

A tale of the field:

It was a rare moment in the qualitative research methodology class taught by Dr. CHB, a feminist of 1960s new left pedigree, that I could not keep my mouth shut. It was after a short-haired girl from the Women's Studies Department demanded that *'Tales of The Field: on Writing Ethnography'* by J. Van Mannen, be struck from the course reading list for its "racist, sexist language."

In my impression, the text is a lively account of the history of ethnographic research in the USA. In the chapter in which the early interest in 'social deviance' (a term no longer in use) is discussed, the author makes reference to a sociologist's in-joke at the time which is certainly offensive today. But does a passing reference to "nuts and sluts ethnography" warrant the book's banning?

I could not stay silent.

"Racist and sexist language?" I glanced between the feminist professor and the young woman. "What if the author's intention was only to provide a little entertainment along with the information? At the same time, maybe he would be remiss in not mentioning a term that was used in that era—even if it is offensive today. I don't know, maybe a sense of humour develops with age."

"Are you saying that because you think I am the youngest person in the class?" glared the girl. "Maybe I'm young but I have a right to speak out. I find the so-called humour in that book disgusting and hurtful. That book has no place on the class reading list. It should be taken off."

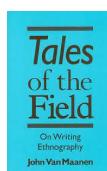
In a jolt of anger, I shot back. "Look, I'm 'offended' every day of my life by something. That doesn't mean I'm 'hurt'. Being offended doesn't mean I need to demand some change that makes my life easier. Don't you draw a distinction between being offended and being hurt?"

Uncertain how to respond, the girl looked at her Professor (who is herself, a legend in the Women's Studies Department).

"I'll stop it here," said Dr. CHB. It was obvious she was protecting a little sister from an old lizard.

The professor flipped the pages of the controversial text and then slapped the cover. "I will definitely consider shifting it from core to supplementary readings. When I find a suitable replacement, I will take it entirely off the list. The problem is that it's so difficult to find a work by a Canadian author that provides this historical perspective."

The professor turned to the other photocopied handout marked for the evening's discussion. The minute of silently turning pages seemed to serve the dual purpose of censuring a cretinous male who has verbally bullied a vulnerable woman. I received not a single eye-catching of support—not even from the blonde-bearded Phys-ed teacher, the only other male at the seminar table. For the rest of the evening, I kept my head down.



Was I justified in speaking out against the unreasonable demands of one—to which the rest of an intimidated group submitted?

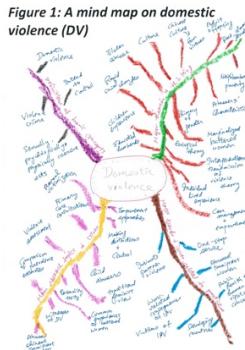
Several hours later, I lay sleepless, agonizing. Paranoia aside, it was impossible to know how the others in the class saw the incident. Most of the women were no-nonsense teachers. Their interest in the classroom-politics extended only so far as the hoops to be jumped for getting their post-grad degree and the accompanying pay increment as quickly as possible. If paying attention at all—they would have taken their cues from the professor. So why hadn't I, along with the others, just wisely kept my mouth shut?

Meanwhile, how likely was it that the girl who was so hurt by racist and sexist language was lying sleepless? But somehow the tape loop of that moment at the seminar table had fallen upon the boorish male to endlessly review...

1994, September



A talking feather and imaginary flower:



The 40ish woman with a punk hair cut I remembered from a Faculty of Education class at SFU last year. She had prefaced her every contribution to class discussion with: “Situating myself as a white middle-aged feminist...”

It was a surprise to encounter her as the facilitator of this Friday afternoon's faculty workshop on the topic: '*Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence*' ...

Before the start of the session, she greeted me a toothy grin. It was then that I remembered a brief exchange near the beginning of the SFU class. She asked to observe the ‘survival English’ class I had been teaching at the time. In my failing to extend an invitation, we had no further interactions... So it was this morning that I smiled, took a seat at the back of the half-empty classroom and ducked my head into a notepad.

At the appointed start time, she grinned up the wall clock—looked round at her audience and switched on the overhead projector. She acknowledged the First Nations territory we were occupying and located herself (this time as “a gay white woman”). She then spoke to each of a succession of bulleted points projected on the screen from *‘What is domestic violence?’* to *‘Domestic violence and the immigrant woman.’* She concluded her opening remarks by emphasizing the need for teachers to work closely with our counselling department (which teachers already do) where victims can be further referred to appropriate services.

Her final screen was a “mind map” showing the range of available services from healthcare professionals, police, lawyers and women’s shelters...

Like fellow participants, I was glad to know that there were such a host of social supports for the battered, threatened and abused (however suggested—not all of whom women). The system, as shown in the mind map, seemed so well-intentioned, so well organized—but what was missing?

For those whose traditional supports have been ruptured through immigration—I still wondered just how difficult it must be to open their private lives to the public sphere authorities... No matter how kindly counsellors present themselves to students in distress—they are not priests or imams—not extended family members. The role of counsellors probably seems murky to many immigrant students. Can they really be trusted with confidentiality? For all but the desperate, the interventions

of assumed representatives of the state into the private sphere probably deepen humiliation and shame...

The last screen of the opening presentation was an illustration of a teacher looking thoughtfully out the classroom window against a peppering of question marks. Across the bottom in bold letters was: *‘How can I help?’*

“Don’t you think it’s time for a short bathroom break?” said the presenter with her high-wattage grin.



When the teachers drifted back, the presenter switched to the role of facilitator. She pulled the chair from the back to the front of the teacher’s desk with her briefcase on the floor beside. Out of her briefcase she fished a greyish feather which appeared to be that of a pigeon...

“Just to give everyone a chance to speak.” the facilitator laughed. “It’s usually the shy people who often have the wisest things to say.” She twirled the feather. “I am borrowing this tradition from our First Nations. Only the one holding the feather has the right to speak. The rest of us will listen respectfully. When the speaker finishes—she passes it along to someone else who wants to speak. No one should dominate.”

There was reluctance at first—with teachers looking expectantly at one another. After an awkward moment, the department head gamely swooped the feather up...

She suggested that teachers could initiate class discussions around Human Rights and family law, given that a direct discussion of family violence could be traumatic for some students... Next to take the feather was seniority heavyweight TL. She said that when a counsellor recently visited her class, the issue of family violence had come up. “The students had no problem with the topic,” she said, “They were surprisingly direct.”

For about 20 minutes longer, the circulating feather allowed mention of such classroom challenges as dealing with ‘macho’ behaviour, racist comments by male eastern European students and encouraging women from some Islamic cultures to be more assertive... While offering a few nods of assent, I did not take the feather...



In wrapping up, our presenter showed a final overhead image of a smiling woman, possible Hispanic, holding a red rose.

“Now,” she said, snapping off the projector and coming back round to the circle of chairs, “I know this is a very difficult—very painful—subject we’ve been dealing with this afternoon. But what I like to do with my own class after a difficult discussion is to make sure we all leave in good

spirits... What I like to do is ask my students to toss an imaginary flower into the centre of the circle. If you don't mind, could we all do that?"

She closed her eyes. "Imagine a beautiful flower." After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and looked around, smiling. "OK, so do all mind tossing in your imaginary flower?"

The grinning teachers, all good sports—threw in a petunia, a lily, an orchid, a hyacinth— even an African violet. There were no thistles, no Venus fly traps...

"A dandelion," I blurted, when my turn came.

1996, June

Mea Culpa at Rocky Point Park:

On the eve of Canada Day, the festivities are underway at Rocky Point Park. On the makeshift stage (set up on the grassy expanse where usually sunbathers spread blankets) music and dance performances will apparently run the gamut of the Canadian mosaic...

When C. and I walked through the crowd early this afternoon, the stage was commanded by First nations drummers. A wide semi-circle of both kids and elders pounded tom-toms, beat hand drums and shook rattles before the curious crowd... They ‘traditional’ dress ranged from woven cedar hats to headbands; embroidered capes to heavy necklaces swinging on bare chests...

They drummed and swayed, often glancing to one another for cues. At one point a girl dressed in what could have been the deerskins of the first people of the prairies, shook a wooden rattle and danced...

In watching, I wondered to what extent the performance was ‘authentic’. Given the diversity of the aboriginal tribes in the territory of British Columbia alone, how could an attempt of reenactment be anything but an improvised pastiche? Of course, the revival of lost tradition from fragments of dimly received memory cannot avoid some guesswork. Yet the very effort is laudable— whatever the result. No less than other onlookers, I respected the sincerity of the performers.

Still, I could not help comparing performances of Andean music. While I have been nearly hypnotized by the ethereal beauty *quena* [pan flute] *chirango*, and *bombo* [skin drum], the best I could do in listening to an indigenous musical performance on home soil was to patronize...

Most unsettling before the BC First Nations drummers was the reminder of just how little I know about the original inhabitants of my adopted province. I cannot properly pronounce the names of the tribes of the northwest coast let alone speak any words of their languages. I have no social contacts with local people of aboriginal descent...

Yet more damning—is my paucity of curiosity. Clearly there must be a great deal to learn from those whose ancestors have occupied for indeterminable centuries these misty dark forests... Yet in sharp contrast to my fascination with the Aztecs or Incas—the history and culture of the Coast Salish or Haida often leaves me cold. My ignorance of the Maliseet and Wabanaki, the ancient forest dwellers of the north Atlantic province of my birth, is even more appalling...

This ignorance does not quite extend to a lack of awareness of the cultural genocide widely visited upon north aboriginal tribes in the overwhelm of European settlement. Yet even in my acknowledgement of the living legacy of historical wrongs, insidious stereotypes persist. Are First Nations’ peoples really held back by a belief in their perpetual victimhood? Is there really incorrigible corruption in tribal leadership?

It was not difficult to understand why many First Nations’ people believe that the “subtle” racism of self-identifying progressives is more menacing than the openly hostile varieties...



It was in the same train of thought, I recalled a moment on an apartheid segregated train between Johannesburg and Durban, *circa* August 1982. I had asked the porky Boer fellow on the seat beside if he knew the name of the distinctive tribal area we were passing through.

He sneered. "How would I know? All the bloody kaffirs look the same to me!"

Also, from Africa sojourn years, came the memory of a particularly biting remark of the Rhodesian girlfriend of a fellow Canadian teacher:

"I guess the African women seem exotic to you North Americans... You know, I always thought that the Red Indians in the old Hollywood movies looked so handsome with their swarthy hawk-like features!"

Even at the time, I wondered just how "liberal" I might have been about race-relations had I been born a 'European' Rhodesian...

As for one of European heritage born in North America— what could be a better determinant of settler blindness than a gut reaction to First Nations drumming? So it was that I turned away from the stage of Rocky Point Park this afternoon in the pall of *mea culpa*...

2013, June
