"Ethnographic Videoconferencing,"
a talk (via videoconference) by Dr Eric Miller on 12th Oct 2023,
in the 2023 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society

Hello! It is an honour to be presenting at the annual AFS conference! My first AFS conference was in 1999, 24 years ago. In that conference I delivered a paper titled "Videoconferencing for Folklorists." And I mentioned Ethnographic Videoconferencing. In 1999! I believe I have coined the phrase, "Ethnographic Videoconferencing."

The theme of this year's conference is "Roots, Rootlessness, and Uprooting." So I thought I might say a few words about this theme before launching into my topic.

I believe that sometimes as folklore scholars we can help community members to get further in touch with their roots – in touch with their communities' traditions and histories, and with members of their communities. Just through our attention and support we can help community members to develop, and to become increasingly aware of, their roots.

In addition, it seems to me that community and rootedness occur especially through the *process* of communication. When people interact with each other, they are together. There's the expression, "Home is where the heart is." But I would also say, home is where one's loved ones are. And home is where one can talk with one's loved ones, where one can be with one's loved ones (even if not physically). I would say that the process and experience of relationship is a big part of home-ness and rootedness.

A word about a word. In Folklore Studies, we love the word, fieldwork. But there has been some protest about this word recently. To some people, the word raises the memory of slavery, and of how some slaves were assigned to do housework and some were assigned to do fieldwork. Thus, for some people fieldwork is a disturbing term. So at least for this session today, instead of saying fieldwork, I'm going to say "physically-present research", or "physically-present interpersonal ethnographic research" – with, of course, "participant observation." But for short, "physically-present research."

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Three of the points of this talk are:
1) Ethnographic photography, film, video, and videoconferencing is a continuum.
2) A definition of ethnographic videoconferencing is given.
3) Ethnographic videoconferencing empowers the videoconference participants whose culture is being studied.

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My first point is that photography evolved into film and video, which in turn has evolved into videoconferencing. And thus that ethnographic photography evolved into ethnographic film and video, and now ethnographic videoconferencing. Of course, when evolutions occur, the original ways often continue (as in this case), but they are often done with awareness of the subsequent developments, which provide new points of reference.

The evolution of which I am speaking, in visual terms, is, first, from still-images to moving images that have been recorded. That's what happens in film and video. And then finally, in videoconferencing, the moving images are interacting with each other because these images are representing living people almost instantaneously. So I ask you to keep in mind this evolution from still images, to recordings of moving images, to images that are interacting with each other in a live event (which can also be recorded).

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My second point is that I'm going to define ethnographic videoconferencing by giving a number of conditions and by positing that a videoconference becomes increasingly ethnographic to the degree that these conditions are satisfied. The conditions are:

1) All participants agree that a primary purpose of the event is the presentation of and discussion about aspects of a community's culture.

2) The videoconference involves at least one site that is related to the people whose culture is under study, and one site that is related to the scholar's university. The scholar can be at either location. People who attend at the university-related site could include faculty and students of the university, interested members of the public, and members of the diaspora community of the culture being studied. For example, for my Penn Folklore PhD research project, I organised videoconferences in 2004 and 2005 between Chennai here in south India and some Tamil people on the Penn campus. So it was Tamil people in Chennai in south India (accompanied by me), and members of the Tamil diaspora community in Philadelphia (including my Tamil language professor at Penn).

3) The language of the culture under study is used as much as possible during the videoconference (with translation as needed). The scholar has done the scholar's best to become fluent in that language. And, of course, the scholar has read as much as possible about the culture, not just before the videoconference, but also before the physically-present research.

4) Members of the community whose culture is being studied are invited to demonstrate a folk process from one or more sites in the videoconference. Of course, videoconferences can be recorded. So videoconferencing provides a method of recording both folk activities and discussions about those activities.

5) Ethnographic videoconferencing – just like ethnographic photography, film, and video – classically occurs after a year or so of physically-present research. Following the physically-present research period, videoconferencing is an option for generating, displaying, and documenting data. Thus, generally-speaking, I am not presenting ethnographic videoconferencing as a substitute for physically-present research. (More about this later.)

So these are five conditions, the more of which are satisfied, the more a videoconference is an ethnographic videoconference.

I believe my interest in videoconferencing is related to the fact that I am a student – especially through my primary professor at Penn Folklore, Roger Abrahams – of the "Performance-centred approach to folklore." I like to work with the process aspects of videoconferences, which can involve not only demonstrating folk activities, but also ways community members are interacting with each other and with people outside the community. Once all of this is recorded, one can do Conversation Analysis and other kinds of Discourse Analysis regarding the ways people are being with each other. In all of this, my approach is very much performance-, process-, and communication-oriented.

By the way, in general it is ideal to meet with a person physically before videoconferencing with that person. Studies show that videoconferencing is most effective when it follows, and alternates with, physically-present communication. One reason for this is that if one has not met one's conversation partner in-person first, and if there is a delay in one's conversation-partner's response-time in a videoconference, one may interpret this delay as being due to passive-aggression or neurological-impairment on the part of one's conversation-partner. If one has met the person physically in advance of the videoconference, one knows that the technology is likely to blame for the delay of a response.

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My third point in this talk is that in ethnographic videoconferences, the people of the culture being studied are very empowered in the sense that they can control the images of themselves that is going out, and they can say whatever they might like, including interpreting their own folk processes, and asking questions of and making statements to the scholars who are studying their culture.

Representation has been an issue since the beginnings of the disciplines of Folklore and Anthropology. With photography, film, and video, all of the image-making is controlled by the scholars and their technicians. With videoconferencing, participants can control their own images (including in terms of their spatial relationships to the camera, lighting, and so on).

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Now I'm going to give a brief history of ethnographic photography, film, and video – just to set up the remaining things I want to say about ethnographic videoconferencing.

Photography as a technology, and the academic disciplines of Anthropology and Folklore, came into existence approximately at the same time (in the 1800s) and can be said to have been aspects of colonisation processes. (In those days, Anthropologists especially studied distant cultures, whereas Folklorists tended to focus on the cultures in rural areas within their own countries.) This corresponds with the idea that the people whose cultures were being studied didn't have very much control over the process.

Giants of early ethnographic photography include Edward Curtis, Robert Flaherty, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson.

Edward Curtis published 20 volumes of photographs of Native-American people in British Columbia, Canada. And he made a movie about the Kwakiutl people of the area, "In the Land of the Head-hunters" (1914). This movie did not do very well commercially, in part, some people thought, because there were no characters who audience members could really relate to.

That was not the case with the next work I'm going to mention, which is Robert Flaherty's film, "Nanook of the North," which came out in 1922. This movie was a portrait of some Inuit people in the Canadian Arctic, and followed very emotionally the struggles of one particular man, as a hunter and as a provider for his family. This movie was commercially successful.

Both of the above were silent films. (Films with sound – "talkies" – were introduced to the public around 1929.)

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson published books of photographs, and films, regarding child-rearing in Indonesia and New Guinea. They did the photography and filming in 1936 and 1937, but the movies were released only in 1958, 20 years later.

Following these innovators, there have been many others. But often in these ethnographic recordings: 1) Events were filmed and/or edited out of order. 2) Events were interpreted by a voice-over (usually the voice of a British or European-American male, a "voice of authority"), which explained what it all meant. And 3) the translations of what community members said were not word-for-word. So, again, the people portrayed in these movies couldn't control the narrative very much.

Timothy Asch is a central figure in these developments. He worked with many anthropologists, including Napoleon Chagnon (in Venezuela with the Yanomamo people). There have been some controversies regarding the methods of Napoleon Chagnon. One of the controversies is that he sometimes paid the people whose culture he was studying with weapons (knives, guns, etc), and this may have encouraged violent behaviour. The violence

of the culture of the people he was studying was a major theme of Napoleon Chagnon's work. So a criticism of his work is that he sensationalised Yanomamo culture in negative ways. And it was Timothy Asch's job in this instance to present Napoleon Chagnon's vision of the Yanomamo people.

By the mid-1970s, Timothy Asch had changed. He said, and I quote,

> Films of people who look exotic can be and frequently are used to reinforce Western prejudices about primitive people. I regret not filming more Yanomamo conversations, which would have allowed individual Yanomamo people to reveal their thoughts and opinions more directly. It is disappointing that so few individual characters emerge in my films.

So he regretted not making clear that these people have intellectual, emotional, other types of interiors. Again, I quote,

> I am no longer interested in making films about these people. I am interested in seeing the kinds of films that they might make about themselves. Moreover, I now question my role as an outsider representing their life and concerns to the outside world.

There's been a good deal of work along these lines, including Sharon Sherman's 1998 book, Documenting Ourselves, about how people in different communities were video recording themselves and sharing those videos.

And now we come to the field of Indigenous Media, which is a direct development out of ethnographic film and video. In 1966, Saul Worth (a Communication professor), and John Adair (an Anthropology professor), teamed up and took 16 millimetre film equipment to a Navaho community in New Mexico. They put the equipment in the peoples' hands and invited them to make a film in their way about their lives and their people. The results included a lot of filming of people walking. There were very few close ups. A finding of the scholars that really struck them was that the Native-American people were especially interested in the social processes around the production and exhibition of the films. The Native-American film-makers were very concerned regarding who was operating the cameras and who was present during filming, as well as regarding who attended the screenings. That social aspect – often involving family considerations – was to the visiting scholars surprisingly important.

I'll mention one more scholar, Eric Michaels, an American person who earned a PhD in Anthropology at the University of Texas. In the early 1980s, he was hired by the government of Australia to advise the government about ways to facilitate aboriginal people in rural Central Australia watching and absorbing the TV programming made in the Australian cities by Australian white people and broadcast via satellite. But what Eric Michaels found when he visited the outback was that members of a number of aboriginal communities were making their own videos and transmitting the videos to each other via radio signals. Eric Michaels became a very outspoken champion of the aboriginal people making and sharing their own video recordings.

Tragically, Eric Michaels passed away at a young age. But he was an inspiration for members of the Warlpiri people in Yuendumu, north of Alice Springs, and members of other relatively-nearby aboriginal peoples, to create the Tanami Videoconferencing Network, a Global Tribal People's Videoconferencing Network (named after the area's Tanami desert). The technology for this was just becoming possible in 1992. And so a member of the Warlpiri people, Robin Japanangka Granites, and a white Australian educator and politician, Peter Toyne, began the Tanami Network. They used videoconferencing for schooling and other government services, and also for discussing and selling art made in traditional styles.

They also videoconferenced with members of other tribal peoples around the world, including native-American people, and Sami people in northern Norway. I found out about the Tanami Network when I was at Penn. We had the *Graduate Student Videoconference Series* (which I had founded) and in 2002 we did a videoconference with Robin and his team in Australia. Some years later I visited Robin in Yuendumu.

[A link to a recording of part of this videoconference is on a webpage I have created to contain supporting documents for this talk. The address of this webpage is given at the end of this transcript.]

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Ok! I have 10 minutes left. Because my Penn Folklore PhD dissertation involved setting up some videoconferences between people in Chennai and people in Philadelphia, I have become a little bit of a historian about videoconferencing. I tracked it back to crystal balls. Remember crystal balls? Through which one could see long distances and into the future.

Well, electricity came into being in the early 1800s. And then the telegraph, and then the telephone and the radio. Around that time, there was a lot of fantasising about "seeing by electricity," which eventually manifested as television (which literally means, "seeing from a distance"). And then two-way television. Bell Labs demonstrated a two-way audio-video system in 1930. In 1964, at the New York World's Fair, AT&T demonstrated a videophone. And then, of course, with the flights to the moon and all, there was two-way audio-video.

Representations of videoconferencing also appeared on commercial media. From the 1930s onward, videoconferencing occurred in science fiction serials and movies such as "Flash Gordon." In comics, Dick Tracy had a two-way TV wristwatch in 1964. On TV shows such as "Star Trek" and "The Jetsons" they were often videoconferencing. In TV news programs from the 60s onward, it has been very common that the anchor-person in the studio talks with people beyond the studio: that is videoconferencing also.

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In conclusion: I must say that the Pandemic (March 2020 onward) has radically changed the world in terms of communication. As has often occurred in the past, a socio-historical event has ushered in the widespread use of a new technology: in this case, videoconferencing. I call the Pandemic the "Zoom Pandemic." (I say "Zoom" because this videoconferencing platform has by far been the most popular in these years. Similar to how "xerox" came to mean photocopy, and "kleenex" came to mean facial tissues.)

When I was trying to tell my Penn Folklore professors in 1999 about videoconferencing, that the folk were doing their folk activities by videoconference, my professors were not really interested. Perhaps in part because folklorists in those days were reacting so much against television, which they saw as the killer of local culture, which it was. But I said, "No, no, this is not TV. This is two-way, and people can represent themselves." They didn't really want to hear about it. And things stayed that way – also with professional storytellers with whom I work – they stayed that way until the Pandemic. Then suddenly, people got a little more tolerant of videoconferencing and realized that it might be of interest, as a medium for discussion and study, and also as a medium to be studied.

So now, with "working from home" and such, videoconferencing has become a fact of life. Today, *where one is physically* often pales in significance as compared to whether or not one has access to an Internet device and high-speed Internet.

Regarding videoconferencing and the history of humanity: to take the long view, I speak of "The Great Dispersal." We already have space stations. We've already had flights to the moon with humans. In the duration of an individual's lifetime, it's happening very slowly.

But in evolutionary time, it's happening very quickly, and it will happen very quickly. People are going to be living in space stations, not just as a means of travel, but also just as places to live. And then we may be living on other celestial bodies. To me, a great drama is, "Will we get off the earth in a sustainable way before we blow up the earth?" You know, with bombs and global warming and everything else. "Will humanity get off the earth before we destroy it?" That's a great drama. And of course, we've got to make sure that we take – it used to be that people took books and vinyl records, but now we can take the Internet, which will have the heritage of humanity. Let's hope it's not censored.

But the thing is, these space explorations will be sponsored by governments, corporations, and wealthy individuals whose top priority may not be democracy in these projects. So there are going to be mutinies. There are going to be hijackings. There are going to be rebellions and revolutions. And – and this is upsetting to me – we will never hear about most of these occurrences! Because some people who do a mutiny, they'll hack up the telecom equipment so nobody can trace them. There will be all sorts of varieties of this. We will just have to say goodbye to having a limited, contained, know-able field of human existence.

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In 2010, I submitted my Penn Folklore PhD dissertation which was titled (in short) "Ethnographic Videoconferencing as Applied to South Indian Children's Singing-games, and Language-learning." And then (in 2012) I reduced aspects of my dissertation to an article titled, "Ethnographic Videoconferencing," which has not yet been published (I still have hopes that an updated version of this article might be published!).

In those works – as in this talk – I have presented ethnographic videoconferencing as an end-of-research activity, to occur only after physically-present research has occurred. In my case, I did more than a year of physically-present research before I invited the people whose culture I was studying to participate in a videoconference.

But that was a different world. That was before the Pandemic.

Now I am imagining that there might be PhD students in Folklore departments in the present and future who might be saying to their professors, "I'd like to do all of my interpersonal ethnographic research by videoconference."

Reasons might include:

1) During some health crises, one is not allowed to visit certain communities physically. (This was the case with many tribal communities during the height of the Zoom Pandemic.)

2) One might want to study the culture of people in a space station, on the moon, etc – and it might not be feasible to go there physically.

3) If one wants to do interpersonal research especially with a person who is online most of the day, with a person who lives much of the person's life via tele-presence, it may not be sensible or effective to seek to go and be physically-present with that person over an extended period of time.

I am wondering what the Folklore professors might say.

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Thank you!

Links to supporting documents for this talk are at
https://storytellinginstitute.org/12Oct2023.html