



## Ethnographic Writing About American Culture

Michael Moffatt

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# ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING ABOUT AMERICAN CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

*Michael Moffatt*

Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903

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Anthropologists have done more research in the United States in the last dozen years than in the entire previous history of the discipline—far more, perhaps twice as much. Some reasons for this boom may be paradigmatic: heightened interdisciplinarity and genre-blurring all through the social sciences and humanities, postcolonial critiques of First-World/Third-World distinctions foundational to an older anthropology, new forms of older concerns about relevance and application. At least as important, however, are more down-to-earth disciplinary pragmatics: growing numbers of anthropologists in a period of declining transnational access and funding.

Anthropologists worked “at home” in the past, of course, and by 1980, a considerable body of work had slowly accumulated.<sup>2</sup> The pace has tremendously accelerated more recently, however. Sociologists have also continued to produce the domestic case studies they have written since the early 20th century, and researchers in American studies, linguistics, folklore, ethnomusicology, education, political science, and so on have joined the domestic ethnographic project. The outcome has been over 160 research-based monographs about the United States written in the last dozen years, plus many articles—

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<sup>1</sup> American in this article means “of the continental United States [excluding native American peoples]”; apologies to American Indians, Alaskans, Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, Canadians, Latin American, and so on. “Culture” is written in the singular loosely and for convenience. Current notions of cultural hegemony, in any case (see note 11, below), blur simplistic distinctions between one and many culture(s) in the nation-state known as the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Including (non-exhaustively) 2a, 19, 32a, 32b, 50, 75a, 79a, 88, 90, 94a, 111, 120a, 149, 154, 155a, 156a, 158a, 162, 167, 168, 185a, 191, 202a, 203, 205, 225, 231a, 233, 235a, 242, plus a number of Holt-Rinehart “case studies” (see 201:72-73)

about half by anthropologists, a third by sociologists, and the rest by everyone else.

This review is about all this recent domestic research,<sup>3</sup> focusing on full-length ethnographies based on long-term participant-observation or interpretively sophisticated interviewing. Who has done what research, and how, and how have these recent ethnographies been written up? What aspects of American belief and practice do they highlight, or neglect? What descriptions or interpretations of culture in the United States emerge from reading them all?

## ETHNOGRAPHERS AND SUBJECTS

Aguilar sketched the pros and cons of domestic research a decade ago, in a collection that accurately predicted this recent boom (4; see also 91, 207, 245). Studying subjects relatively “like themselves,” local ethnographers may be more attuned to cultural nuance than far-from-home anthropologists, better able to draw on experiential understandings. They can often “blend in” more completely—verbally, behaviorally, physically—possibly making for better rapport, possibly affecting who and what they are studying less by their presence. But how can insider-ethnographers perceive in the first place the cultural assumptions they share with subjects like themselves? How do they get at tacit culture without contrast and “difference” to attune them to it—a conventional justification for cross-cultural research?

Many of these ethnographers don’t, and apparently aren’t interested in doing so. Others do, some perhaps for cross-cultural reasons—being foreign-born (24, 26, 83, 125, 166, 196, 227); having done traditional far-from-home anthropological research prior to the present ethnography (3, 68, 79, 92, 93, 115, 122, 140, 147, 149, 151, 161, 176, 177, 206); or building cross-cultural research directly into their domestic monographs (67, 217). Cross-cultural experience or research sometimes plays no known role, on the other hand: Bell (17), Bluebond-Langner (19), Curran (38), di Leonardo (42), Ginsberg (74), Harper (89), Hochschild (95), Merry (143), Radway (175), Sacks (187), and Weston (237) have apparently arrived at their variously impressive or subtle understandings in different ways—imagination, cultural or historical scholarship, or attending to lesser but real differences between self and subject that are almost always part of local research as well.

For, as Aguilar has also noted, “likeness” is rarely complete, and varies in often cross-cutting ways. Nor does the ethnographer’s achieved or ascribed

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<sup>3</sup> One hundred sixty-nine monographs are surveyed here, including seven outstanding or neglected books from the late-1970s. In the bibliography, each of these core ethnographies is marked with an initial asterisk, and with the discipline of the ethnographer at the end of the citation (a few of these identifications are guesses; apologies for mistakes): anth = anthropology (87 are by anthropologists); soc = sociology (49 are by sociologists); ams = American studies (4 ethnographies); eds = educational studies (5); flk = folklore (5); ling = linguistics (8); other affiliations unabbreviated (4: 2 ethnomusicology, 2 political science); and unk = unknown (7).

identification with particular subjects necessarily make for a research relationship less problematic than in exotic ethnography. Identifying with “them” does not necessarily mean you are like them, or that they are all like one another, or that they all trust or identify with you, or that they want to be studied by you. Some “native” ethnographers never clearly arrive at this awareness, usually to the detriment of their interpretations. At least a half-dozen do, however; Weston and Sacks write about it perceptively, for co-lesbian subjects in northern California (237) and women workers in North Carolina (187).

Only four of these recent ethnographies are strictly autoethnographic, written directly out of the experiences of being French-American, an ex-nun, a professional poker player, and a medical student, respectively (26, 38, 92, 115). Everyone else studies someone else, variously mixed and matched with themselves. Most of the many identified studies of gender focus on women (10, 20, 38, 41, 42, 58, 59, 74, 95, 96, 98, 110, 116, 117, 122, 126, 131, 140, 144, 145, 156, 158, 160, 175, 182, 187, 220, 244) and are virtually all by women ethnographers. A few others treat men in particular, however (56, 57, 176, 189); a few treat male and female gender about equally (96, 237), or in passing, or implicitly (12, 17, 26, 45, 61a, 63, 79, 92, 133, 147, 149, 155, 161)—including those whose main topic is male-dominated professions (21, 28, 75, 104, 115, 123, 177, 234), working-class occupations (1, 3, 24, 55, 89, 139, 215), or other ways of getting a living (92, 241).

“Studies-up” (41, 104, 155, and 158) and “studies-down” (7, 55, 60, 63, 76, 83, 93, 133, 140, 143, 153, 159, 182, 187, 235, 244, plus the working-class occupational studies just cited) usually involve middle-class investigators trying to grasp persons of different class status. And, at a finer level, any academic professional (virtually all these ethnographers) not studying other academic professionals (none does) is dealing with persons with attitudes toward career, work, and lived-in culture distinctly different from their own.

Ethnographers of the young (19, 20, 49, 56, 57, 63, 77, 87, 98, 133, 147, 165, 189, 197, 210, 217, 222a, 227, 231, 235, 241) and the old (16, 48, 67, 105, 106, 149, 186, 195, 214, 224, 230) all differ from their subjects in age, though all were either once like the former or anticipate (or fear) becoming like the latter. (They always differ from these subjects in historical cohort or generation.) Ethnics study their own groups less often than other ethnic groups (42, 119, 121, 149, 196, 222, 231, 243, 244 versus 22, 43, 63, 68, 73, 81, 100, 105, 106, 122, 165, 206, 210, 212, 215, 241); cross-racial research is much more common than in-racial investigation (17, 22, 43, 62, 76, 77, 87, 93, 98, 114, 133, 140, 142, 147, 165, 183, 187, 194, 210 versus 7, 82, 112). And, perhaps distinguishing which commitments really matter to urban intellectuals in the late 20th century from which ones don’t, only a few of the ethnographers of religion (5, 6, 22, 27, 38, 64, 69, 76, 79, 83, 126, 141, 152, 161, 164, 170, 184, 185, 198, 232, 238) apparently identify with the belief system they study [Prell with a Jewish prayer group (170) and Curran with a Catholic convent (38)].

Finally, reaggregating these researchers and subjects according to discipline, it's no longer the case that domestic anthropologists, faithful to their far-from-home proclivities, deemphasize the American mainstream and focus on the marginal and culturally exotic (8:xiii–xiv; 129:373). Among these ethnographers, more anthropologists than sociologists have studied social class (60, 63, 76, 79, 93, 98, 122, 140, 143, 151, 153, 159, 187, 237 versus 7, 24, 41, 55, 83, 133, 158, 182); and more anthropologists than sociologists have analyzed aspects of middle-class culture in some depth (19, 74, 79, 98, 147, 153, 163, 200, 217, 227–229, 237, versus 2, 13, 18, 57, 95, 96, 141, 156).

Domestic anthropologists do still disproportionately study culturally distinctive groups. Fifteen of the recent ethnographers of ethnicity are anthropologists (31, 42, 43, 63, 68, 73, 105, 106, 119, 121, 149, 196, 212, 231, 243, 244); only five are sociologists (100, 109, 210, 215, 222). This suggests that, in an ethnically complex nation, anthropologists have collectively happened upon the more balanced research program (“mainstream” + “diversity”); it's the sociologists who are now the more one-sided domestic ethnographers.

## RESEARCH

The research for all these books was based on observing, talking with, and listening to small numbers of subjects, personally known, for months or years; but it varied widely in intensity and duration, and in type of ethnographer's relation to subjects. The ethnographers-as-authors also differ in how much they tell us about these things, in how clearly they describe what Sanjek has usefully termed “the ethnographer's path” (190:398–400). A few say almost nothing, apparently trusting their results to speak for themselves (13, 15, 29, 192). Others are vague about key details. Foster, evidently reflexively “open,” tells us that he was in his Appalachian site “from August to 1975 through the remainder of the research period, which ended in 1976” (65:39), which could mean anything from 5 to 17 months. Many of the large number of ethnographers who evidently did their research part time indicate the overall period but make no useful effort to estimate what portion they actually spent in contact with their subjects.

Most at least sketch their fieldwork fundamentals. Most conducted their research close to home. Occasionally they studied their own local communities, work places, or places of leisure (7, 17, 44, 147, 176, 240); more often they did research in separate sites in the same city or region.<sup>4</sup> A few studied

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<sup>4</sup> The most intensively researched regions of the United States are therefore those with the most social scientists in them: the northeast (especially the New York and Philadelphia areas), parts of the south, the urban midwest, and the west coast (especially California). The least-studied areas are the rural midwest, the Rockies, the northwest, and the interior southwest. See 202 for the argument that an ethnography of the “hinterland” is badly needed.

farther afield, but all choosing less cosmopolitan parts of the United States (the northern Rockies: 5, 27; the far midwest: 74; the southwest: 63; the south: 43, 112; the southeast: 64, 76, 79; Appalachia: 23, 65). Odendahl carried out her depth interviews with the philanthropic elite trans-regionally (155). Shokeid reversed the usual flow of overseas anthropology and came from Israel to study Israeli emigrants in the New York area (196). And Staub, *American-Jewish* by upbringing, first conducted fieldwork among Yemeni Jews in Israel, learning Arabic, and then investigated Islamic Yemenis in greater New York (206).

Simple access to subjects was not a problem for most of these fieldworkers, thanks in part to professional status and the luxury of operating in contexts in which “research” itself was a common and culturally legitimate activity. Investigators of the deviant or resistant had to proceed more cautiously, however (2, 241), sometimes mobilizing insider-status (82, 237), sometimes never obtaining much access (5, 27). On the evidence of these monographs, powerful subjects continue to fend off ethnographers successfully. Significantly, three of the four “studies-up” (150) (still a rare type) focus on women and philanthropy—i.e. on the less powerful gender and on the most image-building activity among the elite. The author of the fourth, Jackall, apparently obtained access to corporate management thanks to the old-boy connections of the prestigious little-Ivy college where he teaches (104). None of the four lived full time with their elite subjects; none dealt intensively with their subjects’ private lives (for a forthcoming study-up, see 137).

About a fifth of these monographs draw their evidence almost entirely from interviews, life-histories, self-reports, or the linguistic analysis of relatively decontextualized stories and other native texts [5, 18, 20, 41, 59, 67, 68, 82, 97, 98, 105, 106, 107, 110, 123, 131, 140, 144, 152, 153, 155, 156, 158, 163, 166, 171, 172, 186, 189, 192, 198, 200, 214, 238, 243; Carbaugh uses his own viewing of TV (25)]. Curran operated through memory, her own and that of other Catholic women, to write a retrospective ethnography of American convent culture 30 years ago (38). Everyone else variously combines material from participant-observation and interviews—and some from historical research<sup>5</sup>—following one or more of four basic strategies in their participant-observation. A few participated in the lives of separately contacted subjects not known to one another (96, 182, 204). A larger number traced networks of interacting subjects not usually together in one place, and participated in their lives individually or in families (16, 42, 54, 83, 117, 175, 196, 206, 237); di Leonardo (42), Shokeid (196), and Weston (237) describe particularly well the

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<sup>5</sup> References 43, 122 and 151 are each about half based on primary-document research; 18, 74, 161, 198, and 200 include significant chunks of secondary-source historical writing; 58, 78, 101, 152, 187, 198, 222, and 243 use oral history; 79 relates folk ahistoricism to individualism; and 65 gives a thinly contextualized account of recent historical invention in Appalachia (for a much thicker analysis of the cultural construction of history, see 71).

difficulties of this time-consuming method of what might be called “dispersed participant-observation.” Some studied settings in which persons unknown to one another interacted or didn’t—the public behavior of strangers (7, 29, 45, 51, 142); the marginal personal relations of alienated suburbanites (163); and (the most original topic in all these books) the imaginary personal relations in private daydreams and fantasies (30).

Most of these participant-observers, however, like anthropologists elsewhere in the world, looked for “villages”—relevant groups or collectivities of some sort—and moved in, or visited regularly: urban neighborhoods (7, 14, 100, 119, 133, 142, 143, 183, 194, 211, 222, 230, 240); small cities (151, 159) and suburbs (13, 44, 79, 83, 101, 141); rural towns and regions (15, 23, 58, 60, 64, 65, 84, 89, 93, 112, 224); occupational groups (1, 3, 139, 160, 187, 215), factories (24, 55, 83, 122, 244), and corporate settings (75, 95, 104, 120); courts (143), prisons (59, 61a), and other legal institutions (80, 136); political party organizations (188, 192, 234); preschools (217), schools (49, 63, 73, 78, 81, 87, 93, 164, 165, 184, 210, 227, 235), colleges (147), and professional schools (21, 113, 115); science labs (125, 132, 221) and academic presses (169); churches (6, 76, 83, 126, 161, 232), synagogues (69), and other religious groups (22, 27, 170, 185); hospitals (19, 21, 28, 115, 187), other health institutions (74, 141, 236)—including mental (54, 177, 193)—and homes or centers for the aged (49, 67, 149, 195, 214, 230); cliques (133), gangs (100, 231), and drug-dealing groups (2, 241); voluntary associations (57, 149, 196), hobbyist and leisure groups (10, 12, 56, 92, 175), and Disney World (61); garages (89), stores (171, 172) and restaurants (100, 160, 206); bars, straight (17, 83) and gay (176, 237); and bathing beaches for the clothed (51) and the naked (45).

These domestic ethnographers undoubtedly did part-time fieldwork much more often than far-from-home anthropologists do, though usually they also had the elementary linguistic and cultural skills that exotic researchers often have to spend time acquiring in the field; and these domestic ethnographers may have made a virtue of convenience—a nearby “field”—and conducted longer-term projects more often than overseas researchers do. Nine to twelve months is the most commonly mentioned period for domestic fieldwork; multi-year investigations include: 2–5 years, Cassell (28), di Leonardo (42), Dominquez (43), Greenhouse (79), Horowitz (100), Konner (115), Kugelmass (119), Latour & Woolgar (125), Merry (143), Myerhoff (149), Peacock & Tyson (161), T. Williams (241), and Yanagisako (243); and 6–10 years, Achenson (1), Adler (2), Anderson (7), Brown (22), Halle (83), Harper (89), Heath (93), Moffatt (147), Odendahl (155), Sacks (187) and B. Williams (240). (Reflecting the leisurely pace of academic writing, the ethnographic present for at least a third of these books published in the 1980s and early 1990s is the 1970s—for at least a dozen, the early 1970s.)

Except for the autoethnographers, virtually all suggest they usually operated as known researchers, though Adler, Moffatt, Rollins, and perhaps Lam-

phere<sup>6</sup> played covert roles part-time as a borderline drug-dealer (2), an undergraduate (147), a cleaning woman (182), and a textile worker (122), respectively; and MacLeod conducted his participant-observation in two mid-adolescent male cliques as a senior in college (and wrote his book as a graduate student) (133). Despite their best efforts at candid self-representation, however, those domestic ethnographers who could “pass” probably did so regularly by accident. To paraphrase Luhrmann in her splendid study of British middle-class witches, they told their subjects carefully who they were, but then did their best research when their subjects forgot (130:17) (though researcher status, at home as abroad, can also give access to settings or mentalities ordinary folk might not be allowed).

Some, as known researchers, also took on working roles in the institutions they studied, as a childrens’ ward volunteer (19), a surgical-unit gofer (21), a factory worker (55), a Little League coach (57), a prison guard (61a), a handyman (89), a social worker (133), a political organizer (187), and an agricultural laborer (215). Myerhoff simulated physical impairments to mimic the difficulties of functioning when very old (149); Estroff bravely took strong antipsychotic medication for six weeks, to share its heavy side-effects with her psychiatric out-patient subjects (54).

Van Willigen combined extensive network analysis with somewhat thinner participant-observation in his study of aged Kentuckians (224). Moffatt taught preliminary analyses of student culture to large undergraduate classes for two years, and rewrote (and collected extensive new self-reports for further analysis) from what the students wrote in response (147). Grant and Heath similarly used teaching to generate new cultural texts in the educational institutions they studied (83, 93), as did Myerhoff through the “Living History” classes she initiated in a Jewish senior center (149). And Sacks, Tobin et al, and Stacey shared drafts of their books with subjects—the first two making minor revisions in response to their critiques (187, 217), the last printing their remarks verbatim as an epilogue (204).

Only two of these books are based on ethnographic research inside the United States and out—Francis’s well-structured comparison of Jewish retirees in Britain versus Cleveland, Ohio (67); and Tobin et al’s *Preschool in Three Cultures*, the most methodologically innovative of all these monographs. Preschools were studied and videotaped in the United States, Japan, and China; all the tapes were shown to preschool specialists in each nation; and nuanced interpretations of American culture (among other things) were generated from the ensuing transcultural commentary (among other evidence) (217).

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Another example of a vaguely described ethnographer’s path—Lamphere tells us only that she “took a job” for several months as an “apprentice sewer,” without making it clear whether anyone knew she was an anthropologist, or how else she might have presented herself (details suggest she was undercover, at least to one supervisor) (122).



## WRITING

Despite the great interest in textual experimentalism in anthropology in the last decade (33, 36, 138), most of these domestic monographs are conventionally written. Ethnographer and relation-to-subjects is confined to the beginning or end of a book; the bulk of the text consists of impersonally written, monologic descriptions variously mixed with various theories, interpretations, or styles of analysis—tacit cultural (23, 25, 26, 79, 147, 166, 217, 237, 243), symbolic (15, 38, 149, 152, 238), performative (12, 17, 149), constructionist (43, 65, 76, 80, 125, 136, 227, 237), cognitive (3, 98), Durkheimian/Weberian (161), Tocquevillian (18, 78, 79), cultural reproductive (49, 63, 98, 133; 235 argues against it), political-economic (24, 42, 55, 95, 96, 122, 151, 187, 215), phenomenological (2, 45, 69, 132), ethnomethodological (7, 19, 51, 77), ethnography of speaking (12, 17, 77, 93, 114, 197), and postmodern (204).

Sociologists tend to produce tidy texts suggesting that separately conceptualized theory has been applied to carefully chosen case studies, for elucidation, proof, or disproof (13, 21, 24, 95, 210, 215). Anthropologists, often equally theoretical, also feature the serendipity and creativity of the field encounter, and the complexities of their subjects' mentalities and behaviors (42, 54, 63, 64, 74, 79, 93, 143, 147, 149, 187, 196, 227, 237) (on the different relation of "case-study" research to the sociological and the anthropological traditions, see 223). Anthropologist Agar's ethnography of independent truckers, on the other hand, is as theoretically centered and methodologically precise as the neatest sociological monograph (3). And sociologist Halle's study of skilled chemical workers in New Jersey may be the single most impressive "thick description" (72) in all these ethnographies—most like classical anthropological "total ethnographies" in its rich, well-ordered, context-specific detail and organization (83) [anthropologist Heath's rich ethnography of speaking from the rural Carolinas is a close second (93)].

Bluebond-Langner's serene write-up of her heroic study of a dying-children's ward is one of the best (and, in anthropology, least known) of the far fewer experimentally written domestic monographs. Case-study material is distilled into a long illustrative "play," identified as fiction, followed by five briefer chapters about the subtle ethnomethodology of pretence among dying children, family members, and hospital staff (19). Sacks's account of the long-term contingencies of gender, race, class, and occupation in hospital-union organizing is also exemplary for the care with which it positions its author-as-researcher-and-political organizer (187). So too is Weston's ethnography of California gay and lesbian culture—quietly reflexive, unique among domestic ethnographies to date for its balance between its interpretive theme of cultural construction and its equally insightful analyses of continuities in tacit culture (237).

Tobin et al have written an unpretentious but subtle book in which a play of interpretive voices is intentionally present (local, cross-cultural, and their

own); but the overall effect is more authorial than they had evidently hoped, with their “polyvocal” ambitions (217).<sup>7</sup> Carter gives us a quirky, readable, textually conscious meditation on the difficulties—without much access—of reconstructing what really happened at the Raj Neesh ashram in eastern Oregon (27). Latour & Woolgar, and Weatherford, use the imagery of “anthropologist,” “tribe,” “ritual,” etc. as distancing tropes—Latour & Woolgar to bracket the truth-claims of science (125); Weatherford, Nacirema-like, to satirize Washington politicians (234).<sup>8</sup>

Horwitz uses photos and fluent language to evoke an American “place” rarely celebrated, a tacky suburban strip (101). Estroff writes messily but vividly about psychiatric outpatients, not entirely effectively bifurcating description and interpretation into separate chunks of her book (54). Rhodes promises Foucauldian and deconstructive complexity but delivers a generally straightforward story of psychiatric professionals handling contradictory or impossible job demands—with bravado, irony, a sense of the absurd, and shortcut techniques (177). Krieger experiments naively with ways of eliciting and writing “pure” subject “voices” among midwestern lesbians (117); Dorst buries a potentially fascinating case study of a self-conscious suburb and art center under opaque postmodern prose (44); and Rose ignores most anthropological, sociological, and historical scholarship on race and urban poverty to write a jejune, choppy, allegedly postmodern set of notes on his research among poor blacks in Philadelphia in the early 1970s (183).

Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days* is, of course, among the most important and appealing of all the reflexive ethnographies in anthropology. The ethnographer is apparently always positioned in the account; her aged Jewish subjects evidently have as much voice and textual authority as herself (149). A new study of Myerhoff’s writing practices, however, raises disturbing questions about the book’s accuracy on certain points—and, more generally, about acceptable limits of fictionalization in ethnographic experimentation. Comparisons between the final text and early drafts suggest that (without ever indicating she was doing so) Myerhoff added background information and her own thoughts to words spoken by subjects, and shifted reported statements and actions between various persons so as to make ethnographically featured characters more central and coherent than they evidently were in the actual dynamics of the center (108).

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<sup>7</sup> On the limits of polyvocality, and the tricky ethics of offering to share textual authority, see also 218; for the alternate proposition that, even given varying authorial control, polyvocal voices often “leak through” ethnographic texts, see Manganaro (135).

<sup>8</sup> In a Canadian ethnography, Handler experiments with a much more embedded instance of “anthropology in the text,” attempting the cultural analysis of cultural nationalists who have themselves appropriated notions of cultural holism from anthropology and other social sciences (85). Moffatt tries the same technique more restrictedly for American undergraduates’ use of “culture” and “relativism” in an interracial context (146).

## READINGS

What, then, do these more than a hundred-and-a-half ethnographies add up to? What do they tell us about the culture or cultures of persons living in the continental United States in the 1970s and 1980s?

*American Culture?*

A very new constructionist approach to American culture asks how concepts of “America” are constituted, communicated, contested, and changed—how the “national unit, a geopolitical space, is transformed into a nationwide cultural space” (129:371). Applied to American culture in general, this constructionist perspective hasn’t yet reached these published ethnographies<sup>9</sup>; but some of these ethnographers do use it in important ways to analyze the contestation of particular American cultural categories, especially “nature/culture.”

Thus Ginsberg’s pro-choice women chose to control their own natural reproduction; given the fundamental axes of American culture, her pro-lifers almost have to “choose” the “natural” way in reaction (74). Weston’s lesbian mothers wonder if natural parentage can be conceptually confined to women, males being relevant only as sperm-donors (237). Sperling’s animal-rights activists, drawing on pop anthropology, have fuzzed the animal/human distinction to the point where animals are the new Noble Savages (200). And Dominguez’s Louisianans have been rewriting the different racial “natures” of Creoles, blacks, and whites for centuries (43).

Two more essentialist approaches to general American culture, on the other hand, are articulated by a few of these ethnographies, and are implicit in many more. One is explicitly Tocquevillian [18, 79; Varenne’s older *Americans Together* (225)<sup>10</sup>]; closely related are a few monographs that include ethnic or cross-cultural comparisons, contrasting generalized “Americans” to French (26), Israelis (196), Japanese and Chinese (217), Japanese-Americans (243), etc. Both highlight an “American culture” associated with some sort of middle-class “mainstream,”<sup>11</sup> features of which can be outlined as follows.

<sup>9</sup> But for a splendid, in-progress example, see the work of Handler and associates on how museumologists at Williamsburg, Virginia are reconstituting mainstream and minority history (71, 86).

<sup>10</sup> *Americans Together* precociously emphasized the fluidity and mutual negotiation involved in “American culture” at a time when these interpretive themes were far less well developed in social science. Compared to some current work, on the other hand, it was also relatively “essentialist,” boiling the culture of its midwest town down to “individualism,” “community,” “love,” etc. For an example of Varenne’s very different current orientation—simultaneously microanalytic, ethnomethodological, hyperconstructionist, and linguistically based—see his forthcoming *Ambiguous Harmony: Family Talk in America* (Ablex).

<sup>11</sup> None of these ethnographers deals extensively with current notions of cultural hegemony as a solution to—or a productive way of restating—old debates about *an* American culture versus “pluralism” or “multiculturalism.” For this perspective, see 66 and 127.

### *The Tocquevillian Mainstream*

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah et al—consciously updating Tocqueville (219)—locate “utilitarian” and “expressive” individualism at the heart of American middle-class values in the 1980s, with the complementary Tocquevillian value, “community,” much more peripheral than it has been in the past. [Contrary to Lasch’s “narcissistic” interpretation (124), however, they consider other-oriented community values to be deeply embedded in American consciousness, and revivable (18).] Anthropologists and others have previously reached similar conclusions about the saliency of a distinctively American individualism (9, 102, 178, 201; see also 239); a number of the present ethnographers further delineate its nuances.

THE INDIVIDUALISTIC PERSON Thus Curran detects person-concepts shifting toward contemporary expressive individualism at a likely time but in an unlikely place—in the 1950s and 1960s, among young Catholic nuns in convents (38). Weston posits the notion of a “core self” beneath the more fluid personal transformations articulated in gay and lesbian “coming out stories” (237); and Moffatt proposes that undergraduates assume a similar distinction between an authentic inner “true self” and a manipulative outer “social self”—the latter the domain of the mandatory American self-presentation, the “friendly self” (147).

Factoring in gender, Hochschild depicts an airline requiring its stewardesses to transmute their presumably authentic, inner female emotions into aspects of their public selves, for corporate presentation (“friendly,” smiling, caring, sexy, etc) (95). And Maltz & Borker’s older article on male and female speech—adumbrating Tannen’s current pop linguistics on the topic (213)—implies, among other things, that American male selves talk more competitively while female selves talk more interactively (134).

Cross-culturally, Tobin et al’s Japanese commentators find Americans peculiarly interested in verbal expressiveness and natural idiosyncrasies in tiny children; the same commentators think Americans overcontrol small children’s peer-group behavior (217). Shokeid’s recent Israeli immigrants consider American “friendliness” constrained and formal compared to their own aggressive personalism (considered hopelessly “rude” by “American” standards in response) (196). And Carroll’s middle-class French are similarly mystified by the unpredictable entailments of “openness,” continual negotiation, expressiveness, tedious earnestness, and “sincerity”—and other aspects of the American self—as revealed in French-American misunderstandings in daily life (26).

CLASS Consistent with Tocqueville’s observations about American egalitarianism, consistent with the aversion of individualists to personal categorization, few Americans described in these monographs consider themselves “class-de-

terminated"<sup>12</sup>; consistent with sociological research, when they do think about class, most associate themselves with the broad middle. Halle's chemical workers consider their manual labor duller and lower-status than the mentally skilled occupations of the engineers and managers running their factories; they attribute their inferior occupations to educational deficiencies when young (83) (for recent cognitive analyses of working-class ideology, see also 208, 209). At home, however, they point to their mixed-class neighborhoods, incomes, consumer purchases, and childrens' chances for mobility to assert they're nevertheless just as good as anyone else. Odendahl's upper-class philanthropists make the same claim in the opposite direction: Despite their wealth, they assure the ethnographer, they live simply, just like the middle classes (155).

Odendahl's subjects live simply with original art on their walls, however, and in simple one-of-a-kind architect-designed homes (plural, not singular), while Halle's workers own tract houses and perhaps a homemade cottage at the beach. And despite their subjects' avoidance of overt status distinctions, many of these ethnographers study the impact of something like class on those they write about. [For an insightful sketch of the unspoken semiotics of American class, including a "living room test" to estimate one's own class pretensions, see satirist Fussell (70).]

Thus three ethnographers of schooling attempt with mixed success to apply British-derived cultural reproduction theory to what sociologists have known for a generation—that there's some relation between adolescent cliques and social class (49, 63, 133) (for a nuanced interpretation of the ambivalence of most American adolescents toward clique membership, see 226). More adequately, Heath contrasts richly described rural white working-class conventions of language use (strict literalism) with those of the middle class (first accurate, then more flexible and "creative") (93); and Martin finds that middle-class women accept medical models of their bodies while working-class women resist them (140) (on working-class resistance to expert systems, see also 11). Rollin's black cleaning women resist their women employers' condescension by gossiping about the dirty undersides of their respectable white lives (182) (on working women's resistance, see also 160). Agar's truckers dream pop-cultural dreams of heroic independence while leading actual work lives full of regulation (3); Halle's even-more-regulated factory workers wish they could be truckers, or policemen, or tavern-owners, all relatively more independent (83); given some workplace autonomy, plus peer-competition, Burawoy's factory workers produce more than is in their own class interest, according to Burawoy (24).

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For an analysis of American middle-class career-choice narratives that never once refer to class causation, see Linde (128). On social class and American culture, see also Ortner (157), preliminary remarks toward interesting new research about a high-school graduating class in middle age, current working title "Jews, the Middle Class, and 'American Culture.'"

Halle's workers invest less sense of self in their routine jobs than many middle-class men (83), such as Jackall's driven middle-managers, who [like Newman's same (153)] tend to lose everything in career failure (104). Bell's middle-class black men use leisurely bar talk to (among other things) mediate the "contradictions" of being both black and somewhat successful in a white world (17). And some of Odendahl's nouveau riche feel comfortable about their elevated status because they "made it themselves," while some of her Old Money wonder if they're personally worthy, given the American value creed (155).

COMMUNITY As good individualists should, the Americans in these ethnographies articulate "community" much more happily than class; but figuring out what the term really means in American common culture in the 1970s and 1980s is not easy. B. Williams writes hopefully about a mixed urban neighborhood attempting to create richer community connections (to counteract the "weightlessness" of modern culture) through newly invented "rituals"—street festivals (240) (64 and 159 also experiment with the analysis of community secular rituals; see also 52). Beaver (15), Forrest (64), Heath (93), and Peacock & Tyson (161) gesture toward local connectedness in poor rural parts of the near-south, and Harper tenderly describes and photographs the non-alienated world of "Willie," a capable rural handyman-bricoleur in upstate New York (89). Otherwise, other ethnographers of American locality sketch citizens more interested in leading privatized lives undisturbed by their neighbors than in having substantial relationships with them.

Thus Anderson (7), Merry (142), and Edgerton (51) treat ad hoc tactics for living alongside strangers in urban America—detecting and reducing danger, dealing with proximity, etc. In safer middle-class suburbs, Perin "semiotically" probes elaborate strategies for dealing with barely known neighbors and thinking about feared outsiders (163); Baumgartner's "moral minimalism" (13) and Greenhouse's "avoidance of conflict" summarize similar suburban sensibilities (79). And though Merry finds more disputing among working-class urbanites than in the suburbs—more use of courts—the sociological motives are the same: "coexistence without contact"; "search for an impersonal moral authority [rather than] ... control [by] local political authorities and [by] local gossip" (143:83).

If many contemporary Americans don't really live in "community" with their immediate neighbors in space, on the other hand, many of them do "build" it in other directions. Community in this sense is more dynamic and agentive than anything fully evoked by these ethnographies; correctly grasped, it implies choice, seriousness of purpose [it's a sacred term, as Varenne has suggested (229)], and some personally connected group (not necessarily localized) often standing metonymically for some larger hypothetical entity [a town, a university, an ethnic community; di Leonardo's savvy remarks about Italian-American "community" point in the right direction (42:131–39)]. None

of these monographs treats this sort of “community” in many of the places it’s known to exist: the plentiful volunteer organizations in working-class and middle-class towns (most fire departments and rescue squads outside urban America are voluntary, for instance) and the relatively new, ubiquitous American “groups-of-the-self,” “self-help groups.”

When Americans connect personally for less serious purposes, they don’t call what they’re doing “community”; they call it something like “fun” or “relaxation.” Moffatt (147) found that undergraduate dorm-floor collectivities—“residence hall communities” in the deans’ fantasies—were “friendly groups of kids” in the students’ experience. Adults often modify the rigors of work with similar sociability—the domestically based food exchanges and networking skills Sacks’ women bring to their hospital jobs (187); and male joking-and-insult humor described by Halle for factory workers (83) and by other ethnographers for other male-centered occupations. Other ethnographic descriptions of hedonism, pleasure, or play include, for adults, Bacon-Smith’s new study of television fan groups (10); Adler on fast-track, southern California, middle-class drug-users (2); Hayano on poker-players (92); Bell (17) and Read (176) on bars; Halle on working-class leisure (83); Bauman on male storytellers in Texas (12); Douglas et al on nude beaches (45); and for youths and adolescents, Moffatt on undergraduate sexuality and friendliness (147) and Fine on male Little League and Dungeon-and-Dragon-type gaming groups (56, 57).

RELIGION When Americans become most serious, on the other hand, they call it “religion”—or, drawing on secularized religious language, “commitment” to “values” etc. [Cultural analyses of contemporary American pop psychology are absent from these ethnographies; but see D’Andrade (39) on folk models of the mind.] Among Baptists in her virtually all-white southern suburb, Greenhouse meticulously unpacks contemporary forms of Tocquevillian connections among denominational Protestantism, individualism, egalitarianism, and ahistoricism (79). Peacock & Tyson lovingly describe an even more basic American Protestant folk: a tiny, patriarchal but otherwise nonhierarchical sect in Appalachia so fundamentalist that its members consider John Calvin suspiciously liberal; strict predeterminists, they do not evangelize (what’s the point?). The tale is almost too good to believe: Max Weber was related to these Appalachian fundamentalists, and visited the authors’ grandfathers just before writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (161).

Several other ethnographies variously explore the cultural style and relation to right-wing politics of Protestant fundamentalists (5, 6, 164, 184, 185). Halle finds a weak, “flattened” Protestantism among his New Jersey workers (83). Prell thickly describes a liberalizing Jewish prayer group (170); Furman suggests that a liberal, socially conscious synagogue has lost touch with the essential values of Judaic ritualism (69). And, back in New Jersey, McGuire categorizes middle-class ritual healing practices as they tail off into New Age

religion (141). [See Luhrmann's ethnography of British witches and other New Age believers, however, for the best available ethnography of this undoubtedly transatlantic middle-class "religious" mentality (130).]

YOUTH, GENDER, FAMILY, AGE "Kinship," once at the heart of anthropology, has faded as a topic of domestic research just as it has cross-culturally; meanwhile, however, "gender" has boomed.<sup>13</sup> Goodwin writes meticulously about language interactions within and between genders among black children (77). Microsociologist Fine's two detailed accounts of boys' play-groups document the development of predatory heterosexual attitudes (56, 57)—which crop up even more darkly among college-age males in Sanday's strident but sometimes insightful *Fraternity Gang Rape* (189) (on ritual expressions of older male gender mentalities, see 53).

Among college women, Holland & Eisenhart detect the importance of "romance" and ensuing commitments to husbands and traditional family roles rather than to career success (98). [Radway studies the same cultural fantasy among romance-reading housewives (175)]. Moffatt discerns a wider range of sex-and-gender attitudes among male and female undergraduates than either Holland & Eisenhart, or Sanday—including "male romantics," "female experimentalists," and extensive cross-gender friendships—but agrees with them about central tendencies (147). Weston treats adolescent homosexual experience in retrospect, in many of her gay "coming out" stories (237) (for more good recent gay ethnography, also see 94).

Compared to the "traditional," multigenerational, duty-impregnated kinship systems characterized similarly by Johnson and Yanagisako for Italian-Americans and Japanese-Americans, respectively (105, 106, 243), mainstream "American" marriage-and-family is individualistic, based on rational calculation and assessments of emotional authenticity (on middle-class marriage, see also 173, 174). Halle describes gender-segregated working-class marriages but argues that his affluent workers are converging toward a more companionate middle-class model, especially as they age (83).

Lamphere and Zavella treat work-and-family interactions for women factory workers of diverse ethnicities in New England (122) and California (244). Fink shows how farm wives' labor was devalued in the early 20th century and is now alienated by major corporations (58). And Fishman documents the can't-win status of prisoner's wives—good women who "wait," with little social support; or "not-so-good" women with even less (59).

Stacey argues vigorously but unconvincingly that two large mixed-class, gender-experimental extended families among whom she did participant-ob-

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<sup>13</sup> Women were among the least-studied subjects in the anthropology of American culture a decade ago (201:67); now, about one sixth of all these ethnographies are about gender, many of the researchers intentionally cutting across older analytic categories—making women visible in work, for instance, and work visible in marriage and family. Owing to its boundary-blurring tendencies, gender research is reviewed throughout this article (as cited), not in this section alone.



ervation in California represent a widespread new phenomenon, the “post-modern family” (204). Hochschild delineates the “stalled revolution” of gender equality in middle-class, dual-career marriages (96). And Daniels and Ostrander document how much unrecognized work “nonworking” upper-class wives actually do philanthropically, and in maintaining key institutions associated with their families’ elite status (the arts, private schools, etc) (41, 158).

Neville’s mostly oral-historical account of family “pilgrimages” in white southern Protestant culture deals with extended kin networks (152), as do Johnson’s interview-based books on the Italian-American family (105, 106).<sup>14</sup> Most of the ethnographies of age suggest how weak these intergenerational family ties are—also documenting especially clearly a general property of American society, top to bottom, rarely analyzed as such in these monographs: its ever-more-layered age-segregation.

Thus Francis’s elderly American Jews have much less daily contact with mobile junior family members than do the elderly British Jews she compares them to (67). Vesperi’s non-affluent, far-from-home retirees suffer as a Florida city redefines itself as a place for younger yuppies (230). Shield’s nursing-home patients lead sad lives of alienation and unritualized liminality between life and death (195). Myerhoff’s Jewish aged—similarly poor and far from kin—fight bravely to create meaning and “community” among themselves, drawing on idiosyncratic strengths from their cultures of youth (eastern European *shtetl* life) (149). Becker’s aging deaf are similarly preadapted to the travails of American age: Shunted to special institutions when young, disadvantaged when mature, they have long since developed skills for dealing with loneliness and finding others of their kind (16).

Only Van Willigen’s rural Kentuckians still grow old surrounded by friends and family (though Van Willigen pre-selected for old subjects not living separately). In early old-age, their social networks actually expand from the average for middle-aged adults, from about 25 to 30 other persons met with or talked to regularly (then progressively declining in late old age, but still averaging about 19 “alters” for subjects over 80) (224).

## Variations

Regional variations in American culture are evoked by a number of these books, especially those about Appalachia and the south; but they are dealt with directly only in a few, and then in simple opposition to the northeast or California. Greenberg’s Georgian suburbanites associate their essence with being Baptist, local, and southern, versus urban and northern; Ginsberg’s Dakotan women activists construct a “midwest feminism” more family and community sensitive than “coastal feminism” (74).

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So too will Carol Stack’s forthcoming ethnography of black return-migration to the south, analyzing extended kin ties and long-term family strategies—current working title, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*.

Two grim studies remind us of the continued exclusion of many blacks from the American mainstream: Boone's analysis of causes of high rates of black infant death in Washington, DC (20), and Anderson's sketch of a drug-disintegrated black ghetto in Philadelphia (and of poignant ethnomethodological tactics used by nonghetto black males to signal "I'm safe/middle-class") (7). Among the other ethnographies of race, Gwaltney and Heath evoke distinctively black cultures best—Gwaltney through lightly interpreted life histories (82), Heath through rich description of contextual and metaphorically elaborate language use in a rural black community (93).

Three recent ethnographies present the extreme cultural diversity of newly arrived American ethnic populations, as well their typically non-assimilative first-generation mentalities: Brown on Haitian voodoo in Brooklyn (detailed about the religion, less so about the American context; 22); Staub about New York-area Yemenis, inventing generalized "middle Eastern restaurants" for an American clientele, while determined to return to family, village, and tribe (and less to "nation") in Yemen (206); and Gibson about Sikhs in rural northern California, equally determined not to assimilate, also intent that their children succeed in American schools (they do, thanks to the Sikh work ethic; 73).

Shokeid's New York-area Israelis (196), on the other hand, aren't all that different from people in the mainstream, except in their novel ethnic strategy. Ashamed of leaving Israel, stigmatized by American Jews, qualified enough to get decent jobs without connections, they've evolved a non-self-presentation that Shokeid calls "low-profile ethnicity." Alienated from Americans by their ruder etiquette, on the other hand, they do collect sporadically and surreptitiously for boisterous Israeli songfests in community centers, Shokeid discovers, and then virtually deny these connections the rest of the time. In the kinkiest and most original analogy in all these books, Shokeid compares their need for this disconnected ethnic *communitas* to the homoerotic "impersonal sexuality" described in Humphreys' controversial *Tearoom Trade* (103).

Studying an older and more assimilated ethnic population, Tricarico writes a concise history based on his third-generation return to his grandparents' Italian neighborhood in New York City, deciding that contemporary Italian-Americans are "situationally ethnic" (222). Di Leonardo reaches related but more complex conclusions in her theoretically sophisticated unpacking of the "varieties of ethnic experience" among Italian-Americans in northern California—influenced by media stereotypes, varying by class, occupation, gender and political purpose, etc (42). [On "ironic" contemporary American attitudes toward such ethnic identities, see Chock (32).] And Kugelmass and Myerhoff write variously about aging Jewish populations hanging on in deteriorating urban neighborhoods in New York (119) and southern California (149).

A number of ethnographers treat aspects of Latin American or Caribbean ethnicity in the United States (63, 121, 165, 210, 215, 231, 241), with only Horowitz's study of mixed values in a Mexican-American neighborhood in Chicago approaching thick description (100; but see also the forthcoming

109). With the exception of Yanagisako (243), richly analyzed Asian-Americans are similarly conspicuous by their absence from these book-length ethnographies (only 68 and 81 are in print; but, forthcoming, see 31).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some aspects of this diverse ethnographic writing have inevitably been neglected here: some innovative, nonparticipatory methods<sup>15</sup>; applied interests; the specific findings of the many ethnographies of schooling; linguistic dimensions; research on organizations, bureaucracies, and a few professions; and smaller literatures on pop and media culture, and on science and technology [for important in-progress work on the last, see Downey (46, 47).] Little attention has been given to ethics or to epistemology. What, for instance, are social scientists doing when they're analyzing a culture in which folk forms of their own concepts are often part of the culture; or, alternatively, in which their "concepts" turn out to be drawn from the common culture?

There are also striking absences in this recent American ethnography, not mentioned above but worth reviewing in closing. Why is there no work on such organized entities as sports teams, the police, and the military? Why so little ethnographic research on formal politics? Why so many studies of medical doctors and so few of other professions? Why so many about factory workers and so few about the much bigger service sector?

Local conceptions of regional identities might be worth deeper investigation, especially in alliance with new thinking in cultural geography (see 199 and the subsequent debate in the same journal); new ways might also be developed to follow and represent Americans in motion as well as Americans rooted in particular places—for the limits of what can be studied using intensive participatory methods have not yet been established. For instance, many Americans relate personally but not face-to-face through computer networks and other forms of new technology. New studies of how ordinary folk actually think of and use mass and media culture—and possibly of how its makers are themselves culturally influenced—are also crying out to be done; Radway's research on readers of romance still stands in lonely contrast to an expanding flood of text-based, academy-based pronouncements on the meaning of pop culture (175) (see 148 for a comment on the limits of the latter).

Despite recent deconstructions of holism as ethnographic rhetoric (216), the value of thick descriptions like Halle's and Heath's suggests that the richer and more intensively researched the "partial truth" (34), the better. One possible traditional area of application might be renovated community studies, as wide-

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<sup>15</sup> Robinson's long-term research on American use of time (180, 181), for instance; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton's methods for tapping definitions of ordinary but meaningful things (37); and Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi's beeper-driven technique for sampling the experiential states of people while they are watching television (118).

ranging in particular localities as possible, delineating contemporary meanings of “community” rather than nostalgically deploring the loss of past ones.

Finally, ethnographic innovators might follow Handler and others in looking for where “America” and its various bits and pieces are formulated and reformulated—and in looking at the ethnic boundaries of the nation more carefully and in new ways. Many more studies of the full range and mix of cultures among diverse newly arrived Americans would be valuable, possibly including home-and-abroad research on “part-time Americans” [the sociologists’ “return migrants,” James Clifford’s “cosmopolitan workers” (35, see also 179)]—especially timely for a nation newly reinterested in, and worried about, its historically ever-remixing “multiculturalism.”

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