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With contributions by Rebekka Kill, Nazar Jabour, Kate Rice, Steph Brocken and Jamie Coull

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## **Remaking Memory: Autoethnography, Memoir and The Ethics of Self**

By John Freeman. With contributions by Rebekka Kill, Nazar Jabour, Kate Rice, Steph Brocken, and Jamie Coull. Faringdon: Libri Publishing, 2015.

### **Hilary Elliott**

John Freeman's Remaking Memory: Autoethnography, Memoir and The Ethics of Self makes a significant contribution to autoethnography and memoir. The book includes a lengthy chapter on autoethnographic performance that draws upon literary and performance works pertaining to self-narrating practices. Five case studies by postgraduate students are also included in order to 'remind the reader [and author] that a sole authorial voice is usually suspect' (13) and to provide first-hand accounts of some of the ways in which performance and autoethnography have been applied within specific research contexts. Case studies by Rebekka Kill (UK), Nazar Jabour (Iraq/Australia), Kate Rice (Australia), Steph Brocken (UK) and Jamie Coull (Australia) stem directly from the graduate researchers' theses, offering rich insight into transnational questions of methodology and modes of presentation.

In a work that is itself 'at least partial autoethnography' (2), Freeman gives sufficient space to nuanced definitions and applications of autoethnographic writing and performance as well as to crucial distinctions between autoethnography and autobiography for the text to be accessible to novice and expert alike. To journey through the five chapters, is to be exposed to questions and provocations concerning processes of writing, understandings of research, relationships between memory and 'truth', ideas of what constitutes works of fact, imagination and story telling and questions of academic motivation and ethical conduct. As such, Remaking Memory explores how the self can be made the subject of the research process.

Chapter One, 'Obscene Truths,' is concerned with forms of writing that are autotelic; or, after poet T.S Eliot, as 'work which is about itself' (26). It includes the first case study by Rebekka Kill, a 'half practice and half text' thesis (38) in which she analyses academic identity construction and argues that autoethnography functions as a 'guiding principle, something that anchors the research and stops it from floating off into chaos' (43). Working against

what she calls the 'monolithic authority of scholarly language' (46), Kill aligns herself with David Lodge's critique of scholars who 'present their writings as facts' (46). By contrast, Kill outlines how her project was motivated by an interest in reflexive language, dialogism and hybridization—concerns which are also at the core of Remaking Memory as a whole.

Chapter Two, 'Are You Talking To Me? Where Autoethnographic Conceit Becomes Autoethnographic Deceit,' articulates common charges against autoethnography of bias and self-absorption. When skillfully conducted, however—when the balance of auto/self and ethno/culture is intelligently navigated so that useful and valuable insights about the community of which the author/performer is a part emerge—then self-narrating practices can and do serve as valid and enriching research methodologies and performance modes. An example of this is provided by Nazar Jabour's case study: an account of creating Iraqi Nights, a collaborative theatrical process built on 're-constructed Iraqi memories by Australian participants' (81). Including his own experiences as a refugee, Jabour outlines his main concern of finding 'ways of communicating and connecting Iraqis' stories to Australian audiences through working with Australian participants' (76). The work emerges as a pathway 'towards further conversation about refugees and exiled artists' experiences' (82).

An engagement with ethics runs throughout the book, but a range of ethical questions specifically permeates Chapter Three's 'Ethics.' This includes 'issues of the deception of subjects' ,such as when secretly tape-recorded (117), the question of whether one owns a story 'because you tell it' (120) and the confidentiality of research subjects. A key point of enquiry in the book is the ethics of appropriation, particularly in regard to Australian Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander stories; when research projects involving traditional stories are published in Australia 'the copyright almost always ends up with the non-Indigenous author' (94). . Kate Rice's case study dissects the jarring experience of needing her creative practice as research process approved by an ethics committee.

Chapter four, 'Rewriting Memory', casts a wide net, considering methods of data collection and note taking within the wider context of the fallibility and deeply subjective nature of memory. Freeman muses that

‘autoethnography and memoir might be as concerned with the creation of aestheticised lies as with the articulation of truth’ (143). This is not a surprising proposition within the context of standard observations of autoethnographic practice, but serves to reinforce Freeman’s argument that the ‘conditions and techniques of autoethnography and memoir are such that they render the goal of providing an objective portrayal of a cultural reality impossible’ (9). Situated within this chapter, Steph Brocken’s case study serves as a concise illustration of one approach to data collection within the context of a youth theatre project. Influenced by methodologies of co-construction (forwarded by applied theatre scholars Kathleen Gallagher and Lisa Loutzenheiser), Brocken critically reflects on her series of weekly workshops in which the participants’ choosing of their own methods of data collection was a foundational value of the research.

In the final chapter, ‘Autoethnographic Performance/Performing Autoethnography’, Freeman argues for the importance of the culturally located experiences of the author within the ethnographic account in order to shed light on the society in which they and their audiences participate. The challenge of autoethnographic performance is to approach the self as a ‘social subject’ (203) and find ways of connecting an individual story with those of others so that spectators can ‘understand and grapple with the meanings of life as we/they live it’ (203). Within this framing, the final case study—Jamie Coull’s investigation of ‘faux queening’ (drag performance by cisgendered females who parody femininity in ways similar to male drag queens)—serves as an interesting interrogation of queer identity. The section opens a consideration of what Coull calls ‘cultural queerness’, in which it is attitude rather than sexual preference that locates an individual outside mainstream values, politics and lifestyles in western society.

The book closes with two Appendices—Research Proposal Guidelines and a Sample Ethical Clearance Form—which are useful templates for new graduate researchers. The book’s combination of Freeman’s wide-ranging enquiry, detailed case studies and practical Appendices opens thought-provoking perspectives on the areas of autoethnography and memoir. Readers will be nudged into reevaluating their own ideas on the intricate

tessellations of self and society, the smudging of illusion and 'truth' and the question of what it means to write with authenticity.