

12

Writing the Deaf Self in Autoethnography

Noel O’Connell

PROLOGUE

The idea for this chapter grew out of my doctoral work after I successfully graduated with a PhD in Education in 2013. As a deaf scholar with over 10 years of experience in qualitative research, I am intimately acquainted with academic life. My work intersects autoethnography with storytelling, deaf education with sociology, and Deaf Studies with Communication Studies. I am also an autoethnographer, Deaf Studies researcher, academic writer, and one amongst a “minority of Deaf intellectuals” working in the field of Deaf Studies (O’Brien & Emery 2013). Deaf narratives and deaf people’s life stories form the core of my research projects. My life experience can be described as Deafhood, defined as “deaf people’s own ontologies” or “ways of being in the world” (Kusters & De Meulder 2013:428). Deafhood, for me, encompasses all aspects of the lived ontological deaf experience. In my line of work, I write stories, not only about life in residential schools for deaf children, but also about my experience of oralism, an educational ideology that prohibits the use of sign language and promotes spoken language communication through articulation and pronunciation drills and lip-reading exercises (O’Connell & Deegan 2014).

This chapter begins by critically and reflexively exploring my experience of writing autoethnography into my PhD thesis, titled, *A critical (auto) ethnographic study of deaf people’s experiences of education and culture in Ireland*. My doctoral project involved a study of 20 deaf participants and the researcher in a critical (auto) ethnographic study of deaf education. I found autoethnography a useful form of inquiry for the doctoral research. The method involves doing “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2004:xix). In many ways autoethnography helped create space for a counternarrative to the dominant deaf education research paradigm, which describes deaf people without including them as research participants and giving “voice” to their stories (e.g., Mathews 2011). When hearing researchers write about deaf people’s

experiences of education, they cannot help but represent these experiences through their own lenses as people who are biologically and culturally hearing. When Deaf Studies and autoethnography intersect, deaf autoethnographies are created in ways that make fertile ground for sharing experiences of education with the world.

This chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How does one represent the lived Deafhood experience through autoethnography? What are the challenges and resolutions for doing autoethnography? How does one address criticism, ethical issues, and narrative truth? To answer these questions, I show examples of doing autoethnography by layering in five “present-tense vignettes” (Humphries 2005: 840) extracted from my autoethnographic stories. These vignettes are utilized as bracketed phenomena linked with the text to illustrate how autoethnography is constructed, evaluated, and produced.

BEGINNINGS

Vignette 1: Discovering Autoethnography

Autumn in Ireland, a doctoral supervisor meeting almost four years ago to the day I start writing this chapter on autoethnography. I glance at the clock on the wall behind “Professor John,”¹ my doctoral supervisor. It is 2.45 pm. “Lucy,” my sign language interpreter is sitting beside Professor John translating my comments in Irish Sign Language (ISL) into spoken English. I tell my supervisor about the autobiographical journal writing that I have written as a separate project from the doctoral research.

“How do you feel about including your story in your thesis?” the professor asks. “I would suggest writing an autoethnography into your research as a way to respond to the challenge of subjective research.”

“Autoethnography?” I make a mental note to do some research on the subject. “What does that involve?”

“Don’t worry about that for now. Your questions will soon be answered after you do some reading on autoethnography. You can decide what to do later. Have you ever heard of Carolyn Ellis?”

“No. I can’t say I have.”

“She is an American sociologist working in the field of Communication Studies. She has published widely on the subject.”

“I don’t think I have come across her work.” I point out. “I am thinking of the viva voce. How will an autoethnography stand up to scrutiny?”

¹ This is a pseudonym. The etymological root of the term *auto*, as derived from the Greek *αὐτο*, denotes the idea of “self,” “one’s own,” and “by oneself”; ethnography is literally the writing of culture.

“Let’s wait until you have read her book, The Ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography. The book is written in the form of a novel that weaves together personal stories, theory, and narrative about her teaching a fictional university graduate course. Ellis uses characterization, plot, scene-setting, dialogue, and action to show the reader autoethnography’s methodological meanings and form.”

“I must get a copy of the book.”

“Good idea. You might also like to read the work of Art Bochner and Norman Denzin. They’ve published papers on autoethnography. We can discuss Ellis’s book at our meeting next month and you can decide what you want to do for your thesis writing.”

So began my entry into autoethnography. As this vignette shows, my own route to autoethnography was via autobiography. The impetus for doing autoethnography grew out of a willingness to understand how theory and reflexive engagement could help elicit meaning from my autobiographical stories. After reading Ellis’s book and the work of Ellis and Bochner (2000), I made the decision to introduce a series of autoethnographic vignettes into the research alongside the study of 20 deaf participants for the doctoral thesis. My first initiative in “creating autoethnography” (Muncey 2010) was to combine tenets of my autobiographical writing with ethnography (Ellis 2004). Before taking on the task, the first step was to learn about the distinction between autoethnography and autobiography.

According to Alexander (1999:309), *autobiography* is “a process of recreating, re-viewing and making sense of the biographic past.” The autobiographer uses retrospection to write about his or her life in order to capture all the fundamentals of that life remembered (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Autobiography may include stories about “epiphanies,” or remembered moments that cause the writer to reflect on lived experience after which life does not seem quite the same. Interviews, journals, photographs, and newspaper articles also are used as sources to help the autobiographers with their memories of certain events described in their writing. Autobiographers sometimes write by “showing”—a form of writing that uses the literary conventions of characterization, scene-setting, plot development, and dialogue intended to “bring readers into the thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions” in the story (Ellis et al. 2011:4). In the mode of “telling the tale,” the autobiographer attempts to put some distance between writer and text in order to describe an event in a more abstract way. When both “telling” and “showing” are employed, they help elucidate an understanding of what is happening in a story.

Autoethnography, on the other hand, is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis & Bochner 2000:739). Autoethnographers also

write about “epiphanies” (Denzin 2014) and may use journals, photographs, letters, and newspaper articles (Muncey 2010). Similarly, they employ the literary technique of “showing” to give readers a sense of “being there” (Spry 2001) with the author going through an experience. They also employ the technique of “telling” to describe an experience in a less intimate way. By contrast, autoethnographers write (graphy) about personal experience (auto) that arises from being part of a culture (ethno) and show how they acquire a specific cultural identity. Unlike autobiography, autoethnography connects the personal with the cultural and political and uses ethnographic methods to analyse personal experience reflexively in order to elicit meaning from the stories (Ellis 2004). Ethnography entails the use of “thick description” to make cultural experience familiar to readers (Ellis et al. 2011). Thus, the hybridity of *auto* and *ethnography* means researchers make cultural and personal experience accessible and meaningful by using a systematic approach to analyzing and interpreting sociocultural understandings of self (1). This systematic approach sets autoethnography apart from other self-narratives such as autobiography.

A number of Deaf-authored autoethnographic texts have emerged in recent times. McIlroy and Storbeck’s (2011) study, for example, is written as an output of McIlroy’s master’s thesis assignment on deaf identities. The idea of including two authors—McIlroy, the Deaf author experiencing the autoethnography and working in collaboration with the hearing author Storbeck—raises questions around the meaning of “auto” in this ethnographic study. Valente’s (2011) book is based on the author’s experience as a young child attending mainstream school and as an adult looking back on his attempt to find a place in society. The author blends autobiographical stories with elements of ethnographic writing and critical theory. Though Valente’s most recent article on autoethnography (2014) explores a number of topics covered in the book, he also includes details omitted from the narrative—details that prompted a reconsideration of the way he shaped his stories. As Valente looks back in time, he finds himself adding details about his father. In a moving telling of the father–son relationship Valente adopts the metaphor of the Incredible Hulk to analyze the emotions generated by the effects of his father’s alcoholism. As Valente writes autoethnographically, he is very much aware of his feelings and conflicting thoughts as a young deaf boy and of the hidden depths of his anger. There is courage displayed in writing the narrative about issues that are of a sensitive nature. The stories are powerful enough to evoke in me an emotional reaction that causes me to reflect on my relationship with my father, which I detail later in this chapter.

Embedded in West’s (2012) narrative inquiry concerning the life stories of deaf and hearing bilingual families is a series of autoethnographic

vignettes about the hearing author who has no corporeal experience of deafness. Both McIlroy and Valente take insights gained from a particular position as deaf people and use these as vantage points to write about their identity, culture, and language. Ruiz-Williams, Burke, Chong, and Chainarong (2015) claim that their work is based on autoethnography. However, I found little evidence of a reflexive engagement, an important feature of autoethnography, wherein the autoethnographer stands back from the stories and begins to ask questions to help reflect on the stories and the writing experience (Ellis 2004).

Though a number of Deaf-authored autobiographical writings, including Laborit (1999) and Bragg (2002) have been published, it is perhaps surprising given the history of deaf people's experience of marginalization and discrimination, that relatively few Deaf-authored autoethnographies are available to us. A number of possible explanations for this neglect can be offered. First, researchers may be reluctant to break away from long-held beliefs about objective research. Second, researchers may have avoided taking this approach due to a general lack of awareness or understanding of what constitutes autoethnography in terms of how it is defined and how it should be written, constructed, and produced.

History of Autoethnography

Historically, certain writers from the anthropology tradition paved the way for autoethnography. Jomo Kenyatta's (1966) *Facing Mount Kenya* is said to be the first published autoethnography, although it received heavy criticism for being too subjective (Hayano 1979). Although Karl Heider (1975:3–17) used autoethnographic method in a study of the Dani people, Hayano (1979) is credited as the originator of the term after he championed a form of "insider ethnography" (Ellis 2004). Hayano published *Poker Face* (1982) based on a study of semiprofessional poker players and argues that researchers' "insider status" should be made transparent in research.

The early 1980s saw a paradigm shift in the way qualitative research was conducted. In that period, postmodernist thought began challenging the legitimacy of the "objective observer" position of the researcher. Throughout the 1990s and the early 21st century, scholars placed great value in personal stories within various social science research disciplines including sports science (Sparkes 2000), nursing (Muncey 2010), health care (Ellis 1995), and education (Hayler 2010). Subsequently, autoethnographic stories emerged on a wide range of subjects, including loss and trauma (O'Connell 2016a), stigma (O'Connell 2016b), and communication (Ellis & Bochner 2006) and have been written using a variety of literary genres from poetry and fiction to novels, photographic essays, journals, and prose poetry (Muncey 2010).

Defining Autoethnography

There are subtle variations in the way autoethnography is defined because various uses of the term and their associated meanings can differ depending on the relationship between the researcher's personal experience and the phenomenon under investigation (e.g., education, health, sports). Reed-Danahay (1997:2) suggests that its meaning contains "a double sense—referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest." This is true to the extent that autoethnography may be described as "a self-(auto-) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto-) ethnography."

Sparkes (2000:21) defines autoethnography as "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding." Writing about performance autoethnography, Spry (2001:710) proposes a form of "self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts." Maréchal (2010:43) describes autoethnography as a "method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing."

Ellis et al. (2011) offer a catalogued list of autoethnographic "cousins" in the form of "layered accounts," using vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection. Another form of autoethnographic writing listed in the catalogue are the "indigenous ethnographies" produced by native and indigenous authors in response to colonized systems, power relations, and the outsider-researcher's right and authority to study their people. In "narrative ethnographies," the ethnographer produces narrative text detailing his or her personal experiences of doing ethnography. The researcher's perceptions around doing research and interacting with participants while doing field work are revealed in "reflexive ethnography."

The one register that closely identifies with my doctoral thesis writing is *indigenous ethnography*:

Indigenous ethnographies are written by researchers who share a history of colonialism or economic subordination, including subjugation by ethnographers who have made them subjects of their work. You could write as a bicultural insider/outsider and construct your own cultural story to depict a way of life. (Ellis 2004:46)

Given that indigenous ethnography attempts to make "characteristics of a culture familiar to outsiders and insiders" (Ellis et al. 2011), I took the liberty to write my "own cultural story" in order to "depict a way of life" and reveal the extent of my experience of oralism around the subjugation of sign language. These stories were written as evocative accounts detailing some painful memories of the past. They are called evocative stories because they are powerful enough to evoke an

emotional response in the reader. They are stories not only of oppression and marginalization but also of steadfast determination and positive life transformations. Just like the stories presented in this chapter, they were written as evocative autoethnography.

EVOCATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Vignette 2: Lost in Translation

My teacher, Miss Carey, is a commanding presence in class. Today, she is talking to us as if we are hearing children. I have no idea what she telling us to do. All she does is point her index finger to the floor.

“ . . . do it now!”

I notice her lips quivering and wavering in frustration. She seems powerless to help us understand her instructions. I wonder what she wants us to do. I am 12 years old and everything seems hazy in this semi-dark classroom. We are seated in darkness save for the light of the overhead projector shining onto the silver screen behind her. I try to read the figures displayed on screen, but they are blurred. In a show of impatience, Miss Carey turns swiftly around and stares at the screen through a maze of wavy shoulder-length hair that partly covers her face and mouth. Then she quickly pushes the projector to the other side of her desk and adjusts the head to make the screen display clear. It is then that I can start counting numbers and figures.

Miss Carey does not sign because she does not know how to sign. Reading her lips strains my eyes. I know she is telling us to do something, but the words from her mouth are elusive; they are like quicksand. She keeps saying, “Do it . . .” and continually adjusts the microphone around her neck. She rolls her eyes heavenward, showing frustrated annoyance.

“Can you . . .”

When her eyebrows are raised, I can see she is asking questions. Only a few of us nod in reply.

“What are we to do?” I ask her. Something in my throat forces me to swallow hard. Miss Carey does not hear me. Instead, she looks at the screen and back at us. Pointing to the floor, she says,

“There . . . stop that . . . now do it . . .”

I take a deep breath, a sense of anger rising inside me. Tim taps me on the arm and leans sideways. Crouching under the table, he makes discrete signs.

“Is that a question?”

“I don’t know.”

Miss Carey says, “Stop . . . now . . . get . . .”

For a second, I place my hands on my face not knowing whether to like or hate her. I see her through the gap between my fingers. She is writing something on the projector. Taking my hands down, I study her notes. The writing is round and slanted like a scribble. We start writing notes onto our notepads. No wants to ask questions. We think she will respond in the same exasperated

way. And she still talks to us like we are hearing children. I know she is talking but not what she is telling us to do.

“... No ... make it ...”

One of our classmates, Bob, is partially deaf. He can hear with a hearing aid. Bob does not sign to us because he is terrified of getting punished. When Miss Carey moves across the room, we ask for repeat instructions, but she ignores us. Instead, she tells us to “... Stop ... look ...” She is irritated at our show of indifference and throws her hand up in desperation. My teacher is about to lose control of herself. As if sensing that we are watching, she moves into the shadow and becomes submerged in the semi-darkness. My classmates start writing on paper, trying to guess the question. What does she want us to do? Once more frustration squeezes my heart. I take deep breathes. Before long, Kevin taps my elbow.

“What did she say?”

There are two particular genres of writing produced by autoethnographers: “evocative” and “analytical” autoethnography. While the first appreciates the emotional context in stories, the second is analytical and does not deal with the emotions of the characters or people in autoethnographic stories (Anderson 2006). Evocative autoethnography has been criticized by Anderson (2006) for using emotion in qualitative research. In his view, autoethnographers should avoid engaging in “emotionalism” and, instead, adopt a more analytical approach using systematic ethnographic methods to find answers to questions about social life. In analytic autoethnography, the researcher is (1) self-identified as a full member of the cultural group or community under study; (2) visible as a member in the researcher’s published text; and (3) committed to an analytical approach to enhancing theoretical understandings of social phenomena and “objective” writing and analysis of a social or cultural group under study. Based on his personal experience of family, work, and sports skydiving, Anderson (2006) analytic autoethnography examines personal experience against the broader social phenomenon involving stories of other skydivers. Similarly, Hayler (2010) constructed personal stories were shared with six other teacher educators as a means of gaining new understandings of experiences, beliefs, and practices. Hayler’s analytical approach is based on comparing and sharing stories with other participants in order to increase his understanding of an experience. Ellis and Bochner (2006:433) accuse analytical autoethnography of encouraging the reader to “become a detached spectator” with little emotional context available in the narrative to engage them. According to the authors, the analytical approach to autoethnography is a genre of realist ethnography that excludes the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of the researcher (Ellis & Bochner 2006).

As Vignette 2 illustrates, this chapter is framed as evocative autoethnography because it shows emotional contexts of experience based on my memories of the events that took place in the classroom sometime in the late 1970s. The story is purposefully written in the present tense in order to summon rich and contextualized information about the experience of oralism. The aim was to cause readers to feel and think about their lives in relation to my life. The chaos in the story is bound together in a systematic way to give coherence to the narrative using dialogue, scene-setting, plot, characterization, and description (Ellis 2004). Thus, the vignette is an exemplar of how emotion can be used to elicit a response from readers and help “generate conversation” (Ellis 2004). The vignette is written in the present tense to create a sense of verisimilitude and to make the experience lifelike and real on the page. Dialogue, for example, is constructed so as to capture the subjective experience of the lip-reader. The reader may experience the author’s feelings of anguish, discomfort, and frustration in the experience of being lost in translation.

NARRATIVE TRUTH

Vignette 3: A Walk in the Woods

“Where are we going?” I ask Patrick.

It is a mild October Saturday morning. The sky is overcast with occasional sunshine bursting through clouds. The air is cold and crisp. We are standing in the middle of the queue, hidden out of sight of the authorities. I am probably seven or eight years of age. All of us are children of similar age dressed casually in jumpers and overcoats with a small rucksacks sitting snugly on our backs. Standing in line, two abreast, we wait for the signal to move forward. Patrick glances nervously over his shoulder looking to see if anyone is watching us. Then he signs.

“We will walk near the trees,” he says, “and pick nuts from the ground and throw them into the field.”

“Yes,” I say. “We can play with the leaves on the ground.”

“We can run around and hide and play catch.”

“Yes!”

My eyes widen with excitement. Suddenly Patrick turns his head and looks toward the end of the queue. All heads turn round, and I stand on my toes peering over shoulders. Beyond the queue is a towering figure looming over a red-haired boy. The woman is holding his hand. She has a large tree branch in the other hand. The sight of the boy receiving three lashes on the palm of his hand causes me to recoil in shock. I gasp with fright and stagger backward. After steadying myself, I turn and stand on my toes and see the distress on the boy’s face. The woman’s eyes glare with anger, lips tightly shut, almost slanted at the corner. I cannot take my eyes off her face, the pulse surging through my

body. My heart quickens apace. The boy picks himself up off the ground and holds his hand under his armpit, tears streaming down his face. Unable to watch any longer, I turn round quickly and face Patrick. Patrick signs with deliberate ease, making sure not to stir his shoulder.

“She saw Joe signing,” he says.

I push my hands down and scuffle backward trying to find my footing. I am back in the row again staring at Patrick’s pale face, searching for answers. But there is nothing more to be said. Time to move on. My teacher steps forward walking past us down toward the end of the queue. I look on anxiously and, when the queue starts moving again, I follow the line ahead of me. Soon the wooden gate appears in sight, a hundred yards ahead. At the gateway, we step into the clearing and walk on grass. I feel the crunch of copper leaves under my shoes until we come to a pathway. From there, we move to an opening where dark pine trees hover above us.

After writing this vignette, I found myself reflecting on standards of truth or verisimilitude in the story. Given that I was somewhere between seven and eight years old at the time the events took place, the issue uppermost in my mind was the question of narrative truth. What is truth? How can we know it? As Denzin (2014) states, there are different types of truths: *facts* and *facticities*. Facts relate to events that are believed to have occurred, while facticities describe how facts were lived and experienced by people interacting with one another. Truth refers to “statements that are in agreement with facts and faculties as they are known and understood” (Denzin 2014:13) and narrative truth “is based on how a story is used, understood and responded to” (70). In this particular vignette, I present my own version of truth by narrating a story about a deeply disturbing incident that occurred when I was a young boy. I had not managed to write about this incident until recently because memory can be fallible. People may either tell different stories of the same event or describe the same event differently (Denzin 2014). I tried various ways to write this eye-witness account but, because it happened over 40 years ago, I was not sure whether this was my story at all. I wondered if the victim should be the one to tell it himself, because I was merely a bystander in the drama that unfolded before my eyes. I wrote the story knowing that the boy was the one who experienced pain and suffering. Although I did not experience his pain, I was overcome with shock and fear given that I also used sign language and the violence inflicted on the boy easily could have befallen me.

To portray accurately the experience of witnessing the violence, I felt it was important to test my memory of the event. While looking back on the past, I reached the conclusion that the walk in the woods did actually happen because this was a frequent event in childhood. Though I remember witnessing the violence inflicted on the boy it was

difficult to know whether this happened on the day we went out for a walk. I asked myself whether the incident occurred on the same day and whether this was my version of the truth. My response was that regardless of whether this was true or not, my truth lay in the painful experience of witnessing and the joys of going out to play in the woodlands. In the interest of description and to make the narrative work, I wrote about the incident as though it happened on the same day. The dialogue was constructed to the best of my recollection. Although I can remember the scenes played out in my mind, I cannot remember details of conversation.

According to Ellis (2011:10), autoethnographers rely on narrative truth, on “what a story of experience does—how it is used, understood, and responded to for and by us and others as writers, participants, audiences and humans.” Although it is impossible for anyone to recall events in language that represents how they were lived, autoethnographers reflexively ask whether the event has been remembered and described correctly in the story. Is the report “fact” or “facticities”? Such questions around narrative truth and the narrator’s credibility as a writer, performer, and observer often are raised by autoethnographers (Denzin 2014). Where validity is maintained, the story must have verisimilitude in that the author’s actual experience is portrayed in a way that is lifelike, “true, coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer’s world” (Denzin 2014:70).

SELF-INDULGENCE OR SOMETHING MORE?

Vignette 4: Stars of the Silver Screen

It is seven o’clock, an hour after Saturday evening supper. We are back in the play hall and there is a minute or two before the film begins showing. We are seated in cast-iron chairs all lined up in rows at the end of the play hall. Six rows of ten chairs, five on each side of the walkway, all lined up in eager anticipation of the start of “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” The play hall is pitched in total darkness and the silver screen before us flickers with light from the film projector behind us. On our right is the theater stage, where curtains are drawn and a wall poster informs us that “Jack and the Beanstalk” will be showing in the spring.

The man in charge of the film showing, Brother Johnson, is inserting rolls of film into the projector reel. Earlier, he had warned us about signing, telling us that anyone caught would be sent upstairs to bed. Halfway through the film there would be a break to allow him time to change the reels. He would take off the reel and replace it with the next roll of film. That night, I arrive in the hall just before the start of the film, and I see Paul’s hand waving in the air. Paul waves me over to an empty chair beside him. By the time I reach my seat, I am greeted by back slaps and thumbs up from the lads seated behind me. Paul’s

face lights up with a bemused smile, and I turn round to face Patrick, Colm, and Kevin, friends I have known for eight years, ever since I started residential school at the age of five.

"Do you know what tonight's film is called?" Paul asks, excitement written all over his face.

I finger spell words: "B-u-t-c-h C-a-s-s-i-d-y. . ."

"The S-u-n-d-a-n-c-e K-i-d!" Patrick interjects "Robert Redford and Paul Newman are in the film!"

"I don't know," I respond. "I have never seen the film. Is it a cowboy film?"

"Yes. Plenty of action!"

"We should be allowed to choose films we want to watch," Patrick says glancing over his shoulder at the projector. "Is he watching us?"

Colm lowers his hands and makes discrete signs. "I have seen many boring films. All talk and no action."

"I know," I say. "Last week's film was good."

"Yes. That was True Grit."

"J-o-h-n W-a-y-n-e."

"I like cowboy films," Paul signs, lowering his hands. "In cowboy films we see action. If there is too much talking, I get bored. So hard to follow the film."

"I think tonight's film is full of action," Colm signs. "James is sitting near the projector. He has just read the name."

As Paul nudges my left elbow, I turn around several degrees and follow the direction of his hand to the projector at the far end of the room. "Brother Johnson is like a sheriff in a cowboy film. Always watching us."

"Yes, I know. He can be cruel. If he catches us signing, he will send us to bed."

"I would hate to miss the film," Patrick says glancing over his shoulder. "Did you know Brendan was sent to bed last week? He missed the show. It was terrible for him. I think he was caught signing to another boy."

"Did you see it happen?" Colm wants to know.

"Yes I saw it happen. . . ."

Suddenly lights are turned off, and we turn in our chairs to face the silver screen. It flickers on and on. Fifteen minutes into the show, we start asking questions among ourselves trying to figure out the heroes and villains in the film. The film is about two outlaws who are on the run from the sheriff and a group of lawmen. We decide the outlaws are our heroes. We love the all-action film. There are anxious moments because the outlaws cannot escape. They are still being followed. Tensions rise near the end of the film as the group of lawmen closes in on them. Then Butch and Sundance end up in some strange country, hidden inside a hut, and surrounded by soldiers with guns aimed at them. There is no hope. They cannot make a getaway. My heart is racing and I am unable to bear the tension. Their fates already sealed, I hold my breath and wait in hope, not wanting to believe they are about to die. The scene before my eyes is now tinged with tragedy. A short time later, the two men run out of the hut, guns in hand. Then the screen goes still.

There is frantic tapping on my shoulder. I turn around.

"Is this the end?"

"I don't know."

"Are the reels being changed?"

"But the lights are not turned on!"

I turn around, crouch low, and wave at John. John says he heard shots being fired in the background.

"You mean they are dead?"

"Yes, I heard shots," he says, holding an imaginary gun in his hands and making a show of firing shots.

"Fire! Fire!"

"Are you sure shots were fired?"

"Yes, this is the end of the film. Our heroes are dead."

This vignette is condensed from my personal narrative based on a version of my childhood lived in residential school and focusing on my experience doing weekend activities. It is a highly subjective account of an event that occurred during the latter half of the 1970s when I was 13 or 14 years old and at a time when subtitling facilities were unavailable. Like all vignettes presented here, this story was written from inside the head of a young boy using an adult's sentiment and outlook. I wrote it from my imagination, using my own sense of reality based on my subjective experience. I emphasize the word "subjective" in the context of autoethnography's focus on the self in relation to others. Because of its strong emphasis on self, autoethnography's status as proper research has been called into question by scholars committed to "objective" social science research (Sparkes 2000). Delamont (2002), for example, argues that self-narratives are "too personal" (Sparkes 2000), highly subjective, too individualized, and self-absorbed. Ellis (2009) notes that critics describe autoethnographers as "navel-gazing, self-absorbed narcissists who don't fulfil scholarly obligation to hypothesize, analyze, contextualize, and theorize." Such criticism emerged subsequent to Ellis and Bochner's (2000:745) statement that autoethnography "is always a story about the past and not the past itself." Sparkes (2002) argues that there must be something more to the way scholars reject personal narratives, that perhaps therein lies a deep mistrust in valuing self and experience. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that the personal is always present in ethnography and, therefore, personal narrative should be utilized "to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (22). In that sense, I wrote the vignette because not only did personal narrative help to understand the experience of oralism better, but it also invoked in readers a feeling for the experience and could inspire critical reflection of that particular experience. Despite criticism leveled at autoethnography, I believe it is my duty as a Deaf scholar and member

of a sign language community to create space in which to share my experience through stories and make these stories accessible to readers (Bochner & Ellis 2000).

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Vignette 5: Homeward Bound

At nine years of age, I am sitting in the front passenger seat of my father's car. On my right, my father is staring straight ahead, his hands gripping the steering wheel. We turn out of the school gateway onto the street under dark clouds. Behind me, in the back seat, are my school friends. It is a Friday evening in February, and we are heading home from school for the weekend. As part of the car pool arrangement, my father is driving the boys to meet their parents in another town. The drive is three hours long. So far, rain has turned light, but dark clouds hover above us. Soon rain starts to fall heavily, pouring needles of water onto the windscreen. My father turns on the windscreen wipers and rests his hands on the steering wheel. He squints his eyes at the road ahead as rain comes down in torrents. At this point, he seems unaware of the boys signing to each other in the back seat behind him. When one of the lads taps me on the shoulder, I turn half a circle and rest my knees on the seat. I lay my arms on top of the seat and watch the boys sign stories about school.

"Did you see the Virginians today?" Paul signs excitedly, imitating the man in a black leather waist-coat.

"I saw it," I reply, half-conscious of my father's disapproval. He has been throwing glances my way since I turned around. For some time, I have been aware of his hostility toward sign language. Still, I cannot find a way to stop signing. The last time he collected us from school, I incurred his wrath.

"Why can't you speak to them?" he had demanded.

I did not wish to argue with him, so I simply ignored his warning and allowed it pass without protest. When I turned around, Stephen wanted to know what my father said to me. So, I told him and the other boys looked at each other in disbelief. I remember feeling ashamed then. I vowed that this time I was not going to let him dictate how I communicated with my friends.

By now buckets of rain are pouring out of the sky. We continue through narrow winding country roads. While we share football stories, my father gives me a persistent tap on the leg, and I turn around to face him.

"Will you stop!" he mouths angrily.

I look at him and turn back to the boys, ignoring his furtive warnings. Paul looks at me enquiringly.

"What is wrong?"

I sign: "He said stop signing."

Before long, my father pulls up to the side road. I quickly turn around to face the windscreen. My father turns toward me looking furious and I recoil in shock. He says something about, "What in the name of Jesus..." Could I not

stop signing? I attempt a meek apology, mouthing sorry, but he does not see or hear me. As rain lashes against the windscreen, tension fills the air. Time stands still. I make up my mind not to sign for the rest of the journey. It is as good as guaranteed. So, we drive on through winding country roads. With my back turned to the boys, I look straight ahead feeling submerged in misery.

This vignette raises important questions around ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the stories (Ellis 2009). The question of whether or not to obtain consent from people included in the narrative must be considered (Wall 2008). Due to the sensitive nature of this evocative story, special considerations were taken into account. Ellis (2007) adds “relational ethics” as a new dimension to ethics in autoethnography, which refers to ethics involved in writing personal narratives wherein intimate others, such as family members, friends, partners, and colleagues are described. Ellis (2007) maintains that no definitive rules or universal principles are available to guide autoethnographers on how to address ethics. Besides following the generic rule of “do no harm,” autoethnographers must strive to be ethical and honest about the events described as well as to be true to the comments made by all those involved in the stories.

While writing the story about my father, I considered the question of consent and, as a consequence, experienced a persistent sense of anxiety over whether or not to contact the participants in the story. Because my father was deceased, I sought consent from my family, including my mother, because I was concerned about implications for their reputation. Following Ellis’s (2007) suggestion, I shared extracts of my stories with the participants and my family members and subsequently obtained their consent. In order to add some perspective to my father’s actions, I added details about his upbringing as part of my reflections on the vignettes. To help give credence to the stories, I described the school’s influence on shaping his beliefs about the value of sign language. Writing the story allowed me to look inward into my thoughts, feelings, and experiences and outward into my relationship with others (Ellis 2004). In that sense, autoethnography proved a useful method not only in my research but also in my search for self-understanding and understanding of others. It has given new meaning to the experience I explored in the vignette in that I am able to put some distance between myself and the past.

EPILOGUE

This chapter explored how I engaged in creative expression by combining autobiography with ethnography and reflexivity. I have demonstrated ways in which autoethnography could be constructed and produced within and across Deaf Studies research. The process

involved writing autobiographical stories from the heart, revealing my thoughts and feelings “uncensored” (Ellis 2009) on the pages. This was followed by a process of deleting parts that I did not want to reveal. When I returned to the text later, I adopted the ethnographer’s critical eye to analyze and reflect on the stories in order to find meaning attached to emotional experience. While engaging in reflexivity, I became self-questioning about stories to gain meaning. Meaning was derived from stories through writing. Meaning was discerned through the use of plot, action, dialogue, scene-setting, and characterization. Meaning stemmed from “showing” rather than “telling.” Meaning became accessible when evocative stories were produced and subjected to interpretation and reflexive engagement. I engaged in the ethnographer’s task of writing, reading, re-reading, thinking, questioning, consulting with people, communicating almost every day about history, society, sign-language-community issues, identity politics, and sign language, all of which I incorporated into my stories and my analysis of the stories. In doing so, I was able to produce an “evocative autoethnography,” one that was not “presented” but rather “communicated” to readers in such a way that they would feel those experiences as if they were part of the story.

Although there are no specific criteria for doing autoethnography, I have managed to raise questions about how exactly it could be constructed and produced. What I have presented here is an argument for its possibilities as a new, innovative, and unconventional research method in Deaf Studies. I have shown how autoethnography provides us with an avenue to address unanswered questions around deaf people’s social, educational, cultural, political, and economic lives. Autoethnography offers the possibility for a critique of power systems and for including new ideas and methodologies in Deaf Studies. Autoethnography gives “voice” to deaf scholars whose story historically has been silenced by dominant hearing narratives that attempt to explain away their experiences without due regard for their worldviews. I hope that the discussion I have presented here about the challenges I faced and how I dealt with them will help inform future Deaf scholars and inspire them to share their autoethnographies with the world.

Postscript

In what seems to be late morning, I wake up and look at the clock on the bedside table. It is already 8.30 am on a Thursday in October 2013, one month since I passed the viva voce examination. I yearn to get back to sleep and instead of turning over, I lie on my back, thinking about the class I am about to teach later in the day. No rest today, I think to myself. Then I leap out of bed and get

myself ready to drive to university. Dressed in casual clothes, I head downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast. On my way, I pass the front door and catch a glimpse of a large brown envelope lying on the doormat. Seeing the university stamp marked on the envelope, I think back to a conversation I had with my supervisor about my viva voce examination report. When I enquired about it, he told me the report was in the post.

Before I submitted my doctoral thesis the previous July, I asked Professor John what he thought my chances were at the examination. I had in mind my concern about autoethnography. "Will it pass?" I asked him. "The thesis is in good shape," he replied, "and I am confident it will." I trusted his judgment and felt sure it was a strong piece of work.

On this dark and dreamless morning, I pick up the envelope and hurry inside the kitchen. Seating myself at the breakfast table, I open the envelope with eager anticipation. Slightly tired but anxious to know the examiners' views on my work, I start reading the report. This is what they wrote:

Well framed, systematic, elegantly written and courageous, the thesis author combined the narrative sensibilities of a novelist and the analytical skills of a social scientist. It is a bold, critical and self-critical study which deliberately blurs the boundaries between the researcher and the research in an attempt to acknowledge the hybrid identity of the researcher and the complexity of the bi-cultural identity of deaf people as presented in the research topic and data. Drawing from extensive autobiographical writing, edited and carefully selected for the thesis, the doctoral candidate presented a series of vignettes throughout the thesis that allowed him to then pause and reframe them through the lens of a range of social science theorists especially Foucault in explicating identity, knowledge and power in the life experiences of the Deaf community in Ireland over the last fifty years. In doing so, the thesis unfolds a story about education, religious-run schools for the deaf and the state that is powerful, at times disturbing, engaging and speaks to how we understand the complexities of inclusive practices in education today. Each chapter in the thesis was crafted in a way that brings another layer to a complex critical autoethnography. Both examiners agreed it was a privilege to read and undertake a viva for such a new ground breaking thesis.

I sit back in my chair feeling relaxed and at peace. If I cannot feel the happiness of getting the doctorate, then I have known the joy of producing an autoethnography. I think I am a different person from the one who started this journey over five years ago. This does not mean I am not myself. On the contrary, I remain the same, only my perspectives have changed for the better. I cannot offer conclusions here because the writing journey must go on, and I will continue writing evocative stories and producing autoethnographies. That is my destiny. I hope it is yours, too.

AQ: First line under Funding heading - We have changed 'authorship' to 'writing'. Please let me know if this is fine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

The author wishes to thank Professor Jim Deegan, Mary Immaculate College, as well as Rachel Sanchez and the book editors for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

FUNDING: The author received the following financial support for the research, writing, and/or publication of this chapter: This research was supported by the Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship GOIPD/2015/73 awarded to Noel P. O'Connell.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, B. K. (1999). Performing culture in the classroom: An instructional (auto) ethnography. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(4), 307–331.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395.
- Bragg, B. (2002). *Lessons in laughter: An autobiography of a deafactor*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Delamont, S. (2002). *Fieldwork*. London: Falmer.
- Denzin, N. K. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography*. New York: Sage.
- Ellis, C. (1995). *Final negotiations: A story of love, loss and chronic illness*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3–29.
- Ellis, C. (2009). Fighting back or moving on: An autoethnographic response to critics. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 2(3), 371–378.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), 10. <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108>.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2006). Analyzing analytic autoethnography: An autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 429–449.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 733–768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hayano, D. (1979). Autoethnography: Paradigms, problems and prospects. *Human Organisation*, 38(1), 99–104.
- Hayler, M. (2010). *Autoethnography, Self-Narrative and Teacher Education*. The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Humphries, M. (2005). Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(6), 840–860.
- Ladd, P. (2003). *Understanding deaf culture: In search of Deafhood*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Mathews, E. S. (2011). *Mainstreaming of deaf education in the Republic of Ireland: Language, power, resistance* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

- Ruiz-Williams, E., Burke, M., Chong, V Y., & Chainarong, N. (2015). "My deaf is not your deaf": Realizing intersectional realities at Gallaudet University. In M. Friedner & A. Kusters (Eds.), *It's a small world: International deaf spaces and encounters*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Heider, K. G. (1975). What do people do? Dani auto-ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31(1), 3–17.
- Kenyatta, J. (1966). *Facing Mount Kenya*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kusters, A., & De Meulder, M. (2013). Understanding Deafhood: In search of its meanings. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 158(5), 428–438.
- Laborit, E. (1999). *The cry of the gull*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Maréchal, G. 2010. Autoethnography. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (pp. 43–45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McLroy, G., & Storbeck, C. (2011). Development of deaf identity: An ethnographic study. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 16, 4.
- Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. New York and London: Sage.
- O'Brien, D., & Emery, S. (2013). The role of the intellectual in minority group studies: Reflections on Deaf Studies in social and political contexts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(1), 27–36.
- O'Connell, N. P. (2016b). "Passing as normal": Living and coping with the stigma of deafness. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(8), 651–661. doi: 10.1177/1077800416634729.
- O'Connell, N. P. (2016a). Childhood interrupted: A story of loss, separation and reconciliation. *Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping*, 21(3), 225–234. doi: 10.1080/15325024.2015.1048151.
- O'Connell, N. P., & Deegan, J. (2014). "Behind the teacher's back": An ethnographic study of deaf people's schooling experiences in the Republic of Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies*, 33(3), 229–247. doi: 10.1080/03323315.2014.940683.
- Reed-Danahay, D. E. (1997). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. Oxford: Berg.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2002). Autoethnography: Self-indulgent or something more? In A. P. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Auto-ethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (pp. 209–232). Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 21–43.
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 706–732.
- Valente, J. M. (2011). *d/Deaf and d/Dub: A portrait of a deaf kid as a superhero*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Valente, J. M. (2014). Monster's analysis: Vulnerable anthropology and deaf superhero-becomings. In M. Sasaki (Ed.), *Literacies of the minorities: Constructing a truly inclusive society* (pp. 10–36). Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishing Company.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7, 38–53.
- West, D. (2012). *Signs of hope: Deafhearing family life*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

