Part 2

LEARNING THROUGH DOING: THE IMPORTANCE OF FIELDWORK IN THE EDUCATION OF THE UNDERGRADUATE

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There is little need to defend the centrality of fieldwork in the discipline of anthropology. Anthropological research conducted without "going into the field" (often for at least a year) is highly questionable. However, despite such an emphasis on fieldwork in anthropology, undergraduate students are still trained in the fashion of early "armchair anthropologists." A true understanding of anthropology does not come from books, films, or lectures, the tools of the trade for most undergraduate anthropologists. It comes from being "in the field" (wherever that may be) and experiencing the joy, loneliness, culture shock, and language barriers that come along with it. Undergraduates should be allowed to experience as much as possible and make as many mistakes as possible. They are ready to accept the challenge of approaching another culture or community face to face and are ready to accept the vast amounts of knowledge that will come from this encounter.

This paper was first presented at the 2000 Society for Applied Anthropology conference in San Francisco as part of a session entitled "Fieldwork and the Undergraduate." Original preparation for the session focused on the importance of fieldwork and this was a topic with which I struggled because it implied that I was to defend the practice of fieldwork in the discipline of anthropology, but fieldwork needs no defense. Franz Boas revolutionized the field of anthropology, and although we no longer speak in terms of historical particularism, the Boasian legacy of a "rigorous approach to fieldwork" remains (McGee and Warms 2000:132). The work of Boas and his students

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reinforced the practice of fieldwork so that to this day, it is arguably the defining feature of anthropology. "Fieldwork," James Clifford writes, "would put theory to the test; it would *ground* interpretation" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:185). Today, anthropological research that is undertaken without the benefit of firsthand fieldwork experience is highly questionable. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson suggest that "the single most significant factor in determining whether a piece of research will be accepted as (that magical word) 'anthropological' is the extent to which it depends on experience 'in the field' " (1997:1).

I was extremely fortunate as an undergraduate to have had the opportunity to conduct field research, but I am aware that my experiences were unique. In the *Anthropology Newsletter,* Joy Bilharz writes, "By denying field experiences to our students, we short change both them and our chosen discipline" (1999:11). Bilharz contends that field research is often restricted to graduate students due to ethical concerns. Many researchers are concerned that the needs of the undergraduate student will compromise the faculty member's own research as well as community relationships and responsibilities. Bilharz, however, emphasizes that field research is important for undergraduate students and that the demand for fieldwork and field school opportunities will increase in the coming years. Bilharz's call for undergraduate field experiences is not one that is taken up by many other practitioners within the discipline. Professors may be discouraged from leading field schools or sponsoring independent field research, and in fact, the professors who enabled me to experience fieldwork faced this discouragement from others in the anthropology department and from the university at large.

If the practice of fieldwork has been established as an integral part of anthropological study, why are undergraduates still trained in the fashion of early armchair anthropologists? James Spradley and David McCurdy, two proponents of fieldwork among undergraduates, remark that,

> While students listened to our lectures, read their textbooks, and passed their final exams, we sensed that they did not grasp the significance of the *perspective* of anthropology. These skills require involvement and participation. [1972:vi]

Books rather than field experiences remain the tools of the trade for most undergraduate anthropologists. As Gupta and Ferguson observe, "It is astonishing, but true, that most leading departments of anthropology in the United States provide no formal (and very little informal) training in fieldwork methods" (1997:2).

I was fortunate to be able to participate in fieldwork and experience, as Ruth Behar defines anthropology, "the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing and necessary forms of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century" (1996:5). The program in which I participated was a formal field school sponsored by the Institute of Anthropology at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas and the Universidad de Quintana Roo in Chetumal, Mexico. Approximately fifteen students from UNT were participants in this program and we received six credit hours. The field school consisted of two weeks in Chetumal, the capital of Quintana Roo, Mexico, and approximately two weeks in Polyuc, one of the many small Maya communities scattered across the landscape of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. These time periods represent two different fieldwork experiences, but it was during the latter that I considered myself to be "in the field."

During these two weeks I was teamed up with an anthropology student from the Universidad de Quintana Roo who was studying *sobaderas, hueseros, curanderas,* and *parteras* or in an approximate English translation, masseuses, bone workers, healers, and midwives. The student with whom I was working was conducting a formal research project. I did not have such a project. Instead, I was to observe and to experience, as Clifford Geertz would say, 'being there' (1985). During my second full day in the field, I was able to become a patient of an 87-year-old *curandera*, Doña Juanita (a psuedonym). For two hours, my body was pounded, prodded, pulled, and massaged and she never lost any strength. When it was all over, I lay in the hammock recuperating and she got up to see to her other patients.

After this experience, I fully understood the concept of participant-observation. When I felt the power in the woman's gnarled and adept hands I began to perceive of what it meant to be a curandera and what it meant to be her patient. During my stay in Polyuc, I was able to participate in the medicinal practices on several other occasions. When I got sick, my stomach would be massaged to rebalance my center. When I had an allergic reaction I was made to wear a plaster of salt, dried tobacco leaf, and Vick's VapoRub on my face for the duration of the day. I helped with various chores, learned how to make tortillas, and joined in on the impromptu games of volleyball, soccer, baseball, or basketball that would form in the dirt road between the houses.

I lived in a small thatched-roofed house that functioned as a storage hut when not occupied by burgeoning anthropologists—the student from the university in Chetumal and me. We lived in very close proximity to a family of curanderas that consisted of the matriach who took me in as her patient, her

son and daughter-in-law and their children who ranged in ages from six to 25. The living situation was arranged by the Universidad de Quintana Roo and I am not sure how it was determined.

I have come to realize that the opportunity to experience fieldwork is not common, but I believe that there is a real and tangible reason to explain why a large part of the study of anthropology is left out of reach of the undergraduate. Most students entering college are not expected to go on to graduate school. Why spend the money and time giving fieldwork opportunities to undergraduates who are not planning to pursue careers as anthropologists? However, I believe that for most students of anthropology a bachelor's degree is not the end but only the beginning of a long and meaningful journey. In conversations with other anthropology students our discussions are likely to center around ideas such as those of culture, ethnocentrism, or the problem of representation. There is a unique way in which undergraduate anthropologists view their culture and communicate with one another. While in Chetumal, I was able to experience and learn this unique discourse from my university companions. I learned what it means to be studying anthropology, and I learned of the dedication and commitment that is present among this group of students. I believe that undergraduates deserve every experience anthropology has to offer from theory, to fieldwork, to ethnography.

Postmodernism has had an important impact on the education of the undergraduate student. Many anthropologists have made changes in the way they look at cultures, people and themselves. As James Clifford comments, "Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves" (1990:10). If anthropologists are no longer the voice of the voiceless and the champion of the isolated societies, what have they become? Margery Wolf asserts, "I am willing to bear the label colonialists paternalistic foreigner, or whatever" (1992:121). Anthropologists are all that Wolf said and in addition they are ethnocentric, biased, and most importantly, involved with the culture that they are studying. They effect change on the culture and the culture in turn affects them.

This focus on the individual in ethnographic research and awareness of the personal indebtedness of the researcher in the field is very important for an anthropologist coming of age, and was exceedingly important to me in my research endeavor. I was conscious of the manner in which I affected and essentially disturbed the community in which I was living. Children would ask me why I painted my hair (I have blonde hair) and would ask me how to say words in English so they could laugh at my responses. Adults would point

and giggle in my direction when I walked through town or would practice the little English they knew with me. I in turn was just as conscious of the way the community I was living in was having a profound and lasting effect on me as well. My field experience in Polyuc was a very personal one, but as an undergraduate the purpose of my fieldwork experience was not to produce details of another culture or to create a meaningful ethnographic account. My goal was gain insight about myself and to mold myself into an intelligent and competent future anthropologist.

During the first few days that I was in Polyuc, I was under the impression that I was there to learn about the culture and the people. It soon became clear to me that this was not possible given that it was my first experience doing field research and my stay was limited to two weeks. I was frustrated at my inability to understand and communicate with those around me. I did enter the field with some limited ability in Spanish and I was able to conduct conversations. However, while living in a community where no one spoke English, I soon realized how little I knew. Doña Juanita would say to me in exasperation, *'Aprende, chica!'* (Learn, girl!) and explained that if she had been able to learn Spanish (in addition to Yucateca Mayan) I should be able to as well.

It was this inability to learn the language that led me to feel I was not being a good anthropologist because I could not gather data. I wrote in my field notes, "I feel so alone. I just want someone to talk to. They can't understand me and I can't understand them. Sometimes I feel like I am losing Spanish rather than gaining it." I would accompany my Mexican partner on numerous interviews with different healers only to sit silently not understanding a word. Eventually I just gave up, and this is when I began to learn.

When I stopped trying to focus on facts, interviews, and gathering data, I negated my intellectual being. I gave up on maintaining the illusion that my two weeks in Polyuc would lead to knowledge of the culture and I realized that at this time and place, I was the subject of my anthropological inquiry. I became aware that I was a child in the culture. I did not know the language, I had to tie my hammock up like a baby's so I would not fall out—that is, knotted on each side so the material would form a wall—and I had to be slowly and patiently taught the simplest of chores like how to get water from the well or how to get a muddy pair of socks pristine white. My so-called subjects became my mentors. The children especially helped me adjust to the culture. In the paper that I wrote for the facilitator of the field school, I later commented on my experience:

> The younger kids would sit and talk to me as long as I would let them. I didn't know what they were saying and they could care less that I didn't understand, but we were able to play with one another and have a great time. Sometimes we would be playing a game of baseball or basketball and I would forget that the kids did not speak English, and I would speak to them in my native tongue. In response to an English phrase they would look at me as if I was crazy and then go on about their business.

One child in particular, six-year-old Alberto (a pseudonym), was usually the first face that would greet me in the morning, and he would stay by my side all day unless dragged away by his mother or older sister. He clung to me as I left the town saying that he was going with me, and I cried when it was time to detach myself and turn my away from my young friend.

When I think back on my time in Polyuc, Alberto's face is the first image that comes to my mind. He was constantly barefooted and shirtless with dirt smudges on his face despite his daily bathing. He would scamper up trees as quickly as a frightened cat and throw fresh mangoes into my waiting arms. He would follow me around relaying fascinating and detailed stories to me as if I understood him. Perhaps I broke the unwritten anthropological rules. Perhaps I got too close to little Alberto when I was supposed to be studying him. However, in this case I can be forgiven.

When I enter graduate school, I assume that I will be expected to conduct fieldwork knowledgeably and as completely as possible. I do not have that pressure on me as an undergraduate. This is the time to reflect and learn about myself. It is a time when I am allowed to make mistakes, learn from them, and move on. Undergraduates should be allowed to experience as much as possible and make as many mistakes as possible, for we are the future of anthropology. As Spradley and Ferguson commented, "Isn't it possible for undergraduates to engage in field research? After all if anthropological field work is such an important feature of training anthropologists, isn't it also important for anyone who wishes to understand the concepts of anthropology" (1972:vi)? Undergraduates are ready to accept the challenge of approaching another culture face to face and are ready to accept the vast amount of knowledge that will come from this encounter.

My experience in the field school in Chetumal was a defining moment in my anthropological journey. My comprehension of anthropology came from this experience. It came from experiencing loneliness, culture shock, and the language barriers that seemed unbreakable. It came from washing my clothes by hand, learning what herbs are used to heal various disorders, and learning

how to make tortillas from scratch. My true understanding of anthropology did not come from books or films or lectures. The stories that I read in books or heard in classes presented a flat, not-quite-real picture of cultures. It is not until I actually encountered another culture that the inhabitants became real people rather than the "exotic other" that begs objectifying and stereotyping. If it had not been for my fieldwork, I never would have gained this comprehension and I would have lost out on many opportunities. I would not have met some of the wonderful people that have taught me about the field of anthropology and helped me strive to accomplish more and to do more.

My first experience in the field also opened the door to further field opportunities. In the summer of 2001, I conducted independent field research in Oaxaca, Mexico, investigating the increase in tourism to the area and the effect of this increase on the production of indigenous craft goods. While in Oaxaca I continued to question my role as a researcher and my ability to formulate my observations. However, I had my experiences in Chetumal on which to reflect. Through both of these adventures, I have begun the preparation for longer, more intensive research knowing that I will be more adequately prepared for many of the obstacles that I will encounter. Although I am sure to be confronted with many more dilemmas in the future, I know I will gain knowledge with each foray.

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