

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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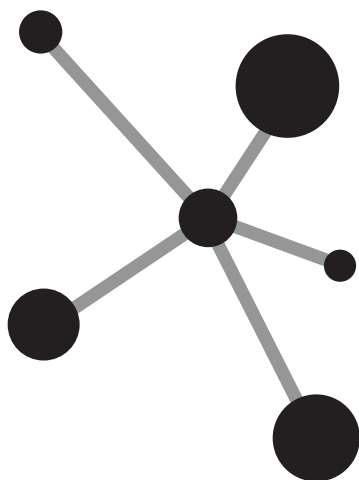
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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adams, Tony E.

Autoethnography / Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-997209-8

1. Ethnology—Authorship. I. Holman Jones, Stacy Linn, 1966– II. Ellis, Carolyn,
1950– III. Title.

GN307.7.A33 2015

305.8'00723—dc23

2014012167

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book has been a challenge and a joy. Translating our knowledge about and experience with autoethnography into an interesting story and a useful resource challenged us to make our values, approaches to research, and writing practices manifest on the page. Sharing the ways our autoethnographic work has enriched and deepened our research practices and everyday lives has left us feeling humble, grateful, and full of optimism about the future of autoethnography and qualitative scholarship.

Of course, writing a book doesn't happen in isolation. Here, we would like to thank the people who have supported our work on this project and throughout our research and writing lives. We especially thank Patricia Leavy for making this book possible; it is an honor to work with you and to publish in your book series. Your support and editorship have been invaluable.

Tony

I am grateful to many others for their support of my life and work, including Brett Aldridge, Mitch Allen, Nilanjana Bardhan, Christopher Birdsong, Derek Bolen, Robin Boylorn, Jay Brower, Marcy Chvasta, Ken Cissna, Norman Denzin, Rachel

Dubrofsky, Craig Engstrom, Brian Flowers, Brad Gangnon, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Jonny Gray, Andrew Herrmann, Kim Kline, Lenore Langsdorf, Michael LeVan, Jimmie Manning, Michaela Meyer, Nicole Neuman, Mark Neumann, Ron Pelias, Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Carl Ratner, Jillian Tullis, John Warren, Jules Wight, Jonathan Wyatt, and Stephanie Young. I appreciate my students and colleagues at Northeastern Illinois University, including Wilfredo Alvarez, Anna Antaramian, Katrina Bell-Jordan, Bernard Brommel, Rodney Higginbotham, Kristen Hunt, Alan Mace, Nancy McVittie, Cyndi Moran, Seung-Hwan Mun, Shayne Pepper, Nanette Potee, Edie Rubinowitz, and Angie Sweigart-Gallagher.

I thank Keith Berry for the everyday, meaningful, and loving banter, and I thank Art Bochner for his continued care, love, encouragement, mentorship, and support. I thank my stepfather, Michael Rome, and my parents, Phil Adams and Sheri Rome, for cultivating my strong work ethic and my compassion for others, and I thank Gerardo (Jerry) Moreno for loving me through many days of reading, writing, and editing.

I also thank Stacy for taking a risk to write with me many years ago; I love us and I look forward to our future collaborations. And I thank Carolyn for working with me on another project; I am grateful for the many personal and professional opportunities you've made available to me as well as your staunch support of me/my work. It is an honor and a blessing to work with you both.

Stacy

I'll begin by thanking Tony and Carolyn for making this work so rewarding and enjoyable. You are wonderful coauthors, editors, friends, and mentors. Carolyn, I am grateful that you and Art Bochner encouraged me to write autoethnography all those years ago and for creating opportunities for me to do my best research and writing ever since. Tony, I thank you for always being willing to take on projects, to talk and write, and to laugh with me. Our research and writing collaborations energize and sustain me. I hope we will always find the time and opportunity to work together.

I also thank all of my wonderful colleagues and students at California State University Northridge and at the University

of South Florida, especially Ben Attias, Ashley Beard, Sakilé Camara, Aimee Carillo Rowe, Ken Cissna, Eric Eisenberg, Sara Dykins Callahan, Elizabeth Edgecomb, John Kephart, Adolfo Lagomasino, Michael LeVan, Kathryn Sorrells, Jillian Tullis, Lori Roscoe, and Rachel Silverman. I am grateful to the people who've taught me all I know about writing and performance: Art Bochner, Tessa Carr, Norman Denzin, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Bud Goodall, Paul Gray, Chris McRae, Lynn Miller, Jeanine Mingé, Omi Osun, Ron Pelias, Deanna Shoemaker, Kathleen Stewart, and Nick Trujillo. And I thank my longtime reading and writing friends Brenna Curtis, Georgine Hodgkinson, and Linda Yackle for their talents and good humor.

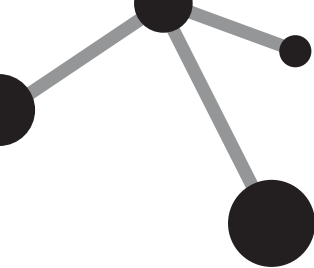
My research and writing life isn't possible without the love and support of my family. I thank my grandparents, William Blackburn and Bernice Holman, for encouraging the writer in me. I thank my parents, Dean and Mary Holman, for their love and support. And I thank my beautiful child for making our life together so meaningful and so much fun.

Carolyn

What an honor and privilege to work with Tony and Stacy again, the best dream team imaginable. They work hard and efficiently, challengingly and lovingly, with imagination and rigor, loving kindness and compassion. It is a scholar's greatest hope—that those who work beside and follow afterwards will surpass and enhance what already has been done. These two scholars exemplify that hope fulfilled. I have smiled the entire time we have worked on this project as I read their thoughtful prose and observed how they both always volunteer for whatever task needs to be done. That's not quite right—they don't volunteer, they just do it. Most impressive is that they led the way in modeling how three authors might write together. They said to me, "It's not necessary to use Microsoft Word Editing. Just make the changes that are needed." At first hesitant, I joined in, and we all freely edited each other's words time and time again. The result, I think, is a thoroughly integrated text composed of three voices where our words and thoughts blend together yet our individual voices still twinkle through.

Thanks to all of you who have contributed to autoethnography by writing your and others' vulnerable selves, supporting and assisting those who need to write, reading and valuing this work, and adding your voices in myriad ways to the growing movement. What a wonderful time to be qualitative researchers who care about vulnerable selves and about contributing to the kind of world we hope to live in. I acknowledge my partner Art Bochner, along with Buddha and Zen, and colleagues and students—all who remind me to approach each day mindfully, open to wonder and surprise, filled with passion and love, and ready to embrace the new day with gusto.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY



INTRODUCTION TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

What Is Autoethnography?

Writer Joan Didion notes simply and powerfully, “we tell stories in order to live.”¹ In this book, we embrace Didion’s call, believing the stories we tell enable us to live and to live *better*; stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives. The stories we discuss in this book—*autoethnographic stories*—are stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture. Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience. With autoethnography, we use our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture(s), politics, and social research.² In doing autoethnography, we confront “the tension between insider and outsider perspectives, between social practice and social constraint.”³ Hence, autoethnography is a research method that:

- Uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.⁴
- Acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others.⁵

- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.⁶
- Shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.”⁷
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.⁸
- Strives for social justice and to make life better.⁹

The goal of this book is to demonstrate how qualitative researchers can use autoethnography as a research method. In this chapter, we tell our stories of coming to autoethnography, discuss the concerns and considerations that led to the development of autoethnographic methodologies, provide a brief history of autoethnography, and describe our plan for this volume. We hope this book will inspire you to use autoethnographic methods and provide you with ideas to explore and guidelines for researching and writing your autoethnographies.

A note on our writing and citation choices: As you may have noticed, we use endnotes to document our sources and/or elaborate our ideas. We do this for two reasons. First, we want to keep the primary text as readable as possible; an abundance of citations can interrupt and clutter the narrative. Second, while the primary text tells *one* story about autoethnography, the endnotes provide an additional, and perhaps more nuanced, account of the method. This secondary text also offers you additional resources for doing and thinking about autoethnography. You can decide how to read the text—for example, you might read the primary text all the way through and then turn your attention to the endnotes; other readers might move from primary text to endnotes and back, while still others might turn first to the endnotes. Choose whatever reading method is most comfortable and helpful to you.

Coming to Autoethnography

Carolyn

I have been an ethnographer all my life. I also have been interested in peoples’ emotions and intentions, how they create meaningful

lives, and how they experience and cope with the problems of living.¹⁰ During the 1970s, I had the good fortune of being at Stony Brook University, majoring in sociology. There I was able to pursue my interests and immerse myself in the ethnographic study of community. Positivism ruled in those days, particularly in sociology departments—it still does—and I was encouraged to emphasize systematic data collection and traditional analysis over imagination and storytelling. In 1982, while an assistant professor in sociology at University of South Florida (USF), my brother died in a plane crash. That event, and having a partner in the last stages of emphysema, led me to begin keeping notes on my relational and personal experiences of grief and loss, which eventually resulted in some of my first autoethnographic writing.¹¹ In 1996, I moved to the Communication Department at USF and there I was able to continue the work that connected my sociological eye with a communicative heart.¹² Autoethnography fulfilled me as it combined my interests in ethnography, social psychology of the self and role-taking, subjectivity and emotionality, face-to-face communication and interaction, writing as inquiry and evocation, storytelling, and my social work orientation toward social justice and giving back to the community.

Unlike the stories that Stacy Holman Jones and Tony Adams will tell below, I did not have “mentors” in autoethnography, and initially it was challenging to get this work accepted and published. What I did have, though, were like-minded colleagues and friends—Art Bochner, Norman Denzin, Laurel Richardson, Buddy Goodall, Mitch Allen, Ron Pelias, and many, many more—who encouraged and supported autoethnographic work within an intellectual environment where postmodern, poststructuralist, and feminist writers were contesting issues of authority, representation, voice, and method. Once Art and I joined our work and lives, the synergy propelled our autoethnographic and narrative projects forward.¹³ We turned our energy to connecting social science and humanities; to making scholarship more human, useful, emotional, and evocative; to developing a research program in which we could mentor students in interpretive social science with a focus on narrative and autoethnography; and to contribute more meaningfully to the world in which we live.

Once immersed in Communication I was fortunate to have many supportive colleagues, especially Stacy, then a colleague in

my department, who early on embraced autoethnography and continues now to carry the autoethnographic “torch” in so many wonderful ways. Together she and I were privileged to have many superb students, including Tony, who came to us already versed in autoethnography and eager to get on with telling their stories. I learn much from this younger generation of autoethnographers, and I am confident in their ability and desire to carry on the autoethnographic movement in academia.

I continue to write stories that start from and explore my relational and emotional life. In this book, I refer to my stories on minor bodily stigma, including tales of my own aging; emotional stories about loved ones in my life, such as caring for my mother and losing my brother; stories of relationships with neighbors, which bring up issues of social justice and extend my interest in ethics and method; and, most recently, stories about the lives of Holocaust survivors. In the latter, my focus has turned to “collaborative witnessing,” a form of relational autoethnography that works to evocatively tell the experiences of others in shared storytelling and conversation.¹⁴ I continue to do work that is a “calling” and the cornerstone of that work is autoethnography. In this book, I hope to further convey my passion for autoethnography, show how writing has positively affected my life, and open the possibility that it might affect yours in similarly constructive ways.

Stacy

I grew up in a research tradition that included personal experience, valued story, and sought the literary. In a collaborative graduate seminar on ethnographic methods, Nick Trujillo taught me to consider every moment of our work—conducting fieldwork (and hanging out), creating field notes, reading the literature, discussing our research in the classroom, all of it—as experiences worth writing about deeply, analytically, and creatively. He also insisted that what we were doing constituted a worthwhile turn in the larger conversation about ethnography and autoethnography happening in and around qualitative research.¹⁵ Later, as I worked on my Master’s thesis, Nick encouraged, cajoled, and demanded—again and again—that I write the story, that I keep writing the story, that I just write the story. And so I wrote stories, lots of them.

When I left California State University Sacramento in 1996 for the University of Texas (UT), I carried my love of story into the performance studies classrooms of Paul Gray, Lynn Miller, and Omi Osun Olomo. Omi taught me that working at the intersection of performance and ethnography meant understanding fieldwork as personal and knowledge as an embodied, critical, and ethical exploration of culture.¹⁶ Performance was a stage and a means for writing, telling, and living the story of my research with others. While at UT, I met Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, who understood and encouraged my commitments to autoethnography and performance as complementary and of equal importance. And so, I wrote and performed and merged the two in/as performative personal writing—work that I have been doing ever since.

My work has focused on telling stories that clearly locate the personal in the field, the writing, and the political contexts of the research. In my essay on autoethnography for the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, I told some of my story about coming to autoethnography as an effort to create research that changes the world.¹⁷ Tony and I have continued to tell these stories, particularly in our efforts to write autoethnography as a queer method.¹⁸

Today my work focuses less on the story of *doing* research and more on storying lives *as* research. I consider the power of texts to call us into and out of being, as well as how identities and lives are performed in relation to others, particularly stories about the shifting and changing nature of queer identities and the relationships and families we create in and through adoption.¹⁹ Throughout this book, I will share several stories about my research, along with excerpts of the texts I have published on these topics. It is my hope that as I share my stories you will observe ways of merging your personal experiences in and through your research.

What autoethnography is teaching me today is this: telling our stories is a way for us to be present to each other; the act provides a space for us to create a relationship embodied in the performance of writing and reading that is reflective, critical, loving, and chosen in solidarity.²⁰ I grew up and was nurtured in a research tradition that embraced autoethnography as a legitimate, important, and *telling* methodology. Although choosing autoethnography wasn't a professional risk during my graduate education or early in my publishing career, telling personal stories in/as research

always carries personal, relational, and ethical risks. I view these risks as necessary not only for our research but also for living meaningful lives and changing the world in important and vital ways. I hope that this book will encourage you to embrace writing and telling stories as not only a way of life but also a way to make life better—for you and for others.

Tony

I first encountered autoethnography when I entered the Master of Arts program in Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) in 2001. Lenore Langsdorf, my thesis advisor, advocated for the use of narrative and personal experience in research, and I took courses on performance theory and autoethnography with Ron Pelias. Elyse Pineau and Craig Gingrich-Philbrook were doing innovative work on auto-performance and embodiment, and I took classes alongside many contemporary autoethnographers, including Keith Berry, Jay Brower, Nicole Defenbaugh, Scott Gust, Ben Myers, Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Satoshi Toyosaki, Adrienne Viramontes, and Amber Zimmerman.

I began my Ph. D. at the University of South Florida (USF) in 2004. In my first semester, I took a course on Narrative Inquiry with Art Bochner, and my final paper evolved into my first autoethnographic publication about the strained relationship I had with my father.²¹ I took another course with Art on the Social Construction of Reality and completed an independent study with him the following semester on narrative ethics.²² Art soon agreed to direct my dissertation on narratives of coming out and continued to work with me to publish my dissertation as a book.²³

At USF I also took a course on autoethnography and another on qualitative research with Carolyn, and Stacy and I began to investigate the fertile relationship between autoethnography and queer theory.²⁴ Many of my peers were working in/with autoethnography, including Robin Boylorn, Andrew Herrmann, Chris McRae, Jeanine Mingé, Patrick Santoro, and Jillian Tullis, and I continued to find myself supported by the legacy of prior USF autoethnographers, including Christine Davis, Laura Ellingson, Elissa Foster, Christine Kiesinger, and Lisa Tillmann.

Although I attended graduate programs that cultivated and embraced the use of personal narrative and lived experience, I initially steered clear of autoethnography as the primary research method for my dissertation; stubbornly, and ignorantly, I thought that the method would thwart the possibility of having an academic career. I worried more about pleasing (imagined) traditional scholars at other schools than about pleasing the professors with whom I worked and doing the work I felt mattered. Thus, for the first two years of my doctoral program, I formulated a more traditional ethnographic study to investigate mediated representations of the environment found at The Florida Aquarium. Though this research was intriguing, it did not satisfy me in the way that autoethnographic research on relationships would do, once I allowed myself to embrace this approach.

On February 28, 2006, near the end of my second year in the doctoral program, my life changed abruptly: Brett Aldridge, an ex-boyfriend and close friend from my time at SIUC, passed away. His sister told me that he died of diabetes-related causes, but two of his friends told me that Brett might have committed suicide after telling his father he was gay.²⁵

Although I recognized that I could not find out for certain how Brett died—his physical presence was gone regardless of how he passed—I did reflect on the onslaught of negative commentary I had been experiencing in regard to coming out and sexual orientation. I recalled various homophobic experiences in the classroom and with students who tried to save me from my homosexuality; discriminatory practices centering on sexual orientation that others relayed to me; and the criticism of family members in response to my coming out and their attempts to silence any discussion of same-sex attraction.

These reflections forced me to contend with some of the ways people were ostracized because of their sexuality and who, as could have been the case with Brett, might turn to suicide after experiencing such pain. I also realized that although my work on the environment and at the aquarium was important, the intimate, personal, and relational work of same-sex attraction mattered much more; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons were being harmed by the ignorance and hate of others, and I could not let these injustices proceed unchallenged. Thus, I turned to doing the kind of work that mattered most to me and to bringing

my emotions and experiences into the research process. I turned to writing stories that others could use in times of relational distress, and I re-turned to the original principles of my graduate education, especially to doing and living autoethnography.

* * *

As our stories illustrate, autoethnography is a method that allows us to reconsider how we think, how we do research and maintain relationships, and how we live. Our stories of coming to the method tell of moments when excluding or obscuring personal experiences felt uncomfortable, even impossible. Our stories are not unique to us; they also illustrate a change in how researchers approach their work. As we show in the next section, autoethnography developed in response to a series of concerns and considerations about social scientific research and qualitative inquiry.

The Development of Autoethnography

Three interrelated concerns and considerations about social scientific and qualitative research contributed to the formation of autoethnography: (1) new and changing ideas about and ideals for research, a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge, and an emerging appreciation for personal narrative, story, the literary and the aesthetic, emotions, and the body; (2) a heightened concern about the ethics and politics of research practices and representations; and (3) the increased importance of social identities and identity politics.

Changing Idea(l)s of Research

Throughout my (Carolyn's) education as a researcher, I questioned how *social science* could leave out the particular, nuanced, and complex elements of *social life*. Personal experience, storytelling, care and emotions, and bodies were considered "feminine" and unpredictable and, therefore, a barrier to producing objective and rational research, even though subjectivity, experience, emotions, and bodies are integral elements of research and rationality.²⁶ If our task as researchers, as *social* scientists, is to study the social lives of humans, then we cannot relegate elements of human lives or experiences to the periphery, nor can we bracket out the ways

our lives and experiences are intertwined with our research projects and participants. I did not believe in the “self-regulation, guilt, pain, the denial of pleasure and the silencing of voice” that was required to produce so-called proper academic subjectivities.²⁷ Nor did I think that the worst sin I could commit as a researcher was to be “too personal.”²⁸ I valued the personal, and I wanted to include—even to *feature* it—in my work.

Further, the idea(l)s of prediction and control in the hard sciences (e.g., chemistry, physics, and biology) do not translate to the movements and meanings of humans in social interaction or speak to the significance of human thought and action. Although we may be able to make educated guesses about cultural patterns and practices, we can never *predict* what other people might think, say, or do. Nor can we establish singular, stable, or certain “truth” claims about human relationships. *Social* life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If our desire is to research *social* life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion.

Thankfully, I was not alone in questioning the assumptions and transferability of scientific methods to the social sciences and qualitative research, particularly in ethnography. In the 1970s and 1980s, the idea that researchers could separate (researcher) selves from the research experience created a *crisis of representation* in the human disciplines (e.g., anthropology, communication, gender and race studies, sociology, psychology)—an “‘identity crisis’”²⁹ that “prompted a rethinking of the form and purpose of sociocultural investigation and description.”³⁰ As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo says of the crisis, “The once dominant ideal of a detached observer using neutral language to explain ‘raw’ data has been displaced by an alternative project that attempts to understand human conduct as it unfolds through time and in relation to its meaning for the actors.”³¹

The crisis of representation called into question many objectives and practices of mainstream social research, including:

- The goal of seeking universal Truths, especially with regard to social relations.³²
- The possibility of making certain and stable knowledge claims about humans, experiences, relationships, and cultures.³³