Auto/Ethnography and the Question of Ethics

Wolff-Michael Roth

Abstract: Auto/ethnography has emerged as an important method in the social sciences for contributing to the project of understanding human actions and concerns. Although the name of the method includes "ethnography," auto/ethnography often is concerned exclusively with an abstract (i.e., undeveloped) and abstracting understanding, and therefore the writing, of the Self rather than the writing of the "ethno." Auto/ethnography, such conceived, is a form of therapy, in the best case, and a form of narcissism and autoerotic relation, in the worst case. But because the Self exists in relation to the world, becomes in and through participation in everyday events, and because the human relation is inherently ethical, there are inherent ethical questions where the Other may come to be harmed as much as the Self.

Table of Contents

1. Auto/Ethnography and Ethics

I am sitting at my desk, thinking about the self-imposed task of writing a piece that would open a debate concerning auto/ethnography and ethics. I wear headphones, and rap lyrics pound my ears. I can feel the anger, the rapper's voice shouts the anger of a generation, and I know from my own experience how the feeling of powerlessness or poverty can make you angry. I listen up: it is EMINEM rapping about his own life, its change from down and out to being a rapper and in the process loosing his wife.

> It's funny
> I remember back when you and daddy had no money
> Mommy wrapped the Christmas presents up
> And stuck 'em under the tree and said some of 'em were from me
> Cuz daddy couldn't buy 'em
> I'll never forget that Christmas I sat up the whole night crying
> Cuz daddy felt like a bum, see daddy had a job

> But his job was to keep the food on the table for you and mom
> And at the time every house that we lived in
> Either kept getting broken into and robbed
> Or shot up on the block and your mom was saving money for you in a jar
> Trying to start a piggy bank for you so you could go to college
> Almost had a thousand dollars till someone broke in and stole it
> And I know it hurt so bad it broke your momma's heart
> And it seemed like everything was just startin' to fall apart
> Mom and dad was arguin' a lot so momma moved back
> Onto Chalmers in a flat one bedroom apartment
> And dad moved back to the other side of 8 Mile on Novara (EMINEM, 2004a) [1]

EMINEM[1] describes a moment from his own life, when he and his wife together with their little daughter Hailie had fallen on hard times. This eventually leads him to leave the American Midwest for California, where he meets Dr. DRE and has success as a rapper. EMINEM does not just describe this situation to his male friends over a glass of beer, but, accompanied by music, presents it to an audience of millions around the world (the music video is freely available on YouTube). EMINEM sings about himself, his wife, and his daughter. He sings about their poverty that prevents him from buying his daughter Christmas presents, about the break-ins and being robbed, where they loose the money saved for Hailie to go to college, and about their marital life that is breaking apart as the heart of Hailie's mom is breaking. [2]

EMINEM is actually not just rapping about himself. He is doing a form of ethnography. He is rapping about America, about how not only he but also millions of other Americans live. In the animated clip that goes with his song "Mosh" (EMINEM, 2004b) there are scenes of domestic problems in the America of 2004, deeply embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan "fighting terrorism (the music video is freely available from the Internet Archive). He shows scenes of racial profiling, the dirty finger held up against the cops once they have turned and face away; KKK crosses burning as an expression of continuing racism; the surveillance helicopter over the assembled crowd listing to the rapper (remember the black movement MOVE in Philadelphia and the bombing of houses in the African American ghetto?); the soldier coming home after attending the rap concert, his wife standing on the doorsteps crying while holding the letter announcing his re-assignment to Iraq in her hand (which he comments with a "fuck BUSH" and becomes a hoodie); and poverty, where an inner-city single mom of two receives an eviction notice while on the TV monitor behind her George W. BUSH promises tax cuts for the wealthy. EMINEM himself is featured as a hoodie, among many other hoodies, what the students I taught and worked with in the inner city of Philadelphia predominantly don. [3]

---

1   EMINEM is the stage name of the Rap star Marshall Mathers. For non-English speakers or non-insiders: The name EMINEM comes from the shortening of the initial M (εm), for Marshall, "and" ("(ə)n"), and M (εm), for Mathers, yielding what the International Phonetics Association would transcribe as εm(ə)nεm, and which in Latin letters is written as EMINEM.

I do not write about this face of American life vicariously. I know life in America is this way. I know this life first hand. I have lived it. I lived it in Mississippi with three dollars a day for food while, if I had not found the possibility of house-sitting for someone else, sleeping on wilderness campgrounds or in cars on empty parking lots of local malls. I know this life from living with a partner who, at 18, had been expelled from school helping a young black woman. I have seen rampant racism, in Lucedale, Mississippi, where in the late 1980s a flea market publicly featured KKK outfits for sale, and where some people left a room when what they called a "nigger" appeared on a television show. I know this life from elsewhere as well, having taught students in Newfoundland who, for the third and fourth week of the month, had nothing but dry bread and black tea because the money from the welfare check had run out and they could not buy anything else. Today, the homeless problems in the US, Canada, and France, three countries I know better than others, again shows that there are people who live in dire straights. And the street riots in Athens and other Greek cities that right now flash all over the news show that there is unease, and the main reason given for the situation is the malaise of the youth charging their elders with rampant cronyism, corruption, and filling their pockets while others barely make it through the day. [4]

EMINEM raps about everyday life in America, as he has experienced it himself. He raps life, and in rapping, constitutes America into life. He raps and raps about life. But because he raps about his own life, he also exposes those surrounding or involved with him. Their pain no longer is something private, but something that is made public, perhaps without their consent. It is not surprising to me that reporting events from his life does not go unchallenged. For EMINEM, this meant that his mother and his ex-wife have gone to court over his making public events from their private life. In the song "Mosh" he makes thematic the possible implications in another way. Rapping this song might have implications at a very different level: "If I get sniped tonight you know why, Cause I told you to fight" (EMINEM, 2004b, ¶5). Being sniped because your ideas question the status quo is another part of the American reality—as the members of MOVE, John F. and Robert KENNEDY, and Martin Luther KING did not live long enough to actually experience and reflect upon. [5]

EMINEM's pounding rhythm and his rapping for change are filling my mind. Together we can do it: "Let me simplify the rhyme, just to amplify the noise/ Try to amplify the times it, and multiply it by six/ Teen million people are equal of this high pitch/ Maybe we can reach Al Quaida through my speech" (EMINEM, 2004b, ¶6). I realize: He is doing a form of auto/ethnography, and he is rapping for change. And I know now: with it comes a responsibility, which I do not know whether he has thought about or takes serious. It is a responsibility for the Other, which both exceeds and is the same as the responsibility to Self. He in fact pays attention to the ethno—that which is inherently shared, the common plight, the common practices, the shared hopes. In the case of "Mosh," there are numerous commentators who suggest that the song influenced the enrollment of the 18–30-year bracket of the American population to register and go to vote—the song actually ends with a call to vote in the 2004 elections for President shortly after the initial release of the song. That is, EMINEM's actions, creating and publishing

the song, changed American society. He, the artist, cannot abrogate himself from the constitutive effect his actions have had on the American people. All forms of auto/ethnography, written, performed, acted out (play, documentary, movie), and otherwise communicated are inherently ethical acts. [6]

2. Auto/Ethnography

2.1 What is in the name?

Beginning before the beginning, which always already has begun, here a late explanation for why I write the term with the slash. As elaborated repeatedly in a collection I edited entitled *Auto/biography and Auto/Ethnography: Praxis of Research Method* (ROTH, 2005), we can understand this composite name of the method, and therefore, the ethical commitments that comes with the praxis therein named by looking at the parts (and their etymologies) that constitute it. "Auto" comes from the Greek αὐτο, "self," "one's own," and "by oneself." *Auto-*biography is a biography that the author writes himself. It stands in contrast to biography, which employs the same genre but is written by another person such that author and protagonist do not fall together in the *image* of the same individual. But the genre is the same, drawing on the same forms of plot populated by the same form of characters (BAKHTIN, 1986). Autobiography therefore is, and essentially so, auto/biography, the singular in the plural, the individual as a kind of individual (character) living a kind of life (plot). We all understand the auto/biography precisely because it is a common pattern. Similarly, the "auto" in auto/ethnography is a method and a product, in which the Self has a hand in play in the productive process and where its traces therefore are available everywhere. [7]

There are two additional parts in the name of the method often appearing as one: ethnography. The "ethno" in this term comes from the ancient Greek ἔθνο-ς, nation, and the second part derives from γραφία, a word of the same language meaning "writing." Ethnography therefore means writing (describing) and writing about a nation, writing and writing about a people. Auto/ethnography then is the writing of a people where the writer is him- or herself a member, the people writing the people, much like in auto/biography, where the author and protagonist are models of each other. As BAKHTIN (1986) suggests, however, the two are different because the author is part of life, living his or her existence, whereas the protagonist, even when modeled after the author, is subject to compositional principles of the text and its genre(s). They therefore cannot be the same. [8]

2.2 What some auto/ethnographers do and other auto/ethnographers do not do

Because auto/ethnography is a form of ethnography, it has to focus on what we have in common with others, even though this might be in and through the life (voice) of an individual, the author's or someone else's. *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (SHOSTAK, 1981) is an example of an ethnography told in and through the words of a member of the tribe. The contributor collective that

produced *Our Lives as Database—Doing a Sociology of Ourselves* (KONOPÁSEK, 2000) clearly describes collective life and culture in and through the personal lives of the co-authors. Taken in this latter way, authors take the special insights they gain from their particular position in the lifeworld of a people (ἔθνο-ς) and use it as a vantage point to write (γράφ-ειν), and write about, the people. But there are also very different understandings of what auto/ethnography is about. [9]

There are many examples in the public domain—books, refereed journal articles, and other forms of representation—where the author associates with auto/ethnography but that have little to do with the ethno and everything with the auto. Authors write about their being conflicted by something, about their upheavals, about their selves, about their self-consciousness, completely failing to address not only the ethno in their method but also the very constitutional Other prerequisite to the existence of the Self. The "auto/ethnography" stories then become of the woe-me kind, auto-graphies, the kind that many not subscribing to auto/ethnography as a legitimate method—which does not include me, as I support the principled use of any method—can *easily* deconstruct and reject. The difficulties self-ascribed auto/ethnographers face in academe, often made evident in the many woe-me-type contributions to the list autoethnography Internet forum autoethnography@yahoo.com, derive (in my view) from the frequently unprincipled, egoistical and egotistical, narcissistic preoccupation with and auto-affection of the Self. [10]

The problem with the latter form in which the idea of auto/ethnography realizes itself lies in the complete abstraction of the Self from its constitutional relation with and for the Other (i.e., the generalized other). This Other is the ground against which the Self becomes figure, but this becoming figure requires the Other not only as ground but also as material and as tool. The Self and Other are co-constituted in their relation, having emerged from a singular plural *with*. As philosophers such as Paul RICŒUR (e.g., 1990), Jacques DERRIDA (e.g., 1998), or Jean-Luc NANCY (e.g., 2000) write, there cannot be a Self without an Other. The Other is a pre-condition of and model for the Self. This is also an implication of the sociocultural and cultural-historical approach, whereby any higher cognitive function attributable to an individual first and foremost was a form of relation *between* individuals who constitute the culture (VYGOTSKY, 1986). Without the Other, there is no *con*sciousness, which, as its etymological origins show—i.e., Lat. con-, together (with), and scīre, to know—knowledge *with* and *for* others. More importantly, without *con*sciousness there cannot be *self-con*sciousness. Consciousness-for-oneself always and already is consciousness-for-the-Other. Therefore, writing the Self without acknowledging the Other is itself a violent (symbolic) act against the ethical condition that comes with being human. [11]

3. Ethics and Responsibility

Ethics, from Greek ἠθος (ethos), character, manners, is the science of morals. It is, as IMMANUEL KANT (1956) expressed in his ethical imperative, essentially a form of relation, where the nature of the Other is specified in the first word of the compounds "human ethics" and "animal ethics." KANT articulates two ideas, one that specifies ethics as a metaphysical endeavor and as having an empirical component, though this "empirical part especially might be termed *practical anthropology*, whereas the rational part might better be called morals" (p.12, my translation). I am not so much concerned with morals, because I am suspicious of any metaphysical project, thinking that without our material life no consciousness would exist. It is the empirical part of ethics that is important here. This empirical part of ethics thereby comes to be co-extensive with practical anthropology, and practical anthropology co-extensive with ethics. [12]

Ethics is all about human relations, and ethnography, in writing and writing about the people, not only describes the nature of these relations but also requires and presupposes a relation from which the knowledge about human relations can emerge. An individual Self always and already is in a world, surrounded and constituted with and by the Other with which the Self stands in an inherently ethical relation (e.g., BUBER, 1970). This relation has begun before the beginning:

> "La responsabilité pour autrui ne peut avoir commencé dans mon engagement, dans ma décision. La responsabilité illimitée où je me trouve vient d'en deçà de ma liberté, d'un 'antérieur-à-tout-souvenir' d'un 'ultérieur-à-tout-accomplissement' du non-présent, par excellence du non-originel, de l'an-archique, d'un en deça ou d'un au-delà de l'essence" (LEVINAS, 1978, p.24).[2] [13]

Ethnography, whether conducted in one's own community or somewhere else, therefore inherently means relation, responsibility, and ethics. [14]

Every act, by its very nature, changes the (social and material) world. This world is not our own but is co-inhabited by and co-constituted with others. EMINEM raps, and his rapping helps us understand the experiences of the Other; and his rapping changes the (socio-political) world. Our very presence in this world thereby makes us responsible for what we do and how we do it. Coming from beyond essence, we can only assume this responsibility. There is no time out, no alibi from our being and responsibility (BAKHTIN, 1993). We can only assume this responsibility or deny, repress, and abstract from it. These latter actions are inherently without ethics, un-ethical, because they constitute attempts to cut ethics of and remove it from our lives, which we inherently share with others in what Harold GARFINKEL (e.g., 1996) has come to call "immortal society." As un-ethical they constitute the negative of ethics, non-ethics, and thereby, in an inter-

---

2   In English this can be read as: "The responsibility for others cannot have its beginning in my engagement, in my decision. The infinite responsibility in which I find myself comes from beyond my freedom, from a "before-all-memory", from a "before-all-accomplishment" of the non-present, from a non-original par excellence, from the an-archical, from this side or from beyond a beyond all essence" (my translation).

esting twist of fate, ethics itself. Whereas our own mundane everyday involve-ment in society and the world does not come with the obligation to ask some human research ethics board, the ethical obligation to research ethics applies because we present our experiences and learning to some wider public. [15]

4. Ethics and the Communication of Auto/Ethnography

Even the most narcissistic piece of writing that we might imagine already implies the Other; and it does so for several reasons. First, narcissistic consciousness still derives from, presupposes, and constitutes a form of *con*sciousness, knowing *with* others. Second, writing and writing about this narcissistic consciousness requires a language. This language, as any language, is the language of the Other, which has come to me from the Other, and which, in my writing, returns to the Other (DERRIDA, 1998). In returning to the Other, it also affects the Other; and what it does to the Other is evidenced in the Other's own subsequent actions. EMINEM raps, and the number of young voters more than doubles compared to the previous elections. EMINEM raps and he raises consciousness. It is not mere self-consciousness but a consciousness for the Other as well. Because of this irremediable implication of the Other even in the most narcissistic, egoistical, and egotistical self-consciousness imaginable, there is a relation to the Other. This relation inherently has to be thought of in terms of responsibility and ethics. We cannot do auto/ethnography without ethics, even if we use the "ethno" as a pretext to write about ourselves. [16]

But writing is not the only form in which ethnographic work is returned to the Other. For example, in one instant one of my high school students and presented the results of our work—subsequently published as a work in and with different voices (ROTH & ALEXANDER, 1997)—as a performance. Others choose the genre of the novel, film, short story, play, or, as I present in the introduction of this text, in rap lyrics, to present to audiences the lessons of and from life they have learned. In all of these situations, we have to construe our representations with ethics in mind. What we write not only is expressed in content but also in the very form in which we write and present the truth; ethnographic writing also is a w/ri(gh)ting of the world (ROTH & McROBBIE, 1997). W/ri(g)ting, its very form, interrupts and disrupts the One, as do rap lyrics. W/ri(gh)ting, as rapping, is dialogical, countering the monologic nature of so much that is published under the flag of the auto. [17]

5. Auto/Ethnography and Ethics—A (First) Return

In this month's contribution to the Ethics Debate, Sophie TAMAS (2008) assists us in understanding some of the ethical issues that come with auto/ethnography. She makes the point that it is not only the content but also the form of the auto/ethnographic "report" needs to be considered in questioning the ethics—which we might have expected, given the well-known dictum of Marshall McLUHAN (1995) who has worked in the geographical vicinity where TAMAS lives and who said that the medium *is* the message. TAMAS provides an example from her own experience, how she writes and directs a play about a small village

and her own husband played one of the characters with "bad" character. The show was a success: there apparently was much laughter, and Sophie and her husband turned out to be a good team—If it had not been for the fact that Sophie left her husband within a month after the play. Her play comes to be not only about life, it is life itself, coming from life and returning to life. The form of this life mediates life itself. It is an auto-affection of life by forms of itself. [18]

TAMAS uses the experience to reflect on the ethics of auto/ethnography and the kind of writing that she has encountered. But in doing this writing, she does not remove herself from the ethical relation. She writes about the problem of order, especially when it comes to ordering something very disorderly. Though the point order potentially being a fantasy is well taken, without reflecting, which takes some form where the Self has to become other, we cannot learn, because learning and understanding are only possible in the dialectic of practical understanding and explaining (RICŒUR, 1991). This work of explaining brings order, because it is the order of the world that allows us to be efficient in what we do and say. Even if we cannot ever write the experience of trauma, the very process of writing singularizes one form of idea over another—unless we truly write in the dialogical manner that Mikhail BAKHTIN (1984a, 1984b) ascribes to the novels of Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY and François RABELAIS. I might say that had TAMAS attempted to w/ri(gh)t trauma, dialogically, involving more actively the Other, she might have ordered the trauma a little more in an unordered and disordering way. [19]

A better solution to auto/ethnography than the one that privileges the monologic voice of one person is collective auto/ethnography or cogenerative dialogue as method (e.g., STITH & ROTH, 2008). Cogenerative dialogue, as we have developed in the context of inner-city schools, involves all stakeholders in the process of making sense of their lifeworlds. That is, in the context of schooling, a principal, team leader, university professor, science teacher, and science students might come together with or without classroom videotape in the attempt to understand what was happening in an event they shared (and perhaps recorded). Because each person gets to speak and each person provides space for others to speak, the understandings (about what has happened) are not conflated into the homogenizing one (usually the researcher's) voice but retain the multiplicity arising from the co-presence of all participants' voices. Order *is* disorderly, requires many voices, a polyphony, which is both ordered and disordered. The writing of the research not only describes the cogenerative dialogue as method but also takes itself the form of cogenerative dialogue (e.g., TOBIN, ROTH, & ZIMMERMANN, 2001). The participants write about the cultural phenomena in which they have participated in and from their different institutional positions and then, without privileging any single voice, report to their audiences what they have learned and how this has changed their everyday practices of teaching, learning, administrating, and supervising. [20]

But dialogicity and multiplicity does not mean that one cannot do so in a monologue. As BAKHTIN (1984a) shows, multiplicity of ideas can be present in an internal monologue. Thus, EMINEM raps speaking in the voice of the white

underclass mother being evicted, then speaks the experience of the African American subject to racial stereotyping, and then belches the "fuck BUSCH" of the soldier freshly assigned to fight an unjust war in Iraq. We hear in what is clearly EMINEM's voice the many different voices of the American people. [21]

6. Coda

Auto/ethnography, as far as I am concerned, is a legitimate method to research, and to articulate structures in and of, social life. Even if it is "only" therapy concerned with the ego and Self, it is still a production in and of social life, and, in and as social structure, affects the constitutive Other as well. This makes auto/ethnography part of the ethical realm. Sophie TAMAS is encouraging us to open up a dialogue about the ethical issues in auto/ethnography. As editor of this Debate (column, forum), I invite others with interests in auto/ethnography to join her and me, and engage in a debate about this method and their ways of viewing and dealing with the ethics that are implied. Precedence for such a debate exists in the debate about the ethical issues involved in cogenerative dialogue published in Volume 2 Issue 3 of this journal. [22]

References

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984a). *Problems in Dostoevsky's poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984b). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1993). *Toward a philosophy of the act*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Buber, Martin (1970). *I and thou*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Derrida, Jacques (1998). *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The prosthesis of origin*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Eminem (2004a). *Mockingbird* [Lyrics]. Accessed December 10, 2008 at http://artists.letssingit.com/EMINEM-lyrics-mockingbird-4p78x3t.

Eminem (2004b). *Mosh* [Lyrics]. Accessed December 10, 2008 at http://artists.letssingit.com/eminem-lyrics-mosh-tk59vf3.

Garfinkel, Harold (1996). Ethnomethodology's program. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *59*, 5-21.

Kant, Immanuel (1956). *Werke, Band IV: Schriften zur Ethik und Reigionsphilosophie*. Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag.

Konopásek Zdenek (Ed.) (2000). *Our lives as database—Doing a sociology of ourselves (Czech social transitions in autobiographical research dialogues)*. Prague: Karolinum Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1978). *Autrement u'être ou au0delà de l'essence.* Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.

McLuhan, Marshall (1995). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. London: Routledge.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000). *Being singular plural*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Ricœur, Paul (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul (1991). *From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics, II*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Roth, Wolff-Michael (Ed). (2005). *Auto/biography and auto/ethnography: Praxis of research method.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Roth, Wolff-Michael & Alexander, Todd (1997). The interaction of students' scientific and religious discourses: Two case studies. *International Journal of Science Education*, *19*, 125-146.

Roth, Wolff-Michael & McRobbie, Cam (1999). Lifeworlds and the "w/ri(gh)ting" of classroom research. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *31*, 501-522.

Shostak, Marjorie (1981). *Nisa: The life and words of a !Kung woman*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Stith, Ian & Roth, Wolff-Michael (2008). *Students in action: Cogenerative dialogues from secondary to elementary schools*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Tamas, Sophie (2008). Writing and righting trauma: Troubling the autoethnographic voice. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(1), Art. 22, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0901220.

Tobin, Ken; Roth, Wolff-Michael & Zimmermann, Andrea (2001). Learning to teach science in urban schools. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *38*, 941-964.

Vygotsky, Lev S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Author

Wolff-Michael ROTH is Lansdowne Professor of Applied Cognitive Science at the University of Victoria.

Contact:

Wolff-Michael Roth

MacLaurin Building A548
University of Victoria
Victoria, BC, V8W 3N4
Canada

Tel.: #1 250 721 7885
Fax: #1 250 721 7598

E-mail: mroth@uvic.ca

Citation

Roth, Wolff-Michael (2008). Auto/Ethnography and the Question of Ethics [22 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(1), Art. 38, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0901381.