

ARTICLE



## We to Me: An Autoethnographic Discovery of Self, In and Out of Domestic Abuse

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### ABSTRACT

“We to Me” is a personal and evocative encounter, reflection, and experience of self through the retelling and analysis of my own experiences in a six-year abusive relationship. This autoethnography uses previous research on domestic abuse, feminist storytelling, and Foucault’s theorization of technologies of the self to produce an insider understanding of what it is to be a victim of domestic violence. As a piece of feminist narrative resistance, it is my place of inquiry and healing. It is my hope that the experiences I share bring awareness and understanding to the lived realities of an abusive relationship and provide an embodied account that illuminates the options available for victims to share their story.

### KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; domestic abuse; feminism; narrative; survivor

When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence. (hooks, 2000, p. 18)

*“What brought you here today Ms. Fletcher?”*

*The nurse asks without glancing up from her clipboard.*

*I don’t know what to say. I sit motionless on the bed, hands slightly shaking. An overwhelming sense of nausea takes over and I begin dry heaving.*

*“I think I have a concussion.”*

*There are no mirrors, but I know what I look like.*

*My hair, a complete mess, small chunks of it visibly missing—my face and neck bruised.*

*She looks up from her clipboard and directly at me.*

*“You know ... ” she sighs, “the first time it’s his fault, the second time it’s yours.”*

*Ashamed, afraid, alone*

*No, not alone*

*Never alone, really*

*He was always there whether I knew it or not*

*Watching, waiting*

*Always watching.*

*Always waiting.*

Much of what we hear about domestic abuse takes the form of gruesome headlines. While these headlines certainly facilitate awareness of domestic violence, they arguably do little to generate understandings of the complexities of leaving an abusive relationship or what it is

to be a victim. Questions like “Why does she stay?” and “Why doesn’t she just leave?” suggest that the victim is to blame for staying. Both women and men who have been in abusive relationships have unique justifications for their decisions, but there is limited information on this topic because it is often difficult for scholars to recruit participants to share their experiences in the context of a conventional qualitative interview. This article provides an autoethnographic account of my own experience to help fill this void.

Much academic research concerned with domestic abuse relies on preestablished theories regarding interpersonal relationships to provide an analytic and conceptual lens to understand the conditions of abuse (Richardson, 2013; Péloquin, Lafontaine, & Brassard, 2011; Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004; Olson, 2004). These models, in their effort to theorize, render everyday experience more amenable to abstraction and entail an anesthetization of the trauma to which they purportedly speak. Many of the tools used to examine sociological knowledge fragment social life. As a form of institutional writing (Smith, 2005), that is what academic production is intended to do: translate the experiences of everyday life into more abstract and specialized forms of knowledge. According to Oliver (2001), “[T]he struggles for recognition and theories that embrace those struggles may indeed presuppose and thereby perpetuate the very hierarchies, domination and injustice that they attempt to overcome” (p. 9). Theory is supposed to grant us a measure of control—control over data, control over textual production, and control of our academic and intellectual goals. By failing to take into account how people experience traumatic events as they unfold, traditional social scientific research commits controlling violence on survivor experiences.

This work is not concerned with control; rather, this work is a tool for survival. Survival is concerned less with mastery than with finding ways to continue to exist and grow in an often hostile world, using whatever tools are at hand (Haraway, 1988). As a tool of survival, this autoethnography resists abstractions that are expected of academic research to focus on the local and particular experiences of intimate partner violence, thereby providing meaning and insight that cannot be gleaned from other research methods. Thus, it extends the small but important collection of research on domestic abuse through first-person narrative (Olson, 2004).

More specifically, this account follows the changes in my identity during and after a six-year abusive relationship. Through exploring the processes of my own identity construction—that is, by looking at the ways in which my self-concept was altered through the experience of abuse—I shed light on what it is to be a victim and ultimately a survivor of domestic abuse. This project involves a reassembling of the self that experienced this abusive relationship. Rather than provide a representation of an abused woman, this work acts as a construction of self, filtered through where I am now. This is, according to Catt (2011), a project that “gives voice to a particular way of construing reality while being aware that it is a voice, a particular discourse within a field of possibilities” (p. 131).

This account is also part of a broader feminist project of agency and empowerment. According to Stern (2014), “[F]eminist scholars must continue to fill the void left by a popular culture and dominant paradigms of silence” (p. 375). As a feminist endeavor, it not only “talks back” (hooks, 1989); it also talks to myself, to the academic community, to a society that continues to blame victims, and to the unbearable silence of perpetrators. My account moves from what Olson (2004) defines as an “enmeshed” identity that is dependent on the abuser to the development of an empowered feminist identity (Stern, 2014) after the relationship’s termination—one part of the process of which this text is a

product. Through the retelling and analysis of my experiences, I foreground the embodied dimensions of situated, localized instances of interpersonal violence, illustrate how stigma contributes to victims' decisions to stay in abusive relationships, and identify self-surveillance as a mechanism by which I experienced and resisted domestic violence.

My insights also comment on the practices used to construct this manuscript itself. The practices I used to document the development of my identity, such as keeping a journal, were part of a technology of survival. The process of narrative writing itself is a form of active self-fashioning and resistive agency. The process of looking back on my diary and sharing and reporting on it are central to the development of my empowered feminist identity. This is a unique and situated piece that is not reproducible, even in other auto-ethnographic work. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this autoethnographic research benefits those who have shared similar experiences. The captivity of an abusive relationship can be a lonely place. It is through sharing my story that I seek to engage others and bring fellow victims, fellow scholars, and myself to new understanding.

## The escape

*“The captain has informed us that we have begun our initial descent into Raleigh.”*

*I look out the window of the plane and see the trees, roads, and houses beneath the thin layer of clouds.*

*“As we prepare for landing, please be sure that your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright and stowed positions, your seatbelts are securely fastened.”*

*I take a deep breath and press repeat, just now realizing I had been listening to the same song over and over the entire flight. I close my eyes and listen as Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros (2009) sing:*

*I think I've been sleeping for 40 days and  
I know I'm sleeping cause this dream's too amazing  
She's got gold doorknobs where her eyes used to be  
One turn and I learned what it really means to see*

*Ahhh—It's the magical mystery kind*

*Ah—must be a lie*

*Bye bye to the too good to be true kind of love*

*Oh—I could die*

*Oh now I can die*

*I feel something stirring inside of me I haven't felt in a while.*

*I stop a tear on its path down my cheek.*

*I smile.*

*It's freedom.*

Autoethnography is highly valued as a means of legitimizing narrative voice. Using narrative, authors attempt to engage the reader in their personal experiences, which are often difficult or traumatic (e.g., “I am overcome with dread”), through a therapeutic desire to both work through particular challenges and to bring greater attention to these challenges (Bochner, 2012). Scholars have adopted autoethnography as a means of delving into sites of personal trauma (Stern, 2015, 2014; Griffin, 2012; Fox, 2010; Tillmann, 2009; Poulos, 2008) in ways that enable both the researcher and the scholarly community to better understand how such traumas unfold.

This project draws from Tillmann's (2009) and Poulos's (2008) innovative approaches to storytelling through autoethnography. Both put forward the role of researcher as theoretical "bricoleur": not adhering to any one particular theoretical framework but rather adopting and adapting concepts where necessary to illuminate and situate particular experiences. Because I am looking at numerous, multifaceted experiences, I am not beholden to any one theory. Rather, I use theory as a tool to facilitate understanding and articulate multiple, vital connections between abuse and identity. As a bricoleur, I add new perspectives on scholarly understandings of domestic abuse by juxtaposing theoretical constructs with a concrete, vivid narrative.

This narrative is made possible by the personal journal entries that I wrote over the course of an abusive relationship. I have kept journals on and off throughout my life. Much of what was documented was benign day-to-day experiences until I met him. At first, I felt the need to document the roller-coaster of emotions. There were so many highs and lows, twists and turns. The highs read as nostalgia, a time when things were good, great even. I would sit on the floor in my bedroom and write, recalling every moment of what had happened that day. As time went on the highs and lows became uneven, the twists and turns sharp and deliberate. There was a shift in my writing. What once read like a sappy love novel was now a cry for help. Writing served not only as a tool to remember but as the way I made sense of what was happening to me. Even though I remained with him, part of me knew it was important to document what was happening, either for myself or for someone who would someday find the text if I were no longer here. My journals became my own private archive available for me to reconstruct.

That reconstruction is this autoethnography, which allows my journals to intervene in a scholarly conversation. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), the autoethnographer not only tries to make the engagement in personal experience meaningful but also strives "to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards" (p. 277). By producing "accessible texts," autoethnography may make "personal and social change possible for more people" (p. 277).

This reconstruction is a performative retelling (Stern, 2014), a narration of my experience through the textual interweaving of memory and reflection. The power of narrative self-reflection works as a technique of self-transformation in the face of the alienating discourses of social science. Narrative allows one to shift the "gaze" inward, so that a person is at the center of his or her own therapeutic experience (Besley, 2002). It is through narrative, which partially deploys and partially disrupts these tools, that I am able to recapture the richness and complexity of my lived experience.

Because linearity and objectivity are both tools of patriarchal power/knowledge (Haraway, 1988), this work engages in a recovery and nonlinear reassembling of moments from my past. Rather than developing a chronological and objective account of my experiences, this text deliberately circles back and jumps forward, forgoing chronological and disciplinary order in favor of evocative comparisons and thematic resonances, in a way that is simultaneously meant to challenge assumptions of formal academic writing while honoring and building on the textual experiments put forward by other autoethnographers on traumatic experiences.

Although the experiences and analyses interwoven throughout this autoethnography are drawn from my own perspective, I must also acknowledge that my work is situated within a

broader context of domestic violence and critical scholarship that has resisted violence and oppression. As a 27-year-old, middle-class, college-educated White woman living in the United States, I am aware of my privilege. According to the American Bar Association's Commission on Domestic Violence, women of color experience domestic violence at rates 35% higher than White women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000), and the American Psychological Association claims that differently abled women have a 40% greater risk of intimate partner violence, especially severe violence (Powers, Hughes, & Lund, 2009). My own research has benefited from the work of authors from groups traditionally marginalized from the academy. The concept of narrative voice was pioneered by women of color who have given voice to their experiences (Griffin, 2012; hooks, 1981, 1989) and shared the experiences of others (Smith, 1999; Visweswaran, 1994) in ways that not only illuminate oppression but transform the ways we think about and understand that oppression.

According to hooks (1989), "It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation" (p. 21). Part of the long-standing inability for privileged feminists to engage with diverse groups of women is due to an inability to understand or acknowledge the "interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (hooks, 2000, p. 15). Without understanding or acknowledging this, we run the risk of sustaining the façade that frames all experience as similar and ignores the unique and deliberate forces that keep women of color out of the conversation they started. In reliving, reexamining, and retelling my story, it is my hope that my experience will serve as a catalyst for more research and more conversation.

## Losing hope

*I open the front door and begin making my way across the living room, passing his dad, who is in his usual spot on the couch. We do our typical "Hi, how are you?" thing as I walk by him.*

*I make my way up the stairs into his room.*

*"Hey babe," I say, smiling. Ugh.*

*He doesn't even look away from the television.*

*Great. He's in one of his moods.*

*"What's wrong?" I ask sheepishly.*

Something was ALWAYS wrong, and it was ALWAYS my fault. He could cut his own finger chopping vegetables and find a way to blame it on me. It was his way of keeping me afraid and submissive. It was control (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011).

*"Nothing," he mumbles, still not making eye contact.*

*"Are you sure? You seem—"*

*"I seem? I seem what? You got a problem? You can leave!" he barks.*

*I notice the empty bottle of cheap rum on the coffee table.*

*"I just got here ... I don't know what's going on. Why are you mad at me?" I ask defensively. Always playing defense (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011).*

*Silence.*

*"Fine. I'm leaving!" I can feel the pain swelling in my stomach. I don't deserve this shit. Why do I let him do this to me? It's not your fault.*

*I reach for my purse that I placed on the floor when I first walked in, eyes welling with tears. He grabs it before I have a chance.*

*"Oh, you're leaving?" he laughs.*

*"YES! GIVE ME MY BAG. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" My voice is loud but shaking.*

*A smile erupts on his face, and he starts to laugh.*

*He stands up and begins to walk around his room.*

*Holding my bag upside down.*

*Open.*

*Scattering all of its contents around the room.*

*Wallet, ChapStick, hair elastics, pens—all fall to the floor. Except for one thing.*

*My cell phone.*

*He slides it into his pocket. Smiling.*

*"Go ahead, pick up your shit. Leave!" he laughs.*

*I feel the tears streaming down my face. I feel the disgust building in my stomach. For him. For me. What am I doing here?*

*"Fuck this!" I yell. "I'll buy a new phone. BYE!" I turn around shaking and begin to make my way down the stairs.*

**SLAM.**

*I feel the whiplash of being pulled back and down. My head hits the ground.*

*I'm lying on my back halfway down the stairs. His hands gripped around my hair. He drags me, by my hair, back to his room.*

*"You thought you were leaving?" You thought you were leaving.*

These reflections illustrate the embodied dimensions of situated, localized instances of physical and verbal abuse. It narrates my experience of humiliation, emotional manipulation, and physical assault. He wanted me to leave; he wanted me to stay. He verbally and nonverbally conveyed anger but denied its existence. He was dismissive and reactive. The toxic language used throughout the relationship and aggressive verbal attacks affected me both mentally and physically. I still experience emotional and physical reactions when engaging with the memories of verbal aggression ("You got a problem? You can leave!") and physical abuse (*I feel the whiplash of being pulled back and down. My head hits the ground*).

While some scholars find that verbal aggression can lead to negative physiological outcomes (Richardson, 2013; Péloquin et al., 2011; Jacobson, Gottman, Gortner, Berns, & Shortt, 1996; Rudd, Burant, & Beatty, 1994), they fail to recognize the embodied dimensions of physical and verbal abuse. Interpersonal communication research provides a different set of agencies (which allows for me to see how my struggle, including the struggle to write this, gains coherency and abstract meaning when roped into broader theoretical understandings). However, as someone who has survived, these concepts feel sterile.

Abuse is chaotic and cannot be fully articulated by, or neatly parceled into, preexisting constructs such as psychological partner aggression, romantic attachment, and negative relational maintenance. I saw emotional manipulation and physical abuse as products of his troubled past. In my mind, he was a deeply troubled man and I was a caring, empathetic woman capable of loving him. I attributed his behavior to stemming from something deeper, but I still internalized his actions. In his eyes, I was always wrong, I couldn't trust myself, I was the reason for his anger, I made him do it. At the time, part of me believed him.

## Secrets

*“How does seven sound?”*

*“GREAT!” Sarah replies excitedly.*

*“It’s gonna be SO nice to catch up. I feel like you disappeared for a while there, glad to have you back!” I wasn’t really back.*

*You have no idea, I think to myself.*

*Sarah doesn’t know that I am still with him.*

*No one knows.*

*I find us two seats at the bar. I scan the restaurant. Don’t recognize anyone. Phew.*

*Before she arrives, I order two pomegranate cosmopolitans. Vodka always does the trick.*

*I’m nervous. Why am I nervous? Oh yeah, because I’m still with the guy who tried to kill me. Nervous is a state of being at this point.*

*Sarah walks in with a huge smile on her face.*

*I feel myself begin to smile too.*

*“MEGAN!” She squeals as we hug for a solid minute and a half. “I’ve missed you so much! Pomegranate cosmos? Excellent!”*

*“Of course! Sarah, I am so happy to see you!” Really, really, really, happy.*

*“How are you? Tell me everything that’s been going on!” She says while adjusting herself on the barstool.*

*“Oh, you know, nothing exciting” Right.*

*I take a big sip of my drink. Damn, it’s good.*

*“Tell me about you! How’s New York?” Someone’s trying to change the subject.*

*“Oh my gosh, Megan. You have to come visit me! It’s so much fun. Seriously, let’s plan your trip tonight. I’m not taking no for an answer!”*

*Shit. He would never let me go visit her in New York. Why? SCREW HIM.*

*“Hahaha, well, we can definitely get the ball rolling. I can’t commit to anything just yet, but that sounds like SO much fun.”*

*She takes a sip of her drink and moves a bit closer. Her face looks serious.*

*“Have you seen him ... since ... you know?” she whispers.*

*I knew that question was coming.*

*“No.” Liar.*

*Sarah doesn’t look convinced.*

*“I mean, he’s like texted me and stuff, but I try not to respond.” If only that was true.*

*“Megan ...” Sarah looks even more concerned now. “Don’t answer him. He’s psychotic. What about the restraining order? Please, promise me you won’t respond!” She begs.*

*“I won’t. I promise.” Another lie.*

*I finished my cocktail without even realizing it.*

*I flag down the bartender.*

*“I’ll have another ... please.”*

I told a few of my friends about the incident. (No, not incident—the attack, the attempted murder; it wasn’t an “incident.”) Sarah was the first person I called. She didn’t answer right away, so I left her a voicemail, sobbing, telling her everything. It was the first time I ever told anyone about the physical abuse. I was trying to hold myself accountable by building up a network of friends who would keep me from going back. Victims of abuse often have a difficult time disclosing information about their relationship quality and the acts of abuse

to others. (*No one knows.*) Due to the sensitivity and personal nature of domestic abuse, it is difficult to get victims to talk about their experiences. If the abusive relationship is still active, it can be even more difficult to facilitate victim disclosure. Victims often avoid disclosing patterns of abuse to loved ones and family members to preserve the relationship with the abusive partner. Secret abuse can become a lifetime sentence for the victim (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997).

My abusive relationship lasted six years. I was ashamed. There's a sense of shame associated with going back to an abuser (Eckstein, 2016). I was afraid of appearing weak or irrational to the people who knew about the abuse. The length of that relationship is still something I feel ashamed to admit, the same way I struggled to tell Sarah that I was still with him. I lied a lot during those six years. Whether it was a lie by omission or just a straight-out falsehood, I found myself constantly avoiding any interaction where I would be confronted with sharing the details of my abusive relationship, or even the fact that I was still a part of it. (*I find us two seats at the bar. I scan the restaurant. Don't recognize anyone. Phew.*)

My silence led to living my life in secret. Silence, as Poulos (2008) notes, is the strategy of forgetting. In my silence, I was hoping others would forget too. I didn't want to be seen as weak, irrational, or insecure. Just mentioning that I still had a small amount of interaction with him prompted shock and concern. Sarah's reactions were justifiable but still suggested that I was behaving irrationally. (*Don't answer him. He's psychotic. What about the restraining order? Please, promise me you won't respond!*) She begs.) I made a promise to Sarah, then broke it. I continued to see him and told no one. I could barely imagine telling my other friends the gruesome details of my secret life, never mind a stranger. As much as I needed the support and help from my family and friends, I didn't want to upset them or make them worry. I didn't want Sarah to know I'd broken my promise. I distanced myself from the people who truly cared about me to preserve a relationship with the person who sought to destroy me.

My two strongest weapons against prying eyes and ears were avoidance and lying. I could keep concerned friends and family out, or at arm's length, using these tools. Not all relationship maintenance is prosocial; in abusive relationships, antisocial behaviors (*"I feel like you disappeared for a while there"*) serve as a maintenance function for couples (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011). Byers et al. (2004) found that even though there was a lower perception of relationship quality, women were more likely to have been in the relationship for a longer period of time with their abusive partner than nonabused women.

Looking back, I reflect that I had a difficult time disclosing information about my relationship and about acts of abuse I experienced due to the stigma associated with being a victim. Stigma is a serious and increasingly relevant issue that makes it difficult for victims to disclose that they are being abused. According to Eckstein (2016), stigma is determined by "dominant societal messages" that create "damaging labels to individuals failing to uphold governing expectations" (p. 217). What would people think of me? Over time I became preoccupied with fear over what labels would be attached to me if or when someone found out about the abuse.

Over those six years, I rarely shared details of my abusive relationship, but when I did, I was consistently met with the same question: "Why don't you just leave him?" Victim-blaming discourse acts as a source of social stigma. The victim blaming I experienced in the hospital (*"You know ... "*) she sighs, *"the first time it's his fault, the second time it's yours"*)

made me question even further whom I could trust. It felt as though I could not escape being judged for my circumstances. I was not alone in this experience. Crowe and Murray (2015) found that victims of domestic violence experienced various forms of stigma from the professionals from whom they sought help. Even organizations that seek to raise awareness of domestic violence engage in victim-blaming discourse. In a recent study, Goehring, Renegar, and Puhl (2017) found that an Amnesty International media campaign to raise awareness about domestic violence in Hungary inadvertently shifted attention away from perpetrators of abuse to the excuses victims make about the violence. The social stigma inherent in this discourse alienates and disempowers the very people it seeks to help.

## The restaurant

*I see the front door swing open and my stomach drops.*

*It's John, a regular customer and dear friend whom I've known since I began working at the restaurant five years ago.*

*He's smiling big under his gray mustache. He walks toward me.*

*I can feel myself starting to sweat. "Oh no," I think to myself.*

*He's watching. He was always watching.*

*I don't need to turn around to feel his eyes on me. I can feel the heat of them. They are piercing directly through my back.*

*I turn to face John. "Hi there! SO great to see you! How are you tonight?" I say with a big, fake smile. I reach across table six, knocking over the salt and pepper shakers in a desperate search for something to clean. Something to keep me busy. Something to keep John from coming closer.*

*"Good," John replies.*

*It's not working. He comes around the table and extends his arms out to me soliciting what was once our usual "hello" routine. We embrace for what feels like forever. It was probably a few seconds.*

*I am overcome with dread.*

*He saw. Of course he saw.*

*I turn around and look toward the open kitchen.*

*He's standing there, glaring at me. A look I was very familiar with.*

*I'm in trouble.*

I am able to reenact this moment in the restaurant, and many others like it, through revisiting fragments I had written at the time. This practice of consulting artifacts to interpret identity formation and maintenance engages in what Fox (2010) refers to as "auto-archaeology" (p. 124). At the time, these journal entries functioned as a tool for survival. I felt the need to communicate my experiences but realized the absence of any normative channel to do so. Journaling was my way to disclose something vital that was happening to me in a way that I could not have done otherwise. In this way, the use of my diary illustrates the value of journaling as a form of *intrapersonal* communication (Pederson, 2012). (*Shit. He would never let me go visit her in New York.*) My diaries and journals were the only place I felt safe being honest about the abuse. According to hooks (1989), diaries are a means of "holding and hiding" speech. It was easier to write about the pain than to tell my parents or friends. I realized early on that the only person I could tell the truth to was myself, so I began documenting my experiences as a way to remember.

My diaries not only document intrapersonal communication (“*Oh no, I think to myself*”) but are also an artifact of my intrapersonal communication. As Jensen (1984) notes, “[A] report of a person’s thoughts discloses the process by which selective memory defines and redefines personal history ... [and] reveals habitual thoughts which are basic to self-identity” (p. 238). My diaries have provided me a means of reading, remembering, and engaging in my past experiences. It is this exploration of my intrapersonal communication that enables deeper insights about how I experienced an abusive relationship.

By exploring my identity reflexively, I am able to experience and cultivate a unique understanding of self through this text. In *The Restaurant*, I recall my embodied sensation of anxiety and the spatial layout of that moment. *The Restaurant* is not just a recollection; it is a reconstruction of a minor but significant social situation in which I can clearly “see” myself from multiple perspectives while returning to the emotional space I inhabited in that moment. I was aware at that moment that I was in danger, but I did not tell anyone. I felt trapped even though I was across the room in a public space. (*What could anyone do to help me right now?*) In my head, the answer was “nothing,” and because of that, I remained silent. This silence is perpetuated by other victims who also believe there is nothing anyone can do to save them in the moment.

My journal writing was a practice of self-disclosure and a mechanism of self-surveillance, both of which were central to my experience in and out of the abusive relationship. In writing this autoethnography, I highlight the shift of someone who is being watched to someone who is intensely self-scrutinizing. I didn’t know it at the time, but what I know now is there is a gendered center to surveillance. To this point, Berger (1972) writes, “[M]en act and women appear ... Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (p. 52). From a Foucauldian perspective, being a subject of intensive surveillance creates subjects who constantly watch themselves (Foucault, 1982). I was the subject of his intensive, controlling scrutiny, and in the process I became a more intensely self-surveilling subject. I was enabled to better watch myself, and my journal became an enactment of that identity and a tool to turn that scrutiny into a document.

At the same time, my intrapersonal communication functioned as a form of resistance. I may not have always verbalized this resistance, but it was still present and articulated throughout my writing. Through narrative, I am able to perform and reconstruct my lived experience while engaging in a process that captures my empowered feminist identity.

## **Losing connections**

*It’s 8 o’clock on a Saturday night. A night I used to enjoy with friends.*

*My cell phone vibrates.*

*“Oh no,” I think to myself.*

*It’s face down, so I can’t see who is calling me. I always kept my phone face down in an effort to buy myself some time—to give myself an opportunity to see whom it was and conjure up a good excuse for why that person would be contacting me.*

*I begin praying it’s my best friend, Ella.*

*Please, dear God, be Ella.*

*He reaches across the table to pick it up.*

*“Who’s Andrew?” Shit.*

*“Oh! Andrew? An old college friend! Just an old friend.”*

*I'm telling the truth, but I'm panicked. Ugh. You did nothing wrong!  
I can feel my stomach drop. I can feel myself start to shake. Even now I can feel it.  
I know my response will not suffice.*

*I see him move his hand to the answer button.*

*"NO! Please! Don't!" I plead. Pleading. If only I knew.*

*"Hello? Yeah, Andrew, sorry, man. She's busy. No, you can't talk to her. You're talking to me.  
Nah, sorry, man, I'm taking her calls. How about you lose this number? Don't call again."*

*Click.*

*Asshole.*

This moment, and others like it, were integral pieces of shaping my identity in that relationship. During the relationship, I struggled to see myself as a full person separate from him. It felt as though all of my decisions were dictated by this other person. What I wore, whom I spoke to, what I did with my time and money—all were decided or heavily influenced by him. I was scolded, punished, and dominated on a regular basis. It was as if I had regressed into the state of being a child, incapable of functioning separately from him.

My visceral and dangerous self-scrutinizing became a technology of survival. Through iteration and practice, and later reflection, this retelling is a technique of my engagement with what Foucault (1982) defines as a "technology of the self," a way in which I act upon my self-concept in order to attain greater understanding and emotional well-being. In documenting my experiences, I engaged in the technology of the self-scrutinizing subject, a subversion of my identity as one who is watched. My journal became the site where I was doing the watching. Journaling engaged in a technology of intensive reflexivity, turning his intensive gaze into a site of my own reflexive self-fashioning.

Foucault's work allows us to better understand how one engages in technologies of the self and what forms of power these technologies are constrained by and operate in. Technologies of the self are the practices one willingly takes up that condition the self into particular kinds of subjectivity. Part of Foucault's project was to think through the opportunities (and constraints) afforded by social sciences that enable subjects to reflect on and rework their own subjectivity, to "analyze these so-called sciences as very specific 'truth games' related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" (Foucault, 1988, p.18). Of course, Foucault emphasizes that we are not free to reinvent ourselves whichever way we see fit; we are forced, always, to work within the constraints of institutions (law, family, sexuality, gender, race) and their histories. But technologies of the self remains a useful and powerful concept for articulating the ways in which I've transformed myself through a difficult situation.

The retelling that I have shared here involves a variety of techniques (reorganizing, analyzing, using first-person perspective, engaging in dialogue with my narrative) that serve as different aspects of this autoethnographic technology of the self. The nonlinear reordering and telling of my experience can be read as a technique, as well as the annotation, commentary, and dialogue (Foucault, 1982). By critically reenacting the abusive relationship, I am afforded a level of agency—as a researcher and survivor—that is not present in our dominant narratives of domestic abuse. By deordering my experiences, I reclaim my agency.

Technologies of the self are specific to each individual; mine are different from any other person's. It is through the combined effort of writing and reflexively examining past experiences that I am able to develop and articulate an authentic representation of my identity. According to Markula (2003), through the technologies of the self, an individual

“begins to recognize her/himself as a subject and in this sense, s/he can be understood to counter the technologies of power” (p. 88). My personal account and analysis are concerned with and informed by self-knowledge, experience, and power. Therefore, my writing of this work as a nonlinear and deliberately fragmented reconstruction of previous journal entries can be read as technologies of the self aimed at refashioning a painful experience into a site of personal growth.

## The motel

*The clacking of the small glass nips of vodka, rum, and whiskey in my backpack is audible as I walk off the ferry.*

*It's his 21st birthday. I've got about two months until mine, but thanks to my alter ego/identification "Shannon," that won't be a problem.*

*We see the motel (quaint, beachy, and expensive) immediately on walking off the ferry. It's directly behind the police station.*

*"I've got a funny feeling I'm going to get arrested tonight," he quips as we walk past the police station. He doesn't know it then, but he's right.*

*We reach the motel, check in, and settle into our room.*

*He unloads the bottle of champagne and, without warning, pops the cork toward the ceiling. It's loud and leaves a visible dent in the plaster.*

*"Geez!" I laugh cautiously. "Wasting no time, eh?"*

*Before he gets to the champagne, he finishes a nip of Bacardi rum. "Nope!"*

*"Need a glass?" I ask.*

*"Nah. Straight from the bottle today!" Oh, today? Right.*

*"To you! I love you," I say, raising my plastic cup.*

*He kisses my forehead. "I love you too."*

----

*It's 9 o'clock.*

*I struggle to remain seated upright on my barstool.*

*"ONE MORE JAGERBOMB!" He yells. Ugh. I don't feel well.*

*We swig it down, and I immediately stumble to the bathroom.*

*Dizzy. Ugh, I'm dizzy. I begin projectile vomiting. Bathroom door wide open. Ugh.*

*Stumbling back out to the bar, slightly better now, but well aware my time in public is up.*

*"I feel sick. Can we head back now?"*

*He rolls his eyes. "Fine, whatever. Someone can't hang!" he says loudly, sarcastically.*

*We walk back to the motel. A huge sigh of relief is released. The bed, the bathroom. At least now I can vomit in privacy.*

*Ah, there's my T-shirt and sweatpants. Ugh. A little better, but not much.*

*I lay on the bed and put on the Discovery Channel. It's an ocean documentary.*

*My eyes slowly close.*

*"HEY!" he yells, shaking me awake.*

*"What?" I respond, groggy and annoyed.*

*"I'm going back out. I can't find the key. You're gonna have to let me back in. Stay awake!"*

*Whatever.*

*An hour passes. I've been sliding in and out of sleep. Suddenly, I feel my phone vibrate.*

*"Babe?" I moan. Damn, I'm tired.*

*“WHAT DID YOU DO?” He screams into the phone.*

*My adrenaline kicks in. “What are you talking about? I’m in bed. I’m laying down. What is going on?” I ask, shakily adjusting myself to sit upright.*

*“YOU FUCKING BITCH! YOU KNOW WHAT YOU DID! YOU FUCKING BITCH! YOU’RE GOING TO PAY!” He screams angrily, completely out of breath.*

*“What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything! I promise! What are you talking about?” Tears welling, heart pounding.*

*Suddenly, I hear his footsteps outside of the door. A loud knock erupts.*

**BANG BANG BANG BANG**

**“MEGAN!” BANG BANG BANG “LET ME IN!”**

*I get out of bed and slowly walk toward the door, physically shaking, heart pounding.*

*“Please, please, calm down, and I’ll let you in. You’re scaring me. Please calm down. I’m not going to let you in until you’re calm,” I plead.*

*I hear him take a deep breath.*

*“Babe,” he says in a calm voice. “I’m sorry. I was just a little freaked. I don’t feel well. Please let me in.”*

*I pause with my hand on the deadbolt, my mind racing. I don’t know what to do.*

*“Babe, please. I’m sorry for freaking out,” he continues.*

*I slowly unlock the door and open it.*

*He’s standing there. Glaring at me. His eyes—something’s off. Something’s wrong.*

*He lunges at me and covers my mouth with one hand, forcing me in the room while his other closes the door behind him.*

*He turns around and locks the door, laughing.*

*“You shouldn’t have done that.” He turns back around, smiling.*

*Petrified. My whole body vibrating. I begin scanning the room for exits. Two windows next to the door, a small one in the bathroom that I’m almost certain I can’t fit through.*

*“Please. Please, I didn’t do anything, Please, let’s go to sleep. Please, you’re not okay. You’re confused. I’ve been here the whole time.” I plead.*

*The tears are rolling down my face as I slowly take steps back toward the bathroom.*

*Maybe I’ll lock myself in there and he’ll pass out.*

*“No,” he says, angry now. His smile gone. “I have to kill you.”*

*“What? No! Why?” I ask sobbing. “Please, no, I love you! You don’t know what you’re saying.”*

*I run into the bathroom and attempt to slam the door, but he kicks it open hard. It hits me.*

*He grabs me by my hair and yanks me back into the room, forcing me against the wall.*

*I can see the front door, the windows. How am I going to get out of here?*

*I begin screaming uncontrollably.*

*“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” He yells while slamming my head repeatedly against the wall. I try sliding my body down the wall in an attempt to escape the grip he has on my hair, on my head. Dizzy.*

*I drop to the floor. He released me, for a moment. He looks confused.*

*He turns around and begins walking to the door. “No, no, it’s all wrong,” he says, manically. “No, you’re not suffering enough. You haven’t suffered enough.”*

*I’m afraid to say anything. Hair ... it’s on the carpet. Oh God.*

*“I’m sorry, I love you. Please, please, it’s me. Please stop,” I plead.*

He turns around and walks toward me. He looks crazy.  
 His hands grip my neck. He lifts me up and forces me on the bed.  
 I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.  
 HELP. Please. Help. Someone, ANYONE. Please.  
 The words can't leave my mouth. Tears falling down my face.  
 I claw at him, his face, his neck.  
 He lifts his hand and hits me. Then quickly returns to squeezing my neck, moving one hand to cover my nose and mouth.  
 "Shhh. It's going to be over soon," he whispers as he tightens his grip.  
 The ocean documentary is still on the television in the background. It looks blurry. I feel lightheaded.  
 Suddenly, out of nowhere, he lets go.  
 He stands up, grabs the keys, and walks out of the room, saying nothing.  
 Dry heaving and dizzy, I desperately begin to search for my phone.  
 No. Lock the door first.  
 I run to the door and lock it.  
 I hear a scraping sound on the door. The key.  
 He's gliding it back and forth on the door, taunting me.  
 I hear him whispering, "I'm gonna get you. I'm gonna get you."  
 I reach for my phone, body pressed against the door, holding it shut.  
 "Nine-one-one."  
 (Beep beep beep)  
 The low battery warning sounds on my cell phone as the operator answers.  
 "PLEASE HELP ME! HE'S GOING TO KILL ME! PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE!" I scream.  
 "Ma'am, where are you? Where is he? Is he in the room?"  
**SMASH**  
 One of the windows breaks, his hand reaching for the lock.  
 "HE'S GETTING IN! I'M RIGHT ACROSS FROM THE STATION! HURRY, PLEASE!"  
 "Ma'am, is that him in the background? Yes, he's screaming. I hear him. He's saying he's going to kill her. She's at the motel."  
 Suddenly, he's gone. I hear him running down the stairs until—  
 "Ma'am, stay on the line with me. Just stay on the line with me. You're going to be okay. Help is here. They've got him. You're going to be okay."

## Help

"That's what I'm here for," she says as she reaches across the table for my hand. "Let me know if you need anything." She walks out of the small room we've been sitting in on the first floor of the courthouse.

Under the title "Affidavit," I begin writing. According to Smith (2005), this document serves as a form of institutional writing which seeks to segment and compartmentalize human experience.

Once I finish, she comes back in and hands me a couple of tissues.

We start walking down the hall toward the courtroom. I see a familiar face.

It's "Pan Salmon," a regular customer at the restaurant (who earned his nickname by ordering the salmon dish almost daily), a defense attorney.

*I'm overcome with embarrassment, shame. I want to hide.*

*He sees me.*

*"Megan! What's wrong?" You don't want to know.*

*I can't speak. I can't find the words. I can't stop crying.*

*He notices my paperwork and responds to my silence.*

*"Let's go. I'll represent you." He puts his hand on my shoulder and guides me into the court. We sit and wait.*

*"Ms. Fletcher?" The judge calls my name.*

*Pan Salmon and I stand as he reads my affidavit.*

*"Ms. Fletcher, will you please approach the bench?" Oh no.*

*Nervous. I walk toward the judge; he leans in, his face serious.*

*"Ms. Fletcher, this—this is attempted murder. I strongly encourage that you press charges. I am sorry this happened to you. Please, press charges."*

*I wipe a tear from my face. "Yes, your honor. I will, your honor."*

I cannot speak for all women who have experienced an abusive relationship, nor do I want to. The purpose of this piece is rooted in the notion presented by Griffin (2012) to "echo and affirm" the experiences of women who have also experienced mental and physical abuse by a romantic partner, not speak for them (p. 145). In a critique on traditional ethnography, Visweswaran (1994) notes the tendency to render a people or person "subject" (p. 60). In this text, I am able to locate and share my subjective experience through narrative without being rendered as "subject." According to Foucault (1982) there are two meanings to the word "subject": "subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (p. 795). I have engaged autoethnography and narrative voice as a technique of self-fashioning that disrupts the easy and problematic "subject" of domestic abuse as someone who is either perpetually victim or survivor, rendered a subject via her experience of male violence. Rather than adding to discourse that positions those who have experienced domestic abuse in the binary "survivor" or "victim" subjectivities, I have sought to contribute something much more agential and complex to feminist communication studies.

What sets this work apart from other academic research on domestic abuse is more than just its narrative form. This is a piece of resistance against the ongoing patriarchal narratives of abuse in the mainstream press that perpetually revictimize women. These narratives frame women's agency only as the ability to "get out" without acknowledging the "network of non-centralized forces" (Bordo, 1993, p. 26) each must overcome to do that. In giving testimony to the reality of my abuse, I historically situate and challenge the dominant social constructs that simultaneously ignore and empower domestic violence. In modeling my subjectivity, I resist the notion of being a passive victim of patriarchy (McNay, 1992). In telling my story of the past, I reclaim my past (Smith, 1999).

I no longer live in silence. This piece is my resistance, healing, and battle cry. According to Smith (1999), the "need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance" (p. 35). Telling the story is no easy task. Rather than reflecting the traditional flow of academic research, this account reflects the messy, complicated, confusing, painful experience of domestic abuse. At times it was difficult to write; I attempted to create narrative distance through using "I" as a way to cope with recalling painful experiences. I worried about the emotional baggage I would be handing to my readers, and I even felt a little embarrassed reliving some of my past. Those feelings are all important parts of

this piece. It was worth every tear, every question, and every moment of feeling insecure, unsure, and intimidated. I am beyond grateful to be able to recover my agency, tell others about my freedom, and write *my* story. So many women and men who are being abused, or have been abused in the past, are not afforded that opportunity.

## Now

*Dead or Alive plays on the speakers as we sit in a small coffee shop.*

*“You spin me right round, baby right round  
like a record, baby, right round round ...”*

*I take a big sip of my green tea.*

*“We really need to go out dancing soon!” I say, nodding my head to the beat.*

*Ally and Katie look up from their laptops and smile at me.*

*“Yeah, except that we have a million huge projects due.” Katie laughs and continues. “You know when you’re a little kid and you’re playing in the ocean and a huge wave comes and knocks you over, then you go to get up and, like, ten more knock you over and you drown and die?”*

*“Yup, sounds about right!” Ally and I laugh in response.*

*It’s true. I am beyond overwhelmed. Drowning, essentially, in work.*

*I can barely visualize the end of the week, never mind graduation in May.*

*I continue typing a document titled “Narrative.”*

*I scan our table. I notice that both of their cell phones are facing up, but I see mine is face down. A habit I have yet to break.*

*I start to think of all the things, the quirks, I have. Small oddities that others may not notice.*

*But I do. All a result of my survival strategies throughout the relationship. These survival mechanisms can be identified as mollified techniques of self. A form of coping with a horrible reality, in a similar way that this work serves as a form of growing from that reality (Foucault, 1982).*

*Healing is a process (Stern, 2014)—a process I am engaged in at this very moment.*

*I may never be able to rid myself of these quirks or memories.*

*Part of me doesn’t want to.*

*For the first time in a while, I realize that I’m okay.*

*I’m not afraid anymore. What a great feeling.*

*I take another sip of my tea and smile big ... really big.*

*“We really need to go out dancing. How about Friday?”*

## Lastly

I am empowered by this research. I feel liberated sharing my past experiences, even though many are drenched in subjective horror. I feel liberated sharing my story with you, whomever you are. This narrative has given me an outlet to walk through the dark places of my past with a flashlight, illuminating experiences to better understand what they mean to me and what they can mean for future research. I hope they mean something to you.

Thank you for bearing witness to my story.

Thank you for bearing witness to my healing.

Onward.

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