

Ethnographic Fiction

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Abstract

This essay explores the “novelistic turn” through fictionalized accounts of my fieldwork in a Taoist commune. Eight characteristics of ethnographic fiction are identified, and one way of writing this particular narrative form is described and then illustrated with an excerpt from what could become a monograph or novel about living in the Settled Heart commune with a Chinese man and his followers. The narrative itself may be thought of as an imaginative rendering of personal participant observation in a Taoist commune many years ago. Similar to the way fiction can reveal a great deal about culture and the nature of human interactions, the fictionalized voice of the qualitative researcher can provide valuable cultural and intercultural insights. The ethnographic fiction presented here is an attempt to illustrate the usefulness of this approach for deepening our understanding and appreciation of human communication.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explore ethnographic fiction as a form of scholarly discourse. It is argued that the approach I describe here and the writing it produces can be useful for communication scholars and specialists, and that ethnographic fiction can give us insights into the human experience of meaning-making and the many manifestations of what it means to make meaning. This essay makes a case for these assertions and illustrates how the fictionalized voice of the qualitative researcher can aid our understanding of human communication. Ethnographic fiction can do more than suggest a line of inquiry; it can also meld personal experience, empirical observation, human subjectivity and imagination into narrative kinds of evidence that contribute to what we believe about the communicative dimensions of constituting social worlds.

By “ethnographic fiction” I mean the use of personal ethnography (Crawford, 1996) to evoke the imagination into alternative narrative forms.

Let me begin by sketching two textual positions about personal narrative as scholarship and mention some of the voices of alternative ethnography to partially set the scene for what I have to say about personal ethnography and the place of ethnographic fiction in communication studies.

Two Textual Positions

Carolyn Ellis (1998) gives an autoethnographic response to the question, What counts as scholarship in communication? She does this with three vignettes about stigma—racial stigma, bodily stigma, and the stigma of disability and embarrassment through

association. Ellis believes that showing very particular social phenomena from a personal perspective is legitimate scholarship, and her vignettes are intended to register in the reader how it feels to be stigmatized in the ways she depicts. She wants her audience to “feel the emotion of autoethnography.” She wants to “[b]ring life to research” and “...research to life.”

Ellis reminds us that the personal **is** political. She asserts “that showing the concrete details of a specific life can convey a general way of life” as well, and that “good autoethnography always speaks beyond itself.” She thinks the vulnerable, self-revealing narratives of autoethnographers mitigate the privileged and voyeuristic tendencies of traditional social scientists who believe they can investigate others without being scrutinized themselves.

H. L. Goodall, Jr. (2004) writes about “an unexpected ethnographic turn” (186) he experienced years ago as a successful academic. He describes a malaise, a difficult-to-identify something that was wrong or missing in his day-to-day life, something wrong or missing in being the person he was being. He tells us this life-changing experience was not dramatic because it entailed a gradual process of losing himself in his work. He was experiencing, he writes, “an everyday emptiness that found its fullest expression in the habit of being me” (186).

To investigate this malaise, Goodall applied theories about communication and identity to himself. He asked, “But who was I to me?” As a disciplined writer, a person who sat at his desk every morning to write, Goodall discovered the reason for his disease: he had written himself out of his life. He had become a “third person singular” pleased with his distance from others. His words, his point of view, “could have been authored by an academic anyone” (187).

Goodall’s discovery, his ethnographic turn, was that he could also write himself back into his life. He did this by finding his voice in narrative ethnography—“a cross disciplinary communication project aimed at re-establishing the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge” (187).

Other Voices of Alternative Ethnography

Goodall and Ellis are certainly not alone. There are many ethnographers in the communication discipline writing at the edge of traditional scholarship. The Ethnography Division of the National Communication Association is well-populated with communication specialists who use alternative forms of qualitative writing. More specifically, the books by Ellis (2004), Ellis and Bochner (1996, 2001) and Banks and Banks (1998) showcase some of the researchers who are writing this way and acquaint the reader with a variety of alternative narrative forms for expressing qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, Goodall, Ellis, and Bochner have all been honored for their work a number of times in a variety of ways by communication researchers and writers who appreciate and practice their methods. For example, the tributes to Bochner, Ellis, Nick Trujillo (1993, 1998)—another leading ethnographer in communication studies – published by the American Communication Journal (Goodall, 2003; Rawlins, 2004) brings together a number of these people. And Goodall receiving NCA’s 2003 Gerald M. Phillips Award acknowledges the place of narrative ethnography in communication studies. Ethnographic fiction as presented here resonates well with many of the views and practices of these writer-researchers.

Personal Ethnography

Personal ethnography is story-telling of a special kind. It embodies the “centrality of personal experience and identity” that Goodall (2004, 187) speaks of to depict selected social scenes. It attempts to reveal a larger view through the subjective voice of the narrator. It “epitomizes the reflexive turn” to “(re)present events and other social actors as they are evoked from a changeable and contestable self” into “precarious stories of various truths” (Crawford, 1996, 167-168).

Personal ethnography skillfully done makes the narrator’s story a tale for everyone—“it speaks beyond itself” (Ellis, 1998). The story and the narrator become so central to the telling that they virtually disappear while also remaining fully present to show the more expansive panorama of human interaction and meaning-making. When this happens, a paradox occurs because the text created isn’t about and is only about the narrator simultaneously.

Personal ethnography is merely one of many ways to explore the practices and possibilities of human communication and culture. It can stand on its own or it can complement any investigative protocol. Human beings create and employ an infinite array of strategies to fathom the miracle of consciousness and make day-to-day experiences meaningful, and the stories we tell ourselves and the stories we tell others comprise the essence of personal ethnography and make it fertile ground for expanding what we can say about what we say and deepening what we can feel about what we feel.

Personal ethnography offers change, impermanence, and paradox as fundamental principles of inquiry. It goes in to get out. It looks small to see large. It stays still to experience and report the dynamism of human sense-making. The idea is to reveal the natural rhythm of a place through the voice of the narrator who tells stories about the people who live there. The person who uses personal ethnography acknowledges the subtext of fragility – i.e., impermanence and the absence of inherent existence—that undergirds the multitude of social worlds we create, inhabit, and transform, and marvels at how well we seem to do when it comes to communicating with one another while fully realizing there may be far less understanding than appears to be the case. Mystery and miracle and the imminence of death make the center of personal ethnography (Dalai Lama, 2003; Crawford, 1996).

Personal ethnography is a stepping-stone to ethnographic fiction. Traditional ethnography plus the person becomes personal ethnography. And personal ethnography plus the imagination becomes ethnographic fiction.

The Real Imagination of Ethnographic Fiction

[W]hat the imagination creates becomes the truest reality of the world that we live in. - Carlos Fuentes (Wutz, 2000)

Real imagination refers to imagining-the-real, and imagining-the-real refers to reconstructing and embellishing the memory and other artifacts of personal experience.

Ethnographic fiction is experimental writing. It encompasses a broad range of traditional and alternative text forms. It makes evidence from the lived experiences of the narrator; it also makes evidence out of scenes never seen about people never known. Ethnographic fiction openly questions the veracity of every tale it tells and brings into play a specialized set of criteria for judging the merits of its evidence.

For example, the narrator of ethnographic fiction values non-interference and intrudes as little as possible into the lives of others. Consequently, the methods of inquiry and

the narratives created are as unobtrusive as possible and as harmonious as they can be with the circumstances depicted by the narrator. No claim is ever made to speak for others. Instead, the voice of the narrator attempts to experience, embody, and express the lived-worlds-of-others in a manner that speaks only for itself. One criterion, then, for assessing the effectiveness of ethnographic fiction is the degree of its non-intrusiveness into the context of inquiry. Ideally, ethnographic fiction does not disturb the scene. It does no harm. And harmony is the key.

Another crucial dimension of ethnographic fiction is the nature of the writing itself. Quite often, the writing is the thing. In some cases, it's actually more important for the writing as it is to be lyrical and rhythmical, rather than sensible or empirical. In fact, it's possible for ethnographic fiction to be credible and perfectly persuasive without any reference or connection to the manifest social realities of the physical world. Michael Jackson (1996) writes, "As Lyotard observes, the credibility of any discourse in the postmodern age is not decided by the facts speaking for themselves or by the data *per se*, but by the way facts and data are organized into a narrative" (40).

Ethnographic fiction may be the poetry of communication studies. Figurative language and literary devices such as symmetry, metaphor and alliteration all find a home here. The narrator values spontaneous and unexpected insights and usually doesn't know beforehand what the narrative will say. Ethnographic fiction expresses a unique, poetic, research aesthetic compatible with language-based communication and cultural/critical studies. This poetic aesthetic is another way of assessing the narrative effectiveness of ethnographic fiction.

Simplicity is also an aim of the ethnographic imagination and another way of judging its effectiveness. Human events and relationships can be unbelievably complicated but our stories about them need not be, at least not in the sense of being confusing or misleading. More often than not the most intricate details and nuances of human meaning-making may be rendered or imagined in simple and elegant ways. The rhetorical appeal of a story often relies on its parsimony—a narrative Occam's razor—to be convincing and instructive. Consequently, the creator of ethnographic fiction attempts to explore and express selected features of human communication and culture as simply as possible. The most powerful and transformative stories can also be the most elegant and simplest of tales.

The self-identity of the narrator in ethnographic fiction is another important issue for deciding the merits of a story and the value of what we learn from it. The creator of ethnographic fiction embraces personal experience from the perspective of an unassuming and tenuous self, which means the textual location and voice of the narrator can take many forms. Jackson (1996) writes, "An empirically faithful concept of experience has first to recognize this multifaceted character of the person—the fact that experience of self, or of self in relation to other, is continually adjusted to and modulated by circumstance" (27). So, the multi-faceted nature of self-identity possible in the texts of ethnographic fiction is a central concern that can decisively influence the credibility of a story. Consequently, the personal voice and rhetorical position taken by the narrator in a text of ethnographic fiction is another way to critique the text itself.

How long ethnographic fiction lives in the mind is another indicator of its effectiveness. If a story is memorable it continues to reside in our consciousness and influence our thinking and behavior long after its telling. Memorable stories stay with us and shape the way we see things. Memorable stories are often transformative and capable of working radical

change in the lives of the people who encounter them. Effective ethnographic fiction is memorable—it lives in our minds and changes our lives.

Ethnographic fiction displays the fidelity and coherence of Fisher's (1987) Narrative Paradigm. These forms of verisimilitude can increase the appeal of a story and make it resonate with experiences we know first-hand. Ethnographic fiction taps into the lived-worlds of the people it tells about in a way that may be heard by people who truly want to listen. Ethnographic fiction is grounded in personal experience and evolves in the narrator's imagination into subsequent expressions of a story first-told. But it isn't total fantasy even though the text itself may begin a life of its own and seem far removed from its inception. Instead, a convincing representation of a plausible social scene can shape the story told and identify the narrator as someone who's been there—literally or figuratively—and earned the privilege of telling us about it. So, fidelity and coherence are additional ways to weigh the significance and usefulness of ethnographic fiction.

Ethnographic fiction is unorthodox. Therefore, its unconventional nature may serve as another way of weighing its usefulness and effectiveness as a means of exploring and interpreting the experience of human communication. The experimental quality of ethnographic fiction increases the chances of creating unusual narratives and alternative text forms. But simply being unorthodox is clearly not enough to make a text of ethnographic fiction insightful and convincing. The unconventional nature of a text "works" only if it successfully engages its audience and brings about change, however subtle or manifest. If ethnographic fiction is to find a place as legitimate scholarly discourse it must demonstrate that the unorthodox manner it uses to reveal knowledge about human experience and communication warrants the attention of researchers, teachers, and specialists.

Doubt, perseverance, and patience are also closely associated with the creation of ethnographic fiction. Doubt can be found in the general absence of unqualified statements or assertions that tend to characterize this method of inquiry from start to finish. Paradoxically, this lack of certainty, which many may think flies in the face of acceptable research, might actually be another criterion for evaluating the believability of ethnographic fiction. The creator of ethnographic fiction fully embraces the mysterious nature of human experience and meaning-making, and is hesitant to claim unbiased insights while attempting to understand them. Consequently, the narratives and alternative text forms that emerge from this method of inquiry speak in specific yet qualified ways about selected social scenes and the people who animate them. Although ethnographic fiction can be inductively expanded into more general understandings of human communication and culture, there persistently remains a subtext of doubt informing the stories and tempering the certainty of what they say.

Patience and perseverance are necessary personal qualities for any research endeavor, but they are especially important for the creator of ethnographic fiction. It's hard to imagine "quick and dirty" ethnographic fiction. The depth of immersion necessary to effectively use the imagination and transform personal ethnography into texts of ethnographic fiction essentially precludes a fast and easy way to results. Ethnographic fiction needs to be deeply felt and cognitively solid if it's to be accepted and persuasive. It's very unlikely that there are any shortcuts to narratives that resonate with the reader and add to what we can say about living together and communicating with one another. Therefore, it is probably better for the creator of ethnographic fiction to go slowly and carefully, to be patient and persevere and even give up, perhaps, the idea of contributing to research-oriented literature. Ethnographic fiction can be like a novel never published.

So, from the discussion above we can say that ethnographic fiction is:

- (1) experimental and unorthodox
- (2) non-intrusive and harmonious
- (3) lyrical with a poetic aesthetic
- (4) simple and elegant
- (5) self-identified with multiple textual positions for the narrator
- (6) memorable and alive in our minds
- (7) “true to life” with fidelity and coherence
- (8) cautious and doubtful and requiring perseverance

These characteristics which identify ethnographic fiction may also be used to assess its effectiveness when deciding how the narratives and alternative text forms created with this approach to human communication inquiry measure up as legitimate scholarly discourse.

One Way to Write Ethnographic Fiction

Dao-ren (pseudonym) was a graduate of Peking University in Beijing, China. In 1947, he departed China to study comparative religion at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States of America. He taught at the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California, and he co-founded and directed a Taoist community in Colorado. Dao-ren died in 1985.

I lived in this community for six months, October 1977–March 1978. My dissertation is an ethnography about my experiences there. Dao-ren gave me permission to conduct my study. He knew I was focusing on the communicating that took place in the community. Much of what I wrote about then concerned Dao-ren and the people around him at the time. Years later, he and I made arrangements to record an oral history of his life but he died before we could do this.

Now, roughly 28 years later, I’m rewriting parts of my dissertation as ethnographic fiction. I’m the narrator of my story, and I’m using my imagination to report, embellish and invent what it was like to live with Dao-ren and the people with him during that particular time, in that particular place. In some ways what I’m doing is a little like writing an historical novel only instead of going to the archives and pouring through documents I’m using a single text I’ve already written to write another text, and the story I’m telling is based on personal experience. One purpose of this project is to evoke from the existing text a story that will tell us even more about the people I lived with and give us additional insights, perhaps, into some aspects of popular culture in the United States during the late 1970s.

My approach is simple. I peruse the text and then write what happens.

Sometimes what I write comes directly from what I’ve written. Sometimes I alter a particular passage in the original account by adding something or taking something away. Sometimes I follow a theme suggested by what I’d written before. And sometimes there’s no apparent connection between what I wrote then and what I’m writing now. In all cases, however, the central text, the fundamental narrative that inspires the present story is the ethnography I wrote those many years ago.

I could have started with a careful reading of the entire dissertation before beginning to write the narrative itself. But I’m not doing this. Instead, the organization of what I’m writing emerges from the process of writing it. I’m not scripting anything beforehand. I haven’t blocked out a series of events that will culminate in a predetermined manner. I try to stay out of the way as much as I can and let what comes next be naturally suggested by what came before, and I’m giving priority to the present tense. My experience in the commune still

lives in me and I trust where it takes me. I flip through the pages of what I've written to discover what to write.

I've taken this approach because I'd like what I'm writing now, based on what I wrote then, to be as spontaneous and uninhibited as possible. It's enough, I think, to keep the larger vision in mind—in this case, the creation of convincing and compelling ethnographic fiction—so the details of what happens in the tale being told unfold without too much unnecessary tampering and get said through the narrator in a manner that resonates with the rhythm of human experience. I believe most of us seek ways to live meaningfully in the small spheres of our existences, and I think this was clearly the case for most of the people who came to the commune while I was there. Consequently, I'd like to reveal aspects of what they did to make meaning for themselves and I can do this best, I believe, by not thinking about it too much beforehand.

The narrative sense of this story is hooked to my memory of those times and the manner in which my imagination recalls them when evoked by revisiting what I recorded then about living with Dao-ren and the others. The veracity of what I'm writing now will depend on how well it resonates with the reader, how plausible it seems, how creatively and realistically it appeals. Ethnographic fiction may be a literary way of doing social science.

I'm trying to write dialogue whenever I can. I'd like people to speak with one another so we can surmise the nature of their interpersonal relationships and learn something about the commune's culture from what they say to one another. People on the move encounter each other momentarily. Most of the people who came to the commune while I was there were just passing through. Conversation was an important dimension of community life and recreating some of these conversations animate the story and help it live more vividly in our minds.

To write what I'm writing I quiet myself. I breathe deeply. I close my eyes, and relax my mind, and settle my heart before perusing the original text and approaching the computer keyboard. I think in pictures and sounds and evoke smells and feelings to assemble the words that go with them.

When I close my eyes, I can easily see the meditation room as it was when I lived in the commune. I can smell incense and hear the little chime Dao-ren would sometimes ring while we huddled together to meditate on a cold winter morning. I can feel the blanket I pulled around my shoulders.

If I pause for a moment, I can vividly re-experience the feel of a hot cup of tea in my hands while we had breakfast together in the kitchen.

I can remember walking on the mountain and warming myself afterwards in the sauna downstairs.

I can hear snatches of conversation drifting into my room.

I can feel the sun on my face in the little library upstairs.

I can see trees standing stark in the snow.

I can hear rain against the windows.

I can see Dao-ren standing outside the main house, smiling and waving good-bye.

And sometimes I ring a little chime and pretend that I'm living there still—to write what I'm writing.

Now that we have a sense of what I think characterizes ethnographic fiction and one way of writing it, let's consider a sample of this alternative narrative form. Presently, January

2006, I'm roughly 42,000 words into ethnographic fiction about living with Dao-ren and his followers. Here is how it begins.

Living in a Taoist Commune 1977-1978

The main house is first seen from the road below—a white, wood frame building of moderate size, set on a mountainside, overlooking a populated valley. The paved road from town turns to dirt and becomes quite steep before passing a small parking lot for the compound; a few hundred feet farther it ends and a trail to the summit begins. Just outside a small porch at one of the entrances to the main house, not far from the parking area, hangs a handmade sign on a post-like piece of driftwood. It reads “Settled Heart”—the community’s name.

When I knock, there is no answer. The compound of what was once a private school for girls seems deserted. I wander around. I investigate different buildings. I go up and down stairs. I look in empty rooms. I sit in a messy open space outside and notice debris piled under the porch of the main house, the largest building on the compound. Dust devils appear in the wind.

It’s now late afternoon. The compound is still deserted. The chill of mountain air begins to settle over me. I’m thirsty.

Surely, people live here. There is clear evidence of human life, recent evidence. Not quite food cooking on the stove, perhaps, but almost—dirty clothes on a sleeping mat in a disheveled room, wet towels near a bathtub, a burning candle left dangerously unattended. A time or two there are sounds, maybe human sounds. The place has the feel of ghosts.

Daylight is fading. It’s getting colder. I find a sweatshirt in my backpack and put it on. I also take out my well-worn and water-stained copy of the Tao Te Ching.

Who can wait quietly while the mud settles?

Who can remain still until the moment of action?

Observers of the Tao do not seek fulfillment.

Not seeking fulfillment, they are not swayed by desire for change. (Feng & English, 1972, Chapter 15)

Darkness is moving in now. A favorite time of the day when the fading light gives a special cast to everything, a luminal never-never time for imaginative sights and sounds.

My first day on the compound and no one is here.

Suddenly, he comes out of the gathering darkness, skin shining, eyes gleaming, and face smiling. He’s been walking on the mountain.

“I walk on the mountain every afternoon after lunch until just before dark,” he announces, looking at me carefully as though sizing me up.

His name is Dao-ren. He is a diminutive Chinese man and he is the leader of the Settled Heart commune.

“I don’t eat an evening meal,” he says.

A sudden gust of wind blows something into my eye. Dao-ren watches me with a hint of amusement while I try to blink it out.

“A little tea, perhaps, and a hot bath and then I go to bed just after dark,” he adds.

I’m still trying to get whatever it is out of my eye. Dao-ren looks a little blurry to me.

“Go into the house and rinse your eye,” he suggests, and I turn to start for the house.

“Stay for a while,” he calls after me. “You might like it here!” and then he’s gone just as quickly as he appeared.

It is fully dark now. Lights come on in some of the buildings on the compound. Other members of the commune begin to materialize. I wander into the kitchen of the main building where I find a small group of people cradling cups of tea and talking quietly. They glance in my direction while their conversation continues. I wash a grain of sand from my eye at one of the kitchen sinks and make a cup of tea. One of them shifts so I can sit down.

I soon realize I am seated with Dao-ren's closest followers. While others come and go these six commune members consider Dao-ren their teacher. Everyone seems guarded but friendly. I learn from them that it is common for people to come to the gate of Settled Heart—typically attracted by Dao-ren's reputation as a translator of the Tao Te Ching and the "Inner Chapters" of the Chuang Tsu – and so Dao-ren's closest followers have learned how to be collectively casual in their dealings with strangers by not appearing especially eager that they linger or unnecessarily distant so they leave.

The six sitting at the table—Edward, Kristaline, Betty, Carlton, Mathew, and Tom—talk about an incident that happened during meditation that morning. I listen quietly.

"I liked meditation this morning," Kristaline says. "It was difficult for me, but I felt understood by Dao-ren."

Betty gives a quick description of what happened, apparently for my benefit. She describes Kristaline's account of a remarkable five-day relationship with a man who owns and operates a pre-school during a recent visit to New York City. Betty reiterates Kristaline's remark that there was nothing "sticky" about their time together, how she had felt complete and energized while she was with this man and how, when it was time to leave, she cried—something she had never done before when it was time to leave a relationship.

Kristaline is silent while Betty is telling us this.

Betty concludes her recap of this episode with Kristaline's realization that she doesn't really have any friends at Settled Heart and that she has felt "all blocked up" since her return to the commune.

At this point, Kristaline interjects Dao-ren's remarks that she was seeing herself in the five-day relationship with this man in New York, and that sex and spiritual matters seem to get all mixed up somehow.

Betty adds that when meditation ended, Kristaline stayed on her cushion while others left the meditation room, except for Betty who had gone to where Kristaline was quietly sobbing and embraced her.

"We need more women around here!" Edward exclaims, getting up to make another cup of tea.

No one made any effort to include me in this conversation. They didn't look at me or ask me what I thought. But I felt included all the same. Simply sitting and sipping tea with these newly met people while they talked about this incident was enjoyable. And, if nothing else, I learned that meditation at Settled Heart is probably quite different from my preconceived ideas.

Edward returns with his tea. The rest of us are sitting with empty cups.

"Dao-ren said I can stay," I announce a little self-consciously. Everyone nods acknowledgment.

"He usually doesn't turn people away when they first arrive," Tom says. "Wait until morning meditation tomorrow. This is when he usually kicks people out. So, you're good for at least one morning meditation," he adds with a smile.

“Dao-ren doesn’t seem like the sort of person who would kick people out,” I reply. “When I encountered him just a little while ago, he was all friendly and smiling.”

“He had just come off the mountain,” Betty says. “He’s typically in good spirits then. But his moods change, sometimes rather drastically. He’s really quite unpredictable. Those of us who have been with him the longest probably know him the best but he can still surprise even us with his shenanigans.” Betty pauses here as though she is picturing one of Dao-ren’s surprises. The others appear to be doing the same and it is quiet in the kitchen for several minutes.

“Four o’clock in the morning comes early,” Edward says, as he gets up and rinses his teacup at the sink. The others stand as well and make ready to leave the kitchen. This disappoints me a little because I thought we were about to settle into an evening of conversation about Dao-ren and Settled Heart and other related matters. I want to learn more about the people at the table with me. I’d like to get a sense of this commune and the people comprising it as quickly as possible, but then I realize I’m being impatient. Better to relax into my present circumstances and experience this place as it unfolds moment-to-moment. After all, there isn’t anywhere I have to be. There isn’t anything I have to do. And there is no one I have to be with. So, staying here for a while seems the perfect thing to do.

“You can put your sleeping bag over there,” Tom says, motioning toward a low, wood platform area adjacent to the kitchen. A rather public place to sleep, I think, as I roll out my sleeping bag. Dao-ren’s closest followers have rooms of their own near where he sleeps on the second floor of the main house.

I use one of the toilets on the first floor and slide into my sleeping bag. Now the compound seems deserted in a different way and it is very quiet once again. Sleep comes easily.

I don’t have to wait long to see Dao-ren kick someone off the compound. It happens my second day here in the kitchen during breakfast, right after morning meditation and t’ai chi.

Harold, a frequent visitor to the commune, brings a friend with him for morning meditation and breakfast. While people are milling about the kitchen preparing and eating their food, Dao-ren questions Harold’s friend about family background and other personal matters. Eventually, his questioning turns to religion. Harold’s friend lets it be known that he is deeply involved with religiously sponsored work in Bolivia. His references to “god” and his use of the word “divine” angers Dao-ren. Suddenly, he’s shouting at Harold’s friend.

“Your religion and the work you are doing in Bolivia is bullshit!” Dao-ren yells.

Harold’s friend stands passively near one of the two electric stoves in the kitchen.

“Your religion and the work you are doing is bullshit that stands between you and reality! You are nothing but a ‘do-gooder’ fucking up people in Bolivia the way I saw missionaries fucking up people in China!” Dao-ren screams.

Harold’s friend seems a little unnerved by Dao-ren’s outburst, but he continues to stand quietly by the stove. At this point, the only visible sign that he may be uncomfortable is a little less color in his face.

Dao-ren circles the stoves in a pacing-like fashion, pausing now and then to take food or sip tea. His gesturing is minimal even while his yelling or screaming is its most intense. And his gaze is normally averted; rarely does he look directly at Harold’s friend. Dao-ren’s profanity is generous, especially favored phrases like “goddamn, son-of-a-bitch” and “scum of the earth.”

Dao-ren continues shouting at Harold's friend.

"You are the worst kind of 'ugly American' imaginable! Your idea of 'serving mankind' is fucked!"

Dao-ren labels Harold's friend "psychotic."

"You are the most 'sick' American I have ever encountered!" Dao-ren screams, his voice cracking. "You should come to Settled Heart and get well! Talking with you is like talking with a 13-year-old!" he shrieks in a high-pitched voice that has gone hoarse from the intensity of his screaming.

Dao-ren's ranting is interspersed with quiet conversation. During these interludes Harold's friend speaks softly and evenly, but the effort of doing so becomes apparent as Dao-ren's abusiveness continues. For instance, he tells Dao-ren how he has been taught that in an argument both people are "wrong." He appreciates, he says, with a slight tremor in his voice, Dao-ren's right to express his beliefs, but he doesn't agree with him.

"You will long remember this conversation," Dao-ren responds.

Harold's friend disagrees. "I doubt this will be the case," he says. A few minutes later he tells Dao-ren that he does not "respect" him.

Dao-ren appears to go crazy. He becomes totally enraged—completely out of control.

"Get outta here!" Dao-ren screams. "Go out the door right now!!!"

Harold's friend exits while Dao-ren continues to order him out and shout his customary abuses. Harold follows immediately behind his friend. When they are gone, Dao-ren tells us that if Harold's friend has no respect for him, then he will respond in kind. Dao-ren also says that he behaves this way to liven things up.

The "seasoned six" or "inner circle," as I have come to think of them, all take Dao-ren's verbal abusiveness with Harold's friend completely in stride. Apparently, outbursts of this sort are quite typical and nothing to get excited about.

"If you've been around Dao-ren long enough," Betty says, "you're less likely to be shocked or unsettled by his behavior." Everyone in the kitchen is listening to Betty. "Face it," she says, "Dao-ren can be totally outrageous! He quite often does the unexpected like the time he stroked a willing visitor's vagina while her boyfriend looked on and seethed."

Dao-ren seems pleased with Betty's comments.

I infer from Betty's remarks and early impressions of community life, that Dao-ren's outbursts may even possess a theatrical quality for those who know him well. When he launches into one of his tirades, when he takes up one of his streams of profanity, the phrases are so repetitious and well-known that they become a form of entertainment for the experienced members of the commune.

Persons new to Settled Heart and Dao-ren's ways respond quite differently, however. Looking around the kitchen after Harold and his friend have departed, it is Rupert and Kristoff, recently arrived from Germany, who appear most affected by Dao-ren's treatment of Harold's friend. When Rupert and I exchange glances, he opens his eyes wide and rolls them while he rinses his eating utensils at the sink. Kristoff gives the impression of being disturbed by what he has witnessed. He sits quietly, withdrawn, and seemingly reluctant to lift his eyes from their focus on the floor.

Quite another response to this incident is a favorable one expressed by the teenager son of an actor friend of Dao-ren's. As Betty prepares to drive him to town where he will board the 9 a.m. bus to Los Angeles after being a resident of Settled Heart for 15 days, he tells her how much he liked the way Dao-ren "gave it to that Christian missionary." Betty replies

that it was his “going away present” from Dao-ren. As we leave the compound for town – I’m just tagging along for the ride–Dao-ren is standing in the open area below the main house, waving and smiling broadly.

Dao-ren’s combative behavior might seem incompatible with the quietist themes of philosophical Taoism. Back from town, alone in the kitchen of the main house, I turn the pages of the Tao Te Ching, stopping here and there to read passages.

Stillness and tranquility set things in order in the universe. (Chapter 45)

Good men do not argue.

Those who argue are not good. (Chapter 81)

The hard and strong will fall.

The soft and weak will overcome. (Chapter 76)

What others teach, I also teach; that is:

‘A violent man will die a violent death!’ (Chapter 42)

Become as a little child once more. (Chapter 28)

Quiet. The compound is quiet. Apart from the hum of two large refrigerators in the kitchen, I hear very little else. It’s as if Dao-ren’s closest followers are providing balance to his morning tirade, as if they are complementing the appropriateness of it and expressing its natural counterpoint.

I learn that the time between breakfast and lunch is personal time when members of the commune see to individual matters such as reading and study, journal and letter writing, cleaning and doing laundry; it is also solitary time for reflection and contemplation. Before his tirade, Dao-ren mentions going to his study in the main house every morning after breakfast to work on his translation of a Chinese classic he does not name. Dao-ren’s closest followers appear to follow his lead and retreat to their rooms – nuns and monks sequestered in their cells... .

Closing Comments

The case for ethnographic fiction is not an argument for the use or creation of literature to conduct communication inquiry. The “novelistic turn” does not mean writing novels in the typical sense, although I’m reasonably sure novelists use ethnographic methods and ethnographic fiction certainly relies on the methods of a writer. Ethnographic fiction springs from a keen interest in human sense-making; it focuses on human acts of making meaning in socially constructed contexts. And it evolves from traditional ethnographic research through a process progressively novelistic in nature. Scholarship is the origin and culmination of ethnographic fiction. (For an illustration of the scholarly value of fictional accounts, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell [2005].) Ethnographic fiction fleshes out this origin, this scholarship, with personal experience and imagination to culminate in stories about human beings making meanings in their worlds.

In the end, what may matter most is that we learn something from our endeavors and the evidence of ethnographic fiction helps us do this. Granted, it’s quite possible we learn most about the narrator. Fiction in its purest form, perhaps – the truest fiction of all.

But more than this, the evidence of ethnographic fiction is especially useful for learning of a particular kind – learning concerned with refining ourselves as human beings, learning that addresses the whole person, learning that thrives on the vagaries of human experience while also trying to comprehend and express the uncertainties and ambiguities of human meaning-making, learning that values peace of mind–the sort of learning that happens,

perhaps, when we become available to alternative methods of academic research and writing and use our imaginations to do research and writing of our own. The kind of learning Lao Tsu may have been alluding to when he counseled us to “Give up learning, and put an end to [our] troubles” (Feng & English, 1972, Chapter 20).

And so I have tried to illustrate here that the evidence of ethnographic fiction can help us fathom the miracles and mysteries of human communication and, consequently, contribute to communication studies as a useful form of scholarship.

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