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Plotlessness, Ethnography, Ethology: Play

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Abstract

The authors of this article hail from perhaps disparate fields of biology and cultural studies. The authors use ethnography and ethology, which have offered parallel modernist responses to the challenge posed by Otherness, as touchstones for exploring modernist responses to the theories/methods of the research texts that are produced and performed in their respective disciplines; for example, ethnography typically promises a supreme moment of insight, an intellectual epiphany, when the trained ethnographer's patient and painstaking field work finally cracks the code of the alien culture to reveal the philosophical and metaphysical essence that constitutes that culture's previously baffling Otherness. Similarly, field studies of animal behavior promise a royal road to the *Umwelten* (encompassing worlds, milieux) of natures and cultures far more alien and "Other" than even the most exotic forms of the human condition. The article highlights that scholars in 20th-century ethnography—and, to a lesser extent, ethology—began to question these philosophical and methodological bases and that by the beginning of the 21st century, their criticisms and answers to such dilemmas sparked a range of interrelated responses, which the article briefly overviews: epistemological decentering and recontextualizing of inquiry; illumination of the tensions between, and experimentation with traditional and avant-garde rhetorical, statistical, evidence-based, performance and literary forms necessary for presentation of research; and return to and/or finer articulation of the goals of ethology and ethnography. Within these responses the authors are particularly interested in understanding "plotlessness," a concept that emerges from recent ethnographic and ethological investigations of "Other-ology" but that is rarely dissected in ethnography. The authors further explore and refine the idea of plotlessness, especially in regard to possible commonalities that this idea might reveal in thinking about play, broadly and loosely conceived, and the "openings" that play may afford present, and future work and thought in ethnography and ethology. Reminding readers of thought on the imperatives of play, on the ordinary/extraordinary nature of play, the authors push play as an all-encompassing paradigm for scholarship across the disciplines and much more (play as core of the ontological-epistemological human condition?).

Keywords

ethnography, ethology, play, plotlessness, culture

> Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 1962/1992, p. 31

Our article is about plotlessness in ethnography. Ethnography is of course centered on human behavior, but we have also incorporated ideas from ethology—the study of behavior of animals in their natural environments—into our thought, and thus, the first section of our title, "Plotlessness, Ethnography, Ethology." Fagen, a coauthor of this article is a biologist; Sydnor is a culturalist. This article is a prolegomenon: We seek to refine, to problematize, the meanings of plotlessness and thereby to give tentative voice to those refinements as windows into ethnography now and to come. We subtitled our article "Play" as we reckon that play, broadly conceived, is a critical intervention, something vital to do with ethnography, especially when plotlessness is considered. As many thinkers have declared, play is imperative—it appears to undergird human community (e.g., Bateson, 1972; Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 1955; Marty, 2007; Sansone,

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1988; Schechner, 1993, 2006; Seligman, Weller, Puett, & Simon, 2008; Suits, 1978).

In the early 1990s, we (Fagen and Sydnor) met—for all of 10 minutes—at an Association for the Anthropology of Play conference. Subsequently, we began a 20-year correspondence whose overriding theme was our continuing obsession/puzzlement over the meaning of play. We represented two different scholarly disciplines, two disparate intellectual traditions. Robert studied nonhuman species from a biological and comparative perspective. Sydnor's initial focus was the ritual of ancient Greece. A tenure-track appointment at the University of Illinois enabled Sydnor to extend the scope of her research to cover the broad area of cross-cultural/historical play, ritual, festivity, and sport.

What does this biographical information have to do with the topics at hand : plotlessness and play? After long years of correspondence in which we occasionally speculated that we might give coauthorship a try some day, we decided that Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines' (CEAD)' Hui's (Maori language for "gathering"; University of Waikato, New Zealand, November 17-19) unique call for papers (from which this article arose) was as good a chance as any. Initially, the CEAD call inspired us to submit a work distinct from our play studies, so we focused on plotlessness, a topic that had recently surfaced in our discussions of literature, art, play, and choreography. During our brainstorming for this article, Robert kept returning to his first experience (published in his 1981 book) observing play in "an undomesticated species living in an undisturbed environment":

> When I first saw white-tailed deer . . . fawns running repeatedly back and forth through shallow water, making rapid turns and performing frequent rear-kicks, body-twists, and headshakes, my immediate response was that they had gone mad or that I was seeing things. It was actually annoying and baffling to watch them. The sight made me uneasy and insecure, as if a crack had appeared in the fortifications of my well-ordered world to admit chaos and misrule. (Fagen, 1981, pp. 492-493)

And Synthia in turn mirrored that same unease in discussions, recounting false steps to make a noteworthy product/ethnography of an attempted immersion in skateboarding culture in the small village, St. Joseph, Illinois, United States, where she lives. The incomprehensibility, the seeming plotlessness of the deer and of the skateboarders: We struggled to understand how, if, or how much, we should stamp these with interpretation or with a storyline. Indeed, our concerns were epistemological and ontological. Were there patterns in what we saw? Was there purpose? Was there purposiveness? We might well have sympathized with Elenore Bowen's ethnographic classic *Return to Laughter* (1954), in which she recalls tensions linking the experienced with the ethnographic form of representation and with the process and mental state of authorship (e.g., Ruby, 2000, p. 159).

We wanted to capture the essential paradox of a problem that came from our personal experiences: What happens when, after extended fieldwork, the ethnography or the ethology doesn't seem to have "findings," "conclusions," "directions for future research," and "significant new knowledge"?

A response to this impasse is that it is not a dilemma, as we know that literature, art, poetry, film, dance, and even ethnography can be plot-less and smart at the same time. It is at this point that we further probed the idea of plotlessness.

When we think about "plotlessness" in relation to ethnography and ethology, like it or not, we have to begin with a dichotomy—*process* and *product*. The *process*—daily events, interactions, field experience, and so on—in which the ethnographer or biologist observes, participates, and engages in the ethnographic present is one division found across the disciplines of ethnography and ethology.

We also want to consider ethnographic *product* in regard to plotlessness: from experiences and interactions, come creations—notes, narratives, theses, performances, books, poems, and so on. This product–process juxtaposition and all it entails—voice, Otherness, subjectivity, authority, self—is much critiqued over the past century. Although a false dichotomy, in trying to figure out plotlessness we found that we had to begin with that dichotomy.

At first glance, plotlessness (antonym: plot) means "without plot," without a story or sequence of events, yet in different disciplines and genres (many of which have been interdisciplinarily influential to ethnography) "without plot" has different meanings that transcend simple duality. We see "plotlessness" as standing in for at least 10 different products and/or processes of ethnography:

- "Radically unstructured and anarchic" as in Bruce Mason and Bella Dicks' early (1999) work, "The Digital Ethnographer";
- "Expressive" as in Jerome Robbins' ballet, *Dances at a Gathering,* which Robbins insisted did not tell a story (he did not want extraneous meanings read into *Dances*; for example, Fagen, 2011);
- Nonsensical—see, for example, Elizabeth Sewell's (1952) classic treatment of the topic of nonsense (more important, nonsense stories can still have plots; for example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*);
- Global architecture such as Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar design (e.g., http://www.jean-nouvel.com/);

- Experimental texts/performances that play around with narrative and order as does Italo Calvino (1993):

> [First lines] You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate . . . You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally.
>
> [Last lines] The seventh reader interrupts you: "Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all tests, the hero and heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death." You stop for a moment to reflect on these words. Then, in a flash, you decide you want to marry Ludmilla. Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings. Ludmilla closes her book . . . says "Aren't you tired of reading?" And you say, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino" (Calvino, 1993, pp. 3, 259-260);

- Narrative fiction without dialogue or chapter titles such as found in James Joyce's *Ulysses:*

> Stephen closed eyes his to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six: the *nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the *nebeneinander* ineluctably. I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two feet in his boots are at the end of his legs, *nebeneinander*. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of *Los Demiurgos*. Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand? Crush, crack, crick, crick. Wild sea money. Dominie Deasy kens them a'.
>
> *Won't you come to Sandymount, Madeline the mare?*
>
> Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. A catalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: *deline the mare.*
>
> Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane. *Basta*! I will see if I can see.

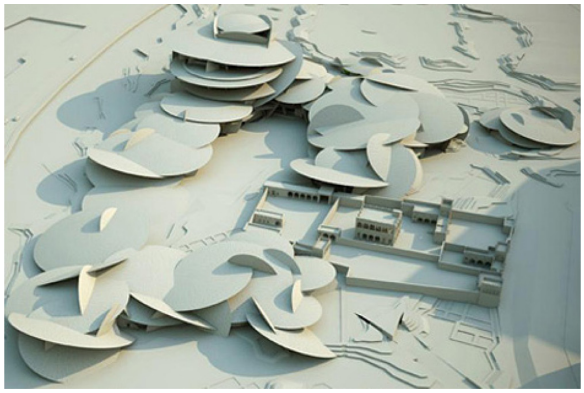

Figure 1. Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar design. Copyright Ateliers Jean Nouvel, used with permission.

> See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end. (Joyce, 1922/1998, pp. 37-38);

- Compilation of scenes that make no sense and/or of twisted behavior and/or crude dialogue exemplified in Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (Harmony-Korine.com);
- Codified yet improvised behavior (the kind with which Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, performance studies pioneers, were fascinated; for example, Schechner, 2006, p. 185; Turner, 1967; Turner & Bruner, 1986) such as appear in wide-ranging genres of jazz, sports, and terrorism (On Jihad/terrorism as performance, see Schechner, 2006, p. 270);
- "Rhizomatic" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 7-13): polyphonic fragments, clippings, texts, and behaviors delineated by Walter Benjamin (1968, 1999; Buck-Morss, 1993), Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and others;
- Ideas about the liminal/subaltern/coming community (Agamben, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Turner, 1967).

– these examples and more (labyrinths; Herodotus' *Histories*; Breisach, 2007, p. 11) of what comprise "plotlessness," we hold, have influenced the natures and formats of ethnography in some way.

At times, ethnography and ethology make particular, special cases for plotlessness. Again, some varied examples: cultural anthropology's lineage/kinship diagrammatic practices (e.g., Fred Eggan, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's first research assistant's Menomini kinship chart, http://lib.typepad.com/scrc/2009/08/index.html); 24/7 recording/plotless production of films of one locale of animals in the wild; avant-garde experimental work such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's first film in 1982 *Reassemblage*; and ethnographic-like award-winning films such as Byambasuren Davaa's *The Cave of the Yellow*

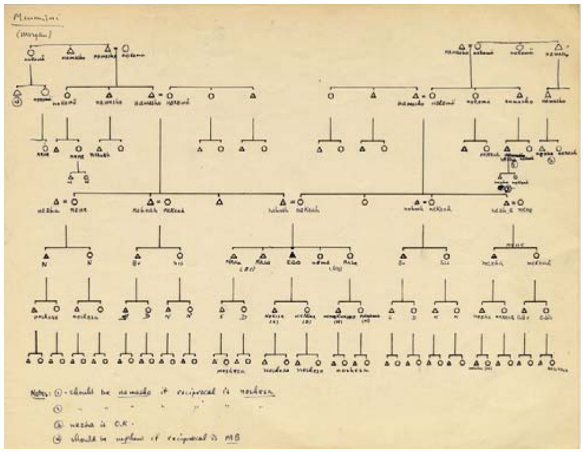

Figure 2. Fred Eggan, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's first research assistant's Menomini kinship chart. *Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library*, used with permission.

Dog (described by Addiego, 2006, as "timeless and near plotless"; see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xlan8eCUsE); concretize the place of plotlessness in ethnography.

To summarize thus far, plotlessness belongs to interrelated critiques and responses to modern plot and truth making, including epistemological decentering and recontextualizing of inquiry; illumination of the tensions between, and experimentation with, traditional and avant-garde rhetorical, statistical, feminist, evidence-based performance and literary forms (such as nonnarrativity) for presentation of research; and return to and/or finer articulation of the goals of ethology and ethnography.

The result of this history of critical, intellectually responsible questioning is the flavored, nuanced metaethnography (e.g, Taussig, 1993) exemplified by the theme and methods of qualitative, critical-cultural thought, seminars, filmic productions, publications, and performances. Ethnographers have learned that the faces of other cultures, and indeed the faces of our own culture, may forever be turned away, like the dark face of Earth's moon, from the light of scholarly inquiry.

We hope that our work here illuminates a particular taken-for-granted practice in contemporary ethnography, cultural studies, and so on: Sometimes in our quest to create cutting-edge readings of life, our conceptual, performative, and pedagogical processes and products use tropes of plotlessness to signify commitment to new multivocal ethnographic moments and criticisms.

Those of us who gathered for the Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines (CEAD) Hui at which we first presented this work, as well as readers of *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* might agree, however, that although contemporary ethnography has written and performed itself out of its older agendas and truth saying, it still seems that James Boon's 1980s admonition is right: "Everything threatens to signify" (Boon, 1982, p. 152; peruse the titles of the presentations and articles in conferences and journals centered on culture and qualitative inquiry and ethnography for a reading of Boon's observation).

Indeed, there are many moments in ethnography and ethology when signification and plot are central, important. Stories are important. To the traditional ethnographer and to the philosopher of physical science, stories are reality, a way of knowing reality, the only reality that can ever be known. Take, for instance, the field ethologist's subjects, who are not fellow humans having a shared culture, or even fellow humans of another culture. The classic field studies of common chimpanzees and bonobos, of gorillas and orangutans, of elephants and bottlenosed dolphins and lions, of common ravens and keas and caracaras, cross the species barrier, their investigators still insisting that sufficient time and sensitivity, a limpid and open mind, will eventually suffice to put the observer in the animal's world, a world that belongs to the knowable reality that constitutes science's primary article of faith. Ethologists and others who have pursued biological studies of individual and social behavior—most notably proponents of an approach to human nature that calls itself "evolutionary psychology"—live and move in the certainty that their science cannot possibly let them down. On the other hand, cultural, anthropological, and ethnographic studies often have at their epistemological-ontological center a critical reflexivity that seeks to contest the hegemonies of science. So when we begin to approach plotlessness from both ethnographic and ethological perspectives, these standpoints may collide (or perhaps merge). It was with this thought that we consciously evoked the Nabokov quote that furnished the epigraph for this article:

> Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense. (Nabokov, 1962/1992, p. 31)

In ethnographic studies, Clifford Geertz's canonical "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" also comes to mind (Slowikowski, 1992, pp. 224-232). At the outset of his career, Geertz is like Renato Rosaldo's now clichéd "lone ethnographer" (1993, pp. 33-42; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 15-17) "riding off into the sunset," returning with a supreme moment of insight, an intellectual epiphany, when the trained ethnographer's diligent field work finally cracks the code of the alien culture to reveal the philosophical and metaphysical essence that constituted that culture's previously baffling Otherness. Here is one of Geertz's early (1950-1970s) grand conclusions:

> The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to

> read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. (Geertz, 1972, p. 29)

And another:

> The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing . . . that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

Likewise, Robert Fagen (coauthor of present article), formulated (in his *Animal Play Behavior*, 1981) hypotheses and mathematical models. The time seemed propitious for novel scientific advances in the study of behavior. The then-fashionable approaches put forth in his text appeared more than sufficient to produce a breakthrough, and the book's readers seemed to agree with its author that significant new insights into nonhuman play waited just around the corner. Fagen's base in the biological study of animal behavior necessarily links him to an optimistic epistemology shared by many scientists whose belief in a knowable reality is axiomatic and sacrosanct. Indeed, science, like politics, is, famously, an art of the possible. Scientists know that to succeed and to find the pursuit of success rewarding, they must identify challenging, nontrivial, yet "do-able" research problems. The once-revolutionary initiative of field studies on animal behavior is still rosily tinted, and understandably so, with the very same optimism that ethnographers long ago began to question. After all, real progress in understanding has indeed resulted from almost a century of increasingly sophisticated studies of the natural lives of animals. The naturalistic study of nonhuman primate behavior and the genuinely hypothetico-deductive science of behavioral ecology (e.g., Altmann, 1998) are demonstrable jewels in the crown of ethology. In view of these real advances, self-doubt might seem almost irrelevant.

We are all aware that scholars in 20th-century ethnography ultimately questioned these philosophical and methodological bases. Geertz' later work, *Works and Lives* (1988), a seminal piece in the writing culture movement, criticized the romantic ontology of the lone ethnographer. To some extent, similar questions emerged regarding ethology. For example, recalling his early evocation of play's "taunt" of "inaccessibility," Fagen confesses that "clearly, the heart of all play remains a profound mystery" (Fagen, 1981, p. 493; 2011, p. 84). Critical voices though, like that of Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (1989), found few if any sympathetic ears among those whose business was the study of nonhuman behavior.

Although the categorization and biological utility of play continue to be questioned and debated (Bateson, 2011), play nevertheless seems to have useful consequences. These consequences prove interesting from various theoretical perspectives, including, as noted at the opening of this article, ideas having to do with ethnography (Bateson, 2011; Fagen, 2011; Fagen & Fagen, 2004, 2009; Pellis & Pellis, 2009). Physical wellness and mental well-being, antistress effects, behavioral flexibility and innovativeness, and creativity are the likely benefits of play in its various forms across animal (nonhuman) species. These and other findings may even point to biological benefits for at least some forms of human play (Bateson, 2011; Pellegrini, 2011).

In its formative years, ethology emphasized direct observation of behavior, in keeping with its deep roots in natural history. However, like cultural studies, its roots also tapped continental philosophy. Moreover, the field of natural history itself is also rooted in traditions/genres of natural history writing: Many classic ethological treatments of animal behavior (e.g., Fossey, 1983; Goodall, 1992; Groos, 1898) are recognized literary classics in a genre closely related to the celebrated literature of travel and exploration (e.g., Pausanius; Herodotus; Baudrillard, 1989; Chatwin, 1988; de Tocqueville, 1835/2003; Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1961; Steinbeck, 1972; Theroux, 1979, all from which Western ethnography traces lines of influence at least in part). That the literary eye and the poetic gaze are essential for understanding the roots of animal behavior has always been implicit in the aims and methods of ethology. But ethologists have also explicitly categorized themselves as scientists and have asked—indeed insisted—that their work be judged according to the standards of experimental science.

As we both do in this project concerning ethnography and plotlessness, Fagen remains of two minds about the epistemology and ontology of play. On the one hand, he feels that observational approaches that involve kinesthetic consciousness (e.g., Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, 2009), as well as his own original research on play and survival under field conditions, do have something important and novel to say about the biology of animal play behavior. On the other hand, taking heed of lessons learned in many arenas, including his studies of ballet and choreography, Fagen continues to entertain the idea that the nature of play may, after all, truly lie beyond human understanding but not human telling: His choreographed dances that tell of his long-term field studies of brown bear play behavior at Pack Creek (Admiralty Island, Alaska) reflect this turn.

There is also "Plotlessness and Beyond." We can go a long way, past the last exit sign and into a realm of unspeakable mystery and awe. Our distance from the known world is now so great that we no longer have stories, plots, or even words or performance. We must apologize to our hearers, for at first we do not understand what we see, nor can we, unlike the classical ethnographers and ethologists, who lived and worked secure that perceptual-cognitive chaos

will ultimately yield to insight. Like the play of the white-tailed deer many years ago, this patterned plotlessness ripples our awareness, but no payoff drops into our outstretched hands; no take-home story trails us to our doorstep. Instead, it is pure experience, unfiltered and unmediated. Listen to Lévi-Strauss: "Let us grasp the essence of what our species has been and still is, beyond thought and beyond society" (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 398).

Yes, our threads of the foregoing discussion are now frayed and straying, but here is an attempt to pull them below into just three common themes (with further elaboration on the "play" theme):

Stories. Evolutionary psychologist Brian Boyd equates storiedness and human nature in his recent provocative *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. To be human is to tell stories; therefore, storytelling is never a moment in ethnography that we necessarily need to move beyond.

Plotlessness. We tried to clarify different forms that plotlessness takes in ethnography, now pushing through to "beyond plotlessness."

Play. As we highlighted at the start of this work, we authors both are lifelong scholars of play, so in our renderings of plotlessness in this study, we conclude with an idea that we have about the extraordinary, ordinary nature of play. Play—broadly conceived—has meaning, narrative, and story line—*and not*. Richard Schechner on play:

> Playing is double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously. . . . Play is very hard to pin down or define. It is a mood, an activity, a spontaneous eruption. Sometimes it is rule-bound, sometimes very free. (Schechner, 2006, p. 89)

We believe that play so conceived is similar to the myriad manifestations and paradoxes raised by plotlessness in ethnography and ethology. However, this issue, once raised, is necessarily accompanied by the obligation to characterize play clearly and plainly. Moreover, no such discussion can be complete without some assertion and justification of the importance of play (or else why mention play in the first place?). Furthermore, advocacy of the importance of play inevitably requires that those advocating play describe and explain whatever underlying conceptual context allows play to be important. The statement "play is important" is nonsense in the absence of some larger context, some bigger picture. For example, contemporary issue-driven justifications of children's play tend to focus on recess, playgrounds, and play equipment against a general background of educational and health concerns.

Recess, playgrounds, and play equipment are all arguably good, and the educational and health implications of play are probably nontrivial, if not always well documented. However, our interest in play and our advocacy of play as a deserving topic for scholarship arise primarily from our intellectual preoccupation with the sorts of ultimate concerns that are the province of cosmologists, philosophers, and theologians. For instance, Bernard Suits explores the notion of society and the meaning of life, concluding that "game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living" (Suits, 1978, p. 172). This scholarship with a transcendental sensibility is the direction in which critical ethnography pushes. For example, in the *CEAD Handbook* (as well as in his numerous writings), Norman Denzin implores,

> I want an autoethnography that shows struggle, passion, an embodied life that embraces a social justice agenda. Critics want to tame ethnography, categorize it, place it under the control of reason and logic. I want an unruly ethnography fractured, a mosaic of sorts, layered performance texts, messy, a montage, part theory, part performance, multiple voices. . . . A critical performance ethnography that makes a difference in the world. (Denzin, in *CEAD Handbook*, 2010, p. 15)

And the CEAD recap of the Hui/Conference, published on the Internet in January 2011, similarly steps outside the usually secular space of the academic conference:

> Knowledge is power. Knowledge is also sacred. One of the aspects of this conference that made it special was generosity of spirit among all of the delegates: Somehow there seemed to be a tacit understanding that shared knowledge is both sacred and powerful. And, by sharing knowledge, we all participated in a small act of social justice. (CEAD Hui/Conference Internet Home Page)

Scholarship, and particularly scholarship conducted at the limits of current knowledge and understanding, is meant to be risky.

The following observations are offered in the hope that they will open avenues leading to an overall perspective on play in a universal sense. Very grand insights are possible in principle if the context for play can be made sufficiently broad and deep. That at least one such context exists and, indeed, has existed for thousands of years in the cosmologies and philosophies of the Indian subcontinent is well known (Handelman, 1992, 1998; Schechner, 1993, 2006). What is perhaps less acknowledged is that another such context has emerged and is continuing to emerge from Western cosmology and from Western philosophies of science, engineering, and technology; that is, play has surprising importance in an emerging cosmology that is seen to

underlie a universe consisting of networked information. That information is a more fundamental constituent of the universe than matter or energy (see Bekenstein, 2003; Bohm & Hiley, 1993; Bohm & Nichol, 1998) is a truism if the context of the assertion is the contemporary world of society and technology in general or the Internet in particular. But to basic scientists the information universe is not simply the Internet and the humans who build, maintain, and use it. Play scholars in particular might be interested to know that a very contemporary cosmological paradigm, one of those grand unifying concepts that seeks to furnish an intellectual basis from which we may approach the universe and everything in it, seems to read somewhat as follows.

The universe has three constituents: information/meaning/wisdom, interaction/networking/relationship, and play (or creativity, innovation, flexibility). (Of course the structures and nuances of each of these vast concepts is much more complicated than single words can envelop.)

Although these ideas have been brewing for many years, particularly among theoretical physics and among the many thinkers whose intellectual roots are in classical cybernetics, it is frustratingly difficult to find one handy take-home citation on which to hang this novel and very large worldview. Most of the relevant material can be found in the work of Gregory Bateson (1972, 1978), but not in easily digestible form, alas. The work of David Bohm, cited above, represents another kind of effort to express the same general kinds of insights. And Fagen's early conviction that a very different sort of picture of the universe is in fact emerging in which play itself is important came from an "aha" epiphany linked to his days at Bell Laboratories and a talk by W. O. Baker (1986), who was long an influential voice in American science and government.

In a universe seen from this perspective, play is fundamental as the source of novelty and change, of new ideas and of innovation, and is, as Johann Huizinga argued, the deep source of civilization itself:

> Play is older than culture . . . in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play. (Huizinga, 1952, p. 5)

Without play, the universe would be stagnant. Current science fact, or at least inspired speculative science, follows closely behind science fiction in the race to explore the dynamic and surprising properties of a Batesonian/Bohmian universe in which mind and nature are isomorphic. They develop the new cosmology in light of the theory and philosophy of physics by asserting that both universe and mind consist of meanings and relationships (the theoretical physicist's mathematical models). They further assert that play of minds both great and small, the creative source of the intellectual models that make up the universe, drives the whole process.

Bohm and Karl Pribram (1991) actually developed their own brand of holographic brain science in which the distinction between an individual's brain and the mind-universe is slight. At scales ranging from the individual brain to the universe, play and creativity are necessary in order for new ideas to appear (a version of ongoing creation).

In other words, paradigms are meant to be shattered, and the moment of nonbeing is the moment of revolutionary insight. Perhaps this is what Denzin and those working in the various products and processes of ethnography and plotlessness delineated above are striving toward—that the paradigms of cultural studies be balanced by nonparadigms that can frivolously, playfully, plotlessly, and venturesomely undo them at every moment. A pioneering attempt to do so is, as mentioned above, Brian Boyd's (2009) very interesting work, *The Origin of Stories*. Boyd's work is an exercise in contemporary evolutionary psychology, but more fundamentally and more importantly, it is essentially Nabokovian (cited in Fagen, 2010). The coherence of story is also paradoxically the recognition of an incoherence of the human condition.

Beyond these hopeful if tentative beginnings, we find the melding of plotlessness, ethology, ethnography, and play in theology and mysticism (e.g., Sydnor, 2003, pp. 24-39; 2005, pp. 536-544; 2006, pp. 202-226; 2009, pp. 65-100). Such a conjoined world of ideas, practices, and institutions is yet still a frontier for the Western ethnographic academic mind. We see important connections between theological currents and scientific, philosophical, and literary studies, particularly where play is concerned (e.g., von Balthasar, 1991; Ratzinger, 2000). Play is a topic that seems to lend itself well to interdisciplinary dialogue and even to tentative syntheses.

Is this article consciously plotless? Is the plotlessness of a work a hard-earned fruit of craft, prolonged revision and assiduous polishing, tactics that lend originality, mystery, and significance to a work? Or is it simply a symptom of a more general and highly unfortunate lack of application and study? Does the plotlessness of performances and writings end up probing the core of being, universality, diversity? What standards of value might serve as criteria by which to judge a plotless work?

These questions have accompanied plotlessness ever since the beginnings of modernism, and probably since the publication of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759/2009), if not far longer. What may be most interesting of all is that play, as a mode of innovation and insight, has frequently been linked to the creative processes that yield insights and breakthroughs in fields as traditionally separate as science and art

(e.g., Bohm & Nichol, 1998; Fagen, 1981, pp. 469-471). These processes may well be an important part of the "big cosmological picture" in a universe of information/meaning/wisdom, interaction/networking/relationship, and of course play itself. The great arc of ideas spanning the domain of play begins soberly and cautiously with considerations about the biology of innovation (e.g., Bateson, 2011, for a highly responsible treatment of this idea). For those willing to risk more, the intellectual leaps starting from this foundation and made possible by developments in play research and cognate fields are truly staggering. Alongside the aforementioned distinctive endeavors of Bateson and Boyd those interested in our topic might study Noah Waldrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan's *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (2006) and Seligman et al.'s (2008) remarkable work, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. For Seligman et al., it is a "performative, subjunctive world . . . [that] rebuilds the world 'as if' it were so, as one of many possible worlds" (p. 11).

Thus, as we explore plotlessness in contemporary ethnography, we remind that the study of *play* has much to offer across the disciplines, across knowledge itself. There is something extraordinary about play that is crucial to the world: Richard Schechner, Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska (1985), Roger Caillois, Mihai Spariosu (1997), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, James Carse (1987), Norman Denzin (1975), Bernard Suits, Victor Turner, Don Handelman, Johann Huizinga, Josef Pieper (1963), Anthony Pellegrini, Peter Smith, Brian Sutton-Smith (1986, 2001), Gregory Bateson, to name some and some are themselves ethnographers—declare this—some exhaustively—in their works (e.g., Sydnor, 2005, 2010). Indeed, if the ontological/epistemological foundation of readers' professional-scholarly lives is to "advance our understanding of the way groups and individuals interact and live their lives into being" (CEAD Hui/Conference Internet Home Page, 2010), then it may be that theoretically, play is a limitless epistemology, ontology, method, and/or presentational format that deprivileges/reconciles—that intermingles more completely—our human need for story with the paradoxical, incomprehensible (plotless) nature of what it is to be human—and nonhuman. The challenge is to characterize play further, given this understanding, using a broader (mystical? sacred?) conception of scholarship that may not ever be identifiable with "scientific" science (whether such science is ultimately taken to be biological or social) and that may trump cultural theory in ways that will require us to extend our intellectual perspectives beyond standard domains of knowable reality.

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