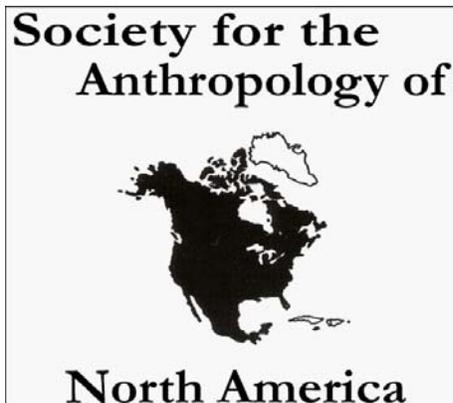


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## Report on the Field **Ethnography of Rural North America**

By *Jane Adams*

**Abstract:** This article surveys the history of anthropological research in rural North America in the 20th and 21st centuries. Anthropologists have studied rural North America since at least the 1920s, when the Rockefeller Foundation funded SSRC spurred interdisciplinary research on a range of social issues, developing the "community studies" approach. Anthropologists in the U.S. Department of Agriculture were integral to New Deal rural studies. After WWII, funding dried up and aside from studies in the peripheral regions of Appalachia and the Ozarks, economically-driven positivist studies dominated the rural social sciences. Beginning in the 1960s, with rural America radically transformed by the massive post-WWII capitalization of agriculture, ethnographers used new research paradigms in ecological, feminist, political economic, interpretive, and historical anthropology to again study North American farming and rural communities.

**Key words:** U.S. anthropology, North America, rural, farming, history of anthropology

In the March 2007 issue of *North American Dialogue*, Kate Masley called for reclamation of ethnographic research in North America. Her recounting of the history of anthropological work in the U.S. focused on work dealing with Native Americans, African Americans, and the urban U.S. She gives only the barest nod to anthropological research in rural America where she indicates (p. 3) that WWII initiated "the shift ... 'from 'isolated tribal

societies' to 'agriculturally based communities' and 'complex societies.'"

Yet there is a significant amount of contemporary research in rural U.S. In this article, I will briefly survey some aspects of anthropology in rural North America, providing information to complement that provided by Masley. Together our articles offer a more full and complete picture of the history of U.S. anthropology. The short list of books cited here, while hardly exhaustive, is intended to convey the depth and breadth of specifically anthropological work historically undertaken and currently being done in North America, focused on my own areas of expertise. I also sketch some of the reasons for the neglect of this tradition in contemporary anthropology.

In the 1920s, the Rockefeller Foundation and associated foundations actively promoted the development of U.S. social sciences, bringing together and funding research by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, psychologists, and legal theorists. The Social Science Research Council resulted from this initiative. These foundations set a powerful research agenda focused on theoretical issues of personality and culture; they were concerned, in a practical way, with "acculturation" of northward-migrating African Americans and European and Mexican immigrants (Adams and Gorton 2004; Baker 1998; Patterson 2001; Powdermaker 1966, 1993 [1939]; Sibley 2001 [1974]; Stanfield 1982, 1985; Worcester 2001). They were also concerned with rural poverty, black and white,

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particularly in the South. These concerns flowed directly into the formulation of New Deal programs (Baldwin 1968; Stanfield 1985), and into a number of studies funded by various New Deal agencies.

Two studies have remained in print: St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's Works Progress Administration (WPA)-funded work in Chicago (1945) that they undertook with W. Lloyd Warner; and Walter Goldschmidt's (1978) study of the impact of different forms of agricultural production on three California communities, entitled *As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness*, funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE). In addition to Goldschmidt's highly controversial work, the BAE undertook a series of community studies, entitled *Rural Life Studies, Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community* (Bureau of Agricultural Economics 1978). Also funded by the USDA (Kimball 1951), Oscar Lewis (1948) conducted a community study in Texas, and Horace Miner (1949) conducted another in Iowa's Corn Belt. The title of Miner's book, *Culture and Agriculture*, was taken as the name of the AAA section.

These studies of rural America followed from the pioneering community studies by Helen and Robert Lynd (1929; 1937) and W. Lloyd Warner. Warner is best known for his "Yankee City" volumes that analyzed Newburyport, Massachusetts (1941, 1942, 1945, 1949, 1959), but he also conducted research in a rural county seat, Morris, Grundy County, Illinois. Warner called Morris "Jonesville;" another researcher called it "Elmtown." Warner also directed research in Natchez, Mississippi (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941).

The massive extension of the State into aspects of the society and economy by the New Deal was not universally welcomed. It threatened established property relationships, particularly in the South and West, and in the Midwest it collided with a deep-seated agrarianism that valorized independent farmers and small government. Under pressure from Western and Southern agricultural interests, these rural studies were eliminated (see Goldschmidt 1978:484-6; Kimball 1951), and the USDA never again undertook comparable studies. The 1940 *Yearbook of Agriculture* represents the height of anthropological

integration into the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1940), with an article on “Cultural Anthropology and Modern Agriculture” by Robert Redfield and W. Lloyd Warner.

### **Transformation of Rural U.S.**

Following WWII the U.S. took on the task of rebuilding war-torn Europe and of “modernizing” Latin America and the newly freed colonies in Asia and Africa. All of this occurred in the context of the Cold War. The U.S. was to be the “breadbasket of the world,” which required high production levels in basic commodities. During this period, the U.S. shifted its industrial base, massively producing consumer goods. Relatively high paying urban jobs sucked people from agriculture, which at least since 1921 had been unable to pay anywhere close to industrial wages or provide comparable returns on capital. Most U.S. policymakers believed that if U.S. farmers were to have a standard of living comparable to that of urban people, there had to be far fewer farmers (to divide a stable or shrinking pie) and which would occur by replacing labor with capital investments. The government made credit easy and widely available to buy land, tractors, and equipment, to purchase fertilizers and the new hybrid, high yield seeds, and to improve farm homes. Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture under Eisenhower in the 1950s, said it best, with a resonance farmers never forgot: “Get big or get out.” While many farmers did not “go along with the program,” except for groups like the Amish who maintained cohesive, economically and socially interdependent communities, large numbers were forced to conform or abandon farming.

The 1950s were, then, a period of major dislocation. Farmers left rural areas by the thousands; rural areas were “left behind” in the “march of progress.” As the government and most social scientists defined the issues facing rural America, the problem faced by farmers was how to adopt the new technologies and new production practices; the problem for rural areas was poverty and economic development. Foundations and the federal government no longer funded studies conducted using the qualitative methodologies and holistic approaches central to anthropology.

Anthropologists turned toward the Third World and reasserted the Boasian emphasis on “primitive” societies (see, e.g., Kimball 1955). In the U.S. that

meant American Indians, African Americans, Appalachians, and the urban poor. Within sociology, most studies of farming regions were delegated to rural sociologists, most of who were housed in Colleges of Agriculture in Land Grant institutions. These programs were directly tied to the USDA, and therefore, inevitably, followed government policies to one degree or another. Rural sociology, like much of North American sociology, became strongly wedded to positivist paradigms. Economics came to dominate most thinking about agriculture. Much of the rural sociology of the ‘60s and ‘70s crunched census data—on urban-rural differentials, on part-time farming, and on other issues that could be addressed using data collected by the Census Bureau. Or rural sociologists asked people questions related to norms of behavior and belief—questions that could be answered through survey research, not through ethnographic methods. Some anthropologists and sociologists, however, continued to draw on the community studies tradition, producing works about the rural U.S. (see Salamon 2003b for a review of some of this work). A number of rural community studies were undertaken by social scientists of various disciplines, particularly in the peripheral regions of Appalachia and the Ozarks (Batteau 1983; Beaver 1992 [1978]; Ford 1962; Gallaher 1961; Gaventa 1980; Hicks 1976; Matthews 1965; Pearsall 1959; Stephenson 1968; Walls and Stephenson 1972; West 1945; Weller 1965). Solan Kimball and Marion Pearsall did a study of Talladega, Alabama (1954).

By the 1960s, U.S. ethnography had become almost entirely focused on exotic societies. In addition, the functionalism of community studies that focused on normative order gradually lost influence as other paradigms came to the fore. John Bennett’s research in Saskatchewan (1969) analyzed three discrete rural groups using models from the newly developing ecological paradigm.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the intellectual landscape shifted. Many anthropologists were attracted to new critical and historical perspectives, and sought to reduce the conceptual “space” between ethnographers and those we study. Despite the fact that the rural U.S. had become “fly-over country” in the national (urban and coastal) consciousness, some anthropologists began once again to study North American farming and small towns. The Farm Crisis of the 1980s also may have

spurred a renewed interest in rural America, although the initial work in this new wave of research on the rural was undertaken before the crisis developed.

U.S. farmers were the first Americans to be directly hit by the inflationary spiral triggered by the oil crisis in the mid-1970s and the debt crisis that followed. Several major ethnographic works dealing with U.S. farming were published during the 1980s and 1990s, based on fieldwork done in the 1970s and 1980s: John Bennett and Seena Kohl's book on farming in Saskatchewan (1982), influenced by the feminist revision of the social sciences, analyzed the agri-family system. Deborah Fink (1986, 1992) focused on women's work and gender relations in Iowa and Nebraska farming communities. Sonya Salamon (1992) broke new ground with her focus on the significance of ethnic heritage in central Illinois farming. Peggy Barlett (1993) described farming in the wiregrass region of Georgia. Jane Adams (1994) turned to history to understand the 20th century transformation of rural Southern Illinois, focusing on class and gender. And Miriam Wells (1996) analyzed the politics of agricultural labor in California's strawberry fields.

The attention to American farming has continued in this century with Kathryn Dudley's (2000) ethnography of the farm crisis in western Minnesota, Mary K. Anglin's (2002) analysis of factory labor in Southern Appalachia, and Eric Ramirez-Ferrero's (2005) study of northwestern Oklahoma farmers' constructions of masculinity. These works formed part of a larger literature that brought historians, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, philosophers, and anthropologists together across disciplinary lines (Adams 2002).

A considerable amount of work has focused on rural communities - small town America: Carol Greenhouse (1986) studied religion and law in a Georgia town, Janet Fitchen (1991, 1995 [1981]) wrote about rural poverty, Rhoda Halperin (1991) traced the informal economic networks through which many Kentuckians forge their lives, Carol Stack (1997) traced the reverse migration of African American women from the urban North to the rural South, and Sonya Salamon (2003a) analyzed the "suburbanization" of old farm villages in Central Illinois. A number of anthropologists have studied the meatpacking industry that transformed many rural communities (Fink 1998; Sider 2004; Stull,

Broadway, and Griffin 1995; Stull and Broadway 2003). This list is incomplete, and continues to expand as dissertations appear as books.

Anthropologists have been central to addressing environmental issues facing the U.S. Kendall Thu and Paul Durrenberger (1998) have published on the problems associated with hog concentration. Many anthropologists work in rural areas on a wide range of applied research. In addition to environmental concerns, many deal with other issues such as health, education, poverty, and disasters. Some of this research takes place with native peoples, some with people of European and African ancestry, and some at the interface, between different Indian nations, between Indian nations and the more recent settlers who surround them, and on the nation's border regions. Anthropologists have also been working with immigrants to rural regions, including the Mexican-U.S. border region.

The urban focus of the dominant U.S. intellectual culture should not lead anthropologists to overlook the long history of research in rural North America. The ethnographers of the 1920s and 1930s, like W. Lloyd Warner and Walter W. Goldschmidt, did not treat those they studied as "exotic" or radically "other." They viewed rural regions as legitimate arenas for significant social scientific inquiry that could be understood using ethnographic methodologies. These studies were undertaken during a period of strong Rockefeller Foundation and U.S. government support for engaged, interdisciplinary social science. After WWII, as sociology and rural sociology adopted increasingly positivist research paradigms, these anthropologists' work helped keep alive the qualitative research traditions in American sociology and rural sociology. We anthropologists should not forget these important roots of our discipline, nor ignore the significant work still being done in rural North America.

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## Report from the Field

### **Negotiating Multiple Roles in the Field: Dilemmas of Being an Employee/Researcher**

*By Ashley Spalding*

**Abstract:** More North Americanists must consider the implications of combining paid work with research since funding for our projects is not keeping up with the rising number of anthropologists conducting research in North America. In this article, I reflect on my own paid work and dissertation research in a divided "mixed income" neighborhood in Tampa, Florida. I negotiated multiple roles conducting research with both middle-class homeowners and low-income renters while working as an employee in one of the neighborhood's low-income apartment complexes. Paid work has advantages beyond making research financially possible. For instance, it enables greater access and insight into particular issues. It can also complicate a researcher's role/s in numerous ways, including how she is perceived by different members of the communities in which she works, and the practical and ethical issues that result.

**Key words:** fieldwork, paid work, housing policy, North American anthropology, U.S.

With limited funding available for anthropologists who conduct research in North America and an increasing number of us engaging in such work (Fennell 2006; see also NAD 2007), more and more researchers will likely face the dilemma of whether or not to combine paid work in a community setting with their research. North Americanists are methodologically innovative but we rarely engage the issue of combining paid work and research, although some of us are doing this type of fieldwork. Vincent Lyon-Callo (2004), for instance, effectively combined paid work in a homeless shelter with extensive research in order to conduct his activist ethnography of the U.S. homeless sheltering industry. Paid work has some advantages: it can help effectively establish a researcher in a community, in addition to resolving funding problems. At the same time, it can also complicate a researcher's role/s in important ways. In this article, I show how these complexities played out in the context of my own research on the outcome of "mixed income" housing policies in a divided neighborhood in Greenwood, a suburb of Tampa, Florida. On one hand, I considered the activities of a middle-class civic association that organized against low-income renters in the neighborhood; on the other

hand, I was also examining the experiences of renters who made their homes in the same low-income apartment complex where I also took on paid work in order to support my research.

Over the past decade, policies designed to address affordable housing have focused primarily on the promotion of “mixed income” housing. HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) and other such programs, which emerged rather suddenly and with overwhelming popularity in the early 1990s, encourage the “deconcentration of poverty” in a number of ways, including the development of new mixed income housing and the introduction of former public housing residents into existing higher income communities with Housing Choice Vouchers (previously known as “Section 8” vouchers, they subsidize at least a large portion of one’s monthly rent in the private rental market). The motivation for this policy shift was the belief that poor families would benefit from their increased proximity to middle-income families who would act as role models and enhance their access to social capital. My research examined the consequences of this policy from the “bottom-up” (Curtis 1999) at the level of an urban neighborhood affected by HOPE VI, by documenting the reality of social contact between middle-income and low-income households.

Greenwood is a mixed income neighborhood into which a large number of former residents of public housing relocated using Housing Choice Vouchers when two public housing complexes in Tampa were demolished in 2000 to facilitate the redevelopment of the community through HOPE VI. Originally developed as a middle-class suburb of downtown Tampa in the 1950s and 60s, Greenwood gradually became mixed income as several upscale apartment complexes were built in the 1970s, and two small public housing complexes were built on the outskirts of the neighborhood—one in the 1970s and the other in the 1980s. Tensions between the middle-income homeowners and low-income renters escalated in the mid 1990s when one of the small public housing complexes was condemned due to shoddy construction. Its residents were then relocated with Housing Choice Vouchers—many to the once upscale but now deteriorating apartment complexes in more central areas of the community. In response to this change, many homeowners then rallied to address

what they perceived as “neighborhood decline,” organizing to have gates and fences installed in various neighborhood spaces in order to inhibit interaction. Homeowners saw their neighborhood as a middle-class neighborhood under siege—and these feelings increased with the HOPE VI relocations. What in many ways appeared to be an ideal, “mixed income” neighborhood for HOPE VI relocatees instead contained a forceful opposition to low-income housing.



*photograph by Ashley Spalding*

**Ashton Heights  
low-income apartment complex  
Greenwood, Florida  
built circa 1970**

The larger research project undertaken by University of South Florida (USF) anthropology faculty and graduate students,<sup>1</sup> of which my research was a part, involved conducting randomly sampled interviews with both HOPE VI relocatees and homeowners in two neighborhoods—one of which was Greenwood (see Greenbaum, and Feldman and Hathaway in NAD 2002 for a discussion of preliminary research conducted for this larger project). However, in order to understand the social dynamics of the neighborhood, I knew that it would be important to interact more closely with all residents—both homeowners and low-income renters—which in this neighborhood meant that I would be working simultaneously with two groups with conflicting interests in a contentious environment.

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I conducted research in Greenwood from the summer of 2003 to the summer of 2006. When I began my research, the Greenwood Community Council—which consisted of both white and African American homeowners (although the majority were white)—had been mobilizing against low-income renters (predominately African America) in their community for several years. Most recently they had pushed for one of the low-income apartment complexes to be declared a public nuisance in order to gain more control over the property, including having it gated and fenced. Because of the gravity of this nuisance abatement order, the managers from that complex and the complex across the street, Harbor Pointe Apartments (HPA), began attending the Greenwood Community Council (GCC) meetings each month to respond to homeowners’ concerns. For instance, homeowners wanted to know if those whom they considered to be problem residents were being evicted, whether residents were subject to criminal background checks, and when the owner of Harbor Pointe Apartments would follow through on his promise to fence off the complex.

informant interviews. These homeowners seemed to see the research as important, perhaps because it addressed the very issue that concerned them—the presence of low-income housing in their neighborhood. I felt as though I was quickly accepted as an “insider,” likely because of my class and perhaps racial positioning. Although I did not live in the community, I was welcomed to attend related meetings and events. I participated in two neighborhood clean-ups and successfully wrote a small grant for GCC to buy signs to better advertise their meetings. While these were important research opportunities, it initially felt like a conflict for me that they probably assumed that I shared their perspectives on low-income housing.

In terms of my research goals, this group represented only one aspect of the mixed income community equation. Seven months after my first community meeting, in February of 2004, I contacted the manager of HPA for an interview. In addition to being one of the complexes with which the homeowner association had problems, HPA was also a complex into which many HOPE VI relocatees had moved with Housing Choice Vouchers. After explaining my research interests in low-income housing in the neighborhood to the owner and manager, I was invited to work in the leasing office as a paid employee, with the understanding that this was also a research experience for me.

Through daily office tasks—including answering the phone, leasing apartments, filing residents’ paperwork, and making photocopies—I learned first-hand about low-income property management, Housing Choice Vouchers, and tenant concerns. The job allowed me to have important interactions with low-income renters in the neighborhood and also enabled me to meet and interview many HOPE VI relocatees that would have otherwise been inaccessible to me.

Once I took on this job, I did fear that my role as leasing agent would conflict with my role as researcher—that it could jeopardize my relationships with apartment complex residents and also my access to the civic association. The job could have made me even more of an outsider to the residents of the complex, as they were predominately low-income African American families—and I am white, single, and did not even live in one of the apartments. Although I was not myself a manager, I worried I could be associated



*photograph by Ashley Spalding*

**middle-class home  
Greenwood, Florida  
built circa 1970**

I first gained entrée to the community by attending these GCC meetings. From my very first meeting, where I described my interest in exploring the consequences of mixed income housing, I was welcomed enthusiastically. The GCC President and the homeowner who lead the nuisance abatement action immediately agreed to key

with management decisions that were often contested by residents. For instance, one Saturday when I was working alone, I had been advised by the property manager not to open the swimming pool because the water was discolored and needed to be chemically treated. A resident called to complain and when I explained what I had been told, she said that she thought the decision was “racial.” Also, when I first began working at the complex, a number of residents were evicted for non-payment. Although I had no role in these evictions, I was sent out into the complex to tape warning notices to residents’ doors.

Eventually, however, my role as leasing agent helped me to build trust and relationships with many residents. After only four months, I was suddenly the employee who had worked at the complex for the longest period of time because there was so much employee turnover in the complex (this seemed to be very common for low-income apartment complexes). I also was able to interview several HOPE VI relocatees that I met by working in the leasing office. This was important because our research team was not having much success contacting residents through mailings to their original relocation addresses (many moved multiple times after being relocated from public housing in a period of just a few years). I often advocated for residents by acting as a middle-woman between various residents and management, and I know that many residents perceived me this way. I also helped out in small ways whenever I could. I called the company responsible for the complex’s washers and dryers on behalf of a resident who had lost nearly \$20 in quarters using the facilities over a period of months but had been unable to successfully navigate the confusing automated system she encountered when she called the 1-800-number for reimbursement. I faxed important paperwork for residents for jobs and government benefits. And I made management’s application screening process completely transparent so that applicants would not waste the \$40 application fee if they did not meet the criteria.

Most residents seemed to see my research on their relocation from public housing four to five years prior as a peripheral concern in comparison to their more immediate economic and family issues. But others were very interested, such as Miss Diane (a pseudonym), a middle-aged African

American grandmother and former HOPE VI relocatee who had been interviewed by my research colleagues when she lived in Riverbend, the other study neighborhood. She provided an exceptionally thoughtful analysis of HOPE VI. Later, after I had worked at the apartment complex for a year, Miss Diane became my co-worker. We worked together a day or two a week and she filled in on the days that I did not work. We had great conversations about my research and related issues, although she let me know that if she were doing research, she would focus on the inhumane treatment of prisoners, an issue of particular importance to her since her son had spent the last ten years in prison.

At the same time, Miss Diane and I developed a complex relationship that superseded our research relationship. At times I felt that she saw me as competition in our shared job, and we had some work related conflicts which we resolved quickly. Mostly we enjoyed each other’s company and commiserated over our problems working a low-wage job for now yet another property owner. The new owner seemed to embody the stereotype of a slumlord and had changed our employee status to “independent contractor,” gradually laying off workers to run the complex more profitably with a skeleton crew. Miss Diane sympathized with my typical graduate-student financial and housing struggles. Even though we both knew my poverty was temporary, neither of us could afford to pay our tax returns because of our new independent contractor status.

Our relationship became somewhat imbalanced when I had a number of scheduling issues that were a real imposition for Miss Diane. She valued her part-time work status as she did outreach for her church on her days off. During the period that we worked together, I requested time off to attend three different conferences to present papers on my research and also to see my family out of town for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Miss Diane did graciously work full-time to cover me those weeks, but I felt badly about imposing upon her time. I tried to compensate by switching days with her whenever she had a church or family event, although I never felt that it truly equaled out.

Eventually we learned that someone in the leasing office would likely be laid off, and this introduced a new kind of conflict—a truly ethical one. I knew that it was time for me to leave the job.

However, Miss Diane suggested that I wait and see what happened since she did not want to end up working full-time as a result. We both predicted that if someone were let go that it would be me since I had begun leaving early two days a week to teach a class at USF. At the same time, I imagined with dismay the scenario of Miss Diane getting laid off instead. I ended up putting in my two weeks notice at the same time I learned that I was definitely going to be laid off (I understood I would not qualify for unemployment benefits whether I was fired, laid off or quit because I was not an employee but an independent contractor). A couple of months later, the property manager had been replaced and Miss Diane and her daughter (who also worked in the office) found the new work conditions so uncomfortable that they left the job as well (initially I heard that the entire staff was fired but Miss Diane and her daughter later told me they willingly left their positions).

In addition to the potential conflicts between my role as researcher and my role as leasing agent, I was concerned that my relationship with the GCC would be jeopardized by my working in one of the apartment complexes that they blamed for the decline of their neighborhood. However, when I told the GCC President about my new job, he seemed to view it positively, reflecting my deeper involvement as a member of the community.

There were certainly some awkward moments when my multiple roles seemed to be in conflict with each other. For instance, because I was already attending the monthly community meetings, HPA's owner asked me to represent the complex at these meetings, report on any new developments in the complex and respond to homeowners' questions or concerns. Since I was already attending the meetings and had established a relationship with GCC, I agreed. Fortunately, the complex owner at that time (the one who had hired me) was initiating a number of positive physical renovations which were the focus of most of the homeowners' questions and comments. My association with the complex was then largely seen as positive.

However, when the next owner bought the property and seemed disinvested and unconcerned about the larger neighborhood, there were some complicated moments. One day I fielded a call from an irate homeowner who lived in the gated condominium complex next door. He claimed that

young men who lived in the apartment complex were throwing rocks at condominium owners' cars as they passed by to enter the gates. This was toward the very end of my nearly two years working at the complex and I knew that his problem would not be addressed by management. First, there was the problem of whether or not these young men actually lived in the apartment complex. In addition, there seemed to be no practical way to address the issue—especially with all of the other concerns for which the overworked independent contractor managers were responsible. A security company had been hired but their role seemed to have more to do with securing the property as an investment for the owner rather than addressing problems like these. When I recognized the homeowner's voice from the community council meetings, I identified myself as someone he knew and listened sympathetically to his complaints, while also describing the situation from the perspective of the apartment complex.

Although I was able to successfully navigate these kinds of dilemmas, they raise important questions about the potential dangers of conducting paid work in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork, an issue that needs further discussion. While taking on paid work definitely made my fieldwork relationships complicated in particular ways, it also allowed me access to data I otherwise might not have been privy to. As North Americanists, we would like to see greater funding for our research. On the other hand, the need to support oneself in the field can also provide openings for new insights to emerge.

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## Report from SANA Spring 2007 Conference

### **Queering the Disaster:**

#### *A Presidential Session*

*By William L. Leap, Ellen Lewin, and Natasha Wilson*

**Abstract:** The 2007 SANA meetings on “Unnatural Disasters” used Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath as the focus of its scheduled sessions, and for scholarly and activist reflection on this theme. As the planning for the conference unfolded, we recognized that a very important component of the Katrina experience, related to our own work in North American anthropology, needed to be part of the conference program. New Orleans is a city with a long-standing queer counter-culture, many of whose participants are black and many of whom were hardest hit by the hurricane and flooding. We organized a session “Queering the Disaster,” designed to document the queer presence in the Katrina experience, and, thereby draw attention to the need to include attention to marginal sexualities in anthropological studies of unnatural disasters

*Keywords:* disaster, queer, public anthropology, urban, narrative

The 2007 SANA meetings on “Unnatural Disasters” featured individual sessions using Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath as the focus for scholarly and activist reflection on this theme. We recognized that a very important component of the Katrina experience, related to our own work in North American anthropology, needed to be part of the conference program. New Orleans is a city with a long-standing queer counter-culture and an equally vibrant and resilient queer presence permeates much of the city’s mainstream terrain. Whiteness and privilege are visible components of New Orleans queerness, of course. But as is true for so many of the city’s other cultural practices, New Orleans queerness is predominately a black concern and is therefore framed in terms of racialized, and often restricted, economic opportunities.

If SANA intended to focus attention on Hurricane Katrina’s impact on New Orleans, it also needed to focus attention on Katrina’s impact on New Orleans queer terrain, and specifically its black queer terrain. Bill Leap and Ellen Lewin joined forces with Natasha Wilson, a graduate

student at University of Iowa and an African American queer identified native of New Orleans who has done ethnographic work with members of New Orleans’ low-income working class lesbian community over the last six years. Together, the three of us proposed a session that would address these concerns – *Queering the Disaster*. We had two goals for the session, to document: 1) the “queer presence” in the Katrina experience; and 2) the importance of including marginal sexualities in anthropological studies of “unnatural disasters.”

After talking together about our intentions for the session, Natasha agreed to facilitate a panel discussion and locate people in New Orleans who would be willing to talk, as Katrina survivors and as queer persons, about their experiences during the hurricane and the relief initiatives that followed. For reasons directly related to the aftermath of Katrina (and issues of concern to the panel), locating people proved to be a difficult task. Most of her New Orleans friends and contacts were now scattered across the South, from Atlanta to El Paso, their lives still disrupted by displacement and relocation. What began as a panel of seven speakers became a panel of three: Bridget Johnson (formerly from the Seventh Ward, now a resident of Baton Rouge), Kozy Lawson (formerly from the Eighth Ward, now a resident of Atlanta) and Necha “Lady Magic” Benoit (who was and still is a resident of New Orleans). Bridget is African American, female bodied, female identified, female loving, and the mother of a ten year old girl. Kozy is African American, female bodied, male identified, and female loving. Lady Magic is white, female bodied, and female loving.

Necha “Lady Magic” produced, and starred in lesbian drag shows in New Orleans-area working class lesbian/gay bars and clubs for many years prior to the Katrina disaster. Kozy is one of the performers who worked with her during that time. While Kozy now lives in Atlanta, she returns to New Orleans a once a month to continue performing in Lady Magic’s weekend shows.

Like Kozy, other performers who have worked with Lady Magic have strong bonds of attachment to the company – and to her. In the aftermath of Katrina, this complex of interlinking social networks, with Necha “Lady Magic” as the central node, became a lifeline of information exchange and mutual support for working class lesbians and

gays trying to locate friends, find health care, housing or other social services, or otherwise bring some order back into their lives. That they did not regularly receive these services from FEMA and other public/private relief agencies was one of the recurring topics discussed during the session as was the fact that queerness was a point of personal biography that relief agencies were unable or unwilling to address.



*photograph by Alessandro Angelini*

**Post-Katrina Scene  
New Orleans  
Spring 2007**

### ***Queering the Disaster:* What the Panelists Told Us**

After Ellen's brief opening remarks, each of the panelists made their introductory statements. There were, at base, narratives of survival. The panelists explained where they were when the hurricane hit, what they did to survive the wind and water damage, how they lived through the next days of flooding and breakdown in local services, how they got out of the city, where they relocated, and when they returned (if they did) to resettle and rebuild their lives. Understandably, the narratives had a routinized quality, as if they had been told and retold, and some ways their format resembles survival narratives that speakers tell in the aftermath of any setting of chaos.

But certain points gave the stories a local quality. The speakers identified with the suffering of the whole city. They described experiences of survival in relation to others, not just in terms of their own experiences or that of their immediate family and friends. Everyone knew about people who were less fortunate, about people who had more difficulty during the storm and in its aftermath than they did. Those comparisons were foregrounded in each speaker's narrative. However, the foreground did not play up the speaker's skills in "working the system" or suggest other heroic tendencies so much as demonstrate the arbitrariness of the Katrina experience and the lack of control that any individuals had over the aftermath.

In this sense, these narratives were the work of "good urban citizens" who were affirming their loyalty to their city's resilience. Consistent with that stance, specifics of race, gender, sexuality and class were not articulated directly in the opening segments of these stories. As the stories moved deeper into Katrina's aftermath, and particularly once the panelists began talking with each other about their experiences, issues of race, gender, class and sexuality entered the discussion with full force.

**Bridget** spoke in detail about the problems she had as a lesbian mother living with her partner, also a lesbian mother, when she applied for services from FEMA: FEMA policies make no provisions for services to “alternative families.” To be eligible for services, Bridget and her partner had to position themselves as “sisters” which produced a domestic arrangement FEMA caseworkers could understand. When Bridget and her partner decided to separate (another casualty of post-Katrina experience), she discovered she could not afford to leave Mesquite, Texas (where they had relocated) and move back to New Orleans. Post-Katrina redevelopment has pushed the cost of renting a one bedroom “shotgun home” like the one she used to rent from \$600 to more than \$1500, something she could not afford especially as a single mother. She now lives in Baton Rouge, but strongly identifies with New Orleans.

Bridget was able to leave New Orleans before the hurricane hit the city. **Necha** “Lady Magic” waited out the storm in a motel room north of the city. Once she returned to her house, which survived the storm with minimal damage, she reported being overwhelmed with a powerful sense of guilt. So much of the city she loved had been destroyed and so many of her friends had lost everything, yet her home was spared, And because so many people left the area in the aftermath of the hurricane, those left behind with no resources had no one to turn to for assistance. Panelists reported that FEMA and the Red Cross appeared to be prioritizing their processing applications and delivery of services: two-parent (heterosexual) families received benefits first, and then single mothers with children, and finally unmarried persons. Necha’s friends fell into the final category, and they are still waiting for some assistance.

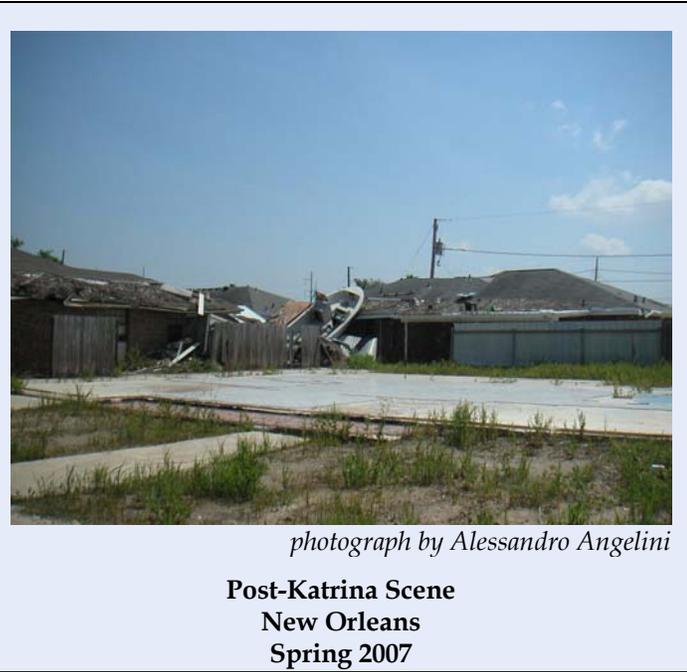
One thing Necha could do to create a sense of queer stability in the face of such uncertainty and frustration, was rebuild her drag company and start offering drag shows in whatever public venues she could find. The women-centered bars in the city were now closed, but several of the gay bars and “mixed” (lesbian and gay) clubs agreed to provide entertainment sites. Necha used her cell-phone to spread the word about these shows since land-line service was still unreliable in much of the city. Often, Necha would provide information to friends in other cities who would then relay it to those elsewhere in New Orleans. Those people

would tell others, and calls would come in to Necha. Before long, Necha was facilitating an extensive network of information exchange about sources of housing, food, and medical care, availability of social services, and whether friends had survived and if so, their current addresses. The network was especially important for those who had no fixed address, and could not be easily contacted by FEMA representatives whose data-processing system assumes permanent location; network connections could provide information that relief agencies were unable to deliver. The network also became a rally point for rebuilding those segments of New Orleans’ gay pride events intended for the local community, not for the tourist dollar; this, too, was important work of queer continuity.

**Kozy** had not been able to tap into Necha’s cell phone network, however. She and her family were trapped in their home by the hurricane’s wind and rain, and then by the rising water when the levee broke. Family and neighborhood supplies were soon exhausted, and with the water continuing to rise (and carrying its risks of pollution and illness) Kozy and her brother decided they had to leave: but go where? They had no family or friends in nearby cities and FEMA would not be prepared to offer relocation assistance for some weeks. Hearing that Atlanta’s Red Cross office was not treating New Orleans residents like “refugees,” Kozy decided that she and her brother would go there. Kozy has settled into Atlanta, but, as she explained, “it isn’t New Orleans.” The two southern cities have different meanings of “hospitality” and are dissimilar in other ways – food was a major theme in her account of these differences. So Kozy makes the six hour drive to New Orleans when she can, timing the trip to coincide with one of Necha’s drag shows so she can perform and earn some extra money.

Overall, the panelists’ stories and follow-up discussions pointed out features of a social services bureaucracy that are familiar to SANA members, but take on some new meanings when reflected through a queer lens. By the panelists’ report, and affirmed by several New Orleans residents in audience who had had similar experiences, FEMA and related agencies assumed that the primary goal of client services would be to support heterosexual family units with both parents resident in the unit, and, while in need, with the unit located at a fixed

address, reachable by U.S. mail or telephone. These assumptions of stability seem out of step with the lived experience of unnatural disaster reported in the session, although they make sense from the perspective of bureaucratic management and measurement.



To receive services from FEMA and related agencies, the queer-in-need had to find ways to negotiate around these heterosexist assumptions. Recasting your partner as your sister, developing support networks independent of the public system, or moving to an area where service delivery is reportedly friendlier (and thereby extending the scope of the queer geography of New Orleans all across the south) – these are a few of the proactive stances that New Orleans queers had to employ to survive in the days after Katrina. Not all New Orleans queers were successful in this regard, of course.

### Talking Back to Queer Theory

As we had hoped, the session did begin to unpack a specificity of queer presence in the experience of Katrina and its aftermath. Moreover, as the panelists and members of the audience discussed ways that sexual sameness contradicted the script of disaster relief services in the days after the hurricane, the session also disclosed the shortcomings in current directions of queer theory that insist on keeping discussions of queerness

away from material conditions and prefer to locate discussions within a-historical and a-political domains. Arguments in queer theory that insist that a person's claims to sexual identity are not relevant to queer understanding of sexuality are good examples of this position. For purposes of theoretical neatness, perhaps, anthropologists may not want to assume the identity of the subject before it is actually named. But as the panelists made clear, FEMA made such assumptions repeatedly as matters of policy and practice -- and queer-identified subjects were inconvenienced, sometimes significantly so because of it. For these subjects, sexual identity did matter. It had historical and political consequences, and to dismiss these claims as forms of uncritical reflection distorts the narrative that panelists were eager for anthropologists to hear.

Thus it does us no good to follow Lee Edelman's recent comment that queerness "names the side of those not fighting for the children" in contexts of social debate (Edelman 2004). "The children" were of primary concern in Bridget's struggles with FEMA and her creative reinvention of self and partner in that regard, in Necha's concerns with network building and continuity, and in Kozy's concerns with family. No "place at the table" assimilation politics here, these are efforts to survive that include, in some ways, the concerns of a "reproductive futurism" (a safe world for children and parents) that Edelman assumes queerness rejects.

Of course, Edelman did not live through Katrina. Bridget, Necha and Kozy did. When we ask if there a queer dimension to unnatural disasters like Katrina, we are really asking: "what meaning does queerness assume in the context of such disasters?" Here, as elsewhere, the teaching of privileged theory is not as helpful as the lessons to be learned from vernacular narrative.

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## MEETING NOTES

### Unnatural Disasters

#### 2007 Spring SANA Meeting in New Orleans

By Maggie Dickinson

It is rare to attend a conference where the dialogue with the place is as important as the dialogue among the participants. This year's SANA meetings, "Unnatural Disasters," which took place in New Orleans in April, sought to do just that. No other U.S. setting could have been more appropriate for scholar-activists looking to deeply understand racism and poverty, considering these are among the key causal factors of the human suffering left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The theme, "Unnatural Disasters," established a valuable, critical tone for the conference. As one among the large contingent of CUNY Graduate students in attendance, I can attest to the fact that the effort was welcomed and appreciated. Meeting organizers, led by Conference Chair David Beriss, integrated an on-the-ground experience in New Orleans with traditional scholarly presentations. The conference was hugely successful largely because of this two pronged approach that included inviting local artists, reporters, activists and scholars to present at the meetings, and organizing tours led by local guides so the visiting academics could explore the city.

Several of the sessions that brought in local presenters focused on the challenges of maintaining a sense of equilibrium in the wake of disaster. In particular, the session on journalism in New Orleans, organized by Maria D. Vesperi with speakers from the Times-Picayune, and the two plenary sessions (one organized by Helen Regis, Matt Sakakeeny and Rachel Breunlin titled *Local Knowledge: New Orleans Artists and Activists Reflect on the State of the City After Katrina* and another organized by Ellen Lewin, Natasha Wilson and William Leap titled *Queering the Disaster*; see article, this volume) allowed attendees to hear first hand some of the issues confronting local populations and the organized attempts at rebuilding against considerable odds in today's neoliberal world.

These sessions were important in highlighting the ways that disasters create crises along already existing social fault lines and how these fault lines

significantly structure the recovery process. The musicians who spoke on the arts panel discussed at length how the recovery process, rife with discriminatory allocation of goods like housing and social support, coupled with official city harassment of their efforts to rebuild a community culture of street parading and performance, can be just as difficult and painful as the moment of disaster itself.

Sessions that brought in activists from other parts of the U.S. complemented these panels by iterating similar themes emerging in very different contexts across the country. A documentary film on mountaintop removal, a mining practice in Appalachia, highlighted both regional specificities in organizing against this destructive practice as well as underlying similarities captured by the title of the conference "unnatural disasters." From hurricanes to the Iraq war to industrial eco-disasters and the ongoing attacks against indigenous peoples and their ways of life, many of the panels and presenters highlighted the theme of devastation in the wake of creative destruction necessitated by neoliberal capitalism.



photograph by Alessandro Angelini

#### Post-Katrina Scene New Orleans Spring, 2007

The tours of the city, conducted by local scholars and residents, were a welcome look at the city beyond the conference and tourist areas downtown and in the French Quarter, which were largely untouched by the storm and bustling with residents, tourists, and workers. A walk down Bourbon Street, with all its restaurants and bars back in full swing, could easily deceive visitors about the extent of recovery in the city. The tours of residential neighborhoods provided no such illusions. Areas like the Ninth Ward remain flattened, with houses still in shambles and very little visible life on the streets.

Anthropologist Martha Ward served as one of the tour guides. She offered a running commentary on the inside story of Katrina's aftermath as the tour drove through various neighborhoods in the city. Along the way, Ward shared many personal anecdotes and provided explanatory theories for what we were seeing. She showed us the damage to her workplace, the University of New Orleans, and the devastated housing around the city. Another tour guide, who grew up in New Orleans, was able to provide an especially intimate view of the city, even inviting us into her damaged home. We heard her personal story as well as the stories of other residents struggling to rebuild their damaged homes and lives.

For many of the younger scholars in attendance, the emphasis on local activism enhanced the supportive and collaborative tone of the meetings. Much more intimate than the AAA meetings, the SANA conference offered wonderful opportunities for dialogue and, since the sessions were smaller, it was a little less intimidating for students presenting work for the first time or early on in their academic careers. Also, because SANA encourages young scholars to present, it was possible to connect with people who are doing similar work, and who we would otherwise not have known. In some of the smaller panels, participants were able to have a conversation about the themes of their research projects that went well beyond the usual question and answer periods of a typical panel session.

In addition to attending fellow colleague's presentations, several graduate students organized panel sessions which proved to be a great way to

better get to know fellow students and their work as well as an opportunity to think through common themes. This year, graduate students from CUNY presented their work on a range of topics, including comedy and race, poverty, anti-war activism, urban issues, indigenous populations, media and water rights. These presentations stimulated many helpful conversations about how we approach certain issues, with what methodologies, what problems come up, what similarities we see, and what trends within our collective body of work we noticed. In this way, an intensive experience with colleagues helped to break some of the isolation of graduate school. For many of us, getting constructive criticism both from an official discussant as well as from peers was very useful in understanding where an argument is weak, and for becoming more conscious of our assumptions.

All in all, we found this year's meetings particularly fruitful, as its stated purpose was to actively create a dialogue between activism and academia - one that is often discussed, but rarely realized. This emphasis is important and we look forward to future endeavors within SANA to bridge the gap in many different ways, including expanding: the reach of attendees (improving how the conference is advertised); the make-up of the panels; engagement with local groups; and discussion about issues of social and economic justice. New Orleans provided a wonderful venue for innovation in the way annual meetings are conducted. I hope that the success of the experiment will encourage SANA to carry on this level of engagement with place at future conferences, not just where there has been a disaster. Many of the panels demonstrated the importance of local detail. It works best when it serves to illuminate common questions that affect the whole of North America.

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**106th Annual Meeting  
American Anthropological Association  
Difference, In(equality) and Justice  
Washington, D.C.**

**November 28-December 2, 2007**

**SANA-SPONSORED OR CO-SPONSORED PANELS & EVENTS**

**SANA Invited Sessions**

**Anthropological Research for Social Movements: Building a Collaborative Research Agenda:  
Towards Social Equity, Part 2 (co-invited with AES)**

**November 29, 10:15 AM-12:00 PM [Note that Part 1 is a Presidential session at 8 a.m. on the 29<sup>th</sup>]**

**The Insecure American (co-invited with AES)**

**November 29, 1:45 PM-5:30 PM**

**Differentiated 'Justice': Law and Politics in Native North America**

**November 30, 1:45 PM-3:30 PM**

**SANA Reviewed Sessions**

**Nationalism, Self-Determination, and Locality**

**November 28, 12:00 PM-1:45 PM**

**Critical Reflections on Issues of Inequality and Social Justice in New Orleans: A Post Katrina Discussion**

**November 28, 6:00 PM-7:45 PM**

**What is "The Social" in Social Justice? A Conversation with John Clarke**

**November 28, 6:00 PM-7:45 PM**

**Race, Class, Justice: Interdisciplinary Approaches**

**November 28, 8:00 PM-9:45 PM**

**The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians: Who is Speaking for Whom?**

**November 28, 8:00 PM-9:45 PM**

**Inscribing and Contesting Identity**

**November 29, 8:00 AM-9:45 AM**

**Possession/Dispossession**

**November 29, 1:45 PM-5:30 PM**

**Local Democracy Under Siege: Activism, Public Interests and Private Politics**

**November 30, 10:15 AM-12:00 PM**

**Against the Weaponization of Anthropology:**

**Critical Perspectives on the Military, War, and U.S. Foreign Policy**

**November 30, 4:00 PM-5:45 PM**

**Bamboozling the Public: Ignorance or Design in the Distortion of Science?**

**November 30, 4:00 PM-5:45 PM**

**Neoliberal Publics and Privates**

**December 1, 8:00 AM-9:45 AM**

**Governmentality, Citizenship, and Social Policy in the age of Neoliberalism**

**December 2, 12:15 PM-2:00 PM**

**Mark Your Calendar: SANA Business Meeting, Friday November 30, 12:15-1:30**

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***Difference, In(equality) and Justice  
Washington, D.C.***

***November 28-December 2, 2007***

**AAA PRESIDENTIAL PANELS OF INTEREST TO SANA MEMBERS:**

- **Anthropological Research for Social Movements: Building a Collaborative Research Agenda Towards Social Equity (Part 1)**
- **Terms of Engagement: Teaching and Its Meanings in Anthropology**
- **Languages and Speakers: Confronting Endangerment, Seeking Equality**
- **Whiteness on the Cusp of Empire: Injustice and the Making/Remaking/Unmaking of Difference in a Changing World**
- **Indigenous Experience Today: A Wenner-Gren Panel**
- **Global Perspectives on Neoliberalism and Transnational Migration: Beyond Methodological Nationalism**
- **The Anthropology of Contemporary White Supremacy**
- **The Public Interest and the American Food Enterprise: Anthropological Policy Insights**
- **The Application of Biological Anthropology: Addressing Social and Health Inequalities in an Increasingly Complex World**
- **Just Words: Breakfast Reading That Unsettles the Appetite**
- **Rethinking America: The Imperial Homeland in the 21st Century**
- **Engendering the Discipline: This Is What a Feminist Anthropologist Looks Like (Part I)**
- **Justice in the Mirror: Law, Power and the Making of History**
- **Collateral Damage I: Military Policy, Local Communities and the Costs of Freedom**
- **Activism in North American First Nations**
- **What Do We Mean by Public Anthropology?**
- **Collaborative Anthropologies, Public Engagements and Epistemologies of Equity**
- **Revisiting the New York African Burial Ground Project: Noting Articulations With the Research and Political Struggles of Washington DC**

***DON'T MISS THURSDAY NIGHT'S AWARDS CEREMONY***

***AND PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:***

***"Bringing Back Biology (Into Anthropology)"***

***AAA President Alan Goodman***

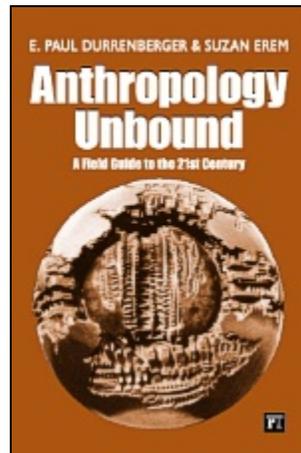
***November 29<sup>th</sup>, 7:30-9:30 PM***

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## ANTHROPOLOGY OFF THE SHELF

**Anthropology Unbound**  
**A Field Guide to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
E. Paul Durrenberger and Suzan Erem  
Paradigm Publishers



For novice readers who may not regard anthropology as relevant to today's headlines this book is a break-through. Durrenberger and Erem show how seeing the world through an anthropological lens enhances our understanding of such current topics as globalization, the new economy, jobs and careers, world trade, the condition of inner cities, and racial and ethnic relations. It provides the best application available of anthropological research to America's current public issues and concerns. Written in lively prose the book is vital to any social science collection.

*Description from Paradigm Publishers 2007*  
[www.paradigmpublishers.com](http://www.paradigmpublishers.com)

**In Anthropology Unbound, the authors write:**

“We started thinking about this book because we were angry about the outrageous prices of textbooks for introductory courses. To us, that’s an issue of class, one of the focal points of the book. It’s more important to our daily lives than most of us think, it’s a good example of our culture misleading us, and it’s an excellent example of a political system manufacturing cultural concepts – all good material for today’s anthropology.....

**Anthropology Unbound features:**

- Fun, witty, savvy; written in the vernacular of today’s students
- Challenges tough humanitarian issues other texts gloss over or skip – race, class, gender, globalization, and more
- Covers contemporary politics, imperialism, and conflict from an anthropological point of view
- Employs a critical political-economy perspective balanced by examples of individual and social agency
- Uses history, ethnographies, and tools of anthropology to sharpen students’ understanding of their own lives and the human condition



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