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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENTS FROM A FRINGE DWELLER

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Rationale.

I compiled these autobiographical fragments in response to a recent request from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. They asked for “a short history of the [Alyawarra] papers outlining the reason for their creation and including biographical and any other details on their creator.”¹This document accompanies the archival material I have deposited at the Institute.

Three factors have been of special importance in shaping the content of these fragments. First, I thank Rob Banks², a geneticist in Australia, for asking a fundamental question about all of my published work concerning the Alyawarra speaking people of Central Australia. With regard to my multidimensional relational, demographic and observational data, he asks, “Are the networks of knowledge and relationship as rich as they appear to be, or is that some sort of sentimental projection, a white fantasy, a wish projection?” Although he then focuses on the presumed validity of the networks I described, I take this opportunity to explore his question of bias.

Second, I thank Sarah Hrdy (p.c.), a primatologist and anthropologist in California, for asking a related question concerning the same *MACT* paper. She wants to understand my apparent change from nonhuman primate research in the 1960s to Australian Aboriginal research in later decades.

Third, I respond to the highly regarded autobiography of Willie Morris, a fellow Mississippian whose account of his coming-of-age experiences in the Deep South enabled me to see my own experiences more clearly.

¹ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2016. Guide for clients: preparing manuscripts for donation, p.1. Canberra, ACT, Australia.

² Robert Banks 2015. Comment on: Denham, "Alyawarra kinship, infant carrying, and alloparenting". *Mathematical Anthropology and Cultural Theory* 8(3):4-5.

In my technical papers, I have discussed the nature of research methods and techniques in detail; here I focus on my motivation for using them. In considering the broad question of what leads people to use certain methods and techniques in the social sciences, I deal only narrowly with racism and species-ism. Both attitudes have long been rationalized in terms of the Medieval Chain of Being and folk taxonomies devoid of scientific support, and both lay at the foundation of European colonialism in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Most importantly, both of them yielded travesties of justice in the 20th century, and both continue to do so today, 65 years and more since the demise of the European colonial empires and 150 years after the fighting of the American Civil War.

If Rabindranath Tagore, Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Isaac Asimov, Hari Seldon, Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, Mississippi Delta blues and the mid-20th century American Civil Rights Movement leave you cold, you may want to stop here.

An artist at work.

Rabindranath Tagore³ began his reminiscences with the following comment that applies equally well to my autobiographical fragments.

"I do not know who has painted the pictures of my life imprinted on my memory. But whoever he is, he is an artist. He does not take up his brush simply to copy everything that happens; he retains or omits things just as he fancies; he makes many a big thing small and small thing big; he does not hesitate to exchange things in the foreground with things in the background. In short, his task is to paint pictures, not to write history. The flow of events forms our external life, while within us a series of pictures is painted. The two correspond, but are not identical. ... Some years ago ... I had occasion to explore this picture-chamber. ... [A]s I opened the door I discovered that memories are not history but original creations by the unseen artist. The diverse colours scattered about are not reflections of the outside world but belong to the painter himself, and come passion-tinged from his heart - thereby making the record on the canvas unfit for use as evidence in a court of law. ... But though the attempt to gather a precise and logical story from memory's storehouse may be fruitless, it is fascinating to shuffle the pictures."

³Rabindranath Tagore 1917. *My Reminiscences*. London: Macmillan.

Deracinated in Mississippi.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
Took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*⁴

Perhaps the single most important factor in shaping my research with the Alyawarra speaking people of Central Australia was my childhood spent in the intensely racist town of Indianola, Mississippi. I became most fully aware of this connection belatedly in 2001 when I read *North toward Home*⁵, the autobiography of Willie Morris, a native of Yazoo City, Mississippi, only 45 miles from my home. Born in 1934, Morris was a Rhodes Scholar who became editor in chief of *Harper's Magazine* at age 32. As his *New York Times* obituary⁶ said, "He had to leave the South to really confirm his own Southernness", but confirm it he did. I never confirmed mine.

Morris grew up happily in Yazoo City, seeing approximately the same world that I saw, but his early evaluation of the Mississippi Delta was different from mine. I sprang from a Faulknerian tradition in which life was essentially grim, with positive moments sometimes interspersed to make the whole experience bearable.

After a failed attempt to run away from home at age 3, I made more subtle attempts to leave Mississippi while I was in high school, generally focusing on television and books decades before satellites and computers changed the world. My wall map of North and Central America and the Caribbean received a pin each time I grasped a stray TV signal from a remote location such as Montreal, Philadelphia, Miami, Havana or Mexico City, yielding a total of 130 pins when I graduated from high school in 1959. A bit later, Walter Cronkite's world news appeared nightly on a Memphis TV station where his alien dialect served as a model for my own language, and his attitudes of fairness, openness, accuracy and tolerance showed me an alternative to Mississippi's "normal problems" of hatred, bigotry, exploitation, ignorance, poverty and self-serving secrecy. My school library offered Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky from exotic places in the past, while the Doubleday Science Fiction Book Club offered Clarke and Asimov from exotic places in the future inhabited by exotic people like Hari Seldon.

⁴ Robert Frost 1915/1969. "The road not taken." In Edward C. Lathem, ed. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 105. New York: Henry Holt. Interpretations of the poem match the structure of the roads: one can bemoan losses due to indecision or celebrate benefits due to free thinking. Frost bemoans; I celebrate.

⁵ Willie Morris 1967. *North toward Home*. Oxford, Mississippi: Yoknapatawpha Press.

⁶ Peter Applebome, 3 August 1999. Willie Morris, 64, writer on the Southern experience. *New York Times*.

While assiduously looking outward, I did a nearly perfect job of not looking inward. My teachers didn't suggest that I should learn anything about Mississippi except what I read in my textbooks. Perhaps they were simply ignorant of their own heritage and incapable of teaching it, but a more realistic interpretation is that they avoided telling students about the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Mississippi Delta for fear that all of us, teachers and students alike, might suffer as a result of that exposure. Not remarkably, White privilege⁷ and White silence intensified the blindness of White people as the United States moved toward the violence of the Civil Rights Movement.

My discovery of the remarkable culture that surrounded me but almost never touched me was retarded profoundly by that paralyzing silence. Often it has been said that southern Black children grew up culturally impoverished in the days before the Head Start Program, but my White peers and I grew up just as culturally impoverished right along with them. The following is but a small sample of fruits forbidden before I graduated from high school.

Concerning literature, I had never seen a book by William Faulkner even though he lived in Oxford at the center of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County where I was born in 1941, wrote about life in the Delta in some of his best works⁸, and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949. At mid-century, work by Faulkner, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Tennessee Williams and many other southern authors – both White and Black - constituted a locally unacknowledged literary renaissance not unlike the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Concerning music, Indianola was at the center of the Mississippi Delta that gave birth to the blues and to many of the Black men and women who defined that American musical genre through the 20th century, a place where ethnomusicologists John and Alan Lomax⁹ collected Black folk music and blues while I grew up in a White neighborhood insulated from B. B. King and Club Ebony. Concerning social science research, Indianola in the 1930s hosted two separate field projects conducted by scholars affiliated with Yale University, John Dollard¹⁰ and Hortense Powdermaker¹¹, whose major books were quarantined rather than lost before I heard of them. The rigidly enforced White silence about these and similar matters meant that I learned about all

⁷Frederick Douglass 1845. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23>. Paula S Rothenberg and Soniya Munshi 2016. *White privilege: essential readings on the other side of racism*, 5th ed. New York: Worth Publishers.

⁸Faulkner, William 1942. "The Bear" in *Go Down, Moses*. Random House.

⁹ Alan Lomax 1993. *The Land where the Blues Began*. Pantheon Books.

¹⁰John Dollard 1937/1957. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 3rd ed. Yale University Press.

¹¹Hortense Powdermaker 1939/1993. *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. University of Wisconsin Press.

of them not as a resident at the center of the action, but as an anthropologist decades after I left Indianola. It is likely that many of my peers never learned about them at all.

Although I failed to learn some valuable things, I received a lot of training in racism itself with its multitude of faces, its nuances and its violence, and was expected to practice it whenever an opportunity arose. I was present at the creation of the White Citizens' Council in the auditorium of Indianola's Elementary School. I was surrounded by Protestant fundamentalists who expected me to act like them and resented it intensely when I did not. I was encouraged to do well in school, but the contradictory anti-intellectualism that came through from no clearly identifiable source said that if I learned too much, I would be tainted forever. I heard reverential stories in hushed tones about Senator John Stennis, and learned that Emmet Till, a Black teenager who was lynched at the age of 14, got just what he deserved. I couldn't cope with all of that and rebelled at a tender age.

Rodgers and Hammerstein said it well in "You've got to be carefully taught", a song in *South Pacific* that never became a hit but almost got the musical banned in the South in 1949.

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
you've got to be taught from year to year,
it's got to be drummed in your dear little ear.
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
of people whose eyes are oddly made,
and people whose skin is a diff'rent shade.
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
before you are six or seven or eight,
to hate all the people your relatives hate.
You've got to be carefully taught!*

White adults began to drum the message of racism into my generation long before I was six or seven or eight. The more I heard it, the more intensely I rejected it, changing my aim from the Blacks that I was expected to hate, to the White Christian bigots who insisted that my values were defective. I was opposed to everything that "Mis'sippi" stood for long before "others", locally called "outside agitators", had an opportunity to impact my attitudes toward my heritage.

So I grew up in the Delta without ever putting down roots there. I lived in the shadows, on the fringes, always looking outward toward an alien world that beckoned me and inward toward an alien world that repelled me. Being White I was not a direct target of racism, but refusing to play my assigned role as a racist made me a target of a different kind of anger. Sometime early in my high school years, I sensed the dilemma, the two roads: should I stay and oppose the *status quo* from within, or jump ship since I knew I couldn't fix Mississippi's problems? I jumped.

A question of bias.

Against this background of mid-20th century childhood in the Mississippi Delta, I take this opportunity to address Banks' question of bias quoted above, especially racial bias of which I am knowledgeable.

Scientific observations, data records and interpretations are intrinsically biased by theory and method, and the literature on this problem is rich and enormous. Theories, formal or informal, inevitably bias our observations both positively by telling us what to see and negatively by telling us what to ignore. No doubt my work is as biased as that of anyone else, but the directions and extent to which it is biased are clearly stated and sometimes are unique. Burling's¹² classic paper on cognition and componential analysis subtitled "God's Truth or Hocus-Pocus" sets the limits clearly; I hope my work falls closer to God's truth than to hocus-pocus, but I can't be sure.

Certainly my data and interpretations derive from my early years in mid-20th century Mississippi. Furthermore, my undergraduate and graduate training convinced me that the Black people of Australia, like the Black people of the Mississippi Delta, had been grossly misunderstood and misrepresented by ethnocentric White observers, many of whom were ignorant, arrogant and vicious.

As is universally true, I began my research with preconceived notions. I was committed to covering a selected cluster of topics as comprehensively and systematically as possible, using computer analyzable numerical methods that yielded data that I believed to be largely immune to traditional misrepresentations from the perspective of either sentimental fantasies or racist nightmares. Thereby I hoped to depict accurately the lives of one group of Aboriginal people of Central Australia without a pervasive taint of racism and colonialism. The result is a body of

¹² Robbins Burling 1964. Cognition and componential analysis: God's truth or hocus-pocus? *American Anthropologist* 66(1):20-28.

work that rejects the Black-White distinction in its many forms and challenges some longstanding social theories within and outside of academia, within and outside of Australia.

My data are imperfect and complex, are not easy to interpret, and do not cover all topics of interest to current theorists. And I remain concerned that the undetected error rate exceeds 5% in some places. But I assure you that I did not fabricate the data or impose any patterns on them; rather I discovered the patterns in them. My interpretations of those patterns in the broader context of Alyawarra society may be incorrect, but the data and the patterns that have emerged from them are as systematic, comprehensive and unbiased as I could make them.

As a small example of what I am mean here, consider alloparenting. In recent decades, fieldwork with 20th century hunter-gatherers has led to a “paradigm shift” away from emphasis on child care by the mother alone, toward alloparental care in which parents and their children benefit from help provided by children’s older siblings, mother’s siblings, mother’s mother and more distantly related or unrelated others. Carol Stack’s¹³ *All our Kin* presents an important description and interpretation of alloparenting and cooperative breeding in a Black community in the United States, thereby rejecting pervasive White stereotypes of dysfunctional and self-destructive Black families. By analogy, I hope my work on alloparenting¹⁴ and related topics among the Alyawarra will help to reject equally pervasive White stereotypes and myths based on ignorance concerning the so-called primitivity of people and societies in Aboriginal Australia.

Species-ism: racism writ large.

My apparent shift in focus from nonhuman primate societies to human societies that Sarah Hrdy questioned was a kind of mirage. Racism at the species level – sometimes called speciesism¹⁵ - is just as arbitrary, capricious, self-serving and pernicious as most other –isms, and is equally rejectable. I rejected it, not by changing my focus from nonhuman to human, but by equating non-human and human at least for research purposes. The exceptionalism that humans often attribute to themselves with regard to nonhuman animals is equivalent logically, if not biologically, to that which Whites often attribute to themselves with regard to a wide range of non-Whites. This analogy should be a self-evident truth, but it isn’t, and arguing in favor of

¹³ Stack, Carol 1974. *All our Kin*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁴Woodrow W. Denham 2015. Alyawarra kinship, infant carrying, and alloparenting. *Mathematical Anthropology and Cultural Theory*, 8(1):1-102.

¹⁵Specisism is defined and rejected by R.D. Ryder 1970/2010, Speciesism, *Critical Society*, Issue 2, Spring 2010. Diverse examples of its rejection include Olaf Stapledon 1937/1968, *Star Maker*, Dover; E.O. Wilson 1975, *Sociobiology*, Ch. 18 *et seq.* Belknap/Harvard; Nicholas St. Fleur. N.I.H. to end backing for invasive research on chimps. *New York Times* 19 Nov 2015.

“cultural relativism” with regard to nonhuman primates seems not to work. But I grasped the analogy when I learned that Aboriginal Australians had been conceptualized and treated as if they were nonhuman animals, just as African American slaves and their descendants had been viewed as nonhuman animals. When I began to prepare for my research in Australia, I rejected speciesism just as Ryder was coining the word for it.

During my first year of graduate study at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle, I frequently visited the Primate Research Center (PRC), Child Development and Mental Retardation Center (CDMRC), Psychology Labs and the UW/Boeing/NASA research program on closed ecological life support systems for human space flight. They converged on an ecology course taught by Gordon Orians that led me to the literature on nonhuman primate social behavior, encouraged me to design and conduct an observational study of social behavior among open-habitat patas monkeys (*Erythrocebus patas*) at the Seattle Zoo using methods from CDMRC and PRC, and generated my early paper on primate energetics.¹⁶ Thus I established my interest in the biological bases of social behavior without regard to species. Simultaneously, I selected John R. Atkins as my dissertation supervisor, a kinship theoretician who was supportive of my “thinking outside the (anthropological) box”.

Out of this mix, I designed my dissertation research to incorporate the following:

- human society (biological foundations plus human cognitive abilities)
- observational field study (CDMRC/PRC methodology)
- excellent visibility (NASA-inspired isolated society, open habitat)
- small population (hunter-gatherer society)
- complex kinship system (kinship methods used by F.G.G. Rose¹⁷)

With that plan vaguely formulated, I spent 1969-70 as a visiting postgraduate student at Sydney University in Australia where Les Hiatt, an Aboriginal specialist, was my supervisor. At the end of the year, I travelled alone in Central Australia where I learned about the Alyawarra and subsequently conducted my dissertation research with them, using the research methods that I have described in detail elsewhere. Henceforth my work focused on the biological bases of human and nonhuman primate social behavior.

¹⁶Woodrow W. Denham 1971. Energy relations and some basic properties of primate social organization. *American Anthropologist* 73(1):77-95.

¹⁷F.G.G Rose 1960. *Classification of Kin, Age Structure and Marriage amongst the Groote Eylandt Aborigines*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.

After receiving my Ph.D. Degree from the University of Washington in 1973, I spent 1976-77 as a postdoctoral trainee at the Language Behavior Research Lab at UC Berkeley with Gene Hammel, demographer and anthropologist, as my supervisor. At McMaster University during 1977-80, I continued to analyze my Alyawarra data, began to construct the Alyawarra Ethnographic Archive (AEA), and worked closely with David Damas, the Inuit specialist, to establish the Group Compositions in Band Societies Database (GCBS), which deals specifically with genealogies, vital statistics and demographics as biological bases of social behavior.¹⁸

Continuing with the same theme, John Atkins, Chad McDaniel and I published a paper¹⁹ in 1979, on the “double helix” model of Alyawarra kinship based primarily on genealogies and age relations in human societies with asymmetrical mating and marriage practices. It was the first in a long series of papers that I have published on that topic, it remains basic to my work in that area. The same model of social relations (lacking kinship reference terms) could be constructed using observational, genealogical and demographic data collected with a nonhuman primate society. Thus the sometimes convenient but often spurious distinction between human and nonhuman, like that between White and Black, was pushed aside again

The theme continued. In 1982, despairing of Marxism, I left academic anthropology, put my AEA and GCBS projects “on hold” and shifted to a dual career in applied anthropology and computing. My wife Nancy J. Hubley and I spent a lot of time among the African American cultures of Barbados and several other Caribbean islands²⁰. While Nancy studied the 20th century migration of former slaves and their descendants from Barbados to Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, I used human literary and historical sources to study 17th and 18th century migration of green monkeys (*Cercopithecus aethiops*) from Africa to Barbados. We worked together closely to prepare “the monkey book”²¹ which on occasion has been challenged as “unscientific” because of the nature of the materials I used. Between 1990 and 2008, we taught in Asia and the USA, and photographed hamadryas baboons (*Papio hamadryas*) in Asir Province, Saudi Arabia.

¹⁸In addition to my Alyawarra data from Central Australia, the richest datasets in GCBS pertain to the Iglulik, Netsilik and Copper Inuit from the Central Canadian Arctic. Primary genealogies, vital statistics and demographics from these groups was collected during the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-1924 and were greatly refined and expanded by David Damas during fieldwork in the Central Arctic in the 1960s. These six datasets are large (2035 people) and extraordinarily rich, as complete and correct as Damas and I could make them, and are available online only at GCBS and KinSources.

¹⁹ Woodrow W. Denham, Chad McDaniel, John R. Atkins 1979. Aranda and Alyawarra kinship: a quantitative argument for a double helix model. *American Ethnologist* 6(1):1-24.

²⁰ My Caribbean and Primate Collections are available online with the AEA and GCBS Collections at www.CulturalSciences.Info.

²¹ Woodrow W. Denham 1986. *West Indian Green Monkeys: Problems in Historical Biogeography. Contributions to Primatology* Vol. 24. Basel: Karger.

Aftermath.

In 2000, I found a message addressed to me on the Internet (almost as if afloat in a bottle) from Doug White at UC Irvine who was looking for my Alyawarra kinship data. His interest in my long abandoned Alyawarra research stimulated me to reactivate it. After working with him for a decade and benefiting from his theoretical and computer skills, I resumed working on the fringe.

Since retiring in 2008, I have devoted most of my time to analyzing the data that I collected with the Alyawarra of Central Australia in 1971-72 and publishing several papers in recent years at *Mathematical Anthropology and Cultural Theory*. I have deposited my Aboriginal and primate materials in electronic and hardcopy formats with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. The AEA Collection and the GCBS Collection are available online at www.culturalsciences.info, and the GCBS Collection is available online at www.kinsources.net in 42 separate datasets in fully interactive formats. These collections are available from Internet Archive's Wayback Machine at www.archive.org/web/. They include more than 50 papers and 42 datasets concerning my Australian Aboriginal kinship research and related topics in technical journals, online archives, and open access websites where they are freely available to anyone who wants to use them. My work has been funded by the US National Science Foundation, the US National Institutes of Mental Health, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and others.

In responding to the matters that prompted me to write this letter, I have eschewed the often favored tradition of oracular scholarly anonymity in the social sciences. In other papers, I have discussed research methods in detail, but here I have examined motivation from perspectives both technical and personal, in styles both scientific and literary. Thus my rejection of racism, speciesism and other travesties of justice inside and outside of Mississippi influenced my use of observational and quantitative research methods that I did not invent but that are applicable broadly to humans, nonhuman primates and other forms of life wherever they may be.