To all the persons injured or killed in the El Paso shooting—those who are Mexican and those who are not.

A couple of months ago I changed my computer screen wallpaper. I chose a photograph of Arthur Bochner, Carol Rambo, and myself taken at a celebration of Art and Carolyn Ellis’s retirement party. The picture became a shield I use to protect myself from what I have experienced as an aggressive imposition of my female colleagues’ domain assumptions in Mexican academia. For me, the image of the three of us is a reflection of myself in a comfortable place of belonging.

In this article I focus on my place in Mexican academia, but ever since I was very young I have wondered how much of a Mexican I can claim to be. How far I can claim to be a member of what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined political community, despite being light skinned, knowing little about Mexican food, extended family celebrations, or many other subtle expressions that indicated to me I was different. Not to mention that in the official history of my country, my family’s presence in Mexico began on the wrong side—the Porfirián dictatorship. My great-grandfather was invited from France to build the Legislation Palace, the building which—had the Revolution not begun—would have turned into the architectural icon of power built by a long dictatorship.

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—Silvia, isn’t Aguascalientes still the place where you feel you belong?
—Yes, it is, Magda. I plan to stay here at least ’til I retire. After all these years, many people who are important to me live here. Besides, here is my house with its garden, one of my major achievements. I would probably only move somewhere else if my son and my daughter moved farther away than they live now.
—So, define your belonging accordingly, for those things are what you belong to.
And academically? Can I establish a sense of belonging to something that goes beyond such traditions as those of the universities where I studied in the two sides of the Rio Grande (Bravo)? The traditions in the universities where I studied and where I currently work are widely opposed to one another. Even at present, when I debate with colleagues from Mexico and Latin America, I must retrieve my knowledge as an undergraduate student of Marxism and macro explanations of sociological issues, which prevail in this part of the continent.4

Those differences, which I experience as divided loyalties, are strengthened by language. I work at a public university in Mexico, and I usually tell my sociology students, “You need to learn English; you need to learn the language of The Enemy.” What a sentence to portray my own contradictions.

It is mostly within the English-speaking tradition that I have learned what I teach and do research on in the present. It is within the combination of that language of “The Enemy” and Spanish, within the university and the national research policy in my country of origin, that I can survive in academia.5

Since I started doing autoethnography near the end of the 2010s, I have written in both Spanish and English, mostly due to publishing opportunities, but also because of a personal urge to communicate parts of my story that I believed might not be welcomed in Mexico. An unintended and contradictory consequence of this has been that publishing in another language and in internationally recognized journals and publisher houses has been considered a proof of academic excellence. Thus, the fact that those articles, book chapters, and edited books are autoethnographic has been underplayed. This is, I assume, one reason I have remained part of the SNI (National System of Researchers), a position that not only constitutes about a third of my total income but proves to be very positive when distributing resources and workloads at the university.

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As I debate with myself and others about these topics, I have found an alternative solution to the puzzle. The question is not based on national boundaries or even language.

My sense of belonging at this point of my life, and after doing research about borders and nationalisms for many years in my research career, can be defined by my story. Yes, it is “my story,” the way in which autoethnography has taught me to understand it. It deals with writing about relevant issues, epiphanies, and turning points that have shaped my life as well as reviewing them, constructing a sociocultural explanation, and dimensioning their political implications—reflecting and rewriting about them repeatedly. The product of all that writing as a way of knowing6 is what allows me to explain myself to me, and to others.

As Denzin describes it:

My stories are reflexive, critical, multimedia tales, and tellings. They begin with the writer’s biography and body, epiphanic moments, turning point experiences, and times of personal trouble and turmoil—Turner’s (1986b, 34–35) liminal experiences. Performed mysteries move from epiphanic moments to those larger cultural and scientific texts that purport to interpret and make sense of such personal experience and public explanations of private troubles (Mills 1959).7
Mystery defines a sense of belonging on grounds that go beyond borders. I dismiss nationalism as the major reference to define who I am. Therefore, my sense of belonging can be elaborated in a much more in-depth manner, considering the complex and subtle ways in which I place myself and others place me, be it in Mexico or abroad.

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Those mysteries I have written, and the many more I have yet to write, allow me to express honestly and openly about who I am, what I feel, and the experiences I have had. The willingness to do so is what Brené Brown calls Courage, the first of her “three Cs” for what she defines as full-hearted living. According to Brown, Compassion (her second C) is as important for achieving a sense of belonging. She takes a definition of a Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön:

When we practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience the fear of our pain. Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us.

It is a relationship among equals that becomes real when we acknowledge our shared humanity. Again, the practice of autoethnography empowers me to see myself as one among others in a society with shared values.

A relevant feature when practicing compassion is to overcome fear to establish limits and make people responsible for their own actions. This is what Brown calls accountability. Further, she argues that making people feel shame or guilt for their actions, instead of making them accountable, is toxic for personal, community, and social relationships. The way to compassion and acceptance, which allows holding people accountable for their acts, is to separate the person from the act they have performed. Following Brown, I realize that lack of accountability is a keystone to my sense of not belonging. As a part of her argument, she stresses how failing to set limits and making others responsible for their actions leads us to feel mistreated.

Autoethnography has allowed me to engage in a process of writing in which I can reflect on my biography and, once there, find a story with which to feel comfortable for following the path toward community belonging. Mystery, a form of autoethnography, is not only something that fits me, but a process, as I mentioned above, through which reflection allows me to see myself and others as a whole, thus resulting in compound and profound interpretations, which include placing the personal within the social and the cultural. Having done the latter, it is much more likely that I can set the boundaries I need to achieve the last of the three Cs: Connection. This is the process that allows me to develop a sense of community, but not in terms of place of birth or citizenry, but within the boundaries established with others who are also willing to bind from an honest—or as honest as possible—position while recognizing vulnerability. That is how I can build a sense of community.

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It is not within and between national borders that either my personal or academic community can be constructed. It is within boundaries established through Courage, Compassion, and Connection that I can practice in the autoethnographic tradition toward building a sense of community. Through that process I gain agency and find political alternatives to action.

POSTSCRIPT

On Saturday morning, a man—whose name I will not print, because that’s what he hopes to happen—opened fire at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing twenty-two people and injuring many more. Seven of the victims were Mexican citizens. According to ABC News and other media outlets, the man told police that he set out to kill as many Mexicans as he could. As reported by the New York Times, nineteen minutes before the first 911 call reported the mass shooting, an anti-immigrant manifesto appeared online that described an imminent attack against immigrants. At the time of this writing it remains uncertain that this manifesto is linked to the gunman: “The El Paso shooting, if the manifesto is linked to the gunman, potentially underscored the global spread of white supremacist ideology in the age of social media and at a time when immigration in America and elsewhere has become a divisive political topic.” Taking this information into account, mass media have described the attack as a hate crime. The suspect has been charged with capital murder and is being held without bond.

In his speech from the White House on Monday morning, President Trump condemned racism and white supremacy, but he didn’t mention gun control; instead, he called for more attention on violent video games and mental illness. When the White House announced that Trump was planning to visit El Paso on the Wednesday following the shooting, many Texans objected, including Democratic presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke, who blamed Trump’s hate-filled, anti-immigration language for contributing to the shooting.

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Again, and again, it is not within and between national borders that communities are to be constructed. Accountability is key in respecting human rights all over the planet. Let us position ourselves beyond those borders.

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NOTES


4. I know there are university and national traditions, and I respect that. Nevertheless, I was raised in a somehow multicultural environment and then educated first, as an undergraduate, in a Mexican university tradition (at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Atzcapotzalco) with a clearly Marxist orientation. Later, as a graduate student in the United States (at the University of Texas at Austin), I intended to learn social psychology, but ended up taking lots of classes and on diverse sociological matters.


