Handbook of Autoethnography

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On Evocative Autoethnography

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In 2017, the two of us performed a 75-minute improvised dialogue on a special session of the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). The session concluded with a brief video that highlighted Csaba’s creation of “Bird on the Wire” mixed-media collage. Inspired by the favorable audience responses to our dialogue, we accepted an invitation from Stacy Holman Jones to participate in the 2018 autoethnography special interest group session at ICQI on collaborative autoethnography. There we presented a video originally titled, “Autoethnography and Working Collectively,” and later revised as “Autoethnography and Purifying Conversation” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8ISggR6u8g). Both of these projects grew out of a series of earlier dialogues between us held at Art’s residence in Tampa, Florida, and inspired by Csaba’s “slow reading” (Osvath, 2017) of Art’s evocative autoethnographic story, “Bird on the Wire: Freeing the Father Within Me” (Bochner, 2012).

These initial dialogues were a welcome relief from our everyday demands of teaching and department life at our university. We were not only extending our scholarly collaboration, but we were also building a deep and close friendship. In the relaxed and earthy setting of the home Art shares with his partner Carolyn Ellis, we talked about how autoethnography puts meanings into motion; memory work as a communion with the past; mindful tending; restorative engagement; autoethnographic temperament; and the enchantments and perils of evocative autoethnography. We also meditated on evocative autoethnography’s existential calling and its ethical conundrums, as well as its ecology of incompleteness, which invites readers and audiences to resonate with the other, joining with, continuing, and extending the boundaries and meanings of a story.

From January to mid-April 2019, we continued to converse with each other every two weeks, recording our dialogues in preparation for writing this chapter and subsequent collaborative projects. This chapter is an abridged portrayal of these recent dialogues intended to represent the spirit, form, and content of our talks. We focus here on issues central to understanding, writing, performing, and responding to evocative autoethnography such as traumatic remembering, inhabiting another’s story, inspiration and resonance, learning how to read and extend evocative stories, resisting alienated labor, and embracing incompleteness.

In the epilogue to this chapter, we discuss an open-access website that can serve as a home for poetic, literary, and other aesthetic and dialogic responses to evocative autoethnographies (https://www.are.na/csaba-osvath/resonance-with-evocative-autoethnography).

Setting

The granite breakfast bar at the home of Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, a 42-inch L-shaped counter is bordered by three tall, soft-cushioned counter seats facing two short windows that expose a wild Florida garden shaded by old live oak trees and laced with diverse varieties of untamed bromeliads, impatiens, Persian shield, philodendron, and crotons. A stainless steel, double-sink sits in the middle of the right-angled extension to the counter. The usual assortment of small kitchen appliances—microwave, coffee pot, toaster oven—rest along this counter as do treats and medicines for Buddha, a 15-year-old rat terrier, and Zen, a nine-year-old mini-Australian Shepard. A nine-foot long raised windowsill counter is layered above the sinks, displaying a dozen of Carolyn’s
multicolored African violets that benefit from the sun-drenched windows during the winter and early spring. A different-shaped and colored glass ball hangs inside each of the four windows behind the plants. A traditional rectangular island with a stove and oven is situated in the middle of the kitchen between the counter and a floor-to-ceiling red brick wall. “Bird on the Wire,” a mixed-media glass mosaic created by artist-scholar Csaba Osvath, hangs on one end of the brick wall with dog leashes and assorted pots and pans on the other end. Two additional portable Osvath artworks decorate the breakfast bar along with a tall, purple and white orchard in full bloom. A stack of unopened mail and a few recently discovered old photos cover some of the remaining counter space.

**OPENING**

*It is mid-March 2019. Art sits at the breakfast bar riffling through assorted papers in a file labeled “With Csaba.” The silence of the quiet spring day suddenly is interrupted by coarse dog barking.*

**CAROLYN:** (shouting above the dogs barking from her second-floor study on the other side of the house) Art, someone is knocking at the door. Make sure the dogs are put in the bedroom.

**ART:** (speaking at the same time over the noise) That’s Csaba. I’ve got them. (Art hustles through one of the two entrances between the kitchen and the living room and flags the dogs, signaling them to move swiftly into the downstairs bedroom, then closing the door behind them.) Be right there, Csaba. (Art opens the wide wooden door and he and Csaba embrace briefly.) Can I get you some water or iced tea before we begin?

**CSABA:** No, I’m fine for now. (Csaba enters the kitchen removes his jacket, unzips his backpack, grabs a notebook, and sits at the breakfast bar.)

**ART:** I’ll let Zen and Buddha out of the bedroom. (Art walks quickly through the living room and opens the bedroom door, continuing to talk.) They look so forward to your visits. (Zen and Buddha rush out of the bedroom barking and quickly locate a familiar scent, their little tails wagging wildly. Csaba leaves his seat, kneels on the floor, and is flooded with dog kisses that nearly knock him over.)

**CSABA:** (Recovering quickly as the dogs prance away.) Did you hear from Tony Adams?

**ART:** Yes. He said the exemplar chapters for the handbook should run about 15–20 pages, but we may be able to stretch that to 25. We’ll need to condense our conversations considerably.

**CSABA:** Do you think we can still hold to the format of a dialogue? That’s what I prefer because so much of our relationship and work together emerged from these dialogues.

**ART:** I agree. Our challenge will be to represent the spirit and embryonic quality of these dialogues.

**CSABA:** Even before I met you, I was having conversations with you in my head. I suspect those inner conversations shaped my participation in our face-to-face conversations. I am trying to pay closer attention to the content and depth of my inner conversations.

**ART:** But as I recall, your initial image of me was not favorable.

**CSABA:** Image is a good word for it. I invented and imagined you. I made you up. Initially, you were a source of stress and pain. My professor had assigned me to critique “Bird on the Wire,” using a rubric he had created for assessing whether an article warranted publication. I could hardly keep my eyes open during the class, which he taught in a vintage PowerPoint way.

**ART:** (Chuckling) You took your boredom out on me, is that it?

**CSABA:** No, not you, your title. I had a strong emotional response to the words in the title: *Bird/Wire/Father.* They hit me like a poisoned arrow.

**REMEMBERING**

**ART:** As I recall, you referred to my title as “two deadly blows.”

**CSABA:** Yes, I did. Because I was immediately transported back to my childhood—into my great grandmother’s barn, the site of a traumatic incident that I had repressed for more than 30 years. I consciously tried to push the memory away, but once aroused I couldn’t forget it. I had accidentally killed a nest of baby swallows. At the time, I was a little boy wanting to tame these little birds so they could love me. I wanted them to be closer to me so we could feel as if we were together. But I didn’t know what I was doing. I knocked the bird nest off the ceiling, shattering it. I can still see my father kicking a large piece of the broken nest across the floor of the barn. His face is red with rage and he roars, “No more birds on the wire, my son.”

**ART:** His anger must have frightened you terribly. But you didn’t run away from the fear, or from me.

**CSABA:** It’s not that I didn’t try to escape. I wanted to crush the memory and remove it from my consciousness. For some years I succeeded, but your words—*bird on the wire*—brought it rumbling
back. I couldn’t contain it. Unlike a computer crash that can wipe everything out, this one did not crash up the memory, as I hoped. Your words opened it up and brought it to the surface like a tectonic force.

Art: And now you had to deal with it.
Csaba: That’s right.
Art: You said there were two blows. What was the second one?
Csaba: Your subtitle. I was at the worktable in my studio late at night, when I finally got around to reading your story. I decided to read it aloud slowly, starting with the title. I read the words: my father within me. (Csaba pauses for a few seconds, looking down, then away, with a pained look on his face.)
Art: (Concerned) What is it, Csaba? (Sensing a different atmosphere, Zen moves across the room and kneels near Csaba’s feet.)
Csaba: (Leans and pets Zen behind her ears.) I’m sorry. I was back in the event again, the moment I realized something frightening was opening up within me, within my body. (He pauses again clearing his throat.) I cleared my throat to start reciting the abstract like I just did. But before I could get out a word, I started coughing. Immediately, I realized that the cough (pauses), that cough was not my cough.
Art: What do you mean, not your cough?
Csaba: It was my father’s cough, not mine. He had this unique harsh-sounding cough. He made these distinct crackling noises as if he was working to remove something from his lungs. His coughing episodes scared me. (Pauses momentarily, looking down at Zen, then back toward Art.) I don’t cough like that, so when I heard that distinct guttural sound coming from my throat, I felt as if he were coughing through me, in me, or out of me. I know that sounds crazy, but that’s what crossed my mind and it stopped me. But I pushed away my fear. (He pauses again, collecting his thoughts.) I reminded myself that your story is only five pages long. “I can do that. I can get through five pages.” You know what I mean?
Art: I’m not sure, but it does remind me of something I often tell students in my writing workshops: it can be more difficult to write a good short story than a long one.
Csaba: I guess I’ve been socialized to think a shorter article is an easier read. But you know how students worry about whether they have enough knowledge to write a longer paper, or about how much longer it is going to take them to fill the pages. I hear that from students in my classes all the time. They want to know how many pages they will have to write to complete an assignment as if I’m going to base my evaluation on whether they reach a certain number.
Art: Yes, I used to get that question from students, too. So, I can see how you would think, “Ok five pages then I’m done, and I can move on to the next reading assignment.”
Csaba: I didn’t anticipate that I would be spending hours, days, and weeks on your story, which became my story and by extension, a new story. Your story gradually merged with my story and took me on a moral journey. I’ve heard you talk about being “in cahoots” with a story (Coles, 1989, p. 64). That’s how I felt eventually—in cahoots with your story.
Art: Once that memory surfaced, you had to find a way to deal with the heightened awareness and feelings that accompanied it. The memory was a guest who planned to stay awhile.

MEANINGS IN MOTION

Art: Inside of you. That’s powerful. But you make it sound regrettable. Didn’t this embodiment end up being a good thing? After . . .
Csaba: (Interrupting) Eventually!
Art: After all, you created a new story, a transformation of the original story that gave my story new life—through the artwork you made. You took Bird on a Wire and used it as an opportunity to deal with the sorrow of that traumatic incident.
Csaba: Meanings in motion as you like to say (Bochner, 2013). Someone interacts with an autoethnographic story and contributes to the momentum or unfolding of the story. It is like a train track where the train relies on human power to push it forward and keep it going. Bird on the Wire puts meanings into motion but it’s up to readers to sustain the momentum and movement of your story’s meanings. Maybe this is what a scholarly community ideally should look like.
Art: We want to get to that eventually—your idea for a free-access site to promote interactions, dialogues, and material transformations of evocative autoethnographies. But let’s not move on too quickly. The story became yours, as you say, but to do that you had to take things slowly, get close
to the story, and resist the temptation to stop yourself when you experienced turbulent emotions. You were frightened, but you still allowed yourself to be swept into the story.

**SPELLS AND ENCHANTMENTS**

Csaba: I’m afraid I didn’t really have a choice. It was as if your story took possession of me. I came under the spell of the story.

Art: I’ve heard you say that before, but I’ve never been convinced that you were acting under the control of a spell. When I think of a spell, I imagine a kind of bewitchment or magic that weakens and controls you. But you didn’t come across to me as faltering. Your energy wasn’t sapped. When you wrote about what you had gone through (Osvath, 2017), you said that you claimed the freedom offered by my story. I got the impression you were strengthened not weakened.

Csaba: At first, I was weakened, or at least frightened. But I also was inspired, if that makes sense. Perhaps, I made too much of the feeling that I had entered a trance-like state in which I was possessed by the story.

Art: (Pauses before responding as if mulling over several possible responses.) I believe your account. But like any account, any description or explanation, the words and sentences are not intractable. There are other ways in which you could have described your experience, other terms you could have used. If I had gone through the same experience, I would not have thought to call it a spell or a trance.

Csaba: How would you have depicted it?

Art: Considering how you say you lived in and responded to *Bird on a Wire*, I would call it an *enchantment*. You were enchanted by my story.

Csaba: (Smiling) *Enchantment*, well that’s certainly a more romantic way of describing it. Perhaps, our different ways of describing stem from the difference between my background in divinity studies and yours as someone who has been studying and writing about close relationships and love for nearly half a century.

Art: Good point! You are right about that. I do resist describing things in supernatural ways.

Csaba: And perhaps I lean too heavily in that mystical direction.

Art: That was evident in your essay (Osvath, 2017). When you wrote about your experience under a spell, you used liturgical metaphors. You referred to your pacing and circling around your studio as if your story took possession of me. I came under the spell of the story.

Csaba: The embrace with my father that I imagined was evoked by your words, Art. That’s a crucial point. It was a response to the scene in your story in which your father kisses you on the lips, then whispers in your ear that he only wishes you would come to see him more often. Our stories merged at that point. Your memory aroused this aching desire I had suppressed for 30 years. But initially I was stunned and dazed.

**INHABITING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Art: Wow, 30 years! I suppose the shock of feeling back in the barn at the site of your trauma would stagger you. Of course, it would. But you told your wife you felt “awakened.” (Art pauses, carefully considering how best to move on.) There is no one “right” way to describe what you went through. I’m not trying to contest your interpretation. I’m playing here with the idea of redescription and reframing. Given your life experiences, I am not at all surprised you would experience it as a spell. I simply find enchantment a more desirable vocabulary, though it may seem to you a radical redescription. Enchantment jells with my idea of evocation. Enchantment makes different things possible. If you’re enchanted by something you want to spend time with it; gain something from entering into a relationship with it. You move toward it not away from it.

Csaba: In my case, your story evoked a desire to create something new yet connected to *Bird on the Wire* to extend and keep the story alive. That’s what happened to me.

Art: Yes, the desire to do or make something can arise from enchantment as well. No doubt, I too was enchanted. By Leonard Cohen’s song, I mean. It spoke to me and I yearned for years to make something from it, some kind of offering about the freedom we can enact, must enact, to lead a good life. I enjoy meditating on this whole process: on how you feel something, which is a change in your body chemistry—a physical and chemical change—or you start thinking about your own life’s connection to something or somebody in the
story. At that point, you are beginning to inhabit the story. You’ve stepped into it, joined with it, and become a part of it.

Csaba: Yes, inhabiting. That is how I was experiencing your story as a spell. I was giving myself over to it, yielding to its suggestive images.

Art: But you didn’t just yield. The images of which you speak were prompted by my story, but they also were a product of being touched by the story. They were relational. They exist between the story and you. You and my story were in it together, one was not controlled by the other.

Csaba: Touching and being touched, that’s so important. Touch implies contact. I immediately felt myself in bodily and emotional contact with the image of “bird on the wire.” I had a historical relationship with it. It resonated with my life.

Art: That’s what evocative autoethnography seeks—resonance. When a story resonates it moves beyond itself connecting to lives lived apart, often far away, from the time and place of the story (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). But the connection you made was not one I would have anticipated. You envisioned a literal image of birds on a wire—an image that frightened you because you associated it with death and trauma. Composing the story, I had in mind a metaphorical expression for experiencing abandonment and feeling stranded. In Leonard Cohen’s song, bird on the wire is a single bird. The bird on a wire expresses the possibilities as well as the burdens of being free, or trying to be free. I was suggesting that the exercise of freedom is never finished. Death doesn’t end the relationship for survivors. One is never free once and for all—as Ricoeur’s (2004) conception of incompleteness suggests.

Csaba: (Excitedly) And freedom is never out of the question. Never completed. Existentially, freedom means making choices. You can be free to choose but decide not to enact your freedom. A person has to do something. Try something. Try to be free, to free yourself from things or people who are containing you, to ask for something, to do or make something. Your story spoke to me. I know that’s cliché, but we, your story and me, we were joined in conversation. I felt a calling to make something from it, to extend it.

Art: Resonance establishes a connection, it touches, but it doesn’t tell you what to do when you’ve been touched. When I consider what you did, what you made in response, I see you trying to understand how your life and its life—the life embodied in the story—are connected. You took the story’s invitation and moved with and beyond it. You extended and transformed it for your own purposes in order to measure your life against a version of the good that you yearned to reach.

RESONANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

Csaba: I like thinking about evocation and the life of a story in this more holistic way. Not just one moment in time but over time. What I made and what I did was evoked by your story. The products, though, the artwork and the correspondence with my father, took different forms yet exist on a similar plane to the spirit of your story.

Art: Two blows. Two responses, the birds and the father inside you. So fitting. Your story and my story become our story. That’s a crucial way of understanding the goal and uniqueness of evocative autoethnography. An evocative story ought to make us more cautious about claiming what we write as “my story” or “your story.”
CSABA: Your story, the one you wrote, demanded something from me. At least, that’s the way I experienced it. The story proposed a different way of living with myself, which is what you were doing in living with yourself. That is how I experienced it—as an experiment centered on what it might feel like if you could speak freely to your father.

ART: I really like that image. It captures something perhaps unconscious to me at the time. Your thought makes me think of the demands I was experiencing in my relationship to my father. Bird on the Wire is a story contingent on my father’s life, on our connection, on his sudden death, on my realization that his death did not end our relationship and on my desire to create something that would extend and better the relationship between my father and me. He was dead, but our relationship, in a manner of speaking, was alive. I had to contend with my consciousness of my father and with myself in relation to my father. In doing so autoethnographically, I exercised a degree of freedom to remake him. Not make him up, mind you, the facts were still the facts; but rather to interrogate and reshape the meanings of our relationship by merging my memories and imagination using storyteller craft.

CSABA: Tim O’Brien (1990) refers to storytelling as a kind of dreaming “in which the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world” (p. 223).

ART: He is so right! Indeed, my story is very much like a dream-state. My father came alive in my story and in my consciousness as he might in a dream. Still, I worked in a reader-centered way. I had in mind a story that would stir a conversation with readers, those who faced difficulties like mine with one parent or another, whether alive or deceased. I had waited too long, but perhaps my story would inspire others to act now.

CSABA: As I was inspired. To achieve this kind of arousal, the readers have to see themselves in you.

ART: Or see you in them. Or both simultaneously, moving back and forth between my relationship to my father and theirs to one or both of their parents.

CSABA: And there’s a theoretical point to the story, which you express with an artistic metaphor referring to the shape of the love between your father and you.

ART: I’m glad you brought shape into our conversation. When I think of shape, I think of relational pattern, something I learned from Gregory Bateson (1972). Leonard Cohen captured this idea lyrically: “It was the shape, the shape of our love that twisted me.” To untwist or unknot a relationship, we have to alter the shape of it; re-form it.

CSABA: You link Bateson to Cohen; merging cybernetics and music, science and art.

ART: And you take the textual form of the story and transform it into a multidimensional mosaic, merging literature and fine art.

WHEN IS A STORY EVOCATIVE?

CSABA: That brings up a question that’s often lost or evaded in discussions of evocative autoethnography. What makes an autoethnography evocative? How do autoethnographers know whether they’ve produced an evocative story?

ART: In our video, we took up that issue explicitly, beseeching autoethnographers to address Foucault’s troublesome questioning: “We know what we think; we think we know what we do; but do we know what we do?” (Dreyfuss & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187).

CSABA: Your story inspired me to write a letter to my father. He and I had not seen or spoken to each other for 15 years. I wanted to reach out, but I did not have the tools or the proper appreciation of how much I needed a purifying conversation. I had a strong desire to make something that would honor and extend the meanings of Bird on the Wire. My mixed-media mosaic was a first step in the process of producing a restorative story of my own. After our dialogue at ICQI—hearing the responses and feeling the gratitude expressed by so many of the audience members—I realized how much I wanted to do something to break the silence. Fifteen years had gone by as I waited for my father to make the first move. Now I was ready to take incompletions seriously. I didn’t need to wait any longer in order to lift the burden of freedom off my shoulders. I decided to take the plunge, inviting him to respond. When I mailed the letter, I felt something deep inside me had changed. I thought of my letter as a soaring comet aimed at the horizon of his life far away in Hungary.

ART: How did you feel when weeks went by without a response from your father?

CSABA: I felt disappointed. But even if I never received a response from my father, I believed I was now unstuck. I had moved forward. I didn’t hear from him for three months during which time I again felt some of the pain of our long silence. Then a letter arrived in which he expressed his desire for a continuation of our relationship and his admiration for the life I had made and for my
artwork. Distance between us remains. But my anger and anxiety have lessened.

Art: The continuation of which you speak feels to me like such a positive step. The process is incomplete but incompleteness is not imperfection. In one of our conversations, you referred to incompleteness as the very fabric of existence. It keeps us engaged and active. You took a risk, tried something out, moved toward completion, or something you conceived of as a better way of being—actively seeking connection. Also, you’ve mentioned feeling inspired several times. You didn’t say you felt informed or you had gained knowledge. Rather, you spoke of inspiration and desire. If evocative autoethnography inspires readers to look deeply at what is at issue in their lives, how they might live differently with themselves and others, make their lives and the lives of others better, well, that is enough. That is plenty. It is part of the human quest for the good and just.

Csaba: In my practice as a minister, I find that’s what most people want, a good and meaningful life. As a teacher, that raises in my mind the issue of autoethnographic pedagogy. I was impressed by how Nathan Hodges used Bird on the Wire in his courses on “Writing Lives.” Some of the letters the students wrote to you were thrilling to read, hearing how reading your story had motivated them to take action to restore their relationships with one or both of their parents.

Art: I was surprised when Nathan presented me with dozens of handwritten letters from students in his classes. Several of the students told me this was the first time they’d ever written a letter. They were college juniors and seniors, yet had never written a letter! Some of the letters were heart-breaking and nearly all showed deep reflections about what they wanted out of relationships with their parents. Some of them told horror stories, but others relayed tender and even humorous ones. What a lovely gift it was for me to receive them.

Csaba: I like conceiving of autoethnography as a gift. Your story to the students. The students’ responses to you. Each is another example of touch. A brilliant move by Nathan too, forcing the students to use their hands and get away from their screens. Then the meanings moved a little further, when you transformed them into a fictionalized conversation in your book (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), extending the meanings of the original story and highlighting the students’ stories.

Art: Yet still incomplete as we continue that movement in the dialogue you and I are having now. But not everyone has the opportunity to establish a conversational buddy like you or Carolyn. We need some kind of a structure or place where readers and writers of evocative autoethnography can engage with each other.

Csaba: I have some definite ideas and plans for putting such a structure into operation, but before we take that up in our epilogue, I think we should circle back and look again at Bird on the Wire as an exemplar of poetic science (Freeman, 2016). You begin with a poem and end with a song. That’s highly unusual in an academic publication.

Art: It is definitely unorthodox. We’ve already mentioned how incompleteness, the message of that poem, can be liberating. Many people are stuck in one way or another. Often, they experience pain and grief associated with their connection to certain people or things, which they consider over and done, complete, finished, ended. That’s how I felt in the aftermath of my father’s death: Story over.

Csaba: That was my sense of my relationship with my father too.

Art: But 15 years after my father’s death, I read Ricoeur’s (2004) last book, Memory, History, Forgetting, and discovered the poem with which he ended the book, “But writing a life is another story—incompleteness” (p. 506, emphasis added). It dawned on me that I might be able to write my father and me into a different story.

Csaba: Which I did too eventually with my father. The process brought home to me the significance of incompleteness in our lives. Every life and every relationship are incomplete as long as they breathe life. But when I first encountered Bird on the Wire, I was not prepared to accept incompleteness. I had an immediate visceral reaction to it. A violent one. I tore your story to shreds. I couldn’t deal with incompleteness. I hadn’t yet grasped its liberating potential. I was impulsively acting in a self-defeating manner. The demand and expectation of completion can squeeze the spirit and soul out of a person. I was traumatized by enduring sorrow about the absence of my father in my life and my guilt over the part I played in the death of those swallows. I believed that nothing I could ever do would change it.

Art: And when you did try, look what happened.

SLOWING DOWN

Csaba: A door was opened.

Art: Exactly! You had to wait patiently, but something good came of it. Speaking of patience,
I want to say that as I read your essay (Osvath, 2017), I was so impressed by your attachment to slow reading. Once you started reading, you decelerated, lingering inside the story and prolonging your stay. I think this had a lot to do with reading my words aloud.

CSABA: I felt that reciting your words was a way of temporarily being you, while also being with you—your words, my voice, us together.

ART: Your self-performative reading teaches an important lesson. It reminds me of an issue that frequently arises in autoethnography courses and narrative workshops. Students will come to me after reading a story and ask, “What was I supposed to get from the story?” I tell them, “That’s not the right question to ask about autoethnographic stories. You should be asking how you can get into the story not what you are supposed to get out of it” (Greenspan, 1998). Ideally, autoethnographies are encounters between storytellers and story readers. Your mode of reading shows us how we might become more immersed and in contact with a story.

CSABA: The kind of reading I promote can’t be done fast. That’s a problem in today’s digital world. When I gave my report on your story to my class, I admitted that I had been gripped by your story and wanted to do something more with it, you know, not just move on hurriedly to the next one. I had in mind giving your story a new living form, a material but not a textual form that represented and extended your story. I think my comment agitated my professor, because he started to lecture me about the perils of getting stuck on one article, which could interfere with the goal of “knowledge acquisition” central to graduate education. While he was talking, he kept looking at his watch, which I took as a reminder that time was too precious to get wrapped up in a single article or story. I know he meant well, but I felt crushed and invalidated. Was I missing the point of what it meant to be a doctoral student? Was I doomed to fail simply because I had this sense that I was not finished with *Bird on the Wire*, that the rubric was too narrow to capture the as yet unnamed potential *Bird on the Wire* offered?

**HURRYING UP**

ART: I don’t think you were the person who was missing the point. Didn’t you say that your assignment was to critique the article?

CSABA: Yes.

ART: But *Bird on the Wire* isn’t really an article, at least not in the traditional academic sense: and critiquing surely is not the only or necessarily the best way to approach a story or an article.

CSABA: I get impatient with the academic compulsion to critique. I’m not opposed to critical thinking and deliberating about what is good and bad in and for this world. But the imbalance is striking when you consider how little emphasis is placed on the importance of creative, imaginative, and visionary work, or aesthetics, or on intimate encounters with material products of human consciousness such as poetry and art.

ART: Your comment reminds me of an interview with Karen Barnard in which she refers to this overindulgence on critique “as a practice of negativity” that is little more than a strategy of distancing, othering, and exclusion (cited in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 1). In my opinion, much of the critical commentary on autoethnography stems from how threatening it feels to orthodox social scientists because it subverts the technologies of disengaged reason. Good autoethnography feels raw, cuts deep, and often resists distance and abstraction. It’s a difference that we autoethnographers believe can make a difference. The connections and extensions you forged with *Bird on the Wire* testify to that kind of a difference, the way you worked my story into your everyday reality, your life as an artist as well as your desire to reconnect with your father.

CSABA: That is what I did. As an artist, I wanted to respond in a different medium. Not by writing a review, or formulating a critique, but by making something that would represent, connect, extend, and transform *Bird on the Wire*—through my hands, with my scissors, through the glue—a mixed-media collage. As a little boy, I had wanted to tame those birds, thinking that taming was a means of establishing a loving connection. My love was pure, but my understanding and my method were flawed. Engaging with and connecting to *Bird on the Wire* had been a therapeutic experience. I wanted my collage also to be a therapeutic act of connection. Earlier, we talked about being touched by a story. I was touched by your story and that touch led to a series of touchings. I became aware of touching the paper, shredding it, reassembling it, touching the glass, cutting my hands—the making of this kind of art involves a series of touches. But the feedback I was getting from my instructor made me question whether I belonged in a graduate program.
Art: I’m afraid you simply didn’t fit the image of productivity promoted by the neoliberal university: Keep grinding out papers and publications. Move swiftly from one project to the next. The biggest vita gets the best job.

Csaba: (Chuckling) I wonder about how Socrates, Buddha, or Jesus would have handled this. They never published anything. Seriously, in this era of social media, everything is moving faster and faster. Twenty-four-hour news cycles; count your likes; post your tweets; list your Facebook friends, some of whom you wouldn’t recognize or couldn’t name if they walked past you.

Art: Then you go to conferences in which everyone gets to give a paper but must present it in ten minutes and with no time set aside to talk about the papers; some of the presentations are about conversation, but there is no conversation at most of these sessions; and many of the panels are attended by only a handful of people because so many people are presenting on other programs.

Csaba: That’s one of my pet peeves. In fact, our dialogue at ICQI was one of the first sessions that gave me hope. I felt relaxed in that space. We weren’t rushed. People responded. Even a year later, some people came up to me and remarked about how special it had been.

Art: I like how you say “special.” Is there even a space for something special anymore? From the beginning, Carolyn and I envisioned autoethnography as transgressive (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) and, in its own way, “special.” The conventions of research and writing in the social sciences too often resulted in alienating practices. We made a pitch to break away from those practices (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) by producing sensual, vulnerable texts that situate readers in lived-through experiences saturated with uncertainty, doubt, contradiction, and ambivalence. The rapid rise of autoethnography testifies to the desire of readers and researchers not only to think but also to feel and in the process to resist alienated work.

Csaba: As a graduate student in the middle of a dissertation project, I identify with the desire to engage in non-alienating research practices. But I have to admit it is tempting just to go along with the crowd and make myself more employable.

## GOING FERAL

Art: I can imagine wanting to quit, though I don’t think you are cut out to fit the mold. When you went into your studio, you moved in a different, if not opposite, direction than the one your instructor promoted. Stacy Holman Jones (2018) has referred to this kind of a transgressive act as “going feral” (p. 2), which is a form of “escaping domestication and becoming wild” (p. 3). It was your means of escaping domestication but without announcing it as such. To me, this is what it means to be original and to be an innovator.

Csaba: At that point, I didn’t know you as a flesh and blood human being. But even then, I was having conversations with you that were driven by repeated readings of your story and how I understood its structural experimentation. I had never read any work published in an academic journal that began with a poem and ended with a song. And you reorganized the song so the passages you chose worked as framing devices.

Art: (smiling) I’m glad you noticed. I wanted the story to be open to many different readings.

Csaba: You start where Ricoeur ended.

Art: It was his final line, in his last published work, one word: Incompletion. How perfect.

Csaba: And how liberating, how freeing.

Art: I began where he ended and you began where I left off.

Csaba: A chain of being.


Csaba: “Anguished searching,” that is how I conceive of your gift of a purifying conversation between you and your dad.

Art: And the mixed media mosaic, Bird on a Wire, which you fashioned as “an offering to the life force” (Becker, 1973, p. 285).

## EPILOGUE

One day I (Csaba) was reviewing my archived collection of digital photographs of my artistic response to Bird on the Wire to prepare for my conversation with Art. The photos were stored in an open-access, online, collaborative research platform, Are.na (www.are.na). I looked for the folder (channel) “Bird on the Wire,” and when I accessed it, I realized that it contained not only the images of the collage and the unfolding process but also my notes, poems, and other digitalized materials related to Art’s story. Suddenly, I had this idea and vision for an open-access online space where fellow readers of autoethnographic stories could share their responses or engage with the artistic resonance of others.
Are.na is a visual organization tool and research platform; a mindful collaborative online space free of the disruption of “likes” and ads. It allows users to build simple collections of content by adding links and files of any kind. Users can connect ideas with other people by collaborating privately or building public collections for everyone (www.are.na/about).

Art and I were attracted to this idea of creating a virtual “home” for evocative autoethnography where readers can share their resonance and responses to a shared story and, when inspired, creative extensions of the story—poetic, dramatic, musical, artistic. Are.na’s structure allowed us to create a symbolic, virtual home (https://www.are.na/csaba-osvath/resonance-with-evocative-autoethnography), where each open-access channel represents a symbolic room that stands for a particular narrative, for example, *Bird on the Wire*. Building on the metaphor of the home we now invite readers to “furnish” these rooms with artifacts of their creations related to the room’s story—inhabiting this space by sharing and interacting.

This site is still an experimental and evolving online space. In that spirit, we now invite readers to access, view, and contribute to this project. We offer a detailed instruction for contributors and users embedded in this online channel: www.are.na/csaba-osvath/resonance-with-bird-on-the-wire

**REFERENCES**


