



## “It’s About the Stories that People Are Willing to Tell You”: An Interview with Guha Shankar

by Michelle Stefano

Our purpose in this piece is to go “behind the scenes” of the ethnographic interview to illuminate some of its distinctive features, as well as its value as a tool for learning about shared human knowledges, expressions, and experiences of today and the past. Although, it cannot be denied that conducting ethnographic interviews—and ethnography in general—can be daunting, especially for those new to cultural research and documentation, but even for the most experienced. When undertaking ethnographic projects, we typically are talking with and learning from people we do not know, or do not know that well—whether during casual conversation or in more formal, prearranged interviews. In this light, ethnography courses and workshops really ought to be called, “Talking to Strangers 101,” to borrow from the folklorist Elaine Eff!

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*About the photo: Zuni Pueblo community members, including librarian Jennifer Lonjose (standing), practice eliciting and recording cultural memories by “reading” historical photographs during Mukurtu community training workshop with Guha Shankar (left), at Zuni Tribal Library, NM.*

*Original photo courtesy Mukurtu.org, 2016.*

Despite this potential awkwardness, however, ethnographic interviews, and the broader projects of which they are a part, can be immeasurably rewarding and seriously important. Understandably, we may face skepticism and pushback, opening up possible opportunities for deeper dialogue, negotiation, and, hopefully, the building of trust with those from whom we want to learn. If there is an “art” to interviewing, it is safe to say that it is best honed through practice, trial and error, and honest self-reflection. Of course, having the chance to work with and be guided by a more experienced ethnographer could only enhance this process.

So, how does one teach it, and what is most significant to impart? In the spirit of ethnography, where the qualitative, personal perspective frequently shines, I thought that a good way to get at this “art,” in all its up-close and messy glory, would be to learn how my colleague Guha Shankar defines, practices, and teaches it. He has conducted countless ethnographic and oral history interviews, dedicating a large part of his professional life to ethnography and cultural documentation and guiding others in navigating it, so I looked forward to talking with him about his ideas on the topic.

Guha first joined the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress in 2004 and quickly became the Center’s resource person for community and place-based education projects, as well as oral history projects, such as the [Civil Rights History Project](#), a U.S. Congress-authorized initiative led by the AFC and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Significantly, Guha has organized, facilitated, and taught numerous workshops in ethnographic research methods and skills-based training in field documentation in a range of communities and institutions, where the art of the interview is featured. In 2003, he earned his PhD in Folklore and Public Culture from the Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin. From 1985-1993, Guha served as Media Production Specialist and documentary film producer at the Center for Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

As with most one-off interviews, it is difficult to capture it all, and the text below has been edited for length and readability. Nonetheless, my aim was to focus on some core components, or “ingredients,” of ethnographic interviews, and then to learn how Guha approaches the teaching of them to instructors, students, and community members alike. Importantly, he does not only highlight practical considerations for ensuring that an interview goes smoothly, and that it is recorded successfully and easily accessible for the future, but also values, such as respect and transparency, that all interviewers should honor. We touch upon the ethics of interviewing and the difficult and sensitive topics that it can bring to the surface. Moreover, Guha discusses the benefits of interview training within intensive ethnographic field schools and the work of the AFC in supporting this endeavor throughout the U.S. and beyond.



Michelle Stefano: Hello, Guha, let's first get into what brought you to ethnography and its methods...

Guha Shankar: My undergraduate degree in radio, television, and film at [the University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill is a foundational basis for the work I've done for the last...however long it is...and I don't want to name the years as that would make me feel very sad and old [laughs]! So, we were exposed in classes to theories, concepts, and the technical language in media and film studies. We would talk about people doing ethnographic work, we would look at documentary films and listen to documentary audio, and so on. We also had *some* hands-on training in shooting film and making audio recordings, principally in a formal studio setting. But the practical experiences—and this may get to the notion of “ethnographicness”—in producing field recordings were by and large absent from our repertoire, simply because of time and resources. You know, in a department of 155 people, there was not a lot of equipment to go around, so you'd take your training where you could get it.

That experience, as limited as it was, got me into freelance jobs and TV crews when I came out of school and moved to Washington, DC, in 1983. I had gigs like production grip and occasional audio engineer. And then came a longer gig: the Smithsonian's then Office of Folklife Programs, from 1985 to 1993. I was principally hired as a film editor and general media production specialist. There, I had this amazing experience of on-the-job training in ethnographic documentary production, and I'll talk about three different ways in which that taught me what I know about ethnographic interviews, and ethnography in general.

First of all, I listened to hours of raw, uncut interviews and conversations...and you're doing that in order to listen—well, this is how it works for me—for the content of the recordings and what they illustrate about the cultural and historical context of the film, right? So, from a research and scholarly perspective, that's one hat we put on. But then you're also listening to what piece of audio—or voice, cultural expression, dialogue—you think ought to be subsequently distilled and edited into a final product, and that's from a production standpoint. So, at the same time, I was learning to think in both those registers.

Then, a second training ground was the [Smithsonian Folklife] Festival, and I worked every summer at its stages and got to listen to truly remarkable and sensitive folklorists conduct interviews and solicit stories on the festival grounds, on the narrative stages, during demonstrations of craft and cooking, and with a range of community members. I got this invaluable front-row seat to Alicia Gonzalez, Betty Belanus, Lynn Martin, Jim Leary, my boss Tom Vennum, Nick Spitzer, and many others engage in the art of conversation and structure it for a public audience. I was able to understand how folklorists mediate between particular community perspectives and the broader audience: the notion that you're going from the unknown to the known, from that world of the hidden and obscure to a broader [public] audience, and that was pretty eye opening. And you had to do it within certain constraints of time and space in the festival setting.

The third training ground was accompanying scholars and folklorists out into the field on documentary film and radio productions, as production coordinator, driver, grip...you know, chief cook and bottle washer, as we often do [laughs]. I experienced firsthand what “deep hanging out” really means, right? And “deep hanging out” is a better way for me to think about what

ethnographic practice actually *is*. These settings allowed me to see how people merged deep hanging out with journalistic sensibilities. I watched, learned, and sometimes I was able to participate in a field shoot, and observe expressions, events, occupational practices, and behaviors among and between cultural community members. I listened to my senior colleagues inquire and probe, and get into the nuances of what was going on around us.

Specific examples that were formational for me were going out with Bob McCarl, specialist in occupational folklore, on a production with DC's firefighters for the Smithsonian Folklife Studies monograph/film series; this was the late 1980s and that project ended with lots of footage, but regrettably no completed documentary (for complicated reasons, shall we say). I worked with Frank Proshan on his research documentation with Khmu refugees, resettled in Stockton [California]: people who came to California from Southeast Asia. The last thing I worked on as production coordinator at the Smithsonian was with Frank Korom and John Bishop on a project with communities of Indo-Trinidadian Muslims. That effort resulted in *Hosay Trinidad*, both a [book](#) and a [film](#), and led to my subsequent dissertation research in Jamaica. While in graduate school, I went on to work with Jake Homiak (at the Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives) and Rastafari communities in Jamaica. In those instances, I was principally the production coordinator, and the scholars did most of the interviews, but they were really generous and asked for my input not only on technical matters, but also in terms of enabling me to participate more fully in the research process, such as asking questions in the course of our filming. That was a pretty heady experience—"wow" moments, really—for someone who was used to being way behind the camera and/or microphone to get such hands-on experience in the research process.

I took these experiences with me to grad school, where I ended up doing my fieldwork in Jamaica, completing my dissertation on race, citizenship, and belonging among South Asians in the diaspora. Interestingly, grad school is not a place where people necessarily get any technical training in doing interviewing and/or ethnographic fieldwork. So, my professors found out that I had this background in ethnographic production and they'd get their students, my fellow classmates, to come and talk to me...and ask, *Hey what do I do in terms of equipment? What do I do in terms of going out in the field to do a recording?* This was good for my long-term practice and got me back into media documentation in a way that I hadn't had much of a chance to do during my first years as a graduate student.

So, more recently, the AFC was where I got the chance to expand on the teaching aspect of ethnography. I was able to do that by taking the principles and methods I learned earlier and formalize them in a teaching setting, under the umbrella of the annual AFC field schools in cultural documentation training, shaped by David Taylor, former Head of Research and Programs at the AFC (my immediate boss at the time). He gave me great insight and invaluable guidance on how to translate and teach esoteric concepts that we as fieldworkers have imbibed—that is, we've naturalized (to invoke Bourdieu) certain ideas and skills over time and through repetition, to the extent that our practice and our methods go without saying because they come without saying. Yet, in the context of a teaching situation, you have to *translate*—get those esoteric techniques and approaches out of your head—and articulate them publicly and in ways that beginners will understand, practice, and reproduce in their own work.

The other key thing I learned is the *crucial* need to develop and record metadata—that is, the notion of developing metadata as a sustainable set of information to accompany one’s field recordings. This is not something that folklorists are trained to do, let alone scholars and professional counterparts in other fields and disciplines. It’s a pity, because if we call ourselves ethnographic practitioners, then we need to know what we’re doing with the products of our research—how to categorize and describe them to make them sustainable and useful for subsequent generations. That this is not taught as a regular part of documentary practice is no one’s fault, but this gap is what the AFC field schools addressed: integrating the methods and approaches established by those wonderful field survey projects that the Center conducted back in the 70s and 80s [e.g. the 1977 [Chicago Ethnic Arts Project](#) and the 1979 [Montana Folklife Survey Project](#), among others]. A large, critical part of the training that AFC did during the field surveys, mostly under the guidance of Carl Fleischhauer, and Mary Hufford in several instances, was to expose fieldworkers to the concept and practice of how to contextualize and capture the “scene,” by means of documentary media, and the accompanying metadata.

And that’s what stands out about what we do at the AFC in terms of raising metadata in importance...and we do so because it makes our collections a hell of a lot easier to use and find. Maggie Kruesi, former AFC cataloger, was great at cementing that in my head when we did field schools together—that need to develop and record metadata in the field and to ensure that that step is adapted as a core principle and practice and, as such, is not ancillary or an after-thought to the documentation and the interview. So, the first thing I lead off of now in my presentations, thanks to Michael Taft [former Head of the AFC Archives], is the principle that the fieldworker is the *first* archivist. And now, in the digital age, as I’ve worked in the field schools for the last 15 years or so, there is this corollary that the fieldworker is the first digital content manager, because everything digital now has to be managed in some shape or form, and without that there is no product, no oral history, etc.

MS: OK, well, let me jump in. And I already feel bad, so I need to stamp this as March 26, 2019, a Tuesday...just adding in the metadata [laughter]! So, I’m going to back up a bit and unpack some of the things you’ve said. I’m using this term, “ethnographic interview,” which I think is rather broad; nonetheless, you brought up these really interesting ideas of “deep hanging out,” “conversations”...and I know there can be differences between the ethnographic interview and “oral histories.” So, can you walk us through how you define these interview types?

GS: For me, the interview that takes place in an ethnographic setting, or with an ethnographer, is only one aspect of a complex of practices, right? So, the formal sit-down interview that we’re having now occupies an hour or two of our time. But, what do you do for the other 40 hours of being out in the field? What you do for the rest of the day involves the process of deep hanging out, or “participant observation.” Every one of those moments of interaction and communication comprises ethnography, when looking at it from a broader viewpoint, and the interview is *one* communicative act among many others. Where I see ethnographic *practice* differing is in the informal give and take, and the unstructured occasions—such as over a meal, after the work day, over a beer, when you’re out with somebody who is doing subsistence farming or shucking oysters, playing music, singing. Those are the moments when greater insight into a sense of community is actualized and made apparent, right? So, ethnography approaches documentation and information gathering from a perspective attuned to nonverbal communication, embodied expressions,



movement, all of which are far different paths to understanding socio-cultural life than you get by means of the oral history interview alone.

For oral history practitioners, the oral history is *the* focal point of the encounter. Over the course of two hours or more, they are going to conduct an interview, and that interview is going to formulate the basis of—or buttress, supplement, augment—received understandings about events that they have knowledge of through deep research, previous publications, and other sources. And the interest lies in understanding what individuals experienced and what they remember from particular moments in time, with reference to larger political, cultural phenomena. So, for the [Civil Rights History Project](#) (CRHP), we might situate an interview in the context of the principal question: *What did you do during the [March on Washington in 1963](#)? What brought you to that moment? Tell us what your days were like [helping organize the event](#).* While this approach yields rich details and amazing reflections, large parts of people’s lives are less documented, simply because of the form of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee, and the subject focus, which does not provide the space to do more. In this regard, ethnographic practitioners center attention on the practice of everyday life, as much as the grander questions of history, such as *Where were you when the Berlin Wall fell?* Here, we also ask: *How do you do things, where do you do them, who did you learn from, what are the community interactions...who are your people?* Those are the kinds of things that the ethnographic interview asks about in ways that maybe other disciplinary methodologies don’t, or at least not all of the time.

Having said that, my impression, based on personal observation, is that there *is* a strong resonance between the types of interviews employed, meaning that both ethnographers and historians are quite comfortable with semi-directional interviews and are on the lookout for stories, rather than the “data” that a heavily structured interview might yield. Although, it is possible to say that the



Zuni Pueblo librarian Jennifer Lonjose (left), practices photo elicitation methods and recording cultural memories through “reading” historical photographs during Mukurtu community training workshop with Guha Shankar at Zuni Tribal Library, NM.

Photo courtesy Mukurtu.org, 2016.

ethnographic approach is more eager to pick up on the tangents, the esoterica, and the deeply local ways of doing things that often surface in interviews. I mean, the interviewee recalls something quite intriguing, and while that is off the point of the ethnographer's main interview topic, you pick up that nugget or thread and you follow it where it leads, to the extent possible.

It may be obvious, but I would also point out that ethnography is a multimodal documentary practice. While ethnographers are also invested in the efficacy and importance of eliciting memories and historical and cultural reflections by verbal communication and oral narrative—the interview format—we have other tools in our toolkit to draw upon in the technical realm, such as photography, drawings, mapping, and field notes.

MS: So, in this broader sense of observing and talking to people about a wide range of their experiences and expressions, I wonder if you could speak about the changes that can occur when bringing recording equipment into the research and interview setting—whether we are talking about a camera or an audio recorder, or an oral history or ethnographic interview. I often talk to students about how that can change the dynamics of the interview, and I'm sure you have thoughts on that.

GS: Sure. You introduce recording equipment and people shut up. Or, you introduce the equipment and you might as well have placed, you know, a cup of water on the table, because people don't care. In all those situations, however, the thing that may present itself as an obstacle only becomes that if *you* present it as an obstacle; if you make more of it than it actually is...like, if you infuse the recorder with some sort of manna that it doesn't have. I use recorders and cameras as instruments, tools, and my approach is not to hide them or minimize them; rather I point them out and say: *We want to make sure we get a really good, clean recording (or a good image) and this is what we use to ensure that outcome.* Today, there's nobody anywhere anymore who is surprised by recording equipment. I have had situations where I pulled out all this bulky gear and they go, *oh, my niece interviewed me the other day for a school project and she had this cute little phone—you don't have one of those?* Oh, geez! So, that's something [the ubiquity of digital recording devices] that has certainly changed people's perceptions of recording equipment.

As for the very act of documentation, people certainly see interviews on TV, and they have been explicit in stating some variation on the theme of *don't do to me what they do on TV*, by which they mean edit the interview to make them look stupid or show them up. This was especially the case in Trinidad, where people were very sensitive to this issue of misrepresentation due to a general mistrust of negative, media portrayals from the past. And this suspicion was apparent enough that we needed to let them know that we, the camera crew, were not journalists there to do some kind of investigative hit-piece, because they knew full-well they didn't want to be a part of that sort of thing. So, we had to tell them more than once that the project [to document Indo-Muslim public performances] was different, that it was for scholarly purposes, and so on. The privilege of working at the Library, or any cultural institution, is that I can say, *what we really want to do is make sure that we add your voice to the public record, and I want to make sure that I get the best recording possible.* And that's what Bob McCarl calls "documentation in full view of the community." Alternatively, I like to say that we're not documenting from behind a duck blind; meaning, we're conscious of and conscientious about letting people know what the recording is for and why we're there. Every interview is situational, so there are no direct guidelines that have worked for me other than being open about it, because 95 percent of the time,

the interviews worked fine, and the five to ten percent of the time when they don't, I take it as my fault.

MS: So, we are getting into ethics, and I'm thinking about documentation and editing. I always wish, in an ideal world, that the person I interviewed will be in the editing suite with me, telling me where to make cuts and what they would like the finished product to say, but that is often too difficult, logistically speaking. How do you feel about the post-interview interpretation that can take place when making a short film, or whatever else—you know, the editing, interpretation, the cutting and pasting of things that didn't happen that way in real time?

GS: Again, it's about how transparent you are about what you've done, letting people know at the very beginning what's going to happen. Most often, people are interested in making sure that you're going to give them a fair representation. That fair representation is not something that is guaranteed in advance by you, but the more time that I've spent in the field with people, the more confident they are that I will represent them not just accurately, but that I will be true about the things they share. Yet, I've had people who say reflexively, *Well, you're gonna get a different story from somebody else, so don't take my word for it*. So, they have a sense that if I'm going to do a documentary, all those different voices will be included...and *they* can then decide if they're comfortable with having all those different voices included. And, yes, you're absolutely right this notion of "co-voicing" and collaborative editing should be the norm, but practical issues can make that too difficult.

CRHP provides a great example of where it works for us on a small scale, where all interviews we put online are full, unexpurgated interviews—although, I make a few cuts here and there to stitch together digital segments, and I have occasionally bleeped out the excessive number of "f-bombs"...you know, one or two is fine, but 25? Not so good, because the teachers [using the videos for educational purposes] would all complain! After that, what we do is return the transcript and DVD and let the interviewee know: *This is what's going out online; is there anything you want to take out, redact? Is there anything that you didn't want to say or be made public?*

During CRHP, there was an instance when we were interviewing an African American family down South. And they told us a story from the 1960s about their involvement in civil defense actions and, as many people do in the South—black and white, many different ages—if you're old enough to shoot for food, you carry guns around, and you carry them for self-defense, as well. It's the opposite of the KKK's purpose of going out to kill black folk. So, this family had guns in their car, and they were being chased by police...they had to flee an event...it was a very exciting story, with different people chiming in about how they had to evade the police, because they would get all the heat for possessing firearms, whereas white folks would not. Some time after the interview, I produced what I thought was the final cut and sent it back to them with the transcript. We then got a call from our colleagues at the NMAAHC, who said that the family was very concerned about that story. They didn't want it going online, because there might be repercussions. My first thought was, *that was 60 years ago, what repercussions could there possibly be?* It was a head-scratching moment, but about three weeks later, I heard that their house had been fire bombed, because white racists knew that they were being interviewed about their civil rights activism and still resented them for it. The lesson is that the consequences that people are going to take on [because of an interview] are not going to be yours since you are removed from the community,



but you have to try and be aware of them and respond appropriately. So, the notion of editing, redacting, being aware of the community's sensibilities and trials—that's important. And you're not going to know that without somebody guiding you through those nuances, right?

MS: Yes. Let's continue with CRHP. I can imagine that highly sensitive, challenging, and emotional stories and experiences were often shared with you. What's your approach to handling what are sometimes called "difficult histories," even if that's too light a term for some of the horrific experiences of racism and dehumanization during the fight for Civil Rights?

GS: We tend to think of "difficult histories" as coming up on issues of profound moral or political problems, such as Black Lives Matter or the Me Too Movement. But, we often don't know what the hard histories are until we get into the middle of them. We don't know what questions are going to trigger the hard-hitting emotions, and so the hard history is revealed right there on the spot, you know? However, that's a reason to do this work, since we are learning all the time. It's about the stories that people are willing to tell you, and remaining open to all of that. The only thing that I do, really, is to be as open as possible. We are not neutral recording machines; we are not the camera. The camera is recording something that we're experiencing. We are seeing through it, so we are a mediating point, and we are giving voice to those difficult histories. Understanding that everything is situational, you listen. That's what you do. It's amazing...one of the sobering things that I learned through the CRHP is that PTSD is not only a condition resulting from having been in a war in some foreign corner of the world. Being on the front lines of the freedom struggle in the South *was* like being in a war: The trauma individuals suffered from seeing and hearing about colleagues and friends being brutalized and killed was intense and long-lasting. When you hear strong, older women with immense dignity and courage tell you that they started watching a documentary on the Civil Rights Movement and had to turn it off and go to bed, and then *stayed* in bed for three days because of all the trauma it brought up—after 50 years had elapsed? I mean, that's serious!

I think it comes back to ethics. When doing the interview, or engaging the ethnographic process, there's the golden rule to *do no harm*. So, in the course of an interview, you may want to ask yourself this question, *Does this person really want to share this story in this particular way?* And one practical consideration is to say, *Can we just stop for a second? We are getting into deeply personal subjects here, maybe we can come back to this a little later.* You're giving people the chance to reflect upon whether they really want to be saying these things, because if not, then you may have to redact the story, or edit it out later, which can be challenging. But that's part of the ethical responsibility you have: Listening to stories of trauma, or situations that are just fraught. But you don't know in advance what's fraught, so you have to be open to it.

I find this with students, who can get overwhelmed when someone's sharing a deeply personal story. You need to ask, *How did that person deliver or say that story?* You need to read the situation, read the context. And by no means publish the story until you have a chance to tell that person what the story contains. This is just standard practice; it's for the protection of the individual giving the story, and for the student. As an instructor, you don't want the student to wander into trouble...and also what this might do to subsequent relationships between that person and the community, and researchers who might come after you to work in that same community. So, the idea of teaching difficult histories is about the idea of listening to them. It passes through you as

the first person hearing them, and then you have to try and put that out to the public in a way that is respectful and illuminates and expands upon our historical memory.

MS: Since you've brought up teaching, let's shift the conversation to the AFC and its educational mission to train people in ethnographic methods and cultural documentation.

GS: The longer story is that it's written in the DNA of the Center's mission, which is to provide opportunities for the expression of folklife, cultural traditions, and to provide opportunities for folklorists and others to document, present, and represent their communities. So, documentation has always been a part of it. For instance, the field surveys [mentioned earlier] go back to the early days of AFC documenting, in an interdisciplinary fashion, cultural traditions from around the world. And it's one of the seminal efforts of the Center: To train people in ethnographic documentation methods and also sustain that cultural record by providing descriptions, a template for people who are not well-versed in librarianship principles and archiving, to enter into that field with some degree of confidence, and to train people to do that. So, Carl Fleischauer, Elena Bradunas, Peter Bartis, and others, set that standard over 40 years ago.

I think the concept of [AFC] field schools was raised during an early, 1980s AFC Board meeting, when the question *Would the Center undertake training in documentation?* was posed. It was felt at the university level that folklorists were going out in the field with no training, formal or



Ann Tome (right) interviews a Maasai community member during fieldwork training exercises for the Community Cultural Documentation program, Il Ngwesi, Kenya.

Photo by Guha Shankar, 2009.

otherwise, in field documentation. Thanks to David Taylor's work as the main organizer of the field schools, they started out as partnerships between the AFC and an institution of higher learning, and remain so for the most part today. So, the first few years it was Indiana University for two field schools...our colleague Howard Sachs at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, did one field school...and Mario Montaña did field schools at the University of Colorado and University of New Mexico over the course of two summers. Many others have participated since then including the latest one in 2018 with the University of Wyoming and Utah State University. They not only trained students, but also academy-based folklorists themselves, in field methodologies in an experiential setting. I should add that about ten years ago we used the field school model to provide [documentary training to Indigenous people](#), the Laikipia Maasai of Kenya and Rastafari and Maroon communities in Jamaica, in partnership with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). And presently, the AFC provides skills-based methods training for North American Indigenous community scholars through collaborations with the [Sustainable Heritage Network](#), out of Washington State University.



John Ole Tingoi (center) and Edwin Kissio (right) of the Laikipia Maasai community interview a herder about drought in the Rift Valley, Kenya, during the 2009 Cultural Documentation Training for Indigenous Communities program run by AFC, WIPO, and the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.

Photo by Guha Shankar, 2009.

MS: If I may interrupt—for those who may not know, what is a field school?

GS: Well, the [\[AFC\] field school in cultural documentation](#) is about teaching a comprehensive set of [ethnographic] methods including technical training in various aspects of field documentation. Let me put it this way: Basically, the field school is an intensive ethnographic boot camp for three weeks. Classroom instruction is for about two weeks, which entails hands-on instruction where we take students out for two, four, six hours a day, teaching them how to turn the recorder on and off, manipulate the controls and so on. Quite literally, we shove the tape recorder into their hands and say *Here's your field kit, here's what you've got in here, now I want you to do a five-minute interview and tell me all that you did and didn't do, and then we'll listen to it*. So, from the very beginning there's this notion of pushing people into the deep end, having them learn things they didn't know, and *unlearn* things they thought they knew in terms of technical set-up. So, you have people teaching audio recording techniques using, as you are, a digital recorder...back in the day, it was a cassette recorder and before that...not quite a hand-crank Victrola, which is the gesture you are making with your hands right now [laughter]...but all of that combined with, say,



photography. (As an aside: when I began teaching in the field schools in 2004, we were still doing photography with single-lens reflex, analog cameras...we still have a bunch of them sitting up in the stacks somewhere, which all went away almost as soon as the digital age hit.)

And during the field school, you're taking them through the process of a fieldwork project, which has been determined by the instructor at the university and the AFC. So, when we worked with researchers at [Utah State University](#) (USU), we [AFC] say [to the instructor], *How does this help you with your research on refugee communities in Cache Valley, Utah?* This is because the university researcher/instructor has already built rapport and trust with community members who will be interviewed by students during the field school. So, instructors Randy Williams and Lisa Gabbert worked with folklorist Nelda Ault to get together members of three distinct resettled, refugee communities and to bring them into the school environment. The instructors' goal was to also demystify the school itself and try to get the children of refugees to start thinking of USU as a place where they are welcome. And one way to do that was to involve the communities in the documentation efforts and to say to them, *Now that you're here in Utah, what are some of the things that you would like to document about your community's traditions?*

Going back to an earlier concept you brought up, how involved is the community in shaping their own representation? That's a big part of these field school projects. We rely on these community members to be our interlocutors, guiding us through their cultural concepts and how they represent themselves as cultural beings in this new setting [e.g., Utah]. And, in an ideal sense, the things you look for when putting together a field school is, first and foremost, buy-in from the community. Who is going to be doing the work on the ground? The students and the instructors. And then we [AFC] come in (after already working with the instructors to shape the field school program) to teach alongside the university instructors.

MS: So, getting a little narrower in focus, what are the key elements, or ingredients, in teaching the art of the interview to field school participants?

GS: There is a [list of 24 tips](#) for doing a guided interview that we give to the students. They're tips and guidelines, not that you need to do them in order, but they need to be taken into account as a whole. For instance, what you just did: "stamping" that it's March 26 on the recording...

MS: And I'll ask for your consent at the end!

GS: That's right, because you didn't ask for my consent at the beginning [which is recommended].\*

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\* Despite our joking, I asked for Guha's consent, or permission, when setting up the interview weeks prior. During this process, which happened via email and in person, I provided the reason for the interview (i.e., to produce this written piece) and the general topics about which I would ask him (e.g., interviews and teaching interviewing). As Guha and I are colleagues working in the same place and, thus, often in contact with—and trustful of—each other, the process of obtaining his consent was very informal. However, while the consent process can unfold in various ways, it is always a serious step in ethnography and/or interviewing. In my teaching, students learn to create written consent forms, where the aims of their broader research projects, as well as corresponding interview objectives, are laid out, and interviewees are encouraged to discuss and agree upon the conditions and other elements of the interview ahead of time. In addition, as folklorists, we often also use release forms, which grant researchers access to the recorded event and permits its use for non-commercial purposes, as explained further in the AFC's [Folklife and Fieldwork guidebook](#).

The guidelines are about demystifying the interview process—that is, to say that the art of the interview is, at base, a conversation. And how do you enter into a conversation with people, and what are the things you have to do to get ready for the conversation, and what to do when you're in the middle of the conversation, and what do you do after? And this is quite antithetical to standard ethnographic practice, which would be practicing deep hanging out before you even turn on a tape recorder, right? So, we point out these contradictions, because a field school is a very short burst of intense activity that exposes you to certain principles...and, from what I've seen, it spurs students to want to do more. And that's pretty cool.

Of course, there's also space built in for reflection after interviews. We start each morning off by asking, *What did we learn yesterday? What happened during the course of the interview that you want to find out more about? What were you completely unprepared for, and how will you ensure that won't happen again?* I mean, *do* work and find out who it is that you're going to be working with [and interviewing], so that would mean that you take the background materials and readings the instructors prepared for you, and you make sure you understand who these people are. For example, let's take John Roberts, son of Helen Roberts. What is John's day-to-day job; what is his standing in this particular community? If it's a ranching community, does he manage the ranch? Is he a cowboy? And what is it that you want to ask him about that? What do you want to know is always the first and most basic question you ask yourself. This is because you, as a mediator, have a duty to, first, the community whom you're documenting, since you will be turning over these recordings at some point and giving them copies. Even if they are not that interested in hearing themselves speak, cousins, daughters, spouses, and so on *will* be interested in hearing them speak. And you want it to be as exemplary a recording as possible for their benefit, as well as for anybody else's. Second, it does further the research agenda of the instructor (and/or institution) for whom you're doing this work. Third, you should be keeping to that principle of "do no harm." You don't want to "poison the well" with your interactions and the questions you ask, because you have a long line of people who will come after you who will want to interview these people, and if you were disrespectful, well...it will be remembered.

Going back to the tips: Practice careful listening. I always tell students to do what I do, which is to not just listen to the conversation you're having for the cultural and historical content, but to listen as a producer, too. Make a great recording because that's what's going to bear the test of time; that's what's going to help you to put together a podcast, or a written blurb on a project's website. The usual procedure is that one student is conducting the interview, and her partner's the recordist, and then in the next interview, they switch roles. This leads to discussions about the responsibilities and different ways to listen, depending on the role you assume. For instance, I stress the necessity of "listening to the room," because you're teaching students how to listen for extraneous or unwanted sounds that may end up in the recording—that is, getting them to think about putting on both their producer and research scholar hats at the same time. And all of this is reinforced with, at least, two to three days of practice, over and over again, and we critique constantly...we listen to each other's recordings and pick them over.

You'd think that students were all chatterboxes, but they're not [laughter], so it's important to demystify the process and say to them, *You know, you are allowed to make mistakes, but try and make them outside the interview situation, here in the field school, the so-called safe space.* There are also other ethical considerations, such as if you promise something over the course of an



interview, you fulfill that promise. If somebody asks you to come back, you say that you will try your best to, but you also explain the constraints. And, above all else, represent yourself as a member of an institution and a team, as well as a whole discipline in terms of practice. Be aware of the harm that you may do in this particular time and space long after you're gone. Your responsibilities are not just to your co-workers in this project, but to all of the community and to people you may never even know. At the end of the day, these conversations that participants are learning to facilitate can enable connections, and it is gratifying that the work we do can lead to such connections and transformations ...and maybe the students are inspired to go on to do something that's larger than themselves.

MS: Thank you, Guha. Based on your rich experiences and thoughtful advice, I think there are many important takeaways here. In terms of teaching, it seems that the immersive, out-in-the-field *field* school model can be highly conducive for critically engaging with the theories, ethics, and methods of ethnography. Field schools attempt to mimic, as much as possible, the more organic ways in which cultural research and documentation projects unfold in general practice. The AFC schools you describe make space for reflecting on the making of mistakes, or at least discussions about potentially negative impacts of poor technique and behavior on source communities—and making mistakes is certainly a part of interviewing! As you note, field schools can also foster the development of meaningful relationships between participants and the community members they get to hang out with and learn from, and a sense of the importance of the overall project—and ethnographic fieldwork in general—can emerge. However, it is also true that planning and facilitating field schools are logistically challenging and require great resources—financial and otherwise. So, if a proper field school setting is too difficult to achieve, it can be helpful to think of creating field school-like experiences in other formats, such as less intensively over a 16-week college semester or in terms of shorter workshop events, to name a few.

And as you stress throughout, what is most important to know—and, thus, teach in any format—is the notion that community members/interviewees are the true experts of the interview topics—that is, of their histories, memories, stories, and their cultural knowledges, skills, and traditions. And so, in terms of training one to actively recognize and honor this expertise, it becomes an exercise in learning how best to ensure that their stories are being told by them in their words and on their terms (and with keeping an ear and/or eye on making sure that the recording will be as good as possible).

Finally, you bring to light the broader dimensions of the ethnographic interview—that is, its relationship to the future. You stress the notion of preservation, in that these interview “products” (recordings, videos, documentary films, among others) can also be important as part of the historical record—years, decades, and centuries from now (if we are so lucky). Accordingly, they need to be made discoverable and accessible for future researchers, the public, and source communities through the conscious planning and use of metadata. Significantly, though, you also shine a light on the legacies interviews and ethnographic research experiences can have in the future—that is, the good and potentially bad repercussions of our work. Here, the notion of respect is not just crucial in the present, but can extend to people we may never know—the future communities, descendants, neighbors, and friends of those we have been so fortunate to interview today.

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#### URLs

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Cultural Documentation Training for Indigenous Communities: <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/ed-indigenoustraining.html>  
Sustainable Heritage Network: <https://sustainableheritagenetwork.org>  
The AFC Field School in Cultural Documentation: <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldschool/index.html>  
The Utah State and Library of Congress Field School in Cultural Documentation: <https://archives.usu.edu/folklo/fieldschool2015.php>  
Suggested Guidelines for Recorded Interviews (“the 24 tips”): [https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/edcenter\\_files/interview-guide.pdf](https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/edcenter_files/interview-guide.pdf)  
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