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COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

by Luke Eric Lassiter



[Editors' Note: As explained in the following article, "anthropology offers a plethora of approaches for understanding the complexity of culture." As Eric Lassiter demonstrates, collaborative ethnography is not entirely new, but it does "highlight the collaboration that has always been inherent in fieldwork practice and extends it more systematically into the writing of the final ethnography." Lassiter's article and companion Teacher's Corner grew from two projects: writing a manuscript on the history, theory, and practice of collaborative ethnography under contract with the University of Chicago Press, and *The Other Side of Middletown*, a collaborative ethnography project in Muncie, Indiana.]

Have you ever granted an interview to a reporter for a local, regional, or national newspaper, only to have that reporter misquote you in print? If you have had this experience, did you feel misrepresented, that your words were taken out of context? What if that same reporter asked you to review the story before it went to print? Would you take the opportunity? If you felt that the story misrepresented you, would you change it? Would you change your quotations, for example? Or would you insist that freedom of the press was more important, that the story should appear exactly as written, that the reporter had a right to represent you however he or she chose?

For anyone in the business of representing others—from journalists to artists to academics—these seemingly simple questions raise larger questions: When we write, to whom are we ethically responsible? To our subjects, who open themselves to us? To our readers, who believe us to be in some way objective? To our

professional colleagues, who expect a particular kind of analysis from us? To our employers, who want stories that will grab the public's attention, thereby setting our publications apart?

For sociocultural anthropologists, who often spend months or years living and working with the people they represent, these issues have become increasingly central to their practice. In today's world, the people with whom anthropologists work often read what anthropologists write about them and have much to say about how they have been represented to the outside world. For today's anthropologists, the ethical commitment to their collaborators is crucial, for without them, they cannot go about their work. For many anthropologists, however, the issue is bigger than just being able to go about their work, doing the business of "anthropology as usual." The ethical commitment to the people with whom we work serves as a guiding principle that—inscribed into many professional codes of ethics—transcends all other agendas, including the more general scientific principle that all is, or should be, knowable.

As you might expect, this issue is a hot one. For decades, anthropologists have passionately debated ethical issues among themselves. Anthropologists have sought many ways to address ethical issues over the years; collaborative ethnography has emerged as one way to respond to these ethical concerns.

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography, the description of culture, is the staple of cultural anthropology. Ethnography remains the most distinctive way that sociocultural anthropologists translate the similarities and differences of human experience. Ethnography references a particular literary

genre, one that delves into rich and culturally diverse sources, so that we may understand the more general role of culture in people's lives everywhere. Ethnography also implies a distinctive fieldwork method, a fieldwork method that essentially rests on four practices:

- (1) participating in the lives of others (which may include learning a new language or learning how to behave appropriately within a particular setting);
- (2) observing behavior (which may include that of the ethnographer herself as well as that of the community);
- (3) taking field notes (which may include jotting down first impressions, drawing maps, or writing extensive descriptions of cultural scenes); and
- (4) conducting interviews (which may include both informal conversations and more formal exchanges).

At the heart of this fieldwork practice—which may be undertaken at home or abroad and may last many years—is collaboration, the practice of working closely with others. Indeed, ethnographers must collaborate with others to build their understandings of culture in any particular setting: they can not very well participate, observe, take field notes, or conduct interviews without it. With constant interaction with their “consultants” (a term that has replaced the older “informant” label), ethnographers learn about the particular meanings of this or that behavior, this or that experience, or this or that story.

What is Collaborative Ethnography?

Today, ethnographers write many different kinds of ethnography and no two of them approach their craft, or some would say art, in exactly the same way. But the issues of ethics and representation are becoming more and more central to the work of all ethnographers. The ethical and political circumstances in which ethnography is conducted and written has caused ethnographers to approach their craft within more humanistic frameworks, rather than the purely “scientific” frameworks that dominated the field in the past. Indeed, collaboration has become a key metaphor for doing ethnography—the work in the field as well as the work of writing.

Some ethnographers have long used dialogue, or a “dialogic” technique in their writings by representing the conversations between the anthropologist and her or his collaborators to illustrate how cross-cultural understandings emerge in the context of fieldwork. Others have utilized fieldwork collaboration literally, choos-

ing not only to focus on the collaborative emergence of culture within the written text, but also asking their consultants to take a more active role in the writing process itself. Called “collaborative ethnography,” the approach highlights the collaboration that has always been inherent in fieldwork practice and extends it more systematically into the writing of the final ethnography.

Simply put, collaborative ethnographers, in their representations of others, place the ethical responsibility to consultants above all else and seek consultant commentary and direction as the ethnographic text takes shape. As a humanistic project—not a scientific one—collaborative ethnography seeks common ground for writing representations that are more sensitive to and more honest about the ethical and political circumstances that provide a context within which ethnography grows. Writing ethnography thus becomes more of a joint process, where both ethnographer(s) and consultant(s) share the task, to varying degrees, of writing the final product. For this reason, collaborative ethnography is often, though not always, co-authored by both the ethnographer and his or her consultants.

Collaborative ethnography is not merely bureaucratic. Many ethnographers seek commentary from those represented in the ethnography, as might be required by, for example, a governmental institution, but collaborative ethnography asks of consultants more than just a stamp of approval. Collaborative ethnographers seek to use dialogue about the developing ethnography to yield deeper collaborative co-interpretations. The results can be mixed, yielding extremely valuable benefits as well as drawbacks. In the end, however, I believe the method is extremely rewarding—both personally and to the field as a whole.

Although collaborative ethnography is a contemporary response to contemporary circumstances, it is not entirely new. Indeed, it has a rich, albeit often unremembered, history.

Roots of Collaborative Ethnography

In the early 1840s, the soon-to-be famous anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, while browsing in a bookstore, met Ely S. Parker, the soon-to-be-famous Seneca Indian who would go on to be General Ulysses S. Grant's military secretary, and later, President Grant's Commissioner of Indian Affairs. There, in the bookstore, Morgan and

Parker struck up a conversation, became instant friends, and after their initial meeting, were soon working together on writing a cultural description of the Iroquois. Morgan had always wanted to write such a study but had no “real” contacts among Indians. Parker enthusiastically provided his own first-hand knowledge of his tribe, the Seneca, and gave Morgan access to many leaders in the larger Iroquois Confederacy (of which the Seneca were, and are, a part), helping him understand Iroquois language and culture. Parker most likely read and responded to Morgan’s manuscript as it developed. In the final version, *League of the Ho-dé-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* (published in 1851), Morgan dedicated the book to his friend: “To Hā-sa-no-an’-da (Ely S. Parker), A Seneca Indian, This Work, The Materials of Which Are the Fruit of our Joint Researches, is Inscribed: In Acknowledgment of the Obligations, and in Testimony of the Friendship of the Author.”

While Morgan eventually went on to become more famous, and disparaged, for his writings on social evolution, his *League* was widely considered to be the first true American ethnography, especially for its intimate description of Iroquois beliefs and practices from the “inside”—thanks, of course, to Parker. Morgan’s was not a collaborative ethnography by contemporary standards, since outside of Morgan’s brief acknowledgment, we do not know to what extent Parker actually helped shape the text. Nonetheless, it placed collaboration with informants at the heart of ethnographic practice where mere observation (by outside government authorities, for example) was no longer satisfactory to a budding science of culture. To be sure, *League* had an enormous effect on how all future American ethnographers would go about their work to describe Native American cultures: in its wake, descriptions that lacked information provided by knowledgeable collaborators seemed incomplete.

Of course, nineteenth-century ethnologists (as they were called then) generally approached the description of American Indian cultures through the “salvage motif”: they sought out older informants as collaborators to describe the “glory days” of a bygone era, often situating historical descriptions of American Indian “culture” within broad theories of social evolution wherein the progress of “civilization” would inevitably subsume the Indians’ earlier “savage” and “barbaric” stages of cultures. Most used collaborators, but some took it one



Ely Parker

step further, co-authoring their texts with their informants. An example is Alice Fletcher, a Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) ethnologist, who, while staunchly believing that Indians should fully assimilate to white ways, nonetheless valued the salvaging of Indian cultures. Fletcher worked closely with her collaborators and recognized them for their contributions to her ethnographic work. One of those collaborators, Francis La Flesche, insisted that Fletcher more directly recognize his contributions by granting him co-authorship. Fletcher agreed, and together Fletcher and La Flesche wrote *The Omaha Tribe*, published in 1911. The two would collaborate for a total of forty years until Fletcher died in 1923.

Another well-known example is the collaborative relationship between Franz Boas, the “father” of American anthropology, and George Hunt, a Kwakiutl Indian. The two collaborated on a number of projects from the 1890s until George Hunt died in 1933. Together, they produced hundreds of pages of ethnographic material on Kwakiutl language and culture. Importantly, Boas and Hunt’s collaborations marked a sea change in anthropology, moving away from the earlier paradigm of social evolution. More and more anthropologists (BAE ethnologists among them) had become disillusioned with the evolutionary paradigm (undoubtedly due to their close work with Native informants in the field). Boas, in particular, became the best known American advocate for

an anthropology more closely reflecting native cultures outside of an evolutionary model, helping establish American anthropology within a more relativistic approach.

Seeking to understand the “native point of view”—a phrase made famous by British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski—necessarily implied a more intense focus on field collaboration. Ethnographers began to focus more energy on listening to and checking their evolving understandings with their collaborators in order to distinguish the native point of view more accurately. Ironically, however, recognizing actual, named informants for their contributions—widespread, for example, in BAE reports—became less common, unlike co-authored works like those by Fletcher and La Flesche or Boas and Hunt.

By the first few decades of the twentieth-century, anthropology was fast becoming an academic discipline that required professional credentials. As the field became more academically-oriented, the authority and objectivity of the researcher to authentically represent “the native point of view” in published works became more and more important. In short, as anthropologists “averaged out” informant voices to create more normalized descriptions (those that could be more easily compared with other descriptions), the individual informants faded into the background of the texts, becoming almost completely anonymous. Thus readers learned little about what the natives were contributing to their own ethnographic descriptions.

In the 1930s, one of Boas’s students, Paul Radin, severely criticized his colleagues for their increasingly common practice of averaging out their informants’ experience. “[Ethnography] can be accomplished only if we realize,” Radin wrote in his *Method and Theory of Ethnology*, “once and for all, that we are dealing with specific, not generalized, men and women.” Through the device of generalization, the anthropologist had become the authority on the native point of view—he knew it better than the natives themselves. Radin pointed to problems in anthropology’s representation of others, especially as the choice of subject and the style of telling were ultimately chosen by the anthropologist—not to mention that anthropologists were increasingly obscuring the “native point of view” through their own theories of culture. In his own fieldwork and writing, Radin chose to

focus intensely on the biography of actual individuals, collaborating closely with these individuals to more clearly distinguish the “native point of view” from his own, paying close attention to the natives’ own way of telling their story through their own theories and philosophies.

In mainstream anthropology, Radin’s critiques were largely ignored (after an initial backlash from his colleagues, who were busily advancing the larger scientific theories of culture). But among American Indian studies scholars, Radin’s writings had a more lasting effect—especially in the writing of “life history,” as his auto/biography came to be known. Like Radin, countless American Indian scholars closely collaborated with their consultants to write Native American auto/biographies, and to this day, American Indian life histories are among the largest collaboratively-produced literatures in anthropology—many are co-authored and co-edited by both anthropologist(s) and consultant(s).

Radin’s intense focus on the individual in culture would resurface in a variety of forms in the discipline of anthropology. Although a thorough discussion of these developments is beyond the scope of this brief essay, suffice it to say that by the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, many ethnographers were beginning to ask the same kinds of questions that Radin had once asked. In particular, interpretive and humanistic anthropologists who believe anthropology is an act of interpretation rather than an exact science wondered if anthropologists, in their search to authoritatively elaborate the native point of view in the service of larger theories of humankind, had, in their ethnographic manuscripts, only reinforced the separation between anthropologists and the communities in which they worked. In other words, most ethnographies were written for other academics and to support larger scientific theories. Most ethnographies, outside of a few written by Margaret Mead and a few others, were not written for the public and were certainly not written for the people they were about.

A question began to echo throughout the discipline: “Ethnography for whom?” This question grew louder and more immediate as the so-called “natives,” began responding to the texts that had been written about them, offering their own interpretations of outsiders’ “expert” ethnographies, responding forcefully to representations they perceived, in some extreme cases, to be unfair, malicious, or just plain wrong. For example, some

of the residents of the New York village Springdale (a pseudonym) were so outraged by *Small Town in Mass Society*, the 1958 ethnography about their city, that they went so far as to parade an effigy of one of the authors positioned atop a manure spreader! As the discipline developed, the “native point of view” began to take on a whole new meaning. The then common practice of keeping informants or communities anonymous was a way many anthropologists argued of “protecting the natives.” But far from protecting the natives, anonymity only confounded the issue. Although anthropologists at times had good reasons to keep their informants anonymous (as in studies of illegal activities), critics argued that the practice more often than not actively protected the anthropologist rather than the natives, significantly lessening the chance that natives could directly criticize the anthropologist.

Many anthropologists insisted that the scientific purposes and goals of ethnography should not be compromised by community or informant responses, that their analyses, descriptions, and stories should appear exactly as written, that their professional credentials allowed them to represent the natives as they saw fit. For others, consultant responses were an important cultural fact: Were not these responses significant and revealing in and of themselves? Did not these contentions provide another opportunity to look at the native point of view? And for still others, these responses represented a whole new ethical challenge to the practice of ethnography.

Having encountered such issues myself, the responses and subsequent re-involvement of my own collaborators certainly brought me to a critical juncture

My Journey to Collaborative Ethnography

I took my first anthropology course when I was a junior in college, in the mid-1980s—the very time when these debates about ethics, representation, and the native point of view had begun to reach their zenith. Not aware of it at the time, these discussions and their consequences would have a profound effect on me and on the anthropology I would embrace.

I came to anthropology reluctantly. Accepting uncritically what I had heard from fellow college students about anthropology as a “colonial” and “exploitative” discipline, I put off ANTH 101, a general educa-

tion requirement, as long as I could. I had spent many of my teenage years in American Indian interest groups (known widely as American Indian “hobbyists”), and this was a commonly heard story-line there as well. Although I knew little about the actual complexities of Native communities and much less about past and current collaborations between Indians and anthropologists, I was convinced that anthropologists knew little about the actual, contemporary struggles of American Indian people.

My first anthropology course—an introduction to cultural anthropology taken at Radford University (RU) under the tutelage of Dr. Melinda Bollar Wagner—changed my outlook irrevocably. I had, at the time, begun to more critically reflect on my own fascination with Indians. Paradoxically, my hobbyist interests had led me to seek out “real” Indians, the Kiowas, with whom I lived during the summers. These summer experiences forced me to reconsider how I had perceived Indians on my own terms, the representation I had constructed. This personal story including the Kiowas’ enormously generous and abiding friendship, I relate in greater detail in *The Power of Kiowa Song*, but suffice it say that Wagner’s anthropology course gave me the means to begin to understand the powerful contradictions I was experiencing between Indians as artificially represented ideals and Indians as real people. By the end of that first anthropology course, I had changed my major.

The following summer, back in the Kiowa community, I announced my plans to become an anthropologist. Perhaps I might one day “study” the Kiowa people. Some of my friends were encouraging and supportive. Others, however, were not. Former Kiowa Tribal Chairman, Billy Evans Horse, with whom I had a close relationship, directly challenged my decision, offering yet another objection to the way that anthropologists worked. His family had worked with anthropologists before, he said, and they had felt slighted when his family had not been recognized for their contributions. Many anthropologists had built their careers on the Kiowa knowledge that had been freely shared with them; and, in their manuscripts, they often passed off their knowledge of Kiowa culture as their own, as if individual Kiowa people had had only a small role. To be an anthropologist, argued Horse, would mean that I would have to follow in these same foot-steps—being an “expert” at the expense of Kiowas. He would have no part in it.

To say that I returned to college with mixed feelings about my new major would be an understatement. On the one hand, I had learned that the typical storyline about anthropology as being “colonial” and “exploitative” was perhaps too simplified and extreme; on the other hand, my Kiowa friends presented me with real and first-hand experiences with the problems of representing others in ethnographic texts—they were tired of being colonized and exploited, and now, unrecognized. To say the least, I was confused.

I began my senior year as an anthropology major halfheartedly. But the classes I took with RU professors Drs. Cliff and Donna Boyd, Mary La Lone, and Melinda Wagner, bestowed new hope in me for the potentials of anthropology, especially the potentials to resolve the incongruity between my chosen major and the feelings I had for my Kiowa friends. One class, in particular, changed everything. Professor Wagner’s “Practicing Anthropology” class required me to engage in ethnographic research, including writing an actual ethnography. Among other books, we used James P. Spradley’s *The Ethnographic Interview* and Spradley and David McCurdy’s *Ethnography in Complex Society*.

I was particularly struck by Spradley and McCurdy’s writings about doing ethnography utilizing an “emic” approach based on language and experience-based theories of culture, trying to view the world through the eyes of those in another cultural group, accessing their understanding through the language they used. Most importantly, Spradley and McCurdy argued that writing ethnography could be relevant and beneficial to the communities studied, as Jim Spradley had hoped his work on “tramps” would help others understand and help the homeless, alcoholic men he wrote about in his classic work, *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*.

With all this in mind, I embarked upon an ethnographic project of local Narcotics Anonymous meetings with a focus on the experience of drug addiction and recovery. I worked closely with several informants/consultants, in both the fieldwork and writing process. With Spradley and McCurdy’s call for relevance in mind, my consultants and I negotiated an accessible ethnographic text that elaborated the experience of drug addiction and recovery, a text they could give to drug addicts who were considering Narcotics Anonymous as an option to recovery. As I wrote my ethnography, my col-



Billy Evans Horse. Photo by author.

laborators (who, in this case, wanted to remain anonymous for obvious reasons) responded to the text, pointing out discrepancies and adding information we had neglected in our conversations.

Looking back on it now, my first attempt at doing ethnography was tentative and rough; but the process of working this closely with consultants—in both field practice and writing—inspired me. Indeed, it presented a collaborative model that I felt might resolve the kinds of issues that Billy Evans Horse had raised in our conversations the summer before, when I announced my new major. I thus returned to the Kiowa community the following summer with a new proposition for doing a more jointly conceived, practiced, and written ethnography.

That summer, Billy Evans Horse and I began a conversation about doing a collaborative ethnography on a topic that we eventually agreed had heightened significance in the Kiowa community, the diverse and extensive world of Kiowa song. Our conversation lasted the next several years, continuing through my graduate studies, and culminating with my dissertation, and subsequently, *The Power of Kiowa Song*.

I credit my graduate education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for giving me the more

sophisticated conceptual tools with which to build this collaborative ethnography. One class in particular—Dr. Glenn D. Hinson’s “Art of Ethnography”—surveyed the contemporary discussions among anthropologists about the ethics and politics of representation and, more importantly, offered methodological strategies for doing a more ethically responsible, collaborative ethnography. In that class I had my second anthropological “conversion experience” as I awakened to the real possibility that collaborative ethnography might transform anthropological practice. Hinson, the “master of collaboration” and my dissertation advisor, worked closely with me, helping me understand the more complex nuances and very real complications of working within collaborative frameworks. Fortunately for me, Chapel Hill’s anthropology program supported this kind of practice, and another one of my dissertation committee members, James L. Peacock, regularly encouraged me to consider how I could situate my collaborative work within larger currents of a more publicly engaged anthropology (a larger movement that seeks to bridge the gap between academic and applied practice, in which Peacock has long been a key player).

By the time I left Chapel Hill in 1993 to live and research full-time in the Kiowa community, I had essentially two different groups for whom I was writing: my dissertation committee and my Kiowa consultants—who, now numbering several dozen, were helping me understand and write about Kiowa song. For those like Billy Evans Horse, writing an ethnography that could be read and understood by Kiowa people was absolutely critical to the project; this was not to be another standard dissertation inaccessible to “normal” people. If Kiowas were going to invest in my project, I had to invest in them as readers: it was the ethical and responsible thing to do. Along these lines, they were also to be clearly recognized for their contributions unless they preferred otherwise (and very few did).

Two key issues thus emerged, which serve as the foundation for building a collaborative ethnography: ethical responsibilities to consultants and writing clearly. Because my ethnography was established on friendship, I had a moral responsibility to my friends to represent them the way they wanted to be represented (as an author, I work very hard to present myself in the best possible light; they should have that right also—deleting or

adding information, changing their quotations, or disagreeing with my interpretations). Additionally, I had a moral responsibility to write clearly so they could respond to my ethnographic text as it developed.

Moral/ethical responsibility and clear, concise writing are critical to collaborative ethnography because they are at the heart of what makes a particular kind of ethnography “collaborative.” All ethnography is collaborative to one degree or another, of course, but what makes ethnographic writing collaborative is involving consultants in the construction of the final ethnographic text itself. It means not only seeking responses and commentary on our interpretations, but, more importantly, re-integrating these commentaries back into the ethnography itself, allowing consultants to shape both representation and interpretation.

This writing process is extremely rewarding. Essentially using the evolving text as a centerpiece of a larger ongoing conversation, the discussion of my ethnography with Kiowa consultants, as I wrote it, led to whole new understandings of Kiowa song—and to the very real difficulties of presenting one genre of expression (song) via another genre of expression (paragraphs and sentences). I regularly struggled with this problem in my writing, but the responses from my Kiowa consultants—and the collaborative co-interpretations that emerged as a result of these conversations—helped me understand on a deeper level the real difficulties of presenting Kiowa



Ralph Kotay (left) and Eric Lassiter work together on “*The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns*.” Photo by Robert Dean Kotay.

song to the “outside world” while remaining attentive, simultaneously, to the “inside world” of Kiowa readers, present and future.

Needless to say, writing this way was as satisfying as it was challenging. Like the ethnography I had done with members of Narcotics Anonymous, I felt the ethnography I was doing with Kiowa people, on some level, mattered, not just for outside readers (academic or otherwise), but to the Kiowa community. Of course, the community value and relevance of ethnographic texts can only go so far, and often they are part of a much larger equation of community-based action (for example, as a result of our work together, Billy Evans Horse and I agreed that all the book’s royalties would go to the Kiowa Education Fund, a fund we established to assist Kiowa youths attend college).

A collaborative ethnography opens up the possibility that ethnography can matter for those beyond the academy. This was brought home to me most powerfully when a sixteen-year-old Kiowa singer revealed to me that *The Power of Kiowa Song* was the first book he had ever actually read from cover to cover. He said he was now thinking about college. That statement, for me, made all the challenges inherent in collaborative ethnography worthwhile.

The experience of writing *The Power of Kiowa Song* provided the base upon which I have built all of my subsequent ethnographic projects, including *The Jesus Road: Kionas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns* (which I co-wrote with historian Clyde Ellis of Elon College, and Ralph Kotay, another Kiowa consultant) and most recently, *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie’s African American Community*, a collaboration of community and campus involving over 75 community members, faculty, and undergraduate college students (see “Teachers Corner” in this issue).

Limitations of Collaborative Ethnography

All manuscripts (even presumably “objective” ones) have limitations: they are, after all, limited by the experience and point of view of the author(s). Ethnographies are further limited by the range of the ethnographer’s field experience, the choice of people with whom she or he works, and the topics of their conversations that serve as the basis for writing a particular ethnography, based on a particular set of experiences and conversations. In

collaborative ethnography, this process is further limited by the involvement of consultants in the writing of the ethnographic text. While some ethnographers might see this involvement as overly restrictive, I have found in my own work that the method’s limitations pale next to what I have learned about others, including myself. The important thing about writing collaborative ethnography is being honest about the limitations—to yourself, your consultants, and your readers—while simultaneously underscoring the real possibilities for deeper, collaborative co-interpretations.

In spite of this, collaborative ethnography is not for everyone nor for all types of ethnographic projects. Collaborative ethnography works particularly well when issues of representation are critical to the project and when communities want an ethnographer’s help in telling their story, their way. For example, as I detail in the “Teachers Corner,” members of Muncie’s African American community had long been ignored in ongoing “Middletown” studies for which Muncie, Indiana is famous; they wanted us (i.e., faculty and students) to help them tell their story to a larger audience. Although in today’s world more and more people are similarly situated in streams of representations that not only include ethnography, but also newspapers, radio, film, the Internet, and television, issues of representation are not always this central to each and every ethnographic undertaking.

Collaborative ethnography may not always be appropriate for documentary projects that struggle to present varying viewpoints about contentious social issues. When, for example, members of Muncie’s African American community asked my students and me to conduct a brief ethnographic survey of business owners’ opinions about renaming their street to Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard, they charged us to conduct a balanced survey (and report) so they could assess more critically a contentious community debate that had clouded individual voices and concerns. My students and I accordingly utilized a very different ethnographic model, more in line with conventional ethnographic methods.

Fortunately, anthropology provides room for both kinds of ethnography. Depending on the goals of the ethnographer and his or her collaborators, and their ethical and moral responsibilities to one another, anthropology offers a plethora of approaches for understand-

ing the complexity of culture—from the anthropologist's point of view as well as from the native point of view. Indeed, our job as sociocultural anthropologists is to enlarge the discussion of culture among everyone; ethnography fortunately continues to provide one of the most powerful ways to engage in this larger discussion. For it is ethnography that still can provide us with one of the most complex understandings of ourselves and others—one person and one voice at a time.

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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



Hurley and Fredine Goodall. Photo by Danny Gawlowski.

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 introduc-



Well before the first African Americans came to Muncie, black farming communities dotted the surrounding countryside. Photo courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Ball State University.

tions, 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*.

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.

(Continued on next page)

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



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

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.

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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Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Harcourt College Pubs.

Wagner, Melinda Bollar. “Beyond the Classroom Walls, University Students Create a Children's Book.” *AnthroNotes* 16:2 (Spring 1994):11-15.

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THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDDLETOWN

The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community by Luke Eric Lassiter, Hurley Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell, and Michelle Natasya Johnson is available from AltaMira Press, May 2004. Part I details an in-depth discussion of the collaborative methodology, the literature of “Middletown,” and a history of Muncie's black community; Part II includes the student chapters that focus on six cultural categories (Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Using Leisure, Engaging in Religious Practices, Engaging in Community Activities). The book includes a Foreword by Yolanda Moses (former president of the American Anthropological Association) and an Afterword by Theodore Caplow (Commonwealth Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and author of several works on “Middletown”). As an option, readers may also purchase a DVD documentary about the writing of *The Other Side of Middletown*. To obtain your copy of the book and/or DVD, call 1-800-462-6420 or online: www.altamirapress.com



COURT DECISION: KENNEWICK MAN TO BE RELEASED FOR STUDY

A federal appeals court panel ruled on February 4 that the 9,000 year-old human remains, known as Kennewick Man, can now be made available to scientists for study. The plaintiffs in the case, including the Smithsonian's Douglas Owsley, curator of physical anthropology, and Dennis Stanford, curator of North American archaeology, believe this rare find is extremely valuable to the scientific community to help answer questions about the life and health of early inhabitants of North America and the range of physical types or human variation of these early people. For many, Kennewick Man, along with other very ancient remains, holds national and international significance, and therefore represents an inheritance for the entire human family.

AAAS DIALOGUE ON SCIENCE, ETHICS, AND RELIGION

by Alison S. Brooks



In 1995, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) established a program, Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion (DoSER), to “facilitate communication between scientific and religious communities.” The director, Connie Bertka, is unusual in that she has a Ph.D. in a scientific field (geology) as well as formal study in theology.

DoSER sponsors many activities for those wondering about religious and ethical perspectives on advances in genetics, or who view religion and science as adversaries, or feel that to embrace one they must renounce the other. Some of these DoSER activities have focused on the science communities’ responses to theories of intelligent design. These AAAS-sponsored activities around the country include:

- multi-day conferences on broad topics of relevance to the scientific and religious communities, such as “Cosmic Questions” about how the universe began, and whether humans are unique in the universe;
- monthly public lectures to explore timely issues at the intersection of science, ethics, and religion on such topics as “Food and Biotechnology” and “Avoiding the Sixth Major Extinction”;
- public forums on emerging areas of public policy significance (e.g. Inheritable Genetic Modifications);
- workshops and working groups in which small research groups work to enhance public discussion of the scientific, ethical, and religious dimensions of emerging public policy issues. These have included such topics as “Islam and Science,” “Judaism and Genetics,” “Genetic Discrimination,” “Astrobiology,” and “Stem Cell Research”; and
- publications, including reports and statements on issues raised by current advances in genetics, an 8-

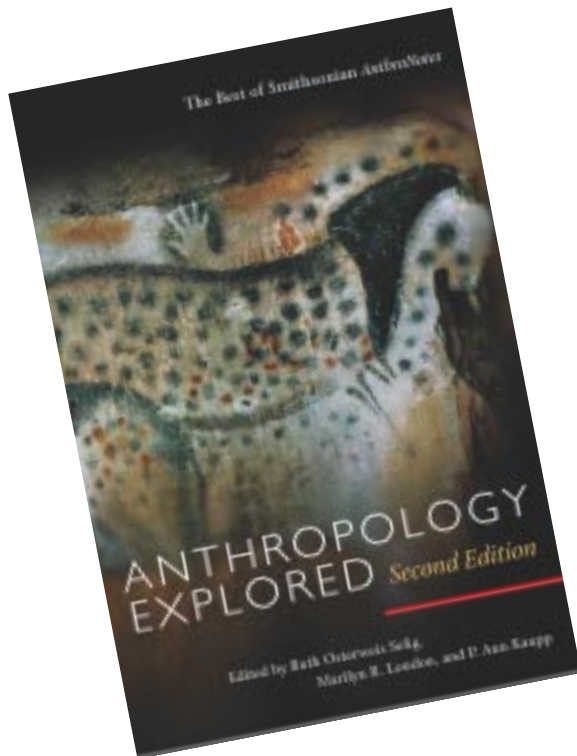
part video series on “The Epic of Evolution,” an interactive CD-ROM on “Cosmic Questions,” and several edited books that bring together relevant readings on evolution, population growth, and other issues from multiple perspectives

A 2003 DoSER-sponsored symposium took place at the AAAS annual meeting in Boston. The session, “Primate and Human Nature: Cooperation and Altruism,” organized by anthropologist Robert Sussman (Washington University), focused on the findings of primatologists and other human and biological scientists concerning the evolution of behavior, in particular, cooperative and altruistic behavior. Sussman and his former student Paul Garber (University of Illinois) argued, for example, that primates, including males, spend relatively little time (less than 5-10% of the day) engaged in any kind of social behavior. Of that small percentage, most social behavior is affiliative (grooming, touching); very little is aggressive.

On January 12, 2004, a number of scientists, philosophers, historians, theologians, and educators met at Gallaudet University with representatives from six different Christian denominations in a workshop devoted to “Theology, Education and Public Policy.” In particular, the workshop addressed how religious communities could support the integrity of science education by taking account of contemporary evolutionary theory in relation to their theological, religious, educational, and public policy functions.

In his introduction to the workshop, James Miller, Ph.D. in Theology and DoSER Senior Program Associate, outlined varying views of how science and religion relate to one another. These ranged from a view of non-overlapping but complementary domains of authority, as popularized by the late Stephen J. Gould; to the view that religion can be fully explained scientifically in terms of cultural development, political and economic dynamics, or psychology; to the view that scientific findings must conform to religious doctrine; to more complex views in which religion and science have a long history of mutually constructive interactions in Western culture. A special focus of the workshop was the challenge to science education represented by the intelligent design movement. The issue of the appropriate relationship of science and religion is most acute in the domain of pub-

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We are pleased to announce the publication of the second edition of the *AnthroNotes*[®] book, winner of the 2000 SAA Excellence in Public Education Award.

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Robert L. Humphrey provided all cartoon illustrations for *AnthroNotes*[®] from 1979 until his death in 2002. Professor of anthropology at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Bob also was a cartoonist and an artist who worked in various media.

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Instructor's Guide to Anthropology Explored: A Sample Excerpt

Below is an example from the *Instructor's Guide to Anthropology Explored*, written by Anna I. Peterson and Ruth O. Selig. This sample focuses on Chapter 31, "Linguistic Survival Among the Maya," by Robert S. Laughlin. Each chapter in the *Anthropology Explored Instructor's Guide* has the same format: summary, questions, and glossary.

Summary

The author of this chapter began his study of today's indigenous Maya culture in 1959 as a member of the Harvard Chiapas project. During this time he collaborated with several Maya and began a collection of folktales and dreams to supplement the vocabulary in the only rudimentary dictionary available at that time. By 1973 Laughlin had published *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán*. Since that time, Laughlin has also published collections of folktales and dreams, as well as two bilingual booklets on history, oral history, and customs. He also helped establish a puppet theater, a live theater, and a weekly Tzotzil-Tzeltal radio program.

Laughlin with the help of Maya friends began a literacy program for the Mayas. The program is in great demand. In the beginning of the program, there was debate whether to allow women into the classes, as some believed it was improper for men and women to be together at night when classes were taught.

In the years since its founding, the program has awarded over five hundred diplomas. Several of the creative writing pieces have been published. The author lists several reasons that people join the program: they want to improve their Spanish through translation exercises; they want to learn; they see the class as making them smarter; and they want to appreciate their own traditions. The program has received much recognition, and the Maya society has benefitted as a consequence.

In the 2004 update the author lists the accomplishments of the program since the 1998 edition of the book. There have been several publications of Maya writings, as well as Maya plays produced. By 2004 over 5,500 people have received diplomas from the literacy project. Laughlin's story of anthropology in action is an inspiring example of what one anthropologist has been able to give back to the people he chose to spend his life

studying and with whom he has collaborated on many productive projects.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why was it important to compile a dictionary of the Maya language?
- 2) How did studying folktales and dreams help create the dictionary?
- 3) Discuss the difficulties of reconstructing a language.
- 4) Why do you think theater has played such a role in teaching the Maya language? Why was starting a puppet theater such a clever way to begin?
- 5) Discuss the hesitations of allowing women to participate in the class.
- 6) In his update the author lists many accomplishments of the program. Which ones do you feel are the most significant, and why?

Essay Questions

- 1) Why is preserving language a key to preserving a culture? How has Laughlin's work contributed to cultural preservation among the Maya today?
- 2) Why is it helpful to the Maya students to record their personal and family history, as well as to produce creative writing samples.

Short Answer Questions

- 1) What topics does the literacy program primarily focus on?
- 2) The author lists some of the incentives for participating in the program. What are they, and how does participating in the program achieve them?
- 3) How has the program brought Mayan society recognition?
- 4) How has the economic crisis of Mexico been a problem for the program?

Glossary

Folktale: A story or legend forming part of an oral tradition.

Linguistics: The study of the nature, structure, and variation of language, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics.

Literacy: The ability to read and write.

The Maya: Mesoamerican Indian people inhabiting southeast Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, whose civilization reached its height around A.D. 300-900, and their present day descendants.

Oral History: Information obtained in interviews with persons having firsthand knowledge, or history passed down from generation to generation.

To obtain the free *Instructor's Guide*, contact Anthrouteach@nmnh.si

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lic education, as more than 60% of the U.S. public hold that both evolutionary science and some form of creation should be included somewhere in the public school curriculum. (People for the American Way Survey, "Evolution and Creationism in Public Education," November 1999; <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=2097>)

Two breakout sessions followed presentations of the latest scientific findings on the evolution of humans, life and the cosmos; summaries of historical and philosophical perspectives on religion and evolutionary science; and a Georgia teacher's "view from the trenches." In the first breakout, theologians, religious educators, and public policy staff met across denominational lines to explore common and distinctive issues within their functional categories in relation to the evolutionary sciences and the ideas of intelligent design. (The "intelligent design movement" argues that certain structures or processes of nature, especially at the level of viruses and bacteria, are so complex that they could not be the result of chance and natural law but must derive from an "intelligent designer." One conclusion of these discussions was that, because the religious communities have tended to adopt a "non-overlapping" stance with respect to science, they have not seen the evolutionary sciences or the integrity of science education as matters for significant attention. The second breakout session was along denominational lines and provided an opportunity to begin to strategize about how these issues could be addressed more adequately in terms of theological reflection, religious education, and public policy advocacy within the denominations.

The following publications can provide interesting topics for classroom debate.

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CBS Religious Broadcasts. 2001. "Religion and Stem-Cell Roundtable" (for a copy, call 1-800-494-6007).

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