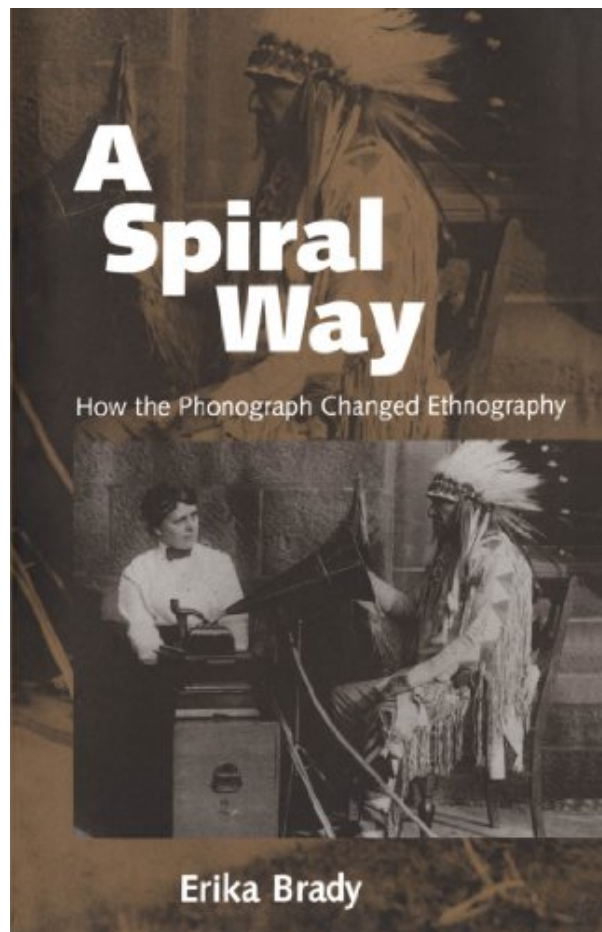
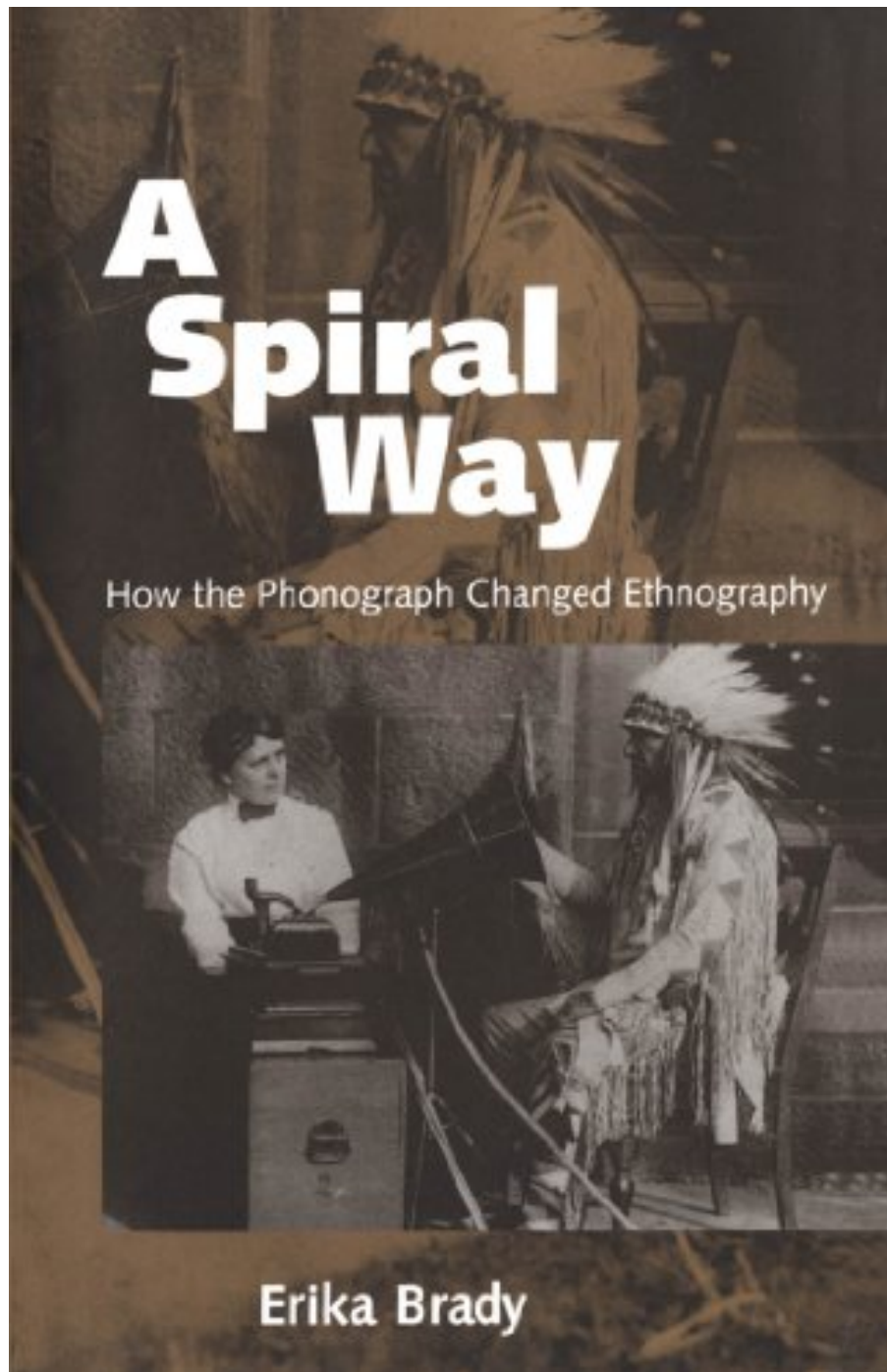


A SPIRAL WAY: HOW THE PHONOGRAPH CHANGED ETHNOGRAPHY BY ERIKA BRADY



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From Library Journal

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From the Inside Flap

The way Edison's talking machine brought the study of ethnic cultures into the modern era

About the Author

Erika Brady is an associate professor in the folk studies programs at Western Kentucky University. She served as technical consultant and researcher on the staff of the Federal Cylinder Project of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

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The invention of the cylinder phonograph at the end of the nineteenth century opened up a new world for cultural research. Indeed, Edison's talking machine became one of the basic tools of anthropology. It not only equipped researchers with the means of preserving folk songs but it also enabled them to investigate a wide spectrum of distinct vocal expressions in the emerging fields of anthropology and folklore. Ethnographers grasped its huge potential and fanned out through regional America to record rituals, stories, word lists, and songs in isolated cultures.

From the outset the federal government helped fuel the momentum to record cultures that were at risk of being lost. Through the Bureau of American Ethnology, the Smithsonian Institution took an active role in preserving native heritage. It supported projects to make phonographic documentation of American Indian language, music, and rituals before developing technologies and national expansion might further undermine them.

This study of the early phonograph's impact shows traditional ethnography being transformed, for attitudes of both ethnographers and performers were reshaped by this exciting technology. In the presence of the phonograph both fieldwork and the materials collected were revolutionized. By radically altering the old research modes, the phonograph brought the disciplines of anthropology and folklore into the modern era.

At first the instrument was as strange and new to the fieldworkers as it was to their subjects. To some the first encounter with the phonograph was a deeply unsettling experience. When it was demonstrated in 1878 before members of the National Academy of Sciences, several members of the audience fainted. Even its inventor was astonished. Of his first successful test of his tinfoil phonograph, Thomas A. Edison said, "I was never taken so aback in my life."

The cylinders that have survived from these times offer an unrivaled resource not only for contemporary scholarship but also for a grassroots renaissance of cultural and religious values. In tracing the historical interplay of the talking machine with field research, *The Spiral Way* underscores the natural adaptability of cultural study to this new technology. Erika Brady is an associate professor in the folk studies programs at Western Kentucky University. She served as technical consultant and researcher on the staff of the Federal Cylinder Project of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

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An Important Record of History

By A Customer

This book is a fine addition to the history of the phonograph and other forms of recording technology. Erika Brady begins with a consideration of early recordings, focusing her analysis on relationships between perception and audio technology. She then winds her way through implications of how this relationship is relevant to developing ethnographic descriptions of folklore and other forms of expressive culture. The book will be useful to anyone interested in phenomenology, social history, intellectual history, and ethnographic description. Much of her work provides a strong basis for more nuanced readings of ways in which new forms of technology affect--and are affected by-- ethnographically-grounded research. Brady is an insightful writer and a fine stylist. Her subtle wit enfolds sharp commentary that reveals hidden nuances of history, and her arguments are always cogent, clear, and intriguing. The book is written from Brady's experience of working with hundreds of old recordings, and her practical experience of handling and listening to the recordings is clearly evident in her writing. The book is illustrated with historical and contemporary photographs that are well-chosen and provide rich context for the study.

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A Record of History and Culture

By grasshopper4

For readers interested in how recording technology has influenced the way that history and culture is represented, this book is essential reading. Brady has personally handled thousands of hundred-year old recordings of stories, folktales, traditional music, and other performances. She writes from a great familiarity with both the early recording technology and the material on the records, and she insightfully uses a range of research techniques and academic insights to demonstrate convincingly that the ability to make audio recordings has significantly changed the practice of folkloristic and anthropological fieldwork. Among the big changes that she documents are greater emphasis on listening to indigenous voices and a concomitant sense of increased ethical responsibility to the societies whose cultural traditions are documented.

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