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Savages, Deplorables, and the Promise of Anthropological Ethnography

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1. SAVAGES, DEPLORABLES, AND THE PROMISE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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FIGURE 1. Main street in Washtucna, Washington. Photograph by the author.

ON ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In the first decade of the twentieth century, anthropology remained largely preoccupied with the classification of socio-cultural difference. Amidst the halcyon days of armchair anthropology, practitioners utilized missionaries' reports, travelers' journals, dispatches from colonial administrators, and miscellaneous other tabulations of difference to assess whether a given cultural group might best be classified as *savages*, as *barbarians*, or as *civilized* folk. In the articulation of Social Evolutionary Theory, disciplinary discussions primarily concerned the criteria for these categorizations. Savagery, for example, was defined foremost by the absence of key qualities, technologies, and cultural features. For Edward Tylor (1958:23), who had essentially launched the new discipline with his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, savagery was recognizable by the absence

of “enlightened Christianity,” and by the presence of the “rudest forms” of animism that might someday evolve into monotheistic coherence. For Lewis Henry Morgan, savagery was more precisely defined by the absence of the “art of pottery” and other technological indicators that distinguished *barbarians* from *savages* (Morgan 1964:17). As scientific appellations these terms seem so antiquated today that it’s easy to forget that Social Evolutionary Theory—in its commitment to a monogenic explanation of human origins, and in its endeavor to grapple with human difference in terms of culture rather than race—was a thoroughly *progressive* position in historical context.

The whole of this theoretical framework would come tumbling down. Bronislaw Malinowski played an integral role in deconstructing these ideas and abandoning the very concept of savagery. Malinowski’s attack was instantiated, foremost, in the methodological proscriptions he envisioned for anthropology’s future. Drawing on the influence of his British mentors and their experiences on the 1898–1899 Cambridge Torres Strait Expedition, Malinowski developed and explored a constellation of new methods for potential inclusion in the ethnographic toolkit (Young 1998:2–3). Foremost, and unlike his disciplinary predecessors, Malinowski sought opportunities to actively participate in village life. He learned the villagers’ language, and with that language in hand, he joined in the quotidian activities of these purported savages. As years in the field passed, Malinowski also came to recognize that the duration of his stay was a key factor in his accumulation of insights. These methods produced a tectonic insight: the evolutionarily stalled Trobriand Islanders were, Malinowski revealed, in reality a socially complicated and interesting people who were fully, equally, and entirely human.

Malinowski’s achievement was threefold. First, he helped shift the anthropological focus from classification to the holistic study of cultures themselves. Second, Malinowski codified parameters and practices that remain integral features of ethnography to this day. More than a century later, for example, aspiring cultural anthropologists still endeavor to learn the language, to participate in everyday life, to stay for a year or more, and to live amongst one’s subjects as best possible. Third and finally, Malinowski demonstrated the latent promise of the ethnographic toolkit—that by using these procedures and these approaches, one might cross thresholds of cultural difference on a mission of empathic understanding, and emerge with an informed grasp of a culture foreign to the anthropologist.

It's this last aspect of ethnography's origins—that it was designed for the endeavor of exiting the familiar, and for plunging into a cultural world foreign to the ethnographer herself—that explains my use of the term *anthropological ethnography*. In American academia today, an array of different disciplinary practitioners claim ethnography in their methodological toolkit. Unlike anthropologists, however, few are concerned with crossing thresholds of cultural difference. Indeed, with the concept of *auto-ethnography*, some practitioners have altogether removed “others” from the equation, and instead claim that the imprimatur of ethnography might also apply to their interrogations of the self. I disregard these claims and applications: with the term *anthropological ethnography*, I instead emphasize the method's original endeavor—to cross thresholds of social and cultural difference, with aspirations for impartiality, on a mission to empathically explore and understand the cultural otherness one might encounter there.

SAVAGES AND DEPLORABLES

In a 2016 campaign speech, American presidential candidate Hillary Clinton declared that, “you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables.... They're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it” (Blow 2016). At the time, her statement and its implications were widely reported. I recall harboring a vague conviction about her unfortunate phrasing, but in the months to come, I thought little more about it. In part, I paid so little attention because, as many recall, there were plenty of other episodes, conflagrations, and media-instigated concerns besieging our national attention. Like most everyone else in my ambit, I remained convinced that a victory for Clinton lay just ahead, and like many others, I was stunned to discover, upon the tally of our votes, that we'd instead be governed by the strange celebrity-developer I'd previously mocked.

In the years to come, Clinton's statements began to reemerge from the fog, and her sentiments began to gradually concretize as a watershed event. I noted how Clinton had shifted disdain from her opponent and his impoverished ideals to the swath of the American public who supported his candidacy. Moreover, her public indictment of those supporters was moralistic in tenor, and portrayed those tens of millions of Americans as ideologically incorrigible creatures: they were not to be persuaded

by reason, nor would their minds be changed. Her sentiments seemed to imply that attempts to interact or understand their concerns would only “platform” beliefs that many wished to extricate from the American public sphere. With the passage of time, I came to believe that Clinton’s statement presaged, or even catalyzed, the divisory socio-politics that fragmented the contemporary American polity.

Leaving discussions of the causes for this fragmentation aside, we might agree that this condition is a social fact in contemporary America. On campuses like the one that employs me, these divisory social politics seemed to take exaggerated form. In the wake of Clinton’s comments, signs that rejected the very premises of American democracy began to show up on campus and in the surrounding neighborhood, suggesting the elected President was “not my President,” that we must “resist” Trump, or or resist governance more broadly. Students increasingly began to propose ethnographic projects concerned with messaging the uninformed and misguided Americans that inhabited this deplorable terrain. Others on my campus discreetly formed an Antifa chapter to, in part, combat the racists purportedly amassing just over the horizon. Agitated by a tour of rural Washington with his partner, another colleague from a nearby college described a worrisome journey through an enemy territory that, in their telling, seemed to most resemble the Jim Crow American South, albeit sans any African-Americans. It seemed that Clinton’s dismissive understanding of the American polity had taken root on campuses like mine, and I began to notice some recurring features in the portrayal of these deplorable Americans bugbears. They always seemed to be just outside the social networks of those who feared them. And in the Pacific Northwest, those deplorable Americans had a geography—they lived in communities just over the Cascade mountains (Figure 1), or just beyond the suburban fringe of the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area.

Eventually I began to see the parallels between these American deplorables and the savages of anthropology’s yesteryear. Both groups were delineated hierarchically—in a social-evolutionary schemata in the case of savages, and in a moralistic cultural hierarchy in the case of American deplorables. Both savages and deplorables were geographically distant from the progenitors of these frameworks and judgments. And both seemed to function as foils in the narratives the proponents of these hierarchies told themselves about themselves. With these parallels in mind, I began to pay closer attention to the handful of ethnographers

who sought to cross the contemporary American thresholds of social and political difference, and who did so on some sort of mission of empathy and understanding (Varenne 1977; Adams 2007; Hochschild 2016). And I began to ponder how ethnography might again help dispel the caricatures, essentializations, simplifications, and ethnocentricities that come so readily to us humans.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY OF RURAL CASCADIA

It was in this context that I've recently established a longitudinal project entitled the Ethnographic Survey of Rural Cascadia (ESRC). The project aspires to convey the tradition of *anthropological ethnography* to successive coteries of undergraduate students, foremost by encouraging them to cross thresholds of cultural and political difference on an impartial mission of understanding. To reiterate the obvious, like Malinowski's venture more than a century ago, the project deploys the ethnographic toolkit in an effort to vanquish the stereotypes, simplifications, and essentializations that permeate the American academic atmosphere. In doing so, the project provides an opportunity for students to ply the ethnographic craft, and to learn by trial, by error, and by experience. The project is also *nomothetic* in nature: it endeavors to gather together empirical observations, with the eventual goal of deriving explanation and theory from an accumulation of evidence.

This project currently depends on a campus program at the University of Puget Sound that provides funding for students to conduct independent summer research projects under the supervision of a faculty member. In conversation with me, students select a community of interest to them. Undergraduate student Maddie Davis piloted this effort in Coulee City, Washington, in the summer of 2022. The first portion of her summer was spent in preparation. Several weeks in the library helped Maddie build a foundational knowledge of Coulee City and its history, and also yielded time for Maddie to familiarize herself with other ethnographic work exploring community life in rural America. The second portion of Maddie's summer was spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Coulee City, with periodic visits by her faculty advisor (me). During her time in the field, Maddie sought to interview residents, to participate in the everyday activities of community life, and to gather other sorts of data that might flesh out our ethnographic *community dossier*.

As our project deliverable, the dossier is configured around three basic sections. The first is a social and economic history of the community that begins with its settlement and the people indigenous to that land. The second section of the *community dossier* explicates the contemporary demography and social topography of the community, which ideally enhances available census data with ethnographic insights collected by the student-researcher. The third and final section of the *community dossier* is thematically determined by the student. Maddie, for example, pursued an exploration of the role of churches and faith in contemporary community life. The entirety of this basic structure is peppered with illustrative ethnographic data. For example, student-researchers are encouraged to conduct sufficient interviews to allow for the construction of at least one business synopsis (an historical summary of a commercial enterprise's trajectory from beginning to present), at least one household synopsis (a summary of a household's members, primary sources of income, and history), and at least one individual synopsis (essentially, a summary of an individual's life story, gathered from one or more semi-structured interviews). These synopses, and photography that helps convey a sense of place, pepper the three sections of the *community dossier* described here. Raw ethnographic data—transcriptions and/or fieldnotes—are included as appendices to the ethnographic *community dossier*.

One foundational premise of this project is that communities are ethnographically discernible things (Calhoun 1978). Although sparsely inhabited, in our limited experiences so far, rural communities in the Cascadia region seem to be ideal locations for neophyte ethnographers (Figure 1). Oftentimes they contain individuals who are actively interested in community history, and many of the communities that I've personally scouted over the past years even contain museums staffed by residents poised for participation in projects like this. Moreover, in our experiences, many of the rural Cascadians we've encountered share the ambitions upon which this project is built: they too often recognize the value of interactions and communication with fellow Americans who may reside across thresholds of socio-political difference, imagined or real. We are currently compiling, editing, and revising our pilot attempt at this ethnographic *community dossier*, and numerous additional students are poised to apply for funding as part of next year's campus grant cycle.

Although this project is largely driven by undergraduates exploring the possibilities of the ethnographic toolkit, we hope it will help facilitate the deconstruction of the ideas and understandings that drive the fragmentation

of the American polity. Simultaneously, we hope that the project might contribute in some small way to the longstanding anthropological concern with community life in rural America. In that sense, we are energized by the possibility of the collaborations and conversations stewarded by this journal. Following the lead of Melissa R. Taysom (this collection) and the steady stream of works collected in *JONA* that precede our efforts, we endeavor to join the broader legacy in anthropology that, in its concern with rural American community life, stretches back more than a century.

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