

African Studies Keyword: Autoethnography

Kathryn Mara  and Katrina Daly Thompson 

Abstract: Autoethnography—a methodology that foregrounds personal experience both during research and in writing about it—is a useful keyword for scholars working in Africa and the diaspora. Mara and Thompson argue that by exploring new forms of writing and engaging in critical self-reflexivity regarding (shifting) positionalities, autoethnography—particularly collaborative approaches—is vital to ongoing efforts to decolonize African Studies. Mara and Thompson propose changes necessary for the development of Africanist autoethnography as a Keyword, and some hopeful indicators that these changes are already underway, including a small but growing body of Africanist autoethnographic work.

Résumé : L'autoethnographie - une méthodologie qui met en premier plan l'expérience personnelle du chercheur à la fois pendant la recherche et en écrivant à son sujet - est un mot clé utile pour les chercheurs travaillant en Afrique et dans la diaspora. Mara et Thompson soutiennent qu'en explorant de nouvelles formes

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d'écriture et en s'engageant dans une autoréflexivité critique concernant les positionnalités (changeantes), l'autoethnographie - en particulier les approches collaboratives - est vitale pour les efforts continus de décolonisation des études africaines. Mara et Thompson proposent les changements nécessaires au développement de l'autoethnographie africaniste en tant que mot-clé et quelques indicateurs prometteurs que ces changements sont déjà en cours, y compris un petit, mais croissant corpus de travaux autoethnographiques africanistes.

Resumo: A autoetnografia — uma metodologia centrada na experiência pessoal quer ao longo da investigação quer no processo de escrita — é um conceito muito útil para os académicos que trabalham sobre África e a diáspora africana. Mara e Thompson defendem neste artigo que, ao explorar novas formas de escrita e de envolvimento na autorreflexão crítica relativa aos posicionamentos individuais (em constante mudança), a autoetnografia — sobretudo as abordagens colaborativas — é essencial para prosseguir com os esforços de descolonização dos estudos africanos. Mara e Thompson propõem várias mudanças destinadas a promover o desenvolvimento da autoetnografia africanista enquanto palavra-chave, apresentando alguns indícios promissores de que tais mudanças se encontram já em curso, nomeadamente um conjunto ainda reduzido mas em fase de crescimento de estudos autoetnográficos africanistas.

Keywords: autoethnography; ethnography; culture; representation; blurred genres; self-reflexivity; positionality; collaboration; decolonization; interdisciplinarity

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Who, about Africa, validly can or must speak at the junction of ethnographic and historical descriptions, and from which background? (Mudimbe 1985:165)

At the 2018 African Studies Association (ASA) meeting, Jean Allman began her presidential address by recalling Melville Herskovits's lecture at the first meeting of the ASA, when he lauded American Africanists—by which he meant *white* American Africanists, as Allman pointed out—for their “detachment” and “objectivity” with regard to Africa. (Allman's speech was later published as Allman 2019, 2020.) Allman's audience laughed ironically at these words, suggesting that contemporary Africanists see themselves as more critical and more linked to Africa than those Herskovitz described. While the last four decades have witnessed an increasing trend toward self-reflexivity in scholarship (Reed-Danahay 1997), which we are excited to see trickling into African Studies, a great deal of Africanist scholarship still remains stylistically detached and concerned with objectivity. Given recent attention to “decolonizing” African Studies (e.g., Mukoma 2021), we suggest it is the right moment to examine what role subjectivity and self-reflexivity could play in achieving that end. We argue for the value of recognizing, as Allman put it, how our “own intellectual biography is fully

entangled in this story” (2019:13)—in other words, how African Studies would benefit from autoethnography.

“Autoethnography” has only recently been used to describe a methodology in African Studies (the first reference we found was Tomaselli 2007) and African Diaspora Studies (e.g., Williams 2010; Mawhinney 2019). Yet many Africanist researchers have demonstrated the value of including personal experiences in academic writing. For example, in *Muntu in Crisis*, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga advocates a *récit pour soi* (narrative for the self), as part of “a new ‘reading’ of one’s own particular social experience (Mudimbe 1988:42; see also Eboussi-Boulaga 1977). Such self-reflections are, not surprisingly, most common in anthropology, a discipline in which researchers already use and value ethnography and in which there is a great deal of disciplinary concern about writing and representation (e.g., Behar & Gordon 1995; Abu-Lughod 2006; Clifford & Marcus 2010). Although a great deal of Africanist scholarship contains autoethnographic elements, an explicit focus on autoethnographic methods is relatively recent, especially outside of anthropology. Here we focus on Africanist texts within this growing area.

In this article, we define autoethnography as a methodology that foregrounds personal experience both during research and in writing about it. We then describe orientations to autoethnographic research and review the small but growing body of Africanist autoethnographic work. Next, we demonstrate ways in which autoethnography may be especially useful for scholars working in Africa and the diaspora today, including its exploration of new forms of writing that might make Africanist research more accessible to broader audiences. In addition, its engagement in critical self-reflexivity about positionality and shifting positionalities makes autoethnography, particularly collaborative autoethnography, useful in ongoing efforts to decolonize African Studies. Finally, we outline some changes necessary in order to develop Africanist autoethnography and some hopeful indicators that these changes are already underway. But first, we “introduce autoethnography autoethnographically” (Bochner & Ellis 2016:24) by explaining our particular subjectivities, research positionalities, and perspectives on autoethnography as a methodology (Ngunjiri 2014; Adams & Manning 2015).

Introducing Autoethnography Autoethnographically

I (Katrina) explore autoethnography from the position of a European American feminist scholar, a cisgender woman, and a full professor at a Research I institution, where autoethnography’s status is ambiguous. My training has taken me through literary criticism to cultural and media studies, which necessitated learning ethnographic methods in the field, first in Zimbabwe and later in Tanzania. During ethnographic fieldwork in Zanzibar in 2009, I began a relationship with a Zanzibari man and soon converted to Islam. At our wedding later that year, my experience in receiving premarital instruction from Zanzibari women launched me into new research on how Swahili women talk about, and teach one another to talk about, Islamic

marriage. Around the same time, an anthropologist friend was researching converts, and she interviewed me about how I learned about my new religion (Galman 2013). An arts-based ethnographer herself, she encouraged me not to limit myself to Zanzibari women's experiences but also to incorporate my own, suggesting some readings on autoethnographic methods (e.g., Chang 2008). While speaking with Swahili women about their private lives and recording the intimate advice they gave to new brides, I made two realizations that profoundly affected my research. First, I realized they were talking to me not just as a researcher but also as a Muslim woman, as the wife of a Swahili man, and, for many of my interlocutors, as a family member, which meant I had a near-insider perspective on what it was like to receive such instruction. Second, since I was asking women to share the kind of information about their marriages that is usually kept private and, in turn, sharing it with a broader audience through my scholarship, it seemed only fair that I be equally willing to share my own private matters. It took some time to figure out how much of myself to share in my writing, but eventually, I began exploring autoethnography in earnest in conference presentations and publications.

Around the same time, I also created a graduate methods course on literary ethnography, using autoethnography and other forms of creative nonfiction writing to broaden the kinds of work my students are reading and producing. The majority of graduate students in my department are from Africa. Despite their intimate understandings of life on the continent, they are often trained to analyze texts in detached ways rather than drawing on their personal experiences and insider knowledge. Most have an academic background in African literature but, in working with me, they become interested in ethnographic methods. Many are themselves creative writers, yet they keep their creative work separate from their scholarship. My course uses literary, ethnographic, and autoethnographic texts, alongside texts that blur these genres, to introduce students to new ways of writing that may help them understand the possibility of dismantling the divisions among their personal, creative, and scholarly interests. The work they produce in this course—though not all of it Africanist—exemplifies how autoethnography can be used even by those who have not (yet) conducted ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Farsiu 2019; Mara 2020b).

I (Kathryn) enter the narrative here as a former student in Katrina's first literary ethnography class. I approach autoethnography as a non-tenure-track European American scholar and cisgender woman. While Katrina introduced me to autoethnography, I have long been interested in blurred writing genres, a passion which was spurred by undergraduate creative nonfiction classes. While pursuing my master's degree at a different institution, I proposed a creative nonfiction thesis about my experience as a student of European descent in a Black Studies program, an idea which was discouraged by my department chair for being too "unconventional." Nevertheless, my subjectivity remained present in my resulting thesis, in my chosen approaches, in the perspectives I brought to the project, and in the strengths,

weaknesses, and insecurities reflected in it. In literary ethnography, I finally found a space to talk about being an *umuzungu* (westerner) in Africana Studies, and I was happy to later chair a panel on literary ethnography at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association.

My training in autoethnography has further informed my ethnographic ethics. Even when my work is not explicitly autoethnographic, like my dissertation on the narrative and discursive practices of Rwandans living in Canada (Mara 2020a), I approach my research with an autoethnographic sensibility. I recognize that various aspects of my positionality impact the kinds of information my interlocutors share, how I interpret it, and how my audience receives my interpretation. In many ways, I believe autoethnography encourages best research practices (cf. Ellis 2018).

While I am fortunate now to have an advisor-cum-mentor who values autoethnography, I did not propose an autoethnographic dissertation for fear that others would not take it as seriously as a more traditional one. By the time Katrina began to explore autoethnography, they had tenure, making their exploration less risky (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990; Bochner & Ellis 2016); however, I do not have the security of a permanent academic position, let alone tenure. Thus, to the extent that my writing is autoethnographic, either I do not label it as such, or it is in addition to the more traditional academic work expected of emerging scholars. One of our goals in exploring and encouraging Africanist autoethnography is to make it less risky for early career researchers to engage in this work.

Defining Autoethnography

We deliberately begin with a broad definition of autoethnography: it involves both personal experience and research that connects the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethno) by examining in writing (graphy) the role of the self in a cultural context. Some scholars who attempt to define autoethnography debate whether the cultural context must be one's "own" culture—one in which the researcher is "indigenous," a "native," or a "complete member" (Adler & Adler 1987; Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis 2008)—to consider the work autoethnographic rather than memoir or ethnography. Anthropologist David Hayano, one of the first authors to attempt a definition of autoethnography, wrote that "the criteria ... must include some prior knowledge of the people, their culture and language" (Hayano 1979:100). However, for us, such "prior knowledge" might come not only from personal experience but also from fieldwork or even from extensive reading of primary and secondary sources. In our view, "the ability to be accepted to some degree, or to 'pass' as a native member" (Hayano 1979:100; see also Anderson 2006) should not be a criterion for autoethnography, since even researchers who would never "pass" as native members of the communities they study can produce new knowledge about their experiences as researchers or as foreigners. One of the strengths of autoethnography we discuss below is its capacity to explore researchers' relationships with others and shifts in researcher identity that

may undermine the categories of native/non-native. As Hayano himself admits, “This insider/outsider (or auto-ethnography/ethnography) dimension is best seen as a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy” (1079:100).

Despite containing the word “ethnography” within it, autoethnography is not inherently linked to anthropology. In fact, one reason autoethnography may be useful to Africanists is that it is agnostic with regard to discipline, theory, and method. In our review of Africa-related autoethnographic work we found examples in disciplines as diverse as accounting (Retief Venter & de Villiers 2013), anthropology (Schmidt 2010; Begley 2013; Berckmoes 2013; Jourdan 2013; Tomaselli 2013; Koot 2016; Thompson 2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2020; Williams 2021; Kefen Budji 2022), business (DeBerry-Spence 2010), communications (Ferdinand 2015), cultural studies (Tomaselli 2003; Tomaselli & Shepperson 2003), economics (Ansoms 2013), education (Ramrathan 2010; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang 2015; Tomaselli 2015; Balfour 2016; Timm 2016; Andersen 2018; Mitchell 2016; Brock-Utne 2018), feminism (Dillard & Bell 2011; Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan 2014), history (Sheldon 2019), international relations and development (Bouka 2013; Clark-Kazak 2013), linguistics (Mwaniki 2016), political science (Vorrath 2013), psychology (Naidu 2014), social work (Schmid 2010), theater (Ajwang’ & Edmondson 2003), as well as in studies of development (Tomaselli 2007; Johnson 2011; Ogora 2013; Koot 2016), diaspora (Williams 2010; Dillard & Bell 2011; Ferdinand 2015; Mawhinney 2019), folklore (Mabasa 2021), leadership (Ngunjiri 2014), memory (Mara 2020b), mobility (Rink 2016), peace and conflict (Ogora 2013; Thomson 2013), religion (Van Deventer 2015; Wepener 2015), and sexuality (Williams 2010; Balfour 2016).

Although this list may suggest that autoethnography’s value is primarily for fieldwork-based disciplines, in our view, it may also benefit researchers in “desk-based” disciplines such as literature, film, and cultural studies, which do not necessarily require that researchers spend time with individuals and communities. In fact, both of us earned our doctorates in a department focused on literature, film, and cultural studies and have produced work in those areas. If time in the field can change our view of the world (Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis 2008), so can literary, cinematic, and other arts, and it is those changed views that autoethnography can help us document. Theater studies scholar Stacy Holman-Jones further contends that we should “consider every moment of our work ... as experiences worth writing about deeply, analytically, and creatively”—not just fieldwork, but also our reading and teaching (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis 2013:18). But even those who do not explicitly think of their research as entailing “fieldwork” have usually spent time in the communities from which the writers, filmmakers, and other culture workers they study have emerged, and their writing benefits from the self-reflexivity that autoethnography requires (e.g., Julien 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced many would-be fieldworkers to develop new projects that do not require travel, and autoethnography has become valuable in documenting those shifts (e.g., Makwembere, Matarirano, & Jere 2021; Perumal et al. 2021; Stevens et al. 2021; Adiku 2022).

Across diverse disciplines, the most common theories combined with autoethnography include feminism and postcolonial theory (Johnson 2011; Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan 2014; Ngunjiri 2014; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang 2015; Thompson 2018; Sheldon 2019). For example, many feminists hold that “our personal experience is inseparable from the political reality which we seek to understand and to change,” a tenet that “runs counter to the separation between experience and theoretical distance which the categories *the field* and *the academy* respectively imply” (D’Amico-Samuels 1991:68). Recent work has also combined postcolonial theory with autoethnography to argue for decolonizing the academy (D’Amico-Samuels 1991; Moreira 2009; Schmidt 2010; Chandrashekar 2018; Chawla & Atay 2018; Dutta 2018; Toyosaki 2018; Sobers 2019), and, as we discuss further below, we see this as a particularly promising research area for would-be Africanist autoethnographers.

Although we outline common definitions of and approaches to autoethnography, we do not intend them as prescriptive. Writing is cultural, and we do not expect all autoethnographers to use the same theories or write in similar styles (D’Souza & Pal 2018). In fact, we hope for the opposite: autoethnographers should develop their own methods and styles, building on both indigenous and cosmopolitan forms of narrative and other verbal arts. As more Africanist autoethnography emerges, we expect to see not only “more diverse voices” but also “more variant storytelling techniques” (Chawla & Atay 2018:4) or what Tejumola Olaniyan called “accents” (2015:104).

New Accents in Writing

Within African Studies, there are many “accents,” both areas of emphasis and manners of expression. While Olaniyan asserts that “There should be and ought to be different accents, in response to the differences of the contexts of intellectual production” (2015:104), he problematizes the unequal ways in which they cross borders. When writers engage with diverse accents and writing, they decenter dominant forms. Eliminating conceptions of a “standard” accent or form of Africanist writing, whose value is too often determined and legitimized by the prestige associated with publications, conferences, and employment opportunities offered by European and American institutions, is one way of decolonizing African Studies (Mukoma 2021; Olaniyan 2015:103). Since autoethnography provides an opportunity for researchers to explore new forms of writing, including blurred ones (Behar 2007), we are excited to see it being taken up in unique ways by African scholars and other people of color, adding additional “accents” to the mix.

Autoethnography exists on a continuum: a “mix of artistic representation, scientific inquiry, self-narration, and ethnography” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang 2010:3). Some autoethnographic work is more artistic or “evocative,” whereas other examples offer more scientific analysis, often labeled “analytical” (Anderson 2006), and still others shift between these

two poles. Evocative or “creative-artistic” autoethnographic work (Adams & Manning 2015:353) tends to use literary techniques, including composite characters, character development, and dramatic tension (e.g., Ajwang’ & Edmondson 2003). Evocative autoethnography typically avoids traditional research report formats, instead incorporating various genres and media. For example, Thompson (2017b) wrote “Secrets of a Swahili Marriage” and Ivolene Kefen Budji (2022) wrote “Crossing Over” as fictional narratives, whereas some autoethnography includes poetry or photography (e.g., Van Deventer 2015). “Creative-artistic autoethnographers also tend to avoid using academic jargon such as *research questions* or *findings*, and terms like *systematic data collection*, *triangulation*, *coding*, *reliability*, *validity*, and *generalizability*, because [such] terms may disrupt the flow and accessibility of the story” (Adams & Manning 2015:353). Other examples of evocative Africanist autoethnographies include Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes’s *In Sorcery’s Shadow* (1987) and parts of Stacey Johnson’s (2011) thesis, a meta-autoethnography about her work with a Zambian literacy NGO where she taught local women how to write their own autoethnographies. Tomaselli’s work (2003, 2007) is also often evocative, written in the first person and using narrative styles, as is Thompson’s autoethnographic work (2017a, 2017b, 2018).

Analytical autoethnographies, which often make explicit claims of systematicity, validity, or both (e.g., Mwaniki 2016), are more common than evocative ones, perhaps because they more closely approximate traditional academic writing conventions and thus are more likely to be accepted for publication. Examples of this style include most of Kenyan ethicist Faith Wambura Ngunjiri’s work on connecting life with research, collaborative autoethnography as a methodology, and being an immigrant faculty member of color in the United States (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang 2010; Ngunjiri 2014; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang 2015; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez 2016).

Many autoethnographies blur these divides, mixing evocative and analytical elements. South African theologian Wilhelm van Deventer includes evocative descriptions of his interactions with Venda community members as he learned to understand their concept of *vhuthu* (humanity) and its relevance for understanding theology as it is practiced in South Africa, alongside photographs and poetry that illustrate different applications of the concept. Yet, he also includes analytic elements such as a formal literature review, methodology, and a summarizing conclusion. Similarly, South African psychologist Thairusha Naidu writes about using poetry to document her own and her research participants’ changing identities, interspersing autoethnographic analysis with poetic excerpts (2014, 2017).

One benefit of evocative autoethnography is that it allows researchers to record their impressions without being overly concerned with validity and to ask questions without needing to provide answers for them. Autoethnography “draws on the ontological position that the world is experienced and therefore can only be tangentially described and predicted. The

epistemological strategy that goes with this ontological paradigm is one of interpretation rather than facts and definitive conclusions” (Munro 2011:161). Education researchers Claudia Mitchell and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan frame this strategy as “doubt,” “ambiguity,” or “productive unknowing”—“a stepping aside from our conventional ‘expert’ role of researcher” (2014:94). Such an approach allows researchers to attend to small moments that may not (yet) have a clear relationship to their research but nonetheless capture their attention, enabling them to remain curious without always knowing where their curiosity will lead. It also allows speculation to enter into academic writing, through which researchers can wonder about events to which they do not have access or about participants with whom they have lost touch (e.g., Thompson 2017a). Finally, admitting when one does not know something or is merely speculating maintains the humility essential to avoiding claims of mastery over those among whom one conducts research. Although evocative autoethnography borrows techniques from literary writing, such speculation should not be mistaken for fiction; even the elements a researcher wonders about draw on their knowledge of the culture they study, allowing “scholarly and justifiable interpretations based on multiple sources of evidence ... that can confirm or triangulate [the autoethnographer’s] opinions”—or justify their speculations (Duncan 2004:5).

Although some may criticize autoethnography for appearing as “catharsis or mere storytelling” (Ngunjiri 2014:621), we see the potential of non-traditional scholarly writing, especially that on the evocative or artistic end of the spectrum, to reach audiences beyond the narrow confines of our disciplines, including non-academic audiences (Goodall 2000) and, by “narrating in ways that make sense to people on the ground” (Tomaselli 2013:175), the participants themselves.

Despite the discomfort and risks that may arise from sharing oneself during research and in writing, there are also many benefits. Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang insist that “autoethnography allows researchers to dig deeply into their own experience, including the attendant emotions in ways that may not be possible if they were being interviewed by someone else.” Furthermore, when researchers are open about their own experiences, they may engender equal openness on the part of others and thus gain access to more “personally intimate data” (2010:52). Vulnerability from both the researcher and researched produces writing equipped to inspire readers’ empathy.

Positionality

Autoethnography further encourages the recognition of our own subjectivities and positionalities in our research and writing, a practice illustrated by our own stories above. Increasingly, Africanists are preoccupied with researcher identity, positionality, power, and accessibility. For example, in her presidential address, Allman (2019:8) discussed “ASA’s position in the

racial landscape of knowledge production”; participants in two board-sponsored panels echoed her sentiments, providing personal accounts about the historical and contemporary marginalization of African and diasporic Africanists (Adomako-Ampofo et al. 2018; Anyidoho et al. 2018). In a recent special issue of *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Africa-based scholars across several disciplines considered how various positionalities—class, gender, geographic location, and race—impact their opportunities in African Studies, with topics ranging from mobility and funding to access and unequal collaborations. Autoethnography can help us address our interdisciplinary field’s concerns about identity, positionality, and subjectivity, foregrounding them as central issues in Africanist research.

This ongoing conversation within African Studies reveals that researcher identity has profound effects on the research itself: how we do research, if we can do research, the kinds of people, sites, and texts to which we have access, how we make meaning through writing, how others receive it, whether it is published, whether it is accessible on the continent and off, and our affective responses to these variables. Following Lila Abu-Lughod, researcher identity “not only is *not* a handicap but must be made explicit and explored” in our scholarship ([1993] 2008:6).

As a methodology, autoethnography presents opportunities to represent researchers in visible, embodied, and human ways, just as we are while we are conducting research. In other words, autoethnography allows us as researchers to “intentionally frame ourselves as consequential participants” in our scholarship, acknowledge and analyze our positionalities, and reflect in our writing how these aspects of our selves inform our work in and knowledge production about our research sites (McGregor & Fernández 2019:228). For example, some non-African women observe that their positionings as “white female researchers” or “female expats” may have favorably influenced their interlocutors’ decisions to interact with them, but they also report personal discomfort about the excess attention that accompany these identities (Ajwang’ & Edmondson 2003; Vorrath 2013). Likewise, some African and diasporic scholars reflect that, before conducting their fieldwork, they anticipated sharing one or more identities with the communities on which their research is based and, through their autoethnographic writing, explore the feelings that arose when they were positioned differently than they had expected (Kombo 2009; Mawhinney 2019). Autoethnography offers an opportunity to acknowledge and reflect on the privileges that accompany our unique positionalities and to consider our limitations seriously.

Far from the “ready to wear” positionality statements anthropologist Jennifer Robertson (2002:788) critiques for attempting to pass for self-reflexivity (e.g., “writing as a [name the identity category]”), autoethnography demands more elaborate and perhaps more honest self-reflexivity. The methodology allows us to really “scrutinize the self” alongside our representations of others, to acknowledge that we are all “culturally mediated and historically constructed,” as Africanist anthropologist Pat Caplan (1988:9)

argues. Considering our subjectivity balances our research by giving both the researcher and the researched equal analytic treatment. Responding to literary scholar Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ's (2021) concerns about "whiteness centering itself ... in the study of a continent that has been moving on," we believe that autoethnography also has the potential to decenter researchers, particularly non-African researchers, as the ultimate knowledge producers in and about Africa. For example, educationist Birgit Brock-Utne (2018) draws upon her own experience collaborating with African academics to critique the uncritical importation of western education theories to African contexts and to demonstrate that African perspectives and theories are often more relevant within the field of education specifically and African Studies more generally.

Much autoethnography addresses researchers' "insider" or "outsider" status in the communities and cultures they study. Extrapolating from work on "native" and "halfie" anthropologists to consider the role of African and African-descended researchers in disciplines other than anthropology, autoethnography might offer African and African-descended researchers a mechanism to draw on their "insider" or "halfie" status in a critically reflexive way. As Black linguistic anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey argues, "Insofar as the discussion of one's positioning in the field engages key anthropological questions around the dialectics of fieldwork, native scholars situate themselves and their work within a rigorous analytic paradigm," constituting "a space for the creation and validation of *native* as a signifier of the post-colonial repositioning of the subject." "In this sense," she continues, "claiming native, indigenous, or 'halfie' status can be a tactical endeavor of critical self-positioning against the mainstream" (2006:144). For African and African-descended scholars, such critical self-positioning means that autoethnography offers space for reflecting on the effects of one's identifications on one's research.

However, as many researchers have found, "being native to a culture or context that is researched or studied does not guarantee that the researcher is treated as a complete insider" (Kombo 2009:315). Furthermore, as Ruth Behar insists, "The very meaning of home gets stretched by ethnographers whose 'field sites,' through the process of everyday living, become home locations" (2007:151). Thus, autoethnography should not treat positionality as fixed and singular, but rather as plural, multiplying, and context-specific positionalities. For example, business studies scholar Benét DeBerry-Spence (2010) explores the "third space" between advocacy and research by discussing the negotiation of her roles as scholar, vendor, and advocate for marginalized African vendors in Accra.

Like other qualitative methods, autoethnography allows scholars to discuss their interpretations of the people with whom they engage. Moreover, it permits researchers to detail others' perceptions of them, demonstrating how "identities" are collaboratively formed. Communications scholar Bryant Keith Alexander (1999:310) observes, "We all exist between the lines of our narrative lives, the stories we tell, and the stories that are told about

us.” When we observe and interpret others, they, too, observe and interpret us, a mutual process of identification and interpretation that brings expectations and desires that are frequently conflicting. In her research on Rwandan agrarian change and rural class transformation, An Ansoms (2013) describes how her interlocutors interpreted and assigned value to her identity and the purpose of her study in unexpected ways, reflecting on Rwandans’ expectations that she disseminate their accounts outside of Rwanda. By acknowledging our own expectations along with the expectations of others, we reveal the limitations set by our research design and those measured by others’ metrics—illustrating potential regrets, alternative courses of action, and explanations for the research.

Because autoethnography encourages open discussions of researcher positionality, autoethnographers are often perceived—not unlike “native” scholars who discuss their own positionality—as non-methodologically-grounded, researcher-centric “navel-gazers, axe-grinders, politically motivated, or hypersensitive” (Jacobs-Huey 2006:144). But the purpose of autoethnography is not just emotional release or storytelling for its own sake; instead, autoethnographers endeavor “to systematically analyze personal experience within its cultural (social, political, historic, geographic) location,” for it allows us to consider how our various positionalities and subjectivities impact us both as humans and as researchers and how and why we analyze our subjects as we do (Ngunjiri 2014:621).

By recognizing ourselves in our research, we demonstrate that scholarship is always tied to our subjectivities and is, thus, subjective itself. Unveiling our positionalities is one way of disclosing our interests and biases, privileges and limitations, our perceptions of others and theirs of us. Doing this may undermine the supposed objectivity of our research, but the benefits outweigh the costs, for our work, as a result, becomes more forthright and equitable.

Shifting Positionalities

If autoethnography allows us to account for our unique positionalities, it also enables us to reflect on changes in how we identify ourselves and others; to speculate about changes in how others may identify us; and to comment on the potential effects of these concurrent identifications. Reflecting on uncertainty and unknowing in research, Claudia Mitchell and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan pose the following questions: “What if . . . we consider our knowledge or knowing about ourselves as contingent and provisional? What if we recognize that how and what we come to know is both facilitated and bounded by our own identities, circumstances and experiences?” (2014:93–94). The representation of “contingent and provisional” subjectivities underscores scholarship’s subjective qualities. By discussing the changing and unstable nature of research, we do not weaken our credibility but rather add a layer of rich ethnographic material to tap into—the effect of (and on) our affect.

Like Frederick Cooper and others (Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Brubaker 2004), we do not see identity as fixed, but rather as “performed collaboratively in interaction and thus better understood as processes of identification” (McGregor & Fernández 2019:230). Though some aspects of researchers’ identities may not change, how we enact and understand our identities is contextual—the experiences we bring to our projects, the relationships we form, and the interactions we have while we conduct our research, alongside the identities and expectations that are thrust upon us by others. Thus, in addition to being aware of how our personal identifications shape our research, we must also attend to how our experiences in Africa or the diaspora shape us as scholars and human beings.

Autoethnography presents us with opportunities to perform this vital identity work; to come to terms with identities we did not consider important before beginning a given research project; to emphasize the ramifications of one identity over another during our research; and to stretch the boundaries of what those identities mean in a particular context. Renata Ferdinand examines literary and filmic representations of African American felt connections with Africa alongside her ideas about and performative enactment of an “African identity” while living in Burkina Faso. Although Ferdinand mentions her self-doubts regarding the authenticity of her new “African identity,” she concludes that her changed and changing subjectivity inform how she approaches and understands her research. Her work illustrates the value of autoethnography for African Studies, insisting that we do not treat our identities and positionalities as stable but rather as complex and challenging as our lived experience demands (Ferdinand 2015).

Our relationships with people we meet while conducting research may also change, even if our identities do not. Anthropologist Deborah D’Amico-Samuels recounts the futility of trying to come across as anything other than a white American educated woman while working in Jamaica, concluding that “no amount of personal change makes for shedding of white skin privileges and barriers in a racist world” (1991:71). Nevertheless, she and others report that developing close relationships with participants and interlocutors repositions researchers (Ajwang’ & Edmondson 2003; Thompson 2018). D’Amico-Samuels says that she could not see the people and concerns of her research as being wholly “back in the field” because she married a Jamaican man (1991:70). Such subjective experiences underscore one of the potentials of Africanist autoethnography. By living, working, and interacting with others, we develop attachments to places and people, irrespective of the overlap among our identities, and regardless of whether our research involves “fieldwork.” If “scholarship is inextricably connected to self—personal interest, experience, and familiarity” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang 2010:2), then addressing our subjectivity enables us to position ourselves alongside those we meet while researching through less reductive categories than sameness and difference and in respect to a wide range of complex and perhaps even contradictory possibilities, investments, and experiences.

How our interlocutors identify us also influences how we engage with them. In their research about Zanzibari women's premarital instruction (Thompson 2011, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), Thompson realized that the women they spoke with perceived them as wanting to be a good Muslim wife, leading the women to share private information that they might not have otherwise been willing to divulge. Our identifications influence the information people might be willing to share with us, and their perspectives, like our own, change over time. In addition, others may not always receive us in ways that we expect or hope, and that, in turn, affects what we feel comfortable claiming in our research. In her account of her participation in a Fulbright Hays Summer Program to Rwanda, Kenyan communications scholar Eddah Mutua Kombo (2009:309) seeks "a balance between being a researcher and wanting to be perceived by [Rwandan] women as 'one of them.'" She recounts "spinning" her national, gender, and linguistic identity to gain the women's trust. Still, she concedes that she was not really "one of them," reflecting on how her interlocutors emphasized their differences, including geographic location, class, and experiences with genocide. Although Kombo insists that she cannot speak about Rwandan women's experiences, by narrating her experience listening to and learning from them, she reveals research's perspectival nature. By attending to how people we meet while conducting research identify us, we not only consider multiple perspectives, but we also reveal our perspectives' potential strengths and weaknesses—what we had access to or did not, what others might have said better, what only we could say—thus inviting and engendering other research and other perspectives.

Given autoethnography's focus on the personal and subjective, theater studies scholar Allan Munro acknowledges that, like other qualitative methods, autoethnography draws criticism for its "specificity of time and place," rather than being generalizable (2011:162). But generalizability is not autoethnography's goal. Instead, as Ngunjiri argues, "autoethnographers, as with [other] ethnographers, seek depth rather than breadth, the specific rather than the general, the unique rather than the common" (2014:628). However, because autoethnographers address our human experiences as researchers, other people, even scholars in other fields, can often relate to and see themselves in those experiences. Thus, autoethnography is uniquely positioned to elicit reflection and offer guidance to other researchers. For instance, autoethnographic essays such as those found in the edited volume *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa* help readers "anticipate, then mitigate, the emotional and ethical ups-and-downs of field research" (Thomson, Ansoms, & Murison 2013:2).

Furthermore, autoethnography presents an opportunity to reconsider "the care with which we research" by encouraging us "to think explicitly about others and their role in our story, or at least consider whose story it really is" (Mitchell 2016:183). Finally, autoethnography creates opportunities to consider and attend to power dynamics in research, making it a fruitful methodology for Africanists to employ as they engage in questions of intellectual decolonization.

Decolonizing Scholarship

We see autoethnography as a particularly apt decolonial methodology for African Studies, though its use in this regard is still underdeveloped. We take it as self-evident that for Africanist research “to be decolonized, it must start by situating itself, its practitioners, and the subjects of its research within the same planetary space and time and with reference to the same world political, economic, and cultural hierarchy” (D’Amico-Samuels 1991:68–69). This affects both how we conduct research and how we write about it. In terms raised by Abu-Lughod more than three decades ago, there are two primary ways in which autoethnography might contribute to this goal: through “a decolonization on the level of the text” and by addressing “epistemological issues about how we know” (1990:11). Furthermore, decolonizing both process and product can be facilitated through increased engagement between autoethnography and postcolonial theory (Chawla & Atay 2018).

Textual decolonization in ethnography refers to deprivileging the (Western) researcher’s voice—admittedly a challenge for autoethnography which, by definition, centers the researcher’s experience. However, as Abu-Lughod argues, the rise of “dialogical or polyvocal ethnography” in the 1980s helped to decolonize ethnography at the level of the text by making “the voice of the narrator/anthropologist ... only one among many,” alongside the voices of the researched (1990:11). Tomaselli’s edited volume *Writing in the San/d* (2007) exemplifies this attempt by including not only the voices of multiple researchers who worked together in South Africa but also their conversations with San community members, alongside drawings and poetry produced by them. Tanzanian dancer and musician Robert Ajwang’ and theater scholar Laura Edmondson’s (2003) work offers another example: Edmondson was the ethnographer and Ajwang’ her research assistant, but both voices (and others) are heard prominently in the published text, and Ajwang’ gets the last word. Similarly, as we discussed above, including researcher doubts, questions, or changes of heart in our writing can be a way of decolonizing academic texts by destabilizing the researcher’s “expert” status (Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan 2014).

Abu-Lughod offers the following example of how feminist anthropologists might decolonize their texts as well as their epistemologies: “Imagine the woman fieldworker,” she wrote, “who does not deny that she is a woman and is attentive to gender in her own treatment, her own actions, and in the interactions of people in the community she is writing about. In coming to understand their situation, she is also coming to understand her own through a process of specifying the similarities and the differences” (1990:26). Extrapolating from her example, we can think about how Africanist autoethnography might adapt epistemological decolonization within and beyond the field of anthropology.

Questions remain, however, about the relative lack of autoethnographic work by African scholars, especially outside of South Africa. Writing about autoethnography generally, communications scholars Devika Chawla and

Ahmet Atay ask: “Whose stories were privileged and why? Which stories were important and why? Was the postcolonized subject of color destined to stay on the periphery of conversations in a cutting-edge genre and method that claimed to re-center the subject?” (2018:3). Although they overlook important autoethnographic work coming out of South Africa and by scholars of color in the United States, Chawla and Atay are correct to point out that most published autoethnographies seem to represent “the White majority group in the United States” (2018:4). We echo their call for postcolonial autoethnographies that articulate the cultural experiences of Africans and other marginalized groups. Only if more marginalized scholars write and publish autoethnographies—and if more Africanists read, cite, and teach them—can this methodology truly contribute to decolonizing African Studies.

Collaboration

Related to the issue of epistemology, a growing number of autoethnographers have explored collaboration as a tool for decolonizing the academy. While there are potential social and political risks to collaboration (Fuh 2019; Jayawardane 2019; Roelofs 2019; Kalinga 2019; Omanga & Mainye 2019; Musila 2019), we still see collaboration of various kinds as central to Africanist research and as an important mode of autoethnographic work. Recently, there has been a growing movement toward collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez 2016; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang 2015; McGregor & Fernández 2019; Mitchell 2016; Mitchell and Pithouse-Morgan 2014; Ngunjiri 2014; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang 2010; Tomaselli 2007), and we offer it as one potential tool for decolonizing Africanist research. Botswana-based literacy scholar Dudu Jankie asserts, “Collaboration as part of decolonizing research reminds us that as insiders and outsiders the selves we bring to the field even as natives of a culture are relevant to the researched for it shapes their relationships with us, the specific roles we assume, the languages we use, and the knowledge we obtain as well as how we interpret and report it” (2004:101). All research represents a collaboration, whether with fellow researchers, those whom we encounter during our research, our advisors, long-dead philosophers, or even reviewer #2. Collaborative autoethnography offers us an opportunity to recognize the contributions of others and to reflect on our understandings of “expertise” and researcher roles.

Collaborative autoethnography may entail crediting research participants with their ideas and influence on our research, designing and writing our research together with them, or writing it alongside other researchers. The research process is an inextricable part of scholarship; we should document the questions we bring to a project, alongside changes in our perspective and lessons learned from others. Highlighting not only what we learned during our research but also how and through whom we learned it is critical to collaborative autoethnography. We must recognize those who participate in or assist with research as knowledge producers themselves and establish

our role as knowledge co-constructors instead of what communications scholar Kombo refers to as “knowledge colonizers” (2009:318). Kombo further insists that “as researchers and/or students we can only welcome yet another opportunity to learn how to learn from others if learning (or learning how to learn) is a main objective of decolonizing research” (2009:322).

Recognizing in our writing how our research goals change due to what and who we encounter in the process is also critical to collaborative autoethnography. In *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa* (Thomson, Ansoms, & Murison 2013), many of the authors recount realizing that their priorities often differ from those of their interlocutors; some ended their engagement there, while others opted to alter their approach. For example, agronomist Julie Van Damme (2013) went to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to study farmers’ decision-making processes, but upon learning of their interest in cooperative work and farmers’ associations, she modified her research to include action-based initiatives on the community’s behalf.

Collaborative autoethnography can also assume more involved forms. Just as including leaders of African organizations in research design has “the potential for use in democratizing and deconstructing inquiry about the realities of life and leadership in African organizations” (Ngunjiri 2014:628), including participants in research design can benefit other kinds of African Studies research. Ngunjiri suggests that collaborative autoethnography enables a more equitable distribution of power among those involved in research in African communities. “Thinking in terms of co-researcher participants (i.e., those who are not researchers by training or trade) ... allows us to gain entry into deeper understanding because those of us who are researchers (i.e. academics) no longer need to hold that power over our research participants, no longer hold on to the power to interrogate, interpret, and represent research participants only from our own intellectual and elitist positionality” (2014:629). Although Ngunjiri classifies the ability of her co-researchers to question the research design and our analyses as a potential challenge of collaborative autoethnography, it allows ordinary people to have more of a say over how they are represented and what kinds of knowledge are being produced about them, their communities, and Africa more broadly. Thus, to usher in a more ethical and equitable era in African Studies, re-examining our role as “experts” and repositioning ourselves accordingly is a challenge to which Africanists must rise.

Some autoethnographers also co-author with people they meet in their research sites. For example, theater studies scholar Edmondson and Tanzanian dancer and musician Ajwang’ co-authored a performative text addressing their romance during her research in Tanzania, in order “to go beyond the classic ethnographic confessional tale by dehegemonizing ... [Edmondson’s] Western self through the challenge of [Ajwang’s] active and involved presence.” However, as Edmondson observes in the introduction, the piece is perhaps “more successful as a product than it was as process,” as she had final

textual control because of her “Western training” and preference for scripted dialogue (2003:467). To overcome this power imbalance, in the piece’s conclusion, Ajwang’ addresses how the piece might have been different under his authorship. Collaborative writing does not eliminate power hierarchies in African Studies; however, it represents one way of reducing these status differentials. Various and more experimental forms of collaboration between “researcher” and “researched” are necessary to realize this genre’s full potential.

Another form of collaborative autoethnography involves researching and writing alongside other scholars, creative writers, or fellow observers. Speaking beyond autoethnography as self-reflexivity on the part of a single subject-researcher, Janice McGregor and Julieta Fernández observe that collaborative autoethnography promotes a “multivocal analysis and presentation” (2019:229), a sentiment echoed by Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, who believe that collaborative autoethnography produces “a richer perspective than that emanating from a solo researcher autoethnography.” They further insist that “one researcher’s story stirred another researcher’s memory; one’s probing question unsettled another’s assumptions; one’s action demanded another’s reaction” (2010:6). In other words, collaborative autoethnography, whether it be with those we are researching, research assistants, or our fellow academics and co-authors, produces accountability to others and further motivates a more rigorous analysis, one conscious of our own and others’ unique positionings and subjectivities. Regarding collaborative autoethnography as a collective action-based methodology, Mitchell insists that it allows us to attend to “the harm being done to us and to others and use autoethnographic research to tell, and right stories of injustice” and to “write stories of compassion, of solidarity and communion, of change and justice and hope” (2016:185).

As we address the African Studies Association’s colonially entrenched history, we can think of no more urgent tasks than to address and “right” our wrongs and to propose new, more justice-oriented research methodologies moving forward. Autoethnography is one such methodology.

Conclusion

The last few years have also seen more autoethnography-friendly journals emerge. Many non-Africanist journals, too, have published some Africanist autoethnography. We refer our colleagues who might like to try their hand at this genre to some of the journals we have cited here.

But we would also like to see university presses and Africa-focused journals such as *African Studies Review* step outside the box and publish work that experiments with new and different writing forms. As we have described, Africanist autoethnography is dispersed in such discipline-specific publications and methods-focused journals as *Qualitative Inquiry* and others, which risks our work not reaching Africanist audiences. As far as we can tell, the *African Studies Review* has published only one piece that mentions

autoethnography (Zeitlyn 2010), an article that refers to African diaries as autoethnographies but does not use autoethnographic methods. Most of the other Africanist journals have not published any autoethnographic scholarship, with one exception in *African Affairs* (Schmidt 2010). Journals interested in branching out can find precedents and models in publications such as *Anthropology and Humanism*, which publishes both traditional scholarship and autoethnography, other creative nonfiction, and even ethnographic fiction. Given the unorthodox forms that autoethnographic work may take, especially those that use evocative autoethnography, we encourage editors to seek a balance of peer reviewers for such work, perhaps one with regional expertise and another who has themselves published autoethnography. Our bibliography below is a good starting point for seeking the latter.

We also need more autoethnographic papers and panels at Africanist conferences such as ASA and the African Literature Association. As with journal articles, proposals for autoethnographic work should be vetted by experienced autoethnographers whenever possible, and panels should be organized to bring autoethnographers together. Both of us have presented autoethnographic work at ASA in the past, but sometimes the juxtaposition with other more traditional papers on our panels has limited the discussion that follows. Then, too, when the audience is not expecting autoethnographic work (as in a panel not labeled explicitly as such), authors of individual papers may need to explain and justify the methodology rather than simply present their findings and fully develop their arguments.

Although autoethnography is not an expensive methodology to undertake, as it often emerges from other research, researchers in this area would benefit from more funding (Ngunjiri 2014). Whether funders will support autoethnographic work remains uncertain, and we encourage autoethnographers to share their experiences with procuring funding. Indeed, more work is needed to convince academic gatekeepers that Africanist autoethnography is a legitimate methodology worthy of supporting and publishing.

Yet, interest in autoethnography is growing in African Studies. In 2017, Katrina presented the sole autoethnographic paper on an ASA panel (later published as Thompson 2018), after which an audience member asked all the panelists to address the issues Katrina had raised about positionality, secrecy, and loss in the field in relation to their research; a lively discussion ensued. The following year, three autoethnographic papers were featured in a panel of fieldwork reflections that was well attended and well received (Engmann 2018; Reed 2018; Shinn & LaRocco 2018). In addition, Africanist historian Kathleen Sheldon (2019) has written a monograph about her experience living in Mozambique during her fieldwork for which she is currently seeking a publisher. All of these developments give us hope.

Interest in autoethnography can be found not only in the United States but also on the continent. In fall 2019, Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, hosted a workshop titled “Auto-ethnography and Heuristic Research: Bridging the Gap Between Personal Life Experience and Scholarly Research.” In South Africa, the UNISA Press has launched its Flame Series to

publish autoethnographic work and other experimental genres (Lethabo 2015).

We see the inclusion of “Autoethnography” in the *African Studies Keywords* panel and series as a promising step in strengthening the method’s foothold in African Studies. We hope this keyword review will encourage our fellow Africanists not only to write, present, and publish autoethnography, but also to support others working in this area by encouraging and attending conference panels that use it and other nontraditional approaches, and to read autoethnography, empathizing with and criticizing it, citing it, including it in syllabi and reading lists, and allowing students to write it. We believe that such initiatives will not only increase intellectual understanding but also undermine attempts at detachment and claims of objectivity in ways that will ultimately help decolonize our scholarship.

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