This book presents the collaborative work of two professors, one in Mexico and the other in the United States, and their respective students, participants in a Ph.D. course called “Critical Autoethnography.” The chapters emerged from virtual conversations as doctoral students and professors examined the intersections between critical pedagogy and autoethnography. They problematized the cultural and theoretical intersections between the participants in both countries, questioning whether their differences were causes or results of power and privilege. They used dialogue as inquiry to interrogate the theoretical perspectives that framed their prior experiences. They realized that these perspectives reflected their cultures, and that although they often intersected, they diverged at times. The fluidity of the learning experience shaped the chapters that form the book sections, including the theory and the praxis, or exemplars, of performing critical autoethnography. Each author explores personal experiences or events through the lens of critical pedagogy, underscoring the problematization of the cultural and societal context that shaped their actions, in particular as they performed in racial, ethnic, and religious settings that reflected power and privilege. The two professors served as editors and authors, as they engaged in constant iterative peer review and dialogue. Both the Mexican and the United States perspectives are reflected throughout the book, and it is this global perspective that separates this book from others that deal with similar topics.
Re-Telling Our Stories
IMAGINATION AND PRAXIS: CRITICALITY AND CREATIVITY IN EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

VOLUME 9

SERIES EDITORS
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SCOPE
Current educational reform rhetoric around the globe repeatedly invokes the language of 21st century learning and innovative thinking while contrarily reinforcing, through government policy, high stakes testing and international competition, standardization of education that is exceedingly reminiscent of 19th century Taylorism and scientific management. Yet, as the steam engines of educational “progress” continue down an increasingly narrow, linear, and unified track, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the students in our classrooms are inheriting real world problems of economic instability, ecological damage, social inequality, and human suffering. If young people are to address these social problems, they will need to activate complex, interconnected, empathetic and multiple ways of thinking about the ways in which peoples of the world are interconnected as a global community in the living ecosystem of the world. Seeing the world as simultaneously local, global, political, economic, ecological, cultural and interconnected is far removed from the Enlightenment’s objectivist and mechanistic legacy that presently saturates the status quo of contemporary schooling. If we are to derail this positivist educational train and teach our students to see and be in the world differently, the educational community needs a serious dose of imagination. The goal of this book series is to assist students, practitioners, leaders, and researchers in looking beyond what they take for granted, questioning the normal, and amplifying our multiplicities of knowing, seeing, being and feeling to, ultimately, envision and create possibilities for positive social and educational change. The books featured in this series will explore ways of seeing, knowing, being, and learning that are frequently excluded in this global climate of standardized practices in the field of education. In particular, they will illuminate the ways in which imagination permeates every aspect of life and helps develop personal and political awareness. Featured works will be written in forms that range from academic to artistic, including original research in traditional scholarly format that addresses unconventional topics (e.g., play, gaming, ecopedagogy, aesthetics), as well as works that approach traditional and unconventional topics in unconventional formats (e.g., graphic novels, fiction, narrative forms, and multi-genre texts). Inspired by the work of Maxine Greene, this series will showcase works that “break through the limits of the conventional” and provoke readers to continue arousing themselves and their students to “begin again” (Greene, Releasing the Imagination, 1995, p. 109).

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Re-Telling Our Stories

Critical Autoethnographic Narratives

Foreword by Carolyn Ellis

Edited by

Gresilda A. Tilley-Lubbs
Virginia Tech, USA

and

Silvia Bénard Calva
Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico

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FOREWORD

Autumn arrived today at our North Carolina mountain cabin, where my partner Art Bochner and I are on a writing retreat. Bundled up in a southwestern throw in front of the burning gas fireplace, I am warmed by the orange blaze emanating from authentic looking ceramic logs and smouldering lava rocks. The wind blows the trees to and fro outside our windows; the fall yellows and reds are just starting to colour the tips of some leaves. Reading Re-Telling Our Stories, I am warmed further by the heartfelt emotion and invitations into the lives of these evocative storytellers. What a gift to me, and to all of us. These texts make me feel excited and optimistic about what critical autoethnographic scholarship—a blend of autobiography, ethnography and critical pedagogy—can be. The writers, many young and first-time authors, take me on a journey to new places, helping me understand better cross-cultural experiences; conflicts in work, family, and relational life; and fears, disappointments, and successes in educational experiences.

Many of the narratives describe living within and between cultures, where newcomers and others have to twist themselves into pretzels to fit in one and then the other. For example, there are stories about being in Nicaragua with the Peace Corps, immigrating to the US from China, identifying as Native American and First Nations women, and working as an au pair in a foreign country. Some of the stories tell about interactions between various groups within a culture, such as service workers and adults in foster homes, and social scientists/visitors and residents in an area destroyed by a tornado. Critical pedagogy is wrapped within stories written by teachers—some of whom also are students—who critically examine the reciprocal roles of teacher and student. These authors try to provide an experience for and teach to the whole student in our schools and colleges; they seek ways to connect with and help students, in particular those from other cultures; they call on their own experiences to understand their students and call on their students’ experiences to understand their own. They deal head on yet sensitively with their own and their students’ trauma, such as the terror of mass shootings and the pain of being bullied. Other stories focus on the self as vulnerable other, who must cope with divorce or other family traumas. A common plot in all these stories involves movement toward healing, empowerment, and belief in self while continuing to try to understand and respond to issues of oppression; gender, class, and other forms of relational domination; and race, color, and language discrimination.

As I read, vivid thoughts of my first encounters with Kris Tilley-Lubbs and Silvia Bénard Calva play through my mind, stimulated by their descriptions of meeting me and working with each other. I recall Kris waiting patiently to speak to me after attending a workshop Art Bochner and I gave on narrative and autoethnography at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) in
Illinois in 2008. In our conversation, she was enthusiastic and animated. “Who is this woman who speaks about and embodies her passion for autoethnography so openly and passionately?” I wondered. After that interaction, I was not surprised when she attended a two-day workshop I gave on the same topic for Research Talk’s Qualitative Research Intensive, held in New York in 2009. Silvia also participated with this small group of women. From the moment I met Silvia, it was apparent she had a story to tell and, similar to Kris, she had a passion for writing it, even if she had to accomplish it in her second language. Though all the women attending that workshop shared amazing stories, Silvia and Kris stood out as they modelled for the other women how to tell about their own lives and how to support others who tell deep and emotional stories. I could feel the closeness developing between these two women, and I felt sure that I would hear again from them. And indeed I have. I have enjoyed the work they have been doing in autoethnography since 2009, visiting with them annually at the ICQI, and being introduced to students they have sent my way.

Now Silvia and Kris have joined their voices in this collection, and the result is synergistic—the whole is greater than the sum of what the two writers could have produced alone. As editors, they bring together strengths that come from the intersection of their differences and similarities. They come from diverse cultures and speak different native languages; one is educated in sociology and the other in education; one has deep roots in social science and the other has more of a humanities and literary focus; one is more interested in theory and the other in critical and applied pedagogy. Yet both are bilingual and communicate with each other in Spanish and English; both focus on storytelling, examining the role of the researcher in research, and narrating one’s story; both are passionate about exploring the connections between Mexican and US culture; both are caring and giving, humane scholars and mentors who want to make a difference and are willing to be vulnerable to accomplish that goal.

Kris and Silvia put themselves through the same self-reflection in these pages as they ask other contributors to do. They are vulnerable with each other and to readers, they interrogate their experiences of working together and living with others, and they share emotional stories. For example, Silvia tells of the trials of moving from a large metropolitan area to a middle-sized city in Mexico; Kris tells about the challenges and pressures of getting tenure and advising students in service-learning courses and activities, and she shows how identity might be connected to speaking different languages. Together and separately, Kris and Sylvia write openly about the difficulties this publishing venture presented.

I can only imagine the problems they faced in carrying out cross-cultural, cross-geographic, and cross-linguistic writing, teaching, and mentoring—through virtual connections, no less, and with serious technical issues. Most of us would have given up quickly. Kris and Silvia persevered and used the relational, technical, and language difficulties to deepen their understandings and bring forth new insights about cultural communication. Their experiences then add to the stories in this volume about cultural conflict and cooperation. They shed light on power dynamics,
subordination and dominance, oppression and submission, and readily examine and acknowledge their roles—cultural and personal—in communication difficulties and the hierarchical positioning that resulted. The editors come to understand each other in deep and complicated ways, viewing understanding as a process, not an end point. Rarely do we have the privilege of seeing the complexities and complications in cross-cultural collaboration, since authors too often focus on the final product and not the process, leading to a sense that all must have been smooth sailing. I learned much from their stories and look forward to and hope for many more joint projects from these two authors.

I have only one reservation to express. Silvia and Kris are too modest in their claims about what they accomplished together and do not take enough credit for having made this project work so beautifully in spite of the difficulties. But then that is who they are—unassuming scholars who care more about the success of autoethnography and their students’ achievements than they do about the credit they get for their hard work. They are successful in jointly editing this beautiful book, supporting each other as the sole professors in their respective universities doing autoethnography, and co-mentoring productive students, many of whom are authors in this book. These successes all are evidence of Kris’s and Silvia’s contributions to humanizing academia through critical autoethnography.

I am touched deeply by this collection of stories, and I predict you will be too. These experiences now have a place in my heart, and I appreciate the vulnerability shown and the insights that writing lives brought forth. These are not victim narratives by any means. They are stories written by people who long to understand their experiences as deeply as possible and convey the nuances, complexities, and multiple meanings to themselves and readers. They yearn to grow and become better people from writing and sharing their experiences, and in the process to offer comfort, companionship, and possibilities to others in similar situations.

So put your feet up and relax a bit. Get ready for an engaging read. What has seemed familiar—such as acceptance of practices in mainstream culture—might suddenly burst into strangeness and what has seemed strange—such as the mass immigration of homeless Syrians into Europe—might now have shards of familiarity. Though I have not experienced personally most of the emotional and traumatic events described in this book, these stories encourage me through example to consider why that is the case. My advantage comes partly from being white and upper-middle class in the United States, the country where my parents and I were born. I have a tenured and well-paying position as a professor in a university, and a stable, long-term love relationship. It is easy to take my lot in life for granted. While my experiences have been privileged, still I am reminded of, and encouraged through these texts to re-examine who I am. I recall what it was like to growing up in a southern, rural, and mountainous community, and then to try to adapt to an academic world of educated cosmopolitan professors.

At times I too worried I didn’t fit in this new culture; for a while, I felt concerned about how I sounded and wondered whether I would make it. As Kris wrote
recently to me in an email, “Can you believe you grew up in Luray, Virginia, and I grew up in Fayetteville, West Virginia, and we are having this conversation about our commitments in places such as Bangladesh, Panama, and Scotland?” I acknowledged that it amazed me too. Later, Kris continued in another email, “And the mountains live in our hearts, no? For me, they will always be home.” “Yes, they feel like home, and yet they don’t,” I respond now, as I view rural America through the complex lens of the almost fifty years of experience I have had at urban universities and in culturally diverse cities since I left my childhood home. Yes, I have returned to live in the mountains for several months a year; yes they do make me feel cosy and protected; and yes, I continue to be in awe of their beauty and majesty. Yet I also am deeply aware of how I have changed and how I don’t quite fit here anymore in terms of some of my values and interests. I have new awareness of the complexities of cultural and political differences both within and outside our borders. Thank you to Kris and Silvia and to all the storytellers in this book for deepening my awareness.

Carolyn Ellis
Franklin, North Carolina
ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Yessenia Bautista grew up in Queens, New York, with her mother and five brothers and sisters. She attends college full-time and works part-time teaching in a science museum. This oil and acrylic painting represents the unique talents and perspectives of the diverse group of youth who work with her at the museum. Through art and science she brings joy to those around her.
INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE

This is not a book about critical autoethnography per se, but rather it is a collection of stories that use critical autoethnography as a methodological approach to problematize individual experiences through the combined lenses of critical pedagogy and autoethnography. We don’t give a step-by-step plan of how to do critical autoethnography; rather we provide an immersive experience for readers who wish to understand the struggles and triumphs that shaped the events the authors write about in emotive and passionate ways (Ellis, 2004). We teach about autoethnography as we present ourselves as vulnerable participants/collaborators/actors in our own stories. During our co-taught courses on autoethnography and critical autoethnography, the students wrote most of the stories in this volume, and we wrote the others. Along with our students, we examined our words and actions, first as insiders, then as outsiders, and finally as insiders with outsiders’ insights (Behar, 1999; Ellis, 2004). Throughout the process, we (Kris and Silvia) tried to replicate some of the experiences we had in a workshop taught by Carolyn Ellis, such as constant writing, followed by peer reading and critique. Just as with any writing that is tied to literary techniques, writing critical autoethnography is experiential, a pedagogy that allowed our students to become immersed in peers’ stories, while at the same time understanding their own realities in the light of others’ lived experiences. Likewise, readers become participants/collaborators/actors in the stories, making connections to their own lived experiences through their interpretive lenses. There is no generalization to be made; the experiences and experiential reactions are personal, but related to sociocultural aspects of individual worlds.

Despite its connection to autobiography and memoirs, the “auto” in “autoethnography” refers to the examination of self, and the “ethno” indicates a systematic analysis, in this case, through intensive reflection and introspection (Ellis & Adams, 2014, p. 257). The personal experiences form the heart of the story, so we start with our story of collaboration and friendship that emerged from an initial meeting at an autoethnography workshop. We examine the intersections that inform our relationship, bringing together the personal and the political, making research a “socially conscious act” (Holman Jones, 2005a) that brings to light the challenges that face cross-border relationships.

In the sections that follow, we recount our journey together in ways that represent our writers’ voices, first in a more distanced academic style, and then, as we talk
about a period of discord and growth, in a closer, more vivid and emotional style. Autoethnography can be written in a number of styles, from positioning the self in the text, as we do in the first part of the introduction, to “claiming the conventions of literary writing” (Ellis & Adams, 2014), which we have chosen to do in the critical autoethnographic deconstruction of the tension that grew as we continued to work together. To bring the reader into the midst of the tense moments after the explosion that rocked both our working and personal relationships, we use dialogue and other literary techniques to show, not tell, the story (Ellis, 2004). In contrast with the earlier chronological account of how we met and began working together, we open a space for the reader to experience the conflicts that arose. We “democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” (Denzin, 2006), and problematize the sociocultural aspects of our backgrounds that underscored hidden struggles, which, once surfaced, had to be addressed.

“Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433), and through dialogue, we trouble the struggles and triumphs two women from different cultural and geographic backgrounds and perspectives experienced in working across linguistic, geographic, and cultural borders. We consider the complexities that occur with cultural differences, causing invisible misunderstandings that can undermine collaborative cross-border projects. We deconstruct those misunderstandings as both cultural and personal issues, depending on autoethnography to narrate the personal, problematizing our reactions and interactions as representations of the social and cultural worlds we live in (Ellis, 2004). Our development as friends and colleagues has been organic, not simply a matter of two scholars reaching out to find a colleague with whom to conduct research, as often happens in the academic world. Just as with any relationship, ours has had its ups and downs, and the deconstruction of our roller coaster ride forms the foundation upon which this book was built.

A SERENDIPITOUS MEETING

We (Kris and Silvia) first met in July 2009 when we attended Carolyn Ellis’ workshop on autoethnography. Over two intense days of writing, then reading and discussing other participants’ work, we explored autoethnography as a method of inquiry. Through Carolyn’s open sharing about the background of pieces we read to prepare for the workshop, we experienced firsthand how Carolyn has revolutionized the world of qualitative inquiry through autoethnography. She shared her struggles while working in non-traditional ways, and then having to justify her methodology in an academic world that regarded “valuable research” in traditional terms. We discussed the importance of regarding the researcher as part of the study, a necessary element for understanding the social, cultural, and political perspectives that shaped both the researcher and the participants in the project. We developed experiential knowledge of autoethnography as a means of making sense of a topic, while
providing openings for others to relate their own experiences and contribute to the discussion and the democratization of research findings (Ellis, 2004).

Silvia: I had been writing and experimenting with narrative. I had even written a couple of pieces under a pen name because I didn’t feel that what I was doing was the research my university would accept as legitimate inquiry. Then a colleague, César Cisneros, sent me information about a series of workshops on qualitative research that were going to take place in Long Island, New York. I was glad to find methodological approaches that formalized the kind of writing I had done, so I applied for financial support from my university to attend the workshop. I was able to sign up for two different sessions, the first with H. L. (Bud) Goodall on writing narrative ethnography, and the second with Carolyn Ellis on writing autoethnography. At that time I felt an urge to have formal training in doing this kind of work. Before I registered, I wrote to Bud to ask him the difference between the two, and googled both professors to get an initial idea about their research approaches.

Kris: I had been voraciously devouring Carolyn’s and Laurel Richardson’s autoethnographic work for about a year and a half when I made the decision to take a workshop on autoethnography offered by Carolyn and Art Bochner at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) the previous May. When I approached Carolyn after that workshop, she suggested that I participate in the intensive autoethnography workshop she was conducting later that summer. At that time, I had two published articles in which I had experimented with autoethnography as a means of interrogating my pedagogical practices, but I still felt unsure about where my instincts were leading me.

To prepare for the workshop, Carolyn had asked the eight participants to write about an event or situation with which we were struggling emotionally on a deep personal level. We wrote, we listened to each other reading our writing aloud, we cried, we empathized, and we connected—all through writing. Carolyn offered suggestions and comments to each. Due to the short term of the workshop, we left with suggestions and inspiration from Carolyn and our peers rather than with completed pieces. We returned home, Silvia to Aguascalientes, Mexico, and Kris to Virginia, in the United States. During those two short days, we had developed a shared connection.

CONNECTIONS ACROSS BORDERS

Although Kris was from the United States, she felt close to Mexico for several reasons. She had been a Spanish literature major in both her undergraduate and her graduate education at the University of Illinois. Through the years, she had
worked extensively in the Spanish-speaking community, most recently interpreting at a public health clinic for Mexican and Honduran women. She had subsequently developed close relationships with them and their families in Mexico, whom she had interviewed for a research project. Silvia felt a similar closeness to the United States, mostly due to her doctoral education at the University of Texas in Austin, but also because her father had worked in the United States after he finished his studies in Canada during the early 1930s.

Kris was drawn to Silvia’s warmth and welcoming presence, and Silvia’s narrative resonated deeply with Kris since it dealt with family issues they were both experiencing. During the workshop Silvia was moved by Kris’s narrative about the shootings at Virginia Tech, where Kris is a professor. As they talked further they also shared their common concerns about social justice, specifically about Mexican immigrants without a legal presence in the United States. Although Kris later published her narrative, *4/16: Public Tragedy Meets Personal Trauma* (2011), Silvia ultimately decided not to publish her piece because of ethical issues involved.

EXPANDING CONNECTIONS

We continued to stay in touch through email until we met again at the qualitative congress in May 2010. Silvia was considering spending her sabbatical year in the United States to deepen her knowledge about autoethnography. She had sought to spend a year with Carolyn Ellis at the University of South Florida, but doing so became complicated. Kris told Silvia she would be welcome to come to Virginia Tech as a visiting scholar. We both knew that autoethnography was not considered a legitimate research methodology either at Virginia Tech or at the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, but we felt that by working together we could enhance our own knowledge, as well as open up spaces for autoethnography within our respective academic realms.

DIFFERENCES EMERGE BESIDE SIMILARITIES

In April 2011, Silvia and her 14-year-old daughter travelled to Blacksburg, Virginia, where they spent four months. During that time, we spent hours talking and working together on autoethnography. That summer, we co-taught a class for doctoral students in Kris’s English as a Second Language and Multicultural Education program. As we planned and implemented the course, we became aware of the differences in our formation as scholars, Silvia as a sociologist, and Kris as a pedagogue with a strong background in Spanish and literature. When we prepared the syllabus for the summer class, Silvia wanted to provide a trajectory of autoethnography, including various perspectives, such as those in “Analytic Autoethnography” (Anderson, 2006), and in articles by other critics of autoethnography, such as David Snow. Leon Anderson had been Silvia’s classmate at the University of Texas at Austin, and David Snow had been her professor, so she felt a special connection with their
work. We agreed that it was fundamental to include authors such as Carolyn Ellis, Laurel Richardson, Chris Poulos, and Ron Pelias. Since Kris’s emphasis included writing in a literary style, she wanted to include the art of writing literature, so we included *Bird by Bird* (Lamott, 1995). To enhance students’ knowledge about writing narrative, we thought it necessary to include *Writing Qualitative Inquiry* by H. L. (Bud) Goodall (2008).

As we taught the class, we both mentioned authors we had studied as part of our graduate and undergraduate programs. We realized our academic trajectories differed, despite the fact that we agreed on the relevance of storytelling, and the presence of the researcher in the research.

Silvia had studied sociology in the second half of the 1970s at a left-wing university in Mexico City, the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, where most of the curriculum was based on Marxist authors. When she engaged in her graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin during the 1980s, she was eager to learn more about classic sociology theory and substantive issues related to meaning and belonging. Her focus on those topics led to her interest in social psychology, more specifically on symbolic interactionism and qualitative methodology.

Kris’s undergraduate and master’s work at the University of Illinois focused on the literature of Spain and Latin America. Her Ph.D. work was in curriculum and instruction, which led to her career as a professor in a School of Education, where she developed a strong focus on critical pedagogy. Eventually her interests aligned so that she could combine her love for Spanish-speaking culture, her proficiency in Spanish, and her concern with Mexican and Honduran immigrants, with her background in education and critical pedagogy.

Nonetheless, we share certain understandings about qualitative inquiry in general, and autoethnography in particular, which led to this joint venture to enhance knowledge generated under these epistemological and methodological frames of reference within our academic realms in Mexico and the United States. We both strongly agree on the importance of narrating one’s story.

Due to our implicit and explicit differences as professors, students during that summer had a long list of readings, as well as significant writing to accomplish. Two pieces that emerged from that first course were Dyanis’ evocative autoethnography about her grief as she approached the end of her marriage in “Metamorphosis: A Journey through Grief” (Chapter 9) and the narrative poem of Pamela’s story about being a “cross-cultural kid” in “An Invisible Immigrant Made Visible” (Chapter 11).

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**THE FLUIDITY OF MOVEMENT BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES**

After Silvia returned to Mexico, we continued to communicate by email, staying in close contact, and developing a stronger friendship and collegial relationship as we worked together virtually. During the fall semester of 2011, Silvia asked Kris if she would serve on a student’s doctoral committee. We talked about not having
colleagues in our own universities who understood autoethnography and who would support our students who were incorporating autoethnography in their dissertations. Silvia was already serving on the committee of one of Kris’s students; we were appreciated having a close colleague to would provide support. Soon, Kris received an invitation to visit Silvia’s university for her student’s end of semester presentation in December.

During that visit Silvia asked Kris to re-read her (Silvia’s) developing autoethnographic account of her experience of moving to Aguascalientes from Mexico City, the text which became *Atrapada en provincia* [Trapped in the Provinces] (2014), a deconstruction of her experience of moving from one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world to a middle-sized city in central Mexico. As we sat and worked together in Silvia’s office, with Kris reading and commenting, followed by hours of conversation, our differing cultural perspectives became apparent. Kris realized her position as an outsider to Mexican culture, just as Silvia was an outsider to Aguascalientes culture.

In fall 2012, Kris decided to teach an autoethnography class at Virginia Tech, and Silvia skyped with the students. For three hours the students asked questions and Silvia replied and talked about her own work, which had begun with grounded theory before it grew to include autoethnography. She shared details about her process in writing “From Impressionism to Realism” (2012), which was published shortly after her session with Kris’s class. The students were fascinated with Silvia’s open discussion of the sometimes difficult and painful process of reliving liminal experiences, writing them down, and deciding on the ethical issues involved. Afterwards, students talked about how Silvia had given them more freedom to explore their own experiences in a similar way. They even commented that most professors only talk about the traditional aspects of conducting qualitative research, but they could now give themselves permission to approach research in a more personal way. As we write this piece, Silvia looks at Kris with astonishment and comments, “I didn’t feel I had that kind of positive influence on your students. I felt more concerned about whether I had disheartened their efforts to engage in autoethnographic inquiry.”

During that class, Kelly started writing the chapter about her experiences conducting dissertation research at a home for adults with developmental disabilities. Whereas her dissertation research relied on more traditional qualitative methods, in writing her personal narrative about how she interacted with Henry, one of the residents at the home, she reflexively interrogated her actions, thoughts, and feelings, which developed into “Henry and Sneaky: Finding Resolution to My Ontological Question about Service” (Chapter 7). On the other hand, Jennifer was in the process of finishing her dissertation for a spring defence. While doing her research, a conversation with a student had caused her to problematize her role as researcher, and during the class she wrote much of the article that emerged from that problematization, “‘Were You There?’: Critical Autoethnographic Reflections on the Researcher-Participant Relationship” (Chapter 5).
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Once again, Silvia invited Kris to Aguascalientes in December 2012 for her student’s committee meeting, and once again, our conversations helped both of us to deepen our understanding of, and knowledge about autoethnography. By this time, Silvia had already served on Kris’s student Jennifer’s committee and at her dissertation defence.

We continued to support each other, still being the only autoethnographers in our respective universities. In fall 2013, we co-taught a course called “Critical Autoethnography,” connecting our students virtually so they could learn from each other. The experience was fraught with technical difficulties, to say nothing of cultural and linguistic differences found in disparate university settings, all of which Silvia deconstructs at length in Chapter 3. Her students, David and Marilú, started their chapters. David focussed on social interactions in schools in “Naming in My Present the Past Nameless: Violence at School” (Chapter 3). Marilú wrote about her experiences as an au pair in the United States in “A Reflective Journey through the Experience of an Au Pair: From a Cultural Exchange Program to Domestic Labour” (Chapter 15).

Melissa put together her chapter about returning to the United States following her time in Nicaragua with the Peace Corps, “Culture Shock: The New Normal.” She examines her re-entry in terms of socially constructed gender roles in both countries (Chapter 14). At the same time, Rong wrote her first drafts of “Never Forget Class Struggle: An Autoethnographic Reflection,” her chapter about the complexities of immigrating to the United States from China as an adult. She struggled with the intricacies of constructing a life where language and culture were so different from anything she had previously known (Chapter 12). Kris had been writing her tenure poem, “The Inquisition/Torture of the Tenure Track” (Chapter 6) for some time, and when she brought it to the group, their critique helped her move the poem from a place of anger and frustration toward an analysis of a flawed academic system.

INVISIBLE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Kris’s students had taken one, or possibly two, of her courses in critical pedagogy, and for this course, she combined critical pedagogy and autoethnography to create a new course. The possible paradigm differences between how critical pedagogy was viewed in the United States and in Mexico were not evident to Kris as she planned the course in a way that would be approved by her university. She taught critical autoethnography from her perspective in a dominant culture, and neither she nor Silvia was aware that critical pedagogy was conceptualized differently in Mexico and in the United States. During the first few fall classes, discussions focused on critical pedagogy, and we soon realized that the term represented different theories from either side of the border. In response to these discussions, so Kris decided to write about critical autoethnography in “Critical Autoethnography and the Vulnerable Self as Researcher” (Chapter 1). Silvia problematized the differences by
doing research and talking to people in Chihuahua, Mexico, who knew about the two perspectives. She narrates this in her piece (Chapter 3).

In the course of the semester, Dyanis began writing her chapters that interrogated cultural heritage as present in immigrant experiences viewed through the lenses of critical pedagogy and autoethnography in “Decolonization of the Self: Reflection and Reflexivity” and in language and customs in “Watch What Yuh Sayin’: The Power of Language” (Chapters 13 and 16).

Two poems, those written by Lisa and Mae, developed from a class assignment in another course Kris taught that same fall, Topics in Diversity and Multicultural Education. In “Sojourn,” Lisa interrogates her attempts to identify culturally with the Native American tribe that was her birth heritage. Mae, as a Canadian First Nations woman, asserts her cultural identity in “Two Braids.” Both poems problematize the dissonance between nature and nurture (Chapters 16 and 17). Jen, who was instrumental in the initial organization of the book, contributed a poem she had written following a trip she made to Joplin, Missouri, with a group of storm chasers. In “What Remains,” she interrogates the power and privilege of people who choose to witness a tornado versus those who are forced to lose their lives and belongings as the result of weather (Chapter 10).

TENSION BUILDS AND EXPLODES

Kris went to Aguascalientes for David’s presentation of his work in progress in December 2013, and while she was in Mexico, we skyped with her class at Virginia Tech. Up to that point, Kris had not realized how uncomfortable and inconvenient the situation had been all semester for Silvia, David, and Marilú. As Kris participated in the class, the sound was impossible, the noise on the Virginia Tech side was distracting, and the apparent lack of attention on the part of the students was disturbing. After that experience, Kris questioned the wisdom of continuing with the virtual class due to linguistic, cultural, and logistic inconveniences. The situation was disconcerting and there was no resolution. At Kris’s university, student evaluations determined merit, so, naturally, she was concerned about negative student reactions to the transnational course. Silvia had felt uneasy for weeks, but she didn’t communicate her thoughts and feelings to Kris. We were both unable to work out the problems that had been slowly but steadily growing, partly because neither of us allowed ourselves to focus on the complexities derived from the challenge we had embraced.

Although we had decided to connect occasionally during the following spring semester, we never did. As we write this and discuss that spring class which never happened, we have become aware of the lack of understanding that was occurring on both sides of our socially and emotionally constructed borders, which have resulted in the uneven latitudes that Silvia describes in “Our Will to Construct a Horizontal Bridge over Uneven Latitudes.”

We question whether the outcome of the class could have been any different. It has taken time, more than a year, to untangle the issues that entrapped and entangled
our friendship after engaging in that video class. Silvia brought back to memory a statement she heard from her professor, Gideon Sjoberg, more than twenty years ago: “You do not get to know someone enough until you realize how (s)he deals with a crisis.” And there we were, still months after the semester had ended dealing with the crisis we had naïvely launched into as one more of our many joint ventures. We had come to accept the situation, with its invisible discomforts and pasted on smiles, little realizing our comfort zone would soon be disrupted. In the following section, we choose to present this tension in the present tense, creating a literary style text that invites the reader to listen in as we struggle with bringing together our individual reflection and introspection.

FACING THE UNNAMED PRESENCE

The 2015 ICQI brings us both to our yearly meeting at the University of Illinois, where we sit down to talk to Carolyn Ellis about the possibility of her writing the preface for this book. Suddenly we are confronted with those unresolved issues that have arisen during the previous year and that exploded during the time when Silvia invited Kris to spend a week in Aguascalientes in September 2014.

As we sit in the café at the Illini Union, Carolyn begins the conversation by saying, “I felt some underlying tension in your relationship as I read this. You explored it a bit, but could you take it any deeper?”

“Here we go!” Silvia tells herself, “Carolyn, don’t go there!” She closes up and escapes deep inside herself instead of expressing her feelings. At that point Kris goes into her usual mode for coping with unpleasant situations and begins talking about the situation that occurred as a way to understand what had happened. Kris finally stops, reflects, and ends with, “Carolyn, are you sure you are not a counsellor? I’m amazed you could pick up on the tension. We thought we had managed to disguise it.”

Carolyn responds, “You’ve done a great job. Only you two could do such a good job because you are both completely bilingual. Your book can be very significant. If you want to leave the introduction as is, it will still be a good book. However, if you problematize that tension, it can be a great book. It all has to do with your level of comfort.”

“Uh, good. That is all I need to know right now,” Silvia continues with her internal conversation. “No more drama,” as my daughter Nana says. Let’s get rid of this book and go on with something else.”

Carolyn continues: “But I sense unsolved conflicts between you two. You touch on them a little as you describe the process of writing the book in your introduction, but you don’t show how you resolved them.”

“Resolve them? Carolyn, that’s not possible right now. We can’t resolve them. Kris and I left them behind and you weren’t supposed to notice!” As Silvia silently talks to herself, Kris starts talking to Carolyn about her feelings.

“The problem for me was that for a year and a half, I thought Silvia and I had a solid and deep friendship. I had no idea that Silvia was so angry with me.
When I finally became aware of her anger, I felt as if my self-knowledge had been shaken. I began to doubt my ability to understand relationships, to know what friendship is, to read people and their feelings toward me. I truly had no idea I was doing things that were so upsetting to Silvia. I’m not sure I can revisit those feelings—they’re still pretty raw.”

Silvia feels like saying, “Don’t start, Kris, not again! We already did what we could!”

Then Silvia hears Carolyn’s soft and clear answer: “Nothing is more important than your health and your wellbeing. They’re worth more than anything else. If you two can work through your introduction, it’s okay and, if you can’t, just let it stand as it is. No matter what you decide, I’ll try to fit writing the preface to your book into my schedule.”

We move on to other issues, approaching the end of the conversation, when Carolyn comments, “It may be necessary for you two to sit down and talk about this. I see many similarities between you two. Talk about those similarities, but let us know about your differences as well. You’ve done a great job!”

“And now what? This was supposed to be the end and look! Now we have to deal with it again!” Silvia continues her internal conversation.

After our meeting with Carolyn, we return to the conference presentations. Kris attends Silvia’s presentation where Silvia problematizes her “Mexicaness.” What a paradox. When we talked to Carolyn, Silvia commented that Kris, from the United States, often reacts more as a Mexican is expected to react than Silvia, who is Mexican. Kris, Silvia thinks, but does not say, appears to be so much warmer, more expressive, and passionate than she herself.

RESOLUTION … FOR NOW?

The last day at the conference brings the final barbecue that closes the event every year. Kris and her husband Dan originally planned to go somewhere else, and Silvia decided not to go with them, but rather to stay with her student Miguel. Silvia and Miguel are already eating when they see Kris and Dan and approaching. It is a soft Midwestern May evening, a bit chilly at sunset, with the breeze softly blowing, and the blue grass music group playing in the background. Miguel and Silvia are seated on the stone bench Silvia chose as a strategic place from which she could see everybody but not be too close to people to have to mingle all night. Kris arrives and sits next to her. After a few introductory phrases, Kris says, “Silvia, if it were not for Carolyn, I would have never talked to you about this again. I wanted to just sweep all our feelings and words into oblivion, never to be resurrected. You were so mad at me in Mexico that I just assumed we would never collaborate, and that I would never visit you or the university in Aguascalientes again.”

Silvia says, “It’s true I was mad, but I didn’t say a word about that to you at all.”

“Yes, but when you picked us up at the hotel to drive us to your house, you drove as if you wanted to kill us all. You wouldn’t speak to us. You gripped the steering wheel and drove on as though to remove our presence.”

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“Well, I was under a lot of pressure. Our other guests were coming to my house soon. The food you and Dan were going to help me prepare was not ready because it was so late. Now you talk to me as if you were the one who was mad at me and not the opposite. You told me that you wanted to return home early. I felt that you were telling me you were not going to talk to me again.”

Kris replies, “I didn’t know what to say. I was embarrassed that I had gotten caught on a conference call that made us so late. I wasn’t mad. I was so taken aback and so crushed to have that reaction from such a dear colleague and friend whom I trusted so much. I was discombobulated and beside myself. I just wanted to return to Virginia. I have never been very good at handling conflict—my way of handling conflict is to escape from it.”

Silvia continues, “And all those days in Aguascalientes that we had to work on the book, you were busy with a thousand things other than what we had to do.”

“Silvia, you were the same. You had to go to class, talk to students, and deal with many other things as well. You were also doing other things at the same time.”

Of all the people who could be sitting around the table right in front of us, it has to be Carolyn. She is talking to someone else, but she see us as we spend such a long time talking, and sitting together, sometimes in silence, and other times crying. Then Kris suggests that we all go to a restaurant since she and Dan haven’t eaten and the barbeque food has been cleared away. We all leave together and crowd into Dan’s car: Silvia, Kris, Dan, Miguel, and Rebecca, one of Kris’s students.

After they order food, Kris and Silvia go to the bathroom together, then as they return to the table, Kris spontaneously says, “Silvia, te perdono [I forgive you],” and Silvia responds, “Yo también, Kris (me too).” We hug. Later, as we sit with the rest of the group back at the table, Silvia says in Spanish, the language we use to communicate unless we are with non-Spanish speakers:

“I talked to Nana and she asked how I was getting along with Kris. Nana said, please, don’t argue.”

Kris says, “That’s what my daughter Eowyn asked about when I talked to her on the phone a few hours ago.”

We laugh. We can finally laugh together again as we enjoy a huge dessert.

We resolved the discord that finally erupted into full anger in Aguascalientes in September 2014, but this process also served as a growth experience in our relationship. We are still friends. We are still colleagues, but we are different. Our hope is that this relationship, which has changed, will not hinder further research and educational endeavours. Being open with each other and communicating at such a deep level was a new experience for both of us, one that never could have occurred without the process of writing this book.

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SECTION 1

THEORY OF CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
GRESILDA A. TILLEY-LUBBS

1. CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE VULNErABLE SELF AS RESEARCHER

ABSTRACT
This chapter presents critical autoethnography as an innovative approach to conducting research in marginalized, vulnerable communities. Combining autoethnography, ethnography, and critical pedagogy, the researcher becomes a participant in the study, turning inward to examine the Self and the complexities of cultural perspectives through the lens of critical pedagogy. Intense reflexivity and introspection undergird this study of Self as participant, going beyond recounting facts as objectively as possible, as occurs with autobiography, to acknowledging that the researcher is interpreting the facts through cultural perspectives formed through years of sociocultural, socio-historical, socio-political, and socioeconomic events and circumstances. Subsequently, the researcher, more than likely a member of the dominant culture in some categories, is able to understand herself as an oppressor.

CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY
Critical autoethnography combines ethnography, autobiography, and critical pedagogy to shape a methodology that allows me to examine myself as a qualitative researcher who works in vulnerable, marginalized communities. As a member of the dominant culture, it is crucial that with every research project I come to understand my own cultural perspectives and that I communicate those perspectives to the people who read my research. I can write autoethnography that only investigates an event in my life, or I can integrate my autoethnography into an ethnography that investigates that same phenomenon within the context of the group being researched. In either case, I present myself as a participant in the study so that I can internalize the researcher gaze and thus examine my Self in the same way that I examine others. That is, with autoethnography, I situate myself as researcher within the study, whether as a separate study or integrated as another participant in an ethnographic study (Blanco, 2012). Intense reflexivity and introspection, examined through the perspective of critical pedagogy, help me to understand some of the cultural complexities that have shaped me as a researcher and a pedagogue.

Since I don’t believe it is possible to function without preconceived thoughts and beliefs, nor to maintain a completely objective position for recounting events,
such as occurs with autobiography (Blanco, 2012), I make it explicitly clear to the reader that I am interpreting the data according to my own perspective. I openly expose my presence in the study, without trying to disguise it under the pretence of objectivity. Then those who read the work can form their own ideas, knowing that I am a participant in the study and that my interpretation reflects both my selection of the data to include and my decisions about how to present those data. With this methodology, as a researcher who is a member of the dominant clase and culture, I can understand the danger of being, or in some cases acting as, an oppressor. This awareness can influence my positionality as I conduct research in communities that are not considered part of the dominant culture.

Other researchers have used critical autoethnography as a way to connect “evocative personal narrative to cultural criticism” (Ellis & Bochner, 2014, p. 10), or to connect autoethnography and intersectionality (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). Robin Boylorn combines cultural and social phenomena to comment on personal experience from a “raced, classed, gendered, sexed, positionality, identifying the distinctions between her lenses for viewing the world and those of others” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 13), using critical standpoints as a way to theorize about lived experiences contextualized in intersectionalities. In combining autoethnography and critical pedagogy, I examine intersectionalities, but rather than positioning myself as a member of a marginalized community, I acknowledge the insidious, pervasive power and privilege I possess due to my race, socioeconomic status, religion, education, and countless other cultural perspectives that have shaped me, regardless of the marginalization I sometimes experience due to gender and age. Like Boylorn and Orbe, I also acknowledge my subjectivity and positionality, but I also claim the possibility of my position as an oppressor when working in vulnerable community. In addition, whereas they position themselves within Communications as a home discipline, and I position myself in Curriculum and Instruction, which lends different focuses to our work as well. In other words, while our concepts of critical autoethnography share certain characteristics, they do differ in others.

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Autoethnography has its roots in qualitative inquiry (Ellis, 2004), specifically in the branch of ethnography. As with any qualitative inquiry, the epistemological premise of autoethnography posits that reality and science are interpreted by human beings, focused on explaining some phenomenon and its interactions aside from numbers and statistics, with an emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of the data. I can provide the reader with a human face, not only the statistics of the phenomenon. I use ethnographic methods such as observation, participation, and interviews to collect data. Autoethnography also combines ethnography with autobiography, “writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (p. 37). With autoethnography, I include the data that emerge from my own reflexivity and introspection as a researcher. I can write this as a personal narrative, but by
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combining this personal story with the ethnography, I can examine the meaning I give to the phenomenon, while at the same time trying to understand it from both the individual and the group perspectives.

As a researcher, autoethnography allows me to examine an event, a practice, or a circumstance in my own life. Autoethnography is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” showcasing “action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (Ellis, 2004, xix). This method is “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710).

Since I use literary forms, such as narrative, poetry, and drama, autoethnography permits the intersection of art with science (Ellis, 2004) to present what I learned as a researcher by practicing deep reflexivity and introspection. I use writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000) to help me understand the sociocultural reasons that explain the situation I am examining. With autoethnography, I interpret the narrative according to my perspective, without the pretext of having eliminated myself as a participant in the study. With autoethnography, I am an actor and participant in the study, and in my other role as author, I write to “understand the significance of what [I think and feel and do]” (Ellis, 2004, p. 68) and the “significance or meaning that [I] give to [my] experience” (Tarrès, 2001), which allows me to deepen the knowledge I discover through reflection and introspection.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy provides the theoretical framework that helps me in my efforts to push against the grain of sociocultural, socioeconomic, socio-historical, and socio-political influences that have shaped me and have caused me to perform and interpret life as I do. Like the rest of the world, I have my origins in a temporal and spatial context, which influences the way I construct the nature of the world (Kincheloe, 2005); that is, my race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, gender, etc., have shaped my way of thinking and living. Of course, my way of thinking and performing life have changed through the years, but situations still occur when my reactions reflect previously forgotten and/or hidden beliefs from my cultural past. In other words, I examine some phenomenon and I reflexively interrogate my own relationships with the phenomenon, focusing on my own power and privilege compared with those of the group in which I am conducting research. Therefore, while I investigate the social, political, and economic contexts that have shaped my perspective, I can recognize myself as a potential oppressor, an important revelation that influences me as a researcher, especially in vulnerable communities.

Freire (1970) developed the concept that the oppressed need to come to a critical consciousness of the causes of their oppression. In this essay, I propose that as researchers, we must recognize our own cultural perspectives and how they are influenced by the dominant culture. Possibly we are not even conscious of our potential for participating in oppression. Such conscientization of my role
as oppressor resonates with the plea of Freire (2005) that teachers be educated as cultural workers, but here, my suggestion is that we think in the same way about ourselves as researchers—as cultural workers who have the intention of including those voices that are often not heard, or even worse, that are ignored.

To conduct research that pushes against the grain of cultural norms that create oppression, it is necessary to recognize the people with whom we conduct research not as subjects or informants, nor even solely as participants, but rather as our collaborators in the research. This epistemology opens the opportunity to participate in emancipatory research (Street, 2003) in which we conduct research as a participant with other participants instead of for them. This causes us to have a counter-hegemonic and counter-institutionalized ethic that doesn’t exacerbate inequalities, and that permits the documentation and denunciation of injustices in the same words as the other participants. In this way, research serves to problematize the representation of Others, and to create a bridge between the excluded and the included at the same time that it erases the separation between subject and object (Street, 2003).

CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN MY OWN WORK

Combining the methodology of autoethnography with critical pedagogy permits me to push against the grain of norms established by the dominant society, problematizing my own actions and practices from a sociocultural perspective. Since I conduct research with vulnerable and marginalized populations, it is important to incorporate a methodology that forces me to examine my own cultural perspectives as a member of the dominant society, and critical autoethnography permits me to do it, examining myself in a systematic and transparent way.

To arrive at a state of critical consciousness regarding my own cultural perspectives, I need to examine how I position myself within socially constructed categories (Banks & Banks, 2012) that create or erase power and privilege: race/ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual preference, language, etc. I can recognize myself as a member of the dominant and powerful culture only by first analysing how social norms position power and privilege, and then by understanding my own cultural heritage within the dominant culture. Through intense reflection and introspection, I can understand the insidious nature of power and privilege, and the way they “reach into the very fibre” of my being, and that “are inserted in [my] actions and attitudes” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Through critical autoethnography, I can position myself in the research (Behar, 1996) to critically examine my own practices as a researcher, navigating the vulnerable spaces that require me to examine my own words and actions with the same care that guides me as I examine those of the other participants in the study. My vulnerability also causes me to be more conscious of other people, which many times guides my selection of the data I want to include in the narrative. As the result of this intensified awareness of vulnerability due to my role as a participant in the study, I feel the necessity of
obtaining the permission of each participant to publish the results of the inquiry and to present them in public venues. Ethics are integrated into the very fabric of study.

This methodology emerged organically as I was writing an article to examine my own pedagogical practices. My work includes poetry and narrative, as well as more traditional research. In the examples that follow, I include illustrations that demonstrate how critical autoethnography allows me to interrogate my research as well as my pedagogical practices. Conducting research and writing within the theoretical framework of this methodology has caused me to become aware that conscientization is not a static state. At the same time that I arrive at a state of conscientization in one aspect of my work, my perspectives based on my heritage in the dominant culture surge forth in another situation, and once again I act from that ingrained perspective. While I interpret my own work, I visualize conscientization as a process that occurs repeatedly insofar as we remain open to being vulnerable through introspection and to admitting our roles as oppressors. With these illustrations, I show the potential of critical autoethnography for helping us as researchers to distance ourselves from the perspectives of the dominant culture that shaped our beliefs and practices as oppressors. This perspective leads the way for listening and hearing words and their diverse meanings that are based on the cultural context from which I come and against which I push.

GOOD INTENTIONS PAVE THE WAY TO HIERARCHY

I began to combine autoethnography and critical pedagogy without knowing that I was inventing an innovative methodology. That is, I knew I was using autoethnography as a methodology and critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework, but it had not occurred to me that this combination was a different methodology. I had already read extensively about both autoethnography and critical pedagogy, and when I began to write my text, it seemed natural to refer to both to establish my methodology. The text emerged from three liminal moments over a seven-year period. The first occurred in the context of the research study that informed my doctoral dissertation. I had been working as an interpreter in a public health clinic for Spanish-speaking women for their prenatal care and their family planning appointments. I was spending 20 hours a week working with them, and since I was the only English speaker they knew and trusted, they called me constantly to ask for help with doctor appointments or teacher conferences, or to ask if I could help them with getting some basic support. I attended a church where people were always ready to share, and they donated mountains of clothes, furniture, etc. I stored everything in my garage, and after a while, I realized that this project was more than I could handle alone, especially with my fulltime work in the university, my work at the clinic, and my doctoral students. The idea occurred to me to design a course that would include service-learning. After a year of listening to class discussions and reading student reflections, I decided to examine the reciprocal friendships I observed developing between the students and the families with whom they spent
50 hours per semester. I also decided to establish a work day on the first Saturday of the semester when the students came to my garage to separate and divide the donated articles and to deliver them to the families, who referred to this as *la dispensa* [gifts of help and love].

The second semester that I did it, the students reacted less than favourably. They told me they had not liked the practice because it was “like observing animals at the zoo” when we went in a truck to deliver the items. As part of the narrative for my dissertation, I included the story of the workday without mentioning the students’ comments. Then when I defended my dissertation, two committee members questioned the practice. One commented, “Kris, I don’t think you understand what you are doing with this practice.” You are establishing social hierarchy, with the students as the “haves” and the families as the “have-nots.” Her words shocked me. They caused my second liminal moment.

The third moment occurred at the end of my first semester as a tenure-track professor when I had my end-of-year evaluation. The Director of the School of Education and my Department Head had read an article (2003) that I wrote based on my dissertation research (2003). In the article, I presented only the positive aspects of the service-learning experience, and they asked me about the “dark side” of the program. Then I remembered the words of my students and my doctoral committee members, and once again I felt the shock of a liminal moment. So I began a period of reflection and introspection, and from that time came two articles, both of which examined the practice of the workday using the lens of critical pedagogy: “Troubling the Tide: The Perils and Paradoxes of Service-Learning in Immigrant Communities” (2009) and “Good Intentions Pave the Way to Hierarchy: A Retrospective Autoethnographic Approach” (2009). Since I was already familiar with autoethnography as a methodology, I wrote both articles from a personal perspective, examining my practice and trying to understand my actions through a detailed examination of the sociocultural environment that had caused me to establish the workday. This article was my first experimentation in combining autoethnography with critical pedagogy, which I presented as two distinct methodologies.

4/16: PUBLIC TRAGEDY COLLIDES WITH PERSONAL TRAUMA

I continued experimenting with autoethnography as a methodology that did not intersect with critical pedagogy. I wrote about the shootings at Virginia Tech, the university where I teach and where I am an Associate Professor, in order to understand what had happened. I was in my office when 4/16/2007 occurred. The event affected me in an unexpected way, leaving me desolate and inconsolable, almost at the point of not being able to function in either my personal or professional life. After spending time trying to understand why it had affected me so gravely, I began to read the work of Carolyn Ellis and Laurel Richardson, and I realized it was possible to write as a way of understanding my situation. From that period of
intensive reflection and introspection, I came to understand that I was suffering from having not taken time to grieve the death of my mother, who had died in January 2006. I used the literary techniques of narration and poetry to write a text about my personal experience (2011), which served as a cathartic experience that led me into a state of peace and consolation. “[I] narrated my own experience, because through it, [I] could understand more deeply what had seemed incomprehensible [to me]” (Bénard Calva, 2014, p. 18), and thus I could resume a normal life. As it has turned out, many people who have read this essay have written to tell me that it helped them to understand their reactions in the face of some tragedy, whether public or personal. As Stacy Holman Jones (2005) says:

Autoethnography is a blurred genre …a response to the call …it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art … making a text present …refusing categorization …believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (p. 765, cited in Denzin, 2006, 420)

I said in my own text:

Therapy and healing through powerful academic writings.
I dissected the things I didn’t do but should have, the things I did but shouldn’t have.

Trips to conferences: Tampa, San Juan, San Francisco, Mexico.
To the tune of the death dirge that accompanied every thought every day.
Too much busyness.
I lived in yoga clothes. I ate organic food. I followed the workbook’s advice and detoxed my system. I practiced serenity. I breathed so deeply I felt light-headed.
The emptiness filled with peace. (p. 147)

Only after the publication of my text, “4/16: Public Tragedy Collides with Personal Trauma” was I able to move on.

THE COAL MINER’S DAUGHTER GETS A PH.D.

My next autoethnographic text, which once again uses the lens of critical pedagogy, resulted in a poem, “The Coal Miner’s Daughter Gets a Ph.D.” (2011a). Using poetry, I examined my trajectory as a coal miner’s daughter who through the years came to be an associate professor in a university. Through the methodology of performative autoethnography, I examined the influences that had caused me to perceive myself as an outsider in the university community. I also examined how the mystery has influenced my work with the Latino community. I questioned how I position/reposition the essence of my Self as I move with certain fluidity between my roots and my academic position:
G. A. TILLEY-LUBBS

I write to understand mystery.
To grapple.
To struggle.
To accept.
To release
Notions of self-doubt.

…

I am a coal miner’s daughter.

…

Conducting research in the Latino community.
Still …
Interrogating power, privilege, and whiteness.
I am now a university professor.
Reflecting, writing, and performing as inquiry. (Ellis & Bochner, 2001; Richardson, 1998)

Just as with my text about the shootings, many people have told me that reading this poem has helped them to know that other people were able to obtain professional position in the academy despite their working class backgrounds. I have performed this poem in Mexico, Chile, and the United States, and in each place, people have commented to me, “That was my dad. He was a miner/migrant worker.”

CROSSING THE BORDER: (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHY THAT TRANSCENDS IMMIGRATION/IMAGINATION

The next text in which I used autoethnography in combination with critical pedagogy has an ethnographic context. I presented and interpreted what I had learned from a research trip to Mexico. I interviewed the families of five women whom I had been interviewing for the seven years they had been living in my city. I collaborated with those women to design a study to investigate the impact their immigration had on the families that stayed behind. The women gave me the questions they wanted me to ask their families, and they spoke with their families to pave the way for the interviews. Their families opened their homes and their hearts to share with me the pain of losing a daughter/sister/aunt, because without legal immigration documents, it was not possible for them to return to Mexico to visit their families.

First I wrote a narrative essay about the research, and when I submitted it to Qualitative Inquiry, I received a letter from Norman Denzin, telling me “There is too much telling and not enough showing. I want a manuscript that enacts its own reflexivity as your poem does [The Coal Miner’s Daughter Gets a Ph.D.],” just as
Bud Goodall (2008) tells us in his advice for writing qualitative inquiry narratives. I returned to the essay, and I removed all the words that weren’t necessary for communicating the power of the data and interpretations that had emerged from the transcribed manuscripts. As I did so, I became aware of my own power and privilege as compared to the women and their families, which I include throughout the resultant poem, “Border Crossing: (Auto)Ethnography that Transcends Immigration/Imagination” (2011b):

Lina left San Juan Bautista, Oaxaca;  
Marisol left Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua;  
Lupe left Tonalá, Jalisco.  
Laura left Santa Fe, Jalisco;  
Gisela left Santa Fe to join her sister Laura;  
Me. I never left anywhere I couldn’t return to.  
Never. (pp. 386–387)

I also gave the details of my encounter with the immigration guard at the airport in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, which is on the border with El Paso, Texas, because I wasn’t carrying with me the paper I had filled out on the plane and in which I gave information about my stay in Mexico. The guard cancelled my passport, saying:

“My people need them to travel to your country  
So you need them to travel to mine.”

…

Two cancelled passports.  
Illegals.  
You can go to jail for being in Mexico without papers.”

The same as Lina, Marisol, Lupe, Laura, and Gisela,

Never in jail  
Except the prison of their own fear  
Of getting caught  
And put in jail.  
Not the same at all.  
I do have rights.  
I do have papers.  
I do have power and privilege.  
I can cross the border whenever I want  
From north to south to north to south to north ….  
One angry border guard.  
Two cancelled passports.  
Not the cancellation or negation of our rights  
As human beings  
As US citizens
Our white selves free to roam anywhere in Mexico
Or the US
Or almost anywhere else. (p. 395)

While I was changing the narrative to a poem, more questions than answers appeared. I began to articulate the doubts that had been bothering me since the time I began conducting research in the Latino community. I realized that I don’t have the right to speak for anyone, and even my right to interpret the words of anyone is limited:

(Auto)ethnography
The auto is correct.
I can try to analyse/understand/interpret
My own words/thoughts/perceptions
But I can’t even be sure of that.
Ethnography.
I can report what I heard/translated/interpreted
When I heard/translated/interpreted it.
Would they have said the same the week/month/year before?
Would they say the same next week/month/year?
I can only report what I heard/translated/interpreted
At that specific time.
And nothing more.
I can’t determine what people mean
By their words.
Their subtexts
Filtered
By my perspective.
My subtexts.
I can only report what I heard/translated/interpreted.
At that specific time
In my life and theirs. (p. 400)

I realized it wasn’t possible for me to ever know the Truth, since for me, a single Truth doesn’t exist. I became aware of the complexity of the human being and of my inability to interpret the words of other people. I can report what someone says in an interview, and of course, I am the researcher who chooses what to include in the text, but for me, fixed interpretations don’t exist.

This text represented a liminal moment in my development as a researcher. Since the time I began to study for my doctorate, the idea of being an expert with the right to interpret the words of others, of analysing their actions and coming to conclusions regarding their true motives, had bothered me greatly. This text served
to help me realize, in an unforeseen way, that by combining autoethnography and critical pedagogy, it’s possible to interrogate and problematize any situation or circumstance.

**THE BAPTISM/EL BAUTIZO**

After writing “Border Crossing,” I continued to think about my positionality in the Spanish-speaking community, especially after my Mexican American grandson was born in 2010. Once again I wrote as a way of conducting research, this time to examine my own positionality/power/privilege, but also to interrogate socially constructed borders. Throughout the text of “The Baptism/El bautizo,” (2013), I refer to the friendships/relationships that I described in “Border Crossing,” contrasting my position as mother/surrogate grandmother for the women with whom I collaborated to conduct that research project with that of being the grandmother of my daughter’s baby. Although I had attended the baptisms of those grandchildren of my heart, this time I was attending the baptism of my grandson by blood:

Insider-outsider.
Surrogate grandmother/mother.
Friend.
This time, there’s no surrogate status.
This time, I am the grandmother.
By blood.
Not just by heart.
This time, Dan and I
Witness the baptism of our grandson

David Isaac Hernández. (p. 2)

Thus I was able to connect “the autobiographical and the personal with the cultural and the social” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix).

During this time, I have developed my desire to write as inquiry, and I have also developed my passion for writing in literary forms, probably the result of my specialized studies in Spanish literature. When I write my poems, I hear in my mind the voices of Miguel de Unamuno, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Federico García Lorca, and many more, drowning me in a deluge of words and images, at the same time that critical spirit becomes reality with the combination of autoethnography and critical pedagogy. As T. S. Eliot says:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot, 1971, p. 144)
NOTE


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CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE VULNERABLE SELF AS RESEARCHER


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SECTION 2
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS PEDAGOGY
(OR HOW IT TEACHES)
SILVIA BÉNARD CALVA

2. OUR WILL TO CONSTRUCT A HORIZONTAL BRIDGE BETWEEN UNEVEN LATITUDES

ABSTRACT
This chapter presents an analysis of a course taught in the fall semester of 2013 simultaneously in two countries, Mexico and the United States, through videoconference. Its purpose is to explore through a critical lens issues regarding language, technology, and how participants—one professor from Virginia Tech and one from Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, and eleven students, two from Mexico and nine from the US—performed multicultural interactions among themselves. This reflection is framed within the two theoretical and methodological approaches that informed the course itself: Autoethnography and critical pedagogy.

THE INVITATION
On Skype:
“Silvia,” said Kris, my friend and colleague from Virginia Tech, “we should teach a critical autoethnography class together. We could have students from Mexico and from the United States and meet every week on videoconference. Then we can edit a book with articles from the participants, part of them written in English and part of them written in Spanish. Wouldn’t that be great?”
“Yes…. Let me see if we can arrange it here so that students from the graduate program, and even undergrads, can take the class”
“Great!”

***
Oh, Kris! Publish a book with our contributions? That’s so much! Yet, teaching an autoethnography video class together, sounds interesting. We could do a good job and also through the class I can make this approach better known in Mexico, at least in my university. Also as so many years have passed since I took my graduate courses at the University of Texas in Austin, it would be interesting for me to compare and contrast the dynamics of the graduate seminars here in our doctoral program and those taught in the two different universities from the USA. That would be a good reference for me, as I very often wonder about the differences among universities in Mexico and those in the USA, particularly regarding their quality.
I should give it a try.
A few days later, I talk with the Head of the Graduate Program in Cultural Sociology:

“I’m organizing a videoconference graduate course with my colleague from Virginia Tech on autoethnography, to be taught simultaneously in both universities. Do you think it could be part of the courses taught in our program?”

“Our students cannot participate in any other courses besides the mandatory ones. The program is not flexible enough to allow for such an option.”

Then, I talk with the Head of the Sociology Department:

“Could we offer a videoconference course on autoethnography as an option for our undergraduate students?”

“Yes, that sounds like a very good idea. But you have to talk to students and make sure that there are at least ten willing to register for the course. Otherwise the university will not agree to either offer it as a regular course, or for you teach it as part of your workload.”

There are not ten undergraduate students that would be willing to take the course and fewer if the readings are in English. Besides—as I remember Yvonna Lincoln’s comment at a workshop at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) a couple of years ago—younger people may not have enough to tell yet using autoethnography.

I decide to go ahead and teach the course “informally,” having two “students” from Mexico: My research assistant, Marilú, who has been reading articles on the topic and who began translating some of them to Spanish, and a graduate student, David, for whom I am chair and Kris is a member of his dissertation committee. David is interested in the topic because he has decided to use autoethnography as a research strategy. They both have agreed to take the seminar, also “informally.”

Kris designs the syllabus and sends it to me a couple of days before the first day of class. It is mostly organized around the Handbook of Autoethnography. I’m glad I bought it at the last ICQI and was willing to carry it all the way back to Mexico. I get so tired from traveling that I really consider what to carry with me so that I can successfully get back home.

THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

A day previous to the start of the class, our technician in the universidad, Néstor, calls me to find out the CODCE number from Virginia Tech. I write an email to Kris requesting the number. She doesn’t know what that is about, but promises she will ask her assistant. The assistant doesn’t know either. Marilú goes to Néstor’s office to ask what that is: “It means codifier de-codifier, but ask them by the brand, ask them for their Polycom number.” That is how we establish our understanding of the key to open remote communication through Internet, at least for the following day.

The video room is in a building different from that of my office in the Department of Sociology. It is a small classroom, probably six by eight meters, with a wooden
table surrounded by chairs and a big television on one wall. There we are, the three of us with our computers turned on, and Néstor, all ready to start the videoconference once we hear the phone call from Virginia Tech.

“It is a nice place,” I mention.

“Yes” replies Marilú “I didn’t know about this facility.”

“Neither did I,” says David.

“I was in a doctoral exam,” I say, “with one of the four professors participating through videoconference and it worked out perfectly. It felt almost as if he were sitting at the table with us!”

They are calling. I feel my heart beat fast. I want to see Kris. I want to reencounter the students I met and worked with when I was a Visiting Scholar at VT. There, I see them all sitting in the classroom…. Suddenly the image is fragmented and we cannot hear clearly what they say. It is all frozen.

Then, we listen to the technician on the other end, speaking fast, loudly and clearly:

“How many megas do you have?”

“One,” replies Néstor, simply and quietly.

“One mega?!” With eyes wide open the lady on the Virginia Tech remote side asks.

Just as it disappeared, the connection starts again and works out for a while. We see them clearly; we can listen to what they are saying:

“Hi Silvia” says Kris.

“Hi Silvia” say Rong and Kelly.

“Hola Silvia” say Pam and Dyanis.

“Hi everybody!” I say.

“Let’s get started,” says Kris “why don’t we each introduce ourselves?”

***

Whatever happened during the class at the beginning, including the issue about what the one mega issue means technologically, doesn’t make us look good. I can sense an abyss between this highly technological university in the USA and our Mexican public university.

My doubts are present all semester long, jumping up every time the connection goes wrong, which is quite often. Nevertheless, it is not until I begin writing this chapter that I go to the videoconference area and talk to Néstor, who kindly explains to me some of the issues we faced during the semester.

“Do we really have only one mega?”

“Nooo, the university has much more than that, but I was talking about that specific piece of equipment, which can hold no more than one mega.”

“So that was not the problem?”

“The problem with us now is that the authorities have recently decided that whatever comes into the university, it has to pass through the firewall, which operates as an antivirus barrier, verifying that the information is safe and thus will
not harm the university. So, if there is too much information coming in, it gets stuck in the firewall.”

“Oh! So that is the reason why, many times during the semester, you called the systems department people, and asked them to jump the firewall?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“And how can we tell which side of the videoconference has to fix the transmission when things go wrong?”

“If they are receiving a frozen image, or the words are cut, it is on their end; and the same for us.”

W. Thomas’ (1928) well-known premise comes to my mind: “Regardless of whether they are true or false, what people think has real consequences” (p. 572). We carried on the burden of being at fault because of our lack of technological aids; regardless of whether there were problems on both sides of the videoconference, or that the participants at VT had similar concerns when communication was cut, Marilú, David, and I often thought it was due to the technological and/or bureaucratic flaws at our university.

THE FOLLOWING CLASS

This time we are communicating fluently. “This is great,” I tell myself. “Now we can have a regular seminar.” The classroom at VT looks very big; it is five or six times bigger than ours. Students are scattered all over the place, some of them talking among themselves, others participating as Kris asks questions. Nevertheless, we now have a hard time listening to what they are saying, and we cannot easily understand their English.

As I position myself closer and closer to the screen to be able to follow the class dynamics, Marilú and David seem to get further away from my view, from my attention, from the other crowd. They, on the other side, are very many, eight or nine, different accents, different types. “Why doesn’t David speak louder? Why don’t he and Marilú try to participate more, and include themselves in the discussion?”—I think to myself, but I do not tell them. “Please, I need a class break!”

At the end of the class, assuming the remote side of the class is unplugged, I comment in Spanish “¡Estoy exhausta! (I’m exhausted!)” “Silvia, I heard you!” Pam, one of the students on the other side says. “It is true,” I reply. “Don’t you get awfully tired during class as well?”

TALKING PAST ONE ANOTHER²

Kris and I taught Autoethnography in a summer course when I was a Visiting Scholar at Virginia Tech during my sabbatical year in 2011. We met in Long Island in a workshop with Carolyn Ellis, where I discovered autoethnography and began to use it as method in 2009. In 2013, when Kris invited me to teach this second edition of the course, called Critical Autoethnography, I did not pay enough attention to
the first word in the class name. To my understanding, autoethnography was critical and that was it.

Then, when I reviewed the syllabus, Freire’s name, together with those of other critical pedagogues, came up during the first section of the class. I did not pay too much attention. I just overlooked it as I thought Kris included him as a reference, the same as in Long Island when having a conversation about critical pedagogy with César Cisneros and me. We were having a hard time figuring out why she still considered this author to be so important as we had grown further and further away from him. In Mexico, Freire’s *Pedagogía del oprimido* (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), together with the work of many Marxist authors, was in most of the social sciences’ undergraduate curricula, at least during the seventies. Thus, at the beginning of the eighties, when Cesar and I got our undergraduate degrees, many students like us had usually read more radical literature than we were willing to take on.

Years later, I taught the action-research class many times at my university in the sociology undergraduate program. This was because for several years before I entered the university, I had been organizing developmental programs with peasant women and inhabitants of a suburban locality in a northern municipality from the city where I live in Aguascalientes.

It is not until after five or six classes when Freire and critical pedagogy are mentioned on the other end of the conference class that I say:

“Freire = *Investigación – acción* [action research], right?”

“No, Freire = critical pedagogy. Action-research is more practical and critical pedagogy can be completely theoretical.”

“Critical pedagogy, Freire? …”

“Yes, critical pedagogy. Besides Freire, it relates to authors such as Habermas, Adorno….”

“Oh! The Frankfurt School.”

“Yes, but not only. Also, and most importantly, Joe Kincheloe, Peter McLaren….”

“Oh-oh, I’m in trouble,” I think to myself. “How could I have passed through half of the content of the seminar? That is serious, I can’t believe it!”

With urgency, once the class session is over, Marilú, David, and I get together in my office and discuss the topic, search for texts through the virtual library, and decide to contact a researcher from the department of education in our university so that she can help us fill such a void ASAP. My colleague recommends someone else to talk to. Our Education Department is a very good one, but not only that; it has also been the major architect of the evaluation tests for students and teachers in Mexican elementary and middle schools. In fact, the first head of the *Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa* (National Institute of Education Evaluation) was from our university, and some of his colleagues have collaborated with the *Instituto* since then. That indicates how far they position themselves from the critical pedagogy perspective.
We keep searching and come to realize how little has been done using the critical pedagogy perspective in Mexico. Besides, whatever we find about the topic, it is not in either of our disciplines, sociology or psychology, but of course, in education, and mostly at a national university system in Mexico called *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.*

Then, in the following class, Kris gives us the name of a professor at the University of New Mexico in Las Cruces, Luis Huerta, a Mexican scholar who has been working from the critical pedagogy perspective and who can give us a view of its development in Mexico. We contact him through Skype and he narrates to us, corroborating what we have found, a short history of critical pedagogy in Mexico, and how little research has been done in our country within that perspective. He also confirms and makes it clear to us, that there is a group of researchers in Chihuahua, Mexico, who began offering the first doctoral degree on critical pedagogy in the world. They have created the *Instituto de Pedagogía Crítica* (Institute of Critical Pedagogy), where the doctoral program is now in fact being offered.

So, Freirean thought and its uneven impact on our disciplines and countries, turns out to be another area in which the understandings between the group from Virginia Tech and those of us in Mexico have to catch up.

### ANOTHER CLASS

A couple of hours before the seminar is scheduled every week, Kris e-mails all of us an assignment for the class.

“Silvia” Marilú suddenly shows up in my office and asks, “Did you see Kris’s e-mail? She wants us to do that for this class!”

“It’s too late for that!” I think to myself. Then I tell Marilú, “I think it’s too late for assignments, but let’s see if we can do it before the videoconference.”

A couple of hours later, in the videoconference room and being connected to the VT class, I hear a lot of noise. Students are talking more than usual.

“Hi Silvia,” says Kris.

“Hi, what’s going on? They are all talking…”

“Están bicheando (they are bitching), they are mad because of the assignment I e-mailed earlier.”

“Well, they are not the only ones” I say.

I hear no answer. Is it because she doesn’t listen to me? Should I say it again? No, that is something we have to talk about away from students…. I wonder, I’m puzzled: Is it because she was planning the class and she thought it was a good idea…. And it is… But aren’t we supposed to plan the assignments together? …. So, I am not the co-teaching professor of this seminar. I am not, and in the students’ eyes, I fear, it confirms that I am not a professor in the same terms.

***
The differences in the institutional status given to the class at Virginia Tech and at the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, becomes more and more noticeable as they shape our interactions throughout the semester. At VT there is a formal graduate seminar with a professor and nine students. In the UAA, on the contrary, we participate as volunteers in an informal relationship, not just among ourselves in Mexico, but also with the class members in Virginia. This is particularly relevant in my case because I had assumed I was supposed to be another professor in the classroom, but I had no institutionalized authority. And last but not least, the readings and the class are both in English, which is not our mother tongue. Finally, because the class is not included in my scheduled activities in the university, I feel torn between what I am expected to do, and what I am doing “informally.”

AND ANOTHER CLASS

“Ok, we will review the chapters assigned for today from the Handbook. They were 16, 17, 18 and 19, right?” We hear Kris asking, and many students agreeing from the other side of the videoconference.

I turn my head towards Marilú and David with a puzzled expression on my face. Marilú quietly laughs and David quietly says, “I didn’t know that!”

We are talking quietly and in Spanish so that just we can hear: “Nooo we didn’t either, did Kris mention it last class?” Marilú asks. “Darn, it was in the syllabus!” I say. “Look, it was marked in the syllabus, and I complain to my students when they don’t check their syllabus to make sure what the next class assignment will be, ha, ha, ha, I feel like a student again.”

Incidents such as those narrated above open our paths as classes develop toward the end of the semester. It seems more and more that they have their class and we have ours. We are less active in the assignments; more tired in our attempts to be part of the class, and less present during the seminars due to technological problems.

INTERLUDE

I am wondering which approach to take in writing this chapter and feeling a bit stuck, so I ask my good friend and colleague at the university to take a break and go for coffee. We sit down outside and start talking about Nana, my daughter who has been living in Brazil for nine months.

“I talked to Nana on Skype,” I say, “and she got mad at me. She asked me if I had any gossip from Aguascalientes and I remembered something, told it to her, and at the end I said, “So this is some gossip from your pueblo [town]. And she said: “It is your pueblo too and people are the same all over the world.”

“I agree with her for getting mad at you,” my friend said. “You always talk about Aguascalientes as if you disdain us, as if you coming from the capital are superior.”

“But I’m critical of Mexico City as well, and it is an expression to say en tu pueblo to refer to one’s own hometown. Besides, I do not consider myself to be us
from the capital as against you, people from Aguascalientes. I don’t really feel part of any ‘us,’ you know?”

“Well, but when you criticize Aguas, we feel that you do, that you think people from the capital are superior.”

And as I talked to my friend I wondered: Is that really true? Is it really the case that I have no parameters to refer to as being better than the ones I criticize in Mexico or when I observe and analyse other countries? Well, I ought to be honest enough to say no. That is not true. I have struggled with issues related to those parameters since I settled in Aguascalientes. I even wrote a whole book trying to figure out why living in a middle size city in the interior of Mexico was so traumatic to me (Bénard, 2014), and something similar happens to me when I think about cultural practices, in this case, in academic circles as I compare Mexico and the USA.

***

David comes to my office once and I mention that the students from Virginia Tech have made a very good poster about the class to present in the 2014 Conference of Higher Education Pedagogy in VT.

“Those VT women students are amazing,” I said. “They finished a poster from one day to another. They are so good! We are really far behind in our productivity as compared to them. No wonder we are always behind in measurements of international standards.”

“If we want to be productive in those terms, as neoliberals are dictating, yes we are. But is that what we really want?”

I don’t know, I don’t know…. That’s another life struggle of mine. I did my graduate studies at the University of Texas in Austin, having a very modest scholarship, which I supplemented by working as a research assistant. I had to study like I never had before in my life. I read tons of books and photocopies in English, and worked ten hours a week, which became twenty when my scholarship ended two years after I started the program. I lived alone most of those first four years of graduate school, when I didn’t do much more than study and work. I can still remember Gideon Sjoberg, my master’s thesis advisor, telling me “Ms. Bénard, you can’t afford to have many friends. You don’t have time,” and I thought he was right.

That probably made sense to me because of my father’s influence—a son of European immigrants in Mexico, my French grandfather and my German grandmother—who studied in Canada. He became an engineer at McGill University. Right after that, he got a job at a General Electric plant in Wisconsin in 1929, and he was deported to Mexico in 1931 due to the Depression.

When I was studying my undergraduate degree in sociology in Mexico City, I told him about the assembly line in the Charlie Chaplin movie we had seen in class. Then he said: “I worked on one of those, and I tried to help the woman next to me when she couldn’t make it on time, but she got mad at me. I don’t know why!” I kept silent. I decided not to answer that I thought she was probably feeling
threatened about her ability to accomplish the job, and therefore she feared she could get fired.

Given my father’s background, we were brought up being constantly asked to do something all the time, to either study or work or exercise, anything, but never at rest. That included the eight of us brothers and sisters, and my mother. My father just couldn’t stand to even see us sitting round the table after we ate our main meal at three in the afternoon.

So my life in Texas as a graduate student followed my father’s path. That is why my adviser’s comment made perfect sense to me at that time.

Those ideas and guilty feelings about not always being at work have come and gone, well, for all my life. These last twenty some years, all of which I have lived in Aguascalientes, I have confronted myself with the need to change my working habits; first because I got pregnant before I finished my dissertation, and then, I had a new-born when I moved to Aguascalientes, with practically no informal support networks. At that time, I had to learn to revalue other parts of life, and to adjust myself to working mostly during the time my son was at the day-care centre, six hours a day. It was through him that I learned life was more than working all the time.

I still sway between the desire to work more, deeply admiring those who do so, and trying to balance out my life with other activities, multiplying my interactions, and having some free time. So when David questions me about productivity, I realize I am again flirting with my Anglo-Saxon roots.

When I met Kris, and still up to this time, I wonder how she manages to work so hard. And as I read accounts of USA professors, such as Carolyn Ellis (2011) and Leon Anderson (2011), about the way they kill themselves working and struggling to “have a life” at the same time, I tell myself: “Silvia, you are not being serious enough. You will never be as good as they are. Leon was your classmate in Austin, and see how far he’s gone, not just academically, but even trying to do serious leisure activities.” And Carolyn, who loves her dogs, writes:

Zen chases Buddha around the room. When the two dogs connect, they roll and topple in play. I watch them and think about how I’d like to be more with them. Then, “in a minute,” I tell them as the ping sound and flashing icon at the bottom of my screen tells me another message has arrived.

Checking e-mail of course takes more than an hour, and now it’s too late to walk. In the dark of my office, the dogs lie quietly at my feet. I can feel their disappointment. (2011, p. 163)

At this point in my life, I realize I honestly don’t want to and can’t work to the point of exhaustion and elimination of everything else, and as much as I admire Leon for his achievements and for being as good a person as he was in grad school, and still appears to be in his article, I just refuse to multitask whether at work, with family, or even while being at leisure, as he loves to practice sky diving. He writes:
I have graded papers while waiting for clouds to clear at the DZ. I spent a
daylong “wind hold” at Skydive Arizona reading David Karp’s *Is It Me or
My Meds?* And I put together the syllabus for my sociology of mental illness
course after sunset at the Bent Prop Café. (2011, p. 151)

Besides, as my university has become more and more bureaucratic, the same
as other universities in Mexico, and also in the USA, and in many other countries,
at least on the American continent, I wonder whether my job as it is now is
what I really want. It seems like we academics have become so concerned with
productivity, and with hundreds of other bureaucratic issues in our daily workloads,
that we have forgotten, at least very many in my generation in Mexico, that we
studied social sciences because we strongly believed we could contribute to building
a better world, an issue certainly not very commonly discussed among us in academic
debates anymore.

Following my dilemma, I read *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown
(2010), as well as other books by her. She connects me with that part of myself that
refuses to be what I do. But when I’m trying to survive in my job, I tend to escape
from her suggestions: “Silvia,” I tell myself, “Brené could decide to work half time
at the university because she’s already very successful and her books and workshops
are very popular. Besides, she has a husband and you don’t. Careful there, once you
make the move, you won’t be able to go back and will probably never recover.”

AND CLASSES GO ON

I more and more feel off base as a professor.
I view myself as not being taken seriously by students at VT.
I know I do not speak English as well as native speakers,
I have not done all the reading assignments.
It is like being a Mexican graduate student again:
Not good enough,
Not having done it all,
Struggling with my English skills.
Again, as it was thirty years ago,
Feeling systematically at a disadvantage.

AND ON

Okay, I will accept that I am in a peculiar situation. I will also accept that I am
imperfect and show myself to be vulnerable, as Brené Brown suggests we do.
Besides, I do have certain strengths. I am a professor and whether or not I participate
on their grading, I do have a doctorate degree and they don’t.

Try again.
Do your best.
OUR WILL TO CONSTRUCT A HORIZONTAL BRIDGE BETWEEN UNEVEN LATITUDES

Humbly accept what you know about the topic of the class.
Speak English as well as you can.
Make comments to their chapter drafts.

AND ON

In a video class:

“What’s the difference between autoethnography and autobiography?” Kris asks. Long silence. I answer.

“The former is about a specific topic and the latter is about a whole life.”

“That is, according to my training as a creative writer,” a student says, “a genre called memoir.”

“A Mexican author, Mercedes Blanco, has argued that autobiographies intend to be “objective,” while autoethnography argues that the author is positioned in the narrative,” I reply again.

“I have never heard of such a thing,” she says.

That is it. Period. So, following my humble mandate, I say, “Thank you.”

AND ON

“I also need to assume my responsibility as a professor and review each of the drafts students sent us to read,” I command myself. “I will do my part.”

It takes me about five or six days of work to go through the manuscripts. I decide not to make comments on the texts, but instead, write an e-mail including suggestions and encouraging their good work. Most students answer right away and thank me very politely for the work I did, and for my comments. They mention that they will consider my suggestions to review and resubmit their papers. Only one student, the next class day, says: “I’m not in the stage for general comments yet.”

LAST DAY OF CLASS

Kris comes to Mexico and we have the last class with the group of students at Virginia Tech with Marilú, David, she, and I here in the conference room at the universidad. As soon as we connect with VT, Kris says: “Silvia, how could you follow the class all semester like this? They look so far away, and it is so difficult to understand what they are saying! You should’ve told us, we could’ve done something about it!”

That makes me mad, again. I have been all semester long making an effort to listen and to pay attention to the other side of the videoconference, I have lost contact with David and Marilú, but instead of voicing my discomfort, I have spent all semester long assuming there was nothing to be done about it, and assuming that I had to put up with those inconveniences.