

# 18 A Few Remarks on Working With Auto-Socio-Bio-Ethnography

Brigitta Busch

## Introduction

Memoirs, life narratives, confessions, (auto)biographies of all kinds – mainly following the pattern of the Bildungsroman, i.e. narratives of coming of age, of conversion, of survival – have been filling the shelves in book stores for a long time (Couser, 2012). In the past two decades, a specific form of literary texts emerged that is particularly rooted in France, with authors as Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis, but quickly attracted a large readership beyond. In Ernaux' words, these texts are less autobiographic than auto-socio-biographic (Ernaux, 2011).

When the manuscript of the present book arrived in my mailbox, I was reading Ernaux' novel *Les années*. I was struck by the parallels between her reflexive autoethnographic writing and the contributions to this book. As Judith Purkarthofer in her chapter reminds us, Lejeune (1996 [1975]) defined autobiography as a retrospective account that a real person gives of their existence while putting the accent on their individual life, in particular on the history of their personality. The aforementioned writers set themselves deliberately apart from the idea of an autobiography defined in this way as they understand their texts less about their individual lives than about the collective conditions of the society they live in. In her novel *The Years*, Ernaux (2018) sets out 'to capture the reflection that collective history projects upon the screen of individual memory'. She reviews photographs showing her at different periods of her life and reflects in an account that avoids the 'I' on how she and those around her were formed in their appearances, attitudes, tastes, emotions and opinions by successive socio-political time space articulations. Ernaux (1988: 106) situates her texts as 'au-dessous de la littérature', i.e. as 'below literature, [...] somewhere between literature, sociology and history [...]'

(my translation). The three mentioned authors, Ernaux, Eribon and Louis, two of whom are sociologists, have a particular affinity to Bourdieu's work and consequently see their principal aim in addressing mechanisms of symbolic power and social exclusion. They understand themselves as subjects formed by social positioning, discourses and practices of their times which they in turn examine and challenge through the prism of their own lived experience.

What characterises the chapters in the present volume is precisely this double perspective: the intention to understand the social fabric through exploring peoples' lived experience and to understand accounts of lived experience as a reflection of and response to social power relations and social changes. In this sense, the contributions affirm the need to bring back subjects' perspectives into applied linguistics, to develop 'socio-auto-ethnobiographic' approaches challenging the exclusivity claim of the observing, classifying, categorising and objectifying gaze. In the same manner as Ernaux labels her literary texts that are enriched with sociological and historical frames of reference as an in-between genre, as 'below literature', we could understand an academic take that is enriched by explicitly addressed (and not carefully hidden) bodily and emotionally lived subjective experience as an approach that is interested in what usually remains below the perceptual threshold because considered as too subjective, too 'messy'.

In the following, I will take up some of the central issues raised in the chapters by regrouping them under three headings: speaking back, writing back; the autobiographical dilemma; condensed scenes and vignettes.

### Speaking back, writing back

The contributions in this book are concerned with the question of how to bring back the subject into sociolinguistics, a subject that is not considered as pre-given but as a subject in the process of becoming (McNamara, Chapter 3), as positioned by others and positioning themselves (Spitzmüller, Chapter 16). The authors refer to 'real', speaking and listening, acting and suffering, fearing and desiring people and not to 'idealized cardboard-like characters' as they, quoting Deumert (2018: 297), often appear in theoretical work. Real people are entangled in multiple ways in a multiplicity of spaces and times through which they move, by which they are formed and in which they in turn leave their imprints. These time-spaces or chronotopes are, as Bakhtin (1981: 252) develops, 'mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships'. It is precisely the entanglement in this maze of chronotopical involvements that reveals the idea of a coherent, selfsame subject as a fiction.

Spitzmüller (Chapter 16) develops that neither historical-biographical times nor social spaces exist as such but that they become effective only

because they are lived, evaluated and ideologically represented by those who are entitled to share them – or are excluded from sharing them. Sonnleitner (Chapter 12) as well as Mashazi and Oostendorp (Chapter 9) elaborate on the concept of the *chronotope*. Both chapters are based on interviews with young South Africans and deal with embodied time-space representations – one regarding the apartheid past, the other regarding present sites perceived as still heavily racialised and (language-)ideologically loaded. As the authors of the latter point out, one of the research participants, when perceiving himself within a predominantly ‘white’ space, virtually discovered: ‘I’m black, I’m hella black!’ His statement points to the performative power of time and space ideologies that, in the guise of body ideologies, shape and re-shape people’s subjective and inter-subjective, bodily and emotional being in the world. Statements like his that articulate particular time-space experiences are also likely to challenge dominant ideologies of space and time ownership.

Different contributions in this volume adhere to the idea of writing back or speaking back by creating a space for research participants to reflect upon their own biographical experiences. Autoethnographic or biographic approaches are more than a method that can be employed but rather a particular take with its theoretical and methodological implications. Research participants are not seen as suppliers of data or as simple informants but rather as co-researchers who bring their stance into the analysis and interpretation of what impacts on their lives and social surroundings. Deumert, Kupe and Mabandla (Chapter 15) plead for a valorisation of ‘ways of being and knowing that have been rendered invisible’ not by paternalistically ‘giving voice’ but by listening and acknowledging others as theory-makers. Equally from the perspective of decolonising research, Singer (Chapter 7) shows how working with the language portrait in the Australian Warruwi community opened a path for the interviewees to move beyond the limited role of the ‘informant’, as in the course of the interview they analysed their own linguistic repertoire and its connections to their life history. ‘The interviewee’, as Singer writes, ‘is encouraged to take on an academic hat while the interviewer is brought deeper into the interviewee’s life world and their lived experience of language’.

Three contributions to this volume explicitly discuss situations in which research participants gave interviews a different twist by unexpectedly deviating from the script and turning them, in an appropriating move, into a kind of autoethnography. Deumert, Kupe and Mabandla (Chapter 15) emphasise that some interview partners in the introductory sequence gave not only their colonial name and surname but also their *isiduko*, their clan name, and performed the narrative praises of their ancestral lineage (*ukuzitutha*). As the authors stress, the erasure of African names was part of colonial dispossessions and cultural annihilation; giving one’s clan name and ancestral lineage is therefore not only seen as

a dignified way of introducing oneself that involves poesis and narrations but also an act of resistance, of speaking back. Singer (Chapter 7) mentions how an anthropologist in the 1970s had to revise his intentions to collect an autobiographic account of Lazarus Lamilami, a prominent member of the Waruwi community, because, instead of telling as expected his life, Lamilami compiled stories and personal accounts by other people to picture the social organisation and way of life of the community. Singer understands this as a move to back up the struggle to retain the community's heritage against external pressures. Zeiter (Chapter 17) discusses an interview with a participant from Eritrea during a pilot project for the socioprofessional support of asylum seekers in Switzerland. In his replies, the interviewee first complied to what he thought was expected from him as a language learner according to discourses that link language to integration. In the second part of the conversation, in contrast, he diverged from the script and affirmed his professional knowledge and competence as a tailor and mentioned his newly acquired driving license to show that he was perfectly able to make his way in the new environment. In all three cases, the authors point out that what might be seen as a transgression of the script, as deviant or disruptive in relation to the research process turns out to be particularly productive: by appropriating the interview in their own way, the participants claimed a right for self-definition and agency, not by placing their autobiographical self in the centre but by locating themselves in their familial, professional and social ecologies. It is a similar move that Pratt had in mind when she coined the term 'autoethnographic text':

[I]f ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. [...] Autoethnographic works are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speakers' own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate. Such texts often constitute a marginalized groups point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture. (Pratt, 1999 [1991]: 35)

According to Pratt, an autoethnographic text is 'a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them' (1999 [1991]: 35). In a manuscript dating from 1613 addressed to King Phillip III of Spain, written in two languages (Spanish and Quechua) by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, she sees a first text that she considers as autoethnographic act of writing back. The author translated information by his Inca elders into the counter project of a 'New Chronicle', thus in the form of a writing apparatus used by the Spanish to represent their conquests.

It is certainly not a coincidence that autoethnographic or biographically informed approaches have made their way into academic discourse in the

field of sociolinguistics from the so-called margins, from situations where bi- or multilingualism is lived under extremely asymmetrical power relations. A milestone in this regard was the colloquium 'Du bilinguisme' held in Rabat (Morocco) in 1981, which brought together participants from different fields such as linguistics, literature and psychoanalysis. Most of the contributions to this colloquium refer to authors' own lived experiences of language under colonial and postcolonial regimes. The proceedings of this colloquium (Collectif, 1985) can be seen as an early attempt to take into account the importance of bodily and emotionally lived personal experience when it comes to understanding linguistic diversity. While this publication hardly received attention in mainstream bilingualism research, it inspired academics like Jacques Derrida for his work 'Monolingualism of the Other' (1998) or Claire Kramsch (2009) for her work on the multilingual subject. What the Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi (1985: 10) stresses in the introduction of the proceedings is today more than timely:

Indeed, we can now say that this colloquium was at the intersection between, on the one hand, a number of discourses about bilingualism and, on the other hand, personal situations of lived bilingualism, sometimes to the extreme of the vertigo of asymmetry. I think that, far from depriving academic discourse of its value of objectivity, these testimonies and self-analyses broaden the field of research and of the multiple cross-overs between language, culture and literature.<sup>1</sup>

'Du bilinguisme' (Collectif, 1985) shows how colonial, paternalistic, totalitarian and other power asymmetries impact heavily on lived experience of language, and it pleads for adopting a translanguaging perspective *avant la lettre*, for abandoning the idea of languages as homogenous bounded units and for the recognition of the 'impure' in language – or following Hassoun (1985), one of the participants of the colloquium, the necessity to accept disharmony against the desire for the one and only.

Similarly, the authors in the present book do not regard multilingualism as an addition of different monolingualisms but take the heteroglossic repertoire as starting point. An emphasis is placed on everyday practices of establishing communication between people with different language backgrounds interacting in the same social space. Authors label these practices differently: as vernac (Deumert *et al.*, Chapter 15), as language mixing, language crossing, street language (Anthonissen, Chapter 5), translanguaging (Guzula, Chapter 8), as transsemiotic, multimodal practices (De Meulder & Kusters, Chapter 6). They describe them in such different environments as therapeutic settings in the context of displacement and migration (Dabić, Chapter 14; Raschidy, Chapter 13), in indigenous communities in Northern Australia (Singer, Chapter 7), in townships and university campuses in South Africa (Anthonissen, Chapter 5; Deumert *et al.*, Chapter 15; Guzula, Chapter 8; Mashazi & Oostendorp, Chapter 9; Sonnleitner, Chapter 12), deaf communities in Europe (De

Meulder & Kusters, Chapter 6), or translocal mediascapes (Sedlacek, Chapter 11). By exploring lived experience, these authors caution against a naive celebration of diversity putting their finger on the wounds inflicted by language shaming, linguistic humiliation and ostracism and by naming what prevents people from interacting as equals.

### The autobiographical dilemma

Another leitmotif that runs through this book, in some chapters more explicitly in others more implicitly, is how the biographic subject can be thought of: Is it a pre-given subject that makes itself the object of its account? Or does a person become subject only by telling themselves to others? Or is it only in the ear of others as the editors suggest referring to the notion of the listening subject elaborated, e.g. by Rosa and Flores (2017)? Among the authors of this volume, there is a large consensus that biographically inspired approaches give insights that are otherwise not available from an observer's point of view. But, as Flubacher develops in her contribution (Chapter 4), engagement with and observation of social (and language) practices and processes as practiced in ethnographic studies should not be seen as contradictory to an engagement with biographic narratives that point to bodily and emotional aspects of such practices and processes. Of course, personal accounts do not render experiences as they 'really are' as already the process of perception is repeatedly refracted through the prism of earlier perceptions integrated into socio-ideological, narrative frames. Remembering is, as Sonnleitner (Chapter 12) argues, a social practice: It draws not only on (refracted) lived experience but also on different kinds of artifacts and mediated collective discourses reformulating past experiences according to the affordances of the present. Telling or writing about oneself and one's being in the world addresses present, absent or imagined others and must therefore be considered as dialogic and situated. It is part of what Foucault (1988: 17) critically analysed as 'technologies of the self', which as he says 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality'. In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005) draws among others on Foucault's thoughts on the subject, making themselves into an object of possible knowledge. She considers autobiographical practices as performative acts that paradoxically enact the biographical 'I' while trying to describe it (Purkarthofer, Chapter 2). From this perspective, individuals become subjects by telling themselves to others in the same way as from being addressed by others. Autobiographic accounts should then be understood as sites of narrative identity construction and self-representation (De Fina, 2015) rather than of self-exploration, of doing rather than having or being.

A certain ambiguity, an autobiographical dilemma, as we could call it, is thus inherent to all work that involves biographical elements: to invoke lived experience encompasses the risk to produce a biographical self that one pretends to describe; but on the other hand, as researchers we never escape the biographical as our personal horizon of experience, informed by the way we are socially positioned, is always present. This scepticism or ambiguity vis-à-vis the biographical is not only a topic in Foucault's and Butler's works but also in Derrida's and Bourdieu's. Derrida, as McNamara (Chapter 3) discusses, developed the move of deconstructing and reverting supposedly pre-given categorisations drawing on his personal life experience. While Derrida admitted that everything he writes is 'terribly autobiographical' (Finas *et al.*, 1973: 309), at the same time he reflected on the impossibility to write an autobiographical text. In his essay 'Monolingualism of the Other' where he discusses moments of lived experience of language, he explains:

What I am sketching here is, above all, not the beginning of some autobiographical or anamnestic outline, nor even a timid essay toward an intellectual bildungsroman. Rather than an exposition of myself, it is an account of what will have placed an obstacle in the way of this auto-exposition for me. An account, therefore, of what will have exposed me to that obstacle and thrown me against it. Of a serious traffic accident about which I never cease thinking. (Derrida, 1998: 70)

Bourdieu (1979) expresses his deep distrust vis-à-vis the 'biographic illusion' as a totalising and unifying enterprise and vis-à-vis the biography as an artifact that creates the fiction of coherence and continuity. It tends, as he says, to make the autobiographer the ideologue of their own life who selects certain significant events in function of an overriding intention and establishes relations of connectivity and causality between them. However, Bourdieu, together with his co-authors, collected and published in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999) dozens of 'accounts that men and women have confided to us about their lives and the difficulties they have in living those lives'. And he goes a step further with the publication of *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Bourdieu, 2008) based on his farewell lecture at the Collège de France. In what he calls, in delimitation to an autobiography, a 'self-socioanalysis' Bourdieu (2008: 1) insists that '[t]o understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed' (Bourdieu, 2008: 4) and starts his account by describing the academic field at the time of his initiation. Bourdieu gives an account of how the development of his praxeological approach and the concepts of distinction, symbolic capital and habitus necessitated two successive conversions of gaze: First from the naive to the objectivating gaze of the ethnologist when he studied marriage patterns among the Kabyle in Algeria, then – after his return to his region of origin, the rural Béarn in southwestern France – to a

reflexivity that takes into account the indigenous and the academic gaze. About this work, he says that it was his intention to write it ‘in reverse’ to the famous work by the ethnographer Lévi-Strauss ‘Tristes Tropiques’, a claim that reminds us of Pratt’s idea of autoethnography as a form of writing back. As Bourdieu somehow hesitated to publish the *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* in France, it appeared first in a German version and only later in French – alluding to Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe, with the epitaph ‘Ceci n’est pas une autobiographie’.

Stimuli for how to connect social orders and subjectively lived experience are currently coming from a strand that gained momentum in the past years primarily in sociology in the German-speaking area (Geimer *et al.*, 2019), the so-called Subjectivation Analysis (Subjektivierungsanalyse). The current interest in ways of subjectivation is seen as linked to new forms of governmentality under the condition of neoliberal economy and politics in which, besides the classical forms of governance and control, techniques of self-formation and self-optimisation gain in importance and increasingly shift the responsibility for success and failure to the individual. Referring to Foucault, Althusser, Butler and Bourdieu, subjectivation analysis focuses, broadly speaking, on how orders of discourse, practice and power become effective by finding, so to say, their way into embodied subjects, and how, in turn, those addressed as subjects respond to the discursive interpellations. As Schürmann *et al.* (2018: 858) develop, individuals are subjectivated individually and collectively; they align with normative and institutional orders, understand themselves in relation to already available categories and subject positions and develop practices that meet the imposed requirements that oppose or transform them. What makes this approach particularly interesting for our purpose is that in empirical studies it takes a twofold perspective: a discourse analytical one that understands the subject through the lens of normative orders and power relations and a biography analytical one that examines these orders through the lens of lived experience.

### Condensed scenes and vignettes

Most of the contributions in this book are grounded in empirical work, whereby narrated lived experience of language often crystallises around moments of irritation, of feelings of being out of place, of discrepancies between self-perception and perception mirrored by others. Such personal accounts typically refer to situations of liminality, of crossing from one stage of life to another, from one social space to another, from one language regime to another, i.e. to moments when habitualised and ‘normalised’ practices no longer seem appropriate and accepted, when language is not easily available and cannot simply be taken for granted, when language use becomes a matter of heightened sensitivity and a source for feelings of vulnerability. It is particularly in such critical moments that it is

possible to develop awareness of the ideological constructedness of language use and language regimes that are otherwise considered as ‘natural’ and self-evident. An example in this book are the accounts that students entrusted to Mashazi and Oostendorp (Chapter 9) about how they perceived their move from different parts of South Africa with their linguistically heterogeneous environments to a historically ‘white’ and monolingually Afrikaans-oriented university as an alienating language shock. It is precisely such feelings of alienation that make one aware that one is positioned as an excluded other. This awareness can gain a performative dimension in the sense that it can become a starting point for analysing and deconstructing mechanisms of (linguistic) exclusion.

It is less ‘full’ life stories in the sense of biographical case reconstruction (Rosenthal, 2006) that interest the authors in this volume than accounts of critical incidents, short-range-stories of landmark or key events (Labov, 2013) or locally performed and on the spot constructed ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou, 2011). Rather than aiming at constructing biographical coherence and consistency, these accounts of a particular event or a chain of events reflect the non-linearity, fragmentation and contradictions of life trajectories. To capture such critical moments or scenes of language experience, the contributions in this volume draw on interviews (Deumert, Kupe & Mabandla, Chapter 15; Sonnleitner, Chapter 12), diaries (Sedlaczek, Chapter 11), therapeutic interaction (Dabić, Chapter 14; Raschidy, Chapter 13), short autoethnographic texts (Mashazi & Oostendorp, Chapter 9; Choi, Chapter 10), creative visualisations in the form of language portraits (Anthonissen, Chapter 5; De Meulder & Kusters, Chapter 6; Mashazi & Oostendorp, Chapter 9; Singer, Chapter 7), participatory photo interviews (Mashazi & Oostendorp, Chapter 9) or on language trajectory grids as developed by Choi (Chapter 10). Participatory art-based research and reflexive visualisations have, in the past years, increasingly made their way into linguistics (for an overview, cf. Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019). Such approaches combine visual and verbal forms of reflexivity: While the verbal is structured in a linear and sequential way and tends to link single elements in chains of temporality and causality, the visual mode steers one’s vision towards the whole (the gestalt) and towards the relationality and interplay of the parts with regard to each other and the whole. Combining the two modes creates a space in which participants are encouraged to articulate emotionally and bodily lived experiences that are related to languages and language use in particular biographical phases. Translating such scenes into image-text-stories means to project them on a screen, to make them palpable. They can then figure as a ‘third thing’ to which the narrator as well as the listeners can refer. Such projections often rely on means of condensation, i.e. a creative process by which lived experience is transformed into a cipher or gestalt that interweaves different time layers and remains to a certain degree polyvalent and polysemic (Busch, 2020).

Besides the language portrait, the Vienna-based research group *Spracherleben* (Lived Experience of Language)<sup>2</sup> developed different other means to elicit accounts of significant language related scenes (*Spracherlebnisse*) that participants then discuss and work through (Busch, 2017). Topics frequently raised by research participants include linguistic ostracism, linguistic insecurity, language shaming, language policing and self-censorship, suffering from or overcoming language barriers, finding comfort in a familiar repertoire, losing one's voice, changing languages/codes of communication (Busch, 2017). Adapting a methodology initially developed by the MIT Community Innovation Lab, Li Wei (2011) employed a similar approach to how people position themselves in their metalanguaging, which he calls Moment Analysis. Participants are encouraged to retrieve the knowledge they acquire through experience, which often remains below the level of awareness, by identifying and reflecting on important events that represented critical shifts or changes in orientations, either positive or negative.

Several contributions to this volume cite spoken or written texts that achieve such condensation through poetic devices: Choi (Chapter 10) reproduces the short story 'Victoria's Piano Journey' into which 16-year-old Sally translated painful language learning experiences; Deumert, Kupe and Mabandla (Chapter 15) reproduce Yamkela's praise of his ancestral lineage and the rural community he left to live in a township; Mashazi and Oostendorp (Chapter 9) reproduce Samson's text 'The dual story of the Rooiplein' in which he describes his contradictory sensations associated with a public space, which for him is imbued with the history of apartheid and of struggles against inequality, with feelings of belonging and of being excluded. The authors of the chapters express their fascination with these accounts and make their poetic power productive for us readers by not simply treating them as data material, but by reproducing them extensively. In this way, they awaken in the reader a sensitivity for what Lorenzer (2006) calls 'scenic understanding' as distinguished from 'logical understanding'. Following Lorenzer, scenic understanding requires taking into account phenomena of experiential resonance on the side of the researcher and scrutinising the artistic-poetic means by which they are triggered. Lorenzer pleads for an interactional engagement with such texts, approaching them with evenly suspended attention, a not-directed form of listening removed from theoretical presuppositions. Specific attention is paid to the emotional power of the text and (by counter-transference) one's own response to it. Lorenzer emphasises the moment of irritation, which signals that one is faced with a condensed 'scene'. In the process of understanding, the scene is reconstructed by the listener/reader by building on their own lived practical experiences. Lorenzer nevertheless underlines the importance of matching the first tentative impressions with other information such as biographical background, context of text production, results of scientific inquiry (see Busch, 2020 for a detailed discussion).

The present volume can be read as encouragement to open a space in research for valorising scenic understanding in complement to the logical understanding we academics are trained for, to welcome in academic discourse and analysis the presence of elements that can, at first glance, appear as ‘alien’ as they refer to researchers’ and participants’ bodily and emotionally lived experience that seeks for articulation through poetic or artistic forms of condensed scenic presentation. Such condensed scenes can take the function of vignettes as is common practice in ethnographic studies. Vignettes usually focus on particular scenes or lived situations providing rich descriptive narrative accounts. They are, as Rampton *et al.* (2014: 4) develop, ‘[d]esigned to provide the reader with some apprehension of the fullness and irreducibility of the ‘lived stuff’ from which the analyst has abstracted structure’. They often take the form of personal experience stories (Creese *et al.*, 2017) used in the research process to address researchers’ emotional involvement and positionality. To explore the functioning of ethnographic vignettes, I find it very inspiring to return to Roland Barthes’ (1980 [1964]) reflections on vignettes, full-page plates that illustrated Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s 18th century encyclopaedia. These plates are usually divided into two parts: The lower part shows single objects such as tools, and the upper part, or vignette, shows the same objects but as part of a lively scene taking place in a workroom, a shop, a farm “enacted” in a *tableau vivant*’ (Barthes, 1980 [1964]: 30). With reference to structural linguistics, Barthes states that the lower part which has the role of ‘declining’ the object corresponds to the paradigmatic axis, whereas the upper part where objects are linked to other objects by contiguity corresponds to the syntagmatic axis. Whereas the lower part aims at immediate intelligibility, the vignette, charged with a disseminated meaning, presents itself like a rebus, a pictorial riddle. ‘The vignette has the riddle’s actual density: all the information must turn up in the experienced scene’ (Barthes, 1980 [1964]: 30). The vignette is a ‘condensate of meaning’ (Barthes, 1980 [1964]: 31); its function is less in giving new information than, by invoking a recognisable scene or experience, to demonstrate that ‘meaning is completed only when it is somehow naturalized in a complete action of man [sic!]’ (1980 [1964]: 31). The vignette in the encyclopaedia – and similarly the ethnographic vignette – certainly has a demonstrative intent but, according to Barthes, it vibrates well beyond this intent and ‘this singular vibration is above all an astonishment’, the vignette ‘is poetic because of its overflows of meaning’ (Barthes, 1980 [1964]: 35).

This is also the case for the three aforementioned texts: ‘Victoria’s Piano Journey’ (Choi, Chapter 10), Yonela’s praise of his ancestral lineage (Deumert, Kupe and Mabandla, Chapter 15) and Samson’s ‘Dual story of the Rooiplein’ (Mashazi & Oostendorp, Chapter 9). These texts create an overflow of meaning through the use of poetic devices and procedures such as metaphor and metonymy, condensation or praise. They unfold

their effect by giving expression to the authors' personal involvement in emotionally loaded matters or scenes, and it is precisely the emotional involvement and its transfer that awakens vibrations, first with the researchers and then with us as readers.

As vignettes are often used to shed light on researchers' positionality and emotional involvement, it might be worth to consider for a moment the multiple 'I's that are in one way or another present in an autoethnographic text, to consider the positions between which the researcher moves back and forth during the research process. First, there is the 'I' of the researcher at the time of the research process who 'selects' from their own life experience critical moments or scenes that seem worth telling because they can be read as emblematic within the specific research context. Then, there is the earlier, experiencing 'I' which the researcher invokes in the process of retrieving memories by transporting themselves to what Pitard (2016: 9), drawing on Husserl's understanding of *epoche*, calls the 'pre-reflexive moment of happening'. Like the flavour of the madeleine cookie dipped into Marcel Proust's cup of tea, it is often smells, tastes or other sensory perceptions or certain artifacts (as photographs, other pictures or objects of daily use) that trigger or help to initiate the retrieval of emotions and sensations linked to a scene of lived experience. What emerges then is of course not what was lived in the past – as lived experience is never directly accessible – but a re-construction, re-enactment or re-embodiment. Another 'I' is the one of the narrator who exposes the narrated 'I', who rhetorically arranges the experience as a personal story or vignette to stimulate an emotional response and provoke understanding from their readers (Humphreys, 2005: 842). A further 'I' is the one that is the object of the analysis, a process in which biographical events are understood as placements and displacements within the social space and its successive transformations (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999). And finally, there is the 'I' of the researcher who is positioned within the academic field and positions themselves with regard to current discourses. However, none of these different 'I's can pretend to become the 'hero' of the story. As Voloshinov (2012 [1926]) reminds us (and scholars inclined to post-humanist thinking would certainly agree), the hero is not the individual person interacting with other individuals but the shared animate and inanimate world 'out there' we are engaged with. In Voloshinov's (2012 [1926]: 172), understanding this world is more than a passive object we refer to. As a 'hero', it is given an active role as 'third participant' addressing us and addressed by us through intonations, gestures and invocations.

On a personal note, I would like to add that this book is published about 20 years after our first steps into the then relatively untrodden field of language biographical research. I say 'we' because these steps were collective ones from the beginning – in Cape Town initially with colleagues from the organisation PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative

Education in South Africa) founded by Neville Alexander, and in Vienna with the research group *Spracherleben* (Lived Experience of Language). This book reflects something of the developments and ramifications that our approach has taken since then, because it brings together very different perspectives: those of authors who were involved in the early days, of others who coming from different schools of thought and disciplines discovered the potential of biographical approaches and of those whose often sceptical and critical positions have contributed significantly to sharpening concepts. Thank you all.

## Notes

- (1) Translation from French B.B.
- (2) [www.heteroglossia.net](http://www.heteroglossia.net)

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