

Reality as Fiction: Autoethnography as Postmodern Critique

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Abstract

Postmodern autoethnography is shown to be a radical response to the ‘crisis of representation’ of anthropology from the 1980s, where post-structuralist theory challenged the notion of objective ‘realist tales’ written by an omniscient researcher/ narrator. This enabled reflexive ethnographic genres living in the deconstructed space between ‘science’ and ‘fiction’. Autoethnography breaks with ‘macro’ studies of passive masses in order to recognize individual agency located within cultures. ‘Narrative knowledge’ allows for both the rhythms of lived experience and its conceptualization. The seminal autoethnographies of Carolyn Ellis are seen as allegories of the ethical life for western academics who must respond compassionately to the researched Other. The radicalism of her autoethnographies is compromised by an ‘expressive realism’ which assumes a transcendental subject outside of the constituting play of representation.

Keywords: autoethnography, narrative knowledge, reflexive ethnography, evocative and analytic autoethnographies, Carolyn Ellis, fictionality of reality.

In recent decades, ‘experimental’ ethnographic methods have disturbed the constitutive opposition between the social sciences and the humanities, particularly in that ‘the dividing line between fact and fiction has broken down’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:10). This essay critically explores the liberating potential of this disciplinary transgression for the practice of

cultural studies, which implicitly challenges the pseudo-scientific ‘realist tales’ (van Maanen 1988) of traditional ethnography.

In recent years I supervised two unusual theses – a PhD thesis that consisted almost entirely of short stories, and an MA study of the Hipster subculture in Durban (by Genevieve Akal, an excerpt of which is in this issue of *Alternation*) which appeared as a fictional autoethnography. These Cultural Studies projects produced ‘narrative knowledges’ that deliberately unsettled those oppositions so dear to academic life: theory/narrative; fact/fiction; science/art; description/interpretation; and social sciences/humanities. Arguments presented in the form of narrative do not have to be translated into the language of academic theory to be explained – their explanation, scandalously, is to be found in the sort of arguments that are peculiar to narrative; it is not that on the one side we have narrative, and the other reasoning.

However, these ‘narrative knowledges’ have met with strenuous resistance from more traditional academics, and so in the face of this hostility to postmodern autoethnography, this essay will critically argue for its centrality to any understanding of our time; that, more than ever, we need experimental and provocative ethnographies to come to terms with the exigencies of the present, which no realism, a form borrowed from 19th century fiction (again, the disavowed fictionality of realist social science discourse), has the imaginative force to comprehend, including with regard to the fundamentally ‘fictional’ nature of our realities.

The ethnographic enterprise was concisely defined by Clifford Geertz:

The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (1973: 5).

Ethnography is the *interpretation* of cultural ‘webs of significance’ – not the identification of facts, but of the meanings people give to their lives. If we all live by interpreting – giving meaning – to our worlds, then, as Geertz put it, ethnography is an ‘interpretation of interpretations’. Such a view places

renewed conceptual emphasis upon the ethnographer, because to ‘interpret’ other systems of cultural meaning is to put aside any hurried claim to objectivity and instead to draw attention to the *creative* and situated act of the academic interpreter. Similarly, if reality is only available through the ‘web’ of language, and if that web was ‘spun’ by human beings, then language suddenly appears, not as some passive reflection of the world out there, but as a creative, constituting force. As Denzin and Lincoln put it, ‘Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representation’ (2005: 5). In Denzin and Lincoln’s well-known periodization of ethnographic history, the fourth stage, in the second half of the 1980s, is one marked by the paradigm shifting ‘crisis of representation’ (Marcus & Fischer 1986), marked by the publication of key books including *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986).

The ‘crisis of representation’ essentially challenged what van Maanen (1988) called ethnographic ‘realist tales’, where an omniscient narrator/ethnographer provides an objective account of a whole culture delivered in realist prose. Drawing on the largely post-structuralist literary theory developed by the usual suspects of Barthes, Jameson, Foucault, Derrida, Eagleton, etc., the critical voices drew attention to what that model had repressed, and which nevertheless played central roles in ethnographies: rhetoric, subjectivity, and fiction (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 5). Both the ‘legitimacy and authority’ (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 8) of orthodox ethnographies were called into question: a post-Saussurean theory of language showed that language did not reflect, but constituted reality, including the cultural reality of the ethnographer; the literary device of the detached objective narrator dispensing truth disavowed the reality of the subjective ethnographer situated in and interpreting reality with specific cultural, theoretical and ideological discourses (Foucault: ‘Truth is a thing of this world’ (Rabinow:1991)); and the factuality of ethnographic texts could be deconstructed by pointing to the endless fictional and rhetorical devices used in their writing, including their narrative structures.

What was urgently needed was a new reflexive ethnography which, like post-realist fiction, Brechtian drama, and the cinema of the French New Wave, was highly self-conscious of its formal procedures, undermining its ‘illusory realism’ (Tyler 1986: 130), drawing attention to its own situated partiality, and acknowledging that worlds are created through interpretation

and writing. The inversion of focus was remarkable: if in previous ethnographies the text was invisible and the world visible, now the text became visible and reality became invisible, a huge epistemological question mark hanging over the latter. Ethnography was now understood to be the product of a host of literary, linguistic, academic, cultural and ideological *discourses* which fabricated its object of study. If for Barthes (1977) ‘language--the performance of a language system--is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist’, since signifier and signified are joined to make solid meanings, then for postmodern ethnography Truth – and this includes the panoply of procedures to ensure validity and reliability in research - was fascist, an authoritarian imposition of univocality upon a rigorously heteroglossic reality. As James Clifford argued (1986: 6) (and bear in mind the traditionalist hostility to fiction in ethnographic studies):

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned’, the principal burden of the word’s Latin root, *ingere*. But it is important to reserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real. (*Ingere*, in some of its uses, implied a degree of falsehood).

Following Lyotard, it was argued that all we have are antifoundational ‘little narratives’ of local and partial experiences that cannot be finally anchored in some transcendental signified (Derrida: 1974). The distinction between the social sciences and the humanities was becoming extremely blurred.

The ‘crisis in representation’ gave birth to the ‘new ethnography’ that moved beyond the ‘naïve realism’ of facts being assembled by an objective researcher and instead celebrated a remarkable blossoming of reflexive ethnographic genres living in the deconstructed space between ‘science’ and ‘fiction’.

The term reflexivity has, of course, been used and abused in many ways in the methodological literature and is sometimes applied in a

rather loose way merely to mean reflective, with connotations of self-awareness that resonate with the autoethnographic genre. However, the full meaning of reflexivity in ethnography refers to the ineluctable fact that the ethnographer is thoroughly implicated in the phenomena that he or she documents, that there can be no disengaged observation of a social scene that exists in a 'state of nature' independent of the observer's presence, that interview accounts are co-constructed with informants, that ethnographic texts have their own conventions of representation. In other words, 'the ethnography' is a product of the interaction between the ethnographer and a social world, and the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena is always something that is crafted through an ethnographic imagination (Atkinson 2006: 402).

Richardson has dubbed this new unconventional writing as 'Creative Analytic Practices' (CAP) which include:

Autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, readers' theatre, writing stories, aphorisms, layered texts, comedy, satire, allegory, visual texts, hypertexts, museum displays, choreographed findings, and performance pieces (2006: 962).

The ethnographic journal, *Anthropology and Humanism* publishes, it tells us on its official Internet site, 'work in a variety of genres, including fiction and creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and photo essays, as well as more conventional articles and reviews'. Notice how 'more conventional articles', once the sole diet of ethnographic journals, is now something of an afterthought in the list of acceptable publications. Perhaps the most successful of these new genres has been autoethnography, to which we now turn.

Autoethnography, according to Deborah Reed-Danahay,

synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question (1997: 2).

Challenging therefore both realist senses of world and self, this consummately postmodern ethnographic genre was first identified by Hayano (1979/2001), who reserved the term to describe anthropologists who ‘conduct and write ethnographies of their “own people”’ (1979/2001: 75), Hayano having Jomo Kenyatta’s 1938 study of his Kikuyu people in mind. This is not the definition that has survived, although Hayano was spot-on in a footnote (1979/2001: 83) where he referred to the autobiographical ‘self-ethnography’. The contemporary sense of autoethnography (although, as we shall see, it is a highly contested field) is that it is:

research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political...It is the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one’s relational and inward experiences. The author incorporates the ‘I’ into research and writing, yet analyzes self as if studying an ‘other’ (Ellis & Ellingson 2008: 48).

It is therefore different to the traditional autobiography (with which it shares a great deal) because it ‘places the self within a *social context*’ (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9 (my emphasis)), thus justifying the ‘ethno’ part of its title, and thus also pointing to the inaccuracy of those traditionalist academics who accuse it of ‘self-indulgence’. Autoethnography emerges directly out of the critiques of the ‘crisis of representation’ period because (a) suspicion was cast upon western anthropologists whose ‘objective’ discourse about the Other often concealed an imperialist agenda (Said 1978), and who were therefore encouraged to be reflexive about their own discursive positions, and (b) the voices of the Other were encouraged to be heard. The reflexive researcher reflecting upon his or her own cultural making therefore combined with the new interest in hearing the ‘inside voices’ of cultures to produce the autoethnographic account, whose authenticity was seen to be far stronger than ‘outsider’ accounts of cultures. And, as Atkinson points out,

the ethnographic enterprise is always, in some degree, autoethnographic in that the ethnographer’s self is always implicated in the research process. Ethnographers inevitably affect and interact with the settings they document and are themselves changed in the process (2006: 403).

Behar (1996: 174) has described emerging genres such as autoethnography, as efforts ‘to map an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life’, and indeed Ellis and Ellingson have recently argued that autoethnography is defined precisely – and radically – by its ability to deconstruct the key binary oppositions of the social sciences: researcher/researched; objectivity/subjectivity; process/product; self/others; and personal/political (2008: 450). It is precisely its deconstructive ‘borderland’ space that has turned it into a protean form:

Autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed *through action, feeling, thought, and language* (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739).

In recent years, autoethnography has become split into two camps (although I feel this division simplifies matters): ‘evocative’ and ‘analytic’ autoethnographies. Evocative autoethnographies take their cue from Stephen A. Tyler’s seminal essay, ‘Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document’ (1986), where he argues in favour of evocation as a postmodern anti-representational writing strategy:

The whole point of ‘evoking’ rather than ‘representing’ is that it frees ethnographic *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails ‘objects’, ‘facts’, ‘descriptions’, ‘inductions’, ‘generalizations’, ‘verifications’, ‘experiment’, ‘truth’, and like concepts... (1986: 129-130).

Evocative autoethnography is highly critical of the ‘alienating effects ...of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by...(enlightenment-derived) research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse’ (Ellis & Ellingson 2008: 450), and thus, by drawing on

feminist-inspired ‘emotional sociology’ (which emphasizes the importance of a male-denigrated emotional and embodied knowledge (Franks & McCarthy: 1989; Ellis: 1991; 1997; Clark: 1997; Lakoff & Johnson:1999; Behar: 1996), and the field of ‘narrative knowledge’ (White 1973; 1986; 1987; Lyotard [1979] 1984; MacIntyre: 1984; Fisher: 1987; Polkinghorne 1988; Taylor 1989; Ricoeur 1990; Bruner 1990; 1991), it produces stories of affective lived experience which, like fiction, invites the reader to experience ‘what it must have felt like to live through what happened’ (Ellis & Bochner 1992: 80). The ethnographic method to gather data (from the writing self) is referred to by Ellis and Bochner (1992: 80) as ‘systematic introspection’.

Sociologist Leon Anderson, in a special edition on autoethnography of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Volume 35 Number 4 August 2006), having suggested the academic weaknesses of evocative autoethnography, argued for an alternative ‘analytic’ autoethnography much more in line with traditional social science research:

in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (2006: 375).

Anderson’s language - wanting autoethnography to generate concepts and theories - is that of traditional realist sociology largely unscathed by the ‘postmodern turn’, an academic and political conservatism (Denzin: 2001) which Ellis and Bochner (2006) see as an attempt to claw back the ‘unruly’ radicalism of autoethnography into ‘mainstream ethnography’: ‘We focus on aesthetics and our link to arts and humanities rather than Truth claims and our link to science’, state Ellis and Bochner (2006: 434).

The difficulty I have with the effects of this debate is that a worrying binary opposition is in danger of emerging that autoethnography at its best was dismantling, or at the very least was putting into question. Under the headings of Evocative and Analytic autoethnographies we can identify the following sets of oppositions: Evocative/Analytic; Emotional/Rational; Creative/Scientific; Feminine/Masculine; Cultural Studies/Sociology; Humanities/Social Sciences; Self/Society; Romanticism/Enlightenment;

Concrete/Abstract; Descriptive/Theoretical; Narrative/Logic; Experience/Analysis; and Postmodernism/Realism.

What we need to hold on to is that autoethnography is *both* evocative and analytic, but it is a different sort of conceptual analysis, suggested by Ellis's remark that 'There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story' (2003: 194). In other words – and this has been simply assumed in literary studies and historical studies for a very long time, and in human cultures for an even longer time – narratives have their own ways of producing knowledge. It may be different from sociological abstraction, but it is nevertheless an understanding of reality.

For Roland Barthes, 'narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative' (1966/1977). For MacIntyre, 'man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth' (1984: 216). Our consciousness, our very lives, are shaped by the sort of narratives we inhabit and tell each other, and which are continually open to re-writing. We are a *Homo narrans*. For those who oppose narrative to scientific knowledge, Polkinghorne points out I believe fairly that the thinking behind the shaping of a narrative plot is similar to the process of hypothesis development, in that that the plot is 'tested by fitting it over the facts' (1988: 19), although he does recognize that the difference between 'logico-mathematical' reasoning and narrative is that 'narratives *exhibit* an explanation instead of demonstrating it' (1988: 21). Literature 'shows' rather than 'tells' (for a magnificent account of 'narrative rationality' with its roots in classical rhetorical logic see Walter R Fisher's *Human Communication as Narration* (1987)).

Moreover, and I believe this to be vital, narratives do not so much provide us with facts but with *meanings* to our lives. As Polkinghorne argues, narrative is the 'primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (1988: 1), and narratives achieve this by placing individual events into a larger explanatory whole – the story - which bestows meaning onto the now connected events. Hayden White (1973; 1986; 1987) has shown how the writing of history involves a series of *interpretations* by historians at a range of levels. For example, historical texts could be emplotted in four major aesthetic ways – as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy or Satire – and each will give a very different (fictional) *meaning* to past events. At another level,

the ideological position of the historian will *interpret* the past in specific ways (1986: 51-80). Through metaphor, through allegory, and through a host of figurative strategies, fictional narratives construct meanings to our lived experiences, and they do so in ways that are alien to science. Take for example Kafka's novel *The Castle*. The novel provides us with *knowledge* of the bureaucratic state (how it works, how it alienates people); it provides us with certain *meanings* about it (the meaning nowadays is that the modern state is 'Kafkaesque'!); and it gives us the *affective experience* of what is to live that endless frustration with bureaucracy. Only narrative – and not the concepts generated by a rationalist sociology (which is prohibited from taking imaginative leaps into allegorical interpretations) – can give us this complex experience and understanding, a hermeneutics of human existence. This is also the enormous strength of autoethnography as the telling of stories about culture, and the individual in it.

Anyone who has followed the long history of debates about autoethnography will know that the descriptions 'narcissistic and self-indulgent' are the key signifiers of those old-school academics for whom the postmodern directions of ethnography over the last three decades have been both bewildering and threatening (Mykhalovskiy 1996; and Sparkes 2002 expose the reactionary nature of the criticism of 'self-indulgence'). To begin with, do we condemn Sylvia Plath, William Wordsworth, Roy Campbell, Allen Ginsberg, or Shakespeare for being 'self-indulgent' when writing poems about their deep feelings, say about their loved ones, God, or the rain-forests? We expect poets to be confessional and lyrical and profoundly aware of their affective lives. And then what about, say, Kafka's *The Castle*: surely Kafka is being overly self-indulgent when giving us his experience of state bureaucracies? D.H. Lawrence is of course beyond the pale, filling his novels with his thoughts about the sordidness of industrial civilization and the importance of vitalism. Couldn't he escape his opinions and let someone else speak, however briefly? Was he incapable of seeing the other person's point of view? The trouble with John Lennon is that he spent far too much time singing about his difficult upbringing and its emotionally disruptive effects on his adult life. We also need to berate all those 'minorities' theorists such as Franz Fanon and Judith Butler (and gays, lesbians, racial minorities, etc.) for going self-indulgently on at length about their oppression. Surely Fanon could have devoted a little of his prodigious energy to the problems of folk musicians in Transdanubia? Of course, autobiographies, which as we know

are immensely popular, are so genetically narcissistic that they are beyond the pale. All those books that J.M. Coetzee writes about his life are surely without any redeeming features, as are Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, not to mention Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*; we have not even mentioned biographies, which are endlessly 'self-indulgent'. The reality is that we live in a highly individualistic age, and the rich autonomous lives of other individuals are of great interest to us, since we are individuals too, and to write about the self is implicitly to write also about Others (the written self becomes the Other to the reader), since other readers can identify with the humanity or the lesbianism, or the African childhood, of autobiographers.

When traditional academics describe autoethnography as 'narcissistic', they also betray their lack of understanding of significant trends within the contemporary world, what Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash call 'reflexive modernity' (Beck *et al.* 1994). As traditional institutions lose their former powers, people in late modernity are obliged to take responsibility for their own self-formation, a 'self-fashioning' which leads to a heightened self-conscious individualism. Indeed, for Cauldry, (2000), a severe weakness of cultural studies is that it generally ignores the importance of the individual, instead relying upon statements of cultural generalities which miss a great deal about what is happening in late modernity. And, indeed, this developed agentic individualism is part of a contemporary 'structure of feeling' that is the condition of possibility for autoethnography, with its focus on a self that is not merely part of a cultural mass, a fragment of a whole (as in so much traditional ethnography), but a substantial and autonomous self that is *also* a member of a culture. It is for this reason that I believe autoethnography to be *the consummate form for present-day ethnographic research*, because it is in its very form sensitive to postmodern agentic individualism, a profound progression from sociological and anthropological 'modernist' accounts that could only speak of 'the social' and 'populations', and which therefore perpetuated the notion of a passive and conformist mass consciousness entirely determined by (oppressive) structures, and in which there was no room for individual difference or acting upon the world. At the same time, it fully recognizes the structural location of that autoethnographic self in a *culture*, from where that self emerges.

No academic has been more central to the development and promotion of autoethnography than Carolyn Ellis who, in a range of

pioneering books and essays has both theorized autoethnography (1997; 2000; 2001b; 2003; 2008b; Ellis & Bochner 1996; 2000; 2002; 2006; Ellis & Ellingson 2008) and written a great many of her own (1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1998; 2001; 2002; 2007; 2008a; 2013; Ellis & Bochner 1992), which have proved to be exemplary models for a great many other autoethnographers (see Jago 2005 for a good example of an autoethnography written in the Ellis style). Much of what I have described here as autoethnography is indebted to Ellis's work (and that of her collaborator Arthur Bochner).

Ellis's autoethnographies are deeply influenced by a feminism which, as we have earlier seen, not only foregrounds emotional reflexivity, against what is perceived to be a masculinist rationality, but which also challenges the patriarchal denigration of the female domestic private space of home and relationships and nurturing. Followers of Ellis's work over the years like me know a great deal about her private life, much of which has been explicitly written about in her autoethnographies.

Her many autoethnographies have to a large degree dealt with loss and trauma and disaster on both a human and grand scale: her partner dying of emphysema, her brother killed in an airplane crash, her bedridden elderly mother, one friend dying of pancreatic cancer and another of AIDS, her elderly neighbor's heart succumbing, the death of a cat and a rabbit, the effects of the Katrina hurricane, the events of September 11, lightning striking their summer home, and so on - what Patricia Clough not altogether kindly calls the 'melodrama of catastrophe' (1997:97). Her writing 'highlights emotional experience' (Bochner 2012: 158) by presenting to the reader in narrative mode the lived *affective* experience of suffering and her intensely emotional response to it, but what is interesting about her autoethnographies is that ironically they are not in any straight-forward way 'writing about the personal and its relationship to culture' (Ellis 2003: 37). There is no carefully drawn culture or subculture which is then explored through her personal narrative; rather what we find is the constant performance and articulation of what I call an '*ethical subject*'. Typically, Ellis will focus on an instance of suffering, and then through her own lived caring response to that suffering, offer her narrative as an example to her readers of how to live an ethical life in the everyday world of suffering and kindness: we *become* ethical by learning how to be emotionally (and cognitively) *empathetic* toward Others. As she writes on the Katrina

hurricane disaster: ‘I empathize with the children, the sick and maimed, the poor, those who lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes, their earthly possessions, their jobs, their identities and sense of place, even their addresses’ (2007: 190). And, in response to the events of September 11:

When I feel deeply, I recognize that what is there is not all agony. Existing in juxtaposition to agony, enhanced by fear and vulnerability, is a sense of collective belonging. This belonging calls me to care and love so deeply it hurts, to express it to those close to me, to reach out to help those in need no matter where they call home, to rethink who we are as Americans and who I am and want to be as an individual (2002: 401).

To ‘care and love so deeply it hurts’ means for Ellis constant references in her writing to her ‘cries of agony’ (2007: 200), a quite extraordinary (and, for some, no doubt excessive) emotional exhibitionism (a perhaps unkind commentator would refer to the discourse of an ‘agony aunt’) which is for her ‘therapeutic’ (2013: 43), since ‘it made my senses more sensitive, my heart more open, and helped me to settle my mind and spirit so that I could be more aware and appreciative of life in the present moment and compassionately embrace the suffering of others’ (2013: 43). Ellis relies heavily on feminist affirmations of caring and nurturing, values marginalized by patriarchy, and here these are turned into the very foundations of a humanist ethics.

These exemplary ethical tales, which appear to draw upon (amongst other voices) Buddhism – from the realization that everything is ‘*dukkha*’ (suffering) to the importance of a lived ethic of a compassionate ‘lovingkindness’, where one mediates upon suffering and experiences caring for life’s victims – are perhaps finally *parables*: allegories of the ethical life. No wonder then that Allen Shelton, in a not altogether serious portrait, imagined Carolyn Ellis as the Madonna of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*:

I imagined her to be in her early forties, with longish, slightly disheveled hair, wearing little or no make-up, an older man sprawled across her lap, his arm dangling over her knees to the ground, the other pinned against her waist and his chest, his hand flipped open and curling into a fingery orchid on his stomach. She would be

looking down through him, her own hands unimaginable in my pieta (1995: 85).

The ethical ethnographic researcher in his or her dealings with the Other of course travels straight from the ‘crisis of representation’ period, when much emphasis was placed on how the ‘objective’ researcher/narrator nevertheless managed to construct the Other (Clifford & Marcus 1986) through the researcher’s ideological, cultural and epistemological prism. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) for example drew attention to the western racist ideology that for centuries permeated all genres of writing including works of scholarship about the East. The ethnographic solution, as we have seen earlier, was for the researcher to be ‘reflexive’, and to work dialogically with the people being researched. In other words, the demand was for ethnographic researchers to be reflexively *ethical* in their dealings with the researched Other, and this is what Ellis is doing: offering narrative guidelines on how liberal/radical humanist academics can behave responsibly in their work, which as we have seen is to live in empathy with those who suffer. If we wish to locate the ‘ethno’ in her writings – the *context* of her texts - it is perhaps an American world of comfortable middle-class liberal humanist academics profoundly concerned to live ethically in the face of human suffering, sensitive to the many oppressions – of race, gender, class, etc. - that scar contemporary life. – or, to put it another way, concerned to be *recognized* as caring, compassionate subjects, and the proof of that authenticity is in the tears.

Ellis and her (both romantic and academic) partner Bochner see their work as we have seen as an experimental response to the ‘crisis of representation’, which challenged the realism of ethnographic writing from a post-structuralist position: ‘we mean that the world as we ‘know’ it cannot be separated from the language we use to explain, understand, or describe it’ (Ellis & Bochner 1996). The ‘realism’ they are opposing is what literary studies calls ‘classic realism’ (McCabe 1974; Belsey 1980); however Belsey has drawn our attention to another, ubiquitous type of realism, ‘expressive realism’. Expressive realism, Belsey argues, is a ‘fusion’ of classic realism (with its mimetic claims) and the Romantic notion that a text directly expressed the authentic and intense feelings and experiences of the writer (1980: 6). It is a kind of emotional mimesis. Belsey points out that expressive realism was central to the literary critical project of F.R. Leavis who, in *The*

Great Tradition, described thus his canon of great novelists: ‘They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity’ (quoted in Belsey 1980: 10). These words could also be describing the autoethnographies of Carolyn Ellis, who tells us that she seeks ‘to tell stories that show our experiences as lived intimately and deeply’ (Ellis 2001b: 87).

The poststructuralist critique of ethnographic realism also extended to Derrida’s critique of ‘presence’, or ‘phonocentrism’ (Derrida 1974), which Belsey helpfully summarizes as ‘the attribution to the human voice of a presence, an immediacy, authenticity and even innocence’ (1980:78). The assumption that a text directly reflects the emotional experiences of a subject fatally ignores the mediating play of language, of discourses, in and around the text, and, more specifically, how those social discourses construct the subject (or ‘subject-position’ – Foucault 1969/2002) of the author/narrator. Ellis’s autoethnographies do not contain any reflexive foregrounding of these theoretical insights, and instead she anchors her texts in the authenticity of her ‘vulnerable’ voice, and thus colludes in the notion of a transcendental subject outside of the constituting play of representation. Although I cannot discuss her work in detail here, the autoethnographies of the sociologist Patricia Ticineto Clough (2010a; 2010b) are very different from Ellis’s in that her postmodern pieces not only mix phenomenological description with abstract theory (which then enter into dialogue with each other, questioning the ‘truth’ of each discourse), but also put into question the status of her represented and representing subjects.

We can only agree with Ellis & Bochner that ‘the bulk’ of sociology ‘is boring and poorly written’ (2006: 440), and indeed this is a major reason why many academics are drawn to more adventurous ‘writerly’ experiments. For Norman Denzin, one of the more aggressive promoters of experimental ethnographic work, the ‘discourses of the modern world involve the constant commingling of literary, journalistic, fictional, factual, and ethnographic writing. No form is privileged over another’ (2001: 357), and indeed it is now common as we have seen when reading ethnographic academic journals to encounter poems, dramas, photographic essays, short stories, reports on films...we have come a long way from the realist study. However it is much more rare to find properly *fictional* autoethnographies, rather than those which use fictional devices to generate ‘narrative truths’ (most experimental ethnographers still include real people caught up in real situations). The book

that has proved to be especially influential, including to encourage Akal to take the next step into properly fictional ethnographic writing, is *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire* (Banks, Anna and Banks, Stephen P. (eds) 1998), a book which both theorizes and provides fascinating examples (the short story, poetry, drama) of 'the intersection of fiction and social research, offering a corrective to the traditional polarization of the literary and the scientific' (1998: 7), or indeed deconstructing the opposition of 'fictional' and 'factual' to the point of their mutual undecidability. Robert Krizek chooses 'fiction to present my understanding because this format allows my readers to meet my cultural participants (the people of my 'ethnos') in the voice, emotional textures, and multi-layered immediacy of the participants' own experience' (1998:104). In other words, the narrative form is ideally suited for readers to engage phenomenologically with the people he is studying. Krizek, however, does make a further point that is I believe essential for any ethnographer drawn towards fictional representation, and that is that 'creative writing cannot be employed as a methodological shortcut' (1998: 107). What he means is that it remains essential for the fieldwork of data collection to be properly done, advice which Akal took seriously: she followed the usual ethnographic path of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with people purposively chosen for their intense commitment to the Hipster subculture. This data was then entered into the fictional world of the thesis. A key essay in this collection is Simon Gottschalk's essay (1998: 205-233), where he argues that a properly postmodern ethnography must both '*reveal...conditions of postmodernity and enact...them*' (1998: 207): not only an ethnography *about* postmodernism, but also one that takes fully on board both a postmodern world-view and postmodern techniques. This was a fundamental motivation for Akal's thesis, which was deliberately written in the manner of what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern 'historiographic metafiction' where the 'most radical boundaries crossed...have been those between fiction and non-fiction' (1988:10).

Gottschalk then outlines five 'methodological moves' necessary for a postmodern ethnography: self-reflexivity of the researcher; the production of modest local truths; the evocation rather than description of culture; multimedia saturation (an awareness of the media-dominated simulated hyperreality of contemporary culture); and a multiplicity of dialogic voices (1998: 208-222). These categories were central to Akal's project, allowing her text to 'evoke' the postmodern in a complex manner.

The central conclusion to extract from books like *Fiction and Social Research* is that terms like ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’ no longer mean what they did; that there is, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, an enormous semiotic traffic between them, disrupting their erstwhile solidities to the point where they are no longer useful as explanatory categories. As Hayden White (1973; 1987) has shown, history writing is riddled with interpretive fictions, while, as Geertz has argued, ethnography is an ‘interpretive’ science, which of course immediately undermines its scientificity. The ‘crisis of representation’ liberated the writing of culture from its naïve facticity, which was reliant on a model of realism borrowed from 19th century fiction, and opened it up to the possibilities of that other space where truths and the creative imagination, science and art, are in inventive dialogue. Moreover, postmodern ethnographies written as fictions also contribute to the theoretical investigations of the complexities of the ‘fictional’ and the ‘factual’. In a discussion of psychoanalytic theories of cinema, Žižek concluded:

If our social reality itself is sustained by a symbolic fiction or fantasy, then the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within a narrative fiction, to seduce us into mistaking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction (2001: 77).

This seems to me to be the radical promise of post-structuralist theory, to grasp our cultural realities as human inventions, where our truths are precisely our fictions.

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