EXPLORING WORLD CULTURES

An Interview with Anthropology Professor Patti Delaney
By Beth Dietrich, Reference & Instruction Librarian

This spring, I had the opportunity to talk to Professor Patti Delaney about one of the library’s truly unique databases, Human Relations Area Files: World Cultures (eHRAF). The following are excerpts from my interview. -- BD

BD: Would you please describe the origins of the eHRAF World Cultures database? I found your description of the card catalog room incredibly interesting.

PD: This database started out as a literal archive full of index cards in a big room at Yale University. When I was in graduate school, we used to apply for funding to travel to the room and salivate over the collected volumes of (then mostly unpublished) anthropological fieldnotes. It was a place where you could look at the “raw data” of anthropology – unvarnished field notes, photographs, and early manuscripts from some of the most obscure cultural groups in the world. It was an anthropologist’s dream world!

BD: Why do you use the eHRAF database? And why do you have your students use it?

PD: I use the database in a variety of different ways for my own research and also when I am developing my courses and assignments. As an applied anthropologist, I am often asked to respond quickly to a request for assistance from organizations like the Peace Corps or the World Bank. Usually I am consulted for my methodological skills and not necessarily for my cultural knowledge (with thousands of cultural groups in the world, most anthropologists only intimately know a handful of them). So, if I get a request to help with a project in Malawi or Vanuatu or some other place where I have not conducted fieldwork myself, eHRAF is the first place I go to read ethnographic accounts of that place and those people. The database helps me to prepare quickly and precisely for my own fieldwork, setting the context and providing me with a ready-made bibliography of additional relevant sources.

For my classes, I often use eHRAF as a cross-cultural resource to help students better understand and appreciate the anthropological (Continued next page)
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practice that we call ethnology (the comparative study of culture). Students can choose from the hundreds of topic areas in the database (ranging from polygamy to funeral rituals to religious beliefs) and quickly grasp the huge range of human cultural diversity on the planet today. Being able to access the raw notes and other unvarnished accounts is an added bonus. Since comparatively little anthropological fieldwork has been done in Vermont, being able to access primary materials is a huge plus!

BD: When I taught eHRAF for your class this fall they were using it in conjunction with fieldwork they were doing on their own. Could you please talk about how the two pieces of the assignment complement and enhance each other? How do the students engage with the material they find?

PD: In my Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class, I always aim to incorporate a “field” component so that students have an opportunity to get a taste of what anthropological fieldwork is all about. Placements vary, but always involve a cross-cultural setting that provides students an opportunity to reach outside their comfort zone. Last semester, most students were assigned to work with King Street Center in downtown Burlington. King Street is a vibrant multi-cultural place and most students ended up working with New Americans (recently resettled refugees) from places like Iraq, Sudan, and Vietnam. Students spent at least 2 hours per week at their field site and utilized their observations to create a kind of mini-ethnography of their own. Once they had gathered enough data to feel like they had a good idea of what anthropology is all about, we asked them to use eHRAF to explore one topic that they observed (e.g. veiling of Muslim girls) and compare it to two unrelated cultures. The goal of the assignment was both to validate their own observations and to generate enthusiasm and excitement about the vast body of anthropological research out there. Students were excited to realize that they were actually DOING anthropology already and had an opportunity to ask and answer bigger questions such as “is this behavior universal?” through the use of eHRAF.

BD: What is important about this type of research and what are you hoping your students will understand?

PD: This kind of research is essential in anthropology because “fieldwork” is the lifeblood of our discipline. Most of the time, class assignments ask students to read the published works of anthropologists but the actual process of doing research is a big mystery. I hope that the use of eHRAF both demystifies the process and opens students’ eyes to the tremendous cultural diversity in the world today. One student told me using eHRAF for the first time helped her to realize that she should be more ambitious in her choice of study abroad destinations!

BD: What do you see as the value of incorporating primary sources into coursework?

PD: Without the use of primary sources, it is virtually impossible for students to successfully utilize, evaluate, and synthesize other kinds of sources. There is no substitute for first-hand data.
STREAMING DOCUMENTARY FILMS

By Laura Crain, Associate Director for Collection Services

The Library has been looking for alternatives to the DVD format and last semester we were pleased to begin providing access to over 5500 streaming films, documentaries and training videos from Kanopy. The films are also searchable through the library catalog and can be viewed anywhere, anytime, by all Saint Michael’s faculty, staff and students.

Subject areas include gender, race, class studies, global studies, education, religion, philosophy, human rights, biology, anthropology, psychology, social studies and more. Featured producers in Kanopy’s collection include Criterion Collection, PBS, California Newsreel, HBO, Kino Lorber, First Run Features, BBC, Documentary Educational Resources, Roland Collection, MVD, Seventh Art, Psychotherapy.net, Symptom Media, and many more.

NEW REFERENCE & INSTRUCTION LIBRARIAN BETH DIETRICH

This past summer the Library welcomed Beth Dietrich as Reference and Instruction Librarian. Beth serves as library liaison to the Business, Economics, Anthropology/Sociology, Media Studies and Political Science departments. Beth previously served as Reference/Circulation librarian at the Law Library at Syracuse University. Beth is a graduate of Saint Lawrence University and earned her MLIS from Syracuse University.

The following is a quick Q&A with Beth Dietrich and Circulation Supervisor Ron Jacobs:

RJ: Where did you grow up?
BD: I grew up spending time between Canton, NY (where my Dad lives) and Henderson Harbor, NY (where my Mom lives). I am used to both extreme cold (from Canton – it’s closer to Canada than we are here) and extreme snowfall (from Henderson – in the Lake Ontario snowbelt). 

RJ: Where did you go to school—BA, MLS?
BD: I was a legacy scholar at Saint Lawrence University because both of my parents and my sister (for a year) went there and I received a BA in English Literature concentrating in Brit Lit. I went to Syracuse University iSchool for my MLIS. Fun fact: I had the same roommate at both schools!

RJ: Why did you choose library school?
BD: My undergrad advisor suggested library school when I was a junior. I flat out refused and told her I needed something far more glamorous, like publishing. Then after 2 years in Americorps when I was finally looking for positions in publishing, I kept finding positions for librarians that sounded a lot more interesting (and with better pay), so I swallowed my pride and went crawling back to my undergrad advisor asking for library school recommendation letters.

RJ: Who’s your favorite band?
BD: I wouldn’t say I have a favorite band exactly. I listen to a lot of different styles. I have over 70 Pandora stations.

RJ: What interested you about Saint Mike’s?
BD: I had been to campus a few times for the Vermont Library Association Conference and last year this position had just posted. I remember sitting out on a bench on the quad and it was beautifully warm and sunny and the campus atmosphere felt so good. I decided that day that I had to apply. And now that I work here, I recognize that the college embodies so many of the things I value, like community service and environmental activism.

RJ: Do you have any pets?
BD: I have a cat named Ansel. We adopted him after he had lost one of his back legs (hit by a car twice!) and was in a shelter. He is the sweetest cat I have ever met and I love spending the evenings with him on my lap.
WELCOME NEW NEIGHBORS

By John Payne, Director of Library & Information Services

The library staff are getting some new neighbors this summer.

Accessibility Services, Peer Tutoring, and Quantitative Skills will be moving to the upper level of the library this summer to form the new Academic Resource Center. The move will bring together the academic support services that students need for success in an environment dedicated to academic work and study. Starting in the fall, students will be able to get help with research, writing, quantitative reasoning, testing, and study skills under one roof.

The ARC will be located in the space that currently houses Modern Languages faculty, who will be moving to Klein. Construction will begin in May and will be completed by August.

DENISE’S MANY HATS

By Ron Jacobs, Circulation Supervisor

In another life, Denise Groll would have been a librarian. Her love of books led to her recent rediscovery of Jane Austen through the 19th century Britain course taught by Professor Jen Purcell. During the summer of 2014, Denise proceeded to read all of Jane Austen’s novels.

The Library is fortunate that Denise Groll has taken on the role of assistant to the library director replacing Tina Ryan, who retired in June 2014. Denise also continues to serve as the assistant to the Fine Arts, History, Media Studies and Digital Arts, and Modern Languages departments.

Denise, a graduate of Champlain College, began her career at Saint Michael’s seven years ago in the Registrar’s office. On why Saint Michael’s inspires her she says: “Saint Michael’s strong community gives a sense of peace. I feel like I’m going from my family to my other family each day when I arrive at work.” In December, Denise will join the SMC class of 2015 and graduate with a BA in History.

Besides working on her second degree, raising two children and working full time, Denise is an avid runner and just completed her second marathon in January at Disney World. Denise has seen her favorite band U2 perform at least a dozen times and her car sports the vanity plates U2BNOVX. Library staff have known Denise as friend and colleague for many years and are delighted to have Denise sharing her skills and expertise in the Library.