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Trying Not to Lie...and Failing: Autoethnography, Memory, Malleability

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Abstract

All research is experiential, whether this is the experience of reading in the library or observing in the field. Autoethnographers take experience into narratives and are themselves key participants in their research, and often also its subject. For autoethnographers the idea of research as a neutral process is abandoned in favour of a self-reflective form that explores the researcher's perspective on the subject in question. Autoethnography inevitably negotiates the relationship between the stories we want to tell and the histories we have lived through; between the necessary fictions of publication/presentation and the real world experiences we draw upon. This article questions whether we can ever tell our experiences truthfully. This article questions what it might mean to write oneself into research findings and narrative reports, and it asks what happens when one's self goes further and becomes the research. It offers perspectives and provocations which are informed but not bound by autoethnography's extant body of thought and readers are invited on a brief journey through self-writing as it relates to the vagaries of memory and the illusion of truth.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Self-Deception, Self-Reflection, Experiential Research, Memory

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Trying Not to Lie...and Failing: Autoethnography, Memory, Malleability

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All research is experiential, whether this is the experience of reading in the library or observing in the field. Autoethnographers take experience into narratives and are themselves key participants in their research, and often also its subject. For autoethnographers the idea of research as a neutral process is abandoned in favour of a self-reflective form that explores the researcher's perspective on the subject in question. Autoethnography inevitably negotiates the relationship between the stories we want to tell and the histories we have lived through; between the necessary fictions of publication/presentation and the real world experiences we draw upon. This article questions whether we can ever tell our experiences truthfully. This article questions what it might mean to write oneself into research findings and narrative reports, and it asks what happens when one's self goes further and becomes the research. It offers perspectives and provocations which are informed but not bound by autoethnography's extant body of thought and readers are invited on a brief journey through self-writing as it relates to the vagaries of memory and the illusion of truth. Keywords: Autoethnography, Self-Deception, Self-Reflection, Experiential Research, Memory

This article casts a wide net and it will range across many fields of practice. In so doing paragraphs will turn from the general to the particular and back again in ways that, hopefully at least, cut through a surface treatment to the heart and blood of self-writing.

In taking writing as a theme the sections that follow will weave form and content in ways that are not always quite deliberate and perhaps not always fully under control. For these moments to come I can only beg the reader's forgiveness and hope that the article's searching for answers rather than documenting that which has already been found will read less like structural collapse than a genuine and useful attempt at practising a little of the things that autoethnographers often preach.

If the macro of the article is writing, its micro is research, brought face-to-face in the idea of communication that legislates against its own concealment of construction. The etymology of *obscene* is *off scene*, hidden, out of sight. In most traditional forms of research the investigator's self has likewise been historically hidden, camouflaged in borrowed cloaks and behind the representation of other. In a similar way, and with some notable exceptions, the writer's self has traditionally been excised from all but autobiographical publication, limited to the idea of observation from a distance; as though this act of disentanglement would somehow result in rigour; as though *good research* could only take place when the researcher stays firmly outside the frame.

Essentially the researcher's position has been regarded as not at all interesting; indeed convention has preferred the neutrality of the term *disinterested*. Nor have we generally regarded the researcher's perspective as important, with the main schools of thought being that one's research should echo that of a dispassionate and essentially objective observer, of an articulate, trained and intelligent *uber*-everyman/everywoman grounding findings within a coolly coherent body of sustained theoretical prose.

As an alternative to this the autoethnography focused on in this article functions as a pedagogic and creative tool for focusing attention on the inevitability and indeed the *usefulness* of subject positions. Its concern is also with acknowledging the inevitable overlaps between the maker and the made, and with a hopefully cautious relationship with truth. This caution is not something we need take as suspect. On the contrary it stems from recognition that ideas of truth are sometimes no more than the opinions that have been spoken by the loudest voices and that any truth is a half-truth at best. In this context any and all claims for objective truths that creep into the next few pages should be treated with healthy disdain.

Alphonse Bertillon wrote that we are only able to see what we observe, and that we only observe things which are already in the mind (Bertillon, 1989); whilst in his essay *On the Decay of the Art of Lying* Mark Twain famously told us that everybody lies ... every day, every hour, awake, asleep, in his dreams, in his joy, in his mourning. If he keeps his tongue still his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude will convey deception (Twain, 2015, p. 26). And truth is indeed an impossible prey to catch, not just because it is elusive, but because it is different in kind to fact.

My belief (if such a conceit can have any place in this paper) is that the methodologies of memoir, autoethnography and creative non-fiction have become so commonplace in the arts, humanities, health, education and social sciences that they are now, in a great many instances, little more than mantras, so that in too many authors' and postgraduate students' hands self-writing has come to honour no audience greater than itself. That I consider this to be so does not make it a fact.

If the personal can hold sway as evidence (and this article is all about that very question) then I can say that in my professional life I have read (and indeed written) a few too many weak autoethnographies to be left with much of the *a priori* faith in the term that many of my genuinely valued colleagues seem to possess. If this results in an article *about* autoethnography that is in part an article *for* autoethnographers that is also in places an article *against* autoethnography then that confluence should be seen not as cynicism so much as a healthy form of skepsis that is desperately seeking conviction. The article's battle then is with the quality of writing in the field rather than with the battleground itself. More than this and because quality is almost as hard to define as truth, the battle is with autoethnography and memoir as these have become able to play in the hands of the idle. Truth be told these thoughts, part-claim and part-disclaimer, part-provocation and part self-protection, will be returned to throughout the next few thousand words. Truth be told. If truth on the page can ever be told.

The idea of truth in art and literature is a hoary idea, done to near death back to Plato and beyond. Nevertheless, both autoethnography and memoir trade on truth so relentlessly that it is simply not a theme that is possible to sidestep; indeed, research that is not concerned with truthful pursuit of verifiable facts is notoriously hard to justify as research at all. As readers of this article will surely well know, feelings segue into findings and emotions can muddy the waters of information to the extent that facts become the first casualty of creative research. As we also well know, our own part-truths are easier to believe than those of other people: because everyone is a liar but us.

Picasso told us that art is a lie that tells the truth, and we know that art in its various forms has its own covenant with veracity. The words *truth* and *fact* are often used interchangeably but one can generally say that a fact is easier to define than a truth, inasmuch as a fact is something that possesses objective reality. To say that the sun rises in the east is regarded as a fact. To say that gravity exists is a fact. To say that a certain person loves coffee is at best a truth, because the factual evidence of that individual's consumption of many cups each day is not at all proof of love. Scientific facts may well change from one generation to the next as new methods of observation come into use but for the most part it is safe to regard facts as assertions that can be made subject to proof. Truth on the other hand is not so easy to pin

down: a work of creative fiction or a painting can, in the sense Picasso meant, be said to be true to life or true to human nature.

For a philosopher or a theologian the opposite may be true and facts may be fleeting in their temporary specificity whereas truth is something eternal and unchanged, but for most purposes a fact is a concrete reality that no amount of reasoning will change, something that cannot be logically disputed or rejected. A truth is almost the opposite. The idea that a particular god exists will for many people be an absolute truth without ever having come close to being an objectively verifiable fact. Writing in the magazine *America*, Terrance W. Klein likens Mary of Nazareth to a great work of art and God as the ultimate artist (Klein, 2012). This is hardly a factual statement, despite the author's obvious sense of his and his own subject's truth. Just as truly a non-Christian might write that they believe neither in God nor the widely accepted story of Mary of Nazareth and yet they would not be able to propose their version as being based on any facts, not even by calling upon the scientific implausibility of a child being conceived as a result of a mother's union with a God who inseminated her by methods unknown.

A non-Christian could not regard their beliefs as being factual despite *knowing* with the same level of certainty that a Christian might have for the opposite view. Many people continue to regard creationism as a truth in spite of more hard scientific evidence than one could shake a Darwinian stick at. Even for those who do not share the peculiar beliefs of the particularly religious, truths matter to us in life at least as much as facts, yet they are essentially fluid, malleable and open to endless challenge.

Facts are often used to substantiate our assertions on particular truths; just as truths may be used to help us better understand particular facts. But to offer a truth as a fact is always problematic. It is also one of the great pitfalls of autoethnography. Describing our beliefs as truths makes them sound rather grand at the same time as it discourages challenge and when we confuse the truth of our memories with the fact of what really occurred we are generally heading for trouble. All writing balances on the razor edge of deception and description but few forms self-delude better (or worse) than autoethnography.

The English language has many words to express the concept of truth: integrity, sincerity, authenticity, honesty etc. and wanting them to be a part of our work is no bad thing, but the words themselves do nothing to make our content *true*. In autoethnographical research terms they are often no more or less than weasel words, used to create an impression that something specific, accurate and meaningful has been written about in words that are equally accurate. When Stewart Chaplin wrote "of words that suck the life out of the words next to them, just as a weasel sucks the egg and leaves the shell," (Chaplin, 1900) he might have been thinking of the ways that autoethnography and memoir would evolve. Added to all of this is the fact (or is it a truth?) that we are living through a time of rapidly increasing technical sophistication, to the extent that digital techniques and not least on the internet are generating a huge interest in manipulative deception and deceptive manipulation. The art world is already well-able to create remarkably convincing images, conjuring the false into seeming reality and Baudrillard's notion of *simulacrum* has come to haunt representation in more ways than we (if not perhaps he) could have ever imagined (Baudrillard, 1994).

Just as the term *art* has grown ever broader in meaning so *truth* has lost even more sense of fixity or permanence. In standard research practice there is no longer the illusion of absolute methodological certainty and as Art Bochner describes it there is no "single, unchallenged paradigm ... for deciding what does and what does not comprise valid, useful and significant knowledge" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 268).

Reality television in all its guises generally deploys very little sophistication with which to conceal its editorial bias and yet we have become so seduced by the image that we still look to buy truth where only lies are up for sale, just as we lap up *X-Factor* contestants when they dedicate trite songs to dead relatives and *Masterchef* cooks who prepare meals so evocative of

their tormented childhoods that they shed crocodile tears into their skillet. The international talent show *The Voice*, which has an overt titular concentration on singing, focuses heavily on the narrative behind each contestant's choice of song and/or reasons for entering the show. Vanity and careerism are never given as reasons, but promises made to dead relatives whose spirits watch over and inspire the singers like guardian angels, are relentlessly invoked.

From chat shows to marketing and from the well-intentioned myth-making of memoir to the world of confessional performance (where the larger clue might be in the word *performance* rather than in the claim of confession) we are it would appear hungrier than ever for a slice of the real. What is clear too is that this article has already used terms like *truth*, *reality*, *authenticity* and *genuine* without any noticeable sense of discernment. This may be no more or less than evidence of my own hazy thinking and lazy writing but it may also be a way of collapsing these words into something that is at once manageable and clean. To this end readers are asked to go with the flow of an authorial conceit that, in terms of memory re-made, sees no easy distinction between a YouTube clip, an autoethnographically written thesis, a memoir and a tightly-scripted revelation to a chat show host. The issue is the extent to which truth might matter in art and the personal might have currency in research. Each of these ideas comes together in autoethnography; and if this does not quite expel my own weasel words it does at least expose them to the light.

Where photographs were once held to be records of a moment in time and considered factual enough to be presented regularly as evidence in legal matters, photographers can now manipulate their images to the extent that little that we see can be taken as true. Words are the same. Anything that is typed, the manuscript for this article for instance, can be edited by someone else to be something that it was not before. In the past, the next edition of a book could always be changed but the original was retained for posterity. Any changes to original records were generally crude and usually obvious. In the digital world the new edition is *the edition* and distinctions between what was and what is are eroded. It was possible in previous times to compare different originals to get to some idea of the truth but it is not easy any more to know what to regard as an accurate recording of an instant in time. It is too simple a task to digitally manipulate an image to make it seem real, or even *more real*, after the event. The questions asked of truth have been with us forever but they are rendered considerably more problematic in the digital age. For sure if there is one universal truth in the twenty first century it is that there is too much content and not enough time to consume it; if there is one more it is that we can no longer have any trust in the images we see and the words that we read.

The Vatican no less is well aware of this and in an ancient institution's desire to keep up with the times Pope Benedict's pre-retirement 2013 message for the World Communications Day was entitled *Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age*. In his address the pontiff called for a "creative and responsible use of the latest technologies in order to communicate the lasting truth of God's love for the world" (Vatican, 2011). Young people in particular, the at-the-time Pope told his followers, are increasingly involved in social networks, posing important questions about the authenticity of one's own being. In the search for sharing and finding new friends, the message stresses, there is the challenge to be authentic and faithful and not to give in to the illusion of constructing an artificial public profile for oneself. With every new medium comes a new disruption to the ways we communicate and the ways we receive and it may well be that autoethnography is enjoying the honeymoon period that it is precisely because we crave so much the truth we know in our heart of hearts we cannot really find.

Matters of fact and even truth have been replaced with matters of signification and in almost everything we see truth has become no more than a copy of truth. Little wonder then that autoethnography and memoir, with their blend of sincerity and deception that can at times amount to one hand swearing on a bible and one set of fingers crossed behind the back are in

danger of becoming the two last turkeys in the shop of the real. What has changed for all of us has been the huge rise of digital socialisation and the endless array of electronic outlets to express anyone and everyone's versions of the truth. This zeitgeist of the digital world has dramatically influenced the negotiability of truth in all arenas because it has democratised global communications in the ways that it has and the ways that it does. So-called citizen journalists, bloggers who see themselves as playing active and vital roles in the process of collecting and disseminating news and information now participate actively in content formation in ways that shape the public narrative on issues ranging from celebrity deaths and a country's reasons for going to war to local authority lawsuits and innuendo dressed up as *reportage*. Regardless of the subject matter, the underlying facts (a weasel word in this context) are negotiated and debated by a newly empowered social media: one that is unbound by the rules governing lawyers and traditional journalists.

Whilst distinctions between bloggers and autoethnographers abound, there are overlaps in terms of the currency of independence. We see this in the blogger's freedom from the dictates of media moguls and politically prejudicial editors just as it exists in the autoethnographer's faith in intelligently framed lived experience. But who monitors the individual's bias? We are none of us independent and free will has been shown on countless occasions to be something of a myth.

In 1966 the psychiatrist, Charles Hofling arranged for 22 nurses working in a large hospital to receive separate telephone calls from an actor who identified himself as Dr. Smith. The assumed doctor told each of the nurses that they were to give a 20mg dose of a highly toxic drug called *Astroten* to a specific patient. The actor posing as Dr. Smith (and there was no Dr. Smith at the hospital) told the nurses that he was *en route* to the hospital and that he would sign the necessary paperwork as soon as he arrived. The drug was an invention of the experimenters. It had been placed in the drug cabinet several days before the bogus telephone calls, marked with a prominent warning which reminded staff that 10mg was the maximum safe dose and that more than this was potentially lethal. Hospital protocol was categorical that no drug should ever be administered based solely on a phone call, yet 21 out of the 22 nurses were about to deliver the 20mg dose when they were stopped (Hofling, 1996).

The nurses had bowed to the imagined authority of the doctor and were in the process of killing patients. Not much evidence of free will there, and what would make us think that our minds are more our own than those of the duped nurses? The last half century's research into human behaviour suggests that we are no more than puppets dancing on society's strings. In a very real sense we can never be sure of ourselves and those of us who think we are free are perhaps doubly deluded.

Contemporary life is sympathetic to the idea, beautiful in its appeal, that each of us is a story waiting to be written and that these stories once written will result in a person explained. Perhaps we are all stories waiting to be written and perhaps we each have our stories to tell? Proponents might well (and doubtless will) argue that autoethnographical research outcomes are prime cultural agents in the interrogation and dissolution of assumed binaries between the watcher and the watched and the maker and the made. And on some occasions these arguments will be sound. At other times, such as when Norman Denzin refers to (presumably all) autoethnographers as public intellectuals who produce and engage in meaningful cultural criticism and autoethnography itself as providing "a framework against which all other forms of writing about the politics of the popular under the regimes of global capitalism are judged" (Denzin, 2005, p. 259) or when Andrew Sparkes suggests that autoethnography is superior to the "standard boring writing of the academy" (Sparkes, 2007, p. 541) the hyperbole clearly exceeds the facts.

As Robert Frost told us, if there is no surprise for the writer then there will be no surprise for the reader (Steele, 2008, p. 19). The writing thus changes the writer as much perhaps or

even more than the reader. This was certainly the case for Michel Foucault who stated “I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same things as before” (Foucault, 2000, pp. 239-240). Objectivity does not necessarily get lost in this mix but it does disguise itself sometimes in subjective language, just as subjectivity often hides behind the refusal to use the personal pronoun. All of this makes defining an article as an act of research (rather than as an article that is just *about* research) problematic. Perhaps these words of caution are a type of self-acknowledgment, a statement of how awkwardly this article and writer will present their own acts of autoethnography.

It is clear at the outset that any easy distinction in these pages between writing *about* autoethnography and writing that *is* autoethnographic would be an impossible aim; even if this were this article’s intent. It is a positive feature of our times that academic and creative writing are no longer seen as oppositional factions, just as autobiography and fiction are fruit from the same poisoned tree: poisoned because the act of writing is nothing if not the pursuit of persuasion; nothing if not the manipulation of words to serve their own intent.

We know that whereas mainstream research was at one time, and for many still is, informed by critical perspectives born out of the literary canon, contemporary research in the arts, humanities and social sciences is now largely informed by a swathe of post-structural theories. The autoethnography focused on in this article is informed by a loose application of these theoretical interventions each of which posits self-reality as no more than a composite of historically situated language constructs within which our individual or subjective perspectives are programmed to play their part. We witness this on a regular basis with autoethnographic practitioners whose work conforms to post-structuralist ideals by presenting material that acknowledges and investigates the relationships between subjective perspectives and the social-historical manifestations of construction.

At its best this makes for powerful work; at its worst it creates a cycle of what is often little more than the language of oppression, obscured by the babble of hypersubjectivity; or as Noam Chomsky sees it, as hypersubjectivity as a form that seeks to deprive the working classes of the tools of emancipation, playing working people and vulnerable, excluded communities against each other through claims that all projects of enlightenment are redundant in so far as inequity is never anything more than one illusion in a world of simulacrum (Chomsky, 1993). Foucault’s observations that truth is an effect of power have created telling critiques on notions of objectivity, but where oppression is a fact of daily life placing inverted commas around the word truth adds casual intellectual insult to savage social injury.

Partly because of Foucault we can say that we are at a point in history where much that might once have been edited out of academic writing is now likely to be edited, and autoethnography is evidence and application of this. For one of autoethnography’s long-time champions, Carolyn Ellis, this inclusivity goes so far as advocating research which is likely to “start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions ... to try and understand an experience I’ve lived through” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). We are told that his excavation and exploration of self takes its toll: Ellis elaborates:

... honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you can’t stand the pain anymore, well that’s when the real work has only begun. Then there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you have written or having any control over how readers interpret it. (Ibid, p. 738)

Ruth Behar adopts a similar line when she writes that autoethnographers need to learn to be comfortable with their own *passionate vulnerability*, knowing that their writings will be published in hostile and unforgiving environments (Behar, 1996, pp. 13-14). Speaking perhaps

to those same hostilities Kathryn Church is emphatic in her belief that foregrounding one's own voice in research "is not narcissism; it is not an egocentric indulgence" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 216). Church's argument is that her subjectivity is filled with the voices of other people and that writing about the self is a way of writing about those others and about the worlds which she both creates and inhabits. If these are reasonably standard claims for autoethnography then they also comprise its standard defence. The notion of autoethnography is regarded with some degree of suspicion by university colleagues - and not only those in the hard sciences - and the risk of confusing self-indulgence with self-knowing is as potent as it is seductive. If we acknowledge Primo Levi's writing of "the need to tell our story to the rest," of achieving "an interior liberation," (Levi, 1997, p. 15) we should also heed Charles Marowitz's dismissal of those who write about their own practice as masturbators; (Marowitz, 1991) an idea echoed in Blake Morrison's belief that confessional writing without some sort of tempering judgement is little more than masturbation in print. (Morrison) Autoethnographers, memoirists and followers of Levi beware.

Autoethnography's fusing of the self and the social, in Deborah Reed-Danahay's terms, famously locates the *self* as innately ethnographic rather than touristic (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This is a shift from Karl Heider's view of self, which referred solely, in the autoethnographic terms he introduced, to the self of the informant (Heider, 1975). Autoethnography is more commonly regarded now as a form of autobiographical ethnography in which researchers are able to insert all of the variants of their personal experiences into their investigation and documentation; which is to say that the feelings of the researcher, or the researcher's emotional journey, is generally accepted as being grist to the mill of research activity and that which was once thought of as spoiling the research is now seen as going no small way towards creating it. Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Art Bochner see in this recognition of "the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process" (Ellis et al., 2010).

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner suggest that "autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)," (Ibid) all of which is true and when each of these elements is given due time, space and attention autoethnography can achieve excellent results. The methodology is prone to suffer however when healthy emphasis leads to gross imbalance and research focuses too strongly on the auto. Locating oneself as part of an investigated community can understandably lead to insights that are likely to have external value in research terms. Locating one's self as the sole object of investigation, framed but not significantly *informed* by the society one belongs to is likely to lead to some quite reasonable allegations of navel-gazing; and this book would be doing its readers a disservice by sidestepping these problems rather than engaging with them. At times this engagement with criticisms of autoethnography and memoir will go so far as agreement. Despite believing that counter-narratives deserve to be heard no less than the grand narratives of modernism, despite knowing that injustice goes hand in glove with silence and despite being aware that autoethnography is at core anti-hierarchical and subversive it is hard for me to find much immediate argument with Jill Taft-Kaufman's view that:

Despite claims that autoethnography is a mode open to all, certain narratives are discouraged (discourse that echoes those dead white males, for example), and other stories are favored (especially from voices considered marginalized). Autoethnography is touted as a practice that does not participate in the perpetration of ideology (advocacy and responsibility are two of those thorny issues). However, many of the autoethnographies that appear in journals and at academic gatherings explicitly structure and relate the points in their stories to the doctrines that underlie the practice, imparting an almost formulaic sameness to these supposedly subjective expressions. (Taft-Kaufman, 2000, n.p.)

It is probably fair to say that whilst not all research endeavours are autobiographic in flavour or intent many are driven by a strong sense of self. In choosing to investigate certain things in certain ways we make overt our interests, passions, compassions and fears to others, probably more cleanly than we will show them to ourselves. In acknowledging its emphasis on self, autoethnography functions as a way of controlling self-interests through their exposure; putting a positive spin on this it follows that autoethnography is not so much the *ipso facto* method towards self-indulgence that its critics often claim as it is a methodology that places the researcher's self-motivations front and centre, bringing to the fore that which other approaches adopt and also conceal. Taking a more cautious tone we should note and remember that in the case of autoethnography methodology is often replaced by mantra.

Because we do not often engage in deliberate, conscientious and self-conscious reflection upon our own processes of experience we do not generally privilege the personal as a form of evidence. Nevertheless Kristi Gerding Scholten suggests that our acts of communication will always already embody projections of the self, even if at a subconscious level, so that we are presenting and/or performing versions of our selves each time we speak or write (Scholten, 2007). For autoethnographers this type of self-reflection and self-projection can be described as a harrowing process but one which leads to identification and learning from experience. Instead of concealing personal experience, because it is resistant to notions of rational argument and systematic results, ideas are articulated *through* one's experience, leading to a form of communication that is offered up as being at once heartfelt, honest and authentic. Rather than assuming a sense of borrowed objectivity, which is often no more than the *language* of objectivity, autoethnography asks whether we are doing ourselves an injustice by not examining the way we write ourselves and our readers into our research findings and outcomes.

How much truth is too much truth? Maybe all truth is good but not all truth is good to tell. Like many before me and despite the hard-line ethical fundamentalism of scholars such as Martin Tolich (2010). I write this article with knowingly partial truths, leaving out much of that which autoethnography so plainly allows. And I do so for two simple reasons: because in research, as in writing and as in reading not everything matters equally; and because whilst this is an article about autoethnography and memoir it makes no claims for full autobiographical disclosure on my own part, whether real or seeming. That said the issues facing me here are not radically different to those facing *de facto* autoethnographers and indeed because in other contexts my work has been knowingly autoethnographic it may well be the case that whilst this badge has been partly removed from my lapel during the writing of this article some of those instincts remain.

Certainly I am aware that at least some of my observations and opinions (*insights* feels like too grandiose a term) will be as likely to caution aspirant autoethnographers against their form as to inspire them and that I will seek to persuade readers through the structure of paragraphs, sentences and chapters as much as through any claims to impartiality, objectivity and those traditional staples of academic work. Certainly I am aware that no clean line exists between who we are and what we write and that no clear boundary separates the researcher from the researched; I am aware too that in my use of the personal pronoun I am invoking Romy Clark and Roz Ivanič's elegant arguments about the political conventions of self and that in referring to their work as *elegant* I am adding nuance to fact (Clark & Ivanič, 1997). And isn't that what writing always does? And isn't that what makes our occasional distrust of claims for writerly truth so compelling? Because we know that writing changes everything; just as we know that the self both is and is not a fiction; that despite a writer's best claims to authenticity there is never anything authentic in the words we read. Certainly I am aware too, after Roland Barthes at least, that whilst autoethnography's implicit and often explicit claim is that this is

just me writing my story within the particular complexities of my life, the subject who writes today is never and can never be the same subject who acted yesterday; and we do not need to locate ourselves as disciples of French post-structuralism in order to know this.

Like reading, writing is never even remotely free from discourse and my own words that make up this book are far from innocent. Edward Said would see this complexity as *worldly*, as being in and of the world rather than being particularly sophisticated. The ways in which we write are rooted as deeply in the things we have read as in the things we think and if when we write we locate ourselves within a huge conversation with everyone else who has ever written we are also engaging in the construction of the ways in which we are asking to be seen. This is the *love-me* which Barthes sees as being present within all writing and which brings into the light the vanities we attempt so redundantly to conceal behind academic terminology; behind a tone of disinterest that amounts to hope disguised as an attitude that asks, and often *pleads* “Am I knowledgeable enough for you?” (Barthes, 1989, pp. 40-41). When taken to extremes the values and practices of academic writing, those values of rigour and complexity, nuance, accuracy and argument, awareness of the field and the right type of name-dropping can make disciplines accessible to only small groups of specialised readers.

In her book *Stylish Academic Writing* Helen Sword analysed 1,000 scholarly articles from a wide array of disciplines before coming up with some tactics used by those writers she regarded as *stylish* academics. Sword’s argument is that stylish writers aim to tell compelling stories, avoid jargon, provide readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and write with originality, imagination, and creative flair. In her survey of stylish writing Sword noticed extensive use of first-person anecdotes, catchy openings, concrete nouns, active verbs, the use of apposite and illustrative examples, references that show broad reading beyond subject-specialism and a prevailing sense of humour (Sword, 2012). In a similar vein William Zinsser cites warmth and humanity as important parts of nonfiction writing (Zinsser, 2001). All of which is good news for autoethnographers and memoirists who know instinctively that every research outcome tells a story and that a story without reader-engagement is no story at all.

Understanding is about knowing what to do next, whilst skill is demonstrated through knowing how to do it. As my own writing no doubt demonstrates, *understanding* Sword’s and particularly Zinsser’s words and *valuing their* views does not automatically mean that we have the skills to develop their advice in and through our own practice; but, as Elmore Leonard is to novelists and David Mamet is to dramatists, autoethnographers and academic writers have our own best guides.

Writing is directed to a certain end and inasmuch as we attempt to articulate our views in a language that will be deemed acceptable by the readers we desire we exercise a relatively controlled discourse, even when we pay homage to our readers’ abilities to write their own meanings into our words. Writing is the negotiation of controlled intent amid the knowledge that readers will always go their own sweet way and that all our attempts to seduce and coerce, educate and fool are subject to the very same readerly interference that we also might champion. All of which is to say that awareness of this is what helps us to distinguish writing from typing.

We cannot imagine that which we cannot first remember and all memory is an act of imagination and *ergo* of invention. Words can do many things and within the pages of this article notions of ineffability have been given no line space, but we know that words can only do their best and that even the best words fail to accurately record experience. In failing as accurate records words can occasionally do much more than this. Perhaps the finest six-word example in English remains Ernest Hemingway’s extraordinary idea for a story: *For sale: baby shoes, never worn*. That Hemingway considered this to be his finest work makes absolute sense. Like much that is great in art these words achieve maximum impact from minimal means. They paint a picture and that picture invokes a truth rather than trying to reproduce one.

It is important to remember how this relates to autoethnography and memoir, for we know that truth is a slippery concept and for those of us who cannot write like Hemingway or paint like Picasso our attempts run the risk of reducing the truth of experience to something both literary and banal rather than channelling it into something purposive. Questions of truth go hand in hand with authenticity: another word that is often glued to autoethnography and memoir without much regard for why. The question of what it means to write with authenticity should be laced through every autoethnographical text.

Like Kristina Medford I know that the difference between truth and truthfulness is considerably less evasive than the difference between truth and fiction, (Medford, 2006, p. 853) just as I know that writing an objective account of reality is not remotely possible, and that written text can be a lazy machine for dissemination (Eco, 1994, p. 49). I know too that the charges of self-indulgence that have been brought against autoethnography stem from critiques of self-showing over self-knowing and that the type of solipsism that offers the argument (whether hidden or overt) that there could be no thoughts, experiences, and emotions other than the thinker's own marks much of the egocentricity of the autoethnographer. In its diluted form solipsism is a fact of life inasmuch as one can never know other minds in the way that we know our own; and knowledge of other minds exists on the basis of certain inferences that we make from what evidence of external behaviour is directly accessible to us.

In John Locke's view all that we can know directly is the existence and contents of our own minds and all insights into other people's thoughts are indirect and analogical, inferences from our own deeply held perspectives (Locke & Sigmund, 2005). But if autoethnography is to function as more than a diary of the given writer's thoughts and if autoethnographic research is to have any purposive validity then a frame of critical thinking and external views is inevitable. Contextualising our experiences is no guarantee of truth and it does little to temper our writerly self-delusions, but it does provide some small guard against solipsism and the tendency to let the auto ride roughshod over ethnography.

Leon Anderson's work on analytical autoethnography is useful here (Anderson, 2006). Anderson stresses the notion that analytical autoethnography is resistant to the position undertaken by the type of evocative autoethnographers this paper has focused on. Where in evocative autoethnography the writer/researcher functions as the prime, and often *sole* source of information, analytical autoethnography demands a dialogue with information that goes beyond the writer's self and self-experience. Anderson is emphatic on this point: "...solipsism and author saturation in autoethnographic texts...stem from failure to adequately engage with others in the field. No ethnographic work, not even autoethnography, is a warrant to generalize from an *N of one*" (Ibid, p. 386). If analytical autoethnography has a commitment to an analytic agenda, it is one that is no less social, political and personal; the shift occurs in the way that personal experience is framed. Where Denzin is proud to write that evocative autoethnography invokes "an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other" (Denzin, 1997, p. 228) and thereby creating texts that refuse to "abstract and explain" (Ibid) analytical autoethnography refuses to use the self as the only locus of information. The writer is still situated as both subject and object of the text, but that same text offers itself up in the hope of creating a dialogue and discourse with a more substantial macro narrative. If this allows multiple and hitherto untold stories to be accessed it also validates those narratives as conceptually and critically framed by experiences that exist beyond the writer's own.

Abstraction, explanation and analysis are not the autoethnographer's enemy. Neither is truth automatically the autoethnographer's friend. Like art, autoethnography does not always do as it is expected to do; if claims for truth are no more than our sweetest deception then perhaps the best we can do is to lace our claims with caution and locate our cautions within frames that are as analytically sound as they are evocatively rich.

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