

Shuffle the Cards, Save the Cat, and Eat the Cake

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Traditionally, a final chapter is seen as closing or concluding a book—bracketing the contents like bookends on a shelf. This type of chapter looks back among the other chapters and tells you what you have read and why it might be important. Unfortunately, I don't think I am going to be able accomplish this conventional undertaking with this chapter... nor do I think I want to. This chapter is not here to tie a nice little bow around the book's contents and declare everything well and good. Just as autoethnography challenges the reader to engage and react, this chapter will instead serve to untie the bow, open the box, and spill out its contents. The authors in this volume have crafted remarkable chapters, stories that I am in awe of, and they are truly gifts to you as a reader, as well as to librarianship as a whole. As with any good gifts, they are both personal and thoughtful, and they are meant to be used, shared, displayed, and celebrated. So let's agree to think of this chapter as not offering up the final word on autoethnography and librarianship, but instead an open invitation for other librarians to write the next chapter, and the next, and the next...

My high school friend Larry had a magical way of thinking about playing cards. Whenever we would play poker or some other card game, Larry would make sure nobody picked up their cards from the table until all the necessary cards were dealt. He believed that while the cards remained facedown on the table, all the suits and values

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were still changing. The numbers were still moving around, jumping from card to card, even after the deck had been shuffled. Jacks were becoming nines. Reds were blinking into black. Twos were transforming into tens. Diamonds were evolving into hearts, and so on and so on. If you happened to pick up or peek at a card, this process stopped and the cards froze into their respective numerical values and suits. I still like to think of playing cards in this way. I like the mystery and the magic of numbers and suits flying between cards when I don't look at them. In a way, I can't really disprove Larry's theory, because by his rules, if I look at the cards the magical shuffling stops. Intentionally or unintentionally, Larry has made Schrödinger's cat a perpetual participant in every card game I play.

The paradox of Schrödinger's thought experiment where the mysterious cat in the poison box is in an indeterminate state of being both alive and dead until observed by the experimenter is perplexing. How can something be in two states of being at once? You have to look to see, that's the solution, and that's also the problem, just as looking at the playing cards supposedly stops the dancing numbers and suits. Your brain hurts if you think about it too hard.

We like to think of libraries as magical places. Yet I am pretty sure the books don't rearrange themselves on the shelves or the words jump from page to page after we lock the doors for the night. However, librarians still find themselves in their own perplexing and paradoxical states straddling a sometimes uncertain and indeterminate library landscape. Libraries are at both temporal extremes as purveyors of the old and antique through its collections and archives, as well as the modern and new through its online materials and digitized texts. Librarianship has yet to resolve the tension inherent at being both a profession embedded with best practices and efficient workflows, and an academic discipline that incorporates theory, research, and scientific rigor. Libraries are an incongruent anachronism by most modern societies' capitalist definitions. Libraries, as institutions, typically define success in terms of sharing, not by profit. This economic anomaly places strain on how libraries and librarians can convey their value if it is not measured by the benchmarks of dollars or market shares. These social, economic, and

discipline-specific concerns are not necessarily mutually exclusive or binary opposites. However, the middle ground between many of these library characteristics has not been clearly demarcated, defined, or developed for librarians to have a sense of who we are, who we can be, or even who we want to be.

Uncertainty, indeterminacy, or being two (or more) things at once is exhausting, nerve-wracking, and confusing. It is no wonder the autoethnographies found in this volume include experiences about the anxieties of librarian identity, imposter syndrome, and liminal spaces. Autoethnography is one method to assist in defining these spaces of librarianship more clearly, but just as importantly, autoethnography captures the lived experiences of librarians as they move through these challenges. The lesson of Larry's card deck and Schrödinger's cat is not only about indeterminate states of being, but also that the observer (or card player) is an active agent in helping define these spaces. As observers we have agency to look at the cat and determine its state of being. As card players we have agency to stop the magical shuffling and look at our cards. As librarians, we have the ability to look at ourselves and our libraries and begin to describe them. Autoethnography offers an opportunity to better explore the parts of librarianship that are defined by librarians—to map out those areas that are made up of our own lived experiences and understandings.

My first encounter with autoethnography as a methodology occurred over the course of completing my doctorate in education. For my dissertation, I led a group of practicing academic librarians through a series of critical reflection exercises that included autoethnography.¹ However, my first foray into the type of deep critical reflection that autoethnography asks one to do actually occurred a few years earlier in a graduate homework assignment. The assignment asked me to reflect critically about my chosen profession. I am a little embarrassed, in looking back and rereading this first reflection, that the tone of the writing is strongly tinged with anger and frustration. I distinctly recall feeling annoyed at being asked to reflect critically about being a librarian. I resented “wasting time” on an activity that required me to engage with feelings, emotions, and aspirations instead of facts, theories, and course readings. However, an amazing

thing happened by the time I reached my reflection's conclusion; I realized that my anger was misplaced. I wasn't angry about the act of reflection but simply encountering my first critical examination of my own anxieties, uncertainties, and insecurities associated with the profession of librarianship. These are the same sorts of anxieties, uncertainties, and insecurities the authors explore throughout the autoethnographic reflections in this book.

Ironically, it is from this place of frustration and uncertainty during that first critical reflection that I also discovered something calming and purposeful about myself and librarianship. From this initial critical reflective activity began my journey, or more rightly (re)awakened me to the path I have always been on, to help give voice to others through my actions as a librarian. This was an important realization for me and something that continues to guide my own practice of librarianship. During this first reflection, I learned an important lesson—*writing can be its own form of discovery*.

I can draw an imaginary line from this first reflective experience straight through to the work put in on my dissertation using critical reflection with librarians. During the process of constructing my dissertation's literature review, I remember first encountering autoethnography as a research methodology in Laura M Jewett's *A Delicate Dance: Autoethnography, Curriculum, and Semblance of Intimacy*.² Jewett hooked me immediately when she stated that autoethnography "offer[s] a promising reconciliation of autobiographic urge (toward self) and ethnographic desire (toward others). Such claims hinge upon notions of intimacy, a textual intimacy between text and reader, and more seductive still, an epistemological intimacy between self and other through a research subjectivity that claims to collapse such categories."³ Jewett's work then led me to Carolyn Ellis and her book *The Ethnographic I*, where Ellis does an amazing job explaining and demonstrating the autoethnographic method.⁴ This imaginary line grows brighter as it travels from that first angry reflection through the dissertation to this book you currently have in your hands. Autoethnography, for me, took awhile to discover and appreciate. I did not always see the path laid out before me, but critical reflection and autoethnography became something quite meaningful to me as a librarian, scholar, and educator. More significantly, autoethnography,

and other reflection methodologies, became something important for me to share with others.

To be clear, autoethnography is not intended to be a succinct nor a precise method. The strength and weakness of autoethnography is that it is thickly, richly, and densely descriptive. Creativity, emotion, and experience spill onto the page next to social theory, social commentary, and social justice. Autoethnography is not the recipe, it's the cake itself. A cake is something that engages the senses on multiple levels—taste, smell, texture, appearance—and so on. Autoethnography, as well, is something that is full of multiple experiences to unpack, dive into, and savor.

Autoethnography, for all intents and purposes, is messy. Librarianship is a profession that traditionally values order and accurate description, and a methodology such as autoethnography can be challenging. Autoethnography also rattles the psyche of a discipline attempting to mimic the rigor, validity, and empirical method found in the sciences and other subject areas. At the core of autoethnography is a critical reflective stance that necessitates a deep qualitative exploration of identity. This autoethnographic expedition into librarianship requires pushing boundaries, creating new pathways, and rewriting the maps about how we define ourselves as librarians.

One thing I have learned, especially during my dissertation experience, is that the type of reflection autoethnography asks one to undertake is not a straightforward process. It might seem that reflection is simply looking backward, but in practice it is also looking forward, sideways, and into the present. Autoethnography breaks, warps, and creates new chronologies of meaning. Carolyn Ellis speaks of this shimmering and blurring aspect of the autoethnographic gaze in this manner: “First [autoethnographers] look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on the social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.”⁵

Deep reflection embraces fiction, reimagination, the telling of stories. In a sense, reflection is a form of refraction, oscillation, even

distortion of the self so we can better see ourselves as the good, the bad, and the imagined—and in doing so we can better see librarianship as a profession.

I like to think my patron saint of critical reflection is Madeleine R. Grumet, who wrote the feminist text *Bitter Milk*.⁶ She offers many lessons that can inform how autoethnography might shape and be shaped by librarianship. Grumet is an advocate for reflection and autobiography, especially with educators. She collaborated with William Pinar to help outline the critical reflection methodology known as *currere*, which has informed my own reflective process.⁷ I am drawn to Grumet because she does a great job framing the benefits, complications, and risks associated with being critically reflective. Grumet emphasizes that the stories found in reflection are vehicles that move us closer to authenticity, community, and redemption. She correctly makes the point that, “viewed against the background of bureaucratic, depersonalized institutions, storytelling seems pretty authentic, or at least expressive. It seems natural to assume that the first person is closer to us than the third.”⁸

This authenticity is deeply inherent in the autoethnographies found in this book. These works also achieve an intimacy by breaking down the distance between the writer and the reader, all the while acknowledging and building our shared community of librarian experience. This intimacy is not simply a trick of writing in the first person but about the authors taking personal risks and being vulnerable. Grumet points out these risks have real consequences as “the telling diminishes the teller”⁹ and that once a personal story is shared, it is impossible “to get back.”¹⁰ This is of particular significance within our community of librarians and their reaction to this book’s autoethnographies. Will these works be received warmly and incorporated into librarianship, or will they be panned, or even worse, ignored?

I have a strong belief in librarians as champions of access, equality, and new ideas, so I would wager that these personal autoethnographies of struggle and growth will add significantly to our professional understanding of ourselves. These writings will hopefully spark conversations among librarians and inspire others. Grumet sees a shared community as an outgrowth of authentic reflection. “Multiple texts

and multiple interpreters bring the presentation of personal knowledge... into a community of people who share a world.”¹¹ This “shared world” of librarianship is what autoethnography works to define and repair. Grumet states, “As we study the forms of our own experience, not only are we searching for evidence of the external forces that have diminished us; we are also recovering our own possibilities. We work to remember, imagine, and realize ways of knowing and being that can span the chasm presently separating our public and private worlds.”¹² As Grumet notes, critical reflection can work to bridge our multiple selves, moving the line from unknown to known, and in this process of knowing address our symptoms of uncertainty and anxiety. Autoethnography offers a methodology for librarians to critically explore the diversity of experiences found in librarianship.

Just as stories often live on after they are told, autoethnography is a process that doesn’t end with a written word on the page. It is a transformative undertaking for the reader, but in my observation, especially for the writer. Autoethnographic writers continue to live and embody their own stories. The authors in this book will continue to live through their stories within their libraries and within their lives. I am positive that autoethnography can change lives and in turn transform librarianship. The act of reading such texts has the possibility to change the reader as they struggle to interpret and incorporate the texts’ meaning into their thoughts and day-to-day practice. The process of writing such a personally grounded text literally changes the writer as they revisit and translate the experience. I have seen it happen. I have even lived it. This transformative characteristic of autoethnography is one of the most important qualities that this methodology brings to librarianship. The results of this transformation are not just recorded on the page but found within ourselves in an open-ended process of realization and discovery that spins out from the reflection in a multitude of obvious and not-so-obvious ways. I observed this in my first personal experiences with critical reflection that transformed my view of librarianship.

More recently, during my dissertation, I witnessed the lasting effect reflection had on the lives of the librarians participating in my project. I wrote in my dissertation that

Writing is its own form of discovery, and while we might know what we want to write about, it often doesn't come out the way we expect. We might not have a word for something that is tugging at our hearts, or the words lead us astray or perhaps to somewhere unexpected that may be better or may be worse. But if we take the premise of reflective writing as a way to discover some small parcel of truth, then the role of reflective writing really is at its core, a discovery of self. That is no small thing. Focusing, refocusing, unpacking ourselves during the reflection process and repacking ourselves to move on in our day to day physical lives is not a simple thing. It is a deeply personal process. With any process, it is ongoing and does not end when a reflection is captured on paper. Reflection can be sustainable and at the same time sustaining.¹³

I often get emotionally choked up talking about my dissertation in public because during that process of employing various reflective methodologies with practicing librarians, a transformation occurred that I found very meaningful. By immersing themselves in critical reflection, these librarians became more engaged and motivated about their practice of librarianship. They moved from a state of indifference to a place of purpose. I never truly thought that my research could transform lives in such a positive way. That was never my intention in choosing critical reflection as a methodology, yet it was the exceptional and profound outcome from my dissertation, and an important lesson. The research we undertake as librarians can change libraries but also change lives. Our research *should* change lives. Autoethnography is such a potentially transformative methodology. In constructing this book, I am certain our authors were also similarly transformed in small and large ways through their experiences with autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a form of honesty that in turn is a form of truth-making. So in speaking the language of truth and honesty, let me state that the editors of this volume purposely came together and have an agenda for this book. This is a good opportunity to point this out a bit more transparently. Let me be clear: this is in no way a hidden agenda. It is a mission that has been embedded throughout this book and perhaps consciously or unconsciously in

each editor's practice of librarianship. I deliberately draw the line back to my first critical reflective experience because that is where I realized that my role in librarianship is to empower others, including librarians, to have their voices heard. Anne-Marie Deitering speaks of this same sentiment directly in her introduction, when she suggests that autoethnography aligns nicely with our library values of "preserving, sharing, and discovering" stories and states that its "focus on the narrative and reflective, on the particular and subjective, allows voices and perspectives that are lost in aggregations of data to be heard." Bob models this agenda of empowering voice as well through his previous book *Critical Journeys: How 14 Librarians Came to Embrace Critical Practice*, which explores librarian practitioners incorporation of equity and social justice into day to day librarianship.¹⁴ One desired outcome of this book is to empower the voice of librarians. The empowerment comes through giving a platform for the authors of these chapters to share their experiences.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge that empowerment is a complicated and perhaps problematic concept—because empowerment implies that we, as editors, had some power to give the authors that they already did not possess themselves. In some respects, this was true. We particularly tried to leverage this power for the positive. As editors, we did make deliberate choices especially as to in what venue these autoethnographies would appear. We were strategic in selecting ACRL as the publisher for this collected work. I bring this up because this is another sense of empowerment. By having a series of librarian autoethnographies published by our primary professional organization, it legitimizes autoethnography as a potential methodology for future library research. This book is intended to bring autoethnography into what Anne-Marie Deitering talks about in her introduction as our shared community of values as both researchers and librarians. And by attempting to legitimize this methodology and carve out a platform for our authors to be heard, I would like to believe that Anne-Marie, Bob, and myself have mitigated whatever power dynamics that might be swirling around. We have moved from empowering librarians to now being inspired by these authors' passionate autoethnographic work.

This book creates a doorway from which autoethnography can enter more fully into librarianship as a methodology. As librarianship moves forward with autoethnography, I want to suggest a few landmarks to consider as librarians navigate this critical reflective landscape. These waypoints aren't groundbreaking, and I am sure many more will be discovered and built as librarians more widely transverse this terrain. However, it is my hope that they provide some license and direction for librarians to undertake a critically reflective journey like autoethnography.

The first vantage point to pause at is the realization that *critical reflection is research... and research is critical reflection*. Autoethnography is a legitimate research methodology, but research in itself is its own form of reflection. Research is a reflection of society, a descriptive lens, whose focal point is the researcher and the choices they make with their methodologies, evidence gathering, and analysis. These critical observations on society can be both internal and external as they contribute to our greater understanding of ourselves.

The second point is for librarians to *employ a diversity of evidence* in their scholarly endeavors. From a research standpoint, this can simply be seen as emphasizing triangulation as means to confirm findings. However, for our purposes, the word to emphasize is *diversity*. One of the strengths of autoethnography is the diversity of personal, creative, and experimental evidence it incorporates into its critical methodological method. Autoethnography “draw[s] from autobiographic data such as memories, memorabilia, documents about themselves, official records, photos, interviews with others, and ongoing self-reflective and self observational memos.”¹⁵ In moving forward, let us be inspired to use and incorporate a variety of forms of evidence into our practice of librarianship.

An important threshold for librarians is realizing that *the silencing of yourself silences others*. Autoethnography champions bringing voice to the unspoken or unheard. It is essential librarians model these pathways for others. Autoethnography is a librarian's attempt at loosening the shackles of self-oppression and building a paradigm enriched with the diverse stories of social justice. Autoethnography is a librarian's attempt to add their voice to the conversation that makes up our discipline. As we ask our students to view scholarship

as a conversation,¹⁶ it is imperative that librarians begin to gather and support our own conversations about librarianship.

Finally, as a librarian, *stay inspired about librarianship; if you aren't, stop and figure out why*. If you ever are at these crossroads, critical reflection and autoethnography offer potential opportunities to explore how you have reached this point. Librarianship is a sharing profession. We share resources. We share stories. We share ourselves. We lean into the profession with our hearts—our passions—and it is these that most often get bruised. At these turning points librarians need to turn to their community of fellow practitioners, dive deep into our discipline's critical conversations, look inward, and seek insight. After reading this book, listen closely to its voices, and be inspired. I encourage you to consider autoethnography as a method and to think about your own agency to stop the shuffling cards, save the cat, and eat the cake.

Notes

1. Richard A. Stoddart, “*Currere* as a Method for Critical Reflection in the Profession of Academic Librarianship” (EdD dissertation, Boise State University, 2015), Boise State University Theses and Dissertations, <http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/td/1054>.
2. Laura M. Jewett. *A Delicate Dance*, Complicated Conversation, vol. 28 (New York: P. Lang, 2008).
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, Ethnographic Alternatives book series, vol. 13 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).
5. *Ibid.*, 37–38.
6. Madeleine R. Grumet, *Bitter Milk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
7. William Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet, *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1976).
8. Madeleine R. Grumet, “The Politics of Personal Knowledge,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 17, no. 3 (1987): 321.
9. *Ibid.*, 322.
10. *Ibid.*, 321.
11. *Ibid.* 327.
12. Grumet, *Bitter Milk*, xv.

13. Stoddart, "Currere as a Method," 102.
14. Robert Schroeder, *Critical Journeys* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2014).
15. Heewon Chang, "Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography as Method: A Social Scientist's Perspective," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 108.
16. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, February 2, 2015), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

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