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Autoethnography, Storytelling, and Life as Lived: A Conversation Between Marcin Kafar and Carolyn Ellis

Abstract This conversation takes place in Warsaw. Carolyn Ellis has come to Poland to accompany Jerry Rawicki, a Warsaw Ghetto survivor, on his first trip back to Poland since the Holocaust. There she arranged to meet Marcin Kafar, a scholar in Poland who has spent time with her at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. During this visit, Marcin assists Carolyn with video recording Jerry's experiences as they visit Holocaust sites, and Jerry remembers and reflects on his experience. Afterwards, Marcin converses with Carolyn about autoethnography, storytelling, and the importance of life in the context of searching for ethos by academics.

Keywords Autoethnography; Storytelling; Personal Narrative; Scientific Auto/Biographies; Ethos, Carolyn Ellis

Stories and the Importance of Life in the First Place

Marcin: Carolyn, tell me, how you feel about stories?

Carolyn: Oh, I love stories!

Marcin: Ok. Then let me start our conversation by reminding you of one particular story. Actually, this is a story about a situation we both participated in. I assume that that situation and the story about it might serve as a sort of passage both to our common biographical ground and to a wider context of a biographically centered view of science. If you're

ready, let's go back to September 2010. I remember it was a very hot afternoon in Tampa that day. We had just finished our autoethnography class and you asked me if I wanted to visit your local wildlife reserve. Do you remember it?

Carolyn: Yes, I do!

Marcin: When I said "yes," you changed your formal clothes into casual wear, we jumped into your car and headed for Lettuce Lake Park, the place packed with greedy alligators. We were walking through treacherous marsh when I suddenly asked you, "Carolyn, why did you decide to invite me for

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an internship in your department?" The answer you gave me was as much surprising as intriguing. Do you remember what that answer was?

Carolyn: I remember some of it. I said that I had many scholars who wanted to visit us and I almost always said "no." But, I had really appreciated what you wrote to me when asking to come. It had intrigued me and I saw that we were kindred spirits...

Marcin: That is correct. But, I remember something else...

Carolyn: What else do you remember?

Marcin: You reminded me of a letter I wrote earlier to you and Art [Bochner], and you said that the letter had made a positive impact on both of you. You also admitted that what really convinced you to continue our relationship was not strictly connected with science as such but rather stemmed from, to paraphrase Victor Turner's term, dramas of life (cf. Turner 1978). You continued, "A lot of people want to come and work with us, but most of the time we reject those proposals because having visitors is time consuming and draws our attention away from our work. Your letter was different. It was not about completing another scientific project; instead, it was about life in the first place." The words you

used here are of exceptional importance for me, “it was not about completing another scientific project, it was about life in the first place.” Those words lingered in my mind, and I think they might be crucial for you, too.

Carolyn: Yes, they are because they relate to life as lived. It’s what I always say. What’s most interesting to me is what we’re doing right here in this moment, being together, interacting with each other, thinking, feeling, caring, supporting. Being here now in this life is the way I know to make meaning out of the life that we have. It’s not meaningful to me to just gather knowledge for the sake of knowledge. I have to feel that whatever I am doing is potentially making life better. The only way I can make sense of that is that I am being caring and loving and giving, now, in this moment. Hopefully then together, collectively in our research, we are being loving and caring and wanting to make life more satisfying for more people.

Marcin: So what about doing science then?

Carolyn: I have no problem with science. We need science. For instance, science helps us eradicate illnesses and thanks to science we can make some predictions that help to make life better. But, I do not think that science is the only story we have; it’s one layer of story...

Marcin: the scientific one...

Carolyn: ...the scientific one, yes, as in the physical sciences. As well, there are the social sciences—they’re important as well.

Marcin: You mean the sciences are, at least to some extent, complementary?

Carolyn: Yes, they all are different approaches towards understanding human beings, our life. In some ways, for me, the individual is the unit I think most about. The unit of analysis, in sociological terms. I’m a sociologist so I should be thinking about larger social collectivities, but I tend to focus on the individual in a social context. That’s where I feel most at home and where I think I have most to offer. I’m a natural social psychologist.

Life Informs Work / Work Informs Life

Marcin: Carolyn, in works of thinkers, or better to say, writers who are “innerly integrated,” we can expect to find some basic thoughts, a sort of core ideas, or at least one trope that is overwhelming. In reading your texts, we’re able to detect quite easily a kind of *idée fixe*. Would you agree with me that this idea is an interplay of what is “private” and what is “public,” “professional” experience?

Carolyn: Actually, I do not want to separate the “professional” from everything else.

Marcin: I see, but would you be willing to declare that this is the most important idea you’re working on?

Carolyn: I do not know if I want to call it the most important idea...

Marcin: What is then more important to you than this?

Carolyn: What is more important to me is that we think about the whole person, that we do not have to split our lives, so that you’re one kind of person here and something else there. I would like those two spheres to be integrated.

Marcin: This is exactly what I meant when I suggested that your autoethnographic project is set up in the tension between your private and professional life. It becomes clear when we skim over your papers. Let’s consider the title of your last book, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Ellis 2009).

Carolyn: So are you having a problem with the title itself?

Marcin: Well, I am not having a problem, but I think *there is a problem out there*, and I’m interested in it.

Carolyn: Let me think about what you are saying. This title might convey that I accept the division between life and work. But, what I think I was trying to say is that there is this division out in the world that people buy into. We assume it’s true and it’s really not true, and I’m going to show readers how to bring these two aspects together. But, you’re right that in some ways this title sustains the separation. In interpretive work, you have to speak a language that other people/scholars understand. So, I had to say to them, “Here are these two things that tend to be separated. Now, I want to bring them together in this work.” I think that got readers’ attention. Scholars don’t usually talk about “life” as a concept, just specific aspects of it.

Marcin: So maybe you should look for some alternative notions that would be more appropriate for expressing your ideas than phrases such as “life and work,” or “reflections on life and work”?

Carolyn: Mm, it probably should be reflections on personal and professional life. I resist using “private” because personal life may or may not be private—often it is not.

Marcin: That doesn’t sound as evocative, but certainly it seems to be reasonable to use these terms for rhetorical purposes.

Carolyn: Exactly! You need a title that can grab people. What you’ve been saying—that my title displays an artificial separation of “life” and “work,” you’re right. It’s rhetorical, it’s snappy, it surprises more traditional people, but at the same time it makes them “look at it,” because they think of work separated from life, meaning “personal life.” Here, they are being joined together.

Marcin: When you use the word “work,” is it a synonym of the phrase “doing science”?

Carolyn: It does not necessarily mean “doing science.” I think we live as though work is something that we go separately to do and it has its boundaries of time and space—though now in our mobile society, less so in terms of space; and for some folks, such as productive academics, there aren’t specific time boundaries either. For autoethnographers, life and work tend to blend together since their work is writing about their lives. But, for most, work is something you do from 8.00 to 5.00. You’re either

doing “life” or you’re off doing your work. Work is what you have to do to make a living; life is all the other stuff that happens. So, there is this artificial separation that we always have to live with, especially in the United States.

Marcin: In your *The Ethnographic I*, you write, “Life Informs Work” (Ellis 2004:56). What does that mean?

Carolyn: What it means is you never are separated from your work, your research, or your life. You’re always who you are; your personal experiences inform the kind of project you choose, what you write, how you write, who you write to, all of that.

Marcin: Ok. So what is the difference then between life informing work and the meaning hidden in a phrase “our work becomes our life”? This is another passage in *The Ethnographic I*?

Carolyn: I am encouraging people to try to see with me, though I’m trying to guide them gradually and softly. I am saying, “Come with me and see how life informs your work, how life seeps into and becomes your work.” There are different stages in this process of pulling people into the idea of “life’ and ‘work’ as the same.” I like the phrases you’ve just recalled because they demonstrate the handholding that took place in *The Ethnographic I*. Of course, I didn’t do this on purpose, but if you come with me through the book, I’m holding your hand and taking you to a place where you will feel and conclude: “Of course, we study our own lives!”

Marcin: You really didn’t do it on purpose?

Carolyn: Not with quite the intention that I’m telling you now in hindsight.

Marcin: So how did it happen that those phrases eventually appeared in your book?

Carolyn: To be honest, I came to think all this as I wrote—writing as inquiry (cf. Richardson 1994). I wrote these thoughts into being. I was thinking and constructing as I was writing.

Marcin: Was what you’re describing a conscious or semi-conscious act?

Carolyn: Semi-conscious. I started with these notions, but then I had to figure out how to tell a story about them and what the story was. Then I had to also figure out how to persuade audience to come/stay with me, difficult because potential audiences would be very different from each other. I had to find the point where I could reach the most people and reach them deeply. I didn’t want to address people who totally reject these ideas, but I didn’t want just to talk to people who totally bought into it either.

Ethnography/Autoethnography as a Way of Life

Marcin: Carolyn, were you sure after your autoethnographic conversion that you had chosen the right path to do social science? Wasn’t that step risky?

Carolyn: It was risky because I didn’t know if I had followers or would have followers. I didn’t know what would happen if I had followers and then they had bad experiences that could ruin their lives...

Marcin: Which means that when you plan to start to be an autoethnographer, you must be accountable to other people...

Carolyn: Yes, you definitely must...

Marcin: What you’re saying now reminds me of Dan Rose’s conviction that “ethnography is a way of life,” (cf. Rose 1990), which means ethnography is something more than “pure science” and consequently, ethnographers are not only “pure scientists” but also people committed to what they live by.

Carolyn: Ethnography is a lifestyle based on the moral view that goes along with this lifestyle. It is a way of treating people, a way of thinking about the world, seeing other peoples’ lives as of value...

Marcin: Yes, but autoethnography is not traditional ethnography which was strictly concerned with examining people and writing about them...

Carolyn: ...and using people, and manipulating them...

Marcin: That is true, and partly because of this, I wonder why you decided to use the term “ethnography” for completing your very humanistic project.

Carolyn: Probably, my choice was political. If you want to be successful, you have to connect to the categories that are already there. You have to connect to something that people identify with rather than starting with completely new categories. For example, I’ve come up with the term “collaborative witnessing,” and now I have to hope people connect

with and buy into that term. At the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry,¹ I recently participated in, I asked my audience, “Would you prefer the term ‘collaborative witnessing’ or ‘intimate interviewing,’ or ‘relational autoethnography’?” Most liked “collaborative witnessing” the best. Now back to “ethnography”; many people connect to and identify with that term as a descriptor of an area, and they were an audience that I wanted to reach and hopefully influence.

Marcin: Carolyn, you just said that for you ethnography is a “lifestyle,” but is it still a sort of science, too?

Carolyn: Why are you so hung up on the word “science”?

Marcin: I do not know. Maybe because I’ve been trying to find different ways of reading your books.

Carolyn: I love that! Truly, I resist even thinking so much about science. I want to just say, “Science is there, what I do connects to science, but it isn’t fully contained there. I do stuff over here that is not there...”

Marcin: I know what you mean, but, in general, people doing science need to use clear distinctions. They start from the point of doing science and they talk about science. We were talking about using the term “ethnography” and you said it was political...

¹ The ICQI is an annual conference, in its tenth year, that is held in Urbana, Illinois and directed by Norman Denzin. The last Congress attracted almost 2000 people from 70 different nations. The conference focuses on autoethnography, arts-based qualitative methods, and social justice.

Carolyn: Yes, you're right...

Marcin: So, relating to science, or at least to the term "science," is also political.

Carolyn: Yes, it is. Now, I'm going to reverse myself and say, "I do think somewhat like a scientist." And what I do also overlaps with what creative writers do, though we have a different orientation. I do humanities from the point of view of a scientist. In that connection between the humanities and social science there is a space that I really like to operate in. So, I don't reject science. In fact, most of my audience is composed of people who consider themselves scientists. I want to say to them, "You don't have to just be in that space. There is a whole other space here that we can operate in and bring the best of science, social science, too, to connect to humanities." I don't think of science and humanities so much as binary but as a continuum. I know there is a large part of the world that thinks of science and humanities as binary so they get all upset with what I'm doing because it doesn't fit into their categories.

Autoethnography as a Calling

Marcin: If you don't mind, I would like to return to the problem of terms. One of your favorite scholars, Art Bochner, writes, "We need to think seriously about the terms by which we conceive of our academic work—as a job, a career, or a calling—because these terms largely define what we come to believe, how we behave, and how we understand and enact our connections to others in our community of practice. Each of these terms emplots a different story of how we understand our work, how invested

we become in it, and whether we truly care about it. To think of your work as a calling in the strongest sense of the word is to make your work morally inseparable from your life" (Bochner 2009:16). Carolyn, how would you classify your academic work? Is it a job, a career, or a calling?

Carolyn: My academic work is a calling. The writing, the autoethnography, the storytelling, the teaching—all are part of a calling. Unfortunately, the role of chairing is more of a job or career...

Marcin: So, you have to be split...

Carolyn: I do now, which is why I don't particularly like being a department chair. I'm trying to turn the chairing into a calling, but I haven't been able to do that yet.

Marcin: Umm, a calling is an ideal, which means it's always one step ahead of you...

Carolyn: That's a good way to say it. Yes, it is...

Marcin: ...and that is why you can only aspire to achieve it.

Carolyn: Yes, you cannot really achieve it because if you reach it, then it's not calling you anymore.

Marcin: So, it's definitely a hard task to consciously act as someone chosen, or as someone who has been called.

Carolyn: I agree.

Marcin: So, Carolyn, to what extent is what you're doing academically a calling?

Carolyn: Well, it feels like a calling. You know, it is so hard to talk about that, but I really believe in it. You have to believe in a calling. It's sort of like being saved or getting religious or whatever, you have to have a belief in it to make it work...

Marcin: Do you believe that what you do has a religious element in it?

Carolyn: Well, no, well, it may... I believe that the practice of autoethnography has added to my life, helped me understand things I didn't understand and I see it doing that for other people. There is some peace that can come out of it, from the searching; some understanding, some clues about how to live a good life, so that's religious sounding.

Marcin: Art [Bochner] also encourages us to truly care about our work. What do you *truly* care about when you connect yourself to your work, Carolyn?

Carolyn: What do I care about? I care that I feel that I'm doing the best I can. By that I mean that other people get considered along with myself, that my work is not just a selfish act, and that I am doing the best I am able to do under these particular circumstances.

Marcin: Do you think there is any set of beliefs that are or should be shared by all autoethnographers?

Carolyn: Yes, compassion and empathy—valuing them and enacting them. We have to have both. Caring about love and being able to love. All of those feminine characteristics, they have to be there.

Marcin: Right, what about the relevance of social, practical, cultural, and political factors?

Carolyn: Here is the irony: if you're self-absorbed, it's hard—maybe impossible—to be a good autoethnographer. That's the first time I've expressed it in this way. Part of being a good autoethnographer is having a sense of the other, the larger, the social, the collective good.

Marcin: Very often autoethnography is viewed only as a method, and probably that's a mistake.

Carolyn: Yes, it is. I want to expand autoethnography to include all we've been talking about. But, the other part of my identifying as an autoethnographer is that autoethnography is a political act for me. It's the only label under which I think I have enough authority or legitimacy to make anything happen, to contribute to social change. So, it's really important to me that, for instance, you would call yourself an autoethnographer because that increases its legitimacy.

Losing Ourselves / Connecting to Others in Our Work

Marcin: I would like to ask you to make some comments about a fragment of your piece titled *Jumping On and Off the Runaway Train of Success: Stress and Committed Intensity in an Academic Life* (2011). There is a dialogue in this text that is based on your conversation with Art [Bochner]. When Art reminds you that the work you do is a "calling" and it cannot be separated from the rest of your life, you quite unexpectedly reply, "I do feel called to this work—to

autoethnography, ethnography, and now my work with survivors ... but sometimes I get so lost in the details, I lose touch with that feeling ... sometimes I just want to make sure that I don't lose me and become one-dimensional in feeling that work is all that matters. Or that we don't lose 'us' in our dedication to our life as professors" (Ellis 2011:169).

Carolyn: Umm, that's the danger—that our work takes us over. These ideas are jumbled and I don't reach a conclusion in this piece. On the one hand, all I really have is my personal experience at this moment, which for Art and me is having work and life be the same. This life has been unbelievably rewarding for us, our relationship, growth, and development. It has given us a sense of being in the world and doing something important, helping others. On the other hand, because the work has taken us over, we have made decisions that may not be ones I would have made if that had not been the case, for example, not have children, in part, because they would have taken us from our work.

Marcin: Yes, but you never know whether the decision you make is good or not.

Carolyn: True, but you make decisions the best you can. If I were now on my death bed and somebody says, "If you could do your life over, would you do it differently?", I would say "no." This life has been really, really rewarding, but I do want to be aware that if you put all your focus on work, there are other things that might be missed.

Marcin: Umm, I think "rewarding" is a key word here.

Carolyn: Yes, I think that even for relationship there are aspects that might be able to be developed that are not. That's why Art and I like to go to the mountains and hike. We become somewhat different people there. We are less obsessed about our work and we develop different aspects of ourselves, which makes us more interesting to each other.

Marcin: So being in the mountains is an investment in yourselves and your relationship, isn't it?

Carolyn: Yes, very much so. But, there are activities we don't get to do and identities we don't get to enact in the mountains that we do get to fulfill in Tampa. It makes life fuller to spend time in both places, and get a bit out of the obsessive work head we get into in Tampa where we're teaching, mentoring, and engaged in service activities in addition to our research.

Marcin: Now you're telling me a very important fact: that not only are thoughts and feelings crucial for you but also crucial is a material world—a real space like Tampa and your mountains.

Carolyn: Yes, the two spaces have different demands and rewards, but are both important.

Marcin: Carolyn, I sometimes use in my works a notion of "ethos" (cf., e.g., Kafar 2011; 2013). Do you know what "ethos" originally meant?

Carolyn: No, I don't, but I know this concept is very important to you.

Marcin: It's a Greek word meaning, among other things, a place where plants can grow and bear

fruit. Ethos means environment, homestead, which is to say—a field of life. Any living being, including human beings, can develop *only* when that being has its own ethos—a place to be able to live a fruitful life. Can you say, Carolyn, that you already have found your ethos?

Carolyn: I think probably so. But, I also think you want to never stop searching, discovering, and growing, similar to responding to a "calling." For example, when I started work with Holocaust survivors, a new world opened up to me. It became important to me to tell survivors' stories in a process of "collaborative witnessing" or "relational autoethnography" that emphasizes "working with" and contributing to the life of participants, family members, and readers.² In some way, this work circles back to "science" in terms of working with other people to tell their stories, but doing it from an autoethnographic perspective. So, now I can connect autoethnography directly to a focus on telling the stories of others, and that has become very important to me. Though a number of scholars advocate collaborative research, they are not doing collaborative witnessing. They intersect autoethnographies primarily of their researcher selves and combine

² Collaborative witnessing is a form of relational autoethnography that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation. Carolyn has used this approach in her interviews with Holocaust survivors, in particular with Jerry Rawicki, a Warsaw Ghetto survivor, with whom she has coauthored four articles and stories (see: Rawicki and Ellis 2011; Ellis and Rawicki 2013; 2014 (in press)). This approach fits with the definition of autoethnography as about and for others, as well as about and for a researcher. It is a relational practice that asks that we enter the experience of the other as much as we think about the experience of the self and it requires us to take others' roles as fully as we can, and to consider why, given their histories and locations, as well as their reflexive processes, they act in the world and respond the way they do.

these stories and conversations with theoretical perspectives and/or a focus on some phenomenon they want to understand.³ Collaborative witnessing is connected with empathy, compassion, and caring, and with the hope that this work will be helpful to other people, not just to us—researchers. Does that make sense?

Marcin: Yes, it does, but it's very hard to predict how our work affects other people's lives.

Carolyn: Yes, it is. So I feel that all I can do is just keep working and trying to write prose that is helpful. For example, coming here; I felt that this was such a big event in Jerry's life, how could I not be here? I also felt that it was a big step forward in collaborative witnessing—to accompany Jerry on such an important trip rather than to just participate in interviews. During this time, I had important decisions to make that helped me understand some of the complexities in compassionate witnessing. For example, do I videotape Jerry when he returns to Treblinka, where his family was killed? I think not, because I do not want to risk making this event into a spectacle and because my being with him is more important than my capturing and recording what happens. That has to be true. So, this trip is really a test of the approach, and then it's also a working

³ For example, in duoethnography (cf. Norris, Sawyer, and Lund 2012), multiple researchers juxtapose their own autoethnographic accounts about the research question and integrate their separate findings to provide multiple perspectives on a social phenomenon. In collaborative writing (see: Diversi and Moreria 2009; Gale et al. 2012), multiple writers, who may not be in the same place or writing at the same time, co-produce an autoethnographic story. In collaborative autoethnography (cf. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013), several researchers write individual autoethnographies and simultaneously contribute their individual findings for collective analysis.

out of the approach and the complexity in the approach.⁴

Autoethnography as Method

Marcin: Carolyn, now I would like us to talk about autoethnography as a method. First, let's try to compose the historical background of doing autoethnography. How would you define autoethnography?

Carolyn: It's a study of the relationship between self and other and all of its dimensions.

Marcin: That's a very short definition...

Carolyn: Yes, it is.

Marcin: Why don't we expand it a little? I think that analytically it might be useful to make a distinction between *an idea* of autoethnography and *the term* autoethnography. What I mean here is connected with my conviction that we had started to *practice* autoethnography long before we *called* it autoethnography. This kind of conviction is, again, implicitly present in *The Ethnographic I*. You show there that the term autoethnography is now quite clear as to its semantic content, but that it has happened only recently. For instance, when one of your students, Hector, asks you, "Were you the first to use the term *autoethnography*?", you give him the following answer: "Oh, no ... It has been in circulation for at least two decades. Anthropologist Karl

⁴ See: Ellis and Rawicki (2013) for a discussion on the complexities in collaborative witnessing, and Ellis and Patti (in press) for more ethical considerations in following this approach.

Heider used *autoethnography* in 1975 to refer to the Dani's own account of what people do, but David Hayano usually is credited as the originator of the term. Hayano limited the meaning to cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their 'own people,' in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being 'native,' acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied. His study of professional poker players, of which he is one, exemplifies this approach" (Ellis 2004:38). You also explain later, "Social scientists often use the term now to refer to stories that feature the self or that include the researcher as a character. Literary and cultural critics applied the term to autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation. For example, Lionnet and Deck described Zora Neil Hurston's memoirs as autoethnography. In these autoethnographies, the traditional historical frame and specific dates and events usually expected in autobiographies are minimized. Instead, authors, such as Hurston, attempt to demonstrate the lived experience and humanity of themselves and their people to outside audiences" (Ellis 2004:38).

You also mention the names of thinkers such as Vincent Crapanzano, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, placing them in the context of blurring the boundaries between literature and social sciences. I suppose those cases and many more similar to them are instrumental in confirming that *the very idea* of autoethnography had been vivid a long time before the term "autoethnography" was coined.

Carolyn: Umm, do you have any particular scholars in mind when you say that?

Marcin: Yes, I do, and, unfortunately, some of them have been forgotten for years. For example, an old Polish ethnographer, Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska, who, in her revelatory book—*Spółeczność wiejska* [*A Peasant Community*] (1948), confirms her passage from traditional ethnography into engaged anthropology. In the process of researching the peasant community of Zaborow (a village near Krakow in Poland), she uses categories such as "deep understanding," "being *with* them," not "*among* them," "honest encounters," and "cordial communication." Zawistowicz-Adamska starts with surveying people, but ends with—to put it concisely—acting for them. The method developed by her is based on a conviction that people are valuable subjects for themselves. Moreover, for her, an ethnographer-anthropologist must be seen not as a pure scientist excluded from the world, but rather a "sensitive" *persona*. Despite the fact that an ethnographer-anthropologist is "vulnerable" in many different ways, she or he becomes responsible for herself/himself, too. Taking this kind of responsibility resembles searching for ethos. What is really interesting is that Zawistowicz-Adamska is today called an "autoethnographer"! (cf. Kaniowska 2011).

These examples reveal "scientific scotomas," as Oliver Sacks (1995) would put it, kinds of "black holes" appearing in a number of disciplinary discourses across the social and human sciences; they show contingences and ambiguities of knowledge construction, its coincidental nature. In this context, the problem of how to detect and characterize the back-

ground of what is currently called autoethnography starts to be clear. Maybe you remember, Carolyn, that during one of your autoethnography classes at the University of South Florida, I asked you whether you could imagine yourself being an autoethnographer 30 or 40 years ago?

Carolyn: Yes, I do remember. I probably wouldn't have been able to write my evocative stories at that time if I had wanted to be accepted as a social scientist.

Marcin: Umm. The question is why have autoethnography and other autobiographical discourses proliferated today?

Carolyn: It is interesting that autoethnography is proliferating all over the world, really. I can talk more knowledgeably about what's happening in the U.S., but autoethnography's popularity is bigger than the U.S. Maybe the U.S. leads the way, but this growth is happening in other countries, such as Poland, and in many different disciplines, and has been for a long time. It has exploded recently and why has that happened? I feel like a paradigm shift began back in the 1980s with the crisis of representation associated partly with the cultural anthropologists and the changing composition of those who became ethnographers—with more women, working class, ethnic, and racial groups, gay and lesbian, and third world scholars taking the stage. That laid the groundwork for this movement because I really do think of it as a movement.

Marcin: But, we cannot forget that the genre of autobiography is even much older! I'm sure we couldn't

really understand the significance of autobiographical reflection present in science nowadays if we didn't look back at the whole cultural background surrounding it.

Carolyn: I know. There was a shift in the late 17th century in Europe with the Enlightenment from an emphasis on religion to one on science. There is still an emphasis on science, and those who see social science as a science still have a lot of control. But, perhaps interest in autoethnography is part of a larger shift now away from science as the end all answer towards a renewed awakening to the importance of humanity, emotionality, spirituality, and soul in our understanding of human life, one which has to do with people, not numbers...

Marcin: That's right. Carolyn, you have defined autoethnography as "study of the relationship between self and other and all of its dimensions," including what you just mentioned. But, it's not the only definition you proposed. I also came across one in which you describe the core of autoethnography through what autoethnographers do. You say, "First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition" (Ellis 2004:37–38). Then you write, "autoethnography refers to the process, as well as what is produced from the process" (Ellis 2004:32), or "Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal

and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis 2004:37).

These are your older definitions, but I found one more, the one you created together with Art [Bochner] and Tony Adams: "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) ... This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others, and treats research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act ... A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; italics in the original).

In all those definitions, we have many elements that work together, such as "ethnography," "culture," "self," "vulnerable self," "interpretation," "research," "systematic analysis," and "alternative way of doing research," as well as "autoethnography as an act of engagement." If you had a chance to choose just one of those definitions, which one would it be?

Carolyn: That first definition I still think is fantastic, the one with the "wide angle lens..."

Marcin: In what way?

Carolyn: In the way it opens up what autoethnography is and does in that it looks inward, outward, backward, and forward, and it shows the connection of the personal, social, and cultural.

Marcin: Could you please reconstruct the process of getting to this level of autoethnographic awareness?

Carolyn: A great deal of work came prior to this definition, and this definition evolved from that. For example, in *Final Negotiations* (Ellis 1995), I focused a lot on the personal aspects because to me then that is what had been so sorely neglected by social scientists. I wanted to argue for the importance of the personal and emotional. I resist analyzing only the social and cultural aspects. With this definition, I started to argue more forcefully for recognizing all the important dimensions of autoethnography and all the different aspects you had to include to write a good one. I had seen that some folks could do the "inward," but not the "outward" (and *vice versa*), and that helped me see how important it was to look outward, as well as inward, which, of course, I was doing all along.

Marcin: Carolyn, you wrote somewhere a phrase like: "Autoethnography chose me rather than I chose autoethnography." What does it mean?

Carolyn: I was trying to convey the sense that autoethnography was a calling. It was an extreme statement indicating almost something supernatural going on. I said it to show my commitment to this approach and how important I think it is.

Marcin: Wasn't it all about having a kind of extraordinary experience?

Carolyn: Right, I had some extraordinary experiences and I wanted to figure it out the best I could. Autoethnography offered me a way to do that. It did feel like a kind of spirituality, or faith.

Marcin: It sounds very mysterious.

Carolyn: Yes, it does.

Marcin: So, is autoethnography, for you personally, a way of discovering what was "covered" before in a metaphysical sense?

Carolyn: Yes, there is the mystery and spirituality contained in autoethnography. But then, there also is the connection to science in the methodological and analytic process. We have procedures, and we try to be systematic, and tell a truth that might be valuable and speak to others. The two come together in a really nice mix. So, I'm not just depending on faith in God, but I'm not saying there is no faith in God either.

Marcin: I see, it's more like you believe in believing...

Carolyn: Yeah, because if it works for anyone, then he or she should believe in it. If one can make it work, yeah, why not...

Marcin: If one can make it worse...

Carolyn: Make it work!

Marcin: Make it worse—I'm joking now, of course! [laughter]

Carolyn: I get it, finally! I thought there was a misunderstanding because of my English... [laughter]

Marcin: Oh, no, I just wanted us to have a short break from all those tough topics.

Back to Story as a Destination

Marcin: Ok, I think it's a good time now to talk about autoethnography and story, and about the relationship between them. Carolyn, most of us, autoethnographers, are people who believe in the power of story and very often we're willing to equate autoethnography with story. For instance, you argue that "stories should be both a subject and a method of social science research." The basic question for me is the following: Why are stories so important both to autoethnography as a method and to autoethnographers as researchers and persons?

Carolyn: Because of evocation. Part of the way you can understand through autoethnography is because it evokes you to tell your stories, to feel, to respond. How do you evoke people to enter experience? You do it through story, so that's to me one of the main reasons story becomes important to autoethnography; then it's also important because of sensory kinds of things—smelling, seeing, hearing, feeling, you do it through stories...

Marcin: What about story as the simplest way of building bridges among people, getting into relation through stories?

Carolyn: Yeah, that is how we as human beings communicate, it's an obvious one...

Marcin: It's obvious for you, but...

Carolyn: It's important because that's how we as human beings relate to each other.

Marcin: So, again, we're coming back to a human being. There is something less obvious for me about story

when I think about the role it plays in creating social theory as it is understood by Art [Bochner]. Art says, "There is nothing as theoretical as a good story" (Bochner 1997:435). Could you please develop this idea?

Carolyn: Well, you know, story is a kind of theory (and theory is a kind of story). As you write, you try to figure out what is happening, how, and why, and you contribute to theory.

Marcin: What kind of theory?

Carolyn: All kinds of theory, depending on the project—psychological theories about the self; communication and sociological theories about identities, relationships, and families; theories about ethnicity, race, and gender. But also, you contribute to understanding the specific and particular, the everyday, the lived experience, other important ways of understanding human existence and the world we live in.

Marcin: Ok, Carolyn, autoethnographers not only write stories but they also think with them, think about them, feel with them, and so on. What kind of relation between you and story is the most important to you?

Carolyn: Well, what's important to me is that I can live in other people's stories, and what is equally important to me is that other people live in my stories.

Marcin: In terms of...

Carolyn: In terms of feeling a resonance with the story, feeling that they've been there, they could be there, or they understand someone else being there even if they couldn't...

Marcin: In certain circumstances...

Carolyn: Yes. For example, someone recently read my *The Procrastinating Autoethnographer* (Ellis 2012) and said, "I read this piece and gave it to my husband who said, 'Carolyn Ellis lives in your head' because it was so much like my experience." I love that response because it means my piece moved them to enter my experience, as well as their own. I described my experience in a way that it was generalizable in my sense of the word, generalizable in that it touched something in them. That kind of touching, that connection that comes from this kind of storytelling and story hearing is the most important to me.

Marcin: Umm, but do you think it is possible to touch the dimension, as it were, of real experience via story? There is always a gap between pure experience and the story we tell about it. You probably cannot overcome this obstacle.

Carolyn: Of course that is true, but I think we can get close to experience, and that is what we want to try to do. Remember when I told you the story of Jerry Rawicki and how important I thought his interaction with you was. I thought that because he has felt so negative towards the people in Poland given what had happened to him during the Holocaust. As I told you how Jerry perceived being treated by those in Poland, his home land, I so empathized with Jerry that I came close to taking on Jerry's feelings as my own. Now I cannot know what it was like to be Jerry during the Holocaust; Jerry cannot even know what it was like to be Jerry during the Holocaust. I cannot know what his experience was, but in that moment of empathy some kind of un-

derstanding took place in my body and emotion that I don't think I have had before. So, that's what it means to get into somebody's story—as limited as it might be, it's the best we have.

Marcin: Yes, but the problem for me is that language is not a perfect means of getting in touch with someone else. There is always something beyond the words, and that is why I'm not quite sure if story should be a final destination for us.

Carolyn: What is the final destination then?

Marcin: I don't know, but maybe we sometimes overestimate the weight of stories in our lives.

Carolyn: Umm, that may be right at times. I don't know what happened when I started telling that story to you about Jerry. I started feeling emotion and you started feeling emotion, too; that wasn't just from the story—that was from something that happened between the two of us at that moment. Some feeling, compassion, sense of the importance of what had happened today between you, me, and Jerry, as we accompanied him on his memory trip through Warsaw. There wasn't much story there really. If someone had heard us talking, we didn't say that much.

Marcin: We weren't in story in the strict sense of the term; we were more in action and, of course, the words appeared there, but not only words.

Carolyn: Umm, there was connection, compassion, feeling, empathy. But, I might agree with you that sometimes we overemphasize the power of story to make our point about its importance. But, as well, the

story's the medium for these other kinds of things to happen.

Marcin: Carolyn, for whom do you usually write story? Do you write it more for yourself or for the other?

Carolyn: It's hard to know because I have both audiences in mind. I usually am not stimulated to start writing unless I'm writing for me, but I follow through often because I think it's a story for others, as well. So, for example, with the procrastinating autoethnographer piece (cf. Ellis 2012), I began by thinking, "I need to know how to write myself through this procrastination and staring at the blank screen, and understand it so I can do better with it. And I think others will identify with it and it might help them think about their procrastination, as well." That sense that the story will resonate with others helps me follow through when it might not be easy to continue if it feels like it might just be something I'm writing for myself. I have to find the other.

Marcin: So you anticipate that a certain story will be written for certain people?

Carolyn: Yes, I do to some extent. Who are these folks? Often I write for academics who I think will take the story to other people, especially students. And sometimes I have in mind specific people, as well, such as those who suffer with stigmas, who have had a loved one die, or who have taken care of their mothers. My writing on the Holocaust has more specifically taken into account the people I'm writing about, such as survivors themselves and their families, though I know some of what I'm writing will not be of interest to them.

Marcin: My next question is a more technical one: What do you want to achieve by distributing a story as you are working on it?

Carolyn: Conversations I have with readers usually help me to go deeper into the story.

Marcin: Does it mean that the story is not only *your* story but it is more a *shared* story?

Carolyn: Right, yes (!). And with conversation, not only can I go deeper but I start to see and analyze the relational and social context of the story. Through conversation, I start to see lots of things going on that I might not have seen by myself. Take, for example, the story about my hip arthritis (cf. Ellis 2014). Some folks read it and mentioned how I coped through my relationships, for example, the various conversations that I had with others about my condition. Once they said that, it was obvious. I then went back to the story and added a relational focus to my emphasis on aging and chronic pain.

Marcin: That makes sense. Do you think about the potential consequences of the power of your story when you share it with other people?

Carolyn: I don't want my stories to depress people. I always try to end in some hopeful way, but not in such a way that readers think, "and she lived happily ever after," or believe that they will, as well. I want to confront life's problems, but I'm constantly thinking about how much human tragedy people can take in, and how much is good for them to have to face. Also, I want to make sure that as many folks as possible keep reading.

Marcin: It's unpredictable and risky...

Carolyn: It is. I also know that some readers, especially people who know and care for me, also worry about me. So, if I'm really vulnerable in my stories, they worry, and I don't want to be too worried about, just worried about enough.

Marcin: What just came to my mind was Carol Rambo Ronai's piece about child abuse (cf. 1995). Personally, this story was too powerful.

Carolyn: The first time I read this piece I threw it on the floor and stamped on it because I was very close to Carol at that time. But, I appreciate powerful stories like this one, even when they make me squirm—especially when they make me squirm.

Marcin: So, again, we're going back to the ethics of writing stories—a storyteller writes a story, he/she can "throw up," you know, what is in the gut. Then the story stays with us, it resonates in us, and sometimes it is not easy to cope with the content of it. That is why, in my opinion, writing a story like the one by Ronai's is extremely hazardous.

Carolyn: Yes, it is.

Marcin: So how to cope with it?

Carolyn: I was going to respond that maybe I would prefer Carol's story to be less risky, but then I thought "no" because she told us something about the human condition that I think we need to be aware of.

Marcin: It is an explanation, but it doesn't explain everything.

Carolyn: No, it does not, but it helps explain some things. I do think the story borders on pornography in that the graphic scenes are so powerful. That might be good or bad—good in that it makes us face the details of what happened; bad in that attention goes towards the titillating details and away from the abuse that is going on.

Marcin: What she did is emotional pornography!

Carolyn: It's emotional pornography, but... Look, I might share some of your concerns about this piece, but discussing this would take more time than we have.

Marcin: Ok, so let's end with my pushing you a bit on a question I've already asked you: Is the story a final product of autoethnography?

Carolyn: It's the best we have, and so far you haven't convinced me that something else is more important. Of course, there also can be performance, art, song, dance, and so on. But, you and I are into the written word, so I'd say that for us a story is usually the final product.

Marcin: Ok. Carolyn, I think this is a nice conclusion of our conversation. Thank you for your time, your attention, and, of course, for coming to Poland!

Carolyn: My pleasure, Marcin. I really appreciate this. Nobody has ever asked me these kinds of questions about my work.

Marcin: Thank you, I hope this means we'll continue the conversation.

Carolyn: I'm sure, we shall. And we'll keep sharing stories.

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Cytowanie

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