A Mixed Methods Autoethnographic Theater: Extending Pedagogy and Research Through the Development of a Sámi Land Acknowledgment

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To cite this article:
CohenMiller, Ness, T. M., & Martin, R. (2024). A mixed methods autoethnographic theater: Extending pedagogy and research through the development of a Sámi land acknowledgment. *Journal of Mixed Methods Studies*, *9*(1), 253-262. [Online] www.jomesonline.com, https://doi.org/10.59455/jomes.2024.9.7

Article Info: *Received*: 4 April 2024 *Revised*: 20 April 2024 *Accepted*: 2 May 2024

Abstract
Drawing forward stories are ways to address sensitive topics and become willing to be vulnerable to share with others. Methodologically being able to critically self-reflect and find those transformative stories offers a means to recognize our humanness in a global world (CohenMiller, 2024). As Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2016) emphasize, in evocative autoethnography, there is a need to pull in the reader to the moment, to dramatize our work. In this article, the three of us incorporate the novel mixed methods autoethnography, weaving together evocative approaches and dramaturgy (Saldaña, 2003) around the topic of developing a Sámi land acknowledgment in a higher education context. We recognize the ways in which arts-based research (Leavy, 2020), including autoethnography, can stand on its own. And echoing Tony Onwuegbuzie's (2023) poetic inquiry of mixed methods research, in 1+1=1, we offer the article as a standalone piece, a theatric work of seven acts integrating the 10 dimensions of mixed methods autoethnography (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2024).

Keywords: mixed method autoethnography, dramaturgy, evocative autoethnography, higher education, Indigenous peoples, voice

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ACT I: Music (Anna)

Sitting a few rows from the front of the auditorium, I could feel the conference attendees all grow quiet as a woman with colorful scarf walked to the center of the stage. This was my first time hearing the sounds that started to emerge. They reminded me of the chants I heard in the Sephardic temples growing up where my family of Spanish-Jewish descent had passed on the same tunes over generations from the Iberian Peninsula to the Turkic region and then to the United States.

Straightening her shoulders and standing bigger and bolder, a stance that commanded presence despite her small stature, the woman started vocalizing quietly. With arms outstretched invited us all to follow her as her voice grew louder, encouraging us to join in. I didn't know the words, was unsure of what I was trying to imitate, but I tried to echo her sounds. Thankfully, a new colleague and musician sat in front of me. How lucky I could follow his lead! I tried to listen to his sounds, working to both become a part of the chorus and in particular to not sing something that would not go astray, to not create any type of dissonance in the evocative space.

First all together, we were guided together to vocalize, a deep and gentle chanting. Then, bit by bit, the musician on stage encouraged us with her words and outstretched arms to sing in rounds—one section of the audience, then another section. *Oh no! I don't know if I can do this!* And yet I did, I followed my new colleagues' deeper voice and let my voice and body be carried by those around me. Going back and forth, a cadence and tune again and again, voicing overlapping and becoming a rich tapestry of voice.

This was a Sámi *yoik*. The ancient vocal tradition was used as an opening for a Sámi and Indigenous research conference in Norway. I could feel how with song, as a community of audience and participants and leaders, we were brought together to acknowledge and value the local Indigenous peoples of the region. We were involved in a collective, communal learning process.

ACT II: Dance (Rose)

Tēnā koutou katoa

Greetings to one and all

Ko Aerana, Ingarangi, Poroni, Tenemaka te whakapaparanga mai

Irish, English, Polish, and Danish is my ancestry

engari

however

nō Tāmaki Makaurau au

I'm from Auckland

Kei Norway au e noho ana

I am living in Norway

Ko Rose au

I am Rose

Tēnā tātou katoa

Greetings to one and all

Walking into the high school dance studio in a small town in Aotearoa New Zealand, the walls reverberated with sound and movement—so much so that I felt it echo through my body, bringing the cells alive a little more. Around 15 young people filled the space, and I had arrived with their teacher, Pauline, who was my Ph.D. student and a Māori dance educator exploring connections to place for youth in this multicultural rural town grappling with gang violence, poverty, and youth feeling a lack of identity and belonging.

The teenagers didn't pause at our arrival, they continued—moving in twists and turns on the floor and in the air, using their voices to project sounds and breath. The energy was palpable. Pauline had informed me that the group had been working on a task called "dance your pepeha". Pepeha[1] is a way of introducing yourself in te reo Māori[2], often woven with a mihi,[3] which could be understood as a welcome and a type of acknowledgement of land. I learnt my pepeha first at primary school, but as a pakeha (a New Zealander primarily of European descent, but also a term used in ancient Māori karakia[4] to describe mythical fairy people of light skin), I only understood the weight of this text and the significance of it when I was much older and had a deeper sensitivity to the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. For others, they learn their pepeha through their family and community. Others might learn it as adults in the workplace online, or as recent arrivals to the country through friends or community organizations.

Back to the dance studio—I sit with Pauline on the floor at one side of the room. Pauline asks the students to gather, and soon we have formed a circle, all on the floor. Legs crossed, some lying flat on their backs, others kneeling or folding limbs in creative ways. The group is still buzzing, and the sparks of enthusiasm are still palpable even though we have become more grounded to the floor. Pauline welcomes the group and introduces me. I have met some of the students before at another event, and we give each other knowing smiles and nods. A student shoots her hand up in the air: "Ms, can we show our pepehas now, I need to do it while it is in my body!". Pauline laughs a little, and responds with "Absolutely, how about you start things off". The group scoots back a little, making the circle wider. The student who was so enthusiastic to start, now looks a little shy, but stands and takes space within the center of the circle. Standing firmly on both feet, arms relaxed to her sides, she closes her eyes. The energy of the space changes, almost like a collective exhale is taken by the group. I watch her stand with strength, the movement of her breath subtly moving her body. I feel my skin prickle—not quite goosebumps, but an attunement to the space and the fresh near silence. I see her fingertips move, quivering, which gradually grows into a wiri[5]. The quivering of her hands grows as she begins to lift them towards her torso, and her right foot begins to lift from the floor. Finding balance on one leg, she tilts her body forward, right leg extending behind her, and arms, still in wiri sweeping from in front of her torso to an extended diagonal position from her shoulders. Looking around the circle I see all eyes fixated, a feeling of a collective gaze and support. I hear the student who is performing her pepeha breathing audibly. Inhale. Exhale. Hmmmmm… Pause… Shhhhhh… Hmmmmm… Pause… Shhhhhh…

The next movements are in the rhythm of this breath—sweeping and swirling arms, hands no longer in wiri, but now fingertips extending and reaching. No longer balancing on one leg, both feet grounded again, but knees soft and rebounding in response to breath and the swirling

sweeping arm movements. I notice myself swaying a little. I often do this when I watch movement or dance. I allow my body to sway and pick up the movements I see, feeling an energy in the space between the student and I, where her movement bounced to us as witnesses. Pepeha is about connections and creating the potential for connections—between people, places, histories, and the natural world around us. This was the first time I had seen a pepeha 'danced', usually this is a verbal sharing—powerful, but using words to connect. Now, bodies were invited to connect, breath was invited to connect, the meeting points in these pepeha were embodied, felt, and sensed. It was this approach to meeting and connecting others through Indigenous welcomes, introductions, and acknowledgements that prior to this point I had not considered so deeply. But now I wondered, how might such considerations allow us to feel connection, care, respect, and reciprocity, to and with Indigenous people and their land?

ACT III: Voice (Anna)

Of voice. That's the thing—we had *voice* when we were all sitting together. We were sharing a meaningful tune, a traditional set of words and music for the Sámi people of northern Norway. The entire conference provided a space to honor and recognize the Indigenous peoples of the area. Presenters frequently started with a blessing and/or recognition of their physical presence on the lands of others, a nod to the universe and being grounded, and ultimately a basic acknowledgement of lives that have come before and that will continue on.

Thus, when I started to organize a pedagogy and research event at the university, I was prepped to think about starting with some sort of land acknowledgment. *Perhaps a yoik and if not that, perhaps a blessing*, I thought.

And quickly, I was taken aback.

"Sorry, but I feel uncomfortable doing that…

It's not typical here. Maybe in the future, but not right now…"

Why did people feel uncomfortable with saying a few words of a land acknowledgment?

I really didn't understand.

I joined the university as a foreigner. I grew up in the United States as an outsider, a Jewish Spanish person who never fit in, being told frequently and consistently how I wasn't Jewish *enough* or Spanish *enough.* Generations of diasporic people have gone through not being seen, heard, or valued, being excluded, rejected, threatened and worse. I was lucky. I lived in various states which worked to acknowledgment and make reparations to diverse communities within their borders, in particular those of Indigenous backgrounds. Then, I moved to Qazaqstan (the Latin Kazakh spelling of the nation, which more frequently is written as "Kazakhstan"). We raised our children there, and we didn't fit either. We were outsiders in the country. I spent years working through lengthy and grueling processes with various governments to be seen and valued as a community member. *Would I ever feel a part of the country I lived in? And what about others?*

ACT IV: Complexity (Anna and Tove)

It's selfish I (Anna) realize at some level. I want for me what others have given. Tove and I met, talked, and listened. I was heard. I felt it in my body. Space was held. I cried. I was exhausted. I was relieved. I want to hear others, I want to honor that space, a justice-centered space for those who have been overlooked, misheard, ignored, mistreated, colonized, and unappreciated.

This is the background I realized to a "simple" expectation that a land acknowledgment would be just that…simple.

Sorry, but I feel uncomfortable doing that…

It's not typical here. Maybe in the future, but not right now…

And Tove stepped in. Tove—the director of the Centre for Sámi and Indigenous Studies at the university. Someone who I had thought *was* Sámi but actually doesn't identify that way. But instead, she shares vulnerability and deeply about her positionality:

> At the age of 6 I became a big sister, and my brother was everything I asked for. He had the biggest smile, and I can strongly remember his laugher when I was running and dragging him on a blanket through the house as a child. In my eyes he was perfect, but in the eyes of others he had several disabilities. He was the direct cause that I wanted to become a nurse, so when I became the mother of my third child and he also had several disabilities, it was no shock to me, but both the experience of being a sister and now a mother of a child with disabilities I wanted to do what I could to fight for inclusion (and facilitate) adapted and person-centered healthcare services for everybody, both as a professional working as a nurse, but also as a mother. When I later took my Ph.D. in nursing science and the university collage had a special responsibility towards the South Sámi population, it was very natural to me to try to find out the experiences of the South Sámi population in regard to healthcare services in their community, and if the healthcare services were person centered and facilitated their background and needs. When I met the older South Sámi, I was deeply moved by their stories about their lives, because they were seldom seen and heard for who they are. And I found out that this is not the case, and we still have a long way to go as their background is not taken into consideration, so they are subjected to a form of subtle colonization.
>
> ….

She gave the land acknowledgment at the conference. Yet, it wasn't as simple as just stepping in and saying a few words. Tove explains:

> I was so nervous. It made me realize how important it was. It is a way of showing respect. That is something… it doesn't have to be someone with an Indigenous background. It is part of the responsibility of the university. That is something I thought about after.
>
> And I think of Sámi National Day, and the importance of highlighting what we do together

Through Tove's land acknowledgment, there was a step forward, showing a means to honor the space and place of the event:

> It is important we do something about this. I want to do something about the action part. When we talk about taking things seriously in terms of the Sámi,… we have a struggle from the part we *say*, we 'acknowledge,' but we don't always follow through. It is time we get to the action part.

When one person turned down giving the land acknowledgment, they offered words that I could say (see the example land acknowledgment at the end of the article). I had the words right there, but I thought I wasn't the right person to say them. I thought the person *should* have a Sámi background. And yet, in our discussions, it is clear the responsibility is on all our shoulders. It is a privilege and power to not *have* to stand up and speak up. If it feels like a potential struggle

for me, someone who has spent her career on related topics, what obstacles are there for others? And how can we help remove those obstacles so we can recognize our responsibility?

ACT V: Welcoming? (Rose)

I arrive in Norway, knowing that there is an Indigenous Sámi population. I am 'waiting' to meet this Indigenous perspective in my first days in the city of Trondheim. I see and feel it nowhere. Maybe I am not looking hard enough. Maybe I don't know what to look for. I asked a colleague "should I include a welcome in Sámi in my presentation?". I receive a response "no need, we don't really do that here." The presentation is about inclusive arts education, it feels weird to not acknowledge the Indigenous people of the place I am in and who (I believe) hold custodianship of the land I stand on. But I am new, and I am nervous. I want to fit in. But, I have a nagging feeling inside. A discomfort. I listen to this. I decide to dance my pepeha at the opening of my first presentation in Norway.

ACT VI: Response (Tove)

As I sit up preparing late at night before the Sámi National Day, I can't stop thinking about how we must continue our talks and writing about this, the need for acknowledgment.

The land acknowledgment is very important to do in Sápmi/ Saepmie/ Sábme. Sápmi, stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia Peninsula (Turi et al., 2009). The population is not homogeneous, comprising several subgroups with their own language and customs (Jernsletten, 1993). And the thing that made me see that even clearer is some of the social media response and news after the opening of Bodø 2024. The city is the cultural capital of Europe, a huge celebration and awareness and cultural festival that opened in Bodø. Yet, there has been so much written in the media the last days. So much hate and negative response from Norwegians after the opening. Several people have said that there are so few that have Sámi background; that there was much focus on the Sámi people in the opening.

We really must write something about this. The land acknowledgment is one way to respect and honor the Sámi people. This is so important. This could be a way of showing respect, seeing and acknowledging the Indigenous population in Norway. *Sápmi/ Saepmie/ Sábme must be acknowledged*.

ACT VII: Dialoguing (Tove, Anna, Rose)

What needs to happen to normalize land acknowledgments at the university? In Norway? What are the steps? What would it look like?

Tove: When I heard that those you had reached out to did not want to do the land acknowledgment or felt awkward about it, I first was a little bit surprised. In my head, I began to think, *what is the reason for this?* When I thought a bit more about their reluctance to do this, I felt in a way that it was understandable, because this is not something just people with Indigenous backgrounds should do, and it is the people without Indigenous backgrounds who have taken the land, neglected, and overlooked that we have an Indigenous population here in Norway.

Rose: I see that Norway is sort of at a crossroad moment—where the moment has come to have really genuine and deep discussions about this.

Tove: I also thought that they may feel they are just being reached out to when necessary, and not so often asked what is important to them. You can also think that in regard to the 6th of February (Sámi National Day). I think it's not the most important thing what you do *this* day

to honor the Sámi people, but what we, as a whole community do—in action—*all* the other days of the year.

Rose: Yes, it could very much be that there is a feeling of being 'used' when necessary, which is something that I think we deeply need to consider if we look to encourage land acknowledgment practices and other markers of Indigenous representation in the university.

Anna: We realized that there isn't one way forward. Our feelings and experiences led to a greater understanding of the constraints, hiccups, quicksand, and pressures felt, but they may not offer the toolkit. And that's exactly it. A toolkit is needed, one that is flexible and recommended and offers the resources and phrasings for the entire community.

Rose: And I think so much of this is the discomfort people feel comes from many directions, and it will take time for feelings to shift.

Anna: "Normalize and develop"—that's what we're looking for across all our work, including in teaching, research, and with communities. To normalize land acknowledgments and develop them at the same time.

You're so right.

Tove: We can't continue to do the same thing. If we talk about the wrongdoings, towards the Sámi in the past, we are continuing to do it. If we going to do the land acknowledgment. We have to take the responsibility that follows. We can't say we're sorry and do the same things.

Anna: Then there's a struggle. Apology without amends. I stepped on your foot, oops, sorry. And again and again I do the same thing.

Tove: It's baby steps in the right direction, creating awareness. Through the land acknowledgment, there is somebody else here. We can try to respect, recognizing that we don't know everything. And yes, sometimes we step on each other's toes, and then there are possibilities. We learn and grow.

Rose: I think you are so right here Tove—mistakes might be made, we have to acknowledge this and also own up to any mistakes or failures we make, but to know that we must try, give effort, and make attempts even though there is a chance of mistake making or failure. This is part of learning, this is part of embracing difference.

Anna: What does this mean for Sámi? How can they be heard, valued, and seen? If we can develop and normalize land acknowledgments at our university, moving away from a reaction of:

"Sorry, but I feel uncomfortable doing that…

It's not typical here. Maybe in the future, but not right now…"

Tove: When I first got the question from you, I thought: could I do this? Do those with Indigenous background feel offended? And I also was afraid to do something wrong, but even so I felt in my stomach that this is my responsibility as both a representative of the university and the center and as a non-Indigenous. After saying yes, I started to Google and read more about land acknowledgement and was trying to find the most respective way of doing this. And the night before I was worried and woke up several times during the night. I have always felt a bit like an outsider (even if I have been warmed welcomed, I have sometimes felt that I am not good enough because I do not have Indigenous background) in a way in the Sámi community and always wanting to do everything I have done with respect. But showing respect

is not always so easy. You must navigate and try to do your best in every situation. I must also say that in some situations I now feel home in the Sámi community, and especially in relation to those I have established and developed a good and close relationship with.

Rose: Sometimes I wonder if having a positionality such as mine makes things a little smoother to navigate this issue here in Norway. I am a double outsider so to speak; in the sense I am neither Indigenous nor am I Norwegian. Maybe I am given more room to make mistakes, I am not sure. Maybe I feel something different being so from Norway as my starting point. Then I bring the feeling of knowing what it can be like to be in a context where indigeneity is so woven with everyday life in education, in universities, in organizations. Aotearoa New Zealand is certainly different in so many ways to what is being navigated here in Norway—but I feel like I have seen and been part of conversations and actions there that I sense Norway is about to embark on. So maybe it makes me feel a little more equipped here.

How can we move to a space honoring and paying respect to the Indigenous people and lands our university, teachers, and researchers use on a daily basis?

Tove: When I did the land acknowledgment, I was a bit nervous, and that was a feeling I had afterward as well, but I also felt that I have to do this better the next time. And it is my responsibility to honor the Indigenous population in Sápmi/ Saepmie/ Sábme Norway, but also a way of honoring the Indigenous people elsewhere. We must take responsibility.

Anna: The responsibility is all of ours. That then puts me on the spot too. It is not just about those I've asked to come forward to speak for their community, but about me stepping forward and speaking up as well. It's about me being willing to misstep and say the wrong thing, and be uncomfortable and vulnerable too, even in teaching and research spaces.

Tove: The Indigenous population all over the world have been badly treated by the majority population and the governments. And in order to honor and take responsibility we all have to increase our knowledge and really acknowledge the Indigenous population. We are we, a whole, not us and them, but we, as human beings, and this means that the majority population has to reflect and contribute to that both the open and subtle colonization stops, and land acknowledgment can be one of the steps in that direction. So, I really feel strongly about this.

Rose: I do too Tove, and I think this leads me back to the idea that taking responsibility as non-Indigenous people requires me to listen and learn, maybe make mistakes, but learn from these and to really try.

Anna: Perhaps it's about all of us as a global community, to see our privilege and own up to it. To be willing to be humble and make amends, and find pathways forward.

Tove: We all have a responsibility to learn and acknowledge the history (and also rewrite history), and then I feel especially those with non-Indigenous background. Many do not know about their privileged position, so we must learn and reflect in order to come together as a 'we', and not us and them. We have to listen and try to truly understand what the Indigenous population has been through in order to come together and be a 'we' together. Land acknowledgement is also strongly connected the expression of gratitude and appreciation to the Indigenous population, and therefore so important in honoring the Indigenous population who has been living and working on the land. I also feel it is so important in relation to how the Indigenous population in Norway are seen, especially considering all the hate speech and discrimination so many experience.

We are in the same position because I am not Indigenous, so we have to do this with respect, and also reflect and talk together about this. But I think after discussions with people with Indigenous backgrounds it is important that non-Indigenous people honor and express gratitude towards the land and the Indigenous population, only then we can grow together, and be strong together. I saw that about the 6th of February as well. It is not the Sámi who should have the responsibility to celebrate and contribute, we have the responsibility together. This is not something for the few, it is for us all. I also feel that the university has a special responsibility concerning land acknowledgments. And we must put actions behind our words, only then we can make changes for the better. In action and together.[6]

Endnote

[1] Pepeha for those who are not Māori must be structured differently to those who are Māori.

[2] The Māori language is often referred to as te reo (the language) or te reo Māori (the Māori language).

[3] Mihi is understood as an 'introduction' often given as an acknowledgement to not only the land of Māori, but also to ancestors and those deceased, the local people of the land, the tribes and sub-tribes of the land, and acknowledging the people present in the space.

[4] Karakia are Māori incantations and prayer used to invoke spiritual guidance and protection. Karakia are traditionally not tied to a religion or understood as 'prayer' in a religious sense of the word. They are also considered a formal greeting when beginning an event or gathering.

[5] The wiri is a side to side quivering movement of the whole hand. Different tribal groups have different styles of wiri. The wiri is said to represent the world around us, from the shimmering of the waters of a bright sunny day, to the heat waves rising from the ground to the wind rustling the leaves of the trees. The wiri is an integral part of Māori movement, seen in haka and in the training for combat.

[6] Since writing this article, a version of the sample Sámi land acknowledgment has now been read by colleagues at multiple cross-disciplinary events.

Example Land Acknowledgement

This sample land acknowledgment was created by an Indigenous scholar at Nord University, Sandra Maria Nystø Rahka, who generously worked with us in developing this recommended text to introduce an event. It can be read by someone of Indigenous background or not, a chance to embrace and take responsibility by all, whether mandated by an institution or not. We include this as an example that can be transferred to the context in which we work in other spaces and places locally and internationally:

> *I acknowledge and respect the history, languages, and cultures of the Indigenous people of this land, whose presence continues to enrich our institutions. Nord University geographically covers the traditional Lule, Pite, Ume and South Sámi areas in Sábme/Saepmie. Nord University has a national responsibility for Lule and South Sámi education and research. And I say thank you in Sámi—gijtto/gæjhtoe—for the opportunity to work and connect with the community in these spaces.*

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