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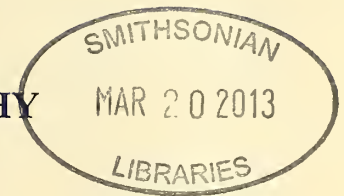
ANTHRONOTES®

MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY PUBLICATION FOR EDUCATORS

VOLUME 25 NO. 1 SPRING 2004

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 Hã-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 One 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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