Madness as Method in Ireland: 
Learning From Sauer and Le Guin

Deborah J. Keirsey
Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University

Method is whatever you need to use for the end you are trying to reach.
- Carl O. Sauer (1961 [cited in Newcomb, 1976])

Apollo, the god of light, of reason, of proportion, harmony, number — Apollo blinds those who press too close in worship. Don’t look straight at the sun. Go into a dark bar and have a beer with Dionysios, every now and then. I talk about the gods, I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth. The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor.

Introduction

This paper discusses the inherent potential of field work, at least in the “Berkeley School” tradition of cultural geography, to be something more than a truth-seeking method. For example, it can also be an opportunity to experience living “by one’s wits” and taking risks in strange and perhaps hostile environments. I will explore the extent to which traditional attitudes about field work in cultural geography might be updated to accommodate uncertainties in expected outcomes that characterize contemporary times. I intend to accentuate the adventurous rather than the arduous nature of cultural geographic field work in post-industrial times and places. To achieve wider acceptance of this potential today, I encourage human geographers—and particularly female cultural geographers—to continue expanding the meanings, possibilities and purposes of what presently counts as legitimate scholarly inquiry in the field. To facilitate expansion it may help to revisit the circumstances and conversations extant at the time field work emerged as the prominent method of scholarly inquiry with the arrival of Carl Sauer (1889-1975) at the Berkeley campus in 1923. It is there, in the past, that we can identify both a precedent and an inspirational link towards promoting a more radical role for field work in cultural geography in the present.

I offer here more as reminder than as revelation that Carl Sauer, founder of the Berkeley School tradition, initially envisioned his cultural geography as a “course of inquiry that does not need to restrict itself to the straits of rationalism” (Sauer 1925:53). I interpret this statement to be a
neglected core theme in the Berkeley School tradition that establishes a precedent for cultural geographers to always think about expanding the limits of their scholarly inquiry. For an inspirational link between Berkeley School cultural geography as it once was and what it might become, I will elaborate on the apparently overlooked, ironic, and thus far unexploited connection between Sauer and the contemporary feminist writer Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929).

Sauer's alleged anti-modernism and relativist proclivities for interpreting pre-Columbian culture worlds and mind-sets (Speth 1987:29) are compatible with the spirit of Le Guin's alternative culture worlds and mind-sets. What makes the Sauer/Le Guin connection ironic is that Sauer, who once "forgave" one of his brightest students for being a woman, might somehow be linked by a woman geographer (myself) to Le Guin in order to inspire more young women in geography to open up exciting new frontiers of field work in their cultural geographies while yet remaining within a Berkeley School cultural geographic tradition. Women geographers empowering themselves through relativist thinking and provocative forms of field work could simultaneously feminize and strengthen the Berkeley School tradition both as a movement and as an institution.

I suggest that the Sauerian Berkeley School tradition of cultural geography anticipates an indigenous American relativist attitude in the present to which Le Guin has given expression, and that the tradition might be appropriately revitalized by free-thinking female cultural geographers attending great public universities like Berkeley to hold its own against the exotic wave of social geography (a.k.a. "new" cultural geography) that actively disparages the Berkeley School tradition in its own backyard. I want to share here my ideas about revitalizing a field work tradition rather than present the results of my field work. My ideas about the feasibility of revitalizing Berkeley School cultural geography generally align with those of Price and Lewis (1993). However, Le Guin, Joyce Carol Oates, Nora Ephron and other innovative and provocative female writers were the major influences on my specific ideas for how to revitalize that tradition. In particular, statements made by Sauer and Le Guin that appear as epigraphs to this essay directly shaped my field experience in Ireland.

**Hybrid Vigor in the Berkeley Milieu**

Ursula K. Le Guin's ethnographic fictions and Sauer's cultural geography arise from the exceptional intellectual milieu and hybrid vigor created at Berkeley by a random convergence of geographers and anthropologists – men and women, professors and students – at the University of Berke-
ley during the inter-war period. Carl Sauer arrived at Berkeley in 1923 to modernize its Department of Geography (MacPherson 1987:69). One of Carl Sauer's closest associates at Berkeley at that time was the famous cultural anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960). Sauer and Kroeber's association has been described by Macpherson (1987:75) as long and productive. I will stress here that Sauer shared Kroeber's appreciation for "the primary importance of intensive firsthand ethnographic field work" (Steward 1961:1049). There is a potential relation between ethnographic field work and relativist attitudes that can be successfully exploited to increasingly empower women pursuing academic careers who choose to explore and expand the tradition of Berkeley School cultural geography.

Initially, the Sauerian tradition of cultural geography—in which field work became valorized above all other methods of scholarly inquiry—had its origins institutionalized at Berkeley as a sort of patriarchal "cult of potestas" where its field work, viewed in retrospect, might fairly be critiqued as a masculine rite of passage (see Green 1993:7; Rose 1996:342-43). But rather than dwell (as others have done) on instances of early Berkeley School sexism, I prefer to draw readers' attention in this paper to a strong record for the Berkeley School tradition in moving beyond its masculinized origins and missions, and far toward correcting long-entrenched gender inequities in academic and professional geography. I attribute some of the reason for this success and potential for continued improvement to Sauer's penchant for field work and proclivities toward relativism and historicism. It seems likely that such unorthodox leanings helped precondition Sauer to discover world agricultural origins in societies "largely developed and organized by their women" (Sauer, 1952:28; see also Price and Lewis 1993:10).

Two remarkable women enriched the intimate intellectual life of Sauer's colleague, Alfred Kroeber. One was the anthropologist Theodora Kroeber (1897-1979), a successful writer of popular ethnographic non-fiction; notably Ishi In Two Worlds (1961). While Alfred, a prolific academic writer, never sought to popularize his knowledge, Theodora successfully wrote creative nonfiction long before it gained its current popularity as an academic writing style (Schneider 1997). Her anthropological writings are personal and intense and characterized by a lyrical style. These are qualities that made her works attractive to general readers (Buzaljko 1988:189-90).

Theodora and Alfred's daughter is Ursula Le Guin. She was raised in the stimulating Berkeley campus milieu that, for her, centered on writing and ethnogeographic studies. Her extremely prolific and successful writing career commenced about the same time as Theodora's. Le Guin's
popular books, many of which are ethnographic fantasies, have won numerous prestigious awards. She is herself regarded as a cult figure among some feminists, environmentalists, and science-fiction/fantasy readers. In view of her success, visibility and background, it is strange that feminist geographers who "prefer their science fiction to be more utopic" (Haraway 1996:112) have overlooked the relevancy of Le Guin in their discursive tracts, and her connection to the Berkeley School milieu.

Le Guin's fictional ethnographies of the future function today more obviously as anti-modernist cultural critiques than do the earlier writings of her mother, her father, and Carl Sauer. Although Le Guin does not write in an academic style, or for academics, a substantial amount of academic discourse involving political science fiction, political imaginaries, and other poststructural and postmodern topics and themes have drawn on Le Guin's works and inspiration during the past several decades. Cultural geographers in the Berkeley School tradition may likewise find her critical approach and writing style especially inspiring. As cultural critique, Le Guin explores a diversity of fictive, alternative and futuristic worlds and peoples in order to tell a plenitude of stories that illuminate conditions and trends in the present. In the same way, Theorora Kroeber and Carl Sauer told stories about past cultures intended to illuminate environmental and social conditions and trends in the past, but which might also be interpreted as cultural critiques of the present.

Since the objectives of the revitalized Berkeley School cultural geography I envision are very different from the objectives of both empirical and new cultural geographers, its methods may differ accordingly. For example, field study in the Berkeley School tradition of cultural geography can be elaborated into an inherently radical method simply by transcending its limited role as a preliminary and exploratory component of empirical scientific inquiry (Shaffir 1980:10). Its field work method, for example, may be incompatible with both positivist thinking and the progressive thinking of new cultural geography. I have cited statements by Sauer and Le Guin that both affirm and inspire some revolutionary potential for innovative field work that expands the Berkeley School tradition. In particular, Sauer's relativism and historicism makes it unlikely that he restricted field work to narrow constraints as a strictly empirical truth-seeking method. Rather Sauer is remembered by his students to have recommended field experience as a means of cultivation of insight (Newcomb 1976:27). It is this aspect of Sauer's legacy that can inspire more relativist thinking for a revitalized Berkeley School cultural geography.
Le Guin offers more specific guidelines by suggesting how and why field study might go outside the straits of rationalism to cultivate insight. While some new cultural geographers may not even advocate intensive first-hand ethnographic field work to meet their objectives (see Pratt 1994; Domosh 1996; Earle, Mathewson and Kenzer 1996:xxi), their circumventing, rejecting or repudiating Berkeley-style cultural geography (and its associated field study method) ignores its potential to adapt successfully along the frontier of contemporary relativist trends in academia. Intrigued by this potential, I recommend exploring Le Guin’s innovative approach in culture studies as an alternative future for cultural geography. Following Le Guin, I encourage cultural geographers and especially women to explore beyond Apollo and discover the haunt of Dionysios, and then to engage him there on his own turf in provocative conversations that might be shared with others in more evocative formats and styles of cultural geographic writing; for example, in romantic, poetical prose.

**Tuning In To The Voice of Dionysios**

The opportunity to radicalize its field study tradition may have always been inherent in Berkeley School cultural geography. Yet, it has never seemed as apparent and inviting as now—perhaps owing to the fairly recent and rapid dissemination of challenging relativist attitudes from ethnographic studies into cultural geography and other social science disciplines and sub-disciplines (Proctor 1998:359; see also Shea 1998:A17). Whereas Sauer might have backed away from pressing the implications of his own relativism, never elaborating his antimodernism into a critique of science, contemporary cultural geographers are much more free to do so. Le Guin’s relativist moral imagination offers field study in cultural geography much more flexible potential today than Carl Sauer could have envisioned within the conservative constraints of academia during his time. Le Guin’s ethnographic fantasies may offer contemporary cultural geographers examples of innovative ways to expand their explorations into narrative worlds that have been neglected within the Berkeley School tradition, but are as yet unexplored by new cultural geographers.

Berkeley School cultural geographers, though long aware of the power of storytelling and narrative in the formation of cultural landscape, hertofofore mainly adopted the metaphor of the visual-seeing and sight (sometimes insight)—as their sub-discipline’s characteristic mode of understanding and communication (King 1990). This metaphor visualizes cultural landscape as either out there (an objective truth) or in the mind (a subjective truth). In contrast, the metaphor of the oral-voice—has only recently (re)emerged in the research of new cultural geographers as a
promising alternative mode of understanding and communicating gender relations by exploring and discussing cultural landscapes (Nash 1993; Monk 1987.) This discursive approach in new cultural geography is of particular interest to feminist geographers exploring gendered Western cultural landscapes and writing about them. However, new cultural geographers are still inclined to turn to Apollo (reason) rather than to Dionysios (passion) for their answers and insights. Their preference is to engage in progressive thinking and valorize the purposefulness of effecting positive social change. In contrast, the kind of field work Le Guin recommends is more apt to undermine the agenda set by progressive thinkers for effecting social change by allowing the conversations they would otherwise control to remain open-ended and to extend indefinitely. Conversations with Dionysios, as Le Guin emphasizes, also repudiate truth claims that are the foundation of judgment in favor of relative truths that are anathema to judges. New cultural geographers need to judge in order to effect social change, and are therefore intolerant of the relativist question that asks: “Is one way of action better than any other?”

And how might a conversation with Dionysios—for example, my own field work experiences—be shared with others? What is an appropriate style? In the March 1996 edition of the Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Jonathan Smith (1996:3-4) introduced three definitions of excellence among geographical writers: scientists, stylists and critics. He notes that two of these, the scientific and the stylist (or literary), have dominated until recently. The third definition, which applies to the discursive approach, has most recently emerged “among geographers enamored by a critical concept of language”, and who therefore value a writing style, that according to Duncan and Ley (1993:7) is “purposely ambiguous, incomplete and open ended.” Smith goes on to categorize the critical stories that geographers tell—and here is implied any medium of discourse, into four modes: romance, tragedy, comedy and irony. While no story is exclusively one of these, he describes the author of the ironic story as a detached, bemused observer, who comments “on a world that is barbaric (properly satire) or unintelligible (pure irony).” The commentary is often witty, according to Smith and “lacks the idea of social change” (1996:8-9).

What could better complement my ironic field stratagem than the ironic writing style? It seems especially appropriate to my stratagems of “witcraft” in the field, described below. The ironic, critical style enables me to elaborate through narrative or storytelling on the political potential of cultural geographic field study to empower women without my being obliged to recommend that they effect social change. My field work can even be discussed as a dangerous game from the ironic point-
of-view. This is because “Irony is the disillusioned trope. It represents
the world as a black comedy populated by scoundrels and fools” (Smith
1996:9). In sum, ironic storytelling, like ironic field study, has appeal in
its detached perspective on the world. The critical ironic approach en-
courages cultural geographic field workers to engage and to storytell –
but not to judge—the world.

Smith notes that the scientific style has dominated geographic writing
until recently because of its claim to represent truth. Critics of the scienc-
tific style of reporting challenge its dominance by undermining its truth
claims; for example: obvious omissions, internal contradictions, and
prevarications. I take here as my own examples, some truth claims that
scientific geographers tell about Ireland and its cultural landscape. Mainly,
I remind readers that the geographies of Ireland have written out women
and continue to do so.

**Consensus Ireland: Patriarchal Storytelling**

All cultural traditions marginalize some ways of life. Consensus Ireland
is a story that geographers have repeatedly told that marginalizes women.
The outcome of their marginalization is of course everywhere apparent
across the built environment and landscape where imprints of Irish
men overshadow, obfuscate or exclude the imprints of Irish women.
“What we know about Ireland” as an informed public may be a privi-
leged story about Ireland intentionally shaped by and told in a patriar-
chal voice that seeks to maintain control over both public knowledge
about Ireland and public behavior with regards to it. If so, culture re-
veals itself in its political role as a proselytizing activity: Culture is po-
itical and cultural landscape maintains the political control of an
entrenched patriarchal order. If we know what we know about the lim-
ited role of women in shaping the Irish cultural landscape, it is because
the geographies of Ireland tell us so. However, these geographies do not
address why Irishwomen’s roles in shaping cultural landscape have been
limited. Nor do they describe how that landscape might limit the em-
powerment of women. The rest of my essay will address both of these
topics. To the extent that my personal story of the Irish cultural land-
scape based on field work differs from the patriarchal consensus story,
it is not their truth. Rather than making any truth claims of my own, I
shall follow Le Guin’s advice here and recommend to my own readers:
“distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth.”

In the main, stories widely disseminated about Ireland these days are
variations on a dominant patriarchal epic about the Irish people being
oppressed by English people. This holds true for the most popular hu-
man and cultural geographies of Ireland, of which I will mention only a
few here. Geographies by Orme (1970) and Johnson (1994), for example, tend to omit mention of stories told by Irish women, now and in the past, about their being oppressed by men. Their geographies of Ireland do not address the conditions faced by women in Ireland whose choice it has been either to spend their everyday lives negotiating a constrain­
ing patriarchal landscape as ladies—or to emigrate. Likewise, Evans’ (1973)
story of the role and progress of the common man in shaping the Irish
landscape overlooks gender inequities there. While Evans recognizes
that a text may be “blurred by the prejudices of men who write it” (p. 4), he ignores addressing the gendered landscape within his own text. In
addition, he reduces female figures in Irish myth to deities or “wishful
symbols of the fertility of the land and the people” (p. 66) Their signifi­
cance is safely marginalized to a pre-modern time when the Irish wor­
shipped things other than progress. Bitel (1996:234) refers precisely to
this problem when she writes:

“The women of [pagan Ireland] may be long gone, but the men who hated and
loved them also captured them for us in sagas, saint’s lives, laws, and poems.
And captured is precisely the right word to describe the process by which women
of such a distant past have come to us.”

These geographies of Ireland not only write out women and speak in
ways that confine their power to the past, but they also tend to per­
petuate that myth of Irish homogeneity that still undermines women’s
aspirations to empower themselves as a special interest group, and dis­
courages them from attempting to achieve some political accommoda­
tion for the inequities they have endured.

**Dissensus Ireland: Other Voices; Other Stories**

What evidence is there that there is any dissensus or suppressed alter­
native stories of Ireland that the geographies of Ireland might include?
Is there evidence of women’s dissenting narratives? Helleiner (1996), for
one, provides some evidence in her analysis of the “Prohibition of In­
citement to Racial, Religious or National Hatred Bill,” introduced in the
Irish Senate by the Minister of Justice in 1988. She confirms that there is
a prevailing myth of Irish homogeneity that tends to obscure the exist­
ence of cultural diversity and inequity in Ireland.

The Irish Senate debate centered on whether or not there was a need
for broader anti-discrimination legislation than the bill required, and
“as a result, the discussion went beyond the specific phenomenon of
incitement of hatred to include reference to broader patterns of dis­
crimination in Ireland” (Helleiner 1996:5). Groups identified and dis­
cussed as possible targets of incitement to hatred included Traveling
People, the gay community, the foreign-born, and women and children.
However, the effort to extend the definition of hatred to include protection for women and children was ultimately unsuccessful. In general, the Irish majority is poorly educated about its minorities. Representing the Traveling People, for example, the education mission and promotion of Travelers' culture is largely in the hands of the Dublin Travelers Education and Development Group (DTEDG) through its activities and publications (see, for example, Pavee Point Publications, 1992).

It is disheartening that, though only a few years had passed, the echoes of the 1988–1989 "Incitement to Hatred" debates had faded even by the time I first arrived in Ireland in 1993, and were much more distant by 1995 and again in 1997 when I revisited. It seems so strange that the powerful women of pre-modern Ireland have left so little trace on the landscape, and that contemporary Irishwomen have little landscape-shaping impact relative to Irishmen. Although the female voices of dissensus Ireland remain written out of the consensus story of Ireland and its textual cultural landscape, their voices have not been entirely silenced. Hearne (1992:1) reports on a venerable indigenous tradition of Irish feminist thought preserved in the pages of The Irish Citizen, an Irish suffrage newspaper which ran from 1912 to 1920. Some of the authors of these articles "saw themselves primarily as women oppressed by men rather than Irish people oppressed by English people." Hearne concludes that although The Irish Citizen "expressed the main currents of Irish feminist thought" and "left an impressive legacy of gender-based analysis," its analysis became submerged by sectarian politics. Similarly, Watson (1991:1) argues using examples of modern historical fictions by female writers that they represent a challenge to that dominant, consensus, male literary tradition that "writes women out." Like Hearne, Watson argues that the dominant male tradition inscribes "a view of modern Irish history that is the story of the struggle to overcome British domination."

Nash (1993) uses a feminist/interpretive—in contrast to the masculinist/empirical—approach in an attempt to deconstruct the landscape of Ireland as it has been depicted in works of art, and in the representative use of maps and Irish place names. Nash observes how masculinist and colonial discourses on Ireland strive to offer factual and 'objective' representations of the Irish landscape in art, mapping and place naming. Meanwhile she explores how artistic, map and place name representations can produce and perpetuate connections between gender, language, landscape and identity. In looking at the work of various artists, Nash finds femininity to be identified with nature and what she terms "landscapes of desire." Such landscapes emphasize a masculinist relationship to place in which there is a "connection between colonial control of other lands and the control of female sexuality and the use of
gender in the discourse of discovery and territorial expansion (p. 41). Nash reads the map as “a manifestation of a desire for control” (p. 49) which essentialize masculinist and colonial discourses. The woman is depicted as homebound, rural and close to nature, and as the spiritual and unconscious Celtic producer of the masculine pragmatic Gael. According to Nash, these representations of women fix their bodies “as landscapes of control and signifying use” (p. 50).

Nash deconstructs representations of the gendered Irish landscape in order to expose and subvert patriarchal authority and control. She suggests that mapping of the land could become “a shifting ground, a spatial metaphor which frees conceptions of identity and landscape from a repressive fixity and solidity” in which “the landscape can be traversed, journeyed across, entered into, intimately known, gazed upon” (pp. 52, 54). These attempts at remapping and renaming are not intended to replace the previous, but rather to offer multiple representations. Nash’s approach seems very postmodern. However, her emphasis on gazing privileges the metaphor of sight over voice, which is problematic.

Other feminist academics have focused on early Irish history to argue that pre-Christian Irish religion was female-positive. Studies on the significance of more recent historical events in the development of current gender inequities in Ireland have been undertaken by Nolan (1986), Rhodes (1986), Percy (1994) and Brozyna (1995). Nolan focuses on late nineteenth-century female emigration from Ireland and concludes that when women were superfluous in Irish society, they either knuckled under or fled. Rhodes searches for a context within which to understand the role of Irish women in their society, and suggests examining more closely the nineteenth-century Irish farm family; particularly the increasing authority of fathers and the importance of male heirs that emerges with land ownership.

Brozyna (1995:1) looks at the social construction of an ideal Christian woman in late nineteenth-century urban Ireland. The geographical implications of her study are clear in her conclusions: “While gradually accepting the extension of ‘woman’s sphere’ to include church and charitable activities, the locus of this construction of female piety was the home. Female piety was seen as essentially domestic.” Similarly, Percy investigated ways in which feminism is socially constructed in Northern Ireland, and concluded that home and family constructs are highly important to the majority of women there, whose perceptions of feminists (as selfish, militant and not-family-oriented) were often negative.

Not one of these studies challenges the dominance of patriarchal controls across the contemporary Irish landscape, but rather they address
how dominance came about. Other studies indicate that women in Ireland suffer from gender inequities there and complain, but generally construct their identities in ways that accommodate the patriarchy rather than undermine its authority. Caldwell's work on women's mobilization in Northeast Ireland (1994:3–6) cites from some of these studies and identifies this argument as the feminist power and coercion model before rejecting it, primarily because "the rhetoric of the power and coercion theme does not include class as an issue." However, I feel that privileging class as an issue, much like privileging Irish Nationalist politics as an issue, serves more to obfuscate than to clarify the gender inequity issue in Ireland.

Finally, Greenwald (1993) notes how empowered women of Celtic myth were subsequently viewed as arrogant, scornful and contentious by the patriarchal church. Brozyna reports that even today pious Irish women (under the influence of the patriarchal church) are inclined to view women intent on empowering themselves, and especially feminists, as selfish, militant and not family-oriented. This literature made me aware in advance of my field work in Ireland that my stratagems for disrupting its patriarchal landscape in order to empower myself might be perceived of as madness.

**Madness as Method**

Building on the preceding discussion, I will address here the question: "Can there be empowering cultural geographic field work for women within the Berkeley School tradition yet outside the dominant paradigm of scientific geography?" The introductory epigraph by Carl Sauer about methodology suggests that the answer is yes. To rational thinkers in Sauer's academic surroundings—and perhaps even to Sauer himself—this suggestion might seem a bit mad. However, the flexibility of Le Guin's moral imagination in the present offers women cultural geographers ways of experiencing in the field that can cultivate insight and, as academic pursuits, involve more than the normal objective application of a truth-seeking methodology. Moreover, women doing cultural geography outside of a truth-seeking methodology is not the same thing as women doing cultural geography in the field without a method. The distinction is simply the difference between insisting that field work is a truth-seeking science and accepting other possibilities; for example, that a field experience can be a geographical art, or, as I introduce in the following section, a craft—for example, "witcraft."

**Witcraft in Ireland**

My attitude, approach and writing style in this paper are closely related
to exploratory stratagems for enhancing my field experience in Ireland. I call these stratagems "witcraft" (para "witchcraft"). My concept of women geographers in the field empowering themselves with witcraft, as advanced in this paper, originates in my studying about the mystical self-empowering ways of a couple of better known mythical characters named "Trickster" and "Coyote," who roam the contemporary literary landscapes of academia; for example, in Native American studies, African-American studies, and most important for this paper—women's studies, where they are frequently creations of women of color. I will briefly describe the key attributes of Trickster and Coyote in women's studies, and elaborate on witcraft as a way I was able to enhance and articulate my field experiences while in Ireland.

Trickster and Coyote are ubiquitous characters in world myth. They are counter-culture characters. Wherever they are found, in whatever cultural context, they are perceived as being inherently mad or evil, for they are continually out of place, and either misunderstand or ignore their proper places within whatever cosmological and social systems they happen to inhabit. They are disruptive, disorderly, and dangerous on this account. They tend to upset monological views of reality, and are considered to be amoral, instinctual, amorphous, desocialized and sub-human. According to Jeanne M. Smith (1996), they frequent borders and crossroads and in-between spaces where their typical misbehavior includes deceit, duplicity, impersonation, disguise, theft, and subversion. Their kindred include Legba (in voudou) and Hecate (in Greek myth). They are very disruptive to the rigidity of the sex-gender system. Female tricksters, according to Landy (1994) call attention to boundaries by transgressing the dominant definition of a woman's place. Moreover, they like to disrupt patriarchal voices as they go about empowering themselves with subversive strategies: transforming, surviving and succeeding.

Yet, however irresponsible these Dionysian shapeshifters and Red, Black, Brown, White and Yellow "picaras" (women with temerity) are portrayed in the world myths, their misbehaviors are ultimately interpreted as creative catalysts for some sort of healing or rebirth. In the end, Trickster and Coyote are humanizing forces capable of creating identity out of illusion and liberating humankind from their self-imposed limitations.

Evidence of an Irish version of the female Trickster is found in the Sheelanagig, or goddess displaying her parts, which still survives as ubiquitous erotic imagery carved in stone and scattered amidst the ruins of the pre-modern Irish landscape (DeMarre 1993). Sheelanagig images are thought to portray the ambiguous goddess Morrigan (the an-
dent Celtic Goddess of Destruction/Creation) who evolved into Morgana Le Fay, sorceress of Arthurian legend.

Captured in stone, Sheelanagigs were common ornaments of Irish churches built before the sixteenth century. They occupied high corner stones, window casements or parts of the archway above the church door. The Sheela's function was to protect and to ward off evil (Gadon 1989). Sheela carvings are notorious for their exaggerations of the female pudendum, and have in more recent centuries been an increasing source of anxiety in the patriarchal landscape. Most of the Sheelanagig carvings have been destroyed, defaced, buried in the yards of the churches they once sanctified, or hidden away in such places as the Dublin Museum (DeMarre 1993).

I tailored a successful field study attitude and approach for myself to use in Ireland that advantaged this recent history of patriarchal Sheelahphobia. Part of this involved my adopting behavioral traits of those mythological females called Trickster, Coyote and Morrigan into a bundle of survival stratagems for myself—my “witcraft.” I also assumed an ambiguous Sheela-like identity to enable my “lurking” about in Ireland and to avoid being objectified and controlled by others. “Lurking” is an established field method in the social sciences (Strickland and Schlesinger 1969) that, when modified to fit my own needs and purposes, resonates to both Sauer’s methodological relativism and what I interpret to be Le Guin’s recommendations to females doing field study. My modified form of lurking does not, for example, assume that “being seen” by Irishmen is a passive activity. It is more of an obtrusive than an unobtrusive field method.

**Conclusion**

In retrospect, I think my stratagems were successful, as I often drew upon my feminine witcraft in order to empower myself in the field. Mainly, I became the proverbial unexpected “stranger comes to town”—but with this twist: In patriarchal narratives of this romantic genre “the stranger” is usually a man entering the world of a passive female; my
approach to field study was to be instead a strange woman entering a man’s familiar world. I wanted to converse with Dionysios on his own turf as Le Guin recommended, and Dionysios is a man. Also, I refused to become objectified as a tourist, or as a researcher. I aimed to assume a more ambiguous and disturbing—though perhaps interesting—identity. I made it difficult for men to objectify and control me. I expected Irishmen to instead sense something familiar yet discomforting about my strangeness—emotions perhaps evoked by their recognition of the Sheela in me that identified with the powerful women of pagan Ireland. Long persecuted for her witchcraft and banished from the Irish cultural landscape, Sheela returns to Ireland as a strange nomad in search of reestablishing her place of power in the Irish cultural landscape. She returns to Ireland not seeking vengeance against men, or even to become some sort of catalyst for the rebirth and rebuilding of an Irish cultural landscape with more gender equity, but simply to empower herself through field work.

Though my revitalized Berkeley School field study method may have seemed like madness from an Irish patriarchal perspective, it has nevertheless successfully served my needs to achieve my purposes as a female cultural geographer. Although my field experiences in Ireland using my stratagems of witcraft were not always pleasant, even my worst experiences sometimes inspired creative thoughts about how I might plan to reconstruct the cultural landscape even piecemeal to empower women. For example, Figure 1. is a page torn from my field notebook that demonstrates my idea for making some rhetorical and humorous use of the Sheela myth toward reconstructing a small part of the Irish patriarchal landscape in a way that might help empower women in Ireland in an innovative and unprecedented way. I imagine that my re-design of an Irish pub would be a radical architectural achievement to the extent that it makes use of subversive Sheela wordplay and metaphor. My inspiration for re-designing this particular pub (my sketch of “Sheela’s Pub”) derives from a spontaneous poetic narrative I wrote there one night:

Now back home in the United States, I still relish the idea of thirsty Irishmen contemplating entering Sheela’s Public House for a Guinness! Perhaps I will return to Ireland and build this pub myself; I like to think it is possible and I find this outrageous idea continuously provocative and empowering. At the least, disseminating my pub plan in this essay may inspire another woman with more resources to build what I cannot. Without my temerarious attitude and stratagems of witcraft in the field I might not have cultivated any original insight into the contemporary patriarchal landscape and its inhabitants. My field study was enriching, though not all of my experiences were pleasant—nor did I
expect them to be under the circumstances of a single female traveling alone. I am reminded in this regard of some inspiring advice given by the film director Nora Ephron during her keynote address at Wellesley College's 1996 Commencement:

"The fly is very sorry she is in the pub, for the man who sings loudly has taken a fancy to her. She gets away from his amusements once, so he decides he fancies her best without her wings. His followers laugh hilariously at his fly antics. She doesn't care anymore. Her whole existence has been changed by one man, for she is no longer a fly; she can't be a fly without wings to fly with. He doesn't even know what he has done to her, and in fact, doesn't care" (Keirsey 1995).
“Whatever you choose, however many roads you travel, I hope that you choose not to be a lady. I hope you will find some way to break the rules and make a little trouble out there. And I also hope that you will choose to make some of that trouble on behalf of women.”

References


38


Schneider, A. 1997. As 'Creative Nonfiction' Programs Proliferate, Their Critics Warn of