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DISCUSSION

From Afro-American anthropology to the ethnography of literacy: Conversations with John F. Szwed

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Abstract

This article presents an interview conducted with John F. Szwed—an anthropologist, musician, and writer, who has worked at universities including Columbia, Yale, Temple, New York, and the University of Pennsylvania where he was director of the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) from 1969–1974. CUE was arguably the first major research center focusing on ethnographic fieldwork in the city since the 'Chicago School' of Urban Ecology began fifty years before, although Szwed's perspective was more theoretically informed by the Afro-American anthropology or African diaspora studies tradition of Melville J. Herskovits. The interview traces a trajectory through Szwed's work, leading from updated research in Afro-American anthropology, into the founding of CUE, and onwards through anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to literature and music which informed an influential conference paper of Szwed's, concerning the 'Ethnography of Literacy.' (Afro-American anthropology, urban ethnography, sociolinguistics, writing, reading, literacies)

Editors' note

In our continuing efforts to honour the legacy of William (Bill) Labov, in this issue we are publishing an interview with John F. Szwed, Director of the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania from 1969–1974. Labov went to Penn from Columbia in 1971, and the interview with Szwed provides not only a fascinating account of Szwed's own intellectual trajectory but also a description of CUE during the time Labov arrived at Penn, while continuing his efforts to address the educational equities facing Black students in reading programs.

Introduction

This article presents selected extracts from interviews[1] conducted with John F. Szwed[2]—an anthropologist, musician, and writer, who has worked at universities including Columbia, Yale, Temple, New York, and the University of Pennsylvania where he was director of the Center for Urban Ethnography[3] (CUE)

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from 1969–1974. CUE was arguably the first major[4] research center focusing on ethnographic fieldwork in the city since the 'Chicago School' of Urban Ecology began fifty years before (Park 1915), although Szwed's perspective was more theoretically informed by the Afro-American anthropology[5] or African diaspora studies tradition of Melville J. Herskovits[6] (1941a). The introduction and interview traces a trajectory through Szwed's work, leading from updated research in Afro-American anthropology, into the founding of CUE, and onwards through anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to literature and music which informed an influential conference paper of Szwed's (1981), concerning the 'Ethnography of Literacy'.[7]

The Center for Urban Ethnography and emergence of Afro-American anthropology

Much of the interview revolves around Szwed's work at the Center for Urban Ethnography, both because of the historical importance of that center, and because CUE became the site and source of some of Szwed's most significant anthropological work and collaborations. For its first five years from 1969–1974, alongside Szwed, CUE's associate directors were Erving Goffman and Dell Hymes, two of the most important twentieth-century researchers on language in society.[8] Proposed and developed during a period of acute social tensions in the US especially concerning race and ethnicity, CUE's work from 1969–1974 was funded by a substantial grant from the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which had been procured by Szwed with the help of Goffman,[9] based on Szwed's current research on Afro-American anthropology, and particularly his advocating about racial discrimination in IQ testing.

At the end of its first grant period from 1969–1974, CUE's (1975) report on its activities provided the following overview of the project and its purpose.

> Beginning in 1969, the Center for Urban Ethnography was established at the University of Pennsylvania by a NIMH grant (MH17269: A Program for Metropolitan Cultural Studies) to John F. Szwed, Erving Goffman, and Dell Hymes. The idea behind it was that Anthropology had particular skills and insights to offer in the Social Sciences, which for reasons of historical accident and academic organization, had not yet been [sufficiently] extended to studies of American society. More specifically it was felt that the study and conceptualization of ethnic groups had suffered quite seriously from not having such an approach, and that the then current crisis surrounding the relations between Black and Whites offered a huge opportunity to thrust Anthropology into the American scene and ultimately contribute in some fashion to the lessening of the crisis... The ethnographic method offered a means for putting ethnic life in America into a fresh perspective, one that would illuminate its historical, social, and cultural features. (CUE 1975:1)

CUE's (1975) promoting of anthropology as an innovation within the urban settings of late 1960s America requires some explanation. The US already had a tradition of ethnographic research in cities, reaching back through Everett Hughes, Robert Park, and others of the 'Chicago School of Sociology' (CSS; see Bulmer 1984), where

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Goffman studied as a postgraduate from 1945–1954. Moreover, CUE's use of 'urban ethnography' may derive from Hughes, one of Goffman's teachers at the University of Chicago (Leeds-Hurwitz 2025). However, it is misleading to see CUE as a direct continuation, even though CSS ethnographies had strong influences from anthropological fieldwork practices, alongside sociological ones (see Jones & Rodgers 2016). There are two reasons why. First, CSS's formative period ran from the mid-1910s to the mid-1940s, but by the late 1960s according to CUE (1975:1) 'no graduate program in the country was training researchers to do the kind of [urban ethnographic] work we proposed'.[10] Second, despite Goffman's methodological links to the CSS, Szwed criticized CSS perspectives on race, and those criticisms became important for the funding of CUE. It is here the historical distinctiveness of Szwed and colleagues' redeployment and development of Herskovitsian Afro-American anthropology can be located.

What Szwed was proposing through CUE needs to be situated within what one of his contemporary urban ethnographers glossed as the catastrophist versus survivalist debates[11] (Hannerz 1975). These peaked in the 1960s but reached back to the 1940s and Herskovits' (1941a) book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Through and around that book, a debate developed between the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and the anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (see e.g. Herskovits 1941b:85). Frazier's position was the established one, whilst what Herskovits was arguing was not yet widely accepted in the US social sciences or society at large—the now common sense understanding of African American cultural diaspora. The 'myth' Herskovits referred to was a belief that African Americans had completely lost their African cultural heritage due to the Transatlantic slave trade and conditions of slavery. Here is Szwed's (1971/2002) summary of the two positions.

> It was Frazier's view that the African heritage of Negroes in North America had been virtually destroyed under the damaging experiences of slavery, and that the slave and his descendants came to embrace the white European's culture as a means of organizing and directing their experiences after Emancipation. Frazier further argued that a continual history of racial exclusion and discrimination combined with forced poverty (especially in northern cities) to prevent Negroes from ever fully achieving and stabilizing their newly learned culture. In other words, racism and poverty explain whatever differences exist between white and black cultural institutions and practices. Melville J. Herskovits, on the other hand, was hesitant to dismiss the African cultural heritage so quickly, particularly since he claimed to have discovered African parallels and retentions[12] in the religion, language, kinship, music, and values of Afro-Americans in various parts of the West Indies and South America. For Herskovits, many differences between white and black cultural patterns could be explained by this continuity and reinterpretation of African cultures in the New World, and he argued that much of this continuity could be explained by the very practices of white racial exclusion and segregation to which Frazier drew attention. In short, Herskovits claimed that the black man, put in a position in which he could not share fully or continuously in American culture, kept what he wanted and could from his African background and remade a new culture to work for him in the Americas. (Szwed 1971/2002:xviii)

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By the mid-1960s civil rights movements, the catastrophist position previously asserted by Frazier among many others can be seen underpinning influential social scientific research which purported to redress racial inequalities. Examples include sociological understandings of *pathologies* in Black urban communities (e.g. Frazier 1939), related anthropological work on so-called *cultures of poverty* (Lewis 1966), and educational psychology on *cultural deprivation* (e.g. Deutsch 1963) and *language deprivation* (Bereiter & Engelmann 1966). These research areas were funded by and informed US government policy, particularly as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's 'War on Poverty', the most notorious statement of which relating to race was the 'Moynihan Report' in 1965, written by the US Assistant Secretary of Labor. If this social scientific research had anti-racist intentions, it would become highly controversial exactly because of its potential for worsening racial discrimination. Indeed, around the race protests of the late 1960s, some of its main arguments[13] would become strategically appropriated by right wing politicians and white supremacists to defund compensatory education which they claimed had failed, increase forms of military policing controls, and in extreme examples promote forms of genocide (see Labov 1971/2025; Ryan 1971; Tucker 1994). It was during this period that CUE was proposed. Szwed's (1972) summary is worth recalling again.

> At the University of Chicago, [from the 1910s to the 1940s, the sociologists] Robert E. Park and E. Franklin Frazier developed what Charles Valentine (1968) has called the 'pejorative tradition': the use of social pathologists' data to describe black communities as disorganized and culturally nonadaptive... By the 1950s and 1960s such views had assumed the status of orthodoxy, and were nowhere better summarized than in Glazer and Moynihan's [1963] *Beyond the Melting Pot* [i.e. a prior work to the 1965 'Moynihan Report'], where it is said that in America the Negro 'has no values and culture to guard and protect'... The evidence is that the noncultural and deviance orientations of the social sciences toward Afro-Americans have taken hold broadly across the society, and that it is this view that is hardening as the racial stresses of the society increase. Witness the wide popularity of the notion of 'cultural deprivation' among politicians, educators, and social workers by which, in an irony cruel to anthropology, material poverty is grossly confused with ideological poverty, culture now being given a remarkably restricted definition... At root, [these arguments] suffer from a lack of [anthropological] ethnographic data on Afro-Americans and an ignorance of existing historical materials on slavery and racial contact in the American South and elsewhere, as well as a refusal to effectively use the second basic tool of cultural and social anthropology: the comparative method. Secondly, they are unabashedly ethnocentric, not only in their bias toward institutions and institutional relationships at the expense of culture, but also in their preoccupation with questions [and theoretical models] of black-white interaction, with no concern whatsoever for [actual] black-black interaction. (Szwed 1972:159–68)

Although Szwed and CUE's (1975) report affirm anthropology per se, in retrospect it seems more accurate to emphasize that as one part of a broader dynamic interdisciplinarity, both at CUE, but also especially through communication focused

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studies at the University of Pennsylvania during that period (see Leeds-Hurwitz & Sigman 2010). Besides Goffman, Hymes, and Szwed, a roster of foundational researchers in their fields worked at or were funded by CUE during the 1969–1974 NIMH grant period. Notable examples included William Labov and John Rickford (sociolinguistics), Marjorie H. Goodwin and Karl Reisman (linguistic anthropology), Gail Jefferson (sociology, conversation analysis), Dennis Tedlock (ethnopoetics), and Roger Abrahams (folklore), amongst others. Field (re)defining publications attributed to CUE included, for instance, Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis*, Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* (1972) and *Foundations in Sociolinguistics* (1974), Labov's *Language in the Inner City* (1972a) and *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972b), as well as Whitten & Szwed's (1970) *Afro-American Anthropology.*

In the CUE (1978) bibliographies of work, there are also pages of early examples of urban ethnography undertaken by current students who were drawing on those influences and supervision at Penn. These covered a wide range of topics, and though Afro-American anthropology was at the core of the CUE proposal, studies covered many other ethnicities too. Some sense of this broader picture can be envisaged through examples listed in CUE's (1975) report.

> We proposed to undertake such subjects as the allocation of material and domestic resources, social organizational and kinship patterns, institutional studies, settlement and migration patterns, responses to cultural differences between ethnic groups, political movements, language and dialects, verbal art, music and dance, social rituals, etc. [In initial studies completed by 1975], 24 researched topics concern[ed] Black Americans, 4 with Puerto-Ricans on mainland US, 1 with Cape Verdeans in Rhode Island, 1 with Mexican-Americans, 2 with Italian-Americans, 4 with Native Americans, 1 with Molokans (Russian Protestants), 2 with Greek-Americans, 2 with Jewish-Americans, 1 with French Canadian-Americans, 1 with East Indian-Americans, 1 with Poles temporarily resident in the U.S., and 11 others [among] multi-ethnic populations. (CUE 1975:2–4)

From the Center for Urban Ethnography to the ethnography of literacy

Following the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant period from 1969–1974, CUE continued to exist in name, but with a much-reduced form and focus, and new personnel. Without another grant to support the project at the scale it had been functioning previously, from the mid-1970s onwards CUE was moved into The University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education (GSE),[14] where Dell Hymes had been made dean in 1975. Whilst CUE's prior research already included 'school learning processes and problems' alongside out-of-school studies on informal learning (see e.g. Labov 1971/2025; Abrahams 1973; Hymes 1973; Berentzen 1974; Sieber 1978), educational research would now become CUE's principle reference point, through its transition into the GSE and association with Penn's 'Ethnography in Education Forum'[15] which was initiated in 1980[16] and is still ongoing.

Prior to this move into the GSE, after the NIMH grant ended in 1974 both Goffman and Szwed ceased to be directors of CUE, although Szwed was appointed Professor of Folklore and Folklife at Penn in 1976 and continued administrative duties relating

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to CUE and writing up work from the 1969–1974 grant period in subsequent years. One important example concerned Szwed's collaborations with the folklorist Roger Abrahams. Begun through fieldwork carried out in the Caribbean funded through the NIMH grant, one major area of Szwed and Abrahams' post-CUE writing continued to trace African American cultural practices outwards across diasporic contexts in the Americas and beyond (e.g. Szwed & Abrahams 1978; Abrahams & Szwed 1983). That work was extremely ambitious in its thematic scope, yet there are two foci of Szwed's research that are significant. The first is music. Szwed was a jazz musician prior to training as an anthropologist, and music is a central focus of his writing throughout his career[17] (Szwed 2005). The second is literature, and writing itself, more broadly and ethnographically conceived. Alongside his work with Abrahams in the late 1970s, Szwed was working on a book based on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to diasporic literatures, which went under the working title of the 'Creolization of Literature'.[18] Both perspectives informed an influential paper that he wrote on the ethnography of literacy, which is the last area discussed within the interview.

During the late 1970s, the National Institute of Education (NIE) funded multiple projects through The University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and elsewhere which promoted ethnography within education and community settings (e.g. Hymes 1981a, 1982; Smith 1982). This was a foundational moment in the development of ethnographic approaches to literacy.[19] Whilst working as dean of the GSE, Dell Hymes employed a new associate director of CUE during this period, an anthropologist named David M. Smith (2002). Smith had worked previously with Roger Shuy at Georgetown University (Smith & Shuy 1972), where following William Labov's (1968) lead, Shuy had been coordinating emerging work on sociolinguistic approaches to literacy and African American Vernacular English since the late 1960s, both at Georgetown and the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington DC (Baratz & Shuy 1969).

Ten years on, in the late 1970s there were several important conferences[20] that are demonstrative of how ethnographic approaches to literacy had developed as a research area. One was the 'National Institute of Education's First Conference on Writing' in June 1977, held in the Education Research and Development Laboratory in Los Alamitos, California, where 'the primary intent in conceptualizing and implementing the conference was to encourage multidisciplinary inquiry into writing' (Whiteman 1981:1). More specifically, what could be seen there became the consolidating of interconnecting anthropological (Szwed 1981), sociolinguistic (Heath 1981),[21] and sociocultural psychological (Scribner & Cole 1981) approaches to literacy, all with ethnographic fieldwork as their basis, and where 'all tie the variety in kinds of writing to the social organization of a culture, and see different types of writing as reflecting different social practices' (Whiteman 1981:1–2).[22]

Appearing on behalf of Hymes and combining Hymes' (1964, 1974) 'ethnography of communication'[23] framework with his own work-in-progress on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to writing, at this National Institute of Education conference in 1977, Szwed put forward early guidelines for doing ethnographic fieldwork on literacy. Published five years after being presented as a conference paper in 1977, it appeared as the opening chapter of the book concerning that conference (Whiteman 1981) and has been republished several times since as a 'landmark essay'

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in the field (e.g. Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, & Rose 2001). One reason may be that through Szwed's posing of broad anthropological questions to examples of reading and writing practices across spaces and times, this conference paper seems to be the first publication to introduce or explicitly use the now commonplace term 'literacies' in the plural.

> The stunning fact is that we do not fully know what literacy is. The assumption that it is simply a matter of the skills of reading and writing does not even begin to approach the fundamental problem: What are reading and writing for? ... I propose that we step back from the question of instruction, back to an even more 'basic' basic, the social meaning of literacy: that is, the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts for their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities... It should not be surprising to see differences in literacy between members of different ethnic groups, age groups, sexes, socio-economic classes, etc. ... What I would expect to discover, then, is not a single level of literacy, on a single continuum from reader to non-reader, but a variety of configurations of literacy, a plurality of literacies. (Szwed 1981:13–16)

An interview with Szwed

As the introduction has indicated, Szwed's wide ranging career is well suited to envisage such a 'plurality of literacies.' The interview excerpts which follow offer Szwed's first-hand accounts on what has been reviewed so far.

DUNCAN: What were the theoretical lineages in your work on *Afro-American Anthropology* [Whitten & Szwed 1970]? The first Association of Black Anthropologists[24] was founded from 1968–1975, around the same time as your early work on the topic. Did you work with any participants from that association?

SZWED: The Jewish-American anthropologist Melville Herskovits pioneered the area previously from the 1920s to the 1960s,[25] although there were only a few people interested within anthropology around that time. Herskovits was also a pioneer in wanting to get dance as an academic subject in the US, as well as world literature etc., and was therefore a forebearer in attempting to expand university studies and encourage cross-cultural perspectives. He taught and befriended in my opinion two of the most important Black figures of his time, the dancer and social activist Katherine Dunham and the writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston.[26] He himself studied under Franz Boas and alongside Margaret Mead [two of the founding names in US anthropology]. In my chapter in *Afro-American Anthropology,* I discussed the development of Herskovits' theories of cultural diaspora [especially Herskovits 1941a, *The Myth of the Negro Past*[27]], and how these worked in counterpoint to viewpoints that were still dominant in the American social sciences during the 1960s, that African Americans had 'lost' or been completely stripped of their African

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culture through slavery. Charting and updating Herskovits' major work from the 1940s to the present day, our *Afro-American Anthropology* book was made up of chapters written by people which we had assembled for the first American Anthropological Association [AAA] meeting that dealt with that subject. That was the 1967 'Symposium on Negroes in the New World' held at the AAA in Washington, DC. On the Association of Black Anthropologists, as far as I know they weren't really formed until after the *Afro-American Anthropology* book came out [i.e. 1970], which was based on prior studies since the mid-1960s and work before that. In fact, there were very few Black anthropologists then, mostly students.[28] In another academic book named *Black Americans* [Szwed 1970] I was invited to edit around the same time, around a third of the contributions came from Black scholars and activists in sociology, education, literature, among other areas, but none by Black anthropologists.

DUNCAN: How did your work on *Afro-American Anthropology* fit into the objectives of the Center for Urban Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania, which you founded and co-directed around the same time from 1969–1974? What was the story of how CUE got started during that period of civil rights and social movements in the US? Can you also say something concerning how and why debates about language came to feature centrally in racial politics during that moment?

SZWED: In the late 1960s, an intense period of social unrest in the US in which there were urban riots, and where political leaders and a US president were murdered, maneuvering politicians suddenly began to gear up for some kind of increased control of Black neighborhoods. They were beginning to develop plans for further arming police and possibly using the military. During this same period, there was also a sudden increased interest in Black English as an important source of educational failure, crime, and social disorder. There was a lot of political and educational controversy about language,[29] with two main bodies of opinion at opposite ends. One was the assumption that there was something wrong with this speech, some going as far as to say it was a kind of pathology, or at least a cause of poverty [e.g. Moynihan 1965; Jensen 1969]. At the other extreme, others were saying that such claims were coming from those who didn't understand the speech of Black people and failed to know how language works [e.g. Labov 1969/1973; Abrahams 1970]. Newspaper articles, school board debates, lawsuits, I found all of this bizarre, and around this time began giving talks about vernacular languages, and the dangers and bias of existing forms of tests, especially IQ testing [see Labov 1970, 1971/2025].

Once, when I was giving one of these talks at the American Psychological Association on a panel during an Advancement of Science meeting in 1968, someone who worked at the National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], came up to me afterwards, and told me that in Washington cultural and linguistic differences were being misunderstood and were being addressed in dangerous ways. My talk concerned the racial bias of IQ testing, as well as the misuse and neglect of African American cultures.

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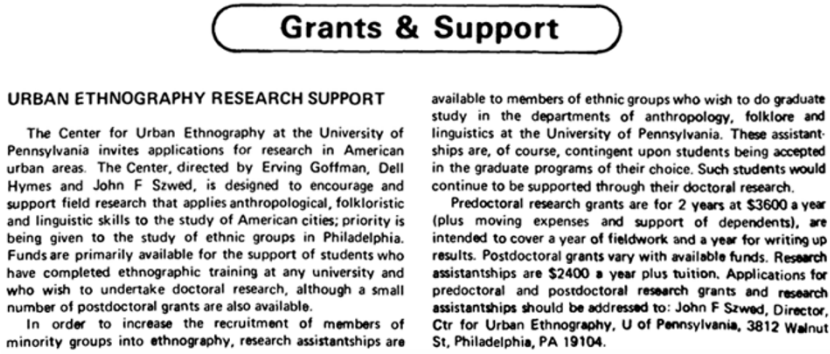
People at the NIMH were worried about this and other racism related issues, and this man from the NIMH asked me if there was any interest in these topics in the social sciences. He asked if I had the money, would I be interested in developing some kind of program that opposed cultural deficit thinking, and that could show that Black communities were far from the abnormality that was being assumed in these new government plans? I doubted that he had the ability to fund such ideas, but I talked with him again several times and told him that there were no real urban studies as such in anthropology at that time, a period in which 'urban' had come to mean a lot more than it did in the 1940s or 1950s.

I suggested that an ethnographic approach offered a means for putting Black life in America into a fresh perspective, one which would illuminate its historical, social, and cultural features. In other words, that would place it into a descriptive and analytic framework which would remove it from the categories of 'problem' or 'pathology' points of view which had made 'Black' virtually synonymous in much mainstream public discourse around that time with 'deviant', 'deprived', or 'disordered'.[30] It was not to deny problems, but to develop a comprehensive set of studies from which to see what was a problem and what wasn't, and from whose point of view. To accomplish this, I suggested that we might begin by locating scholars who were already doing such work, or those just starting to work on dissertations that might be urban and ethnographically based, as well as bring together people from different fields who could broaden our perspectives. Central to this proposal was the offer of fellowships and grants to Black students to undertake studies, since Black scholars were woefully underrepresented in the social sciences.

At that time, I was teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia, which is located in the midst of a large Black community and yet had almost no courses that addressed anything about Black people. In fact, I'd recently suggested one such course at Temple that was turned down. Much to my surprise, shortly after I found out that my proposal to the National Institute of Mental Health had been quickly accepted. In 1968 I was offered a great deal of money for five years [$950,000 then, or approximately 8,000,000 in the 2020s], with the aim of creating new directions in anthropology that would undertake research into the lives of Black people and other ethnic and immigrant groups in cities. Incredibly, the Department of Anthropology at Temple said they would not allow me to accept such a program, so I quit, left Temple with no job in sight or an institution at which to create a new research center.[31]

Erving Goffman had just arrived at the University of Pennsylvania in 1968, as one of their newly inaugurated 'University Professors', an elite set of academics whose only duties were to teach one course a year and to carry out their own work. Somehow Goffman heard about my situation and took me to a deli to discuss the possibility of bringing the grant to Penn.[32] I jumped at the chance, especially when he suggested that he and Dell Hymes could be involved with the project. Hymes was a central figure in it all.[33] It was Hymes who invited Goffman to Penn, having worked together at Berkeley previously during the early 1960s. After moving to Penn himself, Hymes originally had an appointment in anthropology from 1965, but left it after some internal conflicts, after which he moved into several other departments, including linguistics and folklore. He was coordinating all kinds of activities under the general name of the 'ethnography of communication', and around that time

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Grants & Support

URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH SUPPORT

The Center for Urban Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania invites applications for research in American urban areas. The Center, directed by Erving Goffman, Dell Hymes and John F Szwed, is designed to encourage and support field research that applies anthropological, folkloristic and linguistic skills to the study of American cities; priority is being given to the study of ethnic groups in Philadelphia. Funds are primarily available for the support of students who have completed ethnographic training at any university and who wish to undertake doctoral research, although a small number of postdoctoral grants are also available.

In order to increase the recruitment of members of minority groups into ethnography, research assistantships are available to members of ethnic groups who wish to do graduate study in the departments of anthropology, folklore and linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. These assistantships are, of course, contingent upon students being accepted in the graduate programs of their choice. Such students would continue to be supported through their doctoral research.

Predoctoral research grants are for 2 years at $3600 a year (plus moving expenses and support of dependents), are intended to cover a year of fieldwork and a year for writing up results. Postdoctoral grants vary with available funds. Research assistantships are $2400 a year plus tuition. Applications for predoctoral and postdoctoral research grants and research assistantships should be addressed to: John F Szwed, Director, Ctr for Urban Ethnography, U of Pennsylvania, 3812 Walnut St, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

Figure 1. Example of Grants & Support Adverts for CUE (*Anthropology News* 1972), Running from 1970 in *Anthropology News*.

Penn started to become filled with important people interested in communication from a number of interrelating perspectives. Besides Erving Goffman, there was Ray Birdwhistell working on kinesics,[34] slightly later on William Labov developing sociolinguistics, but also people in Penn's folklore program, and their Annenberg School for Communication.

When Goffman had first arrived at Penn, he insisted to be placed in the Department of Anthropology and not in the Department of Sociology, although he would officially be titled Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology. However, Penn's anthropology department apparently had no interest in me or the NIMH grant. So, when I started at Penn, I was given a sort of unpaid appointment in the Folklore Program. The grant would cover my salary as founder and co-director of CUE, alongside Goffman and Hymes as the other two co-directors.

The Center for Urban Ethnography was initiated in the fall of 1969, and eventually it had around fifty-five people involved in a wide range of studies,[35] including urban education, children's play, non-verbal communication, music, language, kinship and family life, the police and their relation to the community, religion, street life, and art. Scholarships were given to Black students (see, e.g. Figure 1). We sponsored meetings and lectures on many subjects, one of which was an especially successful series concerning ethnographic writing and how social life gets rendered on paper, named 'Writing Anthropology.'[36] This was around the same time as Goffman and Hymes' well known 'Conduct and Communication' book series, founded in 1969, and published via the University of Pennsylvania Press. By the end of the 1969–1974 CUE grant, we had enabled over 150 books, chapters, and articles as well as some thirty dissertations and theses,[37] including several examples that would become foundational works[38] in the fields of interactional sociology, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, and other related areas. Afterwards, I became weary of looking for financial support outside the university and wanted to do more of my own writing. Hymes, meanwhile, had become the dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and from 1975 onwards the Center for Urban Ethnography moved with him into GSE and changed direction.[39]

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I should mention that along the way we ran into a few problems at CUE, the most notable being when a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology threatened to bring charges against us to the American Anthropological Association for discrimination against White students because we were offering grants to encourage new Black graduate students. This position was reflected more generally and less dramatically through criticisms of our work at CUE on promoting Afro-American anthropology [e.g. Whitten & Szwed 1970], where opponents argued there should not be an Afro-American anthropology, per se, because anthropology already included everyone, which is exactly what I was arguing was not true. From as far as England, reviewing Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* collected volume which was funded and developed through work at CUE [Hymes 1972], the social anthropologist Edmund Leach said something like, if this is the 'new' anthropology, then the 'old' one doesn't have much to worry about, whilst another British anthropologist said that it read like a bunch of 'puritan ranters'.[40] The claims of these critics carried the same sort of arguments that were being raised against the development of women's studies and Black studies around the time, that is, where the specific concerns of these growing fields were referred to as already forming part of history, English literature, or whatever else. Another more practical problem emerged at CUE when some of the students had finished their dissertations and were looking for academic jobs. At interviews some were told that what they were doing was interesting and important work, but their departments didn't do anthropological work in cities, or some of the other interdisciplinary type projects that had been undertaken at CUE. Some of the students said that I should have warned them before, but I thought that we were creating a new and needed field, or fields, that were justified by anthropology's claim to represent all of humankind. At the students' suggestion, and as a means of addressing these concerns, I wrote 'An American Anthropological Dilemma: The Politics of Afro-American Culture' as my contribution to *Reinventing Anthropology* [Szwed 1972], as well as an op-ed piece later on for the *New York Times*, which they entitled 'Anthropology Now Turns to the City for Field Trips' [Szwed 1976a].

DUNCAN: Some of your major research and publications funded by the 1969–1974 CUE grant were collaborations with the folklorist Roger Abrahams [e.g. Abrahams & Szwed 1975, 1983; Szwed & Abrahams 1978]. That work started out with a focus on African American cultural and language practices within the US, but then expanded outwards to diasporic studies across the Americas. During that same period, you were developing research on what you referred to as the 'creolization of literature' and the 'sociolinguistics of literature'. Can you say something about these works?

SZWED: A good starting point is the introduction and opening chapters that Roger Abrahams and I wrote for our book *After Africa* [Abrahams & Szwed 1983]. Personally, I felt that was perhaps our best or most important writing. Based on our research in the Caribbean, *After Africa* was quite a unique collection for the time, bringing together historical archives and ethnographic perspectives portraying 'the encounter of Africans and Europeans in the New World, in order to explore what was and is distinctly Afro-American in the cultures of the Americas'. However, the

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> historical and ethnographic research that Roger and I did together during that period was most fully published in 1978 by the American Folklore Society, as the two-volume set: *Afro-American Folk Culture: An Annotated Bibliography of Material from North, Central, and South America, and the West Indies*. That was a major piece of work done through the 1969–1974 CUE grant. Major in the sense that we were covering North and South America and the Caribbean, that it took a lot of time and work, and it's the only thing I know of like it, even after all these years. The cover notes suggest something of its breadth in documentation, ranging from, for instance, 'early jazz to religious tracts to Creole French poetry', and much more besides.

Regarding my work on the 'creolization of literature', I was working on another book on that topic during the same period. But although I presented some papers [e.g. Szwed 1976b] and taught some related seminars on the 'sociolinguistics of literature', that book ultimately remained unfinished and unpublished, because its scope became so large that it became unmanageable for me. Prior to that, Roger Abrahams and I had been influenced by Dell Hymes and others' early sociolinguistic and anthropological work on creole languages [e.g. Hymes 1971]. But we took it much further and ended up knowing a lot about a wide range of creole cultural practices in the Americas [Szwed & Abrahms 1978; Abrahams 1983; Szwed 2003]. However, there was one other participant who worked at CUE named Karl Reisman, who was far more advanced on creolization than either Roger or I [see e.g. Reisman 1970]. Karl and Roger were both Summer Fellows at CUE. Besides his more traditional anthropological linguistic research on creole practices in the West Indies, Reisman and I also developed another more literary focused research project together on James Joyce's use of creole and pidgin languages, as well as Black and African cultural references within Joyce's (1939) experimental novel *Finnegans Wake*. We both gave talks on it, but I believe only one article by Reisman was ever published on the topic [Reisman 2007], although there was a lot of other unpublished work.[41] Whilst my own book entitled the 'Creolization of Literature' ultimately remained unpublished too, I wrote one broadly aimed article on creolization titled 'Metaphors of Incommensurability' [Szwed 2003].[42]

When I was looking into the history of English as a process of creolization, as well as researching the history and development of creole literatures around the world more broadly, one interesting point that I found was that much of the earliest forms of literature in various societies seemed to be what we would now call experimental. Some of the first poems published in places like Guyana and the Philippines had alternating rhyming lines in different languages, with one of them being a local creole. One of the first written pieces of literature in South Africa was a satirical play using both 'Afrikaansized English' and Dutch, written by English speaking authors (including Andrew Geddes Bain and potentially three others), named *Kaatje Kekkelbek, or Life Among the Hottentots*[43] [1838–1846]. I found that among the first novels from Australia, Tom Collins' *Such is Life* [1897–1903][44] had distinctive uses of blank spaces in it. In the front of the book, the author explains that since they are not allowed to write certain things that commonly appear in Australian talk, he had censored himself by leaving these spaces for the reader to fill in. Sometimes

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these early writings were written by outsiders in a language new to them, such as Henry G. Murray's *Brown Sammy Finds a Wife and Finds Trouble, Or "Married Hab Teet"* [Kingston, Jamaica, 1876]. Another example from colonial contexts were translations of Shakespeare into 'pidgin English', where changes in the original could turn the serious into something comedic, often with an implicit critical commentary. Creoles have enormous creative possibilities. But even after a standard form of writing in a newly adopted language had developed, some writers still retreated to an earlier form of 'new' English. One such example from India is G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948, 1951, 1970, all three editions are different), which is written in a seeming chaos of different kinds of Indian English.[45]

Connecting back to the US, it is worth recalling how anthropology and linguistics grew up alongside each other in the early twentieth century, and how these disciplines studied and learned Native American languages since many were disappearing.[46] One thing learned from that work was despite prior talk of 'primitive', 'preliterate', and 'traditional' peoples, there were really no primitive languages. All peoples had created languages with complex grammars and vocabularies that were necessary to their own understanding of the world and their survival. There was also literature everywhere, whether written or not, creole, pidgin, vernacular, whatever, and this helped me to see that there was no one literacy, but a multitude of literacies.

DUNCAN: Although written earlier in the 1970s, your 'Ethnography of Literacy' article was first published in *Variation in Writing: Functional and Linguistic-Cultural Differences* [Whiteman 1981]. That conference paper appeared as one of the first guides on how to approach everyday writing and reading ethnographically. How did you as an anthropologist, folklorist, and ethnomusicologist come to participate in that publication?

SZWED: Sometime around the mid to late 1970s, around the time I was working on creolization literatures,[47] there was a conference[48] on literacy going on in California where Dell Hymes was to give one of the main talks, but he had to do something else at the last second and couldn't go, so he asked me if I wanted to give a talk instead. I think another reason he thought of me was because I had written a paper that he appreciated called 'Notes Toward Creating a Field Guide to the Study of Music Use' for a 1972 special issue of the *Texas Working Papers in Sociolinguistics*, where I adopted and adapted his ethnography of communication approach, among other sources. There was a lot known about learning and use of music in particular cultures, but people were not looking at the range of them cross-culturally. Since music is a cultural universal, like language, I thought it should be explored more by anthropology. Social theorists such as Rousseau and Herbert Spencer had used music as a means of explaining the evolution of language, and linguists such as Nicolas Ruwet found music useful as a metaphor in their analyses of languages. During my time at Penn, I also worked with the folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, as an advisor in his 'cantometrics' research. Lomax had done something similar to Hymes' [e.g. 1981b] 'ethnopoetic' analyses of Native American Indian songs, where Hymes had become interested in the structure of those verses, but also how they were being heard and understood

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> by Indians. Lomax's cantometrics[49] [Lomax & Trager 1962] was developed as a system for measuring and modelling forms of vocal performances within and across cultures. Brought together with broader anthropological data, song features became researched as a measure of a culture, or certain cultural practices [see Cohen 2003]. Lomax was also working on something he called the Global Jukebox.[50] It was never completed in his lifetime. His intention was to chart the entire world's languages and music and make them available to the public. The idea was that you could pick one spot on the globe and hear examples of their speech and music, and differences and similarities to others.

Returning to literacy, in the 1970s, there were still relatively few cross-cultural studies of language learning and use, although Hymes and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Berkeley, and some other places, had been starting to develop them increasingly from the mid to late 1960s, including one notable collection published in 1972 [Cazden, John, & Hymes 1972], the same year as my paper on ethnographic approaches to music [Szwed 1972]. So, a few years later [circa 1976–1977], at Hymes's request, in my 'Ethnography of Literacy' paper I was trying to point towards some new directions about how such studies on literacy might be done. Hymes and I had had some talks recently about what we thought were problems with the few studies of literacy in anthropology at that time, including those of Jack Goody [e.g. Goody & Watt 1963; Goody 1968], as well as about related work by the popular media theorist and celebrity Marshall McLuhan, with whom we had some serious disagreements [see Hymes 1967; McLuhan 1967].

Shortly before I left for California, Dan Rose, an anthropologist who had studied at the Center for Urban Ethnography and was doing some research in the Brandywine Valley in Chester County near Philadelphia, dropped by my office to talk about his work [e.g. Rose 1989]. Brandywine is a place with a lot of wealthy people with beautiful homes and gardens, and museums and art galleries that appealed to tourists. Their tourist center had printed a lot of booklets that were left in hotels, bus, train stations, and the like. Rose picked up some of them for something he was doing, and he said to me, 'If you look at these maps, they all point westward from Brandywine, with no sign of Philadelphia, just a few miles to the east. They're trying to keep people from going to Philadelphia'. His point was that they wanted to downplay the city when it was experiencing a period of racial tensions, and they were only pointing to Brandywine with the map. We talked a little bit about this, and he showed up again one day with a big pile of these little pamphlets, on different subjects, and said 'there's an entire literature like this'. So, we started going through all of them, and it occurred to me that reading them required a certain kind of literacy. We continued to have discussions about everything from how to read baseball scores, a stock market report, a newspaper, and other forms of widely spread reading material. I had been Edgar Dale's[51] assistant at Ohio State University previously and knew a bit about the research on readability [e.g. Dale & Chall 1949]. I then started to look for more of these found literatures and went off to the conference in California to use them as examples to talk about what we knew and didn't know about what I felt might be best called 'literacies', by which I meant, in an initial sense, at least, as different socialized forms of reading. I had no answers exactly, but I think I was just asking rather

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simple questions about what we knew about reading, and maybe wondering if there could be another way to approach it, a way that might be called the 'social meaning of literacy'.

In a way, what my music and literacy papers were about was comparative studies. And what I was doing in that literacy paper was just asking what I thought were common sense questions that I didn't know the answer to, that I thought were important to know, particularly when people were prescribing behaviour to other people. I recall that William Labov gave a talk at the Graduate School of Education [University of Pennsylvania] once in which he gave as an example Black students who were tested as reading at a fourth-grade level, but when they were given *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* [X 1965] to read, they not only read it, but had perceptive things to say about it during classroom discussions. The teachers who had assigned it were struck by this, and started asking why they were at the fourth-grade level. Some said this was because they had picked something that they were really interested in, and that they wanted to read or talk about [see Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968]. But isn't that what most people chiefly read for, what they are really interested in? Was it that the reading level tests were only showing what they weren't interested in? So, you see what I meant by common sense. Maybe I could put it the other way, there is a kind of uncommon sense that has made life difficult for some, when it was testing only a narrow range of literacy.

Notes

1. Jamie Duncan conducted interviews with John Szwed from 2021–2024. Interview extracts appearing within this article were compiled and edited by Duncan. The author expresses his gratitude for Szwed's generosity in sharing such breadth of knowledge. The author also thanks Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, who kindly provided archival sources and support. Leeds-Hurwitz served as research assistant to the Center for Urban Ethnography under Szwed's supervision from 1978–1979 and has written extensively on related topics.

2. Szwed's CV and bibliography are available at https://johnszwed.com/

3. Hannerz (1975:5) summarizes Afro-American urban ethnography in the 1960s as 'studies of black life carried out in northern ghettos, by researchers who might be either anthropologists or sociologists in terms of professional identification but who went about their work in a way which tends to be regarded as typically anthropological: i.e., as participant observers in which researchers get directly involved in ongoing everyday events in the ghetto community and thereby achieve a reasonably well-rounded picture of its way of life'. Like Szwed, he argues, '[beforehand], a close-up view of black life ha[d] not in fact been achieved with any great regularity. Much of what ha[d] passed for knowledge about black life ha[d] been arrived at by way of studies from a distance' (1975:5).

4. 'Major' in the number of studies and funding received during CUE's timeframe, principally 1969–1974.

5. Whitten & Szwed (1970:18) define *Afro-American* as 'two presently interrelated, but fundamentally independent constructs. First, it refers to carriers of culture—a cultural stream of elements, complexes, and themes characteristic of Africa south of the Sahara that seem to persist in the New World, regardless of the carriers... [Second, as] an important identity referent of black aggregates within societies where "non-whiteness" is an important criterion for categorical social relationships which differentiate (i.e., segregate) people on the basis of observable, or imputed, ethnicity'. *Anthropology* is glossed as researchers who 'traditionally gather their own data through intensive participation in the lifeways of a people chosen for investigation, and analyze these data in the broadest possible perspective of space and time' (1970:17). Afro-American anthropology was not a specifically Black anthropology. For a history of Black anthropology, see Harrison & Harrison (1999) and Harrison, Johnson-Simon, & Williams (2018).

6. Herskovits was one of the founders of Afro-American anthropology (AAA) in the US (see Gershenhorn 2004, 2017), but there was related work across other fields previously and concurrently. As one example, it

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is important to note how what Herskovits was proposing via AAA differed from literary and artistic modernism. In short, modernists in the arts drew inspiration from and appropriated African aesthetic forms in their work, frequently via romantic and primitivist perspectives, but also to positively redefine African American arts as part of anti-racist politics (e.g. the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Movement). Differently, through anthropological and ethnohistorical methods, Herskovits' traced what he called long term 'cultural survivals' and 'retentions', which were said to be identifiable in African American everyday practices, familial and community structures, religious and secular rituals, etc., having been recontextualised into the Americas via the African diaspora. In this sense of cultural adaptation, Herskovits was largely responsible for developing anthropological theories of *syncretism*, where, for instance, African derived forms blended with broader ranges of cultural practices co-existed with in the Americas, leading to distinctive American lifeways. As a white Jewish immigrant to the US, Herskovits' racial politics have been critically examined by Gershenhorn (2004).

7. 'Ethnography of Literacy' was first used by the British social anthropologist, Jack Goody (1968:4), who argued for the need to 'analyse in detail the uses made of writing in a particular social setting [and] to approach the question from the standpoint not so much of the library scholar but of the field worker with experience of the concrete context of written communication'. But that argument was also implicit to Dell Hymes' concurrent work in the US developing the 'ethnography of communication' (e.g. Hymes 1964). Basso (1974) and Philips (1975) were the first papers through that EOC lineage to focus on literacy explicitly. Basso (1974) offers an introduction to the 'ethnography of writing'. Philips (1975) offers fieldwork observations on 'literacy as a mode of communication' in Warm Springs Indigenous Reservation.

8. *Language in Society* journal was founded in 1972 during the CUE period. Hymes was editor and Goffman co-editor.

9. Correspondence between Szwed and Goffman is in Leeds-Hurwitz (2025).

10. In the 1960s, urban ethnographic research was being carried out in other places, for example via the 'Urban Language Program' at the Center for Applied Linguistics (Hannerz 1975), and by individual researchers (Valentine 1968) and teams (Labov et al. 1968). But no other major research center specialized in that approach concurrent to CUE's 1969–1974 work.

11. Hannerz (1975) proposes a dialectical analysis of both positions. But during the 1960s, the Afro-American anthropology emphasis upon the 'survivalist' served as a strategic counterpoint to predominance of the 'catastrophist'.

12. Cf. note 6.

13. Conservative media on the riots cited Moynihan's findings, for instance, that 'the family structure of lower-class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown' (Moynihan 1965:5).

14. The exact date of CUE's move into the GSE is not certain from the records, but from 1975–1980. Nor is the date David Smith becomes CUE's associate director (1980 in official records, 1976 in some other sources). See Leeds-Hurwitz (2025) on the ambiguous status of CUE at Penn post-1974.

15. See https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-1-issue-2-fall-2002/introduction-dr-nancy-h-hornberger-guest-editor.

16. See https://www.gse.upenn.edu/our-expertise/ethnography-education-research-forum.

17. From the 1990s, Szwed transitioned from anthropology to biography, focusing on jazz musicians and folklorists (e.g. Szwed 1997, 2011).

18. From 1977–1978 Szwed went on sabbatical to write his book on the 'Creolization of Literature', which remained unfinished. 1977 was also the year he presented his conference paper on the 'Ethnography of Literacy' in California. In 1979, Szwed lectured on the 'Creolization of Literature' at the GSE's second 'Language in Education Colloquium'. In 1980, Szwed received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars for College Teachers to teach a course on 'Sociolinguistics and Literature'. In 1982, Szwed lectured at the GSE on the 'Historical and Ethnological Meaning of Literacy'. This trajectory suggests how Szwed's broader work on the creolization of literature overlapped with his more minor presentations on literacy.

19. Another foundational moment for ethnography of literacy was the mid to late 1960s (see Labov et al. 1968; Baratz & Shuy 1969; Cazden, John, & Hymes 1972).

20. Another important conference was the GSE's first 'Colloquium on Ethnography and Education' in 1978, published as a book by Gilmore & Glatthorn (1982). According to that source, that colloquium established Penn's 'Ethnography in Education Research Forum'. Perry Gilmore recollects her experience of that process and period: https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-1-issue-2-fall-2002/

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introduction-dr-nancy-h-hornberger-guest-editor. See also https://www.gse.upenn.edu/our-expertise/ethnography-education-research-forum.

21. Shirley Brice Heath worked at Penn during the late 1970s. She wrote arguably the first classic monograph demonstrating the ethnography of literacy (Heath 1983).

22. This is the basic framework of what later gets called the New Literacy Studies (Gee 2015).

23. Leeds-Hurwitz (1984) clarifies Hymes' development of 'ethnography of communication', out of, and overlapping with 'ethnography of speaking'.

24. See Harrison (1987) for the history of the Association of Black Anthropologists. Harrison cites Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* volume, where Szwed makes the main contribution on Afro-American anthropology.

25. Cf. note 6.

26. Both Dunham and Hurston were trained as anthropologists but worked professionally in other fields (see Harrison & Harrison 1999).

27. Whitten & Szwed (1970:23) argue Herskovits' (1941) *The Myth of the Negro Past* was 'the first major publication about Afro-America by an American anthropologist'.

28. See Harrison, Johnson-Simon, & Williams (2018) for a fuller picture of Black anthropologists during the late 1960s.

29. See Duncan (2025) on Black Vernacular English debates in the 1960s.

30. See Duncan (2025) on the development of cultural deprivation theory.

31. Szwed may be using poetic license here. Leeds-Hurwitz (2025) includes correspondences between Szwed, Goffman, and Hymes planning for CUE at Penn whilst the proposal was being written, and therefore probably before Szwed left Temple.

32. Goffman assisted Szwed with the proposal (Leeds-Hurwitz 2025).

33. Szwed had wanted to work with Hymes since the mid-1960s, when he applied for Hymes to be his post-doctoral supervisor (Leeds-Hurwitz 2025).

34. Birdwhistell's (1970) work on 'kinesics', or human body motion and senses in communication, forbears work on multimodality theory, multiliteracies, and related perspectives.

35. CUE (1975:2) states '55 people associated with the Center for Urban Ethnography had interests in ethnicity', so there were probably more than fifty-five people in total working at CUE.

36. Leeds-Hurwitz (2025) lists other meetings realized through CUE.

37. The 1975 CUE report states: 'to date this research has produced 23 completed dissertations (with 9 others in progress), 63 papers or chapters in books published or in press; 24 books or monographs; nearly 100 papers delivered at conferences, meetings, etc.' (4).

38. See https://www.pennpress.org/search-result/?series=conduct-and-communication.

39. Cf., note 14.

40. Although Szwed refers to criticisms of *Reinventing Anthropology* (Hymes 1972), Leeds-Hurwitz recalls when she got to Penn as a graduate student in 1975, 'everyone was reading it and talking about it and we took it for a classic' (personal correspondence).

41. Reisman's unpublished work is available from https://independent.academia.edu/KarlReisman.

42. Szwed (2003:9) summarizes '*creolization* as a creative cultural process following the meeting of unrelated cultures [as] a centuries-old folk concept, [albeit] one developed and fought over primarily in the arena of African and European contact in the Americas'. He argues 'we benefit from a creolist view of society that rejects monolithic visions (even those that are pluralistic) of society as a sacred, political entity whose principal product is nationality, in favor of a notion of peoples in potentially equal, differing cultures, developing distinct ways of being and doing from ancestral sources, but also exchanging and sharing with each other and developing new forms, meanings, and interpretations' (2003:17).

43. See Upham (2020) for the original text and commentary.

44. Tom Collins is a pseudonym of the Australian author Joseph Furphy.

45. Salman Rushdie called this novel 'the first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language' (Rushdie & West 1997:xviii).

46. Leeds-Hurwitz notes 'this was sometimes called "salvage linguistics" and part of "salvage ethnography", saving what's about to disappear' (personal correspondence).

47. See note 16.

48. National Institute of Education's First Conference on Writing, in June 1977, Education Research and Development Laboratory, Los Alamitos, California.

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49. Working with anthropologists (including Ray Birdwhistell), Lomax initially developed a system of analysis named *phonotactics* for 'contrasting song, speech, and movement "performances"' (Cohen 2003:233–34). He later developed this via work on *cantometrics*. In 1962, Lomax argued 'ethnomusicology should turn aside, for a time, from the study of music in purely musical terms to a study of music in context, as a form of human behavior' (in Cohen 2003:135).
50. Lomax's Global Jukebox is now online; see https://www.culturalequity.org/resources/gjb.
51. See https://research.osu.edu/edgar-dale.

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