BEDTIME STORIES
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Conventional ethnographies portray a reality with limited complexity—from the singular perspective of the ethnographer observing the object engaged in events external to the observer. The multiple voices or personalities of the ethnographer are never invoked nor is the complex relationality of the object(s) and the ethnographer(s) to each other and to their situatedness in a context that is dynamic and dependent on their presence. In contrast to such ethnographies, in this article it is the process of investigation into the central question—the puzzle concerning the nature of the mother-child relationship—that is the main diegesis. This is a description; an investigation into the parallel, complex emotional relationship between a mother and child; an unfolding of the intertwined development of two characters' feelings and sometimes conflicted emotions, probing into the nature of the relationship of the characters in which the historical and psychological depths of that relationship are revealed. In unraveling the nature of this relationship, the rigid, separate and hierarchical polarity of other and self (ethnographer) is deconstructed. There is, in fact, no simple monolithic self to act as a referent to an equally monolithic other. The revelation undermines the construction of such an other and uncovers the dilemma inherent in the entire ethnographic enterprise which masquerades as representation. The inevitable categorization, distillation and oversimplification of reality in any such representation belies its complexity.

In this ethnographic enterprise, the mother's questions on the nature of close relations parallel, reflect, and illuminate the son's stories. The development of the sensibilities of the characters in the piece is brought out in their juxtaposition—reflecting as well as motivating one another. Following the search for understanding into the deepening sensibilities of both characters *is* the main story line—anchored in no time or space other than that of the characters themselves. Here time and space are reorganized to maximally illustrate the search, and yet the puzzle that is the nature of the relationship remains unsolved. Rather that being provided with a description or portrait of "reality," we have in the multi-layered interaction between

mother and child a powerful analogy for the complexities and unresolved questions that are, perhaps, the nature of existential reality. In the play of surface and depth, the particular and apparently trivial moments of story telling are transcended, and through the allegory of the local and incidental lend substance to another level—the anecdotes themselves and the descriptions of story telling episodes overflowing their own boundaries.

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It's early morning. I lie awake in bed staring at the wall opposite me. *Something is wrong, something out of place. . . on any other morning I'd be in bed with mommy, after Pop has left for work. . . but mommy is not in bed.* My door is closed, but I can hear voices, a lot of voices on the other side in the living room. They are hushed, and I can't make out any words, just strained, worried sounds. . . *. is someone crying? . . . Why is George out there? He never wakes up this early. . . . something is . . . Pop is dead. I'm not getting up. . . I'm not getting out of the bed or moving at all. As long as I stay here and don't go out there he's not dead, it's still part of last night and I've just gone to bed first. . . they just haven't gone to bed yet. I'll just stay here and things won't change.*

I shuffle down the hall and the living room opens out in front of me. Faces turn and expand and fill the space. My mom is all red..."Oh, Josie . . . there's something I have to tell you. . ."

> CONRAD-George Fredrik, on Dec. 14 Born in Kaiserslautern, Germany. Chief Engineer, Coronado Ferries. Survived by wife, Mary Rita, two sons and one daughter. Services at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Coronado, 10:00 AM.

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"Whew, hee, hee, hee. Whew, hee, hee, hee. Whew, hee, hee, hee." The pain is rising up from the base of my abdomen, rising and taking me with it. I try to resist, to stand my ground, but it's useless. Quickly, in rapid succession, nothing, nothing, then screams, arms flying, mouth foaming, eyes rolling, dry heaves. . . ok, ok, it's over again.

"Her blood pressure is going up; let's get her to lie down."

"Nooo. Please, it hurts too much to lie down!"

Before I'm fully supine, the pushing starts and the pressure is relieved. Push, push, push, hurt, hurt. . . and then. . . emptiness, relief. . . and a tiny cry.

A wet mass is placed on my breasts. Placental blood is caked on his hair, but his eyes are bright and he is perfect. . . *but where did he come from. . .* ? *Can it be possible that this beautiful creature caused so much pain?*

PETRABORG— Conrad Fredril, on May 15,12:20 PM at Alta Bates Hospital, to parents Guy Petraborg and JoAnn Conrad of Berkeley.

A circle is closed. I try to understand what love is, how it shapes the ones it touches. I know that there is an intimacy I shared with Conrad, and for me, part of it is shaped by the physical link I alone have with his creation and initial nurturing. But does this mean that his father cannot access this intimacy, or that Conrad even reciprocates it? How does that reconcile with my own bonding with my father, however short-lived? No, . . . I think motherhood provides access to such feelings, but they are not immediate or necessarily forthcoming. Does a child experience love differently? Is it dependency? Does it derive from a need for pleasurable experiences? What constitutes an utterly un-selfconscious love? And can the pain of separation ever not be implicit in such emotions?

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OK, now the lights are out, and we're finally winding down. Why do they portray going to bed as such a quick process in the movies? The mom and dad just come in, tuck their kid in, kiss him goodnight and close the door. No hysterics, no crying. . . what planet does that happen on? Lying down and talking to Conrad once he has settled down is so much fun. . . it makes me feel guilty at the same time because I can like him so easily in these non-trying times. God, I wonder how many parents actually lie down with their four-year-old kids... and fall asleep with them? Maybe it's a big conspiracy. . . everybody does and nobody admits to it. It's like the TV versions of delivery. . . women looking radiant—yeah, right.

"Hold still, you wiggle-worm!" He still fits neatly into the curve of my body when we lie together. I have my head resting on his outstretched arm in a gesture that seems almost paternal on his part. I really want to be quiet, I want to fall asleep this way, even though I'm supposed to get him to sleep and go out and do some work. But he wants to tell stories. He wants to keep this going, afraid of going to sleep. Is he afraid of this transition to the unknown? Or is he just trying to test the limits imposed on him, to see how set they really are? Oh man, this fat cat Fred is back on the bed between my legs. . . . Now I'm pinned in between him and Conrad. I can feel my neck twisted in an unnatural and uncomfortable position and I want to move, but fear my movement will get Conrad worked up again. . . . I'll have a crick in my neck in the morning.

"Turn on the light, mommy."
"No, I'm not turning the lights on, it's bedtime." "But I can't hear with the lights off. I need the lights on."

> Light comes into the bedroom from the living room beyond, faintly illuminating the forms and figures in the room. The lights from cars passing by in the street outside penetrate the space between the window frames and the shades, and large shards of light pierce the space and travel in circular patterns across the walls. The central bed, heaped with small figures and stuffed animals, is surrounded by the vestiges of day-time activities: art projects, clothes, clean and dirty intermixed and strewn about, puzzle pieces, books, ropes, balls, chairs, a small table. . . their indistinct shapes occasionally sharpened and given color by the lights from the street.
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> I'm settled in under the covers of Conrad's double bed, lying on my side facing him. He is lying on his back, with his legs over the covers. He's still wiggling around and is physically engaged in the story telling. I like to watch his profile with the upturned nose and the full cheeks. I like the warmth his body gives up, and try to get closer to enjoy that, while not getting a stray arm or leg in the face. This warmth has gained Conrad a number of nicknames: "warm-bug," "heater," or, perversely, "the human worm." I luxuriate in his smell, my favorite aspect of our intimacy. . . . it smells of young skin, wet hair, light sweat, and faintly of soap. Later in the evening, after he has been asleep for some time, thrashing about in his bed, I'll tuck him in again, and the freshly-washed sweetness will have been replaced with a stronger scent, one that I much more emphatically associate with my son. The sweetness of my intimacy with Conrad, the luxury of his soft skin, shared conversation and baby smell is heightened by its fleetingness.

This is the final act of a regularly enacted ritual that includes a bath, nude dancing, acrobatics on the bed, diapering under duress, putting on pjs, brushing teeth, drinking water, reading stories in bed, and finally, lights out with a long period of

talking and storytelling in the dark. The stories unfold slowly, interspersed with conversation about the day's routines. Initially the narratives are informed by cartoon figures and plots, but Conrad quickly begins to fill in with his own story lines, which open up aspects of the world of his thoughts that are otherwise unarticulated. He wants to tell these stories, partly because he wants not to go to sleep, but also because they are a means of communication for him. They are encoded messages for me to decipher, if I expend the effort to really listen to what he is saying.

I don't want to tell any stories. I just want to go to sleep.
I hope he tells me one soon.

"Hey mom, you know what?"
"What?"
"Ahmad got a Beetle-Man and him gonna share with me at school."
"Cool! So, why don't you tell me a story?"
"I don't know any stories. . . "
"Well you do. . . ."
"OK. One a time, [A]laddin, urn . . .Genie, and a who? Abo and what is that birdie name?"
"Yago?"
"And what is the green one's name?"
"Oh, I dunno . . . that bird?"
" Yeah."
"Oh, yeah, I dunno."
"Yes you do."
"No."
"You saw it afore."
"I know but I never knew the name."
"Why? It's Yago's mommy, really."
"Oh, OK."
"Her talk to Yago. The mommy. . . "

Conrad slows down here, pauses, and then speeds up, and delivers the following in a much quicker, louder and more assertive tone.

"And Yago have the daddy and a mommy. Cause, after, um, Yago didn't have a mommy and a daddy. . . ?
" Yeah?"
(said as if crying himself)"Him be crying."
"Yeah. . . ?" (sympathetically).
"And after him have a mommy and a daddy. . . him said, 'yeah! yeah! yeah!'." (Conrad's arms are raised over his head, and he jubilantly shouts.)

Oh God! He's stressing over the transitions, anxious about our separations. We try to squeeze in too much. . . school, jobs, commitments. . . there is no time to do anything as a family. Our schedule is erratic. No wonder he is telling these stories, no wonder he drags out going to bed. It may be our only set routine, and he exercises some control over the situation. But isn't he doing more than that. . . it's too easy to say he's anxious. . . he's trying to get a grip on the whole thing. . . his relationship with us, with the rest of the world. . .trying to figure out how he fits in to all of this. It is just ego gratification to dismiss this as separation anxiety. . . do kids really depend on us as much as we want them to? He's dealing with the conflicting emotions of dependence and independence. His stories reflect this. Having us around is not always so great.

Conrad sighs.
"Tell me a story. . . hmm . . . my story is short." "It's good though."
"One upon a time a snake came, and got [A]laddin on him back. And Yago and. . . ate all the other guys. . . (smacks his lips and pretends to eat for ten seconds). And when [A]laddin got all the way to him face, the snake ate him. And Princess Jasemin came up, *"shweh"*, the snake. . . . Hey, what is that moving? The house is moving. . . ."
"Really? I didn't feel anything. . . "
"I feel it moving. (Big sigh) And then her, Princess Jasemin came all the way to him face, 'swish,

> also). Then them went back home. And then the school was open and it was fixed. And then the
> Gargoyles came back and saw it was fixed and they wrecked it again. That's it."

Here I am trying to resolve my contradictory feelings towards Conrad, and it looks as if he is trying to do the same thing. He is trying to balance his feelings of dependency and love with those of a desire to be independent and to extend his social sphere beyond just us. In the first story school is a good place. The kids are sad when they can't get in, and happy when they can get in to play-without the teachers. This is wish fulfillment, freedom within a safe, familiar environment. The second story complicates the vision of school. School is the site of the most traumatic transition and separation on a routine basis. It is the separation from me that Conrad loathes, not the social interaction at school. Seen as the source of this separation anxiety, school is therefore the logical target of some pretty heavy aggression, and a desire to see the source of the enforced separation eliminated—permanently.

> "Mom, when did you get married?"
> "Oh, a long time ago."
> "Well I don't want you to be married."
> "Why not?"
> "Because when you're married you talk with one voice, you're one person."
> "No, honey, I'm always mommy. What do you want?"
> "I want there to be mommy, and daddy and Conrad."

Although I know that I can't grasp the full intention of his statement, the depth and profundity of them strike me, undermining my initial musings on his stories and exposing my patronizing attitudes towards his narratives in reducing them to such simplistic, formulaic interpretations. Conrad recognizes human complexity and the complexity of human relations. His articulation of this perception in turn sharpens my own. His desire not to be subsumed into a unifying experience or relationship echoes the attempt to interject complexity into ethnographic

description, to eschew essentializing, simplifying accounts and analyses.

> "OK, it's time to go to sleep now. Turn over and go to sleep."
> "I want you to sleep with me."
> *Another separation, compounded with being scared of the dark. I hate the separation as well and would rather stay in bed with him, but I feel that I should have him go to sleep by himself. Am I afraid of the closeness, or am I following the dictates of society that assigns a certain stigma to a mother-son relationship perceived to be too close. I want to rebel, to act as my impulses direct, but something gnaws at me that he is too old, that the long term consequences are not good. Why? I turn over and close my eyes. Conrad turns towards me, press his face up to mine and kisses me.*
> "Good night, mom."
> "Good night, Boo-boo. I love you."
> "I love you too."

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Conrad and I began telling stories to each other naturally. These stories were in addition to and quite separate from reading books. The stories were often in collaboration, and at the very least provoked response, criticism, and correction. They were dynamic and tended to revolve around everyday events, retold in dramatic, exaggerated form. For a long time, my interest in these stories was entirely personal: I liked to encourage Conrad's ability as a storyteller, I physically preferred to tell or listen to a story rather than read one, and it gave us a special context of shared intimacy. I began to become intellectually interested in Conrad's stories during my investigations into the various theories on the formation and transmission of folk and personal narratives. Was there a deeper structure inherent in narratives that could be seen to have parallels in children's own stories, in the same way that deeper language structure was inferred in the processes of first language acquisition? Would it be possible to extrapolate, as Botvin and Sutton-Smith have

suggested, narrative structure from children's narratives? Contrary to the expectations embedded in these questions, however, in the course of our storytelling events it became obvious that both thematically and structurally Conrad's narratives were already quite formalized, and that extrapolating a deeper, inherent narrative structure from those of an as yet "uncontaminated" or "pure" narrative form of a child was an exercise with a flawed premise. What did emerge, as the writing and analysis of the project unfolded, was that embedded in such small, specific narratives and their telling was a much more complicated macro-narrative: the mother-son relationship. There are many stories within stories.

Michel Foucault has claimed that the "author function" serves to disperse simultaneous, plural selves, which exist nonhierarchically (112-13). In this experimental and impressionistic piece, both the subject and the object are multiple and shifting, and in the shifting of voice and the laminations of time we discover an erasure of the boundaries inscribed by the categories themselves. Subject and object are not only multiple, they are constantly invoked and intertwined, and as their sensibilities unfold in patches and chunks of scenes and variations in texture, so the reader is drawn into these sensibilities. In this manner interiority flows from exteriority; the reader breaking through the opacity of the individual narratives into a reality to which she has only partial access.

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