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"Stony the Road" to Change

Black Mississippians and the Culture of Social Relations

This book is the result of an ethnographic study of the impact of Black cultural diversity on social action. The ethnography has three important characteristics. First, it incorporates the multiple perspectives of the ethnographer with the diverse voices of the people through an unusual form of reflexivity that provides additional insight for the descriptions, analyses, and conclusions of the book. This epistemological method is used to challenge traditional structures of ethnographies. Second, it argues for the consideration of nontraditional approaches to studying the Black experience – a focus away from race relations and issues of class and an emphasis on intragroup interaction and diversity. Third, it investigates the processes, social institutions, and structures within the Black community of a small college town that influence social change and social action since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Marilyn M. Thomas-Houston is currently interim director of African American Studies and an assistant professor of Anthropology and African American Studies at the University of Florida. She received her PhD in 1997 from New York University in Cultural Anthropology and a graduate certificate in Ethnographic Film during the same year. In addition to an MPhil and MA in Anthropology from NYU, she holds an MA in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi. She is a member of the American Anthropologist Association, a member of the executive board of the Society for Visual Anthropology (holding the office of treasurer), a member of the Association of Black Anthropologists, and a member of the Society for Cultural Anthropology. Her research interests focus primarily on people of African descent in complex societies, power relations, development, transnational processes, social movements, and identity.

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Black Mississippians and the Culture of Social Relations

MARILYN M. THOMAS-HOUSTON
University of Florida

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Lift Every Voice and Sing
by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson

Lift ev'ry voice and sing, Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, Bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, Have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?*

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.

*My emphasis.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" (written by J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson) used by permission of Edward B. Marks Music Company.

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Freedmen Town Historical Marker (2004)

The black folks won't hire you, and the white folks won't either. Now that's equal opportunity.

- JD, 1996

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For You:

Vivian Edwards Miller

John W. Miller, Sr.

John W. Miller, Jr.

Carl Edward Thomas

Kelvin Thomas

Michael Thomas

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Preface

This study is intended to be useful for several audiences. With hopes of accomplishing this goal, I structured this study for a wide audience readership. As such, the focus is multilayered and the notes are extensive.[1] This method is incorporated as a means of providing students and teachers, activists and politicians, natives and foreigners with a deeper understanding of the Black experience in the United States. Because these various audiences have varying levels of knowledge about the social history of Blacks in the Americas, a great deal of background information (historical, geographical, and social) will be provided in footnotes. This allows the readers an opportunity to gain needed information that may be missing from their particular purview of the Black experience.

In constructing this work, I was influenced by the myths and misunderstandings that shape the thinking of audiences too young or too distant from experiences such as the Civil Rights Movement or slavery or the rural South to have a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these phenomena and current events. For example, in an essay on the contributions of Martin Luther King, Jr., one student – born almost 20 years after King's assassination – wrote: "King was killed because he fought for equal rights of the slaves." The student was unable to make the distinction between the freedom of the slaves as a result of the Civil War and that of Blacks that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement.

History, tradition, and memory play major roles in the construction of regional culture. In order to provide readers with the most in-depth

[1] This design is similar to that of Geertz's (1980) work, which uses endnotes to provide the readers with as much theoretical and historical detail as they wish to pursue.

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picture of the community of study, the text depends heavily on historical descriptions from oral histories and folklore. Through these histories, we are able to trace the connections between current social interactions and the historical construction of community. The privileging of written history over oral tradition and memory is a major issue in the interpretive construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of any moment in time and space. Since many social scientists, particularly in anthropology, have abandoned the notion of finding one great "Truth" in favor of documenting and interpreting multiple "truths," the practice of privileging writing (as a scientific method) is problematic in the study of all cultures as we work to construct models of the societies we study. The endeavor is difficult in pluralist complex societies but becomes even more rigorous in stratified societies. When studying such societies we are often influenced by the very method (i.e., documentation) we use to accomplish our scientific goals of construction and interpretation, and we often are biased against new data, particularly if it contests, delegitimates, or disputes previously documented data. In other words, we are often influenced by the society's level of development.

If we are studying Third World societies that do not have extensively recorded histories, there appears to be more willingness to accept oral histories as the legitimate history, particularly when the same stories are repeated from different sources. However, in complex societies – and here I am speaking of the colonized societies of the Western Hemisphere – we often look for confirmation in the written word rather than in oral history. This is particularly problematic when members of the dominant society or those educated by institutions of that society document the history or culture of their colonized selves. The privileging of written history over oral history also is a problem in raising the consciousness of audiences who have privileged prerevisionist documentations and accepted them as "reality." The new interpretations, particularly those based on the oral aspects of a society, have difficulty displacing those first understandings and impressions.

This quest for written authentication appears to rest its conclusions on the belief that a written history of an event or a phenomenon is proof and consequently Truth. As social scientists, we often give more credit to the dominant society's perspective than to indigenous interpretations, and although I caution students on this very issue – Western societies' tendencies to attach, often unconsciously, the perception of Truth to information in print and just as often to first-printed interpretations – I sometimes find myself guilty of the same tendency. That is the position

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in which one African American organization in my community of study found itself while attempting to validate a section of town as an important historic site for African Americans. A sort of "catch-22" ensued: Written proof was needed, but no written proof was available. For these reasons, the text of this book uses oral histories and memories as its foundation. In addition, my position is that *what, how*, and *why* things are remembered matter most in people's negotiation of day-to-day existence. Therefore, the voices of the community are privileged above written documents.

Ethnographic research and publishing protocol require an ethnographer to do everything within her power to protect the identity of the participants in the research project. A part of that protection calls for pseudonyms for places as well as people.[2] The ethical and moral significance of this act is extremely valuable on the one hand and detrimental to the production of knowledge on the other. The value of this research is intricately related to the knowledge of a particular historically documented social event. As such, the recognition of the geographical location in which the event occurred is not only inevitable but also necessary. Therefore, no effort has been made in this work to disguise the area of research. The name of each collaborator is changed through randomly assigned initials in order to conceal identities. This precaution was taken although many said that their identities need not be hidden. While the use of initials instead of names may be difficult in terms of memory and association for the reader, I have chosen this approach for the following reasons. I expect this book to be distributed in the community of study, and the assignment of a name also assigns gender. In a number of cases, the concealment of gender is the primary means for protecting the identity not only of the individual but also of entire families. (Gender is assigned in some cases; however, that assignment is made only to establish social connections.) In most cases, social reprisals would not occur. However, initials provided the best option for constructing identities for the text, given the possibilities of redress, stigma, or negative public scrutiny. Because the specific area of study is identified, it is almost impossible to conceal the identity of public officials.[3] References and descriptions of events regarding these officials are all public knowledge and as such do not violate confidentiality.

[2] In spite of the efforts made by ethnographers to disguise their space of investigation, members of the profession always seem to know the exact geographical location and often refer to the actual name rather than the pseudonym.

[3] As anthropologists turn more to studying their own societies and publish there as well, this problem will need to be addressed.

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The epistemological structure of this work includes what I believe an ethnography should be – a dialogue between the author and reader that includes not simply the multiple voices of the groups being described but also an understanding of the multiple perspectives of the ethnographer. As such, the work carries a twofold argument. On the one hand, it argues, through examples, that the background assumptions about the world of any ethnographer (native or nonnative, insider or outsider) must be questioned and negotiated; therefore, neither the ethnographer nor the audience to which she communicates can take them for granted. Since "fieldwork is as much a personal journey as it is a method of scientific inquiry" (Jamie Johnson, unpublished conversation), reflexivity is not limited to a small topical area of the introduction but is integrated throughout the chapters in an effort to clarify discussions the author views as being influenced by background assumptions. On the other hand, the work also argues through practice that the authoritative voice of the author/ethnographer should be questioned throughout the work. The researcher's decision to follow one path of questions rather than another is important in understanding the specific depth and breadth of the data provided. What better way than to bring the reader along on the research process by providing an understanding of when, why, and how particular data was viewed as important to the research agenda. It provides the reader the opportunity for discovery along with the researcher and leaves each step open for evaluating and understanding what has been left out of the discussion. Therefore, the research questions addressed in this work are provided in a kind of historical order reflecting the messiness of life as well as the messiness of a "scientific" study of society in which the questions were developed rather than implying through one major question that the research agenda was clearly thought out from its inception.

Finally, in the text, I use "intraracial/intraethnic" to point out that the category of race is predominantly a folk category that connects cultural and social identities to physical features. In daily interaction, the prejudices and discriminations constructed by members of the dominant society are generally carried out based on the assignment of physical features or the knowledge of lineage. Therefore individuals who according to the "one drop of blood" theory would be assigned to the "Black race" but carry no associated physical features may or may not experience discriminatory practices. It is my suggestion that the category "Blacks" should be considered a multicultural ethnic group not identifiable by phenotype or cultural practices but by the assertion of Blackness as identity. In this

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work, the term designates a politicized unit that shares a particular identity and relationship to the dominant society. From an anthropological perspective, Blacks are "the Other." In the text, I have also attempted to distinguish among "ethnic," "racial," and "cultural" in order to underscore their differences as well as their similarities.

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If I have forgotten anyone who has contributed to my intellectual growth and completion of this work, I offer my sincere and deepest apologies. But know that within my heart I realize "It takes a whole village to raise a child" and the support of family and friends to grow from student to academic.

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