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THE MEDDLESOME "I". BETWEEN RHETORIC AND SOPHISTRY IN THE BRAD SAGA

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Autoethnography is often charged with being too close to the seamier side of rhetoric, upsetting the balance between ethos, logos and pathos that best guarantees truthfulness. Seen as ethically unprincipled, theoretically primitive and self regarding, it is more about the author's power to hoodwink his/her audience than the disinterested search for knowledge.

A case in point is Wolcott's "Brad Series" portraying his relationship with a young man who camped in his grounds, their growing intimacy, Brad's arson attack on Wolcott's home, subsequent trial and imprisonment. The research odyssey created an academic firestorm, foregrounding the credibility of auto-ethnography and the uncertain field of rhetoric within it.

This paper explores the argument from classical rhetoric that auto-ethnography's main ingredients need to come in just the right proportions. It asks how this mix is being played out; the forms it takes, the aesthetic it appeals to. How can Wolcott's authorial voice motivate and inspire rather than repel?

It shows how the right mix is entangled in the search for distinction, revealing as much about the academy as Wolcott's relationship with Brad. There is always a wedge between rhetoric and sophistry, felt through the skin. We lose it at our peril.

"All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie"

(W.H. Auden: "September l, l939").

Autoethnography has often been charged with being too close to the seamier side of rhetoric. The criticisms are familiar enough: its advocates are seen as ethically unprincipled, theoretically primitive, emotionally self-indulgent, the authorial voice a biased irrelevance (Anderson, 2006; Delamont, 2007; Adler and Adler, 2008). Autoethnography seems to be more about the author's power to hoodwink his/her audience than the disinterested search for objective knowledge.

I am interested in how the critique is presented either in terms of excess or insufficiency, "too much" of this element, "not enough" of that, its personal animus often barely concealed. In fact, such terms are infused with moral values, placing the rhetorical conventions of auto-ethnography squarely in the domain of culture (Strecker and Tyler, 2009). Rhetoric, of course, has had its own fluctuating fortunes to contend with over the centuries, witness the pejorative references in contemporary discourse to "mere" rhetoric, or its near relatives, "spin", "purple prose", "twaddle". To persuade readers of the truth, so runs the classical argument, rhetoric's key elements, ethos, logos and pathos, need to come in just the right proportions, a

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harmony that is constantly threatened by too obvious a presence of a narrator (Richards, 2010; Leith, 2012). In stirring things up, the "I" draws attention to ethnography's very rhetoricality that more orthodox social science research seeks to disown. Critics argue that getting rid of that "I", a refrain that has dogged my research career, might preserve the social sciences from getting tangled up in Fieldwork's Darker Arts.

A case in point is Harry Wolcott's research odyssey, a set of articles, book and ethnodrama, *The Sneaky Kid and its Aftermath*, known as "the Brad series", that created an academic firestorm, not for what it revealed, but for what it concealed. Before returning to my opening salvo, let me remind readers unfamiliar with his work in more detail of a mis-en-scene that has been heavily represented - mythologised even - by previous accounts.

A Well Sedimented Wolcott/Brad Chronology

Wolcott was a middle aged educational anthropologist, with fieldwork – an African beer garden, a Malay village "That Progress Chose", a College Principal's office - four major methodological texts, and the l989 Spindler Award for outstanding scholarship to his credit. One day he discovered "Brad": a young man, aged l9, job-less, cash-less, the archetypal drop-out from the American Dream, setting up camp at the foot of his 20 acre grounds in Oregon, and Wolcott agreed to let him stay rent-free. Brad also proved to be resourceful, not averse to work provided it was on his own terms, a "free spirit" providing a Rousseau-esque touch of romanticism to the even tenor of Wolcott's professional life. It was but a short step to enrol him to work in Wolcott's grounds. They became close and eventually sexually intimate.

At some stage academic curiosity got the better of sex (the two were not co-terminous, we are told), and Wolcott asked if he could tape record Brad's life, inviting him to read what he subsequently wrote. Over the following 2 years, worrying signs of instability appeared. Brad was volatile, moody, depressed, complaining of a "sledgehammer to my brain", showing symptoms of what was later diagnosed as bi-polar disorder. Wolcott contacted his mother, and tried unsuccessfully to arrange counselling. Brad hit the road now and then. There were odd spells in jail for sexual hustling, with Brad apparently more recipient than instigator.

After one such spell away, Brad returned with a vengeance, physically threatening both Wolcott and his partner Norman, and torched his house, reducing his entire library to ashes. In the subsequent arson trial, Wolcott's first account that had tried to get at the experience of educational failure, was produced as evidence and used against Brad, any researcher's worst nightmare, Wolcott was powerless to intervene in the court's decision to send Brad to prison rather than psychiatric institution, and Brad eventually served 5 years of his 20 year sentence

before being placed under the care of his mother and California's psychiatric services. He was last heard of (aged 49), brandishing a copy of "The Book", the passport to his Hollywood dream, resenting Wolcott to the last, we are told, though he never accused Wolcott of failing to do justice to the way he first saw things in l981.

Here was a case tailor-made to coincide with Wolcott's disciplinary interests in cultural transmission and acquisition: how do institutions with the avowed aim of human betterment such as schools, the courts, or an equal opportunities rhetoric so often miss the mark? Indeed what to make of that irresistible bromide, 'senseless' violence?

Whilst Wolcott's research odyssey found favour in some quarters - "a poignant memoir" for some (Dentith, 2003), "a catalyst" for others (Busier *et.al.* l997), and a source of inspiration for research methods teachers willing to go beyond simple issues of "gaining entrée" and "establishing rapport" (Page, 1997), it was condemned as "a self-glorifying, redemption seeking tale" by others (Roth, 2004:8), offering space for another voice, but retaining the power to decide how to shape it (Malewski, 2007). Wolcott found himself excoriated by mental health professionals and colleagues alike for exploiting Brad sexually, using him to feather his own nest, violating research standards, and betraying social science's long-standing commitment to the under-dog. In fact what started out as a simple re-playing of Brad's story led to a much richer narrative that generated a host of questions and debates about personal and practical ethics, intellectual and emotional rigour, putting the credibility of auto-ethnography – and the uncertain play between rhetoric and sophistry within it – at centre stage.

Aims of Paper

I believe the academic firestorm is worth re-visiting for several reasons. Wolcott's invitation "I wonder what an ethnographer would make of all this" (l999:288*)* is irresistible. Then his work has always been a source of inspiration for my own fieldwork, in contrast to the methodological hygiene of "how-to-do-it" research texts. Like Charmaz and Mitchell (1996) the kind of writing that I am most drawn to is the authorial voice that wrestles with the researcher's involvement with the phenomena, rather than the phenomena themselves. I hope the visit ensures we never lose sight of how our writing makes its subjects up – and how it does not. The facts of the matter are never quite the facts of the matter, but this is precisely rhetoric's power: it invites alternative interpretations. Wolcott's book is "*a* story, not *the* story' as he insists in the book's Introduction. But not any old story. The question always is: to what degree?

The questions I want to press are: How are appeals to the right mix between ethos, logos and pathos played out in this case? What shapes and forms do they take? Is the quest persuasive enough to promote autoethnography's *bona fides*, or

does the desire for distinction under-cut itself? How far can Wolcott's rhetorical "I" motivate and inspire rather than repel and disgust? I will argue that the quest for that mix is inescapably rhetorical, visceral and aesthetic, articulating the key values and feelings around which research communities coalesce (Strecker and Tyler, 2009), that often reveal as much about jockeying for place *within* the academy as outside it. In fact it is precisely autoethnography's double-edged nature that makes it both a source of unease and, potentially a potent force for social transformation. We neglect the messy process of knowledge production at our peril.

After fleshing out the tense relationship between rhetoric and autoethnography, I will address these questions. The specific Brad texts I draw on are: a chapter from *Transforming Qualitative Data* (l994); sections from *The Art of Fieldwork* (l995) and *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* (l999); his main text, *The Sneaky Kid and its Aftermath* (2002); his penultimate paper on over-determination (2010a); and sections from his final oeuvre *Ethnography Lessons: A Primer* (2010b), stiffened, perhaps, by Parkinson's Disease, in which, as the dustjacket has it, he "sums it all up".

Rhetoric and the Meddlesome "I"

First, though, to my stance on rhetoric and its uneasy relationship with autoethnography. It may seem old-fashioned, even anachronistic to return to Aristotle when two thousand years of debate have witnessed so many elegant re-workings of the subject.

Yet I want to stay with Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (c. 332 BC), for several reasons (Aristotle, 1991). His famous opposition to Plato has shaped all subsequent "Western" thought on the matter. In his most anti-rhetorical dialogue *Gorgias* (c.387 BC), Plato drove a wedge between rhetoric and logic. He contrasted the truth-seeking philosopher with a group of scholars known as the Sophists who cultivated an explicit cultural relativism, arguing that all cultural phenomena were contextually shaped (Meyer, 2009: 44-46). In fact they abandoned the objective analysis of nature in favour of speculating analytically about the inner motives of human individuals and groups – precisely the uneasy ground occupied by autoethnographers, and taken to a fine art in Wolcott's Brad series.

Secondly, through Aristotle's emphasis on finding the most plausible means of persuasion, we come to his famous triad that concerns us here: the right mix between the appeal to ethos (or character), logos (or reasoned argument), and pathos (fear and pity) (Richards, 2010: 33). The triad conveyed a sense of the proper order of things which "integrates all my goals and desires into one unified whole in which each has its proper weight." Like health (or life itself), he goes on, "…. each element must be held between the limits of too much and too little for the balance and well-being of the whole" (In Taylor, l989:125).

The mix is also a relation. Understanding the relationship of ingredients to each other, Aristotle contended, always depends on comparison – on ideas of more or less, that are in fact central to the way autoethnography locates itself within a spectrum, as Ellis (2004) puts it. When we compare things, Wolcott notes, we discover differences of degree, rather than absolutes.

While appeals to ethos and logos have been stretched, if not over-stretched, in the debate surrounding autoethnography, the place of affect in Aristotle's triad was more equivocal. Aristotle insisted that attending to the emotional life, including shared experience, prejudice or disposition, was crucial to enhancing our moral imagination. Again, moderation was a key virtue. Taken to excess, pity and fear could be treacherous. With the aid of reason, judgement and "savvy", inflamed feelings could be restored to their proper equilibrium. Moreover, the ingredients to the mixture were never disembodied. Notions of seemliness were grounded in specific events and situations, as autoethnographic research has always insisted.

In fact Wolcott invented his own specific analogy for blending the mix in the right proportions, comparing the practice of ethnography with baking bread. The blend has to be fit for purpose, yet retain its own distinctive character. He described it as a craft that "has customary features by which it is generally recognised, and yet is dependent on no single ingredient and takes its unique shape and form at the hands of the individual who crafts it" (l999: 244). It is what is done with the ingredients rather than the ingredients themselves that make an auto-ethnography worth its salt, he insisted. An eye for where the demands for distinctiveness over-reach themselves will guide me through the academic firestorm that followed publication of the Brad Series.

Reputations, Reputations: The Appeal to Character

Nothing is more integral to persuasion than trust in the author's character. Yet classical rhetoric emphasised the public rather than the private pursuit of virtue. That emphasis is still with us in today's new research economy with its demands for "knowledge workers" and "socially relevant knowledge" (Ratcliffe and Mills, 2008). As far as Wolcott and Brad were concerned, then, "Homosexuality is not the issue" claimed one commentator (Strobel 2005:4), Wolcott's sexual affinities a matter between him and His Maker. Unlike the reviewer who takes his phallic imagination out for a spin in the text, with (*inter alia*) a gratuitous discussion on the possibility of faking an erection (Roth 2004), I can find nothing personally salacious here. "Where is the evidence?" asks Strobel (2005:9). Wolcott evidently kept his promise to reveal no details of his sexual relationship with Brad. Our moral sympathies are seemingly clear – at least on that score.

In practice, public and private were harder to separate than classical rhetoricians assumed. Let me concentrate, then, on Wolcott's professional moral and intellectual standing. It is not clear whether we're called upon to applaud Wolcott as the

temperate lover who seeks to empower and enlighten his beloved, or doubt his integrity. Contemporary charges have generally centred on sexual exploitation, and the abuse of power between researcher and researched, with Wolcott accused of violating the duty of care for a "vulnerable" adult half his age. Strobel (2005), for example, otherwise a sympathetic reviewer, was surprised to note that Wolcott still retained his academic tenure after the book was published. Less sympathetic was the critic (*anon*) who said "Great book for a novice qualitative researcher, but where's the apology?" From Wolcott to Brad? To Norman (his partner)? Or Brad to Wolcott and Norman? Absent father to son, teacher to pupil? Or had Wolcott, a middle aged Professor, over-egged the mix in arrogating to himself the young researcher's privilege to probe other people's lives?

It is well established that contemporary ethics procedures are often more concerned to pass responsibility on than shoulder it, often obscured by demands for legal liability. Witness the unethical practice of asking, or more likely compelling, informants to sign consent forms. Granted Wolcott by-passed the earlier circuits of Ethics Committees' formal procedures that would be mandatory today. We have no written confirmation as to what Brad did, or did not, agree to. Any application covering such a subject would certainly be turned down, one of Strobel's contributors asserted (2005:4).

But Wolcott complied with them later when he agreed to submit a report for the then US Office of Education. Nor has he ever been a devotee of writing-by-committee, where team research can blur the lines of accountability. Rather, he invited Brad to check his initial attempts at putting his story together, and paid him to read a draft of the original study to see if he'd got it right, "muting" aspects of the story that Brad preferred to keep to himself. Petty thieving, but "not from someone you'd hurt" was not one of these. Whilst this is in the best traditions of participatory research for some (Jackson (1995), for example, worked every day for a week with his informant to identify any passage in his text that failed to ring true); for others it shows a "shiftiness" that conceals power relations, and betrays the production of valid knowledge, hindering balanced judgement (Ockander and Oslund, 2001; Malewski, 2007). True we know little about how Wolcott used his editorial experience, (Brad had "the barest of writing skills", he writes). But consultation is rarely straightforward.

In fact some educational critics have not been short on unsavoury practices of their own. When not even Wolcott knew Brad's address, attempts have been made since his release from prison to hunt "the real Brad" down, mount character assassinations, and compromise his ability to publish (the instigator gracefully left un-identified), displaying academic sophistry at its worst.

One literary critic, well armed against accusations of launching *ad hominem* attacks by sharply separating Wolcott the protagonist from Wolcott the author, referred to him as "Wally Haircut" for example, and wrote: "I dislike the way

Wally Haircut talks about himself – he is boisterous, vain, loud, conceited ... your stereotypical US male" (Roth, 2004:8), Another whose scientific training persuaded her that any financial payment was tantamount to sexual bribery, compared Wolcott' s relationship with Brad to Heidegger's dealings with the Nazi party , conveniently ignoring the fact that Wolcott continued to send Brad birthday money long after he had left. (Schreiber *et.al.*, 2001). The journal editor's hope that the authors' moral outrage raised would be "self-correcting" was harder to come by than assumed. Busier's Muddy Waters group, for example, found themselves "animated, troubled …and without consensus" about the ethical dilemmas the Series raised (Busier *et.al.*, l997). As Strobel (2005) notes, it is not only the researcher's conduct that needs scrutinising by those who choose to comment on an author's work.

Wolcott's attempt to find the right mix are most forcefully portrayed in his final work where he writes: "I continue to hold Brad responsible for the biggest betrayal of my life, but I am not sure I can hold him personally responsible for something that may have been out of his control" (2010b:120). There would hardly have been such a furore if the case had not also been fuelled by that mix of fascination and repulsion always evoked by same sex commitment across age and class barriers. The "love and humanity" – fidelity even - that Wolcott speaks of in his feelings for Brad take a back seat in today's fevered climate of sexual scandals and ever closer sexual policing that penetrate our most sacred institutions.

In fact Wolcott makes us grapple – more than most - with a human relationship that has to be justified again and again in the most immediate terms, probing our own rhetoric for the values, however shaky, that make his auto-ethnography worth sticking one's neck out for. Not just the gaps in his own enquiry: the failure to examine the power asymmetries between himself and Brad, his regret over the book title, though the term "Sneaky" was Brad's own, the disarming dismissal of his partner Norman's reactions ("our passion was subdued" he writes (2002:44); but the unspeakable "dirty old man" ageism" lurking just below the surface that neither detractor not sympathiser have risked tackling.

Rather he brings to the fore those irresolvable tensions common to all long-term ethnography: wanting to know about others, whilst proclaiming to do so with impeccable transparency, translating personal relationships into "data", demanding answers when we might learn to ask better questions. "There will always be ethical issues to consider" he writes, "when we find out more than we were supposed to" (2010b:123). In "answering more questions than most of us would consider decent to ask", Singleton (2002) writes in the book's introduction, Wolcott shows what a murky business the moral world is, how tangled up feelings, reason and judgement are with each other, how hard it is to reconcile appeals to ethical judgement with a more sinuous understanding.

When it comes to "virtue" and "vice", then, getting the right mix between looting a life or respecting it cannot do without a strongly developed authorial "I".

Otherwise there can be no sense of moral responsibility. One might wonder at the credibility of an author who failed to confront the reader with such issues.

The Strain Towards Analysis: Academics with Clean Hands, or Academics with no Hands?

It is clear that we cannot talk about one arm of the triad without immediately implicating the other. Of course no ethnography persuades through virtue alone. The second condition at stake is the appeal to well-ordered, reasoned argument, bolstered by social science's conviction that theory, regardless of its merits, can only strengthen its case. To found a theoretical school detaches reason from concrete circumstances, lifting that unreliable "I" beyond the charge of sophistry, vanity and narrow self-interest. In fact putting theoria first in the mix leads directly to the divine. Yet theoretical sophistication is just what critics such as Roth (2004) insist that Wolcott lacks, raising suspicions first that his Brad mix is too narrow, and secondly, that the drive to tell a good story is too closely associated with today's spin.

First, the question of reach. Granted that his book fails to make explicit the fullness of thought shown, for example, by Frank (2000) in her fine study of disability. She searched the works of Gadamer and Levinas, and undertook intensive psychoanalysis to better understand where she was making de Vries up in her own image and where she was not. A salutary exercise, it transpired. Scholarship that takes its learning too lightly risks not being taken seriously at all. Worse, attempts to add the missing ingredient after the fact are likely to turn the mix sour.

However, it needs a sharper eye than Roth's to distinguish works that are genuinely marred by narrowness from those "narrow" oeuvres that develop a wide range of interests within a specific social setting. Wolcott has a sure grasp of what ethnography can and cannot accomplish conceptually. Like Willis (2000), he argues that in the_best ethnographic writing, theory is mainly implicit, informing, but not interrupting the story, leaving the more ambitious goals of explanation and prediction to others. So Wolcott's Brad saga is not firing off theories on intimacy like missiles in search of a target. "Theory is more apt to get in the way than point the way, to tell rather than to ask what we have seen", he notes (l995:l86).

Neither do Wolcott's attempts to understand Brad follow Nietzsche's click-click-click of rosary beads that lead the reader infallibly from premise to inference – the gold standard of positivist ethnography that is assumed to be rhetoric free. Rather his writing is impressionistic and suggestive, a modest relativism that uses philosophical scepticism as a means to knowledge and understanding in the absence of apriori truths. No better reminder of the dangers of sophistry, Wolcott writes, than that "that we never get the whole story and we're not likely fully to understand whatever part of the story we get" (l999: 287). It's precisely that "I" that takes away the temptation to be categorical.

But not at the expense of a professional commitment to accuracy. Though he may not have got everything right, he notes, he has taken "a great deal of trouble not to get things badly wrong" (l995:126). His other works show how he is always in pursuit of "keener observations, multiple instances, avoiding the temptation to settle for single causes", committing himself to more modest generalising than is usual in the to-and fro- of everyday discourse (l999:263) . If the rhetorical "I" is said to be inherently unreliable, it is at least reliably unreliable here. Witness the care Wolcott has taken to be even-handed: the hours of carefully tape-recorded and documented informal conversation with Brad that proceeded, as all the best conversation does, in "little vignettes, staccato-like, usually unconnected with what had gone before" (2002: 67); the nine pages in the book given over to Brad's own words, re-arranged and tidied up, to be sure, but not interrupted; the "draft after draft after draft" that characterises Wolcott's scholarship.

Which brings me to the second issue, namely Wolcott's use of narrative to lend credence to his account. Much has been written about the power of stories to identify ourselves and give meaning to our experience without a radical split from it (Jackson, 2002). "To be able to tell a story well is crucial to the enterprise" Wolcott (l994: 17) writes, if not, in Hannah Arendt's words, a way to "take our imagination visiting" (Jackson, 2005:177), allowing a more intimate and perhaps more compassionate understanding of the human predicament than normally on offer in our daily routines. Narratives, then, are always situated rhetorically. They have both teller and reader. When Wolcott uses all his eloquence to engage the reader's sensibilities, we don't just read Wolcott's Brad Series, we converse with it. The Series presents us with two characters dramatically engaged with one another, motive pitted against motive. Like any good empirical researcher, Wolcott piles up the concrete, the particular, the personal with a sensitivity to words that gets under your skin. Few critics quarrel with his credentials on that score.

However, in refusing to flavour the mix with explicit theorising, Wolcott leaves himself vulnerable to attack on several fronts. He avoids the narrower constraints of research narrative (introduction, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion), the taken for granted structure of the academic paper: "Who, other than possibly some die-hard committee member would ever hold you to a rigid formula like that, especially if you are writing ethnography?" (2010b: 139) he fidgets. But his impressionistic treatment of Brad may not be definitional and foundational enough for the more scientifically minded, as Schreiber *et al.*, (2001) for example have pointed out.

There are other contradictions. On the one hand, Wolcott almost appears to be telling it like it is. The Brad series aims to create a body of knowledge so persuasive as to seem unrhetorical – simply the way the world *is.* Whatever the ambiguities, the narrative "I" grips because the Series is primarily a realist piece of work. However, this raises anxieties not only about Procrustean bed-making, such as the

unexplained gap between the events of the early l980's and book publication in 2002, but about authorial sincerity. What happens, Malewski (2007) asks, when "representations act as a barrier to representations?"

Then there is the problem of consistency both within and between texts. Malewski points out that Wolcott claims to avoid using this saga to unburden himself, "but then proceeds to do so, point by point, article by article", suggesting an "I" who apparently knows less about himself than the omniscient reader. Difficulties are compounded when "the same" story is told in different texts, as Page (1997) found when giving her students early and later versions of the Brad saga to read. Under circumstances such as these, it takes some persistence to persuade the seeker after monolithic truths that the only way to guarantee a consistent account is to bring some degree of inconsistency into the mix.

Wolcott is caught in the well-known rhetorical contradictions of narrative conventions themselves, taking segments of the Brad story out of context, eliminating false starts, imposing a false linearity to events when no human life moves serially and progressively from beginnings, middles to ends. Indeed, as Plummer (2005:14) notes, "The very idea that types of people called homosexuals, or gays, or lesbians … can be simply called up for study becomes a key problem in itself".

In fact Wolcott is well aware of the biographical illusion, representing the world as if one had an omnipotent view of it. Rather he treats this as a warning, not something either he or his critics can personally resolve. It is how one's materials are drawn together into a cohesive mix, and given their distinctive flavour that matters, he argues. No less an authority on rhetoric than Booth (2004) knows that all writers are disloyal at one point or another to the general standards they profess, if they are to get *this* intractable piece of work on to the page. But such is the dynamic and unfolding nature of understanding that writing is always incomplete, on the move, often taking you somewhere you cannot control, as Wolcott found.

The trick is not to settle for so fine a blend in the process as to lose sight of the author's voice and what it distinctively has to contribute, a point to which I shall return in my conclusions. Something more than a corrective dose of narrative deconstruction is necessary if Wolcott is to convince.

Which brings me to the unsettling question of the place of affect in the autoethnographic mix.

Tricky Feelings, Mixed Motives

If the rigours of argument and the pursuit of virtue are difficult for social scientists to perfect in practice, no autoethnography can convince without appealing to the audience's emotions, the trickiest ingredient in rhetoric's triad. The autoethnographic "I" can be both friend and foe here (Wolcott, l995:67). To sway feeling is every bit the legitimate object of rhetoric. If autoethnography is to have

any power it must be connected to inner feelings. Indeed, classical rhetoricians remind us that a writer's ability to arouse pity and fear was the hallmark of virtue. But pity and fear are persuasive only to the extent that they are shared. Part of that shared understanding is that the reader responds to Wolcott with some sort of intensity. Suffering has to be vividly rendered in order to evoke our compassion, but not so graphic as to overwhelm us.

What we call the emotions have not done well in anthropology, surprisingly so when so much of what matters to humans makes us angry or sad. Wolcott is hardly the first to remark at the dearth of human passion in most ethnographies (Law, 2004; Jackson, 2005), although there are honourable exceptions, such as Briggs's study of contested feelings in her fieldwork among the Inuit (l970). As Farella (l993:4) notes, in avoiding pain and uncertainty, we "are surprised that the joy, the passion and the beauty disappear with them". For Wolcott, then, it was not an excess of intimacy that was responsible for the banality of so much contemporary research, but its lack. "If you can't take heady candour as a personal mantra" , he writes, "you can at least come to grips with the question – and your own resolution – of how intimate you want, intend and need to be in order to achieve the level of understanding you seek" (2002: 162).

However, one's taste for "heady candour" can easily become too personal. If every confessional moment flavouring the mix makes the author vulnerable, it is also a subterfuge for self-justification. In today's post-post modernist climate, we are sceptical of anything that resembles Rousseau's secular desire to unburden himself of his sins (l781), on the qui vive for any hint of self-pity, scathing about those who seem to be playing up any element of their emotional repertoire.

In fact, making a convincing case for intensity rests on keeping the lines clear between accommodating one's reader's sensibilities and being subservient to them. Like Kulick (2004), now doyen of sexual scholarship in the field, I had thought Wolcott's *The Sneaky Kid and its Aftermath* was passion enough. So it was startling to find a Brad sequel (2010a), a passionate *apologia,* almost recklessly so, with Wolcott "still reeling" from the relationship, wondering afresh what had been shaping Brad's behaviour, and what was his own part in Brad's breakdown. In "taking things to the limit" (2010a), was this after all the carpings of an elderly professor impatient with the sobriety of his discipline, or the Wounded Educator in search of redemption that Roth had complained of earlier? We know that Wolcott had an established scholarly reputation. But one reviewer turned down his last paper, on moral grounds again. There are signs of pique in Wolcott's response (2010b), perhaps more a case of wanting collegial approval without having the luxury of dispensing with it, as Bourdieu notes sourly somewhere. Otherwise why mention it?

To return to Aristotle, the point is not to prohibit the candid expression of personal feelings, but to examine them as dispassionately as one can Such was my

momentary queasiness at Wolcott's description of his own work as "deeply reflective" (2010a) or deeply anything, for that matter, I had lost sight of how scrupulously he draws the line between pathos and bathos, skirting round what Kulick calls "that pompous bragging that so often animates accounts by male researchers of their sexual relationships in the field" (sic) (2004). Though he steers perilously close to it at times, this is not an exercise in public psychoanalysis, but thinking at its most intense. Wolcott is not talking about feeling against thought, but thoughts- as- felt, and feelings- as –thought. In fact Wolcott writes against the opposition of cognition and affect, reason and irrationality. They are intimately bound up with each other.

Which brings me to consider in more detail the role of reflexivity in enhancing and sharpening a reader's sensibilities. Is this the ingredient that makes the difference to the mix?

As noted earlier, the Sophists' skill in speculating analytically about people's inner motives has always been integral to the development of anthropology as a discipline – whether in appendices, or published fieldwork diaries, such as Malinowski's well-thumbed example. Indeed some of the ethnographies that one returns to again and again for sustenance, like Farella's (1993) study of the Navaho, is scathing about the anthropological practice of avoiding the intensity of human experience simply by re-shuffling the categories – only to find them wanting in their turn. The more interesting ethnographies have always had an ear for those unacknowledged feelings in social interaction. Such intense, deconstructive arguments *between* self and other, probing both the initial account and themselves is integral to the auto-ethnographic situation, not independent of it (Strecker and Tyler, 2009).

Yet historians, anthropologists and literary critics alike often argue that the self-criticism and recognition of power inequalities distinguishing rhetoric from sophistry have given way to self-aggrandisement and celebration of the author's personality (Ryang, 2001). Witness Fine's acid reference to the way the laborious job of field research has morphed "into the armchair pleasures of 'me-search' " (l999:534). The autoethnographic "I", it is claimed, is a thoroughly depoliticised one. As we have seen, the fear of interiority central to "Western" Romantic and Puritan notions of the authorial self, whereby historical forces can be contained within a mind able to ruminate, and then work on them, has been given a frosty reception by seasoned opponents. It is, they insist, mainly the analytic arm of auto-ethnography that is capable of preventing the "I" from becoming narcissistic, or worse solipsistic (Delamont, 2007).

However, Wolcott's Brad Series *was* political, its emotional introspection an analytic strength not a methodological weakness as Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) argue of their own e-mail correspondence between PhD supervisor and student. Wolcott has always known his ethnography is answerable to more than his own whims. "Though enquiry necessarily begins reflexively, it must not end there", he

writes (l999:288). A rhetorical "I" that never transcends the writer's self-interest becomes wearisome, if not maudlin. Indeed, the whole thrust of his work has been to show how self-knowledge – particularly about one's most intimate feelings – is always comparative and contrastive. In opening a door here on a life that academics are rarely privy to, the Brad series transcends the fine-grained specificities of the case. Working with students on the Brad series, for example, Busier reports how his Muddy Waters group discovered "a stunning tale of revision… interwoven with increasing revelation about the nature of any meanings assigned to the Brad/ Harry connection (l997: 168).

I, too, read his Series that way. We see Wolcott staging different encounters with Brad, Brad's mother, puzzling over the adversarial questioning in court that was at odds with his own aporetic style, the tensions between schooling and learning that left Brad stranded, the treatment of mental illness, and the continued stigmatisation of homosexuality across age and class, in both academy and judicial system. Witness the prosecutor's summing up to the jury: "Mr. W. is … a fool. And like they say, there's no fool like an old fool" (2002:84). In the process Brad emerges as a more complex character, "muscular and streetwise", not just a put-upon drop-out, challenging any one-dimensional notions of vulnerability, or simplistic distinctions between perpetrator and victim that have pre-occupied some of Wolcott's critics.

Wolcott's rhetorical "I" also takes us into what the academic firestorm reveals about its own sentiments. He is scathing about the self-promotional climate of academic research that even Roth (2004) concedes is barely concealed by ritual claims of modesty, refusing to lace his mix with such blatant sophistry. He has shown us the seamier side of academic institutions: the petty class system of the research hierarchy, with its standards of "pure" research; the "vigilante colleagues" who police Ethics Review Board and "may try to do *you* in" (2002:126); the hegemony of professional journals and their conventions, in which as editor of the *Education and Anthropology Quarterly,* Wolcott was, of course, complicit. He has never been self-effacing about the power of Brad's story to contribute to anthropological education as a sub-discipline, or serve as an example of anthropological auto-biography. "Even humility needs to be approached with moderation", he notes (l994:28). We are happier recommending restraint when it comes to other people's work, the better for our own to shine.

What blends Wolcott's mix together, yet at the same time gives it its distinctive flavour is always one of purpose. Like Denzin (2006), he was also an impassioned teacher. So, the Brad Series is necessarily pedagogical, goading readers into thinking for themselves. He intended to provoke not just persuade. The force of his convictions lie in the concluding remarks to the ethnodrama that was made of the Brad story: "to see what he saw, to know what he knew, to understand what you think you've understood" (2002: p. 210).

An intensity felt through the skin for this reader, but of course not experienced quite as he experienced it. Certainly it has revealed the difficulties in feeling my way sympathetically into Brad's life-world; my discomfort at appearing as Wolcott's defence counsel; my readiness to be seduced by the 'Western' quest for important truths with an impassioned tutor as my guide; my anxiety that in working with an Aristotelian framework I have removed what matters most from Wolcott's mix. It has also alerted me to those ingredients that would have given the mix that extra bite: a touch of self-mockery, for example, to leaven his moral earnestness. But over-rationalising one's sentiments are apt to make the mixture congeal. These are diffuse feelings, more visceral and aesthetic than logical, that do not readily lend themselves to further exposition.

ENVOI: Auto-ethnography: The Curl of the Lip or the Path to Social Transformation?

I started with a broad-brush conception of classical rhetoric – the Aristotelian quest for the right mix between ethos, logos and pathos as the surest guarantee of auto-ethnography's claim to be taken seriously. I have tried to show the strengths and limitations of such an approach in the academic debate that surrounded the Brad Series. When our search for the well proportioned auto-ethnography exerts such a powerful grip, it is clear that Aristotle is still very much with us. The Brad Series also shows just how hard it is to fuse together into a single attitude different approaches to reality, the engaged and the analytic, the impossibility of holding a once-and-for-all distinction between rhetoric and sophistry, of distinctiveness from the hubris of distinction. Additional flavours are always being added to the mix to meet new insights and changing circumstances, as we ourselves age and grapple with things differently.

This is precisely why re-visiting the debate has been fruitful. When it comes to the meddlesome "I", trying to find the right mix is inescapably cultural, visceral and aesthetic. Too much authorial voice, and the recoil is such that we are incapable of recognising the distinction between defensible and indefensible rhetoric that the Series has raised. Too little, and we lose the sense that Wolcott is engaged on a common project that taps into our most cherished beliefs, making autoethnography a genre worth sticking one's neck out for. Far from being a marginal figure, grafting a little bit on to "proper" research, the authorial "I" can become a catalyst, an intellectual tool in its own right.

To take a quip from one of Melvyn Bragg's radio programme, there's always a little bit of testicle between rhetoric and sophistry. We lose that "I" at our peril.

Note

1. Wolcott never described his Brad Series as autoethnographic, but referred to it as "ethnographic autobiography", or "auto-biographical ethnography". Nonetheless, it is clear from the text that it amply satisfies the customary criteria to warrant inclusion.

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