Here’s the deal.

When I did my PhD, my supervisor had small babies. My two girls were already in elementary school. ‘Writing,’ she said, ‘is like cooking a meal one grain of rice at a time.’ I nodded sympathetically, playing with her infant on her living-room floor while she gave me feedback on chapter drafts, but I did not understand. I didn’t know what each grain cost, or the vast difference between zero and one.

My girls are 17 and 20 now, and my son is four months old. I have not slept for more than two consecutive hours for so long that time has gone shapeless. One of the grandmas has taken the baby for a walk; I have perhaps an hour in which to do everything, but I am sitting on the swinging bench on the peeling front porch of my small-town Ontario century cottage, on a rare cool day in August, with a warm hand of sunshine on my back. Instead of weeding or washing or sorting or resting or reading my students’ theses (like my supervisor did), I am writing, slowly and laboriously. The writer in me is submerged and dissolving in the drowning-pool of mothering. This line is one grain of rice. This chapter a desiccant, or maybe a snorkel, or a tracheotomy? I am too tired to keep my metaphors straight.

Reading academic prose makes me feel informed but inadequate. Writing it used to make me feel smart and armoured-up with citations, but now it feels impossible. The abstract for this chapter is accidentally ironic. I was just trying to be coherent, but ended up doing the god-trick (Harraway 2003) of talking from outside and above myself, as if I know what I’m doing: performing the useful service of passing on knowledge about something significant that I know about that might make you better somehow. But I don’t know you. You don’t need improvement. I am the one who needs this. Somehow, magically, stupidly, talking to my imaginary reader is making me feel a little less trapped or lonely. I will have a bit more room in my heart to lift my drooly boy out of his pushchair gratefully and graciously, because I have taken this time, put this before every other more urgent thing. This chapter, and maybe all of my writing, is about managing my abandonment issues. I am softening and smoothing the frontier between inside and out. Do you need to know that? Would you prefer an impersonal, abstract discussion of why a feminist geographer’s writing could or should be personal and concrete? The do’s and the don’ts? You’ll read them in, even if I try to leave them out. There are only a
few ways to shuffle the cards of the available discourses, and only a few games that we know how to play.

The best writing advice I ever got was ‘Show, don’t tell’, so I won’t just give you a list of the reasons and risks around bringing personal narrative into feminist geography. I’m being performative (I don’t like that word) because, for you, being shown is often more useful than being told, and because, for me, it’s all that I’ve got. I don’t have a clever, armoured person on hand to explain everything. It’s just me, on the porch, with the baby on his way back, the sun behind a cloud and the gears of social reproduction turning in my skin (Henry 2017).

(That’s not true. There is also a dog beside me on the bench, jumping down now and then to ward off passing squirrels. He is roughly the size and colour of a fuzzy loaf of bread with dainty legs. His concerns about personal narrative are: where does it place his body, in relation to my lap? How does it smell? Does it carry my hands toward him? Significant issues that I tend to overlook.)

**Spades: why write research in first person singular?**

A spade is a useful tool for digging and planting, much like personal narrative.

I thought of the term *autogeography* while not-sleeping one night in mid-August. A search online the next day found it attached to one album, two poetry collections and a chapter by Barrie Jean Borich on creative nonfiction. She says:

> I coined this term *autogeography* to define the creative nonfiction project concerned with the ways we might map our bodies and places as interdependent historical strata … An autogeography is self-portrait in the form of a panoramic map of memory, history, lyric intuition, awareness of sensory space, research, and any other object or relic we pick up along the way that offers further evidence of what does or did or will happen here.

I like this definition. It fits my feminist and geographic contention that bodies, things and places are not inert backdrop matter, and meaning does not emerge directly from the discursive ether. It suits my suspicion that, no matter how neatly it’s presented, knowledge mostly arrives symbolically and slantwise. These ideas are not new, and not mine – ideas never are. I could give them an unslanted pedigree (new materialist this, poststructural that), but I don’t really know where or when they slid from tacit to stated, and now they are everywhere in my field, like intellectual dandelions (see, for instance, Anderson and Harrison 2010).

In this chapter, I was asked to write something about autobiography. Most of my other publications are called autoethnography. Do we really need another word for writing about yourself? Probably not, but (of course) I think autogeography says something different and useful. Biographies and ethnographies – auto or not – often tend to stand-in and speak for whoever was written about. This tendency is amplified when we’ve written about ourselves – someone we presumably know intimately and well (more on that later). The primary verb that autogeography invokes is mapping. In mapping, the gap between representation and reality is intuitively obvious. You’re not transposing one abstract thing (a self or culture) into another abstract thing (language). A good map might be useful, beautiful, original, fascinating, and so on, but it’s not a tracing; we don’t expect it to fully encapsulate complex realities (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Whether they’re actively wayfinding or passively browsing, the map reader is liable to know they’re *doing* something, co-constructing meaning rather than simply ingesting it.
Borich offers autogeography as a type of creative non-fiction. Is it also a type of scholarship? My personal answer is ‘Yes, but’. Creative non-fiction, including memoir and autobiography, can (and perhaps should) be written as an end in itself. It often aims to inform, influence, entertain, titillate, etc., but it has not necessarily failed in any fundamental way if the answer to the ‘so what?’ test is purely aesthetic or ambiguous. I believe academic work can (and perhaps should) be as carefully crafted, accessible and literary as good creative non-fiction, but I don’t see it as an end in itself. In order to feel satisfied, I need to be able to plausibly impute some other purpose to it.

This purpose is not to reveal, guide or fix, although I often think that’s what I’m doing, and I might indirectly or incidentally do so to some degree. When I write about myself, I am trying to trace how something constellates in experiences that are mine, but not only mine. This is a quixotic mandate; it takes just a whiff of psychoanalytic or poststructural theory to disrupt coherent, autonomous, self-aware subjectivity, let alone authoritative, singular meaning (see Anderson and Harrison 2010, Britzman 2002, Popke 2003 or Tamas 2013). I didn’t invent myself. There are no clear lines between the personal and the social; the most detached third-person puppet-show of conventional academic prose is shaped by individual subjects, and the most intimate first-person performance is based on social scripts. But even in the absence of binary poles, there are still degrees of difference and writerly decisions to be made. Ostensibly dispassionate, detached prose is a good tool for some jobs, but not the best tool for every job. I’ve pinned my use of personal narrative on my abandonment issues, but here’s a few other reasons why I believe it deserves more space in the academic repertoire.

*Location matters.* Humility is hard. Showing where you speak from (aka your standpoint) can minimize the potential trespass of speaking for others. It doesn’t automatically do so, particularly if your personal coordinates are wedged into a breezy preface meant to allow readers to calculate and offset your biases so that the dream of objective knowledge can be sustained. We generally want authors to offer certainty, allowing us to either trust them or be certain they’re wrong. Reminding you that I am just some idiot, now hiding in a bedroom while a sitter amuses the baby downstairs, holding back the need to pee so I can eke out a few more words, shakes up the snow-globe of authority. I have to resist my own inclination to confine this data to a parenthetical aside; see how easily the text veers into disembodied instruction? I’m not bringing my body back in (it was here all along), but I am deciding that it matters. This is partially about ethics and representation, but it’s also about boredom. If I locate myself well, with precise, evocative images, I might also draw you into your body, which increases the odds that you’ll feel something – curiosity, surprise, connection, amusement, irritation – any feeling could help sustain your attention.

I have 23 more minutes of freedom, but the baby is getting fussy downstairs and I’m losing momentum. I don’t like the way I’m making pronouncements then calling attention to their artifice, having my cake and eating it. Noticing a habit is not the same as changing it.

Now it’s a few days later and the sitter is here again, but I don’t have enough faith in this to prioritize it over packing for the weekend away (volunteering with my partner’s reno company to fix up a non-profit summer camp and going to his sister’s surprise birthday party; trying grimly to hold on to the shreds of things that were possible and pleasurable in the life before baby). I should go have a nap, but I won’t. I don’t have much faith in sleep, either.

*Hope matters.* I can’t write without it. Even the most crushingly bleak personal story carries an implicit hope in the fact that the narrator lived to tell the tale. Carolyn Ellis (2009), the Grande Dame of autoethnography, warns that our stories should leave room for hope. I agree, but this easily veers into saccharine lies of omission and gendered, raced, religious codes of quiet suffering (the meek will inherit oppression). Everything happens for a reason. Every
cloud has a silver lining. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. These tropes are supposed to help us choke down unbearable suffering, but they can also leave us chewing on things that are wrong as if it’s our personal duty to render social problems digestible. Experience that cannot be hammered into a narrative arc that features clearly defined heroes and foes and ends on an upswing (or, failing that, in pitiful ruin) is rendered unspeakable. Trauma appears as an awful and fascinating departure from the imaginary security of normal life, its disruptive potential contained by facile explanations that estrange those others or aspects of ourselves in most acute need of witnessing.

The hope that my writing and I require is a darker thing with complex flavours, which lives beside pain without obscuring it. This isn’t about a goth crush on being angsty; it’s about respecting the gap between language and experience. It is, according to Theodor Adorno (1982), barbaric to represent the unthinkable as meaningful scenes in which humanity flourishes. The furor of writing by Holocaust survivors reveals both the inadequacy of language and its necessity. Its value lies primarily in what it does rather than what it denotes. The poet Celan explains that language can pass ‘through its own answerlessness’ and yield ‘no words for what was happening’, but still provide those who are ‘stricken by and seeking reality’ with ‘a being underway, an attempt to gain direction’, a movement ‘toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps a “thou” that can be addressed’ (cited in Felman 1995, 34).

For me, ethical, sustainable hope requires resisting the urge to clip unmanageable things (including myself) into stable, familiar shapes. This is difficult, weak magic, with no miraculous healing powers, so I don’t judge folks who stick by what Lather and Smithies (1997) call the ‘comfort text’. I have no right to undermine the practices that make your life bearable if I don’t have anything better to replace them with. I do, however, judge the cultivation of discomfort texts, in which the ability to find fault stands in for intelligence. The hyper-critical, compulsory anxiety of the academy doesn’t make me happy. According to Eve Sedgewick (2002), it’s a paranoid defence, clenched around our fears. According to Brian Massumi (2002), it’s poor strategy:

If you don’t enjoy concepts and writing, and feel that when you write you are adding something to the world, if only the enjoyment itself, and that by adding that ounce of positive experience to the world you are affirming it, celebrating its potential, tending its growth, in however small a way, however really abstractly – well, just hang it up. It is not that critique is wrong. As usual, it is not a question of right and wrong (nothing important ever is). It is a question of dosage. It is simply that when you are busy critiquing you are less busy augmenting. You are that much less fostering. There are times when debunking is necessary. But if applied in a blanket manner, adopted as a general operating principle, it is counterproductive. Foster or debunk. It’s a strategic question. Like all strategic questions, it is basically a question of timing and proportion. Nothing to do with morals or moralizing. Just pragmatic.

This bruised hope feels like it lets me, the text and the reader breathe. (Every time I read that line, I breathe). It follows the Trickster. Its footprints are found in juxtapositions, evocative details, artistic beauty, vulnerable slips, bits of context or funny asides that gently recognize the ridiculous, especially when I’m moralizing, taking myself too seriously or being contradictory – by, for instance, writing defensively about defensive writing (Exhibit A: over-kill Holocaust references when I’m supposedly too spent to armour-up with citations). Voice matters. I am scared, now, that this text is getting too long and loose, rattling with stops and starts. I want to rush, to pack it orderly and tight as commuters on a Japanese train. It takes
patience to let it shamble along like we’re taking a walk with a toddler. (Which makes me think of Mountz et al. 2015, on slow scholarship.)

I did a few radio stories for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation back when my girls were small. They told me to write as if I was speaking into the ear of one person. People often listen to the radio alone; it’s an intimate mass medium. People often read alone, too. Keeping this one-to-one voice on the page shapes the relationship between me and the reader. It’s just us, in here, with voice managing our proximity and positions in the imaginary geography of the text. You can tell if I am being distant or letting you in, if I am making you comfortable. The voice I use shows you my spatial beliefs about knowledge: is it achieved by standing back and looking (the standard academic model) or by leaning in, listening and feeling? The feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1995) calls this intimacy a method of knowing responsibly and well. Voice can intimidate and exclude, telling readers they are too ignorant to read this. It can welcome or manipulate, enrage or bore. It can re-centre the hegemonic (White, unimpaired, straight, neurotypical, middle-class, masculinist, disembodied) body, if I assume that’s who I’m speaking to.

You may think there is only one kind of voice that is acceptable for important, adult speech. You may write in that voice, even if you don’t like it. I still do (did you read my abstract?). Sometimes the normative academic voice is necessary, but it can also be a habitual hiding place with political consequences. When I stop speaking that way, nothing bad happens. I feel relief, a release of the pressure to inhabit a barely recognizable version of myself. Speaking from my heart doesn’t mean I stop using my head; it’s a false binary.

I want to write in the voice that occurs on long drives, often at night, when you are sitting nearby but facing outwards, scanning terrain that we are crossing together but seeing differently. I love the kind of hearing it allows, and the feel of those conversations.

Power matters. In this text I am behind the wheel, and you are a passenger. You’ve climbed in and closed the door based on trust that I’ll take you where the abstract promised, not straight into a wall or backwards around traffic circles. The trespasses inherent in research that treats others like lab rats may be obscured but are not erased by my intimate tone. They might be exacerbated; if I don’t think I am exercising power, I am unlikely to be mindful of its effects.

If I write well, I can probably make you feel. This power must be conserved and used carefully. I am writing things into existence, making them appear more or less real and significant by rendering them relatable. I don’t control the meaning you take from the text – what you see along the way – but I choose the route and speed, and your trip is framed by my intentions.

Friendly feminist research methods often aim to flatten power hierarchies but remain ethically treacherous; as Stacey (1996) points out, we become the lover who feels more free to leave. When my fieldwork happens at home, I have to live with its relational consequences indefinitely. This makes it more difficult to play the curious colonial tourist, but also exposes us to more complicated forms of harm (see Tuhiiwai Smith 1999; Simmonds 2011). Because my experiences are never only mine, my personal narrative inevitably touches others, in ways they might not like. Deciding if this is the kind of pain that means stop or the kind that means keep going is always a power move. (I’m not pulling over now, you can hold it). Having more skin in the game can make me more careful and attentive, but it can also make me more cowardly. I now spend more time on the page fussing about power implications than I do telling stories. Wondering whether my over-shares are fuelled by masochistic repetition compulsion is likely both ethically necessary and a defensive retreat from more precarious, difficult journeys – but I appreciate the way personal narrative puts these power dynamics in high relief.

Scale matters. We tend to imagine that the macro is big, distant, general or abstract, and important, while the micro is small, up close, specific or concrete, and relatively unimportant.
Patterns and trends matter; outliers are 'noise' we filter out to render data useful. In one of his many clever publications, John Law (2004) turns this on its head, arguing that the macro is actually only ever found within the micro. As an example, he digs into the minutiae of a bit of British aerospace history and finds the entire Cold War packed into scraps of hallway chit-chat.

This makes me think of black holes, where vast things are compressed into vanishing points, and the wormholes that form inside them, where nothingness takes you elsewhere, and Mobius strips, where this surface becomes that, and Leibniz's monadology, in which every particle contains the whole (see Law 2004). It also makes me think of personal narrative and its aspirations. The idea that important things are big and far can make us feel, and therefore be, disempowered. If I will never have read enough or know enough or be lofty enough to see a proper macro overview, I might feel like I have nothing worth sharing, no gift to give. My smallness feels weak, vulnerable and shameful, like something I could and should overcome or conceal prior to publication. Everyone else seems so big.

I can make myself feel bigger by calling in a posse of citations to bully you into seeing my point, but I'd rather pull them out of my pocket like a child playing 'show and tell' with linty bits of treasure. When I speak from a place of smallness, more interesting things happen. Sometimes, its humble particularity unfolds and opens out into a spacious wonder.

**Clubs: what are the risks of using personal narrative?**

A club is a thing used to hit or exclude.

Back to the Holocaust. Primo Levi wrote about his experiences in the camps and reflected on that writing. He said, 'There is only one risk, of writing badly'. For him, that meant writing that is useless (cited in Probyn 2010, 87, in her lovely discussion of writing and shame).

What makes writing useless? I don’t know, but here’s a list of possibilities. (Ah, lists: you make endless things seem finite and feasible.)

- Lacking generosity toward the reader and failing to make good use of their time. This usually manifests as a reluctance to cut text, because I like it whether or not the reader needs it. If I am writing for myself, it’s a journal, not an outward-facing publication. It is self-centred to approach the page as an opportunity to show off my cleverness, vocabulary, theoretical erudition, likeability, travails or other exceptional qualities. It is similarly inconsiderate to expect readers to stumble through bad grammar, awkward phrasing and choppy structure. Learn how to write well: read how-to books, find authors with admirable style, write lots of drafts and find honest friends to read them.

- Losing readers’ interest and trust because my narrator is too unreliable or too authoritative. If meaning is too open-ended and diffuse or too closed and static, I’ve overstepped and lost my balance on the knife-edge of (minor) crisis that makes education possible. As Britzman and Pitt (2006) advise, my job is ‘provoking, not representing, knowledge’ (394). This requires trust. Readers might need handrails on steep bits and bridges over gaps, but they don’t need to be carried, and don’t want me to tell them exactly where to look. Beware of too much expository prose, even in handbook chapters 😊.

- Preaching. Aiming to help seems nice, but it positions us as external and superior to circumstances, not as participants. As my current therapist puts it, ‘We’re all just bozos on the bus’. Trying to instruct and change others, as I am doing now, places us above our readers and places readers above whomever we have written about. This can
temporarily relieve anxiety, but it is manipulative, coercive, disrespectful, unproductive and ultimately boring (see Mamet 1998). Compelling, believable stories are inhabited by complex, imperfect characters, not angels and demons.

- Carelessness. Readers will learn more from the ethic that I enact than from the ethic that I describe. I aim for compassionate curiosity. This starts with self-care. You cannot know how you (or others) will feel about the text, and those feelings will change over time; but the more volatile it is, the longer I sit with it before publication. One book has been resting for three years while I let things settle and feel out the tangle of impulses that produced it. Fear is not a reliable guide, but don’t write into the dark unless you have strong relational ropes to follow back out to here and now. Don’t pimp your own suffering; you deserve your own kindness. Our worst moments don’t need to define us. Don’t conflate yourself with your narrator. I love the part of me that writes, but she’s not all of me, and her mania for observation and analysis is an inadequate way of being in the world. Don’t displace the people you’re ostensibly writing about. Don’t worry too much about how you are read. ‘People are going to judge’, my former therapist once said. ‘This tells you something about them. It doesn’t say much about you.’ Don’t over-estimate or abdicate your responsibility for what you render imaginable; I can’t tell the whole truth, but I try to write with integrity. Don’t count on the false comfort of binaries; this is neither a good example nor a cautionary tale. Don’t rely on other people’s lists of do’s and don’ts; there is no recipe for innocence.

Hearts

A heart feels and circulates the things that sustain us.

I am standing at the counter again, rocking the fitfully sleeping baby in a backpack. He might have thrush now, or reflux, or maybe he’s just grumpy with the way I’ve written him as a burden and obstacle to things that matter more. There isn’t enough of me to go around, my needs won’t be met, everything isn’t okay: these fears have travelled with me through all sorts of circumstances, so I am learning to take them more lightly. If the sky is always falling, it’s not likely to touch down today.

They are not the only feelings, nor the most useful or precious legacy, but they often surface on the page. They’re readily speakable. Part of my job is to notice their peculiarity, to denaturalize my own nature and expand the fullness of my account, because it is liable to be read as if it stands in for and reproduces reality. The monarch butterflies on the tall white marigolds I grew from seed, and the chipmunk (named Kevin) skittering over to the water bowl outside my kitchen window: do I make space for their significance?

The baby, who is awake now and restless: do I give you the warm scent of his wheat-blonde hair? We lose too much of what matters when we let academic habit confine our recognition of meaning.

Diamonds

Made from carbon plus undisturbed time, as is graphite (used in pencils) and organic life.

Some precious things form only under pressure. You squeeze them out (babies, publications). It hurts. They bear so little resemblance to what went into them that where they came from seems mysterious. Who knows where they will go, what they will do? Their value is barely articulable. Why do we make them? We just do. You lose sleep over them, obsess over finding their best possible shape: the one that will capture the most light.
Key readings


References


