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## Autoethnography as a Never-Ending Story: A Review of Guyana Diaries: Women's Lives across Difference

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### Abstract

The proliferation of autoethnographies offers scholars and writers multiple opportunities to consider the various methods of authorial positioning in qualitative research inquiry. In this article, I review *Guyana Diaries: Women's Lives across Difference*, by Kimberly D. Nettles, while reflecting my own choices as an autoethnographic author. Autoethnographic writing is presented as a 'never-ending story,' which may have lasting, transformative effects on those who produce it

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Representation of Self and Other, Identity, Authorial Positioning, Arts-Based Inquiry

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## **Autoethnography as a Never-Ending Story: A Review of *Guyana Diaries: Women's Lives across Difference***

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*The proliferation of autoethnographies offers scholars and writers multiple opportunities to consider the various methods of authorial positioning in qualitative research inquiry. In this article, I review *Guyana Diaries: Women's Lives across Difference*, by Kimberly D. Nettles, while reflecting my own choices as an autoethnographic author. Autoethnographic writing is presented as a 'never-ending story,' which may have lasting, transformative effects on those who produce it. Key Words: Autoethnography, Representation of Self and Other, Identity, Authorial Positioning, and Arts-Based Inquiry*

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When I picked up *Guyana Diaries: Women's Lives across Difference*, the new autoethnography by Kimberly D. Nettles (2008) published by Left Coast Press, I prepared myself to be swept away to another world, to become engrossed in someone else's life story, and to see and feel what it is like to go somewhere I've never been. I was not disappointed—*Guyana Diaries* is a wonderfully written book, interesting and sophisticated, and full of dialogue and life stories about activist women working with a collective in the country, as well as a bit about the activist woman academic who chose to write about them, resulting in the publication of this book.

Nettles, a professor in California and a specialist in African American research, tells us what drew her to Guyana and alludes often to what kept her coming back to her research of participants' life stories. Most of the book focuses on the content of Nettles' interviews with the women she meets in Guyana; Nettles' experiences are a highlight shadowing and illuminating the "other," on whom she is most focused during the research for her dissertation.

The most compelling part of the book, in my view, is when Nettles talks about her struggles to find an academic "home" and also, her search for a way to voice and document the "backstory" of what she learned and felt in doing her research in Guyana. This discussion is what sets the context for the book in its first pages. Implicitly, it also shows how Nettles ended up an autoethnographic author.

The book really flies in a final chapter, when the author writes about an interview with a participant named Andaiye, who claims "I'm very much an African shaped by the Americas, and particularly, by the West Indies" (Nettles, 2008, p. 256). Reading this, I was struck by how much Andaiye's comment mirrored Nettles' (or how Nettles' story mirrored Andaiye's), in the way Nettles describes early in the book her search for an identity within the academy, and for herself as a woman of color, a "displaced granddaughter of the South," as she eloquently says.

Nettles allows Andaiye's story to end the book, and it is a fine way to close the text, as Andaiye is eloquent, wise, and alive in her identity and her world. After

Andaiye's story, I couldn't help wondering even more about how hearing Andaiye's story affected the author. When she cried on the plane home, as she describes doing, were there certain words of Andaiye's that struck her? How did she make sense of all the emotion she felt on the plane ride home? Nettles' tears at the end surprised me; I had not seen or felt her embodied, emotional experience until that moment—and I wonder if that had been the case for Nettles, too?

In the early part of the book, the activist Andaiye is described as being uncomfortable with one of Nettles' upcoming publications about the Guyanese women's collective, which Andaiye helped start. Andaiye even tells Nettles that the version she is about to publish is out of date. Nevertheless, the relationship with Andaiye at the time of the publication of *Guyana Diaries* is left unaddressed. Did Andaiye know her outdated story, as she saw it, was published as a book? Did she agree with its publication? What wise words would she have for us about that?

My responses to the book and to Nettles as author speak to the power of autoethnographic writing. In the book's early pages, I felt I was having a cup of coffee with Nettles, as I listened to her discussion of her own struggle to “belong,” in the academy, and in the world of identity. At the end of the book, I so wanted to meet her again in its pages, maybe for a beer this time, to hear more about what it all meant to her. Perhaps that is a story for another day.

These questions are especially meaningful to me no doubt due to the fact that they are questions I had to face myself during the publication of my own autoethnography, *Intimate Colonialism: Head, Heart, and Body in West African Development Work* (Charlés, 2007), a year ago. Like Nettles, I have struggled to find a place for myself in the academy, as both a woman of color of mixed, or *mestiza*, background. I have struggled to balance alternative ways of inquiry with the more traditional forms readily accepted in the academy. Like Nettles, I have held posts at several institutions as a junior faculty member. I don't know what Nettles' story is about her different posts (and I doubt it matters that much—our stories of movement are not rare in the contemporary academy); however, for me, publication and writing of an autoethnography brought forth significant changes to my intellectual and everyday life.

At the time I was writing *Intimate Colonialism*, I was also in the process of changing academic institutions. My move was more than geographic; it also indicated a shift in my professional identity. As a Family Therapist and Qualitative Researcher, I was interested in finding and claiming for myself an association with an institution, department, and program that was consistent with my own developmental process—primarily, a focus on advocacy and social justice—in the work I want to do in the academy. This is noteworthy because in the U.S., family therapy is likely to be seen as a conservative endeavor, somewhat narrow and not so globally-minded. I of course did not see myself this way! However, writing an autoethnography pushed me to think not only how I saw myself as an academic, but how I *located* myself—literally and figuratively—in the kind of work I produced.

It was sheer coincidence (perhaps) that at the time I was looking and interviewing for positions, I was also completing *Intimate Colonialism*. The writing process, which eventually centered, for me, on questions of representation of both self and other, was incredibly consistent with the struggle I was dealing with in the search for “place,” in terms of my next academic position. Both experiences required me to think much more

critically about my professional identity, and question whether or not my claims were consistent with my everyday lived experience in the academy.

Carolyn Ellis' (2007) work has suggested that autoethnography can make us more sensitive to issues of social justice. I don't know in what order these things influenced each other, but in one full moment, as I was completing the writing of my book, and changing institutions, I also re-focused my positioning, and thus, the work I produce, as a family therapy academic.

In a sense, the autoethnographic writing process promoted my understanding about the claims I make and the agenda I hold as a woman in the academy. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) noted:

[W]riting moves me into an independent space where I can see more clearly the interrelationships between and among peoples worldwide. Perhaps [this leads us] to actions that decrease the inequities between and among people and peoples that decreases violence. (p. 964)

Writing my autoethnography made me re-think how I was performing my academic work as a family therapist and as a qualitative researcher. It organized me to think more critically about my participation in the world, and question whether or not I was performing relationships in the global way I had been thinking about them before I wrote them down.

Autoethnographic writing forced me to be transparent and assertive about the claims I made—those to do with my own worldview. Once made, it was easy to see how these claims matched up (or didn't) with the work I do everyday. When the mis-matches were clear, it was impossible for me to not act in such a way that honored my beliefs more consistently.

I did not see the logic of my choices, and the influences of writing *Intimate Colonialism*, for many months, and I've yet to write about them in any depth. They are still resounding within me; I am too busy living my choices to reflect about them yet—but I expect that too, will change.

Thus I reminded of one of the most difficult, and wonderful, aspects of achieving great autoethnographic writing—how does one “end” a story that has no end? In what way can form and content send the same message? For we are always in the business of constructing our identity and “showing” who we are—it's a process that happens in real time, not in a fixed, linear fashion. Reading works like Nettles' piece reminds vividly of the effect autoethnographic work has not only on its reader, but its writer; both constructing never-ending stories of one self and others. And this is a lovely thing.

For me, it is a luxury and a gift to have these questions after reading a research inquiry. I am a passionate advocate for autoethnographic stories and research and writing precisely because they allow me to wonder such questions aloud. In autoethnography, these “backstory” questions are valid. They raise further questions about how we as researchers position ourselves in the work we do, whether it is the performance of doing the inquiry, or the performance of writing and presenting it to an audience.

As most qualitative researchers know, particularly those who produce autoethnography, the question of how we position ourselves in our products is no small issue. It is also no small feat to accomplish in the writing itself—and Nettles writes

beautifully. Her dialogue rings true; the details of what she sees and hears as a woman and a researcher in Guyana and as a professor in California are clear and compelling, and I related easily to them. Her Guyana descriptions reminded me of my own experiences in Africa (which is one way I gauge authenticity in third-world memoirs), as much as her descriptions of a class interaction in California did. This is a necessary element of autoethnography, the ability to write compellingly and with authenticity, and Nettles achieves that goal beautifully in her book.

Lately, I have become very interested in how scholars and writers and performers find alternative and unique ways to reveal both self and other in the production of research inquiry. How do researchers “become the subject of their own stories” as Kimberly Dark discusses (see <http://www.kimberlydark.com/>); or use theater and ethnodrama as Johnny Saldaña (2005) does to achieve and show how identity is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in real time? These arts-based methods of inquiry (Leavy, 2009) are powerful and I find them fascinating to experience. Arts-based inquiry allows us to even more clearly locate all players in the performance in real time, visually and “in action.”

Like autoethnography, performance methodologies allow for a more transparent account of the manner in which we construct our research stories. The story unfolds, the performance engages, and what is backstage becomes center stage. Performers are alive, present, and authors are in there with the rest of the cast engaged in a never-ending story.

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