Section Introduction
Nepantleric Traveling: Writing and Reading Autoethnographies as a Mode of Inquiry

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I came to autoethnography to un/learn the things I had internalized through my colonized education in India, Canada, and the United States. I reached a point where I could no longer do empirical work without interrogating how I am complicit with my own oppression as a woman with heritage from India. Having read provocative, resonant, energy-shifting autoethnographies and works on autoethnography as a method of inquiry (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013; Chawla, 2014b, 2015; Ellis, 2004; Pathak, 2013), I have come to appreciate embarking on an otherworldly type of journey immersed in the entanglement of method, analysis, art, and representation. On this journey I experienced cartographies of bodies with their own histories and geographies (Chawla, 2017), as these bodies move through time, spaces, memories, dreams, and, in some cases, in and out of multiple realms of existence.

I read these chapters much like Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2015) nepantlera would, moving back and forth across their thresholds, engaging in perspective-taking through the worldviews they present, and then moving on to the next chapter. Anzaldúa (2015) explains that a nepantlera is a Nahútl term describing threshold people who move in and out of different worlds without being indoctrinated into any. They cross thresholds, understand multiple worldviews, and negotiate their understandings in the liminality of being in-between worlds, a space Anzaldúa calls “nepantla.” Anzaldúa (2002) explains:

Nepantla is the site of transformation. The place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and

identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. Nepantla is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it. Living between cultures results in “seeing” double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent.

(pp. 548–549)

It is through these threshold travels and tensions in liminality that I read the chapters in this section. This notion of threshold traveling is not unique to the scholarship of Anzaldúa. Devika Chawla also evokes the notion of threshold when exploring autoethnography as a method of inquiry. Explaining certain ritualized habits she carried from India to the United States, Chawla (2014a) reflects:

In the ritual is a habit that I experience as a threshold to home. Thresholds are crossed, walked, carried over, passed. Permanent in their impermanence. As habits, they are placeless, arranging themselves wherever or whenever needed or desired. A way in and a way out, but always a “way.”

(Chawla, 2014a, p. 158)

Placing Anzaldúa’s and Chawla’s notions of threshold travelers in dialogue, I find myself in a space of multiple types of border crossings, moving in and out of the authors’ chapters culturally, historically, emotionally, and spiritually. I consider autoethnography a form of
inquiry, situating both the inquirer and the reader as threshold travelers who sometimes cross paths, perhaps even walk similar paths. At other times, the two cross thresholds at different moments in time, space, history, and memories. I think of reading and writing autoethnography as a form of nepantleric journey in which we, as threshold travelers, shuttle into our past, present, and dreams of the future that become memories.

Our situatedness in our particular experiences does not remain exclusively ours when we share our work with the world. In that moment of sharing we extend an invitation to the reader. If the reader accepts the invitation, our work crosses borders and begins to exist in multiple borderlands. It is from these borderlands that I travel in and out of these authors’ chapters.

The authors in this section share insights about the methods, modes of inquiry, tensions, and methodological possibilities in autoethnographies. Tami Spry explores the methodological possibilities of a posthuman performance autoethnography. Kathryn Coleman draws on hypnotic digital arts to explore collaging, map new journeys, and dance with ontological fluidity. Ronald J. Pelias focuses on autoethnography as recursive excavation work that he approaches with humility producing a sensuous scholarship.

Amber Johnson pulls me into her work with her opening sentences. “My child keeps pee- ing their pants. They never pee their pants. The further I drift into darkness, the more they pee. There is a connection.” Mesmerized when I respond to this calling in, I discover a collaged narrative of poems, prose, and theorization situated in her intersectional identities, along with considerations for a rigorous intersectional praxis. My body moves in and around the boundaries of Johnson’s body narratives of counter-memory and re-membering, as I sit with the ruptures such movement creates in gender, patriarchy, identity, power, and parenting.

Kitrina Douglas and David Carless offer a justification for cultivating depth: depth of understanding; relationship-building; compassion; perspective-taking; and sitting with trauma, isolation, pain, and grief through collaborative autoethnographies. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet contemplates the intersections of autoethnography and artistic research, reminding us that while these two types of inquiry may overlap, they are neither identical nor interchangeable. Moving in and out of multiple assemblages, Bartleet compels me to think about improvisation, spontaneity, and frameworks of various genres of art-making, such as poems, dance, music, and many others. When I exist in the space of liminal tension between the chapters, world-views, paragraphs, and ideas, a provocation arises from within me. I honor this provocation because I know that within it lies productive tension and consideration of how this text can serve as dialogic possibility for considering autoethnography as a mode of inquiry.

**PROVOCATION**

I present this provocation for a dialogic consideration of my reading of the chapters: How does one engage in an autoethnographic praxis that is inclusive yet deals with the limits and possibilities of theoretical and methodological labels? Inclusivity becomes an important consideration because privileged academics have questioned the rationality of the self-authored voice among autoethnographers (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008). Yet largely absent from these critiques are discussions of power, privilege, who gets to make the rules governing acceptable modes of inquiry, and how western intellectualism is perpetually situated as superior (Smith, 1999/2012) to many other ways of knowing and being.

Given that the degree to which autoethnography is accepted as a mode of inquiry varies by discipline, it is risky for multiply minoritized scholars to engage in autoethnographic inquiry. I am reminded of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1993) notion of the voice of the subaltern and the disappearance of knowledge amidst the ambivalence of postmodern discourses. This disappearance of knowledge is a form of ontological violence, as knowledge is never innocent and inevitably expresses the interests of its producers. Therefore, if we were to imagine engaging in autoethnography through the lens of radical interconnectivity in which human and nonhuman objects have agency, we would also be obligated to engage in tracing the limits and possibilities of such calls for knowledge-making. Moreover, some exciting possibilities and limitations seem to dwell within these discourses of radical interconnectivity and decentering the human. The ontological turns made by scholars are situated in their geographies, histories, herstories, and their stories. Inescapably, no one work can be everything to everyone; there are erasures and limitations in all autoethnographies, consequences of the choices we make as authors.

For example, Tami Spry describes an experience of humility in her interaction with an Indigenous scholar, which allowed her to understand existence through an interconnected spiritual cosmology that integrates the sky, stars, and other planetary arrangements. Indigenous communities, Black communities, and other communities of color have had a sophisticated
understanding of interconnectivity for centuries without situating the human as hierarchically superior to nonhuman beings and objects. In my own wisdom tradition, trees, mountains, animals, flowers, and even blades of grass have their own agency, none higher than any other. Within the context of my wisdom tradition, if we see someone’s agency being depleted, we can come together in solidarity to restore agency, dignity, respect, and equity.

The tensions that arise in my liminalities point to the fact that many of us are not even considered fully human in various western spaces. Current movements in Black Lives Matter globally are strong indicators of such dehumanization. Trans Black lives are even more vulnerable, as are the lives of others who are multiply minoritized. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999/2002) has spoken about how research is a dirty word for Indigenous people, describing the atrocity of filling the skulls of Indigenous ancestors with millet seeds to measure their intellectual capacity.

I raise this provocation to infuse an element of ethical consideration in our mode of inquiry when we intersect theory, methodology, and representation in our autoethnographic praxis. Certainly, weaving a fabric of interconnectivity locally, nationally, and globally creates a fertile ground of possibility for autoethnographers. Yet certain types of western thought ignore preexisting knowledge in multiple communities that predate western civilization. In doing so, they also engage in a further decentering of those who are already marginalized in western civilization, thereby reinscribing the notion of western intellectual superiority.

Out of these spaces of tension I pose this question for us to consider collectively: Who do we include, exclude, privilege, and restrict in our modes of inquiry, and how do we reconcile such erasures? In trying to answer this question, I bump into my theoretical and methodological training. Through this training I have experienced a thorough lexicon bludgeoning, learning multiple labels, positions, frameworks, turns, crises, and im/possibilities. I begin to contemplate what labels do for us and what we do for labels.

For example, Bartleel shuttles between art and autoethnography, calls for mixing improvisation with form, and offers a framework in which to consider the value of spontaneity and the respectability of genre. Coleman, Johnson, and Pelias present narratives, collages, poems, and visual art that are definitely improvisational and to some extent both genre-blending, bending, and genre-confirming—for the only things we can bend are the things that restrict us and test the boundaries of such restriction. Through such coalescence, autoethnography as a mode of inquiry becomes compelling if we can cultivate intensities of resonance that move and shift people’s ways of being and knowing.

In those moments, people’s lives are split into that which came before and that which comes after reading an autoethnography. Some of this shift can be articulated in language, some is affective, and still another part of the shift escapes language and resides in the sacred. This is where I begin to question where the threshold lies in such intensities of resonance and whether they come with labels that categorize, theorize, organize. Or are such intensities of resonance fostered through an intuitive recognition of our collective interconnectivity? No matter how specific our narratives are, if we are neapantleric travelers, as we move in and out of our ways of knowing and being, we are translating these narratives with our histories and geographies and are being translated simultaneously. If autoethnographies create powerful shifts, then nothing can remain the same as it was before.

**NEPANTLERIC JOURNEYS: A CONCLUDING THOUGHT**

The invitation extended by the authors in this section creates a fabric of perception and imagination between the writer and the reader. Together we engage in a perceived reality; the author and reader, each from their own perspective, cross each other’s threshold to create resonances. We imagine together. The author imagines characters, images, and words, and how they might be received by the reader. The reader imagines the author’s experiences and fills in the gaps between sentences, paragraphs, and sections.

In those moments, the author and the reader become entangled in each other, bridged by autoethnographic modes of inquiry. None of these interactions are stable or permanent. It is as though we meet one another through the whirlwinds of creativity, criticality, and ideologies, knowing the temporality of this interaction that often results in resonance, dissonance, and perhaps an encounter with competing worldviews.

The authors speak in their own tongues, and as I respond to their invitation, I respond with my emotions, sensibilities, and awareness, creating an insider/outside experience in reading these chapters. As a fellow autoethnographer, I am something of an insider, yet I am an outsider in relation to the specificities of the experiences discussed. These readings trigger different selves in me, some dormant, some more present in my awareness. In bearing witness to these narratives, I am able to merge my various selves that were previously fragmented. Perhaps that is the work of autoethnography as a mode of inquiry:
creating sensuous, affective, spiritual, and cognitive shifts through evocation and provocation.

I have allowed these narratives, images, poems, and multiple collages to rest in conscious awareness while I have meditated on their significance. In doing so, I have journeyed across thresholds through the imaginary, making my way through words, images, that which was left unsaid, and that which I longed for, while translating my insights from such journeying. Modes of inquiry have underlying assumptions. In using a provocation, I have tried to excavate such assumptions while residing at the intersection of creativity, criticality, and contemplation.

These modes of inquiry can produce moments of impasse and other moments of smooth transition in and out of worldviews. As we dream of and move toward a more egalitarian world, valuing the lives of those who have been devalued and centered, what does it mean for us to mobilize autoethnographic modes of inquiry in the production of narratives? The authors demonstrate certain possibilities through their genre-blending work, their call for heuristics to engage in due diligence, their attention to the recursive and iterative nature of collaboration with each other, and their engagement with humility for that which they do not know or have not been exposed to in their own nepantleric journeys.

How can histories of various underrepresented communities produce narrative methodologies of knowing and being? The chapters in this section invite us, through possible forms of inquiry and representation, to expand our modes of inquiry. My reading of them has inspired me to call for more communal cartographies, mapping our situated and collective histories, herstories, and their stories and attending to inclusion and erasures.

REFERENCES


