Talking about Autoethnography and Narratives: An Interview with Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner*

Prof. Serpil Aygün Cengiz, a faculty member at the Department of Folklore in the Faculty of Language and History and Geography at Ankara University, hosted Prof. Dr. Carolyn Ellis and Prof. Dr. Arthur Bochner as guest speakers on June 13, 2022, in the virtual “Research Methods” course she taught in the 2021-2022 spring semester in the graduate program. Dilek İşler Hayırlı, a doctoral student in the program, invited the founders of autoethnography, these two esteemed academics, to the class, and during the lesson. Gülgüne Şerefoğlu, who graduated from the master’s program in the Department of Folklore, and Dilek İşler Hayırlı acted as their translators. Bülent Ayyıldız transcribed the video recording of the class. After Serpil Aygün Cengiz reviewed the text, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner edited the text, enriching it in the process.

Carolyn Ellis is Distinguished University Professor Emerita at the University of South Florida. She has established an international reputation for her contributions

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* The text you are currently reading consists of the conversations that took place in a graduate-level class attended by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, presented as they were. Therefore, it is predominantly in English. However, Turkish translations by Gülgüne Şerefoğlu and Dilek İşler Hayırlı are also included in the text in italics.

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to autoethnography and the narrative study of human life. Dr. Ellis has published eight monographs, seven edited books, and more than 150 articles and chapters. She has edited two book series and presented keynote addresses and workshops in seventeen countries. Her books include *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness Expanded and Revised Edition*, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work, Revised Classic Edition*, and, most recently, the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2nd ed., with T. Adams and S. Holman Jones). Her awards include the Charles H. Woolbert Research Award and the Distinguished Scholar Award, both from the National Communication Association (NCA); The Legacy Lifetime Award and best book and article awards from NCA’s Ethnography Division; a Lifetime Achievement Award in Qualitative Inquiry, and two best book awards from the International Center for Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois; a Lifetime Achievement Award from The International Conference of Autoethnography in the UK; two Goodall and Trujillo best books Awards for Narrative Ethnography; McKnight Foundation’s Most Valuable Doctoral Mentor Award; and The Honorary Distinction for special merits in the development of Autoethnography and Narrative Methods from Transdisciplinary Network of Qualitative Researchers (TSBJ) in Poland.

Arthur Bochner is Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at the University of South Florida. He has published more than 150 articles and book chapters as well as two award winning books, *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (AltaMira Press/Routledge, 2014) and (with Carolyn Ellis) *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (Routledge, 2016). He is a Distinguished Scholar of the National Communication Association (NCA) and served as President of NCA in 2007. He has received lifetime achievement awards from the International Association of Qualitative Inquiry and the Ethnography Division of NCA. His endowed awards for his scholarship and teaching include NCA’s Charles Woolbert Award, Bernard J. Brommel Award for pioneering research in family communication, Ohio University’s Elizabeth Andersch Award for sustained contributions to Speech Communication Education and Research over one’s entire career, the Samuel Becker Distinguished Service Award, the McKnight Foundation’s William R. Jones Most Valuable Doctoral Mentor Award for mentoring minority doctoral students, the Goodall and Trujillo Award for Narrative Ethnography, and The Honorary Distinction for special merits in the development of Autoethnography and Narrative Methods from the Coordinating Council of the Transdisciplinary Network of Qualitative Researchers (TSBJ) in Poland.
Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Hi again, Professor Carolyn Ellis and Professor Arthur Bochner. Welcome to our “Research Methods” graduate course. It’s really a great honor to welcome you here. Thank you. I am the lecturer of the “Research Methods” course. This course is one of the graduate courses of Folklore Department of Ankara University. Today you see at the right side of the screen our participants’ names. You can see some of the participants are present. Here are graduate students and some are guests. And I thank you again very much for accepting our invitation. Everybody here cannot speak in English. So today two people will help with the translation. Dilek and Gülgün. You know Dilek very well because she wrote e-mails to you and she was very brave about inviting you to our meeting. I also thank her for bringing us together. I’m sure she would like to say a few words to you from the screen.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: I’m so excited, so I’m not sure whether I will be able to speak English or not. I’m very happy to see you and thanks a lot for accepting our invitation. I was really happy when you wrote me “Of course, we can do that”. Welcome and I’m very happy to see both of you here.

Carolyn Ellis: Thank you so much. We are happy to be here and so glad to have connected. If participants want to write anything on chat, that will be fine. Thank you.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: Thank you.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. Gülgün will translate your speech into Turkish. Last year we wrote a book about the anthropology of Renato Rosaldo. I think Dilek sent you our e-book. Gülgün was the translator of our meeting with Rosaldo. So I think she would like to say a few words to you also.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay.

Gülçin Şerefoğlu Elverir: Hello. It is a great honor to meet you. Today I will try to help with the interpreting of your speeches. It will be a consecutive one, so I hope I will do it in a correct and accurate way. It’s great to witness this meeting. Thank you for joining us. That’s all. Thank you.
Carolyn Ellis: Thank you. Do you want us to pause or just speak slowly?

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Actually, maybe you can pause when you are replying to the questions. Maybe after eight or ten sentences, that would be great. But if it would make you uncomfortable, I can wait until the end of your reply.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay. I can stop after a paragraph and then I should wait for you to translate, right?

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Yes.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay. So I will try to remember, but you should remind me if I get caught up and keep going.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Okay. Thank you very much.

Carolyn Ellis: You just come on and let me know what I need to do at any point in time. Okay?

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Okay. If I have some obstacles, I will cut and say it for sure. Thank you.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün. Dear Prof. Ellis and Dear Prof. Bochner, I will now try to make a little introduction to our meeting. Now, Allen Shelton, in his article “Foucault’s Madonna: The Secret Life of Carolyn Ellis”, writes this very first sentence in the beginning of the article: “I first met Carolyn Ellis over the phone. This was good because I was scared to death of her”. This is the very first sentence of the writing of Shelton. We are scared to death of you at the moment. I’m kidding. But I cannot tell you how excited we are all, really. Thanks a lot again for accepting Dilek’s invitation.

Now, this group started reading about autoethnography last fall semester. We have been fully focused on autoethnography since September 2021. Unfortunately, there are few Turkish texts about autoethnography, so naturally, most of the publications we have read are in English. Last semester, we read your book, The Ethnographic I. This semester we read your, Adams’ and Holman Jones’s book Autoethnography. We also read some of your articles, such as: “Heartful Autoethnography”, “With Mother/With Child: A True Story”, “Grave Tending: With Mom at the Cemetery”, “Good Bread, Bad Bread: Survival and Sacrifice During the Holocaust”, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others”, and “The Other Side of the Fence: Seeing Black and White in a Small Southern Town”. We also watched some of your videos on YouTube. Dilek and I attended the International Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative in 2022.

We also read some articles of Professor Arthur Bochner as well. For example, we read “Love Survives”, “Heart of the Matter: A Mini-Manifesto for Autoethnography”, “Surviving Autoethnography”, and “Criteria against Ourselves”. Also, we read some other articles of other autoethnographers. Now, my question is what did I learn from your texts, you and Professor Bochner? For me, you take ethnography and put it into personal experience. Your texts, all of them, made a revolution in my mind in many ways. For example, in your article “Good Bread, Bad Bread”, you wrote your article with your source person. This article
was the very first article I read in which the source person is also the writer. In mainstream ethnography, we generally do not see something like this. This is a huge thing. This is not something just technical, simple, something like that. Doing this for me requires a very different world view, or another issue is for me. For me, life is very complex and all the meanings are uncertain. And I always find myself thinking in another way. I can never be sure about an issue. I can never feel myself at home, but in mainstream social sciences, to be a person like me is a great sin. When I read your joint article about “which way to turn,” it affected me so much really. I found out being like me is very normal in social sciences. I really feel good now while I’m trying to write ethnographic articles. Thanks to your texts.

Today, the participants of our group will be very happy to ask you questions about all these topics until you say we are fired. Now, the first question is about your becoming autoethnographers from me. We all know more or less how you and Professor Bochner began to write autoethnographic texts. We read about your stories but it will be great to hear your own story from you now in our course. How did you both become autoethnographers?

Carolyn Ellis: Okay, well, we love to answer that question.

I know you know some of this, so I will speak briefly, and then we will ask Art to talk a little bit about his history. He also has prepared a few remarks on the broader history of autoethnography, if you would like to hear that, and then we can move on.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Sure. Thank you.

Carolyn Ellis: Is the translator okay for me to stop here?

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: She will translate your words to Turkish after your talk.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay. Let me take you back to 1981. Well, actually let’s go back just a little farther. I went to graduate school in New York in 1974, and I very much was an ethnographer, and I had, as an undergraduate, done a study of isolated fishing communities. I know some of you know about that, because you sent a question about my study, entitled Fisher Folk. When I went to graduate school to get a PhD in sociology, I continued doing the ethnographic study of the fisher folk in the Chesapeake Bay. I published that book, and there was some controversy about what I wrote there, which we can get into later, if you would like.

But let me take you now up to 1981, when I get my first job in a sociology department at University of South Florida. An important event occurred in January 1982, when my brother was killed in a commercial airplane crash coming to visit me in Tampa. That had a huge impact on me. At the same time, my partner had a terminal illness. He was older than I was, and he had emphysema. So, my life suddenly was one of loss and grief and sadness.

I felt like I wanted to use my sociology to help understand this and help understand loss and grief in general. Since I was an ethnographer, I started keeping notes on my experiences, how I felt about losing my brother, how I felt each day as I dealt with whatever emergency was happening with my partner. I felt that what I was writing was some of the best sociology I had ever written, even though it didn’t look like the sociology I had been taught to do. I also felt it was very therapeutic for me to do this kind of writing. It helped me to get what happened on the page. It felt like a comfortable, normal thing to do, to be writing about it, and it shielded me, for
a moment, from the chaos I was living. Then I felt like I could understand more what was going on. I could get through all the confusion and figure out, okay, events are recorded, now I can better organize my life and think about what I need to do first. What do I need to do after that? So, writing down what happened became a very therapeutic exercise for me, and I felt like it was something very meaningful. I knew loss would be a part of my life forever, and that it was a part of everybody else’s life. And so, I thought, how do we cope with this? Is there any way that might help us cope? I wanted to share my experience with other people.

After a lot of trial-and-error thinking about doing a more traditional study, such as using control groups, where some would do storytelling and some would try other activities to help the grieving process, I decided I just wanted to write my story. I wanted to write it in a way to bring people into the experience, so they can feel some of what I felt, and they can feel their own experiences. They can see the ways in which I didn’t cope well, in addition to the ways I did well. They can see the worst of loss as well as the beauty of attachment. So that became my goal. Of course, I had been trained to write as a sociologist, so I didn’t have any education in how to write in this kind of literary way that would evoke people to enter my experience. But I wanted to provide companionship for those who were going through this kind of experience and I did not think I could do that through traditional sociological writing. Providing companionship seemed to me to be really important and meaningful and something that I could offer the world.

So, I changed my whole orientation towards sociology as not just a way of representing life, but a way of contributing to the best life that we could live, to helping others, to writing in a way that was therapeutic for not only me, but for people who might read it and other people who were going through this kind of experience. I wanted to use my stories to open up conversation with other people so that they would then tell their stories. That’s the way we learn in everyday life, right? We have conversations, we tell about our lives, people tell back about their lives, and we learn from each other. I had always been taught that you don’t say therapy and sociology in the same sentence. That’s not what sociology is all about. I rebelled against this idea at that point, and I said, I do not want to write anything that I don’t perceive to be helpful to me, to readers, and to the people that I’m writing about.

In terms of chronicling significant events in my life that led to my developing autoethnography, I lost my brother in 1982, then I lost my partner Gene in 1985, and then I met Art in January 1990. Up to meeting Art, I felt like I was working as a loner. I was trying to write this kind of sociology in a literary way that was evocative, that invited people into the experience, that really focused on emotionality, the emotionality of the experience, and the emotionality of the researcher as well. When I met Art, he was on the same page as I was, and we had synergy: the whole of us together was greater than the two of us working individually. We just took off from there with each other’s support.

We edited collections, we held conferences, we wrote papers, we came up with new methods. I wrote The Ethnographic I, which some of you have read, and it was a methods book, but I wrote it as a novel. I thought, why do methods have to be boring? Then I wrote a
book called *Revision*, which, instead of presenting life as a static picture, I talked about writing what happened more like a video, to show how we might change in the process. In *Revision*, I went back and looked at stories I had written about my brother, my partner, and my mother. And I looked at them from my perspective now, some 20 years later, and how I might change how I told the story, given everything that had happened between then and now.

One more thing. Our latest book that Art and I did together was *Evocative Autoethnography*, and it was based on a workshop that we had given on Autoethnography.

I do want to say that when we started, we had no idea that autoethnography would take off like it has. We have a book series, and we have over 50 books in our *Writing Lives* series. There’s an autoethnography journal and an autoethnography conference, which I hope all of you will come to in January. It is online, and the registration fee is very low. For $50, you can go to all the workshops and all the presentations. We hope that you will submit something. I can write information about that to Dilek, if you would like. I hope that all of you can come and be part of that, because you will love it. When we began this work, there were hardly any entries in Google Scholar on autoethnography, and now there are more than 70,000 entries on autoethnography and there are some single works that have more than 7000 citations. I’m going to stop here with my personal narrative and let Art say a few words about his.

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** first, if Gülgün translates all the things you said and after that if we listen to Prof. Bochner, I don’t know, I will ask Gülgün. Gülgün what do you think?

**Gülgün Şerefoğlu:** That would be great if I may.

**Carolyn Ellis:** Big job, you have.


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: “Çağrıştırıcı” ya da “çağrışmsal”.


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Teşekkürler Gülgün. How did Turkish sound to you Prof. Ellis and Bochner?

Carolyn Ellis: I wish I could speak it so you didn’t have to translate it. So sorry.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. You are very kind. We are very excited to hear from
Professor Bochner about your personal story, and about the history of autoethnography, perhaps a little bit.

Arthur Bochner: Well, Carolyn has already told you probably the most important parts of our coming together in 1990. However, she didn’t really tell it as a story. The story began when I picked up a copy of the university newspaper called The Oracle at the University of South Florida and noticed that there was a professor of sociology who was going to present a talk in the College of Business, of all places. A sociologist talking in business about work she was doing on the methodology of introspection applied to social science inquiry. My department, the Department of Communication, had just begun a new PhD program, which I had designed with colleagues. It would be a different kind of a PhD program from any that existed across the United States. It would be an entirely qualitative research program, not a quantitative one. It would not require quantitative methods, and it would focus on storytelling, interpretive social science, and performance arts. So, all those things were combined into a new program.

Thus, when I saw introspection, I was very interested in that because I knew something about the history of introspection in psychology. I took four graduate students by the arms and said, “come with me. We’re going to go over and listen to this sociologist”. Now, Carolyn and I had been on the same campus for six years, but we had never met each other. I sat in the back of the room, and I listened to this talk. I don’t have time to tell the whole story here, of course, this morning. That would take more than the time that’s been allotted for your course. But I did tell the story of this in 2014, in a book I published, which is titled Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences. The book focuses on my life as an academic over about 40 years. Chapter eleven is titled “A Simple Twist of Fate”. This is the story of the fateful day in which I attended Carolyn’s talk in the College of Business. The chapter continues with conversations that we were having during that period of time that ultimately led three or four years later to the beginning of our work on autoethnography. I highly recommend that if you want the longer story, you can get it there as well. Or in the book Carolyn mentioned, entitled Evocative Autoethnography.

But to make a long story short, we got together at that time. And we were talking endlessly, continuously with each other because we had never been so inspired by another colleague as we were with each other. We were falling in love and we were falling in love with each other’s projects as well. She was giving me pieces that she had written and not yet published, and I was giving her articles I had published. We found that we had so much in common even though we came from two different disciplines. Autoethnography at that time didn’t have a real existence or following within the human sciences. I like to refer to the kind of work it represents as “the thing that could not be named”. At first we were talking about self-narratives, then first person accounts. We were talking about the way in which we could tell our own stories as researchers. We both agreed that what was left out of social science was the experience of the observer. Even if you weren’t telling your own story, if you were telling other people’s stories, much like Carolyn has told the story of Jerry Rawicki in her Holocaust research, you were there as a human being with feelings, with thoughts, with ideas.
What was very likely, as even the famous physicist Heisenberg said, “the observer is attached to what is observed. The two cannot be completely separated”.

We were exploring these ideas together. I was commenting on her manuscript that became Final Negotiations, which, in my view, is the first book-length autoethnography in the human sciences though we didn’t call it autoethnography at the time it was published. Carolyn had read some works by other people who had used that term. There was only a handful of people who had ever used the term autoethnography and they were using it in a very different way. They meant by autoethnography what we today mean when we use the term ‘indigenous ethnography’. Indigenous ethnography is, for example, a Turkish ethnographer writing about life lived by native people in Turkey. So that’s what these scholars meant by autoethnography. Karl Heider and David Hayano had used this term, but they dismissed personal experience. They weren’t interested in that. Norman Denzin had used it once in a footnote, and Carolyn had used it once in Final Negotiations.

But ultimately we came to the term autoethnography as an umbrella for the work we were doing. We first used it in a self-conscious way in our edited collection, in 1996, Composing Ethnography. That was a very important book because we searched for other sociologists, communication scholars, social psychologists, or any others, whose work fit the kind of paradigm that we were developing as autoethnography. That book had three parts to it: autoethnography, sociopoetics and reflexive ethnography. We were gradually moving toward autoethnography, and then in the introduction to that book, we had a long conversation with each other about what we were doing and why we were doing it. Immediately we started getting numerous requests from people, especially women in different cultures, minority individuals, and others who were excited about the possibility of writing about their own experience in a systematic, ethnographic way. We began not only with that volume, but also at the same time with a special issue of a journal, Contemporary Ethnography, which I think you mentioned. I’m also glad you mentioned the piece on “Which way to turn,” which was connected to that project, because very few people even know about that piece.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: It is my favorite.

Arthur Bochner: Yes, we invited people to contribute to an edited volume at that time and we started getting flooded with submissions. We had no idea that we had touched a nerve. And that nerve worked in two ways. The nerve worked for many people who felt left out, that their experience was completely left out of the human sciences, not discussed, as if it were a secret. And there was so much work that was shrouded in secrecy, that couldn’t get published. We were very excited about that, but there were also traditional social scientists who had been trained in the orthodox mainstream parts of sociology, anthropology, psychology, social psychology and all those disciplines. They were defensive. They resisted. “This won’t be scientific; this won’t be systematic. We can’t do this. It’s too subjective,” they said. It’s all these things. OK? And we understood that they were responding from their own experience, which is how they were trained, this is how they understood social science. They were protective, not wanting something new under the sun to take hold.
Carolyn Ellis: One person said to me once, if we allow what you do to be, sociology will no longer exist. I mean, that’s how it seemed to be to a number of people.

Arthur Bochner: But we also had many people who were supportive.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Why do you think they were so afraid of this new ethnography?

Arthur Bochner: There was a famous psychotherapist I admired named Jay Haley. One of the things I learned from him and from his writings--and I actually got to know him a little bit when I was in Philadelphia--was the first law of human relations. He liked to say, “whenever change is attempted, it is resisted”. We also know this from research on social movements and from cultural change in societies. People resist change because they want something predictable. They fear the unknown and uncertain. And that’s what social science was built on, the idea of prediction and control.

Carolyn Ellis: And on “distance”. We are supposed to be objective observers. Sociology and other social science disciplines so much wanted to be considered sciences, like physics and chemistry. Our work was threatening to that desire, that goal. If it’s subjective and subjectivity and emotionality play such a part in human behavior and our research, then how can we ever be objective? And if we acknowledge that the researcher really can never be completely objective, and not only acknowledge that, but say there’s something to be learned from that subjectivity, then what we do violates the whole idea of social science being an objective science. I also think there are a lot of people who think they can’t do autoethnography and who really aren’t very good at it. So, they wanted what they did and what they were good at to be the accepted norm, not this new stuff, where they would have to learn how to write in an evocative way and do things that they had never thought about doing and didn’t do very well. There are more reasons for the rejection of autoethnography, but I think those are some of the reasons the rejection was so strong.

Arthur Bochner: Does that make sense to you?

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Yes, of course. In Turkey, we experience almost the same things. In Turkey, the mainstream in social sciences is really strong, I guess stronger than in your country. It’s very difficult here to defend autoethnography. Most of the academicians here say that it is not social science, it is not science. You are doing something close to literature, et cetera.

Arthur Bochner: Well, I’m glad you brought that up because one of the things that influenced me very much in the 1980s was something called the narrative turn. This was very big in the humanities as well as the social sciences where people were saying, “vocabularies matter”. The stories we tell that define what we are doing matter. There was one philosopher in particular who I was quite intrigued by. His name was Richard Rorty. He was writing about the importance of vocabularies and also talking about the history of disciplines. We have these disciplines: sociology, anthropology, psychology, and communication, for example, and these disciplines become institutionalized. We begin to imagine that they were somehow ordained from the heavens. But they weren’t ordained from the heavens. They were created by human beings and the separations between the disciplines turned out to be very arbitrary. His work created an opening in the 1980s for thinking differently about disciplines.
The cognitive psychologists were very into scientific methods. A famous cognitive psychologist named Jerome Bruner wrote a very important book in 1990, entitled *Acts of Meaning*, published by Harvard University Press. In it he opened up the idea that the division between the disciplines was arbitrary and there was no reason that the human sciences couldn’t be more human.

What happened in the history of social sciences? As Carolyn was suggesting, we got more and more distanced, more and more separated. Thus, the idea we had, as did others such as Norman Denzin and Laurel Richardson, was that the human sciences needed to become more human. In one of Richardson’s pieces, she admitted, “I don’t finish reading half of what I start to read in the social sciences” because they are boring. They are distancing, and too often pretty simple minded or trivial, about things that we already obviously know.” And they don’t deal with human experience. Both Denzin and Richardson were instrumental in the movement that we were part of.

**Carolyn Ellis:** I always like to talk with my students about the goals of what we do. I have a chart, in fact. It’s in the back of the *Ethnographic I*. It looks at ethnography that is being done in terms of what the researchers’ goals are. So, the chart goes from, on the left, sociology or social science as literary and as close to humanities, over to the right where ethnography is closer to science. You have to locate yourself on that continuum, and wherever you locate yourself, then there are different rules, different goals, different ways of writing, and so forth. I often use the ideas in this chart when someone is really threatened by what we’re doing. Or they say, “well, this is just literature, it’s not social science”. No, no, look at where the author positions him or herself. I think you as an author owe it to your audience to position yourself and say, “this is the mode I’m writing out of, and so this is the way that it should be judged”. If I am working more from a literary perspective, that’s not going to be judged in the same way that an ethnography that’s trying to be more objective and scientific would then be judged. I don’t know if that’s helpful or not. We should probably let the translator translate.

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** Gülgün, are you okay?

**Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir:** Yes, that’s great to hear all of this, but sometimes I’m just forgetting that I’m here to interpret. But just looking at the screen and listening what is happening there, I can do it. Okay. A bit longer than expected, but it will be okay. From the very beginning. Şimdi bu hikayenin kendi açısidan olan kısmını anlatarak başlamıştı Arthur. En önemli kısımlar aslında 1992’dede ortaya çıktı ama çok da anlatmadı Carolyn dedi. Ben anlatayım dedi size hikayeyi. Kuzey Florida’da bir üniversitenin gazetesinde görmüştim, “Sosyoloji bölümünden Prof. Ellis İşletme Fakültesinde bir konuşma yapacak.” Kendi çalışmaları, metodolojisi, sosyal bilimler üzerine bir konuşma yapacak, tabii bu işletme fakültesi için biraz değişik bir program, konuşma, alışlagelmedik bir şey. Ben de o sirada iletişim bölümünde yeni bir doktora programına girmiştim. Bu da çok değişikti, yani daha önce Amerika’da hiç yapılmamış bir şey. Herhangi bir kalitatif araştırma hedeflenmiyor metot olarak. Genellikle hikaye anlatılacağına, uygulamaya yönelik bir programı. Ben de bu konuşma ilanını gazetede görünce dört arkadaşımı daha alıp “Hadi gelin gidelim


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Evet, “Which Way To Turn”.


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Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Gülgün, Carolyn Ellis wrote in what that “We can understand the hand signals of Gülgün”.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Really? Because I am getting too much into it. [laughs]

Arthur Bochner: That was breathtaking.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: The last part I guess.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Okay, the last part, yes. 1980’de bir “narrative turn” adı verilen, bunu gerçekten şu an bilelimyorum nasıl Türkçeye çevireceğini, bir akımın ortaya çıktığını bahsedebiliriz sosyal bilimlerde. Genel olarak, kullanılan kelimelerin, kelime seçiminin de aslında bir şey ifade ettiği, bunun bir ömür taşıdığı araştırma açısından. İddiası bu ve bu tartışmanın aslında tarihçesine bakmak için Richard Rorty iyi bir isim. Sosyolojide, antropolojide ve iletişim bilimlerinde daha kurumsallaştırılmış bir yapısı, daha kurumsallaştırılmış bir hale getirilmesine, aslında sebeb olmak olan bir şey. Yani şöyle düşünebiliriz aslında, bunların, sosyal bilimlerin hiçbiri gökten inmedi, insan eliyle, insanlar...


Serpil Aygün Cengiz:  Thank you Gülgün. Perhaps you would like to take a deep breath.

Arthur Bochner:  Breathtaking.

Carolyn Ellis: She is working much harder than we are.

Arthur Bochner: Let me just add a few final thoughts. I’ll try to keep this quite simple and direct to make it easier on the translator. First, autoethnography has evolved through all these wonderful works that Carolyn has published, so many of which you’ve read and through the books that we’ve done and through the book series we edited (Writing Lives), through the ICQI, (The International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry), and now the IAANI (International Association for Autoethnography and Narrative). Autoethnography is a form of inquiry. We are inquiring into our own experiences and hoping to touch the experience of others. It’s also very much, and I try to emphasize this in the ‘Heart of Autoethnography’ piece, a connection, autoethnography is about connection. We get better connected to ourselves at the same time as we connect to other people’s experiences. At the outset, when you are beginning to do autoethnography, you are beginning to engage in a form of inquiry, a form of research into your experience. It is not self-evident. You don’t yet know what it means. It is an inquiry. You are inquiring into its possible meanings. The reason I mentioned Bruner’s book Acts of Meaning is that autoethnography is an act of meaning and an attempt to touch the meanings of other people, even to the extent, as one of our former students and now colleagues at USF has suggested, it connects, for example, to the world of art. People make art objects from autoethnographies. For example, Csaba Osvath gave me an original artwork he made, because the story that I wrote, “Bird on a Wire,” which you can find in Qualitative Inquiry, touched experiences that he had buried from his childhood; he was touched by my story. As he reflected on those experiences, he made a collage art piece which he and I discussed in the second edition of the Handbook of Autoethnography.

https://www.folklorededebiyat.org
A couple of other final points. As an act of meaning, autoethnography is usually an act of storytelling, which means that when we try to teach autoethnographic method, we sooner or later come around to what it means to tell a story and what the elements of a story are, such as scenes, plot, character, and trouble. All those are ingredients, which you might call elements of storytelling. One of the class members asked what it means to be a “poetic science”, because I’ve used that term. Mark Freeman, a psychologist, has also used that term “poetic science” to explain that when you’re doing storytelling, when you’re doing performance of stories, and autoethnography is a way of performing stories, you are “putting life on the page”. Putting life on the page is precisely what is left out of traditional social science. Our work is not cold. It’s warm. Sometimes it’s even hot. It’s not distanced. It tries to move closer to life as experienced. Carolyn mentioned this earlier in her opening, it is not just about knowing. Social science is traditionally obsessed with the idea of epistemology, of how we know. It is also about feeling, about emotion, about being. So, good autoethnography often touches people where they live, an expression that Laurel Richardson has used. So, you reflect on your experience. You turn that experience into a story, and it touches other people’s stories as well. Often it involves a kind of writing that we call vulnerable writing because it is writing in which we aren’t ashamed, we aren’t resistant to presenting ourselves as full-blooded people. That’s what I will leave you with.

_Art leaves the session at this point._

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** When you write vulnerably, how do you protect yourself? How do you protect your mental health when people attack you?

**Carolyn Ellis:** Okay, well, let me give a little history. When I wrote _Final Negotiations_, which was about the illness and death of my first partner, I was very somewhat fearful about putting that book out there because it was about the 70’s and 80’s, and it mentioned drug use and so forth. I thought, could I lose my job over this? But I didn’t. And I had unbelievably wonderful responses to that book. But I also had some very negative responses not only to the work, but to the personal life that I had lived as well. I remember coming home one day after getting a very critical response from somebody that I admired, who was a sociologist, and saying to Art, do you think I lived an immoral life? Because that’s what was being claimed in this response. He, of course, said all the right things. Still, I went to bed and covered up my head for a couple of minutes. Then I got up and said, “okay, I have to deal with this”. If I really believe in what I’m doing, which I do, and I’m putting my story out there, which I was, and then saying that I can’t control how people respond to it, which I cannot, then I have to be ready for whatever responses they give. I also have to think about what I can learn from their responses.

One of the claims that you hear a lot is that autoethnography is self-absorption. I don’t think good autoethnography is self-absorption, but I think when I went to bed and covered up my head, I was being self-absorbed because it was time then to let go of my feelings about how people were responding. And I had to now turn to investigating their responses. What do they mean? Why are they responding the way they are responding. What in their history led them to feel different from the way I feel or to think of my experience different from the way
I thought about it? When they are responding, that is the time to do more traditional sociology to analyze why this kind of response is coming in. It is not the time to re-feel and worry and obsess about what you have written.

Thinking that way really helped me. So, whenever I now get a negative response, I say to myself, why is this person responding this way? What do I have to learn here about the differences and similarities among people? So that’s really the way that I deal with it. Plus, I tell myself, don’t concentrate on the five negative responses when you just got many, many positive ones. That’s ridiculous.

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** My solution is going to psychotherapy.

**Carolyn Ellis:** That’s another one. I talk to Art a lot. I can let go of my emotions with him and say, okay, now I have to go figure out what to do with this. But to be honest, I don’t get that many negative responses anymore. In the beginning, I did, with people saying some of what you said before, “this is not research”, “this is not social science”, “If you need to go write about your experiences, do that, but don’t claim it’s Sociology”. I got all of that in the beginning, but now partly because of who I associate with, I don’t often hear it. Somebody asked me if autoethnography ever isolates me. And my answer is only in the sense that the people that I probably wouldn’t enjoy interacting with don’t come around, which is a good thing. People with whom I share commonalities and values about being human do come around. I get to meet a whole lot more people that I relate to in doing all of this.

I always think of where I was when I started this work: I was very much into sociology. Let me in, please, I practically begged my sociology colleagues. Consider what I do to be social science. Now I feel like I’m in the center of a wheel, and there are folks all over the world, including in Turkey, who have become my colleagues. We find each other, and we create a community, and it’s not necessarily discipline-related. It’s for people touched by this work. It touches them where they live, and it communicates with them about the kind of perspective they want to have in their research.

I think I probably got off of the question, but anyway, you want to let the interpreter respond?

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** Gülgün?


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you, Gülgün. Now we can hear our new question. Prof. Ellis, we know about your Fisher Folk study and we are aware of the ethical problems you lived through doing this study. Hacı Bayram has now a question about this issue.

Hacı Bayram Karakurt: First of all, you are welcome to our humble house. It’s a big honor to see you among us. Today, I feel excited. But if you let me, the question for me is rethinking relationally about your research on fisher folks. Today, what would your professional attitude be like if you had one more chance to start from the beginning?

Carolyn Ellis: That is an incredibly wonderful question. Thank you. It’s interesting for me to think about that. The fisher folk study was not only my undergraduate honors thesis, but then became my PhD dissertation, and then a book called Fisher Folk. Then after I wrote it, someone who was somewhat, I guess, envious of the work took the book back to the fishing community and highlighted everything that he thought would upset the fisher folk and read it to them. These folks who had become my good friends were really upset because I had said things such as they worked in fish houses and they smelled of fish. I said they often had sexual relationships with close relatives. I commented on their appearances, and it was very upsetting to them, which was understandable.

So, when I went back to the community, there were people who approached me and were very upset. And I thought, I just have to take it; they deserve to be heard and I need to hear what they feel. So, I went to their homes. I talked to them, I apologized, and I even cried with the man I considered my ‘informant’ there.

I then wrote a piece after that about the ethics of what I had done. I had done nothing other than what was considered traditional ethnography at that point. I changed the names. I didn’t tell where the location was. I described what I had seen and observed. My PhD committee and readers loved that I had insight into sexual relationships and so forth, and I got lots of acclaim for how much I had been accepted by the community.

But I felt horrible after that. And I thought, I am never going to write something like this again that is so hurtful to a community. It is not worth it to me to get the information and then hurt people to that extent and hurt myself too. I was really demoralized about how they responded to me. I ended up still being friends with a number of them after that, who forgave me. But it had ruined my very positive and trusting relationship with this community, which I had had for over nine years. I justified it to myself: well, they knew I was writing about them. Yes, they did. But they didn’t really know what that meant. I became a friend to them and they became friends to me. They didn’t really know what I was going to write about or that I was going to write about their personal lives.

Some other writers have claimed that’s why I started doing autoethnography. I don’t think that that’s quite the truth. It wasn’t a direct relationship between, okay, that didn’t work, now I’m going to try something different. Instead I started doing autoethnography because of my own personal life experiences, trying to understand loss and grief and because I saw the value of autoethnography as I was doing ethnography. I saw that most of what I came to understand about the fisherfolk, I understood in interaction with them, through the
experiences and stories we shared. I was very much a participant in that community and I didn’t want to pull myself out of the story as though I didn’t exist. So even in my book *Fisher Folk*, I become a participant and I’m a speaking person. I’m a feeling person, but not to the extent that I was in my autoethnographic writings afterwards.

So that’s a long introduction to get to your question. If I were to start over, I would still like to do the fisher folks study, but I would like to do it in collaboration with them so that they could speak and talk about their feelings and thoughts and desires and so forth. I wouldn’t be the ‘objective researcher’ presenting their lives without feeling for them or feeling for our relationship, or trying to understand on a deep level why they felt and acted as they did. That would be uppermost in my mind. It might be that I would have to present things differently or leave out some things, but that would be okay because I think we still would have a much richer ethnography with their voices being present. In retrospect, I could have gone back to the community. I could have read things to them and asked them to respond and then include their responses in the book. That process can be really hard, and it might introduce other problems. But I think if you have a certain frame of mind of caring about these people, of not wanting to hurt them, of being sensitive, and seek to come to some understanding in your work together, then you can produce something valuable.

I remember I had a student who was writing about people who were seeking therapy in a social agency. She first wrote about going into the clients’ houses and described how dirty they were. I said to her, nobody ever gets over having their house described as dirty and being called dirty. Is there a way you can describe what you see without judging it? Just say the clothes were in the corner, the food was out on the table. I mean, it doesn’t solve the problem, but at least you’re not saying these people were dirty. You’re trying to give a visual picture so that the receiver can decide what’s going on there.

So, I would do it very differently is the answer to your question.

**Serpil Aygün Cengiz:** The next question will be about collaborative witnessing. It is a related subject, I guess. But first, Gülgün, would you please translate?


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün.

Professor Ellis, in your article “Bad Bread, Good Bread”, you gave us an example of collaborative witnessing, which was very interesting for us. Sibel now has a question about this key word. Sibel, you may ask your question.

Sibel Taş: Hello, Professor Ellis. My question is could you share with us the process that led you to the concept of collaborative witnessing. Thank you.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay, thank you. The concept came about in my work with Holocaust survivors, and I think that it is associated with some of what happened in Fisher Folk. I wanted to make sure that I didn’t present a story that could be harmful in any way to Holocaust survivors I worked with or to Holocaust survivors in general. I wanted my work to do some good to help Holocaust survivors tell their story, help them tell the story in a way maybe they had never told it before. I also was very aware that they were telling the story to me and that I was a participant in the storytelling and that I would help with the storytelling by the questions I asked and the responses I gave. Then also the Holocaust survivors could help me with the analysis because they have understandings about their stories that I can’t possibly have, and so our work together should be a collaborative kind of endeavor. I also was intrigued with how to take autoethnography to an interview situation where the focus was on the other person, not on me. I was a participant, but the focus should be on the other person’s story.
Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Dear Ellis, may I say something to Gülgün? Gülgün, Dilek will translate now Carolyn’s answer, so perhaps you can rest a little bit.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Okay. Okay, thank you.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: You are welcome. Sorry, Prof. Ellis. Yes, we are listening to you.

Carolyn Ellis: Thank you. I wanted to figure out a way to bring autoethnography to an interview situation where the focus was on the other person, not on my story, but I was a participant in the story. Even in the Bread story that you read, I’m a participant. Jerry, the survivor, is telling the story to me. I bring you back to the setting we are interacting in. I talk about sharing food with Jerry during the interview and bring that into the story of his experience with starvation during the Holocaust.

To me, autoethnography is also a perspective, not just a method or a story. It’s a way of being in the world. Art has called it “a way of life”. One of you asked about that. Autoethnography is a mindset. And so, my mindset that I brought to this interaction with Jerry was: I want to care about you. I want us to have a friendship. I want it to be a developing, trusting friendship. I want us to cooperate together to tell the best story we can possibly tell. And as our relationship develops, that story will just become deeper and richer. I want our work to help you with understanding and coping with your experience and help other survivors understand something about their situation. I used the term “collaborative witnessing” then to encompass all those ideas as something that we are doing together to reach understanding. I made sure that Jerry Rawicki, who just died a couple of months ago, by the way, at age 94, approved everything that I wrote before I published it. I also produced two films about Jerry, and I showed them to him before I showed them to anybody else. That’s just the way ethically, that I now want to do research. I’m not advocating that everybody has to do it this way, but it’s the way that I feel most comfortable doing it.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. Dilek, we are listening to you.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: Gülgün, it’s a hard job. “‘Collaborative witnessing’ kavramına sizi götürülen süreci paylaşır mısınız?” diye sordu Sibel.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: “Ortaklaşa tanıklık” diye çevirebiliriz.


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: I think it was wonderful. Thank you. Now we have a question from Mina. Now, the personal is political, and we know that but once autoethnographic texts are read, professor, one can feel that autoethnographic texts are not something really connected, related to political power or social moments, et cetera. Mina will ask you whether autoethnography can make a difference in society, I think. Mina, you may ask your question.

Mina Yoldaş: Hi. Thank you. I want to quote Simon Roberts to begin my question. In his Order and Dispute: An Introduction to Legal Anthropology book, he says “a law should be defined by its function, not its form”. This tells us that we need to understand sociological realities and cultural mechanisms for the creation of laws. And while describing the research method of autoethnography in your book, you say it strives for social justice and to make life better. In light of all these, do you think you can make a meaningful difference in the law or in society as mass movements when doing autoethnography?

Carolyn Ellis: Thank you for that question. Well, I don’t want to claim more than I should. I doubt that autoethnography will change laws, and maybe it won’t change society. Although I will say autoethnographic stories get called on a lot politically. Those users may not know the term autoethnography, but in the courts, in Congress--I’m in the U.S. now, and you can talk more about what happens in Turkey--politicians almost always call on personal stories to persuade others toward a political position. Politicians love the personal story because they know how effective it is. So, I think autoethnography in that realm does a lot for social justice and social change, even though the practitioners aren’t referring to their stories as autoethnography.

Also I think autoethnography as we practice it primarily as academicians does lead to social change one story at a time. It’s not so much a social movement in those terms, but by telling the story one person at a time, the awareness and insights might lead to effective social change. For example, personal stories from transgendered people might affect how we as a society think about gender identity.

Unfortunately, I’m not sure that much of what academics do as a whole leads to great societal social change. But that never makes me stop working for change because I feel like
we all need to contribute the little bit that we can do, and hopefully that adds up to a whole lot more. For example, autoethnography just connected you in Turkey to me in the United States. That’s wonderful. Autoethnography advocates this kind of collaboration, talking across boundaries, taking the role of the other, because you’re never just writing about yourself, you’re writing about the other. I think this kind of collaboration would help in the United States, and perhaps worldwide, for people who tend to polarize into two camps and then fight each other, whether it’s the Israelis and Palestinians in Israel, or the Republicans and Democrats in the United States. So, I think autoethnographic practices are commonly used to influence social change, though the term may not always be applied.

Again, I want to do my little bit in the way that I am able to do it to effect the change I view as important. I think that when we take our autoethnographies to undergraduate classes as well as graduate classes, all those folks who read these stories might come to some understanding of people who are different from them, who think different from them. They then talk about what they read and give these pieces to their relatives and friends and it disseminates into the wider world. So, I’m hopeful that in some way autoethnography makes some small changes that are effective. What do you think?

Mina Yoldaş: I think you are right. Türkçe söylesem olur mu? Dilek ya da Gülgün yardımcı olsa?

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Tabii, tabii.

Mina Yoldaş: Sanırım, buna cevabım, inanmak istiyorum. Otoetnografının buna sebep olabileceğine inanmak istiyorum.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Her answer is so simple but really great, I guess. I would love to believe that autoethnography would change something in the world.

Carolyn Ellis: Yes, me too. Thank you.

bahsettiğimiz bir yere otoetnografi. O nedenle ben her zaman için bir akademisyen olarak çalışmalarımı yaparken, sınıfta ders verirken, buna bir katkı sağladığını düşünüyorum, ben kendi üzerine düşünce yapıyorum, insanların biraz daha farklı düşünmesine, zaman içinde, katkıda bulunduğumu düşünüyorum. Siz bir şey farklı düşünmeye başladığınızda bunu akrabalarımıza söylersiniz, arkadaşlarına söylersiniz, bu böyle ufak ufak değişimler yaratır ve yayılabilir diyebilmem için. İnanyorum, küçük küçük de olsa bir değişim yaratacağına inanyorum.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün. Prof. Ellis, it’s very difficult, really, to see the use of art as a research method in the mainstream social sciences or in the mainstream ethnographic studies. It is very well seen that there is art in very different forms in autoethnographic texts. We were really amazed when we read performative autoethnographic texts such as *The Accusing Body*, which was written by Tami Spry. Now, the next question is about aesthetics and autoethnography. Şenel will ask her question, but she quoted from your book *Autoethnography* (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2015, p. 23) and she wanted me to read the quotation before she asks her question. So first I will read the quotation, then she will ask her question.

“Using narrative and storytelling to research and represent experience, autoethnographers also attend to how narratives and stories are constructed and told. As Craig Gingrich-Philbrook argues, autoethnographers must take seriously the epistemic (claims to knowledge) and the aesthetic (practices of imaginative, creative and artistic craft) characteristics of autoethnographic texts. For us, this means studying and practicing the methods and means for conducting research, as well as studying and practicing the mechanisms and means for making art (e.g., poetry, fiction, performance, music, dance, painting, photography, film.” (Adams, T., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C., 2015, Oxford University Press, p. 23.). Now, Şenel, I think you may ask your question.

Şenel Vural: Hi there. Epistemik ve estetik bağlamda bir otoetnografi metni hazırlarken ölçütün ne olacağını soracağım, Hocam.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: I think Dilek may translate it into English.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: Sure. She asks, in epistemic and aesthetic terms, what are the criteria when we create an autoethnographic text?

Carolyn Ellis: Okay, I’m going to give a short answer to this because I see we still have three pages of questions, and you might be here till midnight. But let me refer you to a source. There was an issue of symbolic interaction where many people wrote about this topic. I wrote a piece and Art wrote a piece, as did Laurel Richardson and Norman Denzin. I’m going to refer you to that piece and then to Art’s work also (Ellis, C. (2000) “Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story,” 273-277; Bochner, A (2000), “Criteria Against Ourselves,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 6(2),266-72.). Where he goes through the criteria, I talk more about the feelings of being a reviewer for autoethnography and what I expect to be included there and to do. What are the criteria, the artistic criteria and the writing criteria, and the contribution to understanding the social world criteria?
Your question is complicated. Now I’m going to do a 30 second summary of that response. I look for aesthetic writing. I want to feel moved in some way, to be engaged, to feel something, to want to respond intellectually, either by agreeing, disagreeing, or wanting to have a conversation about the complexities of what I’m reading. That evocative quality has to be there. You have to write at a certain level artistically in order to get your point across, or present photographs or performance or dance or any of those artistic modes in a way that opens up a conversation with the people who are the audience.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Prof. Ellis. Dilek?


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Dilek. Now, Balım has a question. Gülgün, will you please translate Balım’s question, answer into Turkish? Now, let’s hear Balım’s question. You may ask your question.

Balım Yetgin: Hi. First of all, I want to say I am really moved. I appreciate what you said and you shared your story with us. I’m really impressed. Thank you so much. As you said, there are lots of questions, and actually I think I got my answers during your conversation. We can skip this question or I can ask just this. If you want to answer a short or big answer, it’s okay because most of the answer insight I got from your conversation already. I’m just wondering what is your understanding of objectivity in ethnographic encounters? And how it is different from positivist, abstract objectivity, absolute objectivity? Do you think different kinds of objectivity should be an epistemological problem in autoethnography? For example, these questions are bothering me for a long time. After I did read something from Fabian, who was suggesting something like that, to make subjectivity a condition of objectivity is an effort to save objectivity from positive subjectivity. Different from positive subjectivity, he is suggesting one kind of objectivity historical, process, not static, not just logical and accepting subjectivity. Subjectivity should be overt in this objectivity. Like two sides of medallion.

Carolyn Ellis: It’s a great question and I love the way you posed it. I’ll give you a short answer. I think in terms of radical objectivity, which means you can’t claim to be objective unless you include subjectivity. If I don’t tell you my background, my history, my feelings,
I’m not being that objective. I need to give you all the information I can give you so that you can figure out why I’m saying the things that I’m saying. To me, subjectivity is a vital part of objectivity. And, you know, in autoethnography, I really do think we strive to tell the truth with a small T. We try to tell what happened the best way we can, knowing that you can never be totally objective about anything, because once an experience happens, it’s gone. You cannot fully capture it. You can only have a partial memory and interpretation of it. So, the best you can do is to acknowledge all of that and say, given all that, here’s what I have to offer you with all of its problems and so forth. It’s the best that I can do. I have tried to tell the truth with a small t, but I also have had to create because memory is fallible, of course, and my goal is not so much to accurately represent as it is to create, engage, communicate with you, be in conversation with you and see if we can come to some understanding together. Some of the other words that we sometimes use, such as generalizability and validity, I don’t want to discard them, but I want to think about them differently. So, if I tell a story and nobody feels like they want to respond to it, it doesn’t touch anybody, it’s not very generalizable, and perhaps I need to rethink its purpose. I try to redefine these concepts so that they work for us in the kind of writing we do. Or bring in other concepts, such as resonance, which are more appropriate for the kind of work we do. We discuss resonance in our book, *Evocative Autoethnography*.

Balım Yetgin: Thank you, thank you so much.


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Now I said we can quickly move on. There is another question about aesthetics and popular culture and autoethnography? Mina, you may ask your question.

Mina Yoldaş: Okay. Hi again. My question is, when I first saw the concept of aesthetic movements in your book, TV series like *Seinfeld* and *The Office* came into my mind. We see that observations of daily life are frequently used in different art forms. Also, video and photography content produced for ethnographic studies are very aesthetic and artistic. So,
do you think that ethnographic production can turn into artistic forms over time? And what would such a transformation mean for the social science? Thank you.

Carolyn Ellis: Well, I doubt very much that traditional ethnography is going to make that kind of transformation. That does not mean that we interpretive scholars can’t make that kind of transformation and turn what we do into documentaries or performances or whatever. Indeed, that goes on all the time. I think that’s good. I think that Seinfeld is one of the best ethnographies I’ve ever watched. I mean, they are tuned into the little things in everyday life, and they show them and they work with them. They work them. Good comedy in my opinion is really good ethnography. So, the possible connection between some of those things—documentaries, stand-up comedy, and autoethnography, for example—is really strong. The producers and people on Seinfeld, and good comedians may not think of themselves as ethnographers or autoethnographers, but that’s what they are.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. Dilek?


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Prof. Ellis, are you tired of this session? We are writing to each other here “What should we do?”. We don’t know. And I would like to ask you, would you like a break or would you like to finish this session? There are questions.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay. I think maybe I could do two more questions and then we would finish the session. I’m sure that all of you are going to have wonderful conversations later about all this. I do think that we’ve touched on many of the other questions. So perhaps you might decide one or two questions that we haven’t touched on or any general kind of comment you would want to make or question you want to ask me.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Okay, two more questions. Let me ask the group in Turkish.


Carolyn Ellis: One more suggestion. If I see a couple of questions that are related to each other, what if I just speak in general about a few of them?

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: That will be wonderful.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay. They’re all such wonderful, wonderful questions, and I could spend ten minutes answering each one of them happily. But I know that your students, if they’re like all the students I’ve had, they probably are ready to go home by now.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: May I say what will happen here in Turkish to the group?

Carolyn Ellis: Yes.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Tabii ki.

Budem Çağlı Büyükpoyraz: Hocam, ufak bir şey söyleyebilir miyim? Madem son cevaplar, o zaman herkes kamerasını açarsa bir ekran görüntüsü almak istiyorum.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: That will be wonderful. Professor Ellis, Budem wants to take a screenshot if all of us open their cameras. Arkadaşlar herkes kamerasını açabilir mi Budem bir ekran resmi alsin?

Carolyn Ellis: Oh, let me get Art to be in the photo.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: We are taking screenshots.

Carolyn Ellis: Okay, we’re smiling.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. Thank you, Professor Ellis and Bochner. But we want to listen to you for the other questions and answers. So, the question about what happens and this is a great question, like all of them are, what to do when you face, for example, racism during the field work. How should you behave in the field? What is your advice?

Carolyn Ellis: I don’t have so much a general response, because you have to take this situation by situation and figure out what’s the ethical thing to do in this case. Who are you responsible to, who do you owe loyalty to? I’ve had to make those decisions when I did informal field work in a community in the mountains of the United States where we have a summer home. Some of the local people there were extremely racist. When I wrote my stories of interaction with them, I included their racist remarks and symbols, and some of my responses. I made the decision that it was important that I show racism so that others in American society could see the kinds of racism that goes on in these rural communities. I felt that was more important—a greater good—than loyalty to particular people that I included in my descriptions of our life in this community.

Unlike the way I felt about the Fisher folk who had invited me into their community, I was prepared to deal with any response from anyone here who might read what I wrote. While I did not want to hurt them, I was willing to suffer the consequences of their reading my words, because I felt there were more important principles that were operating here than community loyalty—i.e. to reveal dangerous racism that threatened our diverse society. This presented an exception for me to my feelings that if you take on an ethnography, you owe much to the people that you are working with. Here, being ethical to me meant revealing racism.

Ethics is complicated. That’s why they are called ‘ethics’. But really you have to figure out for yourself what it means to be ethical in research, just like you figure out any ethical situation in your life, acknowledging that you have special responsibilities because you are in a power position as the teller.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün.

Carolyn Ellis: I’m going to combine the next two questions you submitted, which are about the effect that autoethnography has had on me, my relationships with other people, and how I might be in the world. Autoethnography has been wonderful to and for me. It has helped me get through issues in my life, and come to deeper understandings of them in so many ways. I can’t even express how much it has been beneficial to me, and I see it being beneficial to other people. I learned from doing autoethnography to not jump too quickly to thinking I know what is going on, but instead to take the role of the other and ask questions about why that person is behaving the way they are or acting toward me in the way they are. I ask the same questions about myself and my actions and feelings. So, I’ve become much more introspective about life. I think that’s a good thing, and that we all should do that before we assume something—a motive, a meaning, for example.

Unlike what happened with the Fisher Folk, I did a lot of writing about my mother before she died, and that writing enhanced our relationship in so many wonderful ways, partly because of the attention I started to pay to her. I also began to think about how she saw me. So, it wasn’t just me saying, ‘oh, we’re so different that she could never understand me’. Instead, I tried to understand her world as well. We became very close before she died. I think that was partly through what happened in the writing process where I became more aware, I became more caring, and more understanding of her point of view and life experiences. Our closeness was also a product of my sharing my writing with her. So autoethnography has been, for the most part, extremely positive in my life.

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Şimdi burada üç tane soru var yine birbiriley ilişkili olabilecek. Bu hem diğer insanlarla olan ilişkilerim hem dünyaya olan ilişkimin

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün. Professor Ellis?

Carolyn Ellis: There was one part of that question I didn’t answer, and I think it’s an important part, which is how it has changed the relationships with my students. Some of you will be teaching autoethnography, and so I do want to say it does definitely change relationships. You become closer to your students, and all that entails, both the positive and maybe not so positive. You become part of their life, and they become part of your life, and it’s a more holistic relationship than traditional professor/student relationships. So, you’re not only looking at those five dissertation pages a student gives you, you also get tuned into the difficulties that they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis if they are writing about their troubles and intimate difficulties.

Art and I have wonderful, long-term relationships with our students. Some of our former students are among the people that we are closest to in the world. We feel like we’ve adopted some of them even. But, you know, when you are acting as mentor, sometimes it can be difficult to know where the academic relationship ends and the personal one begins. They can get confused and fused together, and so the expectations can be pretty tough about who you are to them. Are you just a mentor? Are you a counselor? Are you a parent figure? What is your role in their life? Sometimes it then becomes difficult, for example, when you tell them to have this chapter finished by next week. Then the student might feel, why is my good friend being so hard on me? So, you have to negotiate all of that. But it’s also workable, and it’s wonderful. The relationships that I have with my students are very meaningful and important to me.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Professor Ellis.


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Carolyn Ellis: There’s just one other question that I think I haven’t touched on.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Is it about movies?

Carolyn Ellis: The question was Ruhsan’s. What kind of life experience was effective in bringing literary autoethnography to life? And my quick answer is, when I put my stories out there, I couldn’t believe how many emails I got, how many messages and letters I received. People wanted to tell me their stories back. We knew then we had touched a nerve. When we used autoethnographic stories in undergraduate and graduate classes, the students just turned on. You could see it in their eyes. You didn’t have to force them to do the reading, and you could take the discussion to any level you wanted. I knew we were on to something then.

Ruhsan İskifoğlu: Thank you so much. Thank you. Anything else?

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Gülgün, would you please translate it?

Gülgün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Yes, I guess it’s, Ruhsan Hocamın sorusuydu sanırım. İnsanların kendi hikayeleri ve kendi deneyimleriyle ilgili o kadar çok posta aldım, mektup, mesajlar, o kadar fazla şey geldi ki anlatabilecek, paylaşılabilecek çok fazla şey var. Bunları derste, herhangi bir seviyede tartışmak mümkün, çok fazla içerik var üzerine konuşulabilecek.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Professor Ellis, there is also a question about documentary and movies. It says that in your book, also in the other articles we read, movies are said to be technographic representations, which are very important when they are about the director himself, herself or the researcher himself. So, the question was, I will read it to you. “What would be your approach to the Cinematography of autoethnographic themes? Do you think there are certain forms they should be in such films?” What do you think about documentation, autoethnographic documentation and movies used in autoethnographic representations?

Carolyn Ellis: What do I think about autoethnographic representation in movies? We talked a little about that with Seinfeld.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: It was popular culture, but this question is about documentary and movies.

Carolyn Ellis: I wish that I had more skills doing documentaries. I felt the two that I did were just amazing because I not only had the words, but I had the bodies and the feeling and the physical presence of the speakers there. I don’t have documentary training, but I worked with someone who had video skills. I hoped to write about autoethnography and documentaries, but so far I haven’t. I think it is a wonderful form for autoethnography. If I were starting over today, I think I would want to become a documentarian and bring autoethnography and documentaries together. I don’t know if any of your students have documentary skills or not, but a lot of young people now do.
Serpil Aygün Cengiz: There is one person, one of our master program students, works in the field of movies and she has documentaries.

Carolyn Ellis: Great.


Carolyn Ellis: One more idea, because I do see that I skipped those questions. Our friend, who we mentioned earlier, Csaba Osvath, is very versed about artificial intelligence and so he wants to do a project with me where we could actually place a Holocaust survivor and me into a setting and have us interact in the setting. So, who knows what the future of that might be? I would love to do that with him because he has all the technical skills. He’s shown me some films before that place people together in these scenes and have them interact together. They’re using that approach now in some Holocaust museums. That’s especially important because not many survivors still are alive. I think documentarians have an important future in autoethnography. Many documentarians do autoethnography though they do not use that term.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Gülgün, are you tired also? We will finish in five minutes, I think.


Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you Gülgün. Professor Ellis, I really thank you. Your articles and your books, which we read, and today you give us courage, really, to move on. Thank you very much. Would you like to say anything like the last words to us?

Carolyn Ellis: Yes. I am so impressed with what you’re doing in this class, and I am so impressed with you and your students and how insightful they are, how much they know about autoethnography, and the intelligence of their questions. This has just been wonderful for me. It inspires me. It reminds me to keep writing, keep working, keep talking. Thank you for the inspiration. I know that Art feels the same way. I could see it in his voice and his passion. Thank you all so very much. Keep in touch with me and let me know how you’re doing and how I can help in any way. I hope to see you at one of these conferences we’re planning, if only on zoom.
Serpil Aygün Cengiz: I think most of us will attend your conference this year. Also, I want to thank our translators, Dilek and Gülğün very, very, very much. And I leave the floor to Dilek and Gülğün to have the last words for all of us.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: Let me begin, then. Dear Professor Carolyn Ellis. I’m so happy to have you here. I’m feeling so lucky that you answered my e-mail positively. To be honest, I wasn’t expecting that, so it gave me courage and motivation, actually. And I must say, my husband is here, and he’s an anthropologist.

Carolyn Ellis: Nice to meet you.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: They are both translating English anthropological books into Turkish.

Carolyn Ellis: Oh, that’s wonderful. Wonderful.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: You, professors, are our role models. We try to collaborate in academic works and yeah.

Carolyn Ellis: It’s been wonderful to have a partner in life and love and work altogether. It’s just incredible, really.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: I will be in the conference. You will see me again. And I’m sure I will keep sending you e-mails about the questions because I had several questions, but I couldn’t ask them because we don’t have time. But that’s okay. Maybe I can e-mail them to you.

Carolyn Ellis: E-mail them to me and if I can help with the conference, because I do participate in organizing it, so if there are questions you have or something you’d like to do, a special session or something, let me know and I will see what I can do to help you.

Dilek İşler Hayırlı: Okay, thanks a lot. Thank you.

Carolyn Ellis: You’re welcome. Thanks to everyone and go have your dinner or whatever time it is there for you or go have a nice rest at night.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: But after Gulgüns’s speech, yes, we will say bye bye.

Gülğün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Okay. I will be very short, so thank you for this day also. It’s really a remarkable day in my life, both as a student and as an interpreter, actually. So it was really great to meet you and make the interpreting for you. I learned a lot. I enjoyed a lot of process. And so thank you for everything. It was great to be here with you.

Carolyn Ellis: Thank you. You are truly amazing in what you’re doing. I really appreciate that.

Gülğün Şerefoğlu Elverir: Thank you. Thank you.

Carolyn Ellis: Alright, I wish everyone well.

Serpil Aygün Cengiz: Thank you. Good night.

Carolyn Ellis: I’m signing off.