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Review of Writing American Cultures: Stories of Identity, Community, and Place

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Review of *Writing American Cultures: Stories of Identity, Community, and Place*

Abstract

Review of *Writing American Culture: Stories of Identity, Community & Place*. Sam Schrager, Ed. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College Press, 2013, 251 pp. This collection of ethnographic essays was produced by students in the 2011-2012 **Writing American Cultures** Program at the Evergreen State College. Each contribution shows how advanced interdisciplinary work, pursued in a learning community, can result in powerful, critically astute writing and analysis by undergraduates.

Keywords

Learning Community, Ethnography, Evergreen State College, Seminar, Research, Culture, History, Identity, Politics

Writing American Cultures is a sterling volume of ethnographic essays produced by students in the 2011-2012 Writing American Cultures Program at the Evergreen State College. It marks the inaugural publication of The Evergreen State College Press, established to showcase the caliber and rigor of student writing and research emerging from interdisciplinary learning communities at the college.

In his introduction to the anthology, Sam Schrager, now emeritus Member of the Faculty, observes that “in American higher education, serious ethnographic research is the bailiwick of advanced practitioners in anthropology and allied disciplines[,]” who may be limited in their study by the “conventionalized ways of seeing” that their disciplines impose (xiii). Like his mentor Dell Hymes, Schrager sees great potential in democratizing the ethnographic method, and this volume offers tangible evidence of the remarkable scholarship that can result from making the tools of ethnography available to undergraduate researchers in the context of a learning community. (Full disclosure: this reviewer studied ethnography with Schrager as a student at the Evergreen State College in 2000.)

All students in the program received basic training in ethnographic fieldwork techniques, studied well-respected ethnographic texts, and participated in seminar-based discussions of method, ethics, and representation. Authors investigated a culture or issue that interested them, conducted field interviews and background research, and reported back to their classmates regularly on their findings. In analyzing their field data, the students utilized the tools of multiple disciplines, deepening their engagement with the subject matter and broadening the relevance of their work. Each of the essays could be a starting place for a thesis or dissertation. In the interest of brevity only a few will be discussed in this review, but all eight are absorbing and rich with insightful data and analysis.

Ataya Cesspooch’s “Virtual Reservations” explores Native people’s efforts to preserve culture and build community on the Internet. Describing and analyzing content created by Native users, Cesspooch tackles complex questions about modern traditionalism, decolonization, sovereignty, identity, and indigenous cultural preservation and representation in the digital age.

The authors grapple with their own preconceptions about their topics, many entering very personal territory, as Linna Teng does in “Khmao Euy Khmao.” Frankly admitting “I have been taught to feel ugly about my skin,” Teng sets out to understand attitudes about skin tone amongst her Cambodian American peers and family members, considering notions of beauty, economic class, intelligence and virtue as they are tied to skin tone in first-person narratives, pop culture, commercial products, and family stories (36).

Auricia Guardado wades into the painful and impactful history of immigration in her family, literally travelling across borders to better understand her parents’ and relatives’ experience of violence and political repression in Honduras and El Salvador, forces that eventually drove her parents to flee for the United States, leaving her older sister behind. Grappling with her fractured family and cultural identity, and her privilege as the child born in America, Guardado offers a disquieting and profound examination at the impact of social and political instability, migration, and the very nature of memory and narrative.

In his essay, “Under the Radar” on itinerant wild mushroom harvesters, Olivier Matthon does more than introduce colorful characters from a little-known industry; he maps an entire subculture with a unique economic system, specialized ecological knowledge and jargon, and particular racial tensions. Matthon is a model participant-observer, apprenticing to the experts he meets while carefully contextualizing their choices, prejudices, and language.

Common across the eight pieces is a willingness to confront what Schrager calls the “stakes of doing ethnography: to orient oneself to others’ understandings of experience; to see one’s own position and its ironies; to find meaningful ways to use what one learns; to counter reductive ideas about human conduct that are as prevalent in academia as on the street” (xvii). Such confrontations do more than yield honest and fascinating scholarship, they produce critical and engaged scholars. When those scholars have the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary research and analysis in a community of students, significant work becomes possible, often rising to the caliber of graduate-level study. *Writing American Cultures* makes a compelling case for the learning community model and the employment of ethnography in undergraduate education.