

# Norman Denzin and America

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Qualitative Inquiry

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DOI: 10.1177/10778004231199410

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## Abstract

A personal appreciation of the life and work of Norman Denzin.

## Keywords

Norman Denzin, autoethnography, song

I do not know if anyone born and raised in the United States could possibly comprehend the presence and reach—the formative influence—of U.S. culture on a boy growing up in the southwest of England in the 1970s and 1980s. *Starsky & Hutch*, *Kojak*, *BJ & Bear*, *The High Chaparral*, *Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid*, *Indiana Jones* . . . the list of TV series and films is long. Americana was (and still is) everywhere on British screens.

For me, American music was also a significant presence.

In the 1970s, my parents had an eight-track cartridge player in the car. Their small collection of clunky plastic cartridges included *Best of* collections by Neil Diamond, Glen Campbell, and Simon & Garfunkel. I loved *Cracklin Rosie* and *Wichita Lineman*, but most of all I loved—and still love—*America*.

Later, of course, I came to Springsteen and Dylan. Then, from 14, I would serve breakfast to guests in my parents' B&B before leaving for school. One regular guest, working in the area Monday to Friday, would bring me LPs each week to borrow, to hear, to absorb. JJ Cale, Steely Dan, Ry Cooder, and more. And so it came to be that American music (straight, White, male, American music, I note now) shaped my musical tastes and song writing directions. But—more than that—the *idea* of America, mystical or otherwise, seeped into my being. And with that, an *ideal* of America embedded itself.

In 1997, I found myself at university in the United States, across the Mississippi from St Louis. I had come to get a Master's degree, lured by a graduate assistantship and fee waiver. And, as Paul Simon's 1968 lyric says, I had also come to look for America. I had come to find and experience *for real, for myself* the mythical America of my childhood.

I bought an old Buick Century with spongy seats and a cassette player. I drove it anywhere I could reach in a 3-day trip: Memphis. Chicago. Nashville. Atlanta. I flew to places I could not reach by car: New York City. Washington, DC. Miami. And, finally, I took Amtrak out west: Colorado. San Francisco. LA. Arizona.

I was disappointed by much of what I found.

I feel bad saying this, but it is the truth. Of course, the mythical idea I had absorbed a decade or two earlier was an illusion. How could I have been anything but disappointed?

After returning to England in 1999, I felt reticent to revisit the United States. I did, for short trips, because I needed to see friends who had become family in Georgia and Illinois. But I no longer had any interest in looking for America. I felt I had found it. And I didn't particularly like what I'd found.

Roll around January 2005: In an internet café in Cornwall, Kitrina Douglas shows me an email from Norman Denzin inviting delegates to the inaugural International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois. In reality, Kitrina was not just showing me the email; her gesture was an implicit, wordless, "*We must go.*"

And we did.

And everything began to change.

Roll around August 2023: I hear of Norman's death. Falling between those of Sinéad O'Connor and Robbie Robertson. What a trio. Unconnected to each other, I presume, except by proximity of death. At home on Thursday August 10, 2023, I play, at volume, one of Sinéad's songs (*Throw Down Your Arms*) and one of Robbie's (*Broken Arrow*). I play Robbie's exquisite recording repeatedly, cuing and recuing the needle to the third track of an LP I have owned since I was 17. I play along, working out the chords, writing down the words. I teach myself to sing it because the story he tells fits me like a close cotton glove.

But what to play for Norman? What to sing to remember Norman? I have no suitable song. I have no words.

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I fall into *America*. Playing the chords of this song comforts me in a deep and profound way. I just hint at them, with my sore and broken hands, across six smooth steel strings. My Princeton Reverb amp is turned up loud. I play softly, so very softly. It is all that I am able to do. But the amp makes me much louder than I am. *Speak softly and carry a big stick*. The warm, reverberating tones engulf me, invite me to sing, to sing, to sing . . . and Paul Simon provides the words. Words that some part of me has carried since childhood. Words that have helped carry me since childhood:

*“Bradley, I’m lost,” I said though I knew he was sleeping*

*“I’m empty and aching and I don’t know why”*

Through Norman—his conference, his journals, his workshops, his writings, the community he created that continues to create me now—I found America. I found an America I am far from disappointed in. I found an America to believe in. I found an America I want to be a part of. Thank you, Norman.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### Author Biography

**David Carless** is a researcher–writer–musician immersed in interdisciplinary projects across social science, mental health, and physical activity. His arts-based, autoethnographic and narrative collaborations are available online on YouTube and have been published as journal articles and book chapters. He is with the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland and is an Honorary Professor in the Center for Creative Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh.