

HUM 473 Festivals: Culture in the Making  
A COPLAC Distance Mentoring Seminar  
Dr. Whitney Snow and Dr. Catherine Kroll  
Spring 2016

## **An Ethnographic Study of a Local Festival and a Website Displaying Your Research**

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.

--Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)

Brief prospectus of project (as blog entry) due: Th, Feb. 18

Submit interview questions for IRB: no later than Tu, Feb. 23

Contracts due via Google Docs: Th, Mar. 3

Share field notes in class: Tu, Mar. 22 and Th, Mar. 24 (dates are flexible, based on choice of festival)

Polished, edited drafts of projects due: Th, April 21

Final projects due: Th, May 5

Points: 50

**Overall description of project:** “Ethno” refers to a human culture, while “graphy” signifies a written text. For this project, select a festival that you would like to learn about and write about. Ideally, you will choose a festival that is fairly new to you so you can approach it as someone who has lots of questions about it. In addition to your actual observations of the festival, find three or more cultural informants to interview (these individuals may be festival organizers, festival attendees, or others closely connected to the festival). Consult the Special Collections division of your university library and local historical societies for archival materials related to your chosen festival; you may find hidden treasures! Keep a research journal and blog weekly about your findings. As you work, be aware of how your ideas about the festival are developing, deepening, and causing you to see from multiple perspectives. Your written analysis of the cultural significance of the festival, as well as excerpts from your interviews, will form the basis of your website created in WordPress, a popular content management system (CMS).

**Why *do* ethnography?** Anthropologists, sociologists and other qualitative researchers seek to understand cultural events as well as groups of people that are often ignored, marginalized, or misunderstood. They endeavor to see the inner workings of these groups with fresh eyes in order to validate their realities; thus, they look at the group's values, social practices, and motivations. This project on festivals will enhance crucial skills that all researchers and writers need to have: the close observation of details; open, honest reflection; probing analysis; and writing that is focused, cogent, and articulate.

**The key objective of this project** is to research and analyze a local festival—its patterns, rituals, participants’ behavior, values, status hierarchy among individuals, gestures, body language, clothing, vernacular speech, and so on—in order to understand the festival’s cultural and historical significance. Approach your study of the festival with an open, inquiring mind so that you will enhance your powers of observation and ability to empathize with those who may hold values different from your own. *Note: while it is preferable to select a festival that will take place during the Spring 2016 semester so you can make audio or video recordings, it is not a requirement of the project. If you elect to research a festival that occurs outside of the spring time frame or that is no longer held, you are still responsible for conducting a minimum of three interviews with individuals closely associated with the festival and leaning more heavily on archival and library research, as you will not have the benefit of acting as a participant-observer or recording at the festival this spring.*

**How does one do ethnography?** As we have seen in our reading of Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” ethnographers look for paradoxes and patterns; they consider their work a journey into undiscovered territory. They write detailed fieldnotes about what they are observing and keep reflecting on what they are seeing until patterns start to emerge: until they see the hidden story that perhaps not even the participants are fully aware of. Ethnographers keep asking analytical questions until they feel they have arrived at a rich understanding of the cultural event or group. You want to look for “what doesn’t add up,” what seems paradoxical, odd, or contradictory. Keep asking questions about your subject (“What does it MEAN?” “Why are people acting this way?” “What’s behind this?” “Why do people care about this?” until you feel you understand the festival fully. These questions, while apparently simple, will likely lead you to profound understandings.

### **Checklist of Specific Areas to Study**

(Some of the following areas of investigation may be more relevant than others to your project.)

- Budget your time so that you can conduct a minimum of three interviews in a relaxed setting and also spend a generous amount of time at the festival (if your festival takes place during the spring).
- Listen to the language and observe the gestures (body language) and appearance of the participants and the people whom you are interviewing.
- Observe relationships, status hierarchies, rivalries, and affiliations between people. How does power operate? Who officially holds power and who actually holds it?
- Watch for patterns or repetition in activities, language, and rituals.
- What is the “real” content of what you are observing at the festival? Just as Geertz saw meaning far beyond the mere outward activity of the cockfights, so should you, too, ask “what is this group or activity really about?”
- What is the value system of those associated with the festival and its participants? What is meaningful and important to them and why? How do you know this?
- What role does the festival play in the local area’s bid to attract tourism?

- Does the festival commemorate an important historical event, agricultural product, or another element unique to the local area?
- What is not seen or perhaps deliberately hidden and why? What is tacitly understood, but not talked about? Can you infer festival participants' (and organizers') values? What is it to be part of the "inner circle"?
- What feels new, foreign, unfamiliar, or unclear to you?
- You may wish to use subheadings to structure your observations, interviews, and writing.
- Take lots of detailed notes both during and after your interviews and observations.

### **Interviews**

In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy, you will need to submit your interview questions to your college or university's IRB for review. Be sure to allow ten days to two weeks' turn-around time to receive your campus's IRB approval.

Prepare a **written release form** for each interviewee to sign before the interview. See the section **Conducting Oral Interviews** at the end of these assignment guidelines for a template of an Informed Consent form that you can modify and use.

Before the interview:

- Decide how you will record the interview: video? portable digital recording device? GarageBand or Audacity? iPhone voice memo? All of these methods will allow you to import the interviews directly into your computer.
- Bear in mind that your questions need to be respectful, tactful, and non-intrusive. Your cultural informants are doing you a great favor by being willing to devote time to the interview, and you must return the courtesy by doing your best to ensure that your questions do not make them uncomfortable.
- Write out your interview questions ahead of time, but be prepared to let your cultural informant steer the way in the interview.

During the interview:

- If you sense that an interviewee is feeling uncomfortable, anxious, or just plain annoyed, move on to other questions that are not likely to provoke these feelings. Often, you will learn the most by allowing your interviewees simply to speak about what they find important. Let him or her lead the way. It may be helpful to keep this in mind as your goal: "I want to know what you know *in the way that you know it* . . . Will you become my teacher and help me understand?" (Spradley, qtd. in Heyl 2001; Heyl's emphasis). Above all, your interview should be guided by the highest ethical awareness and respect for the individual whom you are interviewing.

After the interview:

- Transcribe your interviews so you have a text version to work with. This is the first step in your formal analysis of each interview and will be useful for many reasons: the transcript will ensure that you quote your interviewee accurately on your website; you will have a written record of the interview that you can show

your interviewee, if he or she would like to read it; based on the transcript, you may find that you wish to ask your interviewee some follow-up questions, if logistically possible.

### Questions to consider in your analysis:

- What does this festival “say” about the local culture and its history, as well as about our larger American culture?
- What does it “say” about the needs, values, or qualities of human nature?
- Look for connections between the various aspects of your analysis: as Geertz says, “connect—and connect—and connect.”
- Is there a central event, ritual, or other crowning experience in the festival of notable symbolic significance? (Here you are thinking along metonymic lines just as Geertz did when he singled out the cockfight as the starting point from which to “read” Balinese culture.)
- Try to brainstorm a metaphor to describe and analyze what you are seeing.

### Drafting Your Analysis

The format of ethnographic writing is flexible, but be sure to use the kind of close analysis, attention to detail, and probing questions that Geertz does in “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” As you analyze your notes, allow a pattern of meaning emerge: the “what it is.” **Watch out for this pitfall:** Be sure to not only *describe* features of your chosen festival, but also *analyze* them, draw conclusions, and answer the “so what?” question. Your goal is to communicate meaning vividly for someone who does not have your insider’s knowledge.

### Sharing Your Work

If at all possible, share a draft of your website with the festival participants whom you interviewed. Give them an opportunity to correct any inaccuracies and to flesh out what might be missing in your initial draft. Incorporate festival participants’ responses to your work into the final version of your project if you find these insightful and relevant.

### Evaluation

Final projects will be evaluated on:

- 1) The thoroughness of your observation (see the checklist above), extent of library, archival, and online research, level of detail in your writing, and evidence of your analysis of possible meanings behind what you have observed. Don’t be afraid to speculate on what you have discovered; creativity and risk-taking are part of engaging, provocative analysis.
- 2) The design and functionality of your WordPress website displaying your research. (More details about this as we move further into the semester.)

Richard G. Mitchell, Jr.’s questions to guide ethnographic research may also be helpful for your analysis:

- What is the setting of the action? When and how does action take place?

- What is going on? What is the overall activity being studied, the relatively long-term behavior about which participants organize themselves? What specific acts comprise this activity?
  - How are members (participants) stratified? Who is ostensibly in charge? Does being in charge vary by activity? How is membership achieved and maintained?
  - What do actors pay attention to? What is important, preoccupying, critical?
  - What do they pointedly ignore that other persons might pay attention to?
  - What symbols do actors invoke to understand their worlds, the participants and processes within them, and the objects and events they encounter? What names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, settings, equipment?
  - What practices, skills and methods of operation do actors employ?
  - Which theories, motives, excuses, justifications or other explanations do actors use in accounting for their participation? How do they explain to each other, not to outside investigators, what they do and why they do it?
  - What goals do actors seek? When, from their perspective, is an act well or poorly done? How do they judge action—by what standards, developed and applied by whom? What are the group's tacit understandings?
  - What rewards do various actors gain from their participation?
- (Mitchell 1991 qtd. in *Handbook of Ethnography*, Sage Publications, 2001)

## Conducting Oral Interviews

### An Introduction:

Performing oral interviews is an enlightening process which improves communication skills while contributing to the preservation of history. According to Donald Ritchie, author of *Doing Oral History*, “*Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video-format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet. Oral history does not include random taping, such as President Richard Nixon’s surreptitious recording of his White House conversations, nor does it refer to recorded speeches, wiretapping, personal diaries on tape, or other sound recordings that lack the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.*”<sup>1</sup> Oral history is one of the rising specialties in academia, but it is not without controversy.

Critics often decry oral history as unreliable or weak because oftentimes, the subjects are discussing past rather than present events. Some opponents say the testimony is unfounded, hearsay, and/or remembered memory. In truth, oral history can

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

be a wonderful complement to any research project as long as the interviewer understands and respects its strengths and limitations.

### **Creating a Format:**

After deciding on your topic, compose a list of questions you would like to ask your interview subjects. When doing this, remember that these same queries will be asked to each subject so try to make them fairly broad and open-ended. As to the number of questions, that is flexible, but it is advisable to do at least 10. I recently received IRB approval for a project on Cathedral Caverns and here are the questions I used:

- 1. When and how did you first hear about Cathedral Caverns?*
- 2. What were your first impressions upon seeing the entrance, said to be one of the largest cave openings in the world?*
- 3. Tell me about the first time you toured the caverns.*
- 4. Did you ever hear any myths or tall tales about Cathedral Caverns or "Bat Cave" as it was once known?*
- 5. To what extent do you think the caverns have fueled local and state tourism?*
- 6. In your opinion, does Cathedral Caverns rival Mammoth Cave National Park or Carlsbad Caverns National Park. If so, why do you think it hasn't gained the same amount of publicity?*
- 7. If Cathedral Caverns was reclassified as a national rather than state park, do you think it would attract more attention and tourists?*
- 8. Cathedral Caverns has been the site of several movies like Caves of Night, The Ravagers, Secrets of Phantom Cave, Tom and Huck among others. Why do you think it was chosen as a filming site?*
- 9. Do you remember when these movies were filmed? What was the local response to the caverns being used?*
- 10. During the Cold War, Cathedral Caverns was designated a fallout shelter. Did you ever hear any stories about the subject?*
- 11. After Gurley sold Cathedral Caverns, it went through a couple of owners before being purchased by the state. To what extent do you think Cathedral Caverns and its reputation changed upon becoming a state park?*
- 12. Do you have any Cathedral Caverns stories, anecdotes, or memories you would like to share?*

**IRB Approval:**

In order to protect human research subjects, every scholar customarily must attain IRB approval BEFORE conducting oral interviews (check with your home university regarding its specific policies). This involves earning a Human Subjects Training Certificate and an application to your university's IRB board. For a free online training course, go to <http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php> As to the application, typically, you will be asked to provide a summary of your project and why oral interviews would benefit your research. At this stage, you don't have to have a list of names, just a rough number. Another point to consider, those over 65 are a protected class and require that you be more thorough on consent (meaning written). You might also be asked how you expect to find or contact subjects. The approval process can take time so it is preferable to apply sooner rather than later.

**Consent Form:**

The consent form is a vital piece of your project. In essence, it is the subject giving permission for you to use the interview in your research. It is possible to rely on verbal consent, providing it is recording at the start of the interview, but written consent is always a plus. Here is a sample of one of my verbal consent statement:

*Hello, I am researching Cathedral Caverns and plan to write its history. I was wondering if you would consent to a telephone interview during which you would answer twelve questions on the subject. I will provide you with an audio and written transcript of the interview which I plan to use as a primary source in my article. The interview is completely voluntary and you may end our discourse at any time. If amenable, what are some possible dates/times for the interview?*

Observe that the subject has been informed of their rights and that they may cease the interview at any time. So why did I opt for verbal and telephone interviews rather than written and face-to-face? Distance. I live in Texas so it is not always possible for me to do face-to-face interviews with subjects in Alabama. That, however, should not be an issue for you because you are doing local history.

When creating a written consent form, you can incorporate much of what I mentioned in the italicized excerpt above. Here is an example of a written consent form:

### INFORMED CONSENT

**Researcher:****Title of Project:****Department/University:**

I am conducting a research study using oral histories. An oral history is a method of gathering historical information through the use of a recorded interview.

The topic of this interview is:

The purposes of the research project are:

I expect the duration of your participation to be:

Below is a description of the procedures that will be followed:

An audio (or video) tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer. A typed script of the tape will be made and if you desire, may be made

available to you for editing. The tape and the edited transcript will be placed in the (your university's library). Both the tape and the transcript will be made available for the purposes of research, for instructional use, for scholarly publication, or for other related purposes.

It is possible the subject matter may be embarrassing or difficult for you to speak about. Please be assured that you can stop at any time and/or refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

The information you provide will be identifiable, i.e. your name will be available along with what you said. This study is meant to benefit future researchers by providing a base of information from which they can draw. The information will be available to you as well as other members of the general public through

If you should have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact (your name and phone number). For additional information regarding human participation in research, please feel free to contact (your university's IRB office).

Please understand that your **participation is voluntary**.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_, do hereby indicate my desire to edit the typed script of my oral history interview before it is made available (your university's library).

I, \_\_\_\_\_, do not wish to edit the typed script of the oral history interview before it is made available to (your university's library).

Contact information for interviewee:

Name

Address

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip

### **Devices Needed:**

When conducting oral interviews, how you choose to record the interview is important. Some interviewers use video cameras while others prefer audio recorders. For many of you, this is likely an introduction to oral interviews so you can easily purchase an audio recorder for \$100 or less. Here is one example: Tascam DR-05 Portable Handheld Recorder (\$100); Recording Capability (24-bit, 96kHz); Sound File Format (WAV). If you prefer a camcorder, you may already have one, may be able to borrow one from your university, or purchase one for \$100+.

### **Interview:**

Now comes the fun!!! Oftentimes, the interview takes place at a location chosen by the subject. If using a camcorder, be sure to select a sitting place with plenty of light.

If using a recorder, attempt to choose a quiet place where you will be less likely to be interrupted (one time, I did a face-to-face interview with a woman whose two poodles barked the entire time; I bit my tongue and didn't say anything but probably should have because the noise hurt the recording). Begin each oral interview tape with a recorded introduction which includes the following:

*This is (your name)*

*Today is (month/day/year)*

*I am interviewing for the (first, second, etc.) time (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., Dr., etc.)*

*This interview is taking place at (address; may include description, such as "home of" or "office of") in (town, state).*

*This interview is sponsored by (name of university). It is part of the (title of your project).*

If you would like, you can also ask the subject for verbal consent. Then proceed to ask your series of questions. Some questions will solicit longer responses than others. For example, a subject might spend fifteen minutes on one question and two on another. It depends on their interest and personality. The same goes for interview length. When I performed oral interviews for my dissertation, I had one subject, rather quiet and reserved, whose entire interview lasted 20 minutes. Another subject, one extremely boisterous, talked for almost 4 hours.

During the interview, the subject might divert the conversation to another topic not related to the question, but that's fine. You want them to talk and that shows they are engaged in the interview process. Sometimes, the subjects will ask you questions about your experience and/or involvement with the research topic and while you should answer, try to turn the conversation back to the subject.

When each interview is completed, thank the subject for his or her participation. Even though your plans are detailed on the written consent form, be sure to reiterate what you plan to do with the interview and how much it will aid your project. Some of the subjects will want to edit the transcribed interview and you must respect their wishes.

### **Transcribing:**

Once you have your recorded interview, it might seem like a downhill slide but your work is just beginning. Transcribing the interview will provide more than one version and allow you to digest the information. Performing the transcription is a slow, arduous process. You must try to record every word, every sound, and even every silence or pause. I always transcribe the old-fashioned way by just playing the recording bit by bit and writing down the words. However, there is software available for transcribing oral recordings.

Don't try Dragon because it only picks up every few words. Instead, experiment with StartStop Digital Transcription System at <http://www.startstop.com/> or Express Scribe at <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>

### **Implementing:**

Once you have transcribed your recording, you can begin to implement it into your writings. Whenever using interview content, cite the source. If using quotes,

always mention the subject in the text. You will find that when it comes to many subjects, oral interviews are an invaluable contribution to your projects.

Festivals core assignment 1.19.16