Diáty

Ragan Fox

To cite this article: Ragan Fox (2019) Diáty, Text and Performance Quarterly, 39:3, 250-267, DOI: 10.1080/10462937.2019.1643906

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2019.1643906

Published online: 05 Aug 2019.
Haphazard capitalization and letter direction: a 6-year-old’s penmanship. “Я” is synecdoche for me, broken, DiЯty and unlike other kids.


Filth and stench haunt me. Sleaze beckons, threatens to wreck me. DiЯty, DiЯty boy, sloppy little skunk, how did you become tarnished with so much yucky gunk?

1982. I am 6. My half-brother Ryan and I sit in his bedroom watching Poltergeist, a movie about a family named the Freelings. They live in a new suburban development that looks like my neighborhood: partially constructed dwellings, loose lumber and bright orange flags pepper residential lots. The Freeling clan built their home on a foundation of lies, an old burial ground. Developers moved tombstones but never relocated the graves. Oh, the horror of silence, the terror of home. Displaced spirits fixate on the couple’s youngest daughter, Carol Anne. They seduce her: whisper to her through televisions, bend forks, and slide her around the kitchen floor. Ghosts conspire to steal Carol Anne. The girl’s closet transforms into a strobing, carnivorous mouth determined to gobble her up.

I only see 14-year-old Ryan when Dad forces me to spend the weekend with Mom. Midway through Poltergeist, Ryan reveals an oblong object he calls a vibrator. “Put it on your penis. It feels good,” he guides. I clumsily unbutton Osh Kosh jeans and bring them to my knees. Ryan places the vibrator against my “down there” and commands me to return the favor.

The next part of my lesson includes a demonstration of oral sex. “Yours is too small,” Ryan complains. “Put mine in your mouth.” This is where 37-yXar-old mXmorXes turn to dust. I do not rXXemXer all the detXXls, just big mXmXnts. Clear pictures of the incident and then static from the Freeling’s television set: tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. XXXxxxxxxxxXXXXxx. XXXxXxXxXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXX.
Gaps in memory haunt me as I work on an autobiographical solo performance about child sexual abuse. My staged performance about child molestation conceals countless hours of labor. I perform scenes of abuse *in situ* (as if they are currently happening) and avoid citations and methodological exposition that might distract from embodied moments. Writing autoethnography about child molestation is one way I prepare for live performance. To borrow a phrase popular among math teachers, autoethnography makes me “show my work,” or reveal steps I travel when investigating a problem, to “reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experiences” (Spry 712). Autoethnography grounds my theatrical work about child molestation in a narrative that is explicitly ethical, self-reflexive, theoretically grounded, and culturally aware.

Nearly “42 million people live with a history of sexual abuse during childhood” (Cox). Black, Heyman, and Smith report that, “At least 300,200 children are estimated to be sexually abused each year in the US” (203). Psychologist Richard Lanyon notes the difficulty treating, studying, and reporting cases of child sex abuse due to “traditional taboos surrounding the discussion of sexual matters” (176). Child molestation’s communication-oriented problems are best summed up by the phenomenon’s moniker: the “silent epidemic” (Cox). Rhetorically framing child sex abuse as a silent epidemic underscores (1) its prevalence and (2) the reticence a survivor’s friends and family members encounter when faced with child molestation. In this essay, I explore everyday performances of abuse, silence, and shame. Child molestation’s stylized repetitive acts (e.g. abuser seduction and victim-blaming) make the phenomenon suited for performance-oriented autoethnography. This autoethnographic account marks my attempt to make sense of 37-year-old memory fragments of sexual abuse; to use evocative, poetic language to emphasize how memory is radically embodied; and to highlight how absence and discontinuity punch holes in the toxic positivity of recollecting childhood trauma. In this essay, I explore the methodological significance of what I call “dirty autoethnography” and detail performance methods I use to engage in the autoethnographic dirt I advocate. I then theorize how dirty autoethnography may be used as a conceptual apparatus to narrate childhood sexual abuse.

**Dirty autoethnography**

One hour after performing my molestation monologue at the 2019 Western States Communication Association conference, a kind, bright-eyed woman approaches me as I wait at the bar for a martini – *extra* dirty. She grabs both of my shoulders, pulls me close to her breasts, and whispers, “You wanted to cry at the end of your performance, didn’t you? You were fighting back tears. I wanted to run up and hug you, to let you know it’s ok to cry.” Her sugary and sympathetic reassurance presumes that I did not make a calculated decision in rehearsal to remain composed and put on a brave face, just as I did when I revealed to my parents that Ryan abused me. Her delicate treatment infantilizes me and makes me feel like damaged goods, as if I need a stranger to direct “appropriate” emotional responses to abuse I experienced thirty-seven years ago.

The conference encounter exemplifies one form of what Dustin Goltz characterizes as “critical tragedy.” Critical tragedy is a simplification of a tale “through critics assuming an innocent and heroic/victim posture” that appropriates/erases “one story to forefront
another – that of the critic” (396). Goltz references a presentation he delivered at the 2008 Western States Communication Association conference to illustrate his point. Two corespondents lambasted Goltz because they expected him to foreground whiteness more in a personal account of anti-gay violence. The critics “wanted a different story than I told,” Goltz reflects (396). Critical tragedy occurs when an audience member “deploys one theoretical perspective as the only, correct, and True way of understanding an experience” (Goltz 396). Goltz’s theory of critical tragedy provides an apt way to frame the exchange I had at the same conference a decade later. Tears may make me more of a compassion-worthy “victim” in the audience’s eyes but such demonstrable emotion also distract from significant cultural points about sexual abuse I hope to convey in the performance. Moreover, I am not interested in being coddled or seen as nothing more than a victim.

Personal narratives about lived experiences of oppression are important but those stories, alone, are not sufficient. *Self-implicative reflexivity* involves a radical form of turning inward, whereby autoethnographers resist the temptation to paint themselves as nothing more than enlightened heroes and victims of personal and systemic abuse. Ellis and Bochner recommend “confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering” (738). Carol Rambo Ronai demonstrates self-implicative reflexivity when she reveals that her sexually abusive father manipulated her into placing her puppy Knot-head’s mouth on the mother dog’s vagina. She writes, “My father and I were molesting this dog together as a family activity. I was being inducted into the dark side. I thought it was funny; the puppy was sucking its mother’s pee-pee just like my father sucked mine” (404).

Writing about self in an unfavorable light is autoethnographic “dirty work.” In 1951, sociologist Everett Hughes used the term *dirty work* to describe labor thought to be repellent, undignified, or humiliating. Dirty work often feels “confusing, lonely, and courageous” to perform because it is “usually hidden from public view” (Rivera and Tracy 202). Rivera and Tracy explain that dirty work is “deemed ‘tainted’ because it contradicts the noble or heroic characteristics of what society views as ‘good’ or ‘proper’ labor” (202). In this essay, I use dirty work in a methodological sense to (1) name an autoethnographer’s willingness to self-implicate and (2) highlight the partiality of their claims.

Consider how dirty work’s call for self-implicative reflexivity might affect #MeToo narratives. Coined by activist Tarana Burke, the #MeToo hashtag has provided a digital path for survivors of sexual assault to self-disclose and perform sex-abuse stories on social media and in other arenas. #MeToo calls attention to individual tales of sexual violence (personal narrative), while emphasizing the ways in which sexual assault is also a systemic problem (cultural reflexivity). I wonder how dirty autoethnography might enrich #MeToo performances; how a call to self-implicate, when appropriate, might provide more nuance to sexual abuse narratives. In a harrowing self-disclosure of surviving sexual abuse, Ashley Mack wonders when #MeToo will give way to #ItWasMe. She writes:

> Those of us who are committed to ending a culture of harassment, abuse, and sexual objectification should try to begin honestly accounting for our past monstrosity and complicity in a toxic culture of pervasive sexual violence by taking a “sexual inventory.” Exhaustive self-reflection will not, on its own, solve the problem of systemic sexual violence and abuse. But I cannot help but wonder what it would look like if at least some abusers, enablers, rape-apologists – and those who are not sure – looked ourselves in the mirror and acknowledged #ItWasMe. (25)
#MeToo and #ItWasMe: this autoethnography’s ouroboros, or snake eating its own tail. In alchemical texts, ouroboros represents the paradoxical, never-ending path from life to death and the integration of the so-called “opposite.” We are both predator and prey, the cause of our undoing and the newborn skin from which we reemerge, dirty, pure, and everything between.

The ouroboros is a fitting interpretive device for understanding the relationship between martyrdom and dirt in autoethnography. Autoethnographic martyrdom and dirt are not oppositional concepts. They feed into one another. Explicating persecution often involves dirt. Take, for example, bouts of enuresis I experienced growing up. Enuresis, or urinating in places other than toilets, is symptomatic of child sex abuse (Kellogg). I started peeing on the floor one year after my half-brother introduced me to his vibrator. The phase lasted several months. Urine stained the perimeter carpet of my bedroom and the game room, transforming portions of the baby blue material neon green. Bare feet reveal once-soft fibers have turned sticky and spongy. Dad never replaced the carpet. Pee haunts me each time I visit, reminds me that I am broken, damaged, and soiled, like my carpet. Writing about enuresis is both symptomatic of sexual violence (a tale of suffering) and an example of dirty work (often embarrassing, self-implicative, rigorously honest). Moreover, my personal understanding of enuresis has evolved over time. As a child, I assumed I peed in odd places because I was inherently broken. The middle-aged version of myself conversant in the literature about child molestation understands that a once-embarrassing detail about my childhood is symptomatic of sexual abuse rather than some intrinsic shortcoming.

Another benefit of dirty autoethnography is that a reflexive turn away from martyrdom anticipates and challenges audience members who might respond to me, a sex-abuse survivor, as a victim, and nothing more. Martyrdom alone erases nuance and fails to address crucial questions. In what ways might my own acts of silence about abuse make me complicit? How have I potentially perpetuated an abuse cycle? Dirty autoethnography underscores people’s agency, a “need to exercise control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered” (Johnson 11). Dirt also requires owning up to moments when an autobiographical researcher proved fallible. In the following pages, I theorize how dirty autoethnography might be used as a conceptual apparatus to narrate childhood sexual abuse. Stories included in this essay provide a case study or matrix through which I demonstrate the heuristic potential of dirty autoethnography.

**Performance as a mode of autoethnographic inquiry**

Child survivors of sexual abuse may act out in a provocative manner at a young age, self-mutilate (Walsh and Rosen), experiment with drugs and alcohol (Sullivan; Root), and become preoccupied with sexual activity years before their peers (Courtois). Courtois writes that, “The child may be sexually precocious and show an understanding of different types of sexual activity inappropriate to her age” (96). I check all the boxes:

- My middle school yearbook is covered with my sexually explicit graffiti: penises, vaginas, speech bubbles where peers scream, “Rape!”
- I pick scabs. But I do not want to talk about that right now. Merely mentioning skin-picking makes me want to claw away at my flesh.
I developed a cigarette addiction at 11 and smoked a pack a day for eighteen years.

Did I mention skin-picking? Crap. Down the rabbit hole we go.

Unpicked scabs call to me, beg to be plucked like flower petals. Each tear at my skin sings the chorus: “I love me not, I love me not, I love me not.” As a child, I dreamt of men touching me, penetrating me. I confused abuse with, “He loves me, he loves me, he loves me.” Two melodies crash into one another, a counterpoint: He loves me/I love me not/He loves me/I love me not… My body’s garden never runs out of petals. Pick, puncture, bleed, scab, repeat. Excoriation, or skin-picking, is an art. Thirty-seven years after my abuse, fingertips scan my body, looking for even the slightest imperfection. I only “pimple farm” in inconspicuous places, like the fleshy terrain under the elastic of my underwear. Pick. Slide my index finger over the blood crust. Fiddle with the scab as foreplay. Do. Not. Tear. It. Off. Just. Yet. Edge until the hardened blood must be removed. Overwhelming pleasure disguised in stings of pain followed by shame. I pick scabs – literal and metaphorical wounds of child molestation. As a kid, I communicated abuse through tender pink tissue spitting blood down my arms and legs. Read my blood. Bleed with me.

Butler argues that, because there is no way to adequately represent traumatic incest in textual terms, we “have to become [readers] of the ellipsis, the gap, the absence” (Undoing Gender 153). Poetics of the incomplete, dirty, and fragmentary are crucial when reflecting on childhood trauma. First-person accounts of childhood sexual abuse told from the perspective of adult survivors are always “constructed, retrieved, known only after the fact, in the perlocutionary utterance ‘And that’s it, that’s what I remember …’” (Pace 235). Performance pieces beautifully illustrate how poetic modes of self-discovery enable sex abuse survivors to perform their experiences. Take, for example, Paula Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize winning play How I Learned to Drive, which details how a man named Peck uses driving lessons as an occasion to sexually abuse his niece Li’l Bit. Vogel tells their story in media res, or in the middle of an already unfolding plot. Vogel’s creative depiction of time enables her to include scenes that pre-date Li’l Bit’s abuse, such as Peck using the ruse of fishing lessons to molest Li’l Bit’s male cousin BB.

Michael Murphy’s play Sin: A Cardinal Deposed provides another creative take on child molestation. Sin is “documentary theatre” where Murphy relies on court transcripts to re-stage the civil suits of Cardinal Bernard Law, a Bostonian Archbishop accused of child molestation. Murphy references official and ephemeral documents related to Law’s cases and news stories about the scandal to re-collet and theatricalize how the “rape of children could happen with a man of Cardinal Law’s energy, intellect, and morality” (155).

Inspired by Vogel and Murphy, I use theatrical and poetic writing to investigate my history of abuse. Performance scholarship and practice influence this project in three key ways. First, I rely on emotional recall activities to revisit embodied experiences of abuse. For instance, I abstractly remember that my fraternal half-brother Jordan’s friend sexually abused me as a child. Writing about the incident brought back concrete sense memories, like how he bent me over the couch and stuck his penis between my legs. Emotional recall shook that snapshot loose from my brain and body. I can almost feel the tip of his penis rubbing against the inside of my legs. Its warmth radiates on my inner thighs, like phantom vibrations people experience when they earnestly but mistakenly believe a cell phone rings in their pockets. Second, like Murphy, I turn to
institutional documents, like evaluations authored by my childhood psychologist, to compare my memories to an official record of abuse. This autoethnography works against and alongside formal medical discourses “to uncover the logic behind their operation, and to elucidate the specific strategies that work to deauthorize and to silence” people on the margins, like gay men and incest survivors (Halperin 130). Finally, writing in a poetic voice allows me to highlight memory’s fragmentation and my perspective’s partiality. Autoethnography underscores the contingency of truth claims while also making systematic, theoretically grounded observations about examined cultural phenomena (Spry).

**The dirty work of repetition, or remembering child molestation**

1982. My 6-year-old lips sing, “Reproduction, reproduction! Hope he’s proud of what he’s done.” *Grease 2* is my latest obsession. I tie a yellow shirt around my head. The fabric magically transforms me into *Grease 2*’s ciggy-puffing, motorcycle-obsessed heroine, Stephanie Zinone played by Michelle Pfeiffer. I ape Pfeiffer’s “Cool Rider” choreography. Skipping around the backyard with my index fingers pointed to the sky, I sing, “I want a C-O-O-L R-I-D-E-R.” I am every metaphor used to understand the delicate age of six: a “sponge” soaking up information, a monkey aping behaviors I observe. My bony fingers pick up a cigarette burned down to its rusty filter. After running to our pantry to collect matches, I duck behind an air conditioning unit and smoke a cigarette butt.

The Pink Ladies pledge to act cool, to look cool and to be cool/

’Til death do us part/Think Pink!

My obsession with *Grease 2* irritates my 18-year-old, fraternal half-brother Jordan. Each weekend, Jordan invites high school buddies to our house. The young men smoke marijuana, drink beer, and play pool in our game room. One night, I sneak as close as I can to the room’s locked door and eavesdrop on them. Jordan’s friend Lonny catches me as he breaks from the group and looks for a bathroom. Lonny is 17 and has curly, blonde hair that reminds me of Christopher Atkins from the movie *Blue Lagoon*. M-m-ry h-s er-sed th- det-il- o- -ur conv rsa-ion. He p-ob---ly m-de a jo-e. So many d-t---ls los-, eat-n by t-me.

Here is what I *do* remember: Lonny takes me to the downstairs den. He asks me to touch his penis. “Use both hands,” he instructs. He wants to see how I touch myself. Somehow, I end up bent over the couch.

Reproduction, reproduction!/Baby give it to me now.

Lonny tucks his penis between my legs and thrusts. “Are you going to put it inside me,” I ask. In movies, men put their penises inside women.

“No, it’ll hurt you if I do that,” he explains.

“Try,” I urge.

He does not get very far before I screech, “Stop!” He places his cock back inside my thigh-gap and rocks back and forth until he climaxes, leaving a sticky stream of semen sliding down my legs.

Re-prod-duc-tion! Where does the pollen go?
“I have to go back to the game room,” Lonny whispers. “Everyone’s probably wondering where I’ve gone.” My heart sinks. I beg him to stay, to hold me. I long for his attention, kisses, and strong, tan, adult arms. Lonny promises that he will return right before he disappears. I wait and wait but he never comes back. Ghosted at 6, bad spirit tricks.

1983. My father’s girlfriend and her son Tommy visit for the summer. We are the same age. Tommy is from Seattle. His red hair hangs in a quintessential 1980-something bowl cut. One humid summer evening, our parents take us to see Star Wars: Return of the Jedi. Hazy details from the night haunt me. Movie theater off Gessner, by Dad’s office, a one-hour trek from our house. Jabba the Hutt enslaves Leia. Ewoks. Yoda is dying. Leia is Luke’s twin. Mxy the fXXce be wiXh yXX. MxmXxies get IXst to the dXrk sXXe. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. XXXxxxxxXXXXx.

Tommy and I play with Star Wars action figures. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. XXXxXxXxxxxxxxxXX. We sit in my bedroom and joke after our parents fall asleep in the next room. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Memories become more concrete at this point. I ask Tommy if I can play with his penis. He is not interested. I tell him I want to put his penis in my mouth. He says, “No.”

“But I really want to,” I push.
“Just stick a banana in your mouth.”

After several minutes of begging, he acquiesces. The encounter lasts a few minutes. At 7, we fumble through the mechanics of oral sex. Tommy and his mother leave at the end of summer and never return.

2018. 36 years after the promiscuous age of 6, I am 42 and have not had sex in five years. My therapist Monica sits across from me as I tell her about my encounter with Tommy. She is only the second person with whom I have shared this secret. I stammer, “I know it’s not fair to compare pressure I put on him to teenagers molesting me when I was half their age, but I wonder if I inflicted a similar sort of damage.” Tears inch down my face like shimmery snail trails.

... for doing what I did
to Tommy
when we were 7.

... for reproducing,

I hate myself ...

... for my 42-year-old self
holding a 7-year-old boy
to adult standards.

replicating,
aping
what was done to me.

Reproduction, reproduction!
Come on baby show me that you really love me so.
Oh, I think I’m going to throw up.

When I sit down with my therapist and tell her my plan to write about Tommy, her eyes become narrow. “Do you think that’s a good idea, Ragan?” she asks. “Maybe write about that experience but don’t share it. Imagine the professional repercussions in the #MeToo era.” Will telling this tale soil my reputation, stain me? Perhaps. Is it psychologically easier and professionally safer for me to narrate abuse and omit my villainy, my #ItWasMe? Certainly. But consider all the lost heuristic possibilities when autoethnographers take a safe, clean path. Dirt is the mechanism that allows me to theatricalize a cycle, where being abused increases a person’s chances of propagating abuse. Rambo Ronai points out that, “Abuse trains some
people to abuse” (405). Between 40% and 80% of juvenile sex offenders were sexually abused as children (National Center for Victims of Crime 9). Personal narratives about victim-to-abuser progression shift focus from individual actors (survivor and villain) to a performance cycle. Exploring a cycle of sexual abuse complicates binary understandings of child molestation where one person is viewed as completely innocent and another as wholly guilty.

In the context of autobiographical work about sexual abuse, Mack urges readers to, “Reflect on how you might have acted selfishly, coercively, inappropriately, or abusively regarding sex or how you have enabled the harassment and abuse of others.” But how might confessions reinscribe systems of domination? Consider how a sex abuser might confess crimes in a manner that further brutalizes people they have hurt, or how one might reveal a history of abuse to justify ongoing misconduct. Confession by itself is insufficient. Terry writes that

A powerful performance of personal guilt might easily, through its very catharsis, give the illusion of addressing broader social/political ills while in fact leaving them fundamentally unchanged. Sometimes confession, rather than revealing hidden truths, enables one to hide from them. (219)

Months after publishing her personal narrative on Medium.com, for instance, Mack’s rapist discovered the entry and rationalized his actions and gaslit her in the comments section.

Dirty autoethnography requires systematic introspection and a constant eye toward who our stories might implicate and what those implications might be. Assuming we perform ethically, we must have the courage to share our most unflattering moments, otherwise our work runs the risk of self-martyrdom and self-anointed heroization. Both stances miss the point of autoethnography. Carol Rambo Ronai’s autoethnographic tale of incest, for example, would not have the same revelatory power had she not included the anecdote about molesting the family dog. She works through these moral and epistemic tensions when she writes,

These memories sicken me. They simultaneously interfere with the righteousness of my victim status and stagger me with the realization of how victimized I was. That I orgasmed makes what he did “not so bad.” To my father, that meant I like it and should not complain. (417).

Lonny’s abuse also felt good. All these years later, I am turned on by the sense memory of his flesh rubbing against me. His cock. Against. My thighs. How do I reconcile desire crashing into rationality’s brick wall? A 6-year-old cannot consent. Lonny’s affection was abuse. Sexual violence. Emotional trauma. Doctors refer to my lust-abuse confusion as sequela, or the chronic consequence of injury. Memories of the body and mind fold into one another.

Halberstam encourages readers to consider how memory functions like a kaleidoscope that multiplies, refracts, and splits images with “twists and turns [that] alter meaning with each repetition” (64). The kaleidoscope metaphor offers an incisive way to complicate and enrich writing about childhood trauma. Each twist of the kaleidoscope exposes experience as a complex mental geometry, where meaning and memory are determined by shape (an individual’s unique perception of, or way of defining, an event), size (the weight, or value, we assign to an occurrence), a relative
position of figures (power dynamics), and the properties of space (context). Until recently, I rationalized that my treatment of Tommy was categorically different than abuse Ryan and Lonny inflicted on me (shape). I assumed that pressuring Tommy into oral sex likely did not result in similar psycho-sexual damage (size) because we were both the same age (relative position). My past denial of harm is rooted in an early history of sexual abuse and experimentation (properties of space).

Personal accounts of sexual abuse must engage in the sometimes soul-crushing work of self-implication, but also attend to the heuristics of confession: shape, size, relative position of figures, and properties of space – a kaleidoscope’s economy. I can only rigorously explore the “often ambiguous relations involving sexuality and power” (Zarkov and Davis 7) in my encounters with Ryan, Lonny, and Tommy once I admit that I am both a survivor and an abuser. This is not to say the experiences are perfectly symmetrical. Lonny was 17 when he led me to the downstairs den. Ryan was 14 when he abused me. At 14, I understood the difference between consent and mistreatment. At 7, I did not. At 7, sex felt good, like two bodies coming together instead of a family ripped apart. At 7, I did unto Tommy as others did to me.

Dirty silence

1987. I am a dirty or “hygienically challenged” kid: long, oily hair; dirt under my nails; and sour body odor. Last year, I saw a movie that made me afraid of bathing. A scene in A Nightmare on Elm Street depicts a girl named Nancy falling asleep in her tub. Freddy Krueger’s razor-clad glove emerges between her legs. Freddy is a serial killer and child molester who stalks teenagers in their sleep. With one violent tug, he pulls Nancy into a watery abyss.

Now, I only bathe when my stepmother Abbe joins me in the bathroom and keeps me company. She is my guard dog, a new adult presence who protects me from creatures that go “bump” in the night. Abbe is the first person I tell about my abuse. I soak in a scum-stained tub and reveal that Ryan molested me when I was younger. “One of Jordan’s friends did sexual stuff to me, too,” I confess. Abbe replies, “Xxx xxxxx tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Later that night, I share the news with my father. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Tschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Nancy explains to her parents – the drunk and the cop – that Freddy visits her at night, that he tore through her nightgown.

Nancy pleads with her mother, “There’s this guy. He’s after us in our dreams.”

“But that’s just not reality, Nancy,” she barks.

Nancy pulls Freddy’s hat out of a drawer and announces,

“It’s real, Momma, feel it.”

Dad and Abbe appear oddly calm when I break the news, almost like they do not believe me. More attention-seeking behavior from the boy who pees on the floor. Maybe they
figured it was too late to report sexual molestation that occurred five years prior. Dad and Abbe provide other forms of support that help redirect my early-life journey. Dad encourages me to write and perform when I am frustrated. He takes me to see Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller in *Sugar Babies*, a musical send-off to burlesque that celebrates sexuality. Abbe authors lunch-box love letters, reminding me that I am precious. She crawls into bed with me at night, where she scratches my back and tells bedtime stories about a little girl named Sherry Sunshine. When faced with adversity, Sherry Sunshine perseveres and grows stronger, kinder.

A conversation about my abuse does not reemerge until nearly a year later when I disclose the news to a therapist. But I may be getting ahead of myself. Let me go back, back to the early days of puberty, back to black-painted nails and Marlboro-stained exhales, back to the tender age of 11.

Sixth grade is my *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Classmates torture me because they assume I am gay. At 11, I smoke, ditch class, and regularly sneak out the house. My parents send me to a child psychologist in winter, 1987. Figure 1 is the first page of a psychological evaluation conducted in 1988, six years after my abuse. Autumn Brookeman penned the assessment of my psychological state one year after I revealed to my father and stepmother that Ryan and Lonny molested me. The report is five single-spaced and typed pages in which Brookeman details my home life, in-school comportment, psychological exam results, and behavioral issues. I am described as a “dishonest” kid who “tells stories which did not happen.” On page 3 of the document, she notes that my parents describe me as “over-eager to confess problems.” The evaluation never mentions that I told Dad and Abbe about a history of abuse. They must have never shared that information with my therapist. Thirty-one years later, symptoms of child molestation dance in the white space between Brookeman’s carefully typed words.

Brookeman’s evaluation turn me into a contortionist, displaying dramatic feats of flexibility that captivate and horrify. Watch me bend myself into seemingly inhuman shapes, dislocate joints, and squeeze my body into small boxes. Marvel as I stand on my head and front-split my legs: any adult men want a taste? Backbend: I am prone to cry easily and often. Straddle split: I am described as “childish and immature at times, and excessively mature at other times.” Elbow stand: I “[urinate] inappropriately on the walls.” Any act unto itself might frighten onlookers. Taken together, this contortionist’s twists and bends comprise a larger production of child sex abuse.

Seemingly disjointed performances may be used to verify accusations of child molestation. Experts rely on a kid’s knowledge of sexual matters, sexual behavior, and behavioral problems (e.g. truancy, trouble sleeping, aggression, and regressed toilet training) as corroborative data (Faller). Professor of social work Kathleen Faller contends that the most compelling piece of the puzzle is a child’s statement to loved ones. Children are often “candid with a parent or relative, but will be quite reticent with a professional” (Faller 477). Sexually explicit “doll play, drawings, storytelling, and other projective techniques” may also indicate a history of sexual abuse (Faller 477). One need only open my 6th-grade yearbook to witness projections of my sexual mistreatment. Figure 2 features four of several yearbook photos I annotated in 1988. Boy-on-boy rape fantasies dominate my doodles. Burgess and Hartman claim that artifacts like these “provide insight into the dysregulation of memory and critical
discontinuities between the child’s labeling and comprehension of what had occurred” (167). The scribbles likely came off as dirty and destructive to the untrained eye of my father and stepmother – another cry for attention.

**Summer of 1988.** I have decided to disclose Ryan’s abuse to Mom. As the phone rings, my right index finger scans a kneecap, desperate for a scab. Smooth. More smooth. Brittle

Mom picks up the phone. I tell her what Ryan did to me. Her response is dull and empty: a sigh, some equivocation. Years go by before my mother and I revisit the topic of Ryan’s abuse. I am an undergraduate spending summer break with her in Houston. I cry when she suggests I never told her about the abuse. Either she earnestly does not recall, or the memory is buried under a pile of dirt.

24 May 2017. I receive an anonymous email from a man in Houston. He writes:

I live in Houston, TX and 3–4 months ago I met a man named Ryan on Grindr. He and I have been having a sexual relationship. Over the course of our time together, I have observed some behavior that has made me concerned that he may be a pedophile. One lie became three lies which became a whole make-believe past and persona. That led me to start digging around on the internet. He has a squeaky clean online presence that comes across manufactured. I stumbled across an excerpt from a book Exile in Gayville that told a story about a Ryan Gilmore who had molested his half-brother and had been diagnosed with testicular cancer. Check, Check. To be clear, all my interactions with him were 100% consensual. I am an adult and was not forced to do anything. I’m terrified that what I thought was
intense role-play is him recalling past experiences or acting out future assaults on underage victims. I don’t want to open any old wounds for you or try and create any type of spectacle. I don’t want to hurt anyone[,] but I feel like I have to do something. My fear is that he is indeed a sexual predator and may be actively pursuing victims or worse. I couldn’t find any information about him being charged or convicted as a sexual offender. I fear that any information that I would relay to authorities would fall on deaf ears. I will completely understand if you don’t wish to reply to this email. I had to try. Concerned in Houston

Fuck. What do I do with this information? I have not seen my maternal half-brother in over twenty years. If I ignore the message, am I complicit in any abuse that might take place? My computer screen spits a cloud of dirt in my face. After hours of deliberation, I decide to call Mom, to give her the opportunity to right the defining wrong of my childhood.

I read her the message. We discuss its possibilities. Could the author be a scorned lover looking to weaponize me? Or a disgruntled employee? What if “Concerned in Houston” speaks truth and we do nothing? A few days later, Mom phones and asks if I will participate in a conference call with her and her therapist. I enthusiastically agree to her request. The psychologist asks about my relationship with Ryan. I reveal that he molested me, which is one of the reasons the email concerns me. She replies, “Your mother told me about your relationship with Ryan. It’s common for children to experiment with one another.” Her statement makes me feel like I have fallen directly on my tailbone. Words search for oxygen. Inhale. Balance. I reply, “Did my mother tell you there’s an 8-year difference between me and my brother?” Silence. Exhale. Warm pricks of blood speckle my cheeks. “No, she didn’t tell me about the age difference.” After the conference call, Mom and I never again discuss the email. We remain as silent as mimes. What if Ryan never stopped abusing children? What if I am now the adult who failed to act? Again. Because this is not the first time in my adult life I have remained silent.

19XX. I am a counselor at a theater-oriented summer camp in Illinois. One afternoon, I make my way to an on-site library when a White man in his mid-forties approaches me.

“Wanna’ meet me in the bathroom,” he asks.

“Excuse me,” I reply.

“I’ll suck your dick in the bathroom.”

“Get away from me.” Blood drains from my face. I pick up my pace, enter the library, and find a member of campus security. I relay events to him, ending with why I am so shaken. “I’m, uh, tea- teaching at a summer institute on, on campus,” I stutter. “This is a camp for high school students, not much younger than me. What if that guy approaches one of them?” The officer walks away, provides directives on his radio, and returns. Fifteen minutes later, two policemen bring a now-apprehended man into the library and ask me to confirm that he is the one who propositioned me. “Yes,” I reply, scared but triumphant. What a hero.

One week later, my friend Arjun and I sit in my dorm room. We are both gay undergraduates and have developed a brotherly bond over the last year. We start talking about Chad, a bisexual camper. Chad is cute, bright, flirtatious, and four years younger than us. I tell Arjun that Chad is not allowed in my room because he keeps hitting on me. “I’m not taking any chances,” I announce.

“If I tell you something, will you promise to keep it a secret,” Arjun asks. I nod my head. My friend continues, “Chad and I hooked up. He tried to kiss me in the middle of a private
work session. I took him back to my place because I didn’t want to risk doing anything here. We drank some wine and then went down on one another.”

I keep my promise to Arjun. This is statutory rape but only a few years separate them, I rationalize. And Chad is so aggressive with his flirtation. The camp director never hears about the incident. The story is buried. What a hero.

2018. I ask my fraternal half-brother Jordan about his high school buddy with blond, wavy locks, the same one who returned to our house six years after he seduced me. Jordan and Lonny went out drinking on a warm summer night and decided to have a nightcap. Lonny pulled up to our curb 20 minutes before my brother. He spied lights in the game room and threw pebbles at the window. Tap. Tap. Tap. I was 12, old enough to place our sex in the appropriate ethical geometry. He was 17 when he took advantage of a lonely 6-year-old (shape and relative position of figures). His abuse is one of the two defining sexual events of my life (weight/size). Six years have shifted the properties of space. Verb tenses bleed together. My 12-year-old brain understands our sex was abuse. I peer through blinds and look down at Lonny, who looks so much like he did six years ago, golden-skinned and handsome. My heart’s ventricles transform into a hummingbird’s wings. Flap. Flap. Flap. Romeo gazes up at me and points to the garage door, indicating he wants me to unlock it. FlapFlapFlapFlapFlap. I shake my head “no.” Not by the hair of my chinny, chin chin. The big, bad wolf huffs and puffs, winks, and blows me a kiss. FlapFlapFlap. No, Mr. Wolf, I won’t let you in.

I will never forget Lonny’s puckered lips. What does his gesture mean? Is it a warning? Is he threatening to reveal our secret if I do not let him in the house? Or is he bribing me with affection? So many possibilities communicated in our mutual silence: semen dripping down a 6-year-old’s leg, a wink, an air kiss, a secret, a crime, and loving parents who entered the fold of our quietness. Creased lips blow a kiss. Puckered lips whisper, “Shhhh.” To this day, my fraternal half-brother feigns ignorance whenever I ask about his friend. Jordan pretends like he does not recall the name of a buddy who was in his life for several years.

The principle of symmetry guides images (or memories) produced by kaleidoscopes: each repeated image is symmetrical to the image beside it. Obviously, not all instances of child sexual abuse are the same, but research studies illuminate symmetrical patterns of communicative behavior, like denial and dismissal (Finkelhor; Tierney and Corwin; Lanyon). I understand the mechanics of silence. My inaction protected a friend, just as my half-brother Jordan’s hush shielded a buddy. Multiple “stylized [repetitive] acts” (Butler, Gender Trouble 192) operationalize silence, shame, and blame that shape interpersonal performances of child sexual abuse.

For parents and other caretakers, dealing with child molestation head-on is dirty because it involves work that is “shameful, disliked, and [work that challenges] the self-image of the worker” and “can be tainted physically, socially, or morally” (Tracy and Scott 9). I frame guardian intervention into intra-familial child sexual abuse as dirty work for two reasons. First, directly addressing child sex abuse requires guardians to self-implicate, or dirty themselves. Cultural frameworks situate parents as the people ultimately responsible for a child’s welfare. Ryan’s abuse of me, for instance, happened while I was in my mom’s care. The tale of my abuse threatens to paint her as a bad, incapable mother. Erdmans and Black note that “Victims are less likely to be believed if parents or guardians feel complicit or responsible; if the adult fails to protect the child, he or she has more incentive to deny or dismiss the abuse” (83).
Second, my revelation contaminates my mother’s other son. Intervening on my behalf threatens to taint other people’s perceptions of Ryan and potentially damages my mother’s parent–child relationship with him. Denial and parental cover-ups are common performance tactics among parents after learning sons have committed incestuous abuse (Kaplan, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner). Unsurprisingly, perpetrators of incest are less likely to disclose and seek treatment for their abuse if parents support non-disclosing statements or outright deny sexual mistreatment (Kaplan, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner). Performances of silence, denial and inaction color my tale and, even today, sully my relationship with my mother.

I advocate dirt as one way to theatricalize “not only the struggle disclosed (the narrated event), but also the struggle to tell (the narrative event)” (Park-Fuller 24). Park-Fuller argues that “To speak the unspeakable is to enter a world that is fraught with ethical danger – an act that is impossible to neglect because of its importance and impossible to perform because no individual act can capture it all” (24). Dirty autoethnography foregrounds the “need to speak alongside the dangers of speaking, inciting readers into critically reflexive dialogue about what I am doing in this text, this story of ‘mine’” (Goltz 394–95).

Performances of abuse – inflicted, witnessed, and survived – are ongoing and ever-evolving; cultural epidemics and radically personalized; and seemingly frowned upon but permitted by way of inaction. As a methodological instrument, dirt provides a more intricate and three-dimensional way to study interpersonal and cultural performances of child molestation, to place disjointed pieces of the puzzle against one another, to obtain a fuller sense of multiple scenes and acts that comprise the production and reproduction of abuse.

**Implications (cultural, self, and otherwise)**

My understanding of sexual intimacy is built on a foundation of secrets, abuse, and denial. For 43 years, I have struggled to connect, to love. I explore these themes when I visit Monica, my psychologist. “I started seeing you because I need help moving forward,” I tell her. “I know it’s not queer-minded, but I want to be married and have children.” Squinting eyes try their best to hold back a wave of tears. “I’m 43 and starting to think those things will never happen for me. What if I can’t grow past my past?”

Monica recommends an activity. “When you get back home,” she advises, “find a picture of yourself when you were 6, when the abuse happened. Have a conversation with your 6-year-old self. What would you say to him?”

Tears drip down my cheeks like raindrops against a window – drizzle at first and then a storm. When I return to my apartment, I spot a laminated piece of artwork on my fridge. I stuck the black-and-white image on the machine a few years ago but have not paid it much thought until today. The craft is a shadow portrait of my profile when I was a kid (Figure 3). Calligraphy notes my name and the year: 1982. The moment’s poetry knocks the wind out of me. The only childhood artifact I have on display is a silhouette of my 6-year-old self, a shadow that has haunted me, like one of Carol Anne’s spirits. Its long eyelashes and downturned lips intimate atypical melancholy for a 6-year-old. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to protect you, to believe you,” I whisper. “I wonder what you’d think of me, alone at 43. I owe you a brighter future filled with love and care. I am the only person who can make your dreams come true. I’ll do better.”
Autoethnographers are uniquely positioned to explore the ethical components of child molestation narratives. The method’s “ethnographic” component asks researchers to delineate theories that shape perceptions of sexual abuse and account for the methodological rigor of their work. Authoring a scholarly account of child molestation is dirty work insofar as the endeavor requires researchers to (1) textually explore the stigma, or taint, of sexual abuse, (2) grapple with the ethics of naming abusers and providing details of abusive encounters, and (3) self-implicate. My hope is that dirt will become a newly adopted measure of autoethnographic reflexivity, regardless of the topic explored. Autoethnography’s “auto” component demands writers turn inward, to incriminate the “I,” and, when ethical and appropriate, to “spill dirt.”

Responding to accusations of child molestation is also challenging, dirty work. Adults have a responsibility to take claims seriously, investigate the situation, and seek professional help for child victims and perpetrators. Of course, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality all influence one’s response calculus. Kimberlé Crenshaw points out that women of color experiencing abuse are often “reluctant to call the police, a hesitancy likely due to a general unwillingness among people of color to subject their lives to the scrutiny and control of a police force that is frequently hostile” (8). Similarly, low incomes may inhibit families from affording post-abuse care. Blanket inaction, though, is not a viable option. Oliver contends that “Part of this lack of action has to do with the discomfort many adults feel talking to youth about sexual issues with stigmas attached. [This] is part of the reason why child molestation is not going away. It is the problem nobody wants to speak about” (688). This is not to say that simply acknowledging child

Figure 3. Shadow portrait, 1982.
molestation is an adequate response. Likewise, seeking professional help for an abused and/or abusive child without a guardian’s judicious and invested self-reflection (dirt) may derail a survivor’s recovery. Each time my mother minimizes Ryan’s abuse, I ache, our relationship suffers, and all implicated parties slide back to a martyr’s narrative: What mother could anticipate incest? What child could be blamed for not holding a supervising parent accountable for sexual abuse? What about Ryan’s story? My mother has never confronted (performance of silence) him about my allegations and, as a result, Ryan has never been given an opportunity to defend himself.

Ryan. Lonny. Tommy. Writing about them marks my effort to confront a shadow-self that has spooked me since I was 6. This essay will hopefully provide the light necessary to take that spit out of the dark, scary corners of my brain. I am Carol Anne, crawling out of a ravenous closet. I am Nancy, confronting the (boogey)man of her nightmares. I am Ялаган, walking barefoot on stage. Dirt caked on the bottom of my feet. My theater provides no tub in which to scrub the muck away. I document dirt to more adequately narrate a performative cycle of child sex abuse.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for everyone but me.
2. Tommy is a pseudonym. Details about his home state and appearance have been fictionalized to protect his identity.
3. I employ date and detail anonymization to conceal identities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works cited