

When is it Appropriate to Reference Identities, Relationships of Belonging, or Knowledge Lineages in Ethnobiological Scholarship?

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In this editorial, we offer frank discussion of a problematic situation that arose when *Ethnobiology Letters* (EBL) published Raymond Pierotti's (2018) review of an edited volume by Ulysses P. Albuquerque, Patricia Muniz de Medeiros, and Alejandro Casas (2015), at a time when Wyndham was Reviews Editor for the journal¹. In particular, the review commented that nearly all of the authors were from Latin America and referred to them as “scholars of color.” The reply to the review (Albuquerque et al. 2021) has compelled us to reflect on the ways that racialized configurations and dynamics can vary across disciplines, regions, and perhaps generations. We have witnessed a practical lesson in how race is socially constructed within academic contexts and some of the ways this can be problematic.

In the United States, and more recently in Canada, the term “people of color” is often used in a liberation context, related to political organizing against structures of white supremacy and solidarity in the struggle against systemic racism especially, since the 1990s (Malesky 2014; Moses 2016). Though the term has its problems, it can be considered an example of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak called ‘strategic essentialism’ (Ashcroft et al. 1998:159–160), in which an idiom is adopted for its coalition-building utility, even while using ‘false’ (socially constructed)

racialized categories. This historical context of the term is particular to resistance movements in North America, however. In other contexts, and particularly in Latin America, the term ‘color’ and indeed any racializing may be read as offensive, xenophobic, or otherwise Other-ing. These differences in terminology reflect the different histories of settler colonialism and solidarity against oppression that communities have lived through in these different places. Importantly for us as editors and thus gatekeepers in academic publishing, the bigger context is a classic anthropological one in which the parochialisms and genre of the editors go unquestioned, even though terms have variable meaning depending on their context and history. As editors, we are responsible for making our journal a platform for rigorous discussions of the intersections of cultural and biological life that does not discriminate against the very people whom we have invited to voice their thoughts.

We sincerely apologize to our readers—who, indeed, are also our colleagues and collaborators. We could have asked the author to reflect and revise the book review further to be sure to bring identity or place of origin into the analysis only if verifiably warranted by the authors’ own discussion of this as an aspect of their work. We are sorry for the hurt caused by that editorial oversight. At the time, we interpreted



Dr. Pierotti's phrasing as highlighting his expectation of a particularly Brazilian or Latin American 'take' on evolutionary ethnobiology. Now, we see how those same words could be interpreted in multiple ways. This and other issues are discussed in more detail in the *Reply* by Albuquerque and colleagues (2021) and in Ray Pierotti's (2021) response to it. After sorting through the many tangled threads of this situation, we would like to specifically address two points because they are particularly relevant for editing and publishing practices: 1) ethnobiology is the site of specific forms of ethnocentrism and 2) ethnobiologists must be vigilantly aware of our own biases and assumptions around identity in knowledge lineages. Finally, we delineate some of the ways the Society of Ethnobiology (SoE) and its members are creating systems to support less-ethnocentric and less-biased publishing, editing, writing, reading, conferencing, and overall scholarship.

Publishing Ethnobiology at Intersections

As a discipline, ethnobiology is unique in that it is produced *in between* the natural and social sciences and the humanities; *in between* Euro-colonial and diverse other intellectual lineages; often *in between* secular and spirit-informed world views, and hopefully increasingly, *in between* hemispheric and regional academic traditions. As publishers of scholars writing from these various locations, journal editors in this discipline will surely rub up against the friction between different language and publishing traditions. While the SoE aspires to be informed by and serve the world, its journals are still predominantly North American in terms of format, history, and the volunteers who keep it going. As a result, there will be perspectives and blinders that clash or might be felt as intellectual chauvinism by scholars in other parts of the world. In the case noted above, we failed to recognize our own positions and assumptions. As we strive to be more self-reflective, we aspire for our journal to be a venue that invites open dialogue when clashes occur, and we especially appreciate our fellow scholars bringing this to our attention for a more public examination. The potential learning available by working through these 'scraping points' can be transformative, while allowing for robust critique and scholarly disagreement to be freely expressed.

As editors of an ethnobiology journal, we strive to hold space that encourages the flourishing of non-Eurocentric, Indigenous, and other non-settler thought lineages, while also being aware that scholars

who do not identify with that framing may not want any identity or heritage assumptions to be made about them. In a 'strict' natural science journal, the mention or integration of authorial identity in the research is avoided, even taboo. It is a learned rule that authors will operate within the frame of accepted Euro-scientific narrative that does not take into account place of origin, intellectual lineage, or personal identity—these may be assumed to be irrelevant to research that strives to be objective, replicable, and independent of social currents.

Publishing in ethnobiology necessarily differs in that we try to be more attentive to the deep effects that our social and cultural environments have on us as researchers and writers. In a way, this issue gets to the core founding rationale for ethnobiology's existence—namely, that it is valuable and incumbent upon responsible inquiry to engage with and respect natural history and ecological knowledge from a broad array of intellectual lineages. We have been educated to this by Indigenous scholars and thinkers, community research partners, science and technology studies, and other students of human life. From the other wing of this bird (Anderson 2007), ethnobiology publications are often more data-rich and take less of a deep dive into decoding multiple layers of sociocultural and political contexts than do many Indigenous and area studies, anthropological, and humanities publications.

As publishers of ethnobiology, we stand by the principle that all authors should feel free to reference their personal identities or relationships of belonging as key aspects of their learning, knowing, and scholarly processes. This, of course, includes the term "scholar of color" or "person of color." However, a clear take-home point is that this must be a choice left to the individual thinker-researcher-writer. We immediately venture into dubious territory when we write about these processes with reference to anyone who is not ourselves. At that point, our own assumptions and blinders are almost sure to blunder, offend, entrench systems of discrimination, and further obscure the insights that are always best voiced by the person or group in question.

When is it relevant for editors to question the ways that authors reference other scholars' personal history, relationships of belonging, or self-identities? When this occurs, it should be regularly flagged and checked to confirm that terms of belonging were chosen by the authors themselves, not imposed upon



them.

Given our journal's current Euro-North American bias, we are likely to run into other situations like this in the future due to regional nuances and we invite and thank our colleagues to "call us in" to be more aware.

A few related points to keep in mind:

- When writing about race and/or racism, consider whether it might be clarifying to replace these terms with 'racialized'. Racialized is a useful term that refers to a process by which people believe in the constructs of racism (e.g., in the United States) and use race categories as if they are biologically meaningful. It allows us to acknowledge the real impact of the social construct without reifying it in our own writing.
 - Albuquerque et al. (2021) point out another small word that can do a lot of 'othering': "we." We can make it a habit to ask ourselves, or the author whose work we are editing, who exactly is being referenced by "we" in a sentence. "We" is a wonderful window into our subconscious bias. It will often be referencing some nebulous group of stereotyped authority figures: what do they look like?
 - Consulting style guides can prevent some common writing issues, such as Gregory Younging's (2018) excellent *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and About Indigenous Peoples*. Staying abreast of and citing innovative theoretic and methodological developments from diverse regions (e.g., Delgado Burgoa and Silvestre Rojas 2021) keeps us on point.
 - One of the big structural inequities in academic publishing today is the fact that most scholars in Latin America and around the world are required to publish in English in order to advance their careers. This can create a serious communicational imbalance, in which writers of English as a second (or third) language have to spend more time, money, and effort to communicate their findings and thoughts. Thinkers who never had English courses in their schools have even less access. Though it is beyond the scope of this editorial, we want to acknowledge this situation.
- We encourage more personal communication among author-colleagues. We'll be more actively inviting reviewers to send their typescripts to the authors in question if they'd like to ask for pre-publication clarification on points made or preferred identity terms, for example (if any). Though this would never be mandatory, it might lead to more collegial interactions and is recommended for any written piece that uses/references others' material.
 - The language around identity is always shifting (Ghomeshi 2021). As editors and authors, we have to be active listeners to chart the changing tides—not to be 'correct', or dogmatic, but as a practice towards being in better relationships with all people who may be visibly or invisibly disadvantaged by the systems we've inherited.

Identity Terms as Flashpoints and SoE Support Systems

The term "people of color" (or the related BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) has become more commonly used in the United States, Canada, and Britain, to reference solidarity and shared experience in a context of (and often in coalition against) over-privileged settler, white, and Euro-colonial societies and academia in particular. The term may, as so many identity terms have, come to be replaced with a term that better achieves the goals of those who use it through new social and political configurations. Because this is not a shared usage in other parts of the world, however, identifying work as done by "scholars of color" or any other reference to personal identity terminology can be totally inappropriate in some settings. We are not advocating the banning of controversial terms (with a few exceptions); rather, amplifying the message that we need to write and edit with sensitivity to *all* our audiences and their experiences. Even more pointedly, because it is probably inevitable that we will make mistakes in this arena, we can learn to take these friction points as windows that help us understand the layers of assumptions and meaning-making in which we move. How can our ethnobiology journals and professional societies be better platforms for real discourse and structural transformation that breaks down persisting power imbalances in our discipline?

As people who tend the publishing portals that get ideas and current research dialogue out into the



public eye, we would all be pleased if *Ethnobiology Letters* could ideally become a venue that is truly accessible and attractive for all scholars and all languages. It would shed its old skin of feeling predominantly North American and as framing research from a predominantly Euro-settler intellectual tradition. It would be a venue for more active dialogue about the foundational role of people-in-ecology relationships in the past, present, and future, and engage with deeply political and pressing contemporary human ecology activism. It would be a place where not only academics read about new research but also would integrate priority topics of Indigenous rights, ethics, policy, and conservation advocacy. Of course, we are limited as a non-profit, volunteer-run journal. Being one tentacle of the larger organization that is the SoE, however, we hope to build on the synergies of so many individuals who have, over recent decades, developed unique innovations to help break us out of old molds in academia and publishing.

As the Society of Ethnobiology and its publications seek to decolonize and decenter our North American focus (Lepofsky et al. 2021; McAlvay et al. 2021), it is key that in our different venues we continually circle back to our ethical guidelines (Code of Ethics [Society of Ethnobiology 2021a] and Code of Conduct [Bannister et al. 2021]). We are exploring possibilities for breaking the mold of servicing mainly an anglophone, academic audience. What would it look like to have a radically multilingual publication? A journal that is multimedia, of use also to non-literate people (many of whom are our teachers in the discipline)? The possibilities are broad at the moment given the state of technological connectivity and vernacular knowledge production.

In recent years, the Society has created several systems and advisory groups to support its members to “move toward an ethnobiology which prioritizes (1) power equity, (2) receptiveness to diverse ways of knowing, and (3) social justice,” (Armstrong and McAlvay 2021). While there is more to be done, some of these initiatives include:

- establishing *Ethnobiology Letters* as a pioneer fully open access, peer-reviewed journal,
- expanding the Ethics Committee to the Ethics and Advocacy Committee to network with allies, promote justice, host sessions and open houses at conferences, and grapple with ethical issues,

- a Rapid Assistance Fund for Indigenous People and Communities (Society of Ethnobiology 2021b) in need to support Indigenous, Black, People of Color, and other non-white and non-Western individuals and communities in their needs related to human-environment interactions,
- a Memorandum of Understanding to find synergies and continue mutual learning with SOLAE, the Latin American Society of Ethnobiology,
- offering an array of awards and fellowships, including gifted memberships; travel awards; and waivers of conference costs to majority world residents, Indigenous Peoples, and members of underrepresented groups, and
- joining the International Society of Ethnobiology and the Society for Economic Botany to work towards structural expansion of who feels they ‘belong’ in the discipline, and who occupies decision-making positions.

In the case discussed above, for example, the ethics and advocacy advisory group mobilized to discuss the issues of identity and identity terminology in publishing internationally, which was extremely helpful. We are grateful for those conversations. This issue has brought up a lot of important themes for ethnobiology; perhaps most saliently that our discipline, in the ways it brings people together from different regions and fields, will be a site of contested terms, interpretations, views, and ontologies. Our publications strive to be a place where these things lead to learning and dialogue rather than conflict and entrenchment. We invite further conversation on the topic, either here in *Ethnobiology Letters*’ Perspectives venue, or on the SoE’s *Forage* blog.

The double-helix topics of identity and respect are far too complex for us to do justice here. But as in a personal life, through our individual and collective slip-ups and discomfort, generous ‘callings in’ for each other, and contributions to a collective endeavor we hope to get better at the hard stuff and be better relations to each other and the rest of the world.

Notes

¹There are a couple details that I (Wyndham) would like to address personally as I was the one involved. I am very sorry indeed that there was an oversight in carrying through the addition of a post-publication

editor's note back in January 2019 to remove the term 'scholars of color' and other references to places of origin. In response to his mention, I was clear with Dr. Pierotti that it was his choice whether or not to submit his original review, and I certainly have never prodded him to submit written work against his will. I did tell him that critical reviews are as welcome as positive ones. I stand by the idea that our journal does not only publish positive reviews of others' work. As a place that holds space for thoughtful debate and critique to move the discipline forward, we are open to uncomfortable topics, constructive criticism, and downright disagreements. We do require that dialogue be respectful, which is why we wrote this editorial—to help all of us do better in this arena. The co-editors and the SoE ethics and advocacy committee were all involved in discussions and decisions about this back-and-forth in EBL since the beginning, so as to make decisions together that are in EBL's and our readership's best interest. I am grateful to each person and to the collective for their involvement. The level of reflection and insight about meta-processes in our discipline makes me honored to be a part of it and, as I transition off the editorial team after two terms, hopeful that ethnobiology can lead the way towards a more ground-truthed and equal-access academia.

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