

From the iconic ghetto to the cosmopolitan and beyond

An interview with Elijah Anderson

Abstract

This interview with Elijah Anderson has been recorded in Trento (Italy) on July 8, 2016; it has been conducted in an informal setting by Chiara Bassetti and Andrea Mubi Brighenti for *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*. The interview deals with Anderson's approach to ethnography and fieldwork, his research achievements and current projects, as well as his general views on North-American contemporary society.

Keywords: ethnography, fieldwork, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*, Afro-Americans

Elijah Anderson is William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Sociology at Yale University, and one of the most important contemporary urban ethnographers. This interview has been recorded in Trento (Italy) on July 8, 2016, after a seminar given by Prof. Anderson at the Department of Sociology and Social Research. The interview has been conducted in an informal setting by Chiara Bassetti and Andrea Mubi Brighenti for ERQ.

ERQ: *After all these years, after all these books, what is ethnography for you? Why does it matter?*

EA: *My books – A Place on the Corner: A Study of Black Street Corner Men; Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community; Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City; and most recently, The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life – constitute a body of*

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ethnographic work on the American city, and, as such, it represents a sociology of urban race relations in the United States.

I think it was David Reisman who once said, «Good sociology is like a conversation between classes», and I think of my work as being a part of that conversation. For me, ethnography is the systematic study of culture, and I think of «culture» as «a set of shared understandings» of a particular group or community of people. People develop these understandings, or «local knowledge», as the late Clifford Geertz put it, as they go about meeting the demands of everyday life. The ethnographer's challenge is to apprehend these understandings, and then to describe or represent them as truthfully as possible. Thus, when done well, ethnographic work provides an important version of a group's way of life, including its norms, values, social rules, and orientations, and how these are understood. The underlying power dynamics within the group or community can also be uncovered, and then considered.

As ethnographers, we're concerned with what people say and what they do together, particularly the way these behaviors contribute to a group's social organization. We want to know the workings of the social order, as well as how the people make sense of it all. Thus, a primary goal is to render the setting and its people, and not to make them look good or bad, but to describe their local culture as accurately as possible. To accomplish this, we must become familiar with the people and the lives they lead; thus, we engage in fieldwork.

ERQ: You are a great collector of stories: in your books, there are so many human stories... How is the listening part of the job for you? What type of relationships do you develop with the people you are interacting with?

EA: As an ethnographer, it is very important to listen to what people say and to watch what they do – but then to try to represent this behaviour, to make sense of these observations. My «stories» are essentially field notes that are based on social observation. Ethnographic work involves being something of a professional stranger on a mission to learn the way of life of the people one is studying. While engaging in this kind of «participant observation», we place our bodies in the setting, an action that allows us a chance to get close enough to our subjects to listen to their stories.

At the beginning of a project, the ethnographer typically tries to «get in» with the people, to establish a trusting role with them and to learn about their setting. My «stories» are essentially field notes, or small accounts of this process, that are based on what I see and what I hear.

ERQ: When you are in the field, you can spot the general social categories at play, but also interact directly as an individual with other individuals...

EA: In the field, we look for and try to become familiar with the folk concepts and folk categories the people themselves generate and use to make sense of their everyday lives in their social arena, or on their stage. These observations

can be quite telling of the social lives the people themselves lead in ways that can reveal how they think about their counterparts in the setting.

ERQ: With respect to your position in the social world, your place and the use that you make of your own position in the world, I wonder what is the most relevant part. Is it only the reflexive part – the detachment phase, so to speak, when you think, when you don't take stuff for granted and so on – or also when you are in the field? Is there something you do in the field, more actively in a way that leverage somehow your social position? I'm thinking about experimenting, using your own social characteristics in the field to stimulate, to see reactions, and so on.

EA: I am a curious person, and when I'm in the field, I grapple with my own identity in the setting, considering how it might shape my interactions with people and my interpretation of their interactions. It is important to understand oneself, or what one brings to the setting, or what we might take for granted. It is perhaps most important to have an understanding of what one means to the people themselves. The point of view that comes from one's personal experience can work to either impede or facilitate one's understanding of the social world one is observing, and this is an issue we ought to acknowledge. As humans, we take certain things for granted, or we carry a degree of «social baggage» related to the accumulated social experience that comes from just living our own lives. This baggage may become a critical part of what we take for granted, providing us with pre-suppositional frames, or a lens through which we perceive the social world of our subjects. As such, these frames may impede or facilitate our understanding. Either way, it is important to be aware of the impact these factors may have on our perceptions, and ultimately, our work.

ERQ: You describe yourself as a listener. Is it possible to be a non-ideological listener?

EA: This is hard to accomplish, for as I indicated, we all hold with certain presuppositions or working conceptions of the world, and we need to be aware of them. We must take care not to confuse these conceptions with the observations we make of people we study. Otherwise, our «observations» may say more about us than they do about the people we set out to know. Also, as ethnographers, we may not set out to serve any particular political view, liberal or conservative. But sometimes, without knowing or caring, inadvertently, political ideology can cloud our observations. As my old teacher, Howard S. Becker, used to say, whether we acknowledge it or not, often we do in fact choose sides. And we need to be cautious about the likelihood of this.

Furthermore, our ethnographic representations may upset both liberals and conservatives – the liberals might think our account is too conservative, and conservatives might think that it is too liberal. The primary concern is the apprehension of the way of life of our subjects and the accurate rendering of their cultural life. Such representations may raise more questions than answers;

the questions are often more important than the answers. A working conception of the world, or an ideology, is always a part of our mental life, and as ethnographers, it is important to place in perspective what we take for granted.

ERQ: This brings us to the question about the readership. Who reads ethnography and ethnographic books?

EA: We typically write for other sociologists, but the literate public is becoming increasingly interested in reading the work of ethnographers, especially when it offers a timely discussion of critical social issues and is well-written, in a lively and compelling style. The cultural truths such work produces and conveys can be extremely informative for everyone, from the most systematic social scientists to politicians and activists. Often, ethnographers are able to tell important truths about the lives of ordinary people. In today's social and political climate, unfortunately, too many potential readers may have their minds already made up about particular groups. When this is so, the ethnographer may need to deal with a «politics of representation» – or the question of who has the right to say what about whom, and then to have one's findings considered credible.

ERQ: In your field notes, the examples, the descriptions are very vivid and powerful. The reader might feel embarrassed because the description is not so politically correct. Could we say that your descriptions probably reach a larger readership precisely because you don't just try to please the reader?

EA: Perhaps. In my work, political correctness has very low priority. I think of myself as a sort of «truth teller», as someone who tries hard to represent the social life of my subjects truthfully, or as accurately as possible, even when such representations may be deeply disturbing to some – a principle to which I have always been committed. A major strength of ethnography is its inherent subjectivity. Like everyone, the ethnographer is a person with a point of view that is shaped by his or her own biography. In fact, some of the ethnographer's most provocative insights may be related to his or her own biography. The ethnographer's point of view, as I have indicated, may be afforded by this biography, and particularly the ability to know and to ask certain pertinent questions.

ERQ: Is your theory of the iconic ghetto related to your own biography?

EA: Here you're referring to a concept that I introduced in my most recent study, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. In this work, I argue that for many Philadelphians, «the iconic ghetto» is that part of the city «where the black people live». That area is often stereotyped not only as a «black space» but also as a place of destitution, crime, and violence, a space that reinforces a stereotype of blacks as a lowly and desperate people. Because those of the larger society often associate anonymous black people with this space, blacks tend to move about, especially when they navigate the larger society,

with what I have called a «deficit of credibility» that at times sets the stage for their negative treatment at the hands of others – prospective employers and the police, in particular. This prejudice is rooted in the institution of slavery and to the vicious white supremacy and racism of that time.

My own ancestry is related to slavery and the Jim Crow segregation that followed. As an ethnographer and as a black man, I am sensitive to the prejudice and discrimination black people typically experience in everyday life in the United States, and these experiences certainly relate to my sociology. My life began at what is often viewed as the symbolic bottom of American society – I was born in the rural South on a former plantation – and I now operate and live my life at what is considered the symbolic top of society. Long ago, I became interested in racial inequality. As a child, I was awakened to this issue when I first realized the extant perceptual categories of black and white, and the relative value society placed on each. In navigating the American social stratification system, I have been able to obtain a unique perspective.

As black people make their way through life in America, they carry the mark or symbol of the urban ghetto, even when they have never lived there before; others make sense of them with these stereotypes and readily associate anonymous blacks with the urban ghetto, especially when they have little else to go on. Throughout the United States, particularly when present in segregated white spaces, the anonymous black person may experience a deficit of credibility regardless of the social class position he or she in fact occupies. As Everett C. Hughes once wrote, in our society, blackness is a powerful master status-determining characteristic.

Thus, my interest in racial inequality is related to my own biography, and this subject has been an enduring theme in my ethnographic work. At some point in their lives, all black Americans are required to confront the issue of race. It is a critical feature of American life. In my book *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* and my most recent essay, «The White Space», I represent how race works in everyday life.

My own biography is certainly relevant to my understanding of this subject matter. My parents were among the great numbers of Southern share croppers who eventually migrated to the North, in my family's case to South Bend, Indiana, an industrial area about ninety miles to the east of the city of Chicago. My family settled there in a community of black people, many of them former residents of the South. My father obtained a job in the local Studebaker automobile factory; my uncles worked there as well. My father made decent money, but his work was in the foundry, which was hard, dirty, and dangerous. Although my father had a limited formal education, his wages at the time compared favorably with those of educated people, black and white alike. Today, in the United States, income inequality has increased drastically. A huge wage gap now exists between the college educated and the uneducated.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, which culminated in the riots of the 1960s, a major «racial incorporation» process has taken place, resulting in the largest black middle class in American history. Black people are now represented throughout society, but far too often blacks are marginalized and treated

as tokens. To the extent that «black» people are distinguished as black, they contend with the effects of the iconic ghetto and the symbolic racism this icon produces. As they navigate the larger society, individual black people typically encounter prejudice, implicit bias, and racial discrimination, which exacerbate the country's racial divide.

ERQ: Is this related to your current ethnographic project?

EA: My current project builds on the body of ethnographic work that I've been developing over many years, and particularly, my most recent study, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*.

ERQ: The places you list in The Cosmopolitan Canopy, such as malls, train stations, markets, etc. – in short, cosmopolitan places – seem to be related to consumption. In those rare bubbles in which we behave similarly, are we mostly there as consumers?

EA: *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* is not solely about places related to consumption. As a concept, the cosmopolitan canopy refers to an urban island of diverse civility in a virtual sea of racial, ethnic, and class segregation, a common situation in most American cities. The canopy is a setting of cultural convergence, and in this respect, it can be an edifying institution. As a construct, it serves as a metaphor for civil society, in which egalitarian and democratic values are typically expressed, promulgated, and at times debated, through the course of everyday social interaction.

The modern workplace, the café, the restaurant, the Metro, and the public square all can be viewed as examples of such canopies in action. The predominant norms of the cosmopolitan canopy encourage all to publicly display a cosmopolitan orientation and to constrain their more ethnocentric impulses. Most people comply, at least superficially, by showing good manners and being polite, or by displaying «social gloss». But there are circumstances in which this gloss erodes, at times, revealing an ethnocentric person's true proclivities. When this happens, those who are most marginal to the setting, particularly black people, can experience moments of «acute disrespect», or what many blacks refer to as «nigger moments», which tell them they are unwelcome here, or that they simply «don't belong». Such attitudes and their occasional expression are a persistent source of social tension that at times rend the canopy, signaling its breakdown or even its collapse. But most often, given its implicit political correctness manifested in social gloss, the established canopy may become ever more resilient as it awaits its next social challenge. The cosmopolitan settings that I wrote about are similar to this space [the interview was recorded at a café in a public square in Trento, Italy], a place where you and I can meet, where people are civil and generally on «good behavior», showing respect for others who respect them as human beings.

ERQ: Do you think that for the newer black generations things will change?

EA: Things are always changing – the real question is in which direction, and how soon. In America today, the black community can be divided into «haves» and «have nots». Such a division must be viewed in the context of a changing society, to be sure. Currently, the U.S. economy is changing from one based on manufacturing to one based increasingly on service and high technology. These changes are occurring in the context of an increasingly globalized economy in which corporations send their jobs away from urban centers, where many black people are concentrated. These jobs go to non-metropolitan America or to the suburbs. Or they go to Mexico, China, India, and to various developing countries around the world, where they can be performed at a fraction of the cost of what they could be performed for in the United States. There is a sense in which the poorest Americans are effectively competing with poor people all around the world. Hence, the American standard of living declines, for it makes little economic sense for these jobs to return.

In this context, great numbers of Americans become structurally impoverished, failing to make an effective adjustment to this transition. To do so, they require marketable skills, or human capital, that they can trade in the existing workplace. Moreover, the jobs at the lowest levels of the service economy fail to pay people enough money to live. To survive or to do well, one needs human capital, including education and marketable skills. Consequently, working-class people living in the US today often require two, or sometimes three, jobs to make a decent living. But one also needs social capital, or a workplace that is receptive – and this is one requirement that many black people lack. This is especially the case for young black men, people who most others strongly associate with the iconic ghetto. They become victimized by symbolic racism, and the job market resists them. For many of these young black people, especially men, the underground economy awaits, but so do the police, incarceration, violence, and, too often, an early death. Many politicians ignore or have become unconcerned with the plight of the urban poor, or when they make promises, they fail to deliver on them, and there are few political consequences. For people with the adequate human capital, life can be good, but for those at the very bottom of the class and racial order, with limited human and social capital, there is little or no hope that much will change for the better in the foreseeable future.

