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THE FORMATION OF AN IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL HOUSEHOLD

An autoethnography

Arturo Pérez López and Patricia Varas

Foreword

When Arturo decided to apply for the highly competitive Carson Undergraduate Research Grant in the College of Arts and Science at Willamette University (WU), he was torn between two possible projects. Should he write about the growing gentrification in his town, Woodburn, and its implications for his neighbourhood? Or should he explore his hybrid identity (Mexican, Mexican American, and Oaxaqueño/indigenous), something that had been growing heavily in his mind since, in his words, he “stuck out as a sore thumb” among the young WU undergraduates?

As we discussed the topics and went through the pros and cons in an orderly and academic fashion, it became clear to us that Arturo’s decision must be guided by an issue close to his heart. This was a unique opportunity for him to explore how his ethnic identity formation had impacted his self and identity development to understand better the choices he had made in life; his cultural preferences, especially in music; his deep love and pride for his family and community; and his passion for education.

The should, the obligation to understand gentrification and voting patterns in his community, would have to wait. Yet when we met through Zoom many months after his graduation to discuss this chapter on autoethnography, the first thing Arturo mentioned was how the development of the Smith Creek Project was going. He also commented on the Amazon Fulfilment Centre scheduled to open in 2023 and the opportunities and drawbacks it will bring to Woodburn. It is clear to me that Arturo’s autoethnography is as much about him as about his community. Arturo’s subjectivity and agency are actively shaped by a series of interactions with family and society.

A qualitative methodology that would give Arturo the tools to articulate his personal search and academic research needed an alternative scope that would break with the conventional. A voice defined by a hybrid reality, and by complex and ever-changing experiences, needed a narrative that would cross over the traditional generic boundaries. In autoethnography,
Arturo found the intimate and personal tone of the autobiography and the *testimonio*, while at the same time achieving the rigor of the ethnography. Arturo uses his personal experiences as a filter but is also aware of the social context of the relationships he has built at home, school and work, which have shaped his identity and agency. Behar (1996) illuminatingly argues that autoethnographies have “challenged monolithic views of identity in the United States, asserted the multiplicity of American cultures, and deconstructed various orientalisms, challenging the assumption that the anthropologist was the sole purveyor of ethnographic truth” (p. 27).

In his autoethnography Arturo grapples with the desire to understand how his worldview has been shaped by the options society has provided to him as the son of a Mexican-Oaxacan couple born in the United States. His passion for learning, imbedded by his father, made him a first-generation student; his mother’s work ethic insured that Arturo would never shun any job, firmly believing that work dignifies one. How to explain his choices? How to join a hierarchical academic discourse that may not value the subjective autoethnography? It is important to make it clear: Arturo is passionate about writing, he is a wonderful storyteller, but his dream is to join academia as a professor of history. Thus, his account must be valued and taken seriously since it will provide sociological and anthropological understandings of himself and his community. Denshar (2014) emphasises the two approaches that define autoethnography: evocative and analytic. Through the evocative the narrative centres on the personal; through the analytic, connections with social phenomena and data are made.

There is a tension present in autoethnography between the voices that are abandoned because they are not academic enough and those privileged and validated enough to interrogate social constructions. Arturo is conscious of his place as a privileged speaker. Thus, the implicit responsibility he has to his community is incorporated in the collective element of autoethnography, which, as Brodkey (1996) writes, “… auto-ethnography invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones” (p. 29). Through autoethnography, dominant narratives are questioned, analysed.

Arturo’s complex identity makes for a complex autoethnography. In his narrative, Arturo examines reflexively, through vivid and dynamic language and images, cultural experiences that have impacted who he is and his social character, describing the forging of his identity. Because he was born in the United States, his path is markedly different from those of the undocumented immigrants that surround him. Arturo delves into the joy of family reunions, hearing mixteco among his elders, as well as the hardships of the lives of his immigrant parents. Music is an important vehicle for ethnic identity formation. Through different genres and social interactions, Arturo defines his taste, explains how each sound stirs memories, and how it is link to his Mexican American identity. He revisits moments in his life with acute insight, humour and ironic distance, establishing a personal style that keeps a fine balance between personal experience and critical reflexivity to examine cultural experience. These memories bring the cultural experience alive for those of us who are not part of it.

Autoethnography is part of the narrative turn in the social sciences that promotes an epistemological shift (Raine, 2013). As a methodology, it provides a tool to approach identity construction and a way to inscribe one’s worldview. Arturo’s literature review includes articles that speak to him as a researcher conducting identity work, and as a vulnerable person telling his story, reminding us that autoethnography is based on intimacy and caring, and that it is a methodology that encourages the reader to empathise and the writer to open and be
vulnerable (Ellis et al., 2011). As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) suggest, autoethnography demands a paradigm shift in research, breaking the binary between rational and rigorous and creative and unruly:

Instead of being obsessively focused on questions of how we know, which inevitably leads to a preference for analysis and generalization, autoethnography centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way. This is the moral of autoethnographic stories – its ethical domain.

(p. 439)

Hence one of Arturo’s favourite articles was the story of the Padilla family. He identified with many of their experiences, and, I believe, sees himself in the successful Professor Amado Padilla. While there was a personal connection with this story, Arturo critically learned about the different qualitative methodologies such as testimonio and autoethnography.

Another component of autoethnography that was particularly attractive for Arturo’s narrative is its blurring of differences between objects of study and the author – the author is part of what they are studying (Butz & Besio, 2009) – and between the reader as consumerist and the author as active creator. This more inclusive process disrupts hierarchies and promotes social change (Holman Jones, 2005). We embark on a dialogue, which is based on sharing. “Autoethnography invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social, and historical situations and relations in contact zones” (Brodkey, 1996, p. 29).

Autoethnography is not only about the self; it is also about the social, political and communal. “Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764). As Arturo probed his identity, he became acquainted with the concept of ethnic identity. Umaña-Taylor and Fine’s (2004) article gave Arturo a vocabulary and ideas that made it possible for him to understand what it meant to grow up surrounded by people from Oaxaca and from the mixteco indigenous group. He was able to identify himself in the phase of “cognitive maturity” when the person can be self-reflective and “think in a multidimensional manner” (p. 41). In this manner, Arturo writes about immigration, the work in the fields, the difficulty experienced by youth in establishing their ethnic identity, and the systemic racism he and his community have experienced.

Arturo’s autoethnography is an exercise in self-reflexion to discover his ethnic identity and of resistance to how tradition has defined him. As Sidonie Smith (1993) claims, “Reading personal narratives we find ourselves immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity and politics as they bear on subjectivity” (p. 393). Autoethnography allows the articulation of a voice through a personal narrative, while at the same time welcoming information from academia and other sources. Through his writing, Arturo constructs a narrative built of memories and experiences, supporting it with readings on autoethnography, memory and language, ethnic identity formation and cultural patterns of socialisation and interaction. In this autoethnography, Arturo embarks on an inclusive and informal method of learning, and makes important connections with cultural, political and social sources that will prove important to him as a future researcher. This is Arturo’s story: as he reminded us in his proposal for the Carson Grant (Pérez López, 2019), “Although I do not speak for a group, if people relate to my story, it will not be a mere coincidence, because I know that I am not alone” (2).
Introduction

I embarked on a journey to discover the relationship I have with my town due to the approval of the Smith Creek Project in late 2019. This project planned on “developing approx. 694 residential lots, plus 105 multi-family units as Single Family Detached, Row House Alley, and Multi-Family units” (Stafford Land Company, 2020). The approval was surprising, and I was enraged by the fact that almost no one knew or cared to do something about it. There was no dialogue or information regarding the pros and cons of this development (first thought that came to mind was “damn, rent is going to get more expensive, again”). This frustration and desire to confront impending gentrification led me to question my responsibilities as a Mexican American. After debating what my social responsibilities were, a plethora of questions came to mind faster than I could type them. Once I settled and started to write (yes, writing is my preferred form of protest), the question that haunted me the most was this: Who am I and what’s my role in society? This confusion, combined with curiosity, would ultimately launch me head-on into a methodology devoted to the reflexion of one’s identity and relationship with society as a resident of a place in time: autoethnography.

Identity

My identity was forged and built upon the sweaty backs of the so-called illegal aliens. A legal document that states I was born on 19 July 1995, in Silverton, Oregon, and the rights that pertain to this piece of paper are what separate me from the illegal aliens. I have strong legacies from my parents that have been critical for my identity development. I speak proper Spanish because of my father. As a teenager, he was humiliated in the streets of La Capital (Mexico City), where he migrated to for work, because the only language he knew was his mother tongue, mixteco. He was forced to speak and master Spanish and today speaks it better than most whose Spanish is their native language. My mother’s work ethic and discipline are what ultimately made her the first woman from her family to immigrate to El Norte. Education wasn’t emphasised in her household, hard work was. However, the greatest inheritance I received from her was a love for our indigenous culture. Both of my parents are from a region known as La Mixteca, which belongs to the state of Oaxaca and is known for its indigenous population, and high rates of poverty. My indigenous heritage is essential to my Mexican identity. From it, a child named Arturo Pérez López was born representing a conglomerate of identities with various cultural expressions that include language, music and traditions, giving birth to what is known as a hybrid identity, a byproduct of several cultures and subcultures that clash with one another daily.

I decided to analyse my upbringing in a multicultural household through an autoethnography. I wanted to find out what or who is considered Mexican, Mexican American, indígena, and, of course, American. Through my extensive research, I found that an autoethnography was a fitting way to help explain the complexities surrounding the formation of my identity. This form of literature has acquired legitimacy through the efforts of various scholars although it is often confused with a memoir or an autobiography. The difference is that an autoethnography is a personal narrative that has an innate critical, political and social meaning that challenges the disparities present at a point in time in history. “Autoethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, as cited in Burdell & Swadener, 1999, p. 22). My identity falls under an umbrella of stereotypes related to all those identities mentioned above. I love my Mexican culture and music; I can verbally jab with the best of them in formal or slang Spanish, but I wasn’t born in Mexico, therefore I’m not fully...
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Mexican. I love my chilenas, a genre of music native to La Mixteca, but I wasn’t born in Oaxaca, therefore I’m not fully mixteco. What’s more American than listening to Buddy Guy’s “Damn Right, I’ve Got the Blues” while imitating his every move with my air guitar? I have all these identities and many more. Ultimately, writing an autoethnography allowed me to analyse my upbringing and the factors that played into creating my identity.

Autoethnography

An autoethnography can make for uncomfortable writing. Sally Denshar (2014) writes that “autoethnography goes beyond the writing of selves … [it] invites writers to see themselves and everyone else as human subjects constructed in a tangle of cultural, social and historical situations and relations in contact zones” (p. 3). Every interaction that I have had with my parents, friends, and even co-workers, helped shape my identity. While working as a chef at Denny’s, I was questioned where my birthplace was. The main chef was stunned when I replied that I was born in los Estados Unidos. He didn’t believe me and made the remark that I shouldn’t be ashamed of being born in Mexico. This experience was in direct contrast with my home situation where I was called a pocho by my siblings, which is a disparaging remark about Mexican Americans that travel to the motherland. This insult is usually directed to those who lack fluency in the Spanish language but are masters of Spanglish. The juxtaposition between how I was seen at home and at work was conflicting. While at heart I considered myself fully Mexican, every social interaction poked at the validity of that statement and, to an extent, challenged my pride.

In the article “Autoethnography: An Overview”, the authors state that autoethnography “is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2). My writing focuses on several interactions that are stored in my memory and the impact they had on the cultural experiences forging my identity. Being that memory is subjective, autoethnography “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 3). My cultural upbringing, and, to an extent, my emotions at the time, determined how I interpreted every article I read during my research and connected me with the subjective memories of my childhood. Even those memories, when told to other family members, can be dissected; those who will read my paper and were born in Woodburn might have contrasting opinions on what I write, and that’s okay. Denshar (2014) warns that the writer of an autoethnography will “strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position … to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public” (p. 2). My hope in writing is that my vulnerability will create a discussion among my peers and determine our roles in society and what we have to offer to our hometown of Woodburn, Oregon.

I can’t proceed without briefly mentioning the critiques made of autoethnography as a methodology. Most critics want to hold autoethnography to the same standards as a traditional ethnography or autobiographical writing; “thus, autoethnography is criticized for either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 12). Furthermore, it is dismissed by “social scientific standards as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 12). However, autoethnography is a versatile form of writing that allows the voice of the author to flourish, unrestricted, encompassing the autobiography as a form of resistance. It is also a discussion where the reader is invited to become aware of social and identity differences,
while witnessing change through the evolution of the community and the individual. Its innate political connotations are subjected to criticism, but also serve as a tool for scholars to gain better insight into the author and their surroundings. In my case, it will revolve around the topic of who and what is an American with a hybrid identity formation and their role in society.

Oaxaca

Every building has a foundation, and the same goes for every identity. The base of mine is the indigenous culture that I inherited from my parents. Committing to self-identifying as a Oaxaqueño at a young age was essential to my upbringing. As Elizabeth Gonzalez (2016) states, developing a sense of belonging to an ethnic-racial group reflects “adolescents’ growing abilities to think in complex and critical ways about themselves and the importance of ethnic-racial group membership to their self-definition” (p. 1). In order to think critically about who I am, first I have to identify what or who is a Oaxaqueño.

Oaxaca is a southern state in Mexico composed of an indigenous population, culture, language and an array of different traditions like tamales, mole, chapulines, mezzal, totempo, mixteco, triqui, zapoteco, etc. My parents are natives of La Mixteca, the northwestern region of Oaxaca, distinguished by its traditional dances such as rubio, diablo and charleo. What makes this region unique is the plethora of indigenous languages, with mixteco, my parents’ native tongue, being one of them. This language is a staple of a dying culture that has been carried across the Rio Grande and introduced to a foreign land where its survival is dependent on a first generation of children. This culture has taken a back seat as this generation encompasses various traditions. Some embrace the culture more than others, who demean its significance and deny its importance to their upbringing.

Since childhood, my mother would constantly reiterate the fact that I am, or rather we are, from Oaxaca. I never understood this concept or its importance for my identity. I thought we Mexicans were all just one race, but Oaxaca itself holds a different connotation and history. To identify as a Oaxaqueño is to welcome a slate of questions and insults. In an ethnographic study, made with a small sample of migrant Oaxaqueño/a youth living in the US, “adolescents reported being called Oaxaqueño/a and indio/a, derogatory and diminutive terms referring to stereotypes marking Indigenous people as short, dumb, dirty and stubborn by their non-Indigenous Mexican peers” (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 4). While racial discrimination prevented many adolescents from identifying as Oaxaqueño, my parents’ pride in their culture and the family gatherings we had when I was a child helped me create a positive image of what it meant to be from Oaxaca.

These family gatherings were the best form of exposure to my culture and traditions that were native to Santa Rosa Caxtlahuaca, my mother’s pueblo. While some children chased each other, and others waited to crack la piñata, our elders spoke amongst them, in mixteco of course, about work, rent, the weather and, obviously, the children. I couldn’t understand their exact words, but their cadence and verbiage caught my attention. Their stories intrigued me as they reminisced about growing up in Oaxaca. My godfather spoke about waking up at five in the morning to feed el ganado and then going to school in dirty clothes only to be humiliated by his peers for smelling like cow manure. My father spoke of the various times that he and his siblings woke up at four in the morning to help my grandma make an olla full of mole and then having to carry it to an adjacent pueblo. My grandma was a chef, and she was contracted by, as my father states, “gente de dinero” to make mole for weddings and parties. Among the clinks of beers and gentle salud, a child (yes, that was me) would come up to his father and the conversation would go, “Ahorita Estados en la gloria. Nuestros hijos nunca van a saber lo que sufrimos
para estar aquí.” Meanwhile, in the background between the noisy children and the chitchat from adults, you could hear a small radio playing “La San Marqueña” by La Furia Oaxaqueña, or chilenas from Los Kyles. The music would take a sudden pause and “Las Mañanitas” would begin. The birthday child would smile to the camera, while several kids stood behind him ready to push his face into the cake.

Our cultural practices were not only the best forms of reinforcing a positive image of Oaxaca, but also provided meaning and, more importantly, value to identifying as a Oaxaqueño. The development of my identity began with my interactions at an early age with my familial environment composed of uncles, aunts, cousins, siblings and, more importantly, my parents, who exposed me to our traditions and made me proud to be from Oaxaca. Umaña-Taylor and Fine (2004) state that “it is important to think of ethnic identity as a process that is continuous throughout the life course, as opposed to something that becomes ‘achieved’, never to be explored again” (p. 22). The exploration of my identity would continue and broaden as I got older. With it would come various nuances and the difficulties in defining who I am.

Music

Music helped form and tie together all the cultures and subcultures I was introduced to as a child and throughout my teenage years. Rolf Lidskog (2016) states that music “has multiple functions; it can allow people to understand themselves, form and maintain social groups, engage in emotional communication, and mobilize for political purposes, among other functions” (p. 2). More importantly, studies suggest that “music not only is a cultural and expressive practice that bonds group members together but can also cross boundaries between social identities and shape new ones” (Lidskog, 2016, p. 2). The shaping of a new identity at times can be difficult. Due to a language barrier, our parents always listened to music in Spanish. However, as adolescents, smartphones, mp3 players and the radio helped expand our choices of music. The sounds and rhythms that echoed in our rooms soon began to change.

The Mexican American encompasses various cultures, one of them being Chicano. Chicano music is different. It’s not Mexican or American: it’s Chicano. It’s a conglomerate of Mexican slang, Spanglish and James Brown bundled up in a genre called Chicano rap. Despite the explicit lyrics and affiliation with gangs, I loved the culture of Chicano rap. The Oldies but Goodies are a staple of the Chicano sound, and their artwork and vivid imagery consisting of the Mexican flag, the Aztecs, the clown tattoos, the Virgin Mary, la santa muerte, were all appealing to me. Listening to Chicano rappers like South Park Mexican (SPM) or Lil Rob was a completely different experience from listening to the ballads by José José or Los Ángeles Negros. While it is gang-related and some of its lyrics are misogynistic, when they didn’t focus on the negative aspects of growing up in a barrio, they spoke of music as a means to get out of poverty. My favourite verse that sums this up is in the song, “Stay on Yo Grind,” by SPM:

“I’m gonna fly like Vince [Carter]
Bubble like Prince
Momma just ain’t been the same ever since.
She can’t believe I got all these fans
And she won’t stop saving aluminum cans.”

Some might not agree with how instrumental Chicano rap was to our upbringing; however, what made it important for me was how it represented, for good or bad, a part of Mexican
identity. The pinnacle of its popularity was in the early 2000s. While at the time, representation of a Mexican identity wasn’t truly displayed in the mainstream, and social media had not been born yet, these rappers, whether it be in their attire or in their lyrics, always mentioned Brown Pride. The only other people who represented Mexico as loudly were the Mexican soccer team and our boxers. It’s no wonder why a lot of Chicanos, as a pastime, or a way to settle a dispute, box each other to claim the crown of el más chingón.

To us Mexican Americans, Chicano rap falls under the umbrella of hip-hop music. There were a few people who weren’t fond of Chicano rap, but were fans of traditional hip-hop, such as 2Pac, Notorious BIG, Bone Thugs N Harmony, etc. Hip-hop became a fixture in our households. Eventually though, around 2013, more explicitly Mexican music made a comeback. However, it wasn’t the traditional love ballads that our parents listened to. Rather, they were corridos (Mexican folk ballads) consisting of acoustic guitars, a tuba and lyrics focused on the poverty surrounding Mexico and the ongoing drug trade and the violence associated with it. While the origins of corridos can be traced as far back as the Mexican revolution, this new and more sophisticated version, whether it was by design or by accident, found its main audience among the Mexican Americans.

Growing up, the Mexican American could sometimes feel conflicted when listening to music in Spanish. My first memory of Mexican music can be condensed to a list of artists: Los Bukis, Los Temerarios, Los Acosta, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, Los Ángeles Negros, to name a few. Despite it being a staple of most of our childhoods, for many of us, denying it became essential in assimilating to the latter part of our identity, American. One episode in high school stands out to me the most. During lunch, a couple of the homies (no, we weren’t gang-related, it’s a form of speech among us) and I would walk around campus with a portable speaker and play hip-hop music. However, sometimes I played Mexican music, more specifically, corridos. One day, as we walked through the hallways and made our way back to our classroom, I played “Nadie es Eterno” by Adán Chalino Sánchez. The objection in people’s faces was evident. The sound of the accordion and the singing in Spanish were alien to our peers. The irony is that our school was predominantly Mexican. I can recall one of my homies saying, “What the fuck is that! Turn that shit off! It’s embarrassing.” Another girl just looked at me and said, “Really, Arturo? Really? Of course, it had to be you.” I just shrugged it off.

This was in 2013. At the time, most of us were afraid to admit that we listened to Mexican music. It wasn’t the cool thing to do. I believe that this fear came from the lack of exposure to our Mexican music in mainstream American culture. Fast forward to 2021. Corridos have broken the boundary set by television networks and made their way to our ears through social media and music streaming services, which has helped promote our culture and allowed it to become more accepted, directly impacting the identity of Mexican Americans. Lidskog (2016) states that “Music provides resources for a group to construct and renegotiate its identity, but it may also be a resource for controlling space and pushing groups into the periphery” (p. 3). During our teenage years, hip-hop connected us, and, one might argue, is what made us Mexican American. We knew what Mexican music was, but we didn’t dare listen to it in public. Now, the accordion, the tuba, the 12-string guitar, which make up corridos, are the sounds that reverberate through the Woodburn streets. Those that objected to “Nadie es Eterno” are now the same ones that are religiously listening to corridos and claim to be 100 porciento mexicano. That is the influence that music has had on Mexican Americans. It has helped us renegotiate our identity. Listening to music in Spanish is no longer taboo; the idea of denying one’s origin is obsolete. Now everyone claims to be Mexican, not Mexican American.
Education

My father’s emphasis and persistence regarding education as the best means towards success doesn’t derive from a family lineage of doctors or lawyers; it came from years of being humiliated. Oaxaca’s overt poverty, combined with a large indigenous population, has brewed a stereotype and insult (Oaxaquito/a) that leads not only adolescents, but even adults, to refrain from identifying as a Oaxaqueño/a. (I worked alongside a father of three who claimed to be from the city of Oaxaca, where it’s more modernised, only to later find out that he’s originally from a pueblo that’s poorer than mine.) I wish I could tell you that my aspirations of becoming a professor of history stem from a family culture, like that of the Padillas. Their story consists of four brothers whose parents’ unwavering commitment to education, along with family stability and pride in their Hispanic heritage, led to them attending college and becoming respected in their professions. Success didn’t come easily though. Despite the parents’ experience with racism and the father’s blue-collar background, their unrelenting dedication to their children and emphasis on education was affirmed in the Padilla children’s testimonios as “each shared that it simply was not an option to do anything but succeed in school” (Farrington, 2018, p. 400).

Where I can relate to their story is how both of my parents took pride in their job, no matter how menial it was. They’ve worked in the fields (farm labour) practically their whole lives, battling against Mother Nature’s piercing sun or heavy raindrops and gusts of wind, to provide not only a roof over my head and food on the table, but the opportunity “¡para ser alguien en la vida mijo!” My father’s unrelenting insistence that education was vital to my success in life led me to fall in love with the art of writing and the subject of history; failing in school was never an option.

Education is at the intersection of all my identities. It allowed me to attend Willamette University, a private institution across from the state’s capitol, where as a child I marched alongside my mom and aunt yelling “¡SÍ SE PUEDE!” As I type these words, I’m sitting comfortably in The Gov Cup, a coffee shop in Salem, Oregon, on a Wednesday morning. The shop is painted mostly white, and I’m the dark spot in the room; despite this, I feel comfortable and at peace. However, at this same hour, my parents are working under 90-degree weather; just last week, an immigrant from Guatemala passed away from heat exhaustion during the heatwave, when it was 100-plus degrees in the fields. For my father, education was a means not only to succeed, but also to spare me from humiliation. His main goal was to give me the opportunity to dodge Mother Nature and plow the fields of academia to plant and sow my seeds (thoughts) in this vast pool of knowledge. My father’s words hold true every day as I seek to get accepted to a PhD program: “la base del éxito es el estudio mijo.”

Conclusion

In my pursuit of a PhD, I realise that leaving the place I call home is imperative to my success. Change is certain and in five to seven years, Woodburn will no longer look or be the same. The impending arrival of Amazon, along with the Smith Creek Project, will drastically change the face of Woodburn. Despite this, home is where my heart is. Writing this autoethnography has allowed me to analyse my upbringing and helped me realise how crucial Woodburn has been to form my identity. While it’s not perfect by any means, it has been a place of refuge for my family. Despite their undocumented status, they managed to not only find consistent jobs, but also raise an ambitious child who has the unlikeliest of dreams: to become a history professor and ultimately teach in a university. I’ll be the first professor in my family, and probably the only one in the university who listens to corridos openly in his office, while having mole for lunch. No matter where I end up, now I know who I am. I’m Arturo Primitivo Pérez López.
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Notes

1 We would like to thank the Carson Undergraduate Research Grant at Willamette University for funding this project.

2 Woodburn is a city in the Willamette Valley, Oregon, known for its large Latinx and farm-working population. Some 59% of its population is Latinx. However, it is also the home of Russian Orthodox Old Believers and a growing retirement community.


References


