Dan and I sit by the fire sipping cabernet sauvignon, watching *Brunetti* on MHz, our European streaming service. The Italian inspector doesn’t allow his boss, obsessed with social class and prestigious titles, to stop his investigations of “important” people.

“Could you pause the show?” I ask. No conversation is possible as I read English subtitles, and Dan listens to Germans portraying Italians in Venice.

Dan obliges, waiting for my comment or question.

“Brunetti makes me think about the way power and privilege determine nearly everything.”

“Umm,” Dan says, as he takes another sip of wine.

“It’s also made me think about being asked to write a chapter about working across cultures.”

Dan plays a mindless game on his phone as he listens.

“I think about the culture wrapped up in European TV shows we watch on MHz. You speak German and I speak Spanish, but watching shows in those languages is difficult. I pay much closer attention than I would have to when watching a similar show in English. I watch their mouths and body language as well as listen to their words while I simultaneously read the subtitles. Working in a culture and language that aren’t your own is just as difficult.”

Dan replies, “There are so many different accents and dialogues. I remember how much trouble I had understanding people in Switzerland and Austria. I lived two years in Germany, but for me, German in Germany is a different language from German in Switzerland or Austria.”

“Right,” I answer. “I’ve worked in Mexico, Spain, Chile, and Ecuador. Every time we go to a different place, I retrain my ear. Even within each Spanish-speaking country, the language varies. I think people who don’t work across languages and cultures might not be aware of the complexities. People tell me they’re doing an ethnographic study in a Mexican community, and I say, ‘I didn’t know you speak Spanish.’ They say, ‘I don’t. I have an interpreter.’ I think about how hard it is for me to be sure that I really understood what was being said and that I interpreted correctly. I’m never certain. I can’t imagine doing that work without being bilingual. I can’t imagine the missed cultural cues.”

Autoethnography lets me acknowledge my presence in research without pretense of being an objective observer (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I state that I shaped the questions and interpreted people’s answers through my own lens. I acknowledge Spanish as my second language. Going through an interpreter would filter participants’ words through the interpreter’s lens, and again through my cultural and linguistic perspectives.

I serve as a conduit. I move between English and Spanish every step of the way. When I write in English about interviews I conducted in Spanish, the translation is more overt, but the process of working in two languages always involves oral interpretation and written translation at many levels.

Add culture to the language complexity. Communication is also based on body language and facial expression, and they differ among cultures. Think of the levels of interpretation and the opportunities for mistaking information.

I turn back to Dan and ask, “Do you remember when Sandra took us to interview the principal at the elementary school in Chihuahua? He had been her brother’s friend since childhood, and he told us about the *biblioteca de burros* [burro library]. He described how he and Sandra’s brother built small wooden bookcases that fit on the back of a burro. That’s how they took books to country people without access to books. It was a bookmobile, and the donkey was the book carrier.”

We’ve spent enough time in the country in Mexico that I could envision those bookcases, and the children flocking to get books, so I didn’t question anything he
said. After we left, Sandra said, “You didn’t understand anything when he described the biblioteca de burros, did you?” I replied, “I thought I did.”

She laughed. “I bet you didn’t understand why it was important to use a burro to carry books. Those guys wanted to change the way country people saw themselves. People called country people stupid burros, only fit to carry heavy burdens or do heavy manual labor. My brother hoped the burros carrying books, or knowledge, would help people see themselves as capable of bearing knowledge as well.”

I continue talking to Dan, “I had no idea of the complexity of that simple story. Now I don’t assume I know anything about another culture until a cultural guide confirms my assumption. I can’t imagine working in a community where you don’t know the language and culture of your participants!”

“I’ve been thinking about all the years I’ve been in Spanish-speaking communities and how much I’ve changed my ways of thinking and acting during that time.”

“Why don’t you talk about those changes?” Dan asks.

Autoethnography led me to examine the importance of my own values, beliefs, and lifestyle in relation to the people with whom I interact. If we don’t interrogate ourselves as part of the dominant society, we risk creating unintentional hierarchy as I did while learning to work cross-culturally. I want to write about how autoethnography led me to the liminal moments that caused me to examine my words and actions, and to change my way of thinking and behaving as I move within and between cultures. Reading my work from over 15 years ago, I can see how my attitudes have changed, and I feel embarrassed about some earlier assumptions. I will probably continue to make mistakes for as long as I work in the Spanish-speaking community. I expect moments of conscientization, or critical consciousness, that illuminate social and political contradictions and systemic injustices (Freire, 1970).

Dan says, “Including some of your previous work and showing your changes in thinking might help to illustrate that growth. But I think you also need to think about what you’ve learned about interpersonal interactions that make working cross-culturally even more complicated.”

I continue, “I will reflect on my experiences teaching and conducting research in the community. Now I can relate my work to the cultural, political, and social worlds we each inhabit (Ellis, 2004). I can reflect on the ethics of conducting cross-cultural research with intimate others (Ellis, 2007, 2016). I want to unpack my mistakes in fumbling through cross-cultural work, but not as ingenuous navel gazing to justify these mistakes as a gringa working in the Spanish-speaking world. I hope others can learn from my introspection.”

Dan turns the program back on, and we resume watching. I keep thinking about this chapter.

MUDDLING MY WAY TO CONSCIENTIZATION

In 1970 I graduated from the University of Illinois with a master’s degree in Spanish literature. I studied culture only as the language, literature, art, music, and architecture of the Spanish-speaking world. We analyzed literature through the lens of Freudian symbolism. I had never studied literary analysis through the lens of the French continental philosophers—I only knew about Sartre and Camus to whose existential work I had been exposed by a favorite professor. I had never read Marx or been exposed to critical theory or the Frankfurt School. None of my studies had ever exposed me to thinking about ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, and educational level and the impact my position in any of those identities had on my life, and on the lives of those with whom I might work.

Kimberlé Crenshaw didn’t do her groundbreaking work on intersectionality until 1989. I didn’t read her work and watch her TEDWomen presentation (Crenshaw, 2016) until many years later. I didn’t think about the ways systemic issues affect people’s ability to navigate within their own culture by creating discriminatory practices that are like smog, surrounding read her work and watch her TEDWomen presentation (Crenshaw, 2016) us in such a pervasive way that we don’t even see them (Tatum, 2017). I didn’t read Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa until I started working on my doctorate in 1998. I didn’t have the words or concepts to discuss reading their work and to question how little I knew about power and privilege based on those cultural identities. I normed my way of thinking and navigating through life as a White, US born and bred, heterosexual, middle-class Protestant woman of Northwestern European heritage. I assumed everyone shared my privileges. I hadn’t read Foucault (1980) or thought about how power exists in everyone; systemic issues determine how that power is perceived and valued (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Tilley-Lubbs, 2018). I never questioneded gender roles. I didn’t consider where I was positioned as a teacher and researcher. I thought my early years as a coal miner’s daughter in West Virginia allowed me
to understand people who didn’t share my current privileged position as a White, middle class, university professor. I didn’t realize how far I had moved from my days as a coal miner’s daughter since I still felt insecure about my own worth and social position—I figured such insecurity canceled my actual privilege (Tilley-Lubbs, 2017).

Now I acknowledge the importance of being a vulnerable observer (Behar, 1997) of my Self. I analyze my motivations and resultant actions that began with a tourist gaze (Urry, 1996) and resulted in tourism of the marginalized (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009) that unconsciously othered and stereotyped the people about whom I cared and for whom I wanted to advocate and with whom I tried to stand in solidarity. As I unpack the stories of my interactions in the Spanish-speaking community in the United States, I recognize ways that I unintentionally reinforced those same stereotypes and deficit notions. At the same time, my stories examine how autoethnography caused me to change my ways of perceiving people outside my world (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004, 2009).

TEACHING ENGLISH TO MEXICAN MIGRANT WORKERS: 1970–1980

I begin teaching ESL for the Illinois Migrant Council, and for the YMCA, my first professional positions after graduation. President Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, eliminating immigration quotas (Pufong, 2012), but the influx of immigrant families from south of our border to this area hasn’t yet begun. Men migrate north to work and send money back home to the family, so most of my students are men whose families remained in Mexico.

In both classes, as hard as they try, English is hard for these migrant workers, especially after a long day at manual labor. My admiration for their efforts grows each week. There are neither methodology classes nor textbooks available in this new field of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), so I translate my Spanish textbook to teach basic conversational skills.

The YMCA class meets in a dark foundry breakroom. One door leads to the furnace room, so our classroom is uncomfortably hot. As the men enter the room from their shift, the smell and feel of hot liquid metal clings to them. They use their sleeves to mop sweat from their foreheads, then settle down to concentrate intensely on English. Some just completed a shift and fight exhaustion from long hours of physical labor in suffocating heat. I don’t realize the likelihood that some might have limited literacy in Spanish (National Institute for Literacy, 2010), as I teach them to speak, understand, read, and write in English.

I have no idea of the complexity involved in trying to study, work, and live in a country where my oral communication skills are limited, to say nothing of my literacy level. My education didn’t prepare me to understand anything I’m doing. I follow my intuition and desire to help these students learn English. These adults are the first Spanish speakers I have known outside the highly educated Spanish professors or the students and others I knew while studying at a Spanish university in a study-abroad program.

The men remind me of my family in West Virginia, where many of my uncles were coal miners, hard-working men who came home shrouded in the dank smell of spending eight hours below the earth, faces black from digging coal with a pickax (Tilley-Lubbs, 2011), much like the foundry workers who arrive at my class reeking of sweat and metal. These working-class men provide a sense of familiarity and home in a way my professors didn’t. I learn about them by “considering my thoughts, feelings, and actions” about my own family (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 26) as I experiment with ways to help them learn English.

Autoethnography hasn’t yet taught me to “write as inquiry” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), immersing myself in the “critical and cultural spaces” where I can name and theorize the classism I grew up with (Shoemaker, 2013, p. 519). I just know at some gut level that these migrant workers remind me of my uncles.

TEACHING MIGRANT WORKERS IN CALIFORNIA

In 1977, Dan accepts a job in Modesto, California, and we move across the country to the Great Central Valley where I teach through a community college ESL course at a migrant farm laborers’ camp in the Patterson Canyon. I travel through the foggy canyon, my two daughters in their car seats in the back of the tiny orange Le Car, unable to see 200 feet ahead, to teach in a trailer in the camp.

I come to know my students quite well. The women prepare lunch every day and invite us to stay and eat with them. The men are always friendly and they work hard during class, but I don’t sense the kinship with them that I do with the women, whether because of my own greater comfort with women, or because of the distance that I interpret as respect for la maestra, or teacher, which is how they refer to me. I don’t think about class issues; once again, I am with people whose working-class ways of being seem familiar and familial. When I was growing up in West Virginia, my large
family spent most evenings at one aunt’s house; the women hung out in the bedroom, and the men sat in the living room and watched TV.

After class the men stay in the large gathering room of the trailer while the women go to the kitchen to make lunch, actions that seem normal. There seems to be a labor division among the adults, but it doesn’t occur to me to question whether the gender-related tasks are formal or accepted norms. The women keep the children in the nursery, and they cook the communal meals. Both men and women work in the field. Some men take time away from picking crops to attend class, but they wait for the women to prepare lunch, before they return to the field. Years later, I conduct interviews in Mexico with families whose husbands/fathers are in the United States working to send money home, and I observe the ingrained patriarchal society where the man is the head of the household and where women’s and men’s roles are clearly delineated (Anzaldúa, 1999).

I put our two daughters in the nursery for the migrants’ children while I teach, then we all gather for lunch. As we spend time together eating foods I didn’t know existed before, I hear migration stories. The community college schedule works well for the students since all the families plan to return to Mexico to celebrate the holidays. At our final class before the winter break, we chat in the kitchen as the women use their work-worn fingers to flip tortillas back and forth on the gas burners, getting them soft and pliable before they slather them with margarine, sprinkle them with cinnamon and sugar, and roll them up, giving one to each of my daughters. I mop the dripping margarine off their arms and listen to Angelina’s plans for the next week. By now their Mexican Spanish pronunciation and intonation are as familiar to me as my English.

“Ay, señora, we follow the crops from February until December. We start with lettuce in Salinas, then go north. We end with citrus fruit in San Diego. Then home to Mexico for Christmas, New Year’s, and Three Kings Day with our families.”

The California agriculture industry would be paralyzed without them, so in December they cross the border into Tijuana, and in February, back into San Diego. This circuit is a fact of life for the people living in the migrant camps in the Great Central Valley (Jiménez, 1997). I feel certain Gloria Anzaldúa would consider them in Aztlán (1999); the migrant camp seems like a chunk of Mexico in the middle of California.

At the end of January 1980, we leave California to move to Virginia to live near my parents. I miss those students as much, if not more, than our other friends. Our last class is a surprise going-away party, and I’m not sure who cries the most—they or me. My work with them crossed language and culture borders; in many ways, their similarity to my family in West Virginia created a closer bond than I experienced with my professors and peers in the academic Spanish world. In the crowded kitchen watching them flip tortillas on the gas burner, I remember sitting at the table in my Aunt Hilda’s kitchen and inhaling the scent of the cornbread, pinto beans, and fried apple pies she set down on the oilcloth tablecloth. I interpreted their ways through my memories (Ellis, 2004).

Just as I absorb the delicious food they share into the cells of my body, I absorb their stories into the cells of my mind, allowing them to create a romanticized painting of migrant life. I vaguely know about César Chávez’s heroism and the marches he led beginning in 1965, to boycott grapes and to confront oppression and racism embodied in migrant camps where people spent long hours in the sun, backs bent over to pick grapes and carry heavy baskets to the barns (www.history.com/topics/mexico/cesar-chavez). My naivete doesn’t allow me to associate my students with such horrible working conditions. I don’t think about this migrant camp as a borderland where Mexican laborers work for low wages and poor living conditions, interrupted by the constant circuit of travel between the United States and Mexico, and punctuated by the illegal reentry they face every February (Anzaldúa, 1999). I don’t see the women working in the nursery and kitchen as examples of male dominance (Anzaldúa, 1999). I don’t realize the tourist gaze (Urry, 1996) that colors my vision of the people who welcome my daughters and me into their lives. I don’t think about the wide disparities between my students and me in terms of privilege and wealth (Stanley, 2017). I relish their cultural differences. Without knowing it, I am an intercultural tourist practicing my cultural gaze. I don’t even realize all I don’t know.

When we arrive in the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia, I go to the community college to apply for a position teaching ESL. The Dean looks at me quizzically. “Well, I guess we must have a few apple pickers who go through in the fall. But we certainly don’t need an ESL class.”

I fill in the next years teaching Spanish at a local middle/high school. I decide to leave public school teaching in 1998 to pursue a PhD in education nearby Virginia Tech. My heart is still in Spanish literature, but there is no PhD program in Spanish literature available within commuting distance. My dissertation advisor is Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Based on my master’s in
Spanish literature and my strong language proficiency, she offers me a position teaching Spanish.

**BRIDGING THE UNIVERSITY AND THE SPANISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY**

Although I am in the academic Spanish world, my studies are in Curriculum and Instruction. One professor writes notes to me in the margins of my reflection papers that reflect on teaching migrants. Toward the end of the semester, she asks if I have read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), saying that my concern for marginalized people in schools and communities resonates strongly. She suggests that I read it. The following year I do read it, and the idea that people must read the word to read the world makes me think of the migrants I have taught; many weren’t literate in Spanish. Reading Freire provides me with the theory and words to give voice to my experiences and observations since I first began working in the migrant/immigrant world. As those students learned to understand, speak, read, and write English, I saw them developing a sense of empowerment. Being able to understand and communicate with a boss meant they no longer had to depend as much on interpreters as intermediaries. For the first time since I began studying foreign language in high school, I begin to see language and literacy as power. Previously, I regarded language as a gateway to understanding and appreciating culture and beauty or to being able to communicate when traveling abroad. Now, I see language as a powerful tool for navigating in a foreign country, defending oneself against injustices and obtaining further education and certification. I understand how reading the word provides the necessary tools to read the world. I have achieved naïve conscientization, which allows me to understand these issues, but I still need to work toward critical consciousness to help me interrogate my own positionality and the power I can wield and the privilege I enjoy (Freire, 1970).

**A SERENDIPITOUS CALL THAT CHANGES MY LIFE**

In July 1999, I receive a random call from the public health department.

“Is this Kris Lubbs?” an unfamiliar voice asks. When I confirm my identity, the speaker continues, “I’m calling from the health department. Our usual interpreter is in Bolivia visiting family, and someone recommended you as a substitute.”

I begin translating and interpreting for newly immigrated Mexican and Honduran women. I am the only bilingual Anglo most of them know, so I give them my business card so they can contact me in an emergency. I’m not sure they understand where the hospital is or how to communicate when the time comes to deliver the baby, a deficit notion they repeatedly prove false.

Soon, calls like this one become so frequent that I can no longer singlehandedly take care of them. “Señora Kris, this is María. My brother is coming from Mexico on Monday. He can’t carry anything except a knapsack on his back. Do you know anyone who has clothes they could give him? And a bed?” Through the long hours I have spent in the waiting room of the health department chatting with the women for whom I will interpret, I understand that people who come from south of the US border often enter the country by being smuggled across the border. Many walk miles through tunnels or over mountains, or they swim across the Rio Grande, bringing only what they can carry on their backs.

I have no idea I will become a clearing house or conduit between their expressed needs for basic material goods and my world of privilege. I have never heard of benevolent hegemony, which substitutes charity for change (Persaud, 2003–2004). I haven’t read Gramsci’s discussion of hegemony (1971). Years later these readings help me understand my positionality in the dominant class, with families accepting my hierarchical behavior, regarding it as the norm that I take on this role of charitable benefactor.

My family and church instilled values of caring for people living in marginalized circumstances, values that go into motion when I receive calls asking for help. I respond by contacting people I know to provide assistance. I don’t consider the hegemonic nature of charity. I don’t examine the intrinsic hierarchical nature of actions that result in a complex binary of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” My unintentional hierarchical behavior becomes more serious as I involve my students in the project.

In my Spanish classes at the university, I speak of the families. I accompany nurses to interpret for home visits, so I know them quite well by now. Along with numerous hair-raising immigration stories, I hear nostalgic memories of home and family. They entered the United States without a legal presence, and they know returning home and then coming back to the United States will be expensive and dangerous.

My students ask, “Is there any way we could meet those families? I would love to spend time with families from Mexico or Honduras. I bet we could practice our Spanish! And we could teach them English!”
I also talk to the families about the students. I know most students have little or no experience with Spanish-speaking people. Some have participated in study-abroad programs in Spain, Mexico, or Ecuador, but reflecting on my own study-abroad experience, I suspect their interactions have been confined to mostly spending time with other students or with families vetted by the university. Some work in Mexican restaurants and love working with Spanish-speaking servers. I doubt any have the experience of spending time in the homes of immigrants whose lives mirror the hardships inherent to immigrant status, which in turn affects their socioeconomic status and educational opportunities. I don’t consider how I may reinforce stereotypes students already have.

I design a course with a service-learning requirement to spend time with a partner family. I like both the families and the students, and I think they will learn from each other. I am excited that the families are inviting my students to come to their homes two evenings a week for a semester.

Two colleagues question the course due to the language register they’re sure the families must speak. I'm not yet aware of power integral to language register, but their reactions cause me to question the phenomenon. I know the families don’t speak the same academic level of language my colleagues do; I’m just grateful my students will have the opportunity to speak in natural conversations with native speakers, rather than having all conversations limited to other classmates or me—and my first language is English!

For eight years the course, “Crossing the Border through Service-Learning” combines academic learning through readings and class discussions with experiences with partner Spanish-speaking families. The students process experiences through weekly reflection journals. Anytime I check with the families, they tell me stories about how much they enjoy teaching the students to cook and eat their food, or to speak conversational Spanish. They also mention their appreciation for students making phone calls and accompanying them to doctors’ appointments or parent–teacher conferences. They appreciate students advocating for them in meetings or appointments. They talk about ways students help them learn to navigate a confusing new culture. The students are supposedly teaching English to the families, but talking to the families, I think the students are learning more Spanish than they are teaching English. Similarly, the students share their experiences in class every week, speaking with enthusiasm of time with partner families, often just being together and talking. In student reflections, I read glowing reports of time spent with families alongside their analyses of systemic issues in the immigrant community. For their final project, they reread all their reflections and analyze their growth. However, I don’t realize they are experiencing the same tourism of the marginalized as I do (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009).

GOOD INTENTIONS PAVE THE WAY TO HIERARCHY: FIRST LIMINAL MOMENT

Teaching the course, I continue to perpetuate hierarchical notions, albeit unintentionally. I expand my own responses to families’ needs to include my students in a workday that involves delivering clothing and household goods to the families as a way to meet them, a practice that in retrospect causes me to cringe. The students come to my home the Saturday after the first class. We sort clothes and furniture, and each student has a list of sizes and needs for a particular family. In my dissertation (Tilley-Lubbs, 2003), I describe the practice, and I mention the discomfort some students expressed at going to the families’ homes to deliver the items, saying it caused them to feel as if they were “observing animals in a zoo.” At the time they said this, I ignored their words, but at some visceral level, I knew something was amiss.

I feel empathy for the families, but I haven’t yet discovered autoethnography to realize that “[e]mpathy reinforces domina[nt] ideology” (Pelias, 2014, p. 65). I don’t consider how humiliating my “act of charity” (Nava, 1998) must be for the families. I carry this notion of benevolent empathy with me for many years; it is the root of many well-intended missteps as I work with immigrants and even more in partnerships between students and families.

At my dissertation defense, two committee members concur with the students. We have a conversation about unintentional hierarchical behavior, setting up students as “haves” and families as “have-nots.” I consider my actions and realize my response to families is inherent to my belief system and my way of navigating the world. I’m not aware that what started out as my responding personally to individuals who asked for help with basic needs has become a hegemonic charitable project. I discontinue the workday and return to personally responding to the families. I realize that the notion of charity, of “helping the less fortunate,” noble though it might be, is patronizing and hegemonic, whether intentional or not. Although I haven’t yet read about benevolent hegemony (Persaud, 2003–2004), I exemplify how it works.

The third conversation about the practice of the workday occurs in 2006 after my first year in a tenure
track position in the School of Education. I meet with the Director, who was on my dissertation commit-
tee, and my Department Head, who was my profes-
sor. The Director brings up the conversation we had about the workday in my defense. They both com-
ment that I tend to write about the positive impact of
service-learning in the immigrant community, and my Department Head asks, “What about the dark side?
What about the things that don’t go as you intended?”
I leave the meeting with a sense of heaviness and
“not-rightness,” but I don’t process all that happened
until after I participate in Carolyn Ellis’s autoethnog-
raphy workshops in 2009. Autoethnography serves as
the impetus to write an article that interrogates my words and actions in the light of power and privilege as I developed the course involving my students in a
practice that I now recognize as fostering benevolent
hegemony (Persaud, 2003–2004). Autoethnography helps me to understand how “Good Intentions Pave
the Road to Hierarchy” (2009).

BORDER CROSSING

While interacting with Spanish-speaking families,
I hear many stories about families who stayed behind.
Our daughters are close to the ages of the women for
whom I interpret, and I often think about those mothers
who stayed in Mexico and are resigned to never seeing
their daughters again and to never meeting
their grandchildren. Since their moms are so far away,
the women often refer to me as their children’s substi-
tute grandmother, which I interpret as an expression
of loneliness at not being surrounded by women who
provide advice about pregnancies and help care for
newborns. Weekly, I’m in many homes with nurses. The
families invite me to baptisms and birthday parties on a
regular basis. I don’t have grandchildren yet, so I don’t
realize how far from grandparenting our relationship is,
but their invitations personalize the situation even
more. When I attend social and religious gatherings,
I experience occasional twinges that I have created
a false sense of belonging, but I trick myself into believ-
ing that I’m accepted as a community member. I sus-
pect I was enjoying the tourism of being included in
gatherings, while at the same time “viewing the inter-
culturally different Other” (Modesti, 2011; Urry, 1996).

In summer 2006, I have been with the same women and
their families for six or seven years, interpreting for
their appointments, interviewing them for papers for
my PhD classes, and attending their social events.
Since I will be in Mexico for a month with students,
I want to meet the women’s families, if possible.
I invite the women and families for dinner so they can help me with questions for their families. I realize
this invitation to our house for dinner is the first time
I have reciprocated their invitations, and the first time
any of them have been in my home. I have assumed
friendship, but now I question my assumption. Our
relationships seem to have been one-sided; they have
included me in certain activities of their lives, but
I haven’t done the same (cf. Ellis, 2009). They have
shared secrets and longings with me, but I haven’t
reciprocated. I have seen them in their most intimate
moments during doctor’s appointments and home vis-
its, but they only know me as their interpreter/friend,
someone who takes a special interest in them, unlike
most of the other people they meet here in Roanoke.

In this moment of unaccustomed/accustomed inti-
macy, we sit around the kitchen table talking. As a
mom, I share thoughts about their moms. We talk about
US immigration and visa restrictions. I want to under-
stand how their families interpreted their immigration.
I don’t want to ask questions to make the absence more
painful. All five women are excited I want to meet
their families, and they tell me they have asked themselves
the same questions. They help me prepare questions
for their families, and they arrange with their families
for our visit. I now question the ethical issues involved
in invading people’s personal lives. Later, when I read
“Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in
Research with Intimate Others” (Ellis, 2007), I realize
I should have sought a way to include them as true col-
laborators in the project, and at the same time, I ques-
tion whether they were intimate others.

I write a narrative, but thick paragraphs don’t capture
the emotion, the social injustices of the US
immigration system, or the suffering we witnessed.
The impact of poverty, loneliness, and struggle is lost
(Golomski, 2019). Our near-arrest at the border feels
flat. I haven’t read about using poetry in autoethnog-
raphy, but I know from my love of poetry that I can
create emotions and images with fewer words. I attack
the narrative, eliminating unnecessary words, with a
resultant free verse poem. Later I learn that writing
autoethnographic texts as poetry can provide a sen-
na

ual and vibrant space as a means of sharing research.
Eliminating extra verbiage, I can hear people’s voices,
see their spaces, taste their food, feel their pain. Poetry
inquiry allows me to combine social science and art
(Bochner & Ellis, 2016, Faulkner, 2014).

Talking to the families in Mexico, I relied on the
questions the women wanted me to ask, but as I write
the poem, doubts surface about my research:

Is it for the right reasons?
To find out the effect emigration had on the family
that stayed behind?
To find out why the family in Mexico thinks their kids left and how they now live?
To find out whether their families think
Their daughters and their families can ever return
....
To pick up the pieces of abandoned lives
To go to school
To resume their places in the family?
.....
Or am I just being a cultural tourist
Who wants to see behind people’s closed doors?
To know their secrets?
.....
Or do I truly want to hear their stories to inform
A US public that holds such deficit notions about people
.....
To inform a political system that practices gross discrimination,
Violation of human rights?
I think my reasons are the right reasons.
But how do we ever know
What we really think, believe?
We can only regard the performance of our lives
And hope to enact the right deeds
That express what we say we believe.

The families in Mexico wanted me to share the recordings of their responses with their US families. I ponder these questions as each woman comes to my house to watch or listen to the recordings.

Lupe struggles with her emotions listening to her family speak openly of domestic violence she suffered while living with her husband in her mom’s house. I feel uncomfortable, so I ask, “Lupe, are you okay with my including this story?” I know from my history with Lupe that her husband, Juan Carlos’s problem with alcohol leads to domestic violence.

Lupe answers, “Sí, señora Kris. It’s all true. It’s how it was.” Later I question whether she meant I could share the story or whether she was simply confirming the story.

I reply, “I wonder if I have the right to tell your stories.”

Lupe says, “If you don’t tell our stories, who will?” (cf. Behar, 1993). Lupe continues telling me that she believes their immigration stories need to be shared with the US public that so dislikes them. I don’t yet understand that academic literature seldom leaves the academy.

I am oblivious to the power dynamics at play here. Lupe and I have spent countless hours together. I interpreted at her doctor’s appointments and counseling sessions. I interpreted for nurses’ home visits and for Easter Seals counselors working with her son who lost his voice during a traumatic border crossing incident. I knew the chaos of her life in many situations. Looking back, I suspect her trust and respect might have prevented her from refusing her permission. She perpetuates the hierarchical position I inadvertently created. My poem shows her vulnerability as the survivor of domestic violence. I present my vulnerability as a researcher, but somehow that seems less personal. I still make the decisions about what to include and what to leave unsaid.

Her words salve my conscience, and I decide to include the domestic violence stories in the poem, using pseudonyms, since I heard them from all but one Mexican family, and all the women respond similarly. I publish the poem (2012) and send a copy to each woman.

Soon after, we invite Marisol’s family for dinner. Marisol and I are in the kitchen getting the food ready to put on the table.

“I sent you the poem about my visit with your families in Mexico. Did Carolina read it to you?”

Marisol looks down at the salad she’s fixing. “Yes.”

I wait. Silence.

Marisol changes the subject and we continue chatting and getting food to the table.

I wonder about her lack of response, but the next day I re-read the poem, and have an ‘a-ha’ moment as I read the following:

. . . their families’ tears and raw truths
About . . .
Escape from domestic violence.
Substance abuse.
(Tilley-Lubbs, 2012, pp. 390–391)

Marisol and I have never talked about domestic violence in her life. Unlike Lupe’s chaotic life, Marisol and José seem to have a strong marriage. Did she understand the implications giving consent to publish what her family said? Did I explain it adequately when she signed the informed consent? I realize she may not have wanted her teenage daughter to know about José spending too much time drinking with the men in his family. It’s one thing to talk about a topic that is often kept secret, and another to see it in print—and another yet to have your daughter read it out loud. The feelings of unease that always precede a liminal moment begin. I question whether the inherent power differential and the women’s intense affection for me causes them to give me permission to publish things they would really rather that I not publish.
Years later I read Carolyn Ellis’s reflection on her ethnographic work in a fishing community (2009), and I have another a-ha moment. Carolyn asks, “What do we owe those we study? … How should we treat them?” (p. 78), responding to anger expressed by a participant during a return visit. When we are conducting research with people who are friends, we have a responsibility to honor them, never to embarrass them, always remembering that friends will say things in conversation they would not want published. We need to regard research as relational, not patronizing (Ellis & Adams, 2014), meaning that when friends give consent for publication, our obligation is to be sure they understand all that consent involves. I did the research and wrote the poem with good intentions, but once again, hierarchy underscored my words and actions.

The Circle Closes

Dan and I sit watching MhZ on TV once again. I think about writing this chapter, piecing together an adult lifetime spent working in and with communities not my own.

“I finished my chapter for the Handbook this afternoon.”

“Did it turn out like you expected?”

“Yes and no. I examined my work, thinking about things I wish I had done differently.”

“Like what?” he asks.

I reply, “I wrote about my early years teaching migrant workers, and I don’t know that I could have done anything differently, given that ESL was just developing as a subject. I might have tried to tailor lessons to be more practical, but overall, I think I did my best there.”

“I would still partner students with families, but I would explore ways of helping them develop non-hierarchical relationships. I would address the expressed needs of the families personally rather than creating a patronizing relationship of the haves and the have-nots. I would develop more authentic and reciprocal relationships with Lupe, Marisol, and the other women whose families we visited. I would make sure they knew what informed consent meant. I would bring them all together to tell them the topics I intend to address in writing—when we worked on the questions, I noticed they were less concerned with hurting my feelings by disagreeing with me.”

Dan smiles. “The big question is, ‘Would you do it all again?’”

I consider carefully. “If I knew then what I know now, I would do things differently, making different mistakes. But yes, I would do it again!”

REFERENCES


