JOHN FREEMAN
Curtin University

Solipsism, self-indulgence and circular arguments: Why autoethnography promises much more than it delivers

ABSTRACT
The dominance of autoethnography has obscured a measured evaluation of the compatibility of autoethnographic research with its subject matter, and also of the research value of predominantly personal narratives – those stories by researchers who locate and regard themselves as the research subject and who then write evocative stories of their experiences. These are often the most difficult forms for autoethnography to accommodate, relying as they do on experience reading as its own analysis and diary-like description of the researcher/teller’s life standing for a retelling that provides an adequate informing of our understanding of a particular cultural context. It can be hard to distinguish these stories from autobiography. In these cases, autoethnography often appears to be used as little more than a relatively research-friendly term, as something that sounds more academically legitimate than autobiography but which has more in common with drawing the reader into the researcher’s own life than using one’s culturally located experiences as something that opens a door onto wider understanding.

KEYWORDS
autoethnography
memoir
autobiography
self-narration
subjectivity
authenticity
ethical narration
Autoethnography is undoubtedly the fastest-growing research approach in the social sciences, the arts, health and humanities, and, as we have already started to see, it attracts exponents and deriders in roughly equal measure, with neither telling a fully legitimate tale (see Anderson 2006). Memoir, with its never-need-to-leave-the-house-or-office ease of access to subject material and its plugging into the current trend for the Mystery of trauma and the Memoir of family disclosure, has likewise seen a huge increase in research application and publication (Clark 2008). The Memoir (a term copyrighted by Linda Clark in 2002) is, as Patty Sotorin explains, enjoying a near-maniac rise in popularity:

There is a wiki called The Memoir Project; online zines like Literary Mama, HipMama and Brain Child; an annual Mother’s Day contest for 6-word memoirs like ‘Better mom when someone is looking’ and ‘Puppies would have been much easier’ [...] and lots of mom blogs with names like True Mom Confessions.com, Tales from the Mommy Track, The Mommy Blog: Adventures from the Wonderbelly of Motherhood, Offspring: Your Life Didn’t End When Theirs Began, Mommy Logic, The Momtraps: Digging Myself Out Since 2004, Diary of a Playgroup Dropout, and PlainJaneMom.com’. (Sotorin 2010, emphasis in original)

In light of these aspects, the aim of this article is to provide a measured appraisal of autoethnography and memoir as valuable and probably here-to-stay methodologies and outcomes, which nevertheless have their share of problems, many of which are self-inflicted and/or self-invited. On a very clear level then the article sets out to function as a critical and cautious rather than fully convinced guide to self-narrating practitioners.

If writing is always an act of discovery then it is certainly true that in the process of writing these reflective, speculative and at times discursive pages I did not always realize quite what I thought until I saw the words on the screen in front of me. Writing does that. Active writing, at least, where we sometimes write through what we think we know in order to discover that we actually think something else entirely. The writing thus changes the writer as much as or perhaps even more than the reader. This was certainly the case for M. Foucault, who stated, ‘I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same things as before’ (2000: 239–40). Objectivity does not necessarily get lost in this mix, but it does disguise itself sometimes in subjective language, just as subjectivity often hides behind the refusal to use the personal pronoun. All of this makes defining an article as an act of research (rather than as an article that is just about research) problematic. Nevertheless, this is a researched article, and its hope, if not quite its conceit, is that it offers some contribution to thinking in the field; perhaps these words are another type of self-acknowledgment, a statement of how awkwardly the words and author will present their own acts of autoethnography.

Readers of this journal are likely to be well versed in ideas of autoethnography. Notwithstanding this, as a relatively recent term, autoethnography is in need of some clarification, some sense of what exactly it means in terms of methodology, intent and application. Overlaps with ethnography are inevitable, as are those with biography, autobiography, postmodernism, memoir, narrative, storytelling, research, subjectivity, trust and the ethics of disclosure, and these links can and do lead to confusion. In offering some early clarification, these introductory pages will also move towards a note of
caution that functions as a note to self, perhaps, as much as to any reader, a note that in some ways might be seen as something of a contradiction in its acknowledgement of autoethnography’s potential failings and self-indulgent, even narcissistic, qualities.

In this context, narcissistic autoethnography finds its home in the construction of predominantly personal narratives — those stories by researchers who locate and regard themselves as the research subject and who then go on to write evocative stories of their experiences. These are often the most difficult forms for autoethnography to accommodate, relying as they do on experience reading as its own analysis and diary-like description of the researcher/writer’s life standing for a retelling that provides an adequate informing of our understanding of a particular cultural context. It can be hard to distinguish these stories from autobiography. In these cases, autoethnography often appears to be used as little more than a relatively research-friendly term, as something that sounds more academically legitimate than autobiography but which has more in common with drawing the reader into the researcher’s own life than using one’s culturally located experiences as something that opens a door onto wider understanding.

Autoethnography’s long-time champions Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner suggest that ‘autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)’ (2000: 740), all of which is true, and when each of these elements is given due time, space and attention, autoethnography can achieve very fine results. The methodology is prone to suffer, however, when healthy emphasis leads to gross imbalance and when research focuses too strongly on the auto. Locating oneself as part of an investigated community leads to insights that are likely to have external value in research terms. Locating one’s self as the sole object of investigation, framed but not significantly informed by the society one belongs to, is likely to lead to some quite reasonable allegations of navel-gazing, and this article would be doing its readers a disservice by sidestepping these problems rather than engaging with them. Despite believing that counter-narratives deserve to be heard no less than the grand narratives of modernism, despite knowing that injustice goes hand in glove with silence, and despite being aware that autoethnography is at core anti-hierarchical and subversive, it is hard to find much immediate argument with Jill Taft-Kaufman’s view that:

Despite claims that autoethnography is a mode open to all, certain narratives are discouraged (discourse that echoes those dead white males, for example), and other stories are favored (especially from voices considered marginalized). Autoethnography is touted as a practice that does not participate in the perpetration of ideology (advocacy and responsibility are two of those thorny issues). However, many of the autoethnographies that appear in journals and at academic gatherings explicitly structure and relate the points in their stories to the doctrines that underlie the practice, imparting an almost formulaic sameness to these supposedly subjective expressions.

(2000)

In a work on father narratives and autoethnographic exploration, Bryant Keith Alexander tells us that he is not yet ready to tell his story. It is a story, he says, that resists its own telling because it might reveal too much of Alexander to the reader as well as to himself (Alexander et al. 2012: 122). In the same article,
Claudio Moreira asks whether he has the courage to ‘go further [...]’ to explore the impossible pain of finding the origins of myself in the Father? Yes, my story resists its telling even when it is already being told’ (Alexander et al. 2012). Hari Stephen Kumar continues in the same vein, explaining that he lives in tension between courage and cowardice, ruptured by treason and tradition (and I suspect between the urge to stay silent and the desire to be published). The article’s concluding statement, that ‘We three men, separated by the materiality of difference [...] have found psychic connections through the articulation of lived experience that provide each other comfort and refuge in our process of becoming, better men’ (Alexander et al. 2012: 131), does little to strengthen autoethnography’s claims, acting instead as a license to write about not writing in a work that ultimately speaks only to itself.

Lest this concern that the ‘auto’ in autoethnography sometimes assumes too large a role appear overly strident, it is tempered here by recognition that no methodology exists without flaws and that no one approach can be all things to all people. This much is true, or True with a capital T. A lower case truth exists in this article’s reluctance to function as an unequivocal endorsement of autoethnography’s claims. Whereas an increasingly large chorus of scholarly voices feel comfortable describing autoethnography in the language of born again hagiography, my own much smaller voice will speak to a middle ground. It does so not through any sense of being undecided so much as to resist the urge to rhetoric over reason.

At a time when university research methods have become seemingly more important than the subjects they are used to scrutinize, and when methodology wars are fought as passionately as they are, it is prudent to step back for a moment and to locate autoethnography, life writing and memoir as what they are: ways of discovering and ways of describing. That many theorists and practitioners commonly refer to themselves now as autoethnographers ultimately does no more than muddy the waters, for whatever autoethnography is, it is not at its best when it reads as a club one can join or more accurately as a careerist bandwagon one can climb aboard. To call oneself a feminist, postmodernist, structuralist or Marxist rightly suggests an overtly politicized way of viewing the world, and it does so in ways that denote causality between viewpoint and description, between seeing and telling. Whilst working through autoethnography is in no way an apolitical choice, it is a choice, and its value lies in its fitness for purpose. One intention of this article is to function as a critical guide for those authors, researchers and educationalists who find themselves increasingly drawn towards autoethnography as a process of extending social and sociological understanding in ways that seek to expose rather than conceal the researcher/writer’s own agenda and role.

Whilst no one would deny the predominance of white, middle-class members of staff at the majority of western universities, Abraham’s DeLeon is somewhat disingenuous in his belief that these same universities would be unlikely to value his cultural experiences (2010: 405). Universities embrace research outcomes much more strongly than they value particular methodological approaches, and if one’s cultural background fuels work that is disseminated appropriately then no vice chancellors are likely to raise objection. My own formative cultural experience is of being a white, working-class male within a community that favoured physical prowess and loyalty over academic success and an interest in the arts, and which was tolerant, forgiving and even supportive of anti-social behaviour: a sexist, violent and
often racist environment, where the life expectancy was some twenty years down on people from more desirable UK postcodes. This was my world until I was well into my twenties, and the values instilled in those years as well as those discarded have had an impact, large or small and for good or ill, on every aspect of my professional life, which is not the same thing as making a career out of the route from that life to this. We carry our experiences with us whether we choose to or not, and the probability that the bulk of my colleagues come from quite different class backgrounds and that the attitudes encountered in my own early world would not be particularly appreciated has resulted in no marked impediment to my career. As researchers and writers, it is not ultimately who or what we are, have been or aspire to be, that is significant so much as what it is we do with those factors: how we develop what matters to us into material that will matter to other people. Like DeLeon, I undertook the process of distancing myself from my cultural roots in order to negotiate a new form of identity (DeLeon 2010: 404), but this is not tantamount to DeLeon’s confession of a sense of ‘anger and shame that [he] decided to turn to the dominant culture in which to find and situate [his] sense of personal identity’ (DeLeon 2010). In my case, the aggressive attitudes I was raised with, by my wider social environment much more than by the nucleus of my family, were so patently at odds with a lifetime of academic study that something had to give. No shame there. I can love the people I grew up with without the need to embrace the views they held then. And who is to say that their own perspectives have not shifted further than my own?

So many researchers are hanging their work on the peg of autoethnography that it is no longer easy to separate those who believe that knowledge is built from lived experience from those who see the documenting of the minutiae of everyday life as an act of easy tenure. University lecturers and researchers are more inclined to describe themselves as learning practitioners than at any time in the past, and this is evidence that the idea of lifelong learning is more than a sound bite; but there is a gap, potential and often actual, between one’s own learning and the value this might have for a wider public.

Despite the vast majority of research stemming from universities being both sound and well intentioned, universities are now also home to a pendulum of pseudo research. At one extreme of the swing is research without tested outcome, whilst at the other we find outcomes that have been arrived at seemingly without any research at all. The rise in a focus on outcomes, where investigation is redundant without result, has been harnessed to the rise in academic publishers, and thus our shelves groan under the weight of unread books. When we leave the library and head to the theatre or gallery we see work in progress, and whilst these might be examples of research (most times I fear that they are not), they tend in my experience of supervision and examination to be light on significant outcomes. Practice-led research thus gives us plenty of practice that takes the place of research rather than operating as research. A consequence of which is that we quickly lose track of the academic books with vocabularies that disguise their core of emptiness: the boxes get ticked and everybody wins their battles in an increasingly pointless war.

Autoethnography invites us to read it as a form of resistance, and we perpetuate this further by locating ourselves as methodological outlaws, unloved and unwanted, misunderstood and misaligned. There are parallels in my own field of performance, where first postmodernism and then practice-led research were seen as resistant. That they were then and remain today resistant to a mainstream majority is not in doubt, but within their own fields
of operation they quickly became more than accepted: they became expected. Hard to locate one’s work as in any significant way ‘outside’ when it is invited to journey along the same corridors of power it purports to resist.

Within autoethnographic performance the researcher/performer and spectator are generally held as being equally important to the work’s significance, with the intention being the creation of an embodied experience for both parties. As a field of study, contemporary performance will often foreground autoethnography through its focus on solo work and the autobiographical (or alibiographical) practice of those artists who pepper the stage, from Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp through to Marina Abramovic, Orlan and Annie Sprinkle. Autoethnography and performance art thus work through similar methods of personality-as-persuasion, and it is no surprise that this results in a mutually supportive embrace (see Spry 2001).

Because questioning autoethnography has come to be seen as opposing it, few balanced arguments emerge. One is either seen as being pro or anti, and publishing in any of the journals that have been set up as a home for autoethnographic research will often (though clearly not always) mean toeing a largely positive line. Sara Delamont opens her 2007 conference paper Arguments against Auto-Ethnography by labelling it as deliberately provocative when in fact her views are eminently reasonable, reasonable inasmuch as using an educational conference as a platform from which to challenge a particular perspective is the absolute norm (Delamont 2007). Yet such is the vulnerability of autoethnography that reason is excused as provocation even in the moment of utterance. The paper’s position (provocation?) comprises the following:

Autoethnography is essentially lazy.
Autoethnography is experiential rather than analytic.
Autoethnography abrogates the duty to collect and analyse data.
Autoethnography is self-indulgent.
Autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically.
Autoethnography has a focus on the powerful.

Delamont is as entitled to her views as anybody else, and in fact they can be boiled down further: laziness, self-indulgence, reliance on experience and a lack of data analysis are each aspects of the same critique, which leaves issues of ethics and power to address. Delamont sums up her laziness argument by saying that ‘our duty is to go out and research […] not sit in our homes focusing on ourselves’ (Delamont 2007), leaving the two more difficult suggestions to speak for themselves.

Is it the case that autoethnography focuses on the powerful? We have seen already that Jill Taft-Kaufman’s view is entirely oppositional to Delamont’s, and my own sliding scale of experience of university life in Europe, Australia and North America leads me to side with Taft-Kaufman.

Ultimately, autoethnography is about ways of writing the self, about the activity of constructing one’s self through words on the page. This article weaves a way through various paths, but its concern at core is less with the ethics of autoethnogaphical practice so much as with forms of writing that are predominantly autotelic. In T. S. Eliot’s terms this refers to work that is about itself (Eliot 1934: 30), a central concern of autoethnography and memoir.
If legitimate autoethnographic research is to have lasting value alongside the respect it so evidently seeks then self-writing has little choice but to break free from allegations of self-indulgence. It is axiomatic that engagement with the constructed nature of writing leads to greater control.

As a partial disclaimer to my own fears, it is worth saying at this midpoint that this article is not intended as some form of charter, and less still a cheat’s charter: a ‘How To’ guide that sets out to defend the indefensible. If all researchers have the freedom and some the wherewithal to write their positions and experience into the frame of a thesis or article, book or performance, then so much the better, because research demands variety and because methodologies are innately unfixed. But this is not the same thing as arguing autoethnography’s problems into merits and self-writing’s potential failings into unqualified success.

It is clear that any easy distinction between writing about autoethnography and writing that is autoethnographic would be a difficult if not quite impossible aim, even if this were the intent of this article. It is a positive feature of our times that academic and creative writing are no longer seen as oppositional factions, just as autobiography and fiction are fruit from the same poisoned tree; poisoned because the act of writing is nothing if not the pursuit of persuasion, nothing if not the manipulation of words to serve their own intent.

We are at a point in history where much that might once have been edited out of academic writing is now as likely to be edited in as left intact, and autoethnography is evidence and application of this. For Ellis, this inclusivity goes so far as advocating research that is likely to ‘start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions [...] to try and understand an experience I’ve lived through’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 737). This excavation and exploration of self, we are told, takes its toll. Ellis elaborates:

[...] honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you can’t stand the pain anymore, well that’s when the real work has only begun. Then there’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you have written or having any control over how readers interpret it.

(Ellis and Bochner 2000: 738)

Ruth Behar adopts a similar line when she writes that autoethnographers need to learn to be comfortable with their own ‘passionate vulnerability’, knowing that their writings will be published in hostile and unforgiving environments (Behar 1996: 13–14). Speaking perhaps to those same hostilities, Kathryn Church is categorical in her belief that foregrounding one’s own voice in research ‘is not narcissism; it is not an egocentric indulgence’ (Sparkes 2002: 216). Church’s assumption is that her subjectivity is filled with the voices of other people and that writing about herself is a way of writing about those others and about the worlds that she both creates and inhabits (Sparkes 2002). If these are reasonably standard claims for autoethnography then they also comprise its standard defence. The notion of autoethnography is regarded with some suspicion in universities, not only in the hard sciences, and the risk of confusing self-indulgence with self-knowledge is as potent as it is seductive. If we acknowledge Primo Levi’s view of writing as ‘the need to tell our story to the rest’, of achieving ‘an interior liberation’ (Levi 2001: 15), we should also heed Charles Marowitz’ dismissal of those who write about
the forms they practice as little more than masturbators (Marowitz 1991), an idea echoed in Blake Morrison's belief that confessional writing without some sort of tempering judgement is akin to masturbation in print (Morrison 1998). Autoethnographers, memoirists and followers of Levi beware.

In the autoethnographical spirit of disclosure and of all things having potential significance there is an assumed imperative to make clear something of my intentions and also something more of my background. But that is no simple thing. No simple thing at all. Doing so involves both choice and judgement. And these two elements, so fundamental to traditional notions of research, are not so easily found in autoethnography, where the specificity of data has given way to the inclusivity-at-all-costs of personal material. Autoethnography's fusing of the self and the social, in D. Reed-Danahay's terms, famously locates the self as innately ethnographic rather than touristic (Reed-Danahay 1997). This is a shift from Karl Heider's 1975 view of self, which referred solely, in the autoethnographic terms he introduced, to the self of the informant (Heider 1977). Autoethnography is now more commonly regarded as a form of autobiographical ethnography in which researchers insert all of the variants of their personal experiences into their investigation and documentation, which is to say that the feelings of the researcher and the researcher's emotional journey are generally accepted as being grist to the mill of research activity, and that which was once thought of as spoiling the research is now going no small way towards creating it. Ellis, Tony Adams and Bochner applaud this as recognition of the innumerable ways that one's personal experiences are able to influence the research process (Ellis et al. 2010).

Whilst not all research endeavours are autobiographic in flavour or intent, many are driven by a strong sense of self: in choosing to investigate certain things in certain ways we make overt our interests, passions, compassions and fears to others, probably more cleanly than we will show them to ourselves. In acknowledging its emphasis on self, autoethnography functions as a way of controlling self-interests through their exposure. Putting a positive spin on this, autoethnography is not so much the ipso facto method towards self-indulgence that its critics often claim as it is a methodology that places the researcher's self-motivations front and centre, bringing to the fore that which other approaches adopt and also conceal.

Because we do not often engage in deliberate, conscientious and self-conscious reflection upon our own processes of experience we do not generally privilege the personal as a form of evidence. Nevertheless, Kristi Gerding Scholten suggests that our acts of communication will always already embody projections of the self, even if at a subconscious level (Scholten 2010), so that we are presenting and/or performing aspects of our selves each time we speak or write.

Autoethnography asks whether we are doing research an injustice by not examining the way we write ourselves and our readers into our findings and outcomes. In a paper focused on another area of research it might be enough to simply state that my subject-specialism is contemporary European theatre, that I teach Performance Studies within a Faculty of Humanities that has a concentration on Communication, Creative Arts and Cultural Studies, and that I do my teaching at a university in West Australia. I might go further at this point and write that I have addressed issues of autoethnography, self-writing and subjectivity in a number of previous works, and that my next major publication is a 2014 book called Remaking Memory: Autoethnography, Memoir and
the Ethics of Self. This would be enough, probably, to place a legitimate frame around at least some of my arguments. But is this enough for a paper such as this, for a paper about autoethnography?

Should I disclose here too, as part of a contract with the reader, my gnawing distrust of, and even at times distaste for, most professional and faux professional performance that I see? Should I explain that few things fill me with the same sense of dread as a night at the theatre, unless perhaps it is conversing with those immersive actors who describe their well-told lies as acts of holy truth? Should I come clean about the fact that I am a reasonably committed advocate of autoethnography even though all of my published writings in the field (including this one) demonstrate more than a little concern for many of autoethnography’s results, just as my commitment to practice-led research in performance is tempered by doubts as to the quality and efficacy of many of the resulting performances (Freeman 2010 and 2013)? Should I cite details of a recent example from my own university where research points were offered to a stand-in photographer for snapping pictures on demand of a project they had no prior knowledge of? Should I write about my own decades-old research for a Ph.D.: research from a more innocent and, if I am to be honest, somewhat less rigorous time, where ethical approval from my study’s participants involved no more than cheerful verbal consent given during a between-rehearsals coffee break, and where my supervisor shrugged and told me simply to ‘get on with it’?

Should I articulate something of my earlier and non-professional, non-academic, life, a life, as I have touched on, that is just about as far removed from the one I currently enjoy as it is possible to imagine? Should I make public and dwell upon formative hardship: upon beatings and poverty and evictions, upon failings and loneliness, picking at the scars of experience until they open into wounds where blood serves as a type of ink? Should I expose my own often questionable relationship with truth and my track record of occasional misdirection, the slipperiness of authorship as it relates to promotion, tenure and all of the murky unseens of university life? Should I write an article about authorial perspective that is not quite transparent enough about this author’s only half-convincing approval of his subject? Should I refer directly to my age, my gender, my physical health, my marital status, the names and whereabouts of my children? Should I, in the spirit of Bryant, Moreira and Kumar’s Tri-autoethnographic Exploration, delve deeply (they would, I know, prefer the term ‘courageously’ (Alexander et al. 2012) into my relationship with my late father, or my very much alive and kicking mother, or my powerfully no-nonsense brother? My personal history, like everybody else’s, grounds my understanding in lived experience, but does this mean that everything I have experienced is of potential value here? Should I explain how I got from factory floors and building sites to university common rooms and from the Sussex coast to West Australia, and what I lost along the way? Should I try to explain how I have come to regard the heat of the sun as a force that bleaches away the melancholia necessary for art, despite the fact that the term ‘artist’ is thrown around Perth like the cheapest confetti?

Should I write of my feelings for an absent Europe and my reluctance to put down roots in Australia, believing increasingly that roots matter and that mine remain steadfast elsewhere despite how welcome I have been made to feel in this new/old world? Should I describe the view from my office window and compare that with the view I have when I work at home, teasing out differences between writing styles and moods and locations? Should 1. And I am inordinately glad that he did. His name is Barry Edwards and he was an expert supervisor. In fact, the difference in the levels of ethical control determined by UK universities then (in the mid-late 1990s) compared to UK, US and Australian universities at the time of writing (2001) is vast. My PhD explored the creative processes of making work with a group of undergraduates, each member of which was working with me on a formally assessed final-year project. At the time, securing students’ consent to include description and analysis of their time spent on the project was easily and painlessly obtained. The notion of changing their names was discussed with the students, my supervisor and my university colleagues, but at the time this all felt a little unnecessary an exaggerated caution, too much like belt and braces I am aware now, as I was then, of the power imbalance and of the difficulty my students might have felt had they not wanted to be included in the thesis, and we all worked as conscientiously as we could (or needed to) at the time to provide spaces for withdrawal. What was interesting and new, is that the students were adamant that their own names should be used. Partly this was about the pleasure that came from the students seeing their names in print. First in the thesis and then when that document was reworked into a 2003 book (Freeman 2003), but I think they also appreciated the sense of mutual trust and informed respect.
I write about friendships kept and enemies made and relatives lost? More pertinently perhaps, should I write about those conversations with students and colleagues that have inevitably impacted on my thinking, often for better and sometimes for worse? Should I acknowledge key writers and performers in the field, those I enjoy and those whose work I find an increasing embarrassment? Should I mention those people here, rather than listing them, if at all, in the article’s end section on referencing? Should I refer directly to the Ph.D. students I have supervised whose struggles, triumphs and occasional evasions have done much to shape this article’s address? Should I be heroically up front in cautioning the reader every time I develop an idea from my own back catalogue of work or rehash a favourite phrase? Is it the case, as Bernadette Barton suggests in regard to her own work, and like Schoelen before her, that almost every element of one’s life becomes data (Barton 2011)?

How much truth is too much truth? Perhaps all truth is good, but not all truth is good to tell. Like many before me, and despite the hard line ethical fundamentalism of scholars such as Martin Tolich (2010), I offer my words in print with knowingly partial truths, leaving out much of that which autoethnography so plainly allows, and I do so for two simple reasons: because in research, as in writing and as in reading, not everything matters equally; and because whilst this is an article about autoethnography and memoir it makes no claims for full autobiographical disclosure, whether real or seeming. That said, the issues facing me here are not radically different to those facing autoethnographers, and indeed because in other contexts my work has been knowingly autoethnographic, it may well be the case that this label as well as some of those instincts remain. Certainly I am aware that at least some of my observations and opinions (‘insights’ feels like too grandiose a term) will be as likely to caution aspirant autoethnographers against their form as to inspire them, and that I will seek to persuade readers through the structure of paragraphs and sentence structure as much as through any claims to impartiality, objectivity and those traditional staples of academic work.

Certainly I am aware that no clean line exists between who we are and what we write, and that no boundary fully separates the researcher from the researched; I am aware too that in my use of the personal pronoun I am invoking Romy Clark and Roz Ivancic’s elegant arguments about the political conventions of self, and that in referring to their work as elegant I am adding nuance to fact (1997). And is that not what writing always does, and is that not what makes our contemporary distrust of writerly truth so compelling? Because we know that writing changes everything, just as we know that the self both is and is not a fiction, that despite a writer’s claim to authenticity there is never anything authentic in the words we read. We know too, after R. Barthes at least, that whilst autoethnography’s implicit and often explicit claim is that this is just me writing my story within the particular complexities of my life, the subject who writes today is never and can never be the same subject who acted yesterday (1989); and we do not need to locate ourselves as disciples of French post-structuralism in order to know this.

Like reading, writing is never even remotely free from discourse, and my own words here are far from innocent. Edward Said would see this complexity as ‘worldly’, as being in and of the world rather than being particularly sophisticated (Said 1994). The ways in which we write are rooted as deeply in the things we have read as in the things we think, and if when we write we locate ourselves within a huge conversation with everyone else who has
ever written we are also engaging in the construction of the ways in which we are asking to be seen. This is the ‘love-me’ that Barthes sees as being present within all writing (1989: 40–41) and which brings into the light the vanities we attempt to conceal behind conventional academic terminology, behind a tone of disinterest that amounts to hope disguised as an attitude that asks, ‘Am I knowledgeable enough for you?’

When taken to extremes, the values and practices of academic writing, those values of rigour and complexity, nuance, accuracy and argument, awareness of the field and the right type of name-dropping, can make disciplines accessible to only small groups of specialized readers. In her book *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012), Helen Sword analysed 1000 scholarly articles from a wide array of disciplines before coming up with some tactics used by those writers she regarded as ‘stylish’ academics. Sword’s argument is that stylish writers aim to tell compelling stories, avoid jargon, provide readers with aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, and write with originality, imagination and creative flair (2012). In her survey Sword noticed extensive use of first-person anecdotes, catchy openings, concrete nouns, active verbs, the use of apposite and illustrative examples, references that show broad reading beyond subject-specialism, and a prevailing sense of humour. In a similar vein, William Zinsser cites warmth and humanity as important parts of non-fiction writing (1988). All of which, after Marowitz, is good news for autoethnographers and memoirists, who know instinctively that every research outcome tells a story, and that a story without reader-engagement is no story at all.

Zinsser’s book is noteworthy on many levels. One of its most significant moments comes when the author shows a penultimate draft of his work, followed by the final version (Zinsser 1988: 10–11). With this deceptively simple device Zinsser exposes his own writing to critical examination, which reveals much about his own processes of self-editing, as well as his levels of confidence and maturity. The lessons in Zinsser’s comparison are profound: we see first and foremost that the author practices what he professes, and we see that he is as prone to sentence-inflation through useless verbiage as the rest of us. What Zinsser illustrates beautifully is how his own writing comes to be as tight as it reads in its finished form, and seeing that words do not often have an untramelled journey from mind to paper is a valuable lesson for us all.

Zinsser’s book provides something of a checklist for writers. Distilling this here is no substitute for reading his work; nevertheless, within the context of this article, his views demand inclusion:

Prune out every word that does not perform a necessary function.

Strip each sentence to its clearest components.

Learn the small gradations between words that seem to be synonyms.

Improve the rhythm of sentences by reversing the order of words.

Vary the lengths of sentences.

Make our first sentences our best, in order to capture the reader.

Take care too with a paragraph’s last sentence, as it is a springboard to the next.

Make each of our sentences lead naturally into the next.
Make our paragraphs short, because readers think in segments.
Read our work aloud to see how it sounds and re-edit in light of this.
Prune out redundant adjectives.
Prune out adverbs.

(Zinsser 1988)

Understanding is about knowing what to do next, whilst skill is demonstrated through knowing how to do it. As my own writing inevitably demonstrates, understanding Zinsser’s words and valuing his views does not automatically mean that we have the skills to develop his advice in and through our own practice, but he remains one of our best guides.

Writing is directed to a certain end, and inasmuch as we attempt to articulate our views in a language that will be deemed acceptable by the readers we desire we exercise a relatively controlled discourse, even when we pay homage to our readers’ abilities to write their own meanings into our words. Writing is the negotiation of controlled intent amid the knowledge that readers will always go their own sweet way, and that all our attempts to seduce and coerce, educate and fool are subject to the very same readerly interference that we also might champion. All of which is to say that awareness of this is what distinguishes writing from typing.

We cannot imagine that which we cannot first remember, and all memory is an act of imagination, and ergo of invention. Words can do many things, and within this article the idea of ineffability is given little or no line space, but we know that words can only do their best and that even the best words fail to accurately record experience. In failing in this attempt, words can occasionally do much more than this. Perhaps the finest six-word example in English remains Ernest Hemingway’s extraordinary idea for a story: ‘For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn’. That Hemingway considered this to be his finest work makes absolute sense. Like much that is great in art, these words achieve maximum impact from minimal means. They paint a picture, and as Picasso reminded us in interviews as well as through his work, art is a lie that tells the truth. It is important to acknowledge the difference between different types of truth as they relate to autoethnography and memoir, for truth is a slippery concept, and for those of us who cannot write like Hemingway or paint like Picasso our attempts run the risk of reducing the truth of experience to something both literary and banal, rather than channelling it into something purposive. Questions of truth go hand in hand with authenticity, another word that is often glued to autoethnography and memoir without much regard for why. The question of what it means to write with authenticity should be laced through every autoethnographical text. Instead, it is often offered as a given: autoethnography is concerned with authentic experience, ergo autoethnography is authentic. It would be a circular argument, were it to be argued at all.

Because my writing here is about autoethnography rather than striving to be it, I have been faced with few of the ethical questions that autoethnography frequently encounters. Nevertheless, an engagement with ethics is inevitable in any autoethnographical discussion. Like Kristina Medford, I know that the difference between truth and truthfulness is considerably less evasive than the difference between truth and fiction, just as I know that writing an objective account of reality is not possible (2006: 853), and that written text
is a lazy machine for dissemination (see Eco 1994: 49). I know too that the
charges of self-indulgence that have been brought against autoethnography
stem from critiques of self-showing over self-knowing, and that the type
of solipsism that offers the argument (whether hidden or overt) that there
can be no thoughts, experiences and emotions other than the thinker’s own
marks much of the egocentricity of the autoethnographer. Solipsism is a fact
of life inasmuch as we can never know other minds in the way that we know
our own, and knowledge of other minds exists on the basis of certain infer-
ences that we make from what evidence of external behaviour is directly
accessible to us. In John Locke’s view, all that we can know directly is the
existence and contents of our own minds, and all insights into other people’s
thoughts are indirect and analogical, inferences from our own sweet perspec-
tives (2008). And yes, on this level all of our acts of communication embody
ideas of the self. But if autoethnography is to function as more than a diary
of the given writer’s thoughts, and if autoethnographic research is to have
any purposive validity, then a frame of critical thinking and external views
is as inevitable as it is desirable. Without that autoethnography can do no
more than erase its own intent and value with every word we read, promising
more than it delivers and delivering no more than the empty promise of
me, me ...

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SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

John Freeman is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Associate Professor at the School of Media, Culture & Creative Arts at Curtin University, Western Australia. Prior to joining Curtin he was Reader in Theatre and Deputy Head at the School of Arts at Brunel University, West London.

Freeman has written more than 80 articles and chapters on contemporary performance, creative learning and research for international publications, and has authored and edited five books: Performance Practice, Tracing the Footprints, New Performance/New Writing, Blood, Sweat & Theory and The Greatest Shows on Earth: World Theatre from Peter Brook to the Sydney Olympics. His next book, Remaking Memory: Autoethnography, Memoir and the Ethics of Self, will be published in 2014, and Future Theatres: 21st Century Manifestos will be published in 2015. Research towards the establishment of an international Ph.D. in theatre is currently taking place in collaboration with a network of European academics; research into the application of ePortfolios for creative learning is ongoing; an original performance text, Salt Water, is being developed into a full-length work; and a series of government-funded outreach workshops (Phoenix) are being written for a UK community action group.

Freeman is a member of the International Society for Education through the Arts, the International Association of University Theatre, Theatre Australia, National Drama, Arts Societies UK, and the International Research Centre for Development and Training. He is a peer reviewer for the Australian Research Council in the areas of humanities, pedagogy, creative writing, playwriting, creative arts, drama, theatre, performance studies, performance and installation art.

Contact: Department of Communication and Cultural Studies, School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts, Curtin University, Bentley, Perth WA6012, Australia.
E-mail: john.freeman@curtin.edu.au

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Applied Theatre Research

ISSN 20493020 | Online 20493029
2 issues per volume | Volume 1, 2013

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