

*Autoethnography: Preserving the History of the Resilient U.S.-Mexico Border Peoples*

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**Abstract**

When deconstructing our surrounding environments to bridge diversity in a constantly shape-shifting world where capital interests and global perspectives are at the forefront and are often at odds with social interests, autoethnography can be a tool that provides both agency and voice to its users. Through these personal experiences, an autoethnographer can critique practices, policies, and cultural constructions that shape a population's understanding of the surrounding world. Thus, the methodology opens a wider lens on the world, avoiding the constraints of what constitutes meaningful research while providing a singular perspective in a collective understanding of culture, place, and identity.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Teaching, Inclusivity, Creative, Writing

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## **Introduction**

Using autoethnography as a research methodology, the U.S.-Mexico Border people's personal stories can become narratives with a purpose. These narratives can help examine how knowledge production has developed over time and how identity has formed and situated itself in society. Through a critical and strategic introduction to autoethnography, an autoethnographer and student can re-examine literary works through an autoethnographic lens while approaching this self-reflective technique on their writings as they pertain to voice and subjectivity.

## **Teaching Autoethnography as a Method**

First, the theoretical foundations are discussed and evaluated, and then, a range of approaches are assessed due to the different variables that each combination of factors brings to the equation. As students create their autoethnographies, they seek to produce an evocative work that is engaging and opens the door to a discussion while manifesting an aesthetically pleasing work that is a visual representation of their personal history and interpersonal experiences. Through initial field research, consisting of field notes, interviews, photographs, and original documents and artifacts, the U.S.-Mexico Border autoethnographer will begin to identify specific patterns from these types of evidence produced by cultural experiences.

Approaching their curated evidence, as a screenwriter would a film, screenwriter Diane Lake suggests in her article, "Adapting the Unadaptable," that finding a new way of telling the story comes down to choices. For Lake, her methodology is simple: Choose moments that "make for good visual representation" and create a "visual line in the margin" that marks the scene and links those moments together (Cartmell, 2014, p. 409). Once the evidence is mapped out, the story will begin to take shape. Thus, the responsibility of the autoethnographer is to make a personal experience meaningful and a cultural experience engaging. Only then will they be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences, making personal and social change possible for more people (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994).

What makes autoethnography as a research methodology successful with multicultural populations and peoples in diasporic flux is the ability to deconstruct movement and motion in the text as it elicits societal change. With various definitions and approaches, the methodology utilizes personal experiences to understand and critique practices, policies, and familial and cultural constructions that shape someone's relationships with the surrounding world. Thus, autoethnography takes on two roles: a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The process promotes self-reflection and understanding of multicultural others (Chang, 2008). By way of product, it creates an evocative, engaging story that helps fill the knowledge gap in existing storylines (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography opens a wider lens on the world, avoiding the constraints of what constitutes meaningful research while providing a singular perspective in a collective understanding of culture, place, and identity. This specific approach also helps a student understand how the kinds of person they claim to be influence interpretations of what they study, how they study, and what they say about that topic (Adams, 2005; Wood, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As a result, autoethnography captures the nuances of subjectivity,

emotionality, and someone's influence on their research, rather than hiding from subjectivity and emotionality or assuming they do not exist (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Some have begun to acknowledge that different people have different assumptions about the wider world because conventional research methods were narrow, limiting, or insular. These differences can stem from class (hooks, 2000), education (Delpit, 1996), gender (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994, 1994), race (Anzaldúa, 1987), or religion (Droogsmas, 2007), among others.

Autoethnographers can use methodological tools to search literature when analyzing an experience and consider how others have encountered something similar; they can use personal experiences to illustrate aspects of cultural experiences and, in so doing, make the characteristics of a culture familiar to insiders and outsiders. Accomplishing this often requires comparing and contrasting personal experiences against existing research (Ronai, 1995, 1996), examining relevant cultural artifacts (Boylorn, 2008; Denzin, 2006), or conducting interviews (Foster, 2006; Marvasti, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001).

Once the U.S.-Mexico Border autoethnographer has become familiar with the process, they can unpack their personal stories, create narratives, examine how identity is formed and situated in society, and establish their place in it. Through autoethnography, they can retrospectively and selectively jot down their epiphanies drawn instinctively from their roles and position within a culture or by having a particular cultural identity.

## **Discussion**

When autoethnography becomes an interdisciplinary writing course, students and their educators engage in a self-directed form of ethnomethodology where the lives and histories of these students become part of that scholarship that elicits social change. Such an approach to scholarship is essential because it allows people from various ethnicities to retain and transmit their culture. As Donaldo Macedo (2000) explains, "open societies" may have more sophisticated forms of censorship — omission. A selective choice of bodies of knowledge, bordering on censorship," is often to blame for the lack of "significant contributions to the field of education" (Freire, p. 16). This refocusing is now critical in the United States when considering the inclusion of multicultural heritage in an array of disciplines, for example, with the increasing spotlight on the U.S.-Mexico Border, lest this heritage is forgotten.

Such a refocus on America's borderlands includes the perspectives of authors like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is a hybrid scholar-autobiographical work exploring the Chicana and Latina experience through the lens of issues ranging from gender to identity to race to colonialism. Anzaldúa's use of "borderlands" refers to the geographical, geopolitical, and geocultural space that reinforces what she conceptualizes as *mestizaje*. To Anzaldúa, the in-between space of the Border is an open wound between the U.S. and Mexico, not fully belonging either wholly or nationally, but rather a hybridization of the two spaces. This hybridization happened through two distinct periods, through a process of systemic violence that was epistemically and physically oppressive.

In Moraga's *Native Country of the Heart: A Memoir* (2019), the mother-daughter story depicts the similarities and differences between her mother's Mexican immigrant story and Moraga's American story. The story offers great critical reflection and, ultimately, a

revelation. The narrator uncovers her indigenous origins and embraces her cultural loss by deconstructing her past. While told personally, the story also chronicles the larger story of Mexican American diaspora.

This introspection and example of autoethnography add to the discourse that defines who and what Americans are. Many who insist upon the favored form of conducting and writing research advocate a “White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3). By default, this implies that anything deemed as “other” is invalid. Following these conventions, students often disregard “other ways of knowing.” There is a vast difference between the knowledge production of the essential participant and what scholar Terry Goldie terms “non-essential participant” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 174). Conversely, autoethnography expands the lens on the world, avoiding rigid constraints of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; while providing students agency in the kind of person they claim to be, what they choose to study, how they study it, and what they say about a topic (Adams, 2005; Wood, 2009).

In the United States today, Latinx and Hispanic people are integral constituents of the population and are intrinsically woven into the tapestry of the national identity. The U.S. Census statistics noted that the Latinx or Hispanic population, including people of any race, grew from 50.5 million (16.3% of the U.S. population) in 2010 to 62.1 million (18.7%) in 2020. Moreover, slightly more than half (51.1%) of the total U.S. population growth between 2010 and 2020 came from growth in the Hispanic or Latino population (Jones et al., 2021). The diversity within the group is wide-ranging, as are their stories, which often remain untold. The complex social and political ontology has made places like the U.S.-Mexico Border a unique geocultural, geopolitical, and geographical location between two nations. The coming together of these cultures in this Border super-region.

Moraga (2019) amplifies the need to recognize how interwoven the past is with the present and that to understand ourselves; we must locate our ancestors, who are an extension of who we are. *Native Country of the Heart* makes powerful statements about what is gained and lost in the pursuit of the American dream and how the same place that affords privilege and opportunity also demands sacrifice and surrender” (González, 2019). The transnational operations that have taken place on both sides of the Border have created a new population and identity that could result from “transculturation,” as one of many processes that have transpired in this vast stretch of land.

## **Conclusion**

The amalgamation of voices here must tell the stories of these processes: hybridization, transculturation, exclusion, repatriation, and Americanization. Encouraging students to tell these stories about how they saw and experienced them via autoethnography is vital to bridging the knowledge gap and adding to the scholarly discussion of their sense of place and space. For one, Lee (1994) has come to believe that speaking from an authentic place means speaking from your own “space-lessness” (p. 67). Epistemic violence has culturally impacted the U.S.-Mexico Border people and their knowledge production. Dismissing this violence as modernization or essentialism dismisses its history and the histories of border populations throughout the world. Embracing these histories and circumstances provides the future with works that will live on through authentic words and lived experiences.

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