

TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN ANTHROPOLOGY: ORIENTING STUDENTS TO THE DISCIPLINE'S CHANGING GEOGRAPHY

Presented by J. Joanne Kienholz, M.A. Student, University of British Columbia 2009; Alumna of the International Field School in Museums and Sustainable Heritage Development, University of Queensland 2008

At the session *Education and Institutional Practices*, May 14, 2009

During the Annual Conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society/Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA) 2009

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

I am here today, on the left edge of continental North America, to talk about a field experience on the edge of our discipline and at the centre of issues of global importance for communities and the anthropologists who study them. Last December I had the opportunity to attend an International Field School in Museums and Sustainable Heritage Development in Northern Vietnam. Dr. Amareswar Galla of the University of Queensland, Australia, conceived of and coordinated the school in partnership with the Government of Vietnam, bringing together graduate students and heritage professionals from around the world. Over the course of 16 days, we visited institutions of cultural importance—from art museums to local marketplaces. We were to learn about how the needs of the communities in which these institutions were situated are being addressed through heritage development, and to develop strategies for becoming conscientious professionals embedded in a decolonising but globalizing world. As a student of anthropology, I was struck by the importance of letting not only theory, but also the course of our program, bend to local practicalities and the real needs of the communities we visited. To this point in my educational career, conversations of community collaboration and participatory engagement in anthropological practice have been limited

to ethnographic fieldwork¹. I was intrigued by the idea that communities might be involved not only in the research, but in the training of researchers, and my purpose here today is to explore how anthropological field experiences are both influenced by and influencing the changing geography of the discipline.

Alexander Bošković has mapped out some previously-marginalized anthropological schools of thought and inquiry in Other People's Anthropologies. He suggests that stories of these 'other' anthropologies "may stimulate critical reflection on the basis for the assumed centrality of hegemonic anthropologies" (Bošković 2008:3). As today's students will comprise tomorrow's professional anthropological discipline, we need to find the space to explore these "other" anthropologies through educational experiences. Extra-institutional experiences (and by 'institutional' I mean both physical schools and the intellectual institutions) are crucial for anthropologists who are trying to establish the discipline in this dynamic transnational environment, especially one that is attempting to position itself as *post-colonial*. For students, this means encouraging transnational field experiences such as the field school in Vietnam.

When we arrived in Hanoi, Dr. Galla greeted the ten participants warmly, but with the caution that travel often becomes more about the traveller than about the place and the people visited. While students of Vietnam, we were to focus on the people, heritage, issues and approaches of each community we visited. As one participant commented: "Nothing was presented to us from a distance—we had the opportunity to 'get amongst it'" (UQ 2009). Our diverse learning community was thus thrust into the Vietnamese

¹ The Department of Anthropology at UBC runs an annual archaeological fieldschool at Musqueam, and several members of the Musqueam First Nation are involved in the ongoing archaeological work at this site. Archaeological field training is beyond the scope of this paper, but it would be illuminating to compare the two schools.

cultural complex: our educational toolkits exposed and ready to be reconstituted by the each consecutive community. How better to prepare students for a changing global community than to require students to effectively respond to the needs of real communities? One student highlighted that the “ethical pragmatic approach to issues presented, as opposed to any rigid ideological viewpoints [made her] realise the values of experiential learning” (UQ 2009). Another described the importance of working directly with communities: “The opportunity to speak in depth with community members...about their own opinions and experiences was extremely valuable in understanding community connections” (UQ 2009). Educational theorist Michael Singh suggests that the enabling of transnational learning communities such as this could lead to “a renewal and re-articulation of the responsiveness and responsibility of education to engage the imperatives of these changing times” (Singh 2005:19).

The field school learning community was transnational not only through its engagement with Vietnam’s communities in a global context, but also in the group’s composition: ten countries, and at least eight different educational or heritage institutions were represented by the ten participants. The educational experience was enriched, not hindered, by the diversity of experience of all participants. Everyone was pushed outside of their own scholarly and professional experiences, and encouraged to engage with new ideas, theories, approaches and orientations. One participant suggested that “the interactions with the other participants in the course formed the basis of the learning outcomes through the sharing of ideas and viewpoints, and discussions around observations made in the field” (UQ 2009). Reflection on the field school experience was encouraged at both individual and group levels. These reflections enriched the

experience, and have helped to establish ongoing professional and intellectual relationships: the foundation of transnational disciplines. One participant described this process as the creation of “an international network for ongoing support and shared interests. It really does make social change seem possible” (UQ 2009).

This participant makes an important link between education and practice. For students of an increasingly decentralized, transnational discipline, it is important to learn how theory can function on the ground, in context, and most importantly, for people. For museums, especially those of an anthropological persuasion, Christina Kreps has proposed the idea of ‘appropriate museology,’ which she sees as part of “an effort to refashion professional museum practices and technologies to better fit local cultural contexts and socioeconomic conditions” (Kreps 2008:23). If museum professionals—and anthropologists in other fields—are working towards appropriate practices that are sensitive to local needs, then educational practices must become responsive to these same issues.

This requires an acknowledgement from participants in transnational anthropologies that they are, by the nature of their work, part of social transformation within communities. By giving primacy to the expertise and needs of the communities we visited in Vietnam, participants worked to develop an understanding of “the role communities can and should play in sustainable management and positive development of their own heritage resources and the way inclusive management strategies can facilitate this” (UQ 2009).

As part of the course, we read several articles written by local museum professionals (eg. Thi Tuyet 2007; Van Huy 2006; Van Nghiem 2001), and chatted with

local people. Local scholarship and real community needs are not always congruent, though, and there are ongoing intra-national tensions as different communities within Vietnam work for change within their own system. For example, the Vietnamese federal government is encouraging ethnic minorities—through funding and progressive heritage legislation—to safeguard their intangible heritage. Dang Nghiem Van (2001) outlines how many of these groups have adjusted to changes throughout history, and some of the ways that they are (or should be) adapting today. It seems that the Viet people (the ‘ethnic majority’ that includes the federal government) feel that they have a fiduciary duty to protect these people. But when does a genuinely well-meaning suggestion to “open up to the modern world and accept reforms” (Van 2001:57) become damaging to the independence of the group in question? Does the constant reminder that these groups constitute a minority prevent them from being equal participants in Vietnam’s society? In 2001 Oscar Salemink reflected on the issue of essentializing the cultures of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities and the nation’s policy of ‘Selective Preservation’ of their cultures:

It is, of course, impossible and undesirable to create ‘reservations’ where people are instructed to live in a traditional way. Rather, it is a matter of creating favourable occasions in everyday life to enable minority people, while participating in modern life, to live their traditional culture.
[Salemink 2001:211]

It is ironic and telling that this critique is from a non-Vietnamese scholar. How, then, can well-meaning anthropologists locate themselves in this kind of political climate? As students, we were required to find an appropriate place for ourselves within a space that cannot be neutral. When working in a real community, researchers of culture and heritage cannot distance themselves from the greater complex of political, humanitarian and environmental movements taking place therein.

However, being a *part* of social change does not necessarily entail that participants are, or should be, the *drivers* of this change. Professor of educational studies, Andrea Dyrness, promotes participatory research in which “the community members themselves are agents of change” (Dyrness 2008:24). Her approach requires researchers to relinquish a certain amount of control over the direction, course and purpose of their research. What are the implications for students? How about for research and work conducted within the institutional constraints of a fieldschool? How can students relinquish institutional power that they may not hold in the first place? It is exactly this that places students—even if students only for the course of the school, as was the case for the professional participants in the fieldschool in Vietnam—in a unique position to explore community-centred practice.

But, of course, there are limitations on how far we can follow this thread before the educational experience disintegrates altogether. I was frustrated that all of our conversations were conducted in English through interpreters. Additionally, we were still limited, for the most part, to interacting with local professionals or government officials, and our visits were limited to just a few days or less in each community. But thinking in ideals will not help make the experience transformational. Is it possible to adequately imbue students with the appropriate humility, sensitivity, tact, and ethical conscience needed to practice appropriate transnational anthropology—especially given the necessarily-limited scope of a fieldschool? I would argue that it is not; however, it is the encouragement of critical reflection well beyond the temporal, scholarly and institutional constraints of the fieldschool itself that might allow for the growth of an affected, transnational network of appropriately-engaged anthropologists. In the midst of a

disciplinary identity crisis for the “great” traditions of anthropology, Bošković clearly demonstrates that “anthropology seems to be thriving in distant and extremely diverse traditions” (2008:16). Transnational educational experiences can create global networks of self- and other-reflective and -reflexive individuals between and amongst these traditions, potentially forming the bedrock for a locally-centred, transnational discipline whose constituents respectfully engage with people in communities and the communities’ needs for action.

Works Cited

Bošković, Aleksander and Thomas Hylland Eriksen

2008 *Other People's Anthropologies: Ethnographic Practice on the Margins*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Dyrness, Andrea

2008 Research for Change versus Research as Change: Lessons from a Mujerista Participatory Research Team. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39(1):23-44.

Kreps, Christina

2008 Appropriate Museology in Theory and Practice. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23(1):23-41.

Salemink, Oscar

2001 Who Decides Who Preserves What? Cultural Preservation and Cultural Representation. *In Viet Nam's Cultural Diversity: Approaches to Preservation*, Oscar Salemink, ed. Pp. 205-212. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Singh, Michael

2005 Enabling Transnational Learning Communities: Policies, Pedagogies and Politics of Educational Power. *In Internationalizing Higher Education*. Peter Ninnes and Meeri Hellstén, eds. The Netherlands: Springer.

Thi Tuyet, Nguyen

2007 The Vietnam Women's Museum: The Promotion of Women's Rights to Gender Equality and Gender Issues. *Museum International*, 59(6):70-79.

University of Queensland (UQ)

2009 Survey Results. Electronic document, https://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=fz0cn6rdofxjiWivcVKhCcOv_2brEzZdky5d6_2baE_2fB48o_3d, accessed May 7, 2009.

Van Huy, Nguyen

2006 The Role of Museums in the Preservation of Living Heritage: Experiences of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 1:36-41.

Van Nghiem, Dang

2001 Preservation and Development of the Cultural Heritage. *In Viet Nam's Cultural Diversity: Approaches to Preservation*, Oscar Salemink, ed. Pp. 33-62. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.