
9-3-2012

Whose Story Is It? An Autoethnography Concerning Narrative Identity

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Recommended APA Citation

Grant, A. J., & Zeeman, L. (2012). Whose Story Is It? An Autoethnography Concerning Narrative Identity. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(36), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1735>

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Abstract

This paper is divided into three parts, each separated by centrally spaced asterisks. The first part, co-written on the basis of the standpoint interests of both authors, outlines the historical, philosophical, theoretical and methodological contexts for the use of autoethnographic short stories in the social and human sciences. The functions and representational practices of this genre are reviewed and discussed, and the main criticisms leveled by its detractors responded to. This sets the scene for the second part of the paper, an autoethnographic short story. Effectively a story of stories, it was constructed directly from the first author's memories of his early life in relation to textual material and was written exclusively by him. In part three, some of the significant issues raised in the story are discussed in relation to larger co-evolving social, cultural and therapeutic frameworks from a reflexive and narrative identity perspective. It is written as, and represents, an extended, unfinished dialogue between the first and second author.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Ethnographic Stories, Narrative Turn, Reflexivity, Narrative Identity, Culture, Re-Storying Identity

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Whose Story Is It? An Autoethnography Concerning Narrative Identity

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This paper is divided into three parts, each separated by centrally spaced asterisks. The first part, co-written on the basis of the standpoint interests of both authors, outlines the historical, philosophical, theoretical and methodological contexts for the use of autoethnographic short stories in the social and human sciences. The functions and representational practices of this genre are reviewed and discussed, and the main criticisms leveled by its detractors responded to. This sets the scene for the second part of the paper, an autoethnographic short story. Effectively a story of stories, it was constructed directly from the first author's memories of his early life in relation to textual material and was written exclusively by him. In part three, some of the significant issues raised in the story are discussed in relation to larger co-evolving social, cultural and therapeutic frameworks from a reflexive and narrative identity perspective. It is written as, and represents, an extended, unfinished dialogue between the first and second author. Keywords: Autoethnography, Ethnographic Stories, Narrative Turn, Reflexivity, Narrative Identity, Culture, Re-Storying Identity

Introduction: Autoethnographic Short Stories in the Social and Human Sciences

Emerging in the latter part of the 20th century, the “narrative turn” in the human sciences has increasingly challenged a single, monolithic conception of what should constitute scholarly work in favor of a developing pluralism. This has resulted in the promotion of multiple forms of representation and research, and a relative shift of focus from master narratives to local stories (Bochner, 2001; Reissman, 1993, 2008). Further shifts include challenges to the exclusivity of rationally-based categorical thinking and abstracted theory by the values of emotionality and social activism. A related change in researcher value position can also be seen in the rejection of the disinterested, distanced spectator and writer of essays in favor of the embodied, feeling, culturally engaged and vulnerable observer and teller of stories (Bochner, 2001).

We all live storied lives and our stories are relational, embodied and performative. They proceed from dialogue and help us shape and endow our past and present experiences, emotions, and behavior with significance and with hope for our futures (Denzin, 2003; Frank, 2002, 2010; Spry, 2011). Storied lives are thus tales of cultural engagement, to the extent that culture is understood as the meaning construction woven in human and material contexts as people go about and through their lives (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Stories told about forms of cultural engagement are of course myriad, with success and achievement vying with failure and resistance tales.

Not all of these stories are explicit about the degree of reflexivity that contributed to their construction, of course. In contrast, autoethnography enables the act of highly reflexive story telling in moral, political and ethical terms (Denzin, 2003; Frank, 1995, 2002, 2010; Spry, 2011). In this context, such local stories can be told from the vantage point of embodied, lived experience, and in the project of promoting social justice. This enables the detailed interrogation and critique of potentially or actually oppressive and repressive cultural institutions, norms, values, practices, and logics. Such malign aspects of culture are often otherwise arguably overlooked to the extent that they are frequently represented in benign, magnanimous, or positive terms in rationally-nuanced, master narratives.

Autoethnographic story telling has further related and important functions. It can be therapeutic for the story teller to work through difficult times, events and issues in his/her own life in the development of a preferred identity. Specifically, writing personal stories can be therapeutic for individuals as they make better sense of themselves or their experiences, purge themselves of their burdens, and/or determine what kinds of lives they should live (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Frank, 2010). In this context, Riemer (1977) took researchers in the social sciences to task for too frequently neglecting the first-hand knowledge that they alone possess in the execution of their research ventures. Riemer argued that such researchers, including autoethnographers, are well placed to write about their reflexive biographical engagement with culture, since they are, by definition, experts by experience. Equally, bearing in mind the relational, dialogic basis of stories, readers might be helped to make better sense of their own lives by locating themselves in relation to what they read (Bochner, 2001; Frank, 1995, 2010, 2011).

However, autoethnography is often reported as being self-indulgent and solipsistic, and therefore not a legitimate form of qualitative inquiry (Coffey, 1999; Sparkes, 2002). With regard to the issue of solipsistic self-indulgence, this charge only works if the autoethnographic self is assumed to be autonomous and culturally, dialogically and relationally disconnected from other people. However, autoethnography is predicated on quite the opposite: that, as discussed above, culture flows through self and vice versa (Bochner & Ellis, 1996), and that people are inscribed within dialogic, socially shared linguistic and representational practices (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2005). This leaves the self as a sociocultural rather than an autonomous phenomenon (Church, 1995).

Having clarified issues of function and purpose in autoethnographic story telling and its status as a legitimate qualitative research form, the discussion will now turn to the epistemological and reflexive significance of its representational practices. Rorty (1979) argued that all truths were contingent on human representational activity. He asserted no clear demarcation line between values and facts, with observers always implicated in the product and process of observations. In short, the knowing self is always connected to the known. This argument contributed to the development of a platform and justification for autoethnographic story tellers to turn their observations back on themselves by, echoing Riemer's charge described above, writing directly from their own experiences. A further implication of this argument is the justification for the use of literary linguistic devices in praxis as close to the humanities as it is to social science (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In this context, the act of writing constitutes a way of knowing or a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). The language used in short stories should thus be viewed as creating reality, rather than as a technical device for establishing the meaning of a separate world “out there”, independent of its social construction (Reissman, 1993).

Writing from one’s own experience base involves writing from memory. The past is recreated as a series of emotional moments and from the vantage point of the present, resulting in “improvised moral texts that continually revisit the old” (Denzin, 2003, p. 141). It is on this basis and on the basis of the preceding discussion more generally that the following story is presented.

Alec’s Autoethnographic Short Story

In my late middle age, I contacted the school secretary from the small rural Scottish town where I spent the first 16 years of my life. From this phone call I was routed to one of the teachers who obligingly sent me some spare copies of my old school magazine. Published annually, they covered the years between 1948, three years before my birth, and 1968, which was the year I left the town. They were to make poignant reading, but it took me a while to open them up and look inside. I felt a surge of familiar anxiety as I unwrapped the parcel and once again saw “Age pro viribus”, the school motto, emblazoned on the yellow cover of each magazine. Inside the pages were illustrated stories. Stories of the past. Stories of my time, from my time, kind of.

Age pro viribus: In all that you do, do your best. The woman who sent me the magazines, a teacher in the school, seemed pleased to oblige. It turned out that she remembered my father, but not me. A few years younger than me, she apparently hung out with the sister of one of my friends. I felt self-conscious as I looked at the pile of time-worn magazines. Under scrutiny perhaps? There was a meta-voyeuristic feel to the idea of wanting to look inside the pages, knowing that some people from the town knew about my interest and request (made for “scholarly purposes”) and were perhaps curious about this. News travels fast in a small town, population 1,400.

When I eventually looked inside the magazines, I saw faces and names of people I remembered. All smiling, all pristine, from more than four decades back. What would they think of me now if they met me? I went from school to the British Royal Air Force, and then trained as a mental health nurse. Later, educated to PhD level, I have spent the last few years as a mental health and cognitive behavioural writer, lecturer, teacher, practitioner, researcher and patient. But it wasn’t supposed to turn out this way.

As I read and re-read the magazines, I was reminded of a belief I had as a youngster: that there was only room for success stories in their pages. Depending on how they are read, photos of, and stories by and about, well-turned out adolescents signify a particular kind of cultural narrative. Complexity and difference are effaced, airbrushed out. Photos of pupils in their school uniforms are testimony to homogenization, to single stories, to monocultures. Age pro viribus. Cultural conformity (or at least the appearance of it) promises rewards. No dissenters graced the pages.

And the future focus was in keeping with this style of representation. The former pupil lists spoke of success and conformity; of tidied up, sanitized representations of human lives. All was achievement piled on achievement. Promotion, degrees, higher

degrees, more sporting successes. All were happy lives, marriages, and babies. Even death was purified. People had “nice ends” and “passed peacefully away”. No nastiness here. No alcoholics, broken marriages, broken people, broken lives.

And there were bigger stories. The school magazine down the years told tales of inter-generational dynasties. Dynasties which smelled like roses and did not wilt (or die nastily). The promise of eternal respectable certainty shone out from pages produced annually and circulated internationally for the benefit of ex-pat readers.

And the pages communicated an assumption about the school, as an organization, which complemented the above. In magazine after magazine its image was presented as benign. A warm and cheerful place. A harmless bricks and mortar backdrop to gainful, happy and productive activity in learning and on the track and field. *Age pro viribus*.

But there were losers, and the local graveyard in my town tells part of this story (although of course no headstone is testament to this). My mother was buried there in 1974 after she hanged herself.

And who, what, and where was I in all of this? After a while I was able to look at the magazines with detachment. Pleasure even. I was quite surprised to find that I was not filled with rancor, perhaps having worked through most of the problems I developed and had as I grew up in the town, and which plagued me for many years afterwards.

I was never a member of the first eleven football team. I never stood out on the athletics field. I left school early and with no qualifications. I can't remember ever having written anything or having had my photo taken for the magazine. Most of the time there were no books in our house, except for the ones my mother started to send away for on a monthly basis in the mid-1960s, and which would be read only by me. These were bought to populate the new bookcase, and both books and bookcase were there for display rather than utility value. For show only; showcasing respectability.

A year or two before I left the town, there were two stories circulating about my future, which two different groups of people assumed I would conform to, and which were mutually contradictory. The one in my family was that I was supposed to become a housepainter and serve an apprenticeship in my cousin's decorating business. The other story, told by some of my teachers and headmaster, was that I showed academic promise, coming to the top of my class for two years running, and should stay on at school and sit for examinations that would help me escape my working class roots. This would mean that I would probably end up moving away from the town, and my father constantly reminded me at the time that this would bring shame on the family as the act of having to find work elsewhere was a sign of failure.

But no staying on at school or staying in the town for me. I had to get away. My mother was mentally ill and was also an alcoholic. These days she would be classified as having a personality disorder, but back then she was relatively invisible in the community. The family, and she, kept everything behind closed doors. Up until the last year or so of her life she managed to keep most of her problems a secret from the outside world, presenting a pristine, well-turned out front when she had to leave the house. As part of this subterfuge, she had contacts, fellow drinkers, who would buy and bring the alcohol for her.

I was the only child at home, my older brother and only other sibling having left the town in 1956. My father, although still technically living at home, was largely absent

by choice, and quite reasonably so given my mother's behavior, and I saw him infrequently. I never knew how my mother would be from one day to the next. Her mood swings in relation to me (and just about everyone else in her life, although I seemed to take the brunt of it) would vary dramatically from hour to hour, minute to minute, oscillating from extreme idealization to extreme denigration. One day she would scream at me for hours on end, telling me how useless and unlike other boys I was, and the next she would force me to stay in my room in order to protect me from imagined dangers outside of our house. And she increasingly employed alcoholic denial, maintaining that she drank to relax. In my last year at home she'd often achieve spectacular and comatose levels of relaxation when, for example, I'd come home from school to find her lying unconscious on the living room carpet.

I tried to tell some teachers about this during my time at the school, but they didn't seem to want to know. At the time I tended to categorize my teachers into those who were monsters and to be avoided (most of them) and those who were relatively harmless. One day in 1968, I caught sight of another pupil, who would also later become a teacher in the school, in tears over the retirement of our classics master. I was surprised; she obviously held him in great esteem, whereas I thought him a deeply strange bully.

Growing up, I was prone to disabling anxiety attacks and more frequently occurring periods of depression. I also had acute stomach pains which, I found out in my mid-twenties, were the result of constantly recurring duodenal ulcers from my early childhood onwards. I kept all of this to myself at the time. This is not surprising, as I had neither the concepts nor the social and narrative resources to employ to do anything about my problems. Neither did I have the knowledge or resources to discuss what I later came to understand as my retarded cognitive, emotional, behavioral and interpersonal development.

I was completely immature for my years and lacked the confidence to interact successfully with most of my peers. I avoided situations where I might become the object of social scrutiny, and when I could not avoid them I was frozen with anxiety. This of course brought the shame that I so desperately wanted to keep at bay. I was dogged by beliefs that I was worthless, useless. I had constant racing thoughts and a poor concentration span, which might have been the precursor of manic depression, diagnosed in adulthood. And all of this would also eventually contribute to a two decade long battle with alcoholism.

And schooldays were the start of the realization that I felt uncomfortable in my own skin, an experience that was to stay with me for most of my life. I looked at the images of my peers at school, now gracing the pages of the magazines, and remembered just how solid, real and vital they seemed to be in comparison with how I felt at the time. I was attracted to, and made friends with, people who felt a similar degree of ontological insecurity. We became cultural outsiders, marginal figures, who, either by design or default, always chose marginal interests and lampooned what we perceived to be the dominant school culture.

This pattern was to inform the story of who I was down the decades. However, in the space between then and now, in direct response to and in order to compensate for my early life experiences, I have managed to accumulate a range of narrative identity resources. These tell multiple success stories about me, and in my own terms, and can

help me re-inscribe my past in sophisticated and, more importantly, self-compassionate and forgiving ways. In a happy relationship for many years, I find myself in the position of feeling the most sanguine I've ever felt. Regarding alcoholism, I have been dry and in recovery for some years now, and my mood swings are well-controlled with appropriate medication.

It's also the case that since 2010 some of my published books have been lodged in the museum in my home town, donated with my agreement. Their local public presence seemed strange at first and evoked discomfort in me at first, as the individual act of "blowing your own trumpet" usually received insular public condemnation locally, although always applauded if part of a broader, culturally sanctioned, narrative. Did this represent me trying to elicit some measure of belated recognition from the town, and by extension the school, for professional and academic success? Or was I trying to get my own back for longstanding narrative and related material injustices? Or both? Or did it simply symbolize me doing my best in whatever I did in recent years? Age pro viribus. Irony compounded.

Discussion: A Dialogue

Laetitia: Alec, I found your autoethnographic short story most moving and challenging at the same time. Reading the narrative left me with a sense of appreciation for your courage to speak out in order to challenge oppressive discourses and the status quo of research and academic writing to engage in a form of social activism. As story teller, you become visible in the text as a sociocultural phenomenon via your account of life as a young person in Scotland. As reader of the text, I felt drawn in and was moved by its honesty, but experienced a slight discomfort with the politics of such public disclosure due to issues of safety. A question the narrative brought to the fore for me is what happens in the space between the reader, author and text? Or in other words, how do we make meaning of the narrative in order to touch the world?

Alec: Okay Laetitia, I'm with Lock and Strong (2010) here. They argue that the extent to which narratives constitute and are part of the process of the social construction of reality, rather than simply reflecting it, implicates them in relations of representational power and resistance. So, political struggles are played out in contestations over narrative identity, often with regard to the inscription of individuals within master narratives – broad, encapsulating stories circulating within cultures. Because they serve an ideological function which is simultaneously denied, master narratives present the people and circumstances storied with them in an essentialized way, as "just so", the way things are, the way he or she is. I think, I hope, my writing challenges this position.

Laetitia: What are examples of these master narratives in practice and how are they linked to the identities of young people? In this context, what does it mean to be young, to belong or not, to achieve, to be safe, neglected or loved?

Alec: Well, in terms of Reissman's (1993) argument that the story metaphor is a good basis for understanding human experience, we are arguably all inscribed within master narratives in various ways, and from a young age. Rural Scottish mid-20th century local community texts, such as the school magazine in my story, arguably had,

and have, a positive function in both providing and reflecting an aspirational and role modeling framework for young people in their journeys to adulthood...

Laetitia: The normative function of representational practices comes to mind right now, with some children included and belonging and others marginalized and silenced within a broader cultural context.

Alec: Yes, I think that's exactly right. Positioning in the moral order is arguably double-sided, and stories which will benefit some children may marginalize others. Representational practices always have material correlates.

So, in this regard, local community texts serve a normative political function in safeguarding and reproducing symbolic values. In so doing, they simultaneously obscure and suppress cultural complexities. I think my story pointed up that the narrative management of culture is achieved through forms of writing that serve the interests of particular groups at the expense of others. In order to sustain the collective and corporate esteem of privileged groups, the complexity and unruliness of some lives and forms of relationship are rendered invisible, but this doesn't mean they disappear of course.

Goffman's (1959) "frontstage-backstage" metaphor is a useful device in this argument. I think it's useful to regard representations of local life as a pernicious form of showcasing which works to conceal and suppress the unwanted backstage stories which would otherwise get in the way. Backstage stories might testify to the extent to which local life is malign, replete with power and political machinations, and instrumental in the creation and development of winners and losers, and at worst bullies and bullied.

And 'invisibility' needs unpacking in this context. Stories which exclude, by definition, speak loud the problematic existence of the excluded: not good enough didn't make the grade, not allowed to join the club. Equally, invisibility can signify not worthy of attention. This can simultaneously be seen as a form of narrative neglect and representative of a concern not to rock the boat of a dominant story of small town respectability.

Invisibility may also be implicated in the development and transmission of stories of stigmatization and othering by exclusion. Perhaps best conceptualized as co-existing on a continuum or spectrum, stigmatizing in Goffman's (1963) sense constitutes the social process of critically labeling another as not quite human on the basis of some perceived defect, while othering, from Canales (2000), refers to viewing people as "not like me", or "not as good as us". Stigmatizing and othering stories told about people can exhaust their identities, so that all they can be is captured in reductive and pejorative terms, in a form of what Frank (1995, 2005) describes as narrative entrapment. In an important sense, this cruel narrative trend also indicates that those who are victim to it are hijacked into a kind of master narrative possessed by others who are accorded moral superiority by dint of supporting and reinforcing the stigmatizing or othering story. Oppressive narratives of this sort can of course be resisted.

Laetitia: White (2001, 2003) and White and Epston (1990) draw on social constructionism to speak of lives as multi-storied, made up of multiple accounts of lived events. Oppressive or problem-filled accounts of life take frontstage while alternative accounts that describe life more richly are backstaged. How do we bring backstage narratives more fully to the fore, and what gets in the way of this process, do you think?

Alec: Well, it seems to me that if someone remains in a rural location, with a small population, it may make the stories which she or he is caught up in difficult to

resist or contest. In contrast, the refusal or rejection to become a victim of a toxic or unwanted biography may be aided by cultural, geographical and temporal distance. My experience is that the narrative identity resources and flexibility afforded by engagement with higher education can enable a positive re-inscription of one's past and the achievement of a better future.

So, in this regard, what an emotionally significant background means to an individual is dependent on his/her narrative resources. This includes the range of stories available, his/her ability to be reflexive about those, and his/her willingness and ability to construct meta-stories which have a therapeutic function.

Laetitia: This sounds similar to Michael White's writing around dominant and alternative life stories (White & Epston, 1990), and his later work on 'the absent but implicit' (Carey, Russell & Walther, 2009). We live many stories at once, and because lives are made up of multiple stories, as Morgan (2000) further argues, more than one account of lived events are possible. Reframing or re-storying of lives becomes achievable due to the arbitrary and generative function of language. By means of therapeutic inquiry during conversations, lived events are re-interpreted and re-narrated in order to bring narratives to the fore that serve as rich descriptions of lives. What is "absent but implicit" in texts is utilized to enquire into narratives of self that lie beyond problem stories and give voice to a range of territories of life that are alternative to such stories (Carey, Russell, & Walther, 2009).

Alec: Yes indeed, but not everyone is in a position to do this, and at worst there's a link between personal narrative and psychopathology. Some colleagues and I stressed something fundamental to the cognitive behavioral perspective a few years ago (Grant, Townend, Mills, & Cockx, 2008), which is interesting for this dialogue if re-framed from a narrative perspective. This is that as a result of their early life experiences, some individuals begin to construct internal, often covert, problematic stories about themselves in relation to the world and other people. These stories may develop into a tragic commentary replayed throughout the rest of their lives, which, as Gilbert (2009) writes, may be kept as a relative secret because of shame.

Such narratives are self-deprecating and condemnatory, and include the examples given in my story. Self-deprecating stories may be underpinned by the themes of "worthlessness", "uselessness", being "damaged", and being "irreparable", "unlovable", "deficient", or "a failure", to name but a few. Related self-stories about others might include "they are out to get me", "they will hurt me", or "they will not like me". Finally, corresponding stories about the world might include that it is "cruel" or "unforgiving".

Laetitia: Right. In order to help people move from self-deprecating, problem-filled or problem-saturated stories to accounts that describe their lives more fully, I'm interested in what a narrative therapeutic line of inquiry might look like? White (2001), reading Derrida (1978), suggests that we interpret life events to form narratives. What we include in narratives that are presented to us, privileged meaning, is as important as what we leave out, subjugated meaning. We can only make sense of life experiences by contrasting them to what they are not (Carey, Russell, & Walther, 2009). So, what is absent but implicit in texts is as important as what is visible and present. In your story, the meaning of "worthlessness", "uselessness", or "a failure" becomes intelligible

against what is absent but implicit. This could be an alternative account of resilience or perseverance through adversity.

In deconstructing such stories, binary oppositions, such as failure versus resilience, become useful to illuminate subjugated meanings and disrupt what is assumed to be the true or “fixed” accounts of identity. White (2003) asks the following: “What are the subjugated meanings that the problem story relies upon for its expression?” (p. 30). These meanings connect with stories of preference or alternative accounts which appreciate the values, assets and abilities of the narrator. This kind of double listening opens up a range of narrative territories or fields of possibilities that hold the potential for exploration of narratives as rich descriptions of life.

I would like to ponder more on what your short story testifies to that which is held precious in your life. That is, amidst significant loss and challenging life circumstances growing up as a youngster, what made it possible for you to connect with your academic potential? This valuing of academic learning might serve as a point of entry into an alternative account of lived events. How did academic achievement become valued? What does this valuing say about what is regarded as important in life, more broadly? Who other than the headmaster and teachers noticed this academic promise? What did they witness or see that made them recognize this potential?

Through this line of questioning an alternative narrative of the same lived events could emerge from the shadow of the original narrative. Such alternative accounts, previously unknown, would be enriched by linking them to landscapes of actions and identity (Carey, Russell, & Walther, 2009; White, 2001, 2003). In the context of your story; by this I mean the actions taken by you to nurture academic potential, make friends, resist the dominant school culture, oppose internalized voices of judgment and question oppressive discourses. Some specific questions in this regard are: What did you refuse to go along with in displaying resistance to school culture? What was happening during that period of life that you did not want to let go by unchallenged? By means of your actions, what did you speak up for? How were your actions challenging what had been done to you or others? Through these acts of resistance, what were you valuing?

Through developing this line of inquiry, narratives of ‘failure’ or ‘worthlessness’ may better yield to stories that describe lives more richly and reflect actions as signs of resistance or challenging marginalizing norms. White (2003) links narratives over time in past, present and future. So, a more over-arching and perhaps more currently relevant, question for you is the extent to and ways in which your oppositional style, reflected in your story, informs your involvement in autoethnography as a form of social activism?

Alec: This is an interesting question Laetitia, and one I’ve thought a lot about. Had I been better culturally socialized I might not have ended up doing autoethnography at all. I presumably wouldn’t feel such a need to interrogate or critique cultures if I felt at home in them, and if I didn’t feel that I was (originally) culturally damaged goods. But as the old saying goes, “blessed are the cracked for through them the light shines!”

Laetitia: A few final questions then: are we able to regard your involvement in autoethnography as a solid protest that disrupts restrictive academic and research discourses? When did you become aware of this ability? How do you manage to take this action? What makes it possible for you to question academic convention? Carey, Russell and Walther (2009) link questioning to future intentions and purposes by asking “What are you hoping for in taking this action?” (p. 327). From your narratives it

appears as if you are laying the foundation to a form of activism that holds the potential to transform academic writing. For this I am grateful.

Alec: All of these questions are thought provoking Laetitia. They represent potentially really interesting and exciting lines of future reflexive narrative inquiry for me and will help in guiding my storied self. And they're also questions that will keep this valuable dialogue open between us and hopefully others. Thank you.

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Article Citation

Grant, A. J., & Zeeman, L. (2012). Whose story is it? An autoethnography concerning narrative identity. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Art. 72), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/grant.pdf>
