Chapter five

Frank and the Gift, or the Untold Told
Provocations for Autoethnography and Therapy*

Jonathan Wyatt

MARCH 2019

It was Frank’s intensity I noticed first.
I noticed it in the tight swing of his arms, in the brilliant white of his pressed T shirt, the crease of his denims.

Ten years ago, I wrote a story.
The story concerns my work with a therapy client.\(^1\) I call this client “Frank.” I wrote the story when I was working as a therapist one day a week for the UK’s National Health Service in a GP surgery near Oxford. Referred by his doctor, Dr E, Frank came to see me for six 50-minute sessions over consecutive Wednesdays. Six sessions were the maximum permitted. The story focuses upon the occasion Frank returned after our work had ended to offer me a gift.

Those few unexpected, unplanned moments that Wednesday with Frank and his gift stayed with me and, after a time, propelled me to write. The story written, I sent Frank a letter to tell him about it, to ask if he would like to read the text, and to seek his permission for me to use it in a publication. He replied to say he did want to read it. When he had, he told me he enjoyed it, liked the name “Frank,” and was happy for me to publish it.

I have since read the story aloud as part of a talk at a conference, given it as a reading to students (in part as way into the dynamics and, implicitly, ethics of the giving and receiving of gifts in therapy), and offered it into the co-respondence of a collaborative writing project, inviting others to respond. However, the story has not been published. I thought it had: the collaborative writing project became a book, and I searched the pre-prints, convinced the story had stayed in our final copy, but it wasn’t there.

One New Year’s Eve, three years back, Frank emailed. I had not heard from him since our exchange of letters about the story seven years previously. I opened his email as I waited in a queue at a cinema in Edinburgh (where we had relocated since Frank and I worked together) to see the newly released Star Wars film. We thought Star Wars would bring in a big crowd and be a more adventurous way than normal to spend New Year’s Eve, but there was no more than a handful of others waiting. I had succeeded till then in not checking emails over the mid-winter break, but standing with a beer in the queue, I couldn’t resist the email call.

Frank wrote he’d told Dr E, the same doctor who had originally referred him, that he wanted to write to me and Dr E had let him know where I was. Frank had found my university email address easily enough.

He wrote how he was doing well and wanted me to know: his work was thriving, a new relationship was bringing him joy, and he was looking after himself.

He thanked me. He told me he would never forget my kindness. He hoped I was also doing well and enjoying Edinburgh.

He asked if we could keep in touch. Frank signed off the email with his given name, followed by a comma, then “aka Frank.” I smiled when I read that.

I also felt—the story still unpublished—that I had let him down.

---

It was Frank’s intensity I noticed first.
I noticed it in the tight swing of his arms, in the brilliant white of his pressed T shirt, the crease of his denims.

***
I told Sophie Tamas I needed to get going on this chapter (I’m later getting started than I’d like), but I was unclear what I wanted to say. She wrote back how she was sure once I took myself out for coffee and noticed what was around me, something would emerge. It’s what I do, she reminded me, upon which I worried about being predictable.

I’m less confident the café trick will work, but nevertheless, and despite my worries, here I am. This café is one I have walked past many times but not been into until now.

That’s not the full truth. It’s true I have not been here alone to write, but two months ago, in January, I walked past this café, glanced in, and saw someone I know a little, someone I am not sure of but like. A becoming-friend, perhaps. I hadn’t seen her for a few months. I hesitated, a momentary pause mid-step, and walked on. An hour later, after working in a different café and on the way back to my office, I again walked past and she was still there. This time I caught her eye, and she motioned me in. We talked for a while and then left together, she cycling east and me walking north back across The Meadows. I haven’t seen her since. I notice she’s not here now. I am alone in the absence/presence of another.

The café is white-walled. Clean, small. Just seven wooden tables. The music is loud and insistent. I don’t recognise what’s playing but feel I should get up to speed if I am to belong here. There’s an app that would tell me if I held up my phone to the café’s speakers, but I don’t have it. Maybe sometime.

The espresso is “Dark Horse.” The notes on the board say this coffee has the flavours of hazelnut and green apple. I sip, closing my eyes and concentrating, but don’t recognise those tones. I never do. I don’t know how people do that.

There are two others here, both in their twenties: a man on his laptop and a woman on her phone. It feels like a hip young café—the sparkling whiteness, the soundtrack, the café’s proximity to the university, and the many students who live nearby—but earlier an elderly man had been sitting on his own in the back corner, close to the counter, talking to the barista propped on a stool by the man’s table. Later, when it was time to go, the man leant on two sticks as he edged his careful way to the door. The barista called, “Bye, John. See you tomorrow.” This café has surprises; it has a more complicated place in this community than I imagined. The older man may even have his own coffee cup behind the counter.

I am writing in a notebook. To get something started it helps to handwrite, I find. It’s more intimate than the screen. It’s like meeting in a café someone you know a little; someone you’re not sure of but like; a becoming-friend, perhaps. The proximity of bodies, the possibility of touch, the approximations and hesitations that hint at what you struggle to articulate. Amia Lieblich encourages her writing group participants to buy a notebook and write by hand: “I believe in the grounding potential of the mere act of handwriting, like all manual acts—gardening, house cleaning, etc.” My notebook is small, which makes writing my habitual goal of one page less intimidating, and it’s black, decorated on its front cover with colourful handmade pale red and blue paper strips, with silhouettes of white birds circling. Small and decorated are contrivances to make writing feel friendly, like the nuzzle of a warm dog, easing me into the task.

I write how I would like something different to occur, something surprising, something that will stretch both me and the reader. I write the questions: “Can I avoid saying the same things I or others have already said? Can I avoid falling into my usual writing habits, my familiar tics?”

(See previously. Like using the present tense, like my writing’s pervading melancholy, like writing about writing in coffee shops. See previously.

It’s good to have aspirations.)

I note down further questions, this time about autoethnography and therapy: How can we write autoethnography about therapy? Is it ethical? Does such writing become something different when we are writing about and/or with therapy clients? (Might that not be “case study research”? What if I write about my own therapy? Would that be more ethical? Is that more autoethnographic? Is autoethnography therapeutic? Is autoethnography therapeutic? (“I am thinking that if one does what one loves, it is therapeutic.”) For whom? How do we know? Should it be? Why? Should it not be uncomfortable, disturbing? Maybe sometimes the therapeutic is uncomfortable and disturbing?

And I stop. These are decent questions, but I don’t feel their urgency. Not enough. I and others have discussed them, and the energy in them is missing. They are not questions on a mission.

I look up and around. My two café companions appear to be doing what they were doing before, he on his laptop, she on her phone. The barista sits on his stool, now behind the counter, also on his phone. Students walk past the window towards the university campus. A man wheels his bike the other direction, a small child perched on his saddle. She’s keeping her balance by leaning into him, a hand on his arm. She wears a bear hat, with ears.
Inside, it’s as if no time has passed and nothing has changed. Urgency will have to come from somewhere else than here. It will have to come from immersion within the writing itself. Like a wild water swimmer wading through waves into a winter sea, the writing encounter will have to bring its own energy, its own urgent gifts.

Ah. Gifts. So that’s it: Frank.

I need to stop being coy. I had been holding back in some grandiose fantasy that Frank would be the big reveal at the end of this chapter, or I had even imagined I might leave the reader hanging at the end. No: It was Frank’s intensity I noticed first. I need—finally—to trust Frank and the gift he brought, the gifts he continues to bring.

FRANK AND THE GIFT
(SUMMER 2009)

It was Frank’s intensity I noticed first.

I noticed it in the tight swing of his arms, in the brilliant white of his pressed T shirt, the crease of his denims. He wore his short hair gelled, like he worried over it. I pictured him in the mirror, smoothing it, working it intently, intensely. His eyes were narrow and dark, lengthened by developing lines. When he sat, that first time, and I did the preliminaries, he looked at me, holding my eyes, gripping them.

In the writing, I forget. Months on, I forgot the precise colours of his clothes, the timbre of his voice, his accent, the gestures he habitually made. But I remember, too. As if he is me. I feel him, right here.

Writing now, I experience the power of his feelings overwhelming him—loss, disbelief, love, anger, longing, frustration; how he found them so pressing he feared his body could not contain them, feared they might burst through the membranes. Verbalising his feelings was heavy labour; as the words emerged, they seemed to drain him, and he would breathe slower as those words rested between us, as if he were watching and waiting for their impact, anxious they would cause damage.

There was a moment’s release as he realised they did no harm. A few moments. Minutes, even. Yet, as soon as he walked out of my consulting room in the GP surgery each week, his emotional activity once again began to intensify and, late at night, he would need to go running in the hope that his feelings would dissipate sufficiently to allow him sleep. I experience now the connection he made with me and the gratitude this brought. It works both ways: He allowed me in, permitted me to become part of him. As I write, from a distance, I am with him again.

This morning, walking through town, I passed two former clients. They each greeted me, one walking alongside me for a minute or two. He could not go beyond “Hello, Jonathan, how are you?” because in our work together such an inquiry had implicitly been off limits. The work had been about him, not me. Nor could I probe further, because, no longer in role, I did not have the warrant to do so; and how anyway could he answer a question like, “How are you doing?” So we matched each other’s pace until we realised we had no future.

I remembered him, could recall his story, as with the second man, who only nodded to me. I could not remember either name. Later I did, but at the time I couldn’t. I berate myself for this, but seeing these two men—and the woman walking her dog on Thursday morning who said “Hi Jonathan. You don’t remember me, do you?”—reassures me I don’t forget them. Her story was right there, though her name took a few moments. Their stories, like Frank’s, shape me.

Maybe keeping names at a distance makes it possible to hold stories close.

One lunchtime, two months after Frank’s final session, I was in the office searching for stamps in a desk drawer. Kate, one of the office staff, reaching for folders near me, asked how my morning had been. I replied it had been good, thanks. Busy, just the one cancellation. This was the cue for her to make the joke we often shared:

“You had a cancellation? You should have come in here and asked. One of us would have come to see you. Or all of us. We could do with the help, couldn’t we, girls?”

As the laughter passed and I continued my search for stamps, Andrea, one of the doctors, walked through.

“Hi Jonathan. Did you have a good morning? Did you cure them all?”

“Yes, all cured thanks. I just told them to snap out of it and pull themselves together.”

As I applied the stamps I eventually found, the bell went. Kate attended to the visitor and returned. “There’s someone here for you,” she whispered to me.

I wasn’t expecting anyone. I went to the reception window and there was Frank. He was carrying, hands outstretched, a large misshapen parcel. I felt pleased to see him. I motioned for him to go through.

“I worried you’d think I would forget,” he said as I met him in the corridor. At our final session he had
told me he intended to buy me a present. He’d meant to get one for me for then, but he hadn’t been able to decide what to buy. I had been non-committal in my response, trying neither to encourage this gesture nor to dissuade him, fearing the former would confirm I had expectations and the latter would be rejecting.

So he stood with his gift. I said, “Come in, come in,” and he followed me into my room. He placed it on the table. There were three separate items, each wrapped in brown paper, taped together. I was unable to work out what they were. I reached down and touched them.

“I’ve taken this long,” he continued, “because I still couldn’t decide what to get you. And then I thought about what I would like and went with that.”

“Thank you,” I responded. “I’ll open it now, shall I?” I wasn’t sure why I was asking his permission. “As I said,” I continued as I unwrapped, “it was a pleasure to work with you. You didn’t need to give me anything but thank you. You’re very kind.”

The first small parcel contained a cable, the second two DVDs, and the larger third parcel was a DVD player. He watched me. I held the two DVDs, action films both, and turned to look at him:

“Frank, that’s extremely generous.”

“Well, you’ve helped me. I wanted to give you something.”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

We stood silently for a moment. I was still turning the DVDs over in my hands, reading the blurb. He remarked,

“This is strange, isn’t it? Saying goodbye. It feels so final.” He had said this last time we met.

“Yes, it is. It is,” I agreed. I didn’t volunteer any further contact. I didn’t say, “Well probably bump into each other” or “You can always come back,” though I was tempted to. The finality, though difficult, was important and to be respected.

There was no more to say. He reached out a hand, which I took. I wanted to hug him but felt I couldn’t; it would have given too much of me away and would have risked demanding too much of him.

He held my eyes one more time, turned, hesitated at the door, then went.

**LEARNING FROM FRANK: THREE PROVOCATIONS (MARCH 2019)**

It’s a few days later. I am at home. An early mid-March morning, 2019. I catch sight of the shadow of a seagull arcing across the tall sunlit building beyond the courtyards, and their bare trees, which stretch from the window by my desk. I re-read *Frank and the Gift*. It, he, prompts, nudges. It, he, invites. Provokes. And the energy, the urgency, is there.

*Provocation*(1): *Autoethnography and therapy are (not only) about the “self.”* *Autoethnography and therapy are (not only) about the “other.”*

*Frank and the Gift* is about Frank, the Frank-as-client who in those moments of his life walked to the surgery each Wednesday, always arriving on time, and waited, half-reading the magazines; who was distracted; who was worrying, as self-employed, about the work he wasn’t doing; who was anxious about how he would begin to talk and about the issues he knew he had to talk about; who looked up, watching for the clock to hit the hour and the moment I would call him in. *Frank and the Gift* is about Frank, whose life became different, a difference at once subtle and profound. It’s about Frank who brought a gift, a gesture, because he could. Because he wanted to.

*Frank and the Gift* is about the therapist, the Jonathan-as-therapist, who saw Frank along with five others each Wednesday, who met former clients in the street and forgot their names, but whose body held memories of them. *Frank and the Gift* is about the Jonathan-as-therapist who was taken by surprise at Frank’s return that week, who had been getting administrative tasks off his desk and was thinking about the game of football he’d played the evening before and about the lunch he was soon to have and who instead found himself holding a bulky parcel in his hands, standing with Frank, uncertain how to respond, unsure what to do. *Frank and the Gift* is about the Jonathan-as-therapist who was affected by Frank. It’s about the Jonathan-who-writes.

*Frank and the Gift* is about a gift. It’s about the brown wrapping paper that envelops each of the three components of the gift, and the sticky tape that binds them. It’s about the sleek metal and plastic DVD player and its lead; it’s about the Jean-Claude van Damme and Steven Seagal movies in their plastic DVD boxes.

*Frank and the Gift* is about how masculinity is performed, in therapy and beyond. It’s about what men can give each other. It’s about what men can give away to each other. It’s about whether these two men can hug.

*Frank and the Gift* is about the politics of health care, specifically the politics of mental health care, and how these are carried in bodies (human and otherwise). It’s about the rationing of time. It’s about how six sessions of 50 minutes is all that’s possible, all Frank and others deserve. *Frank and the Gift* is about the availability, nonetheless, of health care that’s free at the point of delivery. It’s about privilege. It’s about social justice.
**Frank and the Gift** is about the discourse of therapy as “treatment” and “cure.” It’s about the irony and the flirtation—“did you cure them all?”—“we could do with some help, couldn’t we, girls?”—that keep the demands of the ill at bay, that lift and lighten the routines and the weight of obligations. It’s about gender politics.

**Frank and the Gift** is about the politics of research, therapy, and research about therapy. It speaks of the personal and the relational, the immediate and the mundane. Such research carries risks in the academy and finds few outlets within a world of therapy scholarship that privileges the so-called evidence-based.

It’s about how, sometimes, windows open.

Therapy and autoethnography are about both “self” and the “other,” yes, but they’re about neither and much more: they’re about subjectivity-in-motion, provisional and contingent and entangled with the material and the political and the more-than and beyond-human. The “self” and the “other” are never separate. The self is “given over [to the other] from the start” in Judith Butler’s psychoanalytic terms, the other necessarily always within, and the subject always decentred.

Therapy and autoethnography are best understood as “assemblages,” perhaps or, a sharper term, because of the movement, energy, and politics it conveys, “agentic assemblages.” In the “agentic assemblage” of therapy and autoethnography we might be better using the term, not psychotherapy, which points us to the psyche—the soul, not the mind as we often understand the concept—of the individual, but “assemblage/therapy”; and not autoethnography, which is suggestive of the bounded, agentic, humanist auto, but “assemblage/ethnography.”

**Provocation (2): Autoethnography and therapy (do not) help.**

Therapy “helps.” Of course it helps: that’s the point. Or it should do, surely. Why put ourselves through it, if not?

Frank tells me I’ve helped him, hence the gift. When he writes again years later it’s because his life has improved since our therapeutic work together. Therapy helped. In the recruitment to our professional counselling and psychotherapy programmes at Edinburgh we ask applicants, both in writing and at interview, of their experience in a “helping role.” Therapy is one of the “helping” professions.

Autoethnography “helps.” Of course it helps: that’s the point. Or it should do, surely. Why put ourselves through it, if not?

For example, writing autoethnography might offer hope, claims Poulos: “Writing is a lifeline, a way into and through the mysteries that hover at the edges of my consciousness.” For Ellis, autoethnography’s writing process brings greater acceptance of life’s tensions. Maybe, at times, autoethnography might help the reader handle difficult aspects of their lives. The writer writes and it helps them; the reader reads and it helps them. Not necessarily the latter but, if it’s “good” autoethnography, or if it’s “good” and is read at the right moment in the reader’s life, it helps.

Another version of this set of claims might be therapy and autoethnography leave us “feeling better.” In the current medicalised therapy discourse, therapy’s purpose is to make people better. Andrea, my doctor colleague in *Frank and the Gift*, is not being only ironic when she asks if I have cured my clients. After all, that’s what a doctor’s surgery is there for, and the pressure on doctors and other health professionals to “cure” is unrelenting.

We go to therapy and after a time, whether a single session or five times a week over five years, if it “works,” we feel better. Maybe the therapist feels better too, or at least feels good about the work they’re doing, but that’s a bonus.

We write autoethnography. We write about difficult, painful experience, and perhaps we feel better. We read it and perhaps we feel better.

And yet.

I am in correspondence with Sophie Tamas in part because this chapter is re-engaging me with the 2013 special issue we co-edited and contributed to about the connections between research and therapy. In *Telling*, a two-part dialogic playscript, “Jonathan,” a therapist, tells “Dr Tamas,” a researcher, “I’m not much motivated by helping.” Dr Tamas replies, “It matters to [your clients] that you help, presumably. Or they wouldn’t come.”

In our introduction to the issue, we write as if we (“Sophie” and “Jonathan”) meet—in a café: where else?—to discuss (argue about) the issues raised by the articles in the collection, including about whether writing “helps”:

[Sophie says:] “I just get worn out by all the commitment to help. Like we’re so agentic and responsible and altruistic. . . . I’m not saying the urge to help is wrong. I was raised religious. Of course I want to do good. But it’s not like theory saves us. Didn’t Deleuze jump out a window?”

“What would you like, then?” [replies Jonathan.] She shrugs. “If a theory is unliveable, what’s it worth?”

“That’s reductive. Why tell stories at all?”
“Arendt said the political function of the storyteller is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Which sounds terrible to me, because I hate acceptance. I don’t WANT things to be as they are. I want to fix them. To fix me. But I am tired of being seen as a problem to be fixed. I am tired of seeing others that way and how that makes them disappear, even when I think that I’m offering love. It just doesn’t help.”

“Isn’t that what you write for? To sort things out?”

“That’s not the same as accepting. It’s more like managing, or avoiding.”

“Strange way to avoid things.”

“Helping” does not sit well with either “Jonathan,” the therapist in Telling, or “Sophie,” the writer in the issue’s introduction. Helping, says Sophie, erases the other, even as we think we’re doing good.

The problem with “helping” is ethical, political, and ontological.27 To be more precise, the problem is with helping as purpose, in seeing the therapist or writer as the one who helps. It’s a power move, a trespass, and, as “Sophie” tells us, leads to a dynamic where we (as the “helpers”) see ourselves as “agentic and responsible and altruistic” and the “helped” as grateful recipients of our expertise and generosity.28 However, helping (if it happens, which it may not) is not something someone “gives” or “does” to someone else but something that arises within the relational process, in the encounter between therapist and client, between writer and text and reader, and back in the flow and space between them. Helping might happen, but if it does it will not be because “we” help. “Dr Wyatt,” the therapist, is smug and self-satisfied, perhaps, but I agree with him when he later says to “Sophie,” the researcher/interviewer, “If I can keep out of the way, sometimes interesting things happen.”29

I’m not suggesting Frank is mistaken when he tells me “I” have helped him. His life was enhanced by turning up for six weeks in a consulting room at the doctors’ surgery. However, I’d argue it wasn’t “me” but the therapeudic encounter that helped, because the former positions him as the passive recipient of what “I” did to him. We were there together, both of us, in our chairs by a window onto a drab suburban landscape in a room with a folded-away medical couch, mobile curtain, and stacked chairs, with a door that stayed shut, holding the world outside still, at bay, for 50 minutes so that the world inside could be attended to. It, whatever “it” was, happened there, in that material-discursive milieu, working and struggling and searching for a way through.30

If autoethnography “helps”—however understood—it’s not the writer who helps, whether themselves or the reader. Neither Poulos nor Ellis claim they help: for each, it’s writing that respectively brings the possibility of hope—a lifeline—and acceptance. It’s the encounter with writing (or reading) that suggests promise, offering the possibility of “happy accidents”31 that we might find ourselves open to and—if we’re alert—with the capacity to not smother or ignore them, and to not get in the way.

Therapy and autoethnography, whether for therapist and/or client or for writer and/or reader, do not always leave us feeling better, nor should they. The therapy that forces me, as a client, to confront the decisions I make or that takes issue with my static understandings of my relationships leaves me disturbed. I feel “worse,” at least for a time, but it may be what’s needed. The therapy needs to be handled with care, but such challenge is how change might happen in my life.

Writing takes us to places and spaces we may not wish to go.32 We discover what we may not wish to know. We re-engage with, re-immerses ourselves in, difficult experiences. Writing can be tough. It may not be writing that resolves or is resolved: “Maybe success, for now, is leaving my story open and not creating boundaries,” writes Carol Rambo in her text about living with the impact of childhood trauma.33 Handled with care, such challenge is how change might happen. Reading autoethnography too, it may be troubling, it may be tough. We may “feel worse,” at least for a time, but it may be what’s needed.

The question we might ask about both therapy and autoethnography is not whether they help but what they do. Such an inquiry directs attention away from the imagined agency of the individual therapist/writer and their passive, perhaps placated, client/reader, and towards the process, the encounter, of each, and towards the milieus in which they happen. It draws us into their politics, to consider how both therapy and autoethnography seek change, not stasis, how they “incite transformations, cause trouble, [and] act in unruly ways.”34

Provocation (3): Autoethnography and therapy are about intimacy.

Autoethnography and therapy do intimacy.

It’s not that there are always the “feelings” we associate with intimacy—closeness, friendship, trust, and so forth—present in the (human) parties concerned (therapist/client, writer/text/reader). My client who left after one session, telling me I would never understand, probably did not experience feelings of intimacy in the room with me. Neither did I with the fine autoethnographic piece I was reading this afternoon.
that somehow I was unable to connect with; nor again did I feel intimacy with the client I found hard to like, even after a number of weeks’ trying to find a different place; nor again do I find intimacy in that text I am writing and feel distant from, no matter how often I return to it, and whose reader is a shadow, difficult to reach. Feelings—“senses”—of intimacy might be present in both autoethnography and therapy, but that’s not where this is going. It’s not what Frank and the Gift brings to me.

Frank and the Gift suggests how autoethnography and therapy are gestures of intimacy. They are practices of intimacy, practices of becoming-intimate; they are the work, to use Ken Gale’s term, of “intimating”—the doing of intimacy—and the subtle beckoning such a term implies: Frank and I and/in our Wednesday therapeutic encounter, seated, both of us still but moving. Breathing, talking, hearts beating, blood flowing. Affect circulates between, around, within; affect that surfaces—“de-phas[es]”—as what we might call pain, loss, struggle, rage, hope, relief, lightness, and more, surfacing often as two or more of these at once.

There is intimating in the way our faces, our bodies, Frank’s and mine, turn to each other; and how, weeks later, Frank returns holding a parcel and reaches out his arms to lay it in mine. Then, later, how he leaves: a turn towards the door and he’s gone, the work of intimacy continuing even as we part.

I write. Frank and the Gift is not the therapy itself. We know this. It’s writing about therapy. It is becoming-autoethnographic writing that seeks, that reaches, that wants to touch, to hold, perhaps even—in vain—to hold still. It brings the intimating of the therapeutic encounter to the delicate texture of the page, one hand holding a pen, the other resting on the small, black, decorated notebook, and, later, pressing keys with the tips of fingers, eyes locked onto words that form each letter in turn.

Writing autoethnography is always writing with: with Frank, with that time of my life, with the gifts he brought, with the other people in the story (Andrea, Kate, the former clients in town). It’s writing with those I am citing—don’t we feel we come to know them, even just a little, sometimes? Or feel their words close?—and with the reader, the one I wish to call “you.” Writing autoethnography is writing with the body, with bodies, as best we can. I may miss my body’s calls and cues, and when I notice them I may shepherd them out of earshot, not to be written, but I aspire to write with my body, “open[ing] the doors to a place where the raw and the genuine find their articulation.”

Writing autoethnography is writing with the intimating—the doing—of affect, which circulates between and within the words and pages, between eyes, ears, fingers, heart. It is writing with, at times, uneasy affect. The work of intimacy can, should, be uneasy.

In this doing of intimacy, this intimating, Frank and the Gift invites this claim—that the practices of autoethnography and therapy echo how Sholtz and Carr frame Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical relationship as an opening to otherness: the making, unmaking, and remaking of what Sholtz and Carr call revolutionary love:

[A] constant otherness that opens new potentials and vistas and that causes the proliferations of thought and of life that populate a world, and that push us beyond the concretisations of those worlds which may in fact inhibit us—politically, socially, ethically, and creatively. It is the possibility of a revolutionary love.


MARCH 2019

I am back in the same café this Monday morning in late March as I work towards ending this chapter. This is not a mere literary contrivance, fabricated for apparent neatness and closure, and written not in the café at all but in my office. Knowing it was time to write into the ending of this chapter I have walked the ten minutes across The Meadows. I admit a sense of (impossible) completeness was part of the call to come.

There is much still needed to do. The text requires more than tidying up, and writing is never finished—there are other provocations I have noted Frank and the Gift offers: autoethnography and therapy are im/possible, are about desire, are performance and performative, are generous, are collaborative, promise more than it is possible to deliver, and are “creative-relational inquiry,” so there is more to be done. However, for now, this writing needs to be let go. Writing an ending, here (on my laptop, not my small, black, decorated notebook) will, I know, lead me to rework and/or add to what I have written. It may even lead me to start again, but I’m hoping not.
It’s quiet this morning. The older man, John, is sitting in what I now assume to be his usual spot in the corner at the back. When I came through the door the barista was sitting alongside him and got up to serve me. By the window there is a young woman, with her yoga mat rolled up beside her on the bench, drinking tea and eating croissant. The music is mellower than last time. I still don’t recognise what’s playing. I still don’t have the app. The espresso is “Dark Horse” again and I still don’t catch the hazelnut and green apple.

“Shall we do the crossword, John?” calls the barista from the counter, and brings the folded newspaper over. He sits with John. They set to it. They are animated. They get stuck. The barista fetches his phone. I want to call them out for cheating but manage not to.

It’s just the four of us (and the crossword, the yoga mat, the soundtrack, the espresso, the wooden tables—quite a crowd) and this still-unfolding chapter. Outside the café the street is quiet too: the occasional car, bike, lorry, and bus; still fewer pedestrians. No man and small child on a bike. No bear that with ears. No hoped-for becoming-friends.

It’s the cryptic crossword they’re doing, the barista tells me when I order a second coffee. Their custom is to do the quick crossword, he says. It’s rare and adventurous for them to try the cryptic. I excuse their cheating.

I can see through the window back across The Meadows, with its dog-walkers and runners. I imagine one of them to be Frank. It’s an immediate, unexpected sense of him, a desire for him to run across my sightline, a wish to see him. He would run in an easy rhythm. That’s what I would notice first: not his intensity but his easy rhythm. But then, when he stopped, caught sight of me, and looked, the intensity would be there.

The barista and John give up on being cryptic, and John puts on his black cap and green coat and leaves with slow, measured, step-by-step care.

NOTES

* I thank Ken Gale, Susan Mackay, Fiona Murray, Alex Romanian, Gabriel Soler, and Sophie Tamas for their invaluable comments on drafts of this chapter.

1. I use the term “therapy” (and hence “therapist”) to stand for both “counselling” and “psychotherapy,” terms that in the UK are often employed together to acknowledge what they have in common (e.g. the “British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy”: one person (or sometimes couples and families) meeting one-to-one (or sometimes in groups) with another (or sometimes more than one other) in a professional relationship to explore issues in their lives. “Counselling” can sometimes carry more instrumental associations in the USA and elsewhere (e.g. where it may refer to career counselling, which is not the meaning I work with here. I also use the term “client” in this chapter (rather than, say, the medicalised term “patient”).


3. I am reminded of the alone-ness of the therapist as well as the writer. See Winnicott, 1958. (I thank Alex Romanian for this connection.)

4. I have heard it was tradition for regulars in English village pubs—those who came in most days, sat in the same place and drank the same pints—to be so much part of the place as to have their own tankard behind the bar. This may be a myth. I have not heard of it happening in coffee shops.

5. Lieblich (2013, p. 46); see also Sellers (2004), concerning Hélène Cixous’ preference for writing by hand: “[W]riting is a corporeal act, involving the memories and knowledge of the writer’s body” (p. x).


7. On the ethics of writing about therapy, see, for example, Helps (2018), Simon (2017), and Wyatt, 2012; for an article that concerns an author’s own therapy, including the ethical issues, see Partridge and Canavan (2017). I return later in this chapter to discuss, at least implicitly, the questions I note about autoethnography being therapeutic or not.


11. See Bondi and Fewell (2016).

12. See the 2016 special issues (17, 1 and 2) of Counselling and Psychotherapy Research on “Using personal experience in counselling and psychotherapy research” for such windows.


16. Mazzei and Jackson (2016, p. 4). Mazzei and Jackson are focusing their interview research on developing their argument disrupting received humanist understandings of “voice” in qualitative research. I’m proposing that this concept of “agentic assemblage” can be applied to these discussions here about therapy and autoethnography.


19. Why put ourselves through therapy and autoethnography if they don’t help? I recognise, of course, that with both therapy and autoethnography—as with much else—there may be mixed motives for persisting if they are not beneficial. We don’t always do what’s helpful, and we don’t always stop doing what’s not helpful. However, my question of each leads in a different direction, concerning what we mean by “helping,” its ethics, and how it happens.


22. See Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011): “As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their pain, but also allow participants and readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances” (p. 280).

REFERENCES


Gale, K. (forthcoming). Now you see me, now you don’t: Living with Deleuze, intimacy and the dance of movements, moments and sensation. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*.


