I was couched. I was couched between two horror scenes. On screen, I recalled watching the film character Carol White become bewildered by misedelivered black furniture as I watched colleagues off screen become unsettled by a black couch signifying a black threat invading the intimate space of an always-pastel wearing white woman, her White family home, and her white community in the “Safe” setting of the San Fernando Valley. I might as well have been Stephen King’s Carrie coronated on a blood-soaked stage after my discussant described my semiotic reading of a rapist as ridiculous. He laughed. The mainly-white midwestern graduate conferencegoers laughed. “She got all of that from a couch,” he said shaking his head. Their laughs and my reading of out-of-place blackness in privileged white space on and off screen still haunts me.

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Textual experience re-members. It is an active, interpretive process of bridging lived experience with living memories embedded in words, acts, or sounds to generate temporal, plural, partisan, and partial meanings that are filtered through historically produced subjects or situated speaking positions (A. Durham, 2014). In this chapter, I define textual experience as an interpretive autoethnography of media and culture to distinguish it from conventional textual analysis preferred in media and cultural studies. I describe its development by drawing from the climate-horror film Safe (Haynes, 1995) and other vulnerable movie-moving moments to underscore experience. I identify the interpretive process as a key autoethnographic component that anchors textual experience. By emphasizing the interrelationship between the interpretive-autoethnographer and the cultural (con)text, I suggest textual experience provides a more engaged, embodied, and ethically accountable analysis because it is rooted in a relational reading that circles from the self outward to demonstrate how and why a particular cultural practice, product, process, or performance resonates.

There is extensive research about textuality and experience in media and cultural studies (M. G. Durham & Kellner, 2006). Since its institutionalization as an interdisciplinary critical inquiry area, textual and ethnographic analyses have been juxtaposed to compare the explanatory power, theoretical depth, and descriptive thickness of these complementary qualitative methods to describe contemporary culture under late or advanced capitalism. The “two paradigms” that Stuart Hall (1980) outlined four decades ago continues to serve as a reliable framework to describe its
culturalist and structuralist origins and its methodological interventions, especially as they pertain to language or representation. That said, this framing is a lopsided one. Even as autoethnography mines lived experience to explore the self in relation to culture at a local level, its contribution as a qualitative method remains relatively absent in media and cultural studies compared to the wildly popular text-based ones.

Text-based methods are privileged because of the push for professionalization in an increasingly corporatized academic climate where publication and replication are primary assessments of productivity for students and faculty. First, there are simply more venues to present and publish peer-reviewed text-based studies. The proliferation of this research, however, has more to do with the economic structure of academic publishing than the popularity of deconstruction, discourse, or criticism (e.g., rhetorical, literary, film) as methods. Text-based studies can be replicated insofar as representation-as-text can be isolated or flattened to demonstrate the effective application of a particular theoretical frame or “looking” technique in a newer cultural form or context. There is also predictability in pointing to patterns in representation using a so-called theoretical passkey to analyze culture (Morley, 2015). While autoethnography tackles textuality—in some ways resuscitating it—and wrestles with the politics of representation by placing a personal stake in communicative sense-making, it does not carry the same institutional capital as text-based methods because its emphasis on the personal and experiential promises no guarantees of a settled analysis. Therefore, autoethnography might not conform to the logic of capitalism for a corporate academy where decentered analyses, replicability, and predictability take priority.

Second, conventional text-based methods are privileged in media and cultural studies because they are recognized as teachable, adaptable, and marketable. In graduate and undergraduate courses, I notice remarkable shifts in student confidence when presenting their analyses. They move from a kind of certainty of “mastering” semiotics as a (post)structuralist text-based method of examining signs and symbols to profound second-guessing after they integrate personal experience, identity, and memory. It is not that their analytic eye changed. The integration of an accountable, vulnerable, visible “I” changed (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For them, including the interpretive-autoethnographer interrupts a neat reading and a faceless claim about culture on-high. For me, when an interpretive analysis becomes less formulaic and less focused on reading right, it becomes the exact moment when students begin to craft complex and often contradictory analyses that honor the dynamic ways ordinary people live culture. Students flesh the production of commonsense and the popularity of a text that could be ripe with “isms” but retains resistant potential. In text-based ethnographies (McKinnon, 2012), critical autoethnographies (Boyln, 2017; Boyln & Orbe, 2016), mysteries (Denzin, 2003, 2013), and interpretive textual analyses (A. Durham, 2014), I stage moments to encourage intimacy with the text—an intimacy that relies on mining personal experience and crafting it in embodied, evocative forms, such as the personal narrative or performance. The latter forms are nearly impossible to cultivate with large classes and almost incompatible with digital platforms that require automation, uniformity, and quantifiable learning outcomes. Even software developed to evaluate essays are of little use because it checks composition and grammatical accuracy rather than the kind of critical inquiry students develop from reflexively rewriting in autoethnography (Berry, 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) or reenacting in performance ethnography (Alexander, 2013). In these ways, conventional text-based methods—even those that could be critical in nature—are privileged as “teachable” and adaptable for larger classes whether in person or online because both educational environments fit future models of course instruction across the expanding corporate academy.

Take the discipline of Communication for example. It is an academic home for media and cultural studies scholarship. Communication can no longer—if it ever could—lay claim to distinct disciplinary knowledge about media when its information, technologies, and cultural practices structure social relations and permeate every facet of modern life. To preserve the discipline, Communication has all but ditched Dewey-esque democratic ideals of developing an informed and engaged citizenry in exchange for market appeals to cultivate savvy consumers (and prosumers) in media and cultural studies (McDonald, 2017). Here, conventional text-based methods, including forms of media literacy, are advertised as professional skills. This repackaging works for corporate partners and public “stakeholders” at large. However, in refashioning text-based methods to fulfill narrow private and public interests, some forms of critical self-reflexivity and power-laden critiques endemic of media literacy and autoethnography in cultural studies are devalued. In my department, for example, revamping media and cultural studies courses means “streamlining” content (read: removing autoethnography) to fit established approaches that might increase standardization and replication to manage course content and staffing and to maintain accreditation using uniform
learning outcomes as one product of assessment. These internal and external metrics manufactured to meet market pressures gut what is gratifying about teaching embodied media and cultural studies in the humanities. In what appears to be a final pitch for self-preservation, Communication and other media-related disciplines are sacrificing “the self.” Conventional text-based methods that can be depersonalized and depoliticized to offer marketable skills in media and cultural studies do so at the risk of missing meaningful opportunities for liberatory transformation and transgressive self-revelation honed from critical inquiry, reflexivity, and rewriting/reenacting developed in autoethnography.

To describe marketability, adaptability, and “teach-ability” of conventional text-based methods in media and cultural studies is meant to mark the economic motivation for their proliferation in relation to autoethnographically-informed approaches. It is also meant to unmask the apolitical re-presentation that both paradigms are simply two available approaches that qualitative researchers use to study culture. I offer textual experience to challenge this apolitical construction. While it brings together text-based and ethnographic methods, textual experience is not a blended approach, a mixed method, or a form of triangulation for a postpositivist grasping of an ungrounded truth; rather, it is an embodied, relational interpretive analysis grounded in experience to challenge the depersonalization and depoliticization promoted in the corporate academy and conventional text-based methods. In centering myself as integral to the interpretive process, I show how culture is worked out and worked through my body.

TEXTUAL EXPERIENCE: A METHOD

I came to a method by mistake—a mishap perhaps after misreading misdelivered black furniture as a menacing sign of the white-imagined black rapist in Safe (Haynes, 1995). “Not sure if this works.” The cursive comments circling down my professor-proofed page pointed to her three-column connotative word-stack beneath boxed headers: couch, invades, living room. I stood in the office entryway staring at that couch. Caroled. Black had to be removed from the page as if she were visually assaulted by its presence too. That my white professor-mentor could reiterate removing the thing—the very black thing—that the well-off white wife wanted in the film was bewildering. Black mattered. It was the thing that was significant to understanding the threat. I flipped. Fumbled pages. I dragged my eyes to the white borders where I met her pencil policing my life-language. I had to turn my turquoise into her teal, ditch my “wifebeater” reference recalling the working class hip-hop hard body for her black-and-white one perfected by a bygone Marlon Brando: Stella. White supremacy got a colorblind upgrade to hegemony because the former reminded her of old “rednecks” and hooded clansmen rather than the cinematic suburban white family—a family who in its niceties still relied on the racist language of invasion to portray poor communities of color and a color-matching Latinx domestic who tiptoed without a word in the background. The environment was unsafe. It was the horror, she added. On that matter, we agreed. Only, the horrific environmental threat for me was the ordinariness of white supremacy.

Textual experience hinges on a relational reading of media and culture that is grounded by the interpretive process (Denzin, 2001, 2013). In his development of interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2001), interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989), interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997), performance autoethnography (Denzin, 2018), and interpretive auto-ethnography (Denzin, 2013, 2014), Norman Denzin underscores the interpretive because it is through the examination of experience—as it is enacted and performed in everyday life—that we can critically engage with culture and examine our situated self in society. Textual experience extends his approach to life storying by emphasizing the intimate, interpretive process of meaning-making in media and cultural studies using autoethnography. Like Denzin, I suggest textual experience is an embodied method of re-membering—of bridging and bringing together our storied, performative selves in dialogue or “interplay” (Manning & Adams, 2015, p. 190) with representations as repositories of memory. In this way, the interpretive-autoethnographer recognizes media representations as living memories, as undead signs we animate to make sense of ourselves and our experiences. This does not assume representation is empty or devoid of existing cultural significance; it does suggest its local meaning comes from the “life” matter we bring to it autoethnographically. For example, I could identify black displacement and its threatening presence in the climate-horror film Safe (1995) because they mirrored mine as a graduate student. This point concerning identification might not be dramatically different from Hall’s “negotiated” decoding position in text-based and reception studies; however,
the critically reflexive engagement with media representations as memories we mine as part of the interpretive process is a distinguishing feature of textual experience (e.g., Hall, 2006).

Emphasizing the interpretive-autoethnographer experience echoes earlier scholarship in media and cultural studies. Together, the collective works of Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Norman Denzin serve as precursors to the method because they flesh theory and body method to better understand the complexity of culture by drawing from their situated identities. Where Hall homes his immigrant experience to challenge essentialism, hooks expands the outsider within developed in black feminism to explore race, gender, and class belonging. hooks revisits her southern upbringing as a homeplace for theory-making. She writes, “Often it was that coming together of the idea, theory, and shared personal experience that was the moment when the abstract became concrete, tangible, something people could hold and carry away with them” (2014, p. 3). The southern act of “talking back” or speaking with authority without permission or power is one way in which hooks re-members early forms of feminist praxis. Talking back is another way she develops what Hall would call the oppositional decoding position by reading against the grain. Using the interpretive-autoethnographer experience, both hooks and Hall invite media and cultural studies scholars to talk back to hegemonic representations by identifying ruptures and (intercultural) silences as well as marking points of pleasure from an intimate, experiential engagement with the text. Both note that positionality—even one situated in the margins—can be a productive, resistant place of power.

Textual experience is inconceivable without the development of the interpretive body, epiphanic memory, and multiple representation strategies in autoethnography (A. Durham, 2017) and performance studies (Hamra & Madison, 2006). First, the interpretive body is more than an instrument to record and report information. Denzin recommends researchers who adopt the interpretive approach examine lived experience shaped by culture-making institutions rather than decode, discover, or demystify cultural products in qualitative methodology (Denzin, 2001, p. 157). This is a critical departure from conventional textual analyses (e.g., semiotics). Here, the body is instrumental to sensing the gaps, holes, fissures, and fixtures of culture. It is central to the interpretive process of textual experience as autoethnography. Epiphanies—life-changing epiphanies, built-up or cumulative epiphanies, tension-raising minor epiphanies, or recurrent, relived epiphanies—are moments of crisis or the heightened sense of self-awareness (Denzin, 2001, p. 37, 2014, p. 17). Experience, or what Denzin later describes in interpretive autoethnography as the representation of experience, is performative, symbolic, and material (2013, p. 130). Again, the interpretive-autoethnographer is needed to clarify the meaning(s) of an event or experience (2001, pp. 52–53). The interpretive-autoethnographer is needed to make sense of a given representation that can be presented using different forms, such as personal narrative, poetry (Weems, 2013), and autoethnography. Jimmie Manning and Tony Adams (2015) identify description-rich interpretive-humanistic autoethnography, power-laden critical autoethnography, and aesthetically driven creative-artistic autoethnography as three different approaches that might take different representation forms. Both Manning, Adams, and Denzin privilege the interpretive, critical, and creative to analyze and story experience. Like Denzin, however, textual experience uses the epiphany to mine experience and to move memory. Earlier, Denzin suggested the interpretive process would examine experience using epiphanies with two or more persons (2001, p. 32). Today, Denzin underscores memory. Textual experience extends his use of memory by addressing media representations as living memories or repositories of indelible life moments and by adapting the interpretive process to engage with media texts to stage epiphanic moments when bodies—symbolic and material—diverge or collide.

In addition to privileging the body, the interpretive process in textual experience also takes up politics—including the politics of representation. The interpretive autoethnographer-text-experience relationship requires a reflexive, critical engagement that stems from a moral and political commitment that begins and ends with the “vulnerable I” (Ellis, 2004) to make “publicly private” (hooks, 2014, p. 2) criticism that works to advance democracy. Hall (1996) distinguishes intellectual and academic work in cultural studies. He treats the former as “deadly serious” work that has the ability to intervene and change the material lives of minoritized groups. In this way, the interpretive-autoethnographer metaphorically places their body on the line to call attention to broader formations that structure or organize ordinary lives. To recognize the black couch as replaceable, as threatening, as a thing in the climate-horror film Safe (1995) is to recognize the similar treatment of black bodies throughout US American history. My relational reading of black displacement did not fit formal semiotics, but it matched squarely with ontological blackness and my overall experience of the horrific gentility of white supremacy in the film. Then, I did not have the interpretive training in autoethnography nor expertise
in cultural studies to describe how my analysis could serve as a meaningful departure from conventional text-based studies. From Safe (1995) and the methodological contributions of Denzin, hooks, and Hall, textual experience can bridge personal experience with popular culture.

Textual experience is guided by one central question: How? (1) How do I experience a given representation in media and culture? (2) How do I understand my body in relation to a given representation in media and culture? (3) How do I describe the epiphanic moments when the material and symbolic body converge or collide? (4) How can I use my experience to explore and reimagine existing power relations? The four questions frame the autoethnographically-informed method. “How” questions encourage an intimate dialogue with memory (Denzin, 2001, p. 71; Giorgio, 2013). How questions mark an important shift from “what” or “who” statements that appear to claim an identity location without attending to the complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural process of identification. I hesitate to provide instructions for textual experience because I risk reproducing the very replicable, predictable, and centered analyses that characterize conventional text-based methods. That said, I adapt Hall’s (1975) interpretive approach outlined in Paper Voices, hooks’ evocative cultural criticism in Black Looks (1992) and Talking Back (2014), and Denzin’s steps for the interpretive process (2001) to offer guidelines that can crystallize experience and re-member the interpretive body:

### Textual Experience: An Example

To illustrate textual experience, I provide a creative-artistic autoethnography (Manning & Adams, 2015, p. 203) as an example that takes up the black threat similar to the one that I identified earlier with the narrative snapshots recalling the climate-horror film Safe (Haynes, 1995). The main character Carol White sought a therapeutic remedy to alleviate debilitating allergies in her toxic physical space and patriarchal home place. I experienced Safe through the life-lens of blackness as an ever-present threat to intimate white space. I married the racial marginalization I witnessed in the film with my formative years in graduate school when I began fusing autoethnographic and text-based methods to explore the racial climate on and off screen. This earlier exercise of textual experience is echoed in “‘You’re So Angry and Strong, and I Love It!’: A Black Woman’s Matrix in Academic Mindfields,” where I bring the black woman character,
The program abiders and breakers.

_We’re all here to do what we are all here to do._
Her program says. Her position is an angle
Of vision deciphered only when we learn
to decode
The Architect’s design
Made to use her-me-us’
To control you.

_The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us._
_No one can be told with the Matrix is. You have
to be willing to see it for yourself._

**Voice Two**

There she was.
Here I am
Right, where
You were.
Duct-taped, bound, blindfolded, bullied
by a white girl-cop with a billy club
To Near an icy steel foldable chair,
She was there
Stretched out, long and brown
in her poster-post-feminist blaxploitation
flash-dance
Where red lights and white horny boys gawked at
her greased nipple and Afro-sheen wig drenched
Drenched by the girl-cop emptying a red gasoline
canister canister as she clamped her fire-engine lips
Her fire-engine lips
onto her
Not-yet-lit cigarette in front of a thick, electrified
Abercrombie crowd chanting
_Kill her!_
_Kill her!
Kill her!_
And, here I am
Right, where she was’
Where you are
Offstage, in the middle
of the matrix. She followed me
Around a round pineapple table top
Where first years circled to avoid the inevitable
new student, old academic small talk.
Alone, the peachy-cream girl-cop pressed me
About work, welfare, and white people.
_Do you hate white people?_
_Because I’m not white._
_Do you hate white people?_
_Because I would._
_Do you hate white people?_
She asked again
as if my final _I-hate-white-supremacy_ answer
would somehow slip
On a crooked Freudian stair that she hoped had been (im)planted there
So somebody could explain to her
This glitch in the doctoral program that put any real African American body on the inside, Outside of her bell hooks books, Outside of her ethnographic fieldwork Photographs that captured a graffiti-filled wall Under a billboard Hanging another naked black somebody eating chips in a white-only European neighborhood And, the only thing that stood Out was the U.S. American-ized ad That wasn’t supposed to be there. I wasn’t supposed to be there Around the seminar table With another Other(ed) African American first year Overhearing what was supposed to be A casual conversation About niggers. These bugs are difficult to delete from our program, added the Architect. I had to teach a class on gangsta rap And we all struggled Listening to those words By Dr. Dre and NWA and I’mus say Hearing those words Was hard for me This was hard for me We’ve never had reports of this kind I’ll monitor the program. But know, the system works. The system works. The system works. The system works.

The day I eye-swallow the headless snake placed on my doorstep as a housewarming gift. The day I wave by a white pickup truck driving by my front porch when a white woman yells, You black heifer on my way to class. The day You say niggers in jest and it’s just a joke Not a tool of psychic terror Of psychic terror like the club-branded buff black bald bouncer barricading the doorway who tells me the opening is not my exit.

If you want to leave before the show ends, You’ll have to walk through the crowd.

Chanting, Kill her!
Kill her!
Kill her!
The black bouncer does not even notice me.

He does not see that I am her. I am here, right there where you are. Beer-soaked, word-wounded While white girl-cop keeps on egging on The kill crowd. She approaches me clutching Clutching her postmodern, third wave, queer book pyramid pyramid In one hand, flicking a lighter with the other With the other Yelling I am the One. I am the only One, Who can tell (you the) difference. You need me.
But today, my sister, Dropping the lighter on the stage.

You just burned a bridge.

Voice Three

After this session, you will walk out of this room and remember nothing. You will recall the feeling you had witnessing the performance, but you will not remember this story, the names, or the faces. You will not notice burned and word-wounded flesh-bone black women. You will only see the dental remains of their programmed smiles. To maintain your sanity, you will tell yourself that the system works. You will tell yourself that the Matrix does not threaten your freedom. It will not destroy the human race. You will believe the Architect is monitoring the (intersecting) system for glitches. You will believe the official, translated stories of the Oracle. You will believe in the Oracle because of what she represents for you. You will leave this session, walk out of this room, and you will think: She is strong, she is angry, and I love it.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have described textual experience as an interpretive autoethnographic method to highlight experience and the interrelationship between symbolic, performative, and material bodies. It relied on re-membering the situated self in relation to culture. I suggested depoliticized and depersonalized textual analyses might be privileged in media-related disciplines because they work with the logic of capitalism in the corporate academy. The autoethnographic snapshots from Safe (1995) offered a narrative example of re-membering, and the
experiences of “misreading” provided an opportunity to refine and develop autoethnography in media and cultural studies. The creative-artistic performance autoethnography recalling the black woman in The Matrix (1999) (and the matrix of domination) served as another example of an autoethnography of media because it centered the interpretive body and my interaction with the symbolic one. In both the Safe (1995) narrative and The Matrix (1999) performance autoethnography, I noted the unsafe moments for black bodies. White supremacy on screen, in the classroom, and at the bar served as recurring epiphanies of space invasion. But, I re-scripted the horror. I re-narrated the threat. I re-membered. By staging intimate interactions with media and culture, I highlighted racial epiphanies that re-centered and reclaimed my displaced black self.

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