Navel-gazing breaks the heart open
Autoethnography as love-in-action

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**Navel-gazing breaks the heart open: Autoethnography as Love-in-Action**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Qualitative Inquiry</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Abstract:</td>
<td>This paper is an autoethnography as love-in-action in uncertain times. It is an autoethnography that writes into the complicated relationship that I have with my tummy. Through my tummy I revisit the age old and tired argument that autoethnography is navel-gazing and narcissistic. I return here because my therapist-self is still contesting that navel-gazing and narcissism are not the same thing and so shouldn't be coupled together in the critique. Through writing into uncertainty, I find some indignancy and argue that autoethnography that does not navel-gaze is much more likely to be narcissistic because navel-gazing is actually the cure for narcissism.</td>
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</table>
Navel-gazing breaks the heart open: Autoethnography as Love-in-Action

A shorter version of this paper was originally written for the Autoethnography Special Interest Group (2023), a space curated by Stacy Holman Jones at the 19th Annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at Illinois. The original invitation was to write to the theme of “Autoethnography in Uncertain Times”. This paper then developed into a keynote presentation for the 8th Annual Critical Autoethnography Conference (CAE), Melbourne. CAE is another special space that is curated by Stacy Holman Jones, alongside Dan Harris. With Love-in-Action as the CAE conference theme this paper then came to be about Autoethnography as Love-in-Action in uncertain times.

This paper starts with, and then later ends with, uncertainty. Writing autoethnography in uncertainty, requires a belief in this world (Deleuze, 1989, p.173), or perhaps as Elizabeth Allotta (2023) writes, an “intense belief in life” because there is no more certain world. But there are uncertain times that are just more uncertain than others when there seems to be more at stake and when belief in the tenacity of our lives and the demand for our sustained presence in the world becomes more challenging. This paper is about those times, when difference overpowers repetition, and we seek patterns, shapes, and maps. Something to hold.

There was nothing exceptional about the 14th of December 2020, at least not at 72 Queen

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1 This paper cites hopefully all the conference papers that were heard on the days prior to the sharing of this presentation. This began accidentally, as the words lingered and echoed through my final edits – but it became something else, more purposeful, a way of sharing space, or a coming together of community. This paper would have been better with the inclusion of the papers that were delivered in the afternoon after this one, yet as will also become clear, my listening has severe limitations.
Street in Edinburgh, where I drew in the lens. Nothing happened on that day other than perhaps a delayed reaction to an event, but it was the day where I lost my belief in the world, where “feelings had been cast off into the darkness for too long” (Araki, 2023) and the day I hit the bathroom floor.

Thinking with the provocation of autoethnography in uncertain times led me to this tiled moment. But is this moment meaningful? This question, that perhaps haunts every autoethnographic writer, unwittingly led me back into the age-old argument that autoethnography is both navel-gazing and narcissistic. Many autoethnographers have already fought the battle against this persistent critique and won already for the rest of us and written directly on this topic (for example see Adam & Ellis, 2012, Pelias, 2018, Poulos, 2020). There are also post qualitative researchers that advocate for some navel-gazing such as when Hendricks and Koro write, “though it was (admittedly) a bit odd, we found that navel-gazing spawned some useful ways to think about our research practice and palpate some methodological concerns” (2023, p.534). I am coming late to the conversation with the work already done. At the same time, there is something leftover that still rests uneasy with me. It is not so much that I do not recognise the problematics of research that focusses on the “I”. There are autoethnographies out there that are narcissistic, just as there is in any kind of research, regardless of methodology. The auto is of course problematic, and I always seek to trouble the anthropocentrism of the auto, and have playfully referred to autoethnography as “ethnoautography” (Murray, 2021b) that puts the world first and importantly before the individuation of the I. But I still find my therapist-self contesting that navel-gazing and narcissism are not the same thing and therefore should not be coupled together in the critique.
Therefore, this paper is a sharing of a process of approaching autoethnography as love-in-action in uncertain times. Through writing into uncertainty, I find some indignancy and argue that autoethnography that does not navel-gaze is much more likely to be narcissistic because navel-gazing is actually a cure for narcissism.

I return here to the day I collapse on the bathroom floor in a delayed reaction to the encountering of a change that could not be embraced. I sit rocking on the cold tiles, and for the first time, I am not able to find my way back up onto my feet. But the bathroom floor is no place for a mum, especially a now single one. I reach for the book on the floor, the one with dried soapy bath water stiffening the pages. I tear apart the stuck together pages and my eyes fall on the words, “Go get a pen. Stop crying so you can write this down and start working on it tonight.” (Hooks, 2014, p. 28). I write to heal. I journal senseless random thoughts, I use an ‘emotions wheel’ to tiptoe into the feelings that I cannot dare to name alone, I write whatever sensations my body grants me access to, and I keep writing to get up off the floor.

My writing to get well is an obtuse writing, leading to a reactive, bitter, and resentful flow of disappointed words. My personal pain, my own grief and traumas, my own individual dramas, hit me with such intensity that it becomes hard to hold space for this world beyond them. This writing has an intended primary audience of one; me. In my mind’s eye, I imagine my clients, pulling me to my feet, needing their therapist back, in the way she used to recognise herself, strong as a pair of old boots. But I let go of their hands. My flood of emotions overwhelms my capacity for compassion and so its fatigue takes over. On the bathroom floor I unearth that burn-out is real and I pause from seeing my clients and instead I become one.
I tell my therapist, Matilda, about the practice of writing autoethnography. I tell her about my writing to get well, being unpoetic and sensationless writing that navel-gazes. She asks me what needs to happen for me to be able to write again in service of others and what might need to happen before I can see clients again.

To these questions all there is, is an emergence of a silence that hold the impossibility of an answer. I look at my therapist on the screen and shrug my shoulders. This must have only been our third session, and lockdown has moved us online. I didn’t know until I saw Matilda at home, that she lives in a barge on the canal. And as she searches my face for answers, I am hit by the rainbow string of falling circles against the dark wooden panelled wall. And in this moment of her witnessing, and in her following of my gaze, an encounter and event is set that will transform the way I write and the way I love, as if there is a distinction.

Matilda tells me that each circle is called a chakra, the Sanskrit world for wheel. She decides that the encountering between the chakras and my hungry gaze is a sign that she should abandon the usual psychodynamic concepts from the British Object Relations School she usually works with, and instead go with the in-act of the barge-on-canal therapy system, without knowing if it will work. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), to sense the concept as an experimental tool is to suggest that concepts “are not pieces of a jigsaw puzzle but rather the outcome of throws of the dice” (p. 35). Today the dice lands with the number seven and with the intelligence of the seven chakras.

Matilda said, that despite a broad engagement with the chakras across the world that she thinks they are a closed practice. She didn’t feel she had the authority to teach them to me as her teachings would be based on her understanding that had largely come from an Anglo-
American translation, rather than original sources like the Vedas and Upanishads or other texts written by Sanskrit scholars. In translation, the chakras have been taken out of context and repackaged with some of the applied psychological aspects come from western practices.

Matilda said that she often thought that the west repackages many spiritual practices to make it about self-healing as opposed to being in service of the other. She shared her reading of bell hooks, who writes:

Much as I enjoy popular New Age commentary on love, I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community. It requires conscious practice, a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act. Spiritual life is first and foremost about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness.

(2018, p. 107)

Matilda thought carefully and this time I searched her face for answers. Eventually she spoke. She decided that we could proceed with the barge-on-the-canal therapy system, but that this system would be built on the principles of love-in-action, that self-healing would be about healing to be in service of the other again, to write for those still to arrive, to hold clients again and to focus on community. And that rather than think explicitly with the chakras we could think of forcefields located in our bodies, different forcefields of affects and intensities.

My therapist tells me there are three forcefields on the bottom and three on the top.

“That’s only six,” I say. She tells me that there is really six plus one. She tells me there is one in the middle. The one in the middle is a bridge between the lower and upper force-fields. She
tells me she thinks this bridge is where I need to be able to write again for others. But first, the way there, is through navel-gazing.

The lower three forcefields Matilda explains are in the abdomen and need attended to when our lives are precarious, like when we hit bathroom floors, or when we are dealing with some hard stuff, or if we are in survival mode. These first three forcefields are also the place of our shadows and our humanness. They must be worked through, but if we dwell here for too long then this is when the practice becomes about individual self-improvement and when we fall into neoliberal ideas of wellness. Instead, Matilda explains that we should aspire to be what Frank Fools Crow, a Lakota medicine man and Sun Dance chief referred to as a “clean hollow bone” (Mails, 2001), meaning that we should be open to receiving and learning and healing, and then taking on the taking the next step beyond our own improvement and into a responsibility of passing moments of survival on to others. The navel-gazing is done to eventually lift our gaze out of the abdomen and to reach the bridge, out of the navel and into the heart.

Matilda tells me that the term navel-gazing is figuratively used to describe those self-absorbed with their own thoughts and concerns at the expense of engaging with the world around them.

In therapy, it is a common belief that narcissistic clients are slow to change, and robustly defend against self-reflection, afraid of finding something repugnant inside, that will shatter the

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2 “Thomas Mails, with whom Fools Crow (1890 to 1989) entrusted his life story and work, fashioned the final English wording of Fools Crow’s extensive communications. This is common among those, such as John Neihardt and Richard Erdoes, who worked closely with Lakota holy men to convey their lives, practices and worldviews to an English-speaking audience”. (Drew Chastain, 2018)
image they have fought so hard to create. Narcissistic writing may enjoy this centring of self, may be attracted to this work. But narcissism does not cope well with the deep introspection of the true meaning of the work of navel-gazing, the type that means being open to our shadows and to changing ourselves. It does not cope well with the kind of navel-gazing that autoethnographers might do, where the writing may not take a picture from our best angle, accentuate our sexuality, or uphold our best-food-forward image.

Navel-gazing originates from the Sanskrit phrase, Nabhi chakra Drishti (Norbu, 2008, p.15). It entails a focus on the navel that turns one’s intention inward, the navel being the centre of the wheel. The ancient Greek word for navel gazing is *omphaloskepsis* – *omphalo* meaning navel and *skepsis* meaning inquiry. The Louvre hosts 4 Roman statues depicting philosophers in a circle, staring down at their navels. The following session, with Matilda on her barge, and me having moved from the bathroom floor to the kitchen table, Matilda asks me if I am now ready to join them and to begin some navel-gazing.

**The First Forcefield: Safety**

She asks me to put my hand low on my tummy and to start with the surface of the first forcefield. The forcefields are linked to age, and this one is from the age of zero to seven. She asks me to notice what sensations or stories come up. I put my hand there, low on my navel and close my eyes. My first response is to feel the swell of the fat that I built in protection from sunny days under the trees where I would feel the touch of a man, caressing too gently, a body far too young with a gaze too intense. The man overwhelmed my capacity to stay in my body. So that day, under the trees, at aged three, I packed up and left my home in my body, and
severed connection to my physical self. Ever since then I have lacked a strong embodied presence for those who have needed me to be in relation to them.

Matilda tells me that it sounds like the process of writing autoethnography begins here. She says that before I even think to write for the others, I must set up the conditions to be able to write from a place of safety. As she talks, I gently caress my skin along my arm and the little hairs rise to greet my gentle touch. I write in my notebook:

> Autoethnography begins with finding safety in your body and feeling safe enough to come back home to the sultry mystery of your flesh. We must come home to “our blood, bone and muscle of knowledge” (Spry, 2016, p.18).

Matilda was aware that I had recently got myself into a physically safe place from the more recent dramas, but that my nervous system had not yet caught up. I now was safe, but didn’t always feel it, and when friends and family were asking me questions to help them understand the events, I felt a duty to revisit these places. But the sharing threw me back into a place that didn’t feel emotionally safe. She told me that a good place to start if this is the case is in the knowing that you don’t have to share what you write, and you can first write for yourself. You don’t owe anyone your private world, and certainly not at a pace that is too fast, or through a dive that is too deep. Autoethnographers could lean into bell hooks' helpful distinction between privacy and secrecy here when she writes:

> In our culture privacy is often confused with secrecy. Open, honest, truth-telling individuals value privacy. We all need spaces where we can be alone with thoughts and feelings - where we can experience healthy psychological autonomy and can choose to
share when we want to. Keeping secrets is usually about power, about hiding and concealing information” (2018, p.77).

As a writer, it is possible that you can have a felt-sense of the difference, and the “truth will ring-true” (Tuck, 2023). Tuck writes in a letter to communities, researchers and educators to think about the problematics of “damage-based research”, research that shares pain and trauma stories of Native communities, city communities, and other disenfranchised communities, in the hope of holding accountable, yet “simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless” (2009, p. 409). This letter causes a pause, to think of the cost of the sharing of stories, to whom and for what purpose. For this reason, Tuck advocates for “desire-based research” that shares the pain but also the more-than-that, the wisdom and the hope, that adds nuance to stories and shows much more than brokenness. There is then a politics in the pause, a pause that serves not just to create safety but also to create intention.

I pull out my notebook and write:-

To create safety in my writing, I write first for me and then pause. Do I feel a strong consent to sharing this writing and have it seen and touched by another? Does this story show my desire alongside my damage – the broken alongside the more-than-broken? And then I must “trust in my gut that the risk is actually worth it” (Sundbye, Henderson & Lyons, 2023).

Matilda noticed my hand still hovering awkwardly on the lowest point of my abdomen. She resolved we needed to spend some more time with our gaze on this first forcefield. She reassured me that it often takes the longest. That is why we can be accused of navel-gazing for too long. “But” she said, “we can’t do anything at all, until we feel safe in ourselves to take
these uncertain risks into the unknown.” She asked me what the biggest risk would be for me in
the writing.

I pause to think and then share with her that I would worry that people might cut me off.

Between members of our family sat a shame that I did not understand, perhaps none of us
could understand. But I did understand that these emotions seemed not to be there when I was
not there. She responded by sharing what she believed to be a human universalism with me.

That we are all afraid of abandonment and it is a fear that will lurk at the corners of most
autoethnographic pages, especially for those authors in which it is a real possibility. She tells
me the fear is not irrational and that people may abandon others for what they write. But
being abandoned in adulthood is not as unsafe as being abandoned when you are a small child.
Abandoning ourselves is now more dangerous. For that reason, we must consider if not writing
may be an act of self-abandonment.

Matilda suggested it would be a good idea to think about the strategies that I developed when I
was little to keep myself safe from being abandoned. She pointed out that some of us still use
these strategies in our adulthood, even though they were strategies developed by a very young
part of us and may no longer be the best ones. I close my eyes and think of mine. I realise that
I depend on a part of me that has remained around three years old to keep me safe. Matilda
smiles and says that these parts of us are the “children stitched in our hearts” (Baak &
Chapman, 2023). I share with her the ogre that lives in my tummy.

I tell her that the ogre has a he/him pronoun. He thinks he is powerless and weak because he is
not able to defend me from the man under the trees, or perhaps even just in the maintenance
of boundaries in general. He is a pretty lazy defender and often sleeps but he wakes up when I
am most afraid. His preference is to hide, but if he can’t hide, then he has his club to smack people with in an aggressive manner. Usually, these smacks are verbal. There are occasions when he has hit out at the wrong people and at the wrong time. So, though he has tried his best to keep me safe, he is much more likely to have me abandoned. Matilda smiled and said that there is a saying that people don’t leave you for your wounds, but they leave you for your weapons. She asks how he impacts my writing.

I tell her that I think I experience two types of anger; an anger that is blaming, destructive and defensive and is about providing armour, and another that feels more mobilising and empowering. I tell her that I associate my ogre with the first kind. The ogre still resents and wants to blame and wants to win the battle, rather than to soften into an acceptance that feels helpless and beaten. “Yet” Matilida said, “You say helpless, but you also described that kind of anger as the more empowering place.” I furrow my brow that holds that confusing truth.

Matilda tells me that my description of these two types of anger resonates with the thinking from Resmaa Menakem (2021) refers to pain as either dirty or clean. I crumple my nose at this perceived binarized and over-simplified approach to emotion. Matilda concedes that the “dirty” doesn’t mean that the pain or emotion felt is bad, but rather is a dirty window that stops us seeing clearly. The blaming-anger Matilda suggests is what Menakem (2021) may refer to as a dirty anger. Dirty feelings come from our most wounded parts that are rooted deeply in a fear that smears our reflexive windscreens and stops us from seeing the way forward.

Integrity is our bucket of soapy water and the sponge that acts as our guiding force in our writing, it leads us to a writing that is in line with our grown-up values, and not those of our little wounded ogres.
She tells me that I will know when I am in the “clean” because my whole body will feel less constricted and more open, empowered with the way forward. My brow rests in this clarity, but I sense the ogre responding with something rather edgy in my tummy. I realise that he needs me to write with a practiced vulnerability (Spry, 2011), a vulnerability that will leave me feeling strength rather than over-exposure. As Spry writes “Practiced vulnerability is a purposeful movement into the liminality...of the critical creative process [of becoming]...Practiced vulnerability does not leave the performer exposed, but rather open to the strength gained through critical reflection” (2011, p 167). I decide that a practiced vulnerability is a vulnerability that is shared only when I have done the work of cleaning the windows and have moved into a position where my body opens.

My little ogre seems to like this concept as he begins to soften, and I can feel my body opening once more. He likes that we will take it slow, that we will critique the situation together before we show our writing to anyone else. He meets me halfway, so in return I meet him too. I fathom that one never wants to be too clean. I let him know that if it is the right person and if it is the right time, then he can still occasionally use his club. He nods a contented nod and falls asleep.

Matilda suggested that I practiced Tami’s concept for the next week in my writing practice and see where it takes me. She told me that in the original chakra system the first chakra is known as the root chakra and the element is earth, and that maybe writing outside would be helpful. So, I wrote outside like no one was watching, a “writing without ethics” (Andrew, 2023). It was writing that I did not consent to share. I write on the front of my notepad “whatever is shared here remains here – it is a safe space “(Tan, 2023). I found nature spots in the urban area in
which I lived. I would sink my feet into the earth and watch the clammy soil rise between my
feet. I started to feel rooted even if my roots were no longer clear. The earth grounded me,
held, nourished, and provided for me. My idea-seeds for writing found somewhere to grow.
The urban nature spot became the sit and write spot I would return to, but it wasn’t the only
place I returned. Here, in the shadow of the earth, I also began to return home to the
earthiness of my own body, creating new warmth in the dampness of my left-behind bones. In
my notepad I write:–

*Autoethnography as love-in-action requires the writer to first create conditions of safety. No
matter where the writer situates themselves, they must write from a safe enough home in their
body. One must gaze at their navel until they sense safety has arrived there.*

**The second forcefield: Equanimity**

I connect to Teams and find Matilda in her usual place, the light of Spring finding highpoints on
both of our cheeks and blurring us each against our different backdrops. Now more at home in
my body Matilda asks me to place my hand, still on my abdomen, but slightly higher up, at the
orange dot, and to continue my navel-gazing. She asks what is present here and what comes
up for me as I focus on this point. I place my hand there and close my eyes. Nothing comes up.

I tell Matilda that maybe I need to feel into this alone. Later, in the privacy of my bedroom, I
stand in front of the mirror and raise my hand to this forcefield. I look at myself and cast my
gaze down to my navel.

I touch the scars of me caesarean sections that I never wanted, and I prod the sensationless
point where the knife cut through my nerves and lifted my child out from my now numb
surfaces. I nip a little harder. There is nothing, no sensation, no emotion. I ask myself what the point is of returning to this body just to find a barren land.

I tell Matilda that my tummy though curvaceous provides nothing generous for my writing. She said that this forcefield is second as once we feel safe, then we can start to feel our emotions. She said that if forcefields have rights, then the right attached to this one is our right to feel. She asked me if I felt I had this right. I feel something bubble slightly under my hand before it fades away. Matilda speaks patiently to me and reminds me that I am feeling *something*. I am feeling numb. She suggests that I lean into that and that I practice writing from there.

That night I dream of another young part of self, another child that is stitched into my tummy, more timid than ogre, maybe around eleven. She has hidden my feelings. For her to show me them, she first must trust me to be able to stay, and not to just leave my body again at the first sign of trouble. But her trust is not easy to earn. Each day I write to (re)connect with her, and I write, dance, walk into numbness. One day numbness tingles its way into low level anxiety. I write in my notebook:

*Writing autoethnography requires patience with the self. Forcing ourselves to feel is violent.*

*We can only lean into what is present. But it all counts, it is all grist for the mill.*

Matilda beckons me to be similarly patient with my now less than new emotional baseline of low-level anxiety that threatens to linger as long as numbness. She suggests that the child-stitched-in-my-heart, is testing my ability to tolerate this new terrain. So now I dance-walk-write to this feeling too, for days on end.

Then one day, the child-stitched-in-my-heart takes a chance on me, and she opens the gates. I walk towards her though she nestles beyond wildflower meadows of grief, refreshing waterfalls.
of resentment, pink cherry blossom trees of bitterness and searingly hot jasmine rivers of rage.

As I push towards her, I have never felt so painfully yet deliciously alive. I could feel. The problem was that I did not know how to handle these feelings and so the emotional peaks blew me like a piece of paper in a hurricane, my movements a powerless reaction to the force of them all.

The shadow of this second forcefield Matilda tells me is reactiveness. The task of the first forcefield is to create safety but the task of the second is to develop a capacity for a (com)passionate and boundless equanimity. During the Spring of this second forcefield, I told Matilda week after week about how my reactions gave in to my emotional hurricanes; I had fallen out with people over silly things, nearly crashed my car and been short with my children. She told me that she knows of “Eight Worldly Winds (AshtaLoka) [that can blow you around like a piece of paper. She said] they include praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure, gain and loss.” (Dissanayake, 2015, p. 367). She said that in my writing I must be reflexive around each of their appearances and ask myself if my writing is a reaction or a response. Our feelings, she reminds me, are just impermanent “invitations to hidden truths” (Cadieux Van Vliet & Hanscombe, 2023) and though we can accept the invitation and must write with them, we cannot let them overtake us as the authors of our stories. A difference between journaling and autoethnography is that journaling holds a space for the validity of our

# Footnotes

3 Though I write about Matilda, and while it is true that I came to the chakras through Matilda – most of my knowledge from the chakras I learned came from a programme I embarked on called Experience the Seven Senses.
reactions but autoethnography requires us to hone the capacity to play with the materiality of the emotion so that we can respond.

I take up my friend’s invitation to do SUP board yoga because of the synchronicity of her asking me on the same day that Matilda told me the element of the second forcefield is water.

Oceans are yet another one of my fears. I am afraid of their chaos and depth. The irony of them being mirrors to our own internal chaos and depth is not lost on me. The day we get there, the ocean is a little too choppy for my liking. But the goal of SUP board yoga is to find our balance, or our stillness, in the movement. My intention is to find my equanimity on the board. We paddle out some distance before we stop. While my friend, Rosie, can do a headstand on the board, I spend more time in the water than on the board. Rosie shouts over, “just chill out, try to let go of control.” I realised that as if I were God, I had been trying to stop the water from moving. The ocean wasn’t just going to let me walk on it. I remembered that in the first forcefield I found my roots in the earth. In equanimity, I stay connected to my roots, anchored to earth, finding stillness, which I now know only to be balance while in choppy waters. I remember the words of Elyse Pineau when she writes during lockdown, “Trying to keep my balance on a pinpoint of stillness as the whole world gasped and grieved and burned and yearned for relief, and turned itself upside down, and shook loose all that we knew of it. To be still in the world means you cannot be separate because stillness is not static. Ask a sunflower, tracking the sun on its face in movement” (2022, p.2).

In time, I stay longer on the board, first kneeling, then standing, though not quite on my head like Rosie, my trace-the-sun-sunflower friend. On our last session of this forcefield, Matilda tells
me that I will get caught off guard, and that I will still fall off from time to time, but that this is OK. But the SUP board as equanimity metaphor stays with me and I try to find my balance before I write.

I take out my notebook and write:-

*Autoethnography finds momentary balance on a still point of chaos and is a love letter that pauses to respond instead of react to injustices, betrayals and socio-political events that leave us struggling to live.*

**The Third Forefield: Finding enough (Self) Acceptance**

Matilda admits me into the session and appears on the screen, she has moved further away from the window and nestles in a corner on a stack of cushions. She brought the cascading circles with her and hung them in her new place. She points to the third and announces that she thinks that today I could lift my hand up a little higher on my abdomen to the yellow dot. She said this is the last forcefield that will require me to navel-gaze. She asks me to place my hand just under my ribcage. I shake my head. I tell her that I am not ready, that I still fall off the board too often, still react, still try to control. She tells me that the very fact I want to become perfect with the second forcefield shows that I really need to work on the third.

I do as she asks and reluctantly place my hand under my ribcage. She asks me what comes up for me here. I take a deep breath and raise my shirt, taking a moment to feel into this part of my abdomen. I feel my flesh wobble. I close my eyes trying to find stillness in the bubbling up of the shame of my tummy’s too muchness. Deep breaths barely suffice, and my SUP board sways violently, and the ocean spray wells in my eyes. I hear Matilda say, “It’s OK, you’ve got this.” I self-soothe, find my still point and become aware of my complicated relationship with
my body. I want to do embodied research, but I don’t want to do it in this body. I want to do it in the body of someone who when they raise their arms, reveal a pretty waist band sitting on top of smooth flesh. I feel embarrassed to share this, to be concerned about what I look like. And I admit, its slightly narcissistic to want to do perfect writing from a perfect body.

“Precisely” Matilda says, “this is what this forcefield is about, it is up close to narcissism because it is the home of our wounds, and narcissism is a wound. If we can accept ourselves enough then we are less likely to write about personal self-fulfilling hang-ups, because let’s face it, your readers would never get that time back”! I look at Matilda slightly taken-aback at her rudeness, but her laughter throws me (and my ogre) out of the offence.

She tells me what is important is not what we write about but how we write about it. She tells me she thinks it is important that autoethnographers can make the distinction between a personal suffering and a more societal pain. Bodies are political but individual ruminations are circular and lack both depth and critique. I look concerned. I have many uncontained personal hang-ups. She says that this forcefield is the home of our wounds, but that they share a home with our narratives. She tells me that this is where we store the story that we are too much, but it is also where we store the story that we are not enough (Stanley, 2021, p.4), or that we are unlovable, or stupid. I come to understand that I create my autoethnographies from the same breath that I create the beliefs about the “I” who writes. Matilda told me that in this system, this forcefield in the abdomen, is the home of the mind (not in the head), and it is here that “we get swept away by the process of thinking (Fahey and Hatton, CAE 2023)” too much.

I take out my notebook and write:-
In our autoethnographies the “I” must have enough self-acceptance to stand up against the eye/I that shames so that it can move past its personal suffering and into broader societal issues.

I am reticent to ask Matilda how she suggests we move towards self-acceptance. Since I have been on the bathroom floor, I have been offered many jars overflowing with toxic positivity that aim to pull me out of the womb of the dark night of the soul before I have slayed my demons. I have never turned my nose up at bell hooks, well not until now, when I realised that even she is talking about self-love when she writes:

There was a time when I felt lousy about my over-forty body, saw myself as too fat, too this, or too that. Yet I fantasized about finding a lover who would give me the gift of being loved as I am. It is silly, isn’t it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself. This was a moment when the maxim ‘You can never love anybody if you are unable to love yourself’ made clear sense.

And I add, ‘Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself’ (2018, p.99).

Matilda shift her body across the cushions as she notices my projecting of my disgust and the awakening of my little ogre. The element here is fire, she says, the fire of our anger, but also the fire that can burn our limiting beliefs if we use it well. She says, “All I ask is that you try to accept who you are now, you don’t need to love it yet, baby steps”. She warned me that I will judge others as harshly as I judge myself. Narcissistic writing splits off unwanted and unacceptable parts of itself and displaces them onto others, blaming them for wrongdoing. She
reminds me that blame was one of the eight winds that I needed to be reflexive about in my writing.

Later that day, I decide to dim the lights and try and stand once again in front of my bedroom mirror. I say an awkward hi to myself and then raise my shirt. I put my hand on the third forcefield and navel-gaze. I half-shut my eyes and tenderly stroke my tummy so that the little hairs stand up. It feels nice. I do this daily, in front of the mirror and reclaim myself from the man under the trees. I begin to see my tummy as my vulnerable part of myself that requires my kindness. I decide that for a while at least I will stop focussing on changing it and start focussing on acceptance. I begin to take comfort in this action and find myself gently stroking my tummy whenever and wherever I feel unsettled. This attitude starts to seep through my flesh and into my gut. I want to ask, “does anyone notice anything different about me” (Hogan, 2023)? No, I haven’t changed my appearance, but I got me some nearly-self-love. But we don’t know how to notice. And instead, someone notices my gesture of my tummy stroking and asks me if I am pregnant. And I feel the fire burn at the end of the comment. My ogre sits bolt upright. In my writing I notice that I want to “hold them still with my words and force them to hear my fuck you. Sometimes the other side of love is rage.” (Walter, 2023). Perhaps it is too much that this loving gesture could be just for me and my too much tummy.

The following week, sitting once more at the kitchen table, return to Matilda and tell her that I had tried but inevitably failed. She listens to the tale of my suffering. And after a silence, once again she starts to laugh. She said you can’t own your shadows if you don’t also own your innocence. There is a difference between blaming and holding others accountable. We do not want to blame or seek revenge, but we do not have to protect those that abuse us or oppress
or marginalise us. You just need to find your own line. I work on this. The person who asked if
I was pregnant hurt me with a joke that was a little clumsy, and clumsy jokes are something I
have done a thousand times over. But the man under the trees, well his name was Neil, though
I don’t remember his last name. But if I did, I would tell you. Here, “I am making an aesthetic
ethical choice (Walter, 2023)”.

Deleuze writes, “Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing
else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us” (2004, p.147). For me this suggests
that feeling into our own worth is an ethical demand. Wyatt writes, “I often think of and with
this assertion, puzzling over it, wondering if it is a counsel of passivity and an abnegation of
responsibility. Today...I see it as neither of these. Instead, I understand Deleuze as calling for
stories not to “hit back” but as asking to be seen, witnessed, in all their fullness, complexity and
nuance” (2018, p.142).

I write in my notebook:

To write autoethnography I need to be able to own both my innocence and my shadows so that
I can expand my perceptions of myself rather than blame others for attributes that I myself
possess. It allows me to know the difference between blaming and holding
accountable. Summer drove me from the large window at the kitchen table, and drove Matilda
outside onto the deck. I wished I could have been there with her in person, and noted that my
desire to be alone was subsiding. I knew my tummy intimately by this time and so was feeling
more ready when Matilda told me that she thought we had now done enough navel-gazing and
that it was time to lift our gaze out of the navel and up to the heart. The heart she reminds me
is the forcefield that bridges the lower and upper chakras. Despite my readiness, I admit to
noticing my own resistance to moving from the lower forcefields that allow me to simply focus on getting well. The time struggling to get off the floor has been the darkest of times, but also significant, humbling, transformative, and cathartic. I have found a curious comfort in the aftermath of the bathroom floor. Getting better doesn’t provide the same relief as felt when a horror movie shifts scene from night into a sunny morning, but instead rather like lazy Sunday mornings under the duvet. But the bottom forcefields, like warm beds, are not meant to be forever homes.

Matilda tells me that the shadow of the forcefield of the heart is isolation. She says that I need to make a choice between writing in service of others and opening my heart up again, or whether to stay under the duvet. She asks if I will cross the bridge.

I know that she is right. I need to return to writing that exists outside of my journal and my navel. Ron Pelias said so, when he said that autoethnography is the methodology of the heart (Pelias, 2004). He writes that “without our hearts pumping the words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched” (2004, p. 7). I don’t want to be both fat and outdated - so I slowly nod when she asks if I am ready. But I ask her to give me a minute and I pull out my notebook. I write:

_Navel-gazing in autoethnography enables the researcher to create safety, find equanimity and broaden their perspectives on themselves so they do not blame others in their writing. Navel-gazing such as this, I think, should be a necessity for all research._

OK, I tell her, lets go.

_The fourth forcefield: The heart as the bridge between writer and reader_
Following instructions, I place my hand on my heart and close my eyes. Matilda asks me what is there. Straightaway, without hesitation, what is there appears as if it had never stepped aside. I hear his voice and his words, “I don’t love you anymore”. I inhale sharply and quickly lower my hand and open my eyes wide. She urges me to go on. She tells me that the forcefield of the heart still holds a task. She tells me that rejection is the heart’s wound and that if I truly want to learn love-in-action then I must keep my hand there and allow rejection deep inside my heart so that it can be the very thing that I use to break it open. Staying with the heart means that even in the face of rejection, when you tend to most want to reject yourself too, this is when you must choose yourself most fervently. I slowly raise a trembling hand again and feel the beat of this passionate organ’s yearning as his words break it open. “It’s good” says Matilda, who never rescues me from the teachings of my pain. Matilda tells me that it is when we defend against living with a broken heart, when we try to stop it from breaking, that is when we live defended as if it already is broken (Gangaji, 2015).

She tells me that if you “don’t think and don’t feel, you will learn to construct walls of your own” (Doherty, 2023). With Matilda holding me my heart breaks open. It breaks open the bonds of romantic love. It breaks it open beyond a love where one plus one equals two (Murray, 2021a).

At home, I read bell hooks who writes, “Learning faulty definitions of love when we are quite young makes it difficult to be loving as we grow older… Most of us learn early on to think of love as a feeling…That process of investment wherein a loved one becomes important to us is called “cathexis.” We need to instead, “understand love as the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth” (2018, p.36). A penny drops for me that love is not something that I
should feel, but instead something that I could become, where compassion is no longer an
effort but just a simple exhale of an acknowledgement of connection. This feels like a shift, and
I find a home now not just back in my body but also in my heart space, and even though I at
times leave that home, for a wild night out with my little ogre, I know how to find my way back
to the “society of moving love molecules” (Chapple, 2023). This sounds great to Matilda, but
she wants to know also how I will receive love, how I will have my own “heart belongings” (Gill,
2023). She tells me the element of the heart is air. If I exhale love, then how and when will I
inhale?
I write to this in my journal and realise that previously I was not actually ready to truly receive
love, not courageous enough to be the beloved of a partner. I also realise that I do not need as
much love as I thought I did, love then being attention and affirmation, but that when I do
receive love, I inhale it and hold it deeply inside. I find it in surprising places. I find it in “my
people who will hold my passion and my peace” (Iosefo, personal communication, 28
September 2023), they are lovers sometimes, but also with friends, with colleagues, with
students. Perhaps it was always there but I didn’t notice it or let it count. In losing my partner,
and though I truly didn’t want to let go of my family unit, I started to feel something new that I
hadn’t truly felt, “something other...I started to feel... loved (Sundbye, Henderson & Lyons
2023).” And now I have lots of true loves. In letting go I found receptivity to new ways of
living/loving.
I take out my notebook and write:
It is funny how people think that autoethnography is research about the self. Writing from the I can never be about the self. In a methodology of the heart, there is no isolation and no disconnection.

The following week Matilda tells me that she has someone looking to start counselling with her but that she is now at capacity. She asks me if I would like her to refer this client to me for some counselling. I am not sure. She tells me she thinks I am ready and that I can be there for others again. I receive this trust in me and inhale it deeply and hold it inside. I reply yes and prepare to exhale.

The fifth Forcefield: Finding expression

Autumn has arrived by the time Matilda, and I lift our gaze up further from the navel and move on to the upper three forcefields. Matilda tells me that the upper three forcefields are about creation, and that only after working on the lower forcefields, through navel-gazing, can we create with integrity. They are focussed on a wider meaning than ourselves. This time, ready and knowing the drill, I raise my hand to my throat; the site of the fifth forcefield. It is sensitive to touch, and I swallow gentle coughs to scratch the sensitivity away.

What comes up? Matilda asks. I take my time to check-in and stuttering into language I tell her that I feel an inhibition nestled there, that is hosting a fear of exposing an ignorance that makes accountability threatening. I become aware of an emergent me, but a me in relation to the rest of the world, an auto in relation to an ethno. I start to become concerned about the product at the other side of process. I wonder how my writing could contribute generatively, but also how it could harm, reiterate normativity and how I might not even necessarily know the ways in which it might be deleterious.
Matilda questions why my hands have moved from my throat to my ears. The rumblings of my throat sent vibrations that irritated my ears, making them itch into a deep discomfort that I cannot reach. She looks at me and tilts her head to the side. She asks me if I am speaking about the positionality in the world from which I write. I slowly nod but the itch is not quite scratched. I realise that I personally write from a colonial settler positionality, a positionality that can be “generally understood as [a] particular assemblage of [an] unmarked structure of certainty that guide(s) normative perception and may enact epistemic violence” (Robinson 2020, p.10). I understand I must get more specific about the positionality of my particular “I” and the narrow perception that it affords me to write with and from. I know that there are concrete things I can do from this situated place such as include scholars from different positionalities whose knowledges have been so deeply discredited but inclusion/recognition/accommodation themselves are troublesome and can “on the surface sound(s) like a socially progressive act, [but] performs the very opposite of its enunciation” (Robinson 2020, p.6)⁴. It is not a corrective (Jackson 2020, p.12) potentially because nothing need necessarily have been changed at the level of perception. Matilda directs thought in her reminder that my hands are still on my ears. I explain that although I am a therapist and have built a career in the act of listening, and even teach people how to listen, that I am only now discovering that I actually have ears of armour or “tin-ears”, a description given to settler

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⁴ For example, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) writes that practices of inclusion (and recognition) do not provide protection from anti-blackness and even makes black humanity “infinitely malleable” (2020, p.12). the ways in which anti-blackness presents itself. See also Saidiya Hartman (2022).
colonial forms of perception that are not even aware of sounds they don’t hear (Robinson 2020, p.45).

I move my hand back to my throat and tell Matilda that I can give her an example of not-hearing through a quote that Dylan Robinson offers as he opens his book “Hungry Listening” (2020, p.1). The quote is, “The Eskimos are such an astonishingly unmusical race that the composer really has to wring his material to make it musically presentable. There is a marked similarity between an Eskimo singing and Sir Winston Churchill clearing his throat.” (Schafer, 1961).

We hold that quote between us until Matilda tells me it reminds her of a book she read whereby many of the case studies showed “foundational differences between Indigenous and settler modes of listening are guided by their respective ontologies of song and music” (Robinson 2020, p.41). “In what way?” I ask.

She tells me that western song is often for aesthetic reveries and how we might listen to it as part of our daily way to focus on our moods, or to provide atmosphere in our homes (DeNora 2000). This strikes a chord with me, and I tell Matilda that I often listen to music when I am journalling or have people visit. I wonder if my writing serves some of the same purposes of getting me through the day. She tells me that “Indigenous song, in contrast, serves strikingly different functions, including that of law and primary historical documentation” and that song may also be used as evidence in court (Robinson 2020, p.41).

In response to Matilda telling me these differences I realise my not knowing how to listen is not a passive not-knowing, but is active and demands awareness. Matilda reflects that in this forcefield our pace has been slower, we have been more silent, created more space. She
suggests that I develop a slow writing practice; a practice that waits at the shore and pays
attention to where I tread, the lines I cross, the boundaries I breach. A writing that pauses to
make space for who and what it cannot hear, cannot know. A writing that disrupts its own
aesthetic charge. She wonders if I need a writing practice that pays attention to what it
extracts, appropriates, and how it evaluates itself. This feels like momentum, a way of taking a
slow step forward. My ears stop itching quite as much, enough at least for me to think I might
be able to scratch away at my tin-ear enough to hear “Indigenous calls for increased aesthetic,
political, and kinship accountability” (Robinson 2020, p.31).

I take out my notebook and write:

*To write autoethnography as a love-in-action, I/we/you) need to know who the fuck your
writing-I is in relation to community, and to the world. I understand that my writing practice,
from a settler colonial positionality, must seek to make space for the possibility of sound that it
cannot hear, as much as it seeks to show and to tell.*

The sixth forcefield: Living in the inquiry

Before raising my hand to the sixth of the seven forcefields I tell Matilda that I had hoped to
have finished this barge-on-the canal therapeutic work by now. Winter was already here, and I
was already about to head off to the Critical Autoethnography conference in Melbourne, and as
typical for me on the way to a conference, the work was not yet complete.

Matilda reminds me that the actual chakras don’t work in a linear or progressive way where we
make a “hopeful start, with a messy middle, and crawl to the end” (Fitzpatrick, Iosefo, Park,
Pears-Scown 2023). Instead, you learn to know which one that you need to attend. The effect
is cumulative rather than progressive. And she tells me we never really truly leave the very first
forcefield anyway because in our connection to each we are not safe until we are all safe. She said that we have done enough work to already have lifted out of the navel, and it is time to share the messy process in community with others. I agree to go with the imperfection of this process. But before I go, she asks me to put my hand on top of my head and asks what I feel. I can’t find an answer. I sit back down, and I tell her that this seems clear now, I do not yet know enough to share this work. Matilda said, “In the introduction to this paper you told the reader that this paper starts in uncertainty and then also ends here, in uncertainty. Therefore, it sounds as though this is the end”. The last forcefield I discover from Matilda is exactly that. It is about living in the inquiry, being a living, walking question mark (Mia Livingston 2023), because knowledge is greater than the human, and that it is only in not knowing that we are available for the world to speak through us. This is the love-in-action where “love has its potential for deep revolution” (Teo and Ming, CAE 2023).

As I sit in the airport I pull out my journal and write,

*Autoethnography is still about navel-gazing, but it is not about the gaze towards our personal bellies but to the belly of the earth. Autoethnographic writing as love-in-action is not narcissistic as it troubles the I without putting it under erasure, keeping it for work it can do in telling stories in community. It is not narcissistic writing, it is a gentle stroke, a loving gesture, this time, to the belly of the earth, a soft gaze to the navel of our planet, and to a wisdom much greater than ours.*

References


Rowman Altamira.


