

# *An SfAA Oral History Interview with Charles Williams*

## Applied Anthropology in Service to One's Community

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Charles Williams' anthropology career path began when Professor Demitri Shimkin recruited him as a promising young African- American scholar from Columbus, Mississippi, and a graduate of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to enter the University of Illinois doctoral program in anthropology. Professor Shimkin had launched his applied anthropology research in Holmes County Mississippi in the 1970's with a strong commitment to civil rights and to addressing health disparities. As a graduate student, Charles quickly became part of a research team that traveled back and forth from Urbana, Illinois, to Holmes County, Mississippi. Charles grounded the academic idealism of Shimkin, his medical colleagues, and other graduate students in the cultural, political and economic realities of the Mississippi Delta. Thus, he became an early shaper of an action anthropology approach in the region that would build a knowledge base for subsequent engagement over the next forty years.

In 1978 Charles was recruited to take a faculty position in the College of Education at the University of Memphis. He wrote his dissertation on Memphis' African-American neighborhoods. Charles' research on the Orange Mound and Binghamton neighborhoods of Memphis dispelled many of the myths that existed at that time about the lack of neighborhood identity and rich heritage in the South and created a research base that influenced the next four decades of research and program outreach in the Mid- South. His dissertation remains one of the most referenced documents by students, teachers, planners, and residents regarding neighborhood studies in the Memphis community today. Over the upcoming years, Charles' applied research expanded into the fields of African-American heritage, faith-based community action, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation, making him a tremendous fount of knowledge for faculty, students and community residents. Charles' roots in anthropology run deep: in the interview he comments, "it's almost like I'd always been in anthropology and didn't know it." He reflected that as a child and adolescent he was always asking questions about the world inside and outside the Mississippi Delta. He remarked, "If you're not inquisitive by nature, you probably won't make a good anthropologist."

His love of teaching and engaging students in local research has always been extraordinary. He developed a reputation as one of the best faculty members in the university for working with undergraduate students to build upon their strengths and interests as well as advising his graduate and undergraduate students into careers. His extensive knowledge of African-American heritage led to his directorship of the African and African-American Studies Program and to the development of curriculum changes throughout the university.

Charles Williams has a long history of involvement in interdisciplinary projects and programs and has always recognized the importance of collaboration in education and community-based projects and programs. In short, he was a pioneer in developing new partnerships among the various disciplines in the Mid-South region. These partnerships include The University of Tennessee Health Sciences Center, the University of Memphis' College of Education, and the African-American Studies Program. Throughout his career he has collaborated with faculty and students from the other behavioral sciences.

Charles developed an extensive set of networks in the city, the state and the region. He has worked with agencies as varied as the utility company to local and state government to grassroots organizations in every part of the metropolitan area. Part of his success in working with so many and varied agencies and organizations is his generous personality which make working with him both easy and enjoyable. Perhaps most importantly, Charles really cares about education outreach and engaged scholarship in the Mid-South and surrounding Mississippi Delta. He has spent endless hours working with groups—particularly youth—in communicating the importance of engaging in civic activities to make Memphis and the region a better place to live. He is a rare and talented educator who has and will continue to advance the goals of higher education in the Mid-South region.

Although Charles Williams retired in 2012, he continues to teach in the Department of Anthropology as Professor Emeritus.

The interview was done by Linda A. Bennett and the transcript edited by John van Willigen. (Editor's Note: This is the shorter version of this interview. A long version is found in the online version at: <http://sfaa.net/newsletter/newsletter.html>.)

## The Interview

**WILLIAMS:** I had the greatest admiration for people who go against the grain, straining against the current. So, those anthropologists, in particular, who have gone against the norm—have gone against tradition—have been the ones who most impress me, of course. I think about E.B. Tylor, as, you know, being, of course, the father of anthropology. But probably the greatest influence—it's almost like I knew him, was Boas. I guess I don't like labels, but if someone would [have] called me a Boasian, I wouldn't be too upset by that.

**BENNETT:** You wouldn't be opposed to that? (laughter)

**WILLIAMS:** No, I wouldn't be opposed to that kind of stuff.

**BENNETT:** Yeah.

**WILLIAMS:** I mean, he was quite a soul. I think I've been influenced by Boas' work, even though we don't see him quite, quote-unquote, as an applied anthropologist, *per se*, in the way we look at applied anthropology today. But as far as I'm concerned, I would feel that he was among the first to do a lot of applied work. And, especially, in the areas of race relations, and helping to influence governmental policies, in terms of this whole issue on race, and how we look at it. So, obviously, as far as Boas—that's been one of the people that I could just name, and I mean I could be here all day and talking about people that have influenced me. But, I think that, beyond Boas and, of course, his students and people he worked with, I'd like to work with [Melville J.] Herskovits. And, of course, Kroeber, Lowie and all these other people who worked among the Indians, and so forth. That's really applied work. And of course, those who have picked up the mantle, John van Willigen, you know, Linda Whiteford, Marietta Baba and all these other people who were, kind of, keeping that going. And also [William] Montague Cobbs, and Allison Davis. And African-American anthropologists who have also contributed. And not being recognized so much for what they're doing.

**BENNETT:** Yeah.

**WILLIAMS:** And now we look back, many years later, and it's hard, you know, but at the time they were going through this it cost them a lot of other factors, I think. You know, the race, and other kinds of things that—that held us back. But again, too, that's

the good side of applied anthropology. Here, I always try to get my students to understand. That's the beauty of it. But, we have our skeletons in our closet, as well, in terms of some of our applied work—

**BENNETT:** Sure.

**WILLIAMS:** —that's been used against people, especially on the colonial kinds of conditions, and governmental kinds of things. Those, but you could say that for almost any discipline. That knowledge and information—people take it, and misuse it, and abuse it, even though, oftentimes, you have no recourse as to how your information's being used, once it's been released. People can take it and do what they want with it. But I have a problem sometimes on that applied anthropologists who, knowing that their work's going to be used to subjugate people or to push an agenda that goes against humanity, so to speak.

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** So I'm saying, I guess we have the two sides of applied.

**BENNETT:** Sure. Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** There's a good side to it, and, they've done a lot of excellent work. And they've taken anthropology into places, and made it almost a household word. I don't think those are the theoreticians. It's the Margaret Meads of the world, and the people who work on these community projects—

**BENNETT:** Right.

**WILLIAMS:** And, whether it's in Africa, in developing countries, or wherever the nature may be, those are the kinds of things that resonate with people. Not that I'm opposed to, because even applied anthropology has its theoretical components. But I'm saying that we have to take the heart of anthropology—the theory, and the techniques—and you have to go out and use them to better humanity. And to help government do public policies to help perfect a better way of life.

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** So, we need both. And so, I'm not opposed to—I think—and sometimes it bothers me when we get into these little arguments. I think we do a disservice

to what I call the dynamism of anthropology. Because it's dynamic—that's the beauty of it.

**BENNETT:** Yeah.

**WILLIAMS:** And, uh, I think we get important people who [say] it's not a science, you know. But I just think that's [a] useless issue.  
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**BENNETT:** Well, I have a very broad question.

**WILLIAMS:** Sure.

**BENNETT:** And that is, how you would describe what your career has been in applied anthropology, personally. And that could take such a long time.

**WILLIAMS:** Well, that could. (laughter) I know. We'll never have enough time

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** I started doing applied work as it related to my dissertation. My dissertational research when I came here, to the community. And through the efforts of Stan Hyland, Tom Collins—

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** And that's what I like about Boas, and you're asking the questions, and you're seeing relationships between different encounters and experience. And, I'll never forget his presentation to the students. He was invited to speak to students in Atlanta—black students, liberal arts, DuBois, W.E.B. DuBois invited him. [Editor's Note: This was a commencement address to Atlanta University in 1906.]

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** I like his whole approach to racism, and other things that he had experienced firsthand. He was a genius, in terms of his information, his knowledge. But he couldn't get away from his ethnicity. You know, that was him. But he didn't run away from it. He dealt with it. But, in going and talking to those students, I could understand. In fact, I had a greater appreciation for Boas because he told them. He

said, "Look, you're faced with these challenges. But don't let them weight you down. You have to move on." He felt very seriously that much of what we are facing was going to always be with us, to some degree. But you've got to move on from it.

**BENNETT:** You just have to live with it, and go.

**WILLIAMS:** Yeah, but you do your thing. You go ahead and make a difference. You keep striving. And so, that has, sort of, been my mantra, you know?

**BENNETT:** Is it?

**WILLIAMS:** You have to just keep going.

**BENNETT:** That makes a lot of sense, yeah.

**WILLIAMS:** You know, if you let it get to you, it's going to weight you down. And, it's too much for any one person to overcome. And, it's probably, part of people's culture because they are reared that way. It is the very powerful. But, they would change completely. I think it's going to change over time. But, right now, you have to face [it]. I was always impressed by that. People are going through struggles, and in their academics. And have, only now do they have great achievement. But they have faced obstacles, the odds.

[Edited for length]

**WILLIAMS:** We're seeking truth. As much truth as we can understand it, you may get a little piece of it. And, of course, later on, somebody else may show you another way, and you'll say, "Well, I was going about it wrong." But, your intentions were to seek truth and provide a service for people. Well, that is the way I am towards young scholars, I would tell them, you never bias your data. You don't cut corners. You be true to yourself. But you have to see those people you're working with, you have to see them as human beings. You can't see them as a subject, only as something to study, like in a laboratory. They're people.

**BENNETT:** Right.

**WILLIAMS:** And, once you get to know them, they can teach you. They become the teachers, because they know more about their culture than you do.

**BENNETT:** Yeah, because they've been there.

**WILLIAMS:** So you're the student. And you have to show them some appreciation for what they are trying to teach you. And if you do, they'll show you more, and tell you more. You'll get into the intricacies of their culture. Because they will, you know, feel comfortable with you.

**BENNETT:** When you show genuine interest in them they respond.

**WILLIAMS:** They respond.

**WILLIAMS:** You know, they love their families, and—

**BENNETT:** Now you don't.

**WILLIAMS:** No. But anyway, I wanted to tell him. "So—what do you, you know, they have people there just like anybody else." You know?

**BENNETT:** Yeah.

### **Williams' Retirement**

**WILLIAMS:** Yeah, but it's a thing where, if you don't travel. I think it should be mandatory. That's what I wish [that] they could make it mandatory for anthropologists. You have to travel outside of your own culture. And see what it's like.

**BENNETT:** It's a huge—

**WILLIAMS:** There's a difference. **BENNETT:** —eye-opener. **WILLIAMS:** And it's humbling. **BENNETT:** Yes.

**WILLIAMS:** And it sometimes makes you appreciate what you have even more. But then you're seeing, it's a humbling type of experience. Linda, we could probably get

talking forever and ever. But there's a lot of things that I would have done. And I've tried to engage my colleagues. And they have engaged me. And we've done things collaboratively. I do believe in collaboration. Not just only with my colleagues in anthropology, but in many other disciplines. I think that's just the nature of the way human societies are today. They are so complex.

**BENNETT:** I agree.

**WILLIAMS:** It really takes a lot of different perspectives and viewpoints.

**BENNETT:** And listening.

**WILLIAMS:** Right, exactly. And also, even different techniques and skill levels to do certain things.

**BENNETT:** Mm-hmm.

**WILLIAMS:** And I have been fortunate enough, over my career, to work with people across disciplines. And I think that has a lot to do with applied.

**BENNETT:** Oh, that's a good point. Yeah.

**WILLIAMS:** It's not a forced stretch, because when we can work collaboratively, as applied anthropologists, people can see—whether it's in education or whether it's in urban planning. You know, whatever nature it may be. We can work collaboratively, because we can bring a certain perspective to the table. We can also learn from the other disciplines' perspective that they bring. So, put the pieces together, and we get a more comprehensive view as to how things should go, and what they should be like.