SHAWNA MALVINI REDDEN

Sky Ops Surprise

When Near-Death Experience Exposes Undercover Ethnography

ABSTRACT Invoking the styling of classic spy stories, this essay provides an account of a commercial aviation emergency landing that blew the agent/author's "cover" as a full participant ethnographer. Using an experimental autoethnographic format, the piece offers an evocative portrayal of a perceived near-death experience and its aftermath, as well as critical commentary on writing autoethnography with a fictionalized framing. In the closing "debrief," the author sheds her agent persona to describe the process of writing about traumatic events and to analyze how those events focus attention on methodological and ethical considerations for qualitative research. KEYWORDS Autoethnography; Participant observation; Performative writing; Ethics; Speaking for others

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BRIEF

The goddamned rivets blew my cover.

For nine months, I ran a quiet operation. I blended in, asked around a little, mostly kept to myself, just watching. I was on assignment with, well, let's just say a loosely affiliated group of big brains who wanted answers. It was an information-seeking mission. It was never supposed to get dangerous. So when I found myself mid-mayday on a plane plummeting toward the earth, I got to thinking how life isn't exactly fair.

Little did I know that was just the beginning.

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The day started like any other. A tense morning meeting followed by debriefing with another agent. By the time I arrive at the target location, I'm tired. Ready for a drink and a quiet ride home. But first, duty calls.

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Navigating through foot traffic, I surveil the opposition. Like many hostile territories under the thumb of a dictator, it's controlled, organized, cold. I do my best not to sneer at the blue shirts and brass badges, mere costumes in this theatre they call "security." I follow custom though, getting into line, providing the correct documents, submitting to appropriate screenings. Like all the other lemmings around me, I kick off my shoes, allowing my baggage and person to be searched without comment. Like I said, a quiet operation.

My orders are to infiltrate the organization, observe convention and find ways to bring it down. Get to know the locals, figure out why they put up with tyranny for so long. Without attracting attention. Without lethal force. Without any fun?

With such parameters, I'm a ghost, in it for the long haul, working under an assumed identity. For all intents and purposes, I'm a homesick graduate student, traveling home frequently, a nervous flier who arrives at the airport hours early, "just in case." My "tools"? A cellphone, a laptop, and a wicked sense of curiosity. Who would suspect?

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The truth is, I *was* a university student enrolled in a communication studies doctoral program. Despite the long hours, working as an ethnographer afforded me an excellent cover, protection if people got nosy. *These notes about airport security? Oh, just homework. Do I have permission to research at the airport? Public spaces are fair game, at least according to my university's Institutional Review Board* (IRB). As a new researcher, however, I grappled with the ethics of observing and recording people without their knowledge, a consideration not required by my day job. I judged the project worth the risks—surely understanding airport security interactions in order to improve them is vital knowledge.

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Like any good passenger, I sit in the gate area, jabbering on the phone, enjoying a comfortable Southwest Airlines-branded chair. The middle console holds my laptop, electricity greedily sucked up through convenient outlets. To anyone watching, I'm a typical technology-obsessed, self-absorbed traveler. But while my best friend regales me with a work fiasco, I hawk the crowd. I notice others settling in, reading the paper, snarfing pizza, playing on their phones, ignoring everyone around them. No one pays me much attention. After 20 minutes, the gate agent shouts announcements and oblivious bodies rush to line up.

"Gotta go, my flight is boarding. Love you!" I all but spit into the phone. In order to keep up my cover, I play the game, hurrying off to stake my claim in line like everyone else.

"Love you! Have a safe flight," she says, actually meaning the latter part.

Eyes rolling at my flying-phobic friend, I reply, "I will."

I laugh. Minutes before, I'd posted on social media a smart-ass reply to my mother who also told me to "be safe." I wrote: "Why do people keep telling me to have a safe flight as if I'm the pilot? I promise not to crash the plane from row 7." The message, with timestamp and location, would be clear to *off-site* friends.

Little did I know how ironic those words would soon become.

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Trundling down the gateway, the desert heat oppresses. Ninety-nine degrees on the first of April? Surely Mother Nature has a better sense of humor than that. I tug my small red suitcase, stooping to pick it up when entering the airplane. I greet the flight attendant, like always, perhaps one habit from real life that sets me apart from the crowd.

"Hi, how are you?" I ask the woman with a perfectly coiffed blondish-grey bob, looking for any spark of recognition. Flying the same routes every other week introduces risk, but I find that while I may recognize flight crews, they are oblivious to me. Just the way I like it.

"Good, how are you?" she inquires, not really seeing me.

"Good," I reply, taking stock of the front rows.

The pasted-on smile does not reach her eyes. Typical. Ordinary. Mundane.

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Choosing a place on the open-seating airline is a careful process. I prefer the front third of the plane to expedite exiting and lessen the effects of turbulence. An airsick agent is a useless agent.

My work is about assessing and avoiding risk while gathering intelligence. I typically haunt row seven, although I realize row nine generally gets faster beverage service. From this vantage, I can see over the plane's wing, keep eyes on the forward galley and mark passenger movement. The ultimate goal? To get a row without a middle seatmate. This increases personal comfort and enables me to write briefs without peering eyes.

I usually find success in targeting a row with an unassuming older male on the aisle—someone who doesn't stare or make eye contact like he *wants* me to sit there. A honeypot I am not. I generally avoid people I've talked with while in

line, too many questions. On the plane, I'm all business. Plus, it's the one time I can be out of pocket for an hour or two. And, as I soon explain to my seatmate, I really don't like people anyway.

I choose row eight, window seat as always. The gentleman on the aisle wears a logoed polo, jeans, and a scratched gold wedding band. After standing to allow me entry, we ignore each other until it's clear no one is going to join us. As is typical between regular commuters, we congratulate each other on "scaring off" anyone who may have wanted to sit between us. Removing the leatherette laptop bag I used to block the now-unclaimed middle seat, I joke about my anti-social tendencies and share a story about a recent flight during which a drunk seatmate got fresh and I helped him disappear (for the remainder of the flight, anyway). We exchange pleasantries and then focus on our respective tasks—he on the in-flight magazine; me on intelligence from the field.

I admit everyone has an off day now and again. That's probably why I was concentrating more on the vodka-tonic I planned to order and seeing my dear husband for the first time in ten days than on the brief I was reading. Perhaps that's why I was completely unprepared for the day's turn of events.

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A gunshot sounds and I hunch, instinctively covering my ears. The airplane pitches down, diving toward the earth.
Fuck.

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Los Angeles Air Route Traffic Control Center (ARTCC)[1]: Southwest 812, uh, was that you?
SWA812: Yes, sir. [Unintelligible.] Declaring an emergency descent. Declaring an emergency. We lost the cabin.
ARTCC: Yeah, Southwest 812, I'm sorry I could not understand that. Please say again.
SWA812: Request an emergency descent. We've lost the cabin. We're starting down.

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Disoriented, I gape at the oxygen masks dangling in front of me. I did not anticipate a change in cabin pressure.

This cannot be happening, I think.

My heart threatens to pound out of my chest. With hypoxia tingling my fingers, I fumble for the mask, arching up to reach it and suck in life-preserving oxygen. My mask was apparently stuck in a tangle of translucent tubing. Confused, I desperately stretch to push my face into the soft orange plastic. A forceful tug finally pulls it down, the metal wire giving way. I worry briefly that I broke something. Will the oxygen still flow? I hold the mask to my face with both hands, breathing deeply, trying not to hyperventilate, commanding myself to calm down.

Air rushes through the vents, blasting us, deafening.

Bitterly amused, I realize that although I've witnessed hundreds of in-flight safety demonstrations, I've never absorbed the proper way to wear an oxygen mask. I drape the elastic around my head and almost cry when the mask won't stay in place. Such a trivial worry at the time. I feel guilty for not paying better attention, for never going through aviation safety training. I thought I had more important work to do. I finally realize I've neglected to pull the straps tight.

As I get enough oxygen to steady my breathing, I take stock. The man next to me is frozen, completely tense, eyes closed, hands balled on his legs as if the force of his clenching will keep him safe. I reach out to comfort him, feeling compelled to do *something* as our plane plummets.

We hold hands for a minute as the woman across from us shrieks hysterically. In her 30s, she wails. I'm angry, wanting someone to shut her up. The only thing more upsetting than our situation is her grating cries. It occurs to me that had I been seated closer, I would have slapped her by now. I'll find out later she was crying "My son, my son" because her young child refused his mask. I tell myself that had I been able to see the boy, I could've mustered up more compassion, but probably not. My concern is mainly for the other passengers . . . the majority of us trying to hold on.

The captain mumbles something about fastening our masks and listening to the flight crew, but I can't really understand what he's saying. It's too loud in the cabin with the whooshing of air through the vents overhead. I'm not used to being without communication in an emergency, it's disconcerting.

We're still pointed toward the ground. As we pitch downward still, falling faster and faster, the momentum pushing us forward in our seats, the plane shudders. My seatmate grabs my hand once more and I struggle to hold in my tears. I am acutely aware that agents do not cry and I suck it up. I look around to see a woman two rows behind me go from surprised to shocked to uncontrolled tears streaming down her face. I want to reach out to her, but I'm too far away.

Behind me, I notice a ceiling panel flapped down, but its connection to our predicament is not immediately clear. Nothing about this situation makes sense. In addition to denial, I'm angry. Life is great. I'm making gains on my assignment. I'm newly married. I'm kicking ass at work, about to test into a new level. To die in a plane crash would be so . . . unfair.

Ahead of me, I notice a young man helping others with their masks. He is tall with dark curly hair, and smiling. I wonder instinctively who he works for. He winks at me. One of ours?

Soon, a flight attendant comes by to check on us, borrowing one of the extra masks from each row to maintain her flow of oxygen. "Are you okay? Do you need help with your mask?" It's the same employee I greeted upon arrival. This time her eyes are kind, her calm exterior belies whatever internal fear she must feel.

For each row, four oxygen masks descend.

The air warms and the flight attendant comes by again, indicating oxygen masks are now unnecessary. We must be at or below 10,000 feet. An elderly man behind me keeps the orange cone on his mouth for the remainder of our flight. The plane is leveling off now and my rational brain kicks in. If we are straight and level with both engines, then we must be okay, right? I look around at the bright desert, knowing that dozens of airports litter the desolation below. Even if we lose both engines, the odds are in our favor that

we can glide down safely. I cling to that knowledge and pretend to be an agent once more.

Intelligence will be important if we make it, I think, pulling out my cellphone and snapping pictures of the cabin. As the only confirmed agent on this flight, I aim to be thorough. I take a panorama, sweeping clockwise, catching dangling oxygen masks and still-startled passengers. I'm not alone in taking photos, however, so I don't worry about standing out.

I vacillate between committed agent and scared-shitless human being. Humanity wins out and I send a text message to my husband, T, the only person I really trust. Although I'm 85% sure we'll be fine, it's the 15% that bothers me. By some miracle, my phone has half a bar of reception. I pray the message will get through. Right now, T's in the air too, a civil pilot practicing airshow formations in an experimental aircraft. For fun, you know?

I'm trained to be precise in my communication. Clarity is paramount. How the hell am I supposed to convey "I might die in a few minutes and I love you so much my heart aches at the thought of never seeing you again" without freaking someone the hell out? It takes some doing.

At 4:19 p.m., I write, "Emergency landing 35 min after take-off. I love you." I find out later that others wrote messages like, "Plane going down. Love you." Seriously?

When the pilot, *silent* for the duration of our adventure, finally pipes up to tell us that we'll be *attempting* an emergency landing at a nearby military base, I write, "Landing in Yuma shortly," followed by "Everything should be fine but I want you to know how much you mean to me."

Reading the words now still makes me tear up. A sign of weakness? Perhaps. Necessary communication for my sanity? Absolutely.

I conclude texting at 4:31 p.m., telling T, "Safe landing in Yuma [AZ]."

He never replies.

When we finally speak an hour later, I realize he'd switched off his phone and got my messages in reverse order—"safe landing" first before he knew anything was wrong. The bastard never felt any of my terror.

Had I stopped there, kept my experience private, I might not be writing this report. I might still be on my mission, working diligently to disrupt the hegemony of airport security fascists. But no, I couldn't *not* communicate my experience. And I pay the price.

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Inside the cabin of Southwest 812.

Oxygen masks.

Using pre-determined channels to communicate with my handler, I tweet: "Emergency landing in Yuma, thanks to our amazing @Southwestair pilots for a safe landing." It was the @ sign that changed my life.

Realizing the date—April Fool's day—I post photos to corroborate my story, to show I wasn't throwing up a smoke screen. I needed *help*. What I got was the most intense scrutiny of my life. By tagging Southwest, I inadvertently announced my identity to the world. My "followers" shot from 50 friends and spambots to 800 people eager to hear about my firsthand experience. A significant proportion of these followers? Members of the Inquisition Squad who would go on to quote me and cite my pictures to their audiences of millions. How was I ever going to get out of this alive? But I'm getting ahead of myself.

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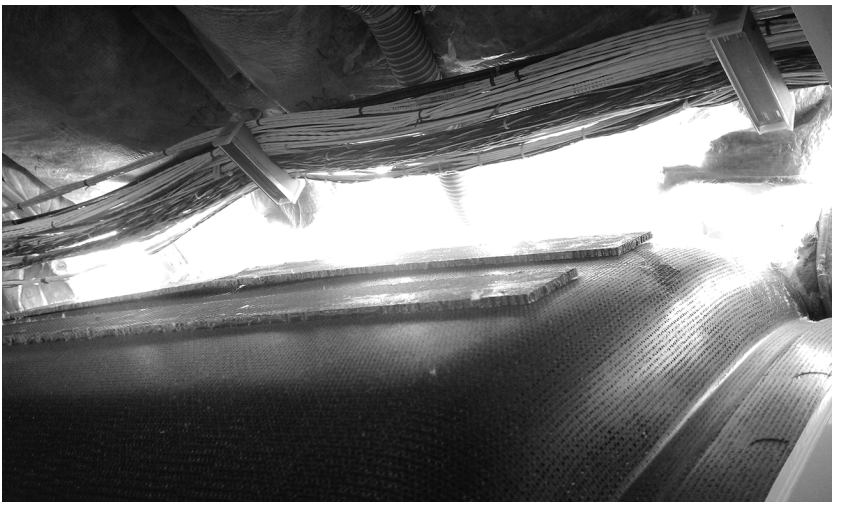
After 30 minutes of fruitless re-dialing, T finally calls back.

"Hellllooo?" I answer, twisting in my seat to watch the captain deplane and talk to investigators. A moment ago, I'd asked him what it was like to fly the plane with a hole in it. Just like normal, apparently, aside from the whole diving-toward-the-earth-thing. The cause of our trouble was a 5-foot-long rent in the fuselage, near the ceiling panel that I soon realize flopped down and bashed a flight attendant in the face.



The 1x5-foot hole in the roof of the Southwest 812 jet, a burst seam in the fuselage skin.

"How are you?" T asks, only now reading my text messages—when we were safe in Yuma.

"Same-old, same-old, you know."

I tell him the story, a condensed version, aware that my seatmate is eavesdropping. T explains with the nonchalance of a seasoned pilot, terms like "explosive decompression" and "metal fatigue." No big deal. He admits never experiencing depressurization or oxygen masks. I can tell he's envious. Pilots, what strange birds.

"You're all over the news," he says. *Oh shit*, I think.

"Really? Is it that big of a deal?" I wonder, fooled by T's casual tones into thinking that I shouldn't feel as shaken up as I do.

I wait for him to convey some expression of worry, but it doesn't come. Not yet anyway.

He explains that Southwest had already been fined for a decompression event a year ago, that they were likely aware of these types of problems after paying huge bucks to the Federal Aviation Administration. *Huh*.

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Our captain, having inspected the damage, stands in the baking heat of an active military base.

For more than four hours, we sit on the tarmac of an active military base, trapped in the plane. Muggy air, sticky bodies, but a surprisingly chill atmosphere. Outside, soldiers wander. I ache for an update, but instead I sit, talking to my seatmate, Gary. The captain speaks earnestly into his cellphone. Pacing in the late afternoon sunlight, his erect posture suggests military training, too. Police, soldiers, and paramedics alternate through the cabin. Announcements are few. We wait.

"One helluva April Fool's joke," someone behind me snorts.

"I wonder if this means free flights for life," I chime in.

"I still can't believe this happened," adds Gary. "I need a drink."

Don't we all, I think.

Holding court in Row 8, Gary describes his family. His wife and stepdaughter. His sales work with a gardening supplier that keeps him on the road and in the air. His plans for when we get home. I feed him details from my cover. Finals are in a few weeks. I'm headed home to see my husband and will now definitely be late for dinner.

All around, passengers take pictures, tell stories, and watch our news coverage on cellphones. The atmosphere is calm, but people seem antsy to get home. My phone battery already died, but I get news from all around.

"We're the lead story on CNN!" a man behind me exclaims, and notes someone aboard called a news station in Sacramento, CA, our destination city.

"Someone actually called the news from the plane?" his neighbor spits, with an air of disbelief and condemnation.

They read the story aloud, mocking the woman's description. "Really, a 'loud pop'? It was more like a gunshot." True story. Civilians aren't trained to analyze and describe details of their surroundings. The imprecision would normally irritate me.

When I finally get off the plane, I'll learn just how different the various reports are. Until then, I wait until the new plane finally arrives and we are allowed to disembark.

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Side by side, the two 737s stand out garishly in the muted military surroundings. Orange, blue-purple, and red, the jets seem more out of place than the 118 civilians dragging carry-ons from one set of steps to another. From the top of moveable stairs, I look across to the old plane. The fuselage rupture is obvious. It's as if a giant knife flipped up an envelope flap. It strikes me how not-scary it seems from the outside.

I ask the could-be-teenage marine standing sentry at the new airplane's entrance, "A typical day at work?"

"We deal with this type of thing all the time," he replies, missing my sarcasm.

Hardly, I think. He means they helped a military aircraft with an emergency landing earlier in the day.

Without an ounce of trepidation—seriously, I'm too tired and anxious to get home—I climb into the new cabin. I breathe in cool air and pray for a quick departure. I am already two hours late for dinner.

"We'd like to share with you some of the safety features of this Boeing 737," the flight attendant chimes once we've all settled in. Gary and I claim Row 8, viciously guarding the middle seat once more.

Holding up the demonstration seat-belt, the flight attendant quips, "Well, we think you already know how to use this . . ."

Passengers laugh.

"Although we don't anticipate a change in cabin pressure . . ."

Passengers cackle.

Pulling out the bright orange oxygen mask we already know intimately, she remarks, "Bet you wish you'd paid attention all those times, huh?"

You have no idea, I think.

Before takeoff, a Southwest customer service manager, flown in on the new plane, asks if we are all okay to continue. At this point, no one refuses to fly.

The new pilot uses the flight attendant's microphone to ask if we are ready. Together, we give him thumbs-ups over the seats in front of us.

Up, up, and away.

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All things considered, the continuing flight is uneventful. Flight attendants hand out free drinks and I finally get my vodka-tonic. A ground-crew member provides peanuts, her orange reflective vest and dirty t-shirt contrasting markedly with our well-kempt flight attendants. She's friendly though, and gives me as many bags of honey-roasted nuts as I want. Three, for the record. It occurs to me then, as I suck down a drink on the job, that we'd been stranded for four hours without food with another two left to go. The libation loosens the knot in my neck and I chatter with Gary for the remainder of the flight.

As we land, I powder my nose. Gary teases me as I reapply the lipstick long ago eaten away, "You better get ready for your cameo." I roll my eyes, slapping him lightly on the shoulder.

I'd admitted tweeting some photos and having a couple reporters ask me about the experience. No big deal. I'm mostly dolling up to see my husband. I still don't realize the depth of the shit I'm wading into.

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Walking into the gate area, I can't help but smile like a Cheshire cat. Home. *Finally*.

The terminal stands empty and noticeably quiet—typical for any late-evening arrival. Only one small television camera suggests anything out of the ordinary. Until getting downstairs, that is.

While T waits outside to whisk me away—engine running and poised to circle the terminal because lingering outside airports is verboten—I search for a path to maneuver through the throng of relieved loved ones. Before getting to T, however, I face one last hurdle: the shiny black eyes of TV cameras and eager microphones of local reporters.

"Are you Twitter girl?" one reporter demands, yanking her cameraman in my direction.

Twitter girl? Not exactly.

After three on-the-spot interviews with local Sacramento stations, I figure I can step back into obscurity. What was I thinking?

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The primary interrogation lasted almost five days, the Inquisition Squad ruthlessly attacking. They didn't use obvious methods like solitary confinement, starvation, or waterboarding. No, instead, they kept after me, insidiously hounding me to get the truth. Who was I? What was I doing on that flight? What was going to happen now? They didn't seem to know what they were after exactly, only that there was *something*. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for them to figure out what that something was.

It started with my cellphone. Their internal intelligence was better than I would have expected. They shouldn't have been able to get my private line, but they did. As soon as I got a charge for my dead battery, the calls came and didn't stop for days. On the night we landed, rings sounded at: 10:30 p.m., 10:47 p.m., 11:07 p.m., 11:15 p.m., and midnight. And then my unlisted home number. Local, national, and then international inspectors pounding "dial" keys until I wanted to cry.

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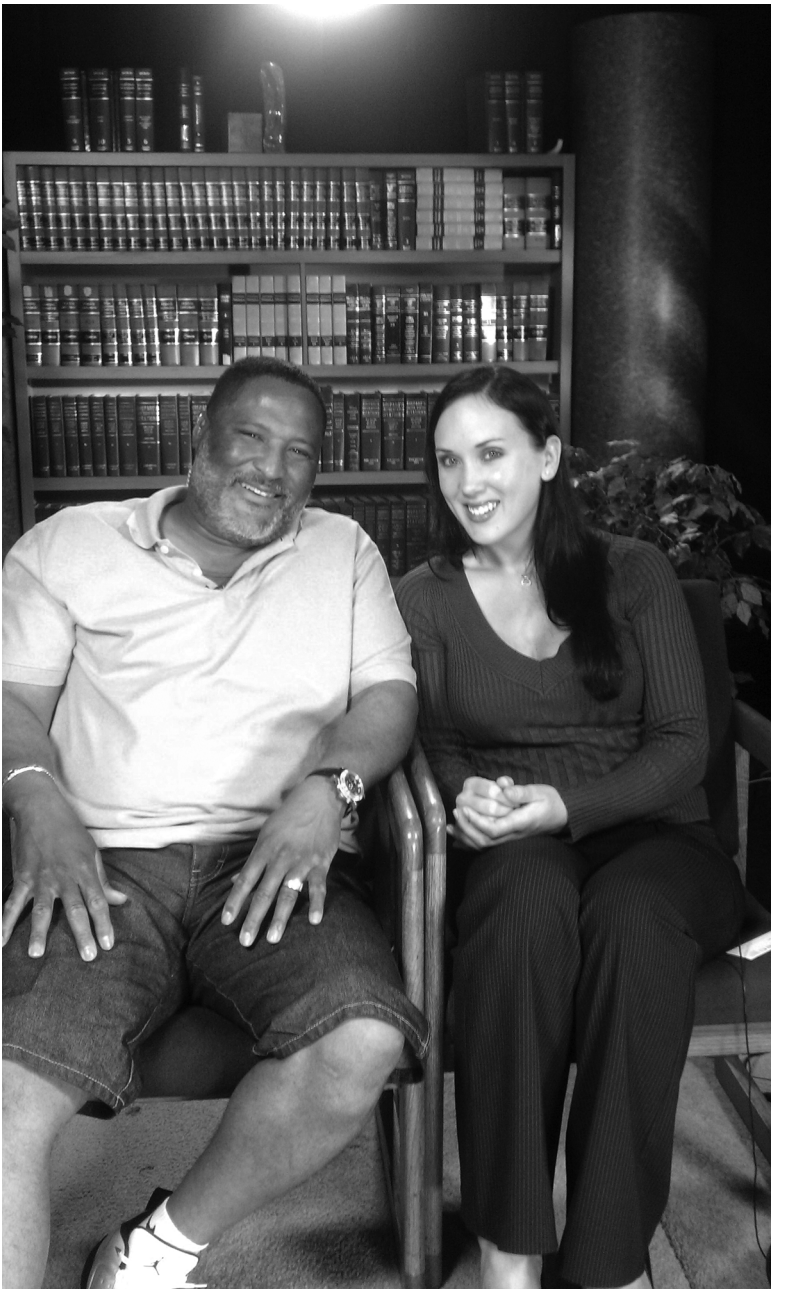
At 2 a.m. the next day, a black sedan arrives at my house and sweeps me away to a private chamber in the bowels of downtown Sacramento. Graffiti, trash, and human refuse welcome me. Inside, they give me a drug (of the caffeinated variety) that will make me talk, strap me down with microphone wires, and level burning lights into my retinas. The interrogators[2] couldn't be bothered to face me themselves, instead they lob questions via satellite and record my answers. I'm not alone at this point. Somehow, they recruited another passenger from the flight to make it seem like a routine interview, to keep it on the level. I knew the truth, of course.

I'm home by 4 a.m., buzzing from less than three hours' rest, and I burrow into our lumpy leather couch instead of disturbing a slumbering T. The calls keep coming. 4:30 a.m., 5 a.m., 5:15 a.m., and every 40 or 50 minutes for the rest of the day. Reporters care little for timezones. I answer most, knowing that if I let them go to voicemail, I'll just be putting off the inevitable. I feel compelled to address all the questions. Shutting them down will look suspicious, won't it? Doesn't everyone crave 15 minutes of fame?

In addition, a thousand Twitter messages and myriad emails flood my inbox. One reporter, unable to reach me, tracked down my estranged father on



On the set of the first live interrogation.

vacation in Hawaii for his 50th birthday, initiating his first phone message to me in more than a year.

The sound of a ringing phone sets my teeth on edge. Sleep deprivation, inevitably part of their plan, sets in and makes me punchy, vulnerable, prone to errors. I lash out at T, who doesn't understand why I keep choosing to speak with reporters anyway.

When they taste blood in the water, the questions change. *Why* did I fly so much, anyway? Who did I work for? Did I realize what a brouhaha I caused with my photos?

At this point I learn the suspected cause of the rapid decompression was tired metal, as T speculated early on. Metal fatigue—the technical term—or invisible-to-the-naked-eye cracks in the airplane's skin. Imagine bending a paperclip back and forth until it's just about to break. That's metal fatigue. Somehow, the rivets in the fuselage broke loose, causing wide-spread fractures,[3] which ultimately led to the cracking of my secret identity.

Like I said, the goddamned rivets blew my cover. Or my *photos* of the rivets' work anyway.

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My biggest mistake was underestimating the widespread attention that would close in. Using social media as part of my legend seemed like a clever ploy. Hide my intelligence in plain sight and communicate with my controller using micro-blogging? It fit the profile of a typical university student perfectly. Too perfectly.

Finding a survivor of the flight who was articulate, comfortable on camera, and apparently social media-savvy seemed irresistible to reporters. It wasn't long before the world paid attention to this "student" and her pretty pictures. My first blog post detailing the incident, written a few sleepy hours after the 2 a.m. interrogation, boasted thousands of hits overnight—topping out at 36,000 views at the initial writing of this report. My Twitter followers grew exponentially and continued to rise. As someone used to writing for a few dozen audience members—mostly family and friends—the sudden explosion of attention was intense, the blowback impossible to avoid. I had no idea how to handle a "public."

Exhausted and still not dealing with the ordeal's physical side effects—ringing ears, body aches, nausea, anxiety—it was a small-potatoes interrogator who finally fished out my secret. He got me to admit, at least vaguely, what my mission was all about. There was an exposé on a local TV station,[4] complete with pictures and details from my private life.

I knew I was in trouble when, after that, one of the mini-bosses at Southwest called to see how I was doing. *How* am *I doing?* I wondered.

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The question buzzed in my brain for a week until I was dropped off at a secondary target location to fly back to the home office. I don't know what I expected—more cameras, more interrogation, more recognition?

I got nothing of the sort. The Interrogation Squad had moved on to newer, more timely, and more lucrative, subjects. To my intense surprise, I slipped back into anonymity as if nothing had gone awry. As if my life hadn't been turned upside-down. As if my story hadn't been compromised and spread around the world. I was anonymous again, albeit a little less so when I started crying during the beverage service on my first flight after the incident.

Although they knew the game I was playing, they certainly didn't seem to care. I'd been weighed, measured, and deemed an acceptable risk. I'd been underestimated.

Game on.

DEBRIEF

The Southwest 812 incident occurred weeks before I was due to finish my doctoral coursework and, if successful, move home to prepare for comprehensive exams. My world fell apart precisely when I'd convinced myself it was go-time. I gave myself the usual procrastinator's pep-talk: *Four more weeks of school. Three more papers. You can do it. This weekend will be productivity central.*

And then I met an oxygen mask.

Ten days later, when I began to conceive of myself as a student again, I sidled into Professor Bud Goodall's office, short on time. Given recent events, my paper for his narrative class would shift from the "mission" mentioned above—a creative nonfiction piece about my research examining the emotional experience of airport security[5]—to an account of Southwest 812. Our class had just read Angela Carter's postmodern twist on classic fairytales,[6] and I felt inspired by her revisioning and destabilization of "typical" viewpoints. At first, I wanted to tell the Southwest 812 story from multiple angles—passenger, flight attendant, captain, airline, etc. I envisioned layering them together to show how perspective matters—how it's not just *a* story, but many stories that emerge from experiences like this.

In particular, I obsessed about telling the tale of the rivets.

The goddamned rivets that blew my cover? The goddamned rivets that popped from the fuselage skin—like popcorn I imagine—they were unhappy.

Well, *one* rivet was mercilessly unhappy. He ached to escape the ticky-tacky, too-perfect subdivision. But when he did . . . he loosened the order and wrenched up the whole goddamned neighborhood.

Behind a desk piled high with papers and telltale minutia of scholarly life, Professor Goodall scanned the first few pages of my rivet(ing?) draft after fiddling with a European music station and taking a swig of his ever-present Coca Cola®, from the can. He smirked, telling me it was *fine*, his lingering Southern twang softening the "i" sound. He may have even shrugged.

"Well?" I asked, tipping my chair forward onto two legs.

"Your main character doesn't have any flaws," he said, peering over thinly rimmed frames, smiling. In order for the story to "work," I needed a hook, something interesting. What is my character's—my—secret? How, as a recent student of narrative theory, had I bypassed the insight that character development and storyline are critical to narrative scholarship?

Weighted seconds passed before the epiphany.

The hook? I was found out. I believe I even uttered the words "blown cover." Not only was I a passenger on the flight, I was an undercover researcher having spent the previous nine months as a participant observer in airports across the country, operating without official permission (but with the blessing of the IRB, of course). All of a sudden, mine was a spy story about the perils of complete participation.[7]

In an exaggerated way, I learned how it feels for researcher and participant identities to collide and what it means for researchers to impact a scene dramatically. My pictures, the images that "broke" the story so spectacularly,[8] were extensions of my ethnographic observations.

The most common query from the "Inquisition Squad" was: "What made you think of taking photos?" I don't know if any reporters registered my hesitation as I formulated a response that did not exactly implicate me as a researcher. So many people reflected that they would be "too scared" to think of taking photos and praised my "presence of mind" to record the incidents. Only one or two pressed me, asking about my background as a doctoral student. To them, I shared about my research and how the impulse to take photos stemmed from my ethnographer's habit of recording surroundings. I did not, however, confess that clinging to my "researcher" identity is likely what got me through so outwardly calm and composed.

For a while, I felt a very real fear that the airlines or Transportation Security Administration (TSA) would notice news reports indicting me as a researcher and try to stop my project in the name of national security. Subsequent interviews with TSA officers would show me that my paranoia was not without merit.

Already I had caused enough hubbub to have Southwest Airlines representatives reach out to me personally. I also worried how people would feel knowing that someone is trolling the skies, researching in airports.[9]

When I returned to my scenes a week after the incident and subsequent news coverage, I felt utterly exposed. Did people recognize me? Could folks see "almost-plane-crash survivor" written on my body?

No. Despite having my face plastered on national and international news, no one paid me any extra attention. To my intense surprise, the inattention—especially after such media scrutiny—made me feel alone, isolated. I felt disconnected from other people, other travelers, the rhythm of everyday life.

Until I began to write.

It started with my personal blog. Unable to sleep the day after the event, I wrenched out and posted a visceral account of the experience—echoed in this essay. Having blogged consistently for two years prior to the emergency landing, it did not occur to me to avoid writing about the incident publicly. As I abandoned the "rivet's tale," I followed my professor's advice and the styling of other performative writers, and wrote myself into the story.[10] And then I got to thinking about what stylized, inspired-by-a-true-story narrative writing can do.

Writing the story in an autoethnographic style helped my own sensemaking processes[11] as I made meaning out of a "near miss" life-or-death situation, one with no physical markings, only psychological scars. I took inspiration from Carolyn Ellis,[12] who begins analyzing her brother's death in a plane crash with a personal reflection before "debriefing" with scholarly works. Although unintentional, this narrative bears strong resemblance to "fictocriticism," a style that blends genres including fiction, criticism, and theory into a single text.[13] Following other writers who adopt fictionalized framing to tell stories[14] and styling myself as a research spy enabled me to reconstruct the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-inducing events with creativity and humor.

But I also recognize that burying myself within the caricature of a prototypical undercover agent embedded distance among me, my memories, and the audience.[15] The trope that I imagine allows readers to identify with an unimaginable experience via a familiar character could also be construed as a smokescreen to avoid confronting the issues. Laboratory research about therapeutic writing emphasizes reconstruction of traumatic events and exploration of associated emotions. Researchers argue that part of what makes therapeutic writing successful—defined by improved physiological, psychological, and behavioral outcomes—is the construction of narratives that help order and cognitively process experiences.[16] Would, I wonder, therapeutic writing, wherein

trauma survivors find relief from emotional injury through systematic journaling,[17] be as helpful if written in a fictional format?

But it's more than meaning making, of course.

This type of writing provides not only connection and resonance through the use of a familiar trope, but also critical commentary on aspects of broad and local culture, a powerful characteristic of autoethnography.[18] Caricatures entrenched in the story—the self-obsessed passenger, perma-grin flight attendant, obsessive/oppressive news media—offer subtle commentary on fixtures in popular culture. Is a Twitter-based "news story" going to be controversial for long in an age of prolific smartphone use and narcissistic social media tendencies? How do private citizens, albeit those with public social media profiles, protect themselves from aggressive media inquiry?[19] Will moments of vulnerability like holding a stranger's hand be possible when we have closed ourselves off to human interaction in public spaces, preferring to Tweet, text, and Facebook, over having conversations?

And of course, the tongue-in-cheek comparison of full-participant ethnographers[20] as undercover spies invites consideration of assumptions sometimes made of/by researchers that—like agents—researchers are not supposed to have feelings, or at least not allow them to affect the work; that gathering data can seem like a matter of life and death; that research, even small-fry ethnography, will effect major organizational change.

While many in ethnographic and autoethnographic studies have embraced the role of emotion in research, discussions about the relevance of emotional experience in various contexts like autoethnographic writing, in-depth interviewing in sensitive settings, methodological process, and between researcher and participant, persist.[21] This essay illustrates the impacts of emotion at various stages of research, including how unexpected moments can change the entire course of a project.

Likewise, the essay points to the perils of over- and under-estimating the impact of research on a scene and context. For instance, I would have never fathomed as a personal blogger and six-months-new Tweeter, that a few images and a short tale could garner so much attention. Imagine using social media resources to communicate important scholarship publicly and shifting how we talk about research "impact." Of course, sharing photos of an ancillary research context also brings up sensitive ethical questions for researchers in public spaces. Consider the possible blowback of publicized photos from inside a context that is meant to remain confidential. Since the incident, I have learned to be careful with what and how I communicate about my research, since I work in public

and often identifiable spaces. Then again, as this tale shows, over-estimating the impact to certain audiences, especially large institutions like the TSA, may be a waste of worry. I went on to complete two more years of research and a dissertation focused on airport security with no fallout, despite alerting the TSA via repeated unsuccessful attempts to gain formal access.

In the intervening months and now, years, since experiencing Southwest 812 and writing this essay, I have shared the story more times than I can count. First on "Good Morning America," then on the *Wall Street Journal* radio's "Daily Wrap" show,[22] MSNBC, the Discovery Channel, and other local and national news outlets.[23] I am keenly aware that the story is partial though. It's my telling. One of hundreds, at least.

I learned this viscerally when, just before the one-year anniversary of the event, I was invited to Germany for what I thought was an interview. Having never traveled abroad, and once I determined the film company's offer was not an elaborate hoax, I thought: *Why not take a free trip to Europe?* In a whirlwind 48 hours, I arrived in Frankfurt, was shuttled to Wiesbaden and finally landed in Speyer, a small town with a big attraction called the Technik Museum, a park with more than 70 airplanes on display.

Looking down from the deck of the Boeing 747 exhibit at the Technik Museum in Speyer, Germany.

In a Boeing 747, hoisted 200 feet into the air on massive poles and banked 15 degrees left such that occupants on board feel slightly tipsy, I learned I was not going to be asked to recount my story, but rather to *reenact* it.

In the wrong airplane.

With no other passengers.

With as much drama as possible.

As the film crew set up inside the 747, which is significantly larger and taller than the 737, the director pummeled me with questions about the Southwest 812 event. I realized the "script" in his hands was a highlighted and annotated copy of my first blog post.[24]

Unease bubbled up when they made me sit in an aisle seat on the wrong side of the plane since it had better lighting than my seat in Row 8. As we filmed, the three-man crew used a wind machine to send plastic-cup-and-napkin debris flying. It was then that I realized it was no longer *my* story being told, but a representation of my representation. The director's vision required me to manufacture more expressed panic and (e)motion. Eventually, despite several attempts at resisting and trying to set the story *right*, I acquiesced to his vision and channeled my inner actress.

The cabin of the Boeing 747was rearranged to allow spectators to view inside the cabin. Film crew members maneuver around mannequin flight crew.

Now, years later, I puzzle over realist notions implicit in trying to get a story *right*, as if there is a stabilized and permanent version of events. Isn't the German film director's dramatized version of Southwest 812 as valid as the portrayal filtered through my lens as a passenger? After watching the reconstructed melodrama in which "Gary" was 20 years too young, the airplane clad in incorrect livery, and with painters' masks instead of oxygen masks, I am inclined to say "No." Have I mentioned that his rendering included a dubbed-in chorus of screaming, major flying debris, and gale-force winds spliced with scenes of other airplanes *exploding into flames*?—images that in no way reflect the events as pictured in photos or witness accounts. Images that rudely conflict with what Norman K. Denzin refers to as empirically verifiable "historical truth."[25] But, I know the power of narrative is not necessarily realism or factual accuracy, but insight and meaning making. Jillian A. Tullis Owen, Chris McRae, Tony E. Adams, and Alisha Vitale offer an important discussion of "truth troubles" that autoethnographic authors face, including privileging certain types of truths (like emotional resonance or relational ethics) over others (such as historical accuracy). The authors consider balancing artistic style and good storytelling with honesty in nonfiction prose.[26] In watching the German film with dramatic images of myself juxtaposed with more standard (and personally comfortable) interview excerpts, I wonder if the audience had trouble discerning which version of me to believe. Thus, I acknowledge that the film, including my overwrought but highly-praised-during-filming performance, represents a *possible* version of events with an emotional tenor that might resonate more than my own telling. Although I do not like all of it, I must grant that the film offers a compelling, valuable story nonetheless.

In processing all of this, I also reflected on the privilege of voice. I viewed the Southwest 812 experience as *my* story to tell. Consequently, I understand better now why groups take umbrage at the authoritative stance of writers who encounter, but are not actually part of a community, and share stories that are not "theirs." In particular, I identify with the unsettling experience of having my words and memories translated—in this case into German and not academese—without control over process or outcome. Although logically I know that once we set our words free their meaning and power take on lives separate from ourselves, it is quite something to recognize that fact on-screen and in full color.

Subsequently, I have considered ways that I as a researcher represent scenes, memories, and interview stories. How often as a young, white, married,

educated, academic woman have I been cavalier—even inadvertently—with words and experiences of participants from other social, racial, cultural groups than my own? A little heavy handed on drama in fieldnotes? Insensitive about the anxiety with which some interviewees approach recorded conversations? To what extent have I, like the Inquisition Squad, exploited people's unique viewpoints without concern for what telling stories *feels* like, forgetting the emotional work connected with telling certain kinds of tales?

Similarly, Linda Alcoff writes about ethical issues related to "speaking for" others, including when people in positions of power speak on behalf of others in ways that reinforce problematic interactions, diminish agency, and ultimately, oppress.[27] She suggests that far from avoiding the practice—how could we write about our experiences if we did not include *some* mention of others—we should do so carefully, considering the location and identity of speaker and audience, the work that speaking will *do* to a group or community, for better or worse. She cautions: "We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of the web in which others find themselves moving also."[28]

Southwest 812 and the resulting narratives demonstrate a veritable system of webs, to continue Alcoff's metaphor, wherein an eyewitness account trumped the organizational account (i.e., Southwest's) for a time, but was then coopted and reframed for a multitude of purposes by many parties with little demonstrated care for the people and organizations involved. I imagine other passengers, as well as airline employees, felt, for a time, the reverberations of my words on their own webs of experience. After witnessing my story spin off into unimaginable directions spanning several years, I now take Ellis's discussion of ethics, which admonishes ethnographers to consider the relational implications of writing in the short and long term, more seriously.[29]

Having tasted life on the other side of the keyboard—being written about instead of doing the writing—I am more sensitive to the people influenced by my words. But I also know that unlike the words I type—those, I can choose—I cannot control how stories evolve. Being committed to a way of seeing the world that accounts for relationships of power, knowledge, and voice means, as I found out, being open to discomfort in representation and sharing the power inherent in storytelling.[30] As I continue with ethnographic and autoethnographic research, I will consider more carefully how, and with whom, and in what contexts, I tell stories. Although I would not go as far as thanking the goddamned rivets, I do appreciate the insight.

APPENDIX A. SPY TERMINOLOGY

Agent—a person obtaining intelligence for an intelligence agency (see also "Spy")
Blowback—unintended consequences of a covert operation
Blown—exposed (as a spy)
Commint—communication intelligence
Compromised—when an agent or operation is exposed and no longer secret
Cover—life story created for an undercover agent (see also "Legend")
Friends—agents who provide information to an operative/handler
Ghost—discreet agent working without the notice of targets
Handler—one who manages and acts as a point of contact for agents
Honeypot—trap set to kill, compromise, or capture an enemy using sex as a lure
Intelligence—information across any number of disciplines (e.g., human, communication, chemical)
Legend—life story created for an undercover agent (see also "Cover")
Spy—casual term for one who gathers information for an intelligence agency (see also "Agent")
Target—agency, individual, or location under surveillance ■

SHAWNA MALVINI REDDEN is a Faculty Associate at the Center for Applied Behavioral Health Policy, an academic unit of the College of Public Programs at Arizona State University. She writes about identity, emotion, wellness, and change in high reliability organizations. She wishes to thank Kate Lockwood Harris, Kristen Fleisher, Tim Redden, Stacy Holman Jones, and the reviewers for their insightful comments and assistance in developing this piece. This article is dedicated to mentor and "CO" Bud Goodall, who will always be missed. Email: shawna.malvini@asu.edu.

NOTES

1. Excerpt from a transcription of voice recordings between Southwest 812 and Air Traffic Control. Federal Aviation Administration, "Information: Partial Transcript Aircraft Accident, SWA 812, Blythe, CA, April 01, 2011," *faa.gov*, 5 May 2011, faa.gov/data_research/accident_incident/2011-04-01/media/Transcript%20from%20ZLA-ARTCC-0296.pdf. Accessed July 2014.

2. See ABC News, "Good Morning America, 2 April 2011," *archive.org*, archive.org/details/WJLA_20110402_110000_ABC_News_Good_Morning_America#. Accessed May 2011.

3. Preliminary reports suggest the metal fatigue was caused by rivet holes machined incorrectly at the Boeing factory.

4. Fox 10 News, "ASU Student on Southwest Plane During Emergency Landing," *fox10phoenix.com*, 3 April 2011, fox10phoenix.com/story/18123658/asu-student-on-southwest-plane-during-emergency-landing. Accessed May 2011.

5. Shawna Malvini Redden, "How Lines Organize Compulsory Interaction, Emotion Management, and "Emotional Taxes": The Implications of Passenger Emotion and Expression in Airport Security Lines. *Management Communication Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2013): 121–49.

6. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 2012).

7. I use James P. Spradley's term loosely to refer to research done by members of an organization or culture, often in a covert manner, such that research activity does not disturb a scene and without disclosing research intentions except in certain circumstances. To study airport security, I recorded interactions surreptitiously via fieldnotes and photos. However, for formal interviews, participants received full disclosure of my researcher status and intentions. See James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (Bellmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1980).

8. My photos were shared by national news outlets before Southwest had a chance to make a statement. As we were stuck on an active military base, the press had no direct access to the site. Several news outlets referred to me as a "citizen journalist" for my Twitter "reporting." Also, researchers from Pew Research Center interviewed me about the impacts of social media on traditional journalism as my insta-fame was one of the first instances of Twitter driving a national news story.

9. In airports, where security and suspicion are foregrounded, I met many hostile passengers and officers skeptical of research generally and ethnographic observations particularly. During one observation, passengers reported my suspicious note-taking activities to TSA officers (who hadn't noticed me after 30 minutes). Subsequently, I record notes electronically as phones and laptops seem less suspect than pen and paper.

10. For instance, Robin M. Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); Devika Chawla, "Walk, Walking, Talking, Home," in *The Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 162–72; Barbara J. Jago, "Chronicling an Academic Depression," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31, no. 6 (2002): 729–57; Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy, "A Secret Life in a Culture of Thinness: Reflections on Body, Food, and Bulimia," in *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, ed. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 1996), 76–108; Sarah J. Tracy, "The Construction of Correctional Officers: Layers of Emotionality Behind Bars," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 4 (2004): 509–33; Leah Vande Berg and Nick Trujillo, "Cancer and Death: A Love Story in Many Voices," *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (2009): 641–58.

11. Karl E. Weick, "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1993): 628–52.

12. Carolyn Ellis, "'There Are Survivors': Telling a Story of Sudden Death," *The Sociological Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1993): 711–30. Contemplating Ellis's brother's experience was not incidental to my sensemaking. Professor Goodall required me to present the article during seminar, a couple of weeks after the Southwest event. I am still haunted by the memory of my classmates' faces as I reflected that contrary to Ellis's wish that her

brother and his fellow passengers might not have known what was going on, they almost certainly did.

13. See Stephen Muecke, "The Fall: Fictocritical Writing," *Parallax* 8, no. 4 (2002): 108–12.

14. For example, H. L. Goodall Jr.'s "organizational detective" consulting tale (*Casing a Promised Land: The Autobiography of an Organizational Detective as Cultural Ethnographer* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994]) or an exploration of "automythology" in a mythic rock band written by the mythical characters themselves (The Ethnogs, Fem Nogs, and Rip Tupp, "Performing Mythic Identity: An Analysis and Critique of 'The Ethnogs,'" *Qualitative Inquiry* 17, no. 7 [2011]: 664–74).

15. As does Harold Lloyd Goodall Jr.'s exploration of family secrets during the Cold War (*A Need to Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family* [Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2008]).

16. Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm, "Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing," *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 11, no. 5 (2005): 338–46.

17. James W. Pennebaker, "Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process," *Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (1997): 162–66.

18. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, eds., "Introduction: Coming to Know Autoethnography as More Than a Method," in *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 9–47.

19. This is particularly relevant for those who experience violent crime. For instance, in the May 2014 mass shooting in Isla Vista, CA, involving University of California Santa Barbara students, the media was so aggressive that students eventually protested, holding signs that said "OUR TRAGEDY IS NOT YOUR COMMODITY" and "Stop filming our tears." See Catherine Taibi, "UC Santa Barbara Students Protest Media on Campus: 'News Crews Go Home!'" *Huffington Post*, 28 May 2014, huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/28/santa-barbara-students-media-elliot-rodger-shooting-news_n_5404014.html. Accessed July 2014.

20. Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

21. See Martha A. Copp, "Emotions in Qualitative Research," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 250–53; Leon Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35, no. 4 (2006): 373–95; Rhonda Shaw, "The Ethical Risks of Curtailing Emotion in Social Science Research: The Case of Organ Transfer," *Health Sociology Review* 20, no. 1 (2011): 58–69; Sarah J. Tracy, Elizabeth K. Eger, Timothy P. Huffman, Shawna Malvini Redden, and Jennifer A. Scarduzio, "Narrating the Backstage of Qualitative Research in Organizational Communication: A Synthesis," *Management Communication Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2014): 1–10; Shane J. Blackman, "'Hidden Ethnography': Crossing Emotional Borders in Qualitative Accounts of Young People's Lives," *Sociology* 41, no. 4 (2007) 699–716, respectively.

22. See Michael Castner, prod., "The Daily Wrap with Michael Castner," *Wall Street Journal*, radio broadcast, 4 April 2011, www.wsjradio.com/DailyWrap.html. Accessed May 2011.

23. After a particularly sleep-deprived interview with an Associated Press reporter (Terry Tang and Walter Berry, "Southwest Grounds about 80 Planes after Scare," *Associated Press*, 2 April 2011, aolnews.com/2011/04/02/fuselage-hole-forces-southwest-emergency-landing/. Accessed May 2011), I found myself the Valley Girl punchline of a joke on National Public Radio's game show, "Wait, Wait. . . Don't Tell Me" (Carl Kasell, host, "Wait Wait. . . Don't Tell Me!" *National Public Radio*, radio broadcast, 9 April 2011, npr.org/2011/04/09/135251638/whos-carl-this-time. Accessed May 2011). Word to the wise: Never say "dude" or "like" to a reporter, even if you are from California.

24. See Shawna Malvini Redden, "Southwest Flight 812: I Prefer My Plane Without a Sunroof, Thanks," *Bluest Muse*, blog, 2 April 2011, thebluestmuse.blogspot.com/2011/04/southwest-flight-812-i-prefer-my-plane.html. Accessed May 2011.

25. Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 23.

26. Jillian A. Tullis Owen, et al.,"truth Troubles," *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2009): 178–200.

27. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991): 5–32.

28. Ibid., 21.

29. Carolyn Ellis, "Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 3–29.

30. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton, UK: Harvester; 1980); Sarah J. Tracy and Angela Trethewey, "Fracturing the Real-Self ↔ Fake-Self Dichotomy: Moving Toward 'Crystallized' Organizational Discourses and Identities," *Communication Theory* 15, no. 2 (2005): 168–95.