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## **Autoethnographic Mother-Writing: Advocating Radical Specificity**

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*Main Article:*

### **Autoethnographic Mother-Writing: Advocating Radical Specificity**

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## **Abstract**

In considering the similarities between "momoirs"--popular memoirs written by mothers about motherhood experiences--and evocative autoethnographic mother-writing, I argue that differentiating these two forms of intimate observation and personal narrative requires a rethinking of autoethnographic practice. Specifically, I draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze to advocate for a radical specificity in autoethnographic writing. Thinking the autoethnographic narrative in terms of specificities and differences encourages us to think creatively about personal experiences and cultural relations beyond what is shared and communicable.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; momoir; Deleuze; difference; radical specificity

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## **1. Writing by Mothers**

Today my 13-year-old son refused to go to school. He went back to bed instead. Last night, my 9-year-old son refused to go to bed. Instead, he sat on the floor of his room fully clothed and tried to count the money in his piggy bank in the dark. I felt overwhelmed by their resistance; why is motherhood so hard? (Sotirin, 2008, p. 1)

This excerpt is from a longer autoethnographic essay about single mothering. As a personal narrative of motherhood, such autoethnographic work might be mistaken for one of the popular memoirs about mothering experiences that have become known as "momoirs." After all, both evocative autoethnography and the momoir emphasize personal narrative and the larger significances of intimate experience. The differences seem obvious too: while autoethnography conforms to academic conventions, the momoir is written for a popular audience. Yet these ready similarities and distinctions trouble me. In examining what I think distinguishes autoethnographic mother-writing from momoires, I have found myself engaging a critical issue for autoethnographic scholarship: the need to differentiate autoethnography from autobiographical writing regardless of whether this concerns mothering, fathering, or whatever identities and relations are entailed.

While others have approached this concern by creating definitions and policing generic conventions, I have been drawn to think more carefully about the epistemological claims of autoethnography. By showing how the claims and motivations of momoires are surprisingly similar to those of autoethnography, I call into question their differences in order to argue for an alternative autoethnographic practice. In the end, my argument is not limited to mother-writing. Informed by the work of Gilles Deleuze, the preeminent twentieth-century philosopher, I call on autoethnographic scholars to rethink the call to evoke impassioned

understanding and to embrace instead the *radical specificity* of lived experience, “the plethora of sensations, vibrations, movements, and intensities that constitute both our world and ourselves” (Grosz, 2001, p. 171).

## 2. What Is a "Momoir"?

“Momoirs” are a variant of the memoir, from the Latin *memoria* meaning memory. Memoir is the classic genre of autobiographical writing that features select scenes rather than the extended story of the narrator’s life. The memoir recreates the author’s memories of these selected events and relations. Emotional evocation, rich though selective description, and self-reflectiveness characterize a memoir:

Of equal or greater importance to what happened are the memoirist’s perceptions--the thoughts, feelings, associations, and digressions that the memory of those events draw forth. That is, the memoirist is trying to convey not “What I did,” but something more like “What it felt like/feels like to be me.” (Edwards, 2003, para. 14)

Composition theorist John Trimbur notes that memoirs not only make personal experiences significant to others but reveal “the secrets and unsuspected meanings of ordinary lives that turn out to be not so ordinary after all” (1999, p. 157).

The momoír is memoir writing by mothers, popular both in print and online. Andrea Buchanan and Amy Hudock, in the excellent introduction to their edited collection of momoírs, *Literary Mama*, explain momoír as “a dismissive label applied to memoirs that focus on the psychological, spiritual, and emotional development of a woman through motherhood” (Buchanan & Hudock, 2006, p. xi). Linda Howard Clark, in an online how-to essay, defined the momoír as “a built-in auto-focus on your busy, sometimes blurry life. It brings a sharpness and clarity to events that otherwise tend to blend together. It captures details better than any photograph” (Clark, 2008, who copyrighted the term *momoír* in 2002). Well-known writers like Anne Lamont (*Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son’s First Year*, 1994) and Anna Quindlen (*Living Out Loud*, 1994) wrote early classics that set the standards for this genre. There was a boom in momoír books from 2000 to 2003 with front table hits like Faulkner Fox’s *Dispatches from a Not-so-Perfect Life*, Ayun Halliday’s *The Big Rumpus: A Mother’s Tale from the Trenches* (2002) and *Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It* by Andrea J. Buchanan (2003). Currently, a new generation of mothers are publishing momoírs: *Motherhood Is Not For Wimps: No Answers, Just Stories* by Elizabeth Soutter Schwarzer (2006), *My Mother Wears Combat Boots* by Jessica Mills (2007), and Stefanie Wilder-Taylor’s several books, among them *Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay: And Other Things I Had to Learn as a New Mom* (2006) and *Naptime Is the New Happy Hour: And Other Ways Toddlers Turn Your Life Upside Down* (2008).

Online, the momoír is alive and thriving. There is a wiki called [The Momoír Project](#); online zines like *Literary Mama*, *HipMama*, and *Brain Child*; an annual Mother’s Day contest for 6-word momoírs like “Better mom when someone is looking” and “Puppies would have been much easier” (the contest is sponsored by *Smith Magazine*, [true mom confessions.com](#), and [delight.com](#); they received 1000 entries in 2 weeks during May 2008); and lots and lots of mom blogs with names like [True Mom Confessions.com](#), [Tales from the Mommy Track](#), [The Mommy Blog: Adventures from the Wonderbelly of Motherhood](#), [Offsprung: Your Life Didn’t End When Theirs Began](#), [Mommy Logic](#), [The Momtrap: Digging Myself Out Since 2004](#), [Diary of a Playgroup Dropout](#), and [PlainJaneMom.com](#). Clearly, the momoír remains a popular genre and a forum for contemporary mothering issues and experiences.

## 3. Variations of Autoethnography

Autoethnographic writing enjoys considerable popularity in academic circles. Classics that pioneered the claims and conventions of this form of scholarship include Carolyn Ellis, *Final Negotiations* (1995); Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (1997), Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997), Deborah Reed-Danahay (Ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (1997), Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (1997), the definitive essay in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.) by Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2000), and Ron Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart* (2004). There are also a plethora of how-to treatises, most notably Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (2004), Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (2008) and H. L. Goodall’s writing manuals--*Writing the New Ethnography* (2000) and *Writing Qualitative Inquiry* (2008).

As Ellis and Bochner observe, “Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (*graphy*), on culture (*ethnos*), and on self (*auto*)” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Efforts to circumscribe what counts as autoethnography have provoked ongoing debates. Specifically, proponents of analytic autoethnography who emphasize systematic ethnographic methods, analytic reflexivity, and theoretical understandings of broad social phenomena (cf. Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008) disagree with those who advocate evocative engagement and narrative development (Denzin, 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Evocative autoethnographers argue that analytic autoethnographers privilege the traditional research ends of control and abstract explanation and fail to engage the affective, creative, and narrative constitution of lived experience. Meanwhile, performative autoethnographers (Tamas, 2009) chide evocative autoethnographers for presenting traumatic emotional experiences as “tidy” narratives that render such inchoate experiences understandable and meaningful, insulating both writer and reader from the unruly emotions that make such personal traumas so powerful in the first place. I cite these debates to suggest that autoethnography remains an ongoing, vital project inviting self-scrutiny and methodological development. My own autoethnographic mother-writing has adopted an evocative approach. Evocative autoethnography is characterized by introspective inquiry into the emotional depths of personal experience, resonances of significance moving from personal to cultural relations and back again, evocative writing, and narratively-couched coping strategies. As I will show, memoirs demonstrate these qualities as well. These similarities highlight the difficulty of maintaining hard and fast distinctions between autobiographical writing and autoethnography and lead me to propose an alternative mode of autoethnographic work: a *radical specificity* that might inform observation, analysis, and writing. Although attention to rich detail is quintessential to ethnographic study, radical specificity moves beyond detail per se to engage the exigence, fluidity, and particularity of living; this is not an exercise in identifying underlying meanings or cultural frameworks but in attesting to the unfolding possibilities within any experience.

## 4. Sampling Mother-Writing

Before I illustrate the similarities that trouble me or the alternative I propose, I offer a concrete sampling of the mother-writing I have been discussing. Following are two brief excerpts: one from my own autoethnographic fieldnotes drawn from a study of life with my sons and one from a popular online memoir blog. My excerpt is from a bedtime incident involving Thad who was 13 at the time and Chris who was 9: Last night when I asked Chris to brush his teeth, he dashed into the bathroom and out again a minute later. “Wait a minute, you didn’t brush your teeth. Come back here!” I called to him. He ignored me and I could hear him running up the stairs to his bedroom. Minutes later, he and Thad came galloping back down the stairs, spilling out into the livingroom in a boisterous confusion of leaping bodies and loud voices. They were laughing, throwing beanie baby toys at each other, a favorite game especially at bedtime. I felt like ducking but held my ground and scolded, “Both of you, stop that and get ready for bed.” They ignored me and swept out of the room, dashing up the stairs one right after the other. Minutes later, they pounded down the stairs again, this time screaming angrily at each other, swirling into the living room, Chris grabbing at Thad who dodged his brother’s grasp. I could hear and feel the intensity of their interaction, Thad’s shouts edgy and angry and Chris’s frustration erupting into enraged squeals. They charged at one another, each swinging wildly but energetically. “Stop, stop, enough!” I cried and stepped between them. They separated roughly, each spitting invectives at the other: “Baby!” “Jerk!” “Stupidhead!” I stood still between them, the mom before the storm--the calm before the male-storm?--of testosterone-driven sibling rivalry. (Author’s autoethnographic fieldnotes, 2004)

Here’s an excerpt from a memoir called “Ezra’s birth story” by Amy Kerosé who posts her stories on her blog. In this excerpt, she is very pregnant and just about to go to the hospital for the birth of her son: Around 7:30 am I noticed that Jason had forgotten to take one of our recycling bins to the curb the night before. Our bottles and cans and plastic containers were piled high--by next week we’d be drowning in them, for sure. I heard the trucks revving around the corner and glanced out the window--our neighbors’ bins were still there and upright and full! We could still make it! And so I dashed out through our backyard in my pajamas and slippers, lugging the bin at an awkward angle below and to the side of my massive belly, out to the curb where I dumped it, practically hyperventilating from the effort and the rush of adrenaline that one can only get from very barely getting your trash out in time for collection, knowing that you are now free to go have a baby in peace, because OH THANK GOD THE RECYCLING IS TAKEN CARE OF. (Kerosé, November 14, 2008, para. 8)

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself that the difference between autoethnographic fieldnotes and momoirs is obvious: momoirs are more entertaining and better-paced than most academic writing. But I don't think we can boil the difference down to the scholarly credentials of academic writing versus the entertainment value of popular writing. I do not want to downplay the importance of ethnographic training and scholarly analysis in distinguishing autoethnographic from popular mother-writing. But my concern in the following section is to point out the similarities between them. These, I contend, are important and considerable.

## 5. Bringing Momoirs and Evocative Autoethnographic Mother-Writing Together

First, both momoirs and autoethnographies blur established categories and boundaries, both in their subjects and in their writing. Both confound the distinctions among personal journals, autobiographies, self-confessions, and personal narratives; both blur the lines between personal and public, concealment and revelation, truth and lies, fiction and non-fiction, sincerity and guile. Both must struggle over the same issues of writing culture and writing the self: the malleability of memory, the *mythos* of remembrance, the politics of authenticity, the polysemy and creative/created truths of narrative. Both, in short, are aesthetically complex; both invite a reader to participate in the creative act of authoring a meaningful life. Second, both focus on personal narrative, lived emotion, and the relational constitution of self. More importantly, both take up these concerns self-reflexively, momoirs through self-deprecating humor and irony and autoethnographies through critical self-reflection. In taking a reflexive stance, both portray lived identities as situated historically, relationally, and culturally. The momoir enacts second-wave feminism's mandate to take the personal as political and to scrutinize the contradictions and discomforts of living out cultural scripts and prescriptions for mothering. Similarly, autoethnographers, according to Ellis in *The Ethnographic I* (2004), move dialectically between sociocultural frameworks and the vulnerable self, beginning with "an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (p. 37). Both, I submit, are concerned with the imbrication of culture, power, experience, and self. Both are exercises in authoring a self in tension with the cultural scripts, material forces, and historical contingencies that shape our personal selves.

Third, both genres share a commitment to vulnerability; both take us "behind the curtain" of our own onstage selves as it were and treat us to an emotionally evocative narrative of self-with-others. Both, as Ruth Behar showed us in *The Vulnerable Observer*, force the writer to confront her/his own desires, anxieties, and fears--of love, of death, of perfection, of our self-ordained fate. Both engage in a "self-authoring" through which the mother-writer plumbs her own emotional experiences in order to figure out and share a way of understanding her life and possibly ours.

In this sense, both momoir and autoethnography entail therapeutic, moral, and meditative impulses (Ellis, 2004, p. 135). This may also be thought of as self-reflexivity, the turn to lived experience in a deeply reflective way that *brackets*, to borrow a phenomenological term, the taken-for-granted meanings of our lives and our selves. While self-reflexivity is an explicit injunction for autoethnographers, it is just as critical to momoirs. In her instructions for writing a momoir, Clark highlights the therapeutic function of such writing and encourages a meditative attitude toward motherhood experiences:

It's a special time for you. A time to express your feelings, to be yourself, to get away from them, even if you have no desire to get away. It gives you a time to relax and reflect, to get some calming distance. A welcome break from fixing, reacting or jumping to conclusions. (Clark, 2008, blog posting, last paragraph)

Fourth, both embrace the power of personal narrative to display existential disruption, self-questioning, and the exploration of lived possibilities and constraints and to affect an intimate political analysis. As Ellis (2004) points out, such self-scrutiny connects autobiographical accounts to the world, renders cultural politics personal, and schools us in empathetic responsiveness. In this, both momoirs and autoethnographies effect a narrative force and a politics of the personal that inspires a more collective sense of struggle, yearning, and hope (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). What I mean is that by sharing the *pathos* of personal stories, both momoirs and autoethnographies seek to evoke an empathic understanding of what is

at stake in personal struggles against oppressive forces, in attending to the indignities and injustices of everyday life, and in the hopes for change that all of us harbor.

Fifth, both memoirs and evocative autoethnography have been put under the spotlight of some pretty severe critiques: questions over their emotional validity, their political significance, over whether they have sacrificed a worthwhile analysis to a good read, charges of narcissism, navel-gazing, sentimentalism, and solipsism (cf. Buzzard, 2003; Shields, 2000). Autoethnography has been accused of confounding personal pain with academic insight; memoirs of substituting white, middle-class anxiety and self-obsession for a critique of the cultural *mythos* of motherhood. For example, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, in a well-known critique of autoethnography, argued that in claiming scholarly legitimacy, evocative autoethnographers have become complicit in the established order's interests in emotional self-surveillance, communicative transparency, and delimited agency (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005). In a similar charge directed at memoirs, Anne Hulbert in Slate.com hisses "the maternal *memoir-cum-manifesto* might be complicit in the privatizing, sentimentalizing, anxiety-inducing 'momism' that so many of the genre's practitioners aim to eradicate to make way for an *ethos* of more collective support for mothers." Deesha Philyaw, in a *Bitch* critique titled "Ain't I a Mommy?" pointed to the lack of memoirs by women of color, arguing that the dominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women memoir writers promotes a particular set of circumstances, identities, and possibilities as universal and further, that women of color are unlikely to indulge in such narratives. The point is that both autoethnography and memoirs have generated and responded to harsh critique often over similar issues, indicating the challenge and promise that both pose. In summary, memoirs and evocative autoethnographic mother-writing share commitments to a kind of "writing as inquiry" (Richardson, 1997) that evokes emotional response and resonance and promotes critical self-reflexivity about not only daily events but their larger political and cultural significances. Memoirs evoke a seemingly shared angst of motherhood beset by anxieties of perfection and the tension between maternal and personal desires, goals, and responsibilities. While the memoir's message is that the trials and tribulations of motherhood are common to all mothers--an interpellation that every woman obeys--autoethnographic mother-writing often focuses on crises and traumas that are not commonly shared, in part to open to readers selves, lives, and worlds that they could not otherwise know. Here's the critical resemblance: both autoethnography and the memoir claim an evocative force that leads us to a compassionate knowledge about the constraints and possibilities of our own and others' lives.

## 6. Autoethnography and Memoir: Advocating Difference

My exploration of similarities underwrites the concern I opened this essay with: how are popular memoirs and autoethnographic mother-writing different? My answer to that question is not straightforward. I want to advocate for a difference rather than explaining what it already is. The similarities I have pointed out suggest that it is not sufficient to rely on genre conventions and claims; rather, I want to make an argument for an implicit yet critical dimension of autoethnographic work as the basis for the distinction and for rethinking how and why we do autoethnography. To do this, I turn to the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his conception of difference itself. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994) seeks to wrest difference from the concept of *identity* in order to grasp the specificity of any particular time, place, or thing. When we think of something as different, we are often basing that understanding of difference on an Aristotelian conception of difference as multiple manifestations of an essential identity. This is the implicit claim in mother-writing: our different experiences of motherhood are nonetheless all aspects of the dominant concept of *motherhood*, hence, we are all subject to the determinations of that concept.

I suggest that autoethnography need not make the same kind of claims to representation and recognition. Instead, autoethnography might engage with a more radical sense of our differences. Rather than understanding my experiences as a way of representing a shared condition or nature--whether that be a shared humanity, the human condition, or whatever--the alternative form of autoethnographic writing I am advocating might confront us not with what is recognizable about another's experiences but with the specificity of experience itself. To put this more concretely, whereas memoirs already know their *narrative object*--the beset mother--autoethnography might take up what Deleuze calls a "problematic object or event"--a lived narrative that doesn't come with an automatic sense of what its significance might be. Autoethnographic writing in this sense might evoke thought, not in the sense that we think about what we already know--for example, the shared angst of motherhood--but in the sense of prompting us to think about

the indeterminacy of experience in ways that are not necessarily grounded in common understandings but that engage with the contingencies of particular experiences, events, and emotions. In other words, the goal is not to evoke a sense of empathy, cultural insight, or deep significance but to confront us with the *radical specificity* of living a life, not in the sense that we all live our own lives but in the sense that life is lived in the flows, multiplicities, and provisionality of each moment, event, emotion. Such radical specificity is difficult to communicate without reframing it as something shared and understandable; yet the power of autoethnographic narrative may well be in what cannot be communicated rather than in the reassurances of comprehensibility and transparency because it is in this way that we can begin to think differently about what we know and what we might become.

I expand on the implications of this approach by reframing brief excerpts from two examples of self-labeled autoethnographic mother-writing, both about the emotional experience of spontaneous miscarriage. Elizabeth Chin (2007) explores the complexities of consumerism as entangled in her embodied experience of miscarriage while Maria Lahman (2009) explores the failure of relational care in her experience of medical response during her miscarriage. Both Chin and Lahman offer their stories as critical reflections on the larger conditions of contemporary life--Chin reflecting on the comforts and failures of commodity capitalism in relation to the personal traumas of lived experience and Lahman enacting the *pathos* of maternal desire and fear acknowledged but unengaged by the doctor--and ultimately the medical establishment--facilitating her miscarriage. In short, both are evocative autoethnographic accounts that link the personal with the cultural and offer readers resources for engaging emotional trauma.

Yet the power of these stories is not the larger significances or the academic arguments they make. Rather, the stories themselves engage an experience beyond representation; both authors resort to dreams and allude to the incommunicability of their inside/outside, private/public encounter with life and death. So in the midst of her body's expulsion of the fetus, Chin recalls:

Last night I dreamt that the miscarriage was over and I was pregnant again and happy. But right now, I'm crampy and bleeding, and there's nobody on the phone and my husband is asleep. And I wish there was somebody out there whose job description read, "comfort her," and even if it wasn't for real, I think it would help, just a little bit, just for a little while. (Chin, 2007, p. 344)

Similarly, Lahman resorts to dreams and missives to her dead fetus:

I dreamt of you. You were so real, a girl, who was brown, compact, dark haired, reminiscent of my nieces, myself, my sister. You were a girl. I wondered at this and then my Asian colleague stopped me in the hall the day I knew I was miscarrying . . . the day I knew you were dead and said you were a girl. She had looked your dates up in the Chinese Zodiac and you are a girl. I knew it and I knew you were dead. (Lahman, 2009, p. 274)

For these mothers, the affective intensities and bodily sensations of losing a fetus are beyond conventional representational strategies; the specificity and intensity of these experiences is attested to in dreams, wishes, and imaginary conversations. These narratives do more than affirm the cultural significance of maternal loss; they enact an intensity of grief, pain, and desire that is not generalizable but that constitutes the intimate specificity of each experience and offers a different way of thinking about miscarriage, that is, as mothering.

To my mind, tapping the radical specificity of experienced events, emotions, relations is why autoethnographic representation has decried the scholarly goal of generalizability and moved to a scholarship of the personal and intimate. And yet we have not gone far enough--following Deleuze, we must move from the relation between "this" moment in its generalizable features with other such moments toward a sense of "thisness" that retains its specificity. I suggest reworking the autoethnographic impulse away from identifying the essence of a particular experience toward thinking the radical specificity of the personal. For Deleuze, this way of thinking difference emphasizes "the particularity that is" as an attempt to think our lives anew.

Anyone who knows Deleuze will caution me that such radical specificity is unshareable, hence, incommunicable. I contend that this way of doing autoethnographic work may not be about communicating a shared experience; rather, we might think more in terms of a "rhizomatic" movement of senses and perceptions. As Craig Gingrich-Philbrook put it, autoethnographic work is like "a potato in the dark, complicating our perception and sensory surfaces by spreading out in search of something real we can use to survive" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 306). An autoethnographic narrative of mothering explores the particularities of the landscapes, figures, contingencies, moments, and movements of mothering--the landscapes of laughter and anger, the intensities and flows of rivalry and testosterone, the moments of activity and passivity, of here and there, the movements of bodies, words, sensations. The reader is not

complicitous in co-authoring a story, a life, or emotional realities. Rather, the radical specificity of reading autoethnographic writing is about the lines of thought, sensate experiences, and imagination that depart from the narrative--lines of flight that do not converge upon shared passions or pain but that disrupt or disregard ready commonalities and assumed connections. In this way, the autoethnographic narrative reiterates the conditions of its creation, animating new thoughts about mothering, bodies, affects. As Melissa McMahon puts it in her rendition of Deleuzian difference:

[The narrative might serve] as the “problematic object” or event, a complex set of singularities that sets off a chain of thought. Thought is transmitted through a form of relay where the injunction is to repeat what cannot be represented, and (thus) repeat as different. There is a tangential relationship between thoughts, where the component of one problem becomes a component of a new, and necessarily different, problem. Each instance is animated by the “spirit” of the first, from a wholly different position, and at the same time refers to a future from which another will arise. (McMahon, 2005, p. 50).

A radically specific autoethnographic narrative is thus about differences and incommensurabilities rather than similarities and recognition: “difference is defined as both the ‘particularity that is’ and an ‘indetermination, newness which creates itself [in its repetition]” (McMahon, p. 51). Such a narrative does not evoke shared feelings or understandings but animates “what cannot be represented” as a different take, a different conception, a different affect. Mother-writing as radical specificity moves toward what Deleuze calls the “‘micro’ regime of ‘imperceptible’ happenings”: “Underneath the large noisy events lie the small events of silence, just as under the natural light there are the little glimmers of the Idea” (1994, p. 163).

I want to return to the moment I described above in the excerpt from my autoethnographic mother-writing, a moment I will repeat following not the narrative logic of a coherent story but flows of movement, intensity, and affect, the particularities of this experience that animate a different repetition.

Back again, screaming angrily, grabbing, dodging the grasp. Hearing and feeling the intensity of shouts edgy and angry, of frustration erupting into enraged squeals, the force of arms swinging wildly but energetically. Standing my ground. “Stop, stop, enough!” I am crying. Face in my face, looming, pressing, I am the mom before the storm, becoming small, becoming silent, reaching beyond the noise and fear, listening for my young son hiding in the stairwell while his father rages. (Based on author’s autoethnographic fieldnotes, 2000)

This repetition does not connect readily to the earlier excerpt to form a coherent narrative of mothering but instead animates its violence, bodies, movements, and affective intensities. The specificity of the moment when play became violent in the first narrative becomes a line of flight, disregarding narrative chronologies to conjoin emotional and corporeal memories. Relations among bodies are rearticulated, the energies and tensions are realigned, forming alternate configurations that offer a different idea about the affective specificities involved. In addition, the characters and storyline are less distinct, moving away from the recognizable script of sibling rivalry and drawing out the imperceptible intensities running through each incident: play and violence, loudness and silence, energy and stillness, and shrinking and reaching.

## 7. Doing Autoethnography as Radical Specificity

In advocating for *radical specificity* as a way of doing autoethnographic writing, I do not wish to depose evocative autoethnographic writing. Rather, in distinguishing memoirs from autoethnographic mother-writing, I have argued for sharpening the critical-creative edge of autoethnographic work and this is not an argument that remains tied to mother-writing but is meant to address the epistemological assumptions and claims of autoethnography more broadly. I urge autoethnographic scholars to question the ready appeal to empathic understanding and the assumption of commonality--the maternal, shared humanity, the humane impulse--that underlies such an appeal. Reading for radical specificities deconstructs the readily identifiable scenarios and empathic resonances of autoethnographic narratives--in the case of mother-writing, the implicit claim that any particular mothering experience can be read in terms of the common grounds or conditions underlying contemporary mothering. After all, the entertainment value of memoirs depends on a recognition of such commonalities.

Autoethnographic writing should be more circumspect: when my writing entreats you to “know how I feel,” I disregard the incommunicable affective specificities of my experiences; when you read my autoethnographic mothering account and “understand how I feel,” you disregard what else is happening that constitutes the particularities of this experience. Together, we repress what cannot be known or said



about this particular experience, event, or life in favor of what can be shared, communicated, and held in common. The specificities of any particular experience of mothering are repressed and obscured in this impulse to recognition and compassion; we reconcile what is different to what is shared and the opportunity to think beyond the dominant, the familiar, and the common is stifled.

The point is not to engage in radical specificity for its own sake but for what such a practice enables us to do: as a way of reading our own experiences and as readers of autoethnographic writing, radical specificity opens unfamiliar connections and relations that move both beyond and against the familiar storylines, emotional verities, and the all-too-recognizable critiques of cultural-political constraints that characterize personal narratives in both popular and academic writing.

This critical dimension of radical specificity bears emphasis because the autoethnographic practice that I propose has both critical and affirming dimensions. In the move beyond and against the ways our representations, practices, and analyses stabilize, reify, dictate, and repress, an autoethnographic practice of radical specificity entails critique, not only of the relations of power and desire that most often occupy critique but also of those banal ways we engage the world. For as we perceive, construe, and act on life as comprehensible, perceptible, amenable to representation, and conducive to our own purposes and projects, we impose limits, eschew possibilities, and stabilize lines and flows.

What I advocate is a rhizomatic practice of autoethnographic writing and reading that works creatively within, upon, and beyond personal narratives, in this case, momoires and evocative mother-writing (or whatever personal narratives might be at hand), spreading out over their narrative surfaces to make different relations and connections, following affective flows and intensities different than those we already know and feel when we write and read as mothers or as mothered, creatively dismantling the affective relations defining the institution and experience of motherhood and allowing the singularity of those relations to show us something different. These implications of radical specificity in mother-writing attest to the value of the alternative I am proposing. In the end, my argument is that autoethnography must become distinctively critical, creative, and affirming: for it is in the complexities and radical specificities of difference that autoethnography opens us to the myriad possibilities of living, acting, and being beyond what we think we share.

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