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M. M. Gergen

Kenneth J. Gergen
Swarthmore College, kgergen1@swarthmore.edu

OPENING

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MARY M. GERGEN AND KENNETH J. GERGEN

Words do not signify things but intimate relations.
—MARTIN BUBER, *I and Thou*

"ONE BEGINNING and one ending for a book is a thing I could not agree with . . ." With these words Flann O'Brien (1966) began his lively little book, *At Swim-Two-Birds.* We hold the same opinion as we undertake the present writing. For our narratologist readers we might tell a story—perhaps a personal account of how our own relationship brought us into the space of these ideas. For autoethnographers, we would lace our account with glimpses into our particular motives, desires, and fears. In contrast, for theoretically oriented

readers we might begin with a discussion of Althusser's concept of interpellation, or Bakhtin's ventriloquation. At the same time, we might wish to honor our academic mentors, those guardians of intellectual conscience to whose many works we owe considerable debt.

How are we to relate to you, the reader, as we engage in the act of writing? Or, more provocatively, how does our form of inscription shape the trajectory of our relationships together? Like other forms of research, ethnographic inquiry traditionally functions as a means of representation. Ethnographers attempt to represent the lives, practices, beliefs, values and feelings of some person or group. An enormous literature has sprung to life in recent years concerning the validity, rhetoric and politics of representation.[1] This literature suggests that representation does far more than communicate about a subject; it simultaneously creates forms of relationship. It carries the traces of one community into another, and thus stands to dislocate the traditions of both (Rose 1993), opening the possibilities for new forms of relationship. To echo Marshall McLuhan (1967), "The relationship is the message."

In what follows, we focus on the relational consequences of ethnographic representation. We shall first scan a range of representational forms—both traditional and experimental—and inquire into their relational implications. We shall then open the door to new horizons that emerge when we take seriously the theoretical dimension of human inquiry. As we move beyond ethnography as description, to consider its performative potentials, we open a space for conceptual flowering. Here we shall relate some of our own attempts to perform theory.

Writing and Relationship

The process of ethnographic research places the ethnographer into a matrix of significant relationships. When researchers embark on the process of inquiry, for example, they go beyond an array of previous relationships—those with former coauthors, research participants, editors, and others involved in completed projects. At the same time, entering the lives of those who are "under study" initiates new relationships. These relationships are affected by the ways in which researchers reveal the "results of inquiry." Additionally, researchers strike up relationships with those who are exposed to the "findings." The circle of relatedness is ever widening. At least two of these relationships have received considerable

attention in recent years. In the wake of the renaissance in qualitative research, many scholars have become attuned to the relationship between the researcher and the researched. We see ways in which the traditional treatment of research "subjects" was inclined to be alienating, demeaning, and exploitative. We challenge the traditional subject/object dichotomy, and the stance of the researcher as a neutral and dispassionate observer of an alterior world (M. Gergen 1988). And we explore new methods that are more humane, collaborative, and participatory. Closely related, the field has given substantial attention to the responsibility of researchers to their research participants in the subsequent characterizations of their lives. We are now highly sensitized to the "politics of representation," the ways in which we as researchers construct—for good or ill—those whose lives we attempt to illuminate. A new array of collaborative, polyvocal, and self-reflexive methodologies has thus been given birth (see, for example, Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

Yet, there is one relational domain that has received little attention to date, that is, the relationship between rhetor and reader, researcher and audience. As deeply engaged social scientists, the way we represent the world to our colleagues and related audiences contributes to our ongoing relationships within these life worlds (see Shotter 1997). Our words constitute forms of action that invite others into certain forms of relationship as opposed to others. Thus our manner of writing and speaking contributes to life forms that may be extended throughout the educational sphere and into public modes of existence. In this light, consider the kinds of relationship invited by the following examples of academic writing:

> This principle states a necessary condition of anything's serving as a criterion of identity. It clearly does not state a sufficient condition; still less does it state a sufficient condition of anything's being, for a given type of thing T, a philosophically satisfactory criterion of identity for T's. In particular (and this was the basis of the later part of my original argument), no principle P will be a philosophically satisfactory criterion of identity for Ts if the only thing that saves P from admitting many-one relations among Ts is a quite arbitrary provision.[2]

> Semantic analysis of natural language terms requires an understanding of complex cognitive processes such as the profiling of a base and the establishment

> of the relationship of a trajector to a landmark. Meaning is not reducible to a conjunctive association of features, or some similar logically based formulation. The way in which the word *gone* builds on the structure of *go,* which is built on the structure of increasing "awayness" across time, illustrates a major characteristic of human semantics.[3]

These samples share important relational similarities. Both distance the writer from the reader. In their formality, their cryptic phrasings, and their certitude, they imply an author who is a bounded, autonomous entity—different from and superior to the reader. The writer is the source, the seer, the knower; the audience is positioned by the writing as passive or ignorant. The rhetor does not consider the audience as equally enlightened. This form of social science writing sustains alienated and hierarchical relationships. The listener remains a spectator, dependent upon the Other's actions.

The qualitative methods movement promotes experimental alternatives to traditional writing (see, for example, Angrosino 1997; Davies 2000; Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Taussig 1993; and many contributions to *Qualitative Inquiry*). Alternative ethnographers break away from the conventions of social science inscription to experiment with polyvocality, poetry, pastiche, performance, and more. These experiments open new territories of expression; they also offer new spaces of relationship. They take different stances toward readers, describing them in new ways, calling into being alternative possibilities for going on together. Both to appreciate these potentials, and to consider the ways in which we remain limited, we urge an open, reflexive discussion of alternatives. We offer the following to stimulate dialogue.

Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relational potential. In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored. In this way the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being. Consider Carol Ronai's (1996) account of what it is like to be parented by a mentally retarded mother:

> I resent the imperative to pretend that all is normal with my family, an imperative that is enforced by silence, secrecy, and "you don't talk about this to anyone" rhetoric. Our pretense is designed to make events flow smoothly,

> but it doesn't work. Everyone is plastic and fake around my mother, including me. Why? Because no one has told her to her face that she is retarded. We say we don't want to upset her. I don't think we are ready to deal with her reaction to the truth. . . . Because of [my mother] and because of how the family as a unit has chosen to deal with the problem, I have compartmentalized a whole segment of my life into a lie.[4]

Compare your sense of connection to Ronai with your reaction to the earlier samples of traditional academic writing. If you are like us, you feel far more involved, curious, and engaged in the present case. Ronai reduces the distance between writer and reader. Her first person expression of private matters—not even available to her mother—brings us into a space of intimacy. We feel that we are in-dwelling—roaming about the author's mental interior and sharing the contents with her. The hierarchy implicit in traditional writing is removed. By shunning the goal of stylized perfection, Ronai admits to being one of us—neither superior nor inferior. If anything, Ronai holds out a hand for us to grasp in a show of support. Like traditional writers, she offers illumination, but not to an audience of the ignorant; rather she invites others to hear her story through their own frames. This is not to say that such writing represents the new standard to which all should aspire. Like every form of writing, as certain possibilities open, others are closed. Ronai appears in her story as a bounded subjectivity—in possession of an interior self that simultaneously creates the reader as separate. The implicit message is that "these are *my* experiences," and "I *chose* to share them with you." Further, this interior region is a coherent one; there is little here in the way of fragmentation or inconsistency. The reader is thus invited into a space where coherence counts, a space that can sometimes be threatening or repressive. Nor can we be certain of the intimacy that is implied. After all, this piece is written for everyone, and if we are everyone are we then anyone in particular?

For another writing that maintains connection but challenges consistency, let us turn to an engaging autoethnographic account. Here sociologist Karen Fox (1996) fashions two, first-person narratives derived from interviews with a convicted child sexual abuser (Ben) and his victimized stepdaughter (Sherry). The author, herself a victim of childhood sexual abuse, simultaneously adds her own voice to the mix. In the published account, the individual voices are displayed as three columns of consecutive expression—as in the following:

Ben-Sex Offender
I love her, you know. You see
we really have a good relationship.
She loves me, she told me that.

Karen-Researcher
I want to believe Ben. I guess.
I've always hoped that I meant
something to my abuser.
That he really did love me;
that he really did feel I was
special

Sherry-Victim
I never felt romantic love for
him. That area disgusts me. . . . I've had
feelings of love for him, like for a
father.[5]

Fox's triadic form of writing allows her to include her "personal voice" within the account, but in her inclusion of the additional voices she creates a certain diffusion of her identity. In carefully selecting and refashioning the narratives of Ben and Sherry, she also colors these voices with her own. They appear as separate individual voices, and yet fragments of her own being are included. Subtly the writing begins to reduce the boundary between Karen and others. In a broader sense, each voice contains the traces of other voices in the conversation, just as readers we now ingest the voices of the writer. The unified and coherent personality coveted by the modernist tradition gives way to a fragmentation. We are thus enabled, as readers, to lose our defenses against our own multiplicities. And yet, at the same time the sense of artifice within the text remains. Are these "authentic" voices, we wish to know? Perhaps the question is born of another historical era. And yet, the question remains.

This revelation of self-incoherence is more fully accentuated in the following excerpt from the work of feminist scholar Laurel Richardson (1997), who reflects on daily life during the time she is focused on writing a book.

While I Was Writing a Book

my son, the elder, went crazy
my son, the younger, went sad
nixon resigned
the saudis embargoed
rhodesia somethinged
and my dishwasher failed

my sister, the elder, hemorrhaged
my brother didn't speak to me
my ex gurued and overdosed
hemlines fell and rose
texans defeated the e.r.a.
and my oil gaskets leaked

my friend, the newest, grew tumors
my neighbor to the right was shot
cincinnati censured sin
and my dracena plant rotted

I was busy.[6]

The irony of this piece invites us to abandon the posture of defensive coherence often provoked by traditional writing. It also calls us to reflect critically on the entire realm of professional writing of which we are a part. We at once can appreciate the academic value of our pursuits, but as well realize the extent to which they numb us to the immediate world about us; in our professional concentrations, we are rendered irresponsible in our relationships with others. Moreover, this work is self-consciously aware of itself as artifice. Traditional writing in the social sciences inherits realist forms of expression. That is, the writing manifests itself as a reflection of the real—for example, the reality of the cultural life under study, or the *actual* thoughts and feelings of another person (or indeed, oneself as ethnographer).

What concerns us here is the relational implications of a realist posture. In our view, a major limitation of realist writing lies in the restrictions it sets on dialogue. Discourse that asserts something to be the case informs the reader that if he or she is to remain a conversational ally this premise is beyond question. If a person announces, "I feel very happy about this," to remain in fruitful coordination one

must grant the reality of the state of happiness. To question it—for example, as a construction of the self—would alienate one from the conversation. Here artifice becomes important. When Richardson uses poetry as her vehicle of expression, she moves us out of the register of "real-world talk." She does not suggest a reality about which we become suspicious. Rather, we are directly informed that the expression is guided by an aesthetic—or, "one way of putting things." We are thus liberated, as an audience, to consider this as a possible standpoint—not the only one we can take. We may offer alternatives with little likelihood of animosity on the author's part. Thus, we are invited into dialogue with her point of view from the perspective of our own.

Toward the Performative

> The concrete language of the theater can fascinate and ensnare the organs. . . . It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which . . . ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of language.
>
> —ANTON ARTUAD, *Theater of the Absurd*

We admire, enjoy, and are inspired by the new range of writing now flourishing within the ethnographic literature. These attempts represent a substantial enrichment in the range and quality of relationships that we now seek with our readers. However, as we become increasingly conscious of representation as relationship, it also becomes apparent to us that writing is but one medium among many. Of course, we have long been aware of the representational potentials of photography and film. But given the twin assumptions that scholarship is inherently the work of the rationally engaged mind, and that words are the finest expression of rational deliberation, the visual media are typically treated as secondary to the more important craft of writing. It is high time to challenge the prevailing logocentrism of this tradition, not only with visual media but also with the entire range of communicative expressions at our disposal. There is little reason that ethnographic representation should not become as rich in its forms of expression as the arts, with painting, music, dance, poetry, multimedia, and performance all serving as potential sources of communication. And with each alternative we are opened to different avenues of relationship.

In this vein the two of us have been increasingly attracted to dramatic performance. Performance shares much with the poetic form discussed earlier. It

reveals itself as artifice, and thus fails to declare a sacred territory of the undiscussable. Or to put it another way, it declares a reality but simultaneously reveals it as make-believe. Further, when one enters the realm of performance there are no limits on the genres of verbal expression available. One can employ the formalisms of traditional literature, but as well the poetic, the profane, the ironic, the emotionally explosive, and so on. As we expand our modes of expression so do we expand the number of people with whom we can join in the dance of understanding. Performance can also express a panoply of voices, thus opening the audience to multiple voice/communities within themselves. And of special importance, performance is embodied in a way that writing is not. Here we break with the logocentric tradition, enabling the message to be carried by a fully expressive body in motion. Scholarship is not chained by the imperative of cerebral order, but is given full latitude of revelation in action. In our view, dramatic performance invites a more fully engaged relationship with the audience as well. If the performance is effective, the audience participates in an embodied fashion.

Our treatment of performance draws sustenance from a substantial corpus of significant writing. The work of Victor Turner (1982), for example, was groundbreaking. He argued not only for the dramaturgical character of cultural life, but as well for the desirability of participating in performed replicas of this life in order to fully understand its character. Ethnography was not, then, about the textual representation of others' lives, so much as offering opportunities for people to participate in alterior patterns of performance. The work of Richard Schechner (1985) explores the relationship between theater and the social sciences, preparing the way for a blending of performance art and social critique, a matrix that is being fruitfully explored by activist scholars searching for means of disrupting the oppression of the ordinary (see Case, Brett, and Foster 1995; Conquergood 1985). When performance art seeds cultural reflection the science/art binary is destroyed (see Goldberg 1979). These confluences, along with Augusto Boal's (1979) use of theater to unseat forces of cultural domination, have kindled our interest in the power of performance—over and above the abstract argument—to create reflection and resistance. Richard Bauman's work (1977) is also important in accentuating the character of performance as a medium of relationship. And the writing of Fred Newman (1996) and the work of the Performance of a Lifetime group in New York, draw our attention to the vital function of performance in expanding our capacities for creative human relationship.

To introduce our experiments in performance, we offer Mary Gergen's account of the life of the American woman passing through middle age. She has performed

this work, which is partially autoethnographic, in a variety of settings, including International Communication Association meetings in Monterey, California, and a conference on the Postmodern Self in Berlin, both in 1999. The title of the work is "Woman As Spectacle," and the full text is published in *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender, and Performance* (2001). While providing access to a certain vision of this period of life, the work is also critical of psychological theorizing. It functions, then, not only to express a widely shared construction of womanhood, but also to subvert and ultimately replace it. After sharing a portion of the work, we will consider further its relational potentials.

[*The performer enters wearing a highly colorful, even garish costume, including a shimmering fuchsia cape, long gloves, a gold lamé bag, a purple scarf, a pink boa, and gold high heels. Underneath she wears a low-cut, orange, full-length sheath, with side slits, over a sheer black top. She is also wearing a large, curly blond wig. As her monologue unfolds, she begins taking off pieces of clothing—subtly evoking the image of a strip-show—lights up a cigar, and occasionally takes a drink of brandy from a hip flask. The following excerpt occurs midway through the performance.*]

At my age (chronological that is), I am meant to disappear. I should have been gone long ago. In the dance of the life cycle, I am being propelled against the wall. [*moving backward as though being pushed from the front, arms extended, curled in the middle*] Centrifugal forces spin me to the chairs, from which I rose so long ago . . . arms that circled me, and kept me on the floor. Oh, how I could dance. [*does a bit of a cha cha cha . . . takes up a sheer purple scarf that is tucked into the purse*] Now they've let me go. My dance card is empty. [*places the large scarf over her head, covering her face*] Now, I'm melding with the walls . . . pressing into paper . . . melting with the glue. . . . Stuck, not pinned and wriggling like Eliot's Prufrock, but misting into mottled lavender, without a muscle's twitch. [*standing with arms out, covered by the veil of purple*] This is the fate of a woman of a mature age.

[*removes scarf, keeps it in hand*] She is somewhere over forty, and, according to some, about as useful as a fruit fly (at least *they* have the courtesy to die swiftly when their breeding days are done). If she cannot procreate she is lifeless you see, but not dead. She never should attract attention. She learns to be the antispectacle. Yet she is the object of our gaze.

[*short pause*]

Such hatred we sometimes feel for her. [*wringing scarf as though it were a neck*] That shameful blot on the image of our youth. Couldn't we just wring her neck? Be done with her. No one needs her . . . hoarder of Medicare . . . Social Security sad sack . . . our tax dollars feeding a body no one wants to see. But lest we discard her so quickly she is also me, and perhaps you. She is our destiny, those of the female persuasion. Ugghhh, should we call for our pills, ply ourselves with hormones? Slather on our creams? Invite the knife to cut into our own throats, and pay for that pleasure? [*making slitting gestures*] Or shall we tipple into our drugs of sweet forgetting? [*takes another sip from flask*]

Is there anyone to call? Will 911 give us any help?

With this critical and ironic image further extended, the performance takes a turn toward a creative activism. Women are challenged to refuse and disrupt the dominant discourse, and to replace it with an alternative form of life. The following excerpt illustrates the move.

We need to draw dirty pictures . . . do unruly things . . . un-ruly . . . against the rulers, against the rules.

Making it up as we go along.

Woman under construction. Or on Top of?

Topsy-turvy, turning the world upside down . . . or perhaps more potently, sidling up . . . saddling up.

Women on Top . . . Controlling the pace . . . taking in as much as she wants. Finding a hip bone for her lip bone.

A missionary in her position, evading the law.

A butterfly wing stroking in sweet rebellion. Stirring up the airwaves in spunky surrender.

The image of the disorderly woman stirring the cauldron, . . . widen options for women . . . a temporary release, there's no grand solution anymore.

but Lady Godiva rides, and politics are rampant.

. . . Let's make some "gender trouble" as Judith Butler says:

Myths of gender, however alluring, are the bane of women's lives.

Weapon one in our wayward wars of transgression: Fool with Mother Nature: Rub on the line that divides the sexes. (MMMMmm that always feels good to rub on that line.)

> Cross over the line, erase the line, blur the line? Is there a politics of lines? Watch out for the dangerous curves.
>
> . . . We may be trapped in social orderings, tattooed within our proper place, but in outlandish moments we are freed to create the possibility of cultural change. Let us go on from here:
>
> To revel in our specialness. To blush only when it suits us. To hold our heads up and be proud, no matter where and how we are.
>
> To celebrate the lifted yoke of fertility and rejoice in our wholeness again. Like girls, to prance in moonlight and in sun.
>
> To remember that the calendar is only one—bureaucratic—measurement of time. It cannot tell the age of spirit, heart, and mind.
>
> Our spectacles are opportunities to glamour into being other forms of life. As we soar over the edge of respectability . . . let us make a joyful noise and be glad of our excesses. Let us find a way to celebrate. Let us dare to strut our stuff and when we die, die laughing.

Of course, it is difficult for these words to bring readers into the same relationship of the full performance to an audience. However, when performed effectively, we find that this material creates a strong bond between the performer and the audience. They have participated in the pathos, the anger, the joys of resistance, and the optimism of alternatives. Symbolically they have walked in the shoes of the performer, and seem to appreciate and be expanded by the opportunity.

Yet, there are also relational shortcomings in the work as well. The performance fundamentally is a monologue. The performer is in full control of the materials, which will change but little from one audience to the next. In effect, the audience may join in vicariously, but not as an active participant "in the conversation." There is a "watch me–appreciate me" characteristic of the performance that is not reciprocated. In its demonstration of itself as play, the piece does invite the audience to entertain alternatives they may bring to the event. However, there is no space made available in which to voice these alternatives.

Performing Relational Theory

> To find the right formulation and tone: more than the art of writing, the art of living and dying.
>
> —EDMOND JABES, *The Book of Dialogue*

At this point the path of our argument makes another turn. Specifically we want to share with you some of our attempts to bring theory to life through performance. There are at least two ways in which this turn is of special relevance to ethnography. One of the chief criticisms of much ethnographic inquiry—both traditional and experimental—is its lack of theoretical content. In earlier times the critique was voiced in terms of the hypothetico-deductive cast of science: much ethnographic work didn't derive from theory, and therefore was dubiously related to the truth or falsity of any particular theory of human behavior. The postpositivist dialogues of the past several decades have largely put this form of critique to rest. However, there is an analogue in these postmodern times, to whit, the meaning of ethnographic work is too often exhausted in the subject matter itself. The reader is invited to comprehend/appreciate/experience the actions and subjectivities of this or that minority, marginalized group, or particular individual—full stop. One is immersed in the life of the other, but as in the case of a fine meal or a fascinating jazz riff, there is no obvious place to go with it. And by "place to go," the critic typically means that the ethnography fails to inform or have implications for any extant dialogue or set of conceptual issues of intellectual or societal importance. There is no future that is implied by the presentation beyond that directly given.

There is more to the problem: As currently conducted, ethnographic inquiry does little to generate new conceptual resources. It may attempt to make intelligible otherwise alien discourses, but the outcome is seldom an increment in our vocabularies of social action. In a sense, the importance of theorists such as Freud, Marx, or Skinner is that—for good or ill—they generated vocabularies out of which new forms of societal practice could be forged. They did not so much "reflect the nature of the real" as transform it through new forms of discourse. And their theoretical languages were appropriated and applied to alter the course of cultural life. The capacity for creating generative theory, however, often seems lacking in ethnographic accounts. At the same time, the skills in alternative modes of expression now emerging in "new ethnographies" are wonderfully suited for the creation of new realities. As the domain of expression is enriched, so is the capacity to realize new worlds—expanding then on the possibility of relationship.

Deliberations such as these have fed much of our experimental work in recent years. We have asked how we can animate theory so that its vocabularies become available for action. By sampling some of these attempts, we try to gain further insight into the relational potentials of performance. First, consider an attempt by one of us (Mary Gergen) to use performance to speak to issues in

postmodern theory. The piece was stimulated by a talk Stephen Tyler gave to an audience of anthropologists in Amsterdam in 1989. Tyler is well known for his experiments in postmodern writing, especially in *The Unspeakable* (1987). While admirable in certain respects, however, elements of an androcentric tradition seemed to persist. The performance piece was thus created both as a feminist critique and a loving embrace of the postmodern moves in theory. The piece was originally performed at a psychology and postmodernism conference in Aarhus, Denmark; the full text can be found in Steinar Kvale's edited work, *Psychology and Postmodernism* (1992). We join the party as First Woman responds to Postmodern Man's joyous remonstrances over his capacities for deconstruction:

First Woman: Who are they trying to scare off? Full of Power and Manipulative Control, Abundant Resources, Speed, Complete management. The New Army, complete with portable Zenises. Pulling the rug out from under the OLD GUARD. (Didn't we all want to run out of the stands and CHEER!!!?) Down with the OLD ORDER . . . Foundations of Modernity, split into Gravity's Rainbow/Rules shredded ribbons adorning the May POLE, wavering in the Breeze of breathtaking words/ABSOLUTE-ly nothinged by the shock-ing PM tropes/smashing icons with iron(ic)s/Wreaking CON-SENSE with NON-SENSE/

PARODYING
PARADING
PANDERING
PARADOXING
PLAYING
POUNDING
PRIMPING
PUMPING

What fun! [*singing*] . . . "London Bridges Falling Down. [*then shouting*] (DE-CONSTRUCT-ED) [*resumes singing*] MY FAIR LADY."

Where can WE jump in? Shall we twirl your batons? Can we all form a circle? Dance around the fire? the Pole? the falling bridges? Give us a hand. Give us a hand? Give us a hand . . .

PM Man: All they ever want are hand-outs. . . . Give 'em an inch they'll take a mile. How many inches do they think we've got? [*a brief pause, then, addressing Women*] Besides can't you see we've got play to do? It's not easy just going off to play each day. It takes practice . . . dedication . . . grace. It's

not something you can just join in like that. We've got our formation. Can't you see you'll just muck it up? We're in the wrecking business. What business is that of yours? "You make, we break": We can write it on the truck. Next thing you'll want us to settle down and play house. We've got to be movin' on. It's part of the code. Girls can't be in combat. Besides John Wayne doesn't talk to them, so adios. Don't call us, we'll call you.

First Woman: That call has a familiar ring to it. The call of the WILD.

PM Man: We aren't animals; and don't call us an army! Better a merry dis-band-ment of (dis) Con-victors;

(dis) Con-artists; (dis)co-dandies;
(dis)iden-ticals;
(dis)-sent-uals; (dis)-coursers;
(dis)i-paters; (dis)contents . . .

The women continue to grill PM Man, making the androcentric implications of postmodern critique increasingly clear. Perhaps the climax is reached in the following exchange:

PM Man: . . . That's another thing. We don't make promises. Just another word for COMMITMENT (the really big C-word, the one that gets you behind bars, and I don't mean mixing martinis). A rolling stone gathers no moss and no mille-deux.

First Woman: Mick Jagger has children.

PM Man: Babies are phallic. If you need one, get one.

First Woman: But your phallus doesn't need bread.

PM Man: "Let them eat cake," as good ol' Marie put it. She had a feel for our rap.

First Woman: That doesn't solve the problem.

PM Man: It's not my problem. Postmodern life is, as Deleuze sez, nomadic. And S.T. added, "We are all homeless wanderers on the featureless, postindustrial steppe, tentless nomads, home packed up." And as a NATO tank commander once said, "You can't have an army when you gotta bring along the outhouse for the dames."

First Woman: Looks like it's going to be a short revolution—about one generation.

PM Man: Au contraire, Baby, we've just begun. I mean the trashing is in dis-progress. Disciplines to dismantle/Methods to maul/Truth to trash

First Woman: Who's on the cleanup committee?

PM Man: You sound like somebody's mother. Whose side are you on anyway? Few minutes ago you wanted to dance in the streets. Down with the old, up with the new. (Never satisfied; always want something ya can't get . . . Bitch, bitch, bitch.)

First Woman: You sound de-fence-ive. Have I got your goat?

PM Man: Now you're getting down to something. Thanks, but no thanks. I get off graphically. Who needs flesh. And I can logoff any time . . . any time . . . any time . . . Let's leave it at that. Stephen Tyler has said: "Postmodernism accepts the paradoxical CONsequences of . . . irreconcilable ambiguity without attempting to end the CONflict by imposing CLOSURE . . .

We're a-dispersing . . . "dis-pursing" . . . we are getting further and further away. Space is beautiful.

First Woman: It's gonna be mighty COLD out there . . .

PM Man: Earthling, do you read me? . . . do you read my books?? . . . do you . . . reeeeead . . . ??? (*voice fading*)

First Woman: You're fading Major Tom.

The signal is getting weaker and weaker. It is running out in space. It is running out of space. Soon there is nothing but

SILENCE

When performed effectively, this piece is intellectually engaging—even provocative—while simultaneously evoking laughter and resonating misgivings about unbridled deconstruction. It also functions as an alternative to traditional intellectual writing, and thus opens paths to expanding the domain of scholarly expression. Yet, as a means of relating to an audience it does have its limitations. Although polyvocal in format, the performance is a self-contained monologue. The audience remains distanced. More importantly, the action within the performance is carried almost altogether through wordplay. There are protagonists, but they do little more than move through registers of rhetoric. Certainly there is a place for such linguistic pyrotechnics (Tom Stoppard is perhaps the consummate craftsman), but there are significant limits to the action-potential of the language; one can scarcely transport this performance form into relationships outside the scholarly/linguistic. How, then, can we develop expressions of theory, without resorting so fully to a strictly theoretical argot? How can we create, through performance, a "lived experience" of theory?

Our answer to these questions can best be understood in terms of our present theoretical investments, which focus on the character of relationships. This concern grows from our social constructionist moorings, in which relationships are viewed as the fundamental matrix from which human meaning is born. This orientation stands in strong contrast to the modernist tradition, in which the individual mind is held to be the basic atom of cultural life. While there is an enormous accumulation of discourse creating the reality of individual minds, accounts of relationship are relatively meager. Traditionally we hold individuals to be the units out of which relationships are constructed, thus rendering relationships secondary and synthetic. Our theoretical work attempts to reverse this sequence, holding relationship as the necessary prior to individual being (K. Gergen 1994, 2000; M. Gergen 2000).

With these issues foregrounded, we attempt to generate performances that are relationally focused. We move away from the monologue to dialogic performance in which at least two actors are involved. Our major means of avoiding reliance on abstract, didactic discourse is to limit the performances to exemplifications—not theory in itself, but theory by implication. To secure the link, we typically contextualize each relational vignette in broader theoretical terms.

To illustrate, one of our major attempts is to reconstruct the language of individual minds in relational terms. That is, rather than abandoning individualist discourse the attempt is to demonstrate how our referents for this discourse do not lie in the private region of individual minds, but rather, in the relational realm—"the domain of the between." Consider emotions, for example. Traditionally emotions are viewed as the sine qua non of individual mental life. Psychologists tell us that our emotions are essentially private events. Further, philosophers, psychologists, and biologists have argued for their universality. In effect, we are positioned by our cultural conventions to view ourselves as biologically prepared to experience and express the basic set of universal human emotions. In relational vignettes we attempt to subvert these assumptions. In the following script, for example, we demonstrate the cultural nonsense that would ensue if emotions were indeed biological.

Doris: Do you love me, Alan?

Alan: Well, this is a little difficult to say . . . I only have access to my pulse rate just now, and you know how variable that can be. And besides it's a little elevated in any case because I just finished dinner. But look, I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow, and I think I'm having an EKG; I'll bring home the results tomorrow, and we can look over the patterns.

Doris: I really don't trust the EKG for this one; too much is at stake . . . I mean our whole future, our marriage, the kids, and everything. I think we really have to be absolutely certain about this. Why don't we take a little from our savings and get an MRI and a CAT scan too?

Alan: Great idea. And I don't think we should just trust our own doctor for this one; we should have a second or third opinion. You can't be too careful about these things.

Doris: And then, if we find out that you do love me . . . and I so hope the results come out this way . . . then I will have to go and have a checkup myself. I mean, it just would be lopsided if we found you loved me but I didn't love you. I couldn't live in a marriage like that.

Alan: Great, Doris . . . but let me ask . . . umm, if we both come out okay in these exams, do you think . . . well, umm, do you think it's possible we could have sex again?

Once several critical vignettes are in place, we shift toward the relational alternative. Our concern here is to demonstrate that emotions themselves are cultural performances. They only make sense within the constructed world of a given culture at a particular point in history. Like theatrical performances, emotions can be portrayed poorly or well. To do them poorly is to fail to make sense within the culture, as the following vignette illustrates.

The scene takes place within the office of an assertiveness trainer; she is speaking with a client, Arnold, who is having difficulties in expressing anger.

Trainer: So you want to be more assertive. You've got to learn to express your emotions. You mentioned problems in expressing anger. Show me how you express you feelings when you are angry . . . let's say when your teenage son comes in and tells you he ran into a wall with your car.

Arnold: I'm very angry. (*said quietly and meekly*)

Trainer: No, no, that's all wrong. Try to put a bit more force into your voice.

Arnold: I'm very angry (*said in a loud, high-pitched voice*)

Trainer: Oh, you can't do that, it sounds like the castrati. Try again in a lower tone.

Arnold: I'm very angry. (*said in a low, strong tone, but without any facial expression*)

Trainer: Oh come on, let's see some facial expression . . .

Arnold: I'm very angry. (*repeats but this time smiling*)

Trainer: No! Stop smiling . . . look stern, show your teeth . . .
Arnold: I'm very angry. (*obeys the command, but his body is inert*)
Trainer: Now you are getting somewhere, but look, Arnold, I want to see your whole body involved, not just your voice.
Arnold: I'm very angry. (*waving his hands in the air like a bird*)
Trainer: No, no, no . . . you have to make fists and bend forward . . .
Arnold: I'm very angry. (*perfectly executing the trainer's commands*)
Trainer: Oh, Arnold, that is wonderful . . . you expressed yourself so powerfully. I am so pleased.
Arnold: I'm very happy. (*performed in the loud, seething style of the preceding expression of anger*)

We follow this vignette with several others designed to demonstrate that emotional performances make cultural sense only when placed in an interdependent relationship with the actions of others. Thus, one's expression of anger (love, fear, sadness, and so on) are not the possession of the individual actor, but more properly of the relational dance of which this action is a part. In the same way, one might say, while the individual player may serve a tennis ball, the player is essentially performing a meaningful action within the game. He or she does not so much possess the act as play the appropriate part within the form of life.

But, we must ask, how do these particular performance pieces function in terms of our relationship with the audience? They do carry with them the advantages of embodiment, polyvocality, and the suppression of the authoritative (truth-proclaiming) voice. Because they are relevant to broad conceptual issues, they also invite conversational rejoinders. The attempt to use relationships to create the reality of relational process also implies an interdependent relationship of performer to audience. At the same time, we have been concerned with the limits of these vignettes in terms of inviting the audience into a dialogic relationship. We search for ways to include audience members within the performance itself. We do find ourselves restrained here by certain structural and intellectual impediments. For instance, we do not want to embarrass audience members.

Perhaps our most successful way of avoiding some of these problems and incorporating the audience into our play is by asking audience members—at critical times within a scenario—to generate dialogue for us. In the case of emotional performances, for example, we try to show that certain relational scenarios are deeply problematic within Western culture. Especially dangerous is the mutual exchange of anger—a scenario that traditionally invites escalation. With escalation

comes alienation and sometimes violence. The challenge, then, is to come up with alternative moves that are intelligible within the existing scenario, but subvert the pattern. Can we locate or create lines, we ask, that would allow us to create new forms of life? To illustrate, we confront the audience with this task in the following exchange between husband and wife:

Flo: The American Express bill came today. You charged over $400 for that dinner you had with your old buddy from school. What kind of restaurant was that? The Pink Pussycat? Is that one of those "gentleman's clubs"? I don't work hard everyday so you can go spend it like that with your friends.

Mac: Come on, Flo . . . get off my back . . . we've got money in the bank . . . it's no big deal . . . just lay off!

Flo: Oh yeah . . . easy come, easy go huh . . . I can't stand that attitude . . . that you would just waste money like that, throwing it away . . . burning it up, like there's no end to it.

Mac: Little Miss Righteousness . . . look at you . . . you spend twice that much for a dress . . . and what about all that makeup, and god, when I think of what you put into shoes . . . hell, I'll go out and drink with my buddies whenever and wherever I want . . .

Flo: Look, Mr. Big Spender, I work hard . . . I need everything I buy . . . it's my money . . . so get off this macho shtick . . . (*voice rising*)

Mac: You make shit . . . that's what it is . . . shit . . . I'm the one who brings in the real bucks. (*each voice continues to rise as the remainder of the dialogue ensues*)

Flo: Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . you make some money . . . but where did you get that job . . . from my father. Without my family you would be a slug . . . stuck somewhere down in a gutter.

Mac: Your family, I've had that bunch of fascists up to here . . . and you're just like 'em . . .

Flo: You bastard . . . (*shouting*)

Mac: (*raises his fist and starts to strike*)

At this point we stop the action and ask the audience for Mac's next line, and especially a line that will terminate this downward spiraling exchange. We have found most audiences wonderfully resourceful in their suggestions. To recall some of them:

- Apologize to her, and tell her how wrong you have been.
- Suggest you both take a walk and cool off a bit.
- Ask her what she would want you to do now.
- Tell her how much you were trying to please your old friend, to whom you owe a great deal.
- Suggest that this is about abandonment and loss of love, and not about the money.
- Ask "Why are we doing this to each other?" and suggest we start over.

As they are offered, we demonstrate them by repeating critical moments in the scenario. Do they function as hoped? Are there variants that might be more successful? These are discussions in which all opinions are valid. The event becomes a communal sharing of knowledge.

Conclusion

Finally we return to the relational implications of the present offering. Here we suspect that we come full circle: we might end as we began, with multiple closings matching the fragmentation of our opening desires. We have employed many voices in this writing, and each may strike a different relation with any given reader. As authors we are scarcely in control of our destiny; it is out of our relationship as writer and reader that our futures will be molded. There is no "one best way" in the matter of representation; relationships can be many and varied and to apply a single criterion to the matrix is to constrain our potential. At the same time, in the present offering we have shamelessly advocated forms of representation that reduce alienating distance, hierarchy, and single-mindedness; we find ourselves deeply drawn to relationships that favor an infinite merging and recombining of meanings. This view has informed our ideals of ethnographic and scholarly representation. We take this stand not from a transcendental high ground but as a result of our own immersion in action-with-others. Yet, in the same way that flexibility and continuous innovation are requirements for living in the complexities and rapid transformations of modern life, so too should we savor variety in our forms of representation. There is much to be said for discarding our style manuals at this point, along with the strangulating writing requirements of our major academic journals. As we enrich the range of representation so do we soften the rules of tradition and enrich the possibilities of relationship.

Notes

1. For a review of this work see Gergen and Gergen 2000.
2. B. Williams (1973), *Problems of the Self.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. R. D'Andrade (1990), "Some Propositions about the Relations between Culture and Human Cognition." In *Cultural Psychology,* ed. J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, and G. Gerdt (pp. 65–129). New York: Cambridge University Press.
4. Carol Ronai (1996), "My Mother Is Mentally Retarded," 115.
5. Karen V. Fox (1996), "Silent Voices," 336–39.
6. Laurel Richardson (1997), *Fields of Play,* 203–4.

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