The day after the last time I had this conversation, I start reading the exemplars written for this edition of the *Handbook*. I had been given the assignment of commenting in some way on this diverse collection. But how to write about the writing of some of the best writers among us? I decide to read them in no particular order, knowing full well that they will be laid out in a particular order when published, but also knowing that the beauty of a book like this is that it can be read selectively, spontaneously, randomly, skipping around, following your gut. And as I stumble into the reading, aware that I may be transgressing by approaching my charge in this way, I chuckle because the very act of writing (or reading) autoethnography is a transgression against the hegemony of the strictly ordered world of “research agendas” and “five-year plans.”

I am quickly struck by the fact that these particular autoethnographies answer my students’ questions beautifully.

They surely should read them.

So should you.

In these pages, they/you will find themselves/yourselves, and you will likely find each other and the authors, and they/you will find a wide range of approaches and experiences and stories and various attempts at meaning-making, and they/you will find resonance, illumination, evocation, exploration, emotion . . . at every turn of the page.

And, even when the author writes from “far way,” it turns out that reading changes something. Alchemy indeed. Reading gay or “blackened” or depressed or toothy or bulimic or darkly pregnant or queer or indigenous or transgressive or angry-black-woman or grieving daughter or enchanted artist or any of the various autoethnographies of identities that are
not quite mine—indeed, often from experiences distant from my own, but rendered evocatively, beautifully, by the autoethnographer—somehow carries the reader deeply into the life storied on the page. I, for example, am repeatedly stunned by the convergence of my white middle-class “normal” and heteronormative cis-gendered male privilege and the experiences of those whose life stories are, on the surface at least, so very distant from my own. So far, yet so close. At first glance, it looks like we stand so far from each other, yet in these stories, we come close, lean in (Pelias, 2011). feel each other in ways none of us could have otherwise conjured.

Quickly, I am swept away into the powerful current of this multivocal stream of writing. I stumble along, blinded by my tears as I read a story of depression (Jago). I have not had this particular version of the affliction, but I have flirted with depression (or at least deep grief/sadness) from time to time. I have sat outside my office on a bench, shivering, hoping to recover enough to teach. I have struggled and stumbled and fallen to my knees in despair. I have even felt suicidal, and I have reached out for help. I have spent countless hours in therapy. And I have come out the other side, only to fall back into the pit again one day. Another loss. Another blow. Another dark day. Followed by sunrise.

And then I’m in the next story, and I find myself making a confession to the universe: I have never, until this moment, really spent any considerable time thinking about teeth (Hodges). It’s just not something I think about, in relation to myself or other people. Maybe it’s because of my privilege. My family, firmly middle class, all have straight, “good” teeth. They cause no controversy, and if they do, we get expertly by highly skilled professionals. But dammit. I have had work done on mine. I’ve had fillings and crowns and even porcelain-ined broken teeth. I have not had to live with “sub-par” teeth. All my dental needs have always been managed expertly by highly skilled professionals. But dammit. Now I can’t stop thinking about teeth. I have become tooth-conscious.

And then, as I pick up the next story (Fox), I remember walking the minefield-packed hallways of the three high schools I attended, packed to the rafters with their share of hormonally imbalanced rageful young jocks whose masculinity was threatened by the existence of someone, anyone, different from them…the smart kid, or the new kid, or the brown kid, or the gay kid—pretty much anyone who wasn’t part of their in-group—and, as I re-member those days of flying elbows and taunts and insults, my anxiety spikes and my stomach twists up. And yet, I steel myself for a project of my own: An auto-archaeoogy of my most painful years awaits my writerly attention. Someday.

Not to be deterred by my knotted stomach, I read on. In the next story, I read up on country sayin’s from a Southern black girl (Boylorn).

My Southern country-born dad had some sayin’s:

“Don’t cry, son. Be a man.”
“Don’t do as I do. Do as I say.”
“Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit.”

He passed these gems on often. And though he passed away from this earth nineteen months ago, I hear echoes of his voice every day. These are not the same sayin’s our young country black girl heard growing up. But the presence and purpose of sayin’s, as clever witticisms and as disciplinary acts—as admonishments—is alive, every day of my life. Sayin’s. They ring a bell. Hearing my dad’s voice, I hear her mama’s voice too.

And then I find myself pounding along a postmodern path, the author of which (Morsi) is simultaneously striving to undo racism and retool the project of “auto-ethnography,” and I find myself wondering where this path will lead, as it meanders off into the wilderness beyond that last page, and I want to follow this writer, just to see where we are going. So, I do follow, and I do not fully grasp where we arrive, or when, or why, but I am left pondering and wondering and embracing the mystery of it all.

And here I am, feeling hungry for more story. Confession: I have not even flirted with bulimia, though I have certainly overeaten (gorged, even). But I have heard the stories (Tillmann). My wife was anorexic and bulimic in high school, before we met. I know about it, but have not come close to direct experience of it or with divorce. But I lean in close anyway, drawn in by the thick description of the experience. And then I read on, and the story turns a corner. I quickly realize I have witnessed some serious genderfucking at my local gym, and I have surely walked through more than my share of grief. And so I find myself thinking, “How can the darker corners of my own consciousness make me a better teacher, a better writer, a better person?” And I realize the writer has done her job beautifully. All good autoethnography raises more questions than it answers.

Another inversion.

And, naturally—I have come to expect this—I walk right into a surprise. As a long-time student of secrecy, I am startled by the fact that I am still somewhat shocked when I read revelations of secret ambivalence, disgust, and even possibly hatred for things we are supposed to be unequivocally enamored with (Faulkner). I watched from a small distance as my wife was pregnant with both our sons. Her always-sunny
disposition darkened only occasionally during those 18 months. She seemed to love all of it except the painful swollen feet and the vomiting, but I suspected her private thoughts were sometimes darker than her blissful smile. And here I am, smacked in the face with the honesty of a series of confessions about not being quite so serene about motherhood. And I find myself wondering: “Aren’t many (or all?) of our human experiences both/and? Both joy and disappointment, hope and despair, ambivalence and clarity? Or is a multiplicity of something—of... all possible responses?”

I round the corner and I’m yanked across the globe, into Polynesia (Iosefo, Hawkins, & Fa’avae)—a place as distant from my own geographical location as any on earth and a culture as distant as any I can think of from my suburban U.S.-American world. *Tapu*, though. *That* is a different story. I am drawn to *tapu*, as I gather it resides in the animating energy of interconnection and the sacred, in a kind of liminal, sacred space. I do not fully understand *tapu*, but I have long been drawn to the sacred, the spiritual. I have felt its presence—in birdsong, in the lush forest, in the breath of the world (wind), in sunlight and rainfall and distant thunder, on the mountain summit, beside the stream, lakeside, oceanside, in gatherings of friends and family, in live performances, in music, in beautiful writing, in beautifully crafted collaborative/critical autoethnography. I find myself caught up in the swirling mystery of it all.

And, as I turn the next corner, I am confronted squarely (again) with my own white (male) privilege (Fitzpatrick, et al.). I have written elsewhere of my own awakening to and re-membering of racial consciousness, and the dawning, early in my life, of my white privilege (Poulos, 2017). I remember the structural ignorance that was built into the culture I grew up in—the Southern U.S.—where we actively engaged in *not knowing*, swimming in privilege, but almost self-consciously unconscious of that fact. Only obliquely were we encouraged to notice this thing called race. I recall distinctly when I started asking questions about this—when the first African American kid I went to elementary school with befriended me, for a reason I was only vaguely aware of at the time. To him, I was both: stranger and friend. And still, many years later, we are wrestling with privilege and its counterpart, oppression. Sometimes I wonder if we will ever untangle these knots. If we do, I suspect we will do it by being friends. And strangers. And wondering if I can rise to become an ally, knowing full well that my privilege gives me choices others simply do not have?

Then I turn another corner, into territory where a person can be put to death for being themselves, in a country that both denies the existence of an identity while also making it a capital crime to be that identity that (legally) does not exist (Abdi). And I can only vaguely imagine suppressing my self so completely that I might be anywhere close to safe in such a place, in such a culture. To have a story that can only be told in exile, can only be written from afar, would, to me, feel like being robbed of something vital, a fundamental severance, a foundational shaking. But I love the idea of narrative *trespass*... and being called into existence—of coming out, and coming to life—in and by and through a story.

Next, I find myself drawn into an angryblackfeminist text (Griffin), and, though it is not hard to imagine why an angryblackfeminist would be angry—I mean, how could you not be, given the conditions in our social world?—there is no way I can feel the exact contours of it. Sure, I can identify. Sort of. I have been angry, but never for such just reasons. I mean, this anger (hers) has centuries of force behind it. It is not just situational. It’s *ancestral*. It’s *full*. It’s a deep, resonant, thunderous drumbeat of anger. I turn from the story, not sure what to do with it, but reassured that something will, one day, come of walking through it. And I know already that I’m shaking, and that’s something.

And then I find myself ducking a little, as the autoethnographic shit hits the fan and I hope I’m not splashed, and at the very least don’t want dust in my eyes (Murray). But I am drawn to stories of active addiction—or, rather stories of being with someone in active addiction—as this terrain is familiar to me, from long ago in my life, not in this specific form, but addiction no less, and the shaky-fidgety foundations of a relationship on the brink of dissolution. I have stumbled again, back inside taboo territory, as I look through an author’s lens into a second lens that blurs as it tries to get a picture of a world beyond words, a world where addiction both removes and obscures. And then, though I’ve never been run over by anything, I find myself standing in the road, wondering what just ran over me. I think it was a story. And to think this one was about, of all things, pornography. Only it wasn’t really. It was about... unraveling, perhaps? And returning, through the word, to “world” a space for writing through taboo.

Of course, as an autoethnographer, I am naturally a voyeur. I’m always listening in on conversations that don’t belong to me. That’s the risk of having a public conversation. There may be an ethnographer nearby. So, it’s easy enough to eavesdrop on a conversation between a professor-friend and his artist student (Osvath & Bohner). I was at the original panel at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, by the way, so this conversation has a familiar ring.
And so, of course, does the story underlying it, which has to do with the fathers that live in us, in spite of ourselves, in contrast to the conflicted relationships we had. My own father passed away in July 2019, so this feeling is fresh, as I find him now leaking out of me at the oddest of moments, like a cough or a tone or a look I send or a little outburst or a phrase. In the physical world, I have often felt like a bird on a wire who hasn’t mastered the balance or grip necessary to stay, and I will say that I have been under the spell of many a story, and that I find the generative nature of stories to be a nourishment, even when my soul feels gripped in a way that isn’t always pleasant. I feel also the honor of participating in an intimate conversation that wasn’t, after all, mine. And I am drawn to the idea of creating visual artworks as renderings of story-response through an artist/reader/participant’s eye. Maybe we should all be so lucky as to have an artist responding to our work. Imagine a collage of this Handbook!

I admit it had never occurred to me to “remix” a painful, layered story of a past I might rather bury, but I am also drawn to render and re-render as the story of my past shapes me in ways I can only begin to imagine as I write and rewrite (Rambo). I do not know much about “intellectual disability” until I read on, and find, to my way-too-naive surprise—that good people may not recoil from exploiting the disabled for their own purposes, and I’m gratified that the writer of the story is as horrified and saddened as I am, and yet recognizes that a spectacle is only a spectacle if we (those who spectate) make it so, and that the people on display may well be just speaking for themselves in a rare opportunity to do just that. And then the story flips, and we (the author and I) are gripped together by our apparent misapprehension of the situation, and I find myself wondering how we all think in dichotomies (this/that) as opposed to multiplicities (this and that and that other thing and that too and this again and that little thing and so on). And how we all have rich emotional lives (ALL of us) and we take care of each other as we can and we each see a world before us, through lenses blurred and enhanced by hard experience and sideways perspective.

I think I will pause now for a good cry, aimed at all the sorrow and missed opportunity and loss and trauma and labor and joy that bedevils my life. I’ll be back in a moment.

Whew. Better.

And ouch. When my mother-in-law and then my father tumbled into nursing-home/rehab limbo, we all cringed our way through “what happens” (Stewart) when a body or a mind or both begin to give out, and things fall apart slowly, and life teeters on the edge, and bit by bit our beloved parent slips toward a physical end, even while looming large in memory and story. We all feel the great undertow of age, tugging at us, first slowly, then ever more quickly as the years accelerate and move us inexorably to our own “what happens.” As and when I would be able to make meaning of this moment, perhaps through the “worlding” power of an autoethnographic poesis to “endure, extend, treat, color, share, fail.”

Perhaps.

Finally, I am walking, stumbling into a memory of walking and talking with my grandpa through the woods behind his farm house, each of us carrying a stick—not to ward off crows, but to poke around in the dirt where a previous farmer had dumped his trash, looking for old medicine bottles of blue and green and brown glass (many still intact despite the ravages of the many years they had lain buried) for my grandpa’s collection. I am eight years old. How did I fall into this memory? I am not always a steady walker in everyday life—I stumble on tree roots and such on our daily dog walks in the forest—but this time, I stumbled into the story of a little girl in Delhi (Chawla), walking along with her Biji in the early evening. It was on those walks with my grandpa that I discovered my own voice, and his. He was the first (and only) adult in my life to talk with me as though I were a person, a human being with feelings and thoughts and ideas and fears and imaginings and playful silliness rifts, and really listen. And he told me stories of his life—grand adventures of his youth as a migrant farm worker and a baker and a trick horseback rider—and little stories of everyday life on the farm. And we gathered both an intimacy and a panorama, talking closely of things that matter to a person, and also talking broadly of the changes he’d seen in the world since his birth in west Texas in 1904. I hadn’t thought of these walks in many years, until I read the story of Devika and Biji, and found its magic working on my buried memories, excavating them like the little glass bottles we carefully dug out of the dirt in the forest. And, like her graduate students, I think of walking as a metaphor, one that mimics the slow march of time, and life, and memory and story . . .

And now I have read them all, one by one, embracing the worlding power of these writers’ words, stumbling into their word-worlds with eyes and heart open wide, ready to be opened wider.

One of the perils of reading evocative autoethnography: It has the power to shift the ordinary, the
everyday, into a new space. Evocative autoethnography writes the ordinary into the extraordinary. (Dammit, I can’t stop thinking about teeth.) It also builds a legacy on extraordinary experiences, storying them into being.

Autoethnography carries a spirit that is rarely available in other “academic” writing.

Yes, there is a certain alchemical magic to autoethnography (Poulos, 2016). You simply must read the stories that follow. Read them in order. Or not. Just read them all.

REFERENCES

