

Holistic Ethnography: Embodiment, Emotion, Contemplation, and Dialogue in Ethnographic Fieldwork

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This paper theorizes holistic ethnography—an ethnographic method of inquiry that is similar to an embodied meditation practice—a conscious awareness of experience in which the researcher intentionally and variously focuses her attention on physical sensations, emotions, contemplation, and dialogue to contribute to deep sensemaking and critical examination. We illustrate this using an historical ethnographic field project as example. Only when we have immersed ourselves into our research within and beyond can we work toward a more dialogic understanding of the experience we are studying. We discuss how entering the experience through narrative requires us to focus on the embodiment of smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight of the phenomena we are studying; moving the story into our heart bids us to feel it deeply and unite with it at a place that transcends words and pulls us into the experiences; contemplating with our minds frees us to reflect on the experience and find meaning in it; and engaging dialogically invites us to discuss, connect, and voice each other and the experience into being. This approach to interpretation is messy yet thorough and provides a deep level of introspection and understanding. We end with a discussion of how this process can be used in the higher education classroom. By adding embodiment, emotion, contemplation, and dialogue to fieldwork and coursework, we suggest we are better able to critically examine cultural and social phenomena.

Keywords: ethnography, contemplation, embodiment, research methods, sensemaking, data analysis

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You can't believe you get paid to do this. You feel like a cross between Nancy Drew and Margaret Mead. Excited, you pull out your iPhone and snap a picture of the scene. The excitement fades slightly a quick moment later when you wipe the sweat from your brow as you swat at a giant mosquito that is dive-bombing your face. You walk away, hoping to deter the mosquitoes from landing. Brown magnolia leaves cover the graves under your feet. The buzzing in your ear increases as another drop of sweat stings your eye.

"Eew!" you say. "Flesh-eating zombie mosquitoes! How appropriate!"

We're walking through Sam Hill Cemetery, the cemetery at Hampton Plantation near Georgetown, South Carolina that holds the graves of Hampton's enslaved Africans and their descendants. We've been studying historical end-of-life communication on multiple South Carolina plantation cemeteries—an ethnography of thanatological material culture—and are now focusing on slave burial experiences. You could say we're using our bodies to search for bodies. We are—literally—in the field, but unlike archaeologists who seek to understand what people and cultures did—their history, we are undertaking field work—in a field—to help understand how people and cultures communicated meaning about their lives and deaths. We're trying to understand their messages. How they're still communicating meaning. Today.

ON FIELDWORK

In *On Fieldwork*, esteemed ethnographer Irving Goffman (1974) reflects on participant observation. He suggests that participant observation involves:

Getting data. . . by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their... situation. . . . (p. 125)

Goffman suggests we can understand people we are studying by "pick[ing] up on their minor grunts and groans" (p. 125), but Behar (1996) and others wonder if we can ever fully understand the other. Hunter (n.d.) asserts that it is only through qualitative interpretive analysis, especially ethnography, that we can understand and interpret culture. Desmond (2014) concurs, and not only laments the paucity of ethnographic fieldwork as a widely used epistemology, but suggests that ethnographic fieldwork offers unique and transformative ways to teach research ethics.

There are many different ways to approach understanding in a research project, and in our field of Communication Studies, there are three main paradigms followed by qualitative researchers alone: the social science paradigm, narrative paradigm, and performative paradigm (Davis, 2013). There are strengths and lim-

itations to each metatheoretical position, and each influences the ways one sees the world and the questions one asks about the world. Some scholars enter the experience through narrative—as a homo narrans, or story-teller (Fisher, 1984; 1987). Other scholars take a social science approach to research and experience it more analytically and in a more linear manner. Finally, other scholars take a more “heartfelt,” (Pelias, 2004) performative approach in which they seek understanding and meaning experientially, embodying their understanding by performing it (see Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Magnat, 2011; Quinlan & Harter, 2010). In an analysis of qualitative research practices performed by top Communication Studies scholars, Davis (2013) found that, regardless of the metatheoretical paradigm, good qualitative research is planned but open to discoveries and surprises. Thorough qualitative researchers are reflexive—they position themselves and their standpoints in their research and acknowledge their positionality in a thoughtful, intelligent analysis that ties the research to the larger picture—historical parallels, cultural meanings, narrative trajectories, or traditional archetypes. Understanding comes from both sides of the brain: studying the data and looking for patterns and themes; immersing oneself in the data; discussing the findings with scholarly peers; following the evidence; trusting one’s gut hunches; and being open to “aha” moments. We seek to merge these positionalities, responding to Goodall’s (1994) call to use narrative ethnography as applied scholarship “aimed at re-establishing the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge” (p. 187).

More traditional scholars might suggest using a triangulation of approaches to fully understand the phenomenon we are studying, or interpretive scholars might suggest a crystallization of the data (Richardson, 2000) by seeking to understand the multidimensional aspects of reality through several different approaches. However, in this paper, we theorize an ethnographic method of inquiry that is similar to an embodied meditation practice—a conscious awareness of experience in which the researcher intentionally and variously focuses her attention on physical sensations, emotions, contemplation, and dialogue to contribute to deep sense-making and critical examination. We illustrate this using our ongoing research into the communicative and cultural practices of historical South Carolina low country inhabitants—and especially enslaved (and formerly enslaved) Africans (and their descendants)—at end of life.

In this paper, we suggest that only when we have immersed ourselves into phenomena within and beyond—through our mind, senses, and heart, mindfully and dialogically—can we move toward a more complex and critical understanding. Understanding through narrative requires us to focus our attention on the embodiment of images, smells, tastes, and touch. Moving the story into our heart bids us to feel it deeply and unite with it at a place that transcends words and pulls us into the experiences. Contemplating with our minds frees us to reflect

on the experience and find meaning in it, through sustained contemplation, active visualization of historical positionalities, and intentional and contemplative projection of ourselves across temporal and spatial boundaries. Finally, engaging with our research dialogically invites us to discuss, connect, and voice each other and the experience into being. This approach to interpretation is messy, yet thorough. It provides a deep level of introspection and understanding. It pulls the sensory experience into the meditative, enriching detailed analysis of field notes. By adding embodiment, emotion, contemplation, and dialogue to our study, we suggest we are better able to critically examine historical, cultural, and social phenomena. This methodology extends current interpretive and ethnographic practices by degree and intentionality. While traditionally held qualitative analytical practices certainly claim multivocality, our practice pauses at the point of connection and drills down—through intentional intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue—to the spark and essence of common humanity and shared experience.

In the next section of this essay, we describe and contextualize our methodological process. We follow with sections illustrating the experience through narrative, as we layer embodiment, emotion, contemplation, and dialogue—an attempt to recreate and model our method for the reader.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

We don't often listen to the voices of our dead. Ethnographers typically practice our trade by observing and interviewing living bodies to understand life, culture, and communication. Janiseck's (2015) idea of observational impermanence—the temporal, cyclical nature of experience—leads us to practice a thoughtful, reflective observation as we connect with the seen and the unseen. In the research project offered as example, we are, by necessity, practicing a rhetoric of silence (Breede, Davis, & Warren-Findlow, 2012) as we try to begin speaking the language of the dead, gingerly realizing we are “in the field,” figuratively and literally. Our field sites are long-forgotten burial grounds, overgrown and abandoned graves cloaked in swampland and scrapheap.

Our field is also our own perceptual field which wears primarily white Eurocentric blinders that make it hard to see what is in front of our faces: the disembodied reaching out for our bodies as we walk on top of them. We approach the pain and horror of enslavement while acknowledging being repelled by it. We also acknowledge how our privilege colors our world beyond race. It infuses our perspectives and understandings within a white ivory tower that many people who aren't white can't access. Because of all of the associated absences that spring from lack of privilege—whether economic, familial, cultural, technological, and/or mediated—understanding is in so many ways historically associated and occurring concurrently with and because of racial apartheid. Although we're middle aged woman who face sexism in

our professional, educational, and cultural communities daily, we are undoubtedly privileged. We've never been stopped by police for walking down the street because of our skin color. We've never been pulled over for "driving while black." We've never made humorous hand gestures in a photograph with friends and been accused of flashing gang signals. We've never been called "thugs" for wearing hoodies.

Privilege, like so many other things, seems relative. Like poverty, it's something that some people don't recognize when they're immersed in it and can't fully understand without experiencing it. There's a chasm between those understandings, a polarization, typical of other languaged ideas that reflect ways of being: black and white, rich and poor, male or female, privileged or disenfranchised. This work moves in the direction of bridging those chasms where privilege is often unrecognizable and assumed and disenfranchisement is unknown.

Our project includes fieldwork at Hampton Plantation Sam Hill Cemetery, home to remains of descendants of the African people enslaved at Hampton Plantation (where the grave stones chronicle the oldest recorded death at 1950), and Hobcaw Barony, the site of 15,000 acres of wildlife preserve holding the remains of dozens of different rice plantations, including slave settlements and gravesites.

To undertake our fieldwork experiences with their challenges of distances of time, race, and class, we undertook a systematic and rigorous four step contemplative process (Davis & Boylorn, 2013). These steps were not linear, but instead were more circular. We experienced, narrativized, emoted, contemplated, and dialogued, simultaneously, repeatedly, and chaotically.

EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

For the first step, we literally immersed ourselves in the field and were intentional about experiencing it through all of our senses. As we walked around and observed, we took field notes (written, photographed, videotaped, and tape recorded) about what we were feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, and smelling. When we returned to our computers, we turned these field notes into narratives—stories with beginnings, middles, and ends; with sensory language and descriptions of action and dialogue. We used a process of "systematic introspection" (Ellis, 1991) to fill in details left blank in our notes. While in the field we were intentional about being thorough and detailed—writing both the seen and the unseen, the heard and the unheard, in our post-field systematic introspection process. When we returned from the field, we considered a specific list of questions related to participants, social dynamics, and mood; and we used a free-association memory chain to pick up additional details. Individually at first, then jointly, we mentally took ourselves back to the field and wrote down all details until we had exhausted our memories. In the narrative excerpted in this paper, not all these details are included, but being this detailed allowed us to capture the experience in its embodied entirety.

EMOTION/TRANSCENDENCE

In our research project, we made multiple attempts to connect with our field experiences by being intentional about—as much as we could—putting ourselves in the position of the enslaved Africans, by asking ourselves what emotions we would have been experiencing if we had been in the same situation. We filtered these reflections through our own emotional recall (Ellis, 1991) as we thought of times we had experienced similar emotions ourselves. We sought an intuitive immersive understanding based on emotional awareness and insight, similar to Janesick's (2015) “zenergy,” or empathetic vibrational energy. We journaled and wrote poetry to explore these emotions triggered in the field. The act of writing poetry is meditative, and poetry lets us get to the essence of meaning and understanding (Janesick, 2015).

CONTEMPLATION/REFLECTION

In the third step, we further attempted to understand the meaning of our experience through intentional contemplation and meditation. Again, individually then dialogically, we went through an iterative and reiterative process of writing, considering, and talking as we reflected on ways this experience connected with other times or places in history, theories or concepts, social roles, areas of focus, or stories or archetypes. Rather than analytically debating these concepts, this stage was thoughtful and reflective, and let us consider multiple positionalities and intersectionalities to move our research from the immediate experience toward a greater social and personal significance. This allowed us to move toward a level of multivocality and complex insight.

DIALOGUE

Our research was dialogic in multiple ways. We engaged in dialogue to move our contemplation from our individual minds to a communal understanding. We wrote and talked, both while we were in the field and for months after we returned home. We had many, multiple conversations with colleagues in related fields of study about the significance and meaning of our work. In addition to taking part in interpersonal dialogue with each other about the research, we also engaged in a dialogic relationship with our research as we sought to understand it at a deep level of meaning.

HOLISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

We suggest that it was the combination of these four practices—the embodied, emotional, contemplative, and dialogic—that together took us to a deeper and

more interconnected level of meaning and understanding. It also enabled us to interact with our research in a way that critically explored a significance that transcended its personal, political, and partial nature, and let us go analytically deeper than we otherwise would have. It allowed us to more honestly contemplate our positionality of white privilege. These insights may not have occurred without the level of dialogic contemplation that moved us beyond descriptive or theoretical ethnographic data analysis.

In the next session of this essay, we take the reader through a layered account of our research project in South Carolina plantation graveyards to illustrate how we interact with the remnants of end of life material culture using our process of holistic ethnography. We intentionally use the first and second person points of view in the narrative to allow for multiple perspectives, including yours.

EMBODIMENT

The day we visit, Hampton Plantation is deserted. The locked doors of the Visitor's Center block our entrance; we are the only visitors. Six inches of decaying leaves crunch underfoot. The air is heavy and the musky smell drifts into your nostrils. Insects buzz in your ears. Gray, lacy Spanish moss drips from the trees.

Graves marked with surprisingly new silk flowers dot the landscape at Hampton Plantation's Sam Hill cemetery. "Of course," you say. "Monday was Memorial Day." The flowers' colors are vibrant; they are remarkably clean from the dirt or sand.

The graves sit in clusters of twos, threes, maybe fives, surrounded by dead leaves, sand, trees and scrub. The burial patches spread out over about an acre. Many of the graves have body-length flat rectangular stones with accompanying headstones. Many graves stones are engraved with markings like crosses, many with metal plaques, some only with a small metal marker with the person's name and years of birth and death, sticking up about 6-8 inches. In time, the forest foliage and the sand will cover them up, you realize as you walk around.

You read: "Christ is the Answer, Gerald Lee Garnett, 1944-1993."

Your feet dig into the sandy ground. A Vienna Sausage can on the ground reflects filtered sunlight. The earth, the swamp, are reclaiming these graves to the tune of buzzing insects.

You walk up to one grave with no gravestone, just a homemade wooden cross made with two small pieces of scrap wood fastened together with a nail in the center. Tied to the cross is a silk flower and a pink bow. Written in what appears to be black marker is: "RIP Maurice. MA."

You feel a knot in the pit of your stomach as you imagine a mother building her son's grave marker with a Magic Marker and two pieces of scrap wood.

North of Hampton Plantation, we walk through Hobcaw Barony, the site of

the remains of dozens of different rice plantations, as we search for slave settlements and gravesites in what is now 15,000 acres of wildlife preserve. We trudge along swatting at the ever present mosquitoes, and see the tracks of feral hogs, wild turkeys, marine biologists, and field botanists. We see no other communication ethnographers, no one else seeking the communicative remains of the lives and deaths that embodied the world of the enslaved Africans brought here from their homes, no one else seeking communicative evidence of the homegoings, a Gullah phrase that describes their funeral beliefs, traditions, and rituals (African American Registry, 2002; Creel, 1988; Ferguson, 1981; Jamieson, 1995; P. McEver-Floyd, personal communication, 2013; Russell, 1997; Smallwood, 2007; Stine, 1996; Wilkie, 1997; Young, 1996). Thousands of slaves lived and died here over the course of three centuries. Their remains lie under the swamps and sand bars, shifting with the tide, deep and invisible.

We climb over a small metal fence. You find yourself on a lane, enveloped by pin oak trees covered in Spanish moss hanging down so low you can touch it. Your feet make indentions in the soft dirt. The buzzing of mosquitoes reverberates in your ears but they are not biting you now. The dirt gives way to oyster shell then to pine needles. Swamp land appears to your left. The muffled hoots of mourning doves call in the distance.

A sudden swarm of yellow butterflies sails past you. A light breeze caresses your face.

As you pass a cluster of bee apiaries, you can almost smell the warm sunshiny honey.

“Damn!” you say suddenly as you break into a run, feeling the stings. “Bees!”

“It’s time to take a lunch break,” I suggest.

We relax for an hour at the Rice Paddy Restaurant. Built from wood taken from old slave cabins, the restaurant sits on the site of former plantations, and most probably long dead bodies deeply below. We are here for their Southern soul food, and we sip iced tea under a large ceiling fan.

“What about the field?” you ask after we’ve eaten and rested. “Are we up to going back? We still haven’t found any of the slave burial grounds at Hobcaw.”

“Only five of them are marked,” I remind us. “With over 15,000 acres, it’s like finding a needle in a haystack!”

We take your Ford Escape. When it starts fishtailing in the sand, we take off on foot.

After an hour of walking, we come to a mossy pass through the woods, and finally spot one of the crosses that designates an identified cemetery on our blurry map. A small, brown sign with white letters confirms our location: “Marietta Cemetery.” We quickly pull our tape recorders, cameras, cell phones, notepads and pencils out of our backpacks and apply another layer of bug spray. The rusty

linked chain fence clangs as we unlatch the connecting two weathered, vertical log posts. The slightly fetid smell of dead pine needles, tree bark, and swamp reaches us before we see the cemetery. Our footsteps and heavy panting are the only sounds. The graveyard seems untended and overgrown: rotted, fallen trees' sawdust spills like guts out and over piles of dead leaves and animal burrows; tree branches and thick weeds cover the ground; yellow dandelions and wild indigo peek out from under sandspur bushes.

"I see a grave stone!" you call out. We cross downed trees, over a fence.

"We're walking on sacred ground here," I say. "It feels disrespectful to be stepping on people's graves."

You look more closely. There, barely visible—wait, everywhere. You look around, you look down. You realize we are ankle deep in bits and pieces of the lives and deaths, the cultural remnants, the bodies of the dead. Not their physical bodies of course; their dis-em-bodies—the artifacts, remnants, and possessions necessary for life, and therefore, necessary in death, necessary in the homegoing. These are the things they need on this journey: pottery and crockery, broken pitchers and jugs, pictures of loved ones. Large conch shells, some moss covered and hollowed, mark each gravesite, lovingly placed to return disembodied across the ocean to their homes, to be reunited, reconstituted, resurrected (Creel, 1988; Fennell, 2011; Ferguson, 1992; Joyner, 1984; P. McEver-Floyd, personal communication, 2013; Wilkie, 1997).

Your voice on the tape recorder is breathless as you describe the field. Layers upon layers upon layers; bodies upon bodies upon bodies. The descendants of the enslaved Africans, now African Americans, still bury their dead here, in the old ways. We find graves as old as 1800s, illegible hand carvings smoothed by time and wind. We find graves as new as 1999—smiling faces fading from photographs placed in now rusty frames. Most graves still face east, toward home. We realize in this field of bodies, that is our compass. Centuries of displaced Africans, and now their descendants, bring their dead here, following the customs of their tribes in southwest Africa. The past is never very far away from our present, for any of us (Ferguson, 1992; Joyner, 1984; P. McEver-Floyd, personal communication, 2013).

Coda: Our immersion into the field was in some ways not dissimilar to that in traditional ethnography. We observed, interacted, and wrote field notes. Unlike more traditional ethnography, however, our interactions by necessity were with the remnants of historical material culture. Our observations included observing our own sensorial experiences, and encompassed our emotional experiences as well.

EMOTION

We leave in search of the next cemetery and I drop back and walk alone; reflecting, thinking, feeling. We walk in silence, lost in our thoughts. I feel tired, heavy,

sad. Where does this experience touch me emotionally? It touches me in my own memories of graves, cemeteries, gravestones. Seeing all these graves makes me think of my dad at the holiday dinner table one year, diagnosed with cancer the next, gone the following. These graves touch me in the people who have disappeared from my life.

I sigh deeply. In the silence I go within and reflect on this experience, to understand what this all means, to connect it to place and space that has meaning for me. I search my mind for experiences that resonate with this narrative. I think of all the marginalizations and subjugations we humans impose on each other on a daily basis. I think of ways we enslave others with our economic and environmental practices and policies. I think of ways that poverty renders people invisible, how voice disappears under the weight of oppression. I think of recent news stories, police killing underage unarmed African American children, rioting and looting in the streets, labels of racists and thugs, opinions lining up like sides, each side fearing the other. I feel so sad. 150 years later and it seems as if nothing has changed. I focus on my breath, then on physical sensations in my body—in my face, throat, chest, and stomach. I focus my attention on my heart, on my emotions. “What am I feeling?” I ask myself. I pull out my tape recorder and dictate a stream of consciousness. I later write it as a poem.

Our flesh with their flesh, their
rotting rotting dead flesh.
White hands in rich clothes, our
raw flesh laid bare.
Privileged with book minds, our
ghostly, ghostly power
is no match for hauntings of
raw flesh laid bare.
Looking and watching, we
listen, listen—then feel
naked hearts beating as
raw flesh laid bare.
How can we know them, we
privileged, privileged white girls?
We think we can hear their
raw flesh laid bare.
Reading their culture in
fragments, fragments thrown down
by nature’s destruction on
raw flesh laid bare.

We see them, our minds form,
 Reaching, reaching for them.
 We feel through our bodies their
 raw flesh laid bare.
 Our time-place experience
 writing, writing stories
 builds bridges that reach out to
 raw flesh laid bare.
 We see them, we feel them,
 crying, crying for them.
 We breathe in the stale air their
 raw flesh laid bare.
 Perhaps we can't feel it, their
 terror, terror mem'ries,
 but maybe our skin holds their
 raw flesh laid bare.

In front of me, you stop walking and raise your hands to the sky and tilt your face toward the sunlight. "I love it out here!" you say. "The smells of saltwater, and swamp, and life, and death. It smells rich and strong. Like them. Like me. I wonder if they learned to love it out here. Or hated it? Or after a while, a weird mix of both?"

You look over at the cemetery now in the distance. The bodies under our feet remain silent, but your body aches from crouching, from bee stings, from too much rich food and not enough exercise. Not a problem for the bodies lying beneath us. Wistfully, they remind you of their hunger, of their labor. Disembodied, they sing like mermaids (Gergen, 1992). Even though they are dead, their voices are calling to you. You can still hear them singing.

Coda: Attempting to approach an emotive understanding required an effort to come to terms with our own emotional responses to our field experience, both immediately as we were in the experience and later as we reflected upon it. This entailed a meditative attentiveness to a stream of conscious and unconscious feelings, sometimes asking the question "what am I feeling?" and other times attending to the visceral reactions in our bodies as we recalled and reflected. Our emotional meditation led to a contemplation on the meaning of our experience.

CONTEMPLATION

"Imagine what it was like to live here hundreds of years ago," you exclaim. "No indoor plumbing. No running water."

“No A/C!” I add. “How about imagining what it was like to be a slave here?”

You shake your head. “We can’t imagine. We can’t begin to understand what it was like. To be kidnapped. Stuffed on a ship for months. Over two-thirds of the people traveling with you, dead. Knowing you could never escape, and if you did there was nowhere to go. For most, death was the only escape” (Bell, 2010; Bracy, 1998; Littlefield, 1981; Schiller, 2011; Smallwood, 2007).

“Death seems to be their escape now,” I say. “They’ve essentially disappeared. Mother Nature has covered them, cloaked them in the decay, growth, and rebirth of new, wild, unfettered life.” I pause thoughtfully for a minute. “Death—for themselves or their children—was a choice that many enslaved Africans made, often seeing that as their only chance at power or agency (Bracy, 1998; Giddings, 1984; Littlefield, 1981). Some African people who were enslaved, in some times and places, had other—albeit limited—sources of agency: bartering with the plantation owners for increased opportunities and resources, for the lives of their children, for their freedom. Some worked on their own personal plots of land to supplement food for their families or sell to other plantations. They otherwise accumulated limited resources for themselves and their families, sometimes hiring themselves out to other plantations, on their ‘own’ time after their primary plantation work was completed for the day (Fairbanks, 1984; Fennell, 2011; Goodwine, 1998; Jordan, 2005; Joyner, 1984). The relationships between enslaved Africans and the plantation owners were complex. It’s hard for us to understand how much they felt agency or constraint, given the structural realities of their situation,” I add.

“Yes,” you concur. “Enslaved Africans did find ways to resist and rebel.”

“Those rebellions are never found in the white history books (Goodwine, 1998; Kly, 1998; Weik, 1997),” I interject.

“No, you’re right,” you say. “But the South was full of ‘Maroon Communities,’ where escaped slaves, disenfranchised Native Americans, white indentured people, and people of mixed race built their own communities” (Creel, 1988; Kly, 1998; Pinckney, 1972).

I add, “Some who could, ‘passed’ for white. Some enslaved Africans developed other elements of agency—they acquired property. Some could buy their freedom and some were given freedom upon their master’s death. They married or entered into relationships with white slave owners. They defied legal ramifications and taught themselves and their children to read. They were provided with healthcare, albeit for pragmatic reasons. They were the economic backbone of the south. They were allowed to celebrate holidays and they were allowed to bury their own dead” (Fennell, 2011; Giddings, 1984; Goodwine, 1998; Jackson, 1987; Jordan, 2005; Joyner, 1984; Myers, 2011; Pinckney, 1972; Stine, Cabak, & Groover, 1996).

“Of course,” you say. “Even the word ‘allowed’ implies hegemony and structural marginalization.”

“Yes,” I concur. “And, also of course, they were starved, whipped, beaten, and raped (Fennell, 2011; Smallwood, 2007). It’s a complex relationship, and the enslaved Africans always got the short end of the deal, but there are documented instances of agency and resistance within the structural constraints in which they lived and died.”

You sit thoughtfully for a minute. “I think of times I’ve felt fear, apprehension, but I’ve never actually feared for my life.” You grimace. “I whined when I got a few mosquito bites this morning but I’ve never spent hours, days on end in mosquito-infested swampland. Take the worst day in the worst time of your life and you still can’t imagine what their life was like.”

“Our culture fears death,” I say. “The enslaved Africans embraced death. Death represented their freedom.”

“Understanding historical experience through artifacts, ecology, and the environment is really daunting,” you say.

“Yes,” I agree, adding, “knowing the history of what happened here certainly informs a lot of our interpretations of this experience.”

You nod. “It’s a perceptual field as well as an ethnographic field. It’s a challenge to get past our ethnocentrism to understand them.”

“That’s why it’s so important to use our senses,” I say. “We can’t understand fully from the artifacts but by listening to their voices, by attempting to feel their emotions, by allowing our body, spirit, and mind to guide us, we can begin to approach empathy. This is an intuitive methodology.”

Coda: Undertaking contemplation and reflection both individually and jointly, meditatively and dialogically, we considered the historical, social, theoretical, and critical implications of our understanding. This stage answered the “so what” question which should be asked of all research but is especially relevant to historical investigation—what does this understanding mean to us today, and how can we use this knowledge to advance a progressively significant future?

DIALOGUE

Later, at the hotel bar, I sip white wine as we talk. Maybe feeling brave from the wine, I open up. “You know,” I say, “I strongly believe in standing up for people who are marginalized and underprivileged. I would never blame people who are poor for being poor, or people who have been victimized for being victims. When I think about poverty and marginalization, I try to look beneath the surface at the systemic issues that create spaces in which people are disempowered and kept down. I became a communication scholar and writer to give voice to people who are traditionally muted by society and to analyze the processes by which voices are muted. I do volunteer work to help people. I donate to charitable causes. I vote to support progressive policies. I am a socially liberal do-gooder. But—deep down—I have to admit I don’t feel it. I can’t feel it. Intellectually, I sympathize. I

can find points of connection with fear, pain, and abandonment. I can read the historical record and visualize how Africans were kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, and otherwise mistreated. I can totally see and sympathize with how a cultural history of enslavement and marginalization results in continued racism, classism, marginalization, and disempowerment among African Americans today. But I am simply too privileged to fully wrap my heart around what it was like to be a slave, or even what it is like to be a person of African descent living in the U.S. today. As much as I liberally and intellectually sympathize, I cannot understand what it was like—or is like. I am unable to feel what they felt. I am unable to immerse myself into the African—or African American—experience. I am unable to step into their shoes. And, frankly, I find I have to work hard keep my focus on attempting to understand. It's much too easy to go back to my air conditioned middle class existence and give lip service to 'ain't it awful' rhetoric while I sip wine in a society built on the backs of slave labor. I can get angry, but it is intellectual anger. The reality is, despite my personal experiences with want, fear, and abuse, I am so privileged I am sure I could not survive one hour in the circumstances in which many people live. And I am so privileged I cannot even fathom what that existence was like then, or is like now."

You nod. "I grew up in the mid-1960s in the south, and while the federal desegregation order had long since been issued, I had never known anything but segregation." You pause for a moment as you mentally go back there. "I lived in segregated neighborhoods, attended segregated churches, and shopped in segregated stores. The first time my grandmother ever saw black people in her favorite restaurant, I thought she would pass out. I never had a black child in my school classroom until I was in 7th grade. I remember a trip to explore the newest portion of the interstate that was being built to connect Norfolk and Virginia Beach, Virginia. In order to get to the new interstate ramp, we had to drive through New Town, a predominantly black, low income neighborhood of ramshackle wooden houses crowded together in a swampy wooded area. As we drove by, the glow of colored television screens shone through the spaces of the open front doors of the homes. I remember being so confused, because color T.V. sets were so expensive in the mid-1960s that we didn't even have one, but then I noticed that many of the houses also had shiny beautiful Cadillacs parked in front of the shacks. Daddy said that when you drive a Cadillac around town, no one knows you live in a shack."

You turn your attention back to me. "White privilege (Jackson, 2012; Nakayama & Kryzek, 1995; West, 2001). It was hard understanding race, class, and gender disparities as an eight-year-old child, and while I now understand inequities, disenfranchisement, and exclusion, it's hard for me to really 'feel' most standpoint-related exclusion based on historical, institutional, and cultural structures.

Even my gender is situated in the context of whiteness; my grandparent's poverty is situated in the context of whiteness; my ethnicity, institutionalized faith, and age are situated in the context of whiteness. On an intellectual level, I can understand, thoughtfully discuss, sympathize, and even empathize with 'the other,' but even my very real personal experiences with religious and gender discrimination and violence, with ethnic slurs, with age exclusion, were in many ways temporary and in all ways are always situated within the context of privilege: the privilege of present and involved family, the privilege of an articulated family value of education, the privilege of parents who had the human, temporal, and economic resources to enable family and educational privilege." I take another sip of wine as I listen. "Yes, racism, power, and privilege didn't start here and it doesn't end here. It's human nature to exert power. And there's lots of ways to oppress: with weapons, with words, with fear, with false promises of safety and security, language of scarcity and lack. There are many oppressors: monetary systems and policies that enslave and cripple; enslavement by status, fear, greed. It's a real danger to say the days of slavery are over. Oppression is alive and well, and if I'm completely truthful, I have to wonder which side of oppression I am on, on a daily basis."

"We can love it here," you say. "It's one of the most beautiful places I sat in. Did they love it or was it just horrible for them? What was their complexity or dialectical tension? We know what scholars tell us the conch shell represented (Ferguson, 1992; P. McEver-Floyd, personal communication, 2013) but do we really know what they were thinking when they put it on the grave? How was it used in the homegoing? Can we ever know? We have to acknowledge it's an unknowable. But we can get some ideas about it."

"We have to ask Goffman (1974)," I say, "if it is possible to be a participant observer when the people you're observing are dead. Not by interviewing the fourth generation of descendants. Not by reading archaeological accounts. But by being there, experiencing it. Standing at their graves. Imagining. Contemplating. Seeing what they might have seen. Smelling what they might have smelled. Feeling what they might have felt. Feeling what it might have felt like to stand in the rice fields, trying to work, while being dive bombed by zombie mosquitoes, so thick you're digging them out of your ears. Wiping their sweat with their filthy hands. Tired and hungry, them knowing they were never going to see home again, me knowing this trip is fleeting. Yet somehow they forged this life. This is the greatest survival story ever told. Together they forged a whole culture. Built an entire rice industry. This place became their home. Their descendants made this their home. It's a circle of life. Their living descendants are still returning and burying their dead, so the dead and the living exist simultaneously out here in the South Carolina swampland."

You say thoughtfully, "We came here dressed for the bugs, the heat. We sweated and swatted. But did we relate to the enslaved? We weren't doing the

labor they were. And we had bug repellent. What would it be like to be bone tired, starved (Handler & Corruccini, 1983; Jordan, 2005). To have the overseer on a horse with a whip? Driving you. Pushing you. In our privilege, we could stop whenever we wanted. Take a break. Eat a snack. Sit under a tree. Drink a cold beverage. We have to admit—there is work, and there is *work*. There's only one place we have anything in common with the enslaved. Under the ground. We're all the same when we're dead." You sit thoughtfully for a minute. "So what are we doing here?" you ask. "What's the point of this fieldwork? We've been bit, stung, and sunburned. We've definitely got skin in this game. But so what?"

"We came to find their graves, to resonate with their experiences at end-of-life," I say. "But life and death are two sides of the same coin. You can't understand death without understanding life." I pause. "We're trying to enter into dialogue with the dead."

"Dialogue," you say. "The I-Thou? (Buber, 1988). Reciprocity and relationship?"

I nod. "Buber said that the I-Thou relationship was about being present for each other as a mode of being in the world. Dialogue begins in concrete experience, but doesn't end there. Dialogic relationships move from the embodied to the symbolic. Dialogue is in the in-between space—between you and me, between us and the enslaved Africans whose graves we've been walking on, between life and death."

"Dialogic relationships between people implies a deep connection at a deep level of meaning," you say.

"Yes, but Buber said you also enter into a dialogic relationship with objects, nature, or God, because to Buber, dialogue was an existential term that encompasses our wholeness, our place in the universe, the mystery of the merging of the self and the other as mortal and immortal beings existing in both separation and oneness. I exist only in relation to you, and not just you in the here and now, but the 'you' across time and space. Dialogue bridges the distance of time and space. Dialogue *here* is about bridging the distance between you, me, the enslaved Africans, and their descendants today. It's about understanding myself in relation to my understanding of others. We are in dialogue when we become aware of each other—truly aware—and when, rather than using each other as an object, we see each other as our partner in a living event. My understanding may be partial, partisan, and personal, but it's dialogic because we're confirming the presence of the enslaved Africans, uncovering their existence, exposing what Buber would call their potentiality."

"What is the potentiality of the deceased enslaved Africans?" you ask.

I think for a minute. "To be a warning for us today. To be a monument for compassion, change, freedom, liberty, voice, and equality. To remind us that we're in this world together, that in an interhuman unfolding, we are all parts of the same whole."

Coda: We were intentional about moving from internal contemplation to external dialogue—to seek to listen, hear, understand, and share our vulnerabilities and positionalities; to engage at a deep level of understanding with each other, with the field, with the remnants and memories, imagined and enacted selves. Dialogue is a communicative activity that bridges divides of time and space, culture and experience, thought and emotion. Dialogic awareness transcends ethnographic understanding.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Introducing students to these practices is a similar experience. In classes as disparate as an undergraduate class on End-of-life Communication, a graduate class on Communication Research Methods, and a workshop on qualitative analysis for professional scholars, we have led many students through this holistic approach.

All experiences begin with embodied knowledge—visiting and observing various field sites multiple times, engaging in systematic introspective recall. Our instructions for field observations are multisensory—students are instructed to utilize a stream-of-consciousness notation both in real time and retrospectively, of everything they see (and don't see), hear (and don't hear), feel (and don't feel), taste (and don't taste), and smell (and don't smell). They are instructed to focus on each sense for a period of time, and to attune to specific sensory details such as colors, shadows, location, proxemics, size, shape, loudness, pitch, tone, tempo, temperature, hardness, feelings, emotions, tartness, sweetness, and fragrance. The purpose of this is to encourage revelation of a variety of stimuli and to develop the ability to see familiar things in novel ways.

Once back in the classroom, students are invited to turn their field notes into narratives about their experience. Thinking through stories enables us to use all of our senses, expand our pictures of the world, and engage ourselves holistically. To recreate the experience as they write their narrative, we take students through a guided imagery exercise that assists them to access the full spectrum of sensory experiences. This exercise includes the instructions to: describe the scene; jot down all the details you can see; write about the details you can't see; write about who the people are, what they are like, what the social dynamics are; use details that show—rather than tell—the mood of that moment; use as many details/words as you can; and use a free association memory chain. Sometimes this step is only a classroom exercise; other times it involves individual student journaling.

The third step involves accessing emotions related to the experience, using an exercise of mindful attention (Levey & Levey, 1995). Students are instructed to continue remembering, reflecting, meditating, thinking, attending, and writing with the following instructions:

Complete the sentence: “Wow! I feel so _____!”
Describe what you are feeling. Jot down all the emotions you feel.

Write about the emotions you can't feel. Write about who or what are involved in the emotions. Use details that help us feel your emotions. Use as many details/words as you can. Use a free association memory chain.

Some students write poetry, others write prose in response to this exercise. Sometimes this is a classroom exercise; other times it is turned in via student journals. Sometimes students share their journals with each other and respond; other times this is a private exercise.

For the third step, students engage in a lateral thinking exercise in which they are asked to brainstorm for all the ways their experience connects with different times in history, theoretical perspectives, social roles, places in history, and areas of focus. This act of intersecting the phenomena with various sociological contexts leads students to generate new ideas and connections by making jumps between seemingly unrelated contexts, breaking the phenomenon down into smaller patterns, creating analogies, and restructuring the pattern of the phenomenon by changing what is attended to (DeBono, 1970). Students are encouraged to ask: How is this like the phenomena I am studying? What if the phenomena were _____? What are the similarities? Sometimes this exercise is solely a contemplative classroom exercise, and sometimes it involves outside research assignments to understand theories or historical contexts.

Finally, students are asked to share these experiences with each other. Dialogue results in new connections and meanings. Sometimes this stage involves classroom discussion, other times it involves small group work ranging from group discussion to semester-long papers and assignments.

CONCLUSION

In all ethnographic research, when seeking to understand historically and culturally situated phenomena—and its enduring rhetorical power—a level of existential understanding is necessary. It requires sensory embodiment, emotional transcendence, reflective contemplation, and dialogue.

Many scholars talk about embodiment—the knowing that emerges from understanding through your body. In this paper, we suggest an approach that extends the notion of embodiment beyond the body, an emotive, contemplative, and dialogic approach that reaches within and beyond to connect at a deep level of meaning to find the spark of understanding that transcends words. These dialogic contemplative practices allow us to rise above spatial and temporal differences to view our North Star—one point at which we can connect in our shared humanity—an enlightenment of perspective, an intuition of experience. In our research, since we're studying people and culture long dead, we had to come up with new and different ways to understand their experience. Out of necessity, we cycled

through an understanding based on embodiment, emotion, contemplation, and dialogue, which helped us achieve some measure of empathy that allows for compassion and caring.

We argue that such a level of understanding is necessary in many research projects and venues, especially those projects and venues that are undertaken both within and outside of traditional classroom settings (Hess, 2011; Rutten, van.Dienderen, & Soetaert, 2013). Pierides (2010) suggests that “multi-sited” ethnography is underutilized in most educational settings and offers transformative insight when studying historical, social, and/or cultural phenomena for analytical and educational purposes. Arguing that “educational sites have never been silos with preconstituted objects waiting to be found” (p. 183), he suggests that this traditional “boundness” is impractical, incomplete, and fails to foster educational inquiry. We suggest that holistic ethnography is necessarily a jointly constructed, sensory, dialogic project with others. Multiple people can play multiple roles, each focusing on the different elements of the process in turn.

Creese and Blackledge (2012) observe that by using dialogic and collaborative approaches, the “process of meaning making becomes complex and rich with potential” (p. 306). They assert that when applying teamed and dialogically oriented research among phenomenon, students, and researchers within multi-sited ethnographic research, “the perspective of the students and the researchers appear to merge” (pp. 312-313) and more fully enable “voiced” participants. This process becomes a valuable educational tool for students and teachers, participants and researchers, both within the field(s) and within the classroom(s).

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