

## Transgressions

By: [Christopher N. Poulos](#)

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### **Abstract:**

This performance (auto)ethnography confronts the continuing controversy surrounding qualitative inquiry via examination of the tenure process in a particular case. The perils and delights of the performative/auto-ethnographic voice take center stage as "transgressions" against the status quo. This is a story about the *call* of autoethnography, about the perils and delights of engaging the autoethnographic voice. It's also about the broader and deeper reasons for pursuing the autoethnographic life, even in an academy that often seems hostile to the impulse that drives so-called qualitative inquiry. In the end, it's about the courage to *transgress*, to reach across the boundaries that threaten to contain us— or even shut us down.

### **Article:**

#### **Transgressions**

#### **Cast:**

**The Professor**, a bearded man approaching middle age, dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt.

**A Chorus** of 12 characters, dressed in black robes, with hoods shrouding their faces. The numbers 1 through 12 appear in large white letters on the backs of their robes.

**A narrator**, who speaks over a microphone, from the wings.

#### **Scene I: Transgressions**

*(The stage is dark. Music plays in the background for a few moments, then fades. It is the refrain from Don McLean's "American Pier From the shadows, over a microphone, a deep voice intones):*

Narrator: Definitions: TRANSGRESSION (noun) —1.a. The action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin. 1.b. The action of passing over or beyond. From the Oxford English Dictionary. *(pauses, then):* Emmanuel Levinas wrote, "Communication with the other can be transcendent only as a dangerous life—a fine risk to be run<sup>1</sup>:"

*(A single spotlight shines on center stage. A dark figure, dressed in black walks slowly from the wings into the light, pauses, then speaks):*

The Professor *(stands center stage, center spotlight, arms at his sides):* There are things you are allowed to say in this world, and things you are not allowed to say. Or so they say. But: I am a trespasser. A transgressor. I step over the line. I speak the deeper truths that reside in our secret worlds. I open the closed doors people want to hide behind. I have always been the one to speak the words that are not allowed.

*(A dozen people enter the shadows— a Greek Chorus—in the wings, and begin milling about, whispering. Their voices overlap.):*

One: What's he talking about?

Two: Shhh...

One: I just want to —

Three: Hey, listen!

The Professor: When I was four years old, the story goes, our dog, Snoopy (yes, he was named after Charlie Brown's dog) would see me walking across the neighbor's yard on my way home. He would run out to greet me, bowling me over with his eighty-pound shepherd-mutt's body, licking my face. (*In a child's high-pitched voice*): "Dammit, Snoopy! Get off!"

Five: Cute story.

Six: Shhh!

Chorus: SSSHHHH!

The Professor: That night the first time it happened the neighbors called my parents.

Narrator *Are you aware...?"*

The Professor: Yes, they were aware. They worked hard to get me to shut my mouth. But they could never get the job done. Their words did not deter me. At first, it was a simple transgression: Inappropriate language. "*Dammit Snoopy!*"

Chorus: *"He's only four, and he cusses like a sailor! Where did he learn to talk like that, anyway?"*

The Professor: My mom glared at my dad as she asked this rhetorical question But, seriously, it was a moment for cursing, at least as I saw it through my four year old's eyes. I mean, the dog was heavy and sloppy. And the ground was muddy. And, besides, I was hungry and wanted to get home. Dammit, indeed.

Chorus: Dammit!

Narrator: Indeed!

Five: Like I said, cute story. Where's this going?

Two: Shhh!

The Professor: As I grew older, I began to "mouth off" to my parents. They would question what I was doing, and I would have some quick retort. They would tell me to do something— or not to do something— and I would ask, "Why?" They would try to discipline me, and I would remain defiant. They would try to reason with me, and I would simply explain my point of view, which very often differed dramatically from theirs.

Ten: Smartass.

One: Trespasser!

Eleven: Rebel!

Twelve: Forgive us our trespasses...

The Professor: They seemed to think that if they could just get me to stay quiet their lives would be much easier. (*Pauses, takes a deep breath.*) Ah, point well taken, but I was not about to comply. I was a trespasser!

Chorus and Narrator (*chanting loudly*): As we forgive those who trespass against us...

The Professor: I had learned, at an early age, a simple (though for some people quite thorny) word: Why?

One: That's a *dangerous* word!

Chorus: Why?

The Professor: I wanted to know *why*!

One: A controversial question

Chorus: Why?

The Professor: My parents, who came from a different time, were of the generation who truly believed—

Chorus and Narrator (*chanting loudly*): "*Ours is not to question why, ours is but to do or die.*"

The Professor: Or so they *said*. But, after all, I was a child of the 1960s. What on earth did they expect? Eventually exasperated, they would throw up their hands and walk away. (*Sighs.*) Later, they began to tell me to "Just shut up!"

Chorus: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

The Professor: My reply: "Uh, no, I just can't do that." For some reason, I have always felt compelled to speak my truth. Damn the consequences. Reason, threats, cajoling, bribes, appeals to my kinder nature, even physical punishment or outright violence — nothing would shut my mouth.

Chorus: Shut up!

The Professor: Nothing could stop this train once it was rolling. My father even threatened to glue my lips together. I replied, "Go ahead. This should be fun." He walked away, shaking his head in disgust.

One: Use *SUPER*glue!

Twelve: Tsk. Tsk.

One: I hope it works.

Two: Sshhh!

The Professor: As I grew older, they started calling me a rebel. They thought I just did it to "get" them. They thought I rebelled just for the sake of rebellion.

Three: Rebel!

The Professor: But *that's* not why I did it. I did it because I could not *not* communicate.

Six: Not not!

Seven: Oooh! A double negative?

The Professor: I did it because I could feel *spirit* rising up through me. I did it because spirit, once it flows in, *must* flow out. It's gotta go somewhere. I did it because I know injustice— or inconvenience, or stupidity, or control—when I see it. As I grew toward adulthood, I determined that my family's habit of hinting and evading, of implying and avoiding—of communicating elliptically, indirectly, hoping everyone just "gets it" is an unhealthy, pathological communication pattern.<sup>2</sup>

Nine: *Don't you get it?*

Eight: *You're just supposed to know that.*

Six: *We're not supposed to have to talk about it.*

The Professor: I began to say what I meant, and mean what I said. I began to call injustice by its real name. I began to explore the deeper meanings —the whys and the lies —of human communication. I began to expose the secrets, always asking that pesky question: *Why?* My parents would say—

Nine: *"But what will the neighbors think?"*

The Professor: I would always reply, "I don't know. Let's ask them. I'll bet they have issues too."

Three: Hey! Let's be the neighbors!

Four: Yeah, hey! We live next door! Hey, doc! We think you're loud!

Five: Yeah. LOUD!

Six: The LOUD family.

Seven: Obnoxious.

Eight: Crude.

Two: Oh, come on Give 'em a break. They're just like *us!*

Twelve: Issues. Man, *my* family's got *issues*.

Ten: Mine too.

Eleven: You ain't seen nothin' 'til you've seen my house!

One: Hey, everybody shut up! I'm trying to watch my show!

The Professor: I don't mean to imply that everything was a controversy, or that I was always in the position of antagonist. Just as often, I would be the sympathetic listener. But I had hope—hope for freedom, for *openness*. And though I understand the arguments against openness, to this day, in my heart, I cannot abide a dosed circle of heavy silencing silence.

All: (*whispering*): Hey, did you hear...

The Professor: I think a *secret* should really be a *story*.

Two: 000H! Tell us a story!

Twelve: Tell us a *secret*!

The Professor: How else are we to learn from our collective experience? Of course, calling these things out into the open—speaking them into the air—is nearly always a *dangerous* game. I often got smacked for it—sometimes with words, sometimes with hands, occasionally with a belt, once or twice with a fist.

One: Smack him!

Five: (*claps loudly*) Smack!

The Professor: But I did it because I *knew* that some kinds of silence are just *wrong*. I knew, intuitively, what happens when people keep their mouths shut, when they shut their feelings down, when they bury their pain, when they harbor resentments, when they hold their secrets close.

Ten: *Shhh...*

The Professor: Eventually, they boil over.

Seven: *Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble...*

Six: No — It's 'double, double' —

Nine: You got *that* right.

Two (*angrily*): Hey, you guys are starting to piss me off! LISTen!

The Professor (*Yelling*): They may even explode!

Ten: Rage!

One: Oh, yeah?

The Professor (*Sighing sadly*): Or implode.

Three: Depression...

Two: *Ooof!*

Chorus: *Sigh!*

The Professor: That stuff has to go *somewhere*. Besides, to paraphrase Levinas, we need some risk here. What's the point of communicating if it's not dangerous, risky, out on a limb?

Three: Danger?

Four: Risk?

Six: What about the ordinary? The everyday? The *mainstream*?

The Professor: I know, I know. We do have to do mundane things with communication Meet and greet; joke and play; argue trivia; coordinate action; and make plans. But then there are the more complex (and risky) communicative moments: Negotiating real differences; exploring and expressing values; managing real conflicts; telling important stories; falling into genuine dialogue.

Nine: Ooh! A monologue on dialogue!

Ten Ssshhhh!

The Professor: Of course, truth be told, I was clearly violating a rule—a rule my family had hoped would remain unspoken, unwritten, unquestioned, and, of course, obediently followed. This is why they continued to call me on my transgression, and probably why I continued to violate it. The rule was—

Twelve: *There are some things we just don't speak about.*

One: Sshhh! That's a secret!

All: *(whispering walking offstage)* Words we don't say, secrets we don't tell...

*(The stage goes dark)*

### **Scene 2: Walk the line**

*(The stage remains dark. From the shadows, over a microphone, a deep voice intones):*

Narrator: Promotion and Tenure: The Academy's Pearly Gates.

*(For a few moments, the stage remains dark. Then, CLICK! A single, blindingly bright spotlight shines on center stage. The Professor sits alone on a stool in the center of the spotlight, squinting. The chorus sits at a round table, in the dark outside the spotlight's ring stage left rear. Background music plays: Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line").*

The Professor: One frigid early spring day, I found myself lying on my couch, having cancelled classes for the first time in years, nursing a fever of 102° Fahrenheit.

Chorus (Whispering): He's losing it!

The Professor: Fahrenheit 102: Hot fever.

Five: Hey! Isn't it Fahrenheit 451?

Six: No! It's 9/11!

The Professor: Hot fever.

Narrator: Narrative heat!<sup>4</sup>

Chorus: And cold shivers.

The Professor: And laryngitis.

Three: No voice. Interesting.

Twelve: Shut up!

The Professor (*Groaning*): As I wondered if this illness could possibly get worse, just this side of dying, the phone rang. (A phone rings).

Four: Somebody get it!

Five: Sshhh!

The Professor (*Pulling a cell phone out of his packet, voice croaking with laryngitis*): Hello?

Narrator (*from the wings*): I've got news. You got tenure.

The Professor (*whispering*): Really? Thank you. That is really good news. Thank you. One: He did it!

Ten: Congratulations!

The Professor: As I hung up, I found myself standing in the middle of my living room, phone in hand—gaping. It's hard to describe what I felt, but today, looking back, I think I felt a mix of disbelief, relief, profound sadness, and a touch of joy, with a side helping of anger. Not at all what I had expected.

Seven Wait! What?

The Professor: Looking back, I think maybe there were hints that something was wrong.

Three: Hints.

Four: Innuendoes.

Six: Whispers.

Five: Signs.

The Professor: But I am an optimist. I thought I had done everything right. *I knew I had*. I never thought—it never crossed my mind—that it could go so wrong. In the end, 'fell into deep sadness.

Eight: Why's he sad?

Nine: Why's he *sick*?

Eleven: Yeah. He *never* gets sick!

The Professor: Little did I know that the flu would soon give way to pneumonia. A disease of the *pneumos* — the *spirit*, a Religion scholar friend of mine reminded me, months later. Pneumonia, the inability to gain a foothold in the simple act of drawing in spirit— a *spirit* illness if there ever was one!

Twelve: Even sicker now.

Ten: No breath!

Six: Catch your breath.

Seven: Respire!

One: Inspire!

Five: Perspire!

Eight: Transpire!

Eleven: *Expire?*

The Professor: Or that pneumonia would give way to the deepest depression of my life. I have experienced some dark days in my 50 years on this planet, but these were dark beyond my imagination. The ensuing days, in fact, led me to the brink. On the day, a month later, when I received my "official" letter from the university's Chancellor, congratulating me on my promotion to associate professor with permanent tenure, I found myself dialing the phone, calling a therapist to see if he could help me pull out of my tailspin.

Chorus (*softly*): How did it come to *this*?

(*The stage goes dark.*)

### **Scene 3: Hints in the hallways**

(*The Chorus is standing divided in the wings, six on stage left, six stage right, in darkness. Music plays in the background, slowly fades: Bob Dylan's "Tangled up in Blue" The Professor stands, center stage, spotlight beaming down on him. As he talks, he begins to pace, nervously.*)

The Professor: One day, someone commented on my shirt—not a positive comment. I thought that was odd. And besides, I *liked* that shirt.

Chorus: *Well...look* how he dresses.

Four: Reprobate!

Five: *Bad* boy!

The Professor: There were little conflicts along the way, but nothing serious. As I prepared my tenure dossier, I was optimistic.

Chorus: No clouds?

The Professor: None that I knew of— at least not at first. But as I moved through the process, there were little hints.

Twelve: Sideways glances.

One: Innuendoes.

Six: Whispers?

The Professor: Just a knot in my stomach. It started out small, when a senior faculty member in my department kind of snapped at me one day. I wondered what was going on, but I was so busy, I brushed it off.

Five: Funny. I thought it was a catch in his throat.



The Professor: It started in my stomach, though.

Seven: Traveling anxiety.

Eight: Butterflies: They travel.

Ten: Far! Monarchs —

One: Fly.

Two: Flutter and fly.

Three: Flutter. Fly. Butterfly.

Ten: —Canada to Mexico!

Eleven: Butterflies?

Twelve: Stomach to throat!

Nine: Anxiety— *embodied*.

The Professor: I asked for help, but was told, simply, "Follow the models" (*Pauses, sighs.*)

Chorus: The model!

Twelve (*muttering*): You're on your own.

The Professor: Then one day, mid-fall, my Department Chair invites me into his office. When I see the look on his face, my heart sinks and my knotted stomach does a backflip.

Narrator (*From the wings, in a formal tone*): I have news on your tenure case. Sit down.

The Professor: So I sink into a chair (*sits on the stool*).

Narrator: The department committee has voted. The vote tally is as follows: Two in favor, one against. I have a separate vote. I vote in favor. So, it's three in favor, one against.

The Professor (*in a shocked tone*): Against? (*I ask, knowing that the one vote against is like a flashing red flag that will follow my case all the way up the line.*) Can you tell me why?

Narrator: The committee indicated that your research is 'not mainstream enough' and that your teaching is, in a sense, 'too therapeutic.'

The Professor (*voice cracking*): What does that *mean*?

Narrator: Which part?

The Professor: All of it. I have never heard any of this before. What does 'therapeutic' mean? And *of course* my research is not mainstream. I never pretended that it was. That's the *point*. I'm an *autoethnographer*, for Christ's sake. (*Walks to the front of the stage, stares out at the audience.*) At the same time, I find myself thinking, "Thank God I'm not in the mainstream. A person could drown in there."

Narrator: Well, as far as I can tell—and you must remember that I was not present for the final deliberation and vote they think your teaching is too geared toward changing your students' hearts, rather than their minds.

The Professor (*Turns around, looks up at the ceiling searching for the source of the Narrator's disembodied voice.*): Wow/. You're kidding, right? I mean, wouldn't *that* be cool, if my teaching really was *that* therapeutic? Wouldn't that be great? Change their *hearts*? Wow. *That* would be something.

Narrator: Not kidding.

The Professor: But—why? Why would these two things—these glorious, *wonderful* aspects of my work—be used pejoratively, against me? Why?

Narrator: I'm not sure.

The Professor: *Therapeutic*? It doesn't make sense? I have never heard this before in any of the peer teaching evaluations I have received over the years. Nor have any of my students said so. I don't think it's fair to raise it now.

Narrator: Well, the committee insisted that I include it.

The Professor: Then, can you define it? Because I still don't know what 'too therapeutic' means—though, by the way, I happen to think therapy is a good thing. Still, I don't pretend to be a therapist, or to practice 'therapeutic teaching; so if you're going to include that word, I'd like you to define it before I sign anything. By the way, I'll flow with the 'not mainstream' comment, since I agree with it. But I don't think it's sufficient justification for a negative vote.

Narrator (*grimly*): All right. (*Pauses*): I'm sorry.

The Professor: Yeah. Me too.

*(The stage goes dark).*

#### **Scene 4: The Meeting**

*(The spotlight clicks on, revealing the Professor slumped on the stool, then quickly clicks off. A softer, almost ethereally dim light shines on the round table, where the Chorus, still hooded is seated. A mist rises around their feet. Looking closely, you can see that a black cauldron, sitting under the center of the table, is the source. Music blasts loudly — the opening of Guns 'n Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle — then stops abruptly after the line "we got fun and games.").*

Narrator (*in a deep, serious voice*): The tenure meeting.

One (*whispering*): Double, double, toil and trouble.

Two AND Three (*whispering slightly louder*): Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Chorus (*chanting loudly*): Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble!

Twelve: Let's call this meeting to order.

One: Right, let's start.

Six: The first case.

Three: Red flag!

Two: A vote against!

One: Look at *that*, will you?

Seven: What's this guy doing?

One: I don't like this.

Two: His work is not... right. It's too—

Three: — *emotional!*

Four: Right. He can write, but —

Five: —his writing—

Six: Isn't *mainstream!*

Seven: It's downright *therapeutic*.

Eight: It's *dangerous*.

Twelve: I kind of *like* danger.

Nine: Emotional!

Twelve: But —

Ten: What's his *agenda*, anyway?

Chorus: *Pathos!*

Twelve: So?

Eleven: Dangerous!

Chorus (*Except for Twelve, whispering*): Crucify him!

Twelve: But

Chorus (*except for Twelve, chanting loudly*): Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!

Twelve: But --

One (*pausing for a moment, then intoning in a deep, booming voice*): PROFESSOR! What is it that you do?  
(*The spotlight shines on the Professor, blinding him*).

Chorus (*Rising from the table, encircling the Professor, and moving in a circular clockwise direction, just outside the circle of light, bodies swaying voices overlapping*): Who are you? What are you doing here?  
Why do you do this? What's the *point*? Where's the generalized knowledge? What is the nature of your

research agenda? Where's your data? What are your hypotheses? What are your predictions? What, exactly, do you *explain*? What have you discovered?

The Professor (*stammering*); I –

Chorus (*voices overlapping*): This *is* research? How? Knowledge? What? Wait. Generalize, man, generalize! Predict! Control!

Narrator (*voice booming*): Just what are you trying to *prove*?

(*The lights go down. The Professor walks offstage the Chorus returns to the table.*) One: Time to vote.

Two: No.

Three: No.

Four: No.

Five: No.

Six: No.

Seven: No.

Eight: No.

Nine: No.

Ten: No.

Eleven: No.

Twelve: Yes.

One: No!

Narrator: The vote is 11 against, one in favor.

(*The stage goes dark*)

### **Scene 5: Forgive us our trespasses**

(*The Professor stands alone, center, stage front, gazing out at the audience. The lights are soft. Soft piano music plays in the background —George Winston's "Spring."*)

The Professor: I was, for a time, struck mute by these developments. It's not that I didn't know that autoethnographers are trespassers. As I said, I've always been drawn to trespassing. It's just that, until that fateful moment in my tenure process, my faith in the power of the Word had rarely—if ever—slipped, even a little. I think this is because, when I knew I was "in the groove flowing with the very real, very palpable magic of the writing process, I just *knew* it would all work out. Even rejection letters—of which I have, fortunately, only received a handful—never really slowed me down much. I would simply rewrite the piece in question, and publish it elsewhere. And all along, I just *knew* it would work out. (*Pauses, sighs*). Maybe I was just naïve.

Narrator: Yes.

The Professor: Of course I knew that autoethnography was not "mainstream." That, in fact, is entirely the *point*. There is *plenty* of water in the mainstream. But *someone* needs to work on the edges, in eddies and pools and tributaries. Shouldn't we explore the whole stream, not just the main flow? But I guess that was my trespass.

Chorus (*from the wings, softly*): Forgive us our trespasses...

The Professor: If we are all one thing, isn't that actually a bad thing? I couldn't help remembering a time, when I was an undergraduate philosophy major, when we kept hearing the phrase 'the end of philosophy,' intoned as a way of pointing to the bankruptcy of a tradition that had limited itself too strictly to tidy little games of logic and language.' Later, as a graduate student in Religious Studies, I heard the same claim being made about theology, though for different reasons.' Were we now witnessing the death of my field, communication studies? Were we to limit ourselves to neat little games of "positive knowledge" and statistical force, and thus bring about our own disciplinary death? Regardless of the bitter picture, perhaps I had trespassed one time too many. Perhaps I would *not* be forgiven.

Chorus: As we forgive those —

The Professor: It seemed— at that moment—that I would lose everything I had been working for during the past ten years. If not of our discipline, was this the death of my career?

Chorus: Who trespass against us...

*(The stage goes dark)*

### **Scene 6: Helpers in the Wings**

*(The stage is dark Music plays softly —"Aquarius" by the 5th Dimension. The music fades as soft lights fade up onto the stage, lighting center stage. The Professor perches on the edge of the stool, a piece of paper in his hand)*

The Professor: One day, just after the committee met, I got this memo (*reads, gasping for air*): "The vote of the committee ... serious concerns ... recommend against tenure and promotion." My breath was taken.

One: I've got bad news.

The Professor: As I read it, my heart sank. To the bottom. I was stunned. That night, as I walked in the front door, a stricken look on my face, my wife, Sue, took one look at me and asked —

Narrator: What *happened*? Are you OK?

The Professor: The committee voted to deny tenure. (*Pauses, takes a deep breath, blows it out rapidly. He slowly turns to face the audience, then speaks in a breathless, halting whisper.*) And the wind rushed out of our lungs. (*Long pause.*) I have never, in all my adult life, felt such a heavy blow.

Narrator (*in a child's high-pitched voice*): We're not *moving*, are we? We don't want to leave our home.

The Professor: My kids cut right to the chase. No, we will not move. I promise. I'll give up my career before I ask you to give up your friends. (*Pauses, turns to face the audience.*) Those were some hard words to say, and to swallow. (*Takes a deep breath, stands tall.*) But I'm going to fight this. I don't know how, but...I'm going to fight.

(Voices start to chime in, from the wings.)

Three: A memo?

Four: What's going on?

Five: Intrigue. Seven: Mystery.

Nine: The long, dark corridor...

The Professor: The memo said that my work —

Three: What?

The Professor: —lacks rigor —

Four: Rigor mortis?

The Professor: — doesn't make predictions —

Twelve: This is an outrage!

The Professor: — or add insight—

One: An attack!

The Professor: —or add to generalized knowledge

Six: Outrageous!

The Professor: Over the next several days, I wrote to my friends and colleagues around the country about my situation. Most were taken aback. A few were incensed at what they (and I) saw as an attack on qualitative inquiry generally, and on autoethnography specifically. Many people rallied around me, including many members of my own department. These people stood by me, and even wrote letters on my behalf.

Twelve: As I said in my external evaluation —

Four: — he's a respected member of our field.

Seven: He's one of the best young writers of his genre.

Six: He has a voice, and an audience, and a good reputation.

Ten: His methods are considered "cutting edge" in our field.

Eight: He's a *rising star*.

The Professor: For their efforts—and their support and faith—I am forever deeply grateful. And it is their *support* that gave me the strength to write a rebuttal to the memo. I wrote a lengthy memo in defense of qualitative inquiry and my place in it.

Nine: Retort!

Eleven: Rebut!

Twelve: Revolt!

The Professor: Of course, this act of rebuttal—along with the letters written on my behalf by my friends and colleagues—constitutes a very real transgression, according to the usual procedures for Promotion and Tenure. I was expected to remain silent—to "take my medicine" and pack my boxes. But all along, throughout the process, all I wanted was my day in court, my chance to defend myself, my record. I decided to force it. *(Smiles wryly)* I went to the Dean, and we had us a *conversation*. This was a *turning point*.

Narrator: Every good story has a turning point. An unusual case calls for an unusual response.

The Professor: An unusual case, indeed. They attacked not what I had accomplished, but *how I* accomplished it. The committee, apparently, did not like—or understand? — my methodology. All along, I knew autoethnography was controversial, but I had never suspected the consequences of my work would be so dire. *(Sighs)*. I wrote my letter, and I waited. The next committee was not to meet for several weeks. So I waited. *(Takes a deep breath.)* And I held my breath. And I hoped. *(Pauses for a long time, lets out a long low sigh.)* These were some of the darkest days of my life. *(Pauses again. A thin ray of light shines on the back of the stage. The Professor turns, back to the audience, looking up at the source of the light.)* But I never lost that thin ray of hope.

*(The stage goes dark)*

### Epilogue

*(The Professor stands alone, center stage, wearing a brightly colored shirt. Soft music plays throughout the Epilogue—The Beatles' "Across the Universe").*

Narrator (from the wings): Denouement.

The Professor: Memorandum: The ongoing fight between social scientific (quantitative) and humanistic/interpretive (qualitative) approaches to the study of human social phenomena appeared to be the flash point that triggered a nasty tenure battle. Reflection: Now, looking back, I think that the whole story of this version of the "culture war" is sad, especially because the debate is much like many such polarizing debates where one side wants to claim ascendancy over the other—so much sound and fury, but really much ado about nothing.

*(The Chorus and the Narrator join the Professor onstage, all now in colorful tie-dyed T-shirts, and jeans or skirts).*

One: Memorandum: If you can muster the intellectual strength to hold a paradox in your mind` surely you can at least entertain the idea that competing (or at least very different) ways of studying and understanding and expressing knowledge about human social phenomena are at *least possible*, perhaps even *desirable*.

Two: Reflection: The idea that we must entertain only one or the other—that good old fashioned either/or thinking is simple-minded at best, intellectually dishonest at worst. The truth is that for most of human existence, we have *celebrated* the co-existence of poetry and mathematics, religion and science, literature and economics, music and architecture, *mythos* and *logos*.

Three: *Surely* we can learn to celebrate the idea that both the experimental social scientist and the autoethnographer have something to say about who and how we are as humans (in this case, as human *communicators*) on this planet.

The Professor: After all autoethnographers answer a specific call: To write evocatively about life, drawing up the best emotional, spiritual, and intellectual resources at our disposal to show our readers what it means to be human. We autoethnographers write to "connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political."<sup>8</sup>

Four: But, in the "mainstream" of social science, they tell us we are supposed to generate, test, explain —

Twelve: — and *avoid* the autobiographical, the personal, the emotional —

Five: Surely, the "objective world" of prediction, of test, of generality is not all there is to it not the *whole* thing we want to do here.

Six: True—but what are the contours—and boundaries—of this contested space?

Seven: Territory—that's the question!

Eight: And the problem!

Nine: Surely we can do better than fight over either/or propositions.

Ten: It's a both/and world!

The Professor: As I contemplated, in my darkest hour, the fate that awaited me — a fate voted into being by a disembodied committee of strangers, I could not help thinking that there was more to what was going on than an attack on me and my work. Stepping back and reading both the lines on the memos and the spaces between them, it seemed to me that what was being attacked was not just my writing, or even the approach I take to writing, but something *bigger*.

Twelve: The attack was on a world-view that allows for uncertainty (maybe even embraces it) that seeks to engage the imaginative, the spirited, the emotional, the not-so-cognitive aspects of our knowing praxis, that does not seek certain "positive" general knowledge, but rather searches out the local, the intuitive, the embodied, the experiential, the emotional.

One: Mystery!

Six: Wonder!

Twelve: Ambiguity!

Three: Oh my!

Eleven: The attack was on the idea that what we humans are —and what we know—is constructed narratively, socially, communicatively, not always or only through the application of a structured scientific method.

Ten: But wait! Even science is a *story*!

The Professor: Arbitrary as it may seem to those of us trained in qualitative inquiry, the promotion and tenure committee sought evidence that Thad "produced" the kinds of knowledge that flow from a hypothesis-test-conclusion model of social science. Their paradigm simply did not allow a space for research that clearly moves knowledge in a new direction —



One: — a *performative* direction, a direction that stems from an epistemology that sees knowledge as *praxis* rather than as an object or a product.

Two: They did not seem to grasp that qualitative research methodologies proceed by a narrative logic rather than a linear logic, that the new, emerging narrative methodologies do not proceed via a traditional social scientific approach (hypothesis-test-conclusion), a causal predictive view of reality, or a positivist or neo-positivist paradigm grounded in prediction and control.

The Professor: They sought work that "generates data, tests predictions, or leads to explanations"— and they did not find these things.

Two: This work —this qualitative inquiry—is...

Three: Integrative!

Four: Synthetic!

Five: Participatory!

Six: Unorthodox!

Seven: Intuitive!

Twelve: Evocative!

Eight: Unique!

Nine: Local!

Ten: Engaging!

Eleven: Holistic!

One: Interactive!

Two: Performative!

The Professor: They didn't find what they were looking for, because it was not there. But there was much, much more...

Narrator: Quiet, everyone! I have news!

Chorus: Yes?

Narrator: The university committee has voted to overturn the previous committee's vote.

Chorus: Due process.

The Professor: In the end, with the help of friends and a little fortitude, I triumphed. Chorus: Victory!

Narrator: Hear! Hear!

The Professor: But I have suffered because I write performative and autoethnographic narrative texts.

Narrator: Misunderstandings. Misinterpretations.

All: *Divisions! Territories!*

The Professor: But this work has also brought me great joy and healing. When someone tells me my writing *moved* her, — or, even better— *changed* her — WOW! Besides, I am not the only one who does this stuff— Bochner, Ellis, Denzin, Goodall, Pelias, Tillmann — and many, many more are writing right now, as I speak. I am in good company.

All: WOW!

The Professor: So, on balance, now, more than ever, I would not think of writing any other way. There is too much at stake here. Without narrative texts, what access does our research have to the spirit that makes us humans, walking the thin line between the everyday and the divine? I write autoethnography because I *must*. I write autoethnography because it is the only way I can see that will allow me to *reach inside* what it is like to experience the joys, the sorrows, the pain, the ecstasy, the laughter, the tears that are, simply, part of this human life we lead—and to evoke, through the engaged praxis of writing, the nuanced, subtle contours of the deeper meanings of our humanity. I write autoethnography because it allows me to give voice to my own ways of sensing, thinking, feeling, and being in our life world. I write autoethnography because I do not know what else to do. I write to make sense, to gather energy, to split the fog (if only for a moment), to invoke, to evoke, to provoke, to give heart, to breathe life and death, to bring stillness, to ignite a spark, to move, to change, and to change the world. I write autoethnography because I cannot *not* write it. In the grips of the autoethnographic spirit, I have known joy and pain, agony and ecstasy, fear and courage, hope and despair. But in the end, it has brought me more joy, ecstasy, courage, and hope than I could ever have bargained for. Besides, I am a trespasser. (*Pauses.*) A transgressor.

Chorus: A trespasser!

The Professor: Forgive me my trespasses, as I –

One: Trespass!

Twelve: Transgress!

Three: Rebel!

The Professor (*smiling*): But that's not what I *mean* to do...

Chorus (*facing the audience, smiling winking*): Who's he kidding? There will be more!

The Professor (*smiling*): *Dammit*, Snoopy!

Narrator: *Dammit*, indeed!

All (*turning to the audience, chanting loudly, in unison*): Transgress! Trespass! *Write!*

### **Commentary**

This performance documents my own personal "trial by fire" during tenure and promotion. For me, it was a watershed moment of my career, an opportunity to take a stand for my work (and, by extension, the work of others who engage personal/performative methodologies), and a chance to carve out a space for genuine

understanding and advancement of the value of autoethnographic and performative work as a legitimate approach to human social research. It is my hope that my story can contribute, in some small way, to improving the lot of the qualitative researcher in today's academic landscape. At the very least, it may serve as a cautionary tale.

Over the last twenty years or so, the academic world has experienced an explosion of new qualitative approaches to social inquiry in many fields. As scholars began to push the boundaries of what counts as knowledge, the "old guard" began to attack, apparently attempting to maintain a hold on the territory that was shifting underneath their feet. As the tenure story in this performance piece demonstrates, these attacks on qualitative inquiry—particularly toward the new/alternative modalities such as auto-ethnography and performance — have persisted, especially within the so-called social sciences. These attacks often seem to take the form of questioning the legitimacy of the methods employed in these works. In this particular case, as Goodall (2008) points out, a "symbolic kill" was attempted. But the kill failed, largely because the attack was unwarranted.

Still, it required a fight.

I was forced to "speak truth to power" as they say.

The fight centered on three issues raised during the tenure deliberations, which led to the negative vote at the intermediate level in the process. The documentation in the case outlined, in the coded language of quantitative social science research, the committee's claim that the research in question fails the acid test of "real" research. According to the documents, the committee sought evidence that the research in question "generates data, tests predictions, or leads to explanations" — and failed to find evidence that it did.

My response was to point out that, quite naturally, the committee was correct in its findings. Most qualitative research doesn't generate, predict, or explain! Applying the standards of quantitative inquiry, in fact, entirely misses the point of qualitative inquiry, which proceeds under an *alternative* paradigmatic inclination. Beyond generation, prediction, and explanation, autoethnography, in particular, *examines* and *explores*, *eschews prediction* (as self-referential), opens up *possibilities*, *questions*, *interprets*, *wonders*—and *maybe even disrupts*.

Transgression indeed.

Qualitative inquiry seeks to *expand* our body of embodied/lived practical knowing (the Greeks called this *phrônesis*) rather than *explain* phenomena from a privileged "academic" (*theôria*) stance.

It is a methodology of *praxis*. It is a methodology of wonder. It is a methodology of the *heart* (Pelias, 2004). It is a methodology of the whole.

In contrast to orthodox, traditional, often quantitative methodologies, the so-called "new ethnography" (Goodall, 2000), *offers nuanced lessons from experience*, thus expanding the boundaries of so-called knowledge.

This work seeks to engage the mystery of being.

Apparently, this expansion and engagement is threatening to some.

Apparently, we need to keep fighting the good fight.

## Notes

1. cf. Levinas, p. 120.
2. cf. Watzlawick, et. al. 1967.

3. cf. John Durham Peters' history of communication, *Speaking into the Air*.
4. cf. Goodall.
5. cf. Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Rorty.
6. cf. Barth, Derrida, Gadamer, Raschke.
7. For the physicists among you that might be something like the observable features of light, which displays properties of both waves and particles— which, I am told, can't possibly be true. But it is. For the rest of us— or, at least, those who have been in a serious long-term relationship—it would be something like the mere fact that, on any given day, it is possible to both truly loathe your partner and at the same time adore her beyond all reckoning. Anyway, you get my point: Paradoxes are possible to at least contemplate, if not accept. At least since the days of Zeno in the Western world, and the first Buddhists in the East, we humans have been capable of contemplating paradox. But somehow, in the academy, some of us have lost this capacity.
8. cf. Carolyn Ellis's *The Ethnographic I*, p xix.

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