Chapter forty one

Using “Auto-Ethnography” to Write About Racism

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1.

It was like waiting for your favourite scene in a movie, our silent anticipation set the stage for Socrates’s most famous words. And when it came, like the smack of a gavel, it echoed as authoritative, and I tapped my pen on my notepad with some joy like a fellow judge. Professor Carroll played his role ever so well that day, as he read the key passage, he paced his reading, he dropped his tone, whispered, peered above his glasses, and stared upwards to tell us students: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” We slowly nodded along. Then, he smiled. And, although it will make little sense right now, if ever, this chapter, perhaps even my career, comes back to that professor’s smile.

The week on Plato’s Apology had excited us all semester. Professor Carroll had built it up for weeks, and when it came it had a right “feel” about it. But I would walk out of that undergrad class feeling let down, feeling what I have long felt since. I learnt less about the trials of Socrates that day and more about my place in the world, learnt more about unmet expectations and about university, learnt it all, learnt a first lesson in racism from Frantz Fanon, a lesson where we confront in that moment that someone points at our Otherness and says, “look” (Fanon, 1994).

As I recall this classroom memory, I can still feel it in my bones, feel something, that something extra that came with the professor’s smile. I have thought about it a lot since; maybe his reading of Socrates reassured him with a sense of security, a purpose, a sense of place in the world, with a rightful pride, with an ownership over and close relationship with truth. I don’t know. It’s only a feeling. But it is not just that, it’s more about how the words felt like they gave him permission to look at me. That’s why the smile stuck, because he was smiling at me. For, as he put the book down, he took off his glasses and stared at me. I had tried all semester to bring Arabic, Indian, and Persian philosophers into class discussion, tried to disrupt the Eurocentric claim to Europe owning the big philosophical questions. But now he had his answer. To “know thyself” he said, again, starring, “is a founding idea of Western civilisation.”

If I am to be fair, I cannot be sure if he meant this stare. Can I? I don’t know. A passing stare, ever so brief, yet long enough for me to notice me and yet not long enough for me to be certain it was me. But, then again. Surely, it was meant for me. For along with his words, with his tongue’s emphasis on “Western,” the stare felt in my bones like it needed its Other.

Let me take a step back and say something else. Whether he meant it or not is almost irrelevant. Identifying his true intentions is not my point in remembering all of this. I am not here to say with accuracy or to state facts. I am writing only to testify to managing the uncertainties that swirl within a person of colour who challenges the status quo. Uncertainties that swirl within those of us who must interpret racism in its various fleeting aggressions. Academia has taught me to be cynical of even smiles, perhaps I am to blame, but me recalling this through my writing for me is the point, is me staring back; staring back, not just at the professor but the younger me suspectable to the fear of them always staring at me.

What I can tell you with far more certainty is that when I tapped my pen on the notepad, with that initial joy, I felt like I belonged. And, in contrast, when I looked back at that notepad every other day of that semester, I felt I didn’t. So, this memory brings me to this current chapter on racism and “auto-ethnography.”

In the years since then, in coming to know myself and knowing how and why I write, knowing how and why I fail too, I feel it is important to give you some early direction to why I write the way I do and where my paper is likely to take them. I enjoy “auto-ethnography” (which I put in scare quotes for reasons that will make sense at the end). I enjoy it for three
main reasons to be precise, but what is precision when I have a tendency to lose discipline and said direction, to switch track, to get drunk on words and ideas, to speak of memories and half stares, to stretch for rather than speak truths—especially when it comes to discussing the entanglements of self and racism, especially on writing and not writing academically.

Allow me thus to at least commit early and to anchor a purpose through these initial words, on this first page, in this early paragraph, and to say it all in its simplest way. Yes, my chapter is on racism. It is on stripping oneself free, through snaps of the keyboard and clicks of the mouse, freeing myself, through writing, from the residue of the white gaze that stares, wringing oneself free from doubts that peer from above a white man’s glasses. So, it may be better to say this chapter is on writing, on the act of writing about, despite of, against, and to make sense of racism. I want to stare back, to spell out both the social and cultural conditions in which I write, its form, its content, to answer, in doing so, a single question, with three reasons, on why “auto-ethnography.”

2.

I owe you another anchor or a couple, an explanation of two terms that repeat throughout my argument, two that intertwine and at other moments separate or dance together to help respond to why “auto-ethnography.” They came to me way back in the day but now again in a more pronounced way while researching for this chapter.

Two days after Christchurch, while walking to my office, I sat on the car park’s curb. A need to control my fall, to succumb to the weight of the event dragged me down. I closed my eyes to manage their burn, to shut out the world, to shut out trauma, I focused on the residue of the white gaze that stares, wringing oneself free from doubts that peer from above a white man’s glasses. So, it may be better to say this chapter is on writing, on the act of writing about, despite of, against, and to make sense of racism. I want to stare back, to spell out both the social and cultural conditions in which I write, its form, its content, to answer, in doing so, a single question, with three reasons, on why “auto-ethnography.”

Reason 1. Aesthetics

I am not sure if I have read the right or wrong thinkers, and you may call me postmodern, but over the years as a scholar of colour I have learnt to distrust academic appeals to a dry rationality; distrust neat, right angle thinking and categorisations, distrust the
modern lust for a symmetrical lafz and patterns in our writing, especially when it comes to speaking about the relationship between human and human and their societies. Too many books explain how the philosophical attempts to categorise us into rigid races by Kant, and his like, correlates with an expansion of scientific terms, form, lafz. Hence, the first reason on why I choose “auto-ethnography” comes back to lafz. It comes back to the method’s willingness to politicalise the normative aesthetics of our social science forms.

The question of aesthetics drives “auto-ethnography” for me. How I find beauty—in our inability to present truth ever so neatly—draws me to a method that takes this failure as a type of splendour. Accepting a haphazard style of writing, “auto-ethnography” allows me to clasp at vulnerability and half-done reflections, while opining in unfinished interpretations. I see value in jigsaw pieces and not its final portraits. An appealing drunkenness thus inflicts the approach and reflects my thinking, and I have come to embrace this Dionysian me.

Then, there is the political world that never leaves me alone. To write “auto-ethnography” allows a lafz to mirror the mana of my own raced disorientation. I understand the world through short snippets of research bursting through lived experiences, resentment, pain, and some inspiration, all trying to connect mind and body, trying to find patterns, and the lack of, and learning to sit intellectually in spaces of discomfort and partial sense. “Auto-ethnography” became a permission for me to write about these through sensorial details of a life, opposing racism, of university, in university, a way to show, hear, touch, smell, taste, rather than just tell.

The approach bridges the scientific with the affective. And more, for when I write like this, I receive more of the world, research more, and it contrasts with a pervious me who struggles with the dry machinations of Kantian-type academese when trying to publish as a “proper” scholar. I shift form, from being a stuttering writer to a passionate one. I live. Perhaps above all, by aesthetics then I mean the modality of telling stories, by being a storyteller, by being gripped in the political act of storytelling.

Eventually it all came together. A few years ago, weeks before a deadline, a desperate need to finish my book, which had no words to its name, led me to research more about auto-ethnography, led me to Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis’ book, *Autoethnography: Qualitative Research* (2015) where one early line popped out, a point made by writer Joan Didion: “We tell stories in order to live” (p. 1).

Even as I remained sceptical of the sentence’s truth and the proper place of storytelling in a welcoming political science department, the sentence lingered with me long before I understood fully its potential. I wanted to believe. Telling stories as research captured my need to escape the confines of an epistemic racism that sealed in Western practices on researching politics. In the end, the book helped me question many normative objectives and practices of mainstream research, including: “The prohibition against stories and storytelling as ways of knowing” (p. 10). Storytelling became a first step to thinking through writing as a de-colonial act. It helped me think about the “I” as a Western epistemic Self, even when I am writing as “I” the Other. I must confess here, my Arab and Muslim “identity” (a crude word) might be too strongly at play, but whose identity isn’t.

Stories may appeal because of the world I come from, where aunties, and uncles, cousins and parents, Quran and others, tell stories to make sense of life. I don’t know if I am religious, and I actually don’t care for the title, but I do come with a heart enamoured by a world with an Islamicate language and a literature and a way of seeing through parables and metaphors. And, I have learnt lessons about all things from those who taught me my “religion.”

3.

Around the same time of Carroll’s class, I heard from my friend Hussein, a fellow student in philosophy, a story about twelfth-century Islamic philosopher Ghazali. I should admit that this chapter’s corrupted version of this tale is neither his nor Ghazali’s. There is a reason for this, I suppose. The tale has twisted around in my head for years. It altered in meaning to suit my given religious or political mood. It came to be, for me, a point of reference, an unfolding metaphor to say something about the colonial world the Other navigates. But even as the details changed or my memory faded, the message of the story remains, for both its content and its form helped me think about myself as a writer.

The story goes that one day in the market a Muslim Sultan overhears a quarrel between Greeks or Chinese painters about who between them are the better artists. The Sultan intervenes to try and settle the dispute. He informs both sides that he will host a competition and will himself declare a single winner. The sultan ordered them to do art that truly reflected the majesty of God’s universe. Both agree.

In the following days, they began work on two opposing walls in the Sultan’s palace. A curtain in the
middle of the room separated them. But, where the Greeks brought buckets of bright paints, the Chinese only brought water. Days passed. And, when a servant blew a horn to announce the work’s competition, an excited Sultan rushed to the Greek half. He stood overwhelmed. The richness of their painting dazzled with handsome colour and skilful detail. The Greek painting became something akin in scope and depth in beauty to the Sistine chapel. Bright jewels shone in the painting as stars. Melted gold and silver painted a story of our origins from the prophet Adam to our current day. Their art was as majestic as it was rich in content. And, so after Greek art had awed him, the Sultan opened the curtain to stare at the Chinese wall. He stood shocked to see himself. Without using a single brushstroke, the Chinese polished wall reflected like a mirror. The colour and beauty of the Greek’s art showed in greater detail and brightness. A washed wall shone back. His reflection merged into the Greek art behind him. He became part of the very art he had demanded. He became part of the storytelling of God’s creation.

4.

I made no decision to become a critical race theorist. No single moment told me to write about racism or to write about my experience as a Muslim. It happened. And, it still happens without planning. My path chose me. But, I accept, resent and respect this path, only to make the point it comes with little choice or consent. I have long tried to figure out how it came to be, how one day, like that, because of this or that stare, or smile, or this or that ensuing insecurity, I found myself accepting certain conversations and looking back at every other professor’s gaze and asking them, and myself, “what do you want from me?”

Before I knew how it happened, it happened. I was paddling through half-truths about my life and a symbolic world to try make sense of power through coloniality. Reading texts and theories, exploring memories and forever interviewing self and sometimes others to try and piece together a life of navigating whiteness. But something else happened.

I read lots of early modern English texts about Islam. While drowning in many orientalists’ fictions (and art) about who Muslims are and what Islam is, I responded with vigour, with a will to fight, to be creative, but these did not come alone. A resentment and bitterness as two more foes, rising within me came to be me. Even today, as I write, I continue to feel this great pull within me towards confronting the West. A need to challenge, to argue against those who champion its knowledge, to corrupt its standardised methods of writing. And, this brings me again to “auto-ethnography.” I don’t always trust myself. It is thus a style and a method that helps me make sense of such compulsions, especially those you catch after the fact of writing. It pushes me to reflect through words on the page, to work backwards and sideways and not always forwards. It helps me excavate memories as well as staves. It helps me polish the marble wall to see my place in the world.

When writing my book for example (Morsi, 2017), I stumbled into “auto-ethnography” as a method, for “I” could not write as a neutral “I.” Originally, I had planned to write a critique of the government’s countering violent extremism programme (CVE); a set of policies targeting young Muslim radicals. I spent months researching how governments perceive and frame Muslim violence. I read papers discussing how they planned to address the problem. I took notes on the assumptions driving their conclusions. However, engaging daily with the bland and general vocabulary of “bad Muslims” elicited an array of strong emotions. I felt inarticulate before this discourse as it subsumed and then retaliated against any reasonable position I tried to take.

What was interesting in these moments was how I tried to intellectualise my feelings in a cool academic account of the state’s racism. I told myself I ought to be critical in the proper language and tone for both the state and my peers to take me seriously. But as I attempted this, I found myself hiding behind the government’s own abstract language. I found myself pretending I was objective. I tried to draw a painting on the Sultan’s wall, rather than polish the wall.

I felt fake.

Focusing only on the intellectual parts of my project felt like an act of tearing my thoughts away from the life I have lived. During those frustrating initial months, I deleted every attempt at a proper “introduction.” I erased what I knew had to remain repressed about my anger, about my rage, about everything that made me sound like a violent Other. And then from amongst the silence, stifled by institutional rules, I was consumed by an inexplicable urge to break free. From somewhere in the recesses of my mind I heard the re-emerging voice of an Islamist Other. I enjoyed its seductive arguments. I tuned in to its anger. I listened to its performance of pursuing a lost dignity. It compelled me to take notice, to deconstruct and to use my backspace button. The voice demanded I resist the less-than-visible racism that shaped my academic style.

Indeed, I had not planned to write “auto-ethnography” at that time at all. I struggled to write
my book. It became an awkward and a confronting exercise in which I questioned my capacity to be a scholar. I can see now that my failure reflected the nexus Edward Said speaks of; one resulting from what he calls the dehumanising “web of racism” (Said, 1979, p. 27). A web of language fastening the Oriental (Muslim) to their punishing destiny. A nexus of knowledge and power creating “the Oriental” as Other. One that obliterates the possibility of this “Other” ever becoming a full “I.” It was only in hindsight and long afterwards that I came to recognise the nature of my struggle. I googled it, I searched for it, and I ended up on the name “auto-ethnography,” after a colleague of mine had shared his own.

Reason 2. Resistance

When choosing to do “auto-ethnography,” I felt a more ethical approach run through my work. A second reason unfolded itself to me. An obligation rose to consider the personal, relational, and institutional places and responsibilities of doing my writing and research. The space between the writer and the written as a third phenomenon became a variable impossible to ignore. As Francoise Lionnet mentions (Lionnet, 1990), auto-ethnography “opens up a space of resistance between the individual (auto) and the collective (-ethno-) where the writing (-graphy) of singularity cannot be foreclosed” (p. 391). In short, “auto-ethnography” acknowledges how and why one’s place, one’s being as well as how one’s identity entangles and matters. The approach interrogated my background experiences and my foreground aspirations to help me explore how the social influences my research, influences my writing form, and drives my very will to write.

Perhaps more than other topics, perhaps because I occupy a place in a colonial settler nation, I believe research on racism and anti-racism demands researchers to give readers clarity on their positionality and their commitment to decolonisation, their commitment to resistance, or if they have none. We must tell us as much as we can about our politics. The who is as important as the what we study and the how we interpret (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 19). Especially when the topic requires us to work with or discuss the world of those targeted by racism (Denshie, 2014). It addresses certain consequences. For instance, I often ask myself who am I writing for and talking to? So many of those on the borderlines of racism do not read academese. They do not take part in the pedantic debates about what this thinker says and what this one does not do.

Indeed, “auto-ethnography” for me challenges the approach where a privileged academic researcher desires to study everyone else’s social and cultural construction, everyone but their own (Denshie, 2014, p. 834). More than any approach it compelled me to think through these issues, to bring my privilege into question. It demanded deeper reflection on taking ethical approaches to my place and how it shapes my resistance to racism. I began to ask in what moments I should move over. For, as Jillian Tullis (2013) notes, auto-ethnography “tethers” researchers to their experiences, participants, and texts. It requires “contextual, contingent and primarily relational” ethical engagements (cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 25).

5.

As a scholar of colour, a contest occurs within me. I cannot tell you when it started. But it has always been there, since my undergrad years. It is between, on the one hand, an Othered Arab, radical, Muslim, and a political belligerent who wants to disrupt things, and on the other hand, a Western psychology graduate with a PhD in political science. A battle that translates too often into a paradoxical wish to obey and to break the rules. It is a fight that happens within my head, as I walk the university corridors. For when I do, I cannot help but notice the lines of portraits of decorated past white male professors. I notice the Anglo names of my lecture halls and libraries.

Since the beginning of my undergrad, through to my PhD, and as an early career researcher, I have long noticed a consistent and major part of me wills to resist academic writing norms. The wish to not play along plays out typically through a desire to break writing rules, or at least bend the establishment’s expectations of how I should speak. I disliked from the outset the functionality of signposting my sentence, like “in this paper, I will argue.” I hated the idea of offering directions and of clear introductions giving away the thesis early. The rigid form of a typical essay paper turned the content of my thinking into a rigid voice, but I also lost my sense of self. To say it in the way I have in this chapter, to talk about the recurring theme. For me, form is content.

As a result of this will, I often ask myself why I bother, why I became an academic to begin with, if I find academese writing so abject and alienating. I guess all I can say, as a student of colour, and then as a sessional jumping from one causal contract to the other, I learnt to be a ghost from them, I embraced the subjectivity of being here and not being here. In a real way, this embracing means I want to haunt, to be a
partial thing, a shadow, fleeting, neither fully committed to belonging to this space; entering through one office wall into another.

I don’t know how to explain to my reader with accuracy what is going on in my head when I see the portraits of decorated past white male professors. It’s a messy mixture of resentment and aspiration. I appreciate them, admire them even. But also, I don’t know, I dislike them. I have learnt from them. At the same time, I know that what I have learnt about me and my world has come despite them. All I can say with some certainty is that I cannot see them as separate from racial violence and privilege. A violence that created the space for them to thrive as our examples and leaders of knowledge. And yet still, I want my portrait up there too, in this institution, to be like them, I think...

If I am honest, it’s such a complicated and tiring endeavour to want to be and not be. I guess, I want to maintain the intellectual mana of my work but challenge the lafz in which I do the work, and this relates to the institution’s epistemic racism. For, I can only speculate that the academic subject, the thinker, the man in the portrait, if I dare say, is a European invention. I should be careful here. I do not mean to say intellectual work or philosophy is European. I am saying the current form of academic content is. In the neoliberal institution, can we divorce the two? That is to say, I pursued knowledge and teaching, but very early in my career, I realised that was not enough.

Let me explain a little more, or to say it more accurately, let me speculate aloud. I suspect to study the ontological and epistemic realities of racism I must succumb to its logic. To learn and teach how to resist racism, I must barter within the confines of its major institutions. I must work its economy. Thus, I must instrumentalise my body and identity into a site of study that has a monetised value. I must code and translate my work for grant applications. I must reorganise my curriculum for student feedback and participation. I must write particularly in a way that passes the peer reviews of publications. All this translates to me writing and speaking about racism in a way that does not disrupt its order. I must squeeze the content into an existing form.

A resentment born of being Othered produces in me conflicting desires. The desire to resist social science conventions and yet to belong to them. This is not as paradoxical as it may seem. To bend things rather than to snap them is my aim. For, in this bending lies a third desire. I wish to explore and to legitimise my reasons for stretching norms. This final desire is born of a necessity not to break the bonds of whiteness even whilst fighting racism. For to challenge whiteness beyond its breaking point is to lose access to the privilege. It is losing access to wealth and opportunities of academia.

So, I stare at the portraits with both aspiration and resentment. I vow that I must twist whiteness and myself clean, must reclaim what its steals. I must win myself back despite my intellectual bondage to the institution. This chapter is about that vow. What does it mean to write to bend? In that difficult place between exclusion and inclusion on their terms. How can writing be a tool of refusal? This question is part of a larger question, the implicit research question of this piece. Why “auto-ethnography”? Why? Because, the subsequent ambivalence about my career drives my writing. Over the past two years all this mess in my head has spilled onto the page through a book that I would have never written if I had found my place. An autoethnographic book inspired by the Ghazalian story to see myself shine back off my labour and my life. For it comes to be only through life’s reflection, to be a form, a particular writing style that reflects a life of disruptions. A way of writing in particular on racism, whose effects are never ambiguous, but a racism that so often hides behind ambiguity. It appears in names and citations, present in an atmosphere, a tone. It structures what we know and how we know it. It evokes certain expectations, produces what “feels” right. It arrives as a truth we have heard before and comes to others who feel out of place.

So, such are as these words, an embrace of my ambiguous being. I write with half thoughts and half concluded sentences. Yet, from another angle, they are not half of anything. They are born from the struggle to figure out how to be an academic in the West but not of the West. For, yes, I am ill-disciplined in approach but not in project, for since day one I have always sought out loud a writing voice to un-write the Other’s voice. I want a voice that would allow me to speak outside the script in which I am always-already written as Other. And, so I must polish in the very same act of painting.

Reason 3. Act

In many ways, “auto-ethnography” functions as a retelling, a way to remember, to foreground other (partial) voices within me that make sense of events. It allows me to recall half-truths, half-stare and to tell what I had not planned to tell. In no other article would I start with a story about a Professor’s stare. It’s hard to describe, but allow me to say it this way: auto-ethnography gives me confidence to be me, to experiment, and to let go, to shun the academic gaze, it helps me raise the unexpected and uncomfortable stories that hide within me,
and believe them to be valuable clues on how the social shapes the personal. I can remove myself from the pressure of assuming to know what I am supposed to know. In a way, it is a form of therapy; it helps me speak of truths that sit behind conscious and idealised accounts of them and myself as a scholar.

For this reason, I choose “auto-ethnography” because I get to say all this out loud. I can write about the disintegration of ideals as it happens, write about my struggles to write about racism. But this says something else. In this confidence comes another product. To write “auto-ethnography” is an act, an act of defiance, a paradoxical act. An act of surviving the self-inflicted erasure of my own subjectivity as a proper scholar. It involves rejecting the Western academy’s standards while remaining defiant as my right to explore academia differently.

Also, by act, I mean something a little more than a word that describes an agent doing an action. I mean a process that transforms its bearer through its very action. A process to expand the possibilities of agency itself. In this way, the act of writing auto-ethnography involves a kind of temporary eclipse of old subjectivity that gives birth to a new possibility. It’s a writing that annihilates me as a knowing subject and in its place something else is reborn. To act is transformative. For, to write good “auto-ethnography” transforms me as a writer. I’m not the same after I write a piece, I do not think the same about the topic, and my ideas are not the same. As a researcher I undergo a transformation through the act of writing about racism.

Writing changes the horizon of my understanding about what I am writing about. Whatever previous plans I began with, whatever I once wanted to say too often vanishes. The lafz shapes the mana. Ideas transform, evolve, link together, and disintegrate through the act of writing. In a real way, writing auto-ethnography is an initiation act. My initial arguments must survive the challenge of writing about them.

I am attracted to this approach because it allows me to explore the not-yet-properly-thought-out. It liberates me from the need to write authoritatively. There is an ethical implication to this. It also grants me the space to discuss aspects of racism that are mystified. It helps me discuss the thus harder to prove aspects, or to name things, such as a professor’s stare. It helps me to observe partial truths. It helps me say other potential truths out loud for a community of scholars to dismiss or debate.

6. Implicit in all of the three reasons I choose “auto-ethnography” is the way the methodology helps me address how the post-racial moment clouds our conversations on racism. Too many times, I am on a panel discussing racism and having to say things no one else on the panel wants to say. Sometimes, rarely, I choose silence because I recognise the harm in speaking. But then after, after the silence, I have to deal with the guilt of not speaking. Racism has these negative spaces. It has an in-articulation, an in-between that we find hard to put on paper or measure as an observable thing. I believe these spaces need a way of writing that appreciates the lived experience. It needs a method to help us make sense and see how these negative spaces work. Returning to the analogy of the painting, we must locate themselves in the painting.

For a long time, I assumed the Greeks in the Sultan’s story stood for the ways of the logician, the scholar or the positivist thinker. They were the scientists. But, all of us like the Greeks in the story hope to imprint on our mind a representation of the world and its purpose. We observe and copy to show the world as we see it through our observations. Such an approach, when married with the best of science, captures truth as much as we can with an appetite for accuracy—which I value, sure. I appreciate works that collect our gains in knowledge about the world and ourselves. I have never seen “auto-ethnography” as a replacement methodology or as one that is in direct contest with more positivist approaches. The important lesson I took from story is how it helped me think about how works that take seriously our embodiment, and place, our appeal to aesthetics, can merge with other types of science.

In the story, the Sultan’s reflection represented the form of the body of the person and scholar of colour merged with both reality and the symbolic representation of the Greeks, like at the heart of a three-circle overlapping Venn diagram, it helped me understand how we must interact with both the symbolic and the real.

“Auto-ethnography” is about that interaction. It is about the interaction between lafz and mana, and thus an opportunity to write about how we write about the personal in a way that is both nuanced and straightforward, embedded and reflective. It is not just about reflection, but the politics involved in reflections; how discussing self must merge with the knowledge that shapes us and me and the politics that enables or attacks us and me.

To speak about the rooms we inhabit, rooms we find ourselves in with others is to speak about the interlocking layers of my and their social relations, formed, in part, by a racial contract. To make visible unconscious taps on the notepad, through putting this relationship into words.
This chapter is on racism, yes. But it is more accurate to say then that racism is the driver, one that plagues and animates my being, leads me to try and write. But implicit in this act is an ambition. It is my aim to write in a way (and as a way) to describe how difficult it is to balance the temperance of scholarship with my intemperance of dealing with the “arsenal of complexes” that inflict and sway my thinking on this topic. My hope is to become another type of writer, to write about the Other in a way where I become other than their Other. Or, to say it all in a way that takes you a step closer to my aim, this chapter was about my abuse of “auto-ethnography” and hence why it remains in scare quotes, in helping me unwrite the way I wrote about racism.

On another note, perhaps unfairly, since it requires more space or another chapter to fully address, I ought to mention that I put “auto-ethnography” in scare quotes for another reason. In doing so, it eases a sense of growing guilt. I have come to suspect and not lost sight that the imperially credited European term of “ethnography” carries the term “auto-ethnography.” It has a Western ring to it. I am slowly learning about the traps of epistemic racism and that there are many non-Western and indigenous approaches that adopt, developed, and naturally orbit around the three reasons I have mentioned and attributed to “auto-ethnography.” But this chapter is more about my journey to this suspicion about “auto-ethnography” which came through and could only come through doing “auto-ethnography.” For this I am grateful, and it’s perhaps the best of testimonies to say the approach eventually challenged itself and made me understand the breadth of racism that much more.

REFERENCES