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Critical Ethnography

D. SOYINI MADISON

# Critical Ethnography



Method, Ethics, and Performance



D. SOYINI MADISON

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

# Critical Ethnography

Method, Ethics, and Performance

*To Judith A. Hamera  
and  
Reighne Madison Dyson*

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## Note: Postmodernism

In the 17th and 18th centuries, modernity comes to be associated with enlightenment. The secular enlightenment presupposes that history will unfold into an open, possibly limitless future. Technology and industrial development is associated with social change. [Historical modernism] actually begins in the 15th century and comes to characterize the Christian epoch (15th century, in the writings of St. Augustine). What falls apart in the modern era are the values of the 18th century, the age of [Enlightenment], also known as the Age of Reason and the Age of Progress. In the 18th century, thinkers become optimistic that by using the universal values of science, reason, and logic, they can get rid of all the myths and holy ideas that kept humanity from progressing. They feel this can eventually free humanity from misery, religion, superstition, all unnatural behavior, and unfounded belief. Humanity would thus progress to a state of freedom, happiness, and progress.

An important difference, noted by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), between modernism and postmodernism is that modernism embodies a nostalgia for a lost sense of unity and also constructs an aesthetic of fragmentation; however, postmodernism begins with this "lack" or loss and celebrates it. Truth is based on radical contingency, and this "nihilistic" conclusion offers a way out of modernity and marks the birth of post modernity—truth is dissolved and the predominance of knowledge as contingent reigns.

Lyotard (1984) argues that postmodernism ought not to be understood in terms of a historical progression, which signals a present departure from past modernism, but should be characterized as a response to a set of concerns which are themselves already postmodern.

The social critic Fredrick Jameson (1991) demarcates three developments in modernism and postmodernism based on the global economy:

First Period (1700–1885): Market Capitalism

Second Period: Monopoly Capitalism/Age of Imperialism. National markets expand into world markets

Third Period: Postmodern. Postmodernism erupts on the world scene with the unrestricted growth of multinational corporations (this is the purest form yet to emerge)

post-modernism? (everything is contingent/  
~~subjective?~~)

Conceptualizations of the Other have a long and varied history articulated by Western thinkers and their critics around the world. This brief introduction to the key concepts in Western morality that have served to define an ethics of ethnography lays the groundwork for now turning to an extended and alternative view of ethics through the elaboration of "world

traveling" and "loving perception," first articulated by Maria Lugones (1994). The emphasis on Lugones's notion of ethics will serve to bring the discussion of ethics into the discourse of those marginalized identities who are setting forth their own alternative moral paradigms and perspectives on the Other from their experience as outsiders. It will also serve to place our examination of ethics and the Other into a conceptualization of world traveling that is particularly relevant to the ethnographic project.

## Maria Lugones: Contemporary Ethics, Ethnography, and Loving Perception

### World Traveling and Loving Perception

A particular feature in being an "outsider" or "minority" of mainstream constructions of experience and reality is code switching, or what feminist philosopher Lugones (1994) calls "world traveling," where one must travel through worlds of difference, unfamiliarity, or alienation as well as the contrasting worlds of comfort, familiarity, and support by shifting codes from one world to the next. Lugones describes a world as "inhabited by flesh and blood people. . . . A World need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people. Some 'worlds' are bigger than others" (Lugones, 1994, p. 631). When outcasts travel to different worlds and perform differently in those worlds, they do so not out of deception, but out of appropriateness, civility, respect, or out of health and safety for their own survival. They are required to use space and language in a particular way that is constitutive of that particular world (p. 632). One may or may not be conscious that they are employing different gestures, language patterns, intentions, and personalities as they travel from one world to another.

Successful world traveling is a matter of skill and experience, and there are some who will be better world travelers than others, such as those who inhabit multiple worlds and feel at home, more or less, in all the worlds they inhabit. World traveling is a matter of learning the different rules and norms in these Other worlds and then choosing to play by those rules or not. It is also a matter of knowing what is expected and being able to anticipate it. It is a matter of knowing the language, the aesthetics and taste, the norms of civility, and the emotional landscapes. World traveling is a natural part of human interaction for all of us who live in a diverse social world where power and authority operate in diffuse and multicentered locations. However, for minorities or outsiders, where the levels and processes of disenfranchisement are more entrenched and deep-rooted, world traveling is a

necessity that demands even more skill, effort, and experience when crossing the borders of different worlds. The more different you are, the more adept at world traveling you must become. But there are some outsiders who have crossed into different worlds, and their presence in that world may not necessarily be based primarily on learning the norms or rules of that world, but more on learning how their identities are already constructed in it. These identities may inhabit that world by enacting the caricature or stereotype that that particular world projects upon them. Moreover, they may also refuse or simply not recognize themselves in the construction.

### Stereotypes

For many marginalized identities and people of color, they are known in a particular world through caricature and stereotypes. A major problem is that the stereotypical projection of one's identity by other worldly constructions of who one is diminishes the complexity and humanity of one's individuality, as well as one's ethnicity or affiliated group. When in one world, I may animate that world's caricature or stereotype of the person they construct me to be. We all may fall prey to the expectations, images, and stereotypes that particular worlds hold for us. We actually enact the caricature, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. We become a double self: the self of our "home place world" and the self that succumbs to stereotypical behavior that the particular Other world expects, sometimes demands, of us. We may realize we are playing the caricature—conscious of this construction as we perform it; but we are not always aware, we may not always understand:

Some of the inhabitants of a world may not understand or accept the way in which they are constructed in it. So, for example, a recent Latin-American immigrant may not understand how she is constructed in White/Anglo worlds. So there may be a world that constructs me in ways that I do not even understand or I may not accept the construction as an account of myself, a construction of myself. And yet, I may be animating such a construction, even though I may not intend my moves, gestures, acts in that way. (Lugones, 1994, p. 631)

We may enact these stereotypes for several reasons. First, I may enact so you can engage or accept me into the construction you have of me; otherwise you will remain distant, fearful, or unfamiliar. Second, I may enact because I have internalized the caricature you project upon me when I am with you. Enacting the expected stereotype may be easier and more "natural" than breaking outside the expectations you have of me. Third, I may enact the

caricature because the act is survival rich; I, like the trickster, am a plurality of selves in order to accomplish a particular end.

World traveling is a challenging endeavor. I am different in different worlds, and I can remember myself in both as I am in the other. "I am a plurality of selves" (Lugones, 1994, p. 634).

### Being at Ease

Much of the way in which we all are required to code-switch or perform differently in different worlds is based upon what Lugones (1994) describes as "being at ease" in these worlds. One may be at ease in all the worlds one travels. However, for most marginalized individuals, they must travel to worlds where there are varying levels of ease. Lugones charts four ways of being at ease. First, to be at ease in a particular world is to be a fluent speaker in that world. To know the norms and the vocabulary of a location is to be at ease. Second, to be at ease, one must be normatively happy. You like the norms, you like doing what you are required to do there and what you think you should be doing. Third, one is at ease in a world where one feels "humanly bonded." You are with those you care for and they care for you—even when, and especially when, you are in a surrounding world that is hostile to you. Finally, one is at ease in a world where there is a shared history. For example, you may be among strangers and music is playing in the background. Someone you never met before says, "I remember when I first heard that song at Woodstock more than 30 years ago." There is little or no response from the others, but you are excited and say, "I was there too!" You both immediately make a connection in a way that memory can bring people together through the shared feelings and meanings of particular moments in time. You both enthusiastically share stories about being at Woodstock, unconcerned about the others around you.

### Playfulness

With an understanding of world, world travel, and being at ease in a world, we will turn to Lugones's (1994) idea of playfulness. To be playful in a world means that it is both safe and appropriate for one to take risks, to be foolish and uncertain; to be playful means that one is free to not worry about competence and to abandon competition and self-importance. It means that in this particular world one need not fear harm or arrogance for being playful. In this world, one is secure, healthy, and totally at ease. Lugones writes,

... is in a

Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight. . . . Positively, the playful attitude involved openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction of the "worlds" we inhabit playfully. Negatively, playfulness is characterized by uncertainty, lack of self-importance, absence of rules or not taking rules as sacred, a not worrying about competence and a lack of abandonment or resignation to a particular construction of oneself, others, and one's relation to them. (pp. 634-666)

However, one must not confuse being at ease (and being competent) with being playful (Lugones, 1994, p. 635). To be playful in a world, you must be at ease in that world, but being at ease in that world does not necessarily mean you can be playful. For certain individuals, particularly outsiders, travel to Other worlds—even when at ease—does not mean they cannot necessarily be playful, because there are consequences. You cannot be playful in worlds where the norms, rules, expectations, values, and structures are not for playing. We do not generally consider a lecture hall, a courtroom, or a conversation with those who are unfamiliar to us or in authority over us as spaces for play. But we may be at ease in these spaces, even though we should not play. And there are the other spaces where we cannot play—spaces inhospitable to our identity and being.

Lugones (1994) reminds us there are "worlds we enter at our own risk, worlds that have agon, conquest, and arrogance as the main ingredients in their ethos" (p. 635). Moreover, we enter out of "necessity [those worlds] which we would be foolish to enter playfully" (p. 635). These spaces are not simply formal or competitive, but spaces that perceive difference arrogantly—with arrogant perception. In these worlds of arrogant perception, one must move with levels of competence, caution, awareness, and mastery. The nature of this world demands that one must be unplayful in it (p. 637). Therefore, for the outsider to be playful in a world that perceives you arrogantly is "foolish." However, as Lugones writes, "I am not a healthy being in the 'worlds' that construct me as un-playful" (p. 637). This does not mean that you can or should stop being a playful human being; you just cannot be playful in that world. We play in worlds that are safe and loving. As human beings we require the wholeness and abandon of play for delight, creativity, purpose, and good health. More important, we must also understand that in order to be playful, it is not the individual that must change but the unplayful world.

### Arrogant Perception/Loving Perception

Maria Lugones (1994) brings forward Marilyn Frye's (1983) notion of "arrogant perception" as the failure to identify with someone that one views arrogantly or that one has come to perceive as the product of arrogant perception. Arrogant perception objectifies the Other and casts the Other as an inferior being. To perceive another arrogantly is to stand at a distance in opposition to an egalitarian relationship, thereby prohibiting any consideration for honest dialogue. Lugones (1994) writes,

When I came to the U.S., I learned that part of racism is the internalization of the propriety of abuse without identification: I learned that I could be seen as a being to be used by White/Anglo men and women without the possibility of identification, i.e., without their act of attempting to graft my substance onto theirs, rubbing off on them at all. They could remain untouched, without any sense of loss. (p. 628)

An added connection is that between the failure of identification and the failure to love. Lugones (1994) sets forth a love of deep caring and responsibility. In perceiving others arrogantly and failing to identify with them, "We fail to love them in this particular deep way" (pp. 629-630). This particular "deep way" that Lugones sets forth is very similar to Martin Luther King, Jr. and his interpretation of the love found in agape:

The Greek language comes out with another word which is the highest level of love. It speaks of it in terms of agape. Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate. It means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love. . . . With this type of love and understanding goodwill we will be able to stand amid the radiant glow of the new age with dignity and discipline. (King, 1994, p. 564)

The critical ethnographer may understand loving perception as it echoes through the love of agape as a principle of ethics, but what does all this have to do with an ethics of ethnography and ethics as a method? It relates to an ethics of ethnography because Lugones is advocating for world traveling as a means to identify with Others and to perceive lovingly.

### Summary

Although Lugones (1994) examines the experience of women of color in the United States, fieldworkers may learn a great deal from the strategies