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Ethnographic Alternatives

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Review essay
Ethnographic Alternatives

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CAROLYN ELLIS and ARTHUR P. BOCHNER (eds) *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1996. 400 pp. ISBN 0 7619 9163 8 (hbk); ISBN 0 7619 9164 6 (pbk)

ANNA BANKS and STEPHEN P. BANKS (eds) *Fiction and Social Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998. 272 pp. ISBN 0 7619 9034 8 (hbk); ISBN 0 7619 9035 6 (pbk)

H.L. (BUD) GOODALL *Writing the New Ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2000. 221 pp. ISBN 0 7425 0338 0 (hbk); ISBN 0 7425 0339 9 (pbk)

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These three books are part of the Ethnographic Alternatives series, which is edited by Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis. The purpose of the series is to highlight and establish experimental forms of writing, in response to the ever-present 'crisis of representation' that affects all qualitative research. The series editors' stated intention is to publish experimental forms of writing that deliberately blur the boundaries between social sciences and the humanities. This blurring of (more than) genres stimulates the ongoing debate with regard to how to judge the worth of these 'new' ethnographic texts. No consensus view has, as yet, emerged. However, I find myself in broad agreement with the criteria suggested by Laurel Richardson (1999) in her assessment of 'creative analytic practice' (CAP). She puts forward five criteria that she uses when reviewing alternative texts: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact (emotionally, intellectually, praxiologically) and expression of 'a reality'. In addition, I find myself in fervent agreement with her assertion that 'it is our continuing task to create new criteria for choosing criteria' (p. 665). I therefore approach the writing of this review with these five criteria in mind – and with an awareness of the

need to always already be working at their unravelling in the light of the irrevocably political and value-laden process of constantly ascribing 'new criteria'. This review is inevitably part of the (tumultuous) conversation that constantly (re)shapes the, now unleashed, uncontrollable play of writing difference.

withering as it

is placed

where it does not belong

Composing Ethnography was the first book to be published in the Ethnographic Alternatives series and is edited by the series editors. There are 14 chapters divided into three sections, on autoethnography, reflexive ethnography and sociopoetics. There is also an extensive introduction, which takes the form of a scripted dialogue between the two editors. All five of Richardson's criteria are easily met by the volume as a whole, which is perhaps unsurprising for the first book to seriously mine this ever-widening vein of textual creativity. Emotional evocation appears to be an important goal for almost all the chapters, as they focus on 'sensitive stories', on personal, emotional and often painful spaces. Years after my first readings I still find Carol Rambo Ronai's account of her ambivalent and layered relationship with her 'mentally retarded' mother, and Karen Fox's intricately woven voices of herself, a sex offender and a female 'victim', sufficiently subversive and distressing to goad me into intellectual and political action. *Composing Ethnography* offers a number of important insights; however, it shies away from interrogating the varieties of criteria we might apply to CAP and certainly sidesteps the concerns that may be voiced about solipsism and interpretations of the social world. Yet, my main concern is a more general one with regard to the Ethnographic Alternatives project. In the three books reviewed here, 31 of the 33 authors are based at North American universities. Therefore, to what extent might the accepted protocols of the reflexive text shield a casual cultural centrism? Laurel Richardson asks that authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied. Authors and editors should remember that this should apply both to the outward ethnographic gaze and to the inward move of the autoethnographic and the reflexive gaze.

careful prose

conforming by the edges

Fiction and Social Research echoes the format of *Composing Ethnography*. The book begins with a lengthy first chapter, which takes the form of an interview with the two editors, Stephen and Anna Banks. Thereafter 14 chapters are divided into four sections named narratives of representation, of understanding, of suspicion and of vulnerability. Inevitably in a collection,

there are some pieces that disappoint and some that delight. I will return to Sandra Coyle's 'Dancing with the Chameleon', a story of coming to terms with alcohol abuse and the twelve-step programme, and to Christine Elizabeth Kiesinger's haunting account of anorexia 'Portrait of an Anorexic Life'. I will continue to find my way between Stephen Linstead's multi-layered story of metatheory and the practice of research, as I appreciate the switches of register and jarring styles that both frustrate and entice. Throughout this chapter, the technique of using direct exposition through characters is onerous for the reader but ultimately productive. Sadly, in some of the other chapters it is applied too simplistically and so becomes merely irksome. I anticipated that this book would demonstrate (perhaps evoke?) how fiction and social research can comfortably cohabit. Sadly, too many contributions demonstrate how fiction can be used to do the work of traditional academic texts rather than showing how a new form of social research may be generated through an intimate relationship with 'fiction'. Although each author works to produce a substantive contribution to the possibilities of narrative forms, there is the scent of self-conscious worthiness here, of texts written in order to 'instruct'. In being too eager to explain and not eager enough to evoke, the lightness of aesthetic touch required in order to invite the reader into the text is frequently lost, and so the collection as a whole is weakened.

of the words

removing all the corners and

Writing the New Ethnography is a sole authored text, with a fairly conventional prefacing chapter followed by six chapters in which Goodall develops his arguments with regard to the practices of innovative ethnographic writing. When I began this book, I wondered what on earth was going on. The style, reminiscent of glitzy-psychobabble, grated; an uninterrogated 'I' and stories about 'my life as an ethnographer' peppered the text. Did Goodall know what he was doing? Where was the sophisticated reflexivity? What had happened to academic rigour? However, by the time I had moved further into the text it had become a real 'page turner'. Goodall had managed to shift registers, to prompt me to recognize that any apparently simplistic narrative is knowingly chosen as but one textual strategy from amongst several. This book has been carefully crafted, layer builds upon layer, chapter upon chapter, so that as a whole the text gives an excellent account of the writing processes associated with 'innovative' ethnographic writing. The text is instructive, providing clear advice, examples and exercises relating to every step in the ethnographic process from deciding to become an ethnographer to fieldwork to final text. Nor does he shy away from the ethical, representational or institutional implications of attempting to pursue a career as a 'new ethnographer'. This is a book that embraces the intricacies, the pitfalls, the pleasures of 'doing ethnography'; it will be an excellent resource to all those

who teach ethnography, and yet it is also pitched so as to nourish the hunger for honest guidance that lurks within even the most experienced writer.

rubbing itself bare

until it bleeds

Richardson's list of five criteria (and some . . .) is a simulacrum, and as such is both useful and futile, in existence only through use and only through the acknowledgement that it must be modified or even discarded during any possible enactment. Whatever criteria I select with which to judge these books, they remain a brave attempt to shift the ground under the feet of academic endeavour. There is more at stake here than prose style. These books, indeed the whole *Ethnographic Alternatives* series, are important because they gesture toward something other. My main concern is that these self-labelled 'alternative writing forms' are at risk of solidifying as they gain admittance to a new, albeit minority, academic canon. Academic precedence is a great comfort to authors. Contextualizing a writing style via an alternative canon generated by established academics and judged by accepted criteria, has to be a seductive option for authors attempting to transgress traditional text boundaries. Therefore, whilst I applaud the efforts made by these three books, I am compelled to sound a warning shot – how long will it be before the forms admitted by this groundbreaking series become the only way to script an 'ethnographic alternative'?

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REFERENCE

Richardson, Laurel (1999) 'Feathers in Our Cap', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28(6): 660–8.

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