



Autoethnography

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Abstract

The term autoethnography was described by Reed-Danahay as ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’. We outline autoethnography’s main characteristics, situate it in relation to the so-called ‘crisis of representation’, and describe five loosely configured categories of autoethnographic practice. We argue that all types of autoethnography dissolve to some extent the boundary between authors and objects of representation, as authors become part of what they are studying, and research subjects are re-imagined as reflexive narrators of self. Dismantling the author/represented boundary in this way has implications for how researchers understand their objects of research and ethnographic knowledge itself. The study discusses the relevance for geographers of the various categories of autoethnographic practice and of a broader autoethnographic sensibility.

Introduction

Identity is often conceptualized as the result of continuous, often tacit, social effort manifest simultaneously as the presentation of self to others through the outward projection of biography and experience, and as ‘a form of “introjection”, a presentation of self to self, the ability to mobilize and hold on to a coherent image of “who one knows one is”’ (DeNora 2000, 63; cf. Giddens 1991). We all engage in this sort of identity work, this presentation of self to others and to oneself. At its most basic, *autoethnography* may be understood as the practice of doing this identity work self-consciously, or deliberately, in order to understand or represent some worldly phenomenon that exceeds the self; it is ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’ (Reed-Danahay 1997b, 9). It is becoming an increasingly common research and representational orientation in the social sciences and humanities.

Autoethnographic self-narratives may take a variety of forms and emerge from a range of speaking positions, including (i) academics’ systematic efforts to analyze their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena; (ii) researchers’ reflective ruminations on their fieldwork encounters; (iii) subaltern subjects’ responses to the ways their group has been represented ethnographically; (iv) so-called ‘Indigenous ethnographies’; and (v) other types of insider or complete member research. In each of these styles of autoethnography, authors scrutinize, publicize, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world. As such, autoethnographies are necessarily *trans*-cultural communications, articulated in relation to self *and* a wider social field that includes an audience of ‘others’. This can be challenging for several reasons. First, in reflecting on one’s own life, it is often difficult to avoid the communicative dead-end of solipsism. Autoethnographies always risk becoming what Van Maanan calls ‘confessional tales’, which ‘take the author or knower as subject matter and

by and large bypass what it is that the author knows because of fieldwork' (Van Maanen 1988, 96; cf. Pile and Thrift 1995). Second, even as autoethnographic narratives strive to represent self in a way that communicates strategically to an audience of others they are also *constitutive* of identity, and therefore autoethnographic self-narration may be risky to *self-identity*. This is most obviously the case with subaltern autoethnographers' self-representing to their oppressors, but pertains to the other – academic – forms of autoethnography as well. Third, the intended audiences for autoethnographic representations, as for other types of research communication, are often multiple and difficult to engage simultaneously. Academic researchers, for example, may have to shape their self-representations to catch the ears of the people with whom they research in the field and in the office, ethics review boards, supervisory committees, editors and peer reviewers, students, colleagues, and so on. The need to communicate effectively and strategically to this variety of audiences necessarily influences our constitution as researchers and the knowledge that we produce, not always in ways we are aware of or would like. Autoethnography provides a mode of *reflexivity* for tracing the effects of these influences on the work that we produce and on our constitution as researching subjects (cf. Meneley and Young 2005).

Our purpose in this study is to provide an overview of autoethnography as a family of research and representational practices, and explain their relevance for geographical scholarship. We begin by tracing the emergence of autoethnography as one product of the 'crisis of representation' that so animated anthropology and other disciplines in the 1980s (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986), as a way to provide a rationale for this difficult form of research practice. We then describe in more detail the five cross-cutting categories of autoethnography listed above, in order to give a sense of the range of current autoethnographic practices and to suggest how they may be used by geographers. Note that the typology we offer is rough and provisional; our attempt to lend some definition to those entangled practices and preoccupations that the academic literature has inconsistently described as autoethnographic. Like other efforts to provide an overview of the field, its purpose is heuristic (cf. Butz 2009; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Reed-Danahay 1997b). The study concludes by advocating in favor of what we call an 'autoethnographic sensibility', whether or not explicitly autoethnographic representational strategies are employed (Besio and Butz 2004; Butz and Besio 2004).

Autoethnography and the 'Crisis of Representation'

Throughout the early 1980s, an assortment of young anthropologists began to develop a critique of the claims anthropology was accustomed to making about the knowledge it produces (cf. Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Turner and Bruner 1986). It culminated in the edited volume, *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), whose main argument Tobias Rees (2008, 5) summarizes, as follows:

... genre constraints govern the composition of ethnographies. These constraints (or conventions) affirm, if only implicitly, colonial perspectives and asymmetries of power in so far as they lead ethnographers to construct timeless others who have presumptively lived in the same way for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years; to construct spatially bound cultures and thus deny mobility; and to speak for the other, thus denying natives a voice of their own. The subtitle, 'on the poetics and politics of ethnography', subtly captures this dual focus on rhetoric and power.

This specifically anthropological argument mingled with similar currents that were developing in other disciplines. A wide range of scholars, including geographers, began

to question the conventions by which their disciplines constituted the objects of research, gathered information about them (ethnographic or otherwise), and developed representations of reality that counted as knowledge. An intellectual – and for many scholars, a professional – crisis ensued that had ontological, epistemological, methodological, representational, and political aspects. It came to be understood as the ‘crisis of representation’ (cf. Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Marcus and Fischer 1986), in large part because of the influence of an emphasis on textuality in the French philosophical thinking that informed much of the critique. Standard scholarly conventions of representing the worlds of others were criticized for reproducing a discourse of academic authority and objectivity – a ‘God’s eye view’ – and of claiming a descriptive and analytical coherence, that were not epistemologically tenable. In particular, by absenting themselves as subjects from their writing, while simultaneously claiming the unquestionable authority of ‘having been there’, researchers were able to avoid the partiality and positionality of their knowledge claims, thereby protecting the illusion that their objects of study were unrelated to the subjectivity that produced knowledge about them. This was understood to be an epistemological problem, in that it ignored the ways that knowledge is imbricated with power and subjectivity (i.e. it was naively realist), and an ontological problem in that it imagined the objects of research in constrained and ideologically suspect ways (e.g. the notions of bounded culture, native informant, belatedness, or the anthropological present).

Dealing with these problems became a major preoccupation across the social sciences and humanities. Following the logic of *Writing culture* that knowledge is produced through representation, many researchers sought a solution by developing experimental (i.e. non-conventional) forms of representation that ‘challenged the realist’ tradition of ‘been there, seen that, know that’ writing (Reed-Danahay 2002, 421). The objective was to destabilize ethnographic authority by writing in a way that emphasized the socially and politically constituted nature of knowledge claims. A variety of *processual* and *confessional* styles resulted, that variously emphasized the unfolding interaction of a biographically situated researcher with a research setting (cf. Crang and Cook 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 1998) and attempted to ‘explicitly demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field’ (Van Maanen 1988, 73). Scholars who developed these approaches aspired to dismantle the anthropological convention of relegating self-narratives – or even methodological reflections on fieldwork – to travelogues or ethnographic memoirs published separately from, and without influencing, the realist discourse of analytical pieces (cf. Hardwick 2001; Malinowski 1967; Pratt 1992; Rabinow 1977). One form non-conventional writing took was *autoethnography*, which radically foregrounds the emotions and experiences of the researcher as a way to acknowledge the inevitably subjective nature of knowledge, and in order to use subjectivity deliberately as an epistemological resource. In other words, autoethnography is the representational outcome – the performance, in a sense – of a process of *critical reflexivity*; what Kim England (1994, 82; emphasis in original) describes as ‘self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher’.

Autoethnography’s development as a representationally focused approach to critical reflexivity was part of a more general tendency to tackle a crisis that was at once epistemological, ontological, political, and methodological from a mainly epistemological direction, a tendency that was recently underscored by George Marcus (quoted in Rabinow et al. 2008, 24):

Writing Culture had two important effects: to make explicit the inadequacy of standard forms of ethnographic writing in dealing with the realities of fieldwork and, therefore, to encourage a critique of the actual process of research itself, of fieldwork. The former effect occurred in excess, from the 1980s on; the latter has hardly occurred at all.

Marcus and his interlocutors argue that two decades after the publication of *Writing culture* field researchers across the disciplines are finally moving beyond the epistemological preoccupations of reflexivity as 'a genre form' (Rabinow et al. 2008, 33), toward an ontological questioning of what constitute the legitimate *objects* of fieldwork. In other words, the big question is shifting from, 'How can we as subjectively positioned researchers adequately know and represent our conventional objects of research?' to, 'What *objects of research* are appropriate to a fieldwork-based analysis of the contemporary world?' In answering the latter question, some scholars have turned away from the analysis of cultures, communities or identity groups, and toward the study of networks, rationalities, and emerging assemblages of one sort or another (cf. Ong and Collier 2005; Rabinow 2003).

This shift to the ontological does not reduce the importance of reflexivity; indeed, critical reflexivity can be a resource for constituting objects of analysis anew. For example, some strands of autoethnography take the critical reflexive struggle to produce knowledge and representations that self-consciously recognize the place of the researcher-self in the production of that knowledge in the direction of constituting that researcher-self – the 'ethnographic "I"' (Ellis 2004) – as the *primary* research subject and the main site of analysis. That is an epistemological *and* ontological move, in that it breaks down the conventional ethnographic distinction between researcher and subject, and thus changes the research subject as an ontological category. If ethnographic research can treat the self as an object of research – an ontological, and not just epistemological, resource – then research subjects in general can no longer be assumed to be definitively 'other'. And if not definitively other, then potentially – and probably actually – as reflexive as the researcher-self. This point is central to Mary Louise Pratt's (1992, 1994, 1999) conception of autoethnography as the self-representations accustomed objects of research produce in dialog with and in response to the ways they have been represented ethnographically. Pratt's understanding of autoethnography implies a transcultural, reflexive, research subject, as distinct from the autochthonous and culturally bounded native informant of traditional ethnography. The object of analysis for Pratt shifts from culture as thing to transculturation as process, and that requires researchers to engage in the reflexive move of understanding themselves as agents and subjects of transculturation, and of imagining fieldwork as a site where transculturation occurs.

Despite criticizing what he sees as ethnography's long tendency to overdose on reflexivity at the expense of developing more adequate objects of research, Marcus recognizes the importance of the sort of reflexivity we describe for resolving ontological questions. He says:

The emergence of the reflexive subject as a trope of research makes one sensitive to the idea that there is very little one can think or imagine in the confines of academic study that is not already thought in some version, expression, or venue in sites and scenes of fieldwork. These discursive chains that link one to one's eventual literal subjects of fieldwork must be thought through and addressed analytically in constituting the very notion of fieldwork for each project of research. To do so creates additional beneficial complexity in the formulation of research in anthropology, and makes visible in the places and spaces of fieldwork a lot that has been elided, kept to the margins, or just not seen for the sake of finding traditional subjects within

accustomed scripts. To understand the problem in this way gets us beyond the question of 'Is the subaltern included?' in our discussions. (George Marcus quoted in Rabinow et al. 2008, 112)

The 'reflexive subject' Marcus is referring to is the *research subject* or participant "'over there'", when in fact the relation of here to there is now organic and graduated' (Rabinow et al. 2008, 112). In other words, ontologically speaking, there is no distinct 'over there'. Neither is there a *researching* subject who is distinct from the 'sites and scenes of fieldwork', a point Rabinow (quoted in Rabinow et al. 2008, 51) stresses as he encourages researchers to engage in,

an undertaking of self-examination, of coming to terms with who you are and how you got to be that way that, if not done, leaves you with the naïve or debased or ill-prepared subject that you very likely are at the outset of any research project.

An *autoethnographic sensibility* – a 'sensitivity to the autoethnographic characteristics of what we learn from research participants as well as to our own situatedness in relation to the people and worlds we are studying' (Butz 2009, 140) – means recognizing that clear-cut distinctions among researchers, research subjects and the objects of research are illusory, and that what we call the research field occupies a space between these overlapping categories. The passages from Marcus and Rabinow quoted above articulate what is at stake epistemologically and ontologically in approaching research with an autoethnographic sensibility, and speak eloquently to its importance. *Autoethnography* as 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997b, 9) is one way to develop or employ an autoethnographic sensibility. We now turn to a description of five main categories of autoethnography to give a sense of the range of current practices and to show their relevance to geographic research.

A Typology of Autoethnographic Practices

The preceding discussion describes autoethnography as an approach to addressing certain aspects of the so-called crisis of representation that rocked parts of the social sciences and humanities in the late 1970s and 1980s. The discussion provides a definition and rationale for autoethnography, to which we now attach five categories of practice that are themselves distilled from a much larger range of 'blurred genres' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 749). It is important to note that most of these predate the crisis of representation and emerged independently of one another for somewhat different purposes. Only in the past decade has this field of representational practices been grouped together under a single heading (Butz 2009; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Reed-Danahay 1997a). In other words, 'autoethnography' is a retrospective label that groups together a variety of existing self-representational practices, and which shapes current practice. Not all people who do any of the things we are calling autoethnography use that label themselves; as Ellis and Bochner (2000, 749) stress, whether a representational strategy is called autoethnography 'depends on the claims made by those who write and those who write about the work'. Few instances of actual self-narrative practice settle comfortably into any of these categories without remainder. Autoethnography is just one approach to challenging the realist and objectivist pretensions of conventional ethnographic discourse. Others include, for example, dialogic or polyvocal modes of representation (cf. Price 1998; Shostak 1981; Tedlock 1983), a heightened openness and sensitivity to the nuances and contingencies of the research and writing *process* (cf. Crang and Cook 2007; Richardson 1998), and experimental writing styles that evoke particular aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual

analyses of larger social and cultural phenomena. Researchers experiment with forms of representation that dissolve the distinction between representing and performing experience; hence the frequent use of such evocative and strongly first-person forms of writing as 'short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essay, personal essays, journals ...' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739). A challenge of this sort of highly self-referential narrative practice, especially when employing forms that are more evocative than analytical, is to craft representations that are meaningful to the text's audience and not just to its author. What distinguishes personal experience narrative from autobiography or memoir is an explicit effort to inform readers' understanding of some aspect of the social world that exceeds the autoethnographer's individual experience.

Autoethnography as personal experience narrative is most strongly associated with the work of sociologist Carolyn Ellis and her associates (cf. Ellis 1993, 1995, 2004; Ellis and Bochner 1996, 2000). It has not been widely practiced by geographers, despite its advantages for exploring geographical themes, and more generally in terms of critical reflexivity (but cf. Cook 2001; Moss 1999; Shrestha 1995; Valentine 1998; none of whom identify their work as 'autoethnography'). For example, geographers are becoming more interested in geographies of emotion, and the embodied and affective experience and constitution of place, as part of a larger conceptual collapse of the distinction between the material and the discursive (cf. Dewsbury 2009). Personal experience narrative with its fine-grained focus on the researcher-self, and its method of blurring the distinctions among emotion, experience, representation and performance, may be a good way to develop these themes. In addition, as our discipline attempts increasingly to understand spatiality and specific spatial processes (such as globalization) in terms of networks, flows, assemblages, lines of flight, and the like, it may be useful for geographers to employ an explicitly autoethnographic mode to trace the intimacies of these flows and formations from the inside out, so to speak. Finally, and closer to home, at a time when governments throughout the industrialized world are simultaneously touting the 'knowledge economy', restructuring the academy and drastically reducing university budgets, academic geographers' personal experience narrative analyses of these changes as they play out in their own academic practices are desperately needed (cf. Meneley and Young 2005).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLEXIVE OR NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Reflexive or *narrative ethnographies* are another variety of autoethnography where academic researchers include themselves as an important aspect of what they are signifying. Here, 'ethnographers' experiences are incorporated into the ethnographic description and analysis and the emphasis is on the "ethnographic dialogue or encounter" (Tedlock 1991, 78) between the narrator and the members of the group being studied' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 741). The move from signifier to object of signification is less drastic in narrative ethnography than in personal experience narrative, because here researchers' own lives, emotions and experiences are not their primary objects of study. The point of narrative ethnography is primarily epistemological; it is a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyze how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships, and is a way to describe the situatedness and partiality of the academic knowledge that results. Although narrative ethnography may have characteristics of ethnographic memoir or travel narrative the main point of self-reflexivity is to understand the epistemological characteristics of information that is assembled in relation to the research field and of the resulting representations. The latter

occurs as researchers expose their positioning and practices at home in 'the office' to the same reflexive scrutiny as they do their relationships and activities in 'the field', thereby constituting home and office as part of an expanded field (cf. Hyndman 2001).

The self-reflexive strategies narrative ethnography employs may also have implications for the ontological framing of research if they lead researchers in any of three overlapping directions. First, in reflecting on their positionality *vis-à-vis* the various aspects of an expanded field, including their relations with research participants, researchers may be led away from conceptualizing their research subjects as 'native informants' (Spivak 1999), that is, 'traditional subjects within accustomed scripts' (George Marcus quoted in Rabinow et al. 2008, 112), and toward understanding them as reflexive subjects in their own right. Second, in striving reflexively to write themselves into narrative ethnography, researchers may begin to constitute themselves more fully as *objects* of knowledge, in a move that brings narrative ethnography closer to personal experience narrative. Third, if researchers attend carefully to the flows of power, information, signification, and identity that occur in an expanded field, they may come to understand their objects of research less in spatially bounded and temporally static terms, and more in terms of flows, assemblages, networks, and other associated ontological formations. These are the sorts of ontological moves Marcus and Rabinow recommend in *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary* (Rabinow et al. 2008, 112).

Narrative ethnography has similar epistemological benefits for geographers as other critical reflexive practices; it can help us to understand and articulate the conditions in which we construct geographical knowledge, and provide insight into the characteristics of the knowledge that results. Beyond that, to the extent that human geography remains a field science at a time when the notion of a discrete field 'out there' and separate from the context in which knowledge of it is produced is no longer tenable, narrative ethnography may be an especially productive and appropriate representational strategy, especially if it entails the ontological moves described above (cf. e.g. Besio 2005, 2006, 2007; Hyndman 2001; McGee 1995; Roth 2001). Moreover, research in geography is moving increasingly toward collaborations and partnerships with various sorts of stakeholders, in the name of direct relevance, social benefit, capacity building, community 'ownership', and so on. These are moves that ostensibly break down the hierarchical differentiation between knowledge producers and subjects of knowledge, but we think they are likely to be disingenuous unless they involve a critical reflexive component on the part of researchers; narrative ethnography is one appropriate option if it avoids lapsing into unreflexive confessional 'stories of infiltration, fables of fieldwork rapport, minimeleodramas of hardships endured (and overcome), and accounts of what fieldwork did to the fieldworker' (Van Maanen 1988, 73).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FROM BELOW

The two broad categories of autoethnography we have discussed so far involve researchers including themselves as objects of signification in their research. What we are calling *autoethnography from below* or *subaltern autoethnography* entails a move in the opposite direction. Here, the accustomed *objects* of research produce self-representations that are meant to intervene in ethnographic and other dominant discourses about them. Postcolonial literary critic Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 7) frames subaltern autoethnography as follows: 'if ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations'. Although the aims of academic

autoethnography are primarily epistemological, ontological, and methodological, those of subaltern autoethnography are fundamentally political: to find a voice and speaking position that will be heeded in metropolitan representational space for purposes of self-definition and therefore self-determination. However, as Pratt (1992, 1994, 1999; cf. Butz and Besio 2004, Butz and MacDonald 2001) argues, the same relations of domination and oppression that inspire these autoethnographies also require them to concede something to the idiom, logic and rhetorical style of the metropolis in order to circulate and persuade in spheres of authorized knowledge. If, as we have been arguing, autoethnography is 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997b, 9), then transcultural relations of domination and oppression are part of the social context in which this form of autoethnography necessarily places the self. In this way, autoethnography is itself a source and outcome of transcultural identity formation.

Subaltern autoethnography by definition is *not* an academic representational practice, but rather a form of autoethnography from below to which scholars can attune. Human geographers often study groups whose members produce formal, textual self-representations that address both their own group and a more dominant audience. Examining these texts for their autoethnographic characteristics may yield important insights into representational strategies and processes of self-identification in particular contingent, self-interested, and constrained circumstances. The notion of autoethnography from below provides geographers and other researchers with a resource for understanding the epistemological characteristics of their subjects' self-narrations, including, we would argue, what they say and how they perform themselves to researchers in the context of a research interaction. In other words, the field is an autoethnographic space, and researchers are an important part of the audience that shapes research subjects' self-narrations. Understanding research encounters in this way has ontological implications in that it requires scholars to understand research participants as *reflexive subjects* whose self-narrations and indeed identities are constituted in relation to their own in a field that encompasses and entangles both parties. Epistemological and methodological implications follow; in order to understand *how* the information they get in the field is shaped by this entanglement, researchers are drawn to the critical reflexive practices described above as narrative ethnography. What we have been calling an autoethnographic sensibility consists of this recursive interplay between researchers' efforts to treat themselves as objects of signification and their research subjects as agents of signification.

The notion of subaltern autoethnography was developed to describe transcultural self-representations among colonized and other radically subordinated groups and so far geographers have used it mostly in that context (e.g. Besio 2005, 2006; Butz 2001, 2002; Butz and MacDonald 2001; Gold 2002). It pertains productively to development geography, studies of cultural globalization, vulnerability studies, and many other areas of geographical scholarship that involve working with groups positioned outside the circuits of authorized knowledge.

'INDIGENOUS' ETHNOGRAPHY

Another way that members of subordinated groups – the accustomed objects of signification – become subjects of self-signification in metropolitan circuits of knowledge is by *becoming* academics. 'Native ethnographers', as they are conventionally called, are members of subordinated groups who have metropolitan academic training and who study their own groups often from a position of opposition to existing metropolitan representations. We prefer the term *indigenous ethnography* because it embraces a wider range of

subaltern subject positions. As with other autoethnography from below, the aim here is to change the way one's group is understood in authorized circuits of knowledge. The difference is that indigenous ethnographers speak from within or at the margins of those circuits, in terms both of subject position and mastery of idiom and rhetorical style.

Indigenous ethnographies are often credited with being more authentic than others, according to the claim that indigenous researchers are more representative of the world they are studying and therefore are better able to produce authentic representations of that world and its inhabitants (Deck 1990; Hayano 1979; Lejeune 1989). This perspective is at odds with the autoethnographic sensibility we have been describing here, in that it reinstates the convention of ontologically separating agents of signification (academic researchers) from objects of signification (their research subjects), except this time from within a single subjectivity, and for legitimate purposes of self-definition. This claim to 'native authenticity' (Butz and MacDonald 2001) invokes an essentialized native whose identity is not hybridized by her encounter with metropolitan culture, scholarly training, discursive authority, or the experience of studying her social world from an academic perspective. It makes more sense from an autoethnographic perspective to understand indigenous autoethnographers as simultaneously occupying multiple subject positions, among them those of scholarly researcher and subjectively engaged member of the social worlds being investigated.

To the extent that indigenous ethnographers are hybrid or transcultural subjects they lose their claim to special authenticity, but they gain

a self-representational location at the unstable margins of dominant discourse and between social worlds that are often assumed to be ontologically separate. Claims to authenticity may be replaced by critical reflexivity as ethnographic objects speak as autoethnographic subjects who intervene in essentializing discourses of authenticity by performing the experience of transcultural subjectivity through their use of idiom and the adoption of an authorial voice that dismantles the borders between the same and the other. (Butz 2009, 149)

This way of practicing native ethnography would unite the projects described above as personal experience narrative and subaltern autoethnography.

In its efforts to understand and work in sympathy with the perspectives and experiences of subaltern groups the discipline of human geography needs the leadership of indigenous academics, and should promote their greater visibility and influence. We doubt, however, that the discipline's ability to deal seriously and productively with indigenous peoples' circumstances in relation to contemporary geographical processes such as international development, globalization, environmental change and degradation, health provision, infrastructural development, and so on, will be aided by a reinvigorated ontology of the essentialized authentic native. Alternatively, an autoethnographic approach may provide indigenous geographers with a way to utilize the betweenness of their subjectivity and authorial position that avoids self-essentialization while strengthening the persuasiveness and political effect of their self-representations (cf. e.g. Green 2007).

INSIDER RESEARCH

A final category of autoethnographic practice that shares many characteristics with indigenous ethnography is *insider* or *complete member research*. Its practitioners are academic researchers who study a group or social circumstance they are part of, and use their insiderness as a methodological and interpretive tool. Much work on race, sexuality, gender, and other axes of identification and/or marginalization is informed by an insider perspective.

Sometimes researchers who work as outsiders in small-scale social situations strive over time to become insiders – or at least to achieve experiential access to life as an insider to the group they are studying – for a combination of personal, political and methodological reasons. This strategy has produced a large body of influential literature, much of it associated with the Chicago School of urban sociology whose affiliated scholars were among its most committed practitioners (cf. Bulmer 1984; Fine 1995).

The notion that it may be possible to *become* an insider highlights a significant difference between specifically indigenous ethnography and what we are describing as insider research; the latter is less influenced by discourses of representativeness and essentialized authenticity, and is therefore more animated by methodological than ontological questions. The most basic of these questions is whether approaching a setting as an insider allows researchers to gather better information in support of their research ambitions, and then make better sense of it. Although it may seem that it would increase access, rapport, and analytical insight in relation to a social setting, much scholarship indicates that insiderness can make it more difficult to interact with and get information from research subjects, and limits researchers' ability to develop insights that get beyond the taken for granted (cf. DeLyser 2001; Hurston 1942; Strathern 1987). In discussing these difficulties, many scholars confess that, as academics conducting fieldwork, their status as insiders is unreliable, and unreliably helpful, and conclude that 'the "insider/outsider" binary in reality is a boundary that is not only highly unstable but also one that ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space' (Mullings 1999, 340). Researchers are unlikely to move beyond these dilemmas if they imagine themselves as agents of signification accessing a separate object of signification from a privileged position of insiderness; that is, if they use insiderness simply as a methodological tool. Insider researchers are increasingly adopting the reflexive approach of treating themselves as objects of signification, thus making insider research autoethnographic in ways that are similar to personal experience narrative and narrative ethnography. The distinctions between what we have been calling insider research and indigenous ethnography are blurry for those many scholars for whom insiderness is more than an issue of access and who endeavor not to essentialize indigeneity. 'Complete member' analyses of class-based (e.g. Saltmarsh 2001) or religious communities (Gold 2002), for example, may well be understood as either – or both – if they develop an interpretation from below.

Geography has a well-developed tradition of critically reflexive insider research (e.g. DeLyser 2001; Porteous 1989; Saltmarsh 2001). We think that one of the lessons of an autoethnographic sensibility is that *all* social research is insider research to the degree that it occurs in an expanded field that incorporates home, office, and the academic context in general, and to the extent that researchers study the world between themselves and their research subjects. The sort of reflexivity inherent in an autoethnographic sensibility may be especially relevant to collaborative and participatory modes of research, which are becoming more prominent in geography. Whatever researchers' pre-existing relation to their research subjects, one of the objects of such projects is the collaboration itself, to which researchers are necessarily insiders. Autoethnographic analyses seem entirely appropriate, even essential, to critically reflexive collaborative or participatory research.

Conclusion – Thinking Autoethnographically

In the preceding section, we describe five 'forms of self-narrative that place the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997b, 9). What unites them under the general

term *autoethnography* is that they all strive in some way to collapse the conventional distinction between researchers as agents of signification and a separate category of research subjects as objects of signification. What distinguishes these categories of autoethnography from one another are their different starting points and the extent to which the distinction is dissolved. We think that individually each of these approaches to autoethnography can be a useful resource for geographers, but that autoethnography has the greatest potential to inform geographical research practice when its various modes are considered in relation to one another. This is what we mean by an *autoethnographic sensibility*, and it entails an effort by academics to: (i) perceive themselves inevitably (even if not intentionally) as part of what they are researching and signifying; (ii) understand their research subjects as autoethnographers in their own right, whose self-presentations in the context of research are reflexive; and (iii) conceive of research as unfolding in an expanded field where their own self-interested project of self-narration interacts with those of their research subjects in the context of an existing network of social relations. Thinking autoethnographically in this way is one approach to critical reflexivity. It enacts the ontological move of reconstituting the subjects (i.e. as reflexive) and objects (i.e. relations and assemblages in an expanded field) of social research, and provides epistemological resources for better recognizing the shape of representations researchers receive and produce, whether or not researchers' academic writing takes a specifically autoethnographic form. These epistemological and ontological yields are significant for all areas of social research, but perhaps especially so for contemporary geography, with its growing preoccupation with affect, emotion, and embodiment, its enduring interest in the constitution of social life through interactions across space and the constitution of space through social interactions, its increasing commitment to collaborative and participatory research, its tradition of ethnographic inquiry, its concern for groups positioned outside the circuits of authorized knowledge, its long concern for issues of reflexivity, and its attention to how local, grounded, personal experiences of place relate to larger processes.

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Short Biographies

David Butz is a Professor and the Graduate Program Director in the Department of Geography at Brock University and a member of the editorial collective for *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*. He has been conducting community-level research in northern Pakistan since 1985, on such topics as irrigation agriculture, portering labour, community development, self-representation, modernization, and social change, and has published several articles on this work. He is currently working with Nancy Cook on an ethnographic study of a road building project in Shimshal, a small farming community in Pakistan's Karakoram Range.

Kathryn Besio is an Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. She is a social-cultural geographer, and is interested in how the violent and messy legacies of colonialisms manifest in inequalities of class, gender, and ethnic privilege. She has also been told that she is 'obsessed' with issues of representation and how that informs

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Note

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