda was accompanied by long, intense hours of participant-observation in a particular locality. At the beginning of the semester, we required the students to attend at least one community event each week, but after the first few weeks, their community advisors were inviting and taking them to numerous family gatherings, school meetings, sporting events, church services, political rallies, and so on. Indeed, after the first month, many of the students had become a regular part of the "Muncie scene." Importantly, we required the students to keep detailed field notes of all of their activities and experiences; we also expected them to reflect openly in their field notes, including what they were learning about themselves and how this was shaping what they were discovering about Muncie's black community. This would be extremely important, we explained, for writing an honest and responsible ethnography, and they often used this material to situate their discussions of their individual topic areas.

Further Research

In addition to the texts produced by the students as a result of their interviews and participant-observation, they also read and researched extensive background materials on Muncie's African American community. Much of their historical research, in particular, had already been done for them by Hurley. Before the seminar began, Hurley compiled a summation of his research to date for each category ("Getting a Living," "Making a Home," etc.), which he placed in individually labeled folders for use by each team. These materials provided direction to the much larger collection on Muncie's African American community held in Ball State's Archives and Special Collections, which housed further materials.



Student Jessica Booth interviews Pastor Martel Winburn, Sr. of Muncie's Shaffer Chapel. Photo by Danny Gawlowski.

Throughout the project, each student team compiled all of their research (particularly tape logs, field notes, archival and other materials) into portfolios, on which they based their writing. Soon after the seminar began, we asked students to use this evolving collection to construct rough outlines for their chapters, based on the themes they had learned about so far. These they shared with one another as a group. Much of their material overlapped, as expected, so they spent some time discussing which team would write about what, as well as how to best create transitions between chapters. During the process of their ethnographic research, they shared their outlines with their community advisors, which created further discussion about the direction the students' writing would take. These collaborative discussions highlighted gaps in the students' understandings and defined new trajectories for further research.

Writing Collaboratively

Near mid-semester, the students began writing their first drafts. Discussing their writing with their community advisors, each student team began to forge their chapter. As the drafts developed, the students distributed their writing among all their community collaborators (community advisors and other consultants), all the while still conducting interviews and other research. Until the end of the semester, the student-advisor teams continued to meet, both in private and in larger public gatherings of the entire research team that included faculty members. Importantly, discussions about the students' developing texts spawned deeper co-interpretations of each chapter's content—a discussion that lasted up until the students finished their final chapter drafts, and which continued with me as I prepared the manuscript for publication by AltaMira Press.

Student/Community Involvement

Building our collaborative ethnography around key relationships (particularly the student-community advisor teams) created a particular dialogue about the Muncie community. Had those relationships taken any other form, a very different dialogue would have emerged, and our collaborative ethnography would have looked very different. But, in the end, it would still point us to understanding more deeply Muncie's African American community (as we believe the ethnography does in its current form). As such, *The Other Side of Middletown* is not so much an ethnography of Muncie's African American community as it is a dialogue about Muncie's African American community. Of course, all dialogues, and thus all ethnographies, have their boundaries, and ours was no exception. We based the ethnography on information collected in a short amount of time (about four months), and we primarily, though not exclusively, worked with older, and often retired, middle-class collaborators who had the time to work intensively with us within this short time. So our ethnography has very clear limitations. Given these, we view our book not as a conclusive statement, but only as beginning to new study and new conversation

Talking About Race

For the students, in particular, an important part of this project had to do with learning to talk openly and regularly about race in the classroom (6 of the students were black; 8 were white). Race and racism were important to our consultants for obvious reasons, structuring their experiences, their memories, their stories, their communities, their businesses, their leisure. And because race was so central to understanding both the historical and contemporary African American community in Muncie, we spent a lot of time talking about how well we were understanding race from the viewpoint of our community advisors and other consultants. But the process also helped us to understand more deeply the role of race in our own lives (both faculty and students, both black and white).

Our collaborators also talked about how they were changed by this process. “It was quite an experience for me to work with these young people on such a worthy project—a project that I think was long overdue . . .,” said one of our community advisors, Phyllis Bartleson. “I think there’s a better understanding—particularly from the white students—about what goes on in the black community. You mentioned earlier the stereotypes [about the black community], and I think this is a way to dispel some of those falsities that we have. And I think it works both ways, too. As an older person in the community, we have our own minds set about young people—regardless of what color—and about college students: they party all the time. It’s not true. We all have false perceptions.”

In the end, the mutual respect and trust that developed between the collaborators and students did much to increase better understanding between these two groups about one another, and in the process, the gap between the “researchers” and “subjects” was narrowed. But also narrowed was the larger gap between the university and the community. In a letter to the students at the end of the semester, Hurley put it most eloquently:

Hopefully Ball State University has learned a lot from this experience and will support more efforts in the future to reach outside the borders of the campus and learn about and understand the community in which it sits. The best thing about this experience is that we all learned we are in this community together whether we like it or not, and the sooner we learn to reach out to each other and care for each other, the stronger and better our community will be for all who reside here.

To be sure, many schools, colleges and universities could well benefit from taking Hurley’s comments to heart. I, for one, believe that collaborative ethnography—directed by an ethical commitment to local constituencies and uninhibited by the academic impulse to privilege academe over local audiences—is among the most powerful ways “to reach outside the borders of the campus and learn about and understand the community in which it sits.”

[Note: Portions of this article are excerpted from parts of the “Introduction” and “Conclusion” of *The Other Side of Middletown* and are reproduced by permission of AltaMira Press.]

Further Reading

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