


BOOK REVIEW

I'm Afraid of That Water: A Collaborative Ethnography of a West Virginia Water Crisis edited by Luke Eric Lassiter, Brian A. Hoey, and Elizabeth Campbell

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On January 9, 2014, a ten-thousand-gallon spill issuing from a chemical-storage facility belonging to Freedom Industries contaminated the Elk River with MCHM, a chemical used in coal production. The Elk supplies water to some 300,000 people in nine counties surrounding Charleston, West Virginia. Residents were instructed to refrain from using water for anything except flushing toilets during several weeks. The spill closed numerous local businesses and left the people of Charleston without a vital resource they had taken for granted. Tainted water triggered physical symptoms in a third of the population. While the local and state governments took charge of the disaster in its immediate aftermath, the existence of the chemical-storage tanks had been known for a decade, but they had never been inspected. The West Virginia government's close ties to the coal industry—the state is a center for mountain-top mining—help to explain its lack of attention to the dangers posed to the environment by noxious chemical contaminants.

I'm Afraid of That Water is the product of a Charleston-based research group seeking to document the consequences of the 2014 MCHM spill. But unlike those studies that examine the moment of disaster and its aftermath through a bird's-eye view of its effects on public health, the steps taken toward mitigation by local and state agencies, or subsequent legislation and reform, this project pays attention to the personal experience of Charleston residents, not only in the weeks following the spill but over the long term. Originally conceived as a pedagogical project coordinated through a university research seminar—much like Lassiter et al.'s *The Other Side of Middletown* (2004)—*I'm Afraid of That Water* brings together three strands of research, including an oral history project, the creation of a website, and the production of a radio documentary. By situating their collaborations in the university context, participants were

able to read and reflect collectively, organize interviews as a group, and work together on the book manuscript. Only a handful of the participants were academics, including the three editors of the volume; the others were local activists, students, and the documentary writer and website author. Even the students were not the usual seminar members, but participants in a continuing-education experience: they were local professionals and community members, some enrolled in the Marshall University humanities graduate program.

This diverse gathering of activists and scholars has produced a volume that is itself heterogeneous. Some of the contributions are reports of interviews with rural and urban citizens of the Charleston metropolitan area, collecting the personal experience of narrators as they faced the disaster and as they coped with their fears over several years after the chemical spill; narrators range from directors of community organizations, lawyers, and businesspeople to activists, journalists, homemakers, and some of the most vulnerable inhabitants of the city. These contributions to the volume are decidedly nonacademic, emphasizing both the sentiments expressed by the individual narrators and the feelings that their stories provoked in the researchers. Some reveal the authors' pessimism—their fears that the intimate relationship between political and economic interests would continue to unfold in a never-ending sequence of environmental disasters. Others detail the activist itineraries of recently politicized citizens, emphasizing, instead, the solidarity that flowered during the crisis.

However, not all of the chapters dwell on personal reminiscences. Several chapters outline the various methodologies used by the team—collaborative ethnography, radio documentary-making, website creation—and how they were folded into a single polyphonic project. Most persuasive, to my mind, was the epilogue, which describes the dynamics of a team meeting dedicated to preparing the final draft of the book. It cogently illustrates how collaboration unfolds: how participants with divergent interests and different skillsets can slowly reach a consensus. Few works on

collaborative ethnography provide readers with this sort of a window into how collaboration happens.

I was also inspired by the way the academic contributions to this volume were placed in dialogue with chapters by local citizens (although many of the latter were simultaneously students in the Marshall University graduate seminar, their chapters were decidedly nonacademic). In the first section and mid-book, Brian Hoey, an anthropologist from Marshall University, shares exceptionally insightful reviews of the relevant literature on disasters, which I would recommend to dissertation writers because of the author's ability to weave descriptions of the literature into essays that closely hone to the ethnographic objectives of the re-

search team. Although Hoey's chapters, at first sight, seem to cast an academic veneer on top of an activist project, we learn in the epilogue that they were conceived as interventions into conversations taking place within the team, both orienting participants and offering significant issues around which dialogue could take place, guiding an expert melding of academic and community objectives and methodologies.

REFERENCE CITED

Lassiter, Luke Eric, Hurley Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell, and Michelle Natasya Johnson, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Middletown*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.