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# FEATHERS IN OUR CAP

LAUREL RICHARDSON

## CAP

During the past quarter century, ethnography has hatched from an anthropology/sociology egg—white shelled, oval, smooth sheened, frequently hard boiled, and artery clogging—to a flotilla of fancy birds flying everywhere, following pristine or ancient trajectories, altering courses, inventing new songs, landing where they might, foraging, nesting, and releasing feathers. Ethnography is everywhere; it cannot be contained in a shell.

In the wake of poststructuralist, feminist, critical race literary, and queer theory, ethnographic work now appears in multiple venues in a variety of forms. The ethnographic genre has been blurred, enlarged, and altered to include autoethnography, poetry, drama, conversation, new journalism, readers' theater, performance, hypertext, fiction, faction, creative nonfiction, true fiction, aphorisms, comedy, satire, layered texts, writing stories, songs, museum installations, photographs, body painting, choreography, and so forth (for analysis and examples of these representations, see Richardson 1994, 1997). Moreover, the producers of these ethnographies locate themselves in different disciplines inside and outside of social science; some even locate themselves outside of academia.

This is what historians of the future might call the Ethnographic Era or perhaps even the Golden Age: the legitimation, adoption, and proliferation of creative analytical practices that have produced a plentitude of creative analytical practice (CAP) ethnography. These ethnographies invite Beauty and Truth, finding them not antagonists, but birds of a feather.

The more frequently CAP ethnographies are published, presented, performed, or installed, the more legitimate they become.

The more legitimate they become, the easier it is for individual social inquirers to represent their understandings of life through their own creative analytical practices and products. The more people do CAP ethnography, the more inviting and welcoming ethnography becomes to people of different cultures and traditions. The more welcoming, the greater the diversity, the more the feathers fly.

CAP ethnographies are not alternative or experimental; they are in and of themselves valid and desirable representations of the social. They display the process and the product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer or the mode of production or the method of knowing.

Into the foreseeable future, CAP ethnographies may indeed be the most valid and desirable representations, for they invite people in and open spaces for thinking about the social that elude us now.

Cap (and CAP) comes from the Latin for head, *caput*. The head is both mind and body and more. Producers of CAP ethnography are using their heads. The products, although mediated throughout the body, cannot manifest without headwork.

Cap—noun (product) and verb (process)—has multiple common and idiomatic meanings and associations, some of which refract the playfulness of the Ethnographic Era: a rounded headcovering; a special headcovering, indicating occupation or membership in a particular group; the top of a building; a fungus; a small explosive charge; any of several sizes of writing paper; putting the final touches on; lying on top of; and surpassing and outdoing. And then there is the other associated words from the Latin root, such as capillary and capital(ism), which humble and contextualize the ethnographic labor.

The practices that produce CAP ethnography are both creative and analytical. Any dinosaurian beliefs that creative and analytical are contradictory and incompatible, are standing in the path of a meteor. They are doomed for extinction. Many ethnographic species have evolved, and diversified during the past quarter century—and there seems to be no end in sight for the proliferation of the new ways. There are many feathers in our CAP.

## FEATHERS

In Australia and Japan, Bronwyn Davies, feminist theorist and educationist, explores how language is implicated in the experience of being in a body in a particular landscape. She studies novels, journals, students' collective memory-work, and environmentalist discourses. Her co-researchers are environmentalists, fiction writers, and university students.

A graduate student in education, who had been a florist, reports her research process to the qualitative seminar. She uses the Japanese art of flower arrangement, Ikebana. Each flower represents a particular aspect of her research. But she is not satisfied with the aesthetics of the flower arrangement; it needs more flowers in the same symbolic places that she needs to do more actual research. The language of the flowers helped her figure out the next step in her research. She can be deeply engaged in her graduate student life without abandoning her earlier interests.

A teacher of high school mathematics writes an ethnographic play about students' statistics anxieties. They perform it. Their test scores improve.

From around the world, a bevy of manuscripts fly to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's *Ethnographic Alternative Series* (AltaVista Press).

Anthropologist Quetzil Castaneda directs a field school in experimental ethnography in Chichen Itza. Participants are those interested in arts, history, theater, Mayan culture, tourism, critical pedagogy, or journalism. In one project, students are trained in English as a second language (ESL); they then provide free English language training to children and adults using invisible theater, experimental ethnography, and critical pedagogy. In a second project, field schoolers collaborate with local artists to produce ethnographic catalogues, video documentation, and on-site art exhibits. A third project, Memory and History, recirculates through displays in public places, archival documents, film footage, photographs, census materials, and unpublished fieldnotes from the archeological reconstruction of Chichen Itza from 1900 to the 1930s; oral histories and responses are elicited.

*Historical Archeology* solicits experimental representations for its journal.

North Dakota sociologist Kathleen Slobin presents the keynote address at the World Literature Conference, having been asked to do so by R. S. Krishnan, a literary theorist.

The novelist Tom Wolfe talks to the National Press Club about his new novel. Wolfe describes his ethnographic research in Atlanta, Georgia. He says that there are similar fascinating sites all over this wonderful country of ours to be similarly researched by American novelists. My husband, a novelist, thinks that Wolfe is prescribing a new brood, "eth-novelists."

At the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Art educator Eliot Eisner proposes that novels be accepted as Ph.D. dissertations in Education.

In Mexico and France, a choreographer teaches the elements of dance to community groups interested in expressing their political ethnographies. She helps them choreograph and stage the representations for diverse audiences. And then they are on their own—equipped with the skills to create more dances, telling more stories.

A visual artist and social scientists (Sandra Menefree, Linda Gammell, and Michel McCall) collaborate with rural women of Minnesota. Meeting in workshops to talk about stereotypes of the farmer's daughter led the women to deconstruct those images and to create new ones. They took photos, collected stereotyping text, and wrote about their lives. The images and texts were mounted in a gallery, then printed as postcards, wrapped in a mailer, and secured with straw. All participants were credited.

In Canada, nonuniversity-affiliated Kathryn Church organizes a museum exhibit as a textural social science inquiry into gender. The exhibit features twenty-three wedding dresses sewn by her mother from 1955 to 1995. Beginning as a home-spun local exhibit in Red Deer, the dresses travel to museums throughout Canada. A biography of Church's mother and interviews with the brides have been published in a Canadian woman's magazine, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has aired a documentary about the project. Church

has a Web site where she collects responses from women about the project. One woman wrote and recorded a song.

## IN

In the midst of all this plenty, we can rejoice that we are bird-watchers and feather gatherers. We can hear new bird songs, new displays. We learn new ways of learning as the birds learn new ways of voicing themselves into the world, or recovering ways that have been suppressed. Curiously, none of these birds lose their old song—the voice of science—any more than students learning a second language lose their first.

## OUR

### Ethnographic Birds

A figment of swans  
A pigment of herons  
A babybrush of juncos  
A flush of flamingos  
A chance of condor  
A branch of jacamar  
A goodness of tern  
A dress of penguin  
A meek of snowbirdies  
A love of dove  
A squack of hawk  
A squeak of rubber duckies  
A stark of martins  
A carton of larks  
A migration of turacos  
A citation of owls  
What a mighty chorus  
Are Us!

Our choices, our calls now, are many. We have many things to consider; we have left the gilded cage. There are two calls I want to make now: writing-stories and criteria for evaluating CAP ethnographies.

Writing-stories—including text, hypertext, dialogues, drawings, dances, and so forth—are narratives about the contexts in which the ethnography is produced. They situate one's writing in other parts of one's life such as disciplinary constraints, academic debates, departmental politics, social movements, community structures, research interests, familial ties, and personal history and longings. They offer critical reflexivity about the writing-self in different contexts as a valuable creative analytical practice. They evoke new questions about the self and the subject; they remind us that our work is grounded, contextual, and rhizomatic. They evoke deep parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance or even alter one's sense of identity. They help demystify the ethnographic process for the upcoming generations of ethnographers. And they nest the projects ethically.

Writing-stories sensitize us to the potential consequences of all of our writing by bringing home—inside our homes and workplaces—the ethics of representation. Writing-stories are not about people and cultures out there—ethnographic subjects (or objects). They are about ourselves—our workplaces, disciplines, friends, self, and family. What can we say? With what consequences? Writing-stories bring the danger and poignancy, the ethics and personal responsibility, of ethnographic representation up close and personal.

Evaluating CAP ethnographies, my second call, is not only raised by a murder of crows, a rafter of turkeys, and a brood of parrots; it is also raised by a buzz of hummingbirds, a flight of chickadees, and a quarry of game hens—good-willed birds who want to know how to advise their flocks.

I believe it is our continuing task to create new criteria for choosing criteria. Days of judgment will not cease in the new millennium. I offer here five criteria as a temporary resting place for us congregations of birds.

1. Substantive contribution. Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply

- grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?
2. Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
  3. Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?
  4. Impact. Does this affect me emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
  5. Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem true—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the real?

Creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified.

### **ENCAGED: A WRITING-STORY**

I do apologize, Dear Reader, for my flights of fancy, but they are how I get through the writing of pedagogically intentioned texts. Normally, I would delete metaphoric excesses, but I will not here, for it seems only seemly that you should see some of the writing-story beneath this text. Perhaps this story resonates with some of your stories.

This article has been difficult for me to write for four main reasons. First, the disciplinary and departmental context in which I now write has shifted tremendously. I have taken early retirement from the sociology department and am teaching in Cultural Studies in Education. Departmental and disciplinary politics which earlier choked me have been virtually eliminated. As my investment in a narrowly defined academic career has

lessened, my investment in living a spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally generative life has increased. Time and energy for these I have, too. I am in a new and easier stage of life. How, then, do I write to people who are beginning to build academic careers or solidify them? Do I try to position myself back in time, or do I write from where I am now?

Second, because of the shift in my life, I wanted to write a marvelous, millennium-setting piece. I would not have another chance. But when I am feeling grandiose, I cannot write because I cannot find the voice within myself that I want to hear. I started the text over and over; I was growing angry, bored, and frustrated. Everything I was writing I had thought or written before. The text was dead—deadening. The way I finally let go of the ego trip was by thinking about all the wonderful CAP ethnography produced by others. My writing began, then, by writing about other people's work.

Third, I usually need a working title, focusing statement, or format to write plain prose; I was searching for these. A half dozen years ago, my sciatica nerve sent shooting pains down my left leg. No medical intervention relieved the pain or the feelings of hopelessness. The only thing that helped was going to the sun porch and watching the birds at the feeders. Who was taking care of whom? The morning I had set aside to find a focus for this article, three bird things happened: a good friend e-mailed me about her new feeder, my husband put out the heated bird-bath, and the newspaper carried a story about the plight of eagles in Ohio. Three things must be a sign. I accepted the bird talk: the others' ethnographies were glorious feathers, and the title fell from the sky, "Feathers in Our CAP"

Fourth, an autoethnographic piece about social class and intellectual elitism was calling to me, my writing heart. Giving into my heart, I decided to finish one section of the autoethnographic piece. Once the section was finished, I turned easily to this *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* piece. I recognize my dynamic: it is like my holiday shopping routine—I get myself a present first and then there is no trouble shopping for the rest of the list. But because I did do the autoethnographic writing, I have come to this text altered. How have my examined and unexamined middle-class origins deeply inflected this work

now? Most of the CAP ethnographies I mentioned have been produced by students and nonacademics, or they substantively focus on marginalized peoples or classes—the birds have not been randomly chosen, but represent geographical diversity, endangered species, common sightings, and service birds. Writing about writing-stories in this article, how can I not reflect upon myself as its writer? And so, I have.

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LAUREL RICHARDSON has multiple attachments to the Ohio State University: professor emerita, Department of Sociology, visiting professor of Cultural Studies, College of Education, and adjunct graduate professor of Women's Studies. Her recent book, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (Rutgers, 1997), has been awarded the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI) Cooley award for the Best Book of 1998. Currently, she is working on socionarratives that reflect the rhizomatic ways through which people reconstruct their biographies.