

# Ethnography of me

By: Riley Weisenburger

## The Ethnography of Me

In this project I chose to do things I think are important to me and shaped who I am today. In this ethnography of me there are several pictures taken of me or by me as well as my art and others that speak to me as a person. There are four sections to this project that are integral to me as a person, these sections are: who I am, travel, the Environment/ocean/diving, and community. Here is my first person story by a speaker who knows best, me.



My name is Riley Weisenburger, born on March 15, 1998, in Scottsdale, Arizona. My parents' names are Donovan and Rachel. If I had to choose one word that I have been called all my life it would be eclectic. From 11 years old I chose to be a vegetarian and that carried on till I was 21. I have moved around a lot in my life; born in Arizona, Idaho for a year, growing up in Denver, Wisconsin, a year abroad in Croatia, living in a van the entire time I was 19, and then various places in Colorado from 20-26 years old. High school was a difficult time for me. I went to three different high schools; Denver Christian, Three Lakes High School, and Deseta Gimnazija. I was raised religious but when I went to high school for my sophomore and junior year I came out as bisexual and was shunned from the church. I later had a girlfriend in Croatia.

In neither Croatia or Northern Wisconsin was this seen as acceptable.

Part of my high school life also had to do with swimming, where I experienced the flow state for the first time. "Flow is a state of experience where a person, totally absorbed, feels tremendous amounts of exhilaration, control, and enjoyment. In flow states people push their abilities to their boundaries and in so doing experience a merging of action and awareness" (Hunter, 2000). Swimming taught me discipline. For 8 years of my life, I grew up near Denver University and later swam for their junior league. There are parts of my identity that have always been present but never complete, which is my race/ethnicity, and gender. My ethnicity stems from African, European, and Native American. Being mixed is something I find to be beautiful and tedious. The United States likes to operate in check boxes from the second you go into school. On every

survey you may read, it wants to know your gender, race, age, possibly religion, and even currently your pronouns. While I have always checked Native American, I never felt like I truly knew what that meant. I also have always identified as black even though I don't look like I am. It also felt as if I was ignoring the other parts of who I was. I have also always checked female, which later in life confused me. While I still go by she/her, I am not sure that's exactly who I am.

It wasn't till I learned the concept of intersectionality that I learned a different framework in which to view myself as a person. "Intersectionality is the observation that one's class, race, sexuality, age, and ability can all define and complicate experiences" (Hasty, 2021).

Through the framework of Intersectionality, I realized that growing up poor, mixed, bisexual, was all a part of who I was. My viewpoint shifted from checked boxes to a more fluid notion of how these things changed who I was while also having a hand into who I continue to be.



Your parents are the first people to give you an idea about the world around you, they shape your worldview as a person, teach you language, and guide you through life with a sense of what your morals should be. “We cannot perceive ourselves while we perceive the world, we often rely on the reaction of others to learn about "me." (Hunter, 2000). Through anthropology I have a better sense of my cultural ideals through the lens of my own childhood and identity. I never had siblings in any form be it blood related, half or step siblings.

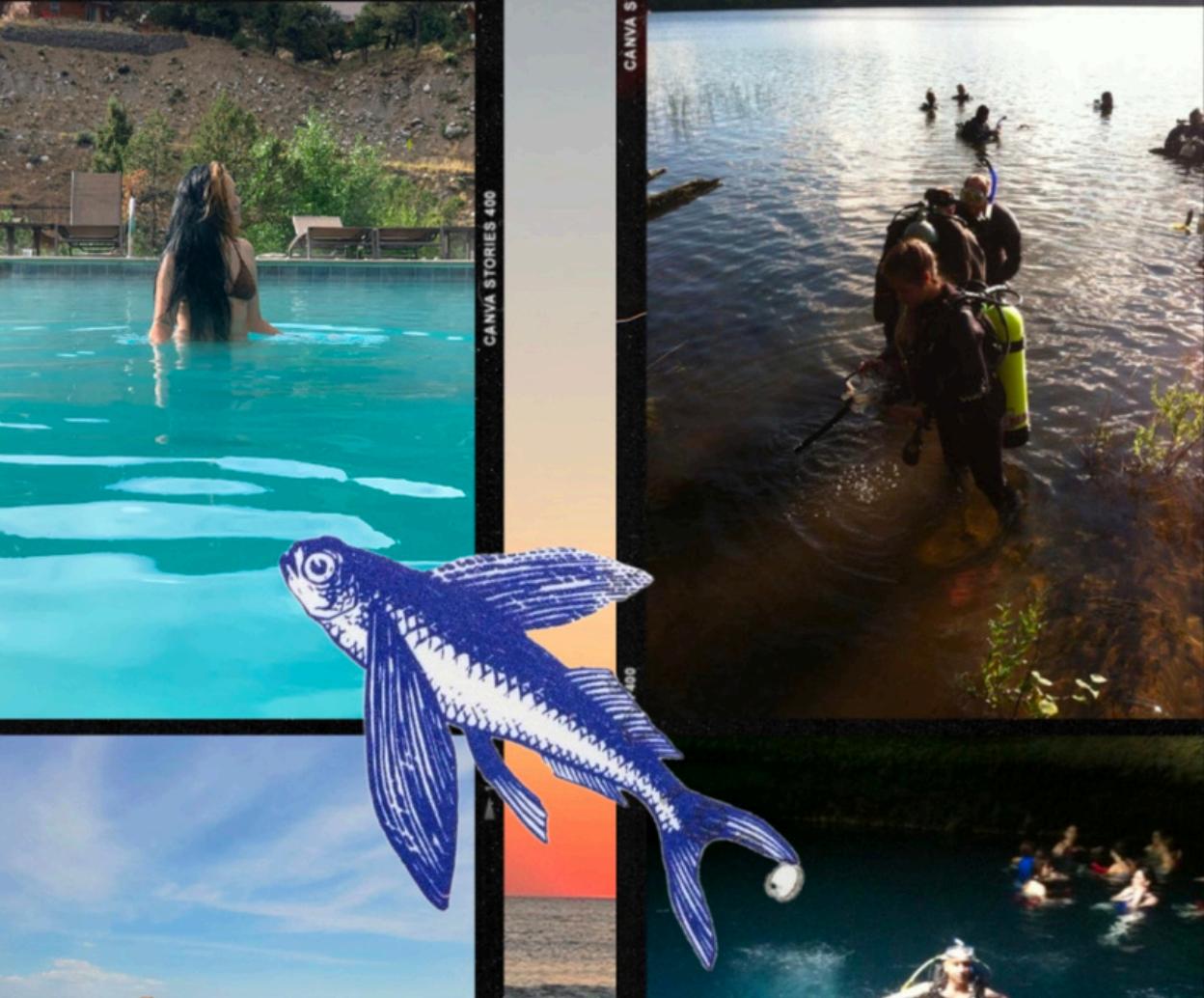
Learning family dynamics especially those surrounding siblings never really related to me, but I think that's valuable to who I am now. My family history is shaky at best, on my dad's side my grandma had an affair with someone on the reservation, so I didn't meet them until 2023. I always identified with being Native American but felt disconnected in a way from the identity, I was always told that we were Ojibwa from the Turtle Mountain reservation. On my mom's side it only gets more convoluted. My grandmother was adopted, and my great grandfather was essentially erased from our family history. He was a poor black man from the south with nothing to his name, and wanting to be separate from him, switched last names from Bouhannan to Goshey. Between my grandmother and grandfather, they were an interracial couple so to save face on either side decided to break up and find partners of their own “race”. Race is a socially constructed idea, an idea that the human species are divided into distinct groups on the basis of behavioral, and inherited physical differences. It took a DNA test for me to find most of my family I hadn't met and to figure out what ethnicities I had.



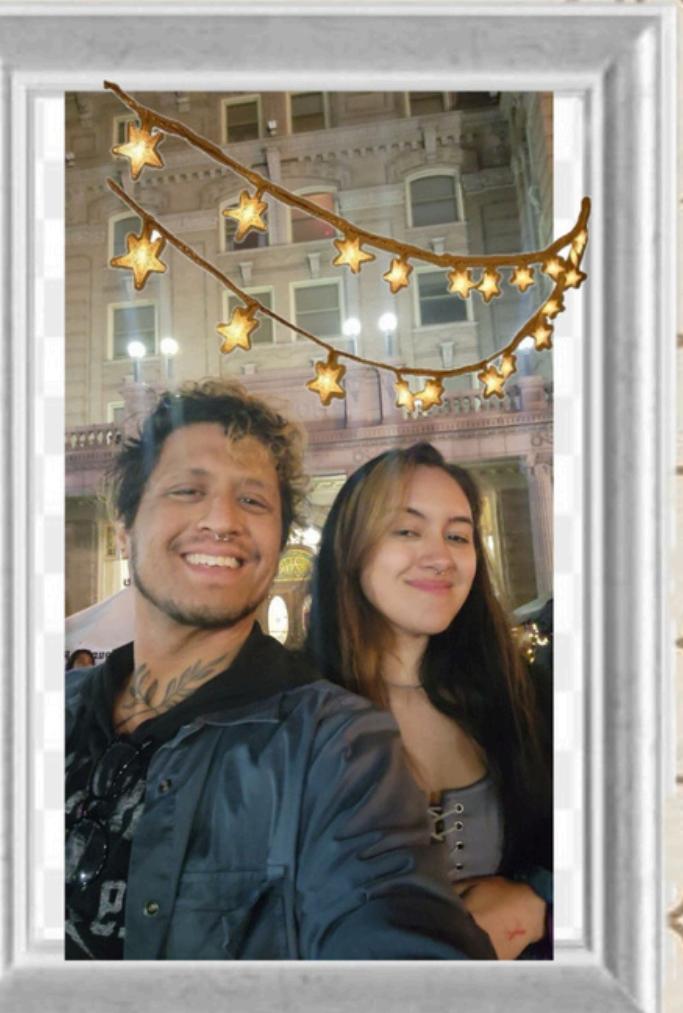
I have always felt a part of two countries, Croatia and the United States. Through Anthropology I've learned a lot about my time there which taught me valuable lessons about cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, bias, and transnationalism. Bourdieu's idea of habitus is, "Bourdieu's concept of habitus also relates to the resource of knowledge (Bourdieu 1990). Knowledge is gained from a specific culture that an individual lives in" (Huang, 2019). Getting to live abroad and traveling a good portion of Europe, and also living in a van and traveling much of the United States shifted me as a person. Cultural relativism is the principle regarding values, beliefs, and practices of a culture from a viewpoint of that culture itself. They teach you this before you go abroad but you don't really embody it till everything has changed around you. Ethnocentrism is an idea of judging someone else's culture and way of life through bias of your own culture, everything was different there and I had to let go of a WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) perspective to appreciate it. Through transnationalism I realized it was ok to embody both countries in my identity. I learned through my own bias how important ritual, culture, and food were in every culture you are a part of. "The notion of "heritage food" itself is a tightly bundled package of sometimes-contested material substances and practices and verbal and textual representations, but generally refers to foods associated with a particular group's histories of production and geographical territory" (Cavanaugh, 2023). Getting to experience heritage foods and the language that surrounds them changed my relationship to food and is why I stopped being vegetarian so that when I could travel, I would get to experience food in a way that the culture intended.



I have loved the ocean and being in nature for as long as I can remember. When I first got to college I started out as an environmental sustainability major. I assumed that I had to be all about conservation and preservation, or I couldn't be a real environmentalist. I had a lot of inspiration from films in this aspect too. Into the Wild and studio Ghibli films really taught me about environmentalism and there was a time I did not think people and the environment could coincide. A quote from Into the Wild by Lord Byran says, "I love people not the less but nature more." It wasn't till I learned about Marx and the idea between the relationship of culture and the environment that I changed my mind. "Nature is man's inorganic body – nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die" (Marx, 1844).



I also learned that the environment, sustainability, and anthropology ideals were so interlinked I couldn't ignore it. With being a scuba diver and loving the ocean I realized I was a social actor. All actors that interact with the ocean are a part of its biosphere and are therefore entitled to protect it.



Community is important, the people you choose and do not choose become a part of what you think and what you are. Different communities have contributed greatly to what I am now, which are; my online friends, my in person friends, family, and classmates. “Narrative can thus be seen as mediating relationships between individuals separated by time and space. Shared forms of narration, discursive patterning, and in particular, reflexive forms of talk can be a powerful means of instantiating and maintaining a narrated community amid separation and fragmentation” (Falconi, 2023). I noticed that language shapes a lot of my interactions with my community. The speech I use in every single one is different. Online communities are particularly unique. They surpass borders and boundaries, have their own speech communities and really open up a world for discourse of globalization. The idea that as long as you have an internet connection and the same game means you can meet anyone from anywhere and you all have a language to participate in a shared space and understand each other. From utterances of disgruntled people in first person shooters to names of worlds.

# Thank You!

In conclusion, Anthropology helped me understand myself in ways I could not have managed by myself. The things that are important to me, the social actors in my life, my communities, and surroundings all shape who I am today.