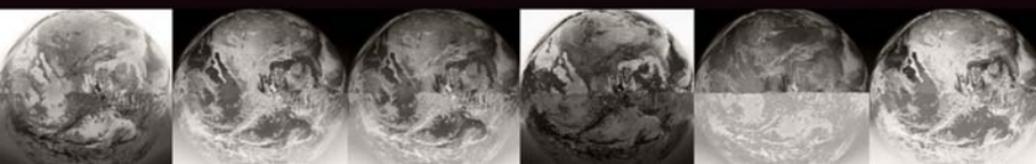


ETHNOGRAPHY in Today's World

Color Full Before Color Blind



ROGER SANJEK



Ethnography in Today's World

HANEY FOUNDATION SERIES

A volume in the Haney Foundation Series, established in 1961
with the generous support of Dr. John Louis Haney

Ethnography in Today's World

Color Full Before Color Blind

Roger Sanjek

PENN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

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Published by
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-4112
www.upenn.edu/pennpress

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sanjek, Roger, 1944–

Ethnography in today's world : color full before color blind / Roger Sanjek.—1st ed.

p. cm. — (Haney foundation series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8122-4545-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Ethnology—United States—Methodology.
2. Ethnology—Methodology.
3. Anthropology—United States—Methodology.
4. Anthropology—Methodology.

I. Title.

GN345.S255 2014

305.800973—dc23

2013019444

*For my teachers: Anne Schwerner, Robert Stigler,
Marvin Harris, Lambros Comitas, Jaap van Velsen,
George C. Bond, Allen Johnson*

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Preface

This book might have been titled *For Ethnography!* or, alternatively, *Ethnography for What?* Throughout, it aims to affirm the value of ethnography in engaging contemporary issues of race, migration, political activism, and an urbanizing globe. It includes as well essays examining this distinctive anthropological fieldwork method—ethnography, or participant observation—which its practitioners use to understand particular groups and places. And last, it asserts that ethnography is inescapably lodged in the social worlds of those who use it: first, as they decide what to study; then, how to do it; and finally, how to engage various publics with their findings.

The essays, now revised, were originally composed during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. They build upon and extend ideas and arguments contained in my books *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (1990), *The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City* (1998), and *Gray Panthers* (2009). They also reflect the journey of an anthropologist who entered the field when it was undergoing tumultuous change in the 1960s, who moved from fieldwork abroad in Brazil and Ghana to long-term engagements in his own society, and who, after weathering theoretical storms in ensuing decades, now values ethnography even more than when he began.¹

Engaging Ethnography

The book's first part, *Engaging Ethnography*, contains three chapters about fieldwork in New York City's Elmhurst-Corona district. Chapter 1, "Color Full before Color Blind: The Emergence of Multiracial Neighborhood Politics in Queens, New York City," summarizes the major findings and arguments about this fieldwork arena in my book *The Future of Us All*. It was

first presented as a talk to a multidisciplinary scholarly audience at the Russell Sage Foundation (which included sociologist Robert Merton, who, gratifyingly, told me that he enjoyed it). It was later published in the *American Anthropologist*, and here all demographic figures and projections are updated with more recent information.

This essay illustrates the “doing” of ethnography as this process is defined and historicized in Chapter 4 (“Ethnography”). Chapter 1 also exemplifies what “an ethnography of the present” with “a concern about the outcome,” as advocated in Chapter 6 (“The Ethnographic Present”), might be, in this case in “perhaps the most ethnically mixed community in the world.” The background sections about Elmhurst-Corona in the 1970s, before my fieldwork began in 1983, illustrate the importance of historical contextualization (more of this occurs in *The Future of Us All*). The significance of women leaders in these neighborhoods is what I found there “on the ground,” although a feminist perspective no doubt ensured that I deliberately paid attention to both men and women (as I had in earlier fieldwork in Ghana and did from the 1970s onward as a Gray Panther participant). The lesson I draw about the importance of inclusive “color full before color blind” political action is also a fieldwork-derived conclusion. Indeed, had I done my fieldwork in this neighborhood ten years earlier, my findings on both scores would have been quite different.

Chapter 2, “The Organization of Festivals and Ceremonies among Americans and Immigrants in Queens, New York,” was also written for a multidisciplinary academic audience, this time in Sweden, and halfway through my 1983–1996 Elmhurst-Corona fieldwork. The framework of four contrasting categories of local ritual events emerged while I was sitting in a Houston airport in 1988—a fieldwork-derived “theory of significance” that then led me to attend as many of these events as I could. I had not anticipated the range and degree of public ritual activity I encountered, and my Queens College students who later read this essay, most from similar or even these same neighborhoods, were surprised as well.

This chapter also illustrates the comparative and theoretical side of Chapter 4’s “anthropological triangle” of ethnography, comparison, and contextualization. I enjoyed reflecting on Meyer Fortes’s classic approach to the interlocking cycle of Talis and Namoos rituals and on Stanley Tambiah’s similar portrayal of rituals in a Thai village. I also found helpful more recent thinking about ritual by Tambiah and Fredrik Barth. Bits of this analysis reappeared in *The Future of Us All*, but Chapter 2 here examines the public

ritual efflorescence following racial change, immigration, and fiscal crisis in Queens with greater focus and coherence.

Chapter 3, “What Ethnographies Leave Out,” answered a request from the editor of *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics*, Mark Nowak. He asked for a contribution to a special issue on “Fieldnotes and Notebooks,” and what he wanted, I realized, was something less conventionally academic. The two fieldnote episodes I proposed, of a “revival” at a Protestant church I was studying and “international day” at an elementary school, had struck me with their short-story-like ironies when they occurred. I knew I was not the person to attempt to recast them in that genre, but Mark agreed that on their own they were suitable for his journal issue.

In this book’s context, these events show what raw notes from the field look like. Many of my Queens College students who read this piece—of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, many from immigrant families—found the revival unfamiliar and remote, but not the international day events: most had participated in similar “rituals of inclusion” themselves.

Ethnography, Past and Present

The second section, *Ethnography, Past and Present*, moves away from fieldwork in Queens to the distinctive features and history of ethnography. Chapter 4, “Ethnography,” introduces the “anthropological triangle” formula of ethnography, comparison (where theory comes in), and contextualization. It then briefly surveys the development of ethnography by such germinal figures as Lewis Henry Morgan, Frank Cushing, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, William Foote Whyte, and Max Gluckman, who reappear in other chapters. Finally, it examines the “funnel”-like, wide-to-narrow course of ethnographic fieldwork: through situated listening, observation, and interviewing to utilizing fieldnotes in writing ethnographic accounts. This chapter embodies the didactic tone and tight word budget of two encyclopedia entries (on “ethnography” and “field observational research”) that are combined here.²

Like most of this volume’s essays, Chapter 5, “Anthropology’s Hidden Colonialism: Assistants and Their Ethnographers,” was first presented in oral form, in this instance at an American Anthropological Association (AAA) panel on “Scholarly Canons and the Replication of Hierarchies”

organized by George Bond. It reemphasizes the “color full before color blind” theme by showing how ethnography in its formative years was frequently produced not by “lone strangers”³ but by hierarchical multiracial partnerships and teams of white professionals directing assistants of color, who were often silenced and displaced, thus mirroring U.S. and European colonialism. (Barbara Tedlock further complicates “lone stranger” narratives by detailing the role of “incorporated wives” in many male anthropologists’ “two-person single careers.”⁴)

The standard “color-blind” history of ethnography needs rewriting, and since Chapter 5 was first published more contributions to themes raised in it have been made (or learned about by me) by Garrick Bailey, Andrew Bank, Judith Berman, Lane Hirabayashi, Ira Jacknis, Gordon Jensen and Luh Ketet Suryani, Joan Mark, Z. K. Matthews and Monica Wilson, Lyn Schumaker, Gerald Sullivan, Wayne Suttles, and Michael Young (as noted in “See also” references in Chapter 5’s endnotes). In addition, Hugh Baker has brought the fascinating career of Hong Kong fieldwork assistant C. T. Leung into view.⁵

Chapter 6, “The Ethnographic Present,” first appeared in a leading British anthropology journal (*Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*), and as Queens College students often reminded me, it is written in the most academic in-group style and format of the essays in this volume. Responding to the impact of 1980s postmodernism, it affirms the centrality of ethnography for an “anthropology of the present.” The essays in the first, third, and fourth sections of this book are intended to illustrate this.

As Chapter 6 establishes, I found some aspects of postmodernist textual critiques unexpectedly congenial. My anthropological perspective was formed in the context of 1960s demands for “relevance” and for recognition and delineation of larger structures of power.⁶ I was not much impressed with Levi-Strauss’s structuralism, and the structural Marxism of the 1970s seemed overly abstract and tinker toy-ish. Political economy as it emerged in that decade was a welcomed carryover from the 1960s “critique from power,” mainly for its contextual and comparative importance.⁷ From the 1970s onward, feminism—politically, personally, professionally—was more important to me, with a much deeper impact on the way I saw the world and thought about power. It affected what I studied and wrote about, including two books, *The Future of Us All* and *Gray Panthers*, that turned out to be largely about women political activists.⁸

During the 1980s, as my Gray Panther involvement reemerged in New York and I began a team research project on racial change and immigration in that city, I also became editor of a Cornell University Press book series that I named *The Anthropology of Contemporary Issues*, which over the next two decades numbered fifty-two titles. Most were ethnographies, two-thirds were based on fieldwork in the United States, and they included a broad range of theoretical orientations: political economy, feminism, symbolic and psychological anthropology, migration studies, ethnoaesthetics, social history, the anthropology of Judaism, legal and medical anthropology, lesbian and gay studies, social gerontology, postmodernism. My editing experience made me receptive to anthropological concerns with “writing about writing,” and I was an early reader of George Marcus and James Clifford.⁹ Indeed, it was a suggestion by Clifford in 1984 that we needed to think about “the writing that precedes ethnographic writing—fieldnotes” that led to the 1985 AAA panel that eventually became *Fieldnotes*, with Clifford among its contributors.¹⁰

Postmodern anthropology, and Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (1986) in particular, provoked, inspired, and rankled. *Fieldnotes*, as well as *Localizing Strategies* (1990), edited by Richard Fardon and discussed in Chapter 6, reaffirmed a fieldwork-rooted, if more critically self-conscious, ethnography as still central to anthropology. They were followed by other such edited volumes—Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon’s *Women Writing Culture* (1995); Ellen Lewin and William Leap’s *Out in the Field* (1996); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s *Anthropological Locations* (1997); Allison James, Jenny Hockey, and Andrew Dawson’s *After Writing Culture* (1997); Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup’s *Siting Culture* (1997); Irma McClaurin’s *Black Feminist Anthropology* (2001)—as well as by Clifford’s *Routes* (1997) and *On The Edges of Anthropology* (2003) and a continuing stream of overview essays by Marcus (such as those of 1995, 2006, 2009, 2010).

At the same time, hefty multiauthored and theoretically ecumenical volumes reemphasizing the broad range of post-1960s approaches also appeared: *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Robert Borofsky (1994); the *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (1996); *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (“meaningful,” “person-centered,” “discourse-centered,” “direct systematic observation,” “structured interviewing,” “feminist,” “transnational”), edited by H. Russell Bernard (1998); and *American*

Anthropology, 1971–1995: Papers from the American Anthropologist, edited by Regna Darnell (2002). Moreover, Darnell’s insightful *Invisible Genealogies: A History of Americanist Anthropology* (2001) added greater time depth to assertions that much in pre-postmodern anthropology was of enduring, and even prescient, relevance to anthropology’s present and future.

In the twenty-first century so far there has been no single “next big thing” in anthropology to follow postmodernism. The “convergence of applied, practicing, and public anthropology” that Louise Lamphere pointed to in 2004 has become more visible in professional meetings and journals, as well as in career trajectories,¹¹ but it has not displaced other interests and pursuits. The rise of digital media and communication in human social life is affecting how and what anthropologists study, and its impact will loom even larger in years to come.¹² Overall, the field (in multiple senses) of social and cultural anthropology is both broadening and consolidating. As Ulf Hannerz put it in 2010:

Most of us simply want to get on with our work, which by now does not appear to be inevitably shaped by any of the more dramatic theoretical divides or confrontations of the later decades of the past century. . . . Recent thought within the discipline has tended to move away from grand theory, into a fertile middle ground where new connections cross-cut such divides as those between global, regional and local scales, between structures and events, between ethnography and history, between objectivism and experimental genres of writing, and between theory and practical concerns. . . . No real state of crisis here.¹³

Within this terrain, several recent volumes affirm that ethnography remains an indispensable resource.¹⁴

Comparison and Contextualization

The third section, *Comparison and Contextualization*, begins with Chapter 7, “Worth Holding Onto: The Participatory Discrepancies of Political Activism.” This essay derives from an AAA panel I organized honoring ethnomusicologist Charles Keil.¹⁵ Exemplifying the comparison side of the anthropological triangle, it applies Keil’s theory of “participatory

discrepancies” to the dynamics of political meetings in three fieldwork locations: Accra, Ghana; Gray Panthers in New York City; and Elmhurst-Corona. The question it addresses—why people keep coming to meetings—is one I had long pondered, and reading Keil’s work suggested an intriguing answer.

Chapter 8, “Intermarriage and the Future of Races in America,” began with wanting to understand the wider context of interracial marriages in the genealogies of white Elmhurst-Corona residents I interviewed. As I probed the history and current trends of intermarriage in the United States I found much that resonated with the differing Elmhurst-Corona residential experiences of African Americans and of Asian and Latin American newcomers: less neighboring interaction and intermarriage among whites and blacks, more among whites and Asians and Latin Americans.

Proximity, of course, does not explain everything about marriage or politics; ideologies, histories, concepts of identity, group and personal experiences, and inconstant sources and flows of migration and arrivals are also important. In contrast to sociologists and some anthropologists who analyze immigration almost solely in terms of “assimilation” (and assimilation to what? you might ask¹⁶), I see the present and future as more complicated and open than that. Chapter 8 concludes with six future scenarios relating intermarriage and political trends, all of which are likely to occur in combination. A “Postscript” at the end of the chapter reports the most recent New York City housing segregation and U.S. interracial marriage figures.

My team research project in Elmhurst-Corona was designed to bring the study of race and immigration under one tent—as against the separate development of research on race, racism, and race relations on one hand and immigration, the immigrant experience, and immigration policy on the other. It was for this reason that I chose to work in the area of Queens, the most diverse New York City borough, with the greatest proportional representation of whites, blacks, Latin Americans, and Asians. Race was examined most directly by Steven Gregory writing about African Americans—who did not arrive in North America as immigrants—in his book *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (1998), and by me, focusing on white Americans. Gregory and I also co-organized an AAA panel on race and coedited the resulting volume, *Race* (1994), in which an earlier version of Chapter 8 first appeared.¹⁷

Immigration was a major topic of our other team members studying post-1965 immigrants who arrived in the United States as adults: Chen

Hsiang-shui in *Chinatown No More: Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York* (1992); Kyeyoung Park in *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (1997); Madhulika Khandelwal in *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City* (2002); and Milagros Ricourt and Ruby Danta in *Hispanas de Queens: Latino Panethnicity in a New York City Neighborhood* (2003).

However, the whites of Elmhurst-Corona needed to be understood through the frame of immigration too, as most were children or, like me, grandchildren of European immigrants. Chapter 9, “Rethinking Migration, Ancient to Future,” first published in a special journal issue honoring Ulf Hannerz, addresses my frustration with the “assimilation” approach and places current immigration within a larger historical context. It offers a comparative canvas of seven successive processes, all still continuing today: expansion, refuge seeking, colonization, enforced transportation, trade and labor diaspora, and emigration.

This view of “the past of us all” begins with “deep history”: the expansion of “anatomically modern humans” throughout Africa and to other continents. Starting the analysis of human migration here also returns me to my deep history. In the 1950s, I read and reread Anne Terry White’s children’s books *Prehistoric America* (1951) and *The First Men in the World* (1953) and then later, anthropologist William Howells’s *Mankind in the Making* (1959).¹⁸ My high school biology teacher Anne Schwerner, whom I idolized, encouraged this interest in human origins and dispersals, and during 1960 I read still other physical anthropologists for a forty-page biology term paper on the fossil record. Decades later, when in 2002 I began teaching a four-field senior seminar, I assigned a current overview of modern human dispersals over the past hundred and fifty thousand years, and I began reading contemporary physical and biological anthropologists and archaeologists on prehistoric expansions more widely.¹⁹

Schwerner’s son Michael was one of three civil rights workers killed by Ku Klux Klansmen in Mississippi in 1964. I was then an anthropology major moving from human evolution to ethnography and also closely following Civil Rights Movement activities and legislation. This disturbing news helped solidify my leanings toward an anthropology “relevant” to race and current issues. Anne Schwerner died in 1996, and sometime after, I met her son Stephen when he spoke in New York about the 1960s racial justice movement. I told him how great an influence his mother had been on me,

and he responded that she had studied anthropology at Hunter College and wanted to pursue it but became a high school teacher.

Ethnography and Society

Anthropology in the 1960s and its aftermath is the topic of Chapter 10, “Politics, Theory, and the Nature of Cultural Things,” which begins the book’s final section, *Ethnography and Society*. I was an undergraduate and graduate anthropology student at Columbia University from 1963 to 1969 when I departed for fieldwork in Ghana. As Darnell observes, “every practicing anthropologist has a unique genealogy . . . tracing her or his relationships to the ideas, institutions, and social networks of the profession.”²⁰

More on that in a moment. But first, I want to add that we also have other prior and “coeval” social relationships, as persons and as “citizens.”²¹ These include

1. The families, communities, life circumstances, and political climates that bring us to anthropology, that continue and change as we practice it, and that, in conjunction with the “ideas, institutions, and social networks” of the profession, shape (if they do not overdetermine) what and where we “choose” to study. The theories we embrace are products of who we are in total.²² Theory is autobiographical, I contend in Chapter 10, as much as fieldwork is autobiographical, a postmodern insight perhaps fuzzily understood all along.
2. The people whom we study and study among, and with whom we share one globe. Their lives preexist our arrivals, continue during and after fieldwork, and may be affected by what we write about them. They include those persons who assist us in various ways (Chapter 5). If these “informants” do not also have major impacts on how we see and write about the world, then what are we there for?²³
3. The audiences we inform in various ways about what we learn as anthropologists. These include other professional colleagues and students, of course, but also “society at large.”

Returning to the 1960s, Chapter 10 revisits this disruptive era in the profession and at Columbia. Many anthropologists then publically professed the belief that the discipline could no longer “remain aloof from the

great issues of our times.” They included Marvin Harris, who had learned this in the 1950s, and whose work and example I consider here. This chapter was first written for an AAA panel honoring Harris, who was present and thanked me for these reminiscences and reflections.

Although Harris registered the strongest impact on me, other Columbia teachers shaped me too. In my first anthropology course, archaeologist Robert Stigler’s well-organized and content-rich classes set a standard I tried to meet when I became a teacher. Lambros Comitas (like Harris and Stigler, a Columbia PhD), Jaap van Velsen (a visiting professor and student of Max Gluckman), and George Bond (trained at the London School of Economics) nurtured and guided my social anthropology inclinations; Allen Johnson (a product of Berkeley and Stanford) expanded my understanding of theory and fieldwork methods.²⁴ All four had deep appreciations of ethnography. Among guest speakers, M. N. Srinivas (then at the Delhi School of Economics in India) and Fredrik Barth (from the University of Bergen, Norway, who spoke about Darfur²⁵) were fieldworkers and thinkers whose work I already admired and continued to follow.

Chapter 11, “Keeping Ethnography Alive in an Urbanizing World,” asks how we may preserve wide-ranging ethnography and not retreat to interviews alone, in the dense, increasingly enormous cities of our urbanizing world. After first steps in a Brazilian village, all my fieldwork has been in urban settings: Accra, the Gray Panther movement in Berkeley and New York, and Queens. It is the latter experience I return to in this essay, highlighting sites for participant observation that team member Chen Hsiang-shui and I found especially productive. I conclude Chapter 11 by considering the interplay among the contextual, comparative, and ethnographic sides of the anthropological triangle that I experienced in thinking and writing about Queens.

A Queens College student once asked why I discussed Chen’s fieldwork here and not that of our other team colleagues. The answer is that this chapter was originally presented to students at the Institute of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, where Chen, a faculty member, invited me to speak. In addressing the topic of ethnography’s continuing importance for anthropology, I wanted to acquaint the students with his New York work, which some might not have read or fully appreciated. Our other team members certainly found productive locations for ethnography in Queens as well, and their ethnographies richly demonstrate this.²⁶

The final chapter, “Going Public: Responsibilities and Strategies in the Aftermath of Ethnography,” considers ethnography in “the public sphere” via a revisionist look at Boas, an alternative genealogy for anthropological advocacy, and my own community-based and media experiences after publication of *The Future of Us All*. This essay first appeared in an issue of *Human Organization* honoring Donald Stull, who has written informatively about his extensive “third stage” activities following fieldwork among Americans, immigrants, and the meatpacking industry in Garden City, Kansas.²⁷