Owning Multiple and Complex Belongings in the Borderlands: An Autoethnography

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Abstract
This autoethnography recounts the process of developing my own agency out of a borderland life-world formed in multiple geographic sites. I use self-reflection and research to make explicit a functional inbetween space where I belong. Through Gloria Anzaldúa's work, literature from border and cultural studies, identity formation and my own qualitative research, I analyze the complexities of this space. The narratives presented illustrate a spectrum of belonging and of alienation, unpredictable and frequent mobility, and unrecognized loss. I crossed the border from the U.S. to Mexico daily to attend first grade. I learned differing cultural rules and developed tolerance for ambiguity. In Mexico City at nine, I fluctuated between being Mexican and an expat. At thirteen, nearly a Mexican teen, I moved to the U.S. After two years, I added a rural, Midwestern, US identity before returning to my birthplace in urban California. As an adult, reflexive action resulted in a sudden awareness of an encompassing image: an internal convivial borderland ambiance around and between my distinct cultural identities. This holistic redefinition gave open access to my border person identity and mindset. It made available rich and ample resources for bridging political, social, organizational and individual boundaries in all aspects of my life. My story and its analysis offer an alternative to categorical identity norms with a single belonging place. Sharing these possibilities contributes to understanding the knowledge base, abilities and skills available to border people and those with multipart cultural identities whose numbers are increasing in a globalized world.

Keywords: border person, borderlands, belonging, Anzaldúa, autoethnography, communication, Coatlicue state, reflexive action, multi-sited belongings

This autoethnographic journey recounts how discovering border personhood elucidates the satisfactions of owning multi-sited cultural belongings while learning to survive and thrive in borderlands. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., & Bochner, P., 2011). "Reflective and engaging, focused on creation and making something happen, and providing means for movement and change, autoethnography is more than a method. [I]t is a way of living and of writing life honestly, complexly, and passionately" (Holman Jones, S., Adams, T.E., & Ellis, C., Eds., 2013).

Most people looking at me and listening to me talk English conclude I am a typical American. Light brown hair, now grey, blue eyes and the small freckles sprinkled over my easily sun-burned skin give no clues to what lies beneath. It has taken me years to unravel the depths of how I came to be different from most Americans. When I speak Spanish similar questions arise, however, there is a common word in Spanish, *fronteriza*, which communicates who I am. Naming myself a border person, in English, in 1988 and incorporating borderland living into life and work in organization development gives me words to describe my differences to people on the northern side of the US/Mexico border.

In early 1991 when I read Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), I knew I'd found a kindred spirit. Her accounts helped me feel less alone and more grounded in what, to heartlanders, is an unfathomable identity. Exhortations of inclusivity, mediating divides (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 85); defining mental nepantilism and cultural collisions and the need to be "healed so that we are on both shores at once" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78) supported my own feelings and ideas. In spite of our differences, her philosophy helped resolve confusion around my tolerance for ambiguity, identity and belonging.

Many of us have multipart cultural identifications, some call them identities. For us, just one identity doesn't work and a two part hyphenated alternative may not describe us either. Narratives of living in three different cultures during childhood and multi-disciplinary analyses of the effects on belonging and identity provide clarity on behavioral responses. Next I describe how these experiences prepare me for adult reflexive action resulting in naming myself a border person, development of the concept of a border person mindset and borderland communication strategies. I show how this is analogous to the process Anzaldúa experienced as she moved toward a new mestiza consciousness and continued writing out paths for living life in the borderlands. Emphasis in her later work highlights the importance of transforming personal history into spiritual activism and is similar to an autoethnographic process. Anzaldúa's work lays the foundation for recommending continued research on alternatives to coercive assimilation, a practice which deracinates and silences cultural origins not conforming to the majority.

To the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz *life-world* means the world into which we are born, the one from which we receive assumptions about everyday life (Wagner, 1970). I expand his definition to include parts of additional life-worlds I acquired as a child.

I was born into my first life-world, in Santa Barbara, California to middle-class white Anglo Saxon protestant parents. I have no siblings. By the time I was five we lived in three different houses, in two cities and travelled by car across the deserts of California, Arizona and Texas, to arrive in El Paso, where my father began work for the U.S. government. Multiple moves continued until I returned to California to attend university.

Narrative I: Immersion in the Borderlands of El Paso/Juarez

Too young by state law to enter first grade in El Paso, my mother finds a school for me across the border in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. Every morning we board the street car that crosses the border into Juarez, get off, and walk several blocks to my school. My mother drops me off and doesn't return until five o'clock. I spend lunch and siesta time, from noon to three, with a classmate's family. I'm a five-year-old in a new culture, I don't know anyone. I don't speak Spanish. My mother and father are across the border. I spend much of the first three months crying. To comfort and quiet me, the principal sits me up on her desk in front of the sixth grade class she teaches. She looks into my blue eyes, smiles and pinches my cheek with thumb and forefinger and says "*¡ay, que chula!*" (Oh, how cute!) and I cry even harder. Yet by the end of the school year, I speak, read, write and do math in Spanish, but not in English. And, I've had an indelible Mexican "home-stay" experience with the Iglesias family that took me into their home and life.

Analysis: What a Five Year Old Can Learn in the Borderlands

Events themselves have their impacts, but as they occur within space and time and culture, they also occur within a developmental matrix of experience and capacity within an individual. To better understand what happened to me and my sense of belonging, I contextualize my early childhood experience within developmental psychological theories of attachment.

At age five, I was frightened and abandoned by my mother when she left me in a situation where the fledging underpinnings of my first life-world suddenly didn't apply. I learned fragments of a new life-world and discovered alternate ways of eating, living, speaking, thinking, and of managing my feelings of fear and abandonment. Within a few months, I began to belong in a second life-world.

But my relationship with my mother changed. I lost trust in her and distanced myself from her, especially in Mexican settings where I felt she was the foreigner and I wasn't. Teachers and an unfamiliar family offered refuge. I developed my sense of attachment not only to them, but to the culture, language, and customs in which I experienced a supportive and safe "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1960), a space necessary for child soothing and internal emotional regulation and the eventual ability of "connecting well" as an adult (Kegan, 2001). At the same time, I managed the hurt and anger of separation from my mother by cutting myself off from her emotionally and substituting an air of independence (Karen, 1990).

My father, from then on, endearingly, referred to me as a half-breed or mongrel because of my facility to move between cultures. Speaking two languages and functioning in two cultures served to help me develop agency. I felt strong and capable because of my skills. Adults asked me to interpret for them. As I managed

novelty, fear and aloneness I formed an emotional defense template of appearing independent and self-sufficient.

Narrative II: Four Mex-Pat Years: Mexico City and Guadalajara
Over the next three years I live in four new homes and go to four new schools as we move to Phoenix, Arizona, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, Bakersfield and Redding, California.

When I am nine, we move to Mexico City. At first, being a Mex-Pat is like playing on a checkerboard with missing squares. Small town casual to cosmopolitan Mexico City, public transportation and taxis, new history to learn, excavations of the indigenous past to ponder, Catholic churches everywhere, a confluence of many cultures and an automatic change of social status.

As an employee of a joint Mexican-American government commission, my father is assigned a chauffeur-interpreter and a "red card," a sort of get-out-of-jail-free card, to be shown in case of any difficulty with Mexican officials. Privileged white-skinned Americans in Mexico with government connections and economic capacity automatically moves us—me—into upper- middle-class society.

My formal education continues in three successive private schools, half day in English and at least a half day in Spanish, required by the government. My mother and I live in eight different rented houses and apartments in different sections of the city while my father works "out in the field" and comes to the city two days a month to report to headquarters. During school vacations, we travel by bus to spend time with him in outlying rural locations.

I have casual associations with expat children in Girl Scouts, YWCA and Episcopal Church activities. The one constant in this life of changing cultures, living spaces and schools is the Lopez family that we meet roller skating in Chapultepec Park. They and their two daughters my age are our connection to "normal" Mexican lower middle-class life, weekend excursions and holiday celebrations. When I leave the commercial street in an old part of the city and walk through huge wooden doors into their enclosed neighborhood I escape into welcome warmth, unconditional acceptance and lack of pretention, just like I did with the Iglesias family in Juarez. It's a relief to leave the responsibilities of expat-ness for a while. Here I am just one of the kids playing tag on smooth stone slabs between rows of single story living units. We compete with radios playing popular tunes, women talking as they hang up laundry, dogs lazing in the sun and flowers blooming in pots outside doorways.

After three years, my father is transferred to the provincial city of Guadalajara. The three of us live in only two different houses. For the first time in Mexico I have a family home. The only Protestant American in a Catholic school, I continue the back and forth-ness, the fitting-in, between a new group of expats and Mexican classmates. Sara Chavez and her sisters, daughters of a Mexican army general, and I ride a city bus to school every morning. Before we leave, Mrs. Chavez makes the sign of the cross over us and says a prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe to keep us safe.

Analysis: Re-Thinking Mex-Pat Life

Educational psychologists and sociologists offer insight into events that occurred during those years. Crossing social and language boundaries felt seamless, natural and satisfying. I flowed from one circumstance to another, in what La Framboise, Coleman, & Gerton (1993, p. 399) called *alternation,* which assumes it is possible to know and understand two different cultures and to alter behavior to fit particular social contexts.

Expats were exclusive, cliquish, preferred speaking English and seemed jealous that I had no American accent in Spanish. Or did that fact imply a lower status in their eyes? Mexicans were surprised and pleased that an American could and would sound so Mexican. Or was it the power of my privilege?

Buckingham (2008, p. 1) points out tensions I noted between an expat identity over which I had no choice and desire to be closer to middle-class Mexicans whom I assumed were similar to me in important ways and were the majority culture. I practiced border crossing between social, religious and cultural groups, even ones that conflicted (Canclini, 1992, p. 214) as if, like Giddens wrote, they were fluid, not fixed (Buckingham, 2008, p. 9).

I used power manipulations inherent in both expat and Mexican societal constructs that were bolstered by the confidence and protection I assumed my father's position afforded me. Spanish language itself supported internalizing class distinctions by mandating to whom was owed the deference of formal forms of address. When I spoke to the maid, for example, I would tell her what to do or not do using grammatical forms for what Mexican society deemed to be lower classes. I sensed that if I acted in a more egalitarian way I could be ignored. If I acted "too Mexican" with expats, I'd lose connection with them. If I was perceived by Mexicans to be a usual expat I wouldn't fit in with them. Zigmunt Bauman (2008, p. 8) might suggest that I was practicing lessons in "rational conduct," keeping options open rather than risk gaining an identity that fit so tightly, options would be given up in advance.

During this comparatively settled last year of living as a Mex-Pat in Guadalajara, my mother decided I was becoming "too Mexican" and we returned to the States, to Michigan, where my father was born and raised. It is two years before he leaves Mexico, retires and joins us in Michigan.

Narrative III: Birthright? Northern Michigan

I start high school the next year in a small city three hours south of the Canadian border. For the first time I meet my father's brother and a young second cousin who, along with me and my mother, carry the family name of Fairbanks ancestors who were early settlers to that area. Soon after we arrive I am walking down the main street and a lady stops me, looks me in the eye. "You're a Fairbanks," she says. "You have the same eyes as your grandfather." I am astounded. At a family reunion I meet relatives that grew up with my father. I'm beginning to think I belong here.

However, for the next two years, I am as miserable and out of place as I was in first grade in Juarez, feelings exacerbated by missing my father's presence and support. I know nothing about being an American teenager. No one wants to know anything about me or Mexico and I have no past with them. After two years of outsider pain, I

decide—against my mother's wishes—to change schools. Since we now live in the tiny burg close to the cherry orchard where my father was born, I choose a nearby high school and don't say a word about Mexico or my past life. I know the language now and how to dress. I am accepted by the smaller school's insiders almost immediately. During the next two years, I am a very happy, successful rural northern Michigan teenager: I play in the marching band, I am voted a cheerleader, editor of the yearbook, have a football star boyfriend, a job as a 'soda jerk' in the local drugstore and I get good grades. I work in our cherry orchard in the summers, and without mentioning it to classmates, I'm an interpreter for Mexican migrant workers. As soon as I graduate, I leave for Southern California.

Analysis: Re-Visiting a Teenage Mind

To make sense of these four years, in other than adolescent memories, I looked for explanations. The first high school community was a tightly supervised and policed traditional community with restrictions on movement and change. Members were masters at keeping insiders from deviating from their norms and at excluding outsiders (Bauman, 2008b, p. 21). Mex-Pat privileged status of race and class opened no doors here. During the first three years we lived in rented housing that was seen as less desirable than owning your own home; a Mexican, one of the Mexico City Lopez sisters, lived with us. The only Mexicans the locals knew were migrant laborers that came in the summer and left when the cherries were picked. And, we were associated with a farming community rather than an urbanized area. I was marginalized and relegated to lower status. Unlike my Mexico experience, there was no possibility of alternation or escape to a more comfortable space. The apparent independence of demanding a change seems like a repetition of the survival response I used in first grade to cover hurt. When a past identity didn't work, I took charge and substituted an air of independence for the relationships from which I was alienated.

Michigan was a completely new experience: a native father, early settler great-grandparents, family resemblance, and blood relationship to a number of locals. I had legitimate claims to birthright here. Using these facts, expertise in fitting-in and determination, I soon became a full-fledged member of a second closed community. I was ecstatic—for a while. What I didn't realize was that I had deceived myself. I was unaware then of what I had given up. To fit-in, to belong, to join, maybe even to win, I gave up some of my selves. At my fiftieth class reunion, I asked if any classmates knew I'd lived in Mexico. They didn't. I so tightly closeted my prior identifications that no one there knew the Mex-Pat, the border person, the South Westerner, or the Californian. I followed the community rules to achieve what I thought I wanted. At the same time I gave up the freedom of choice to show all of myself. I fit-in to the point that others, and I, too, believed I belonged. I even felt a twinge of guilt when I left what everyone else called "home."

Externally, I assimilated. Underneath, I longed for my Mexican self to be visible. I left for California, nearer Mexico, and friendlier to Spanish speakers. The choice I made at this crossroad, an Anzaldúan *encrucijada* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80), was a major step to owning and accepting "multiple belongings," (Bauman, 2008b, p. 24) and a reflection of the effect on me of constant change and mobility.

The First Time I Call Myself a Border Person

In California after graduate school and between careers, marriage into an orthodox Jewish family, children and traveling, questions of belonging continue. I notice the comfort of being in border areas on several continents and of living near and crossing the US/Mexico border often. In journal writing workshops, I continue efforts to make meaning out of my life experiences and examine feelings of belonging enough to imagine what real belonging might be like. I acknowledge the accumulated pain and disappointment of years of trying to fit in. I conclude that fitting in is not enough for me. Yet I'm still unwilling to pledge allegiance to any one group or culture.

I think about the cultures in which I was immersed as a child. I experience new cultures, notably African Americans, with whom I'm engaged at work and in our ethnically and racially mixed neighborhood. I consider my usual behaviors, both in business and socially. I picture how I keep expressions of each cultural identity separate from the others. I see myself vigilant, on guard, protecting each one from exposure to possible harm or rejection. Like in a video, I watch myself keep my Mexican life-world responses from appearing in the midst of discussions with rural Michigan friends. I make sure my involvement with the Jewish community does not break norms in Anglo groups and that my early white Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) learnings and Mexican identifications don't alienate my Jewish in-laws or African-American neighbors and friends. And, while doing organizational consulting I interact credibly with diverse staff groups in community agencies, schools, prisons and industry.

Reflections on these complications and complexities in my journaling, results in a sudden awareness of an alternate encompassing image: a convivial internal borderland ambiance around and between sometimes conflicting identities. I visualize an open mindscape where more than a categorical, solitary identity is accepted. I see me, as a border person, living my life among and between cultural identities. I breathe a sigh of relief and smile with pleasure and record this event. In naming this belonging space, I feel integrated. "*Completa*." As Anzaldúa wrote after releasing *la Coatlicue* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 51).

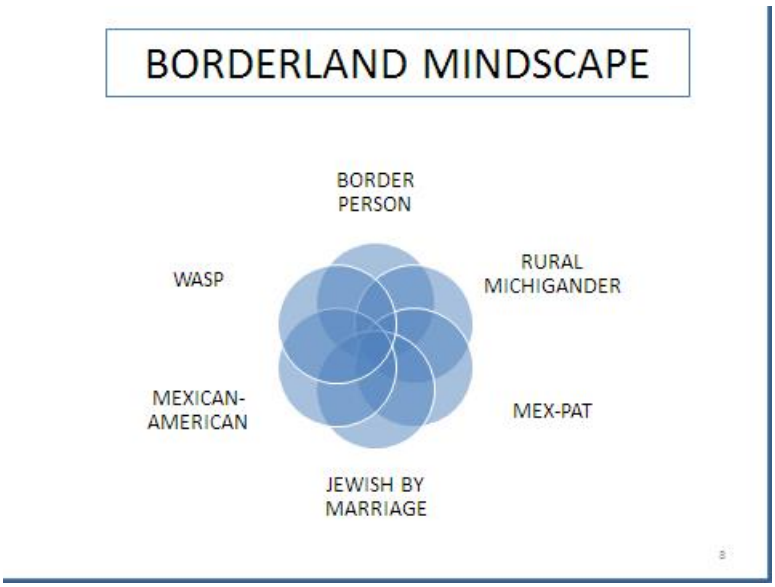

Fig. 1

For years prior to this epiphany, I suffered Coatlicue states (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 46-7). They were as wrenching as the images of Coatlicue herself. In place of her head, two rattlesnakes face each other, as if in combat. I'd argue with myself about who I really was because I was stuck in a categorical definition of identity that didn't hold all of my selves. Coatlicue wears a necklace of human hearts. My heart seemed to enclose hurts of so many people I had no power to help. I was sensitive to their pain and felt like I had no recourse to make a difference. Coatlicue's hands extend outward. I reached out my hands to the world around me, looking to connect, and found myself misunderstood. My fears of being alone and in the darkness of that fear felt like certain death, like the skulls Coatlicue bears. Evil wriggles in Coatlicue's skirt of snakes like evil in the world. These states were also brought on by others' reactions to my chameleon-like behavior that confused them when they were unsure of where I stood. My long standing addiction to fitting-in everywhere and anywhere contributed to intermittent bouts of identity crises. Not belonging anywhere dragged me down into depressions without the reward of "crossing" into "knowing" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 48). On this occasion, out of the challenges I faced and what I learned from the process, I formed a new way of perceiving myself. I became what Anzaldúa would label a *nepantlera,* a person who, in spite of and because of the difficulties, learns to live inbetween to survive and then, thrive in the borderlands.

Acting on the Vision

Becoming comfortable with this new self-concept, I continued to play openly with border ideas. Participating with the Association of Borderlands Studies and the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, I found kinship with border person scholars. These *nepantleros*, from several continents, include Anthony I. Asiwaju (Nigeria/Benin), Francisco Oda Angel (Spain/Gibraltar), Oscar J. Martinez and Jose Manuel Valenzuela (US/Mexico). I identified a border person mindset and communication competencies and developed an experiential learning exercise to teach bridging skills between departments within organizations (Rubin, 1992). I drew upon personal interviews and my own professional experiences, as well as Brent Ruben's work on communication theory (Ruben, 1976) and Martinez's detailed analysis of people living in the US/Mexico borderlands (Martinez, 1994).

This borderlands model is what Giddens might call a consciously built self-reflexive identity project (Buckingham, 2008, p. 9). A border mindset includes comfort with ambiguity, acceptance of multiple world views and a desire for synthesis, a predisposition to accept mingling rather than rejection. To communicate with clarity in the borderlands both an intergroup and interpersonal focus is important. It is paramount to show respect and empathy for each individual as a member of the group (gender, sexual orientation, work group, race or mixed race, etc.) with which they identify as well as for them as an individual human being. Interpersonally it is critical to be aware of and minimize assumptions, to balance interaction time, to be non-judgmental and know how to manage cultural accidents when they occur.

A BORDER MINDSET INCLUDES

- Comfort with ambiguity
- Acceptance of multiple world views
- Search for synthesis

BORDERLAND COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

INTERGROUP
INTERPERSONAL

Demonstrate intergroup RESPECT
Express intergroup EMPATHY
TIME
Build NETWORKS
CHECK OUT meaning
Balance INTERACTION
ASCRIBING VALUE: non-judgmental
Plan for dealing with CULTURAL "ACCIDENTS"

Fig. 2

Anzaldúan Process

In order to live life as a border person, I went through a process analogous to what Anzaldúa describes in her work (Anzaldúa, 1987). The following demonstrates how her border theories generalize to my race, gender, ethnicities, sexual orientation and age.

I was birthed, as a border person through an *arrebato,* a precipitous snatching away of one life-world for another; being inbetween without knowing what that constitutes; experiencing psychological blocks and addictions; experiencing depressing Coatlicue states, eventually arriving in *nepantla,* the borderlands, tolerating ambiguity in this inbetween place that will be home; negotiating, understanding and living inbetween cultures; and, finding ways to resist societal pressures to assimilate, or to align myself exclusively with one group or belief system (Anzaldúa, 2003).

But just surviving and living in the borderlands is not enough. Anzaldúa uses the story of Coyolxauqui's dismemberment as a metaphor for the importance of transforming the past by re-membering. It is a process that requires courage to dust off memories, re-examine them, then reconstruct exiled emotions to reintegrate them. Excavating one's past prepares borderlanders to move into spiritual activism (Keating, 2006, p. 5-11).

Autoethnography promotes examination of fragmented life events and sequences them to create a coherent narrative. This gift of uncovering the raw materials from which we've made ourselves allows for the ultimate upgrade. It brings us into the present, ready for newly imagined and constructed futures.

Conclusions

Issues common to border people, regardless of identifications or belongings, can only be addressed within a framework that legitimizes multi-part, concurrent identities and belonging.

Finding and promoting additional alternatives to assimilation and its disconfirming invisibility is crucial.

Further research using Anzaldúan theories can formulate more strategies for successfully navigating in-between spaces. An example of one such strategy is a science curriculum designed specifically for Chicano students (Aguilar-Valdez, LópezLeiva, Roberts-Harris, Torres-Velásquez, Lobo, & Westby, 2013).

Reconnecting life fragments through reflexive action to make meaning from life experience is essential to owning multi-sited cultural belongings. The use of autoethnography, metaphor, and the creation of a newly imagined personally coherent narrative promotes acceptance and facilitates learning how to be in the inbetween. These strategies are critical to becoming a person who reclaims and integrates an expansive capacity to experience a simultaneous sense of belonging to multiple cultural identities.

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