

Rhetorical Autoethnography

Brett Lunceford*

Although autoethnography has been used in other fields, rhetorical scholars have been slow to embrace this methodology. However, a handful of examples of rhetorical criticism demonstrate how embracing the personal experiences of the critic and writing about those experiences can provide the reader with a greater understanding of rhetorical processes. This essay proposes some potential ways to connect rhetorical criticism and autoethnography by focusing on the role of emotion in rhetorical discourse and the role of the critic. The essay concludes with some broad guidelines for writing rhetorical autoethnography.

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How does one begin to write an essay on rhetorical autoethnography? Michael Leff described Cicero's *De Oratore* as a "cookbook that bakes its own cake," and this is an approach that many autoethnographies seem to take.¹ For example, Ellis and Bochner wrote their essay in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* in the form of a story—autoethnography about autoethnography.² On the other hand, I could do what I have done in my pedagogical writings and intersperse my experiences with theory and other literature.³ I would be in good company in that regard and, as previous writings have demonstrated, it is an approach that I am comfortable with.⁴ But this is not an autoethnography. I am not writing only about the experience of criticism, but making a case for a particular form of criticism. With this in mind, I am not entirely comfortable taking the approach of

* Brett Lunceford (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is the editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*. He can be reached for comment on this essay at brettlunceford@gmail.com. Now to change from the third person voice to first person. When I was a graduate student, I once met Lloyd Bitzer at the Penn State party at NCA. When he asked who I was studying with, I replied that Tom Benson was my advisor. "Benson?" Bitzer exclaimed and, pointing a finger at me for emphasis, he said, "You give Benson a message; you tell him Bitzer said it's time to retire!" Well, it took a decade, but Tom Benson is finally retiring. One could not ask for a better teacher and mentor. He taught us to push the envelope of scholarship in both his teachings and his research and I count myself blessed for having worked with him. With thoughts of his essay "Another Shooting in Cowtown" running through my mind, I dedicate this essay to him.

¹ Stephen Howard Browne, "Introduction," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45, no. 2 (2012): 105.

² Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed., 733-68 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

³ See Brett Lunceford, "A Practical Approach to Teaching Rhetorical Theory," *American Communication Journal* 10, no. 4 (2008): <http://ac-journal.org>; Brett Lunceford, "There Are No Girls in My Classroom: A Pedagogical Note," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 68, no. 1 (2011): 63-67; Brett Lunceford, "Walter Ong and the Willard Preacher: Bringing the Public Speaking Classroom to Orality," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 7, no. 3 (2008): 225-33; Brett Lunceford, "When First-Generation Students Go to Graduate School," in *Faculty and First Generation College Students: Bridging the Classroom Gap Together: New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 127, ed. Teresa Heinz Housel and Vickie Harvey, 13-20 (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

⁴ See Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008), 136-137.

Ellis and Bochner, which I found to be far too nebulous. I came away from that essay with little more than I had before: autoethnography should be engaging; it should be well written; it should speak from one's own experience. But it didn't get me much closer to knowing if I was doing autoethnography correctly, and my experience with journal editors is that not all are sympathetic to such experimental and experiential research. So with that I tip my hand somewhat and explain how I will go about this essay. Although I am loathe to prescribe a rubric, I am much more comfortable having some guidelines when embarking on a new methodology. Just as we would not expect someone who had taken a course in statistics to be well versed in quantitative research methods, we should not expect that people who know how to write are able to translate their personal experience into autoethnography. My aim in this essay is to provide some sense of how to do rhetorical autoethnography. I provide overarching goals rather than strict color-by-numbers methodology (after all, we already have the pentad for that). With that in mind, I suppose I should provide some context.

Thomas Benson was my professor, mentor, and the chair of my dissertation committee, so his approach has molded and shaped my own writing. Even those who were not his advisees said that they wanted to be Tom Benson when they grew up. I was fascinated by his ability to write in so many different arenas: film, new media, social movements and protest, presidential rhetoric, among other things. He also managed to create beer advertisements and start CRTNET, the listserv for the National Communication Association that still bears his name as editor-in-chief on the masthead. Almost a decade after completing my doctorate, I still want to be Tom Benson when (or if) I grow up.

He would tell us that we should remove the word "I" from our prose whenever possible. He was quite right when he explained that it would make our work more powerful, more authoritative. There is a significant difference between saying "I argue that autoethnography can be incorporated into rhetorical scholarship" and simply stating, "autoethnography can be incorporated into rhetorical scholarship." Of course he didn't always take his own advice, as his work "Another Shooting in Cowtown" illustrates.⁵ He told us that he took some considerable heat for that essay; people either loved it or hated it. I side with the crowd that loved it. As I have written elsewhere, I found this essay to be "one of the most lucid examinations of American politics I have read in any of our journals."⁶ One reason for this is that it is so accessible; Benson refuses to become bogged down in abstract theory and obtuse jargon. He reports not only what happened in the course of filming the campaign advertisements, but his observations and his own feelings about the events in ways that are immediately identifiable to anyone with some life experience. He brought the "human" component back into the human drama.

So, as I sit here writing this article, my training (and my mentor) is foremost on my mind. But I really have to go back further, to my days as a M.A. student at California State University, Hayward. When I took a course in organizational cultures, Daniel Prentice introduced us to the work of Michael Pacanowsky. His ethnographic work was amazing and illuminating—and fictional. His goal was not to report the actual day to day experience of his informants, but rather to distill the very essence of the experience in the

⁵ Thomas W. Benson, "Another Shooting in Cowtown," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67, no. 4 (1981): 347-406.

⁶ Brett Lunceford, "Must We All Be Rhetorical Historians? On Relevance and Timeliness in Rhetorical Scholarship," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 5.

form of a story. However, Pacanowsky was also well versed in traditional scholarship. His work on organizational culture and ritual, for example, are excellent and useful.⁷ His work, “A Small Town Cop,” was only the beginning for me.⁸ I found, perhaps, the only work of fiction to grace the pages of *Quarterly Journal of Speech*: “Slouching Towards Chicago.”⁹ It was an engaging and, ultimately, depressing portrayal of academic life at the convention of the National Communication Association. A few years later I would find that it was accepted by none other than Tom Benson. He told me that he took some heat for that one too.

I have been fascinated with autoethnographic research, then, for almost fifteen years. In that time there has been some interest in communication studies in this methodology, largely as a result of work by Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner.¹⁰ There has even been an autoethnographic study published in that paragon of empirical research, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, along with a companion article discussing the methodology.¹¹ However, there has been less interest in autoethnography from rhetorical scholars. I suspect that this is because we are already inserting ourselves into the critique and wish to portray a veneer of objectivity.¹² There have been some tentative steps toward incorporating personal reflection into criticism, most notably from young scholars working on their advanced degrees, but also from established scholars.¹³ Moreover, I am by no means the first to advocate for engagement with autoethnographic practices in rhetorical studies. In his discussion of autoethnography, Charles Morris writes, “the reflexivity of perfor-

⁷ See Michael E. Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell-Trujillo, “Communication and Organizational Cultures,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46, no. 2 (1982): 115-130; Michael E. Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell Trujillo, “Organizational Communication as Cultural Performance,” *Communication Monographs* 50, no. 2 (1983): 126-147.

⁸ Michael E. Pacanowsky, “A Small-Town Cop: Communication In, Out, and About a Crisis,” in *Communication in Organizations: An Interpretive Approach*, ed. Linda L. Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky, 261-82 (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983).

⁹ Michael Pacanowsky, “Slouching Towards Chicago,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 4 (1988): 453-67.

¹⁰ See especially Ellis and Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity.”

¹¹ Lisa M. Tillmann, “Body and Bulimia Revisited: Reflections on ‘A Secret Life,’” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 37, no. 1 (2009): 98-112; Lisa M. Tillmann, “Speaking into Silences: Autoethnography, Communication, and Applied Research,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 37 (2009): 94-97.

¹² Bonnie Dow has noted that rhetoricians seem to struggle with a sense of legitimacy: “We are a bastard discipline in many eyes, continually searching to establish our legitimacy as heirs to some tradition,” and asks whether rhetoricians are “never satisfied that we have truly arrived, burdened to forever see ourselves as the trailer trash of the academy struggling to please our betters?” Bonnie J. Dow, “Response: Criticism and Authority in the Artistic Mode,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 3 (2001): 337, 338.

¹³ See Jacob Davis, “The Perils of Expatriation, Identity and Autoethnography” (master’s thesis, University of South Alabama, 2012); Anne Gravel, “The Interplay of Autobiography and Ethnography: A Rhetorical Approach to Autoethnography in Women’s Writing” (Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1995); Joshua Gunn, “ShitText: Toward a New Coprophilic Style,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2006): 79-97; Peter Simonson, “The Streets of Laredo: Mercurian Rhetoric and the Obama Campaign,” *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 1 (2010): 94-126; Stephen A. Smith, “People, Power, and Realpoliticks in the Provinces,” *American Communication Journal* 2, no. 1 (2000): <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol2/Iss1/articles/smith.html>; Nicholas A. Thomas, “The Joy of Rhetoric: Turns in Rhetoric and Ontology that Orient Being in Aesthetic Habituation” (Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 2008); Corrina M. Ward, “Suck It Up and Drive on Soldier: A Burkean Rhetorical Analysis and Critical Examination of the Internal Rhetoric of a Military Rape Victim” (master’s thesis, Oregon State University, 2014).

mance critics may not be a panacea (there are ongoing important caveats and critiques), but it certainly deepens critical engagement, especially if we take seriously criticism as art, and those contexts that make critical meaning, judgment, and action expansive, provocative, generative; in a word, powerful.”¹⁴ So when Brian Snee sent me his essay, I saw an opportunity to add to this literature and explore how rhetoric and autoethnography can work together. This special issue is a step in that direction.

Telling Stories About Stories

One starting point in discussing rhetorical autoethnography is that one must understand the rules of scholarly writing to know when—and how—to break them. For our purposes, when you break the rules, you had better have a good story to tell. Walter Fisher explains that “human communication should be viewed . . . as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons, as being rational when they satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements.”¹⁵ If rhetorical criticism is rhetoric about rhetoric, then it is also, at its heart, a story about another story. Still, we have trouble translating our scholarship into stories, likely because they just don’t seem “scholarly” enough. Jargon allows us to hide in the text, lurking just beneath the surface. Even now, as I look over what I have written, I find that I do not let much of myself out. I poke my head out, and cautiously look around before slipping back behind a curtain of words.

Wayne Booth explains that every text has an author and an implied author; these need not be the same entity.¹⁶ This also applies to us as critics. In fact, we seem to base our entire enterprise on this fact. We present the rational aspects of criticism. Rarely will we say that we approached the text with hostility. Even Kenneth Burke gave Adolf Hitler his due in his examination of *Mein Kampf*, noting that “there are other ways of burning books than on the pyre—and the favorite method of the hasty reviewer is to deprive himself and his readers by inattention.”¹⁷ To be fair, Burke calls Hitler’s work “exasperating, even nauseating,” but argues that critics must take seriously the work being examined.¹⁸ I have no quarrel with Burke’s approach. Indeed, it seems that we must, if we are to give a full explanation of the text under consideration. Edwin Black suggested that “the critic will undertake to see the object on its own terms — to see it with the utmost sympathy and compassionate understanding,” but is quick to add that “this sympathetic explication is, of course, only a phase in the process of critical engagement” and does not necessarily apply to the critic’s ethical or moral judgment of the text.¹⁹ So our implied author—the critical scholar—must be constructed so as to avoid appearing to have any kind of pre-existing prejudice toward the artifact in question.

¹⁴ Charles E. Morris, “(Self-)Portrait of Prof. R.C.: A Retrospective,” *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 1 (2010): 33.

¹⁵ Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 2.

¹⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 71-77.

¹⁷ Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 191.

¹⁸ Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle,’” 191.

¹⁹ Edwin Black, “A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44, no. 4 (1980): 334.

But sometimes the implied author can seem even less objective than we really are. For example, my work on the rhetoric of nudity and protest may be seen as an endorsement of the protestors simply because I chose them as my case studies. For the record, I am not a supporter of PETA, I am a big supporter of breastfeeding, I found the College Humor contest to be problematic, and I find the World Naked Bike Ride amusing and had some sympathy toward their goals.²⁰ Students are surprised when I tell them that much of my research is guided by one simple question: “What the hell made them think that this was a good idea?” I examine phenomena that I do not understand. Sometimes I’m in agreement with them, sometimes I am against them, but I am always interested in understanding it more fully, if only to figure out why they did it that way.

At any rate, what we have here is a question of *ethos*. Ethos is more than simply one’s reputation or credentials. It is created within the discourse: “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak.”²¹ This does much to explain why we shy away from scholarship that may not look like scholarship to others. In order to be considered scholarly, we need to write in a scholarly way, and this is, unfortunately, disembodied and impersonal. This may work for scholarship, but it may weaken our argument. As Cicero explains, “It is impossible for the listener to feel [emotions] . . . unless all those emotions, which the advocate would inspire in the arbitrator, are visibly stamped or rather branded on the advocate himself.”²² For those who actually hope that their scholarship will move people to change, emotion is a prime mover.²³ Once again, we can return to Cicero who argued that nothing “is more important than to win for the orator the favor of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse or emotion, rather than by judgment or deliberation. For men decide far more problems by hate, or love, or lust, or rage, or sorrow, or joy, or hope, or fear, or illusion, or some other inward emotion, than by reality, or authority, or any legal standard, or judicial precedent, or statute.”²⁴ But if the real issue is simply getting scholarship into print so we can get a job, get tenure, or get promoted, then impersonal, disembodied scholarship is the coin of the realm. We know our audience and what they expect of us. Janice Hocker Rushing describes the difficulty in letting go of academic conventions: “I thought I had dropped Athena’s shield but there it was pretty much intact—so obvious when I reread the paper through their eyes—still protecting me

²⁰ If you want to see what I’m talking about, see Brett Lunceford, *Naked Politics: Nudity, Political Action, and the Rhetoric of the Body* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

²¹ Aristotle, “Rhetoric,” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2152-269 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1356a4-11.

²² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore, Books I-II*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), II.xlv.189. Despite the antiquity of Cicero’s words, this sentiment has also been confirmed through modern science. See Brett Lunceford, “The Science of Orality: Implications for Rhetorical Theory,” *Review of Communication* 7, no. 1 (2007): 92-93.

²³ Critics must be careful, however, that advocacy of a cause does not blind them to the actual workings of the text at hand. One must seek truth even when it would not support the desired cause, as even the noblest causes can suffer rhetorical and/or ethical missteps. As Edwin Black observes, “A problem of applying any pre-existing theory to the interpretation of a rhetorical transaction is that the critic is disposed to find exactly what he or she expected to find.” The same holds true for applying any pre-existing desires and biases. Black, “A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism,” 333.

²⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore, Books I-II*, II.xli.178-179.

from attack. This armor is close to the skin, if not to the bone, and, taking it off, I feel so naked.”²⁵

Thus there is more to criticism than just the implied / real authors. There is also the implied reader of these works of criticism. Edwin Black argues that rhetorical discourses imply an ideal auditor, for whom the discourse is designed.²⁶ When we write these works of criticism, who is the implied auditor? Of course Black was after ideology rather than literary theory, but the mental exercise is worth considering. Would someone read these critiques for fun? Who is reading them? There is a website, Academia.edu, that allows you to sometimes see the search terms that the actual readers use to find one of your articles. This gives some indication of what led them to click on your articles. Sometimes the results can be downright hilarious. My favorite one came from someone in Saudi Arabia who found one of my essays on media theory and sexting with the search string “hot mother in law seduction.” I’m sure that my article was a total buzzkill for that individual (“come on, man – when does this story start getting hot?”). Others are more direct, such as those who found my pedagogical articles looking for “teaching rhetoric.” Like the distinction between implied / actual author, there are some differences in the implied readers. The catch is that we have some say in who that implied reader is. That reader, for the most part, seems to be other scholars.

Peter Simonson laments that it is “not hard to find moods where that scholarship seems dull and lifeless, dominated as it is by analysis of disembodied texts and armchair theorizing.”²⁷ When we act as critics, we often present ourselves as disembodied voices. Our voices are always embodied once they begin telling a story. It could be our story, the story of another, gossip that we heard from a friend of a friend—it doesn’t really matter. The story happened to *someone*. It has left the realm of the abstract and come into the realm of the living. I am not advocating a wholesale exodus from theory, however. We need theory to understand how things work and articulating theory is part of the role of the critic. Roland Barthes famously proclaimed the death of the author, arguing that the reader bore some responsibility in figuring out the meaning within a particular text.²⁸ This is no less the case for rhetorical phenomena and texts.²⁹ But not all readers are equipped to be critics. Fisher called humanity “homo narans,” suggesting that storytelling was an intrinsic part of humanity.³⁰ It would be difficult to find evidence against this claim. However, not all who tell stories understand the full meaning behind those stories. This is why the critic is worth having around and why not all storytelling is actually autoethnography.

When I was in graduate school, I took a course in textual analysis from Stephen Browne. I had come to rhetorical studies through the back door of media production and the hard sciences. When we had a workshop on writing our CVs, I was asked if I really

²⁵ Janice Hocker Rushing, “Erotic Mentoring: Pygmalion and Galeta at the University,” in *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, ed. Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, 122-149 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 147.

²⁶ Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 112.

²⁷ Simonson, “The Streets of Laredo,” 95.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, 142-48 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

²⁹ Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 274-89.

³⁰ Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm,” 6.

had a B.S. in Speech Communication or if it was a typo. No, it was not a typo. This background colored my view of theory and what constitutes actual knowledge. As such, I had a difficult time in the course. I wanted to figure out what things *really* meant. I remember asking why anyone would care about my interaction with the text. In addition to the recognition that much of reality is subjective and lies outside of the realm of empirically verifiable, physical phenomena that I had grown comfortable with, I finally understood why my critique meant something: I was trained to see things that others would not. My training in theory and methods of criticism show me where to look, but not necessarily what I will find there. As Black says, “Good criticism is always a surprise. It is a surprise in the sense that you can’t anticipate what a good critic will have to say about a given artifact.”³¹ By virtue of my training, I can more fully examine the inner workings of the rhetoric where others may be content to stay on the surface. The text that finally clicked with me was Stephen Lucas’s stunning analysis of the Declaration of Independence.³² His analysis of the words themselves, including prosody, rhythm, and the meanings of certain terms in their 18th Century context, forever changed the way I thought about the Declaration and those who have mobilized it for their own political purposes. When I went to class that day I declared, “I haven’t really cared for much of what we have read up to this point, but this was amazing. If this is what textual analysis is, then I can totally get on board.” For me, Lucas did more than provide his interpretation of the Declaration; he also demonstrated why his interpretation was useful by providing considerable evidence for his stance. Everything that we had read up to that point had been too subjective for me. Of course I see the irony of advocating for rhetorical autoethnography with such a story, but different approaches will work for different texts and different readers.

The truth of the matter is that we already tell stories within criticism. Any engaging work will involve a clear discussion of the context of the rhetoric in question, and this often takes the form of narrative exposition. The reader is able to “see” the work as it happened. This is not merely a remnant of neo-Aristotelian criticism, but rather the work of rhetoric itself. Aristotle noted the power of “expressions which set things before the eyes” in rhetoric, so why should we not take advantage of this power in our works of criticism?³³ As Art Bochner puts it, “If we experience our lives as stories, then why not represent them as stories?”³⁴ Autoethnography does this, and rhetorical autoethnography seems quite in line with the practice of rhetorical criticism. After all, Michael McGee argues that the work of the critic is no longer to interpret the text, but rather to create a text worthy of interpretation.³⁵ We wrap the story up with the theory to decode the story and give it to the reader in a nice little package. Sort of like how we wrap a pill for a dog in

³¹ Edwin Black, “On Objectivity and Politics in Criticism,” *American Communication Journal* 4, no. 1 (2000), <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol4/iss1/special/black.htm>.

³² Stephen E. Lucas, “Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a Rhetorical Document,” in *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson, 67-130 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

³³ Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 1411b. For more on this, see Ned O’Gorman, “Aristotle’s *Phantasia* in the *Rhetoric*: *Lexis*, Appearance, and the Epideictic Function of Discourse,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, no. 1 (2005): 16-40.

³⁴ Arthur P. Bochner, “On First-Person Narrative Scholarship: Autoethnography as Acts of Meaning,” *Narrative Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (2012): 157.

³⁵ McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” 288.

bacon. People are unlikely to care much about the theory unless they have some kind of emotional investment in the text.

Once More, With Feeling

I once had to teach a course in intercultural communication for a colleague who had been abruptly terminated a few weeks before the semester began. The course was designated as a writing intensive course, so I had to come up with some kind of project for them to work on through the course of the semester. Had this been in my area of rhetorical studies, I could have easily assumed some understanding of methodology, but this was not the case. With a group of students who may or may not have taken a research methodology course at all or even learned the essentials of scholarly writing (let's face it – at some schools, first year composition is an uphill battle), I had to come up with something that any of them could do, and I only had a few weeks to decide how to do it. The best answer I could come up with was autoethnography, and it seemed to fit well with the course content.³⁶ All I needed to do was teach them how to do it. As with my rhetorical criticism course, I believe that the best way to learn how to do something is to examine the masters of the craft.

In the process of building that course I read a lot of autoethnographies. Some were good, some were bad, and some made absolutely no sense at all to me from the standpoint of scholarly writing. Maybe the “poetry as scholarship” idea is something I still need to figure out. But there were also a few that made me wonder why all scholarship couldn't be that amazing. The one that stood out was Marcus Weaver-Hightower's essay on coping with the stillborn birth of his daughter.³⁷ As I contemplated how I would react to his situation, I had to fight back tears. In fact, even as I write about this now I still feel those emotions of shared grief for this father. I knew that this would have to be in the readings. The reason it would have to be in the readings was not merely because it was well written, which it was, nor because it did an excellent job of combining theory, existing research, and his personal experience. The reason that essay had to be in the readings was because it was one of the few scholarly things I had read in quite some time that had made me *feel* something emotionally. It made me cry for this man and his family. I prayed for that man and his family. Like most scholars, I have felt emotions like indignation or anger at injustice, but few things have touched me on such a deep emotional level. There is a difference between caring about an issue and caring about *a person*. This is precisely what autoethnography does—it reminds us that the individuals we write about are actually living, breathing human beings. If, as Carolyn Ellis suggests, “the goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathetic social science in which readers can keep in their

³⁶ Later on I would find that I was in good company in thinking that autoethnography and intercultural communication would work well together. See Davis, “The Perils of Expatriation, Identity and Autoethnography”; Craig L. Engstrom, “Autoethnography as an Approach to Intercultural Training,” *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 5, no. 1 (2008): 17-31; Stephanie L. Young, “Half and Half: An (Auto)Ethnography of Hybrid Identities in a Korean American Mother-Daughter Relationship,” *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication* 2, no. 2 (2009): 139-67.

³⁷ Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, “Waltzing Matilda: An Autoethnography of a Father's Stillbirth,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41, no. 4 (2012): 462-91. Seriously—if you read only one piece of autoethnographic research, read this essay.

minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience,” then Weaver-Hightower’s piece was a startling success for both me and my students.³⁸

Rhetorical scholarship has long been concerned with emotional appeals. Aristotle codified it as one of the methods of persuasion in his *Rhetoric*.³⁹ But even before Aristotle, the Sophists had become well versed in the use of aesthetics to create an appeal. As John Poulakos writes, “The Sophists conceived of rhetoric primarily as a *technē* (art) whose medium is *logos* and whose double aim is *terpsis* (aesthetic pleasure) and *pistis* (belief).”⁴⁰ But Charles Segal notes that the Sophists’ use of aesthetics was not simply to create a beautiful speech; aesthetic pleasure could be harnessed to induce persuasion through emotion. “Reason is thus ultimately made the master of emotion, but not, as Socrates taught, by completely overpowering it, but rather by channeling and directing emotive energies to preconceived ends. It is now the emotional potentialities of the *logos* which are exploited, and not the intellectual, though the methods of exploitation are still rational.”⁴¹

As a discipline, we seem to cling to rationality, and emotion is not always rational. Stephen Smith’s account of his time in politics, for example, beautifully illustrates how emotion, family connections, and party mechanics swayed an election in his favor.⁴² But rationality is easier to understand and far easier to critique. We also cling to rationality within ourselves—in part because we need to present a front conducive to the scholarly ethos that we are supposed to display, but also because we may not wish to admit that we have some emotion in the game. This is not always the case. Benson explains that the goal is “to open one’s self to the experience, then to notice one’s responses and try by an application of intelligence to make structural sense of what began as unguarded feelings.”⁴³ This is similar to Ellis’s explanation: “I delve into my memory, putting myself back in the scene that took place Then I search for words to describe the feelings running through me.”⁴⁴

As critics, we too are affected by rhetorical discourses. We are persuaded, angered, sympathetic, given hope, and may feel a range of countless emotions. These emotions play a part in the critic’s evaluation of the discourse, whether he or she is actively aware of these responses or not. As Benson observes, “Listeners and readers engage in rhetorical action of their own—being, knowing, and doing with the speaker and other listeners, accepting or refusing to accept the images offered by the speaker, enacting or declining to enact the role of the public.”⁴⁵ Critics become part of the rhetoric.

There is, of course, some danger in allowing our emotions to play a part in criticism, but there have been some nods toward this subjective approach. In Michael McGee’s dis-

³⁸ Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 30.

³⁹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George Alexander Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴⁰ John Poulakos, “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 16, no. 1 (1983): 36.

⁴¹ Charles P. Segal, “Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962): 133.

⁴² Smith, “People, Power, and Realpoliticks in the Provinces.”

⁴³ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 387.

⁴⁴ Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 333.

⁴⁵ Thomas W. Benson, “Rhetoric as a Way of Being,” in *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson, 293-322 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 320.

cussion of performative criticism he explains: “The difference between reflection from the subject position of philosophy and reflection from the subject position of rhetoric lies in an orator’s anticipation of performance where elephants walk. Anticipation of danger, more than the anticlimax of actual performance, makes oratory one of the more fearsome, anxiety-producing human activities. Write as though you were speaking, and speak as though you are under the scrutiny of a tyrant. You will then be in harm’s way, where elephants walk.”⁴⁶ But with these dangers come the potential promise of a more committed form of rhetorical scholarship. Simonson suggests that “there might be a kind of post-academic rhetoric somewhere lurking, a dialectical step or two removed from where we stand now, where we embrace the Mercurian roots of the art, and invest ourselves more energetically in needs and opportunities elsewhere.”⁴⁷ The question remains, however: are we willing to invest ourselves, to be vulnerable, and to put ourselves on the line? It is much easier to take the safe route, the “armchair examination of texts and situations recorded from a distance” described by Benson.⁴⁸ But sometimes the safe route isn’t the best way to understand a particular text and the scholarly persona may not be able to tell every story that we wish to tell.⁴⁹

What Would Rhetorical Autoethnography Look Like?

Rhetorical autoethnography should have the same goal as any other mode of rhetorical criticism: to help us more fully understand the rhetorical artifact under consideration. As Loren Reid wrote, one of the greatest perils of rhetorical criticism is “the strong possibility that the critic may produce something that is not criticism at all.”⁵⁰ As such, the first order of business for rhetorical autoethnography is to consider how this narrative serves as a rhetorical critique. This standard is not as narrow as it may first appear. As Benson explains, “Rhetoric critics inquire into meaning, not simply in an artifact but also in the pragmatics of that artifact: that is, in how a human being can, or did, or should use that artifact.”⁵¹ Stephen Lucas puts it another way: “The benefit of close textual analysis is that it allows the critic, in essence, to ‘slow down’ the action within the text so as to keep its evolving internal context in sharp focus and to allow more precise explication of its rhetorical artistry.”⁵² Autoethnography can satisfy these functions, and often requires the kind of slowing down of the action described by Lucas.

Much has been written concerning what constitutes good criticism. Indeed, in his retrospective of the special issues on rhetorical criticism in *Western Journal of Communication* alone (which is in itself an interesting blend of retrospective and autoethnography), Charles Morris explains that this has been going on since 1957, but notes that this issue

⁴⁶ Michael Calvin McGee, “Fragments of Winter: Racial Discontents in America, 1992,” in *Rhetoric in Postmodern America: Conversations with Michael Calvin McGee*, ed. Carol Corbin, 159-188 (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1998), 161.

⁴⁷ Simonson, “The Streets of Laredo,” 121

⁴⁸ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 387.

⁴⁹ See Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 404.

⁵⁰ Loren D. Reid, “The Perils of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 30, no. 4 (1944): 418.

⁵¹ Thomas W. Benson, “The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman’s *Primate*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71, no. 2 (1985): 204.

⁵² Stephen E. Lucas, “The Renaissance of American Public Address: Text and Context in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 2 (1988): 249.

“has mostly slipped into disciplinary oblivion,” eclipsed by those beginning in 1980.⁵³ Rather than try to reinvent Morris’s excellent discussion of the tensions between theory and interpretation, text and context, and other aspects of the art of criticism that have vexed our discipline over the years, I will pull two fragments from those issues. First, Celeste Condit argues that “the uniquely powerful province of rhetoric” is “judgment of the collective human meaning-making process as it occurs in history through situated discourse-construction.”⁵⁴ This provides us with an understanding of what rhetoric is and what it does. Second, Michael Leff argues that in interpretation, “the critic attempts to account for and assign meaning to the rhetorical dimensions of a given phenomenon.”⁵⁵ Putting them together, we can surmise that good rhetorical criticism should account for and provide meaning in the collective human meaning-making process.

But this essay is prescriptive, so there is no way that I can let it stand at that, can I? We’re not just interested in armchair theorizing that will go in one’s diary, but rather *publishable* criticism. Steven Hunt lays out some explicit criteria for this endeavor, explaining that “publishable criticism must be criticism about worthy texts, employing clear insightful criteria or methods, which is well written and argued.”⁵⁶ To some extent, one could make a similar argument for research in any field, although what constitutes a “worthy” text is open for debate. Indeed, Celeste Condit notes how “white male liberals of the twentieth century” are creating a canon featuring “white male leaders of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries,” and suggests that this is likely because the critics “find themselves consubstantial” with these texts.⁵⁷ By focusing on “worthy” texts, it is easy to discount texts by sexual, political, and ethnic minorities or rhetoric of limited circulation. Indeed, sometimes the worthiness is only established after the critic has established it, as in the oft-mentioned example of the Coatesville address described in Edwin Black’s *Rhetorical Criticism*.⁵⁸ Moreover, even if there was some agreement on what would constitute a worthy text, such judgments would remain provisional. As Robert Hariman explains, “there is not and is not likely to be and perhaps should never be a canon that ought to persist as a stable and extensive basis for judgment.”⁵⁹

Hunt continues his discussion of publishable criticism, stating that “the question for criteria, or standards, or rubrics is fit, or appropriateness, or insightfulness to the illumi-

⁵³ Morris, “(Self-)Portrait of Prof. R.C.,” 11. For an alternate synthesis of this history, see Jennifer deWinter, “A Bibliographic Synthesis of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 4 (2006): 388-407.

⁵⁴ Celeste Condit, “Rhetorical Criticism and Audiences: The Extremes of McGee and Leff,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 342.

⁵⁵ Michael C. Leff, “Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44, no. 4 (1980): 342.

⁵⁶ Steven B. Hunt, “An Essay on Publishing Standards for Rhetorical Criticism,” *Communication Studies* 54, no. 3 (2003): 383.

⁵⁷ Condit, “Rhetorical Criticism and Audiences,” 337.

⁵⁸ Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 78-90. John Jay Chapman delivered the Coatesville address in 1912 at a vacant grocery store on the first anniversary of a brutal lynching of an African-American man. The address was heard by three people. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues that “his treatment of the Coatesville address discloses a process by which the rights and wrongs of a particular historical moment are transcended symbolically to form an enduring moral statement. In each case, what we learn about the specific rhetorical acts is secondary, they become illustrations or means through which the reader apprehends the nature of symbolic processes themselves.” Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Criticism Ephemeral and Enduring,” *Speech Teacher* 23, no. 1 (1974): 12.

⁵⁹ Robert Hariman, “Norms of the Rhetorical Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 3 (1994): 332.

nation and/or elevation of the worthy rhetorical text/s.”⁶⁰ This is similar to Black’s suggestion that “criticism has no relationship with its subject other than to account for how that subject works; it demands nothing but full disclosure.”⁶¹ That criticism should illuminate a text is not in question; what *is* in question are the ends to which criticism should aspire. Some have argued that criticism should contribute to the creation of rhetorical theory. For example, Campbell distinguishes between “enduring” criticism, which leads to theory, and “ephemeral” criticism, which is limited to the rhetorical artifact under consideration.⁶² Rod Hart likewise draws “the battle lines” between “those critics who would conduct their analyses in a theoretical vacuum and those who view their critical objects as satellites orbiting within a complex universe of discourse,” but stops just short of advocating theory building as a goal for all critics.⁶³ Others, however, have rejected this stance. James Darsey, for example, suggests that each piece of criticism functions as a piece of a larger “mosaic.”⁶⁴ Darsey takes a middle of the road approach in his discussion of what should be considered publishable criticism: “Either studies use some cases to contribute to what we know about rhetoric itself, the way it works, its limitations, special circumstances, or they provide new insights into a text of recognized or arguable importance.”⁶⁵

As a walk down memory lane within the archives of rhetoric journals will attest, there are many different ways to do rhetorical criticism. Sometimes there is no method at all. In his examination of the Gettysburg Address, Edwin Black takes a “prismatic” approach, admitting that “it is a method without system, and scarcely a method at all, at least not a predetermined one. But sometimes—maybe even all the time—a subject deserves to supersede a method, and to receive its own forms of disclosure.”⁶⁶ With such a wide range of critical approaches, it would be difficult to determine the “right way” to do criticism. The only real certainty with any approach is that the critic constructs an argument concerning how one ought to view and understand the rhetoric under consideration.⁶⁷

I remember sitting in Tom Benson’s office discussing the paper that I was writing for his rhetorical criticism seminar. I had done an immense amount of literature review and was beginning the analysis. I had what I thought were some insights, but they didn’t seem to fit into any particular method. My previous exposure to rhetorical criticism came through a popular cookie cutter text (that will remain unnamed).

I asked, “But what will I say that my method is?”

He replied, “You’re a rhetorical critic, aren’t you?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

Benson simply smiled and said, “You’re a rhetorical critic. You’re using your critical method.”

⁶⁰ Hunt, “An Essay on Publishing Standards for Rhetorical Criticism,” 383.

⁶¹ Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 18.

⁶² Campbell, “Criticism Ephemeral and Enduring.”

⁶³ Roderick P. Hart, “Theory Building and Rhetorical Criticism: An Informal Statement of Opinion,” *Central States Speech Journal* 27, no. 1 (1976): 71.

⁶⁴ James Darsey, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Theorists? An Anti-Democratic Inquiry,” *Western Journal of Communication* 58, no. 3 (1994): 176.

⁶⁵ Darsey, “Must We All Be Rhetorical Theorists?” 173.

⁶⁶ Edwin Black, “Gettysburg and Silence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 1 (1994): 22.

⁶⁷ See Wayne Brockriede, “Rhetorical Criticism as Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60, no. 2 (1974): 165-74.

At that moment the heavens parted, a glorious light shone down on me, and I could hear angels singing Black's refrain, "Criticism is that which critics do."⁶⁸ I was stunned. "I can get away with that?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied gently.

I had never realized that criticism could be done any number of ways and still be useful. Perhaps this is why Black cautioned against walking around with a method in search of rhetoric on which to apply it.⁶⁹ Such an approach draws us away from the rhetoric itself and may limit our ability to provide the "full disclosure" sought in criticism.

Of course to say that there is no agreed upon method is not to say that criticism eschews theory. However, like method, theory should be used not as a starting point, but as a response to the text itself. Also like method, there is no unified theory of rhetoric, but rather many theories. I often tell my students to think of theories as tools in their critical toolbox. They are not all going to be useful for every text (or even most of them), but by considering whether a given theory has any explanatory force for the rhetorical object under consideration, and doing this with multiple theories, they will be better able to make a thorough accounting of how it functions rhetorically. Barry Brummett compares rhetorical theories to fishing lures, observing that "they are discarded only if they *never* seem useful."⁷⁰ However, he also puts forth a more amusing similarity: "Rhetorical theories are like vampires: you need see one in action only once to believe in what it can do, and it is nearly impossible to kill."⁷¹

Like rhetorical criticism, there are many different approaches to autoethnography and criteria describing what constitutes publishable autoethnography are difficult to come by. In their landmark essay, Ellis and Bochner depict a presentation in which Bochner is asked about how one should judge autoethnography. Ellis says to the student seated next to her, "Notice how Art dodges questions that try to get him to stipulate categorical criteria. He always wants to balance rigor and imagination. He thinks if you're too bound up with rules, you probably won't do anything interesting."⁷² However, some have attempted to provide some demarcations.

Norman Denzin argues that "for the autoethnographer reliability refers to the narrator's credibility as a writer-performer-observer; that is, has an event been correctly remembered and described? Is the writer a credible observer of those events? What does credible even mean?"⁷³ Ellis and Bochner question whether one could ever remember things as they truly were; we have only our perceptions of memories, which are always colored by our current experiences.

Stories show us that the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and revisable according to contingencies of our present life circumstances, the present from which we narrate. Doesn't this mean that the stories we tell run the risk of distorting

⁶⁸ Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 4.

⁶⁹ Black, "A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism." Thomas Farrell also notes that "some studies seem to be a model in search of an appropriate object of analysis." Thomas B. Farrell, "Critical Models in the Analysis of Discourse," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44, no. 4 (1980): 307.

⁷⁰ Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification," *Communication Education* 33, no. 2 (1984): 99.

⁷¹ Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral," 99.

⁷² Ellis and Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity," 749-750.

⁷³ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 70.

the past? Of course it does. After all, stories rearrange, redescribe, invent, omit and revise. . . . a story is not a neutral attempt to mirror the facts of one's life; it does not seek to recover already constituted meanings.⁷⁴

As such, remembering "correctly" may be too much to ask. However, the critic should be true to the ways that he or she remembers an experience or an event.

Taking a more social scientific slant, Heewon Chang provides the following list of possibilities of how to write autoethnography:

(1) Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (2) look for cultural themes; (3) identify exceptional occurrences; (4) analyze inclusion and omission; (5) connect the present with the past; (6) analyze relationships between self and others; (7) compare yourself with other people's cases; (8) contextualize broadly; (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (10) frame with theories.⁷⁵

However, most of Chang's list would apply to other methodologies. For example, most research considers recurring patterns with an eye toward outliers and the culture in which the phenomena take place. Context, theory, and application of existing literature are likewise applicable to most scholarship. Only numbers six and seven are geared specifically toward autoethnography.

In short, autoethnography relies on many of the frameworks that describe good research, but also on the frameworks that describe good literature. To put it another way, one needs a compelling, theoretically informed narrative. The writing must be engaging and the characters and dialogue should be believable. However, this is not merely a story that we tell, but rather a story that we tell in order to help others understand some specific experience. We do this by looking into ourselves and connecting this experience with what we already know through research. Sometimes our experience will add to that body of research by providing confirmation, and other times it will challenge conventional wisdom. Other times it will illustrate gaps in our understanding. But there is a good reason why we use stories: they engage the emotions as well as the intellect. When Smith relates his story of a trip to Washington, D.C. during which "a pigeon shat upon my head, a commentary on my campaign rhetoric and an omen of my political future," the reader cannot help but laugh and be drawn into the narrative.⁷⁶

As with any methodology, there are detractors. For example, in their discussion of personal narratives and autoethnographies, Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont lament that "While the development and spread of qualitative social science are to be welcomed, too many of its manifestations result in slack social science, born of an adherence to the evocation of 'experience,' as opposed to the systematic analysis of social action and cultural forms."⁷⁷ It is certainly true that evoking an "experience" with the narrative is a desirable outcome, but is this enough of an end in itself? Autoethnography is more than a well-told story. It should promote some sense of understanding that touches our humanity in ways that numbers and brief snippets of text cannot. Moreover, autoethnographic research and

⁷⁴ Ellis and Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity," 745.

⁷⁵ Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, 131.

⁷⁶ Smith, "People, Power, and Realpoliticks in the Provinces."

⁷⁷ Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont, "Rescuing Narrative from Qualitative Research," *Narrative Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (2006): 170.

traditional social scientific research each function from differing epistemological stances. Where social science in general seeks some degree of generalizability, autoethnography seeks the individual experience, that person's truth. This truth is always subjective and intrinsically problematic because, as Ragan Fox suggests, "memory's mosaic qualities situates human recollection as partial, citational, fractured, de-contextualized, re-contextualized, reflective, refractive, decorative, and text-ured."⁷⁸ As such, each methodology seeks different ends, with autoethnography more closely approximating the epistemology of rhetorical criticism than social science. Both rhetoric and autoethnography by design seek "small t" truth rather than truth with a capital T. As Norman Denzin explains in his discussion of autoethnography, "the goal is not to produce a standard social science article. The goal is to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action."⁷⁹

There are some elements in autoethnography, however, that are not congruent with current practice in rhetorical criticism. For example, rhetoricians pay careful attention to language, word choices, rhythm, prosody, and other microscopic elements of discourse. In his exhaustive analysis of the Declaration of Independence, Lucas explains that "By probing the text microscopically—at the level of the phrase, word, and even syllable—we can, in effect, slow down its internal dynamics so as to allow more precise explication of its internal artistry."⁸⁰ To fabricate the words that someone actually said would be completely antithetical to many rhetoricians, similar to a social scientist who fabricates survey data to reach a desired conclusion.

If we change the rhetoric, can we even say that we are doing rhetorical criticism at that point? My answer is yes, but not because we are able to consider the text microscopically. In rhetorical autoethnography the focus would be not on the text itself, but rather on how that text was received, internalized, and responded to. In rhetorical autoethnography, the audience occupies center stage because that audience is the critic. I do not pretend that Benson, Simonson, or Smith remember each conversation mentioned in their articles as they took place and then dutifully transcribed the exchanges into their narratives. I do, however, believe them when they say what they thought of those exchanges and how they interpreted them. Indeed, this methodology could help to compensate for one of the blind spots in our critiques, which is how the audience actually reacted to the rhetoric. Once we recognize that the critic's subjective experience is worth exploring, we are opened up to a different kind of criticism—one in which the critic is fully present and accounted for.

Rhetorical autoethnography of necessity requires that the critic downplay their performance of objectivity. Sherick Hughes suggests that "Rather than seeking to escape subjectivity, authors considering autoethnographic techniques should do so precisely because of the qualitative genre's capacity to engage first person voice, and to embrace the conflict of writing against oneself as he or she finds himself or herself entrenched in the complications of their pedagogical positions."⁸¹ Andrea Frolic likewise argues that

⁷⁸ Ragan Fox, "Re-Membering Daddy: Autoethnographic Reflections of My Father and Alzheimer's Disease," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2010): 8.

⁷⁹ Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 70.

⁸⁰ Lucas, "Justifying America," 69.

⁸¹ Sherick A. Hughes, "Toward 'Good Enough Methods' for Autoethnography in a Graduate Education Course: Trying to Resist the Matrix with Another Promising Red Pill," *Educational Studies* 43 (2008): 128.

autoethnography is “an ethical practice promoting greater transparency in the production of knowledge and more robust exploration of the agency of the researcher/author (including the influences of lived experiences, and social and political contexts on the choices made in the conduct of research).”⁸² The critic becomes a part of the rhetorical transaction, and not simply a narrator occupying the standpoint of outside, disinterested observer. The critic is invited to interrogate his or her feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the rhetoric in question. However, this seems to be against the norm in rhetorical studies; as Charles Morris writes, “the mainstream of rhetorical criticism seems to have abandoned a commitment to manifesting the critic-in-context as an inherent, constitutive component of scholarship. Perhaps critics are *doing* it, but they aren’t *articulating* it.”⁸³

Perhaps by removing the illusion of objectivity, we will more honestly be able to take a moral stance concerning the rhetoric in question. Michael McGee advocates taking a position rather than attempting to remain objective and impartial; he argues, “The goal of interpretation is to solve problems through understanding, not to stultify them in an understanding that never adapts.”⁸⁴ Our views concerning the rhetorical transaction may shift and evolve over time as new elements come forward and others recede into the background. When I defended my dissertation on the rhetoric of hacktivism (politically motivated hacking), one of my committee members asked me, “So what do you think about them? At some points you hold them up as an ideal for protest and at others you denounce them as dangerous.” “The problem,” I replied, “was that they were all of these things in different measures at different times.” Some of goals and ideals espoused by hackers are quite enticing to me. On the other hand, there was a strong undercurrent of misogyny and elitism which I find repellent. It was difficult to convey that clash of emotions in a traditional format. As Black observes, “Rhetorical transactions are not things; they are processes.”⁸⁵

Rhetorical autoethnography is neither atheoretical, nor is it ahistorical. These narratives do not exist within a vacuum; our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and reactions are shaped by one’s personal history and the culture in which he or she lives. Michael Tumolo calls for a “rhetorical historical perspective in which histories of ideas and events are appropriated to develop a deeper understanding of those contexts and events that resonate as timely and relevant to the contemporary reader.”⁸⁶ One way to make these events resonate is through the use of personal narrative that connects the history and context of the rhetoric with the critic’s own history. This may also have an unanticipated benefit of providing some sense of the vernacular experience of rhetoric. As Rod Hart suggests, theory may be best served by examination of the “commonplace (often mundane) components of rhetorical life,” rather than on the exceptional.⁸⁷ In other words, “worthy” texts may depend on the ends to which the critic aspires. If one wishes to examine only the well-documented texts of leaders, then traditional methods will suffice, but if one wishes to delve into the experience of rhetoric as it was experienced by the masses, then autoethnography may provide such an entrée. Reid notes that “scholars who look

⁸² Andrea Frolic, “Who Are We When We Are Doing What We Are Doing? The Case for Mindful Embodiment in Ethics Case Consultation,” *Bioethics* 25, no. 7 (2011): 376.

⁸³ Morris, “(Self-)Portrait of Prof. R.C.,” 33.

⁸⁴ McGee, “Fragments of Winter,” 176.

⁸⁵ Black, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 135.

⁸⁶ Michael Tumolo, “On Useful Rhetorical History,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 2 (2011): 58.

⁸⁷ Hart, “Theory Building and Rhetorical Criticism,” 72.

down on [everyday vernacular rhetoric] might give much to know about the everyday speaking that went on in New Salem, Illinois, in the 1830's, in the hearing of young Abraham Lincoln."⁸⁸ As Johanna Uotinen argues, "autoethnography offers a possibility to connect the individual and general," and rhetorical autoethnography should do likewise.⁸⁹

So what should rhetorical autoethnography look like? With the perils of creating a rubric for a hybrid of methods which resist rubrics firmly in mind, here are some general guidelines.

1. Rhetorical autoethnography should draw on theory to help illuminate some aspect of rhetoric, whether in the general sense or as it relates to a particular rhetorical transaction.
2. Rhetorical autoethnography should draw on the critic's experiences with the rhetorical transaction in question.
3. Rhetorical autoethnography should stay true to the spirit of the rhetorical transaction, even if details are incorrectly remembered or forgotten—in short, rhetorical autoethnography should be honest.
4. Rhetorical autoethnography should be well written and engaging.

I realize that this is a rather short list, but I have tried to keep it as comprehensive as possible, while providing room to experiment with the methodology. This element of play is one of the more promising aspects of rhetorical autoethnography.

There is an element of risk in rhetorical autoethnography. By making oneself vulnerable, the critic can explore feelings and thoughts that an outside research participant may be unwilling to share.⁹⁰ But there is something to be gained in the exposure of the soul, what Thomas Frenzt called the "rhetoric of the interior."⁹¹ As Benson explained, "Only by involving myself as a participant can I be a useful observer, because by risking a double investment of myself—both as a media consultant and as an academic critic—I encounter feelings that I would not encounter as a mere observer."⁹² But one must be honest about the experience, even in the face of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. Even as Benson reports, "I carefully hoard my shame at listening in silence to Richard's political

⁸⁸ Reid, "The Perils of Rhetorical Criticism," 419.

⁸⁹ Johanna Uotinen, "Digital Television and the Machine That Goes 'Ping!': Autoethnography as a Method for Cultural Studies of Technology," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 2 (2010): 167.

⁹⁰ See Rebecca Murphy-Keith, "Living and Leaving Lolita: An Autoethnography of Identification and Transcendence," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research* 12 (2013): 89-90. Because of the taboo nature of certain topics, some have chosen to write in the form of fictionalized narratives and poetry; see Marie Lovrod, "Shifting Contexts, Shaping Experiences: Child Abuse Survivor Narratives and Educating for Empire," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5, no. 2 (2005): 30-56. For some topics, the research participant may require a high degree of trust or need the researcher to ask the right questions in order to gather the desired information. Moreover, risk is not always the same for different individuals. As Craig Gingrich-Philbrook notes, "Many autoethnographers burlesque literary artistry in the name of their own advancement, self-congratulatedly promoting the 'riskiness' of their enterprise the way the comics supposedly tackling 'controversial material' do, but from the point of view of a subject position much safer and much more familiar than that of the literary artist they exploit for their own purposes." Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2005): 302.

⁹¹ Thomas S. Frenzt, "Reconstructing a Rhetoric of the Interior," *Communication Monographs* 60, no. 1 (1993): 83-89.

⁹² Benson, "Another Shooting in Cowtown," 387.

sermon,” he notes that “One’s obligation as a critic is to make that information public and arguable.”⁹³ He concludes that “It is better to risk foolishness than to keep a dignified professional silence.”⁹⁴ But this is a luxury that Benson could afford as a full professor at a top research institution. At that point in his career, he had published three books and almost two dozen articles and book chapters, many in top journals, and served as editor of *Communication Quarterly* and associate editor of *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Could an early career scholar afford to take such a risk with the current expectations for tenure and promotion? Even for a scholar like Benson, there was still risk, a reality that he recognized when sending “Another Shooting in Cowtown” off for publication: “it’s true that I was professor at a great institution, and that I wrote the piece with no particular expectation that it would be published. But I also assumed, after it had been published, that I would never be asked to edit QJS or another major journal — I remember saying as much to Kathleen Jamieson, who had come to deliver our department’s Carroll C. Arnold lecture a year or two after the essay was published.”⁹⁵ I want to believe that such an enterprise will eventually be rewarded, but I remain somewhat skeptical.

I am somewhat torn in advocating for a methodology that is risky in a professional sense. There are substantial benefits to be gained from rhetorical autoethnography. However, those benefits center on the insights to be gained when the critic is honest with him or herself. When Benson realizes that “I came to observe a process, and I have found much to condemn, and much that surprises me. But . . . any condemnation that is in order is something that I must share in,” he can do so with an understanding that his position is secure and that those who would punish him for working with an unsavory candidate would have little recourse.⁹⁶ Many scholars have had to hold their tongue concerning perceived injustices until gaining tenure. Indeed, this is what academic freedom is all about—the ability to pursue knowledge, even that which is unpopular or goes against conventional wisdom. Maybe it’s best to play it safe, but that has never really been my strong suit. Maybe it isn’t yours either.

The risks go beyond the academy though, and can be personal as well. This is especially the case when we are honest, because we are not only honest for ourselves, but also in relation to our observations of those around us. It is difficult to prescribe a particular ethical framework for this research because every situation is different. As Ellis writes, “Just when I think I have a handle on a guiding principle about research with intimate others, on closer examination, my understanding unfurls into the intricacies, yes-and, uniqueness, and relational and personal responsibilities of the particular case under question.”⁹⁷ At the end of his essay, Benson notes that he may have portrayed his friend in an unflattering light and asks, “I seem to have destroyed a friendship. Was it worth it?”⁹⁸ No one can answer this question for the critic. Three decades after the article was published,

⁹³ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 387.

⁹⁴ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 388.

⁹⁵ Thomas Benson, email message to author, December 9, 2014. Benson did, in fact, go on to serve as editor of *Quarterly Journal of Speech* from 1987-1989 and founder and editor of another NCA journal, *Review of Communication* from 1999-2003. Still, the fact that Benson found it likely that he had curtailed his potential participation in the field by publishing his essay should give one pause.

⁹⁶ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 399.

⁹⁷ Carolyn Ellis, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 22.

⁹⁸ Benson, “Another Shooting in Cowtown,” 406.

he told us that this question still lingers. Ellis provides this sobering reminder: “I tell [students] they don’t own their story. That their story is also other people’s stories. I tell them they don’t have an inalienable right to tell the stories of others. I tell them that intimate, identifiable others deserve at least as much consideration as strangers and probably more.”⁹⁹ The work of the critic has real consequences, and the best that one can do is to attempt to behave ethically to all parties involved; this consideration also extends to the researcher.¹⁰⁰ The critic must weigh the consequences of embarking on such a project—personal, professional, and relational—and proceed with caution.

Conclusion

As with any methodology that has yet to gain widespread acceptance, it will continue to evolve as critics experiment with it and adapt it to their style. Although there are risks associated with rhetorical autoethnography, there are also benefits. As Sherianne Shuler suggests, “Perhaps the most significant gift of autoethnography is that it not only turns the gaze upon oneself and resists the Othering urge, but it also invites readers to become travelers and to recognize that while our journeys are different, points of connection can be found.”¹⁰¹ With this potential in mind, I will end as I began—with a story.

As I sit at my computer writing this conclusion, I am struck by the various elements that have come together to bring me to this point. I am currently putting the finishing touches on an autoethnographic study of call center work.¹⁰² Robert, the editor of the book that it will appear in, is a friend of mine from various conferences and panels. In the drafts that I have been writing, I have had to justify for him autoethnography as a practice. It is often confused with participant observer, so it is natural that people may wonder about research notes, journals, etc. I do not have them, but the memories of the work environment and the stress that comes from continually talking to people who are very unhappy to hear from you and having your life regimented down to the minute is something that has been seared into my memory (and I have a pretty bad memory). Perhaps this is one reason why autoethnography is so inviting in some instances. It allows us to tell stories in ways that we would not be able to do with traditional methods of research. We know what it was like, so we do not have to rack our brains thinking of the proper questions to ask to delve into the experience. I suppose that very few researchers would think to ask about our bathroom habits or strategies of reclaiming our humanity, but these were important parts of my story. I can still recite from memory some of the poetry that my co-workers and I wrote about stupid customers. In that essay Robert asked me to tone down the harshness of the depictions of the customers, and I did, although as a result we probably seem a little nicer than we actually were.

I am also writing this before seeing the final drafts of the essays that will be in this issue. I’m not sure if they will completely follow the guidelines that I have laid out in this

⁹⁹ Ellis, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives,” 25.

¹⁰⁰ See April Chatham-Carpenter, “‘Do Thyself No Harm’: Protecting Ourselves as Autoethnographers,” *Journal of Research Practice* 6, no. 1 (2010): 1-13; Ellis, “Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives,” 20-22.

¹⁰¹ Sherianne Shuler, “Autoethnographic Emotion: Studying and Living Emotional Labor in the Scholarly Life,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 30, no. 3 (2007): 281.

¹⁰² Brett Lunceford, “Chained to the Dialer, or Frederick Taylor Reaches Out and Touches Someone,” forthcoming in *Remote Control: Essays on the Nature of Connection, Communication, and Control-at-a-Distance*, ed. Robert MacDougall (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

essay, although in some ways this whole framework should serve mainly as a starting point. If you can't experiment with your own life, then what *can* you experiment with? I am also left with the nagging feeling that there is something fundamentally wrong with telling someone how they should tell their own story. I shake it off with the rationalization that I have left the framework open enough that any critique that follows it would fulfill both the imperatives of autoethnography and rhetorical criticism. After all, it isn't just their story at that point. It's a story that the author wishes to share with us in a scholarly forum, and the reason for such fora is to explore the workings of rhetoric in all of its incarnations. In other words, the author wants us to learn something from the story. Rhetorical autoethnography should not function as a parable in which the meaning is never articulated. The story should guide the readers by the hand and show them where they are going and what they need to see on the way.

I am somewhat optimistic concerning the potential of rhetorical autoethnography, even as I recognize that change is difficult to enact. So here is my invitation to you, dear reader. Write your story. You have a mixture of thoughts, feelings, history, beliefs, viewpoints, and training that no one else does. Use that combination to teach rhetorical scholars and laypersons alike something that only you can. You may be surprised to find that others with different backgrounds have experienced something similar or shocked that those similar to you have had completely different experiences. At any rate, you'll teach us all something either way, so start writing. We'll be here waiting for you.