Chapter twenty

Failing Autoethnography

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“You could make a dynamic atlas for your PhD,” I told the graduate student sitting in my office. She looked puzzled. “It’s a . . . well, I can just show you the one I made.” It was a postdoctoral project, I explained, as I typed in the URL. I hadn’t visited in years, but it was still there. “I never finished it,” I said. A pang of something. “I built it, but then—.” Then what? There was no need for a long story, I shrugged. “My life kind of fell apart, and I lost faith in the project.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, and nodded understandingly.

A few days later I was lying on a soft bed at the cottage while my son fell asleep on my chest. He was almost a year and a half. I was looking through the windows at tall pines etched on a darkening sky, in a big airy room lined with cedar and books. A mobile of cut paper fish that I made when I was four was slowly spinning overhead.

I was thinking about that conversation and that pang of feeling. Shame and failure. Earlier that week in a second-year lecture I had said feelings were not problems to be fixed and that failure teaches us more than success. File under: those who can’t do. I can barely imagine what it would be like to live with that much acceptance.

Then I felt the flutter of this chapter quickening, in the space held by my son’s slowing breath. Anne Michaels (1996) writes that “the grief we carry, anybody’s grief . . . is exactly the weight of a sleeping child” (p. 158). This warm weight, that grief: all my unfinished business.

The postdoctoral project was this: I wanted to create a space where survivors could post and share their art journaling or create scrapbook pages to document the places and things that they had lost after leaving abusive relationships. If they (we) could locate those losses on a map, perhaps we could see them in relation to proximate histories of violence and feel less isolated and abnormal. If we put them down somewhere maybe they could stop being everywhere and nowhere and perhaps we could eventually see something like a collective accounting of costs. I was trying to create space and rituals for mourning within the progress-narrative of recovery by building on and adapting a familiar, feminized craft. There were no scrapbooking kits for abuse and trauma, so I was making one, based on close-up photos of textures I found in rural scrapyards, where irreparable losses were given the space to become beautiful or useful or to just be.

I made a few images as prototypes to populate the website. Then I got distracted, caught up in compulsively writing a book on and from traumatic loss, in the middle of which I lost both my laptop and my backup drive, including the copy of Photoshop I’d gotten from my ex and the archive of photos that I was scrapbooking with. I have not had the wherewithal to bounce back from those losses, to test and promote and roll out the project. I did not follow through on my well-funded research.

The thought that arrived as the sky slowly faded over the lake was that maybe this story is inadequate. The project was never really about other survivors: it was a failed autoethnography. I liked the feel and the aesthetic of the scrapyards; they reminded me of scavenging around for used car parts with my dad on childhood excursions that usually ended with ice cream. I liked the guys who worked there, with their scuffed steel-toes and affable sexism and blue-collar masculine ethic of care. I liked the look of trees growing up through engine compartments and peeling paint and finding odd things like a school bus filled with waste paper baskets. I liked the bird song and rusty tractors tangled in raspberry bushes and the symbolic resonance between broken-down vehicles and broken-up relationships. I wanted or needed to make pictures but didn’t believe in their value enough to justify investing in their existence. My own grief and confusion were too heavy so I was looking for ways...
to set them down somewhere, on paper, on a map, on the web, on my list of professional accomplishments and services to others, so I could maybe, even momentarily, rest.

Perhaps it was good that the project stopped because it was based on projection and a squeamish reluctance to believe in the value of my own tiny, peculiar, creative impulse. I was trying to hide in the imaginary crowd of survivors just like me because I was too insecure to go it alone. I was working visually because this experiential terrain lay beyond the reach of text but my relative lack of skill as a visual artist left me and the work feeling vulnerable and illegitimate and I did not know how to defend it. I found my images cringe-worthy but never questioned why: did they suck, or just point toward experiences that sucked?

Once the baby was twitching in dreams I slid out of bed, lit a fire in the woodstove, and went up the path to the outhouse. A dim line of cobwebby plastic lanterns marked the way. The final one was tacked into the corner with a bent framing nail. In its soft yellow glow the menagerie of magical creatures drawn on the outhouse walls was looking lively.

The collages that I made from scrapyard textures had never seemed lively; they felt leaden, flat, and embarrassing. “Show, don’t tell” is one of the rules that I write by; had I just taken it one step further, by creating visual stories that slipped from words into shapes? The hopeful possibility of reframing the project in a way that might rescue its value expanded in my chest. Maybe I was simply placing my collages in the wrong category of cultural production? A pause, and then the negative self-talk snapped back: they were too static, too expository, too corny and earnest, trying too hard, like I used to vogue as a little girl, prancing and prancing in front of my reflection, always far too self-involved and dramatic.

All that may be true, but vain and proud as I am, my anxiety over the artistic merits of the pictures I produced isn’t actually the issue. It doesn’t matter that much, even to me. The surplus of shame tied to this project emerges from my failure to recognize that what I wanted or needed to do was autoethnography. There is nothing inherently wrong with writing from and about the self but burying that gesture in a wrapper: small, crumpled, and empty. I am often demoralized these days. My therapist says it’s circumstantial, a natural consequence of spending so much time with a child in pain that you can’t stop. She says this because she knows that I am ashamed of feeling depressed. It seems like a failure of gratitude, a perceptual error that makes me part of the problem, increasing the drain on our depleted resources. It would be more useful to see it as the simple chemical outcome of not sleeping, but so it goes.

In the midst of my rambling attempt to pick away at naturalized notions of subjectivity I told my students that my partner has a habit of asking if I’m okay. “It’s actually a very difficult question,” I said. “You know there’s one right answer, but often I’ll say, ‘I dunno, what do you mean by ok?’ Imagine what a treat I am to live with.” A little pandering self-deprecation, to get a laugh. I failed to make the point that was pertinent to the lecture, which is, that depends on what you mean by “you.” My partner’s caring question is hard to answer because I can’t find the self at the center of it, let alone assess her okayness.

A few months later I was walking across campus to a parking lot after giving a lecture on subjectivity and relations in research. The class of 90 second-year students only seemed to wake up near the end, when I stopped trying to explain and critique modernist constructions of the subject and started telling stories, as an example of Indigenous relational approaches to knowledge. In those paradigms (so far as I understand them), you can’t learn from me without learning about me, direct instruction is presumptuous, and decontextualized abstract theorization (like this) is avoided (Kovach, 2005; Wilson, 2008). In order to say anything useful about subjectivity and relations, I would have to begin by sharing what they mean to me and why I care about them. So, I told a few stories that offered glimpses of scenes that illustrate the ethical questions that trouble my own work. It was a classic qualitative-methods move, using the personal as garnish to liven up a bland plate of theory, because I didn’t trust the audience enough to try anything truly unconventional. It was another failed attempt at autoethnography, in a pedagogical application that sustained the norms that it set out to critique by coming in at the end to make the status quo slightly less boring.

It was cold and damp, on the cusp of winter, and the day was already getting dark. I felt like a gum-wrapper: small, crumpled, and empty. I am often depressed.

There is nothing inherently wrong with writing from and about the self but burying that gesture in an ostensibly other-centered project shows an embarrassing lack of reflexive acuity. It’s an invitation to ethical trespass.

Back in the cottage, my moralizing was interrupted by the baby. He stirred and cried, writhing away from his tummy. He does this five or ten times a night but gets up every morning filled with sunshine. It is unsettling to see pain and well-being coexist in one tiny body. Every day I doubt that something is really wrong, and every night he reminds me. It slips so easily out of certainty, which compounds the difficulty of finding solutions.
If you can’t answer the question, you’re probably not okay, or maybe you’re just well-theorized? The two might go together.

I texted home from the car, to say I was leaving campus. My partner quit his job a few months ago so he could be the primary caregiver and cover two-thirds of the night shifts so that I could go back to teaching. It’s a role reversal with deep reverberations. He’s had a rough day alone with the baby and now it’s my job to come home at suppertime carrying a fresh gust of positivity from the outside world into our little blue house. I need to be cheerful and sustaining and okay, like he used to be when he came home from work during my year of maternity leave. I review my day, looking for footholds. Plenty of nice things happened, but I see no way to climb up to that place.

It’s a forty-minute drive with a stop for take-out on the way. When the server in the Vietnamese restaurant asks if I want hot tea while I wait for my order I almost cry at her kindness. “Stay warm,” she says as I am leaving. The length of the drive gives me enough time to come up with something I can do, that might help: I can write. I told Tony Adams I’d do this chapter so a frame is already set; I just have to fill in the blank. If something about the writing process pulls me into a better place, is this good autoethnography, regardless of what makes it onto the page?

I turn off the radio, to see if any ideas will appear, like animals when you stand quietly in the forest. Some do. I am driving so I ask Siri to text them to me. She gets none of them right; the predictive text algorithms are not expecting me to dictate a list of points for a paper on evaluating autoethnography. The man who built those algorithms was interviewed recently on Canadian public radio; he explained why he designed them to avoid accidentally replacing benign words with profanities, and how he spent months researching the terminology of hate speech in order to ensure that the system never makes it easier for people to text hate.

The forms of address that we slide into readily are not random or ideal; they are designed and put in reach to advance particular interests and perspectives. Which makes me wonder: What work does evaluating autoethnography do? Who does it serve? The hyper-vigilance of our academic habitus does not seem like a dumb-down physics magazine that “reality is a plum” (Cixous, 2002), while I am brushing my teeth and reading in a dumbed-down physics magazine that “reality is a

One of my teaching assistants has been forwarding around a series of articles in the wake of “Sokal squared”—yet another band of positivists publishing phony articles in feminist journals in order to reveal how badly awry things are in academia. Their elaborate exposé of “mesearch” and our excessively accepting, foolishly progressive tendencies suggests that qualitative inquiry ought to be evaluated more critically, against conventional standards of objective rigor.

Really? We are already so afraid of each other. Who would this help? “Foster or debunk,” Brian Massumi says (2002, p. 13). It’s a strategic choice; when you’re busy critiquing, you’re less likely to be finding and feeding the sparks of brilliance buried in the ashes of whatever folly lies before us. We absolutely need each other’s help to see beyond our own edges, but how often do we calibrate our evaluations to focus on what is necessary and useful? I am a master of superfluous instructions; I see with appalling regularity how this makes the people around me feel frustrated, untrusted, and misrecognized. It invites disengagement and makes it harder for them to care about whatever it is that I set out to protect or improve.

In her psychoanalytically informed analysis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) describes the paranoid frame in which research operates; one of its core principles is that you can never be paranoid enough. If you go looking for flaws, you will find them. They offer the cold comfort of something to say, but I am not confident that fault-finding facilitates progress. Rather than providing traction for alliances and flourishing, critique “makes people feel attacked” (Barad, in Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012). Ron Pelias (2000) warns that critique commodifies “everything and everybody” (p. 223), including itself; even culturally sensitive, humanizing, contingent, additive judgments “seem to move inside the body… You wonder how often its effect is simply to harden us” (p. 224). I teach my students about appreciative inquiry that relies on emphasizing strengths but my allegiance to it is hypocritical. Or, to think more gently, aspirational. Why?

Maybe the tight grip of linear progress narratives leaves too little room for reframing. No matter how cleverly I critique this model, I still act on its assumptions when I imagine that it is my job to nudge a person, a paper, or a process along the path toward improvement. The benefits of this kind of teaching are murky at best (Halberstam, 2011). It’s Biblical salvation writ small, based on self-centered common-sense assumptions about time, causality, and my own power. At least, that’s what it seems like, later that night while I am brushing my teeth and reading in a dumbed-down physics magazine that “reality is a
static four-dimensional block of space-time, in which all of time exists all at once” (Webb, 2018, p. 31). If that is true, the things I am trying to fix are already finished and unborn, in every developmental stage all at once. Finding something to admire in them instead of pushing them along like recalcitrant children might not change their trajectory, but it would probably change mine.

Several years ago, on a bike ride under a colonnade of trees in Holland, my brother asked me what I thought of his young sons. “They’re lovely,” I said, “but don’t push them so hard. Let flowers open up on their own.” Could I say that to an autoethnography? To my own unfinished scrapyard project and the unpublished book that derailed it? Can I imagine the lunacy of actually trusting the process?

When I read my students’ work, I find and correct their errors as if I am cooking. Taste this; what does it need? A pinch of ground roasted cumin, a squeeze of lemon. Chop this fine, compost that. This smells off, toss it. These flavors do not mix. This is too sweet, too mushy, too bland, too salty, too raw. I correct the seasoning to suit my palate or—for a good day—my best guess at what they’re going for. If it is just right and perfectly plated, I have nothing useful to say other than “well done.” I don’t realize there are other, better ways of doing things until I see someone else doing it differently, but I am liable to forget these lessons and revert to familiar methods.

When I am working with relatively unskilled writers, I am often too rushed or exasperated to explain the lack in their texts and let them find ways to fill it; I correct their grammar or spelling or awkward phrasing. I solve most of the problems that I have identified. They are left with a better text but without better skills. If I notice at all, I am liable to feel badly about it, like I have missed an opportunity for pedagogical intervention. But a painter friend of mine once told me about a first-year fine-art program where half the incoming students were asked to paint as much as possible, and the other half were asked to paint as well as possible. At the end of the year, they all brought in their work. Guess which group had produced more good paintings? Enthusiasm, practice, and time might be far more useful than my painstaking corrections.

At a theatre conference a few years ago, I saw a mind-blowing presentation on devised theatre. This is a play-building practice in which actors deliberately begin with no story; they get together and improvise, gradually becoming familiar with each other and randomly accumulating lines and gestures that stick loosely together. Once a rough amalgam has emerged, long before it’s a coherent show about something, they start bringing in audiences. This changes the dynamic. As soon as the performance starts to get smooth and tight, they mix it up, deliberately pushing it back into uncertainty. Why? Because nothing is more dramatic and engaging than a show where you don’t know if that was a mistake or meant to happen. You can’t fake the energizing, affective rush of actually risking failure.

I assume the success of this approach must depend on the skill and confidence of the actors. This suggests that I still don’t get it: I am inserting a provision to minimize and manage the possibility of failure by bracketing it in competency. But devised theatre is not aiming to expertly teeter on the edge of catastrophe; it dives right into it. To fail well is to see what happens if, to be in the moment, with the resilient curiosity to carry on.

Can you imagine a devised autoethnography workshop? I am sitting at my tiny desk in a bedroom corner on a frozen day in late November, listening to my savior vacuuming downstairs. Soon she will be coming in here to dust, and I will give up on this stupid paper and go forage in the kitchen for lunch. Devised autoethnography would be boring and dumb. When I look at it directly, the glimmer of something I thought I saw there just looks like hippie shit, the kind of thing that only seems profound when you’re stoned.

Perhaps I just envy and admire the boldness that I ascribe to its practitioners. In real life I often find theatre people tiresome, probably because they reflect back to me something I’ve abjected. Whatever. Who cares. Certainly not my reader. This is not the kind of fun thrilling failure the devised folks are jonesing for; this is just a thin line of thought fizzling out.

But instead of getting up right away, giving in to exasperation, I put my face in my hands and sit with it, holding space for the cursor to blink. Embracing failure means you don’t get to pick and choose. I can accept a mad-cap dash into frivolity or excess that is accidentally profound and stops just short of being stuck, banal, pointless, or bad. In other words, if it isn’t failure at all. But trying to use failure like that misses its ontological challenge, domesticates it. Using art in scholarship arguably does the same thing. Failure is not just another mode of cultural production; it’s something else leaking out between the seams of representation.

The lunch break that was meant to give me a boost is a flop. My partner hasn’t reset the mousetraps under the stairs and he’s left his workout clothes in a damp wad in the laundry hamper again. When I point out these things he gets a bit prickly. I go quiet and sad; he is not the first man to feel unduly criticized, so the problem is probably me. He comes over to apologize while I’m frying an egg. “If I’m failing at home, that’s
all that I’ve got,” he explains, “I don’t have successes at work anymore, to balance it off, and you always seem to know how to do everything.” His ego has become more fragile without an external workplace offering regular doses of validation, and he is tired, too. But that is only part of the truth; I have also become more critical because he is not earning money and my view is clouded by the shadows of other defensive, unemployed men. Thorns of the past, stuck in our paws. Parenting is high-stakes and you are always failing. The child cannot be the problem, and the hot potatoes of failure keep on coming so you pass them between you until both your hands are burned.

I want to eat them with butter and salt, to find a way to make failure sustaining, because the supply of it seems to be endless. I want it to be the prelude to a gift, with noxious properties that lead to and become something useful, the way that stickiness yields improvisation (see Etchells, 2012), or poisonous rhubarb leaves become insecticide. I want to read a terrible autoethnography and, like Jesus looking at the rotting corpse of a dog, only remark on the whiteness of its teeth. And, at the same time, if someone says good things about my work, I want to know that they’re not just being nice.

In her lovely book, *Birds Art Life*, Kyo Maclear (2017) describes the way that she and her husband cheer each other on in their misadventures. “If I embark on a fantastically ill-conceived journey,” she says, “I know he will be the guy throwing paper streamers in the air and hooting ‘Farewell! Farewell!’” (p. 26). She explains that he is “too loyal and drowsy” to doubt her. This is not impassive negligence, but an active awareness that “[i]there are moments when what we need, what will benefit us most, is the power to style our own stories” (p. 26).

The expansiveness of that kind of love: I might, like my grandfather, find it in my nineties, once I have finally learned how to let things be. Maclear’s observation reminds me of the women’s shelter workers I interviewed during my PhD research. They told me that the average survivor leaves her abuser eight times before she leaves for good. Going back is generally seen as wrong, as a failure of courage and strength that endangers her children, but the shelter workers just say, “ok, I support your decision, do you have a safety plan?” They understand that women have their reasons, and who decides matters more than what is decided. Fostering the survivors’ sense of agency will be far more helpful than correcting their mistakes (Tamas, 2011).

I often make this point when I am trying to help my students understand Indigenous approaches to knowledge. To illustrate, I tell them a story about one time when my Tlingit' Auntie Doris was fishing with my mum. They were a bit inland, building a fire, when my eight-year-old brother called out from the shore, “I caught a fish! I caught a fish!” My mum stood up and said, “Good job, I’ll come help you gut it,” but Doris told her to sit down and feed the fire. After a while my mum asked, “why’d you tell me to sit down?”

“Susie,” Doris said, “how many times has he seen you gut a fish? If he needs your help, don’t you think he’ll ask for it?”

My auntie let the kid figure it out, even with a sharp knife and a slippery fish. Once he had confidence in his work, he would invite them to come see. He would own the accomplishment. His dignity was worth more than a few mangled fish. This way of teaching trusts the learner to observe, take what they need, and progress at their own pace, on their own path.

I wish I could meet the person I would be if I had learned this way. How would my Auntie Doris evaluate autoethnography? She died last year. I can hear her laughing at the question, like the caw of a raven.

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I gave a guest lecture on research ethics to the first-year MA students in my department the other day. It’s halfway through their first semester and the enthusiasm that brought them here is already dying down, smouldering under a steady drizzle of education. They are caught in the colonial knowledge factory, depressed by critically analyzing their own aspirations. I read them a paper that I wrote with my eldest daughter, on family members as conscripted collaborators in autoethnography (Tamas & Tamas, 2020). One of the Indigenous students said it reminded him of the way his uncle used to tell stories around the fire at night. This was a very kind thing to say, and I take it as a high compliment.

They asked me how I feel about my own work. I had to stop and think. I said mostly I don’t read it; I often forget what I’ve written and when I stumble across it I’m usually surprised by what I used to know. Some of my early papers are a collage of citations; I don’t write that way anymore. I’m not sure if I’ve gotten lazy or just gained the confidence to speak directly, in my own voice. It is a bit sad and disconcerting to read about relationships I used to have. I feel shy and grateful when people tell me they’ve read and liked my work. Occasionally I impress myself. Sometimes I wonder why I bothered, or what I was thinking, but my assessment of it doesn’t really matter once the writing is done. I cannot know what it says to the reader.

I did not explain to them that while I am writing I am constantly evaluating, faltering, waiting for words...
to fall into place, trying to catch waves of momentum. The process is primarily intuitive. I mostly don’t know where I’m going but I have a sense of where it’s not going right. There is so much sitting quietly that the writing process strongly resembles listening. The effort involved feels like tuning my attention to a frequency where I am already whispering this paper to myself. The signal itself is clear and persistent but easily lost in static if I am not a focused receiver.

This may be why, even though the stories are inevitably personal, I often feel like my writing doesn’t have much to do with me. I can chalk this up to my dissociative tendencies, but if I lean on psychoanalytic theories this dorky form of channeling just seems like the everyday uncanny dynamics of subjectivity. Stephen Frosh (2012) explains that we, as subjects, are opaque to ourselves and do not control a clearly bounded interior space; instead, communication leaks between bodies. Unconscious knowledge that we cannot access directly can be “projected into” the other, where it stirs and grows, until, on occasions, it can be articulated clearly” (p. 261). It can also come out sideways in jokes, dreams, and behaviors. The self who is responsible for “my” writing seems more like a masked choir of intra- and inter-subjective voices and forces, loosely organized by a beleaguered conductor. The “sole author” is a convenient fiction.

Some members of the choir are wearing other people’s faces, but even if I directly quote someone in my text, I am not really representing them. The folks who appear in my writing are my inventions, just like the people who appear in my dreams. No matter how faithfully I try to render the other, my depictions are complicated by the tendency to project feelings about myself onto others, and to transfer feelings about person A onto person B. I cannot know when and why I am doing this, though writing (and therapy) can offer some hints (see Bondi, 2003; Tarc, 2013).

Many scholars (including me) seem to enjoy entertaining and occasionally using these ideas but keep them mentally compartmentalized so that they don’t flow around unsettling things. I borrow bits from a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity when I need to account for something murky but forget about it when I want to assess the merits of an autoethnography based on the author’s conscious intentions, how they will feel in the future about having written the piece, or how truthfully they’ve represented themselves and others—things it would be lovely to know, that are likely indeterminate. It would be more feasible to wonder who is speaking and why, or to ask, what work does this text do? What does it render imaginable? Where does it locate authority? To catch memos from the unconscious you have to tolerate uncomfortable brushes with things you have abjected. I would guess for scholars this often includes the experience of not knowing or not knowing how. I am afraid that my ignorance and incompetence might leak out onto the page like sweat or blood stains. Remember the fear and shame that we began with?

This urge to cleanse the text is powerful but often misguided (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). The “spectral truths” that are glimpsed indirectly when they show up unexpectedly elsewhere “give psychic life its depth,” according to Frosh (2012), and meaning often lies in the irreducible remnants that explanation always leaves behind (p. 247). Autoethnography is inevitably unruly, saying more or other than we meant to and full of holes. Erasing these shadows and slips might shore up our egos but costs us meaning and depth.

And yet. When I have taken a paper as far as I can and I can’t see where it needs to go next, I will send it to a friend (usually Jonathan Wyatt, peace be upon him). A smart, direct, caring first reader is worth his weight in croissants and coffee. He finds grammatical errors and says things like “this is clever” or “you’ve lost me here” or “really? I don’t believe you.” He connects the dots to things he’s been reading or mulling over and tells me where he stumbles or feels rushed or puzzled. Sending out a paper that he hasn’t read would be like getting dressed and leaving the house without looking in a mirror: I can do it, but I’d rather not. My PhD supervisor performed a similar function: I could write audaciously because I knew that she would not let me make an ass of myself in public. I trust them both to titrate therapeutic doses of failure. These first readers have a lot of power so I choose them carefully and avoid wasting their time with problems I can spot and solve on my own.

I spent six months several years ago working on a manuscript with an editor in a literary nonfiction program at the Banff School of the Arts. His writing standards were higher than academic readers; reams of deft expository prose and direct quotes were cut. He trusted readers to come to their own conclusions and did not worry about what the text meant. He wanted me to write with integrity, to push deeper into scenes, to not flinch and dodge halfway to a sore point. I was a mess at the time, and he knew it. He was caring and curious. The resulting book is well written but homeless. I don’t know what it’s good for, if it should identify as a memoir or an autoethnography or exist at all. I am mostly okay with this indecision, but that’s a fragile emotional accomplishment, built like a house on stilts over the slough of despond. When it’s time, I’ll do something with the book. For now, it offers an example of evaluation that was rigorous and sometimes painful but also welcome. My editor pored
over and assessed the text with an attentive calm that reminded me of sitting with my father while he said “let me see, what do we have here,” and fished tiny tweezers from his pocketknife to pull slivers out of my palm. A quasi-masochistic, quivering exposure of almost invisible wounds, to older men placed in predictable roles.

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I get stuck here, writing and rewriting. The point keeps slipping out of my hand. Perhaps I’m just too tired (it’s 10 p.m. on a teaching day), but I think it’s because what I was trying to say isn’t right. I was moving toward the idea that perhaps I will one day be grown up enough to be my own self-affirming authority, followed by a superego reference that somehow linked back to my central theme, but as I was saying it the idea started sounding a lot like popular Western fantasies of autonomous individualism. That collides with the interdependent, loosely bounded, and much cooler self of feminist relational theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Gridlock. After twenty minutes of false starts I give up and go back to sitting with my dad and my editor, to find a new trajectory.

The scene is jittery with affective charge. Sometimes, pressure from the unthought known (Bollas, 1987) knocks me out of the narrative flow. If I read this as a simple failure of writing proficiency or discipline, I become too busy with self-blame to be attentive to these knocks. Evaluation displaces more interesting things, like noticing what’s going on. It’s not liable to reveal itself in any direct way, but a shimmer of something disruptive, a half-seen flicker of movement in the trees, ought to give us pause. “Gaps in our knowledge, whatever else they are, are also places in which the unspeakability of the Other can reenter” (Munro, 1998, p. 145).

I am ashamed of my need for help, permission, and praise, but I don’t know how far I should trust this feeling. Interdependency is not bad, and autonomy is not all good. Sensitivity to judgment can be crippling and silencing, especially in spaces where critique is the default mode of engagement, but it can also set up ethical fences that remind us to be attentive, to climb over them carefully if we intend to go there and to avoid accidentally straying too far. Hannah Arendt (2003) argues that we need both to call ourselves to account (to think) and to connect our thoughts to those of our community (to judge). Letting the herd shape my standards only seems like an affront if I imagine that I invented myself. It is easy to celebrate failure as a counterhegemonic form of “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault, 2003, p. 7), but even texts that valorize failure tend to do so in full sentences that follow culturally familiar structures of detached sense-making (Halberstam, 2011). The avant-garde thrill of writing in “a wild idiolect” is tempered by our practical and fearful investments in legibility (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008). Perhaps craving approval and recognition is fine but needing it to arrive on schedule is not; what if Van Gogh had waited for the echo of affirmation? The need to create is somewhat separate from the need to be received and recognized, but in our critical culture believing your own work into existence can require a tenacity that verges on madness.

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I am moving too quickly now, tossing in scraps of references without going back to my reading database to remind myself what the author I’m thinking of actually said. I don’t notice this until the next day, when I am digging around for things to send to a student I’m supervising. I accidentally come across my notes from Lyndsey Stonebridge’s (2009) article on Arendt. It seems like years since I read anything. What if I read Arendt wrong? A good autoethnography would not randomly cite whoever happened to be at hand and seemed to sort of fit; it would deliberately and strategically offer the best current clips to complement the text.

Does that mean that every publication should be as planned and highly produced as a postcard Christmas dinner? There is a dull roar of protest in feminist geography and elsewhere over the excessive demands of neoliberal academic cultures, with calls for “low theory” based on mundane sources and “slow scholarship” inspired by the same fed up and depleted sensibilities that (in sites of privilege) brought us the slow food movement (see Halberstam, 2011; Mountz et al., 2015). Is it bad autoethnography if I whip something up based on whatever’s in the fridge? I can do a turkey dinner from scratch for twenty with everything hot and tasty on time followed by four kinds of homemade pie on a nicely set table without yelling or crying (flex!) — but I can’t do it every day, and nobody would want me to. The textual analogue is impressive — and I can write like that, too — but the formality of the event produces a particular kind of encounter. It is beautiful to serve something so patiently crafted but it lacks the intimate informality of a paper you can eat with your hands, out of the box, leaning against the counter, with a little squirt of Arendt. Both meals will nourish you. Here, as in devised theatre, time is a creative partner. I rely for sustenance on everyday fare but my pride and identity are more heavily invested in the difficult, occasional and fancy.

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I am thinking about this because now it’s the end of November, and I am sitting at my little desk by a little window in my bedroom corner on a Thursday morning when I should have gone into campus for a meeting. There is a compression in my chest, as if two hands are in prayer position under my ribs, squeezing hard enough to make me slightly queasy. I went downstairs for a hug an hour ago, just before the boys went out the door to playgroup because the pressure was making me cry. There is not enough time. False. My PhD supervisor once said, there is never enough time, and at the same time, we have all the time in the world. The physics magazine I was reading several pages ago seems to agree. The magic trick of making sure that everyone’s gifts are fabulous, equivalent, and affordable, that delightful meals and treats show up on time, that assignments are fairly and promptly marked and emails are returned, that grant applications are submitted, and on and on, so every pot gets stirred and seasoned and nothing burns. It feels like burning. Burn down the house. I once saw a photo of a middle-aged Doukhobor farm wife watching her own house burn. Fists on her ample hips, impassive. She had set all her belongings on fire, including her clothes, in protest. She wasn’t even wearing a headscarf, just her monumental resolve. Evaluate THAT.

There are quotes that I am tempted to insert here, like Roger Simon’s (2000) call to question how “dominant discourses determine successful and useful forms of attentiveness and learning” (p.17), but I don’t want to. I’d rather stand around in the kitchen with you, feeling relaxed. Well, somewhat relaxed; I have left a small stack of dirty dishes on the counter. Can this be ok? If a student served it to me, what would I say?

Yesterday, at the end of the second-last class of the semester, I stood by the door as I do every week, collecting lecture response questions from my students as they filed out. I do this primarily so I can make friendly eye contact with each one of them and exchange pleasantries. A few have withstood my campaign and remain steadfastly withdrawn. Most are courteous and smile. A handful linger to say nice things about the lecture. They ask what else I am teaching, because they like my teaching style and want more. This positive feedback from a tiny minority skews my self-evaluation; the ones who hate the lectures don’t show up or don’t bother saying so. Readers who hate my publications similarly (so far) don’t often share their assessments with me. I perpetuate this by not sending papers to hostile journals and not presenting at conferences where autoethnography is marginal and suspect. I operate in a bubble of praise and constructive criticism where my work and I seem to have value. I want and need this praise, but it’s like the debit card that my youngest daughter keeps on losing because (I suppose) it promises both pleasure and anxiety. I never really own it. I feel like I have tricked or misled the reader or student and will eventually be caught out and disappoint them. A therapist once explained that this is how people with low self-esteem receive compliments. I don’t think I have low self-esteem, I see myself as (maybe not-so) secretly bossy and snobbish, but perhaps this further proves the point. It is much easier to believe negative feedback because it harmonizes with my ongoing and sometimes deafening background roar of negative self-talk. I consider none of this complexity when I am asked to evaluate someone else’s work. I judge it as if what matters is coherence, style, and insight, rather than wondering what this achieves. That is, I read it as an act of representation rather than an act of disposal.

Mary Douglas (1984) observes that sticky, viscous, unsettling, anomalous things that disrupt classification are represented out of existence through the known social rules of interpretation, or through physical control, avoidance, or by using it in such a way so as to remove its unsettling qualities through a transference into something else, something better subject to the processes of control.

(p. 40)

I don’t often think of writing as a method of disposal, even though we call bad papers “garbage” (double up: total garbage). But autoethnography seems a lot like a way of moving experiences, memories, observations—and the selves that they indicate—from here to there in order to remove their unsettling qualities and transfer them into something more readily controllable. Like disposal, autoethnography is “fundamentally implicated in the making of modes of representational order—it helps to make a society make sense—even though that is often done in a fluid manner and at a highly local, mundane and material level” (Hetherington, 2004, p. 160). The removal is never perfect or permanent; unsettling things have “a tendency to stick, even if only as a trace of what has passed” (p.162).

In this framework, evaluation becomes a question of how we account for and are held accountable by the unfinished disposals that show up as gaps and absences with their own agency. A disposal (an autoethnography) that is too soon, too hurried, or ineffective will be haunted by unresolved questions of value, so we feel guilty and indebted in its presence.
(Hetherington, 2004, pp. 163–170). Knowing this won’t make those feelings go away, but it does help me make sense of them.

En route from in here to out there, Hetherington notes that things move through a third space or threshold (p. 162). This makes me think of the amorphous digital space where I leave my writing and you might find it and of the psychoanalytic “third position,” which Liz Bondi (2013) explains as a developmental accomplishment that allows us to move from the primary (mother–child) dyad into becoming an observer. When we write about our own lives or others or perform reflexivity, we are in third position (soft pink slippers, toes turned out, heel against instep). When we can’t make this move from immersion to observation, we feel stuck, uncreative, or unable to look at something. Evaluation itself can knock us out of third position. Bondi writes:

I doubt that I am alone in often finding it difficult—at least initially—to receive feedback on my manuscripts, especially when that feedback comes in the disembodied form of anonymous reviews. I can find myself unable to take in the written words and I can experience even the slightest hint of criticism as an outrageous attack. Sometimes my faith in my own work collapses at this moment and I join with the imagined attack regarding my efforts as useless and unworthy. While I usually get over and move beyond this kind of initial response (thank goodness), when immersed in this experience it is as if I have become inseparable from my own manuscript. . . . I seem to have only two positions available to me—either that of helpless victim of the attack or that of identifying with the aggressor. Only when I am able to gather myself and differentiate between me, my manuscript, and other readers’ responses to my manuscript, can I begin to think again. In this context, thinking is synonymous with becoming observer both of my own words and those of reviewers.

(p. 14)

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I can almost see the lines of logic converging—losing access to the third position, improper disposal, thoughtlessness—when I lose the wave. It’s my own fault; I don’t listen to myself. My apparent need to turn this pizza of a paper into a turkey dinner (despite declaring that I don’t want to) is luckily interrupted by a text message from my eldest. She wants me to remind her, what was that song she used to rock out to in the kitchen as a little girl? Heart in my hand or something? I know it immediately: Annie Lennox, Wonderful. I see her as a seven-year-old, belting out a song about unrequited love with total commitment. The pressure in my chest turns into another sensation, a mix of gratitude, loss, and wonder. That kid is now sitting in a government office analyzing the environmental impact of shipping traffic on endangered whales off the coast of Canada, with a manicure and lady-clothes she paid for herself. She has a “mom” playlist on her music app. She’s adding Annie Lennox. She says it will make me sob. She’s right; I will listen to it tonight and be dancing with my first baby again, after putting my last baby to bed. He still doesn’t sleep, but life goes on.

The lull allows me to notice that I’m rushing this paper, hurrying it along despite Hetherington’s warnings. The ending has been hovering all day, gaining density without coming into focus, like a storm that won’t break. I will miss the writing once it has passed, but my patience for slow meandering has been used up by a toddler. I have been at it all day and now it is dark. The only light on in the house is my laptop screen and the boys are on their way home. So, cut to the chase.

A good autoethnography should “let the traces of other people’s struggles, passions, pasts, resonate within one’s own past and present, and destabilize them” (Kaja Silverman, 1996, p. 185 cited in Simon, 2000, p. 10), but it should also, as my therapist said, let us live to write another day. Its voice should be ironic, not as a defense against witnessing but as a serious mode of engaging with hurt while carving out a place beside it to think (Stonebridge, 2009). It should “teach acceptance of things as they are” as a necessary prelude to judgment (Arendt, 1983, p. 262). What about accepting its own garbage or garbled self? I don’t know. Irony is “frequently self-disparaging” (Riley, 2000). Rather than moving toward redemption it aims to spread perplexity (Arendt, 2003). The solace it provides might surface as the ability to befriend emotions, to feel them in the body as sensations, to tolerate ambiguity, and to integrate scattered shards into an account that is necessarily somewhat leaky and incoherent, not just because the writer lacks skill, but because life is like that (Baker, 2009).

What about the bad autoethnographies? Ones that are too tight or too floppy, too facile or abstruse, too easy or unbearable, that tell generic, boring stories about undertheorized subjects with first-world problems or pimp suffering for the sake of a publication; that perpetuate ignorance or produce estrangement or are insensitive, colonizing, humorless, disorganized, and grammatically incorrect: can I really accept and value such failures? After 8,000 words of prevarication...
without a single goddamn subheading, would it be too much to ask for a little summary of basic practical guidelines?

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On a Monday morning in mid-December, I am in a sleek grey room where several dozen professors sit with their backs to the twenty-first-story view discussing this year’s batch of candidates for tenure and promotion. Jonathan Wyatt’s review of this piece arrived yesterday, on my birthday, but I can’t unwrap it here. I am sitting in between the directors of the two departments where I work, watching a procession of dossiers go by, bristling with accomplishments. The strength and worthiness of various colleagues is lined up like a military parade. I look out the window. I have a cold and even the knitting in my lap feels like too much work. I am deliberately not thinking, not comparing myself to these glittering peers, even though I am here to prepare for my own review next year.

After the meeting I walk through the tunnels back to my office. The door opens with a burst of sunshine and I settle in for a dose of Jonathan. He pushes for clarification in a few places and chastises some excessive self-deprecation. He uses the words beautiful, gorgeous, lovely, and strong. The only thing he really doesn’t like is that last paragraph on bad autoethnographies. “I don’t believe you, quite,” he says. The whole paragraph troubles him: “It seems like you’re—suddenly—thumping the topic with a hammer, where previously you’ve been sharp but subtle.” He suggests cutting it and ending the paper on “life is like that.”

Hmm. A student arrives to pick up an assignment, to see why my TA gave him such a low grade. I fail to locate his work. He has walked in the cold to get here. I apologize and offer to regrade if he emails it to me. Then I write to my directors to ask how extending my medical workload reduction into the next semester might impact my eligibility for tenure and promotion. They don’t know, so the management of my insufficiency gets passed on to the Dean.

I wonder about Jon and that paragraph for the rest of the day. What did he notice? I hold it in my mind, letting it warm and soften so I can feel what’s underneath. On the long drive home Siri does a pretty good job with my questions: “Would I pay to see devised theatre? In that last paragraph, are those writing problems or personal problems? Can someone with a week character write a strong auto with not Griffey? I don’t know.”

I figure it out during bath time and scrawl a few thoughts on a damp envelope while my son discovers the possibility of pouring water out of the tub. The problem is that my list of terrible bad things is hypothetical. The autoethnographies I actually see are at worst short-sighted, stiff with fear, or poorly edited. These are minor sins that primarily reveal my expectations. The major sins I listed point to my own deep insecurities, the issues and traits that I fear in myself and cannot allow—but I can sit with them, here, with you, in the cozy space of a “good enough” autoethnography—one where care and failure combine to lead us out into the world (Winnicott, 1971).

NOTE

1. An Indigenous tribe from the north-west of the territory now known as Canada.

REFERENCES


