



Turning the Gaze Inward: Collections, Identity, and Archival Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

In performing appraisal and other archival functions that involve decisions about the values contained in records and collections, archivists in cultural heritage institutions must recognize and engage the interests of various stakeholders. With an eye toward increasing transparency, accountability, and collaboration, this poster calls for research on the construction of identities and power relations through collections and collecting practices. Recognizing the power of authoritative interpretation inherent in the archivist's position, the author discusses how archival practices often naturalize economic and social constructions and norms. One way this occurs is through the removal of collected objects from their original contexts and their subsequent recontextualization in collections. Issues to be considered include the collector's psychological motivations and the effects on social relations that result from the status and value attributed to commodities and objects in a capitalist economy. Drawing on discourses in comparative literature, anthropology, and Native American and cultural studies this presentation will argue that archivists should engage with the dialectic between cultural categories as a means of better understanding the politics and implications of archival practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Archivists are continually making decisions about the values of records, collections, and texts. If archivists are to make these decisions effectively and fairly, they need to have as full an awareness as possible of the issues and stakeholders involved.

Thus, archivists need to: more thoroughly research all aspects of records, collections, and the contexts of records creation and use; more fully recognize the function of collections, records, and texts as instruments of power; cultivate greater accountability and awareness of the power inherent in their own role as interpreters and creators of archives; increase transparency through disclosure of their own biases and decision-making processes; increase collaboration with records-creators, users, and other stakeholders in decisions involving judgments about the value and meaning of records. With these goals in mind, we will examine the construction of identity and power through collecting practices and argue that autoethnographic discourse be incorporated into archival practice as a means of turning the archival gaze inward.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Drawing on Sherman Alexie's 1996 novel *Indian Killer*, Janet Dean (2008) points to the role of Native American collections in constructing and inscribing the subjectivities of colonizers and colonized people. The role of collections in the novel illustrates a "central paradox of collections, which theorists have argued serve to contain objects in a system of knowledge and simultaneously to solidify the identity of the collector" (Dean, 2008). According to noted anthropologist, James Clifford, such collecting practices "cannot be natural or innocent. It is tied up with nationalist politics, with restrictive law, and with contested encodings of past and future" (Dean, 2008).

•Daniel's collection of maps, through its spatial representations of dominance, creates, contains, and normalizes racial subjectivity and difference. As Daniel "'silently read[s] his way across the whole state' of Montana, figuratively possessing the space once populated only by Native Americans like his son", he imagines John "lost without a map" (Dean, 2008).

•A modern day Native American reconfigures Native identity in contemporary culture through his collection of white scalps.

RESULTS

From anthropologists' attempts to re-imagine ethnographic methodology, Mary Louise Pratt's concept of **autoethnography** emerged as a promising technique. In Clifford's summation, the term referred to **"the ways colonized people portray themselves using a mix of imported and indigenous terms, symbols, and genres, reinventing their cultures through critical engagement with external representations"** (Buzard, 2003).

• For Pratt, if ethnography is a means by which "Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others", autoethnography is a means by which these subjugated others reconstruct these narratives (Buzard, 2003).

•Buzard points to Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographical and ethnographic work in which Hurston explores her own location, departure from, and return to the "culture of 'negroism'".

•Buzard (2003) argues that a qualified appreciation of "strategies of detachment as elements of ongoing forms of social life" enables a nuanced exploration of subjectivity. That is, if we recognize that cultural categories are never absolute and can generate new understandings and identities, we can explore and learn from the intersections of these constructs.

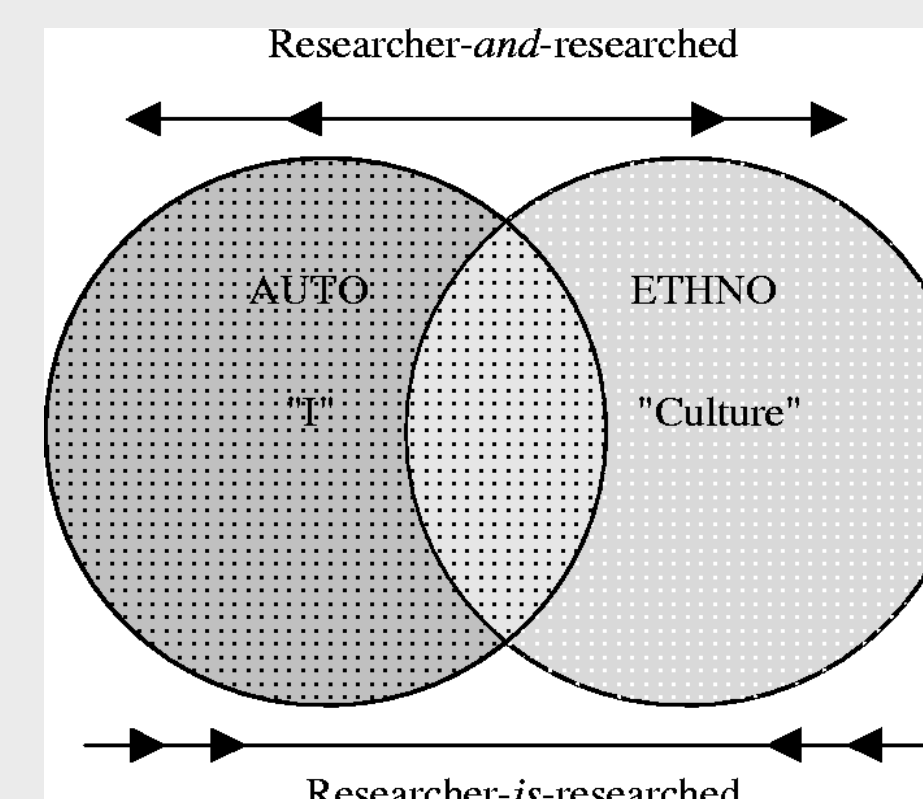


Figure 1. Doloriert & Sambrook (2009). Figure 2. Collaborative Autoethnography Ngunjiri, et al (2010)

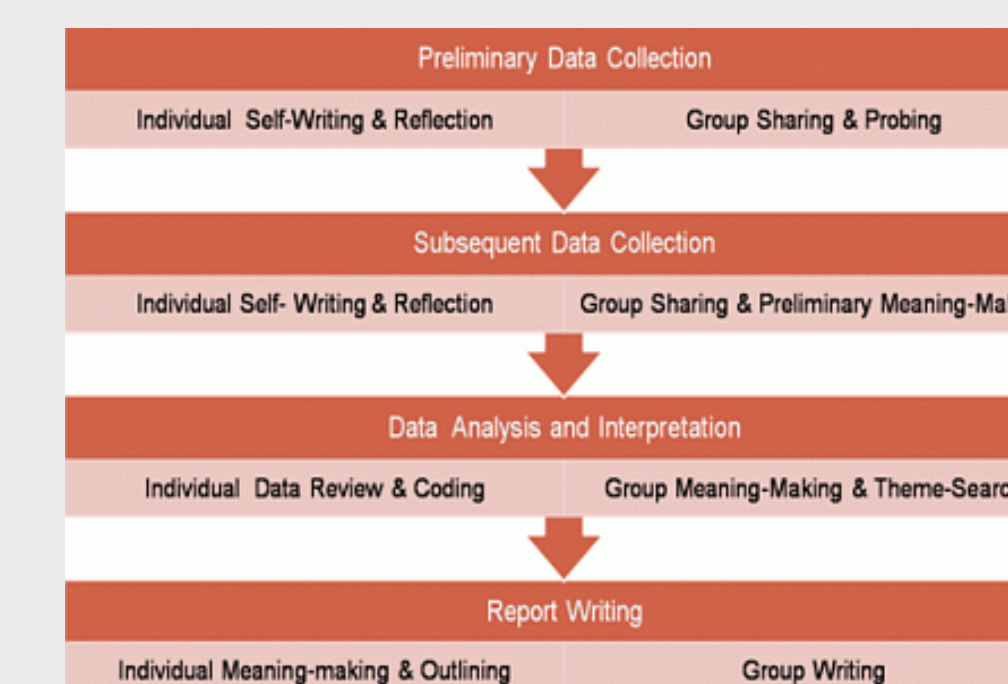


Figure 3.

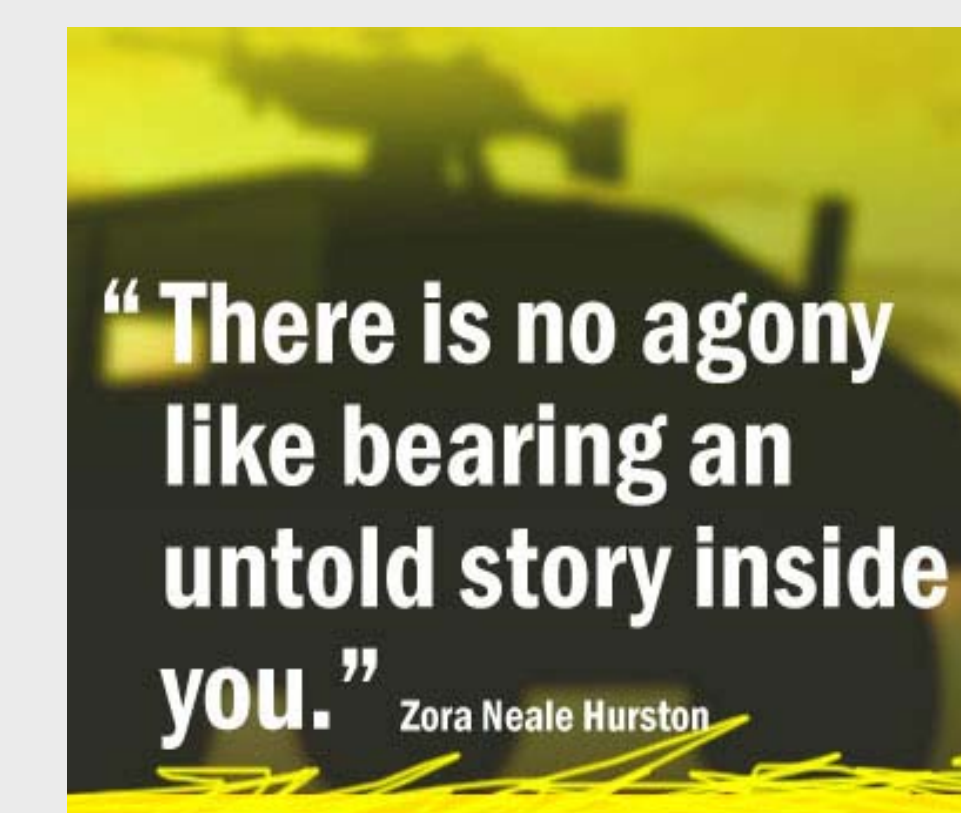


Figure 4. .Tawana (2010)

DISCUSSION

Archival autoethnography could not only provide accountability and transparency but could also facilitate: 1) an augmentation of the traditional archival focus and 2) the critical examination of the study and understanding of archival practice itself. For Marcus and Fischer, Kaplan(2002) observes, "the true study of anthropology was anthropology, not the "Other", but the deconstruction of their own presumptions and their own products". Similarly, Taussig (2010), has suggested that anthropologists reevaluate the position of cultures previously constructed as objects of study. Anthropologists, he argues, should engage with and take seriously discourses critical of Western, capitalist culture. That is, those concerned with or engaged in the practice of documenting cultures should recognize the opportunities for new understandings offered by critiques of their own cultures as articulated by those on the margins of capitalist paradigms and positions of privilege.

CONCLUSIONS

•Archivists could facilitate autoethnographic accounts by members of documented groups detailing the ways in which cultural roles and subjectivities compete and coalesce.

• Archivists may themselves engage in autoethnography as a way of illuminating archival practice and creating transparency and accountability.

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