

Ethnoautobiography

Stories and Practices for
Unlearning Whiteness
Decolonization
Uncovering Ethnicities

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&

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Appendix
Ethnoautobiography
as Research Methodology





Riff

Finding our way

The research speaks
Yes, the research itself
Some might call it organic, or mindful
Still others critical, Indigenous
Certainly it is ceremonial
Creating and re-creating
Fixing and healing ourselves
And our relationships in the world

Ethnoautobiography
Is both/and inquiry
Acknowledging its recent either/or methodological ancestors
Even including them
Whilst returning to more ancient ways
Of being and knowing

No surprise then
That EA includes recommendations
Yet is not prescriptive
Such inquiry is both
Critical and humble
Focused and open
Socially engaged and deeply personal

It is in this manner, then
That there are some
Important elements
Though ultimately the path is
Constructed by what is present
And the path
To come to presence
Is different for every single person

* * *

An Ethnoautobiographical Conversation Among Co-research Participants

Story: Perhaps we can begin by each saying briefly what matters to us the most regarding ethnoautobiography. This can be a question, a concern, or a statement of what is vital to you. I'll begin by invoking the words with which we tell our stories. As we've read, there is a way to tell and construct our stories that is fluid, changing, and ultimately healing for our selves and the world we inhabit. Let that be something to guide this.

Susan: I am sometimes kinda conflicted about ethnoautobiography. So I'd say that I love the potential it offers for creating powerful, healing stories, but I worry that people will not buy into all the intentions that are necessary for a decolonizing effect, because then it would just simply become privileged navel-gazing.

Chris: I'll bring in the concept of studio time as it pertains to inquiry. The studio is a metaphysical "space" or "place" that exists between two or more individuals as they engage in an open, unfiltered, uncensored exchange of theories, ideas, dreams, stories, insights, experiences and other fragments subconsciously or consciously shared in this "sacred space." That's what ethnoautobiography is for me.

Raven: One thing that I love about ethnoautobiography is that we can even be allowed, no encouraged, to have this conversation in a description about how to do research. How mischievous, playful and fantastic! There's lots of hard critical thinking, blah, blah, blah and lots of play, fantastical exchanges and creative flourishes. Now you're talking!

Ellen: What moves me about EA is how it brings forth so much possibility for healing what gets stuck in our selves, our families, and in our very bodies. It is embodied inquiry. That is such a profound path to be on as we attempt to learn about the world.

History: I feel so validated by ethnoautobiography, because so often people's descriptions of history are superficial and cheap retellings, at best. EA becomes a roomy, spacious, history-filled extravaganza complete with many stories, often unknown to each other, and in the end making a rich, vibrant narrative that I am proud to have called history.

N: I struggle with ethnoautobiography because I am drawn to its openness and possibility. Yet, I especially question my connection to community. I wonder about how my ethnoautobiography can come about if I have to somehow explicitly acknowledge community, when it's my community that has fostered so much confusion and discord in my life.

Hummingbird: I am amazed and grateful for EA because it makes all of our presences in a circle matter. There are so many little things that make our lives possible. I feel that EA honors and brings them in. Like my efforts to pollinate a single flower requires so many flaps of my wings. That's EA.

R: EA for me is about doing healing work in the world and in our selves simultaneously. It's about connection, relationship. Between people, spirit, the places we live, even in our families. It is simple yet profound work.

Jen: It is also so overwhelming. I can see the potential, the destination, if you will. But the process becomes too much sometimes. And that's the irony, isn't it, because it seems to me that EA is so much about the process, and then I just get bogged down in it, if I don't see some type of map.

Snow leopard: For me ethnoautobiography is elegant and subtle. There is so much to do in the world just to survive and ethnoautobiography offers so many ways to help that along. I don't see so much emphasis on requirement and expectation, rather on honesty and obligation. It provides a way for beings to feel connected and obligated to one other.

Place: So my feeling is that ethnoautobiography might be something of a map that a group of various beings, including humans, make of their interactions. One layer woven into another: the clouds offer one perspective; the rivers another; this human family knows this way particularly well; these foxes go this way and that a lot; these dreams appear frequently to this little girl; and on and on.

Smiley, the dog: I am so happy to be here. That is what EA is for me. It is a chance to be welcomed. EA is about belonging, and that is so important to me.

Jürgen: Ethnoautobiography has taken many paths along the way; indeed it attempts to bring so many of them together. Amazingly, all of the elements, ingredients, people, visions, creatures, and spirits that are a part of it have been so patient, and in that patience there is so much possibility. What I find most astonishing and impressive is that we each have our own individual entry to begin the process and that each entry — from a piece of pottery or family photo to a pet or dream — leads us into the depths of healing.

Ancestry: Ethnoautobiography offers so much hope. Yes, radical hope. For many generations I feared that the awareness of my presence was fading from this world, and that while I was never gone, fewer and fewer even saw me. But this work turns that around, I feel welcomed and honored and humbled.

Body: And I feel whole. And that's saying a lot.

Salmon: Thanks for all of your contributions, because when we put these all together we get ethnoautobiography. There is no one way to do EA. And while I must always return to the place of my emergence, there are many streams and rivers to and fro. Thus, it is with EA.

Story: Thanks to all of you for sharing your perspectives. I am struck by the power and poetry that we are already creating. Ethnoautobiography makes it very tempting, especially for me, to weave our strands into a single narrative. But I will resist that impulse now, and rather see if we might tell some more together. Anyone want to continue?

Jen: Well, it's funny because in some ways what you say about telling our story together is elegant, and yet that still doesn't reduce my anxiety. I know that there are many elements that make me who I am, and contribute to my ethnoautobiography. So, I need to allow them to emerge, or get out of the way. And at the same time, not only does that

not always make sense to me, but I also have to wonder about the manner in which the stories emerge, and how they are even researched.

Raven: Maybe that's the both/and that keeps getting mentioned. The beauty rests in this very conversation, or in the fluidity and possibility that keeps being offered. While also being conscious or aware that it is fleeting, incomplete and perhaps all some trick.

Susan: Like earlier, Raven, when you referred to critical thinking as blah, blah, blah. Sometimes in these conversations, and in this work, I am tempted to say as my teenage daughter would: "Whatever!"

History: Yes, but therein lies some of the beauty or elegance in ethnoautobiography. What I have experienced, especially in postmodernity, is that all the narratives become fractured and fragmented, as if everyone is saying, feeling, acting like "whatever!" Ethnoautobiography, however, welcomes the "whatever", the fracture, acknowledges that experience, and places it at the table, or in the textbook, and uses it as a starting point. Ethnoautobiography is not anything goes; rather, it is about connection and relationship. Going into "whatever" fractures opens up the possibility to develop connections.

R: Perhaps an important part of this conversation is asking what the intentions are in the "whatever". If the intention is to acknowledge feelings of overwhelm in the face of grief, colonization, experiences of dislocation, as well as more mundane things, like crafting an ethnoautobiographical research question, then EA offers room at the table. But if the intention is to disconnect, disenchant, or denigrate a part of the story, then EA might not work at that moment and we will walk away for some critically humble reflection.

Body: Sure. But no matter where you turn, we have so much work to do. Even all of us coming together have taken so much intention, attention and action. There is so much. And perhaps it is healing to be able to say, "Hold on, I'm very tired," because this work is exhausting. There have to be places, animals, times, events, people, communities that offer quiet time.

Ellen: Which brings me back to my comment about embodied inquiry. There really are many paths within qualitative inquiry that welcome alternative narratives, that are building connection rather than furthering disorder. What distinguishes EA from these is that everyone is encouraged to come to the table. That's not to say that there won't be challenging topics once we show up there. It's the quintessential family gathering.

Ancestry: For me it's akin to what Stanley Krippner said in his foreword: that people cannot renounce their heritage without losing parts of themselves. In any given family, there are a countless number of people and events that are all connected, whether they are seen and acknowledged or not.

Hummingbird: I'm so glad you refer back to the start, ancestry, because I too want to go back to what Apela Colorado said about EA being a ceremony. First, there are all kinds of ceremonies, and second, sometimes ceremonies have to change to adapt to various times. I feel EA can provide this.

Raven: Yes, as my winged relative here notes, on the one wing, there is a need for a container, or ceremony, or map of some kind, even though I do chuckle when people might get lost for a while. And on the other wing, like getting lost, there is a need to be open, challenged, even scared from time to time. That's one of my hopes in EA: that people might wake up from the stupor we find ourselves living in.

Chris: And yet, that waking up does not imply that dreams aren't some of what ethnoautobiography is pointing us to. Rather, it's that inquiry, research, whatever it is called, seems to get fragmented and disjointed, as if it can really take place in some kind of vacuum.

Smiley, the dog: And I don't like vacuums. Oh, right, that's a different kind. But I don't like being cut off from anything, sealed away. It's as if there's some false sense of separation that humans are trying to force us all into.

Salmon: Yes, Smiley, it does really feel that we are, all of us, being forced into some box. And no one likes or deserves that. Hopefully, ethnoautobiography might break down a few walls, make boundaries more permeable, expand a few circles, and weave more strands together. And perhaps that can be our place to pause, to pass this conversation on to the readers, dreams, storytellers, inquirers and places yet to come, as we have had our say for now. Hopefully, however, we might pop in on folks from time to time, offering support, tricks, direction, but most of all radical hope.

Approaching Ethnoautobiographical Research

To tell our story in the proper way means imagining ourselves with something resembling an Indigenous process of awareness – the freedom to be an artist aware of Indigenous roots. ... It means decolonization as much as self-actualization. (Kremer, 2003b, p. 13)

Ethnoautobiography is a borderland—or transitional—methodology. It honors its grounding in the heritage of human science, critical theory and qualitative methods. It advocates decolonizing research, interrupts settler colonial worldviews, and finds kindred spirits among critical, Indigenous methodologies. Fundamentally directed toward decolonization, ethnoautobiography intentionally and explicitly foregrounds identity.

Decolonization encourages recovery of Indigenous mind for amer-europeans: the potential for imaginative and spiritual initiations into hybrid, borderland and multicultural identities. This is a process by which Eurocentered people acknowledge that they reside in more complex narratives of place, that they participate with all manner of people, beings, histories, and that an ancestral process has unfolded to bring them where they are. Recovery of Indigenous mind means be(com)ing at home in place, and in personality.

Ethnoautobiography is critical to the recovery of participation, the decolonization of inquirer (and inquiry), and the transformation of relationships with place and identity.

In the spirit of *criar y dejarse criar* or being knowing the intention is to gain meaningful understanding and knowledge as transformation is facilitated in the researchers at the very same time. Inquiry, ritual, storytelling, knowledge, truth, and transformation are woven into a singular intricate process.

These broad parameters establish the epistemological and methodological context for research implementations, i.e., beyond personal quest and ritual. Ethnobiography is not a specifically defined method, it is an umbrella methodology for a host of methods that can help to achieve the intentions just described for the purposes of a research study, whether thesis, dissertation, or another type of project. In each case researchers need to define the details of the research protocol themselves.

Ethnobiography finds its closest kinship with autoethnography and can be seen as a specific form in which certain parameters for self-reflection are given as necessary ingredients (i.e., its decolonizing dimensions). As individual inquiry it sees writing as central to its method and relies on a process of (self)discovery that does not separate personal reflection and scholarly inquiry.

Ethnobiography can also be implemented in dyadic work, as cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996), and in other ways. The support in a group of fellow inquirers offers opportunities for support and insight.

It is beyond the scope of this brief appendix to discuss possible method translations in detail. *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (published in various editions since 1993 by Denzin & Lincoln) as well as the *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008) provide valuable information to get started.

Given the intentions of ethnobiography summarized above, research protocols, whether conducted individually or in a team, might include:

Initiation: Ethnobiographical inquiry is an entrance into transitional and decolonized places—inhabited by shadow, underworld, and unconscious identities—that encourage healing of personal and cultural disorders from Eurocentered consciousness toward recovered participation, transformative identities, and reconciliatory renewal;

Transformation: Ethnobiography as decolonizing methodology embraces embodied feelings—including vulnerability, and grief—associated with process-oriented transformation and the healing of gendered and racialized Eurocentered consciousness;

Storytelling: Narrating ethnobiographical inquiry includes the many voices and styles that reflect the diversity of human experience, including poetry, performance, and mythology which restor(y) the Eurocentered experience;

Genealogy: Ethnobiographical inquiry is grounded upon ancestral connections, human science and qualitative research legacies, as well as place, or relationship based, and Indigenous, consciousness;

Remembrance: Ethnobiography necessitates acts of self-remembrance (such as underworld material of conquest and migration), remembrance of the other (including acceptance of narratives of survivance), and remembering self-with-other (offering new relationships with people and places);

(Re)placing: Ethnoautobiography emphasizes being put back into place, fostering a more fully embodied, and relational consciousness, so that inquiry includes the varied narratives, beings, and peoples of particular places; and, finally,

Renewal: Taken together, these protocols culminate in renewal. This research is about “fixing methodologies” (Christian, 1993), working toward healing in the world, between peoples, the land, but also in the way that inquiry is conducted in the first place.

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NOTES

