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Recalling emotional recall: reflecting on the methodological significance of affective memory in autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the theatrical roots of an oft-referenced but under-theorized instrument used in autoethnography: emotional recall, or affective memory. I define emotional recall, provide an overview of affective memory's history in performance, and consider how the tool is modified when used in qualitative research. After distinguishing between more conventional forms of recollection and emotional recall, I offer specific strategies for practicing and accounting for affective memory in autoethnography. **Trigger Warning:** This article contains stories about child molestation, anti-gay violence, and domestic abuse.

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I penned my first dramatic slam poem in 2000. "Heterophobia" artistically connects my then-80-year-old father's homophobic microaggressions to cultural violence against gay people. The 3-minute poem is a synecdoche, 180s that animate my father and our relationship.

YouTube includes a recording of me performing "Heterophobia" at the 2001 Austin Poetry Slam finals. I take the stage, extend the microphone stand to match my height, turn my head toward the heavens, and stand in contemplative silence for six seconds before I utter the first line. Those six seconds represent performative remembrance, or a stylized, repetitive, and embodied act that suggests I am recalling the relationship I prepare to narrate.

> Each year, my 80-year-old pops ponders why I've "chosen" to be gay.
> He'll ask, "Rago, have you ever slept with a woman?"
> "I say, 'No.'"
> Then, as if he's figured out the great conundrum of the century,
> he'll exclaim, "Then how can you really know?"
> to which I reply, "Dad, have you ever slept with a guy?" (Fox, "Heterophobia 2001" 00:08–00:42)

The exchange with my father leads me to introduce the prospect of a heterophobic world where straight people are asked to "butch it down," gay people claim they have "straight uncles" to downplay their heterophobia, and the word "straight" is spit like venom at heterosexual men before gay people beat them to death in hate crimes. "But it's not straight

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people's parents who ask them why they're straight," I lament. "It's my dad asking me, 'If you've never been with a woman, how can you know?'"

Reflecting on "Heterophobia" twenty years after its composition reminds me of my favorite moment from Susanna Kaysen's book *Girl, Interrupted*, wherein the author recounts a two-year stay at McLean psychiatric hospital. Kaysen uses creative, autobiographical writing and poetry to challenge the hospital's official documentation, or history, of her institutionalization. Medical charts and case records are juxtaposed against first-person recollections that challenge the ways in which psychiatric discourses ensnared her.

The title of Kaysen's book is inspired by the Vermeer painting "Girl Interrupted at Her Music." A few years after her release from McClean, she stands in front of the painting. Kaysen characterizes the baroque snapshot as an "interruption" that has been "snatched and fixed on canvas: one moment to stand still and to stand for all the other moments, whatever they would be or might have been" (167).

To modify Kaysen, "Heterophobia" snatches and fixes my father in print. The poem fixates on one exchange to stand for all other moments. Dad died in 2004 after living with Alzheimer's disease for ten years. "Heterophobia" captures my relationship with Dad six years after he first showed sustained signs of memory loss. When I wrote the poem, I saw nothing more than homophobia in the annual repetition of the question, "Have you ever slept with a woman?" It was easier for me to think Dad was homophobic than dying from Alzheimer's. I stopped performing "Heterophobia" two years after his death, when I realized that the cruel repetition of his question was partially a product of his memory-oriented illness.

Kaysen looks up at the girl in the Vermeer painting. She writes, "She had changed a lot in sixteen years. She was no longer urgent. In fact, she was sad. She was looking out, looking for someone who would see her." Tears burn Kaysen's eyes. "I had something to tell her now. 'I see you.'"

I feel a similar empathy for my father when I re-read "Heterophobia." His question about my sexuality is no longer unkind. In fact, the query is sad. My father was dying. Like Kaysen talking to the girl interrupted at her music, I have something to tell my father now. "I see you."

I want readers of my work to see Dad in a more complex, beautiful light, too. But how? How might an author rewrite past-printed work? Think of times you have read a published essay you authored only to find a grammatical error that jumps from the page and taunts. There is no turning back. As Julius Caesar noted crossing the Rubicon, "The die is cast." Painting a distorted image of my father pricks much deeper than a typo.

Inspired by Carolyn Ellis' work in *Revision*, I aim to challenge my past writing, "revising and rethinking what I'd written from the perspective of the present" (12). Ellis calls this practice "meta-autoethnography," or an exercise wherein an author revisits "original representation, consider[s] responses, and write[s] an autoethnographic account about autoethnography" (*Revision* 13). This essay considers the processes autoethnographers and performers use when recalling, and sometimes re-recalling, significant people and events. Gemignani points out that "By reflecting on the conditions and impossibilities of telling, we can promote the ability to widen our view of memory from being an account of the past to acknowledging its creative potential for the future and the present" (132).

My work crackles at the circuitous intersection between performance and autoethnography. Performance and autoethnography spark, like two synapses communicating with one another. Autoethnography enables me to explicitly grapple with the ethics and methodological considerations I often hide in monologues and poems. Likewise, aesthetic traditions profoundly influence my approach to theory and method. I worry that I have a history of not properly contextualizing the roles aesthetic texts (literature) and performance training have played in my approach to autoethnography. Failing to "attend to specific artistic traditions and controversies … betrays autoethnography's unfortunate tendency to presume that the meaning of 'literature' is transparent and noncontroversial" (Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's" 308). In this essay, I revisit past autoethnography and performance pieces that would have been enriched had I utilized more rigorous recall strategies. I first provide an overview of emotional recall's roots in theater, then outline specific strategies for using affective memory in autoethnography, and finally reflect on the aesthetic and methodological implications of rigorous emotional recall.

What is emotional recall?

Ellis and Bochner extensively outline best practices in autoethnography in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ellis describes emotional recall as an exercise "in which I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. If you can revisit the scene emotionally, then you remember other details" (Ellis and Bochner 752). Ellis and Bochner's un-cited and limited definition of emotional recall surprises me given their painstakingly researched approach to virtually every other concept mentioned in the chapter. "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity" contains a staggering 228 citations – none of which speak to the history or mechanics of emotional recall. Ellis' work prior to *The Sage Handbook* entry provides more insight into how one might practice emotional recall. Reviewing multiple pieces from Ellis' oeuvre enables me to cobble together a more nuanced idea of what she means by emotional recall. Ellis describes something akin to emotional recall when she writes about "sociological introspection," or a process by which autoethnographers "first write fieldnotes on the relevant aspects of their experiences. Authors concentrate on emotions and dialogue, but they also describe places, colors, sounds, and movements" ("Systematic Sociological Introspection" 854). Ellis details how sociological introspection enables researchers to chronicle the ways in which emotions are fluid, or evolve, and experienced alongside other, sometimes contradictory feelings, like laughing through tears. She also notes how ethnographers strategically use emotion to cope with experiences, such as laughing in the face of fear or ambiguity. Ellis' thoughtful reflection on emotion work reminds me more of mindfulness than emotional recall. Mindfulness is a technique, or practice, where we systematically observe our own thoughts and bodies. Ellis even describes sociological introspection as "the process of thinking about thinking and feeling about feeling in a focused way in order to examine the lived experiences of the self" (854). That definition could easily pass for a basic explanation of mindfulness. I first learned about mindfulness in yoga and then became a more ardent practitioner when I began cognitive–behavioral therapy to treat my obsessive-compulsive disorder. Ellis traces a genealogical pivot from psychology to sociology and ethnography in her foundational essay "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience." In the 1991 essay, she makes the then-radical claim that

sociologists have neglected affective orientations with the world and fixated on "social facts that exist outside of individual consciousness" (27). Turning inward offers a rich and underutilized cornucopia of data and experiences. Ellis later uses the terms "systematic sociological introspection" and "emotional recall" almost interchangeably when defining the former in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods.* Although Ellis' feet are more firmly planted in sociology than performance, I wonder why she failed to trace emotional recall's theatrical roots with the same fervor she originally tipped her hat to psychological theories of introspection. I fixate on Ellis and Bochner's above-mentioned explanation of emotional recall because it is *the most commonly cited description of emotional recall in communication-oriented autoethnography*. More often than not, autoethnographers quote Ellis and Bochner's explication of the concept without tracing its history or specifying the precise ways in which they practice affective memory.

Ellis's and Ellis and Bochner's "imagine being back in the scene" shorthand emerges in Lee's autoethnographic account of music therapy after laser eye surgery; Chang's how-to chapter on autoethnographic practice; Raab's advocacy of autoethnography in transpersonal psychology; Johnson's narrative of Black masculinity on college campuses; Neville-Jan's first-person tale of an occupational therapist coping with chronic pain; Piirto's reflection on her 21-year participation in a psychological research group; and Gerena's consideration of conflict between homosexuality and his affiliation with a Pentecostal church. The implication is that performing emotional recall is a one-size-fits-all approach to autoethnography. Whether the researcher reflects on the racial dynamics of a university or rehabilitation after laser eye surgery, simply "imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically." How do the ethical dimensions of emotional recall change from scene to scene? What about the psychological implications of recalling trauma? Might remembering laser eye surgery be less traumatizing than revisiting homophobia in a scholar's church? Ellis and Bochner's oft-cited definition lacks enough detail to offer a substantive illustration of emotional recall. Imagine if an ethnographer told readers that she engaged in informant interviews or participant observation but failed to specify the number and average length of interviews, or hours of observation and number of typed field notes. Reviewers would rightfully point out that the author's method lacks precision.

I, too, am guilty of name-checking emotional recall without detailing the instrument's history. Take, for example, my autoethnography about instructional communication titled "Homo-work," where I provide a single, un-cited sentence to elucidate the heuristic instrument. I explain that emotional recall includes "activities whereby I revisit past experiences before creatively re-rendering them" (66). My anemic description of emotional recall implies that an author merely sits in front of a computer and thinks *hard* about the past before writing. Other qualitative researchers define emotional recall as using "imagery to place one's self back in the situation by paying attention to physical details, events, thoughts, and dialogue" (Galle and Lingard 725); and "remembering conversations, contexts, and emotions of important events in as much detail as possible" (Hoppes 263). Reading these definitions, I cannot discern emotional recall from more mundane reminiscences. "If an autoethnography consists of emotional recall, triggers or critical incidents, it is worth describing this process to readers," Tullis argues in her consideration of autoethnographic ethics. She continues, "Descriptions of what stories were selected over others and how they were crafted can lend credibility to an essay or a performance and, by extension, a scholar's analysis and interpretations" (256).

Nick Trujillo's "In Search of Naunny's Grave" exemplifies the sort of careful attention to recollection Tullis advocates. Incidentally, "In Search of Naunny's Grave" is the first essay explicitly marked as autoethnographic in *Text and Performance Quarterly*. Trujillo documents memories of his deceased grandmother, as articulated by family members. The author explicates his exact instruments of recall, including letters to family members soliciting memories of Naunny and 15 semi-structured interviews that probed into her past. Trujillo provides an example for how autoethnographers may account for systematic recall in their work.

But how might emotion be woven into the recall process? Gariglio reflects on the gendered politics of emotion and recollection in his autoethnographic re-engagement with data collected at an Italian Prison. He explains that he re-read field notes and revisited images and videos to "return to the scene emotionally" (211). Gariglio confesses that he policed his emotions in the research site. Acts of violence in the prison began to "appear like déjà vu," he writes (215). "I'm starting to feel anesthetized to the trauma," Gariglio continues in a field note. "I cannot refrain from crying. I don't feel that crying is appropriate here. I am afraid of my tears" (215–16). He points out that crying betrays masculinity in prison. Emotional recall permits Gariglio to re-live and reevaluate emotion in a safer space.

Reading Gariglio's account of emotional recall reminds me of how high school theater was my safe space in high school. Ms Edwards' theater classroom was a place I could cry or try on a dress. I did not yet have the courage to disclose my same-sex desire, let alone defend it. Instead, I used Harvey Fierstein's play *Torch Song Trilogy* to channel years of anti-gay trauma:

Ma:	Arnold, think about the boy. The way you live is bound to affect him!
Arnold:	Ma, David is gay!
Ma:	He hasn't even been here a year!
Arnold:	He came that way!
Ma:	Nobody *comes* that way! (*Torch Song Trilogy*)

I also performed Jean Brodie in my dramatic interpretation of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. In the 10-minute performance, I theatricalized interpersonal struggle between a 12-year-old school girl named Sandy and her beautiful, unconventional teacher Jean Brodie. Brodie tragically pushes underage female students into sexual affairs with adult men. "Little girls," Brodie coos, "I am in the business of putting old heads on young shoulders, and all my pupils are the *crème de la crème*. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" (Spark 5). 27 years later and I finally understand my obsession with this text. Four teenagers sexually abused me by the time I turned eight. I identified with Sandy, one of Brodie's students molested by a teacher at the school. Brodie encourages a sexual relationship between her students and the man. Sandy's final showdown with Ms Brodie provides a stage upon which she is able to articulate and respond to the teacher's abuse. Sandy points out that Ms Brodie, like most predators, is drawn to easy targets, like school children. "You were only attracted to Mary because she had no one else and she was so totally suggestible. She appealed to your vanity" (Spark 83). At 16, I used oral interpretation of literature to work through sexual trauma, just as I pulled from that history of abuse to connect with the material I performed at speech competitions.

Recalling my theatrical training, a methodological recollection

The theatrical process I utilized to connect my history to Sandy's despair is affective memory, or emotional recall. In her 2004 book *The Ethnographic I*, Ellis briefly mentions that emotional recall is "similar to the 'method acting' of Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio" (118) but does not explain Strasberg's method nor specify how the theater-based term has been modified to fit within the grammars of autoethnography. Gingrich-Philbrook encourages autoethnographers to pay more careful attention to literary and aesthetic traditions that the method allegedly celebrates. Autoethnographers often use the language (e.g. "implications") and conventions (e.g. excessive citations) of social science to formulate claims but fail to reference (let alone cite) artistic practices and histories that influence an essay's aesthetic elements. Gingrich-Philbrook likens the phenomenon to autoethnographer's seeking "Daddy's approval" ("Autoethnography's" 311). My gendered reading of Gingrich-Philbrook's argument is filtered through a historical lens through which the master narrative paints science as masculine and logical and theater/performance/aesthetics as feminine, emotional, and irrational. Performance studies scholars are uniquely positioned to contextualize affective memory (aka emotional recall) and provide specific strategies for how the instrument may be utilized.

Actors use affective memory to bridge personal experiences to texts they interpret. Russian theater actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski borrows the term from psychologist Theodule Ribot. Ribot argues that people experience memory in different ways. One drowning survivor looks at crashing waves and feels nothing; another survivor's throat contracts at the mere thought of deep water (Ribot). Ribot theorizes that some sensitive people "recall the circumstances *plus* the revived conditions of feeling" (153). Emotional recall, for Ribot, is not merely recollection where one imagines "being back in the scene emotionally and physically." Emotional recall requires an ability to relive *conditions of feeling*. Ribot's drowning survivor example insinuates that not everyone has the *capacity* to invoke and re-experience past emotion, which explains why trigger warnings are alternately viewed as necessary or ridiculous based on an individual's subjectivity.

For Stanislavski, affective recall characterizes a *systematic* recollection of emotionally significant events and physical sensations incited by past experiences. By systematic, I mean a careful, nuanced, and planned approach to recalling sense memories. I worry when I read autoethnographic essays where authors sometimes make a passing reference to emotional recall without elucidating specific approaches of recollection. Emotional recall is not simply thinking hard about past events. Emotional recall implies a rigorous process that can and should be mapped for readers.

Stanislavski clarifies his approach when asking an actor to consider life as a tree. Unsatisfied with the student's blasé description of the tree, the director poses a series of questions: What is in the tree's line of sight? How does the wind feel against its branches? What is the specific design of the fence surrounding the park? Stanislavski writes:

> If [the student] responds thoughtlessly, I do not accept his answer. Work on the imagination is often prepared and directed in [a] conscious, intellectual manner. The student sees something, either in his memory or in his imagination: certain definite visual images are before him. For a brief moment, he lives in a dream. After that, another question, and the process is repeated. So with a third and fourth, until I have sustained and lengthened that brief moment into something approaching a whole picture. The more often he recalls it,

> the more deeply it will be printed on his memory, and the more deeply he will live into it. (62–63)

In short, affective memory involves "recalling an emotion from one's past analogous to the emotional life of one's character, [or] replacing the character's logic and emotion with something from one's past" (Carnicke 148).

Stanislavski's method of emotional recall should, of course, be modified when making the transition from stage acting to autoethnographic instrument. In a 1964 interview, Joseph Chaikin and Richard Schechner discuss the limitations of emotional recall. Chaikin was among the second generation of students taught the Stanislavski System and the director of The Open Theatre in New York. He admits that emotional recall may keep the actor anchored to "his recollection rather than freeing him *into* the situation at hand" (194). In other words, too significant an investment in emotional recall may result in an actor connecting more to past trauma than the material in a playwright's script. In Chaikin's world, a performer's job is to animate a dramatist's text, not mine the scholarly value of a practitioner's life story. The focus shifts when researchers use emotional recall in the context of autoethnography because *introspection becomes the text* that will be performed on paper or on stage. The goal of autoethnographic emotional recall is to provide thick textual description of sometimes traumatic, life-changing, and/or confusing experiences that also prove heuristically provocative.

Ellis and Bochner encourage readers to practice emotional recall and write "close to the time of the [recollected] event … while your feelings are still intense" (752). Their recommendation lacks an important caveat: researchers might not be emotionally prepared to cope with an invocation of past distress. Studying a theme that "hits close to home" may result in unexpected anguish. Reflecting on Black actors' use of emotional recall in plays about slavery, Cizmar notes that Stanislavsky-based exercises "potentially damaged actors of color by triggering cultural trauma and distorting identity formation" (187). Cizmar's words resonate with me because I have penned and performed monologues too close to the narrated event's fire, its burn. Three years into a doctoral program and the year after my father died, I staged a one-person show titled "Soapbox." The final monologue dramatizes moments leading up to Dad's funeral:

> The day of his funeral, I stood in his bathroom and stared at his toothbrush and Lubriderm lotion, wondering how long it will take my stepmother before she is able to throw away the tiniest of treasures. How long will it take me to erase his voice from old answering-machine messages? How long will I keep his shirts in dry-cleaning plastic to conserve his scent?

My advisor Dr Linda Park-Fuller pulled me aside and expressed her concern. Was I temporally and emotionally too close to devastation to write, let alone perform, my grief for an audience? "I'm fine!" I countered. But I was not ok.

For most of my adult life, I have worked under the false pretense that art would help me move past injury, as if a poem or monologue enables me to put despair in a box and burn it into non-existence. Art does not diminish or nullify suffering, art honors survival. Emotional recall takes time, in terms of (1) temporal distance from a life-changing ordeal, and (2) time to systematically practice the technique. The same ethical consideration holds true when autoethnographer's employ affective memory. Applied to the method and reporting style, one might ask: What resources are available to an autoethnographer should affective memory exercises prove too taxing? What activities help an

author prepare for narrating past upset? How might an author prepare readers for emotional triggers in an essay? Detailing emotionally laden events requires authors to pay careful attention to *how* recalled moments may affect an author and audience. These are just a few questions autoethnographers should explicitly address when they mention emotional recall in their work.

In the following sections, I revisit past publications and note the ways in which a more nuanced and systematic approach to emotional recall would have enriched the projects. First, I revisit my essay "Tales of a Fighting Bobcat" to help illustrate the difference between standard recollection and emotional recall in the context of autoethnographic work. Next, I reconsider "DiЯty" to make a case for clearly articulated affective memory strategies. Finally, I contemplate a few ethical considerations that emerge when practicing emotional recall in autoethnography.

Recalling "Bobcat"

I first learned about the utility of artifacts in autoethnography after reading Brogden's essay "art•I/f/act• ology," where the author showcases childhood report cards. The artifacts concretize "both [her] learning and [her] learning to teach" (Brogden 855). Brogden's work inspired me to develop a Foucauldian-oriented form of autoethnography I call auto-archaeology. Autoarchaeology characterizes a form of artifact-driven autoethnography where researchers use personal archives to illustrate how schools ("Tales of a Fighting Bobcat"), disability organizations (Kattari and Beltran), hospitals and universities (Hanan), and mental institutions (Fox, "Auto-archaeology of Homosexuality") constrain and enable identity. I, for instance, use disciplinary write-ups from middle school to reveal that teachers failed to mention in-class anti-gay bullying that often provoked my misbehavior ("Auto-archaeology of Homosexuality").

"Tales of a Fighting Bobcat" is an auto-archaeological essay, in which I use artifacts from high school to call attention to the ways in which teachers, administrators, and my peers disciplined and communicated about my gay body. I never claim to use affective memory in the piece, despite its emotional appeals. Reflecting on "Bobcat" helps me illustrate the difference between recalling a past event and engaging in emotional recall. As I will soon argue, writing about past emotion is not the same as emotional recall, just as writing about the body is not the same practice as embodied writing.

My freshman year of high school was thirty years ago. I was one of the only unmistakably gay kids at Cy-Fair in 1990. The jukebox in the school's cafeteria played nothing but country-western. Imagine how scary that environment might be for a gender-bending gay kid. In "Bobcat," I narrate an assault that took place in my ninth-grade science class. Apropos of nothing, one of my classmates approached me before class began and repeatedly punched me in the chest. I write:

> I was initially shocked and outraged by his violation of my body. Weeks later, I sat on my bed and began to fantasize about how his bulbous biceps stretch the sleeves of his cotton shirts. I arched my chest into empty air, hoping to recapture the feel of his hand on my underdeveloped pectoral muscles. I want to feel the force of his masculinity inside me, in places his fist failed to hit the last time our flesh became enmeshed. I have spent more than a few hours in Physical Science hoping he would find it in his heart to hit me again. How do I reconcile

> being attracted to a boy who is mean to me? Am I attracted to this beautiful hunk of meat *because* he hits me? Is my desire the result of post-traumatic stress. ("Tales" 127)

I have spent the better part of my scholarly career documenting anti-gay bullying I experienced in middle school and high school. My research is largely dedicated to ending anti-LGBTQ violence in academic settings. When it comes to this sort of brutality, my memory runs deep and clear. But remembering emotion is not the same thing as what Ribot describes as the "revived conditions of feeling" (153), or re-living an emotional state or its approximation.

Ten years after the publication of "Bobcat," my childhood friend Bev invited me to join a Facebook page dedicated to Cy-Fair High School's 1994 graduating class. New members typically post a recent picture and short message. I scroll down my updates when my finger freezes – temporary paralysis. Brows dive close to my eyes, accentuating the vertical line time has etched between them. Breathings stops, as it often does when fight-or-flight takes hold of me. I would recognize those biceps anywhere. They have not changed in thirty years. The lower and upper parts of his arm are perpendicular as he holds a mug of amber beer and smiles for the camera. This is the sort of pose a man strikes when he wants to accentuate his build. My former classmate's right bicep tears through a maroon cotton sleeve stretched to its capacity. He announces to the group, "I was gone for a while but I'm back cyfair [*sic*]. Hows [*sic*] everyone doing? Miss yall [*sic*] like I always have [*sic*] I'll never change that, cheers!" Deadness that began in my index finger spreads through my entire body. I sit statue-like in front of my computer, just like I sat motionless the day the now-man in the photo punched me before class. Then punched again. Tan knuckles crack against my ribs. And again. The force of his fist absorbs my breath. I cannot breathe. Cannot act scared nor cry. Beautiful man-Medusa has once again turned me to stone. Marble sits in my veins for a full five minutes before my eyes twitch me back to 2020, the year of pandemic. The tiniest of tears breaks from the outside corner of my right eye. I shake my head and whisper, "I have to say something. For the 14-year-old this jerk-off scared stiff." Fingers crash against my keyboard as I type, "It's the guy who assaulted me freshman year – punching me repeatedly in the chest. Woo hoo! Welcome back! So glad you're here!" Our Greek tragedy unfolds for our classmates:

> Medusa: I don't actually know you, and I've never hit any female in school. I'm sorry that some asshole did that to you. If that happened, I'm sure others saw it and would still remember. Anyone remember that?
>
> Ragan: You're that asshole. What matters is that I was on the receiving end of it.
>
> Medusa: I'm sorry, man.
>
> Ragan: First, you don't hit "females." Now I'm a man. Which is it? Are you mis-gendering me, or are you sorry for the assault you don't remember, the assault that only counts if others in this forum remember it? What matters is that *I* remember it.
>
> Medusa: You can punch me in the chest. How's that? So we would be even. 30 years and I'm not the same person.
>
> Ragan: Unsurprisingly, you think more violence balances the ledger. It doesn't. Me calling you out on what you did to me our freshman year isn't for you, it's for me. You likely singled me out because I was the only kid in our class that was obviously gay. Your attempt at misgendering me in this thread echoes that juvenile mentality and demonstrates how much you are "not the same person."

Medusa: I hope you can get over this. High school was a long time ago. You can't live in the past.

Ragan: You don't get to tell somebody you assaulted how and when they get over it. It was important for me to call out your assault because I was too afraid to do so when I was fourteen. Despite claiming you've changed, you repeatedly tried to gaslight me (it never happened, you don't hit females, I'm living in the past). Do I think you've grown since high school? Of course. But it would be irresponsible for me to remain silent when you entered this forum.

Nobody else in the group acknowledged our exchange. I did not even receive a cheesy "like" or heart emoji. My former classmates immediately pivoted to, "Let's share photos of ourselves 30 years ago and compare them to what we look like today." Their silence is cut from the same cloth of complicity that made them *de facto* agents in the violence I survived so many years ago. Their inaction brought me back to that terrifying island, alone during the tempest.

I review this exchange in detail because the tale helps me illustrate the difference between thinking hard about the past and emotional recall. The punching anecdote I share in "Bobcat" is not the product of affective memory, nor do I claim emotional recall as a research instrument in the essay. The story from my past is emotional and may trigger emotion in readers but is categorically and methodologically different than what I experienced standing up to my assaulter thirty years after the event.

Emotional recall is the sting gut punch to your stomach when you earnestly remember the breathlessness of anti-gay childhood torment. No escape. Wake up every weekday and go back to the pack of hungry bobcats. Emotional recall reminds you of the *feelings* you *forgot*, not the *memory* of those feelings but the *actual feelings*: a racing heartbeat that mindful breathing cannot control and a manic panic attack sensation that the walls close in around you. Emotional recall is that feeling you get when you are in the presence of family, brothers who so expertly treat you like the child you were that you momentarily forget the man you have become.

The central purpose of emotional recall is the "recalling and re-experiencing of previously felt emotions. By recalling the sensory details that accompanied an experience, [the practitioner] could entice the emotion from his subconscious and re-experience it" (Pireddu 97). Pireddu points out that affective memory incites a "psychophysical response" and "stimulates the player's physical and mental being with remembered sensations that colour his or her behavior and expressions" (99). This re-*lived* emotion is what often lends a recounted autoethnographic tale its electricity and immediacy, or "aliveness and verisimilitude" (Pireddu 99).

Of course, one need not confront an assailant to practice affective memory. I would not recommend traversing that road just to pen a more lively autoethnographic anecdote. I share the above story to provide a general distinction between recollection and emotional recall. In the next section, I describe a few instruments autoethnographers might more safely use when trying to re-experience feelings and sensations from the past.

Recalling "DiЯty"

I taught my first graduate seminar in Performance Autoethnography in fall 2019. My goal in the Performance Autoethnography seminar was to take tacit knowledge about

autoethnography and clearly articulate the information to a group of talented graduate students who knew little about the specific instruments I use in my research. The start of the semester focused on traditional qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, informant interviews, focus groups, and site maps. The overview for each instrument includes multiple definitions, modes of deployment, and associated controversies. Qualitative interviews, for instance, take many forms. A qualitative researcher might rely on informal conversational interviews that are on-the-fly and take place during participant observation; informant interviews that are long, more formal, and typically structured by an interview guide; and focus group interviews, where a researcher speaks to multiple people at the same time (Lindlof and Taylor). Literature about interviewing in qualitative research is replete with controversies and ethical considerations. Stacey, for instance, rejects the notion that researchers are "objective" and research respondents are "objects." Her feminist approach to qualitative research champions the growth of relationships and shared empathy. Wheatley extends Stacey's notion of feminist ethnography, contending that research reports containing interview data should be readable to project participants. She writes, "Unlike much academic writing, feminism calls for forms of writing that are available to readers who might not be conversant in or trained to translate the jargons of specialized scholars" (409).

Compared to other qualitative research methods, emotional recall is woefully undertheorized. I grappled with this concern as it unfolded in my Performance Autoethnography seminar. Darting my eyes over a new pair of Ray-Ban readers (welcome to middle age!), I addressed the four students in my class, "I don't want to give you the impression that autoethnographers simply sit at a computer and write about memories. There's more to it." I turned to my most recently published essay in *Text and Performance Quarterly* to demonstrate autoethnographic memory's *technology*, or combination of techniques, skills, and processes to accomplish a memory-related objective.

"DiЯty" chronicles two instances of child molestation I survived when I was 6. Those memories have haunted me for decades. I would not claim I used emotional recall in my report had I merely sat down in front of a computer and wrote about my recollections in an unstructured manner. One tale involved the high school buddy of my fraternal half-brother molesting me in the den of a house my father leased for a year. I had not seen the inside of this dwelling since I was 6. While writing "DiЯty," I typed the address into RedFin, a real estate brokerage website that serves as a repository for property sales data. Redfin provided seventeen images of the house in which my abuse took place. I clicked my way through pictures that released memories, smells, and sensations that once felt forever lost.

Photo 1, lush emerald bushes bookend rock gravel steps that lead up to an orange-brick, two-story home with red shutters. I first experience pleuritis, or a sharp pain in the lungs, running up those steps. Each breath triggers a stabbing sensation in my tiny chest. "I'm having a heart attack," I cry to Monica, my nanny. She shakes water from her hand and places it against my chest. Her cold hand is a salve. "Shhh. You're ok," she consoled in her melodic Barbadian accent.

Photo 2, a carpet-covered stairway and white, wooden bannister curve into the home's stone-floored foyer. Dad introduced me to the musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* when I was 6. I see my 6-year-old self materialize in the photo. He skips down the steps, pretends he is Dolly Parton's Miss Mona, and sings a song about fans turning and men cumming.

Photo 3, a den with peach carpet. Tears stream down my 43-year-old cheeks. This is where my brother's friend takes me, where he asks me to touch his penis. "Use *both* hands," he instructs. (I had forgotten that request until I saw the photo.) Then another "new" memory: He bends me over the couch, sticks his penis between my thighs, and thrusts. No penetration. All these years later, I remember the warmth of him on my legs. In "DiЯty," I compare the sensation to phantom cell phone rings people sometimes feel when they mistakenly think a phone vibrates in their pocket.

Those RedFin pictures brought back the *feeling* and *embodied experience* of my abuse. "DiЯty" does not include a paragraph where I specify how I used RedFin to reconstruct the architecture of my old house. Accounting for my unique method of emotional recall would have helped me better explicate the *architecture of my memory*.

Sensory data often triggers newly recalled memories, as well as their associated emotions. I will never forget the first time I stuck my head under the plastic barrier protecting my dead father's dry cleaning. Dad stopped buying nice clothes in the 1970s, so his unique scent – a chocolate-covered pretzel mixed with old lace fragrance – permeates his dress shirts. I buried my nose in handkerchiefs made from those clothes as I typed the previous sentence. Sixteen years later and I can still smell him back to existence: the feeling of his warm, soft skin embracing me. Willander and Larsson argue that "autobiographical odor memory" permits people to smell their way back to the past. They argue that "odor-evoked memories [are] associated with stronger feelings of being brought back in time" (240). In this essay's introduction, I reflected on the ways in which less systematic remembrances flattened my father when I wrote about him in "Heterophobia." Smells emanating from Dad's red-checkered shirt bring him back to me. My nose relives burying my head in his chest as I cried over high school bullies. I am brought back to his closet that now sits in a home owned by another suburban family. I used to run my fingers across and poke my face between his plastic-wrapped fabrics. No room smelled more like my father than that closet – a chamber filled with cloth that absorbed his oils and dead skin. Smelling Dad takes me back to his gorgeous complexity, to the pinprick bristle of his stubble against my cheek when I went in for a hug, to the rush of joy when I would hear the muffled sound of the garage door growling open when he came home from work each night. Each huff of Dad's shirt brings me back to Miami Beach. Dad holds me in his arms as he wades in the Atlantic Ocean. No wave can crash the sense of security I feel as sun beams kiss our red skin. Dad is so much more than the forgetful man he became, the one who repeatedly asked, "Have you met any nice women?" An unstructured approach to recollection resulted in my poem "Heterophobia." First, I imagined being back in the moment when Dad's question punched me in the tummy. Then, I scribbled a poetic anecdote into a spiral notebook. I doubt I would have written the same poem had I employed affective memory. Without emotional recall's rigor, I pushed Dad into a paternal archetype that dominated media depictions of family life for gay men in the 1980s and 1990s: the one-dimensional father who refuses to accept his gay son's same-sex attraction. Temporal distance and a more systematic approach to recollection pulled my sweet father from the clutches of that trope. To modify Kaysen talking to the girl interrupted at her music, I tell my father, "I *smell* you."

Other instruments that aid in affective memory include artifact/memorabilia digs, interviews, and autobiographical timelines. First, artifact digs enable an autobiographical researcher to comb through personal archives to discover personal items associated with a

narrated time, person, or place. My essays "Tales of a Fighting Bobcat" and "Autoarchaeology of Homosexuality" provide detailed information on how autoethnographers can incorporate artifacts in their research reports.

Next, informant interviews with people present or implicated in narrated scenes provide texture, or layers, to moments we hope to recall. Ellis describes this practice as "interactive introspection," wherein a "researcher works back and forth with others to assist in their introspection, but the object of study is the emergent experiences of both parties" ("Sociological Introspection" 30). After my father died, I wrote autobiographical research about communication that went awry after his Alzheimer's diagnosis. I spoke with my sister Tina about her experiences with our father. Tina revealed that Dad lied about his early life. For instance, we used to watch Penn State's football team play Saturday afternoon games. "Yes. Come on, run! Yes! Yes!" I remember my father shouting, as a football player intercepted a ball and sprinted toward a game-winning touchdown. Dad told us that he attended the university. Our second oldest sister – who is nearly thirty years my senior – broke the news to Tina that Dad never went to college. My father was born in 1920 and grew up during the Great Depression. His mother was a Russian Jewish immigrant. Dad fibbed about his academic pedigree to get ahead in business and afford the middle-class life that allowed me to grow up in relative comfort. Memory is at the heart of an essay about Alzheimer's disease. How could I write about Dad's memory without interrogating newfound knowledge about my father (he never attended college) alongside a personal history about him that was real to me for most of my life (he was a Penn State graduate)?

Third, I recommend constructing an autobiographical timeline that temporally organizes major events in your life. I created one while writing "DiЯty" because the subject matter required meticulous detail, especially regarding ages and approximate dates. The autobiographical timeline I formulated includes pictures from each year, outlines key life occurrences, and notes significant pop culture events that function as cultural touchstones (see Figure 1).

Clarifying emotional recall techniques allows an autoethnographer to account for memory's stumbles and stutters. Foucault might frame the practice as elucidating "games of truth" that call attention to and clarify an "ensemble of rules for the production of truth" (Gauthier 15). Foucault's gaming metaphor is especially apt in research settings "where researchers constitute themselves and constitute the researched" (Peters 57). Peters argues:

> In Foucault's late work, we find a greater emphasis on the self-awareness of the researcher, on the identity of the researcher and on the ethics of self-constitution which challenges and brings a new focus to the researcher/subject relation and its discursive and methodological representations. (57–58)

These are just a few specific ways that life researchers may more methodically practice and account for emotional recall in their work. I recommend explicit elucidation of emotional recall practices in research reports. Ellis and Bochner point out that autoethnography is composed of three intertwining strands: "research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)" (740). Good autoethnography evokes identification with the author (auto) and engages the cultural circumstances (ethnos) that resulted in a tale. Great autoethnography teaches readers how to perform similar work (graphy).

1982		• Turn 6 • Start 1st Grade • Molested by half-brother • April: *Valley Girl* released • June: *Grease 2* and Poltergeist released • Nov: Michael Jackson's "Thriller" released
1983		• Turn 7 • Move to Fleetwood • Jodi and Dad Marry • Start 2nd Grade • Transfer from Meadowbrook to Addicks elementary • Leonard begins first year at Cornell • Jodi and Dad divorce • My brother's friend molests me in den
1984		• Feb: *Footloose* released • Turn 8 • Start 3rd grade at Addicks • Visit new home during construction, pee in closet of new bedroom's lumber • Move to Hearthstone • Transfer to Owens Elementary
1985		• Turn 9 • Whitney Houston's "How Will I Know" • Camp Longhorn (Navajos) • Start 4th grade • Best friends with Scott Gross • Problem peeing on the floor • Start roller skating • Joyce moves to Houston and marries Dad

Figure 1. Four years from my autobiographical timeline.

Ethical considerations

A student registered for my section of Gender and Communication visits office hours the first week of class. She asks if LGBTQ themes will be covered in the course. "Oh, definitely," I exclaim. "We discuss same-sex desire in ancient Greece, explore the rhetorical construction of homosexuality's pathology, review LGBTQ social movements, and critique LGBTQ representation in media." Blood drains from the student's face as I enthusiastically preview all the ways in which I have woven queer themes into course content. She tells me that she may have to drop the class. "I have OCD," she reveals. "It's a specific kind of OCD called SOCD, or sexual orientation OCD. I'm straight but constantly question my sexual orientation."

Take 1. Blood rushes to my cheeks. I am that scared 14-year-old again, sitting in science class about to absorb punches. My heart knocks against my chest. Sexual orientation OCD? Or maybe you are gay, I think. I tell the student about an essay written by a lesbian academic named Jaclyn Pryor. Pryor recounts her experiences teaching undergraduate theater at the University of Texas. Her entry-level course included an in-class screening of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches.* A few students emailed Pryor and complained about the explicitly gay material. One class participant described learning about the Tony and Pulitzer Prize-winning drama as a "waste of time" and wondered why she had not used those class periods to study "actual theatre that normal people have interest in, such as *Oklahoma*. Hopefully, this problem can be corrected and future students can avoid this pain" (Pryor 74). Pryor points out that the university does not recognize homophobia as an excused absence. The point of academia is to expose students to a range of human experiences, even those they may find irksome. I encourage the woman sitting in my office to stay in the class. "This might be a productive way for you to combat your intrusive thoughts," I tell her.

Take 2. A year prior to the aforementioned student's visit, I made an emergency appointment with a psychiatrist. Debilitating intrusive thoughts and compulsions brought me to my knees. Fifteen minutes into our meeting, the psychiatrist diagnosed me with obsessive-compulsive disorder and prescribed cognitive–behavioral therapy (CBT) and an antidepressant called Celexa. I underwent CBT in group therapy sessions, where I observed the various ways that OCD affects patients. Some people obsessively check appliances to make sure no electronics are left on. Others cannot complete a run in the park without worrying they accidentally stepped on and maimed an animal. And, yes, many people with OCD deal with intrusive thoughts that their "true" sexual inclinations are inconsistent with their embodied desire. Instead of judging the student in my office, I empathize with her situation and confess that I, too, have OCD. CBT exposures should not be willy-nilly. Effective exposures occur slowly, methodically, and in controlled environments. "I understand your concern," I tell her. "This is not the right class for you to take this semester, especially if you already feel so much anxiety." After we met, I wondered if Take 1 would have been our communicative path had I never been diagnosed with OCD or undergone CBT. This experience made me more deeply ponder the ethical contract between performers/instructors/authors and audiences/students/readers. In other words, in what ways can performers, instructors, and authors look out for the emotional wellbeing of their audience?

Autoethnographers using emotional recall tend to investigate emotionally laden life events. Why else would a researcher use affective memory unless a past emotional state were significant enough to justify the tool's use? How might a textual invocation of intense emotions affect readers? This article marks the first time I have included a trigger warning, or a statement that precedes potentially distressing material. I am of two minds when it comes to content warnings. On one hand, trigger warnings enable students to shy away from uncomfortable themes and frame critical scholarship as dangerous (Wyatt). Authors and performers cannot anticipate a range of sometimes benign and unpredictable references that may provoke a troublesome response in a reader or audience member (Wyatt). Trigger warnings may even *promote* symptoms of distress (Sanson et al.). Conversely, trigger warnings allow for transparency, accommodate students with mental illness, and are small but empathic acts that potentially minimize anguish for

some readers. In autoethnography, foreshadowing need not take the form of a trigger warning. Key words in titles and subject indications in abstracts may be sufficient.

Other ethical questions emerge when I consider affective memory's role in autoethnography. How might autoethnographers more conscientiously practice and teach affective memory? What ethical questions should practitioners ask when using emotional recall? I offer two more recommendations for using emotional recall in autoethnographic writing, including temporal distance and anecdotes that properly animate recalled emotions.

Temporal distance

A student in my fall 2019 Performance Autoethnography seminar pitches a project about domestic violence. I was in the latter stages of revising "DiЯty." In the piece, I detail how two teenagers molested me when I was 6. I also narrate an instance where I was sexually coercive at 7 and dismissive of sexual abuse when I was 19. Writing the self-implicative anecdotes in "DiЯty" allowed me to more reflexively engage in affective memory.

"I don't want you to write about a traumatic topic unless you are in the appropriate emotional frame of mind to do so," I explained. "Writing about violence too soon after the experience often proves counter-productive. If you are confident that you are up to the task, I will likely ask you to self-implicate and emotionally nuance your approach, whenever it may be appropriate to do so." She convinced me that she was ready to write about her abuse in complex, sophisticated, and important ways. Having just written my own account of abusive relationships, I felt well-positioned to help guide her journey.

In her final paper, she notes that blame-oriented narratives of domestic violence often situate one party as wholly innocent and another as entirely guilty. This narrative framework distorts intimate-partner violence's transactional dynamics (Drees). Drees admits that the dirty, or radically self-implicative, approach to her project provided an opportunity to disclose moments she was violent in her past relationships. She details knocking out one boyfriend's teeth and calling him a "loser who was never going to be anything or anyone" (Drees 14). Drees confesses that, until writing the report, she never shared this information with anyone. "Admitting any of this behavior," she writes, "would have threatened my reputation and would take away my victim status" (Drees 14). Drees's disclosures offer unique, critical insights to the situational aspects of domestic violence.

Temporal distance from abusive events enabled both of us to more ethically engage in affective memory practices. In previous recollections of abuse we encountered, we both failed to account for, let alone critically explore, moments in which we acted abusively or enabled the abuse of others. Emotional recall's more systematic approach to embodied experience often results in more nuanced forms of self-implication. The 6-year-old misses the touch of the 17-year-old who sexually abused him. My 44-year-old self winces at that longing. Was I trying to recapture his touch when, at 7, I sexually coerced my same-aged friend? Feelings of guilt had been inextricably linked to my tale of abuse but more conventional modes of storytelling/recall enabled me to omit my culpability, just like they permitted Drees to sidestep her violence.

Moreover, temporal distance from a life-changing and distressful event often proves necessary from a mental health perspective. Autoethnographers wade into dangerous territory when unprocessed suffering is treated as mere grist for the scholarly mill.

Anecdotes that properly animate recalled emotions: recalling "Skinny Bones"

Authors employing affective memory should consider how their textual choices engender embodied feelings incited by emotional recall activities. To illustrate my point, I revisit one of my earliest publications, "Skinny Bones." The piece chronicles the first HIV test I took after a decade of promiscuity. As I waited for my results, I reflected on the signification of my then-slim body in relation to the AIDS pandemic. The piece considers "HIV serostatus performativity," or the ways in which "people perform their subjectivities in relation to presumed HIV-positivity and HIV-negativity" ("Skinny Bones" 5). I detail how HIV discourses shaped readings of my skinny, gay body and poetically render emotional turmoil I experienced prior to learning my HIV serostatus. The last five lines of the analysis demonstrate how a textual/poetic choice anchored in emotional recall would have enriched the now-thirteen-year-old essay. I conclude the analysis with the phone call I made to retrieve my HIV test results. "Number by number, I punch in my access code," I typed. "My identity has been reduced to a drop of blood. Will it continue to be? 1-2-6-7-7-4-8-3-5-2-9. Finally, a recording proclaims, 'You have tested … '" ("Skinny Bones" 16). I share my test results in the conclusion. I will not make the same mistake here.

Revealing my result was a mistake because the more emotionally consistent move would be to let readers sit with my body's ambiguity. Emotionally consistent aesthetics, in this context, characterize artistic choices that best represent embodied experiences incited by affective memory. Why not capture the dread of *not knowing* my serostatus? I should not have provided a clear-cut conclusion to the work's primary theme: audience-projected connections people make between HIV and thin, gay bodies. My decision was guided by fear and anxiety. I did not want the burden of people asking me about my HIV-serostatus at each NCA I attended. Kind silence respecting my boundaries would have been even worse. Every conversation would make me think, "You're wondering if I'm negative or positive, aren't you?" Years later, I better appreciate how that uncertainty would make "Skinny Bones" infinitely more interesting and important. I unfortunately took a cleaner path. In doing so, I reinforced a positive/negative dualism by revealing my serostatus and took a less adventurous road of authorship by providing a tidy, unambiguous ending. Not revealing my result would have artistically captured the anxiety that periodically knocked me on my ass in the decade I went without knowing whether I was HIV- or HIV+.

Looking back, looking forward

My friend Craig Gingrich-Philbrook once rightfully critiqued my excessive use of unnecessary citations in an early draft of an autoethnographic paper. His remark wormed its way through my ear and set camp in my brain. My take-away from his observation is that I internalized norms of rigor in the eleven years I studied at research universities. "Show your work," math teachers tell their students. From an early age, we learn that performative demonstrations of labor mark rigor. Autoethnographers struggle with a unique and delicate calculus: How much work should we show when using a method that celebrates open-endedness and artistry? The question is especially important to consider when foregrounding method is *only* a performative strategy to show work, rather than enrich an autoethnographic narrative.

I advocate clearly explicated affective memory recall because popular use of the term "emotional recall" in autoethnography feels like the sort of performative gesture that tips its hat at rigor. Does everyone use emotional recall the same way? Are all attempts at affective memory successful? How much time should an autoethnographer or performer wait before attempting to revisit emotions that bubble around catastrophe? Addressing these questions need not perpetuate a false division between autoethnography's intertwined aesthetic and epistemic threads. Like Gingrich-Philbrook, I challenge the binary by which:

> Analysis arguably leans toward prose, evocation toward poetry; analysis toward the values of reason and argument historically associated with the masculine and hard sciences, evocation toward the feminine and soft associated with art; theory toward the analytic, literature toward the evocative. Guilt and innocence are more complicated, but no less deployed by those more partisan in their devotion to the opposition, as charges of succumbing to self-indulgence/self-absorption or their epistemic inflation of presuming to theorize toward transcendental laws of human experience circulate. ("Almond Grove" 20)

I urge autoethnographers to more meticulously account for affective memory *and* creatively package that important information.

One of my favorite aspects of autoethnography is its open-endedness. The method has "evolved in a manner that makes precise definition and application difficult" (Ellis and Bochner 739). I do not advocate a singular approach to detailing emotional recall in research reports. Autoethnographers already employ a range of strategies for addressing theory and method in autoethnography. One may seamlessly integrate theory and citations into the main body of a report, as Tony Adams eloquently proves in his book *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction.* Or one may unpack more explicitly theoretical moments in 85 endnotes, as Stacy Holman-Jones does in her narrative-based engagement of adoption. My aim is not to narrow the field of what constitutes a "rigorous" account of autoethnographic method but rather to make a case for how affective memory might better enrich our collective deployment of a commonly used instrument. The recommendations I provide in this article will hopefully help life researchers better articulate the rigor of their work and provide a rationale for their aesthetic choices. This essay is a love letter to my sweetheart method, a blueprint for how one may more carefully dance her dance.

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