Chapter seventeen

Thinking Through Rejection
Reflections on Writing and Publishing Autoethnography

James Salvo

How might we take up questions concerning publishing autoethnography? Ultimately, if we’re thinking about publication, we need to address the question of rejection. We’ll confront rejection directly, but perhaps we can start from the brighter side of this. Our first question, then, might be: How might one go about increasing one’s chances of publishing the autoethnography that one has written? Though the answer to this question is simple, the implementation of it is decidedly not. In fact, it could be that one could read most—if not all—of the chapters gathered together by the present Handbook as openings to ways of practicing this simple piece of advice: To increase the chances for publishing an autoethnography that you’ve written, write an autoethnography that’s both good and publishable. Fair enough, but what does one mean by good autoethnography and publishable autoethnography?

GOOD AUTOETHOGRAPHY

An autoethnography may be good in at least two ways. First, an autoethnography may be good in the sense that it’s an exemplary realization; in other words, though the method of autoethnography isn’t a static one, but rather one that continually becomes, the autoethnography can be evaluated as something of value by those having the capacity to evaluate it as such. The autoethnography at hand is an example to be beheld. Second, an autoethnography may be good in the sense that it’s aimed at the highest good, in other words, in the sense that it’s ethical in a way that’s eudaimonist. Of all the diverse methods for doing autoethnography, one thing shared among them is a commitment to the ethical concern for the flourishing of all. If we concern ourselves with the flourishing of all, we can’t have autoethnography without ethics in this way. In other words, if we’re to be called to do something in the name of flourishing, we should’ve first confronted the fundamental question of ethics. From an individual standpoint, the fundamental question of ethics is: What ought I do? Other than in the broadest sense, what I ought to do is situational. I must always consider the situational context in which I find myself to properly answer the question of what ought to be done. But given that two contexts are never exactly the same, would we say we can never make a universal of our “ought”? Not quite, for though doing a particular thing wouldn’t be right in each and every situation, that isn’t to say that repeating that thing in a situation that’s fundamentally similar would be wrong. In other words, I can still have method, just not one that closes ways through being either inflexible or unable or unwilling to adapt. Again, having something like method here wouldn’t be wrong given that in both situations, we’d essentially be responding to a similar thing, an identical thing having arisen under different circumstances. In other words, though we can’t universalize without context, we can universalize for particular contexts that can belong to a set of things partaking in a common identity. Occasions wherein we encounter injustice can belong to such a set.

Any time we encounter injustice, we encounter a situation where not all can flourish. In these situations, if we’re concerned beings, we feel pushed toward and into action. Feeling pushed toward and into activism is itself the name for feeling compelled to have concern about injustice. This is perhaps the more correct version of what we’ve come to know
as the deontological in the field of ethics. Rather than an ethical orientation focused upon what our duties might be with regard to each other’s rights, to understand ethics as deontological might be to say that when confronted with certain situations, we can’t have no concern, and thus, we feel that we shouldn’t do nothing about it. Put another way, when we perceive forms of injustice, our compulsion to be concerned makes us feel as though we should act. To have such a concern about injustice is part of our being human. So when we ask ourselves the ethical question of what we ought to do in the situation of injustice, we ought to accept our compulsion to have concern and then eventually do something. And just as ought implies can, can implies might not. In other words, for there to be a situational ought, there needs to be the possibility to choose to act or not. It’s indeed true that we can’t choose whether or not to have compulsions. We can, however, choose to act upon those compulsions or not. Too often, we don’t follow these good compulsions to be concerned. Either we let self-serving tendencies get the better of us, or we let ideology convince us that change is impossible, or we simply mistake the almost impossible for not possible at all and give up. As regards autoethnography then, it’s also good to write autoethnography because autoethnography is activism.

Because autoethnography must concern itself with both the auto- and the ethnos-, it’s a discourse that concerns being-with. There’s no self without a people from whom that self emerges as a self such as, and there’s no people without selves. Thus, autoethnography isn’t so much a writing of the I in relation to the you. It isn’t a writing wherein one foregrounds the self by delegating others to the background. Rather, autoethnography is the writing of an I with an I with an I. And because this is so, autoethnography accounts for how we’re to exist not merely alongside of each other but to be with each other in terms of the sharing our being. A people containing selves isn’t a people as such unless there’s something shared among the selves. Otherwise, the selves aren’t a people, but people alongside one another. In other words, being-with isn’t simply the plurality of singulars but the mode of being belonging to the singular plural. And how can we achieve this sort of being-with without first asking the question of ethics from the standpoint of the singular plural consisting of a set of I’s: What ought we do? In truth, there’s no other way. For there to be a sustainable being-with, one must consider the flourishing of all as a singular plural. This is all to say that an autoethnography that’s true to the fundamental practice shared across all methods is good because it’s also good. But what about being publishable?

Wouldn’t we assume that were an autoethnography to be good, then it would also be publishable?

**PUBLISHABLE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

What constitutes a publishable autoethnography? From the perspective of publishing as being caught up in a capitalist economy, publishable would mean marketable. And as much as we might rally against neoliberalism, which we should, the practical matter of this is that if one is seeking to publish an autoethnography through a press needing to sustain itself through revenue, then marketability is something that needs to be considered. Being the fiery leftist that I am, I shudder to write such a thing, but I’m also certain that we won’t overturn capitalism in the coming months. Further, I’d caution the writer seeking publication against falling into the trap of thinking that publishers are but parts of the capitalist machine. It’s true that the institution of publishing is part of global capital, but so is nearly every other institution. And just as there are principled individuals resisting and operating within institutions that uphold global capital—principled inasmuch as they too play the hand that they’ve been dealt as best they can—this is no less true for the institution of publication. That this very *Handbook* is in its second edition with a new press is an indication that there exist at least two people who are our allies, and for that we should be endlessly grateful. Still—and I ask this genuinely—how dire is it that some good autoethnographies go unpublished because they’re deemed unmarketable, because they’re innovative but too niche, or they’re good, but not innovative? Yes, we might hear such things directly from publishers, journal editors, or editors of collections. In these instances, such pronouncements might not come from the perspective of marketability but instead from the perspective of limited publication space. But really, at the end of the day, this isn’t unrelated to the market, for the allocation of scholarship to available space is the promotion of certain scholars and scholarship over what doesn’t get published.

The situation is dire, one might say, if we confine ourselves to a narrow definition of publishing. If the reason we seek to publish our autoethnographies is to achieve wide dissemination, then certainly there are several ways to disseminate our work bypassing publication, especially in the digital age. So what if a publisher rejects my autoethnographic book proposal? So what if a journal doesn’t want my piece? I can always post my work on the Internet on a blog or in a repository! But then this often isn’t enough. This isn’t enough because many of us who write autoethnographies...
need to publish as the condition for maintaining our jobs. Publish or perish is almost literally true, so this is indeed fairly dire, at least in terms of doing our jobs. But if we think carefully through this situation even only a little further, we see that we need to make explicit two sets of distinctions that we’ve only here-tofore hinted at. First, we should make a distinction between writing an autoethnography and publishing it. Second, we should make a distinction between our work and our jobs. Ultimately, this will lead us to be able to answer a very important question concerning publishing autoethnography, and answer it from different occupiable positions. The question of import is: Should this autoethnography be published?

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING AND PUBLISHING

For some time, I’ve been returning to an idea from Norman Denzin (2017), one wherein he expresses a sentiment that he repeats often in different contexts, so we should be alerted to its importance. Recently, it’s been expressed in this way, and I’ll quote it at length so that we might examine it carefully:

The writer has to be a better-than-average researcher, and a better-than-average writer. Then, the writer has to be skilled enough to effectively link research and writing within a literary frame. . . . Most social science researchers are not literary writers, and they have been punished when they have tried to be literary. In order to develop the proper writing skills, they need training in creative writing; they need to form, join, and participate in writing groups. They are encouraged to invite literary coauthors, and they need to get their work critiqued by professional writers and editors.

Most journal editors are not capable or competent to review writing in this genre, including experimental performance narratives Without a set of criteria that can be followed, they do not feel comfortable saying that something is a good piece of literary social science. They do not have the training to be able to do this own their own. Criteria need to be outlined, but a plurality of frameworks should be encouraged.

(p. 676)

I’ve been returning to this idea alongside things expressed in a passage from Carolyn Ellis (2009):

Sir Social Science Rants: Autoethnography isn’t sufficiently realist or scientific; it’s too aesthetic and

What Denzin writes is within the context of the poetic, but the poetic taken in the broad sense of an artistic bringing forth. We might broadly say that he’s speaking of what we’ve come to know as arts-based research, an umbrella term under which one might find autoethnography. Denzin’s passage would on first gloss seem mostly, and uncharacteristically, prescriptive: The writer has to be this. Then, the writer has to be that. In other words, directed toward a writer, there seems to be an imperative, a “you must.” But there’s a way in which we might read the first few sentences as being descriptive instead. The third sentence, in fact, is: “Most social science researchers are.” This constates rather than demands. It could be, then, that the “has to be” of the first two sentences might be indicating that we can observe, and thus describe, a set of necessary conditions when encountering a particular writer, much as in the sense of how someone, after seeing its skyline, might say, “Look, I don’t care what the GPS says because this has to be Chicago.” In other words, that the writer has to be better than average and has to be skilled might simply be a descriptive observation that to be able to have read the sorts of texts that an autoethnographer might write, it must be the case that that writer has been both a better-than-average researcher and writer, all the while having skills enough to link research and writing within a literary frame.

At this point, one might’ve noticed that here, my own argument slipped from speaking about the writer, into the writing, and then back again. It does this because this is the way in which we readers typically encounter writers. Unless one meets an autoethnographer who then presents their writing to us in the immediacy of their presence, we know of a writer as a writer only because we’ve read what they’ve written. And if, for now, one of our objectives is to make a distinction between writing and publishing, we might mark this as part of our definition of writing: From the perspective of a reader, writing is the medium through which a writer emerges.

Still, even were we to take the first three sentences of the quoted passage as descriptive, that isn’t to deny that at some point there must’ve been some prescription. If there’s indeed a prescribing agent in the passage from Denzin (2017), it isn’t clear who or what that
agent is. If it were Denzin himself, then we might’ve expected to read, “The writer should be.” In fact, we shouldn’t expect this, for that wouldn’t be within the flow of Denzin’s own thought here. The sentence immediately preceding this passage reads, “This kind of arts-based work is difficult” (p. 676). This statement itself is descriptive, and really, why the writer has to be this and that can be taken to be an elaboration about why the work is difficult in the first place. Notwithstanding, this still doesn’t answer who— if there is a who, for in a way, it might take the text itself—is doing the prescribing implied by the first three sentences. True, writers have been punished, but punished by whom? And really, can we assume that the whom of the punishment needs to take the form of a person or persons? Couldn’t it be reasonable to think that writers such as autoethnographers have been punished, too, by institutions? How many times have we heard something to the effect of, “So-and-so failed to get tenure on the basis of an autoethnographic portfolio because their department didn’t value that sort of work”? True, departments are made of people, but the people have authority of recognizing others as belonging only by way of borrowing from the criteria and procedures obtaining in that department. And it’s precisely herein that we see the brilliance of Ellis’s (2009) passage, one which sheds light on the by whom regarding the punishing.

One might assume that Ellis (2009) uses pseudonyms out of politeness. No doubt, how she writes what she does functions to shield specific critics of autoethnography from any embarrassment should her argument prove to be persuasive. And the argument against the critics is made through the juxtapositioning of the criticisms themselves.

Again, it’s nice that Ellis (2009) uses pseudonyms. I myself agree that in our own writing, it’s impolite to attach proper names to mistakes we should no longer make, and it would seem that Ellis is following this same practice of avoidance, though anyone who might be familiar with the broader field of qualitative inquiry might be able to fill in particular names in any case. Citational practice is hardly an innocent thing. Who gets cited and published sometimes conforms to configurations of power that we may be wanting to challenge. But still, I see little reason to make citations only to shame. However, how this is written serves more than good manners. The names aren’t only proper name pseudonyms; they’re stand-ins for several scholarly things: traditional social science, theory, and humanities scholarship. And of course, from within these things, the utterances that follow are well-known respective critiques of autoethnography. Thus, this sheds light on the “who” of the albeit indirect and implicit prescribers of the has to be regarding autoethnographic writers. Writers of poetic work—broadly understood—have to be better than average because not only do they get criticized by people from the traditional social sciences, from theory, and from the humanities, the institutions of these disciplines themselves call for the devaluation of autoethnography. But at the end of the day, to repeat all this is a well-trodden path. I don’t mean to revisit it to make only obvious claims. I took the care to explain these juxtaposed passages because doing so sets up a potential insight that we can draw about publication.

The passages of Denzin (2017) and Ellis (2009) fit nicely together only if we conflate writing that has yet to be published with published writing. What Denzin asserts is true descriptively only if the description is one describing the outcome of a prescription, one from the critics of autoethnography. We can of course have descriptions of the outcomes of prescriptions. For instance, I may describe my observation that cars stop at red lights, and cars, of course, do this because it’s the law. Denzin’s observation, however, can’t be descriptively true in this general way. And it’s this non-generality that’s important to note, for any description that could be drawn from observing the results of prescriptions isn’t necessarily an empirical observation of a non-interpretive truth.

Thus, Denzin’s (2017) observation makes room for the case that I could be a below-average writer who follows to the letter methodological prescriptions to produce an autoethnography. One might expect that what I produce could be called an autoethnography, but it’d simply be an autoethnography-by-the-numbers. Perhaps there might not be any artistic value in something so processual, but it still could be nonetheless aesthetic by someone’s criteria, and thus in some sense of the word, what I would’ve produced would be, in some sense, an autoethnography. And not that one would expect that anyone would’ve done this, but I could take an autoethnographic work from so and so, use some version of grounded theory to code all the passages to create a template, and plug in my own experiences that match the codes to fit that template. I mean, that would be odd, but who’s to say that that wouldn’t technically produce something counting as an autoethnography? If autoethnography is valuable inasmuch as it tells particular stories that can become universalizable singulars, why wouldn’t one be able to do this? I myself have been known to say that if one subtracts the proper names from autoethnography, one is typically left with brilliant philosophy, so why shouldn’t we be able to just plug different names attached to different experiences? Isn’t that really what we do when we identify with autoethnography as readers? Yes, all this might
be true, but it seems to pervert the spirit of good auto-
ethnography in terms of being exemplary. Why?

The exemplary cannot at the same time be deriva-
tive. The exemplary is something that can be taken as
an example. An example isn’t merely a particular par-
taking in some universal form but rather the other way
around: an example is something that’s a universal-
able singular. For instance, any one of us are examples
of human beings inasmuch as we are singular in our
particular being, but the human-ness of our being is
universalizable with regard to any other human: there’s
no human template from which we’re extracted. All this
is to say that we probably wouldn’t publish derivative
autoethnographies if we were holding to the idea that
only good autoethnographies be published. Denzin’s
(2017) observations about those who need to be bet-
ter than average are true when it comes to writers who
are published. Thus, we might draw from this part of
a definition for publication: *Publication is the medium
through which authors are recognized.*

So to whom do Ellis’s (2009) not-quite fictional
critics apply their criticisms, to authors or writers? We
should read the vitriol of these criticisms as express-
ing the opinion that no autoethnography is good. If
no autoethnography can be good, then according to
the critics, no autoethnography should be published.
And thus, if it’s the case that no autoethnography
should be published, then when we encounter pub-
lished autoethnography, we shouldn’t recognize it as
having the status of publication, which also means
that we shouldn’t recognize the authors as those
who partake in traditional social science, theory, or
humanities scholarship. Given that Ellis records these
generalizable critiques as barriers to publication for
autoethnographers—barriers that autoethnographers
have encountered when they come across either people
who refuse to recognize their work or institutions
that make the same refusal—doesn’t this leave
the space, still, to write autoethnography? In fact, the
article ends with the autoethnographer grabbing her
pen and carrying on (p. 376). There’s no mention
of publication, and instead what’s focused upon is the
enjoyment and opportunity of writing. Again, if the
gatekeeper gods have closed the door of publication,
the window of writing has always been open. And it’s
herein that we should return to our task of distinguish-
ing our work from our jobs, at least if we’re academics.

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OUR
WORK AND OUR JOBS**

To take stock, we’ve thus far seen that (1) from
the perspective of a reader, writing is that medium
through which a writer emerges, and (2) publication
is the medium through which authors are recognized.
I grant that at this point, one may feel that this isn’t
much of a distinction at all. Thus, we should be clear
about what the difference is. The difference isn’t that
writing might exist only on a notepad or computer
somewhere, and that publication exists through at
least one publicly accessible medium. The difference
isn’t that writing might be on an openly accessible
blog, and that publication typically exists behind a
paywall, either through article-processing charges
for the author or, for the reader, through purchase
or subscription. The difference is that writing doesn’t
bear the stamp of some kind of officially acknowl-
edged approval, whereas publishing does. And that’s
why to emerge as a writer is different from being rec-
ognized as an author. When one emerges as a writer
retroactively— emerges because a piece of writing
that a reader encounters can’t have been written by
no agent—it seems as though the writer brings them-
selves forth from their own product. When one is rec-
ognized as an author, one is being interpellated—or
named through—the acknowledgment of another.
And while one may think that it’s better to bring one-
self forth through one’s own doing, that this would be
more praiseworthy, the opposite is true with regard
to being either a writer or an author. As a matter of
common practice, don’t we mostly tend to disvalue
writings that are self-published? This would tend to
show that to be recognized is to have prestige, to be
allowed to have a position from which to be heard,
or, in other words, to be granted subjectivity—which
is tantamount to having a position from which to
speak—from within the realm of the academy, if that’s
where we in fact work and have a job.

Again, publish or perish. If the dissemination
of knowledge were really our target, why should our aim
be to publish rather than to write? Why, as in the won-
derful image that Ellis (2009) leaves us with, should it
not suffice to exuberate in the joy of grabbing one’s
pen—or computer, as it were—in order to change the
world, all the while taking it in? As I said, in the digi-
tal age, granted that the Internet is accessible, there
really should be no difference between writing and
publication from a distribution standpoint. Shouldn’t
we just want to get good knowledge out there? One
could argue that the published is curated, but anyone
who’s read through enough of any body of literature
knows that peer-reviewed doesn’t necessarily mean
excellent. What does it matter that I’ve distributed
something myself or through a publisher? It matters
because we almost literally perish if we don’t publish,
almost literally because if we don’t publish, though
we don’t necessarily die a biological death, we do die
a second death, the death of our subjectivity granted through the speaking position of authorship. By all accounts, at least by the all who have us by our job, we don’t matter if we haven’t published. But that we haven’t published, does this mean ipso facto that we haven’t done good work? What sense could that possibly make? If I write a good autoethnography, good in the sense of exemplary and directed toward the flourishing of all, and it doesn’t get published simply because the journal ran out of their yearly page budget, how should that diminish anything that I’ve done if I can get my story out in some other way that’s just as effective, if not more? After all, free is more accessible than not free. Of course, this is from the perspective of a benefit to the reader. For the writer who works within the academy, there are of course other institutional things to which one is beholden. Publishing is a way to accumulate citations, to raise impact factors, to meet all the accountability metrics that we leftists like to complain about in a huff that probably ends in an expletive and the word “neoliberal.” Obsessions with colorful donuts with large numbers inside chase us around only because we chase them, and all too often, they just indicate that someone has trolled us good on Twitter. And even before publication, reviewers who reject our manuscripts don’t tell us to read anything—since when have they asked this?—but only that we fail to cite a large body of relevant literature, namely their own. Little do they know that their impact factor has been high only because people shame quoted them!

Our jobs are what we’ve come to either hate or become disillusioned by. But it’s no illusion this good that we can do through our work. We know this. It’s often why we entered the academy in the first place. We ought to remember it. And as regards publishing, we ought to remember this on both sides: (1) as those who pass judgment on whether an autoethnography coming across our desk should be published and (2) as authors who submit our work for publication.

**SHOULD THIS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY BE PUBLISHED? THE QUESTION FROM A REVIEWING READER’S PERSPECTIVE**

For someone who’s asked to act in a reviewing capacity, what’s the normative justification for answering “No” to the question, “Should this autoethnography be published”? We should note the potential gravity of this situation. It could be that someone’s job is on the line. Again, we know that as far as the academy is concerned, publication is often a means through which we maintain employment. Because, as of yet, publish or perish hasn’t been dismantled, the question could be one of death or not, yes, not biological death, but the second symbolic death of someone being removed from the plane of recognition.

Let’s return again to the two passages we juxtapositioned earlier. Further, let’s take journal editors to occupy the same position as a friend asked to look over a manuscript and a peer reviewer: all are people who’ve been given some say in whether or not a particular manuscript ought to be published. Continuing then, regarding the broader category under which autoethnography is contained, Denzin (2017) maintains that “Most journal editors are not capable or competent to review writing in this genre, including experimental performance narratives.” If he describes how skills can be acquired by writers, and better than averageness achieved, then, though written as a description also, this observation about journal editors is perhaps something of a prescription inasmuch as he ends this particular observation with how “Criteria need to be outlined, but a plurality of frameworks should be encouraged.” Here is our should. Though I’m not one for uncritically accepting authority, I think we can read this passage in a way that’s in keeping with a critical spirit.

Examining this passage carefully, we see that the prescription to journal editors—and I’d say this is equally applicable to anyone acting in a reviewing capacity—is what? Develop criteria, but be inclusive. What is any prescription encouraging a plurality of frameworks? If we think this in the realm of the political, it looks something like what goes by the name of agonistic pluralism. In agonistic pluralism, what’s of utmost importance is that a plurality of perspectives be maintained, even should those perspectives be at odds. It differs from political perspectives that prescribe consensus-building. And while I’m not willing to say that agonistic pluralism is absolutely without problems, it is an attempt to solve a problem regarding consensus-building that we overlook because consensus-building seems to make intuitive sense.

For an agonistic pluralism to function, we need to think of groups that may be at odds with each other as adversaries instead of as enemies. While we may want to eliminate enemies, we keep adversaries. Adversaries are necessary for there to be choice. With no choice, there can be nothing of the democratic. Agonistic pluralism, of course, can’t allow absolute inclusion. For instance, in the political realm, we wouldn’t want to include bigoted groups as groups that should be allowed to exist. Even when inclusion is our target, we need to have some exclusions. Thus, it’s best to minimize exclusions. In governance, I think one of the exclusions we must have is to exclude all things that are
THINKING THROUGH REJECTION • 247

unfairly exclusionary. As far as autoethnography is concerned, I think we should develop the criteria Denzin (2017) calls for regarding good and publishable autoethnography by using the model of minimal exclusion. When we work from a model of minimal exclusion, this is a way to maximize inclusion. True, we can attempt to maximize inclusion by spelling out what should be included, but this would exceed our imaginative capacity: we can’t imagine all contexts; we can’t imagine all relations; we can’t imagine all those individuals who might choose to write autoethnography and become exemplary writers or authors themselves. Given this, when the discussion turns to method, the method of autoethnography shouldn’t emphasize necessary inclusions but necessary exclusions. For example, we might take the method of evocative autoethnography and epiphanic autoethnography as two adversarial methods. As adversarial methods—not ones that are enemies of each other—there’s of course overlap, but the focus of each is different. This isn’t true, but for the sake of our example, let’s say these two methods were the only methods around. Say, for instance, those who followed the evocative method were to maintain that the evocation of affect in the narration of autoethnography were a necessary inclusion for a text to count as autoethnographic as such. This might foreclose the possibility of a person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a person who may have difficulty identifying their own emotions, of using autoethnography as a method to narrate their being-with as they live in the world. Were this same person, then, to turn to epiphanic autoethnography, what if no epiphany regarding their disorder had occurred at the time of writing? What if such an epiphany can’t occur owing to the disorder? Were the epiphanic to be a requirement, then this method, too, would be foreclosed. Would this, however, make the writing any less valuable? Clearly, this isn’t the case as there have been many good autoethnographies written by persons with ASD about having the disorder. All this is to say that a method cannot be an opening of a way if its necessary inclusions end up being exclusions in some as of yet unforeseen context.

As such, the sentiment, “This isn’t my preferred version of autoethnography,” isn’t a reason to reject a manuscript. Nor is it a reason to reject an autoethnographic manuscript because it fails to quote other autoethnographies. As per the aforementioned, there’s the obtaining oddness of citational practice regarding autoethnography. We might not be able to do anything about that, but all the more reason for this not to be the basis for rejection. Even worse should we reject an autoethnography just because it doesn’t cite our friends’ work or our own! When one is in a position of gatekeeping, consensus-building cannot result in anything but censorship. If we’ve done this, we ought to stop. If we’ve been taught that this is the only way to respectfully follow a tradition, we need to unlearn. If we’ve been under this regime, we ought to break away and find a more welcoming family elsewhere. My own plea to editors and anyone in any position of reviewing would be this: Please don’t try to make autoethnography look like any one thing, one accepted manuscript at a time. Promoting any one methodological version of anything can’t account for the truth of plurality. Plurality is what needs to be defended, because nothing survives without plurality; not autoethnography, not arts-based research, not qualitative inquiry, not democracy. This is an idea we should all believe. No one can sign their name to it, for no one can own inclusivity. And because no one can sign their name to it, without an author, this is a prescription, in other words, without an authority that seeks to silence other perspectives.

At bottom, what should our criteria be for determining whether or not a manuscript is publishable? These criteria should revolve around what makes an autoethnography good. We’ve explained that here. Namely, the autoethnography should be exemplary—which includes the universalizable singularity of its example—and it should be ethical. In other words, reasons of the market aside, if an autoethnography is an autoethnography as such because it’s good in both ways, then we should deem it publishable. We might set this as the hard limit of the maximum criteria for maintaining minimal exclusivity. The plurality of frameworks that Denzin (2017) wants to encourage can be accounted for through this minimal exclusivity. Minimal exclusivity maximizes that plurality of perspectives that can coexist. We could also avoid the hurtfulness implied by the detractors Ellis (2009) writes about, and this should keep we who are supportive of autoethnography from being our own harshest critics. And because jobs could be potentially on the line, I think minimal exclusivity would be a good thing. But this concerns the perspective of the reader, and publishability, and jobs. What about the perspective of the writer as regards whether or not we should pursue writing autoethnography as our life’s work or as our job?

SHOULD THIS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY BE PUBLISHED? THE QUESTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A WRITER

As someone who hasn’t published an autoethnography with his own signature, I really can’t speak to the question, “Should I publish this?”, other than in a
philosophical and speculative way. And so, my answer is simple: The same criteria for a reviewing reader should apply to the writer. Perhaps, then, we might explore more about the value of writing autoethnography outside of publication, explore the value of having written an autoethnography even after having been rejected time and time again.

Anyone who’s gotten any kind of response letter to a manuscript submission—reject or revise and resubmit, but also conditional accept or accept—knows that at least part of all of these letters are boilerplate. One would imagine, then, that getting rejection letters in this context may be disheartening on a level as universal as the template. One spends countless hours working to be a part of the conversation that’s academic discourse, years preparing to be able to be conversant, even, and one is met with what seems to be an at least partially canned response. Still, there’s truth to something that’s often in desk reject form letters. Namely, any venue of publication is only able to publish a limited amount of manuscripts per year, having to reject much good work. It can’t be otherwise should publication platforms remain limited. Thus, the fact of the matter is that there’s a lot of good work out there that never ends up being acknowledged. Our distant colleagues may never know of this work. As they say, autoethnography is a way of life. We may never be acknowledged for doing such work, but let’s please not stop doing the good work that we do. At the end of the day, rejection isn’t something we should avoid altogether. Taking a cue from eudaimonism, I think that if we can keep the focus of our actions on the pursuit of the flourishing of all—and really, isn’t this the reason behind the philosophical aim of disclosing truth, and thus the aim of autoethnography which is but philosophy that includes proper names?—we mustn’t let fear of rejection steer us. Rejection is mostly what there is, and this itself mostly because—whether we like it or not—it can’t be otherwise if even there remains even a little bit of truth to disclose. Put another way, what should steer us is trying to discover what closures of truth to reject, so we should thus take a more welcoming position with regard to at least some types of rejection. And, that being said, because flourishing for all is important, as academics in pursuit of truth, we ourselves can’t fail to recognize the importance of the necessary but sometimes unacknowledged work of writing every autoethnography we feel compelled to write. As I mentioned earlier, writing autoethnography is activism, and as such, even if it remains unpublished, the work is never for nothing. On this note, Ellis (2009) has already spoken something exemplary, a universalizable singular that should be the words by which we might live an autoethnographic life: “‘Carry onnnnnnnnnnnnnnnmmnnnn;’ the sky, cloud, sun, and mountain respond in harmony. And she does” (p. 376).

NOTE

1. Nor can I fail to address the work of careful and thoughtful editorship. I’d like to thank the editors not only for including my work, but for their wonderful suggestions regarding the argument presented here. Any shortcomings that remain are my own.

REFERENCES