

# Decolonizing African Knowledge

Autoethnography and  
African Epistemologies

Toyin Falola



AFRICAN IDENTITIES

*Past and Present*



## DECOLONIZING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE

Addressing the consequences of European slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism on African history, knowledge, and its institutions, this innovative book applies autoethnography to the understanding of African knowledge systems. Considering the “Self” and Yoruba Being (the individual and the collective) in the context of the African decolonial project, Falola strips away Eurocentric influences and interruptions from African epistemology. Avoiding colonial archival sources, it grounds itself in alternative archives created by memory, spoken words, images, and photographs to look at the themes of politics, culture, nation, ethnicity, satire, poetics, magic, myth, metaphor, sculpture, textiles, hair, and gender. Vividly illustrated in color, it uses diverse and novel methods to access an African way of knowing. Exploring the different ways that a society understands and presents itself, this book highlights convergence, enmeshing private and public data to provide a comprehensive understanding of society, public consciousness, and cultural identity.

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Autoethnography and African Epistemologies

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*University of Texas, Austin*



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For  
Adanna and Damilare Bello, One Union, Blessed Future  
and  
Kaosarat and Ibrahim Odugbemi, May Allah's Blessing Be  
Upon You.





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## NOTES ON LANGUAGE AND ORTHOGRAPHY

This book uses many Yorùbá words, explaining their meanings on the first mention, providing translations where necessary, and using them as key entry points to long analyses. As a tonal language, each syllable has a low, medium and high pitch, which affects the meanings of words. In recent orthography, sh has been replaced with a dot under the s (ṣ). Where dots are under e and o, they indicate shorter sounds. The overarching idea behind the design of orthography is the possibility of devising symbols (in this case, letters) to represent each significant sound of a language to ensure there is at least a one-to-one relation between sounds and the symbol that represents them – bearing in mind that humans started as speaking beings, and writing is a later development. Thus, to avoid the ambiguity resulting from the use of similar letters for different sounds of Yorùbá, particularly [ʃ, ɛ, ɔ] written as [ṣ, ẹ, ọ] and their relative: [s, e, o] written as [s, e, o]. Things become quickly complicated because there is a limited set of letters available in the Roman/Latin alphabet to be adopted. As a result, additional signs (technically, diacritics) above, below, beside, and before are being added to the alphabet. Meanwhile, convenience and familiarity are traded for esoteric symbols. From afar and to untrained eyes, [ṣ, ẹ, ọ] and [s, e, o] could be mistaken as being the same.



## PREFACE

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* demonstrates how autoethnography can enhance the study of Africa. Its fundamental features as a research tool provide channels to and for foregrounding and consolidating subaltern perspectives in the mainstream, that is, as central, especially outside the hegemony of Western methodologies and perspectives in the study of African cultures and knowledge forms. It also substantiates the work of African scholars decolonizing African knowledge and knowledge-producing centers by providing effective alternative strategies, methods, or methodologies.

The pervasiveness and absolute hegemony of the West and its philosophies in African countries – where a Western presence has become a metastatic cancer eating away at centuries-old traditions and the knowledge they hold – demands alternative, innovative, and sometimes far-reaching approaches to sustain African heritage and culture. The continuous Western infiltration, encroachment, and takeover of Africa, even after the institutions of slavery and colonialism have supposedly been halted, can be seen in the insurmountable presence and influence of Western capitalism and culture on the continent.

Western capitalism controls the direction and ethics of research, along with the knowledge, benefits, and profits gained from that research or the use to which such research and its findings are put. It provides the methodologies, principles, and philosophies that shape research on Africa. These allow research on Africa to be guided by Western modes and systems of thinking or rethinking phenomena, displacing them (African phenomena) outside of their natural, cultural scope. Sadly, Africa's position in the global matrix of power requires African researchers – whether Western trained or continental – to rely on these Western-derived methodologies and principles in their research engagement with African cultures. This perpetuates the conditions of coloniality that sustain the West's domineering presence in Africa. The condition of coloniality expresses itself in several ways and sustains several unequal equations or relational inequalities: it could be the objective researcher versus the voiceless African subject unable to shape the direction of discourse; the consideration of African culture as something only capable of

producing data that researchers interpret from Eurocentric perspectives; the use of Western theories to examine African realities; or in claims of ethical concerns regarding researchers who also serve as subjects of research.

Knowledge fuels national progress and defines a nation's identity. The methods of producing such knowledge determine its relevance, uses, and outcomes. This makes it counterproductive to base the knowledge that defines Africa solely on outsiders' perspectives. Using Western concepts to generate knowledge about Africa can sabotage decolonial efforts because of their sometimes authoritarian, totalizing, and overly presumptuous conclusions about Africa, allowing for omissions, errors, sweeping generalizations, and provincial or prejudicial perspectives to form the foundation of African knowledge and knowledge about Africa. In this situation, that which is presented as African knowledge runs contrary to the realities, needs, and potential of African cultures.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* builds a connection between autoethnography and how Africa is and can be studied. The narratives it presents, which also foreground its argument, suggest that an insider's perspective can be merged with the rigor and principles of research to re-determine how African epistemologies are pushed to the center of global knowledge production. These perspectives can take any form, from autobiographical narratives to archived/archival and culturally relevant items. The book demonstrates that archival materials can serve as the basis for critical introspection on African culture. In doing this, individuality is expanded and retooled to reflect on the larger cultural framework.

This book presents an argument that cultural items, including sculptures, textiles, paintings, and photographs, can be transformed from archived materials into cultural vehicles, while also retaining their place as items within a personal collection. One implication of this book's argument on decolonizing African knowledge through autoethnography is that the experiences constituting an autobiography or life narrative can be reflected upon to critically interrogate the culture that shaped them. With the intent of emphasizing these experiences and the knowledge they represent as culturally significant, African epistemologies – serving as the bedrock of experiential knowledge – can be accentuated beyond the repressive allowances of Western-oriented research paradigms.

The book also serves as a litmus test for the decolonial power inherent in autoethnography, revealing how autoethnography can transform personal items into cultural vehicles, and how an archive can be approached, read, assessed, and accessed as a tool or prism for interrogating the larger culture. It focuses on Yorùbá culture, which also serves as an example of what autoethnography can do for Africa – its approach to Yorùbá culture, highlighting its knowledge forms and epistemic practices, without privileging Eurocentric perspectives at the

ideological level or at the realm of the subject-object/research-researched dynamic. These encourage the centralizing of African knowledge and place it at the center of Africa and its knowledge matrix.

The conclusions, reached by merging personal experience with public knowledge while using the archive to reflect on aspects of folklore such as proverbs, hair making, sculpting, painting, singing, masquerading, festivals, burial ceremonies, and philosophical concepts and practices, reinforce the decoloniality of autoethnography. Through autoethnography, the personal learning of an archive is reworked into a tool for communal representation. This study critically blends personal and public realities, generic knowledge and private experience, the subjectivity of self-narratives and the objectivity of research, and academia's exclusivity and elitism with the accessibility of knowledge gained from folklore and pedagogical narratives. It recognizes that autoethnography is an essential tool that can emphasize and enhance African epistemologies, rivaling Eurocentric approaches while circumventing their faults.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* is different because it offers insights into the value of an insider's perspective, applied through any medium, when it is retooled into a critical paradigm in knowledge production or the understanding thereof. The approach it presents offers greater benefits in understanding African cultures than borrowing foreign paradigms or for an insider to rework these borrowed paradigms as templates for viewing their culture. It also takes readers on a journey that transforms personal reflection into communal inquiry, emphasizing both personal experience and belongings as parts of the public (communal) reality that defines them. The intersection of private and public knowledge in the book reveals that autoethnography can access an archive to examine a culture's foundational realities and knowledge base, emphasizing its ethos, thought system, epistemology, and philosophy in the process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in knowledge decolonization dates back to the 1970s. During my university education, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, decolonization was the central theme. The challenge was how to replace the influence of the West on the curricular. Some regarded the adoption of Marxism as a decolonial project, treating Marx and his ideas as anti-Western. However, the real problem was how to draw from the indigenous in ideas, practices, and knowledge systems. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that the indigenous is valuable if a systematic knowledge system can be undertaken.

To sustain various validations, conceptual and theoretical follow-up requires affirmation, additional work, and a search for new data. The validation work has been long, including my books on belief and spirituality as sources of epistemologies and various approaches to decolonize the academy. As “decoloniality” becomes a current trope, many concepts of the past, some dating back to those expounded on Negritude and Afrocentricity, were rescued and retooled for new understanding. This book also falls into this “rescue mission,” but with a different approach: my lived realities merged with the life of the mind to undertake detailed research on the “Self” in the broader canvas of identity and people.

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of many scholars and friends who contributed to this work. For over a decade, Vik Bahl and I have discussed many of the ideas in this book. Some of them were even converted to verses as we looked for ways to focus them creatively. Members of the younger generation were also drawn into it to accomplish an interpretative framework. Notable among them are Tolulope Oke, Wale Ghazal, Ibrahim Odugbemi, Damilare Bello, and Kaosarat Aina. Hours of revisions could not have been possible without the hard work by Peter M. J. Gross and Adebukola Bassey. I would also like to thank, again, Damilare Bello of Duke University, who read the entire draft of this book and kept me sane through the difficult task of reducing the number of figures. Special thanks again to Tolulope Oke of the University of Bayreuth for his intelligent contributions to complicating the reading of the texts and stories, and for his generosity and kindness. In the final preparation of this manuscript for press, I must thank Tayo Keyede, my competent proofreader.

The stories and objects that make this book possible are from diverse places and people. Thus, I am grateful to thousands of people for their work, creativity, stories, and ideas. From my introduction to wood carvings in the late 1950s to deeper engagements with paintings in my adult life, I have regarded objects in awe, precisely as I see wonders in words. Converting words and objects into “monographing” takes me back to moonlight stories in which humans and non-humans habit the intellectual space. I appreciate my three associates and friends in choices of objects: Z. Apata, a sculptor collector; Omo Lamidi Fakeye of Ilé Ifè, a prominent carver; and Moses Ogunleye, a first-rate artist. I am thankful to various institutions, notably my permanent base (the University of Texas at Austin), and various places where I delivered keynote addresses that supplied clarifications to many ideas in this book.

There is a unity of purpose in many African academies: the institutions are looking for the most effective way to achieve intellectual emancipation in order to empower their students to transform the continent. If this book helps to forward the quest for decolonization, the goal for which it was written has been more than fulfilled.



# PART I

---

## Introduction





## Prologue: My Archive

As a collection, this archive is many things, a quality it demonstrates via its diverse manifestations. An archive as “schematics of self” can act as a “cognitive itinerary,” providing insights into the formation of the self, the journey toward understanding the self within and without, and the methods of self-construction that involve navigating temporal, spatial, ideational, and ideological conduits toward establishing self-consciousness. An archive in this sense serves as a collection of items with representative power that speaks to the process of self-definition; it provides illumination on patterns of personal growth, which can be mapped for reexperiencing or interrogating the formation of the self, since the self is a progressive construct, continual in its self-redefinition. Manifesting in material form as a collection, the archive can disclose the interconnections between intellection as an activity or tool of self-construction, consciousness as a source of power, and choices or actions that define and individuate persons. An archive can also exist as a tribute to an individual’s (intellectual) enterprise/industry; it can serve as a collection of materials that have past, present, and future significance, indicating touchstones that stand out in an enigmatic life, career, or that emphasize an ideology, idiosyncrasy, or proclivity. In this sense, the archive would be the material realization of a cognitive itinerary.

An archive’s impact on liminal spaces, which human consciousness inhabits, is also pivotal to its significance as part of a matrix, a system. The human world is a composite system of relations where things, people, and events react to one another: each part works in tandem with the other to ensure effective functioning and the progress of nature and the species habituated within it. These relations afford human reality the luxury of continuity, even in the midst of ruptures and seeming discontinuities. An archive is part of this system, and there are myriad ways through which the archive can be conceived within this particular order. There are also several forms in which the archive can manifest that highlight this essence.

The archive’s manner of composition also informs its value. As part of an organized system, the archive acts as signage, that is, as a systematic collection of signs with referents and significations. The significations can manifest in terms of any of the afore-listed realizations of the archive. Its

referents can be specific moments or actions in human cultural history that are readable or can be historicized. Because the archive holds its constituents in a systemic relation, wherein the elements that comprise it interact systematically, reading, engaging, or exploring the archive yields knowledge that transposes it from “a mere assemblage of things” to “a complex system with an equally complex import.” The transposition of an archive from a collection into a system is possible because of the complex levels of interaction within the archive itself or between the archive and the world external to it – the world within which it finds or achieves (greater) meaning. The nature of this interaction is based on the kind of knowledge the archive yields and also the kind of consciousness that interacts with it. The insight it provides and the interaction it allows – for instance, how accessible is the archive to intrusive reasoning? – determines what knowledge is to be gained from it. Equally important is the knowledge gained from exploring the significance of its composition as a system and that of its constitutive elements as independent (mini)systems.

Not all collections are systems, even if systems are collections of several parts, items, materials, etc. An archive provides knowledge that is conditioned by the relationship between its parts and between the parts and the referents residing within the world external to it, since all readable items including art and textiles are texts in their own right, and since archives wield referentiality. The archive can narrate the process of its being, stressing its significance as a “meta-schematics” to itself; narrate that of the materials that comprise it; and also narrate the generative force behind its creation, which in this case is the self. Two things must be noted here: conception and continuity. An archive is a conception; here that means a knowledge-scape conceived at some point in time and in some space, even if its quality, texture, and nature as a system are continually redefined. This means an archive is not static, regardless of being defined in and by space and time. Another way to see the archive in this sense is as an engineered knowledge cosmos – although in material form – generated (by the self) in the process of experiencing knowledge and thus fated to continuity, insofar as the generative center (the self) that transforms experiential knowledge into material forms or binds both persists.

I should, however, point out here that these positions are not definitely defined or fixed in their manner of relation: archive as knowledge source/cosmos and the self as a generative center. These roles can be reversed, and indeed this mutability is what shapes the relation, since both the self and the archive are constantly in a symbiotic relation in foregrounding their relevance, essence, usefulness, and continuity. As said earlier, the archive provides insight to the constantly evolving self, while, as will be shown, the self, by virtue of aiding the engineering of the archive, contributes to its essence and continuity, serving as a source to the archive’s persistence and continuity in and across time.

However, this state of perpetuity does not detract from the archive's organicity as a system or its ability to yield knowledge of itself to others, or of others to third parties. What I mean here is that as an organized system it does not shut out possibilities of historicization. It means the archive opens up to external queries, queries that would aid its definition and contribute to its essence. In fact, yielding itself to historicization and (re)contextualization marks the dynamics and fluidity of the archive. The archive is thus fluid and organic.

The archive's process of conception, its state of perpetuity, and its positionality with the world it textualizes all define it and the knowledge it provides. Archives textualize the material space because they co-shape the human perception of things. More so, archives as part of cultural forces condition human reception, relatedness, or perception of things or phenomena, especially if they (archives) are located or discovered outside of the temporality within which they have been composed, or if their constituent parts date differently. If an archive's immanent parts date differently, this system of difference defines and contributes to its organicity as well as its relevance to the material world. Therefore, the archive is a sum of its constituent parts; hence, it cannot be treated independently of them or, at least, the diversity that defines it. An archive can be underscored by several forms of diversity, and temporality is only one of such. But in the case where a systemic difference occurs, the knowledge it provides is a mixture of the implication of this constitutive difference and its effects on the contextual world. Therefore, the knowledge an archive provides is multileveled with multiple implications. It becomes a blueprint, readable and applicable to several issues, so far as they relate to the ideology behind the archive's conception, the ideology conceived of by the self that has created it.

What then is the archive? The answer is simple without being reductive and complex without being mysterious. The archive is a narrative. To appreciate the archive as a source of information, it is vital to see the archive as a system-in-narration. The various manifestations of the archive all yield patterns that tell a story. The knowledge extracted from an archive after due exploration by a probing mind is a consequence of seeing patterns within these patterns. These patterns have corresponding referents in the outside world, which allows a logical interaction between the probing mind (third party) and the archive. This is possible because as a system and as a narrative the archive has an organizing principle, a nucleus to its circumference, a generative center that holds it together and transforms knowledge into experience and vice versa, an intelligence constituted in much the same way that the human as a living narrative has a nucleus, an intelligence that holds its parts in harmony. The interaction of the two nuclei (that of the archive and that of the probing mind as a living narrative) allows for exchanges that advance the transfer of knowledge. This knowledge can come from the probing mind relating parts of the

archive to existing referents in the human world or worlds beyond it, or engaging the intelligence that has organized the archive, which can be within or without the archive.

The intelligence of the archive can exist outside it, but still be felt within it as its generative source, where it performs the function of a marshal, commanding its various parts for cohesion and unity. The intelligence within the archive would, in this case, be a trace of the overarching intelligence, a sort of microcosmic force, which can be anything from the self, a cosmic intelligence, a super-computer, or any consciousness external to the archive, to cite a few possibilities. What I am essentially saying here is that the self that serves as the source of the archive, engineering it into a possibility, leaves a trace of itself within it, one organic to its composition. Therefore, the archive and everything about it can represent the self: its organicity, constituents, the patterns that define it, the implications of its internal relations, and its extratextual connotations. All these can inform on the inner landscape of the intelligence (self) that has created the archive, especially since archives wield referential power.

The archive therefore is a metaphor of the self. Its ability to represent the self and the processes of its definition underscores it as a narrative. An interpretive engagement with the archive leads to exploring the cognitive landscape of the self, as if the self were responding to an investigative force. In the case where the archive represents and narrates the self, it would be acting in the capacity of a trace of the self. Although the archive is a narrative, it is not the self, but a trace of the self. Being a trace, the archive leaves room for the narration of the self without being the self. The archive thus is a useful tool for connecting culture and self, private experiences and common knowledge, or introspection, cultural epistemologies, and personal perspectives – everything that defines the self as a sociocultural being. It tells a story of the self as it relates, works with, affects, or is affected by the larger culture. These qualities of the archive have defined its importance, particularly to me and my consideration of African knowledge forms and their place in the global world. As I entered the last phase of my academic career and began to ponder how best to use my remaining limited number of years, the possibilities the archive offers encouraged me to settle more for introspective work. The possibilities are vital to the introspective angle from which I approach the idea of bridging personal experience and cultural knowledge for revisiting African epistemologies.

Over the decades I have acquired tremendous experience as a scholar and researcher, teacher, and mentor, and I have equally served as a policy formulator and public intellectual. As I began to think of how best to cumulate the diversity of knowledge and experience into a set of writings, my mind became restless. I had already written two memoirs and was planning the third. I agonized on how to structure an interrogation of myself as archive in order to arrive at originality and value. I settled for two interrelated bodies of ideas and objects – the accumulation of my creative/literary and academic work as

one part; and the cumulation of my extensive collections of sculptures, textiles, and paintings as the second. Both parts are archives that are both external and internal to me, an entry into an expansive library. Both have taken a lifetime to collect. The two archives speak to the African societies from which they emerge and to which they are addressed. Both reveal the path of history and all of its contradictions.

I am part of the contradictions, of growing up in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. The visual objects speak to the contradictions of modernity. The literary works capture the anger and displeasure of modernity. In light of the foregoing, I consider my archive a narrative, a system-in-narration, a composition of patterns that tells a story, expressing all the afore-discussed possibilities. Comprising materials that hold value for me, it advances a theory that centers my lived approach toward decolonizing African cultural practices and knowledge form. The archive thus offers a narrative that not only textualizes this philosophy but also stresses my aesthetic choices in relation with my knowledge of the world and my cognitive itinerary in connection to my position within an epistemic space whose cultural vehicles continue to intimate me and to which I respond appropriately. The accounts this archive provides emphasize my position as a knowledge-scape; they present me as a matrix of possibility generating several layers of knowledge that find traction within a world outside of me.

This archive is thus an extension of me as a consciousness. In exhibiting cultural and personal significance, they advance a narrative of me and the experiences I have gathered over the years as the “intelligence” capable of organizing different elements into a system and an “organizing principle” generating patterns that cast private materials as cultural vehicles. This is buttressed by the fact that readers and viewers can respond to this archive, (re)negotiating the meaning of its composition as I have organized them and their knowledge of it as they have received it. This way, they create personal responses that interact with me as the “trace” within the archive, validating the evocative responses of an archive. This evocation is both of self and of culture.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* is, therefore, a product of ongoing interaction between me and the world, and between intelligence (self) and an archive as a collected system. I use my collection organized into an archive to explore personal and public perspectives in relation to the Yorùbá and the African world. This is the function of an archive, and mine is not different. The archive’s revelatory power or connotative possibilities are revealed when the intelligence that organizes it engages it. Probing it for knowledge reveals several layers of connection between the self and the archive: there is, for instance, the layer of industry, where the archival or ethnographic effort is made manifest; the layer of epistemic significance, which relates how the archive serves as a cultural vehicle revealing cultural histories; and the layer of self-representation, which is the layer of the “cognitive itinerary” where the archive

traces and embodies the self, symbolizing strategic intellectual effort toward the (re)definition of consciousness. The connotative possibilities of an archive can be the subject of debate since they can take several forms. But what is implicated when the archive is engaged by the intelligence that organized it, while it is also expected to speak to the larger cultural firmament within which both self and archive are positioned? One simple answer is that the archive operates on a dual level. The archive is a complex system with an equally complex import. While this rationale is straightforward, it does not answer the question of what happens when the archive is engaged by the intelligence that has created it and is responsible for its organicity. What is the result of my metacognition of my own archive?

A useful answer, which sets the tone for the chapters in this work and reveals the overriding premise, is that the archive as a trace of self not only narrates the self, but also reveals how the archive (as a network) intimates to the intelligence that has created it. What this means is that the archive, as a network with cultural and historical significance, demonstrates the intelligence that has created it as a matrix of possibility. The intelligence not only lives on in the archive, as a trace, but is projected as drawing cultural networks into close proximity through diverse cultural vehicles (that make the archive) in order to establish a convergent zone. This zone is the intersection between the self and culture; the self as an organizing principle and the created archive as an expression of this principle as well as a cultural vehicle and a source of knowledge in its own right; the archive as a narrative of the self and of culture; the archive as a trace of the self and a network of interacting cultural elements. Also, within this convergent zone (made possible by the archive as a trace of self and a network of cultural vehicles) is the intersection between conclusions of general scholarship and those of personal observation; general aesthetics or aesthetic appeal and personal knowledge of the archive's (and its parts') symbolism; and the intersection between what is intimate to the self and how it draws the culture into this private world of intimacy.

An instructive summary of this zone is that it creates room for the collusion of what is known to all and what is known to the self. This condition is brought about by two important things: the archive comprising personal materials that also are cultural vehicles; and the intelligence (self) also being the organizing principle, that is, the generating center of the archive, as well as the critical voice interrogating the archive. In other words, if the intelligence that serves as the powerhouse of the archive interrogates the archive, a trace of the self, the intelligence interrogates itself. Doing so, it emphasizes itself as a matrix of possibility or a knowledge source. Engaging the archive to establish the convergent zone depicts the self as an archive, while the endeavor becomes autoethnographic. The self is essentially an archive demonstrating its ability to generate another archive with personal and public significance. These are bounded by the merging of personal and public realms, which allow for personal and communal import.

The philosophy behind the book, to put it simply, adapts a familiar English expression: show me your books, show me your clothes, show me the art in your home, and I will show you who you are. This is possible because the self is a miniature of culture. Questions of “why” and “to what purpose” that address the self (and also implicate the culture) can be quickly answered by engaging the materials collected into an archive. A double channel of knowing is created: the self and the culture. The intelligence enters both simultaneously to establish a connection between the self as a generative center and the culture as the knowledge source, and vice versa, since the self can also serve as a source of knowledge and culture, a generative zone. In establishing this connection, experience is transformed into knowledge, personal items into cultural vehicles, and personal knowledge into public and vice versa.

Each chapter in this book operates on this principle. I demonstrate how personal objects as cultural vehicles tell my cultural history even as they intersect other histories. The chapters are autoethnographic because their premises are rooted in the convergent zone whence they observe the world and emphasize my position within it. Using my archive with its traces of the self to engage the world and its knowledge and to foreground African epistemologies allows me to demonstrate how autoethnographic approaches can transform experience into knowledge and derive from the convergent zone. To reveal this, the book is divided into two sections. Each focuses on a particular archive: the [first section](#) (Part II) contains six chapters that interrogate African culture through memoirs, existing scholarly works, and creative literature. The chapters approach the convergent zone by using personal narratives to explore African culture for a broader sociocultural significance. The second segment (Part III) differs slightly in its approach even though the premise remains the same. With five chapters focused on various archival materials – textiles, paintings, hair, sculpture, and photographs – the place of the archive as a trace of self is accentuated.

The larger context in the two archival categories that form the second part of this book confronts the Western encounters with Africa as well as two imposed competing models of development: capitalism and socialism. The encounters and models changed Africa, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. As I am part of the changes, I had to document them, in minor and major tales, thereby constituting the primary archives of specific moments, as in the peasant rebellion of the 1960s captured in *Counting the Tiger's Teeth*. While each chapter focuses on a separate archive, this strategy gives the book an opportunity to closely examine the place of Africa and its cultures within a changing social climate initiated by Western capitalist forces from several perspectives toward generating useful and holistic conclusions.

Not only have we as a people had to accept many imposed cultures, we also had to rebel against them and their life-altering influences. I was part of both responses. But the tools of studying our experiences – the libraries, protocols, and ideas – were also foreign and largely imposed. I experienced this as well as



part of my education system in Nigeria, from the elementary to the University of Ife where I acquired two degrees. Since the 1960s the humanities and social sciences have changed with the times, from a “dark continent” paradigm, to modernization theories, to Marxism, and to the current market-controlled liberal scholarship and so-called democracy. Thus, I have to accept and challenge epistemologies, and, as this book argues, make a case for alternative ways of thinking. If there is a core theme that this book demonstrates, it is to reinforce alternative ways of thinking based on African indigenous ways of knowing. This book provides a convergent zone, where alternative ways of thinking can materialize or be shaped to purpose.

From the introduction is revealed how autoethnography reinforces and is a product of this convergent zone. The subsequent chapters focus on several archival materials – autobiographies and essays, textiles, sculptures, paintings, photographs, and hair – to explore several aspects of the Yorùbá and African reality; and in their treatment of these subjects is reflected the strength of autoethnography in returning agency to African cultures, even if it investigates or researches it. The intricacy of this convergent zone is laid bare as each chapter implicates its decolonial leanings from several perspectives. The strength of autoethnography – in reestablishing/buttreassing African epistemologies, foregrounding the transformation of experience in knowledge, and reinforcing the connection between the self, the archive, and the culture – is established from the book’s introduction to its conclusion.

This book cannot be confined to one discipline. It is a work of History as of Philosophy; it is grounded in ideas associated with gods and goddesses as well as in sheer literary imagination. The book enhances the value of proverbs to the same pedestal as those of books. As the chapters range from folklore to academic work, they expand understandings around the limitations of disciplinary boundaries. While the book captures events in some chapters, it is not about these events but about the ideologies and epistemologies surrounding them. While the book references stories and tales, it is less about them than about meta-narratives and meta-theories, revealing the mega-ideas that shape societies. And those theories are largely non-Western, widely used in African communities as they draw from language and lifestyles. There is a major focus in this book on cultures, even when they speak to social hierarchies, modernity, ethnicity, and nationality.

There is cultural nationalism in basing the archives on the Yorùbá experience. Without a deep understanding of culturalism, the core of African indigenous knowledge systems would be lost. As deployed in this book, there is one advantage to culturalism: it reduces generalizations around Africa, thus offering challenges to some of my formulations as African culture becomes located in different people and places. There is yet one other advantage: one cannot be led astray, as an insider, by the failure to understand what one addresses.

*Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies* provides decolonial direction through the Yorùbá example. And this is very



significant as there is not one single way to put decoloniality to work as a tool of decentralizing and distribution of agency. Its focus is on the Yorùbá space, past and present, and has implications on how Yorùbá epistemologies are presented and received, now and in the future. It also has implications for how the culture is studied as autonomous and historical, and as reflective of obtainable realities in Africa as a continent, without attempting to account for all of it. The connection between autoethnography and how Africa is studied is the thread that holds together the several levels of analyses and layers of meaning in the book. Autoethnography is an alternative and counter-hegemonic instrument and is useful to the African who has been branded the alternative to a Western standard; hence, it enhances the visibility of those branded as subaltern persons, centralizing their culture, institutions, and epistemic possessions away from Western hegemony. It draws attention to the importance of the rapport between individuality and communality, and how one affects the other. By doing this, it gains the cultural value it needs to be an evocative tool of decoloniality. As demonstrated in the chapters that make *Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemologies*, autoethnography rebrands the archive as a cultural vehicle to achieve cultural relevance since the archive returns the spotlight and value to African epistemologies.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

### Part I: Introduction

#### *Chapter 2: Autoethnography and Epistemic Liberation*

This introductory chapter addresses the idea of autoethnography, examining its reliance on the objectivity of research and the subjectivity of autobiographical works in ethnographic efforts. It argues for the use and importance of autoethnography when researching indigenous epistemologies, drawing attention to autoethnography's relevance for decolonial studies. The discussion focuses on what autoethnography is, the arguments against it, the benefits, and ethnography's relation to existing research methodologies and patterns, particularly within countries located at the margins of global power. In its conceptual exploration of autoethnography as a research mode, the introduction argues for the book's approach toward centralizing African epistemologies. It also draws links between the theses of the chapters and the idea of autoethnography.

### Part II: History, Fictions, and Factions

This book is an archival meta-narrative that reflects on my corpus as an ideological afterthought, considering the scope and concerns of my

engagement with art and life as expressed in my writings, dealings, and experiences. The first part of this book focuses on the literary and historical dimensions of my textual narratives, highlighting the deep-seated ideologies within them. The recurring theme in this section is the *telos* present in textual narratives, regarded as “narrative politics” in different parts of the chapters.

The **third chapter**, “Narrative Politics and Cultural Ideologies,” delves into the functional prism of a narrative by using *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* as an ethno-autobiographical embodiment of cultural ideologies. By locating the personal within the communal, the memoir attempts a master narrative that can be described as narrative frames embedded in varying cultures, often unconsciously, to provide a culturally accepted communal guide for being a “good” member of that culture. The chapter investigates how the memoir contributes to the production of collective memory, providing a complementary–alternative approach to navigating the cluster of the past and the people, similar to myth, religion, literature, and history. Although *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* is a negotiation and interpretation of my sociocultural beliefs, and my experiences in relation to my past, this chapter is a meta-narrative that carefully guides readers through the reconstruction of the narrative’s fragments of cultural ideologies – some of which might not be perceived by even the keenest of readers.

“Memory, Magic, Myth, and Metaphor” is an intersectional evaluation of the narrativity of memory and memory as a narrative. It also examines the purgatorial and historical dimensions of memory: “a walk on the fragile fragments of my memory.” As in the previous chapter, this chapter extends the counter-alternative approach of narratives to past and culture, examining *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* as a viable cultural manifestation and sociohistorical documentation. It identifies the focalization of the *Ogun Àgbẹkọyà* narrative, from personal and communal perspectives, as a representation of the absurd reality characterizing immediate postcolonial Nigeria; the country struggled to transition into modernity, and these struggles are sustained in the metaphors and symbols employed by the narrative. Surpassing a mere invocation of memory, this chapter establishes the narrative as a restitution of the past.

The next two chapters, “A Poetological Narration of the Nation” and “A Poetological Narration of the Self,” examine the expression and manifestations of “self” and “nation” across different bodies of poetry. The concepts of “self” and “nation,” as designated in these poetological narrations, may seem oppositional and discontinuous. However, there is an overlapping relation between the two concepts. The discussion in “A Poetological Narration of the Nation” is grounded in the idea that poetry, as a national narrative, and especially in postcolonial Africa, is an aggregate of sociocultural, political, and economic realities within a nation. The poet has a duty and desire to fulfill this sociocultural responsibility. As national narratives, the poems that this chapter engages with are characterized by

significant embodiment and representations of society, including the diasporic as part of a nation. The chapter situates and equates the relevance and representation of African women within larger discourses of nation, nationality, nationalism, and nation building. It examines the conscious and unconscious functions of poetry in a nation's narration by examining the history, beliefs, and culture of a group of people with a shared sense of belonging.

"A Poetological Narration of the Self" pursues universalist-cum-collectivist interpretations of selected poems, extending and refracting from the personal and collective "self" respectively, as thorough invocations of emotions for understanding and creating an image of the self. The distillation of the emotions and thoughts provoked by the poem are re-collected in this chapter. Through the prism of the universal self, the chapter highlights how emotions are quintessential to the survival of humanity and the universe in its entirety. Love, fear, despair, joy, disillusionment, and hope are portrayed as basic components of the human consciousness in understanding the self, the other, and the world. The discourse in this chapter highlights the poetological narrative of the self as a quest to sketch an identity and understanding of the self, established as the agency of consciousness prompting the existence of the self and others. This obtains a new, extended, and profound understanding of the self.

Chapter 7, "Satire and Society," explores the critical undertones of *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* and *Counting the Tiger's Teeth* as reflective and refractive narratives commenting on society to encourage positive change. The chapter analyzes one of several narrative dimensions, engaging them as satire to reveal different vices that are latent in the society described by the memoirs – these flaws existed in the past but remain rampant in the present day. The societal ills include sociocultural follies, religious excesses, political menace, and environmental degradation. Their consequences, ranging from personal and previous shortcomings to present and collective vices, generate forces that push society away from development and morality. The environmental menace created by greed, recklessness, and careless acts continues to weaken nature's capacity to support life and human existence. These narratives ridicule the recounted shortcomings against this backdrop of deterioration and existing sociocultural standards in the hope of restoring proper civic conduct and fostering desired development.

The last chapter, "Narrative Politics and the Politics of Narrative," provides closure for the overarching frame of the book's first section. It shifts from literary narratives to several other textual narratives focused on society's history, sociopolitics, and cultural and economic reality. It describes the central aim of every narrative as the intent to persuade and achieve a desirable future for society, positioning them as conscious agents of human and societal development. This chapter establishes narratives as important and

essential mechanisms through which humans order and stabilize reality as the constructs of their conscience and consciousness. It identifies relevant and common preoccupations across different narratives that span decades, presenting an overview of the politics of narrative. For example, *Narrating Violence in Nigeria* navigates the religious and political dimensions of violence, considering how it has impaired or enhanced Nigeria's development. It not only historicizes and intellectualizes discourse; it also provides the rationale for studying its causes, identifying its symptoms, highlighting its consequences, and proffering pragmatic solutions to harmonize and advance society.

### Part III: Visual Cultures

This part uses archived images to argue for autoethnography in relation to African epistemologies. These chapters present another angle to autoethnography, allowing material collections to serve as cultural vehicles. This establishes a convergent zone between several concepts: self and culture; personal library, ethnographic work, and cultural knowledge; experiential and public knowledge; private and public realms; knowledge evoked from cultural materials and sourced from existing literature; and items belonging to public and personal archives. It also probes the space between that which is known to all and knowledge gained from observation.

[Chapter 9](#), "Sculpture as an Archive," interrogates Yorùbá sculptural tradition using sculptures and carvings from my archive. It deploys the carvings as prisms through which several aspects of Yorùbá history and culture can be examined for extensive illumination. This chapter establishes that cultural items can be used to investigate a culture without undue subjectivity; also implied in the chapter is an unstated argument that using sculpture to address aspects of Yorùbá reality – by merging personal observation, experiential and academic knowledge, public/cultural knowledge, and perspectives from existing literature – is an effective strategy that applies autoethnography to oppose hegemonic, Eurocentric narratives of Yorùbá reality.

The chapter deploys sculpture to address not only Yorùbá reality but also scholarship on Yorùbá (and African) art, which foregrounds the function of sculptures as archival materials with cultural significance. It also addresses issues of the linguistic turn, authorship, and religious significance through the advocacy for, focus on, and use of Yorùbá epistemic concepts to appreciate the artistry and significance of sculptures. To properly engage sculptures as repositories of cultural knowledge, epistemic concepts and philosophical principles of indigenous tradition must be applied. The chapter buttresses this thesis by locating oversights caused by outsiders' perspectives within an insider-outsider dialectic, emphasizing its influence on the study of Yorùbá sculpture.

By identifying sculpted materials as tools for performing a critical appraisal of Yorùbá history, economics, politics, and artistic industry, [Chapter 9](#)

explores the methodologies of understanding, ideologies contained in, and epistemologies sustained by Yorùbá sculptures and sculptural tradition. The chapter discusses the idea of sculptures as agents of socioconsciousness, repositories of knowledge, cultural codes, and reflectors of Yorùbá spirituality, philosophy, and religion.

“Textiles as Texts,” the following chapter, engages textiles as readable materials. It argues that Yorùbá textiles and sartorial tradition reflect the history, sociocultural economies, politics, and spiritualities of their culture. The presentation of textiles as text makes an argument for certain knowledge practices that define textiles as systems, especially ones that accommodate other mini-systems. These practices present a rich history of Yorùbá clothing, debating and correcting European misconceptions of Yorùbá garment origins and their dress tradition. This chapter also presents the Yorùbá cloth-weaver as a creator who allows intimate cultural values, as well as the configurations and ethos of society, to reflect through their created work.

Approaching textiles as text provides avenues for exploring their textuality, especially in their reflection of African epistemologies. In exploring the components of Yorùbá textiles, the chapter extracts the meanings invested in them, which have cultural and historical significance. These meanings retain, safeguard, and foreground histories that are an alternative to those created by Eurocentric scholarship. The readability of the texts is emphasized by the way that they reflect realities, philosophical concepts, and social codes when held in visual dialogue.

Chapter 10 reinforces the place of Yorùbá and African sartorial influences on Western designers, using different cloth types as primary data, and it reconsiders the European entry into the African cloth market. It also reexplores the theory that Africa has perpetually drawn creative influences from the West; this assumption is negated through a counter-narrative establishing how Yorùbá cloth types, tastes, and an established sartorial industry existed before European contact, influencing designers who sought to break into the African cloth market.

This chapter also emphasizes the readability of textiles by highlighting associations between different cloth types and existing cultural principles and folkloric practices. It not only imparts an understanding of a rich sartorial culture where clothes have designated functions and values, but it also explains how Yorùbá dresses serve as indexes that point to different junctures in time and space, as well as visions or ideas that have persisted throughout Yorùbá cultural history. Textiles embody cultural concepts and philosophies, reflecting cultural adherence or disobedience.

Chapter 11, “Canvas and the Archiving of Ethnic Reality,” interrogates the rapport between Yorùbá painting and spirituality, cultural order and principles, and artistic practices. It provides a conceptual understanding of the canvas as a blank space upon which the collective Yorùbá unconscious is

inscribed with brush strokes and vivid colors, tracing the functionality of Yorùbá art in a cyclical process of inspiration between the painter, the culture, and the artwork. The complementarity between Yorùbá painting and culture addresses how fundamental epistemic and philosophical concepts are realized in paintings. For example, *Ọ̀nà* (crossroad) in Yorùbá painting exists as an artistic expression and a culturally loaded concept related to epistemic concepts such as *Ìpín* (lot), *Àyànmọ́* (destiny), and *Kádàrá* (fate), affecting how they are realized on the canvas with culturally coded patterns or symbols.

Examining painting as visual rhetoric provides channels for exploring its place and its networks in Yorùbá culture – it is a contrast to the exhibitive dynamics within which visual artwork exists in the West. Addressing these networks identifies the close-knit, dynamic interaction between Yorùbá culture and its artistic practices. In Yorùbá culture the mediumship of painting galvanizes the creation of networks for artistic patronage, which develop differently from those in the West. This chapter explores the importance of “the network of placement” for understanding patronage, and painting exhibition in Yorùbá culture.

Paintings are idealizing frames in Yorùbá culture; this chapter explores how paintings condition human behavior and succeed at redefining the ambassadorial qualities that the culture endorses. These engagements are supported by the link between the aesthetic qualities inherent in Yorùbá painting and their cultural values. The chapter engages the intelligibility that characterizes Yorùbá painting as visual rhetoric by examining cultural concepts and realities such as aesthetic of the cool, *Orí* (head/destiny), *Àṣẹ* (generative power), and communalism and kinship systems (*Èbí*, *Ará*, *Mọ̀lẹ́bí*), using the archival images as examples. The examination is enriched by Yorùbá folklore, including proverbs, maxims, songs, and spirituality. Images from the archive support the exploration and allow the chapter to trace the circle that binds painting, painter, and culture together.

The subsequent chapter, “Yorùbá Hair Art and the Agency of Women,” explores hair as art, power, and symbol. Focusing on women’s hair, it addresses the hair’s synecdochical power, expressivity, and cultural symbolism. It also examines hair’s metaphysical connotations in Yorùbá ontology and cosmology while addressing its proximity to Yorùbá spirituality. Yorùbá women are placed within this discourse, and the chapter discusses how the art of styling hair affects social perception, representation, and cultural expectations of women and the female identity. The art of the coiffeur in Yorùbá culture is a dedicated performance of identity; it narrates, instructs, educates, and holds people in visual dialogues.

Chapter 12 interrogates the styling of women’s hair as an avenue for power shifts between the sexes as well as between the female subject and members of society. The workplace of the coiffeuse is a performative space where transformational power is exhibited – in the Yorùbá social sphere this is a fecund

space for female solidarity, expressions of femininity, cultural pedagogy and reorientation, and a place to ventilate and learn as well as a space for excising mutually felt forms of oppression. It is germane to the structure of Yorùbá society as a space of both conformity and nonconformity, reaffirming orality and the efficacy of folkloric elements such as proverbs, songs, and panegyrics for cultural progress.

By focusing on the workplace of the *Onídírí* (hairstylist) as a unit in the Yorùbá social sphere, the chapter considers the self-reflexivity and referential power of women's hair. Aside from foregrounding the symbolism of Yorùbá hairstyles and how they reveal accepted expressions of femininity, or their transgression, it also demonstrates how hair is an expression of self-fashioning for the Yorùbá woman. The chapter employs Yorùbá epistemic concepts to evaluate the function of women's hairstyles and their place in Yorùbá ontology and the culture's social space. It explains how these hairstyles reveal several Yorùbá philosophies on beauty, moderation, aestheticism, behavior, extravagance, artistry, tradition, authorship, civility, anti-aesthetics, and creation and rebirth, among others. The chapter also traces connections between Yorùbá hair and cultural beliefs on destiny, deity worship, and visual engagement or the act of seeing and being seen in Yorùbá culture. By evaluating women's hair as art, the chapter applies aesthetic principles associated with Yorùbá art, relying on images from the archive.

Chapter 13, "Photography and Ethnography," traces the connections between photography as a tool, an activity, and a producer of knowledge and culture. It reflects on the nature of photographs, especially in relation to African culture, its people, and black skin in general by engaging with photography as a colonial tool and activity, along with several photographs that provide physical representations of the camera's power. Aspects of photography are significant as processes and activities for encoding knowledge, and although they are non-material they are integral to the way that photographic images and tools are received and used. The chapter also focuses on how racial politics, cultural practices, and knowledge – whether an insider's or an outsider's – influence perception of photographs and the impact of photographs on individuals.

This chapter traces the memory function of photographs, touching on the colonial imperatives sustained by cameras and the technology that aids their functionality. It also addresses the visibility and agency afforded by digital cameras, rescuing them from subaltern positions. It remains an open question whether digital cameras are completely autonomous from the colonial imperatives that are discoverable through the use and functionality of analog cameras. The gaze behind the digital camera, with its own cultural conditioning, controls what is produced. The camera lens that focuses on the subject is also conditioned by the human eye that directs it.

The chapter further addresses the possibilities that digital cameras offer to people as individuals, without sacrificing their position in a culture as

members of a collective. It interrogates these possibilities because they do not erase the powerful relation between the camera lens and the human eye, despite the tools available to manipulate images during or after production. These explorations are carried out to foreground possibilities for the reception of photographs in a world where lenses, either human or machine, are conditioned by contextual knowledge.

Ultimately, this chapter explores how photographs can affect the remembrance of Yorùbá cultural history – the human eye that creates through the camera lens, or the eye that sees the finished product as a photograph, is a product of cultural conditioning. It examines photographs as major archives, exhuming history and establishing linkages. The discussions attempt to answer these questions: Do photographs represent certain sources of or advancements in knowledge? How are meaning and deduction, as aspects of seeing and gazing, implicated in, through, and by photographs? Do contextual realities extend the frame of photographs beyond that which is visible on the canvas? Images from the archive expand on this chapter's arguments.

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

Chapter 14, “Self, Collective, and Collection,” builds on the case made for autoethnography, concluding the thesis of the book by reflecting on the interconnection between the self, the collective culture, and the archive in the form of the collection. It presents the self as its own narrative, which can be understood via its actions, including the creation of an archive. It argues for a collection as a manifestation of cultural ideologies, especially in relation to the Yorùbá, who consider archives to be a means of defining selfhood. The chapter also makes arguments for the premises of the previous chapters by emphasizing their connection with the idea of autoethnography and their relation to one another, sustaining and reemphasizing African knowledge.



## Autoethnography and Epistemic Liberation

“A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and souls of its people.”

-Gandhi

The relationship between knowledge and power is as old as civilization itself. Institutions support systems of knowledge that reinforce their power to rule.<sup>1</sup> The Pharaohs were central to the religion of ancient Egypt, and that religion reinforced their rule. Academia as a system is central to the power structure of the modern period – since the age of Enlightenment, it has become the center of knowledge that supports those who wield power in the global world. This originates, in part, from European colonization of the Global South, industrialization, and the projectile of (post)modernism. This historical process inflicted physical, economic, political, and institutional violence on colonized peoples.

The institutions that developed in the context of colonialism exist beyond liberation struggles and nation-state independence movements. They include global economic, political, and cultural patterns that disadvantage postcolonial nations, and these patterns represent the colonial matrix of power.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge is at the center of the colonial matrix of power. Western powers support academia as a system that maintains Eurocentricity.

Western universities are infused with colonial and Eurocentric perspectives. Their system of knowledge production, which originates from Enlightenment-era definitions of “knowledge,” is the product of European epistemology. Globalization has spread this knowledge more widely as the standard and encouraged culturally inappropriate research. The Global South is estimated to produce less than 3 percent of academic articles published annually.<sup>3</sup> In Africa the percentage is only about 0.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> For instance, countries such as the

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power, Truth, Strategy* (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Peace A. Medie and Alice J. Kang, “Power, Knowledge and the Politics of Gender in the Global South,” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 37–53.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Zeleza and Garry Weare, *Rethinking Africa’s Globalization*, vol. I: *The Intellectual Challenges* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003).

United States of America publish over 300,000 books every year. Postcolonial nations, such as El Salvador, Tanzania, and Oman, produce less than 500.<sup>5</sup> The social sciences have, arguably, the strongest cultural bias in research in psychology; 96 percent of studies are done on 12 percent of the world's population. Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries account for 12 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> The term WEIRD acknowledges social sciences biases that stem from Eurocentric research. The global academic system amplifies WEIRD voices, drowning out the majority of the world.

Academia creates narratives that are represented as truth(s) through educational institutions. These narratives are the product of research. Research, as an academic activity, is implicated in a systemic process of "taking" data from subaltern cultures and "rebranding" them as Western. This academic culture was initiated by European modernity, which laid the groundwork for Western dominance. The ethics, procedures, and methods of this research produce narratives that favor the capitalist philosophies of the West. If these narratives are only created in Western nations, they do not represent a global truth. Western perspectives are influenced by economic and political motivations that perpetuate Eurocentric superiority and maintain the colonial matrix of power. These perspectives protect European self-identity – Western epistemology creates European frameworks for non-European issues.<sup>7</sup>

Women, minority groups, and the people of postcolonial nations have been made to represent what is called subaltern academia. This is not due to their population size, but to their lack of representation in academic literature. When studying the so-called subaltern, Western academics analyze research through the perspective of the West; they are unable to experience the perspective of this subaltern or create enough room for the subaltern's ascendance to power. This struggle for inclusion or independent representation within the matrix of power is what Denis Ekpo in his Post-Africanist<sup>8</sup> pursuit has totally condemned as self-deluding and obstructive to modernity, and which disregards the latent truth that Western ideologies and narratives of the

<sup>5</sup> Worldometers, "Book Statistics," New Book Titles Published. Accessed February 7, 2019, [www.worldometers.info/books/](http://www.worldometers.info/books/).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33 (2010): 61–135.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Brennan, "Antonio Gramsci and Postcolonial Theory: 'Southernism,'" *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 143–187.

<sup>8</sup> See Denis Ekpo, "Towards a Post-Africanism: Contemporary African Thought and Postmodernism," *Textual Practice* 9, no. 1 (1995): 121–135; Denis Ekpo, "From Negritude to Post-Africanism," *Third Text* 24, no. 2 (2010): 177–187; Denis Ekpo, "Africa without Africanism: Post-Africanism vs Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Culture/Art," in *The Arts and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in a Modernized Africa*, ed. Rudi de Lange, Ingrid Stevens, Runette Kruger, and Mzo Sirayi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 1–28.

subaltern are forms of epistemic violence. They are so, for they are tangible forms of trauma inflicted on the ex-colonized when their story is told for them,<sup>9</sup> or are deliberately constructed and exploited by the West to fortify and maintain its place within the power matrix. However, his call for those forced into the category of the subaltern to literally prostrate before the purported Eurocentric ideologies to navigate modernity is itself more self-deluding. Kant defines human dignity, which separates humanity from animals, as the ability to reason. The subaltern's exclusion from academia denies these groups their membership in the genus of human beings.<sup>10</sup> It all adds up when we consider that one of the principal excuses behind the category of the "subaltern" used to describe and group ex-colonized cultures is the supposed lack of reasoning or the inability to think for themselves.

The solution to this is decoloniality: dismantling the colonial matrix of power. This is both a political and an epistemic process.<sup>11</sup> In academia, decoloniality requires the rejection of Eurocentric epistemologies and the acceptance of the Global South's epistemic perspectives. To reach epistemic liberation, subaltern academics must advocate for the legitimacy of subalternized epistemologies. Then they must put these epistemologies into practice. But these must first be preceded by a careful identification and rigorous conceptualization.

Epistemic liberation faces several challenges. Universities often respond to academic Eurocentricity by recruiting students from the Global South, and these students face a "sandwich problem." They internalize the Western epistemic perspective as truth and return home to view local problems through Western frameworks – they fail to integrate their education into their culture<sup>12</sup> and their culture into their education. This can create first- and second-order Eurocentrism. Finding ways to make research accessible to those in the Global South is also a challenge. Limiting factors include economics, politics, access to technology, and access to education. Bilingual papers may help make research more accessible to non-English speakers,<sup>13</sup> but this relies on Europeans to create the academic narrative and share it with the subaltern. Decoloniality advocates for the epistemic liberation of the subaltern. However, this literature

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Masaka, "The Prospects of Ending Epistemicide in Africa: Some Thoughts," *Journal of Black Studies* 49, no. 3 (2018): 284–301.

<sup>10</sup> Masaka, "The Prospects."

<sup>11</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa: Decoloniality, Africa, Power, Knowledge, Being," *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 485–496.

<sup>12</sup> Birgit Brock-Utne, "Researching Language and Culture in Africa using an Autoethnographic Approach," *International Review of Education* 64, no. 6 (2018): 713–735.

<sup>13</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Elsa M. González y González, "The Search for Emerging Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Further Strategies for Liberatory and Democratic Inquiry," *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 5 (2008): 784–805.

is limited to the academic location of history or subaltern studies.<sup>14</sup> Subaltern academics still rely on publishing through Eurocentric epistemology for validation.

This chapter explores epistemology's role in the colonial matrix of power, specifically in relation to the field of ethnography. It deconstructs the researcher's role in ethnography, including the biases involved. It examines the merits of qualitative, narrative research and its congruence with indigenous epistemology. And it proposes the underutilized methodology of auto-ethnography as a tool for epistemic liberation. In doing so, it explores the epistemic foundations, criticism, and the decolonial value of autoethnography.

### Defining Ethnography

Ethnography has its roots in nineteenth-century colonialism, when the study of non-Western cultures was fetishized as "orientalism" or understanding the ways of "backwardness,"<sup>15</sup> and the image and idea of Africa continues to be antithetically collapsed into an exotic and primitive frame. Ethnography provided ideological support for colonial efforts and the idea of the white man's burden. The Global South was perceived as helpless and hapless, so this Christ complex and "civilizing mission" attempted to convert its people to Christianity and teach them the ways of Western "civilization": the greatest deceit and irony of history, perhaps, was that the West had attempted to rescue the indigenous peoples it had endangered. Ethnography's foundational scholars were white men from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as E. B. Tylor, Lewis H. Morgan, Franz Boas, and Bronislaw Malinowski. These scholars wrote about their extensive fieldwork in the Global South from the perspective of Western colonialism.

Malinowski established that his intent was to understand cultures from the perspective of the people he studied.<sup>16</sup> However, his research remains tainted by his assumptions that he studied people who were "backward," "less civilized," and "primordial." Researchers such as Alain Locke did not begin to explore the idea of cultural relativism until 1924. This concept began to deconstruct colonial terms, including "civilizing mission," to reveal their racist foundations. Cultural relativism in the social sciences marked a turn toward the acceptance of cultural and ideological differences.

The ideas of ethnography and cultural relativism have shaped the development of cultural anthropology. Although researchers in ethnography engage in extensive fieldwork studies to examine the perspective of the "other," they will

<sup>14</sup> Shome Raka and Radha S. Hegde, "Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 3 (2002): 249–270.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Race & Class* 27, no. 2 (1985): 1–15.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Firth, ed., *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, Malinowski Collected Works 10 (London: Routledge, 2002).

always be outsiders – they will never understand their subjects’ perspective as if it were their own experience. This is seen in the mis- and underrepresentation of those epistemologies and their uniqueness as a cultural group.

Modern ethnography expands its scope beyond the study of the “other” to include academics researching their own cultures and the roles of culture in society. Modern ethnographers do not exclusively perform extensive fieldwork in foreign nations. They study various topics around culture, including human behavior, gender relations, minority relations, and societal patterns. An ethnographer was able to use data from traffic cameras to improve city parking communications.<sup>17</sup> The broad nature of ethnography translates to diversity in autoethnography, which explores not only the perspective of various cultures but also of subcultural groups.

The problematic nature of ethnography stems from Western academia’s attempts to represent alternative cultures, to impose itself as the objective and universal viewpoint. Ethnography functions through the ethnographer’s study of the “other,” and all academic work is done through the identity of the researcher.<sup>18</sup> Ethnography is the intersection of two identities: the people studied and the self-identity of the researcher. The way that researchers view themselves, especially in relation to the subjects of their research, informs their analysis and conclusions. This identity is influenced by the transaction of gender, nationality, ethnicity, age, religion, self-image, and other factors. The neutrality of ethnography is a myth.

Many ethnographers correct for the biased nature of ethnography through a constructive approach where the researcher does not form theories prior to observation. The subject is handled in an exploratory manner, with the goal of collecting as much information as possible before evaluating it for patterns.<sup>19</sup> This approach creates less biased research, but it does not escape the researcher’s identity that influences their perceptions. From start to finish, fieldwork ethnography is a result of the researcher’s identity influencing the data.

Using the rainbow analogy: culture is similar to a rainbow that looks different depending on where the observer is standing. A person close to the rainbow will see a different shape and length than someone seeing it from far away, although they are viewing the same occurrence. Culture also appears differently depending on the position of the observer. An outsider’s view of a culture may appear completely different from an insider’s perspective.<sup>20</sup> The

<sup>17</sup> Ellen Isaacs, “Ethnography: Ellen Isaacs at TEDxBroadway,” March 2013, TedxBroadway video, 12:02, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV0jY5VgymI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV0jY5VgymI).

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Mayukh Dewan, “Understanding Ethnography: An ‘Exotic’ Ethnographer’s Perspective,” in *Asian Qualitative Research in Tourism*, ed. P. Mura and C. Khoo-Lattimore (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 185–203.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce LaBrack, “Disciplinary Approaches to Culture: Anthropology,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence*, ed. Janet M. Bennett (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 245–248.

insider is not merely observing the culture and the patterns defining it, which connects to the premise of the research. Insider-researchers allow their identity as members to shape their approach to the observed phenomena.

Gary Alan Fine has focused his research on ethics and misrepresentations in ethnography. Fine asserts that ethnographic research must regulate the effect of the research on the community. This includes its effect on outsiders' perceptions of the community. Fine emphasizes the freedom that researchers have in ethnographic studies – their data is often paraphrased, and the ethnographer is vulnerable to myriad biases. In one representation of ethnographers Fine outlines the “candid” nature of their research: it is common practice for ethnographers to report narratives or data from events they did not witness. Much of the data is paraphrased or the result of hearsay or assumptions.

Another bias stems from the “chaste” nature of the ethnographers. When living in another culture, personal relationships influence data collection. They inevitably shape the community's perceptions of the researcher. Further bias results from the literary aspect of ethnographic research. Researchers can make their data as literary or factual as they like; the social nature of their research may lead them to exaggerate or include events and phrases that make the research more poetic.<sup>21</sup>

One distinction for ethnographers is whether they write realist or critical ethnography. Realist ethnography focuses on the researcher's view of reality from a neutral perspective. Critical ethnography focuses on minority or systematically oppressed groups, adopting a subaltern perspective. In this type of ethnography the researcher serves as a social advocate for underrepresented groups. The purpose of the research influences the conclusions of the ethnographer's fieldwork.

The attempts of Western researchers to perform realist ethnography on the “other” have resulted in the skewed literature of area studies. For example, African Studies should be focused on the perspective of the African diaspora, using African epistemic perspectives and advocating for contributions from African academics. However, its foundation rests on aid organizations, missionaries, and the imperial administrators of the nineteenth century. The field developed in Western universities, and African epistemic and philosophical perspectives did not enter the academic discussion until the 1980s. The field remains vulnerable to a desire for validation from Western academics; Eurocentric perspectives are still favored in publishing decisions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Gary Alan Fine, “Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22, no. 3 (1993): 267–294.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah O. Arowosegbe, “African Studies and the Bias of Eurocentricism,” *Social Dynamics* 40, no. 2 (2014): 308–321.

Instead of confining African epistemology within a subsection of Africana Studies, every piece of knowledge produced within the field should take the African epistemic and philosophical perspective.<sup>23</sup> The only way to truly understand a culture or group of cultures is to analyze them from their own perspective. This chapter – and the entire book – is anchored on this premise. Chapters on textiles, painting, and women's hair, along with the memoirs, the poetry, and the photographs, all draw from this philosophy. Each chapter focuses on the Yorùbá people through representational materials.

The use of materials as touchstones is an approach to examine the onto-epistemology, worldview, folkloric practices, and life of the Yorùbá with an insider's critical perspective. The premises of these chapters converge at several ideological junctures, including the use of the indigenous perspective to explore the so-called subaltern reality. This approach complements the ethnographic approach on the one hand and, on the other, subverts the ethnographic misrepresentation that, as Fine argues, continues the unregulated effects of unethical research on the community.

When Yorùbá textiles – whose threads and fabrics are and can be read as metaphors of history or signifiers of cultural periods – are discussed as texts to explore and assert their readability, critical and realist ethnographic methods are combined. On the one hand, this approach channels historical and cultural materials for appropriate representation. On the other hand, it merges objective and personal perspectives for broader cultural representation. In reflecting on the Yorùbá textile industry and sartorial tradition, the sociocultural codes of belonging that define Yorùbá lives and culture are explored. The same concepts apply to the chapter on sculptural works, which allows for a broader appreciation of Yorùbá culture, epistemology, spirituality, and visual artistry revealed through the carvings. The Yorùbá people's collective consciousness is embodied and symbolized through the statuettes and effigies.

According to Ghandi, "A nation's culture lives in the hearts of its people." A responsible representation of culture must be made through the hearts and minds of the people studied. Autoethnography allows individuals to act as both researcher and subject, instead of restricting the researcher's role to that of an outsider. Autoethnographers have autonomy over their own story and what it represents for their culture. These chapters take this philosophy to a logical conclusion: the purpose of this endeavor is to critically and realistically explore an archive of memoirs, essays, artworks, photographs, textiles, and paintings to adequately represent a culture, merging existing conclusions with personal observation.

This exploration is possible because the researcher is part of a collective consciousness; their consciousness is an intelligence that can reflect and be

<sup>23</sup> Sureshi M. Jayawardene and Serie McDougal, "Francis Cress Welsing's Contributions to Africana Studies Epistemology," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 1 (2017): 43–56.

reflected upon. The chapters herein unpack and creatively recombine the insider–outsider dichotomy of research, driven by the desire to serve as an interrogative voice that also casts illumination on itself and what it represents. The insider voice, besides being critical, is participatory. Through it, collective channels of thought and cultural wisdom that manifest through art forms such as canvas and sculpture can be duly appreciated and observed.

### The Merits of Qualitative Research

Some scholars reject autoethnography because of the researcher’s contradictory role as researcher and subject, although these chapters establish that neither is mutually exclusive. Autoethnographic researchers defy the Western epistemic value of neutrality in social sciences. This value of the “neutral researcher” represents separatism in research and the division of the humanities and sciences, or the separation of the mind and the heart in Western academia. In the West, science follows the empirical method. The researcher does not express interpretations of the research beyond that which can be proven through scientific inquiry. It is a Eurocentric view of knowledge as separate from personal experience, opinion, religion, or emotion.

A humanistic approach to social science requires qualitative research. Quantitative research is necessary in the physical sciences, where measurements are exact and nature responds often reliably, but research is more relative in the social sciences. Some researchers try to make social science research quantitative through coding, where they analyze interviews or behaviors and group them into categories. This reductionist approach simplifies the wide range of human experience into numbers. Although quantitative social science research can be useful, qualitative research adds a more complete picture of the human experience. A humanistic approach to research analyzes interviews or behavior from a narrative perspective that finds themes and showcases individual narratives.

Qualitative research is more appropriate to the social sciences because of its coherence with subaltern epistemologies. In many cultures the Western division between emotion and science does not exist. For example, African epistemologies commonly integrate religious themes with science.<sup>24</sup> They also value orations handed down from generations of experience and consider testimony as knowledge. The exploration of Yorùbá sculpture in [Chapter 9](#), “Sculpture as an Archive,” reveals that the *Gbènàgbènà/Gbègilére* (woodcarver/the artist) and the *Gbènugbènu* (the oral critic) act as living signifiers for the workings of indigenous epistemologies and cultural systems. Or the significance of Ìyá Lékuléja, as highlighted in *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* in [Chapter 4](#),

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, “Religion and Politics: Taking African Epistemologies Seriously,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 3 (2007): 385–401.



“Memory, Magic, Myth, and Metaphor,” as a representative of the ingenuity of traditional herbal knowledge.

When evaluating sculpture, the Yorùbá oral critic uses creative praise to critically appreciate beauty in the process of visually communing with the artwork and the artist. These oral renditions are not mere praise employed to appreciate delicate designs and skilled hands; they recognize and reflect the hours of work, industry, and mental fortitude required to create the sculptures. The criticism also considers the transformative power of the artist and the artwork. The testimony of the *Gbènugbènu* is respected for its knowledge within a specific field of art, and the knowledge required to perform this testimony is a product of genealogy and generational transfer.

The artworks themselves hold religious significance, even when they are subjected to scientific and methodical principles for the creation of art, such as measurement, luminosity, symmetry, height, and verisimilitude. Yorùbá art is holistic, and so is its criticism. The *Gbènugbènu*, as an oral aesthete with the critical power to make informed commentary, dovetails with the creative structures of African epistemologies. These holistic contributions touch on several aspects of the sculpture’s world: its spiritual and moral connotations, historical and social importance, and creative significance. The critical “testimony” is a well-rounded approach supported by a need to sensitize other artisans or apprentices or to sanitize the society. This process reveals the holistic power of African epistemologies that can serve as critical modes of understanding. To appreciate this feature of African art, scholars such as Babalola Yai have advocated for a return to the use of African concepts and epistemologies to appreciate African cultural forms.

On a general note, African epistemologies are holistic, blending morality with the pursuit of science. African artisans, sculptors, painters, or hairstylists embody this symbiosis perfectly. They pursue excellence, experimentation, and innovation without neglecting the sociocultural implications of those choices and the existing tradition. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is often considered unnecessary and futile. Afrocentric research typically privileges knowledge that improves lives within the community<sup>25</sup> because it centralizes issues and realities such as the aforementioned.

The global academic system validates knowledge based on the West’s imposed epistemic foundations. The subalternized indigenous researcher must overcome this bias by actively reshaping epistemic foundations.<sup>26</sup> Many researchers advocate for methodological diversity to represent an

<sup>25</sup> Kiatezua Lubanzadio Luyaluka, “An Essay on Naturalized Epistemology of African Indigenous Knowledge,” *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 6 (2016): 497–523.

<sup>26</sup> Mambo Ama Mazama, “Afrocentricity and African Spirituality,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 2 (2002): 218–234.

Afrocentric perspective.<sup>27</sup> Afrocentric research uses the epistemology of African philosophies to theorize on data about Africa.<sup>28</sup>

However, researchers who present themselves as neutral often come off foreign and cold in Africa.<sup>29</sup> Afrocentricity rejects objectivity: the idea of the “neutral researcher” that originated in the West. Other elements of Afrocentricity in social science research are cultural centeredness, knowledge pluralism, and holistic thinking.<sup>30</sup> The ideal Afrocentric social science research is performed by a community member who can accurately understand and represent the culture, presenting it to the outside world in a way that is helpful to the community and appropriate for local philosophy. This researcher would practice methodological reflexivity by considering how their personal life and position in the community affects their research. One of such frameworks for conducting Afrocentric research is autoethnography.

### Introducing Autoethnography

Autoethnography defies the Eurocentric standard of conducting science from a neutral perspective; instead, the researcher’s own narrative is used to explore cultural themes. Researchers embrace and analyze their biases, as opposed to ignoring them, as part of their work.<sup>31</sup> This autoethnographic research at the very least complements the deficiencies of and in traditional ethnographic fieldwork, while also serving as an alternative, especially with its emphasis or posturing as being heavily and perhaps more natural and humanistic than traditional ethnographic fieldwork, as pointed out already.

To understand autoethnography, we must break it into its parts. “Auto” requires the narrative to be a self-narrative. It must describe the author’s own life, not the experience of anyone else or intentional research. “Ethno” requires the narrative to relate to larger themes about a culture or subgroup. The

<sup>27</sup> Shannon Morreira, “Steps towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 3 (2017): 287–301.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth W. Stikkers, “An Outline of Methodological Afrocentrism, with Particular Application to the Thought of W. E. B. DuBois,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2008): 40–49.

<sup>29</sup> Karanja Keita Carroll and DeReef F. Jamison, “African-Centered Psychology, Education and the Liberation of African Minds: Notes on the Psycho-Cultural Justification for Reparations,” *Race, Gender & Class* 18, no. 1–2 (2011): 52–72.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Schreiber, “Overcoming Methodological Elitism: Afrocentrism as a Prototypical Paradigm for Intercultural Research,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 5 (2000): 651–671.

<sup>31</sup> Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, Marjorie Treff, and Irianti Usman, “Research for Social Change: Using Autoethnography to Foster Transformative Learning,” *Adult Learning* 16, no. 3–4 (2005): 30–31.

narrative must contribute to the field of knowledge in order to be considered “Graphy.”<sup>32</sup>

Although there is much debate over what counts as autoethnography, there is a distinct difference between autoethnography and autobiography. Both describe the narrative experience of a singular person. Both can be emotionally gripping and culturally informative. An autobiography might provide insights on larger cultural themes, but autobiographies do not explicitly state the narrative’s implications in the context of cultural research.

Olaudah Equiano wrote *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano*, a narrative providing insight into the Atlantic slave trade and the problems of Africans enslaved in the Americas. The book provided a cultural commentary that motivated social change. However, Equiano did not write an explicit analysis of his experiences in relation to the larger culture or how it related to previous writings on the topic. An autoethnography must not only present a story; it must also bridge that story and its contributions to cultural understanding.

In contrast, this book’s autoethnographic chapters explore an archive of collections in light of their relation to the Yorùbá sociocultural and epistemic firmament, reflecting the latter’s cultural and religio-spiritual configuration. Autoethnography developed within the context of the 1980s, which was a time in academia when people began to lose their faith in master narratives, seeking more qualitative and humanistic data in research. Autoethnography functions not to discredit previous ethnographic literature nor the master narratives, but to offer new and complementary narrative perspectives.

Examples include the chapter on photography, which presents perspectives that do not reject existing positions on the subject, even if it takes a different approach to generating its conclusion. The chapter on Yorùbá women’s hair contains commentary on the expressivity of these hairstyles, and not only because hair has been discussed in this light. It is also because I grew up within this tradition; my relationship with the subjects comes from a place that is simultaneously critical and personal. Likewise, my reflections on *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* establish the need for an alternative narrative that realigns history toward appropriate factuality and wider inclusiveness. Laurel Richardson describes autoethnography as a crystal offering new perspectives based on the positionality of the author. No single narrative perspective represents a complete truth, merely different perspectives on the same story. Autoethnography rejects master narratives to organize individual stories into larger cultural themes,<sup>33</sup> which is the premise of this book.

<sup>32</sup> Satoshi Toyosaki, “Toward De/Postcolonial Autoethnography: Critical Relationality with the Academic Second Persona,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 32–42.

<sup>33</sup> L. Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

### Epistemic Foundations of Autoethnography

The epistemic foundation of Western science holds that there is a single truth to be revealed. The assumption is that any pursuit of this truth is beneficial to humankind, and Western epistemology is based on this binary of truth and untruth. In contrast, the epistemic foundations of autoethnography are based on the plurality of knowledge and humanism.

I have already explained the secularity of research and its incompatibility with subaltern epistemologies. Ultimately, secularity is not neutrality because subaltern epistemologies often include religious perspectives. This Western concept of secularity reflects a Western bias in research.<sup>34</sup> The West's attempts to remain secular extend far beyond religion: scientific articles disclose any conflicts of interest that may have affected the research, including personal biases, company affiliations, or personal relationships. With these acknowledgments, the author claims neutrality and asserts that any bias, even if it has been disclosed, has been removed from the final product.

Autoethnography embraces the context of research, and the author includes religious, personal, and cultural influences through their personal narrative. It encourages the synthesis of various facets of indigenous life, executing a reflexive investigation of culture. Therefore, the epistemic foundation of autoethnography is an investigation into the context of the research, biases and all.

Procedure is another epistemic foundation of Western science, operating under the assumption that the scientific method allows scientists to discover truth. Researchers are required to follow various procedures, including academic publishing requirements, IRB certification, and university guidelines. These procedures are deeply embedded in the academic system, to the point where any research that follows them is accepted as truth. Research that does not follow these procedures is typically rejected as pseudoscience. Autoethnography's lack of fixed, rigid, and preexisting procedure and standardization is epistemic disobedience – traditional research attempts to sort data into a framework of preexisting research, but autoethnography takes a constructivist approach that creates something new. The epistemic perspective of autoethnography is that procedure is not always rationality.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of a singular truth is also present in the social sciences. Western social sciences seek ultimate truths of human nature. Autoethnography assumes that human behavior is relative. Two theories explaining this assumption are cultural constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Social constructivism holds that human behavior is not standardized, and that it differs

<sup>34</sup> J. K. H. Tse, "Grounded Theologies: 'Religion' and the 'Secular' in Human Geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 2 (2014): 201–220.

<sup>35</sup> T. A. Schwandt, "Farewell to Criteriology," *Qualitative Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (1996): 58–72.

between cultures. It rejects any standards or comparisons of morality, meaning, or behavior – each is considered to depend on preexisting cultural values.

Humans develop through their social interactions. Their knowledge and behavior changes in response to their physical and social environment, meaning that there can be no singular truth; knowledge is socially constructed by individual experiences within a culture. Autoethnography supports social constructivism by examining the truth of individuals in their social context.

Consider the prejudices structured into photographic tools that deny visibility to the black body, even when their functions are allegedly to improve it. This truth cannot be glossed over in the context of African postcolonialism, where matrixes of Western imperialism are sustained in overt and covert forms. By using select photographs as templates, the ethnographic impulse is sustained and relative truth in social constructivism is maintained for individual agency – that of the man whose black skin cannot be accommodated in the postproduction stages of photography, whether analog or digital. Any photographic representation is, at best, an afterthought of the tool's configuration. This is his truth, refutable when spread beyond his cultural domain.

Symbolic interactionism explains how groups socially construct knowledge. Symbols can take the form of rituals, items, words, people, or pictures that have meaning for individuals because of their cultural context. When ethnographers try to analyze another culture's symbols, they will never truly understand the meaning outside of their own cultural context. An ethnographer might see a Yorùbá religious mask as part of a play, which would miss the symbol's meaning as an embodiment of an ancestral spirit during those rituals. Autoethnography corrects for symbolic interactionism through the researcher's insight into the culture studied.

Another example is the potency of images and artwork, or even the exhibitivite context within which photographs, paintings, or portraits come alive generally in the indigenous culture. To the West, exhibition is when works are set in a museum or capitalist-oriented public displays. The cultural transactions in the exhibitivite milieus of native settings depart from those of the European world, and so does the ideology upholding them. The networked system of distribution and exhibition for paintings, sculpture, or photographs relies heavily on kinship and close-knit relational systems. The mix of the status symbol's value and the materialist orientation of the Yorùbá provide templates for art patronage that galvanize interest and initiate exhibitivite procedures. Appreciation for these distributive networks rests on cultural awareness and aesthetic considerations informed by sociocultural and religiouspiritual consciousness.

Another epistemic foundation of autoethnography is its interdisciplinary flexibility, its ability to cross disciplines. Traditional Western epistemology separates science and the humanities. Scientists do not include poetry or commentary about their passion for research, and humanitarians rarely

conduct scientific analysis of literary works. Autoethnography blurs the line between art and science.<sup>36</sup> It works from the epistemic foundation that literature, on its own, cannot provide the social commentary that contributes to knowledge about culture. Science alone is also considered too detached from the human experience to capture it in a relatable, practical way. In this way, autoethnography practices border thinking that stands in opposition to academic separatism.

Academic separatism divides the fields of the art and science and breaks them down further into categories. The arts break down into literature, history, visual art, and dance. The sciences are divided into physical and social sciences, and even further into sociology and psychology. Researchers in each academic field are expected to keep within the scope of their field of study, avoiding research that crosses disciplines. Complex subjects, such as globalization, culture, colonization, racism, and human behavior, are influenced by multiple disciplines. The ability of researchers to venture outside their field and consider problems from epistemic and disciplinary perspectives is called border thinking.

Border thinking recognizes the limitations and strengths of all academic disciplines. It encourages academics to look at every field as useful but limited. Researchers can decide how the different fields fit together to portray a more exhaustive truth. Through border thinking, the Western epistemic perspective is neither right nor wrong, it merely has limitations.<sup>37</sup> Autoethnography combines literary elements with the social sciences, practicing border thinking and allowing it to elicit emotion and retain relevance, while contributing to humanity's understanding of culture.

Autoethnography embraces pluriversalism of knowledge, an epistemic perspective asserting that no single knowledge system is complete. It is similar to border thinking in that it focuses on the limitations of various epistemic perspectives and fields of knowledge. Instead of seeking a singular answer, it advocates for the acceptance of multiple truths. Autoethnography utilizes individual experiences to invite researchers to express their own truth and accept the truth of others.

Autoethnography's focus on individual experience asserts that reality is ever-changing. Reality is seen not as a singular truth but as the result of humans' interaction with their environment. Autoethnography assumes that the researcher's positionality – their relationship to the research, which includes the beliefs that influence it – is a product of the researcher's lifelong learning and experiences. This allows autoethnography to understand culture

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273–290.

<sup>37</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2000).