Handbook of Autoethnography

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Writing Feminist Autoethnography

Publication details
Elizabeth Mackinlay
Published online on: 22 Jul 2021
**Chapter twenty five**

**Writing Feminist Autoethnography**

A Memo/ry to the Personal-Is-Political

*Elizabeth Mackinlay*

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**Memo/ry One**

**FROM:** Elizabeth Mackinlay  
**TO:** Carol Hanisch  
**DATE:** 2006/2020  
**SUBJECT:** The personal-is-political

You never did give the paper the title. Someone else named it “The personal is political” for you. You had originally titled the essay “Some thoughts in response to Dottie’s thoughts on a Women’s Liberation Movement” and it was written in reply to a memo from Dottie Zellner which asked whether the women’s movement was really political or was the personal take nothing more than consciousness raising navel gazing. I read the memo you wrote 36 years later. I take note of the record you left behind of your racial, economic, and political justice work. I see you pull on your Redstockings while your mind and those of other women began to grow muscles (2006, p. 4). I hear you sigh deeply as opposition to the idea of sisterhood and women’s collectivism came thick and fast. If only women took more personal responsibility, they said. If only women stood up for themselves, they said to you. If only women would just “shut up and do their part” (p. 1), they said, “the revolution would take care of it.” They said women were to blame for their own oppression; they said a woman’s oppression was all in her head (p. 2). Who were they, and how dare they lay claim to your rebellion?” I shake my head in frustration as I read. You shouted back, “Women are messed over, not messed up!” (p. 3) and with sisters in arms, fought to change the material and objective conditions of women’s lives so that we might be free from the chains of patriarchy. You were not sure what to do with it once “the personal is political” became a 1960s feminist catch cry and a radical call for theory in-as-through-with action. Upon leaving the haven of your own head, heart, and hands, you could never have imagined how well the memo would stand the test of “time and experience” (p. 3), nor the ways it would need to be defended. You did know, however, that ending women’s oppression was going to need ongoing movement far stronger than anything you had witnessed so far (p. 3); and beyond your wildest feminist dreams, “the personal is political” became four words that held—and arguably, still hold in relation—the promise of radical change. I write them here in memo/ry of you.

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**Memo/ry Two**

**FROM:** Virginia Woolf and Sara Ahmed  
**TO:** Those who are not afraid  
**DATES:** 1929/2001 through to 2017  
**SUBJECT:** Searching for meaning

When you asked me to write about feminist autoethnography, I looked out my office window and wondered what the words “feminist” and “autoethnography” meant. The steadfast sandstone bricks of the university library stared sternly back at me, warning that any search for meaning on feminist autoethnography, would be fools’ folly; shining a light on

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feminist bodies and bodies of autoethnographic work was not a practice encouraged in dark neoliberal times. Emboldened by Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929/2001), I sneered defiantly back at the authority of the androcentric archives, for I have a secret—across the waves of history, several wise and loving feminist ethnographers secrete-d to me the codes that would smash open the stronghold of the centre and lead me to their feminist stories sequestered on the shelves. I reach into the past of the present to retrieve them (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Bell, 1983; Berndt, 1950; Kaberry, 1939; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Stacey, 1983; Strathern, 1995; Visweswaran, 1994). For years I have been secret-ing these ciphers to and in memo/ry of the historical trajectory of feminist autoethnography in a particular kind of in-relational order.

In Living a Feminist Life (2017), Ahmed asks, “Where did my feminist story begin?” as a way of gathering memories, acquiring clarity, sense-making, and generating new feminist ideas so that I-you-we—feminism, in whatever discipline and moments of disciplining it finds itself—might persist. The secret codes of feminist ethnographers that I have listed here, brought me to an un-forgetting that it was time to change, to imagine, and to begin to become one of them. My search for meaning begins there in relation with such revolutionary women—always already in relation to the personal-is-political—because where we find ourselves in relation to feminist autoethnography matters, and from whom we descry feminist autoethnography matters, too. My thinking and wondering drift on feminist waves which simultaneously perform; and the feminist response-sense-abilities I strive to embody—but I cannot help but squirm with ethico-onto-epistemological (after Barad, 2007, p. 185) discomfort from those directed to me by Grande. Grande is calling me to account for the ways in which ethics, knowing, and being are entangled as response-abilities and possibilities for the way the world—and our words about worlds—might become. I sense that before I have even begun to really speak about feminist autoethnography, I may have really offended those who do not find affinity with the cis-gendered, heterosexual, white-settler-colonial, middle classed and middle aged, able-bodied mother, and academic subjectivities I call my own, and which might—rightly or wrongly—be read into Woolf’s words. This offence of feminist theory is real, it gives just as it takes and is powerful precisely because it gets in the way (Maclure, 2010, p. 277). Feminist theory offends because it “blocks the reproduction of the bleeding obvious,” writes Maggie Maclure, it “stops us from forgetting that the world is not laid out in plain v” (p. 278), and it interrupts the flow of “generalisation, abstraction or the condensation of complexity into categories or themes” (p. 278). While I might want to position Woolf’s writings as one of many beginnings in relation to my feminist movement, it does not mean...
that this is the right kind of feminism, or that this kind of feminism is kind, or even that feminist movement cannot begin again in kind. I take heed of Ahmed’s cautionary words, “We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure” (2017, p. 7), because “feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite” (2017, p. 14). The kind of work feminist theory does and the work we do as feminists matters because we are not done yet; in some ways, feminist theory needs to offend to get in the way because feminism needs to be everywhere including autoethnography, because feminism is not everywhere. Perhaps, this is where feminist autoethnography needs to begin: with feminism and feminist theory, tools we can’t put down or put away; it’s not optional, as Ahmed (2017, p. 14) insists, feminist theory and “Feminism go wherever we go” for without them, feminist autoethnography is not.

**Memo/ry Three**

FROM: Doris May Barlow, Daphne Abigail Mackinlay, and Annie a-Karrayn Isaac  
TO: Elizabeth Narelle Mackinlay  
DATE: 1971/2009  
SUBJECT: Feminist beginnings

She is named Dot for short, short for Doris May Barlow, but short she is not.  
Dot slowly creaks and groans her crippled bones and body to stand up from the rickety kitchen chair. “Yes Jock, I’ll just get it for you. White with one.”  
Dot paces up and down the driveway. It is late. She is waiting for her husband to come home. I can hear the special shoes she wears to protect her feet, cruelly twisted and turned by arthritis, click clacking on the concrete. I hear her swear softly, “Bloody hell, where is that bugger?” I hear her tears fall hard on the ground.

Dot is up and away and storming and moving fast out to the back shed. “If I find you in there with a VB in your hand Jock, there’s going to be trouble!”  
Dot is sitting quietly on the edge of her bed. She is holding a white floral handkerchief in one hand and a white piece of paper in the other. I jump on the bed next to her, knocking the electricity bill onto the floor. Stuffing the notice into her dressing gown pocket she gently taps my nose with her finger, “Women are like tea bags, you never know how strong we are until we get into hot water—lucky you and I like tea young lady!”

Dot’s pale face has turned bright red. She waves her fist at the television. “Get your dirty hands off my Navy Blues you bloody Richmond thug! Holding the ball pig’s bum, more like round the neck!” I look to and from the figure of my Nana to the football game in wonder, a mild and softly spoken woman transformed into a wild and strong banshee by the sound of an umpire’s whistle and the sight of men in tight football shorts. I raise my fist and begin waving madly too.

Dot picks up a silver butter knife and begins to stir the sticky mixture in the bowl. “Are you watching?” she asks. “Come closer so you can see.” She is showing me how to make passionfruit icing to go on top of the fresh vanilla sponge we have made together for afternoon tea. “Take care that the tracks you make in the icing stay in place, then you can take heart knowing you have made the perfect mixture; it’s a simple recipe for life,” she says with a wink.

Dot cuddles me in close to her. I breathe in the sweet smell of Johnson’s baby powder on her skin and the caramel of Columbines on her breath. She begins to croon, “Two little girls in blue, two little girls in blue.” I snuggle in closer.

Dot lies still. Her wavy strawberry blonde is perfectly set; a small smile sits on her mouth. She is wearing her
best Sunday frock—a favourite because the v neckline highlights the gold cross on her necklace—but her feet are bare. I bend down to kiss her cheek and she is ice cold. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” I whisper the words of this gospel tune. In that moment, so much more than a song, but a reason why the catch cry.

She was born Daphne Abigail Alexander and died Daphne Abigail Mackinlay. My Dad affectionately called her Queenie and we called her Nana Mac. The name Queenie was given to her as a little girl, maybe even from when she was a baby by her Mum and Dad, maybe as a reference to Queen Victoria; whichever way, the name stuck and Queenie she was and always will be. Picking up the silver tablespoon from the top drawer in the kitchen, thoughts of my grandmother begin stirring. Nana Mac was right-handed and the left-hand side of the spoon is worn down from the many bowls of baked goods it has taken a turn with. I have two of her spoons and they were given to me when she died. My oldest cousin was bestowed the Singer sewing machine, my Auntie kept my grandmother’s piano, my older sister laid claim to Nana Mac’s engagement ring, but I think the spoons were the most precious item of all. I have one kept in reserve just in case the other is misplaced; I cannot bear the thought of either spoon ever becoming lost. Each time I use one of the spoons, a sweet and specific memory of her hovers close, so close. I see her hand moving slowly, with an air of elegance and in careful circular motion, as she creamed butter then folds in flour into her Christmas cake. The kitchen is warm with the smell of fruit and brandy lingering in the air; I hear her humming her favourite carol ever so softly. Holding tight to the spoon, I feel her tender embrace and a deep yearning wraps around me. With each turning of the spoon, her essence becomes more tightly bound to the metal, and to me. I have other spoons for baking; fancy plastic ones with Teflon coating, wooden spoons picked up on sale, and others that just seem to have appeared in the drawer as if by magic. My favourites by far are my Nana Mac’s silver spoons. I imagine that maybe if I hold them often enough, and stir and bake with them often enough, maybe, just maybe I will become half the woman she was with half the love she had to give; for those she once loved—and loves still.

She was called by many names—Annie Isaac, Annie a-Karrakayn Isaac, Mrs. Isaac, or sometimes simply Karrakayn. I called her “marruwarra,” a Yanyuwa Aboriginal word for female cross-cousin, even though she was fifty or more years older than me. When I first began my ethnographic work in 1993, she was the most senior Yanyuwa Law woman at Burrulula, a remote town in the southwest region of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory of Australia. “Ngabiyarra [young girl] marruwarra—marnaji barra!” She called me over to her place in the shade on the porch. “Yinda marruwarra, yinda kundiyaarra,” she paused before adding softly, “Yinda a-ngatha mara; yu—marruwarra.” Later, much later, I learned what it might mean to live and love within as a most necessary companion within the boundaries of this word kundiyaarra and world of Yanyuwa women’s being-in-relationship. Marruwarra was a-wirdi, a big boss woman. “Yu right marruwarra,” she said, “I’ll show you proper way.” Marruwarra taught me—me, a white-settler-colonial-woman and mother to two of her grandchildren—the centrality of love, care, and compassion to the ways in which are born, live, and die in this world as women. Kundiyarra, marruwarra explained, are those women who talk, walk, sing, and dance beside you when you are a young girl, those who hold you close as you enter into womanhood, and cradle you in their arms when you give birth to your own. Kundiyarra, marruwarra said, lift their voices in song and kick up the dust on the ceremony ground alongside you. Sometimes at night, I close my eyes and I can hear her singing, “Ngardiyaarra, ngardiyaarra, yaka jamala, mala bila mala bila.” Her voice rises higher and higher, calling up and out to the mermaid women, the a-Marabarna women who gave Yanyuwa women their own law. In song, she told me—most especially in song—we kundiyaarra are strong women, women ourselves, bosses ourselves. Kundiyarra, marruwarra taught me, nurture your body, heart, and soul; they hold you close as you experience both the levity, loss, and love that is life.

Memo/ry Four

FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay, with Virginia Woolf and Sara Ahmed
TO: Those who want to know about feminist autoethnography
DATE: 2019
SUBJECT: About the title and this chapter

The title “feminist autoethnography” then, might mean—and you might have meant it to mean—feminists and the autoethnography they write; it might mean feminists and the autoethnography that is written about them; or it might mean the ways in which autoethnography is written and read as feminist; or perhaps, “it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light” (Woolf, 1929/2001, p. 3). The words of Virginia Woolf—or most respectfully Virginia as I have come to think of her—fall easily from my mouth before I have time to draw them.
back. Although I am keenly aware that as a modernist Victorian writer, she is out of this time, not for the first time I feel myself folded into a particular kind of feminist friendship with her as an autoethnographer. Virginia’s writing attempts to tell us about our experience of the world, to cut through the “cotton wool of daily life,” embodied perhaps by the kind of heavy and damp woolen blanket I often find myself smothered underneath, to moments of being. She (1980) professes that the “shock receiving capacity of emotions is what makes me a writer” (p. 72) and further that this sensation is followed immediately by a desire to explain it in writing. “It is only by putting it into words” (p. 72), Virginia insists, that the experience and the emotion they hold become real and whole.

“Feminist autoethnography”; two words, which considered as one, seem not so simple now that I am to write about them. Perhaps that is the point; their entanglement with and as uncertainty is as desirable as it is inevitable. Perhaps I will follow Virginia’s lead. Perhaps it is better if I avoid “handing you a pure nugget of truth” and shirk “the duty of coming to a conclusion” (1929/2001, p. 4) about feminist autoethnography. Perhaps instead I can “develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought” which sits behind my thinking and wondering about feminist autoethnography so that you may trace your own. Perhaps, by embracing an affective and diffractive turn, together we might return to an ethico-onto-epistemological position dwelling where the “heart, body and brain [are] mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments” to consider anew feminist autoethnography. Perhaps if we place ourselves there delightfully, deliberately, and dangerously, we might be moved to feminist autoethnography. Perhaps thinking and wondering about performativity in relation to feminist movement in, through, and as autoethnography is what we need to do. Perhaps, in the way that Ahmed (2017, p. 1) suggests, we might then be moved to hold on to the promise of these two words as one to think what it might mean to live a feminist autoethnographic life by claiming them as our own.

**Memo/ry Five**

**FROM:** Virginia Woolf  
**TO:** Elizabeth Mackinlay  
**DATE:** 1938/1993  
**SUBJECT:** Define and claim? Define and destroy I say!

The memo arrived just in time for Elizabeth to unforget, and for that reason at first she thought it was from Hélène Cixous (Cixous, 1994, p. 89; Mackinlay, 2019). But, she was mistaken—the memo was from Virginia Woolf to remind her. You see, in her thinking and wondering about the contribution someone like Virginia Woolf might make to the ways in which the words “feminist” and “autoethnography” might come to be in relation, Elizabeth’s memo/ry had completely side-stepped the fact that Virginia had a love–hate relationship with the “F” word. Elizabeth felt her face turn red as she re-turned the memo to her memo/ry. After celebrating the recently won economic independence of educated daughters in her work the *Three Guineas*, she declared the word “feminist” to be a “vicious and corrupt [one] that has done much harm in its day and . . . now obsolete” (1938/1993, p. 227). If the dictionary definition of “feminist” is taken to mean “one who champions the rights of women,” she asserted, then the word itself is a word without meaning—a dead word—“since the only right, the right to earn a living has been won” (p. 227). “Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper!” Virginia urged, “Look, how it burns!” (p.227). Elizabeth feels her heart fall into despair and her head drops ever so quickly to keep it company confusion. It is clear that Virginia saw the word “feminist” as divisive and destructive, duplicit in its claim to be fighting for the equality of women and men. Elizabeth sighed heavily. It is true, she finds the words of Woolf inspiring beyond imagination, but Elizabeth struggles to reconcile her understanding of the “F” word with that of Woolf’s—(see, she has already distanced Virginia from the folds of feminist friendship). What is she to make of Woolf’s assertion that the daughters of educated men who were called “feminists” were in fact “the advance guard of your own movement” (p. 227)? If she cites Woolf in her thinking and wondering about feminist autoethnography when Woolf herself detested the word, does that make Elizabeth a bad feminist (after Gay, 2014)? Does that make her a guilty feminist (after Frances-White, 2018) whose noble goals have now become the vilest hypocrisies, or even worse—her thinking and wondering catches in her throat now—does that make her a bad and guilty feminist? Elizabeth picks up the memo from Virginia Woolf, and taking Woolf’s own advice, tosses into the rubbish bin. Virginia can be whatever kind of “non-feminist” she likes but she is not her kind, and claim the labels—all three of them, feminist, bad, and guilty—she will.

**Memo/ry Six**

**FROM:** bell hooks  
**TO:** Elizabeth Mackinlay
Dear Elizabeth,

Here are some thoughts from the second edition of my book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000) I wanted to share with you as you write with defining feminist movement in relation to your own disciplinary practice of autoethnography. Some might say that the third wave washed this work over and out—but I hope you will find meaning in what I have to say.

Never forget that “feminist movement continues to be one of the most powerful struggles for social justice in the world today” (hooks, 2000, p. x). With origins in the women’s liberation movement and the work of women like Carol Hanisch, “when women began to meet and talk together in collective rebellion” (hooks, 2000, pp. x–xi) against sexism, feminist movement began.

To be feminist then, is necessarily to be in movement; “it happens when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy” (hooks, 2000, p. xi) and “feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resist sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. x). Any definition of who, what, and why feminist(s) holds these performativities of the personal-is-political close, so close, at heart.

Yours in feminist movement, bell.

Memo/ry Seven

FROM: Sara Ahmed
TO: Elizabeth Mackinlay
DATE: 2016
SUBJECT: On defining “feminist(s)”

I understand that bell hooks sent you a memo/ry recently with a reminder about what sits at the heart of any definition of what it means to be feminist in movement. I love the straightforward and no-nonsense definition she provided and I agree with her. Feminism is the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression; and “[f]eminism is necessary because of what has not ended; sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression” (2017, p. 5).

And I want to add something that is not negotiable: feminist struggle against sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression “cannot be separated from racism, how the present is shaped by colonial histories… Feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” (p. 5). As feminists, this kind of feminism goes wherever we go and “if not, we are not” (2017, p. 15).

So, some advice for you as you wonder about the ways that we as feminists in feminist movement come to be in relation to, with and through our disciplines—in your case, autoethnography. Think about feminist autoethnography, like feminism itself as “a building project” (2017, p. 14). “If our [autoethnographic] texts are our worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials… should not be possible to do feminist [autoethnography] without being a feminist, which requires an active and ongoing commitment to live one’s life in a feminist way… This is not optional: it is what makes feminism feminist” (2016, p. 14). Remember, “living a feminist life creates feminist things” (2016, p. 241), living a feminist life as an autoethnographer makes feminist autoethnography a feminist thing, too.

Willfully yours,
Sara

Memo/ry Eight

FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay
TO: Carolyn Ellis, Stacy Holman Jones, Katherine Allen and Fred Piercy, Paige Averett, Haneen Ghabra, Robin Boylorn, Elizabeth Ettoire, and Hélène Cixous
DATE: 2005/2015
SUBJECT: Feminist autoethnography as a possible feminist thing

Carolyn Ellis’s often cited definition of autoethnography as “research, writing, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” and which “features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (2004, p. xix) calls to mind the sentiments of the personal-is-political feminist catch cry. I think and wonder, while much her work focuses on the self-social worlds of women, does this make Ellis’ autoethnography feminist? Would Ellis call herself and her autoethnographic work feminist? What calls us to call ourselves feminist? Indeed, “making the personal political” Holman Jones (2005) re-iterates, is a feature of autoethnography and she emphasises the radical democratic political movement autoethnography pushes towards and seeks to perform to affect and effect change in the world. There is feminist feeling
here too, but is that feminist autoethnography? I think and wonder then, what is it exactly that makes feminist autoethnography a possible feminist thing?

I re/turn to begin living the possibilities of feminist autoethnography by seeking out the words of others who explicitly name and claim their work as feminist. “Personal and reflexive research” write Katherine Allen and Fred Piercy (2005, p. 155) is where “vulnerability is returned for strength” (2005, p. 156). Taking up the responsibility to tell the stories of marginalised peoples and making use of our own experiences to enact this responsibility are central, they add; but go no further, and I am left thinking and wondering—is this the feminist possibility I am searching for? The descriptions as definitions given by Allen and Piercy seem to be missing the personal-is-political edge that Hanisch, hooks and Ahmed gesture towards in their earlier memo/ry’s. Paige Averett’s (2009) “autoethnography of feminist identity” seems to move closer to the cutting kind of struggle and resistance against patriarchy central to feminist autoethnography by-storying her search for and ultimately claiming the figure and symbol of Wonder Woman as a role model for herself and other social work practitioners striving to make the world a better place. Averett’s autoethnography—importantly—centres on the ontological (being) and practical (doing) work as a feminist in movement, but I keep looking for writing which entangles responsibility as a deeply ethical matter. Paying attention to feminist autoethnography as a personal-is-political and ethical-onto-epistemological matter, matters because of the possibility of what we might become.

Recalling Ahmed’s warning that “feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit,” I think and wonder about the contributions of Black and non-white women to the possibility of feminist autoethnography. Finding affinity with the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Anzaldúa in an effort to disrupt the powers and privileges of whistestream feminists and in “order to stay connected with our sisters,” Haneen Ghabra (p. 12) advocates writing the performative embodied self in relation to sites of gendered, classed and racialised contestation (p. 12). Here, she asserts, “resistance, reflexivity, representation and voice” (p.3) make room for critical cultural disruption and thereby an “intersectional feminist ethic” which becomes the movement. Speaking from her position as a Black feminist/womanist autoethnographer, Robin Boylorn (2013; writing as Griffin, 2012) recalls being a young blackgirl surrounded by “reluctant feminists” in a “world that was sexist as it was racist” (2013, p. 73). She powerfully tells the story of her academic blogging in association with the “Crunk Feminist Collective” as the beginning of her journey to research and writing in feminist movement—in Black feminist and “crunk” feminist movement. Her work reveals the tensions, turmoil and tussles associated with claiming the “f” word because of the ways in which whistestream feminism itself engaged in oppressive performativities of patriarchy, racism, and classism. Boylorn explains, “when I first heard the term feminist, I didn’t know what to do with it but now I don’t know what I would do without it” and further shares that “when autoethnography came into the picture my life made sense in the context of my black feminist politics” (2013, p. 74). Boylorn positions her feminist autoethnography all at once and very necessarily on the ethico-onto-epistemological edge—creative, complicated, critical, contradictory, and cultural commentary.

I begin to think and wonder that this is the kind of possible personal-is-political work that feminist autoethnography might do and become; and then . . . a pause—and I step aside. Last week one of my doctoral students shared with me her experience of being questioned by her other advisor about why she thought she could ever cite the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde when she herself was not a Black woman. “Go away and cite the work of Foucault or Bourdieu,” she was told, even though she is not a white man. Her experience leads me to question, what are the ethico-onto-epistemological entanglements of a white-settler-colonial woman reading, citing and writing feminist autoethnography as though I am in sisterhood with Ghabra and Boylorn? Agreeing with Ahmed that “citation is a feminist memory” (2016, p. 16), and like her, I too have a strict citation policy to never cite the “institution of white men” (2016, p. 15), but instead, privilege the writings of those who lay out other feminist, anti-racist and decolonial intellectual paths. No matter how many times I turn and re/turn the question around—and it does matter—the ethico-onto-epistemological entanglements of claiming to be in feminist movement sit uncomfortably. Perhaps, as Wanda Pillow (2003) suggested, this is a lesson we all need to learn—to trust the discomfort as ethico-onto-epistemological movement in feminist movement.

After sitting for some time reading, I am in need of the very movement I have been writing. As I push my chair back to stand, a copy of Elizabeth Ettorre’s (2016) work, Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the Feminist ‘I’ peeks out from the papers on my desk. Picking it up, I turn to re/turn to the introduction and the following phrases and words propel themselves from the pages. Autoethnography, “one way of doing feminism . . . and there are many ways” (p. 1). Feminist autoethnographers, “acutely aware,” an “embodied crossroads” where we give way to “ambiguity, uncertainty and equivocality” (p. 4). Feminist
autoethnography, “the personal is political” (p. 6), “liberatory practice” (p. 6), “political responsiveness embedded in performativity,” a “commitment to the future of all women and women’s liberation” (p. 10), and a space where “precarity is unbounded” (p. 12). An “epistemological and ontological nexus,” which “demands reflexivity” (p. 15) and a profound awareness of ethics (p. 16)—this is feminist movement in autoethnography. Ettore’s words and phrases about feminist sends my thinking and wondering to be in close companionship—as I often do—with the work of Hélène Cixous. I read Cixous from “a dangerous feminine position” (1994, p. 42) and feel myself coming close, so close, to the kind of feminist autoethnography which does not “seek to master. To demonstrate, explain, grasp. And then to lock away in a strongbox. To pocket part of the riches of the world” (Cixous, 1991, p. 57). The kind of feminist autoethnography I read in Cixous’ writing is one which seeks to find a way to “transmit: to make things loved by making them known” (1991, p. 57). Yes, a loving kind of feminist autoethnography which insists that writing-as-thinking-as-writing is a place of love—that heart, body, hand, and blood touching in writing breathes text to life and life to text—and “under the blows of [such] love I catch fire, I take to the air, I burst into letters” (1991, p. 44). It is this kind of feminist autoethnography which wants to “affect . . . to wake the dead . . . to remind people that they once wept for love, and trembled with desires, and that they were then very close to the life that they claim they’ve been seeking while constantly moving further away ever since” (Cixous, 1991, p. 57). I think and wonder about the collective words I have cited here in an effort to move close to defining feminist autoethnography; yet I am aware that I have only come close, so close to any sense of arrivance there; but in feminist autoethnography as feminist movement, it becomes a possible feminist thing.

**Memo/ry Nine**

FROM: Stacy Holman Jones  
TO: Elizabeth Mackinlay  
DATE: 6 December 2019  
SUBJECT: Dare I say it, a list?

Hi Liz,

I’ve really enjoyed reading your section on defining “feminist” in relation to autoethnography as a “possible feminist thing.” I wonder if you might be able to summarise the feminist movements, themes and possible things you have been gesturing towards in your thinking and wondering about feminist autoethnography? Dare I say it, would drawing together a list be useful at this point?

Yours, Stacy

**Memo/ry ten**

FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay  
TO: Stacy Holman Jones  
DATE: 4 May 2020  
SUBJECT: Drawing a list

Hi Stacy,

I love making lists, and I love list-ing even more once list-ing becomes drawing. Drawing a list is a different kind of list-en-ing, a list-en-ing that asks me to pay attention to words. Holding my heart thinking in hand, I have drawn together those words in an attentive “list-en-ing” which will carry us through difficult terrain, as Ahmed (2017, p. 2) suggests, to the promise and hope of feminist autoethnography as a possible feminist thing which is waiting for us.
This kind of feminist movement is a glimmer, a not yet in the distance as Elizabeth St Pierre (2019, p. 3) might say and the only way to arrive there is to begin from where we are. “Look at her move: what a movement” (2017, p. 248). Ahmed recognizes the way our bodies of feminist thinking, wondering and feeling are glimmering.

As a feminist autoethnographer, I am drawn to move in this way as suggested by Cixous, “I follow the movement. I am the scale, I am sure. I have gone on to life … I do not think, I respond. I am called to living and I respond.”

(1994, loc 3606)

Memo/ry Eleven

FROM: Carol Hanisch
TO: Elizabeth Mackinlay
DATE: 2019
SUBJECT: How do we “do” feminist autoethnography as a possible feminist thing?

Dear Elizabeth,

Thanks for taking the time to read my reflections on the original memo I wrote which we now know as “The personal-is-political” essay. I appreciated the way you have associated the sentiments of this second-wave slogan as a central theme in your discussion of feminist autoethnography but I am very curious—do you have an example of your feminist autoethnographic work you might trouble to share?

Waiting in eager anticipation for your reply, Carol.

Memo/ry Twelve

FROM: Helene Cixous, Karen Offen, and Sara Ahmed
TO: Feminist killjoys everywhere
DATE: 1976, 1988, and 2017
SUBJECT: A warning

A warning. The trouble is, this chapter is troubling. Feminist autoethnography is troubling. The trouble is, feminist and feminism are troubling and dangerous words. Writing words as a feminist autoethnographer and in the name of feminism is dangerous trouble. Feminist words become dangerous because they trouble. They all warned me about the trouble and the dangers. The dangers of feminist troubling, thinking and wondering; the troubling dangers of feminist writing; and the dangerous trouble that accompanies
feminist worlds of working—including, feminist autoethnography. The way they all spoke about the trouble and the dangers, about being dangerous as feminists and getting into trouble because of it, and what we might be able to achieve on the edge of danger if we raised trouble was delicious and delightful. With neoliberal, neo-colonial, neo-positivist and new forms of heteronormative-phallocentric-masculinist logics standing formidably at the centre of power, privilege and performativity in the academy, these are troubling and dangerous times for feminist autoethnography. The people, performances and politics at play are real and feel—there is ethico-onto-epistemological trouble here in taking the trouble to write about the trouble. Taking time to care fully write about the trouble is a necessary trouble and which is more troubling? To write or not to write about the troubles? The trouble is. The trouble is that danger is who we are as feminists and feminism, and writing feminist autoethnography enables us to dangerously trouble. “Unto the dangers” (Cixous, 1994, p. 125) then, in writing feminist autoethnography, we must go for “this trouble is beneficial, it softens the hard of hearing—makes them receptive. Opens the eyes, awakens the heart” (Cixous, 1994, p. 249).

Memo/ry Thirteen

FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay
TO: Villanus troublemakers (a.k.a. feminist-autoethnographers)
DATE: 2017
SUBJECT: Embrace danger, make trouble, killjoy—we have and we do

It is hard to say when it all started, when the trouble began—when as a feminist autoethnographer doing feminist autoethnography I became the troublemaker. Or perhaps I have always been in trouble because I was the one charged with naming the trouble, therefore accused of causing the trouble and once thereby labelled troubled; found myself sitting precariously on the edge of individual and collective troubles that eddied uneasily and placed me in a great deal of trouble. The trouble is, which troubles are troubling enough to go to the trouble of troubling and in the performance of these troubles might I become even more troubled? Let me take the trouble to share a story about doing feminist autoethnography in dangerous times. The story itself is troubled, unable to settle on way of writing or the other, shuffling to and fro between prose and poetry, touching and turning words around to find the rhythm that will take these troubles and carry them on their way. I alighted upon the villanelle, a poetic form of five tercets and a quatrain running on two rhymes where the first and third lines of the opening verse recur alternately at the end of the others and comprise the final two lines. To compose takes trouble and is trouble—villan-elle, the word itself embraces and emboldens trouble. Villan extends to villanus, a Medieval Latin term which describes the “inhabitant of a villa” or a “villager.” Those with power and privilege who ruled the world and words at that time soon took control of its manners and morals and turned the word villain into a scoundrel-ous person with an “uncouth mind.” Yes, the villanelle is the kind of trouble I am prepared to take and make to recount this unionist-feminist tale.

Villanelle #1, “To write with words in rhyme”
To write with words in rhyme
Because language is strange
A villanelle carries and beats in its own time
Repeat and return at the one and the three
Five threefold then a six with four
To write with words in rhyme
Learn the rules, take the rules
And follow them into a certain form
A villanelle carries and beats in its own time
In the mystery of the moment
The form hands freedom over to you
To write with words in rhyme
In a serious play towards otherwise
The waves in her mind signal their fear
A villanelle carries and beats in its own time
Her form carries her own duality
Kept ever so close yet apart
To write with words in rhyme
A villanelle carries and beats in its own time

Villanelle #2, “I wear my unionist-feminist politics with pride”
I wear my unionist-feminist politics with pride
I am ready to make some willful noise
To be and become the trouble far and wide
What we have done, what we stand for and more Blue-stockings beside
As we go marching we fight for bread and roses
I wear my unionist-feminist politics with pride
“Ask me about my feminist agenda!” my purple t-shirt is dyed
“We are union women!” I roar in reply
To be and become the trouble far and wide
A worker here, management there and I am pushed roughly to the side
I risk danger, refuse to become the background and decide to stand against
I wear my unionist-feminist politics with pride
I don’t agree with you, they decried
I willfully announcement my disagreement and delight
To be and become the trouble far and wide
No more collectivity, no more consultation, their neo-liberal voice now amplified
I don’t agree with you, I reply now a delightful and willful child
I wear my unionist-feminist politics with pride
To be and become the trouble far and wide

Villanelle #3, “I decided to willfully get in their way”
I decided willfully to get in their way
For Jane and Lucy and Brian and Esther and Rachel
For after all, trouble was my name and I was here to stay
Overloaded, undervalued, demeaned and cast astray
The alarm flashed amber and re-ignited the worker’s rights agenda
I decided willfully to get in their way
“You’re interpretation of the rules and regulations is wrong,” they began their sharp word play
“It is my right to set the wrong right,” I stared and declared
For after all, trouble was my name and I was here to stay
“We don’t agree with you,” they bid me good day.
“I don’t agree with you,” I gleefully sang back.
I decided willfully to get in their way
They called in reinforcements from the fortress of grey
This was too much, too far and too important to ignore
For after all, trouble was my name and I was here to stay
They offered paper promises that I tore up and threw into the flames
They flustered and flailed as their words were snuffed out
I decided willfully to get in their way
For after all, trouble was my name and I was here to stay

Villanelle #4, “Yes—killjoy, we have and we do”
“Yes—killjoy, we have and we do”
I willingly respond to the charge of willfulness, and
This unionist-feminist says “Dear neo-liberal management, f*#k you!”
It’s lonely standing there as this judgment follows through
A willful part stands a stranger, against and apart
Yes—killjoy, we have and we do
A memo/ry of Dot comes into view

Standing at the end of the driveway she joins the chorus against injustice, willfully raises her hand in the air and cries
This unionist-feminist says “Dear neo-liberal management, f*#k you!”
Two grandmothers in arms refuse and rendezvous
Queenie reminds me to push back, push hard and push through because the wrong way is the right way
Yes—killjoy, we have and we do
Karrakayn’s Yanyuwa voice is the next I turn to
Yu, ngarna a-kundiyarra a-ngabiyarra, yinda a-yabi ngalki
This unionist-feminist says “Dear neo-liberal management, f*#k you!”
To trouble then this unionist-feminist story must be and become
Name it, own it, live it, hold onto it, move with it, love it
Yes—killjoy, we have and we do
This unionist-feminist says “Dear neo-liberal management, f*#k you!”

Memo/ry Fourteen

FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay with Virginia Woolf
TO: Those in feminist-autoethnographic movement
DATE: 2019
SUBJECT: Answering the personal-is-political call
She did not recognise this particular caller by the ringtone as her mobile phone began to call out to her from somewhere beyond the room of her own in which she had willfully placed herself this morning to write words and worlds as a feminist autoethnographer. She had become lost only to be found in writing, of writing autoethnography, of writing feminist autoethnography, searching and hoping to “see the heart of the world uncovered for a moment” (Woolf, 1980, p. 153). She was not expecting a call and she was annoyed by the interruption. It was the manufacturer pre-set ringtone and as such it held no particular significance for her except to signify that the caller was no one in particular. At a particular time — she cannot be sure when — she had started assigning particular kinds of tunes to particular kinds of callers so that she would know in advance the particulars of the person calling. Her Mum was assigned Helen Reddy’s 1971 classic “I am woman,” the 1985 feminist anthem “Sisters are doing it for themselves” by Aretha Franklin and the Eurythmics signalled it was a feminist friend calling, and Joni Mitchell’s 1970 hit “Big yellow taxi” told her it would be one of her two children. On this particular occasion, the lack of particularity meant she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to take part in answering their call. She hoped that it was not another dean, professor or doctor warning and advising her — a.k.a. mansplaining — “You can’t do this and you shan’t do that!” (Woolf, 1929/2001) She was exhausted by always having to look to the left and the right, desperately trying not to stop, hesitate, or fumble as she encountered one fence, another, and another fence beyond that (Woolf, 1929/2001). At times she doubted whether or not she had the staying power, for the incessant ringing of the telephone was “fraying to the nerves” (Woolf, 1929/2001). She waited, willing it to stop, but this particular caller was persistent. Sighing deeply, she walked out of the intimate space of her own room, tucked away as it was on the outer wing, into the much grander space of the room in the centre of the house.

“Hello?” She answered wearily.

“Hello? Is that you Liz? It’s Patriarchy calling.”

She paused; she was faced with “a situation” (Woolf, 1929/2001) and her heart quickened. His voice continued to boom down the line.

“It’s me Liz, Patriarchy! White-supremacist-imperial-capitalist patriarchy? Surely you remember me! I am here to set you free, are you free for me?”

She remained silent; summoning, beckoning and getting together the words that would make her feminist autoethnographic presence felt. “Now is the time,” Virginia whispered to her, “[that] certain moment when without doing anything violent [you] can show the meaning of all this” (Woolf, 1929/2001).

Snap. It was the sound of her snapping — her feminist autoethnographic snap — becoming Ahmed’s kind of feminist snappy (2017, chap 8) which refused to “take it anymore, the violence that saturates her world, a world” (Ahmed, 2017, chap. 1) — indeed, this feminist autoethnographic room of her own she now called her world in, through and with words. She quietly hung up the phone and snapped the connection (see Figure 25.4).

**Figure 25.5** Her feminist snap

She did not recognise this particular caller by the ringtone as her mobile phone began to call out to her from somewhere beyond the room of her own in which she had willfully placed herself this morning to write words and worlds as a feminist autoethnographer. She had become lost only to be found in writing, of writing autoethnography, of writing feminist autoethnography, searching and hoping to “see the heart of the world uncovered for a moment” (Woolf, 1929/2001). She was not expecting a call and she was annoyed by the interruption. It was the manufacturer pre-set ringtone and as such it held no particular significance for her except to signify that the caller was no one in particular. At a particular time — she cannot be sure when — she had started assigning particular kinds of tunes to particular kinds of callers so that she would know in advance the particulars of the person calling. Her Mum was assigned Helen Reddy’s 1971 classic “I am woman,” the 1985 feminist anthem “Sisters are doing it for themselves” by Aretha Franklin and the Eurythmics signalled it was a feminist friend calling, and Joni Mitchell’s 1970 hit “Big yellow taxi” told her it would be one of her two children. On this particular occasion, the lack of particularity meant she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to take part in answering their call. She hoped that it was not another dean, professor or doctor warning and advising her — a.k.a. mansplaining — “You can’t do this and you shan’t do that!” (Woolf, 1929/2001) She was exhausted by always having to look to the left and the right, desperately trying not to stop, hesitate, or fumble as she encountered one fence, another, and another fence beyond that (Woolf, 1929/2001). At times she doubted whether or not she had the staying power, for the incessant ringing of the telephone was “fraying to the nerves” (Woolf, 1929/2001). She waited, willing it to stop, but this particular caller was persistent. Sighing deeply, she walked out of the intimate space of her own room, tucked away as it was on the outer wing, into the much grander space of the room in the centre of the house.

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**NOTE**

1. The “villanus codes” are presented as a set of three villanelles. See the explanation of “villanelle” in the memo/ry “FROM: Elizabeth Mackinlay, TO: Dangerous troublemakers (a.k.a. feminist-autoethnographers).

**REFERENCES**


