

For multispecies autoethnography

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Abstract

This article makes the case for *multispecies autoethnography* as a methodological approach in qualitative research involving other species. Multispecies autoethnography can work to address the persistent anthropocentrism in multispecies methods and offer a richer understanding of the way humans are implicated in the lives and deaths of other animals. I use a brief sketch of the experience of raising “backyard chickens” to illustrate what multispecies autoethnography might do in the world and for more ethical practices of research. Ultimately, this article argues for an explicitly anti-anthropocentric approach to research, scholarship, and living that might expand possibilities for more just, ethical, and caring multispecies worlds.

Keywords

Multispecies ethnography, autoethnography, methods, anthropocentrism, animals

Introduction

How might qualitative research, especially ethnographic practice, in multispecies contexts be conceptualized and done more carefully and ethically? What is the place of the human in multispecies ethnography? Whose interests are represented in multispecies research and to what ends? These and other questions arise in the methodological considerations surrounding multispecies research – careful considerations that become increasingly urgent as scholarship proliferates on the lived experiences of other species and as more scholars turn toward this field of study. With few institutional ethical guidelines in place to oversee the involvement of nonhuman animals in social science and humanities research (animal ethics review is disproportionately focused on the use of nonhuman animals in biomedical or laboratory research settings), researchers are often in the problematic position of determining the ethicality of their own research. Research involving other species is already wrought with ethical issues because of the profound power imbalances that often subject other species to bodily and reproductive control, instrumentalization, violence, infantilization,

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and relational severings by humans. These ethical issues are heightened when, indeed, our own success and professional advancement as researchers is dependent on the research we do. As anthropologist María Elena García (2019: 356) worries over, “so-called multispecies research” – even that which is done with the intention of improving conditions for other species – can be rife with moments of betrayal and disavowal of the animal, fieldwork that may ultimately in fact be “taking place at the expense of the animal.” How to study the lives, labors, relationships, subjectivities, and deaths of other species, then, poses serious challenges both ethically and methodologically.

In addition to ethical deliberations (which should, in my view, always be the first focus in multispecies research, forming a prerequisite anchor for any consideration of methods), multispecies research poses a number of practical methodological challenges – that is, how as researchers we are to understand the lives and subjectivities of members of other species, and their/our relationships to others. Social scientists, and geographers in particular, have explored some of the possibilities of methods and methodologies that attend to these complexities and difficulties of research involving other species. I will not recount those here; Henry Buller’s (2015) *Progress in Human Geography* report and Timothy Hodgetts and Jamie Lorimer’s (2015) review of methodologies for animals’ geographies both provide fairly comprehensive reviews of existing methods.

Multispecies (or posthuman) ethnography, in particular, has quickly gained traction in the past decade in the social sciences as a practice that extends ethnography beyond the purely human realm and beyond its humanist roots (Blattner et al., 2020; García, 2019; Gillespie, 2019; Hamilton and Taylor, 2017; Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Ogden et al., 2013). Multispecies ethnographers aim to understand the positioning of animals, plants, and other nonhuman lifeforms within broader social, political, and economic contexts (Ogden et al., 2013). For instance, multispecies ethnographers have focused on such subjects as: guinea pigs raised for meat against the backdrop of Peruvian gastropolitics and racialized nationalism (García, 2021); hunters, alligators, and their ecosystems in the US Everglades (Ogden, 2011); relationships of care and harm in orangutan rehabilitation in Borneo (Parreñas, 2018); the complex ecological systems of the Amazon (Kohn, 2013); sanctuaries for nonhuman animals in the United States (Abrell, 2021); and multispecies entanglements of intimacy in the Himalayas (Govindrajana, 2018), to name a few. Although multispecies ethnographies often include personal reflection as part of their ethnographic writing practice, as these examples do, *autoethnography* as its own multispecies methodology has been left undeveloped.

Autoethnography can be understood as a methodology that combines ethnography with autobiography, contextualizing personal experiences within a broader political and cultural context (Butz and Besio, 2004; Denzin, 2014; Ellis et al., 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997). As such, autoethnography is a kind of ethnography of the self, but the self in relation to others and to the social, political, and economic systems of power in which it is embedded – it is a relational methodology. It acknowledges the researcher’s central role in the doing of research perhaps more than other forms of ethnography because of its specific focus on the researcher and their experience (Adams et al., 2015). As a feminist practice, in particular, and as one focused on transforming unjust social relations, autoethnographic research can offer a methodological manifestation of the “personal as political” (Jones, 2005). Emotionality, relationality, embodiment, and storytelling are core features of autoethnography and are offered as legitimate ways of knowing and sharing knowledge (Adams et al., 2015: 3; Butz and Besio, 2004). Autoethnography has been critiqued for being navel-gazing or solipsistic, accused of privileging the researcher-writer to the elision of other subjects; however, contrary to this characterization, done with critical reflexivity, autoethnography has the potential to significantly enrich our research practices and the insights gained from this work (Butz and Besio, 2004).

Autoethnography has remained predominantly humanist in its orientation, perhaps unsurprisingly, anchored as it is by the *auto* (i.e. the human self). Similarly, autoethnography has

typically not featured in multispecies research that aims to understand the lives and experiences of other species perhaps specifically because of the fact that *auto* suggests a primary focus on that human self, and not on other species. And yet, multispecies autoethnography, like humanist autoethnography, is by nature a *relational* methodology; it signals a focus on the self, but in its *multispecies* naming necessitates attention to *the self in relation to another* (or multiple other) species. Autoethnographic approaches can be attentive to intimacy, to the knowledge-making that comes from relationship-building, to the geographic contexts in which these relationships unfold, and to the spans of time required to manifest this intimacy. Multispecies autoethnography asks the researcher to consider the entangled scales of what Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner (2012) call “the global and the intimate” – intimate relational encounters (between individuals, for instance) and how these impact and are impacted by structural powers and processes. Autoethnography with members of other species offers a window into these intimate scales of our own lives and the lives of nonhuman others as a manifestation of *the particular*.

I propose *multispecies autoethnography* as a way to attend to these relations and to bring together the generative methodological possibilities of multispecies fieldwork with autoethnography in order to reveal new ways of understanding and knowledge-making. Multispecies autoethnography can politicize intimate relationships of care, harm, power, and exclusion, and as such, can highlight aspects of human-animal relations that may be obscured in research that does not attend fully to the researcher’s situatedness in a web of multispecies relations.

In advancing a multispecies autoethnography, I hope to offer a response to a few problems that have plagued much multispecies ethnographic research, such as: the persistent anthropocentrism in the methodology, even as claims are made to “decenter the human” in its celebration of *multispecies* attention; inadequate attention to the exploitation of and violence against nonhuman animals; and the at-times obscured fraught ethical questions posed by including animals in research at all in contexts where at worst we cause harm to animals and at best we are complicit in this harm (Blattner et al., 2020; Hamilton and Taylor, 2017; Koprina, 2017; Watson, 2016). These exclusions and oversights in multispecies ethnography highlight the need for greater attention to the ethics of including animals in scholarly research and how this research is carried out. Multispecies autoethnography is certainly not a panacea for these problems in multispecies ethnography, nor is it by default an anti-anthropocentric approach – a point I elaborate on later. However, autoethnography *may* be able to address some of these challenges, and in particular, might offer a way to address the anthropocentrism in multispecies ethnography.

A few key questions in particular guide my thinking in this paper. What does it mean to “decenter the human” in multispecies research and should this be the goal? What might an *anti-anthropocentric* approach do differently? How can the research we do and the methods we use be crafted around transforming the world around us into a less anthropocentric place and how can it benefit those other species with whom we share this world? How can our research be in service to these nonhuman others?

With these questions in mind, I am interested specifically in foregrounding multispecies autoethnographic work that: even in its autoethnographic focus unsettles anthropocentrism; explicitly challenges exploitative relationships between humans and other species; and attends carefully to ethical questions related to the wellbeing and flourishing of other species. To that end, I use my past experiences living with “backyard chickens” in an urban setting to explore through a very brief sketch the complexities and possibilities of a multispecies autoethnographic methodology. I look at this experience through two different lenses: first, I offer a multispecies autoethnographic accounting of this experience that maintains an anthropocentric orientation; second, I think through what an anti-anthropocentric multispecies autoethnographic reading of this experience might look like. The paper concludes with a deeper interrogation of anthropocentrism and the move to decenter the human in multispecies research. But first, an orientation to autoethnography itself.

What is autoethnography?

Autoethnography as a methodology is unique in its typically retrospective nature; “[u]sually, the author does not live through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document; rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight” (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Ellis et al., 2011: 275; Freeman, 2004). This approach allows for reflection and analysis of a situation not wholly influenced by the way a researcher thinks and the kinds of attention they practice in a “research” context conceptualized as “the field” from the outset. This also, then, shapes the kinds of attention paid (or not) as a particular situation is unfolding, and so could have the effect of overlooking things that might be important later in the process of reflecting, analyzing, and writing autoethnographically. Ellis et al. (2011: 275) explain that autoethnography often involves moments of epiphany (Bochner and Ellis, 1992; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989) and crisis (Zaner, 2004) that rupture the routine goings-on of life. A benefit of the retrospective orientation is that these epiphanic events or moments of crisis can be understood as such, in the broader context of lived experiences and how they have unfolded and changed the lives of the autoethnographer and those around them.

In this sense, autoethnography can track processes of growth and transformation, perhaps inspiring epiphany, change, and action in others (Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). It is not merely a process of reporting a personal experience of epiphany or crisis but prompting action related to what these experiences can do in the world. Methods, including (and perhaps especially) those involving research with other species, are “entirely political and never neutral” (Taylor, 2012: 48). For multispecies autoethnography, one of the core political questions at the heart of an anti-anthropocentric approach to the methodology is what this can do for other species to make a more just, gentle, and caring world for those who are so routinely subjects of normalized violence, instrumentalization, and dispossession.

It is easy to claim that the work we do as academics can lead to transformative political change and more ethical action beyond the academy. However, in practice, this does not always – or perhaps *often does not* – manifest in ways that make the difference the academic might hope. We need some connective tissue between the autoethnographer’s research practice and the way it might make a grounded impact in the world. I imagine this connective tissue working in a couple of ways – both of which prompt questions about the value and political utility of academic scholarship. The first relates to how the products of autoethnography might be shared in order to inspire change in others. This necessitates writing (or communicating through other media) with audiences beyond the academy in mind – communication that centers storytelling and articulates in a compelling and moving way the experiences and lives that are the subjects of the multispecies autoethnographer’s research. A second, and more personal point, is that autoethnography has the potential to change the lived relationships between the autoethnographer and members of other species (I illustrate this point in the next two sections). But this not only relevant for the individual autoethnographer and the individual animals with whom they are in relation, but also for the others who witness these relationships unfolding. In other words, the practice of autoethnography and its transformative potential can be modeled for multispecies kin, friends, neighbors, colleagues, or strangers who may pass by, sparking new ways of thinking and acting on a more localized and personal level with those who might never intentionally reflect on these kinds of relationships.

Writing autoethnographically about our relationships with members of other species requires an excavation of our role (as individuals and as a species) in these forms of hegemonic violence. Autoethnography can be a painful experience as we might recall and reckon with not only difficult past experiences but also the ways in which we may have been actively complicit or implicated in harm against others and ourselves. Writing autoethnographically requires vulnerability and a willingness to reflect on and experience our own emotionality, as well as the vulnerability and

emotionality of others (Ellis, 1999). It also necessitates a certain level of intimacy and capacity for empathy with and for ourselves and others (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2006). Intimacy as multispecies research practice can evoke and be strengthened by the process of empathizing with individuals of other species (Gillespie, 2017). Autoethnography attends to how this empathy emerges, is cultivated, and might lead to more ethical action. As feminists have documented for decades, emotion is instructive, political, and politicizing. The guilt, grief, joy, euphoria, desire, and fury we experience personalizes autoethnographic storytelling and thus politicizes the conditions in and through which these emotions emerge. Elizabeth Dauphinee (2010: 818) argues that, “[t]he risk of autoethnography opens us to the possibility of seeing more of what we ignore in both ourselves and others, asking why it is ignored, and what we might need to do about it.”

In this political nature, autoethnography often has an explicitly social justice orientation and ethical call to action (Denzin, 2014). Autoethnography is an ethically oriented practice – one that can involve careful consideration of ethics in research practice and which has the potential to engender more ethical ways of living and being in the world (Adams et al., 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Lapadat, 2017). As Judith C. Lapadat explains, “the goal of autoethnographic stories and performance is not to describe and theorize some underlying reality, but rather to elicit ethical action from the self and others. Autoethnographers use a critical interpretive method drawing on the personal/biographical, political, and historical to perform and share painful experiences to make ‘visible the oppressive structures of a culture’ (Denzin, 2013: 139) and to point a way toward more socially just possibilities” (Lapadat, 2017: 596).

Alongside a commitment to social justice, *care* is at the heart of autoethnography. It is often in and through relational practices of caring for, with, and about others and ourselves that the autoethnographic process is possible. In its careful attention to interpersonal interactions, emotion, embodiment, vulnerability, and precarity, autoethnography has the potential to contribute to moving toward a more caring society (Visse and Niemeijer, 2016). Here, again, intimacy anchors autoethnography – the intimate relationships of care within which we are embedded with others are sources of knowledge- and world-making. The everyday relationships of care that might be the stuff of autoethnography embody the complexities and unevenness with which we care for and are cared for by multispecies others. Caring relations, then, are both a source and an aspiration of autoethnographic practice and knowledge-making.

Among other possibilities, autoethnography can center the personal, intimate, and emotional experiences of vulnerability that illuminate lived and embodied multispecies experiences; it can lead to reflection and action to create more just and ethical futures for and with other species; and it can engender the power, difficulty, and beauty of everyday forms of multispecies caring relations. And yet, it also has the potential to reaffirm and reinscribe anthropocentric ways of relating in multispecies worlds, in effect privileging the human subject even as it claims to decenter the human and consider or center the nonhuman. Let’s take a look at what that might look like in the context of autoethnographic reflections on raising “backyard chickens.”

A multispecies autoethnographic illustration: raising “backyard chickens”

Over the course of eight years, my partner and I shared a life with a flock of four hens – Emily, Charlotte, George, and Jane – who lived in our urban backyard until they each died of illness or old age. The decision to raise “backyard chickens” was rooted in a specific set of my and my partner’s own desires. We were concerned about the effects of industrial animal agriculture on animals, workers, and the environment and wanted to do what small thing we could to avoid supporting that system and produce animal-based foods differently. We also found pleasure and satisfaction in the

salt-of-the-earth nature of engaging in self-sufficient food production. We had the means and space to raise a small flock of chickens and to build a coop, purchase straw, food, and additional nutritional supplements. We loved the idea of living with and getting to know chickens – individual members of a species with whom we had never had a personal relationship. We also loved eating eggs.

Our lives were enriched by living in community with Charlotte, Emily, Jane, and George. I would sit outside for long hours and watch them peck around the yard, dust bathe, groom themselves and each other, drink sips of water and tilt their heads back to let the water flow down their throats, and find joy in a slice of watermelon in the summer. I was curious about their relationships with each other and learned that Charlotte and Emily were strongly bonded, never letting the other too far out of sight. George was an outlier in the group; she was usually off on her own across the yard from the others, and bossy when she joined the flock for food, pecking the others sharply if they darted in for a morsel she had identified as her own. Jane had a gentle disposition and was intensely social with humans, seeking out someone whose lap she could sit on who would stroke her iridescent black feathers while she cooed quietly.

The nature of our relationships changed (as I discuss later), but in those early days, we were delighted with the forms of connection we believed raising chickens made possible – we believed that we had a close connection with these individual hens and that this relationship enabled a deeper connection to the source of a particular food we ate (eggs). We also found new forms of connection to other humans in our neighborhood through sharing eggs and stories of the chickens' adventures. We even felt a greater sense of connection to our yard and the many different forms of nonhuman and human life that made up that ecosystem – in part by virtue of just spending more time outdoors to hang out with the flock, and in part because living with chickens increased our attentiveness to the nonhuman lives unfolding around us. This attention to the chickens and forms of multispecies connection fostered in this set of relations could be read as a classic example of the entanglement of multispecies beings – entanglements that are messy and complex and embedded in intricate forms of human and nonhuman sociality.

To approach this experience from an anthropocentric multispecies autoethnographic perspective, there are many entry points for analysis. I could analyze my own experiences raising chickens in the context of the food localization and urban agriculture movements in the United States and beyond. Urban agriculture can enact a response to the problems of the industrialized and globalized food system by refocusing on “the local” as a potential site of more ethical food practices (Tornaghi, 2014). However, there are a number of social justice issues that arise in urban agriculture movements. Class-based norms shape urban agriculture and, in particular, the presence of urban farmed animals. For instance, farmed animals were historically expelled from cities in the United States as local laws and cultures shifted to redefine ideas about which species belong where, responding to the proclivities and norms of the growing middle class, and then much later, the reintroduction of certain farmed animals (like chickens) to the city who became *en vogue* among middle class residents (Brown, 2016). In addition to, and entangled with class-based norms, the racial politics of urban food justice activism and the (even unintentional) oppressive practices of white activists in urban foodscapes can and often do stand in the way of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities' self-determined forms of empowerment and transformative food practices (Ramírez, 2015). Raising chickens in urban areas is a practice entangled with these complex racial politics of urban food activism.

I could also further situate my experience raising chickens as a white person living in a rapidly gentrifying urban neighborhood within broader structures of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. I could center the way these violent processes of dispossession and displacement are historically contextualized and track the long arc of white supremacy that underwrites settler society in the United States and other settler states (see Miller, 2020). Raising chickens in urban backyards can be

understood, and is often described by enthusiasts, as “urban homesteading,” which Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012: 28) explain, “is the practice of re-settling urban land in the fashion of self-styled pioneers in a mythical frontier,” and is, then, far from an innocuous salt-of-the-earth practice of food procurement (a claim Tuck and Yang describe as a “settler move to innocence”). Contextualizing my own practices and role in gentrification necessarily involves analyzing the settler colonial logics and practices I reaffirm in raising chickens at home, and in occupying the unceded Indigenous land I refer to as “my yard” in the first place. It also involves attending to other aspects of gentrification and land occupation by white people. For instance, the proximity of our neighborhood to the city’s Chinatown impacts the forms of gentrification unique to Chinatowns across the country and the histories of racial segregation out of which many “Chinatowns” emerged originally (Naram, 2017). These are important geographical and historical contexts for the foundational forms of violence inherent in the social relations I affirm and enact in my presence and life lived on this patch of land where these chickens peck and scratch.

In another vein, an autoethnographic approach could explore the forms of human sociality that are enabled and prevented by the reality of raising chickens. Our chickens were often a conversation-starter with people I didn’t know in the neighborhood, opening the door to a form of connection in a city known for its difficulty in making new friends. I could ask what it is about chickens in the city that inspires conversation and interest and disrupts people’s more introverted tendencies. Sharing eggs with others in the neighborhood was also an interaction that engendered excitement and positivity, reflecting the ways that food itself can be a site of connection, care, and sociality (Marovelli, 2019). I could also reflect on the hostility I experienced in some neighbors who found the presence of chickens in the city offensive – those who thought they were dirty, loud, and destructive, and who were concerned about the potential for zoonotic diseases and attracting “pests” who would eat the chicken food and eggs, like rats and raccoons (Whitehead and Roberts, 2014). Raising chickens meant that I was located in a new, fluid constellation of multispecies social encounters with others I might not have engaged with otherwise.

Analyzed through lenses that attend to such uneven power dynamics, such as racial capitalism, settler colonialism, gentrification, whiteness and white supremacy, and class hierarchy, it is possible to assemble a rich tapestry of multispecies autoethnographic observations of the phenomenon of “backyard chickens”. It would also cut to the heart of what many autoethnographers identify as a priority of autoethnography: that it is a methodology centered on social justice, ethics, and care, and which offers the possibility to transform social relations and structures of power and oppression. In reflecting on these dynamics now, the forms of seeming connection we felt with the chickens we were raising, it is clear that there are many anthropocentric assumptions, norms, and violences we were reaffirming both in our practice of raising chickens and in our beliefs about how this connected us to new forms of sociality and ethical practice. Eva Haifa Giraud calls for moving beyond a mere recognition of entanglement or appreciation of the complexity of multispecies worlds to attend to and intervene in the exclusions that are implicit in this framing. Stopping at an acknowledgement of these entanglements and the multispecies politics at work in this context would reaffirm an anthropocentric approach to research that involves other species, somehow backgrounding the chickens themselves, even as they are at the heart of situation.

Toward an anti-anthropocentric multispecies autoethnographic approach

How, then, could this autoethnographic analysis be made more *multispecies* – and explicitly *anti-anthropocentric* – in its orientation? What would follow from this form of attention?

It would begin with a deeper interrogation of my relationship with Charlotte, Emily, George, and Jane and what these years lived together illuminated about my and settler society's anthropocentric orientation to other species, like farmed animals. And this interrogation would not, nor should it, end – it would not end with a decision to no longer eat their eggs, and it would not end with their deaths. Interrogating and working to undo anthropocentrism is an ongoing task that's never finished, and autoethnography, in its persistently self-reflexive nature, can be one mechanism through which to sustain this ongoing work.

We might think about this in the context of Giraud's ethics of exclusion, wherein "the act of excluding certain relations is precisely what creates room for others to emerge, or for existing forms of life to be sustained. Exclusion can also, therefore, be a site where accountability is taken not just for who or what is classified as an actor worthy of moral consideration, but—more fundamentally—for which worlds are materialized over others" (2019: 11). An anti-anthropocentric approach would attend to these exclusions – to notice and take action in response to the possibilities for nonhuman (in this case, chicken) flourishing that were foreclosed by our conceptualizing and instrumentalizing them as "food." It would necessitate active intervention to undo the 'active materialization' of human worlds of consumption of animals' lives and reproductive energies – indeed to *exclude* these kinds of relations in order to make room for their own.

In the first year or so of living with this flock of chickens, when we were still eating their eggs and conceptualizing them as lively, "humane" sources of food, I was not without a level of careful attentiveness to them and their embodied and emotional experiences, just as I was attentive to my own. I worried over them. I wondered what they were doing when I was in the house not watching them. I waited in anticipation for a warm egg to appear in their nesting area after a chorus of loud *hawk*s. I tried to carefully observe the diverse range of ways they communicated to try to understand what it was they were communicating. My partner and I tried to create conditions where they could enjoy variety, interest, and safety in their daily lives – information we gathered both by research about chickens, and by observing the behavior and desires of these specific chickens. I was aware of how decent their lives were within a broader political economic context that raises and slaughters chickens in the billions every year in industrial settings. Knowing these chickens in this backyard context helped to illuminate what industrially-raised chickens are denied and the devastating impacts this has on their lives, bodies, relationships, and psyches.

My interrogation could have stopped there – with a recognition of their subjectivity and an appreciation for the way their lives were better than industrially farmed birds – but through an ongoing process of educating myself about chickens and egg production, and through my attentiveness to these particular individuals, I realized the harms built into the practice of raising chickens for eggs even in non-industrial settings. Raising chickens in an industrial space versus in a backyard are not opposite practices – they exist on a continuum of instrumentalization and exploitation. This realization came in part as a result of encountering a critical animal studies (CAS) scholar who gently pushed back on my claims that "humane" egg production was possible, and our conversations prompted the need to read and think more deeply about this issue. My increasing awareness and epiphanic process also came as a result of observing the toll of egg laying on the chickens themselves – the daily saga of laying, the need for significant quantities of nutritional supplements to recover what was lost in egg laying, the health issues that emerged from this capacity for intensive laying, and the very fact that they were laying an egg every day (a biological function shaped entirely by human practices of breeding chickens for prolific egg production to serve humans' desire for eggs). I began to see and experience these relationships differently – both my own anthropocentric expectations and assumptions, and the broader, normalized anthropocentric structures in which I and they were embedded. Although I wasn't thinking about in these terms now, this was the beginning of a realization of what entanglements it was necessary to interrogate and what

‘material worlds’ it would be necessary to exclude to unsettle this deep-rooted anthropocentrism (Giraud, 2019).

In purchasing these four hens as chicks at the country feed store, and raising them with the aim of consuming their eggs, I realized that we had supported an industry that breeds and exploits female chickens for their capacity to lay eggs, and discards male chicks as surplus – superfluous to the ovulatory process. Chickens and other birds raised for eggs are manipulated and commodified for their fertility, their bodies and lives appropriated for their reproductive capacities and “outputs” (Davis, 1995; Gaard, 2010). In raising “backyard chickens,” we reinforced these normalized and ingrained ideas that chickens are here, existing in multispecies social landscapes, to fulfill human desires. Without interrogating my own desires and the kinds of worlds they affirmed (to eat eggs, for instance) it would be difficult to conceptualize the extent to which human entitlement to other animals’ bodies operates so insidiously – their lives, their wellbeing, and their bodily autonomy eclipsed so easily by my own desires.

My act of consumption, then, was not innocent; it was not merely incidental to a reproductive process that was already occurring and of which I just happened to take advantage. Coming to understand these dynamics – and this understanding did not, of course, come all at once, nor is it finished – led us to stop taking their eggs for our own and other humans’ consumption, and instead, we began hard-boiling, crushing them (shells and all), and feeding them back to the chickens. This was the recommendation of multiple members of the farmed animal sanctuary movement who described this as a way to replenish nutrients lost in egg laying. *Not* consuming Charlotte’s, Emily’s, Jane’s, and George’s eggs, and indeed, actively trying to do the reparative work of feeding their eggs back to them was one way we tried to reject, to the extent it was possible, the extractive logics that underwrite the consumption of farmed animals and their reproductive lives.

These kinds of brief reflections on the practice of raising chickens for eggs hopefully offer a glimpse into what a more anti-anthropocentric autoethnographic approach might do for understanding this multispecies relationship within broader political economic and cultural contexts. It is not that these observations eclipse the kinds of questions and analyses I introduced in the previous section; rather, they offer a richer understanding and fuller picture of the ways that animals and animality are embedded in and sustain processes of racialization and settler colonialism, and the way anthropocentrism is woven in and through these oppressive structures (Belcourt, 2014; Kim, 2015; Ko and Ko, 2017). This analysis is likely still rife with residual anthropocentrism that I am unable to see in this particular moment, at this particular stage in my thinking. However, I hope it offers a start. There is much more work to be done, then, in thinking about the depth of possibilities for multispecies autoethnography – as a methodology and as a personal interrogation of understanding the layers of implicatedness through which humanness, whiteness, and anthropocentrism operate.

Excavating anthropocentrism: The promises and perils of multispecies autoethnography

Moving forward from these thought exercises in multispecies autoethnographic analysis necessitates a deeper excavation of anthropocentrism itself. What exactly *is* anthropocentrism? Even in its slippery definitional terrain, anthropocentrism can be understood as “a name for a kind of domination that structurally privileges the perspectives of humans over nonhuman animals” (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018: 58), and I would add that it is not just the *perspectives* of humans, but the very notion of human supremacy that relies on “ontological claims about the uniqueness of human beings [and how these] are bound up with claims about the ethical superiority of humans over all other life-forms” (Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016: 126). Following Matthew

Calarco (2014: 418), anthropocentrism “is more than a conceptual apparatus; it should also be understood as a robust, interlocking, complex series of discursive and material practices.”

Within this complex anthropocentric system, what are the possibilities for multispecies autoethnography to contribute to *actively undoing* anthropocentrism in disciplines, like geography, that study multispecies relationships? As I said at the outset, I am conscientious about the fact that autoethnography, by definition, is focused on the (human) self and as such has the potential to reassert an anthropocentric approach to research. However, multispecies autoethnography alternatively might offer an intimate lens into a more carefully attuned understanding of multispecies relationships. Because of the naturally self-reflexive nature of autoethnography, I imagine possibilities for a less anthropocentric rendering of multispecies life. Multispecies ethnography, as a methodology where the researcher can imagine themselves as “decentered” or separate from the other species/individuals they are studying, can easily avoid a meaningful practice of reflexivity and thus an examination of the fraught power relations between the human and other animals. In multispecies autoethnography, by contrast, critical self-reflexivity is a necessity, opening the door to a consistent interrogation of anthropocentrism and positionality.

Multispecies autoethnography has the potential to highlight relationships of harm, and our own implicatedness in that harm, by demanding a close examination of our own positionality. But at the same time, I worry over the fact that autoethnography can also normalize relations of harm because researchers may be too embedded in the dominant cultures or too attached to forms of consumption that sustain normalized systems of violence in which human-animal relations routinely unfold to interrogate their own complicity. Lapadat explains that, “[autoethnography] can fall short of its ideological promise due to a lack of distance that results from the subject and the researcher being the same person, and because it can be challenging to translate personal experience into sociocultural and political action” (2017: 589). Part of this “challenge to translate personal experience” is the capacity to reflect critically and honestly on one’s own practices of harm, as well as possessing the will to do so. An avoidance of this process of self-reflexivity, and specifically the ways that our human proclivities shape our behaviors and ethics, is to center the human to the elision of other species and their wellbeing. Autoethnography, then, has the potential to either challenge or re-affirm normative forms of multispecies relationality – sometimes simultaneously.

This problem of centering and decentering the human is multifaceted. Critical analyses of post-humanism warn that moving too quickly beyond the human denies the ongoing struggles for all humans to be recognized as fully human, and overlooks the need for reckoning with longstanding racialized notions of the human/subhuman/nonhuman and the violence they do in the world (Jackson, 2015: 215; see also Deckha, 2010; Kim, 2015; Ko and Ko, 2017). For other reasons, too, we may not be ready to decenter the human in our methodological discussions because we have not reckoned yet with how implicated we are as a species in the lives and deaths of other animals. To decenter the human could involve obscuring those implications. To imagine that animals live their lives unencumbered by human impact is a fiction, and one that perhaps an anti-anthropocentric autoethnography can help to illuminate. Helena Pedersen and Vasile Stanescu argue that “the most acute and serious research problem for CAS [Critical Animal Studies; and I would add, multispecies, animal, and human-animal studies and geographies] may not be the animals but the humans” (2014: 272) and attention should be directed at least in part to “human behavior toward animals, rather than the animal herself” (Dinker and Pedersen, 2016: 417). Multispecies autoethnography cannot obscure or ignore other animals, but nor can it obscure the human and our effects on other animals’ lives.

It is important, then, to consider the distinction between “centering the human” and “anthropocentrism”. Decentering the human does not necessarily mean taking an anti-anthropocentric approach; in fact, I might go so far as to suggest that decentering the human can reassert an anthropocentric orientation to other species in that it allows an escape from self-reflexive analysis

of the harms humans often do to animals, in research, and more perniciously, in life as well. In other words, “decentering the human” can involve a kind of side-stepping – “look over there, not over here” – and so a fuller accounting of the lives of other species necessitates an anti-anthropocentric approach over such a persistent focus on this question of “decentering the human”. To attend to our own place in a web of relationality with other animals is not necessarily to *center* the human, but involves instead trying to understand our own human animality and its effects in relation to others.

Let me draw attention for a moment to my specific articulation of *anti-anthropocentrism*. Ibram X. Kendi (2019), in writing on racism and antiracism, helps us to understand what an explicitly *anti-anthropocentric* approach makes. He asks: “What’s the problem with being ‘not racist’? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: ‘I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.’ But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist’ It is ‘anti-racist’ What’s the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist” (Kendi, 2019: 9). Although Kendi’s focus is on racism and antiracism, which are different projects from anthropocentrism and anti-anthropocentrism, I suggest that the distinction between *not/non* and *anti* highlights how *anti* can be a powerful antidote to the claims to neutrality, innocence, and apolitical orientation that seem to pervade material and discursive practices of anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism. A *non*-anthropocentric stance is not enough, nor is an acceptance of anthropocentrism as an inevitability; rather, an *anti*-anthropocentric way of living and doing research centers the active and ongoing work needed to do undo this persistent problem. This importantly involves a consistent interrogation of the anthropocentric orientations that I/we sustain on a moment-to-moment basis without thinking, without knowing, and without disrupting the comfort and ease with which it is possible to sustain a hierarchy of human living, wellbeing, and desire.

Finally, it is not just an avoidance of harm and violence that multispecies autoethnography might address, but also ways of living and doing research that support the flourishing and self-determination of other species. We *write* ethnographies, and the relational nature of multispecies autoethnographies allows for a creation of texts that are present in the way our relationships change, the ways we affect each other, the emotional ties, the moments of surprise. Perhaps the most important dimensions of autoethnography are not here in an academic journal, but out there, in the world, being lived, felt, imagined, and reimaged. As multispecies autoethnographers we write our stories through living them, through attending to how we (as a web of a multispecies beings) shape and are shaped by broader social, economic, and political positions, and how we are present for each other and for the things that would have to change for nonhuman others to flourish. It is not, then, humans who are the sole ethnographers in multispecies autoethnography, but a multispecies cast of ethnographers writing – through living, struggling, loving, and caring – our shared worlds and futures.

Highlights

- Makes the case for multispecies autoethnography as a methodology
- Centers questions of ethics, care, and harm in multispecies research
- Offers a brief empirical sketch about “backyard chickens” to illustrate what multispecies autoethnography might look like in practice
- Argues for an explicitly anti-anthropocentric approach to multispecies research

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