

**The Women of San Luis, Costa Rica:
Sharing Life Experiences through Oral History and Photography**

Project Summary

We received an ACS Interdisciplinary Mini-Grant last year to document the lives of women in the small, rural community of San Luis, Costa Rica using an innovative combination of methods and disciplinary approaches, drawing mainly from art and anthropology. We are requesting a supplemental grant to fund the final phase of this project: the installation of a permanent exhibit in San Luis. We successfully brought students of anthropology and photography together before, during, and after we photographed and collected oral histories from 13 women in two weeks in June 2007. We conceived of this project as a teaching and learning opportunity, supplementing coursework already completed by the students, and as something that will influence our curriculum for years to come. Our final product has been determined in collaboration with the Costa Rican women with whom we work, and they have shown interest in creating a website about the community, a book, and an exhibit. The work we performed in the summer provided material for all of these options.

As professors from different disciplines, we work to demonstrate for students the usefulness and appropriateness of a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach. Our respective fields borrow methods and concepts from each other, but do so in a largely unexamined and incomplete way. We each use oral history and photography in our own, independent work, though our strengths may lie more in one area than the other. Last summer, our students learned from us, from each other, and from the women as we interviewed and created photographs of people who have provided the backbone of this small community.

We began consulting with a group of women in San Luis in June 2006, and have found our on-going relationship to be productive and beneficial for all of us. In addition to the final

products mentioned above, we anticipate outcomes such as public presentations, peer reviewed papers, and changes to existing curricular offerings. We believe our students have benefited from a collaborative rapport with their subjects and with us.

Original Goals and Objectives

Our project unites methods from the social sciences and the humanities to create a product in collaboration with, and desired by, a small community in the highlands of Costa Rica. We planned to use photography and life history interviews to illustrate the lives of women who have lived in the rural community of San Luis for over 50 years, producing a product that is meaningful for the participants and the community. We hoped to engage a small group of students in a project that demonstrated the relevance and usefulness of anthropology and photography, especially when used synthetically. We aimed to show how anthropology is enriched by the visual and how photography can benefit from in-depth participant observation. Our final product may take the form of an interactive website, a museum exhibit, a book, or all of the above.

Changes to Original Goals

While almost all of the women we photographed and interviewed had lived in the area of San Luis for over 50 years, we were also fortunate enough to interview younger women who were seen as influential by their community. These women had been identified by others as important in some way to the community of San Luis and their stories and images will add an interesting temporal component to our final products. We were also able to interview and photograph more women than we had anticipated, due to the help and cooperation of many members of the community who supported this project.

Activities Underway and Completed

Our faculty/student team (Goldberg and Payne and four students, two of whom focused on photography and two of whom emphasize anthropology) began meeting in the Spring 2007 semester in preparation for travel to Costa Rica in June 2007. The pre-travel meetings discussed literature reviewed, established a mutual framework for working with Costa Rican consultants, and evaluated previously collected oral histories. We also worked to break down disciplinary barriers, emphasizing the overlap of our methods and theories. The group met again in Costa Rica in mid-June and photographed and interviewed women there for ten days in a period of two weeks (we did not work on weekends in order to allow our students time to get to know the community in a broader sense). Because each interview required us to hike together through mountainous terrain, we used the travel time to discuss what we had learned, and to translate some of the Spanish conversation for those members who were not proficient in the language. The travel time allowed us to “debrief” as a group and to discuss our ideas for the next meeting.

Currently, Payne and three of the four students are processing their film at the photography studio at Hendrix College, as there are no photographic facilities close to San Luis. Two of the four students and Goldberg are beginning the work of transcribing the Spanish interviews using a transcription machine. They will follow this effort by translating the interviews into English for the exhibit in the U.S.

Unanticipated Delays and Snags

Goldberg is currently on maternity leave, expecting a child in October. While her pregnancy did not impact the collection of data (and, in fact, it may have helped to prompt interesting discussions about gender in San Luis), her oversight of the transcription and translation has been reduced. Thus, we anticipate that the translation will be completed in the

spring semester of 2008 rather than the fall of 2007, as originally planned. The exhibit, however, should still be ready to install by June 2008.

Original Budget

We have attached a current financial statement that shows our use of ACS funds. We also received a grant from the Hendrix College Odyssey program for \$5,090 to cover the travel expenses for Maxine Payne and three students (Goldberg and another student's travel expenses were covered by a separate Odyssey program) for our work in June 2007. Our original budget planned for printing, framing, advertising, and shipping for an exhibit in Costa Rica, and our current expenditures show approximately that amount reserved. We did not originally request any funding for travel back to Costa Rica for installation and opening of the exhibition. Our current supplemental proposal is solely for that purpose. We are also planning a similar exhibit to be displayed first at Hendrix College and then capable of travel to any ACS schools that request it.

Supplemental Budget Request

Prints for exhibition (16 x 16" image, 20 x 24" paper)

Framing of 20 x24" prints (both covered by money remaining in initial grant \$1894.00)

Prints for women who were photographed (10 x 10" image on 11 x 14" paper) = **\$200.00**

Framing for smaller images **\$400.00**

1000 booklets featuring text from interviews and original photographs = **\$1500.00**

(50 families in San Luis will receive these free of charge - the Eco Lodge would like to offer the remaining booklets for sale, with the money going to scholarships for local kids – or some other community cause that we can decide together as a group).

Travel for Goldberg and Payne

Airline tickets \$650.00 x 2 = **\$1300.00**

Eco Lodge 11 days/10 nights \$560.00 each x 2 = **\$1120.00**

Stipend for Payne

\$1200.00 = **\$1200.00**

* Goldeberg is not asking for stipend here. If Goldberg’s travel costs are covered by Hendrix Odyssey, she will ask for a stipend from the Odyssey program as well.

Total Supplemental Budget Request **\$ 5720.00**

Context of the Interdisciplinary Project

Hendrix College is committed to increasing interdisciplinary projects through a variety of avenues. First among these, however, is the newly created Odyssey Program. Indeed, our travel in 2006 was supported by the Odyssey office in anticipation of just this sort of collaborative project, and they continued their support by funding student travel expenses in 2007. The nature of the Summer Semester in Costa Rica is multidisciplinary, rather than interdisciplinary, but even this program strives for mutual influence in curricular content across disciplines. Our proposed project aligns nicely with this agenda and may serve as a model for future truly interdisciplinary learning opportunities.

Payne’s prior work has involved the collection of oral histories to be used as part of her photographic installations. Her teaching encourages students to interact with their subjects on a more personal level, investing time with them. In this way, they avoid merely presenting superficial or stereotypical images of people and instead the work becomes more collaborative, better representing the subject as a whole person. Working with Goldberg, who specializes in ethnographic data collection, photography students can use methods from anthropology to enhance their work as well. Likewise, the anthropology students, who were already at the Summer Semester, learned from Payne’s humanistic, holistic approach – one of the central tenets of the discipline of anthropology. Payne co-taught a session during the Summer Semester on this topic. We strive to demonstrate that even within a “disciplinary” framework, both of our actual

methods are deeply interdisciplinary, not merely borrowing from each other but integrating ideas and techniques.

As we install the exhibit during the summer of 2008, we will work with the sociology class that will in progress as part of this year's Summer Semester. Goldberg has been invited to contribute a two-week unit toward this course, which will substantially involve this project. We will work with locals to create a space and exhibit that is inviting to the community and can be a source of pride. We will likewise work with the sociology students to document the installation and opening. We can then use these materials in our courses when we teach about collaborative research, applied anthropology, and museum studies. These efforts to involve locals and students demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary work, and link curricular and co-curricular activities. We hope to rise above "town and gown" distinctions in an international context.

Evaluation, Dissemination, and Continued Support

We hoped that the success of this project could be measured in part by the participation of the women in the Cost Rica community. Indeed, the fact that we were able to perform in-depth interviews and photography with more women than we expected is a tribute to the commitment of the entire community to this project. The knowledge that the stories and images we collected would return permanently to San Luis was a major motivating factor for many participants. We will also make this work available to travel to any ACS institution that is interested in displaying it. We will also look for opportunities for presentations at ACS conferences and in ACS publications. We believe this could be an ongoing opportunity for interdisciplinary projects in the future and will serve as a good model for departments at other institutions who have study abroad programs.

An additional resource for dissemination will come in the form of a booklet we will create for the community (part of our original ACS grant). We will provide the booklet to the families of San Luis free of charge. The director of the Ecolodge San Luis, which is run by the University of Georgia, has also offered to sell booklets to their visitors. All proceeds will go to the community for a scholarship fund or other cooperative venture of their choice. The community of San Luis has a strong record of cooperative enterprise, including a coffee co-op that provides scholarships to youth, a recycled paper co-op for local women, and an artist's co-op in which local women produce crafts for sale in nearby Monteverde. Each of these ventures provides resources that the entire community shares, so sales of our booklet fits quite well into an established pattern of community development.

Goldberg intends to write at least one article for Practicing Anthropology, a peer reviewed journal devoted to applied anthropology. She also teaches a course called *Ethnographic Research Methods* for anthropology majors, and intends to incorporate photography and visual representation into future versions of the class, based on this project. We both expect that this collaboration will inspire future projects for us as a team, and for our research with others from outside our disciplinary confines. Indeed, we are currently discussing such a project that would be based on the oral history, writing, and photography of Arkansas with members of other disciplines at Hendrix College. The success will be measured, ultimately, by our ability to publish, exhibit, and present this work to interested audiences. Also, people, particularly our students, may use this project as a model for similar work.

We are convinced that this project will benefit us, our students, and our institution academically and professionally. Equally important, however, is the impact the project will have on a rural community in Costa Rica, one with which we hope to have a sustained relationship.

When we visited with women and men from San Luis, there was great excitement about continuing the oral history project, and people requested photographs of the women involved. Even in our most preliminary interactions, the women made suggestions about topics, aesthetics, and directions for the project. This type of collaborative effort brings rewards on multiple levels for us and the students, as well as for the community, and we are enthusiastic about this opportunity.

Disclosure Statement

Goldberg may have her travel costs covered by a short teaching appointment at the Summer Semester in Costa Rica in June 2008. These plans have not been finalized, however.