

# Popular Culture Studies and Autoethnography: An Essay on Method

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At a recent Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association national conference, I (Jimmie) opened the social media app Yik Yak to pass the time while waiting for a session to begin. Yik Yak has become quite popular, especially on and around college campuses, as it allows users to post anonymous messages that can be read by others who also have the app and are in close proximity. It is, in many ways, a more anonymous form of Twitter. Because of such anonymity, it is not unusual to see secret confessions, rude comments about others, people making bizarre posts, and even requests for support in embarrassing situations. The yak I saw that particularly caught my attention seemed to be a mix of a secret confession and a request for support: “Someone did something called autoethnography in my last session. Really different. Left me crying. Is it wrong to say I’m intrigued?”

I quickly yakked back: “Wrong? Heck no. Welcome to the club!” And then, “Check out the Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis book to learn more about autoethnography.” That was the beginning of a stream of yaks where participants asked for more details about the presentation, mentioned that they were interested in the method, and asked questions about how autoethnography could be considered “research.” There were also some skeptical responses, including someone who questioned the objectivity of autoethnography (an unusual question given that so much popular culture research is humanistic) and someone who said it sounded narcissistic and navel-gazing. However, yakking allowed us to have a

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productive conversation about autoethnography, one where people had a chance to learn about a method that has an increasing presence across many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

Discussions on Yik Yak are ephemeral, and even though that conversation is a distant memory we believe that people who do popular culture studies would benefit from learning more about autoethnography. In an attempt to provide something more substantial and enduring, we collaborated to write this essay and edit a special issue of *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* (Manning and Adams). The goal of both is to offer newcomers to the method a sense of what autoethnography is and how it can be used in popular culture studies; while simultaneously providing new ideas for those who are already familiar with autoethnographic methods.

We begin this essay by defining autoethnography, paying special attention to the various orientations of autoethnographic research. We then review popular culture research that has used autoethnography as a method of inquiry before identifying key strengths of autoethnography. As those strengths reflect, autoethnography is a valid, viable, and vital method for popular culture research. We conclude by examining criteria for evaluating autoethnography, especially in terms of quality and risk. As we demonstrate, autoethnography offers another way to study popular texts and contexts, or, in the words of Stuart Hall, the “local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and the everyday experiences of ordinary folks” (107-108).

### Defining Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method that foregrounds the researcher’s personal experience (*auto*) as it is embedded within, and informed by, cultural identities and con/texts (*ethno*) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (*graphy*). More specifically,

it is a method that blends the purposes, techniques, and theories of social research—primarily ethnography—with the purposes, techniques, and theories associated with genres of life writing, especially autobiography, memoir, and personal essay.

For example, and similar to ethnography, autoethnographers often take, as their focus, their experiences with cultural identities, popular texts, and a community's attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Autoethnographers study these phenomena by doing fieldwork, which includes observing and interacting with others, conducting archival research, and directly participating in community life. They often take "field notes" of their experiences; consult with relevant research and theories about the identities, texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices; and may interview members of the culture to inform their understandings.

Similar to genres of life writing, autoethnographers value personal experience, memory, and storytelling. They are interested in how people—especially the researcher—make sense of mundane or notable life events and the lessons they have learned across the lifespan (Bochner and Ellis). Autoethnographers share this sense-making and these lessons with the purpose of offering guidance and wisdom to others. Autoethnographers might consult with artifacts such as photographs, diaries, letters, and other personal texts, and often use storytelling devices such as narrative voice, plot, and character development to represent their experiences.

Although we will discuss variations in autoethnographic practice, we want to highlight three characteristics shared by most autoethnographic research. First, autoethnographers assume that culture flows through the self; the personal, the particular, and the local are inseparably constituted and infused by others as well as by popular texts, beliefs, and practices. For example, in justifying his use of autoethnography, John Fiske characterizes himself

not as an individual, but as a site and as an instance of reading, as an agent of culture in process—not because the reading I produced

was in any way socially representative of, or extrapolable to, others, but because the process by which I produced it was a structured instance of culture in practice. (86)

Fiske further writes, “Any personal negotiation of our immediate social relations is a necessary part of our larger politics—the micro-political is where the macro-politics of the social structure are made concrete in the practices of everyday life” (97). Ron Pelias makes a similar observation about personal experience, noting that we are each “situated within an historical and cultural context,” and, as such, ideology drapes our “every utterance” (*Performance* 152). To be an autoethnographer and to do autoethnography means recognizing that personal experience cannot be easily or definitively separated from social and relational contexts. In this way, personal experience becomes a valid, viable, and vital kind of data from which to make meaning and use in research.

Second, autoethnographers engage in laborious, honest, and nuanced self-reflection—often referred to as “reflexivity”—in an attempt to “explore and interrogate sociocultural forces and discursive practices” that inform personal experience and the research process (Grant, Short, and Turner 5; Berry and Clair). More specifically, reflexivity allows autoethnographers to identify, interrogate, and make explicit the persistent interplay between personal-cultural experiences; consider their roles in doing research and creating a research account; and hold themselves responsible for their mistakes or errors in judgment in a research project (Ellis, “Telling Secrets”). Given the use of reflexivity, autoethnography stands in stark contrast to traditional social scientific studies in the sense that terms such as “objectivity,” “researcher neutrality,” and “stable meaning” are eschewed in favor of understanding the researcher’s careful and thoughtful interpretation of lived experience and the research process (Grant, Short, and Turner 3).

Third, autoethnographers tend to write about life-changing epiphanies (Denzin); difficult and perhaps repetitious encounters (Boylorn, “As

Seen"); insights about, and dilemmas in, doing and writing up research (Chawla); mundane but notable interactions and events (Bolen; Speedy); and experiences about which they felt shame, confusion, and/or despair (Herrmann, "I Know"). As Carolyn Ellis eloquently notes, "I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (*Ethnographic I* 33). Tami Spry makes a similar observation: "After years of moving through pain with pen and paper," she writes, "asking the nurse for these tools in the morning after losing our son in childbirth was the only thing I could make my body do" (36).

Autoethnographers write about these often-private experiences not only to better understand those events themselves, but also to show others how they make sense of and learn lessons from them.

Although a large community of scholars across many disciplines has contributed to the quickly-expanding corpus of autoethnographic research, we also recognize variations in autoethnographic practice, all of which emphasize different aspects of the social research-life writing continuum. Drawing from our previous work (Adams and Manning), here we review four common orientations—social-scientific, interpretive-humanistic, critical, and creative-artistic—that many autoethnographers use to design, conduct, represent, and evaluate autoethnographic projects. Although we list four distinct orientations, it is not unusual for autoethnographers to blend the goals and techniques of each in a single research project or as they write about the same experiences over time. This flexibility is linked to the reflexive nature of autoethnographic research practices.

One common autoethnographic orientation is the *social-scientific autoethnography*, sometimes referred to as *analytic autoethnography* (Anderson and Glass-Coffin). This orientation involves a combination of fieldwork, interpretive qualitative data, systematic data analysis, and personal experience to describe the experiences of being in, or a part of, a community. Some social-scientific autoethnographies foreground the researcher's experiences (e.g., Zibricky), but most tend to treat personal

experience as secondary to a more-traditional appearing qualitative research report (e.g., Manning, "I Never"). Similar to other social scientific qualitative research, these autoethnographies might also include discussions about rigor, systematic data collection, use of coding procedures, and valid and reliable findings (e.g., Burnard; Chang; Manning and Kunkel, *Researching*). Social-scientific autoethnographies are often presented as written research reports using the traditional introduction-literature review-methodology-results-discussion format common to most social scientific research (e.g., Adams, "Paradoxes").

A social-scientific orientation to autoethnography is one of the least common, as the inherent and required use of personal experience that accompanies autoethnography is seen by some as threatening to social scientific desires for objectivity and researcher neutrality. On the contrary, we believe that social science scholarship that uses autoethnography allows for lucid interpretations of research findings as readers are connected to vivid accounts of lived experience. Given that there is often a chasm between social scientific and humanistic approaches to popular culture studies, this orientation of autoethnography might be especially beneficial for blurring lines between those research orientations and combining ideas that have been generated across the different methodological paradigms.

An orientation that will probably feel more familiar to many who study popular culture—especially because of its heavy focus on cultural description and analysis—is *interpretive-humanistic autoethnography*. This approach to autoethnography typically involves fieldwork, the use of extant research and theories, and the researcher's personal experiences and perspectives. At the heart of this orientation is "thick description," the principle of recording personal and cultural experiences in descriptive, thoughtful, and illuminating ways (Geertz 10). Although some interpretive-humanistic autoethnographers use ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, interviews, and/or archival

research (e.g., Goodall), many choose to make the thick description of personal experience the primary focus of a project (e.g., Ellis, “Maternal Connections”). A coherent representational structure should also exist for interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies, but it does not need to follow the introduction-literature review-method-results-discussion format often expected of social-scientific research. Based on the literature review we provide later in this essay, we estimate that the interpretive-humanistic orientation is one of the two most common orientations for autoethnographies that research popular culture.

The other most common orientation for popular culture autoethnography is *critical autoethnography*. Similar to other methods that involve critical approaches (e.g., Hall), these autoethnographies use personal experience to identify harmful abuses of power, structures that cultivate and perpetuate oppression, instances of inequality, and unjust cultural values and practices (Boylorn and Orbe). Critical autoethnographies often call attention to harmful cultural assumptions about race (e.g., Boylorn, “As Seen”), gender equality (e.g., Allen and Piercy), sexuality (e.g., Adams and Holman Jones), social class (e.g., Hodges), grief (e.g., Paxton), and colonialism (e.g., Pathak). Critical autoethnographies also make arguments about what texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices should and should not exist in social life, and, as such, are not concerned about objectivity and researcher neutrality.

Whereas some autoethnographers focus on the use of more traditional research practices and choose more traditional forms to represent their autoethnographic research, creative-artistic autoethnographers are more concerned with the life writing side of the social research-life writing continuum. As such, those who create *creative-artistic autoethnographies* value aesthetics, evocative and vulnerable stories, and the use of different forms or media to represent their work, including fiction (e.g., Leavy, *Fiction*), poetry (e.g., Faulkner; Speedy), performance (e.g., Pelias, *Performance*), music (e.g., Bartleet and Ellis), and blogs (e.g., Boylorn,

“Blackgirl Blogs”). Creative-artistic autoethnographers might consider themselves “artists” rather than “researchers” and are the least likely to use academic jargon or care about systematic data collection. Instead, they are moved by the research/artistic process, emergent questions, and new ideas. They often take great care in the craft, feeling, and flow of research and incorporate these sensory processes into their finished texts.

As popular culture scholars embrace autoethnographic research, it is important to recognize that there is no single way to do autoethnography and that these orientations fall across the social research-life writing continuum. Similar to Laura Ellingson and other scholars who encourage the blending of methods, we believe some of the best autoethnography can happen when orientations overlap. This overlap might be subtle, such as a social-scientific autoethnography adopting a critical tone as personal experience is brought into the discussion section (e.g., Zibricky); or it might be more obvious, such as personal artwork being placed throughout an interpretive-humanistic essay to complement the written text (e.g., Metta). Because autoethnography is a form of research that involves at least some creativity, blending orientations can be illuminating and useful.

### Connecting the Personal to the Popular

Now that we have explained what autoethnography is and some of the most common ways that researchers choose to do it, we turn our attention to the ways autoethnography can be beneficial for popular culture studies. To begin, we review popular culture research that has used autoethnography to provide a sense of how the method has been used as well as to serve as inspiration for those who want to do their own autoethnographic projects. In the spirit of autoethnography, particularly its focus on the use of personal experience, we begin by sharing our experiences related to autoethnographic popular culture studies.

I (Jimmie) have mostly written social-scientific and interpretive-humanistic autoethnographies. My social scientific work includes a qualitative interview research project where I interviewed viewers of the television program *Grey's Anatomy* to learn about how they identified with the characters featured in the program (Manning, "I Never"). Because I found that most participants identified as the characters—people would say, "I am Meredith Grey" or "I'm just like Christina Yang"—I opened the essay with an autoethnographic vignette about how my coworkers and I engaged in similar behaviors as part of our office banter. I then blended that opening into the discussion section of the essay where I offered a theory of *symbolic boasting*, or the idea that people place themselves inside particular popular culture figures or characters in order to boost their personal worth. In other words, even though the theorizing I did was tied to the data, it was also informed by my personal experiences that resembled what participants in the study were sharing.

In another study, I blended autoethnography and media criticism of *Catfish: The TV Show*. In this mixed-orientation project, I juxtaposed my own story about being catfished (i.e., tricked by someone online) with analysis of the television program (Manning, "Ipsedixitism"). This back and forth between my personal account and the arguments I made as part of the criticism allowed for an expanded sense of scope in the essay. I could also understand more about the assumptions and values I carried when approaching the text as a media critic. As I argue in an upcoming essay ("Relationships and Popular Culture"), the awareness that autoethnography can allow is helpful for researchers in the social sciences and humanities. Not only does it provide the potential for new insights and research ideas about a topic or project, but it also allows a good personal sense of values, assumptions, and inclinations as they relate to the research.

I have also used more traditional interpretive-humanistic autoethnography. In a project I described as *audience autoethnography*, I

examined the thoughts and feelings I had when watching the television program *Mad Men*, specifically my reactions to storylines regarding alcoholism (Manning, “Finding Yourself”). Even though my father was not much like the main character Don Draper, I still found myself making comparisons between the two. These comparisons motivated me to consider my father’s motivations for drinking and how they were probably quite different from Don’s. I also considered Betty Draper’s feelings of being trapped to how I imagined my mother felt. The essay included thick description both from my experiences as child and the television program. That allowed me to theorize about how we use popular narratives and the characters in them to make sense of our own lives.

I (Tony) too have used autoethnography to study popular culture texts. In my first book, *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction*, I used personal experiences to write alongside, and against, popular representations of coming out of the closet—that is, representations of the moment when a person discloses a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer identity. I specifically discuss coming out representations featured in the television sitcom *Will and Grace* and films such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Another Gay Movie*, and as discussed by popular writers such as E. Lynn Harris and Dan Savage. In orientation, I would classify the book as a mix of interpretive-humanistic, critical, and creative-artistic autoethnography.

In another essay (Adams, “Watching”), I use autoethnography to describe how the values and practices represented in the reality television series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* align with my experiences of being raised in a rural, lower class environment. And I am currently finishing an essay about “Queering Popular Culture,” in which I use both queer theory and my personal experiences to offer queer interpretations of popular, mass mediated texts such as *The Golden Girls*, *The Leftovers*, and *Inside Out*. In orientation, I would classify these essays as a mix of interpretive-humanistic and critical autoethnography.

Beyond our work, there is a small but growing body of autoethnographic popular culture studies. For example, some authors have written about their relationships with popular music. In one essay, Andrew Herrmann described how popular cultural texts—particularly music—can assist in the “creation of self” (“Daniel Amos” 7); and, in another essay, reflected on his punk identity as he interacts with younger members of punk culture (“Never Mind”). Patricia Leavy described her connections with musicians such as Tori Amos and Paula Cole, her daughter’s connections with musicians such as Pink and Katy Perry, and how these musicians espouse empowering messages for women (“Confessions”). Derek Greenfield also examined the power of music to inspire, sharing his accounts of using hip-hop in the classroom. In an auto/ethnographic study of popular music and karaoke, Rob Drew described what happens in karaoke environments, such as who participates, how, and why people choose and perform particular songs. Stacy Holman Jones has written two books about her experiences with torch singing, feminism, and popular music (*Kaleidoscope Notes*; *Torch Singing*). And Art Bochner used Leonard Cohen’s “Bird on a Wire” to write about his tenuous relationship with his father, including the ways he has freed himself from the grief and memories of his father’s actions and how he has learned to live and love himself—and others—more (“Freeing”).

Other autoethnographers have critiqued popular representations of race, ethnicity, and gender. Robin Boylorn (“As Seen”) used autoethnography to describe and critique problematic representations of Black women on reality television shows, especially representations that perpetuated erroneous stereotypes and assumptions. Ron Pelias used autoethnography to write against harmful binaries of masculinity, particularly the (perceived) need to be a “Jarhead,” a tough and violent man, and the fear of being called a weak “girly-man,” a phrase popularized by actor-celebrity-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger (“Jarhead”). And an entire issue of *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical*

*Methodologies*, “Iconography of the West: Autoethnographic Representations of the West(erns),” included essays by authors who use autoethnography to write against “the script of how we discuss notions of the West” (Alexander 224). Authors specifically discussed their (lack of) relationship to representations of the West, disturbing characteristics of the Western television and film genre, and how recurring motifs of Western-themed texts can be perpetuated and embodied by audiences (e.g., discourses about exploration and domination; human connections to the environment; and relationships between “Cowboys” and “Indians”).

Some autoethnographers have described their media use, fandom, and the ways in which they relate to popular texts, events, and celebrities. For example, David Lavery’s autoethnographic essay about crying at television programs—written in response to his own tears during the final episode of *Six Feet Under*—illustrated how popular culture texts can bring us together, make us reflect on our own lives, and encourage us to think about the values we hold dear. Although Lavery clearly wrote his essay from the perspective as a fan of the series, Jeanette Monaco took a more explicit approach to theorizing about how fandom ties to popular culture research by advocating that autoethnography is a way of making motives more explicit in popular culture studies. Damion Sturm also used autoethnography to study fandom, drawing from his experiences as a fan of gaming, football, racing, and wrestling to consider the affects and contexts in which fandom occurs.

Some explorations of fandom have been more personal and intimate. Markus Wohlfeil described his experiences as a fan of celebrity Jena Malone and how the actress has been present in his everyday life—including his awkward dating experiences—and by way of numerous autographed photos, wall posters, and films (Wohlfeil and Whelan). Other fan-oriented autoethnographies have been more media-centered. For example, Danielle Stern described her connections with the feminist characters and messages of three televisual series—*My So-Called Life*,

*Felicity*, and *Sex and the City*—and how these characters and messages informed her intimate relationships. Stern placed media texts in the forefront of her essay, but Shinsuke Eguchi—who also explored connections between intimate relationships and media texts, only with a focus on interracial dating—chose to put his personal experience at the forefront of his writing with the critique of media texts serving more in a supporting role.

Although this review is not exhaustive, it provides a sense of the many ways that autoethnography has been used in popular culture studies. As the review demonstrates, many different forms and genres of popular culture are being explored, and by way of many different methodological approaches. Collectively, the essays also help to illustrate some of the many strengths that accompany the use of autoethnography for studying popular culture. In the next section, we more explicitly consider these strengths, drawing from the contents of this special issue to provide concrete examples.

### Strengths of Autoethnography for Popular Culture Research

Here we articulate five strengths of autoethnography for popular culture research. Our hope is that by making these strengths explicit, popular culture scholars will gain both a better understanding of how they can use autoethnography in their work as well as be able to justify that work to others who might not be familiar with autoethnography. These strengths include the ability for researchers to 1) use personal experience to write alongside popular culture theories and texts, especially to show how personal experiences resemble or are informed by popular culture; 2) use personal experience to criticize, write against, and talk back to popular culture texts, especially texts that do not match their personal experiences or that espouse harmful messages; 3) describe how they personally act as audience members, specifically how they use, engage, and relate to

popular texts, events, and/or celebrities; 4) describe the processes that contribute to the production of popular culture texts; and 5) create accessible research texts that can be understood by a variety of audiences. Although most popular culture autoethnographies will not capitalize on every strength, we expand on each one here so that one or more might be used in a particular autoethnographic project.

First, autoethnographers can use personal experience to write alongside popular culture theories and texts and, more specifically, show how their experiences resemble or are informed by those same theories and texts. In this way, autoethnography can be used to illustrate the importance of theories and texts for particular audiences. As Hall writes, “It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (111). Many essays in the special issue use autoethnography to write alongside popular culture texts and show how those texts influence their experiences and relationships. For example, Janice Hamlet describes how different television and movie characters have served as her personal mentors, showing how characters such as Celie from *The Color Purple* or Olivia Pope from *Scandal* have informed her experiences as a Black woman. Similarly, Renata Ferdinand shares her stories of being inspired or shamed about having dark skin based on both celebrities as well as popular culture representations. M. Cuellar draws from parasocial theory to describe his relationship with media, telling stories about how different celebrity personalities served as his mediated boyfriends in times of loneliness and longing. And Michaela D. E. Meyer takes yet a different approach, making sense of falling in love with her future husband against the backdrop of the popular television series *Castle*.

Autoethnographic studies about how popular culture has informed personal lives are not limited to television and film. For example, L. N. Badger weaves popular literature (e.g., *Flowers in the Attic*) with narratives about illness, insanity, and her family. Sandra Carpenter writes

alongside the work of bell hooks and Dorothy Allison, considering how their writings inform her sense of history and space. Linda Levitt demonstrates how early feminist icons, including Mary Tyler Moore and Maude, influenced the ways she understands and lives feminism. Finally, Gary Strain considers how the board game *Pretty Pretty Princess* offered him a context to play with gender and express his femininity. Each of these essays shows palpable, personal, and profound ways that popular culture has played into or against the author's life experiences, both informing and constituting their lived worlds.

Second, autoethnographers can use personal experience to criticize, write against, and talk back to popular culture texts, especially texts that do not match their personal experiences or that espouse harmful messages. In this special issue, numerous autoethnographers did just that. Authors critique harmful representations of class (Rennels) and ability (Scott); the inaccurate and harmful ways in which Brazilian comics portray indigenous Amazonian people (de Almeida); and everyday moments in which Disney princess culture—a culture that is problematic in terms of feminist values—infuses the lives of parents and children (Shuler). We mentioned previously that Strain described how the board game *Pretty Pretty Princess* offered him a context to play with gender and express his femininity, but Strain also offers important critiques of the game, not only in its encouragement of competition but also its insidious racialized aspects such as the game's celebration of White beauty norms.

As the topics of these essays and of the many essays reviewed earlier suggest, pointing to the harms of popular culture texts will likely result in a project that embraces a critical orientation. To be certain, problematic representations related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and ability—among countless other identities—are often harmful. In addition to exposing personal and cultural injuries related to identities and social inequality, autoethnographers should also consider how popular culture provides and perpetuates harmful information. Such

information could be about health, relationships, technology, civic processes, or a host of other topics. For example, actress and talk show host Jenny McCarthy famously made anti-vaccination comments that led to movements against allowing children to be vaccinated as well as countermovements, often led by health scientists and physicians, that involved educating people about why vaccines are not harmful. An autoethnography from a parent who bought into McCarthy's popular rhetoric but who has since realized the importance of vaccinations might help other parents to consider how they, too, might be tempted to believe popular discourses about their children's health.

The first two strengths of autoethnography we identify here combine to suggest a third strength: The method can show how researchers serve as audiences of particular texts (Berry). As Rob Drew notes, "Few people nowadays linger within particular 'audiences' long enough for researchers to monitor them" (25). Related, Dhoest critiques closed, survey questions asked of audiences about their media use as these questions "often hide mixed feelings or more complex stances" about such use (37). Instead, he suggests, autoethnography can provide more complex insider accounts about how people use media – specifically how they engage and relate to popular texts, events, and/or celebrities. Such a shift also allows for the dominant research focus on media or popular culture *effects* to expand to consider how *affect* circulates in relation to some aspect of popular culture (Manning, "Finding Yourself"). That is, the autoethnographer can consider complex historical, emotional, and embodied responses as they are constitutive of popular culture and lived experience.

Fourth, autoethnographers can use personal experience to describe the processes that contribute to the production of popular culture texts. Thinking of popular culture as an industry—an industry that produces everyday pleasures, values, and texts consumed and appreciated by many people—requires thinking about its numerous gatekeepers. Autoethnographers who have directly encountered and transcended these

gatekeepers and who have directly participated in creating popular culture texts can use their personal experiences to offer insider accounts of production processes and the numerous decisions that go into making these texts. By doing so, they offer insight into processes and products that outsiders, including most researchers, could rarely access.

Stephanie Patrick's article in this special issue offers one such example. She uses her experiences as a film and television casting agent to offer an insider, behind-the-scenes account of how media texts come to be populated by certain kinds of actors. Her descriptions both provide the reader a sense of seeing the casting process in action as well as her inner turmoil about some of the requirements of the job. Because essays offering insider accounts of production are rare, they are an especially valuable resource for popular culture studies. Other notable examples include Ragan Fox's autoethnography that explored how he had to perform "multiple characters" on the popular reality television series *Big Brother*. As he explains, "Other research methods would not provide immediate, ongoing, and *in situ* access to the *Big Brother* house, nor would CBS likely permit non-affiliated investigators to enter the show's immediate contexts (e.g., soundstage, casting interviews, and sequester house)" (194). In a similar way, Amber Johnson uses a kind of autoethnography—"autocritography"—to describe her experiences auditioning for and performing as a "video vixen" in a rap music video, as well as her struggles in being perceived as a (hyper)sexual Black woman. In so doing, Johnson provides an insider account of how the music industry commodifies and sexualizes particular raced and gendered bodies.

Fifth, autoethnography allows popular culture scholars the opportunity to create and disseminate accessible and relatable research. As an interdisciplinary field, popular culture studies has excelled at making its work accessible to others while still making sure it exemplifies academic rigor and merit. Multiple academic book series (e.g., the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series) have allowed scholars and fans alike

to consider philosophical themes, think about sociological implications, understand communication practices, and critically explore television, movies, music, and sports. Departments that are dedicated exclusively or even partially to popular culture studies are rare, however, and most scholars who study popular culture do so while housed in another discipline. These disciplines tend to have decades if not centuries of writings that are difficult to access, filled with jargon, and that reference research ideas that likely appear unfamiliar to readers with little academic training (Herrmann, “Criteria”). Although these studies almost certainly have value to those in the academy, their direct value to people outside of academe—especially those who could possibly benefit from the findings—is suspect.

Given autoethnography’s ties to genres of life writing, particularly uses of storytelling and personal experience, the method often results in texts that are both interesting and accessible. Such accessibility can ground dense theories and concepts in lived experience (Herrmann, “Criteria”); allow readers to gain an intimate understanding of how those theories and concepts look and feel (Manning and Kunkel, “Making Meaning”); and allow scholars to serve more in the role of “public intellectual” (Batchelor). Autoethnography is also easily translatable for outlets beyond academic books and journals. For example, Robin Boylorn, a prominent and prolific autoethnographer, is a regular contributor to the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC), an online blogging site whose Facebook page has more than 34,000 members. In addition to her regular CFC posts, all of which reach thousands of readers, Boylorn also published an essay in *The Guardian* about Black and White uses of the term “bae” (Boylorn, “Now That”). Within a few months, Boylorn’s article had been shared more than 2,000 times via social media and had more than 1,000 comments from readers. Such reach and impact are not enjoyed by most academic writers.

## Evaluating Autoethnography: Quality, Risks, and Limitations

The five strengths we identified in the previous section point to some of the unique and valuable contributions autoethnography can make to popular culture studies. Even though we are enthusiastic about the potential of autoethnography, we also acknowledge that it is no panacea. Some autoethnography is poorly conceived or executed; other projects are pursued without consideration of impact or ethics; and still some research goals are not well-suited for autoethnographic inquiry. In response to these concerns, we conclude this article by offering some basic criteria for evaluating autoethnography as well as a review of some potential risks associated with the methodology, including ethical concerns. As we illustrate with these criteria, engaging autoethnographic research involves consistent and ongoing personal reflection about how our work might impact others.

*Evaluation.* Two essential qualities should be present in all autoethnography projects. First, any work labeled “autoethnography” should include personal experience and demonstrate, through thoughtful analysis, why the experience is meaningful and culturally significant. An essay that does not use or describe the importance of personal experience in a cultural context should not be considered an autoethnography. Second, this personal experience must be reflexively considered through the use of extant theory, other scholarly writings about the topic, fieldwork observations, analysis of artifacts (e.g., photographs), and/or involvement with others (e.g., interviews). If many of these elements are not evident, then a project should also not be considered an autoethnography (Adams and Manning).

Beyond these core two criteria, evaluation of autoethnography depends on the research orientation. For example, those using a social-scientific orientation should be concerned about evaluative criteria such as the soundness of data collection (Chang), the development of good research

questions (Manning and Kunkel, *Researching*), and the validity and transferability of the data (Burnard; Philaretou and Allen).

Autoethnographers who approach autoethnography from an interpretive-humanistic, critical, or creative-artistic orientation are not going to be as concerned about those criteria. Rather, researchers working within these orientations are going to be focused more on providing coherent stories with details that help readers clearly envision a setting, the people and feelings involved, and the actions that occurred (Bochner “Criteria”).

Those approaching autoethnography from a creative-artistic orientation must especially consider the aesthetic aspects of the research text, including the use of narrative voice, development of characters/people, and dramatic tension or emotional resonance. However, creative-artistic autoethnographers might also find themselves subject to some of the critiques that accompany different art forms, e.g., creative writing ability (Gingrich-Philbrook).

As a final note, good autoethnographies are interesting. Although the stories included in an autoethnography do not have to be fantastic, unusual, or even particularly unique—in fact, some of the best autoethnographies happen when the researcher reflects on seemingly mundane practices—there must be some interesting sense-making or theoretical development in the text. Good autoethnography happens when the researcher has something deeper to say about an experience, and that something deeper should go beyond simply pointing out how personal experience aligns with or defies a theory or common research finding. The autoethnographic work also needs to teach, inspire, and/or inform. Asking why an experience or story is important, what it might suggest about social interaction and cultural life, and what it suggests about ourselves is valuable for ensuring the worth of an autoethnography. These questions can often be answered or explored through theoretical reflection, examining the existing research about a topic, and/or by talking with others as part of the project.

*Risks.* Before taking on an autoethnographic project—and especially before publishing or presenting it—considering what risks might result from the research is important. Risks include sharing vulnerable, private, and possibly controversial personal experiences; being exposed to unnecessary judgment; and receiving accusations of offense and betrayal from others (e.g., family members, friends, students) who feel as though their privacy has been violated, that the autoethnographer shared too much personal information, and/or that particular information is not accurate and truthful (Ellis, “Telling Secrets”). For autoethnographers, these criticisms can feel like highly personal attacks that can call into question the validity of shared accounts, motivate anxiety, and generate emotional pain (Chatham-Carpenter). Although autoethnographers often recognize the importance of telling stories, sharing personal experiences, and humanizing research, it is also important to frequently consider the potential risks of sharing these experiences. That includes both risks to the self and risks to others.

*Ethics.* “Relational ethics” is a key ethical concern relevant to all autoethnographic research (Ellis, “Telling Secrets”). Relational ethics means considering all of the people who might be implicated in your account (e.g., family members, friends, students), possibly seeking their approval for what you say or suggest about them, doing your best to ensure that others are not harmed by your representations, and thinking about the possible consequences of your autoethnographic texts on their lives. Many textual strategies can be used to address relational ethics, including using pseudonyms (e.g., Anonymous SF), fictionalizing an experience (e.g., Angrosino), creating composite characters (e.g., Ellis, *Ethnographic I*), or through collaborating with others in ways that increase anonymity regarding whose particular story is associated with whom (e.g., Adams and Holman Jones). In the process of doing autoethnography, it might also help to seek feedback from others, recognizing that seeking

feedback is different from asking or needing others to approve the account (Adams and Manning).

In some cases, autoethnographers try to de-identify people within a story, but doing so can be difficult. If people are not directly named they may still be identifiable by others who are familiar with the author's story (Bolen and Adams; Ellis, "Emotional"). Others who may not even be mentioned in a text may be affected as well. For example, as we wrote in another essay,

If I (Tony) use autoethnography to examine personal experiences of familial homophobia, it may be difficult to disguise family members, especially if I come from a small family; these members, and even readers, may be able to identify these people in my life. When I (Jimmie) use autoethnography to talk about alcoholism in my family, it often requires pointing to my father's abusive or irresponsible behaviors, vulnerable moments experienced by my mother or other family members, disputes my family has about what did or did not happen, as well as the responses of non-immediate family members and community members. In other words, my account implicates not just me but also my mother, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, close family friends, teachers, and co-workers. (Adams and Manning)

Recognizing that we may implicate family members should not suggest that we should not tell our story or that doing so is unethical. Instead, we pledge to do our best to consider who our representations might affect and how we need to acknowledge and/or protect others.

Beyond these concerns, it is also important to consider that some autoethnographers, especially those who do social-scientific or interpretive-humanistic inquiry, might need to adhere to requirements espoused by research ethics review boards. For autoethnography, this is commonly informed consent for interviews (Tullis). However, other

autoethnographers, especially creative-artistic autoethnographers, will probably consider review board requirements to be irrelevant and unimportant, particularly because artists such as painters, dancers, musicians, and life writers do not need to worry about these requirements in order to paint, dance, play music, or write about their lives.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have provided an overview of autoethnography and its orientations, reviewed past examples of popular culture scholarship that uses autoethnographic methods, and identified several strengths of using autoethnography to study popular culture. This overview demonstrates that the interdisciplinary field of popular culture studies has much to gain from autoethnographic research. Recently, media scholar Alexander Dhoest wrote, “a collection of autoethnographical essays by researchers would be helpful to establish broader patterns in (self-understandings of) contemporary media uses” (41). In reviewing the contents of this special issue, we believe that Dhoest’s observation was correct. The essays included here illuminate self-understandings about media use as well as numerous other ways in which popular culture informs, challenges, interacts with, and constitutes everyday life.

If, as Herrmann astutely notes, “Popular culture helps us define who we are, what we believe, and influences whom we befriend” (“Daniel Amos,” 7), then we need a method that can provide rich and nuanced examinations of how popular culture shapes our personal and cultural identities, inquires into researchers’ popular culture use, and allows researchers to discuss how they make sense of their relationships to popular culture theories, texts, events, and celebrities. It is our hope that the articles in this collection, along with this essay, connect the broader cultural texts, artifacts, ideas, and events that we collectively refer to as popular culture with the personal experiences of everyday life.

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