

David M. Csinos
Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
dcsinos@astheology.ns.ca
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**From Pioneer to Partner:
Dismantling White Normativity through Ethnographic Theology**

Abstract:

This paper explores postures that transgress white normativity in ethnographic theological research by using a particular research experience as a case study for generating practices for transgressing dominant, white norms and assumptions. The author begins by drawing from the work of non-dominant scholars to build a theoretical framework focused on relationality, multiplicity, and transformation through research. Next, by mining a recent research project, the author offers three postures that researchers can take on in order to dismantle white normativity: remaining flexible and open to improvisation, seeking interpretive lenses that reflect those of the participants, and engaging in practices of reflexivity at every stage of research.

A number of years ago I participated in a day-long workshop about Indigenous communities and reconciliation in Canada hosted by a church on a First Nations reserve. During a session in the afternoon, a white ally of the congregation explained how being involved with the community has transformed her understanding of the word *pioneer*. It's a word woven throughout everyday speech, but one that had been on my mind lately. At the time, I was in the midst of researching and writing a proposal for dissertation research and I wanted to make a contribution to the broader field of practical theology that was novel and original, boldly going where no theologians have gone before. I wanted to be a pioneer.

Until that workshop, I had perceived of pioneers to be bold, daring, and creative. Pioneers were those who thought and acted differently, who blazed new trails that others would follow. To be a pioneer in a given field was something to which one should aspire, a role couched in positivity and laud.

Yet as that white ally explained, the etymology of the term *pioneer* paints a very different picture. The root of the word comes from the French *peon*, which is related to the English *pawn*. These are the words used in the military to speak of foot soldiers, the ones who march ahead of the main legions of troops, marking trails and building roadways for the rest of the soldiers. Much like pawns in a game of chess, they were the first ones to move forward, were not prized for their strength or fighting skills, and were easily expendable.

This was a very different understanding of *pioneer* than that which I had learned. As a white male who grew up in North America, my vision of the world was marked by my inherited privilege as a settler. Pioneers, I was taught, were brave Europeans who gave up their lives at home to enter the wilderness of North America in order to build a new world for others to inhabit. But in reality, those early settlers were often pawns in the power games of empires, the expendable nobodies who followed orders as they engaged in dangerous work for the sake of a more powerful system. And as pioneers settled in North America, this work meant imposing the dominant empire's way of life onto those who already inhabited the area. To be a pioneer was to participate in a system that oppressed those who thought and lived in different ways.

White normativity relies on pioneers. The patterns of thought, belief, and action held up and imposed by whiteness are inscribed onto the world by those of us who act as pawns of the system. As I continued preparing for and conducted my dissertation research, I no longer sought to pioneering. Rather, what I gradually wished was to partner with those who participated in my research, walking alongside the children, adults, and wider faith communities that I came to know along the way. In this paper, I mine this recent experience of conducting qualitative theological research—what some scholars call ethnographic theology¹—in order to identify ways in which the practice of qualitative research can transgress white norms and dismantle white normativity. The use of qualitative methods in theological research is common within practical theological fields such as religious education, areas of scholarship that are intimately bound up with the lives of individual persons, communities of faith, and the wider societies in which they participate.

¹ See, for example, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

The style of auto-ethnography that I use in this paper employs qualitative research in a two-pronged, multilayered manner. At one level, it relies on the results of a year-long qualitative study into the theological lives of children within diverse cultural contexts. Throughout 2013 and 2014, I conducted ethnographic research within four culturally-distinct congregations of the United Church of Canada. Each congregation can be perceived as a distinct cultural context or *habitus*, with many variable and features distinguishing one from the others. They were urban, suburban, and rural; some were struggling financially while others had no problem balancing the books; they welcomed between 20 and 200 people for Sunday worship services; and each community was marked by particular ethnicities—one consisted of mostly white congregants, another of Aboriginal people, the third of immigrants from an African nation, and the fourth seeking to become intentionally diverse.

Instead of describing in detail the results of this study,² I move to a second level of interpretation, that is, I use this broader experience of ethnographic research as a case study for generating practices for transgressing dominant, white norms and assumptions within ethnographic theological research. Such a methodology relies on reflexivity as I explore the struggles and opportunities that surfaced as I, a white person, attempted to engage in research in multiple non-dominant contexts in ways that were respectful and appropriate.

To begin this paper, I will build a theoretical framework by drawing from the work of non-dominant scholars who challenge white normativity in their analyses of common research practices and assumptions. This framework upholds the importance of relationship, multiplicity, and transformation and as guiding principles for research that develops from those who are marginalized by dominant (white) norms. Following this, I take on an auto-ethnographic stance as I probe my recent experience of conducting qualitative theological research. This investigation brings to light three broad postures that researchers can adopt in order to dismantle and transgress white norms in qualitative research: flexibility and improvisation in research methods, an openness to interpretive lenses that rely on non-dominant assumptions, and immersive reflexivity. These postures are related to the principles to which I now turn.

Building A Theoretical Framework

As the end of Enlightenment era draws near, scholars in many fields have taken to examining how the philosophical assumptions and methodological norms of this sweeping epoch have influenced various aspects of human life and thought. One such person is Margaret Kovach, an Indigenous scholar who writes, “The Enlightenment era was marked by the celebration of science and a perception that through scientific reasoning man could understand, control, and shape the natural, social, political, and economic world. Inherent in this method is the belief in a

² For more information about this study, see David M. Csinos, “From the Ground Up: Cultural Considerations in Research into Children’s Spirituality and Theology,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 23, no. 1 (2018): 53-66, and David M. Csinos, “A Faith Worth Making: Understanding the Cultural Nature of Children’s Theology—and Why It Matters,” in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, edited by Benjamin D. Espinoza, James Riley Estep, Jr., and Shirley Morgenthaler (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, forthcoming).

universal truth applicable to all people and cultures.”³ She is one of many scholars from non-dominant (non-white) contexts who are challenging the hegemony of white, western Enlightenment assumptions by raising up the legitimacy of those on the margins—those who were colonized, silenced, and ignored by white normativity. In this section, I will build a framework that will buttress my own assumptions—born out of experiences of qualitative research—by highlighting three key principles that transgresses white normativity in research: relationality, multiplicity, and transformation.

Relationality

The days of the objective anthropologist observing research subjects at arm’s length are coming to a close. While such distancing was at one time seen as a requirement for ensuring validity and reliability, scholars who hail from non-dominant contexts have in recent years emphasized the crucial role of relationships in research.

In his quest to build an Indigenous research paradigm, Shawn Wilson drew from conversations with Indigenous leaders, elders, and scholars to conclude that relationality was at the heart of such an approach to research. In *Research is Ceremony*, Wilson demonstrates the crucial role of relationships both in the arguments he puts forward and the manners by which he conveys them to his readership. For him, relationship is embedded in every aspect of a research paradigm: “Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. There, that sums up the whole book in one paragraph!”⁴ Such accountability shifts the outcomes of research from the generation of ideas to the advancing of relationships, for he posits that any ideas, concepts, or arguments we might put forward hold less importance than the relationships that had a hand in constructing them.⁵ Such accountability is not simply to our relationships with people, but also with the land/environment, with the cosmos (the world of spirituality), with ideas, and with oneself.⁶ With all this in mind, Wilson can confidently say that an Indigenous research paradigm indeed sees research as a ceremony, for “the purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves.”⁷

Wilson is joined by other Indigenous scholars, including Marlene Castellano and Margaret Kovach, in prioritizing the relationality embedded within all levels of research. In her analysis of Aboriginal knowledge, Castellano identifies five characteristics woven throughout Aboriginal approaches to knowledge: it is “personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in

³ Margaret Kovach, “Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies,” in *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2005), 22.

⁴ Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2008), 71.

⁵ Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 74.

⁶ Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 84-95, 123.

⁷ Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 11.

narrative or metaphorical language.”⁸ Relationality is inherently built into each one of these characteristics. For example, the oral nature of Aboriginal knowledge requires relationship, which forms the context in which knowledge is passed on—often through metaphor and story—from generational to generation.⁹ In a related vein, Kovach addresses the importance of relationship in Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, arguing that a model of research built on relationship includes an abstract philosophical level and a concrete practical level; at the philosophical level, research “honours the cultural value of relationship, it emphasizes people’s ability to share and change their own destiny, and it is respectful.”¹⁰ Relationship matters in a practical sense because it is the basis by which access is granted to a community involved in research, likely through massive amounts of time being invested in building relationships.¹¹

Multiplicity

In addition to placing relationships at centre stage, some scholars from non-dominant contexts are also upholding the value of multiplicity in research. Ghanaian theologian Emmanuel Lartey, in his introduction to intercultural approaches of pastoral care, writes that one of the basic principles of interculturality is the presence of multiple perspectives. In his words, “equally rational persons can examine the same issue and yet arrive at very different understandings. It goes on to insist that these different perspectives need to be seen as equally deserving of attention.”¹² Through conversation and keen attention to one another’s perspectives, researchers can consider multiple—even competing—perspectives on a question or issue in order to gain a fuller, more complex picture of it. Going further, Lartey’s understanding of personhood demonstrates that human beings are in and of themselves individually complex and diverse beings, for they are in some ways: “1. like all others, 2 like some others, 3. like no other.”¹³ By recognizing the universal, cultural, and individual characteristics of all people involved in research, one opens the door to multiplicity.

Castellano likewise names a diversity of perspectives as vital for Aboriginal knowledge. Not only does knowledge come from multiple sources, but one of those sources in particular—empirical observation—ought to be carried out through “a convergence of perspectives from different vantage points, accumulated over time.”¹⁴ For Aboriginal communities, she argues, knowledge is not individual; rather, it’s a collective enterprise that is adjudicated as reliable by

⁸ Marlene Brant Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge,” in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 25.

⁹ Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions,” 27.

¹⁰ Kovach, “Emerging from the Margins,” 30.

¹¹ Kovach, “Emerging from the Margins,” 30.

¹² Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling*, 2nd ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 33.

¹³ Lartey, *In Living Color*, 34.

¹⁴ Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions,” 24.

the consensus of the wider community through collaborative analysis.¹⁵ Thus, both the generation of knowledge and the validity thereof necessitate the holding of multiple perspectives.

The principles of multiplicity is vital for dismantling white normativity for it challenges any monocultural perspectives of our world which, according to Lartey, “are usually inadequate and can actually prove oppressive.”¹⁶ Considering multiple perspectives, then, is an emancipatory research practice.

Transformation

For the third principle that I will highlight in this paper, we turn again to Wilson. We have already seen that, for him, the outcome of research is relationship; it is a ceremony that brings us us closer to one another, to the earth, to the spiritual realm, to ideas. Yet, as I have noted above, Wilson argues that the researcher’s relationship to oneself is also altered as a result of research. Putting in bluntly, he writes “*If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right.*”¹⁷ Without a degree of personal transformation on the part of those engaged in it, research can be seen as unsuccessful.

This is a value that Wilson demonstrates in his own writing. Toward the end of *Research is Ceremony*, after reminding readers of the necessity of personal transformation, he names a number of ways that his own journey of learning about and building an Indigenous research paradigm had a hand in shaping and re-shaping who he is as a scholar and, more broadly, as a person:

Changes that have occurred were not big revelations, flashes of insight or dramatic differences in my life or lifestyle. Change has been a growing awareness of what I am doing and why, and the change associated with greater awareness. (Is that what maturity feels like?) I feel as though there has been a gradual shift, subtle and perhaps long lasting, in my perception and view of the world.¹⁸

Perhaps the fact that, as Wilson’s experience testifies, transformation can be a subtle, incremental process, it has largely been overlooked in dominant, white norms for research. Outcomes have tended to relate to contributions to a body of work or forming answers to research questions instead of evoking profound changes in the ones doing the research in the first place. Wilson’s words are a call for scholars to engage in research not simply for the sake of changing others, but to kindle the flames of transformation in our own lives.

Of course, the scholars I have cited in this section are certainly not the only—nor the first—to underline the importance of these three principles for emancipatory, transgressive approaches to research. And these authors likewise rely on several other sources to build their arguments. Yet by drawing on their particular works, I can construct a theoretical framework that is both strong enough and flexible enough for me to build upon, which I will do by analyzing

¹⁵ Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions,” 26.

¹⁶ Lartey, *In Living Color*, 33.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 135 (emphasis original).

¹⁸ Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 136.

three postures for transgressing white normativity that were embedded in my recent research project.

Retrospective Reflections

In 2013 and 2014, as part of my doctoral dissertation research, I embarked on an ethnographic research project in order to learn about how children make meaning in different cultural contexts. Armed with some of the values and principles described above, I built a proposal for a study in which I would spend time at four congregations within the United Church of Canada. In 2006, this Christian denomination made a commitment to become an intercultural church,¹⁹ one that shifted away from tolerance and surface-level experiences of diversity to more profound and complex “encounters among persons and groups with cultural differences.”²⁰ Through pre-existing relationships with clergy and laypeople within this denomination, I recruited four congregations for this study, each of which was culturally distinct from the others in multiple ways. During this project, I spent time at each congregation—between four and eighteen months depending on the congregation—getting to know them and their members, especially their children. I worshipped with the congregations, sometimes offering small leadership roles in services, helped to each Sunday school classes, conducted focus groups with their ministers and lay leaders, volunteered at vacation Bible camps, and—most importantly—held interviews with four or five children from each congregation.

At the end of this research project, I was able to draw a number of fascinating conclusions regarding my initial research questions. I was equipped to speak with detail and nuance about all sorts of topics related to how children make theological meaning in contexts of cultural diversity. But this study not only taught me about children’s generation of theology; it also taught me much about ethnographic theology. Through preparing, carrying out, and reflecting on this adventure in qualitative research, many of the assumptions that I, as an educated white, western, cis-gender, heterosexual male, had learned about the nature of qualitative research. In philosophical, theological, and practical ways, my core assumptions were undermined and challenged by the encounters with difference that met me as I came to know the people at these four unique congregations. For the rest of this paper, I will use this experience as a case study for identifying three postures for dismantling white normativity in ethnographic theological research.

Flexibility and Improvisation

Traditional (white) approaches to qualitative research rely on carefully planning to use methods that allow for consistency throughout the research process. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this better than Research Ethics Board (REB) proposals; these documents indicate that researchers have thorough understanding of the topic of study and have carefully prepared detailed research

¹⁹ United Church of Canada, “A Transformative Vision for the United Church of Canada,” report to the 39th General Council of The United Church of Canada, 2006, *Record of Proceedings* (Thunder Bay: The United Church of Canada, 2006).

²⁰ Roger C. Hutchinson, *Ethical Choices in a Pluralistic World* (Camrose, AB: The Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, 2009), 11.

plans to be implemented in sites and interview sessions. While consistency and a level of predictability in research help limit variables and demonstrate an ability to carry out a project, the reliance on such norms are based on dominant white academic approaches to research that place the researcher at a distance from those who participate in it.

I certainly took a more rigid, pre-planned approach to research during the first studies I conducted. During a 2007/2008 project into children's spiritual lives,²¹ I heeded the advice of experts like Creswell and Poth, who recommend determining in advance who ought to participate in research interviews that are guided by a particular set of questions asked of each participant.²² While this more clear-cut, predetermined approach was suitable for the three predominantly white Canadian congregations that participated in that project, the immense cultural diversity of the congregations and individuals involved in my doctoral dissertation called for a different approach. In fact, it called for several different approaches.

In order to respect the traditions and norms of those participating who were not part of the dominant white culture of Canada, I had to gradually let go of my desire to maintain consistency and predicability across research sites. My original research design had me proceeding along a clear line of inquiry that began with a particular approach to participant-observation, followed by one-on-one interviews with a set number of children, a focus group with clergy and laity in specific leadership roles, and then a final participant-observation visit. I had created a consistent, chronological—even rigid—method that would be carried out at each of the four participating congregations, spurred on perhaps by nativity or limited previous research experience, but most certainly from white assumptions about acceptable research practices

Lartey reminds us, however, that cultures are not static: “there is a continual interplay resulting in dynamism, adaptability, reinterpretation, reformulation and change. There is certainly continuity, but this is itself continually challenged by changing circumstances. As such, new forms of expression, new perceptions and creative interpretations are emerging all the time.”²³ Embracing the cultural diversity built into my research required that shift from the predicability and consistency lauded by dominant approaches to research to one of the improvisation, adaptability, and change that Lartey—and others²⁴—reminds us is built into all cultures. Not only did I choose to approach interviews with children without a specific set of questions to guide our conversations, but I had to take on an overall posture of flexibility, of dynamic and ongoing reformulation, in order to allow my research methods to become adaptive to the contexts and cultures of participants. Such a posture was necessary to honour the relationships my participants and I had built with each other; as they had come to trust me to

²¹ See David M. Csinos, *Children's Ministry that Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Ministry with Children* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

²² John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 164-5.

²³ Lartey, *In Living Color*, 31.

²⁴ See, for example, Neil Bissoondath, who writes, “‘Culture is life. It is a living, breathing, multi-faceted entity in constant evolution . . . Stasis is not possible. A culture that fails to grow from within inevitably becomes untrue to itself, inevitably descends into folklore.’” Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Penguin, 2002), 75.

engage in research in a respectful way, I also trusted them to adapt my initial research methods in ways that best suited them and their communities.

For example, at Parkdale United Church, an urban intercultural congregation, community is a core value. This prioritization of the collective over the individual means that, as the minister told me, congregants don't do anything alone. Since my research was seen as a (temporary) congregational practice, this meant that interviewing children one-on-one was not appropriate. Thus, I abandoned my desire for consistency across all four sites (one-on-one interviews) so that the research could reflect the ethos and values of this congregation. While Parkdale required a few adaptations, at Colkirk United church, an Indigenous congregation, nearly every piece of my overall research agenda had to be altered to reflect their cultural norms and values: I engaged in reciprocity as I volunteered at three week-long vacation Bible camps; I worshipped with the congregation several times in order to build relationships and trust among the community; because of these relationships, I grew quite close with this community and they trusted me—and felt it was most appropriate—to interview children without a research assistant; and I continue to remain in occasional contact with members of this congregation. Each of these adaptations sacrificed consistency for flexibility in order to honour and respect those who were participating in my project. And in so doing, new spaces were opened into which the Holy Spirit moved.

Changing Lenses

One of the ongoing challenges I faced during this project had to do with my power and positionality. Given that there were four culturally-distinct congregations that served as research sites, my position to each congregation varied from that of the others. Technically I was an outsider to each site, as none of the congregations served as my home faith community, and I am not a member of the United Church of Canada. But my race, ethnicity, first language, and nationality—among other aspects of who I am—placed me in different positions as researcher within each site. While in one congregation I might have occupied a position of what James Banks calls the indigenous-insider, at another I was certainly an external-outsider.²⁵ And at other congregations, I was perhaps more likely to be in the position of indigenous-outsider or external-insider.

Even though my positionality among each congregation may have varied, my presence as a white person remained consistent. And along with my skin colour I brought assumptions, values, and norms for research that were bound up with my whiteness. This certainly influenced my interactions with the participating congregations during my field research; but it also affected the manners in which I analyzed and interpreted the data generated through this research.

To exemplify this, I turn once again to Colkirk United Church. During my interviews with the children who were part of this congregation and throughout my analysis of these conversations, I became keenly fascinated by the integration of Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology in their thinking. They shared Aboriginal stories passed on orally from generation to generation, like the story of the woman who fell from the sky or stories about the Peacemaker. And they also spoke about elements of Christian theology. As I asked questions to

²⁵ For more information about this fourfold typology of cross-cultural researchers, see James A. Banks, "The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society," *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 7 (1998): 4-17.

help me learn how these children connected these two traditions, I noticed that they avoided responding directly to these questions, content with the fact that stories from these two traditions blended together but unconcerned with how this is so. In fact, at times it was difficult for me to discern that some of the children even saw Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology as two distinct schools of faith or thought. Their blending of these traditions with seamlessness and subtlety piqued my interest even more. And yet as I read and re-read transcripts and listened to recordings of my interviews with these children, I could not identify any clues about *how* these children put these two sources in conversation with each other.

Then it hit me. Maybe the problem was not that I could not find any evidence—or even that they they did not offer any evidence in the first place. Maybe the problem was that I was reading their non-dominant culture through my dominant lenses. White normativity suggests that the dominant, white, western view of the world is most credible, most authoritative, most universally legitimate for understanding the world. In *The Comeback*, John Ralston Saul speaks of this hegemony of ideology as an ongoing challenge: “Europeans insisted that their principles were universal. Of course they were universal. After all, they said they were. They still say it, with the same old conviction.”²⁶ Yet the universal credibility of white ideology is simply not true; as I demonstrated above in my discussion of multiplicity, no one interpretation can be sufficient at all times and in all places.

In order to accurately analyze and understand the theological thinking of the children at Colkirk, I had to try as best as possible to view them through their own cultural lenses. This meant, in this case, interpreting these children’s theologies through a narrative lens, for Aboriginal epistemology has at its heart a narrative approach to seeing and engaging with the world.²⁷ I abandoned my quest to make sense of how these children combined Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology as two distinct sources and sought to pay attention to their use of story. Doing so opened up new vistas that I would not have been able to perceive through my white normative perspective.

Immersive Reflexivity

Qualitative research of any kind has the potential to evoke deeper self-awareness and changes in thought and behaviour among those who engage in it.²⁸ Ethnographic theology in particular is pregnant with such possibility. It assumes the very presence of God within every node of the research process, a God who speaks and acts in our world, a God who can touch our hearts and minds and transform us into those who live as Christ calls us to live. Yes, through ethnographic theology, qualitative research becomes a theological practice that can foster positive spiritual transformation among researchers—and, in fact, among all those who participate in research.

But such transformation is not a given. It comes through a posture of reflexivity. Speaking generally, this involves conscious, intentional efforts on the part of researchers to take

²⁶ John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback* (Toronto: Penguin, 2014), 10.

²⁷ See Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions.”

²⁸ For more about the formative power of qualitative research, see David M. Csinos, “Between Yes and No: The Inner Journey of Qualitative Research,” in *Qualitative Research in Theological Education: Pedagogy in Practice*, edited by Mary Clark Moschella and Susan Willhauck (London: SCM, 2018).

note of how we are bound up with our own studies. Sometimes this can mean simply keeping a journal in which one tracks one's own emotions, thoughts, and biases throughout the research process; at other times, this might mean writing oneself into the project as a participant, especially if the research involves studying a circumstance or phenomena that the researcher has experienced firsthand.

However one chooses to do so, taking on a posture of immersive reflexivity, that is, reflexivity at every level of a project, is crucial to research that has the power to dismantle white normativity. Throughout the modern era, studies had credibility when researchers conducted them at arm's length, when they served as outside observers who keep their distance so that they did not interfere with the phenomena they were studying nor become bound up with those involved, which might cloud their objective judgment. Often, this meant white researchers observing and studying those from non-dominant groups. This is something the people of Colkirk United Church know all too well, for their minister informed me that Aboriginal people are the most researched group in Canada, yet benefit the least from the studies conducted about them. Rather than building relationships and having a stake in the findings, white research norms seek to maintain an illusive form of objectivity.

Human beings are subjective beings. We live and move and have our being in very personal ways as we interact with the world around us. As much as white researchers might attempt to remain at a distance—physically and/or emotionally—from their participants, we are all bound up together. As I got to know the congregations and members thereof throughout the research process, I came to care about them, to seek their welfare in very different ways. At the predominantly white, middle-class Burke Street United Church, this meant that I wanted to ensure that the interview process was a positive experience for the children. Indeed, thanks to conversations with and emails from parents afterward, it was evident that the interviews offered children a unique space in which they could share their deepest spiritual and theological thoughts with an accepting, non-judgmental adult. At other churches, such as Messiah Methodist United Church, a congregation of African immigrants, I was the one who received spiritual nourishment from the research process; through my participation in their worship services, the deep encouragement of the congregation, and the prayers that the minister offered for me, my family, and my research bound me to them as a contributing member of their worshipping community, if only for a time. Did this affect my research? Most certainly. Did it colour the way I perceived the children? Absolutely. But by tracking these biases through immersive reflexivity, I was able to pay attention to them along the way and account for how they might have affected my analysis and interpretation of the data generated through this study.

Wigg-Stevenson succinctly writes about the importance of reflexivity, stating that “if I am not reflexive about my self in relation to the field, my descriptive analysis of it will be shaped unconsciously and thus distorted by my own biases.”²⁹ For centuries, the “proper” or “correct” analyses of fields of study have been shaped—and distorted—by white biases. In order to dismantle such normativity, a posture of reflexivity is necessary, especially on the part of scholars belonging to dominant white cultures. By becoming conscious of our own assumptions,

²⁹ Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “Reflexive Theology: A Preliminary Proposal,” *Practical Matters* March 1, 2013. <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/2013/03/01/reflexive-theology/>.

tendencies, and biases—and recognizing them as such and not as *de facto* standards for our fields—we can take apart white constructions of normativity and open ourselves to the plurality of philosophies, methodologies, and pedagogies swirling throughout our diverse world.

Conclusion

As I continue to reflect on and write about this recent research experience, I cannot help but be drawn to Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that an interview can evoke a sort of conversation experience in the researcher.³⁰ For me, the conversation I underwent through this study did not involve the flashing light of the road to Damascus. Rather, it was more of an Emmaus Road experience, one in which ongoing conversation and deepening relationship gradually opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the world.

Through ongoing flexibility and improvisation, a willingness to take on the perspectives of others, and practices of immersive reflexivity, ethnographic theology has the power to dismantle the hegemony of white normativity, not only through the ideas it generates, but through the very means by which theologians engage in research. Of course, the postures I offer in this paper are simply the three that were most salient in my research and most powerful in my own growth as a transgressive researcher. There are countless others that are surely also significant in the dismantling of white normativity in our fields of inquiry as we shed our roles as pioneers and instead partner with those who breathe life into our research.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, "Understanding," in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla Pankhurst Ferguson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 614.

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Such research can not only dismantle white normativity through the subjects investigated; it can also be practiced in ways that are transgressive. This article uses a particular experience of ethnographic theological research in diverse cultural contexts as a case study for learning about three postures that subvert white normativity built into assumptions and practices of ethnographic research. Using a two-pronged, auto-ethnographic approach to analyzing this case, three nuanced postures become critically apparent: improvised flexibility, the ability to change lenses, and immersive reflexivity. "Dismantling the master's house": Freedom as ethical practice in Brandom and Foucault. Jason A. Springs. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 (3):419-448 (2009). Add citations. You must login to add citations. Order: Most recent First author. This paper provides an agonistic interpretation of Robert Brandom's social-pragmatic account of normativity. I argue that social practice, on this approach, should be seen not just as cooperative, but also as contestatory. This aspect, which has so far remained implicit, helps to illuminate Brandom's claim that normative statuses are "instituted" by social practices: normative statuses are brought into play in mutual engagement, and are only in play from an engaged social perspective among others. *Evolving Forms of Ethnographic Practice* - Free download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. ROBINSON; SCHULZ. *New Avenues for Sociological Inquiry*. *Evolving Forms of Ethnographic Practice*. A B S T R A C T This work examines evolving forms of ethnographic practice generated in response to advances in mediated communication. It chronicles phases in the transformation of offline ethnography, beginning with pioneering virtual ethnographies concerned with identity work and deception. Subsequently, analysis illuminates cyberethnographic redefinitions of traditional methodological concerns including fieldwork, participant observation, and text as data.