ART-BASED EDUCATION RESEARCH

Ruth Beichelt
Prentice Hall
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

"Art-based education research is a process of art/design education in the context of higher education.

The art-based education research process can be described as a cyclical process involving the following steps:

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2. Literature Review: A literature review is conducted to identify relevant literature.
3. Methodology Selection: An appropriate methodology is selected based on the problem and literature review.
4. Data Collection: Data is collected through various methods such as interviews, observations, and surveys.
5. Data Analysis: The data is analyzed using appropriate statistical and qualitative methods.
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Songwriting as Ethnographic Practice

How Stories Humanize

Kristina Jacobsen

As a touring singer/songwriter,\(^1\) ethnographer,\(^2\) and honky-tonk artist living on the Navajo Nation for many years, songwriting and ethnography in my own work are two ends of a continuum linked through the central role of storytelling in our lives. Rather than two isolated and sometimes polarized domains—one “artistic” and the other “analytic”—I see songwriting and ethnographic writing as mutually feeding one another, as not only forms of artistic expression but also as genres that offer the capacity for what I call empathetic analysis. As a cultural anthropologist and Assistant Professor\(^3\) of Music and Anthropology (Ethnology) at the University of New Mexico, I use empathetic analysis to inform my approach to teaching in classes such as the anthropology of music, Navajo (Diné) expressive culture, songwriting, and the student-led honky-tonk ensemble (www.facebook.com/UNMHonkyTonkEnsemble/; for videos, visit: https://vimeo.com/search?q=unm+honky+t+ensemble).

In this chapter, I reflect on my own work as both ethnographer/researcher and singer/songwriter to show how I use ethnography and songwriting to share my love and appreciation for a place I’ve now lived on and off for twenty years, the Navajo reservation in Arizona and New Mexico. As an Anglo (in this context, the local terminology to refer to someone who is white and non-Native) anthropologist, these roles are complicated and sometimes fraught. Drawing on my own roles in this sovereign space as a high school social studies teacher, volleyball coach, radio station deejay, park ranger, sheepherder, singer/steel guitarist or in an all-male country band,\(^4\) language learner, tribal college instructor, and, much more recently, as an anthropologist and songwriting facilitator, I reflect on how these experiences are channeled and then refracted through an original song, “Inez,” from a recent solo album, *Three Roses* (to hear songs from this album, visit https://soundcloud.com/kristinajacobsenmusic sets/three-roses-album-preview) and also through an ethnographically immersive songwriting retreat I lead on the Navajo Nation. I then discuss my sense of connection to another part of the world that is more heritage-driven, reflecting on a show I recently
played in a men’s prison outside of Stockholm, Sweden. Here, I delve into a cowrite, “No Man’s Land,” a newer song inspired by the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact in suburban Sweden, performed while on tour in October 2016.5

I conclude by reflecting on the ways that songwriting and ethnographic writing are different tools that serve to narrate and humanize a small sliver of human experience for outsider (and sometimes insider) eyes and ears. I argue that paying as much attention to emotional authenticity and alchemy in our ethnographic writing as we do in our songs and paying as much attention to specificity, detail, and cultural nuance in our songs as we do in our ethnographic writing could serve to enliven the former and broaden the resonance and applicability for the latter.

Ethnography

Long-term ethnographic fieldwork is used to get to know a community or culture from the inside out. As a methodology, it is by definition deeply immersive—“deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998)6—and, at its best, serves to humanize communities that we as readers might not otherwise come to know or even care to know. The vehicle for this work, however, is the self. Ethnography, Ortner (2006) reminds us, “has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much as it is possible—as the instrument of knowing” (p. 42). Ethnographic writing is the product of ethnographic fieldwork, a genre unique to anthropology that combines storytelling—thick description—with analysis.

Specificity, disturbing what we think we know, and crafting meaningful, sense-bound descriptions that invite an audience into a story are also central tenets of anthropological writing. Sense-bound writing—focusing on taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight, and what Pattison (2009) calls the kinesthetic sense—invites us immediately into a story and a lifeworld. If ethnography is understood not as a science but as an interpretive art (L. Meintjes, 2012, pers. comm.), then it is in the interpretation and the craft of writing about a lifeworld with compassion, depth, and nuance where the greatest skill—and challenge—arguably lies. At the same time, getting the facts right—down to the brand of someone’s western boots, the spelling of someone’s maternal clan, and knowing where the mutton was raised in the stew you ate the day before—and accurately reflecting the worldview of one’s interlocutors is essential to one’s credibility as an ethnographer. Thus, ethnographic writing—like songwriting—is a delicate balance between art and accuracy (a key difference, of course, is that songwriters have an artistic license to alter the details of a story that ethnographers do not).

Storytelling and narration are essential to both songwriting and ethnography, and utilizing visceral,7 sense-bound imagery to invite the listener or reader deeply into a story (e.g., Fox, 2004; Samuels, 2004)—showing not telling—is part of what distinguishes a good song or ethnography from a great one. It is also part of what determines a listener’s desire to enter the world that you create, as either songwriter or ethnographer, and their subsequent emotional investment in that world. Ethnographic writing—like songs—has the potential to change the way human beings respond to and treat one another, and in this way, does “real” work in the world, when and if we let it.

Songwriting

Following Ortner (2006), my own songwriting uses the self as an instrument of knowing. In contrast to ethnographic writing, however, as songwriters we are also given license to make a more personal commentary on our subject, with the focus often on lived experience, using sense-bound writing to access that experience.8 Here, telling an emotionally authentic story is the focus, creating investment from the listener’s perspective to stay with the artist through the entire duration of a three-minute song.9 This is labor intensive. “Getting to truth and beauty,” Americana songwriter Mary Gauthier (2013, 2014) reminds us, “is effortful, hard work.”10

Artfully crafted songs also humanize their subject. Gauthier’s (2012) “Karla Faye,”11 about executed death-row prisoner Karla Faye Tucker, is one example. Another is Gretchen Peters’s (2012) “Five Minutes,”12 a story of a middle-aged waitress who is a single mom with a broken heart reminiscing on her life, and Steve Earle’s (2002) “John Walker’s Blues,” about US Taliban fighter John Walker Lindh,13 is yet another (also, to my knowledge, the only country song incorporating Koranic chant). Songs also humanize, because the best songs help us as songwriters to connect back to our own sense of humanity in live performance; in the process, they allow listeners to connect back to their own humanity and to connect to each other, as well (Gauthier, 2013, 2014).14,15 There can also be tremendous personal healing and catharsis through the songwriting process: through learning to write songs in our own authentic voice, we go from feeling narrated to learning to effectively and powerfully narrate our own stories, instead. The self as an instrument of knowing becomes the way to create narratives from our own stories and lived experience.

Songs take the particular and make it universal. Ironically, this universality—and what distinguishes a song with limited circulation from one that has the potential to universally resonate—is often grounded in specificity, what allows someone to identify a song as “their” song. Well-written songs allow others to latch on to whatever entry point they’re able, and each richly descriptive line, each phrase that shows rather than
of Chiricahua Apache leader, Geronimo, holding a rifle and flanked by other Chiricahua men, the caption is an ironic commentary behind the notion of “homeland security,” a reappropriation of settler colonialism’s reach into contemporary indigenous communities (Smith, 2009) and a redefining of who the “real” terrorists are from an indigenous perspective.

“Inez”21 (Kristina Jacobsen, copyright 2006, BMI)

Inez, big smile, crooked teeth
White T-shirt, a Ranger’s watchful eye
Foster parents in Brigham City
Stolen Generation, black hair and white lies
A Latter Day Saint, but she drinks pop and whisky
She loves spam, mutton stew with neeshijzhi
A sailor’s gut, she’s as calloused as they come
Oh Inez, she’s American (she said I’m proud to be:)

Chorus:
Homeland Security
Fighting terror since 1492
Oh but our history
Is bittersweet
But this I know:
She said I’m proud to be a Navajo
She was born in Cameron, Arizona
Trading Post, selling Navajo rugs
Boarding School, ugly marks left upon her body
Hell, she’s bitter, but she’s also full of love (She’s the backbone of)

Chorus
Who came first, what does that mean?
Politicians fight over who
Will defend our homeland under siege
She said: “we’ve already been doing that, for centuries”
She’s proud to be:

Chorus
Oh but our history
Is bittersweet
But this I know:
She said I’m proud to be Diné

Perhaps most importantly, “Inez” allows me to paint a portrait of indigenous resilience—one that feels emotionally authentic to my ethnographic

experience living on the Navajo Nation—of a feisty, fiercely loving Diné woman with a bawdy sense of humor who loves mutton stew and who, as one CD reviewer put it, has perhaps “been beaten down but not conquered” (Minter, 2015, p.n.).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, resilience is also the lens I use to frame the Navajo Nation in my writing and teaching. Resilience and a sense of connection to place are the central tenets of a cultural immersion-focused songwriting retreat on the Navajo Nation that I offered for the first time in June 2017, held on top of an Arizona mesa on a working ranch with no running water and hosted by a Navajo family.22 Following the mantra that all stories happen somewhere (Basso, 1996, p.143; Camus, 1955, p. 188), our workshop is guided by the principle that “all songs happen somewhere,” and songs written on sovereign Diné land inevitably reflect the place in which they are written.23 The second guiding principle for the workshop is that paying attention on purpose, a guiding tenet not only of ethnographic fieldwork but also of mindfulness meditation and songwriting, is essential for writing deeply immersed, place-based songs. An anglicized Navajo word such as “Yatahey” (“hello”) is not the same as the Navajo word “Yá’átééh,” and getting these differences and their nuances correct in a song—if one is brave enough to try to sing using glottal stops!—can mean the difference between a song resonating with a Diné audience member or feeling parodied by that same song. These nuances are particularly important, since the final concert, held in a Navajo hoop, is performed explicitly for community members, a form of reciprocity for allowing us to offer the workshop as guests on sovereign land.

“No Man’s Land” or, When a Song Comes Home to Roost

In another geographic context, as an anthropologist focusing on senses of belonging, social citizenship, and civic estrangement, I’ve been closely following the Syrian refugee crisis as it has unfolded and differentially impacted various European countries where I’ve lived. In January 2016, I wrote “No Man’s Land” with Swedish singer/songwriter Lisa Horn,24 a song first chronicling the Okie dustbowl migration to California from the perspective of the woman in Dorothea Lange’s (1936) famous photo, “migrant mother,”25 then describing another migration experience from the perspective of a Syrian refugee (Moutsafis, 2015),26 to the suburb of Göteborg, Sweden. In the writers’ room, the birth of the song itself was fundamentally anthropological: to give names, stories, and ethnographic specificity to anonymous faces in widely circulating photographs that have visually come to stand in for the displacement and suffering of entire groups of people (émigrés from Oklahoma and Syria).
Chorus
I will remember this window into
what you've been through
And I want you to know
I see you
I will remember this window into
And I want you to know
I see you

Tag
And I want you to know
I see you

In October 2016, ten months after writing this song, I performed it in a Swedish prison to a room full of Syrian immigrants. Thus, I was singing the song in the exact place and to the community about whom the song had been written. Since 90 percent of inmates in Swedish prisons are apprehended on drug-related charges at Arlanda Airport in Stockholm and then transported directly to the prison (L. Roos, 2016, pers. comm., Mariefred Men’s Prison, Mariefred, Sweden, October 25), very few of them speak Swedish or have been integrated into Swedish society. Moreover, upon release, a similar percentage return immediately home to their country of origin (L. Roos, 2016, pers. comm., Mariefred Men’s Prison, Mariefred, Sweden, October 25). Thus, these inmates live in a betwixt-and-between, liminal space, and their greatest crime, as the warden himself phrased it, “is being poor” (L. Roos, 2016, pers. comm., Mariefred Men’s Prison, Mariefred, Sweden, October 25). Inside the prison, as I introduced the theme of a “No Man’s Land,” an inmate from Nigeria interjected, “We know what that’s like. We live in the ultimate no man’s land, here.” Although I didn’t know I’d have the opportunity to perform this song at Mariefred Prison at the time I wrote it, the song had, literally, come home to roost.

But, performing this was also an opportunity to experience the way a song can change the chemistry of a room. At the beginning of the performance, the men were talkative and lively, some joking with each other and continuing to talk through part of the song. As I continued, however, a quiet began to descend upon the room, and, by the end, some of the inmates began to squeeze their eyes shut in an effort to cover up tears. As we all drank coffee and ate sweets, afterwards (a traditional Swedish “fika”), the openness of the men—many Syrians but also eastern European Roma, West Africans, and southern Europeans—was palpable. What was perhaps most remarkable in this hypermasculine space was the permission they gave to one another during the performance to express emotion, in general, and sorrow, in particular. (This was expressed most visibly through side nudge and rough pats given to one another on the shoulder or back.) This was—and is—one of the most
We take the aesthetics of our songs. Concomitantly, as songwriters, we are obligated to use the specificity of ethnography to create richer, fuller, and more nuanced portraits of the lives and human communities we share through both sung and spoken forms of storytelling.

Songs—and expressive cultural forms more broadly—give us the ability to voice the inexpressible, allow listeners to access emotions we don’t even know we had or were capable of feeling. Tightly crafted art forms take us to the liminal cracks that exist between the analytic realm of the mind and the spaces of the heart. Songs let us reach and then connect through those spaces, places even the most fine-grained and nuanced analysis might not ever take us. To get there, we need to pay attention on purpose, take artist dates, create the space in our daily lives to produce the art we are inspired to create, set aside time to focus on our art and to trust that it’s worth it, and continually remind ourselves and our students that songs and expressive forms matter because they create human empathy and connection across racial, socioeconomic, and cultural divides. And that is powerful and important work.

As ethnographers and songwriters, artists and social scientists, it is these moments—of the profound connection achieved through alchemy, conjuring, and storytelling—we strive for. We aren’t always successful, but knowing what a story is capable of and how it can change the social fields around us is this potential reward that keeps us writing, singing, and sharing stories in the rawest, most humane way we know how.

Notes
1 www.kristinajacobsenmusic.com.
3 http://music.unm.edu/faculty/kristina-m-jacobsen/.
4 To hear songs from the main band, Native Country, with whom I played and chronicle in The Sound of Navajo Country (2017), visit: https://soundcloud.com/kristinajacobsenmusic.
5 This essay is conceived of as an interactive work encouraging readers to engage directly with sound and video clips provided.
7 I’m grateful to ethnographer/poet Adrie Kusserow (2013) for highlighting the importance of visceral experience in poetic writing as a means of teaching about the human experience, as seen, especially in her book of poems, Refuge.
8 Although not my primary lens of analysis here, much of what I write regarding songwriting also applies to the genre known as ethnographic poetry. For published exemplars, see Faizullah (2014), Kusserow (2002, 2013), Rosaldo (2013), Stone (2008), and Cahnman-Taylor (2016).
9 Along these lines, I appreciate the following as a guiding principle for both songwriting and storytelling: “Think of songwriting as lowering someone down the side of a mountain, methodically. Make too big a movement and you’re going to lose the person” (Gauthier & Songschool, 2013).

Conclusion
Ethnography and bringing someone alive through ethnographic writing is another form of conjuring, a combination of vision, ideas (using the toolkit of social theory), life experience, and emotional authenticity. As anthropologists, we are charged with being the antennae, ears, and eyes always to the ground within a given community of practice. Welded together by equal parts storytelling, accuracy, and connection to one’s interlocutors, ethnographic writing, like songs, can become emotional electricity. I’ve seen this in my classrooms in the process of teaching a poetically written, powerful ethnography, where attitudes toward an unknown group can change dramatically over the course of a single text. As scholars, humanists, and educators, we should take—in fact, we must take—the aesthetics of our ethnographic work as seriously as
For excellent texts on songwriting and creative practice, see Cameron (1995, 2002), Goldberg (1986, 2005), and Ueland 1938 [1987, 2010].

https://youtube.be/htio_Uv_1FPY.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=17a_jfSrl.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1SPNTRaXRll&t=25.

Something similar happens with ethnography, where, as a by-product of engaging in the narrative world of someone else, we are also rehumanized in the process.


I'm struck, here, by ethno-poet Aher Zia's reflection on the possibility of songwriting and poetry in the field as forms of "self-care" tools used to process the intensity of the immersive fieldwork experience (American Anthropology Meetings, "Ethnographic Poetry," 11/17/2016).

For an example, please visit: https://vimeo.com/172336891.


In the Book of Mormon, it states: “Their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and...they shall be a pure and a delightsome people” (Second Book of Nephi, Chapter 30), www.ldsc.org/scriptures/bom/2-ne/30.6?lang=eng.


An example of this is retreat participant Alicia Stockman’s song “AM 660,” a reference to the local country music AM radio station: https://soundcloud.com/aliciastockman/am-660.

https://soundcloud.com/linahorner.

The Lange (1936) photo is of Florence Owens Thompson of Tahlequah, Oklahoma. To view the photo, visit: www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html.


https://soundcloud.com/kristinajacobsonmusic/no-mans-land-introduction. Thank you to engineer Stefan Lindvall, cowriter Lina Horner and Anfalszonn Recording Studio of Goteborg, Sweden, for permission to share this track. Thanks for Drake Hardin for the mastering.

One way that I introduce this song can be heard here: https://soundcloud.com/kristinajacobsonmusic/no-mans-land-introduction.

Lyric from “Me and Willie,” Laurie Hyde-Smith, recorded by Emmylou Harris, Luxury Liner, 2004.


References


