Mixing Genres: It's a Floor Wax *and* a Whipped Topping!

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The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography
by Carolyn Ellis. Newbury Park, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.
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Carolyn Ellis has given us a textbook, in the approximate style of a novel, justifying, illustrating, and explaining the fundamentals of autoethnography, a style of conducting social research and an epistemological approach to social reality. This book is a novel because it is told in the first person; contains spoken dialogue; employs literary devices, such as characterization, voice, metaphor, a plotline, and dramatization; openly expresses emotion; and fictionalizes its scenes as well as a few characters. Ellis also discusses other forms of expressing autoethnography, including poetry, storytelling, dramatic performances, and even painting.

I love *Final Negotiations* (Temple University Press, 1995), Ellis's first book-length foray into autoethnography. I regard it as a truly heroic and thoughtful book that points the way to a fresh, insightful—and *interesting*—way of doing sociology. And, unlike a lot of tales about illness, dying, and death, it is not melodramatic or saccharine. After decades of trying to read the articles in the *American Sociological Review* and finding myself, time after time, bored into stupefaction, I experienced Ellis's book as an exhilarating, even intoxicating, experience. But after reading it, I still did not have a clear idea of what autoethnography was. The approach has something to do, I sensed, with bringing the personal life of the researcher into the research picture. But it was not until reading *The Ethnographic I* that I realized how complex and ramifying the genre is.

Nowhere in *The Ethnographic I* does Ellis lay out a clear, systematic definition of her subject matter. Look up "Autoethnography, definition" in the book's index and you will find the following: "*Autoethnography* refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre . . . that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (p. 37). There is more of the same, but nowhere, systematically

and in detail, are we told what autoethnographers actually *do* or *how* they do whatever it is they do. Examples, yes; a cookbook explication of principles and practices (which is the way traditional textbooks on methods are laid out), no. "That's the best I can do with a definition," Ellis finally admits (p. 38). "I want to keep the boundaries blurry and inclusive. I don't want to play the game of 'this fits, that doesn't'" (p. 39).

But that statement is disingenuous. In practice, Ellis does play this game, because she refers to a mountain of work that is consistent with her approach, and ignores other work the outsider might think would qualify, but does not. And she admits as much by referring to genre writing, publishing, and reviewing practices (p. 39), in effect admitting a clear definition of autoethnography—which would explain what "fits" and what "does not"—is used, if not explicated, by her and the field's practitioners. The vagueness of her definition is, I suppose, consistent with the orientation of the genre. Hence, here is my attempt to lay out the defining elements of autoethnography. Some of these elements are implicit rather than explicitly spelled out in *The Ethnographic I*, however, if this book is a reflection of the genre:

> Autoethnography brings the personal into the research act.
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> Autoethnographic reports are written in the first person, in the active voice.
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> Autoethnographic reports include researchers as characters in the stories they write.
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> The expression of emotion is important in autoethnographic research; this is in stark contrast to the emotional sterility of traditional, positivistic social research.
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> Autoethnographic reports are written in an interesting and engaging, and ideally, a literary, style.
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> Autoethnographic reports may be embodied in a variety of forms: fiction, poetry, dramatic performances, and so on.
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> Autoethnography is transgressive in the sense that it gives voice to the voiceless in a manner and style contrary to the methods and the epistemology of traditional positivistic social science.
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> It is less important that autoethnographic reports accurately represent the literal facts of the matter than that the facts are rendered in such a way that the report expresses fundamental truths.
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> Narrative truth is more important than literal truth.
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> Because it adheres to the "narrative mode," autoethnography looks for specifics and particulars, as opposed to abstractions and universals, which is the task of traditional positivistic science.
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> Validity, or verisimilitude—a lifelike and "possible" depiction of the behavior and subjects of the research—is a central goal of autoethnography; in contrast, reliability is neither attainable nor desirable.
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> Ideally, the researcher takes an ethnographic report back to his/her subjects/informants (who should be called "participants"), who vet it; ideally, the writing of a research report is a collaborative venture between the researcher and his/her subjects/informants.

>The researcher must be held accountable to his/her subjects/informants ("participants") for doing or saying anything contrary to their interests.

>Ideally, the researcher is or becomes a friend with his/her subjects/informants ("participants").

>Ideally, engaging in autoethnography is a political act, undermining hegemonic representations (the "master narrative") and encouraging progressive social change.

>Autoethnography seeks to change the lives of its subjects/informants ("participants"), readers, and researchers.

>Ideally, autoethnography is therapeutic for the subject/informant ("participant"), the reader, and the researcher.

I have no problem with basing ethnography, carefully interpreted, on autobiography; indeed, I joyfully embrace the development, as I did with *Final Negotiations*. I certainly believe sociologists should become better writers, and wish they studied more interesting topics—those that more than just a handful of specialists want to read about. I wholeheartedly agree that emotion has been neglected by sociologists, who seem to fear that expressing or even writing about it will taint their objectivity. Rather than discussing these issues, however, I would like to lightly touch on a few other topics Ellis's book raises, namely, in whose interests we do research and write, the conglomerate nature of autoethnography, and the matter of fictionalization.

Ellis writes that she wants "to be friends" with the people she studies. She adds, however, "there are people you might not be able to be friends with" (p. 148). She mentions criminals and the very powerful, who are, it seems, off-limits to friendship—and hence, research as well. Facing this restriction, I cannot imagine how ethnographic criminologists could do their research. I once interviewed a man who told me he stabbed another man to death. To be honest, we actually were friends, but I did not know how to respond to his admission. It made me uncomfortable. I am curious about what sorts of restrictions that considering friendship a qualification for conducting research will place on the researcher's methodology. How much will that leave out of the equation? And I wonder how much friendship might have warped the approach I had taken to the friend's behavior, and how we (as researchers) might pull in our horns when writing about said behavior. Friends had told me not to write about certain things I observed, and I complied—but I did not feel good about it.

I do not think we owe our subjects or informants anything but a realistic portrayal. We should not humiliate them in print, though offending them is inevitable. No one likes honest, "warts and all" portrayals of themselves in print; however, all too often, writers have to be merciless. We are not advocates of the people we study; we should not have to protect their interests; and they are not our clients. If we let them read what we write about them before we publish, we should do so only for accuracy's sake. I do not see subjects or informants as "participants" in the research endeavor—at least, not as Ellis does—and it is unacceptable to me that they have the right to shape the final product to their own ends, interests, and agendas. Journalists do not do it, good biographers do not—*should not*—do it, and sociologists should not, either. Clearly, autoethnographers, including Ellis, disagree.

Like Ellis, I have encouraged my students to write autobiographical accounts. But what I have done does not remotely qualify as "autoethnography." I never imagined these accounts harbored literary value. In soliciting them, I was not trying to take the students' side. And I never fooled myself into thinking that writing them would change their lives or be therapeutic for them. It has never been that way for me; for them, I cannot say. In any case, therapy seems irrelevant to getting their stories on paper. In contrast, Ellis writes: "My research usually has therapeutic value, for me, other participants, and/or readers" (p. 136). I question whether therapy should be a criterion for the value of sociological work. I do not even want my students, readers, or subjects or informants to feel better about the world or their lives. Life is filled with tragedy, as Ellis herself points out (p. 177). Like Leo Buscaglia, the guy from the seventies who always wanted to hug everybody to make them feel better, Carolyn Ellis hugs her students a lot. There is more than a strain of Oprah in Ellis's version of autoethnography.

One of my students wrote an account of his recent mental breakdown, an episode that culminated in an assault on his girlfriend. Trained in karate, he wrapped his fingers around her throat and flung her to the floor. The police had to be called in, and he was sent to a mental hospital, she to a medical hospital. When he gave me his account, I did not hug him. Another of my students stole a Lexus from a garage in Virginia. ("Gimme the motherfuckin' keys!" he shouted to the frightened couple he waved his gun at.) When he told me about wrecking the stolen car at a bus stop in Washington because he was cut off by a police vehicle, I did not hug him, either.

Bringing the personal into the research picture has no conceptual or logical connection with research as therapy, friendship with subjects and informants, taking the side of the people we study, changing their lives, or fictionalizing our research reports. What worries me is that autoethnography has become the tail that wags the dog. Will some sociologists be discouraged from using first-person narratives—either their own or those of their students, subjects, or informants—because they do not go along with the approach's paraphernalia? Clearly, the genre's advocates do not regard it as paraphernalia, but it is possible critics are likely to use these ancillary features to holistically discredit the personal approach to social research. For the autoethnographer, this is an irrelevant point, because the ancillary features *are* the approach; for the sociologist who seeks to use personal material in research but does not buy the paraphernalia, this is an important issue.

Two points about fictionalization. Everyone knows some reconstruction is necessary to recreate real-world events. Dialogue cannot be recalled word for word, distractions and irrelevancies have to be deleted, and descriptions must be condensed. Everyone recognizes the difference between these necessities and fabricating characters and scenes. Ellis warns her readers some characters are "composites," some scenes are fabricated, and not all the student-characters were in the same class at the same time (p. xx). Hence, her readers are free to decide whether that is a problem for them. Not all writers (memoirists, for instance) have been as considerate. Audiences tend to judge a work differently if they know it to be fiction rather than

descriptions of materially real events. It is difficult to write good fiction, agreed; but it is also difficult for an author to write effective, moving prose when constrained by the facticity of events under description. On this issue, most readers, when encountering what is supposedly nonfiction, expect that the author has agreed to an informal pact: If the author fictionalizes some of it, he or she has an obligation to tip off the reader to that fact. Ellis did it; but I wonder if her students and readers, when they become authors, will be as careful as she has been.

And second: the artistic or literary gaze is not a kindly gaze. Indeed, as a rule, it is devastatingly cruel. Thomas Mann tells us the way one looks at a man as a man and as an artist are very different. The man tends to "look upon everything as all right." In contrast, as an artist, your demons "constrain you" to observe, "to take note, lightning fast and with hurtful malice, of every detail that in the literary sense would be characteristic, distinctive, significant . . ., recording all as mercilessly as though you had no human relationship to the observed object whatsoever." This tendency does not seem to comport with being friends with subjects and informants, with permitting them to collaborate in preparing the research report, or with regarding them as clients. And it certainly does not comport with therapy. Far from the experience being therapeutic, being served up as the basis for a character in a novelist's fiction is likely to send someone *into* therapy.

Ellis is a lot smarter, better, and more complex a sociologist than her programmatics suggest. In *Fisher Folk* (University Press of Kentucky, 1986) she did say things about her subjects/informants they perceived as critical (discussed at pp. 147–50). She did not show her mother in advance of publication an article she wrote about her (pp. 144–51). And she is, or depicts herself as, remarkably undogmatic about her position, handling the (relatively few) contrary student arguments with empathy, understanding, and flexibility. And she does not argue that autoethnography renders traditional, positivistic social science worthless and invalid, as some of her peers do.

If you feel your personal life is relevant to your research, want to take the side of your subjects/informants, indeed, consider them participants in your study, have a hankering for writing in a literary or fictional style, are more concerned with narrative truth than literal facticity, and believe conducting research has something to do with progressive social change (at least, by giving voice to the voiceless), the research program and the epistemology laid out in *The Ethnographic I* are for you.

But if you are more traditional in your approach, if your mission is getting at the facts of the matter and the reasons why things are the way they are, if you are concerned with getting the facts straight and reject using fictional devices to make what you write seem emotionally true, if you believe your clients are not the people you study but yourself and your peers and colleagues, if you do not mind offending your subjects and informants, do not think that you should be obligated to take their side, and do not believe that research has anything to do with therapy, then neither autoethnography nor Carolyn Ellis's book will be your cup of tea.

Me, I'm just not a hugger.