

ACS Interdisciplinary Mini-Grant Final Report

Names: **Anne J. Goldberg** **Maxine Payne**
E-Mail: goldberg@hendrix.edu payne@hendrix.edu
Phone: (501)450-3896 (501)450-4587
Institution: Hendrix College

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

Project Dates: Spring 2007 – Spring 2008

Amount Awarded: \$5,238.93 (original) and \$5,720 (supplemental)

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.

Ways Our Goals Have Been Met

Learning Outside of the Classroom

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 2007 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.

In the fall of 2007, Payne and three of the four students processed their film at the photography studio at Hendrix College, as there are no photographic facilities close to San Luis. Also in the fall, two of the four students and Goldberg began transcribing the Spanish interviews using a transcription machine. Goldberg translated the interviews into English for the exhibit in the U.S. and for use in a course taught to Hendrix student in Costa Rica in June 2008.

Curricular Development and Learning Inside the Classroom

In spring 2008, Goldberg invited Payne to speak in her course, ANTH 300: Ethnographic Research Methods, about incorporating visual material into ethnographic work. We spoke together about the project and how our diverse experiences made the project richer and more successful than it otherwise would have been. We hoped to demonstrate a successful interdisciplinary project. Goldberg included a unit on visual anthropology in the course, which was a new addition. Likewise, in June 2008, Goldberg taught a unit called “Gender, Oral History, and Community” in the above-mentioned course in Costa Rica, which took place during the installation of the exhibit and Payne again joined the class to discuss the project. All of the students attended the opening, and collected fieldnotes about social interactions during the opening. They then completed a group project investigation aspects of culture in San Luis, with special attention to gender, based on our work.

Giving Back to the Community

Of course, the most important outcome was the successful installation of an exhibit in San Luis on June 15, 2008. Most of the women and their families were able to attend. We provided a luncheon, cake, and coffee at the Ecolodge San Luis. We brought 450 booklets to Costa Rica and 175 were distributed for free at the opening. The community of San Luis only has a population of about 300, so this number represents a fairly successful turnout. We also gave framed photos to each of the women involved. The remaining 275 booklets will be sold to tourists for \$10 a piece, with all proceeds benefiting the San Luis Development Association, which provides scholarships for local children.

Evaluation and Assessment

No formal instruments were used for evaluation or assessment. Nonetheless, we have several indicators that point to the success of the project. The robust attendance of the exhibition (which was unfortunately on Father’s Day) indicates the interest of the community in the project. At the opening, several grown children of the women approached Goldberg to speak about the importance of the project. They spoke tearfully of their mothers’ hard work and the fact that this work was seldom acknowledged. One of the women said that she felt like an important person, and never dreamed that she

would be celebrated in any way. We both found the opening quite moving and satisfying, as we watched members of the community move from image to image and flip through the booklets.

Additionally, student in both classes wrote journal entries, response papers, and fieldnotes about the ways in which the project inspired them to work with communities and to collaborate. While our goal included showing how art and anthropology could come together, students brought in other disciplines like Spanish and Tropical Biology (noting the medicinal uses of plants by some of the women) as they considered the project.

Lessons Learned

Goldberg's pregnancy caused her to take maternity leave in fall 2007. 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 was reduced. The two students who were to assist with transcription and translation did very little work during the academic year. This forced us to hire someone to assist with part of the transcription. Without a method of compelling students to work (like a grade), we have learned that even promising students may not follow through with a project after the fun of the travel is over. Perhaps making this segment of the project an independent study would alleviate this problem.

Similarly, the photography-oriented students took far fewer photographs than we anticipated and were disappointingly uninterested in observing the interviews. While the interviews were in Spanish, which neither photography student understood, much was translated into English and the homes themselves were visually interesting and provided a way to learn about culture through observation. In future projects, we will stress what can be learned through observation as well as through interviewing.

Finally, the costs for printing were substantially higher than anticipated. We have spent over \$600 of our own money for shipping, accommodation, and other supplies. These cost overruns occurred despite additional funds obtained from various sources at Hendrix College.

Next Steps – Sharing the Results with ACS

Our next step will be to print and frame another set of photographs to exhibit at Hendrix College and tour the ACS schools, along with text panels of the words of women in both Spanish and English. We will have to obtain new funding to carry out this step. We may also print a new version of the booklet to accompany the exhibit; the original had most text in Spanish but a version in English would be appropriate for the U.S. show.

We also hope to co-author one or more articles on the work. The journal *Practicing Anthropology* may be our first target.

We have discussed extending our collaboration to women in other locales, including other communities in Costa Rica where people have expressed an interest in our work,

Arkansas, and Tanzania. We are talking about the themes that could unify this effort, such as the relation of women to the transmission of culture, women and cultural change, and representing women's lives through photography and oral history.

Financial Accounting

See attached statement

We give ACS permission to post our original proposal and a summary of our work on the ACS Interdisciplinary website

(<http://www.colleges.org/newmodels/interdisciplinary/index.html>).