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ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING WITH KIRIN NARAYAN

An Interview

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In January 2014 I interviewed Kirin Narayan through email, she in Australia and India while I was in the United States. Inspired not only by her writings, but also by an ethnographic writing workshop she led for faculty and students at the University of Colorado, I wanted to share her insights and inspiration with others. Here is our conversation:

CAROLE MCGRANAHAN (CM): One of the things so unique about your writing are the many genres and forms you write across: academic prose, fiction, memoir, creative nonfiction, writing about writing, storytelling, editing, books, articles, and so on. What has your writing path in anthropology been like? How much have you purposefully shaped what and how you wrote versus how much have you embraced what invitations and opportunities have serendipitously come your way?

KIRIN NARAYAN (KN): My writing path in anthropology is for me part of a longer journey that began as a child discovering the magic transport of words: the chance to reach out beyond immediacies to share insights, experiences, imagined spaces, and also to record what I learned from others. My mother kept my old notebooks, and once every few years I leaf through. I find a range of genres, trying this,

trying that, a form of play as I found new forms through reading. Of course, this was all parallel to what was being expected in school. I learned to take stock of form and produce what a good student was expected to do, though also trying to keep this somehow mine in a jaunty choice of words.

For me, this question about purposeful shaping versus the serendipity of outward forces pushing work into form goes back to this early tug between writing what I wanted and writing what was expected or demanded. Outward expectations—invitations and deadlines—can be a great galvanizer, forcing words into form and especially pushing one to finish. It's a painful and mysterious alchemy to transform what one is *supposed* to write into what one *wants* to write. Frankly, I've been encountering the same difficult challenge after agreeing to respond to these questions!

With the big press and procession of outward professional and institutional demands, it's ever more of a challenge to pay attention to a welling of inspiration separate from all the Have to Do's. As a beginning assistant professor, I was lucky to have received some talismanic advice from Professor A. K. Ramanujan, a great figure in South Asian studies, who was a poet, a linguist, a folklorist, a translator, and more. He told me that he wrote first thing in the morning. He staunchly held to the need to listen to one's own creativity. If he felt a poem stirring, he said, and instead insisted to himself that he should write an article, neither the poem nor the article were likely to get written. But if he allowed the poem to come to him, then later he could do the article with greater energy. I wish I had written down his exact words, but I have often inwardly re-created them.

CM: What changes have you seen in anthropological writing over the last several decades?

KN: It seems to me that anthropology grows ever more capacious, allowing for multiple kinds of intellectual projects and forms of writing. The critiques of the 1980s, when I was a graduate student, have, I believe, left the lasting legacy of more room to write in, more references as armor to justify an innovative style. Thanks especially to feminist anthropology, we also have had the chance to recover the fuller range of experimental forms that our anthropological ancestors worked with, forms that were earlier not recognized as a bona fide part of our legacy. There has been a greater acceptance of more openly

embracing collaborations—writing with rather than writing about—and to write with the urgency of ethical and political engagement for wider audiences.

CM: Your books are populated by characters the reader really gets to know, including yourself—from Swami-ji in *Storytellers, Scoundrels, and Saints* and Urmila-ji in *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* to your mother, father, and brother in *My Family and Other Saints* and then Anton Chekhov himself in *Alive in the Writing.* I see this attention to character rather than to a person's status or category or role in a society as a hallmark of the new post-1980s ethnography in general, but also as something you have in particular really developed for the field. Why does a fully fleshed-out individual speak so strongly to ethnographic knowledge? Why do you think this has mattered so much in recent decades?

KN: Simply as a literary device—engaging readers—the chance to evoke other people and their stories is a real gift for ethnographers. The best ethnographers and those writing for popular audiences in particular have always known this, and you can look back into the history of anthropology to find all kinds of memorable characters, especially in fieldwork memoirs and life histories. But I think that more than a literary device, portraying people in their complexity is theoretically and ethically important.

Writing about individuals known through long periods of shared time with an attention to their many facets doesn't allow us to contain them or pin them down in Schutz's memorable phrasing as "homunculi of theory." This keeps us honest about other people's creativity, transformations, and quirky unpredictability, and grounds intellectual missions within human encounters that can allow different readings. Fully fleshed-out individuals bring light to the complexity of lifeworlds that ethnographers try to make sense of and enhance a sense of compassion, a feeling for stakes and difficulties. Yet writing with a sense of character also demands a nuanced sensitivity as sometimes the most fascinating things can be embarrassing or harmful.

CM: What are you working on now?

KN: Most immediately I have just finished an essay for the new journal *Narrative Culture* about the stories told among artisan communities

in different regions of India and the embedded commentaries on the creative process, on shifting relations to materiality, and a wariness toward patronage. I am letting that essay settle a little as I look forward to learning more about memory and forgetting of artisan stories at a moment that many hereditary artisans have shifted occupations. In different ways, this is related to *My Family and Other Saints, Alive in the Writing*, and also my ongoing work with oral traditions in the Himalayas.

CM: What book or article of someone else's do you wish you had written?

KN: I'm often filled with admiration for other people's writing and can marvel at how much they are able to write and publish, but I don't wish that I'd written what they have. I know that I could never duplicate another writer's particular experience, insight, and skill. So I try to learn something for my own writing from what I really like in someone else's.

CM: Do you write in the field, or perhaps a better question: *what* do you write in the field? Only field notes or also drafts of things?

KN: Whether I write and what I write in the field really depend on the fieldwork circumstances: the project and the people around me. No matter where I am, I try to do freewriting in a journal each morning. Sometimes that material can form the basis for notes.

In addition to talismanic field notes, because of my interest in oral traditions I am usually working on transcriptions to be folded into further discussions. I am often writing letters or now emails when I can. I sometimes get a flash, seeing how the materials in notes could be made into a chapter and might try my hand at that.

The biggest separate project I've taken on in the field was writing *Love, Stars and All That*. I was in the Himalayan foothills of Kangra in 1990–1991, with many people around me pouring out sorrowful commiserations over how old, unmarried, and unmarriageable I had become. Writing a comic novel in the evenings, after field notes and transcription, and summoning up the company of faraway friends who might laugh, was for me a form of staying sane.

CM: Whom do you write for? To what extent are anticipated readers (individuals and community of readers) a part of your writing?

KN: Of course, this changes with every project and genre. Mostly, when I can think of my writing as sharing something I care about with someone I care about, that can help loosen a big freeze of self-doubt into a flow of words. My anticipated readers are both people I can give a face to—like my mother or friends in various locations—and also an amorphously imagined interested, smart, friendly, and hopefully somewhat forgiving person whom I might not yet have met but who I will become connected to through these written words. Especially for books, I am writing for the widest circle of potentially interested readers, whether or not they are professional anthropologists.

CM: What would Chekhov make of *Alive in the Writing: Creating Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*?

KN: I like to hope that Chekhov would be amused rather than appalled. As a doctor, he could playfully invent imaginative ailments, and he liked to say that he suffered from "autobiographobia." So there's a chance that all the details I assembled might have brought on a related case of "biographobia" even as he might have found all the earnest advice giving a little plodding. As someone who loved absurdity, he might have been entertained to find his quirky brilliance reframed and set into dialogue with all these other figures living in different times. And as someone with a strong sense of social justice he might have given his blessings to portions of *Sakhalin Island* being read afresh and perhaps seeding ideas for further ethnography.

CM: Why ethnography?

KN: For the discipline of paying attention, for learning from others, for becoming more responsibly aware of inequalities, for better understanding the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope, and most generally for being perpetually pulled beyond the horizons of one's own taken-for-granted world.

CM: The postscript to *Alive in the Writing* is such a gift to writers. You have wonderful, encouraging, and concrete suggestions for writing: getting started, moving forward, moving past writer's block, revising, and finishing. Do you follow your own advice? What are the hardest parts for you as a writer?

KN: I'm so glad that you found that postscript helpful. Writing is always hard for me, and yes, I try to follow my own cheery advice—

sometimes more successfully than other times. Every part of the process can be painful and burdened by self-doubt. Writing along with others is a wonderful way to get past the sense of one's own crushing limitations. All of *Alive in the Writing* and especially the postscript was a way of conjuring up companionship with the hopes that this might help others as it has for me.

Thank you for including me!

CM: It is my pleasure, Kirin. This is such wonderful food for thought, from reflections on anthropology and ethnography to reassurances about writing, and all in between. Thank you for *your* quirky brilliance, catalytic energy, and the permission to write what needs to be written, to let—for example—a poem pause the writing of an article so that you may come back to it refreshed and ready. May it be so!

Notes

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