

## Autoethnographic writing inside and outside the academy and ethics

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### Abstract

*Published writers of fictional or semi-fictional works entering the academy as doctoral candidates express surprise at the requirements of formal human ethics reviews. Admitting an element of the autoethnographic exists in their writing, they may insist that they possess what Freeman called 'narrative integrity'. This paper considers the ethics of autoethnography as they apply to both the academy, chiefly within the PhD by artefact and exegesis, and the world of published writers, seeking possible solace from such scholarly concepts as 'relational ethics,' or 'ethic of care.' Drawing methodologically on our experience as doctoral supervisor and student and with the permission of writer/students whose stories are inseparable from this work, this study unpacks in ethical terms the problems reported by students whose methodology involves evocative or performative autoethnography. As interpretatist methodologists, autoethnographers maintain it provides insights into the interplay between the personally engaged self and mediated cultural descriptions. Methodologically, it enacts the self and others as data. This connection between the personal and the social makes it difficult for autoethnographers to speak of themselves without speaking of others. Examining autoethnography involves a close scrutiny of the boundaries between the self and the other, a process that is both enlightening and essential for supervisory dyads in creative writing methodologically informed by autoethnography. These aspects of the ethics of autoethnography are crucial, but little attention has been paid to the problematic notion that practice-led research is emergent in practice and that its autoethnography requires a retrospective approach, looking backwards as well as forwards. The reality of applying this methodology in practice-led research clashes with the pro-active nature of ethics procedurals required by universities. The paper identifies nine praxical problems that arise from such clashes, and considers best-practice principles for responding*

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*to these problems, drawing strongly on indigenous research. Finally, it offers conclusions relating to consent, transparency and the need to open a dialogue around best practice in autoethnographic research in the academic field of Writing.*

KEYWORDS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY; ETHICS; RESEARCH SUPERVISION; ETHICAL EDUCATION

## Introduction: Capturing autoethnography

In this paper we consider the question: ‘How are the ethics of writing involving evocative and performative autoethnography different for writers outside and within the academy?’ We consider what this means for writers from outside academia entering it as doctoral candidates using narrative or practice-led methodologies impacted by autoethnography. The distinction we make here about writing based on the lived experience of the writer and the writers’ past and present communities is one between writing that does and does not come under the oversight of a university. Autoethnography, can, and needs to, be situated as qualitative research (Tolich, 2010), and practiced in analytical-interpretative, evocative and performative forms. It is the latter two forms that concern us in this study of ‘autoethnography’ in this study. It is practiced as research but is seldom the conscious practice of writers beyond academia. If this is the case then qualitative researchers must, according to the Position Statement of the Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (2007) ‘resolve conflicts of interest, document research plans in advance, respect participants’ voluntary participation, and document the informed consent process that is foundational to qualitative inquiry’ (cited in Tolich, 2010: 1602). As such, closer attention to ethical issues is crucial (Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2017; Tullis, 2013; Tolich, 2010), especially given that PhD candidates in Writing increasingly call on it as part of the *bricolage* of a multiplicity of creative methods within ‘practice-led research’, a methodology and a mode of creating knowledge explored in more detail below. This recourse to practice-led research has implications for the involvement of ethics committees in such research. However, as this paper discusses, the input of ethics committees changes the parameters of practice for autoethnographic writers in the academic compared to the non-academic world, arguing for a deeper understanding by HREC committees of the ethical complexities of autoethnographic writing practice.

Autoethnography takes self-narrative from the domains of storytelling and memoir into that of the creation of data and it leads to new knowledge and/or new understanding of areas of old knowledge. It ‘transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation’ (Chang, 2008: 43) and necessarily involves others. Autoethnography demands a self-reflexivity that allows spaces for narratives and representations of the

individual to be validated as research (Tierney, 1998; Muncey, 2010). It involves presenting and re-presenting the self in ways that produce data through interactions, observations, analyses and interpretations. In turn, it provides us with insights into the modes of thought, action and interaction that underpin and/or evolve from enacting the self and others as data (Arnold, 2011). For Ellis and Bochner (2000: 742), this provides ‘autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation’. Based on this definition an argument can be made that authors outside academe whose autobiographical work offers commentary on the impact of historical or social contextual factors on a life are undertaking autoethnography; the core difference being that the reflective process of writers in an academic setting is formalized, recorded, and subject to scrutiny.

During this consideration, we, like Holt (2003), turn the telescope on our own data. During the past three years, the first author has supervised 11 doctoral students using methodologies involving autoethnography through the ethics approval writing and rewriting stages and towards the journey to completion. Although we base this discussion on our own experience (respectively as supervisor and supervisee), we include within this the awareness that others’ stories and dilemmas are part of our own stories. We draw an analogy with voice-centered methodology in sociological and educational research with its focus on keeping respondents’ voices and viewpoints alive while acknowledging the creative dominance of the researcher or writer (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Our retelling is reflexively dialogic and embodies the voices of others. This reflexivity involves ‘acknowledging the critical role we [researcher writers] play in creating, interpreting and theorising research data’ (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 3). This self-reflexive observation points to an issue at the heart of many forms of narrative research: *Whose story is it anyway?* This is a question that goes to the heart of the problem faced by autoethnographic writers in the academy. This mock-flippant cliché has been used in the titles of several academic articles on the topic (Pavlenko, 2002; Carey, 2008). Clandinin and Connelly (2000), working within the dimensions of time, place and the intersection between the personal and the social, challenged writers narrating stories involving their experiences and observations with the question: *Do you own a story simply because you tell it?* Martin Tolich (2010: 1159), nuancing the challenge further, asks ‘do others mentioned in the text have rights?’ In response, Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 60) would say we meet ‘ourselves’ in our texts and in academic texts this is inevitable (Arnold, 2011).

The rest of this section will consider the ethical implications of the relationship between self and other in autoethnography in more depth, beginning with the origins of the approach and moving into its use in the creative writing discipline. We will consider further some of the key facets of autoethnography as it pertains to writing. Along the way, we note resonances of its parent disciplines such as Anthropology and Social Science. As early as 1997, Deborah Reed-Danahay observed autoethnography consisted in the researching and writing (the *-graphy*) of observations about others in the sociocultural world (the *ethno*) from a unique insider's perspective (the *auto*). Veering between viewing autoethnography as narcissism and therapy, Roth (2009) examined the ethical issue of the 'Othering' of the 'ethno' as an unavoidable correlative of autoethnographic enquiry. Others in autoethnography are always visible or invisible 'participants' in our stories (Chang, 2008: 69) and they have rights of consent and deserve protection. Roth's capitalization of 'Other' acknowledges these subjects as discrete, individuated subjectivities whose individual stories matter.

The discipline of Writing encompasses creative writing and the flexible methodologies of practice-led research. To describe the term more deeply, 'practice-led' research enables writer/scholars to see their exegetical, epistemological and theoretical understandings as emergent from their creative work, often through the medium of a reflective journal that is a form of memoir (Arnold, 2007; Bacon, 2017; Harper, 2008). The act of practice contributes methodologically to the process of coming to know and the process of telling as well as the narrated text are contributors to knowledge in practice-led research (Barrett and Bolt, 2007). Practice-led research allows the academy to consider practice as a *bona fide* realization of research in itself even as it interacts with scholarly ideas and debates that emerge from it (Arnold, 2007). There are, we need to clarify, ethical dimensions to both the creative and exegetical components of the doctoral output.

The discipline of creative writing is, thus, often broadly underpinned by postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist insights about the natures of truth and subjectivity, and so claims to truth in any absolutist and scientific sense are neither made nor desired. 'If postmodernism has taught us anything,' writes autoethnographer Tessa Muncey (2010: 48), 'it's that there's a thin line between fact and fiction.' In Writing, autoethnography is about feeling real rather than being truthful, and much of its authenticity is imagined. But what is imagined often begins with what is experienced, observed in natural life, overheard, overseen. It is not set up as data collection, but as an act of urgent creativity. Autoethnography, as Reed-Danahay (1997: 9) wrote, can be *both* 'a method and a text.' Applied to Writing, autoethnography is the individual's experience of the world, their unique ways

of seeing, being, expressing, telling, that lead to a knowledge claim. There is no necessary scientific claim about applicability to other cultural members or to generalizability of fieldwork observations as there might be in autoethnography in Anthropology or Social Sciences, for instance. There is no objective outsider, as Denzin observed in 1989.

The narrative in autoethnography involves analyzing storytelling and enquiry into self and others as data rather than mere presentation of narrative (Arnold, 2011; Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010). Autoethnographers can investigate themselves as the main character; include others as 'co-participant or co-informants' or, more scientifically, study others as the 'primary' focus (Chang, 2008: 65). In doctoral writing, the first is the commonest choice and deals with the categories of evocative and performative autoethnography. Unfurling the self and the ways in which it produces data through interactions, observations, analyses and interpretations provides us with insights into the modes of thought, action and interaction that underpin and/or evolve from enacting the self and others as data (Arnold, 2011). For Ellis and Bochner (2000: 742), this provides 'autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation'. This 'interplay' needs careful description in the academy. This connection between the personal and the social makes it impossible for even the most ethically aware to speak of themselves without speaking of others (Wall, 2008). The next section suggests the same degree of ethical care may not need to be practiced by writers beyond the academy.

### Writers outside the academy

In our roles as supervisor and candidate in the discipline of Writing, we encounter writers coming to the academy with imaginations brimming with creative ways to incorporate their own experiences and those in whom they are expressly interested into broad fictionalized frameworks. These subjects may be remarkable family members, people who have lived in unusual ways or individuals whose stories would otherwise be consigned to oblivion. Such writers approaching the academy want, for instance, to retell the narratives of forebears, imagine stories set in places they know well and among people they have known, recreate personages from history as ethically unidentifiable composites and create (auto)biographical memoirs, sometimes dealing with urgent issues of illness or death. They want to emphasize, to paraphrase Larson (2007: 104), the emotional truth of the *author* as much as that of a character. Favoring autoethnography as a robust methodology for telling or performing life stories, they put

themselves and their experiences to the fore and consider what Roth (2009) called 'the Other' as partial data. What is more, they want to do this with a twist; and this twist is part of what makes it fresh and new. Further, at the risk of over-generalization, they are likely to have an ethical sense that might be described by Mark Freeman's (1997) term 'narrative integrity'. The first generation of autoethnographers parsed this thus: 'before we act we consider what we are writing ourselves into' (Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Goodall, Jr, Pelias, and Richardson, 2008: 319).

When potential candidates approach potential supervisors with an idea for a creative PhD they may already have (and be) 'data' in much the same way as qualitative research begins with a hunch (Cormack, 1991); itself a phenomenon derived from a writer-researcher's experience and leading to their ability to identify a 'gap'. Chang (2008: 61), offering a tidier, more linear reading of autoethnography than what often happens in practice warned: 'given that autoethnography is more than casually recalled and accounted memories, your research plan needs to delineate why and how you want to explore your own life'. Ideally, in practice, supervisors only accept ethically non-contentious projects in the first place; but at this early stage the line of enquiry is emergent. The basic tenet of ethics, 'since no life is lived in isolation, information about other people can never be completely excluded from autoethnography' needs consideration *before* the student writes a PhD proposal. The supervisory team and the candidate will consider the ethical issues: *What about informed consent? What about willing participation? What about indirect participation? What about the politics of representation? What about the subjectivities of those Others?*

However, projects that have grown from life experience in this way may well be underpinned by a social justice orientation/intention, in that the writing aims to give voice, to bring to life or to identify an injustice or gap; this may, in fact be where the desire to write comes from. That is, such projects can be driven by a transformative paradigm. Further, since, as Muncey (2010) argues, autoethnography can play into counter-discursive spaces and validate the stories of the silenced, the imprisoned, the marginalized and the deviant as sites of knowledge and research, it is a close methodological fit. Since taking this approach assumes an ontological stance of righting wrongs this can give writers of such projects a sense that their work is inherently 'ethical'. Yet projects derived from these origins are less likely to be ethically non-contentious, involving as they do the marginalized and vulnerable, particularly so as in creative practices autoethnography looks backwards ethically as well as forwards (Tolich, 2010). When such projects come up against the pro-active university ethics process there is an evident mismatch. This will be discussed further in a later section, but

first, in order to understand how writers entering the academy respond to institutional ethics after apprenticeships in the professional world, we want to turn the glass to writers in the community, in society. Here, writers might follow Joan Didion's code for writers of creative nonfiction: 'live – and die – by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully' (Banks and Andrew, 2012; Carey, 2008).

We can begin in Australia and the works we discuss are touched by what can be considered *autoethnography* rather than being autoethnographies *per se*. We will open with Tim Winton, whose titles are popular and include *Cloudstreet*, *The Turning*, *Breath*. His works absorb facets of the places and people around him, but we do not in any way claim he, or other writers outside the academy, necessarily set out to write generic autoethnography. We argue that the principles of autoethnography that may trouble a human ethics board are, however, present, including potentially identifiable communities and individuals. Winton repeatedly locates his stories in patches of Western Australia renamed Angelus or Sawyer or White Point, but recognizably Albany and the little crayfishing town of Lancelin. He is close to home and writes with what ethnographer Behar (1996), in her study of the vulnerable observer, would regard as 'empathy': a deep identification that is felt, lived and observed enabling insightful and compassionate writing. The ethical issue of the identifiability of place is understood as writerly license, and whether anyone is harmed is a matter of professional ethics. In an academic context, the reputations of researchers, supervisors and institutions are vulnerable, and an unexamined act of innocent writerly empathy could unintentionally but potentially result in harm.

Further, Winton also draws on memories and eavesdropped conversations, calling on personal resources of experience and real incidents and creating evocations of the decaying meat-works, the end-game cannery and the depleted fishing industry that resonate with denizens of small-town Western Australia. His fiction 'draws its energy from its sense of the everyday' (Ben-Messahel, 2006: 6). His 1991 *Cloudstreet* commandeered his own family stories and gained verisimilitude through its historical references: World War II, the Korean War, Kennedy's assassination. Specifically, he wrote of the grandmother who lived in a tent in her backyard, the farmers forced to leave their land, the grandfather who worked at the Mint, the fundamentalist Christianity, the *wharfies* and marksmen, the gamblers and drinkers. In a review in *The Guardian*, Aida Edemariam (2008) wrote Winton:

made of them a baggy, unashamedly poetic and non-naturalistic but also hyper-real and absorbing saga of two poor families rubbing along in a big house in Perth.

Edemariam continues, identifying the grainy authenticity Winton might share with James Joyce: '*Cloudstreet* gets you inside the very skin of post-war working-class Australians the way Joyce makes you feel like a turn-of-the-century Dubliner.' *Cloudstreet* is a future 'classic' (online).

Winton and Joyce may appear to use autoethnographic methods to write texts that are methodologically part autoethnography, but they write beyond the ambit of university ethics committees and their practices are accepted as the stock-in-trade of published authors. If they were writing PhDs by artefact and exegesis, the issue would remain: these are based to differing degrees on real people, exchanges, incidents and places. Are these people participants or merely part of the writer's fabric of memory? A question for the candidate would be: what are the ethical challenges of weaving stories from our fabric of memory and the everyday?

Whether in the academy or not, writers hoard experiences. Virginia Woolf, (1985, in 'A sketch of the past', 1938: 84) experienced a flower in St Ives and filed it away: 'It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later.' Drawing on extensive travels, Arnold Zable is also part autoethnographer. He evokes the 'moments of being' Virginia Woolf (1985) spoke of rather than the Joycean epiphanies of *Dubliners* (1914) as the pivots of his stories in the collection *Violin Lessons*. In an online interview, Zable (2011) says:

The stories in *Violin Lessons* emerged out of encounters with people in railway carriages, fellow workers in Swiss orchards and vineyards, on the mountain paths of the Greek island of Ithaca, in ancestral villages on the Polish–Russian border, and the living rooms of homes throughout the city. In war-torn Saigon, in 1970, I immersed myself in the streets and came upon 'The Dust of Life' – the term the Vietnamese applied to the displaced boys that roamed the city.

This, of course, is simply what writers do and have always done: hoarding experiences and applying 'empathy'. In her book for creative writers, *Write* (2006), also drawing an analogy with Joyce, Sarah Quigley unpacks this process of 'stealing' from real life (2006: 109):

A writer of fiction is in the best position to hold a mirror to life and give back a true reflection. (79)

Writers are like magpies, picking up by nature and instinct any glittering items that appeal to them. This appropriation can be seen as a kind of stealing; but then all art steals from the world in which it is based. In other words, it's a necessary theft that usually does no harm (unless it's intentional, in which case the writer is likely to end up in court with a libel suit slapped on them). (107)

A fictional character may be composed of thirty parts – physical, emotional, spiritual – of thirty different people, known by the writer, throughout many different phases of life. (107)

Quigley's language shows awareness of the ethical undercurrents although her market is clearly the aspiring writer rather than the PhD candidate. The idea of 'stealing' recalls Janet Malcolm's (1995) charge in her Sylvia Plath biography that biographers peep through keyholes, rifle through drawers, and plunder the loot of dark family secrets. This gestures to two things: recognizability and coincidence. It is possible for readers to recognize, or think they recognize, someone or something in a work by a writer they know. Quigley offers remedies for that: invent composite names ('pseudonyms'); bestow additional characteristics on any character who might be recognized and go for 'composite', and invent fictional pasts, presents and futures (110–111). Tullis (2013) adds other strategies, such as creating distance between the facts and the researcher; and writerly flourishes and generic features to de-identify subjects or 'others' She offers a warning: 'potential autoethnographers need to consider the risks of conducting this type of research not only for others, but also for themselves' (251).

### Writers in the academy

We now return to the university, where writers produce autoethnographic narratives in the subgenre of 'trauma memoir' (Joseph, 2013), of the illness and death of a spouse (Ellis, 1995), international adoption (Wall, 2008), spousal abuse (Tamas, 2011), suicidal ideation (Eales, 2011), home-based palliative caregiving (Carey, 2008) and teenage pregnancy (Muncey, 2010) amongst other serious issues. Currently, PhD writers within our university create fictions drawing autoethnographically on their experiences of rest homes, high school cyber-bullying, working with the disabled, living in a trailer park and memories of the Holocaust, to cite a few, some more traumatic than others. Having posited a pedagogical and ethical model for trauma-based narrative nonfiction, Sue Joseph (2013) warns, 'each candidate wishing to render creatively their personal trauma narrative must be viewed individually and carefully, and supervised and monitored closely, both for ethical as well as safety issues' (online).

While student-researchers should be encouraged to examine their ethical stance this pre-supposes supervisors are equipped to issue what Tolich (2010: 1605) calls the 'general caution to be aware of the vulnerability their topics might generate for themselves and their participants.' Most universities have ethics advisors for this, but such advisors, like the reviewers Holt (2003) encountered, are unlikely to be autoethnographers

and few are likely to be familiar with self-as-data or voice-centered methodologies. Increasingly in modern universities, sub-IRBs (Internal Review Boards) operate at discipline or faculty level for projects of low-level risk, while HRECs (Human Research Ethics Committees) are university-wide and are unlikely to involve researchers with expertise in creative disciplines and methodologies. This can leave supervisors and students negotiating uncharted and complex territory. A mapping out of ethical terrain is, then, essential for all supervisor-student dyads. Here we discuss three recent studies to illustrate students' analyses. First, Tamas (2011) analyzed difficult questions of harm versus benefit and intent versus impact in the context of a doctorate in autoethnographic writing focusing on spousal abuse. Next, Rose (2011: 7) interrogating her right as an outsider to produce a narrative of Sri Lankan migrants based on her close friendship with one family, concluded 'we should always be aware of our responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction: to question the impact of our decisions and actions'. Third, Carey (2011) foregrounded writers' responsibilities for what – and who – they write within narrative methodologies. She notes these methodologies are more closely aligned with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007) than those of creative industries.

As an example, observation-based methodologies offer a picture of how this ethical complexity can play out. Arguably all cases using observation-based methodologies – especially if they *a priori* seem non-contentious – need the scrutiny of any IRB or HREC. Chang (2008: 68) says: 'If your study engages others as interviewees or the observed, you should treat your study in the same way as other social science research requiring an IRB approval'. In Social Sciences research involving subject voices, it is ethical to allow interviewed subjects the chance to correct words or perceptions in transcriptions or creative representations. In ethical research of any kind, subjects have the right to veto how a writer may have represented them (Borland, 2006). They can decide their story is not to be used at all (Tolich, 2010). Subjects may withdraw at any time. These are known ethical norms for empirical research, but autoethnography in writing often poses cases not so easily understood by the principles involving empirical research (Ellis, 2007; Sparkes, 2017). The next section uses three cases of autoethnographic research to locate and problematize other ethical issues for writers of autoethnographies in the academy. Riskily, such writing can expose 'the limits and fragilities of self-knowledge' (Gannon, 1996: 492), so our discussion identifies risks inherent in problems that are unique to writers of autoethnography in Writing.

## Ethical issues in autoethnographies for writers in the academy

While ensuring justice is done to the appropriate representation and voices of 'others' in stories (Wall, 2008), institutions, specifically supervisors, also need to ensure the psychological welfare of the writer-researcher recounting stories (Joseph, 2011). In autoethnography in Writing, mis/under/over representation is a topic of contestation because the 'others' are neither subjects nor participants but people we may have lived our lives with, reimagined and reconstructed, like those in the lives of Winton, Zable or Quigley. Carey (2008) concludes the strategy of co-negotiating textual representation with subjects solves many ethical dilemmas, particularly that of the interpretive authority of the writer. In doing this, Carey undertakes Ellis's (2007: 4) common-sense-based 'relational ethics', requiring researchers to 'act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to initiate and maintain conversations'.

The concept of relational ethics resounds through Ellis's own autoethnography (1995); to this day it has influenced the work of supervisors of students of autoethnographic research. Ellis's (2007) guidelines for ethical ethnography remain well-known, particularly the advise to exercise an 'ethic of care'. Write for the greater good; remember you do not own your own story; expect the unexpected. Also influential for supervisors are Didion's principle of rendering faithfully, Freeman's (1997) idea of 'narrative integrity' and Denzin's introduction of 'ethic of care', presuming 'a moral community that is ontologically prior to the person' (2003a: 249). We have moved on from Denzin's (2003b: 249) belief that 'many forms of participatory action research, reflexive ethnography, and qualitative research involving testimonies, life stories, life-history inquiry, personal narrative inquiry, performance autobiography, conversation analysis, and ethnodrama' should fall outside HREC jurisdiction. Ellis (2007) had argued such projects should have a kind of generic 'process consent', meaning voluntary involvement is rechecked throughout the project. She argued that the researchers' understanding of ethical processes, as expert practitioners within a discipline, should earn the trust of the HREC/IRB. However, ours are hyper-vigilant times and supervisors and candidates are university representatives, vulnerable on many levels.

Today supervisors of autoethnographies in Writing can draw on a range of resources, There are the guidelines of social sciences research involving human subjects. Supervisors may apply to their supervisions their awareness of such concepts as 'relational ethics' and 'ethics of care', ingrained as they are in the work of the authoritative first generation of autoethnographers. Other tools can be found in the insights of Joseph's model for

supervising students writing trauma narratives (2011) and in Tolich's ten principles (2010), to which this study unavoidably turns.

There are, nevertheless, other problems encountered by the supervisor-student dyad on a case-by-case basis. For example, for journalists writing creative nonfiction, there are professionally ethical ways to deal with the imperatives of non-identifiability, confidentiality, authentic representation and minimizing harm (Banks and Andrew 2011). In this section we consider some of these other problems with reference to three Writing projects, roughly equivalent to those of three of the first author's own candidates:

- *I've been a resident in a rest home, and I'm writing stories about the tensions between residents and staff, residents and family members, like those I've experienced. I'm not writing biographical material but I'm inspired by snatches of dialogue and observed interactions (Candidate 1).*
- *As a high school teacher with a social justice agenda, I'm writing a fictional book for young adults where I investigate the impacts of cyber-bullying and binge drinking. Much of my knowledge of the current state of affairs comes from interacting with students in my line of duty (Candidate 2).*
- *My magic realism novel places people with disabilities into heroic positions and draws on my experience as a social worker to add verisimilitude to their characterizations and empathy to their transformations and, sadly, degenerations (Candidate 3).*

The essential problem is that none of the students above can proactively list specific participants as required by an ethics review, although all freely admit to drawing on observation, experience and empathy in their creative work. Problematically for them, Chang (2008) and Tolich (2010) are clear that ethics is by definition proactive not retroactive. 'The position statement on qualitative research and IRBs' (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007; Tolich, 2010) concurs. But the problem remains. To be more specific, the nature of being a writer means that perceptions and impressions are formed throughout life, not merely once an ethics approval is passed. Writing 'data' is often retroactive not proactive so writers in the academy face additional ethical dilemmas beyond the possible apparent misfit of institutions' ethics approvals.

This dilemma, characteristic of autoethnographies using practice-led methodology, is due in part to unresolvable issues related to writers' pasts and futures. The dilemma has three horns: one related to the past and two to the future. Candidate two diarizes the first 'horn':

we may already have collected what HREC would term ‘data’ and it’s now part of our ontological being, our performance of self, as well as shaped us epistemologically. Would the ethics committee, like Shylock, cut our memories from our bodies?

Second, candidate one speaks of the difficulty of knowing in advance which stories will come to mind when the writing flows: ‘the fluid and emergent nature of autoethnographic practice-led research makes it hard to project who and where we are writing about until we write it so we’re forced to “best guess”’. Third, quoting Chang (2008: 61), ‘research steps often overlap and mix’, candidate 3 notes that ‘it’s challenging to describe research in terms accessible to the norms of likely members of an HREC’.

### **Ethical issues as praxical issues**

Drawing together the discussion so far, and returning to the recognition that HRECs are unlikely to involve researchers with expertise in creative disciplines and methodologies, but that ethical processes are essential, it is evident that for autoethnographers in Writing in the academy, there are praxical problems stemming from positions expressed in HREC documents that would not exist outside academe. By ‘praxical’ we mean that we view ideas and theory as the result of practice, not the other way round (Barrett, 2007). Drawing on our experiences in supervision, and extrapolating from supervisory conversations with students and their insights, we present below nine praxical problems.

#### *1. It is difficult to know who ‘Others’ might be*

Writers in autoethnography express frustration with HREC insistence on the nomination of the number, sex and ages of ‘participants’ or the identification of specific (i.e. ‘vulnerable’, ‘Other’) groups (rest home patients, cyber-bullied kids, people with disabilities).

#### *2. It is hard to predict how our best ‘data’ will come to us*

Students who have created an *Information Statement for Participants* based on their position at the time of applying for ethics, sometimes find in the process of their practice-led research that they end up gathering ‘data’ in other, unforeseen ways.

#### *3. We cannot obtain informed consent for experiences that are already part of us*

Another issue of contention is that the ideal of ‘informed consent’ is logistically difficult if the experiences motivating a student-enquirer’s practice-led

research are already experienced or are ongoing. Musing in her diary, candidate 2 wrote:

Clearly, 'seeking informed consent after writing an article is problematic and potentially coercive, placing undue obligation on research 'subjects' to volunteer' (Tolich, 2010) in social or health sciences, for instance. But does that also apply to writing creatively (or writing about writing creatively) in the academy?

*4. The nature of autoethnography is that we often write about a familiar subject*

Autoethnographers are often close – emotionally, familiarly – to those whose stories they represent, and the HREC model of ethics assumes the consent process to be between strangers (Ellis, 2007, 2011). The best person to tell the story of an individual might in fact be a writer close to them, bringing empathy as freight not liability to the undertaking.

*5. It is difficult to obtain informed consent if one of our subjects is 'incompetent'*

Also contentious are occasions when others in autoethnographies are actually or borderline legally incompetent: children (Wall, 2008) or the dying (Ellis, 2005; Carey, 2008), particularly when the person with the second-best authority for granting consent is the researcher-writer herself. There are conflicts of interest, but is Ellis's notion of process consent enough to validate the autoethnographer's practices in the eyes of the HREC?

*6. Do we need informed consent for casual observation?*

Another example from students' practice is when the observed are a generic group and the observations non-deliberate: the kids at school where the writer works; the old folks in the writer's mother's aged care home; people with disabilities the writer has unconsciously, or consciously observed. Candidate 3 grapples with this:

Clearly, such general observation is neither coercive nor deprives individuals of rights to be voluntary or to withdraw, and might also be covered by the ethical notion of process consent.

*7. Writers' data is often co-experienced*

Another problem for autoethnography is that much of this lived experience, this 'data', is shared, with a partner for instance, or friends. Once more, candidate 3 questions her ethical position:

Again, there is no coercion, but are they participants, retrospective and ongoing? Is internal confidentiality an issue? Is any speculation about what might happen in the relationship in the future relevant to the research now?

#### 8. *Writers don't have 'participants'*

Terminology is another issue for autoethnographers in Writing as it is for many interpretivist researchers employing such qualitative methods as ethnography, phenomenography or phenomenology. While autoethnographers in Writing understand the term 'data', the terms 'subject' and 'participant' remain epistemologically jarring. This is because naturalistic interpretivist time does not stop and start like that of positivist research but flows with the rhythms of lived experience. Methodologically autoethnographic knowledge in practice-led research just does not unravel chronologically and linearly in actuality. Its methodologies allow for reflective discovery, creative serendipity, the unexpected, the iterative, the as-yet-unknown and knowledge realized, negotiated and shared with Others. As such they share much with such indigenous methodologies as *Aotearoa* New Zealand's *Kura Kaupapa Māori*, which we briefly discuss in the next section.

#### 9. *It is hard to predict if our work will bring capital*

Ethical processes demand to know what capital might be generated from the research output and for whom. This capital might take the form of royalties, power and reputation or any form of esteem or advancement, tangible or intangible, material or non-material, in the present or in the future. With the publishing industry in a state of uncertainty and doctoral students aware that their thetic output might not be immediately publishable, no doctoral writer can predict 'capital' gain at the point of applying for an ethics application and will generally need to revise their application as the project's potential for 'capital' becomes evident. However, ethical issues about the dispersal of any possible capital from stories involving others do need careful pre-consideration and the involvement of potentially impacted individuals and communities is essential. This is particularly true in the case of ethnographic research involving vulnerable communities or narratives incorporating indigenous story-telling and identities. In such cases, as we briefly describe in the following section, the guidance of indigenous researchers is crucial (G. H. Smith, 1990; L. T. Smith, 1999).

### **The state of ethics for autoethnographers including writers**

Ethical approval processes are part of an increasingly complex and instrumentalist system of dilemmas for such qualitative researchers as

autoethnographers. As Richard and Schwartz (2002) and Carey (2008) noted, the guidelines HRECs enforce originate in health and medical research and are oriented towards quantitative scientific methods like experiments and surveys. In 2017 this is still the case. Andrew Sparkes (2017: np) is pessimistic: 'Autoethnographers need to recognise that like qualitative researchers in general, they are suffering from a more general malaise instigated in recent years by the rise of methodological fundamentalism and a resurgent scientism'. The Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007) was revised to more roundly discuss qualitative paradigms; yet it still does not accommodate practice-led creative methodologies, stymying and delaying research (Romano, 2008). Romano states the problem in relation to practitioners of creative industries, and the same is true for autoethnographers in these and related disciplines:

While creative practitioners clearly benefit from forethought about the implications of the different territories their research may traverse, they may be unable to provide the very precise identification of human research participants and potential risks expected from researchers in other disciplines. (Romano, 2008: 6–7)

Wall (2008), exploring the ethical issues around creating an autoethnography about adopting her son, commented that questions of ethics in autoethnography have 'hardly been raised' (49). Tolich (2010), further, found there was 'little consistent ethical guidance for novice autoethnographers' (1600). Inclusive of autoethnography, Romano (2008) critiqued the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, and recommended a fast-tracking of non-contentious creative research, perhaps run by discipline-specific or faculty-focused sub-IRBs. While this represents a bottom up compromise and allows for peers to assess peers' research ethics, Romano also recommends the inevitable top-down solution: more awareness for creative practitioners from industry entering the university (20). Clearly, more training for supervisors must, as usual, be part of the solution.

A decade ago it seemed that Denzian autonomy for 'performative' researchers including autoethnographers might escape such top-down scrutiny. Now Universities such as Sheffield University are starting to rise to the challenge by including resources for autoethnographers in its research ethics policy (online), largely due to the influence of Tolich (2010). However, owing to the dominance of the politics of evidence in current managerial practices Cheek (2008) critiqued, it is for the researcher to adapt, not the HREC. This marks a victory for the top-down and a defeat for the first generation of autoethnographers' agency and 'ethics of care'.

The need to protect personal and institutional reputations has been the main driving factor. Tolich's ten principles for autoethnographers (2010) are instrumental and influential here. He writes:

If autoethnography is to advance its ethical considerations, its leading exponents must provide insight into the ethical boundaries between the self and the other that anticipates ethical dilemmas (1605).

The nine points we raise here contribute to this discussion. Ensuring autoethnographies are proactive is ideal, but there is still scope for exercising best practice when observations have been retrospective. Any writer, for instance, should not publish anything they would not show to the other persons mentioned in the text (Medford, 2006). No writer should write self-disclosively without thinking through possible impacts on their health or how they might be regarded or remembered – the reputations of Sylvia Plath or Janet Frame come to mind. No writer should rely on pseudonyms or even composite characters if it is possible for some potential readers to deduce the concealed identities. As Quigley (2006) suggested, imaginative techniques can go some way to overriding this without sacrifice of authenticity, but the writer-researcher still needs the ethos of minimizing harm while rendering faithfully.

It is particularly crucial to consider the edict of 'nothing about us without us' in the case of vulnerable communities, minorities and indigenous groups, particularly in relation to the issue of capital arising from writing. In this context, we turn to such researchers as Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2004) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). As a New Zealander, the first author acknowledges two major contributors, but also that any colonized nation will have its own leaders in ethical research. Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1990) spearheaded a renaissance in ethical indigenous research foregrounding reciprocity and respect and leading to *Kura Kaupapa Māori*, six principles applicable to research with Māori (Rangahau, 2017). An ethical researcher, for instance, mentors others, adds lifelong value to communities, collectivizes the power of knowledge and builds empowerment according to a group's aspirations (Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, 2005).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) offered researchers four principles that may guide autoethnographers and all researchers. First, the principle of *Whakapapa* demands the positioning and contextualizing of relationships between people, communities, participants, landscape, and the universe as a whole. No autoethnographer can claim to own the definitive telling of a story; they are of and belong to communities and the world and so the benefits, the 'capital' must be shared. Second, the principle of *Te Reo* reminds writers that any worldview is embedded in and constituted by language and that this impacts on how we build relationships.

Writers, autoethnographers included, should share how Others are represented, and allow other representations and other words. This overrides any writer's love of the sound and shape of their own chosen words. The principle of *Tikanga Maori* applies to researchers writing with or about any Other group, and teaches us of the need to navigate and operate within contexts appropriately (such as that of Māori), and make judgments and decisions collaboratively within this space and alongside these communities and their elders. Finally, *Rangatiratanga* refers to the ethical, autonomous shaping of a research context, its purpose and direction and these need to be shared, understood, negotiated and revisited as the text reaches its final iteration. Outcomes that empower communities, bring life-long connections or build cultural and socio-political awareness and attract capital to vulnerable and indigenous individuals and communities are clearly more ethical ones. Close consultation with empowered representatives of vulnerable communities remains crucial in issues of representation, or more specifically appropriation of forms of representation, and shared 'capital,' financial or otherwise.

Tolich's ten guidelines revolve around three core ethical considerations: consent, consultation and vulnerability and are grounded in a solid reading of ethics literature.

### **Consent**

First, respect participants' autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation and document the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007). Second, practice 'process consent'. Ensure participants still want to be part of the project at all stages (Ellis, 2007). Third, recognize the conflict of interest or coercive influence when seeking informed consent after writing the manuscript.

### **Consultation**

Fourth, consult with others, such as your IRB or HREC or institutionally delegated experts. Fifth, don't publish anything you would not show people/subjects/Others mentioned in the text (Medford, 2006).

### **Vulnerability**

Sixth, internal confidentiality is a real issue in autoethnography since it is hard to ensure confidences will not be exposed to family members, friends, colleagues or acquaintances. Seventh, regard any autoethnography as permanent and anticipate your own, your co-observers' and Others' future

vulnerabilities. Eighth, just as no photograph is worth harming others for, nor should any story. If harm is unavoidable, minimize it. Ninth, if minimizing risk to self, co-observers or others is impossible, use a *nom de plume*. Finally, assume all people with an investment in the text will indeed read it.

These guidelines push us inevitably towards conclusions.

## Conclusions

Regard for ethics in writing involving autoethnography is qualitatively different for writers in the academy and outside it. Writers practicing beyond the non-academic world like Tim Winton, Arnold Zable and Sarah Quigley, professionally immune from HRECs, have their own codes and practices. As guides for writers within the academy, we have mentioned Ellis's 'relational ethics', Behar's 'empathy', Freeman's 'narrative integrity', Denzin and Ellis's 'ethic of care', Didion's principle, Quigley's tips for disguising identities, and Tullis's ideas for textual subversion although these are only a few examples. The commonsense notion that no writer should publish or perform anything they would not show to the other persons mentioned in the text (Medford, 2006) applies equally to the non-academic world and the university.

The research practices of writers in the academy are, however, necessarily subject to closer scrutiny due to legalistic, evidentiary policies and principles that have at heart a protectionist orientation (Sparkes, 2017). In any research, the reputations of many – researchers, students, subjects, 'Others', supervisors, disciplines, institutions and their figureheads – are at stake. Because of this, institutional HRECs and IRBs, informed by the *Position Statement on Qualitative Research* developed by successive Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry and in Australia guided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* are mandated to evaluate, report on and ensure the ethical practices of all researchers. While institutions expect researchers creating autoethnographies to create ethical research and advise more training in ethics for higher degree supervisors, there remain spaces of contestation. How these flexible spaces might play out in practice requires further research, such as that in the fields of indigenous research exemplified by *Kura Kaupapa Māori*, but the employment of sub-IRCs of peers who understand the methodologies and practices of the discipline could go some way towards ameliorating this issue and preventing the roadblocks to research Romano (2008) describes. Courageous autoethnographers might go as far as Sparkes (2017) and engage in acts of resistance even in light of the strategies listed above. This is because, as Ellis (2007) had warned, there will always be an unprecedented and unforeseen dilemma in creative practice.

This paper does not go as far as Muncey (2010: 106) in maintaining 'ethical committees take it upon themselves to create a protection where it isn't always warranted'. Like Joseph (2013), we suggest that writers need to be protected from themselves, from self-absorption and forms of self-representation wrought by obsession. Janet Frame, for instance, hid *Towards Another Summer* (2007), a 'semi-autobiographical novel', for 44 years and did not want it published during her life-time as it was too self-disclosing.

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate a range of exacerbating issues for writers embarking on autoethnographic higher degrees in universities after working as professional writers and for writers of autoethnography in practice-led research. Ultimately, along with Ellis (2011), Tullis (2013) and Sparkes (2017), we agree that autoethnographers in Writing necessarily take a different point of view toward the subject matter of social science, and the conversation can move forward even with small-scale contributions such as ours. In this spirit, we offer three conclusions.

First, emergent and unfixed epistemologies such as those that characterize practice-led research are discordant with expectations about how research unravels according to institutional ethics procedures. For instance, researchers in creative arts may be unable to provide precise identification of human research participants and hence be unable to anticipate the most effective ways of learning about subjects, risks associated with those methods and the treatment of the data. For researchers to have an embodied 'ethics of care' and to write with Freeman's 'narrative integrity' is utopian and cannot be assured. However, there is certainly scope for professional development in research to accommodate training in ethics of care for all researchers using creative methodologies. The current default position is to apply Tolich's (2010) and Tullis's (2013) principles, and this brings us to the second and third conclusions.

Second, the practices of professional writers regarding the use of 'Others' as 'data' in an academic context, need to reflect a closer understanding of voluntary consent and to better evidence close communication with empowered representatives or 'elders' of vulnerable communities. Where writers practicing beyond academe as professionals advocate freedom of expression as an ethical principle, they need to go beyond viewing consent as implied or tacit into explicit and non-coercive articulations of consent and what it means in the short and long term. The concept of consent extends beyond ethical understanding expressed prior to conducting research into negotiations into the representations of subjects in published outputs (Carey, 2011). Sparkes (2017) reminds us: 'Quite simply, our stories are not our own.' As we have suggested, thoughtful ethical work in this area has been conducted in the domain of indigenous methodology,

such as *Kura Kaupapa Māori*, and writers of autoethnography must align with these principles. Put simply, agreed strategies for consultation and for dissemination of ‘capital’ in whatever form it may take, are subjected for negotiated agreement, and need to be revisited before the work’s submission, publication or dissemination.

Third, such notions as not writing anything a writer would not be prepared to show to anyone are commonsensical, but also reflect an ethical understanding of the importance of consultation that emerges in studies by Borland, Carey and others. Because autoethnographies often involve people close to the writer as well as observed others, researchers are humanely invested in ensuring the latter come to no or little harm but need to realize that all others have rights over how they are represented regardless of any apparent consents they may have given at the outset. Photographers need to have all others in images they own sign release forms; writers too need to protect the identities of persons represented, particularly from leaks of internal confidentiality. Even though writers think they can trust a person at the point of writing, they may not be able to trust them, or their descendants, and especially their heirs, infinitely.

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