



**JOURNEYS, EXPERIMENTS, INNOVATIONS : NEW DIRECTIONS IN MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY**

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# DIGITAL OAK PARK: AN EXPERIMENT

Jay Ruby

## Abstract

This essay describes an attempt to convey anthropological knowledge by an innovative means. Combining text, photographs, and video clips in a nonlinear fashion, these four ethnographic portraits explore aspects of Oak Park, Illinois, an upper-middle-class suburb of Chicago renowned for its success in creating and maintaining ethnic diversity. The portraits explore the impact of this diversity among Euro-American, African American and Lesbian families. One of the portraits examines the Oak Park Regional Housing Center, the cornerstone of the village's integration efforts. This experiment is offered as an alternative to the more common means of publishing scholarly research – the book or the film.

**Key Words:** Visual anthropology, Digital media, New ethnography, Nonlinear format, U.S. suburban studies, Racial integration.

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## Introduction

*Oak Park Stories* are a series of experimental, reflexive and digital ethnographies that explore a forty-year-old social experiment in Oak Park, a Chicago suburb in the United States. By the end of 2006, five Stories had been completed and are distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (DER at <http://www.der.org/>). The work is experimental in that I have not followed the traditional method of producing a book or a film but instead made an interactive and nonlinear work that has video clips, still photographs and text, and in one case, a 30-minute video on DVD. It is reflexive in that the subject of my research is my hometown. Rather than hide this fact, I try to make

  
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the reader/viewer aware of how my identity influenced things. It is digital in its form of delivery – four of the Stories are on CD-ROMs using Quicktime movies and html text and photographs. I have constructed four Stories in a nonlinear fashion, that is, unlike a book or a film, there is no defined beginning, middle or end. Viewers/Readers are free to begin anywhere. They can ignore anything that doesn't interest them. I have provided links to materials that will allow anyone interested to pursue a topic in more depth. I found writing in a nonlinear fashion to be amazingly freeing. I did not have to worry about some editor telling me that I was going off on too many tangents and that the work lacked coherence. Because I cannot know which paths a reader/viewer will take, I decided to say the same thing in a somewhat different manner in different places, that is, to be repetitive on purpose.

It is a multifaceted investigation permitting me to pull together a number of issues that interest me. At the broadest level, I am intrigued with the application of ethnographic methods in the exploration of an affluent middle-class suburban community. Social scientists have too often concentrated on the exotic, the oppressed and the pathological and assumed that all U.S. suburbs emerged after World War II and suffer from sprawl, malls, out-of-control growth and boring conformist architecture. There are few studies of a pre-World War II suburb that is, by its own terms, successful. Oak Park is one of the more interesting social experiments in the U.S. It is regarded internationally as a model of successful ethnic integration. It is a community convinced that it can self-consciously construct itself. How it maintains its ideals and the impact of this experiment on the everyday lives of its citizens is the focus of my study. In addition, I explored nontraditional ways of communicating my research results, trying to get out of the confinements of a choice between the written word and a film.

Oak Park is my place of birth and thus provides a chance to pursue a long-term interest in the advantages and limits of reflexive ethnography. I wish to understand what happens when the anthropologist is both native and researcher. I studied some people I have known most of my life. I am intrigued with the advantages and disadvantages. I am also exploiting the community's affluence and high level of computer literacy to explore how the internet might serve as an ethnographic research tool. I have established a website where I offer regular updates via a listserv designed to encourage residents' comments and criticisms. I get both on a frequent basis. The study is a rare example of 'studying sideways.' Social scientists have tended to study people from the lower socio-cultural classes — people often with little political or economic power; people who live in communities that exhibit serious social pathologies like high crime, drug abuse and unemployment. Even studies of middle-class suburbs often concentrate on problems like sprawl. While anthropologist Laura Nader's (1972) admonition to 'study up' has resulted in some studies of the power elite, few have produced an ethnography of an apparently successful community populated primarily by advantaged upper-middle-class college-educated people.

In the late 1960s, Oak Park was faced with what appeared to be an inevitable move of a large number of African Americans into this then all white suburb that would have

‘re-segregated’ the community into an almost all black area. In Chicago this process had meant a disinvestment in the community with a major loss of services. Some residents decided to proactively attempt to make a transition that would not destroy the fabric of the community. They had many bad examples of how not to react in the rapidly re-segregating communities on the West Side of Chicago, including Austin, Oak Park’s immediate neighbour, and few positive examples like West Mount Airy in Philadelphia or Shaker Heights in Ohio.

In order to realise their goals of integration and stability, Oak Parkers marketed their community initially to African Americans to demonstrate that they really did intend to enforce their own fair housing ordinance, and then, to middle-class liberal whites to counterbalance the loss caused by the white flighters who fled when blacks started to purchase houses. Probably because the community gained a reputation for tolerance, a publicly active gay and lesbian community also emerged. Recently, a poll by planetout.com voted Oak Park one of the most gay-friendly small towns in the U.S. The community is amazingly ambitious in its attempt to be diverse. Many of the residents who replaced those unable to accommodate these changes are employed in social services, the medical professions and universities. Oak Park has been transformed into a haven for liberal whites — gay and straight — seeking a place to act out their political and ethical values, and for middle-class blacks looking for a safe place with stable property values, good schools and decent services.

I explored several aspects of this community in terms of how some of its core values have remained the same while others have been modified to accommodate planned diversity. Let me briefly describe the subjects of these Oak Park Stories. In one, I explore how this community devised ways to maintain the desired diversity. I concentrated on the Oak Park Regional Housing Center, a nonprofit organisation designed to prevent resegregation by affirmatively marketing apartments so as to distribute whites and blacks throughout the community and to avoid having any apartment building contain a predominance of one ethnic group. The Housing Center is part of a complex of village ordinances, other nonprofit and governmental agencies striving to keep the housing market healthy and integrated. In another, VAL, a 30-minute video, an incredibly articulate independent record store owner offers a view of Oak Park from a countercultural point of view.

The other three *Oak Park Stories* are family portraits designed to take a look at how this experiment works itself out in the lives of its citizens. It is hoped that through their lives I revealed some of Oak Park’s core values and how the transformation of the community impacts on the people who live there. Each family reveals different aspects of the community. In *Walking the Line*, we see the Taylor family who are solidly middle-class African Americans who moved to Oak Park because they wanted their children to attend good schools and be in a neighbourhood where they could ride their bikes in the streets. They wanted them exposed to children of different ethnicities and from different economic strata. They are able to realise their goals because of decades of work to make Oak Park a welcoming place. Through their lives I explore

the historical and contemporary roles of African Americans in Oak Park as well as the values of a middle-class black family.

The second 'family portrait' *Oak Park Story* concerns a lesbian family, Rebecca Levin and Sophie Kaluziak and their children, Ariel and Ben. Rebecca is a long-term Oak Park resident, community activist, and instrumental in the formation of the local gay and lesbian organisation. Their engagement with the schools and other aspects of the community illuminates a number of important issues concerning the integration of gay people in Oak Park — a community with a lesbian village president, a gay village trustee and a gay man on the school board. As the openly gay population ages, the character of the community changes with it. Gays and lesbians are becoming more and more middle class and suburban and less likely to live in a gay-identified neighbourhood. Many are homeowners with children. Increasingly these gay suburban families are indistinguishable from their heterosexual neighbours. It is this ordinariness that is often overlooked in favour of the more sensational aspects of single gay life.

The third 'family portrait' *Oak Park Story, Dear Old Oak Parkers* is about Helena and some of her family. Helena Gervais McCullough was the matriarch of a family who had lived in Oak Park for four generations. She recently died at the age of ninety-six. She was both a part of the old WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) aristocracy and an active participant in the New Oak Park. Helena displayed all of the most traditional Oak Park values. Yet she was able to accept a bisexual son-in-law who is a retired public school teacher active in the local politically powerful gay and lesbian organisation and local politics, and an African American daughter-in-law. Exploring her world provides a guide through this remarkable part of the community's history.

With the three family portraits, I tried to show how some middle-class Oak Parkers cope with living in the most interesting social experiment in the U.S. It would be impossible to tell all of the stories that make up a community like Oak Park, but hopefully through these five stories we can gain some insight into this place.

## History of the Project

This project has two seemingly unrelated origins. I have for some time been critical of a genre of film called ethnographic. I have called repeatedly for anthropologists to assume control of this field and to produce their own films. As I was revising a collection of my essays for publication in a book (Ruby 2000), it became clear to me that it was time to produce my own visual product as an example of what I had been describing. So I undertook this project to see if I could produce something in keeping with my ideas.

About the same time, I was thinking about the possibility of writing an autobiography. There is an unfortunate tendency for academics when they reach a certain age to think that their reflections on their lives would be of interest to a sufficient number of people to warrant publishing them. They seldom are. There were two related factors that came into play around this time. When my mother died, I was sent the

family photo archive that dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century. I felt the need to properly document the collection for my children and to build upon the Ruby family history that my parents wrote in the 1980s. In thinking about these potential and related projects, I begin to consider where I could locate a new research site. I started by exploring what literature existed about my hometown, Oak Park, Illinois, in the hopes that I could combine my autobiographical needs with an ethnographic film project. One of the first discoveries was Carol Goodwin's *The Oak Park Strategy* (1976). To my amazement, I learned that my hometown had transformed itself into a liberal integrated place — virtually the opposite of my childhood memories. I became fascinated with gaining an understanding of how this happened.

### **A Reflexive Interlude: Being at Home and in the Field or 'Bringing it All Back Home'**

Unlike many social scientists, I cannot separate myself from the object of my analysis. Moreover, I do not wish to do so. One of the reasons I decided to undertake this research was to discover some things about myself and to explore the advantages and limits of studies in which the researcher is both analyst and native. I therefore must reveal as much of myself as is relevant and will aid the reader/viewer in understanding the work. I do not know how much of myself to reveal and cannot locate a model that suits my purpose. Reflexivity is often discussed but rarely accomplished. To say too much is to be self-indulgent and to say too little is to hide important bits of information. While researching a community with which I share much cultural knowledge and linguistic competence has many advantages, the research can also suffer from the myopia of the 'insider.'

There can be no question that the results of any social research have to be a consequence of who the researcher is. I have a huge stake in the outcome of a study of my hometown. I hope that I have factored into this work knowledge about how my position causes the work to be formed. Such an approach allows me to enhance my understanding of my own life in a unique way. Instead of producing a conventional autobiography, which was the original impetus of this study, in which I rely completely upon my own recollections, I will have at my disposal ethnographic insights together with the perceptions of those interviewed to challenge and broaden my own remembrances. I am therefore able to combine the autobiographical with the historical and ethnographic. This exploration of the personal and the professional will in turn offer the opportunity to examine the limits and benefits of reflexive ethnography.

### **Methods**

I employed ethnographic field methods of observation and participation and interviewed numerous people in this study. I lived in the community for several summers and one entire year. In short, I utilised a relatively traditional ethnographic approach to the study of a community. The application of these methods to a middle-class U.S. suburb is a

bit unusual in that most ethnographies deal with cultures exotic to the researcher. It should be noted that Oak Park is a community with clearly marked geographical and cultural boundaries. At the moment, anthropologists have become deeply concerned with issues concerning globalisation and transnationalism and studying people who live in more than one community. These so-called 'multi-sited' ethnographies directly contrast with my work in Oak Park, which looks positively old-fashioned when compared to these more recent ethnographies.

If there is anything really innovative here, it is in my use of the internet and videotaping during my field work and the manner in which I chose to communicate my findings. I created a web site (<http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/>) and an email listserv of Oak Parkers and other interested people. In addition to traditional field notes, I videotaped over 120 hours of observation and interviews. I will expand upon all of these methods below.

### **Participant Observation**

Ethnography is founded upon a relatively simple idea — the ethnographer lives in the community under study and attempts to both observe and participate in relevant aspects of the community. As Oak Park is my hometown, I did not have to spend months learning the language or the customs of the people I studied. I was able to begin the ethnography immediately upon arriving. While I concentrated my work on the need to produce three family-portrait videotapes, a short film and an examination of an organisation involved in maintaining diversity in the village, I also tried to become familiar with other aspects of village life that broadened my understanding of what it is like to live there. I attended meetings of the Diversity Task Force, the Black-White Dialogue and also organisations and events like a men's group and the activities of the Village Managers' Association (the non-partisan organisation that produces slates for the election of Village president, clerk and trustees), to name a few. I also talked informally with many Oak Parkers to deepen my understanding of this place. For example, I felt that my knowledge of the perspective of African Americans on Oak Park and its policies of managed diversity was not adequate. I sought out those African Americans who are community leaders and who constitute an elite to discuss their points of view. I also tried to contact 'rank and file' African Americans (those who do not participate in the public life of Oak Park) with limited success. In practical terms I went out every night to a meeting or event and spent my days having informal conversations and formal videotaped interviews. Like most ethnographers, even my recreation was part of the research. I was 'in the field' all of the time.

### **Community Involvement**

I was concerned with giving the community under study a chance to actively participate in the construction of this ethnography and to have access to and critique the results. I established an email listserv and a web page where I placed progress reports (<http://>



[astro.ocis.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/](http://astro.ocis.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/)). I activated a dialogue among community members as well as with me that would continue after the research was completed. Whenever asked, I provided information about the workings of various organisations I studied. I gave talks in a number of places and wrote articles for the *Wednesday Journal*, a local newspaper. I am committed to a long-term relationship with the community for both professional and personal reasons. Many Oak Park residents are convinced that their social experiment in diversity can only succeed if there is a continual discussion about how to maintain that diversity. Some believe that the moment they stop working on this experiment the community will begin to re-segregate. I hope I have assisted their already existing dialogue through this study. Some of the material I used in publications I first wrote as progress reports and circulated them among as many Oak Parkers as I could for their comments.

### **Making Ethnographic Videos**

For thirty-plus years I have been writing about the role of film in anthropology. As a historian, critic, and theorist of this genre, I have repeatedly voiced my discontent about how ethnographic films are made and their relationship to anthropology. I edited some of my essays on this topic in *Picturing Culture* (Ruby 2000). Briefly, it is my contention that anthropologists should view film/video making as a way to disseminate their research findings. They should not defer to professional documentary filmmakers nor produce work that is primarily designed to satisfy the marketplace demands of the educational world or of public television. These works should be scholarly communications designed for people with a serious interest in the subject matter.

While I have participated in the making of many films as a consultant and had the major responsibility for two, I had not explored these ideas by attempting to make work that would exemplify my theories. There are several reasons why this is so. I am, by nature, more of a historian, critic, and theorist than a practitioner. Perhaps as important was the limitations of technology and funding. Sixteen-millimetre films — once the standard for ethnographic film — and even nondigital video-making required expensive equipment, large budgets and people with extensive technical competence. Within the last few years, the world of the minidv digital cameras and digital editing software that is within the budgets of most academics has emerged. The ‘prosumer’ level three chip cameras produce an image of exceptional quality and, with the addition of a mini-shotgun microphone, excellent sound. The editing systems are also relatively easy to learn to use. Video production systems can be acquired for less than \$10,000, reducing the cost of production to the cost of the videotapes. For those technically minded readers, I used a Sony minidv DCR-TRV900 digital camera with a Sennheiser Mini-shotgun microphone and edited with Final Cut Pro on a Macintosh computer. Scholars can now afford to experiment without the necessity of obtaining large grants that require the production of materials designed either for the classroom or public television, nor must they hire professional crews whose goals are often at



odds with those of a scholar. Professional filmmakers cannot afford the luxury of being experimental.

In 1999 I proceeded to put my money where my mouth was and embarked upon this ethnography armed with a digital video camera. My assumption was that I would come back with the raw materials to produce something resembling what I had been calling a filmic ethnography. I was wrong. After seriously contemplating how I might produce a pictorial ethnography, I decided that what I wished to accomplish could not be realised as a film or videotape. I am not suggesting that a film can never be an expression of anthropological knowledge. I am saying that I cannot personally find ways to overcome the position most viewers assume when they watch a film. Val, my 30-minute video is an afterthought and happy coincidence in that Val is one of those rare articulate subjects who need little editing to make a coherent filmic statement.

For centuries, the role of a theatre audience has been a passive one. Attempts to engage audiences, to get them to interact with the actors and the scenes, are few and far between and not very successful. While experimental theatre is filled with interesting attempts, mainstream theatrical productions continue as before. Movies have traditionally been seen in 'theatres' — dark and silent places with little chance for spectators to do anything but watch. Consequently, viewers came to television with a several-thousand-year-old theatrical/filmic tradition of passive attention. Television changed that a bit. It is not always seen in a darkened room. Talking is commonplace. You really do not have to pay much attention to understand most television programmes. It was assumed by some optimistic media critics that the advent of the VCR would create more active viewers as they could stop and start and rewind at will. I see no evidence of that sort of active viewing or an increase in visual sophistication on the part of the 'television generation.' These two passive traditions (theatre and film/television) make it hard to ask viewers to pay active and critical attention to anything on a screen. There might be an alternative. Sitting in front of a computer is a different experience. You are in an office chair in a room in which you work. You must pay constant attention as the computer requires you to make decisions on a regular basis. It sounded to me like a good environment for my work.

There are several disadvantages to this plan. I was only marginally competent with this technology and with ways to shoot material that reflect what I had learned and what I wanted to say. I experimented and learned as I went along. I was continually anxious that I was not able to shoot material I needed or that I would do something technically incompetent and ruin the shot. Even formal interviews that should have been the easiest became complicated as I was wedded to deferring technical considerations to the needs of the subject. I was determined to make people as comfortable as possible and not create the artificial environment commonly associated with a filmed interview where the technical needs of filming dominate all decisions. The subject's comfort determined the place of the interview. The result was that they were taped in less than perfect situations — sometimes the subject was backlit and often their face is in shadows with both natural and artificial light in the same scene. I did not light

an interview. I believe lighting creates such an artificial atmosphere that it defeated my purpose. Sound was also a problem in summer when most people had fans or air conditioners turned on. The Housing Center, the site of one portrait, had ancient air conditioners that sound like cement mixers. I tried to filter out those noises in the editing. I was committed to allowing subjects to control the setting. I accepted the quality that resulted. I cannot be certain my viewers will.

In terms of the logistics of the interview itself, I simply placed the camera on a tripod and attempted to maintain eye contact, engaging the subject in a conversation. We talked in a manner that resembled an interaction more than an interview. I shot no cutaways and did not create the wholly artificial action-reaction interview sequences common to the documentary. The camera was fixed, with only a few minor adjustments in framing. Once it began, I tried to concentrate completely on engaging the subject in a useful dialogue. Even with these technical limits, being able to see and hear someone talk about their life remains an engaging experience providing a strong sense of the person that more than makes up for any technical limits and, I feel, superior to reading a printed interview.

A one-person crew that consists of an anthropologist like myself with little formal training, cannot possibly produce work that has the look of a professionally made product. I was willing to give up the technical advantages that come with a professional production because I believe being a one-person crew is essential to accomplish the task I had defined for myself. Audiences will have to learn to alter their expectations. Viewing instructions have been incorporated into the work itself. I must deliberately frustrate audiences' need to suspend their disbelief and to get lost in the pleasure of the narrative. If viewers cannot go beyond their normal expectations, this work will be dismissed as hopelessly amateur if not incompetent. For me this is the crux of the matter. Audiences must be trained to examine the quality of the ideas portrayed and to regard the intellectual contribution of a work as being primary and to stop assuming that pretty pictures are the most important element. I truly believe that ethnographers cannot produce what the film industry calls a 'good film' and also produce a work that is good anthropology.

Let me now become more concrete by discussing how I worked in shooting the video portion of the Housing Center Portrait. I prepared myself by regularly volunteering as receptionist at the Center, thus allowing me to watch their activities for extended periods of time. I followed clients in the process of locating an apartment. I stood at the entrance to the Center, buttonholing people, asking if I could film them going through the process. Most said yes. I attempted to shoot as wide a variety of clients as possible. Sometimes, when I got lucky, a client was escorted to view some apartments instead of being given a list that they must pursue on their own. I tagged along. As I never knew in advance if the interaction between a client and a counsellor giving them listings of available apartments was going to be revealing or not, I continued to film clients until the high season for finding apartments ended in autumn. The process was very inefficient but completely necessary. As I sat and waited for clients to arrive at the

Center, I fantasised that the next one would be the ‘perfect’ client who would say and do all the ‘right’ things. I followed up with interviews of some clients after they settled into their apartments. In addition, I interviewed the counsellors who provide apartment listings, the marketing department, which locates apartments suitable for the Center, and staff in the organisations involved in this process. My intention was to show how the relatively straightforward task of locating an apartment becomes transformed into a symbolic act of maintaining the community’s self-image. When the process works, clients get an apartment and the community maintains diversity.

Following clients through the process of locating an apartment was often challenging. I was filming in complex, uncontrollable conditions that sometime produced technically questionable results. We visited empty apartments with no furniture and hardwood floors without rugs. The sound echoes. The lighting was terrible, as most of the apartments have no blinds and the sun streams in the windows. When following a client being escorted into an apartment, I had the choice of exposing for the subjects or the windows and obviously selected the subject and thus overexposed the windows. While these situations are commonplace for a professional crew, the normal division of labour — soundperson, cameraperson and director — makes the necessary adjustments easier. I juggled the technical with my need to concentrate on the quality of the interaction. I believe that while adding several more people to the scene would have improved the quality of the tape, it would so alter the interaction as to render it useless for my purpose. If I were a David Macdougall or John Marshall with decades of experience, I could solve these problems more easily. Although these masters produce far more satisfying images, I am arguing that an anthropologist’s level of technical competence should not prevent him/her from making video ethnographies. The history of anthropologists deferring to professional image-makers has impeded the development of an anthropological cinema.

As important as these technical considerations were, I had a much more important concern. There were and still are no precedents for what I did. I could not look to other people and their experiences for advice. There have been multipart films or television series like the 1970s PBS series, *An American Family*, but that work tended simply to deal with the development of the characters of the various family members and the drama of a divorce and its impact on the family. For each of the portraits I made, I dealt with complicated situations and very complex and layered ideas that took a lot of screen time to present. I acknowledge that the *Oak Park Stories* are very demanding of viewers. They are not used to being challenged in this manner.

While it took me a long time, I finally realised Peter Biella was correct about the inherent limitations of film as a mechanism for conveying ethnographic knowledge (1993). I now understand the audience for this work has to be sitting in front of a computer — an audience of one — and assume the activist stance that is the norm for people working with a computer rather than passively waiting to be amused by the television.

## Usefulness

Apart from the introduction of a new format for communicating ethnography, I believe this study can satisfy a number of needs from the most personal to a larger public one. Let me concentrate on the largest and most public need. Living in harmony in diverse communities may be one of the most pressing problems humanity faces in the twenty-first century. We live in a time when the luxury of living only with people like ourselves is over. Catholics must learn to live with Jews and Protestants and Muslims, the rich with the poor, and Europeans with people of colour. Everyone must overcome their natural inclination to surround themselves with people who share their ethnic, religious, and socio-economic identity. We no longer have the luxury of living in homogenous societies. This will not be easy, as the tragedies of Northern Ireland and Serbia attest. We need to learn from examples of communities that successfully maintain diversity, like Oak Park. My goal is to provide insight into a community that has been able to maintain itself as a stable and diverse place — a community devoted to the social experiment of tolerating difference. Oak Park is a model of the diverse and tolerant community in which many residents are actively engaged in maintaining this character. It appears to be a kind of place that most people aspire to live in. Can we learn something from this place that will ease the ethnic and religious tensions in other places that appear to be worsening through time? Can Oak Park serve as a model of the tolerance and heterogeneity that other communities can use? I thought so when I started the research, but am less certain at the conclusion. Oak Park is small – 4.5 square miles — relatively affluent – average income is close to \$100,000 — and most important, politically independent. With money and independence it is relatively easy to become proactive in the manner that Oak Parkers did. I am uncertain how many other communities have the luxury of quick and decisive action to counteract a perceived problem.

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