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Skirting a Pleated Text

De-Disciplining an Academic Life

Laurel Richardson

Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life (Richardson, 1997) is the story of a woman's struggles in academia in the context of contemporary intellectual debates about entrenched authority, disciplinary boundaries, writing genres, and the ethics and politics of social scientific inquiry and presentation. The woman is myself, the story, an embodiment of these issues. I hope the story resonates with those who are struggling to make sense of their lives in academia.

I believe that writing is both a theoretical and a practical process through which we can (a) reveal epistemological assumptions, (b) discover grounds for questioning received scripts and hegemonic ideals—both those within the academy and those incorporated within ourselves, (c) find ways to change those scripts, (d) connect to others and form community, and (e) nurture our emergent selves.

Applying my theoretical understandings to sociological writing, I asked, How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become? In answering these

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questions, I found that if I were to write the Self into being that I wanted to be, I would have to “de-discipline” my academic life.

What practices support our writing and develop a care for the self despite conflict and marginalization? What is (are) the ethical subject’s relation(s) to research practices? And what about the integration of academic interests, social concerns, emotional needs, and spiritual connectedness?

Fields of Play explores these issues through what I call a pleated text, traditional and experimental papers written over a period of 10 years folded between what I call “writing-stories”—about the contexts in which I wrote those papers. The pleats can be spread open at any point, folded back, unfurled.

Framing academic essays in writing-stories displaced the boundaries between the genres of selected writings and autobiography, “repositioning them as convergent genres that, when intertwined, create new ways of reading/writing.” These ways are more congruent with poststructural understandings of how knowledge is contextually situated, local, and partial. At the beginning, the book, the writing-story, is a personal story, framing the academic work. As the book progresses, distinctions between the “personal” and the “academic” become less clear. The last essay, “Vespers,” stands in a section by itself, simultaneously a writing-story and a sociology-story, though I do not name a single sociological concept. In the genre of convergence, neither “work” nor “Self” is denied.

The present chapter is a (very) partial-story about the construction of *Fields of Play* and how writing it has changed me. I skirt around the text but enter one of its pleats: departmental politics as one context for writing and as a site of discipline. I provide three examples of departmental politics: (a) an excerpt from a writing-story about my own department; (b) the first act of a surrealist drama about a surreal, yet real, sociology department; and (c) an excerpt from a multivoiced text, which builds community across departments and academic status. The three examples span a decade. They are not a narrative of progress.

We are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us. Carolyn Heilbrun (1998) suggests that we do not imitate lives, we live “story lines.” To the extent that our lives are tied to our disciplines, our ability to construct ourselves in other stories will depend on how the discipline can be deconstructed. The social scientific disciplines’ story line includes telling writers to suppress their own voices, adopt the all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy, and keep their mouths shut about academic in-house politics. But contemporary philosophical thought raises problems that exceed and undermine that academic story line. We are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves. We are always

writing in particular contexts—contexts that affect what and how we write and who we become. Power relationships are always present.

“Authority”

I began *Fields of Play* with a writing-story called “Authority.” Here is an excerpt:

I begin this collection, and my reflections on it, at the time when I found a different way of “playing the field,” of exploring its boundaries and possibilities, and my life within it. This was the mid-1980s. No more children living at home; no major medical or family crises; a husband who liked to cook; friends; completion of a major research project and book tour; academic sinecure; and severe marginalization within my sociology department, which relieved me of committee work and of caring about outcomes. For the first time in my adult life, I had free time, playtime, time I could ethically and practically call “mine.”

Like a medieval warlord who executes or banishes all who might pose a threat to his absolute authority, my newly appointed department chair deposed the three other contenders for the position, all men, from their “fiefdoms,” their committee chairships. He stonewalled written complaints or queries. He prohibited public disagreement by eliminating discussion at faculty meetings. He abolished one of the two committees I chaired, the “Planning Committee,” a site of open dialogue. He restricted the departmental Affirmative Action Committee’s province, which I also chaired, to undergraduate enrollments. I publicly disagreed with him on his new affirmative action policy. Then, at the first university Affirmative Action Awards dinner, where I was being honored, surrounded by top university administration, my face making a face, repulsed, I shrugged his arm off from around my shoulder.

The chair hired a consultant, a well-known functionalist, to review faculty vitae. The consultant declared me “promising”—the chair told me as one might tell a student, not the full professor I was—but the consultant had also declared “gender research” a “fad.” The chair advised me to return to medical sociology, a field I was “in” during a one-year postdoctorate, ten years earlier. Research it, teach it, he advised, teach it now, at the graduate level. He may have already had me down to do it. He discarded ten years of my research, teaching, and service, it seemed. I told him I strongly disagreed with his plans for my academic future. Perhaps it was only coincidental that sometime later that same year at the annual departmental banquet, hitherto a lighthearted gathering of colleagues and friends, the visiting consultant, now hired as an after-dinner speaker, lectured for an hour about why people, in the interests of smooth institutional functioning, should yield to authority.

I was on quarter break, out of town, when the department chair’s secretary called to tell me that the chair had added an extra undergraduate course to my

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teaching schedule for the next quarter, a week away. My stomach cramped in severe pain. No, I said, I absolutely will not accept this assignment. I was adamant, unyielding. I telephoned the new dean, a sociologist and putative feminist, who would soon be elevated to provost. Her “best advice” to me—on this and subsequent matters—was to “roll over.” I refused. She then taught the course herself, in my place. Rather than pull rank on the chair, a man, she modeled “rolling over.” It was a course on the sociology of women.

I felt no gratitude to her. I had wanted protection, for my colleagues as well as for myself, from a chair’s punitive and arbitrary actions. Instead, she presented herself in my place, as the sacrificial lamb. The clear message, it seemed to me, was that if she, the dean of the college, was willing to sacrifice herself, so should we all. Her action legitimated the chair’s right to do anything he wanted.

My new chair was empowered to micromanage all aspects of “his” department’s life, even to the point of dictating a senior colleague’s intellectual life. Any refusal to “roll over” precipitated punitive action in salary, in what one could teach and when, in virtual exile to Coventry. Thus in the mid-1980s, I experienced what has, by the mid-1990s, become an experience common to faculty members of American colleges and universities: “Total Quality Management” in pursuit of “Excellence.”

Many departmental colleagues understood that, like the chair’s previously conquered opponents, I had become dangerous to associate with, dangerous to even know. In their minds I had brought it upon myself, which of course I had. As I write these paragraphs, my stomach swells and hurts just as it did then. (Richardson, 1997, pp. 9–11)

In the mid-1980s, not only did departmental life surprise me; so, too, did the theoretical concepts of feminist poststructuralism—reflexivity, authority, authorship, subjectivity, power, language, ethics, and representation. Soon, I was challenging the grounds of my own and others’ authority and raising ethical questions about my own practices as a sociologist.

Experimenting with textual form, I wrote sociology as drama, responsive readings, narrative poetry, pagan ritual, lyrical poetry, prose poems, humor, and autobiography. Experimenting with content, I wrote about narrative, science writing, literary devices, fact/fiction, and ethics. Experimenting with voice, I coauthored with a fiction writer, played second theorist to a junior scholar, turned colleagues’ words into dramas. Experimenting with frame, I invited others into my texts, eliding the oral and the written, constructing performance pieces, creating theater. Troubled with the ethical issues of doing research “on” others, I wrote about my own life. I did unto myself as I had done unto others. And, troubled by academic institutions, I began to discover more agreeable pedagogical and writing practices and alternative community-building sites.

I experimented with three interrelated questions: (a) How does the way we are supposed to write up our findings become an unexamined trope in our

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claims to authoritative knowledge? (b) What might we learn about our “data” if we stage it in different writing formats? and (c) What other audiences might we be able to reach if we step outside the conventions of social scientific writing?

My intentions then—and now—have never been to dismiss social scientific writing, but rather to examine it. My intentions then—and now—have never been to reject social scientific writing, but rather to enlarge the field through other representational forms.

By the mid-1980s, I could no longer write in science’s omniscient Voice from Nowhere. Responding to the long-suppressed poet within, I wrote up an in-depth interview with an unwed mother, “Louisa May,” as a five-page poem, adhering to both social scientific and literary protocols. A poem as “findings” was not well received at my sociology meetings; I was accused of fabricating Louisa May and/or of being her, among other things. To deal with the assault, I wrote a realist drama about it from my (very accurate, non-fabricated, easily-checked-for-reliability) “field notes” taken at the meeting. In 1993, with the assault warming up in my home department, I decided to write a surreal drama—“Educational Birds”—about my life in academia. Surreal seemed appropriately isomorphic to the real.



ACT I FROM THE ETHNODRAMA “EDUCATIONAL BIRDS”

(Scene One: It is a chilly September afternoon in a sociology department chair’s office. The walls are catacomb drab; there are no mementos, pictures, or plants in the room. Seated at one end of a large conference table are two women: a department chair with her back to the windows, and full Professor Z. looking out to the silent gray day.)

CHAIR: I’ve been reading your work, because of salary reviews—

PROFESSOR Z.: —

CHAIR: You write very well.

PROFESSOR Z.: —

CHAIR: But is it Sociology?

PROFESSOR Z.: —

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(Scene Two: On leaving the department office, Professor Z. sees Visiting Professor M. at the drinking fountain. The pipes are lead. The university says it's not a problem if you let the water run. Professor M. is letting the water run into his coffee maker. His hair is flat, plastering his head; he's heavy-looking, somber, wearing worn blue pants and a stretched-out dun cardigan, hanging loosely to his mid-thighs. Not the eager Harvard man hired a year ago.)

PROFESSOR Z.: Looks like you've acclimated.

(Scene Three: It is an overcast November noon at the Faculty Club. Pictures of deceased faculty, men in drab suits, line the room; wrought-iron bars secure the windows. Professor Z. and assistant Professor Q., whose five-author paper "Longitudinal Effects of East to Midwest Migration on Employment Outcomes: A Log-Linear Analysis" has made her a member of the salary committee, are having lunch.)

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR Q.: Everyone says, "You write very well."

PROFESSOR Z.: Is that a compliment?

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR Q.: "But is it Sociology?"

(Scene Four: A cold and dismal January afternoon in the sociology seminar room. During one of the department's "reconstruction" phases, the oak conference table was disassembled and the legs lost. Without a leg to stand on, it lies, in pieces, at the far end of the room next to discarded computer equipment. The wallpaper is flaking away like mummy wrappings. Assembled are the new graduate students, the graduate chair, and the department chair. The new students are being taught how to teach.)

NEW GRADUATE STUDENT: *(Addressing the department chair)* Can you tell us about the worst undergraduate sociology class you ever took?

DEPARTMENT CHAIR: Yes. The worst course was one where the professor read a poem.

GRADUATE STUDENTS: —

DEPARTMENT CHAIR: What a waste of time! (Richardson, 1997, p. 197)



The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed, and because the life is not yet over. But

the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another's life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started, and knowing "the place for the first time."

My fears for this "place"—academia—had grown over the course of writing the book. Over the decade, academia had become increasingly inhospitable to those who would change it and to those who are most vulnerable—graduate students. In the penultimate paper in *Fields*, I wanted to link the embodiedness of scholarship across generations, disciplines, and theoretical positions. I wanted the book to include the voices of graduate students in different sociology departments, to link my story with their stories, to write a new collective story. I wrote "Are You My Alma Mater?" as the vehicle.

"Are You My Alma Mater?"

New mines have been set. As in real war fields, the young, inexperienced, and adventurous are the most vulnerable to detonations. Graduate students. Four examples have passed over my desk in the past two weeks. On a feminist e-mail list came this request from a first-year graduate student:

My department has been having a series of "feminist epistemology" debates . . . The anger/hostility/backlash/defensiveness in some of the faculty and the increasing alienation and marginalization of feminist (and students pursuing critical race theory) students is troublesome to me (one of the disenchanted grad students). When I raised my concern, it was suggested that I organize the next seminar. While I am not altogether sure this is a responsibility I want, I am wondering if any of you have had successful . . . forums which address hostilities within the discipline/departments yet does not increase those hostilities or place less powerful people (untenured faculty or graduate students) at greater risk . . . Please reply to me privately.

When I asked the student for permission to quote her e-mail, she asked for anonymity:

It drives me crazy that I have to be afraid to even speak, but it is realistic. Actually, even posting to [the listserv] made me nervous, but I can't think of other ways of accessing resources beyond my pathetic institution.

Another graduate student, Eric Mykhalovsky (1996), writes about what happened to him when he used an autobiographical perspective in the practice of sociology. Changing his "I" to "you," he writes in *Qualitative Sociology*,

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During a phone call “home” you hear that your application for doctoral studies has been rejected. Your stomach drops. You are in shock, disbelief. When doing your M.A. you were talked about as a “top” student. . . . Later you receive a fax giving an “official account” of your rejection. Your disapproval, it seems, was based on reviewers’ reservations with the writing samples submitted as part of your application. One evaluator, in particular, considered your article, “Table Talk,” to be a “self-indulgent, informal biography—lacking in accountability to its subject matter.” You feel a sense of self-betrayal. You suspected “Table Talk” might have had something to do with the rejection. It was an experimental piece, not like other sociological writing—YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER!

Slowly self-indulgence as assessment slips over the text to name you. You begin to doubt yourself—are you really self-indulgent? The committee’s rejection of your autobiographical text soon feels, in a very painful way, a rejection of you. All the while you buy into the admission committee’s implicit assessment of your work as not properly sociological. (pp. 133–134)

Third, in a personal letter requesting advice on whether to apply to my university, a lesbian graduate student from another university recounts,

I cannot do the research I want to and stay here. The department wants to monitor how many lesbians they let in because they’re afraid that gender will be taken over by lesbians. I’ll be allowed to do gender here if I do it as part of the “social stratification” concentration, but not if I want to write about lesbian identity construction or work from a queer studies perspective.

And fourth, there are documents on my desk pertaining to a required graduate seminar, in a famous department, on how to teach sociology. In that seminar, according to the documents, a non-American student of color questioned the white male professor’s Eurocentrism. Following a heated dispute, the professor provided a statistical count of the racial distribution of students in undergraduate classes—80 percent are white. The professor, then, putatively said that instructors cannot afford to alienate students by teaching multiculturalism; that professors are uncomfortable teaching multiculturalism “crap”; that the student raising these issues could “go to hell”; and that white heterosexual males were being discriminated against. When the student of color complained to the department administrators, they proposed he “voluntarily” withdraw from the class. The department administrators (including another new chair) later attended the seminar, supported the syllabus, and sidestepped discussion of the race-based issues. The professor apologized to the seminar for breaking his own code of proper behavior in the classroom, but he apparently had not grasped the import of postcolonialism. He was modeling his teaching model.

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As a result, at least one graduate student has chosen to go elsewhere for the Ph.D. The student sent an e-mail to all faculty, staff, and graduate students to avert “idle speculation” regarding the reasons for departure:

It has disgusted, saddened and enraged me that this department has chosen to ignore and avoid the serious occurrences of racism going on within it. Instead of admitting to these problems and dealing with them, the department has used its institutional power to scapegoat, marginalize and penalize individuals who dare to challenge its racist structure. Then those in power go back to their computer screens to study race as a dummy variable, not even realizing that a sociological process called *racism* is happening in their midst. . . . Students are advised to study social movements, not participate in them. . . . [H]ere racism is not considered real sociology, as evidenced by students having to start “extracurricular” groups to do reading on postmodernist or Afrocentric thought.

I am leaving because, while I respect, learn and appreciate the importance of things like demography and statistics, the same appreciation and respect is not offered here to other areas of sociology which are very influential in the field, and institutional power is used to prevent students from learning about them.

I sincerely hope that the prospect of losing more talented students, especially those who are students of color (who are not leaving because they “can’t handle it [statistics courses],”) will compel this department to reevaluate its capacity to serve its students of diverse backgrounds and interests more effectively. My career just didn’t have time to wait for all that to happen.

Feminist epistemology, autobiographical sociology, queer studies, and Afrocentric and postcolonial perspectives are apparently so dangerous that the graduate students who have been exposed to these plagues must be quarantined, invalidated, or expelled from the university nest. Graduate students are “terminated” lest they reproduce themselves. (Richardson, 1997, pp. 208–213)

As I pause in the writing of this paper, wondering what to write next, the UPS man delivers an advance shipment copy of *Fields of Play*. The production editor’s note says, “Congratulations” and “Thanks for all your cooperation along the way; I hope you’re as pleased as we are with the final result.”

The final result for the production editor is the book, I think. But what is it for me? What have been the consequences of the book’s feminist-poststructuralist practices? How have I changed?

For starters, I have taken early retirement from my “home” sociology department. I have left it physically and emotionally. As a shaman might say, I have called my spirit back; the place no longer has power over me. I go into the building and do not feel alienated. Sometimes, I sing while I am there.

Leaving my department, however, has not meant leaving the sociological perspective, the academy, or professional associations. I teach qualitative methods to Ph.D. students in the Cultural Studies program in Educational Policy and Leadership at Ohio State University. There, I find a positive commitment to qualitative research among the faculty and the graduate students. I visit universities and colleges, teach, lecture, present at conferences, write handbook chapters and sociology articles, edit a feminist reader, and serve on editorial boards. My professional life is full and nurturing, having let go of that which I did not value.

Indeed, I have let many things go.

In 1985, while working on a book that I was tired of working on, I cross-stitched into a sampler the aphorism: "I finish what I start." I put the sampler over my computer so I could read the affirmation over and over again, and I finished the book, as I have most things I start. My persistence has been a point of pride.

But, now, as I apply poststructural understandings of temporality to my life and work, my ideas of "start" and "finish" have changed. When does a project start? When is it finished? Says who? Now, I find I can put projects aside, perhaps never to return to them purposively, but never to be away from them either; they remain as traces in that which I do.

The sampler I have moved to the living room; metaphorically, that seems apt. In its place on the wall, I have a picture of my flapper mother wearing a kid leather cloche and fox coat, holding my sister—then 7 months; now 70 years. When does a project start? When is it finished?

And my writing. Oh, how I value my writing time. I understand autobiographical writing as a feminist practice. It is how I both center myself and connect to others. The last essay in *Fields of Play*, "Vespers," is an account of how an experience at a vespers service when I was 8 shaped my relationships to my parents and to my academic work; it is a forgiveness story. Others have told me it resonates with their lives. A new essay, "Paradigms Lost" (in press), recounts a car accident and a coma. It is a recovery story. Only now—25 years after the accident—am I able to tell that story, and only, I think, because I have accepted writing as a process of discovery, and writing autobiographically as a feminist-sociological praxis. "Jeopardy" and "Meta-Jeopardy" (in press) narrativize some of my experiences with parenting and grandparenting. In the next few years, I plan to write more of these essays, structured rhizomatically, the way my life is experienced—lines of flight; whirling, whirling skirts of pleated texts. A surprisingly surprising de-disciplined life . . .

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