

2016

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Mark Noe

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Recommended Citation

Noe, Mark (2016) "Autoethnography and Assimilation: Composing Border Stories," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 21 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl21nfm>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol21/iss1/10>

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Autoethnography and Assimilation: Composing Border Stories

Mark Noe

I moved to the Rio Grande Valley in 2002 to take a position as a rhetoric and composition faculty member in the English department of a university there. I'd lived most of my life in Texas, so I was not prone to the culture shock other new hires experienced when they moved from Wisconsin or Minnesota to South Texas—or so I thought.

One sunny afternoon during my first semester, I walked across the street from the university to a mom and pop *taqueria* for lunch. The woman behind the counter spoke little English. I spoke less Spanish. So, I ordered my lunch by pointing to one of the many taco selections on the menu. I didn't recognize any of the words identifying meat choices, so I settled on "*tripas*." When my order was brought to me, I discovered that *tripas* is Spanish for tripe. My plate of tripe tacos had been grilled to a golden brown and had a baked potato on the side.

After my meal—tacos heavily fortified with a fiery green salsa—I found myself more and more bothered, not by the overlooked cognate that resulted in tripe on my plate, but how the baked potato ended up there. I had gone to that *taqueria* rather than the chain Mexican restaurant a block away to find authentic Mexican food. My concept of authentic didn't include a baked potato. I knew that my expectations were at fault—and that's what bothered me.

My story, then, isn't the familiar story of linguistic misalignment, but of cultural interaction, of what has been described as a *contact zone* ever since Mary Louise Pratt coined the term, and the possibility such zones provide for crossing boundaries. The more I thought about that baked potato, the more I realized that in the classroom where I taught, the student population was 97% Hispanic and 95% first-generation college students.

That baked potato shook loose many of my assumptions, not the least of which was my belief that somehow students could be brought to understand our differences the same way I did, and that our mutual understanding would result in a smooth meeting of minds. In contrast, the contact Pratt describes is not smooth. In Pratt's nomenclature, I was inviting students into a "speech community," which Pratt describes as a "discrete, self-defined, coherent entity, held together by a homogeneous competence or grammar shared identically and equally among all the members." According to Pratt, as a concept, a speech community has a "Utopian quality" that paradoxically overlooks difference, which in turn, disguises assimilation (37).

Contact, on the other hand, emphasizes difference, placing various discourses in a space where no discourse stands above the others. In that limited space, no discourse is safe from scrutiny and critique, including that of the professor. Contact thus becomes messy, disturbing, even frightening, putting everyone's "ideas and identities on the line" (Pratt 39). Just as each discourse becomes an ethnicity to be placed under the microscope, in a contact zone each discourse brings a perspective to bear, both on itself and on

other discourses. Each discourse brings something to the conversation, and any authority that might cling to a single discourse is lost in the cacophony, itself a frightening prospect for those of us carefully trained in a single discourse.

But these realizations came later. At the time I was determined to understand my students and the differences between us that had been suggested by something as mundane as that baked potato. I turned to the standard research strategies to try to learn more about the culture my students shared, but which I did not. I started with that cornerstone of academic discourse, a literature review, a move which would allow me to map the social territory of my students without actually entering it, depending instead on the experiences of other scholars. Before long I had a shelf of books with titles such as *Manufacturing Hope and Despair: The School and Kin Support Networks of U.S.-Mexican Youth* by Ricardo D. Stanton-Salazar and *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* by Carl Scott Gutiérrez-Jones. These studies provided insights that I lacked. I learned, for instance, that the theoretical debate over the ethnic labels—Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano—hardly touched the lives of my students. They tended to use these terms interchangeably, if they used them at all.

I asked students to write the all too familiar “Literacy Narrative,” knowing that this assignment can be an opening into local culture and education’s impact—negative, positive, or negligible—on that culture. At the time, some of my colleagues were experimenting with “Writing about Writing” pedagogies, which I thought might turn the composition classroom into a space where discourses met by exposing the places where they had not met in the past.

In those literacy narratives, one student wrote about being punished in middle school for speaking Spanish in class, or even in the school hallways. English only, his teachers insisted—a paradox, since most of his teachers were Latino/a. Another told about being moved from the highest to the lowest reading group because she pronounced “chicken” as “shicken” while reading a story orally. For some, preparation for Texas-mandated exams, with emphasis on worksheets and grammar drills, took precedence over writing or critical thinking. Still others wrote of taking AP classes, concurrent and dual enrollment classes that were often overloaded with students so the district could improve their numbers with state agencies. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the exposure provided by these narratives was one-sided. Literacy, a student learning outcome rather than a student’s native discourse, stood above the fray.

I friended first-year composition classes on Facebook, and even spent a harrowing two days with one class on Twitter before I gave that up. On Facebook, I learned that one student, her English tinged with an accent I couldn’t quite place, owned a bakery and gourmet cookie business in Reynosa, just across the border. The product of a private school in Mexico City, her written English was immaculate. Her Facebook page was full of pictures of her European vacations. Another student, recently homeless when his macho father learned he was gay, worried about missing class as he looked for a place to stay every night.

New to Facebook, I was surprised at how open my students were, at how easily they invited me into their lives. On the other hand, on Twitter I was struck by the triviality encouraged by 144 character messages, when one student tweeted that he was at IHop: “Should I order pancakes or waffles?” Later, I realized his inane question hid a deep-

seated need for connection, any kind of connection, the essence of teen angst regardless of ethnicity.

I opened a Pandora account to play music in class when students were writing. Each student was invited to submit the name of one artist to the account. I sought both to create a mini-culture in the classroom that duplicated the popular culture I assumed my students shared outside of class, hoping to gain insight into this strange culture by examining its artifacts. I discovered that the eclectic musical tastes of my students defied such categorizations as much as that baked potato had. They requested *conjunto* and *Norteno* bands—and Lady Gaga, Kanye, George Strait, Metallica, OceanLab, Mozart. One day, a shy young woman in goth from head to toe, along with an incongruous “Hello Kitty” bow in her hair, requested Billy Holiday.

My assumptions of cultural homogeneity were as misplaced as my assumption that an authentic plate of tacos—and *tripas* are about as authentic as they come—should be accompanied by refried beans and rice. My goal shifted, slowly enough that it took me a while to notice that shift, from becoming an expert on my students, to trying to find a pedagogy that would allow us to engage each other across essentializations inherent in an academic discourse that saw all other discourses as an “other.” Pratt’s words rang in my ears: “The lecturer’s traditional (imagined) task” is to “unify the world in the class’s eyes by means of a monologue that rings equally coherent, revealing, and true for all, forging an ad hoc community, homogeneous with respect to one’s own words” (39). The more I got to know my students, the more they resisted my every effort to homogenize them, despite the similarities implied by *ethnicity* as a label.

Like a score of rhetoricians (Bizzell, Giroux, Mutnick, Schroeder, Kraemer), I was troubled by the undercurrent of assimilation that I could not shake from a pedagogy based on teaching academic discourse, the backbone of freshman composition. Yet, I could not see myself clear to entirely abandon academic discourse. I found myself caught between the same rock and hard place as Don Kraemer, who admitted that our discourse is both “critically empowering” and “oppressive” (53). Kraemer reminds us that though we teach what Bizzell refers to as the “discourse of power,” it may be the power for students to achieve social mobility. But it is also the power to change those students in ways they do not fully understand when they take up that discourse (60).

I placed these contradictory concerns alongside emerging voices of Latina/o scholars (Anzaldúa, Villanueva, Sanchez, Mejias, Ybarra) who affirmed Latina/o resistance to academic discourses, and the cost of that resistance. Ybarra in particular made no bones about the way disciplinary expertise is seen by Latina/o students, telling me that those students “see this pattern of writing structure as confusing and view it as a hostile attempt to change who they are” (18). More and more what Ybarra referred to as the “hidden curriculum of assimilation” became visible to me in my own classroom (43). I knew it wouldn’t be enough for me to see the hidden curriculum. I could not solve this problem for my students as though it were a pesky comma-splice in an otherwise well-written paper.

Yet, my standards for a well-written paper were often precisely what hid that curriculum. Sure, I avoided rubrics that focused exclusively on error or strict and often stifling structures such as the five-paragraph theme or the more sophisticated, and thus more subtly constricting Toulmin method. My standards, I told myself, were based on the

newest research from *College Composition and Communication* and *Journal of Advanced Composition*. I sought to draw students into the discourse of the university while at the same time recognizing the National Council of Teachers of English resolution on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Hidden in those standards, no matter how much they recognized students’ rights, was an unwritten rubric thoroughly embedded in the discourse I taught that thoroughly privileged the way academic discourse organized the world (e.g., a clear argument placed early in a paper, the language of assumed objectivity, a literature review that establishes an *ethos* of expertise based on knowledge of the field).

In my quest to come up with a way for my students to see that curriculum as more than “cultural dissonance” (Ybarra 43), I poured over works such as Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts and Counteracts*. Their insistence that students “come forward in the text and push against the emerging structure of [their] own discourse” had a theoretically sophisticated ring, yet looked like a pedagogy for students who already floated comfortably along in the mainstream. In fact, Bartholomae and Petrosky’s pedagogy seemed calculated to create turbulence in the mainstream ideals of middle-class youth. They complain, “When called upon to speak the language of insight and authority, our students generally speak the language of parents, coaches, or other powerful adults: ‘Give it your best shot.’ And, ‘Things will get better’” (34). I knew that denying my students the language of parents, coaches or other powerful adults—in other words, their cultural discourse—was to deny them any identity other than the one I privileged.

Out of the questions that whirled through my head, I developed what I would eventually come to refer to as a pedagogy of “transculturation” (Noe 17). I first came across that term in an article on punk music in Latin America that described punk as a “crucial part of the process of transculturation in Latin American popular music today. This is a hybrid, mestizo music with such a capability for mimicry and adaptation that, by seizing and absorbing the diverse music of Latin America, it creates a new tradition of music” (Esterrich 40). Later I found a more nuanced definition in the writing of Juan Guerra, who describes transculturation as “a notion grounded in the idea that members of historically excluded groups are in a position to cultivate adaptive strategies that help them move across cultural boundaries by negotiating new and different contexts and communicative conventions” (299). A classroom environment where students could cross cultural assumptions—mine and theirs—was precisely what I wanted. At the same time, I was less sure about the positivism assumed by transculturation as a natural effect of cultural interaction. Torn between attraction and unease, I searched for a pedagogy that could:

- Satisfy the rigor that Bartholomae sought;
- Mitigate the assimilation worries I shared with Kraemer; and
- Provide students a way to cross discourses that they saw value in crossing, as well as re-crossing, straddling, even rejecting.

About this time I came across a link to Sarah Wall’s “An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography.” Curious, mostly by the un-academic implication in the title, that the writer was willing to admit that she didn’t already know everything there was to know about her topic, I followed that link. What made Wall’s narrative resonate was her uncertainty about the veracity of autoethnography in the social sciences. Even

her definition of autoethnography as “an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style” (1) sounded like an attempt to justify the genre in the face of resistance from the discourse of her discipline. This tension between her autoethnography and her disciplinary discourse mirrored Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of autoethnography as “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35).

As I read Wall’s, and other academic autoethnographies, I realized that though I had started out studying my students, I ended up studying myself. Somehow, I had backed into a journey of reflexivity. As John T. Warren warns us, I “tended to focus more in the academy on what we believe, considering less on how what we believe got to be that way” (140). I was so busy studying others I forgot to look in the mirror occasionally. Warren writes about the need in our profession to occasionally step back and reflect, looking at ourselves in what he calls “performance auto/ethnographies” that “build from our educational experiences (as both reflexive teachers and critical ethnographers) and craft reflexively rich, performance-centered scholarship that has the power to meet, through the body, through the poetic, our vision of what education should look like” (142).

Though I found writing my own autoethnography revealing, my original interest was in the possibility autoethnography had for students to “craft reflexively rich, performance-centered scholarship” that could meet our scholarship head-on. I began experimenting with this genre in first-year composition to see if it had the potential to satisfy the constraints I had set for myself. Though autoethnography tends to disrupt assumptions, even about itself, I found that most autoethnographies shared three attributes that gave the genre potential:

- As Pratt notes, autoethnographies are often, *mixed genres*, appearing at times, “anomalous or chaotic” (36). The challenge posed by mixing genres requires the rigorous writing so important to Bartholomae. An autoethnography might be created by sampling, remixing, re-envisioning, or parodying various genres without respect for their original purposes. Such a transcultural text requires more attention, more rigor, than either academic or expressionist genres can achieve independently. In order to combine several genres in the same assignment, students have to understand what each genre brings to the project and what each leaves out, often by bringing those genres into contact, and conflict, with each other.
- Though Pratt describes autoethnography as a “response to or in dialogue with” mainstream discourses, in autoethnography, indeed all transcultural conversations, the *writer initiates the conversation*, often by challenging a hegemonic discourse that is silent, that has no interest in that particular conversation (35). When a student writes from his or her perspective, that perspective is grounded in that student’s ethnic experience (widely defined) rather than mine or academic research that has a tendency to assume an authority above student experience. As the initial speaker, the student maintains some degree of control over the direction the conversation, even when outside research is brought to bear. Student-initiated discourse mitigates, though does not preclude, the assimilation that troubled Kraemer, nor the rejection noted by Ybarra.

- When writers initiate the conversation, that is, respond to or enter into dialogue with mainstream discourse in autoethnography, they tend to write *about transitional moments* in their lives, often weaving various genres into a narrative that questions assumptions about identity, ironically from a subjective position; these narratives serve less to fix identity than to locate their identity in, and between, cultural discourses.

Mixing Genres

My story, as autoethnography itself insists, is only one perspective. From the student's perspective, autoethnography has a different profile, one in which mixed and unfamiliar genres take the forefront. When students walk into a first-year composition classroom and the instructor writes *Autoethnography* on the whiteboard, they are immediately faced with the unfamiliar. Their expectation that they will continue in genres that have become comfortable in high school is disrupted.

In response to standardized testing, which has become the only assessment that matters in Texas, most of my students have been exposed to some form of creative writing in which they are given free reign. They have also been carefully trained in restricted forms, most often the five paragraph theme. They have learned through painful experience, as did Derrida, never to "mix genres" (57). In the ecology of standardized testing, mixing genres is the unforgivable sin. On the other hand, while autoethnography makes use of creative self-exploration and restrictive, academic forms, it indiscriminately mixes those genres. It is precisely within the schizophrenic tension caused by mixing genres that autoethnography exposes—even as it makes use of—each genre or discourse as one "version of reality." When more than one genre must compete within the same project, any claim that this is "the best way of knowing and communicating" reality is weakened (Berlin 766).

Those writers who have explored autoethnography *through* autoethnography write about the dialectic energy of clashing genres so regularly that it comes close to being a governing rule of that genre. In her first tentative autoethnographic writing, Sarah Wall found that "the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says that what I know matters" (3). Rahul Mitra describes mixing genres as an elaborate textual dance: "I do so via a performative lens, believing this to be the best way to illustrate the dialectical mode of doing/being in the research process; thus, I intersperse portions of personal narrative with academic writing and reviews of literature" (3). Tami Spry pushes past surface labels for genre and notes how combining genres mixes the self and the text: "Autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts. Autoethnography is both a method and a text of diverse interdisciplinary praxes" (710).

Each of these writers brings different genres into close proximity: traditional, or "positivist" science (Wall), academic writing and literature reviews (Mitra), interdisciplinary praxes (Spry). In each, these genres are juxtaposed against the personal. In order to capture the same tension, I designed assignments that mixed three genres that bring student experience into focus from three distinct perspectives:

- personal experience or narrative
- field work or data in the social sciences; standard ethnography
- academic writing based on bibliographical research and critical thinking as defined in the humanities

Each of these genres, taken individually, has much to say when brought to bear on a single object of study. When they are brought together in the same writing project they bring their various perspectives to bear *on each other*, often contradicting each other. Such contradiction itself has heuristic power, presenting the writer with a new challenge: the necessity to analyze and evaluate each discourse in order to come to an understanding that has not been dictated by any of these discourses individually.

Students must combine these genres, which are familiar individually, in ways that question how they've done them before—so that they contradict each other internally and intentionally. It is in this breaking down and recombining that autoethnography is an effective introduction to academic discourse for Hispanic students, allowing them entry into the academic without first requiring acquiescence (or in other words, assimilate) to its norms.

The way students can use autoethnography as a tool for transitioning between discourses was brought home to me when I read one student's essay, "Living a Farce." I was struck by the writer's awareness of the hybridity of her own writing, and how she used that hybridity to move between genres in order to develop an idiosyncratic concept of audience against a standardized, even calcified, norm of academic writing. In one passage, she enters into conversation with Wall, noting: "Wall insists that the author, 'relates the personal to the cultural' . . . 'through their own lived experiences'" (6). For Wall, the value of autoethnography is that it disrupts the objective eye of science, using the personal to explain aspects of the writer's culture that can be experienced, though not observed. The writer of "Living a Farce" has another goal. She redefines "cultural" as the ethnicity the writer shares or does not share with the reader. She does so in order to initiate a conversation within that ethnicity: "Just as important as it is to relate the personal (the author) and the cultural (the reader), a writer will not fully get the audience to understand what he/she is trying to convey until the cultural becomes personal for the reader, not just personal for the author."

This writer reverses the polarity of autoethnography, which until reading her paper I had seen as an *alternative* academic discourse, but an academic discourse nevertheless. In my mind, and in my pedagogy, academic writing involved teaching students how to become disciplinary experts writing for other disciplinary experts about their ethnicity. In "Living a Farce," this writer combines academic writing with other genres, not in order to explain personal insights about her culture to me, or to explain academic insights into her culture to those who share her culture (surely the most assimilationist move), but in order to initiate a conversation within and between cultures for the one audience that she wishes to reach, her classmates. She writes,

I have chosen to pinpoint the way Mexican roots dominantly pressure a sexually abused Mexican-American woman to keep quiet about her abuse with the understanding that my audience will be fellow students from the Valley, most of which are Chicanos. With that in mind I want to use my personal experiences and those of others to reach my readers, because both my sources and I have in common our heritage . . . I want to

take Wall's words and "ask the reader to emotionally 'relive' the events with the writer" (6) but not just my event, but their own events and personal experiences with Mexican roots and values.

I have to admit to being delighted by the way this student twisted academic discourse out of my hands. I'd always been enamored of academic discourse because I frankly liked the way it explained the world. The world made sense to me when viewed through an academic lens. I had to resist seeing the moves that the writer of "Living a Farce" made as errors, or a misunderstanding of the academic discourse she'd read. I could not simply tell her, "No, that's not it" (Bartholomae and Petoskey 34). From the student's perspective, she had nailed it. This writer made me realize how often we, writing teachers, have limited the way students may enter the academic arena, as outsiders entering our "exemplary culture" in order to speak to us in our language (Bartholomae 479). The writer of "Living a Farce" will have none of that. In a few phrases, she has made me the outsider. I cannot "relive" in the sense she uses Wall's term, even as she uses my discourse to speak to others who share her experiences, inviting them to relive those experiences with her. I can objectively assess her, which is always the final assimilative move of academic discourse. But I can only do so from outside her discourse—and as all such moves do, I will simply silence her through any judgment I make.

Initiating the Conversation

As "Living a Farce" illustrates, given the opportunity, students can find ways to turn the various genres that make up autoethnography to their own purposes. However, in order for students to take advantage of that opportunity, they need to initiate the conversation.

Before students take on the academic role of theorist or researcher, students use autoethnography as a method for writing about their experiences that goes beyond the monologic model of expressionism by writing about their subject position within a social or cultural group. To make students aware of the many groups they already belong to, I assign short perspective assignments that might include literacy narratives, stories of personal experiences, or a description of a community of experience. Even a list of the various ethnicities students belong to helps them recognize that identifying discourse is simply a way of noting that language-use is embedded in culture. Soon, students begin to recognize that their stories, however personal they may have been when they first wrote them, are narratives written by members of communities that explore issues and questions of interest to that community. Thus, in contrast to Kenneth Burke's familiar metaphor for academic discourse, the autoethnographer does not join our ongoing conversation, listening until he or she "has caught the tenor of the argument," which requires a certain degree of discursive assimilation (111).

Admittedly, there are two ways of identifying this new conversation and the way students enter it: either students initiate the conversation, or they recognize the many conversations that they are already a part of. Though the second description is more theoretically sophisticated, or at least theoretically preferred, I have chosen to identify this critical step as *the student initiates the conversation* to emphasize that this moment is made possible by the sequence of writing assignments we do—the student writes about

the various conversations, or discourses, or ethnicities, that he or she is already a part of *before* inviting academic discourse into the conversation. When students initiate a conversation that the academic genre must then be invited into, academic identity is recast as just another persona that can be sloughed off as easily as it is assumed.

The writer of “Challenges for Migrant Students” opens with a narrative that is embedded in the personal and the cultural in order to explore the challenges of his experience, where he is now, and how he got here:

“Levantate ya es tiempo!” were the words my mother would yell out every morning as I would drag my tired, sluggish body out of bed. Being a migrant student had a lot of rough challenges. One of the toughest challenges for me was waking up early in the morning, since I was so tired from the hard labor we had done the day before. We would wake up at six in the morning every day to help my mother make breakfast, and then we would pack our breakfast and head out to start picking in the field at seven in the morning.

As expressivist as this opening sounds, the writer uses a familiar experience to stake out a subject position open to ethnographic exploration. Often, narratives such as this one may sound clichéd to professors accustomed to, and enamored of, the objective voice. It certainly did for me the first time I read it. The challenge was to listen, to get the tenor of this unfamiliar conversation, and see what this student can do when other voices are invited in. The writer of “Challenges for Migrant Students” finishes his story with a conclusion that is as possible to read as clichéd as his opening:

Fortunately for me becoming a migrant student made me who I am today. Working in the fields made me look at my education in a whole different way. I am now thankful to wake up, go to school, and be able to sit in a classroom with air conditioning and learn about new things instead of working hard in the fields. I know I have to become something in life because I don’t want my own children to have to go through what I went through as a child and young adult.

This conclusion may borrow the familiar “language of parents, coaches or other powerful adults.” Yet, the experience is not borrowed; it is embedded in a cultural milieu that is marked by a continued tension between the need to hold onto cultural norms, most often centered on family relationships, and attain the socio-economic promise that education promises. Throughout this paper, the writer refers to his extended family, noting that his uncle “didn’t get an education, and his two oldest sons are in their mid-20s, and both of their occupations are migrant farm workers.” He writes about his nuclear family, how he “didn’t want to follow in their footsteps,” but “wanted to have a more secure lifestyle by getting an education.” He draws other migrant students into the conversation. These students tell similar narratives, about how they have been “given the chance their parents didn’t really have which was to improve their working conditions so they wouldn’t have to go back to the fields their whole life.”

As conventional as this story may first appear, it focuses on experience in a pragmatic sense, that is, as a means of bridging “ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience)” to see if they “help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience” (James 30). The pragmatic narrative goes beyond the expressionist focus on individual experience and its potential to explore the aesthetics of experience. In autoethnography, the writer’s experience comes first, not in order to voice an authen-

tic identity at the “center of the universe,” but in order to make sense of the complexity of experience, eventually including a variety of discourses in that experience (Elbow 497). This narrative voice provides a personal perspective that all too often gets silenced by academic voices, but is itself complicated by the necessity of focusing on the self as member of a community. Students write about the personal, not as an end in itself or an aesthetic purpose, but as a way to initiate a conversation from a perspective that professors all too often ignore.

Experience as Transition

The theoretical questions that gather around assimilation, identity, and discourse, and the possibilities transculturation has of rewriting those terms has influenced my pedagogy and eventually fueled my interest in autoethnography. Consequently, I was surprised when I noticed a common thread in student autoethnographies that had not been part of my theoretical framework. My students were writing in response to the prevalence of autoethnographies to bypass the standard narratives of identification, the narratives I had come to associate with expressionism, in order to tell stories of transition. While I hesitated to see the prevalence of transitional narratives as an Hispanic trope, Ed Morales, in *Living in Spanglish*, is less cautious, arguing that Hispanics *experience* rather than *theorize* the post-structural. “Latino culture,” he insists, “is constantly evolving both north and south of the border.” That evolution “involves an increasing, if nonsystemic, proliferation of identities that allow us to choose from an array of guises, accents, class mannerisms, and racial solidarities” (19).

The Hispanic students I teach write about a wide array of experiences that emphasized the transitional nature of identity—as a returning veteran, a migrant farm worker, a single mother returning to school, a first generation college student. These students are adept at recognizing the cultural implications of these and other identities they inhabit, and how identity subtly shifts as they move between various cultural norms. Transition narratives open the conversation in ways that theories of assimilation, identification, and transculturation do not. As useful as these theories were, they assumed the hegemony of one voice over another, fixing the identity in that voice.

In an analysis of “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” Américo Paredes contrasts Latino narrative with Anglo, writing that the corrido was “a personification of the spirit of border strife” (205). Richard Flores adds to Paredes description of the corrido, that “the Mexican hero is not the individual historical figure” . . . “but embodies the larger, collective figuration of the local community” (170). Heroes are “no longer individual personas, but discursive figures who are derived from the social and cultural world of the corrido’s authors and audience” (170). Such narratives, derived from the Latino community, often resist fixed identities through what Tara J. Yosso identifies as “counterstories” and Carmelo Esterrich and Javier H. Murillo refer to as “transculturation.” Rather than telling the story of a counter-identity, a fixed identity in opposition to Western *presence* critiqued by Derrida, these counterstories create multiple or hybrid identities that not only resist politically, but culturally, the imposition of identity through transition narratives in which identity is in flux.

The writer of “Metamorphosis,” signals that she is going to write explicitly about transition—in her case, transitions she experienced in response to the complex interaction of traditional gender roles, cultural knowledge, and education. She emphasizes the ways the demands of academic discourse and her own cultural knowledge stretch her identity in new and sometimes uncomfortable directions by telling her story in first and third person simultaneously:

As I’m sitting in the kitchen table writing, the housewife in me keeps looking over at the pile of dirty dishes that need to be washed, and at the half eaten breakfast that my son failed to throw away and just left on the counter. This relentless housewife does not understand homework deadlines; she does not understand that there is life outside the home, and her constant screeching in the back of my mind is making it difficult to concentrate on what I need to accomplish in this paper.

Though the “I” in this narrative resists the “consuming traditional housewife” who “constantly tries to shove my personal needs into a secret emotional bin once cluttered with insecurities, regrets, self-pity and dead dreams,” the writer paradoxically invites academic discourse into the conversation in order to defend that traditional identity even as she leaves parts of it reluctantly behind. First, she questions the either/or dichotomy of feminist theory that sees motherhood as “‘imprisoning’ rather than a choice that promotes and embraces strong family values” (Hurting 250). She then shifts her perspective to the dominant Hispanic trope of *machismo*, arguing that academic expertise, which objectifies Hispanic gender, must share the blame for her identity crisis:

But it is the [academic] studies which are based on traditional views that often provide a distorted portrait of Mexican American fathers (Saracho 224), and give the term *macho* or *machismo* a negative connotation. A *macho* is viewed as a strong tough, virile “he-man.” Quick to anger, who responds violently to any insult, challenge or dare (Kinzer 302) but mainly as *mujeriego* and *borracho*.

She looks to another Hispanic women, also torn between tradition and education, to question that expertise:

And although the term macho may have different meaning to many people, Gloria Anzaldua gives or depicts a beautiful and honorable picture of what being macho meant to her. In her book *Borderlands* she states “For men like my father, being ‘macho’ meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love” (105).

In her conclusion, she indicts popular American culture, and the tendency of Hispanics to desert the good along with the bad in their own culture in order to buy into that other culture:

Before writing this paper I thought that feminist views were causing women in our culture to lose important values, but as I read different articles and books, I noticed there was only one thing that was consistent. I also saw it in my own writing and at that moment is when I found the reason why our values may be dying. Negativity is what’s killing our culture, and affecting our marriages. We have joined the rest of society in the blame game and walk around with a victim mentality to justify our actions. (“Metamorphosis” Spring 2012)

The writer of "Metamorphosis" illustrates the potential autoethnography has to bring a variety of perspectives into productive interaction. By mixing genres and perspectives in a conversation this student explores the often difficult transitions she has experienced, particularly in response to education.

The plurality of identities in "Metamorphosis" and other autoethnographies my students write bypass the model of academic discourse in which they must assume the subject position I inhabit in order to be heard. Instead, their writing enters into conversation with a variety of discourses, including my own, and make space within those discourses for students to assert, explore, and sometimes switch, subject positions. Far from being assimilated by academic ways of knowing, they assimilate that discourse into their own experience. As a means of working within this complex meta-discourse without necessarily resolving it, autoethnography emphasizes rather than disguises difference. Many Hispanic students, already living in the tension between ethnicities, find the tension created by mixed genres familiar, if not necessarily comfortable. They then find ways to come full circle and grapple with identity, transition, change, and issues that are central to their experience.



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