



Practicing the Four Seasons of Ethnography Methodology while Searching for Identity in Mexico

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This narrative is an account of my field experiences and challenges practicing González's (2000) Four Seasons of Ethnography methodology in Mexico City. I describe the complexities and tensions inherent in managing two scientific paradigms: Western scientific logic vs. a more organic ontology. The experiential knowledge produced in this text is useful to ethnographers who face questions of identity and ethics in the field. To evoke a sense of experience, I re-present the ethnography for the reader in the way it unfolded for me—sometimes painful, other times insightful, oftentimes both. This dual text exposes my struggles as emergent ethnographer grappling with issues of voice, identity, and representation while describing scenes from life in Mexico drawn from observations and narrative interviews. At the forefront of this text are the methodological choices and ontological experiences of the Four Seasons of Ethnography methodology, while observations and conversations in Mexico City form the backdrop. Keywords: Ethnography, Identity, Four Seasons Methodology, Mexico, Ontology, Place

Experienced ethnographers express with much heart that “doing” ethnography is as much about learning and experiencing other cultures as it is about your own; it is as much about others as it is about selves (see for example, Ellis, 2007; González, 2000; Goodall, 2000). It is about the interconnection between others and selves. I have come to know not only this tenet of ethnography, but also to understand it in an experiential manner. This is the account of an experience that resulted in an understanding of the doing (the methodology) and the being (the ontology) of ethnography. Simply, we become ethnographers by doing ethnography. My purpose in writing this is to mark what might otherwise be unremarkable moments in fieldwork in order to share with emergent ethnographers the smaller, but crucial, ethnographic moments that underlie a larger ethnographic text. In this sense, it is a “confessional tale,” an explicit attempt to “demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 73). I frame this narrative as I experienced it, in González's (2000) Four Seasons of Ethnography. I intend to evoke the experience of the Four Seasons of Ethnography by exposing my own struggles and success with the methodology. At the forefront of this narrative are the daily methodological and ontological complexities of conducting fieldwork. Narrative descriptions of place and identity in Mexico City form the background. Thus, the central focus of this account is on the process and experience of the Four Seasons of Ethnography. More importantly, this text makes transparent a process not generally available to emergent ethnographers about

the experience of doing ethnography, and how it can sometimes take five years to find out what the important thing is that you have to say.

The experience began with a guided introduction to González's (2000) Four Seasons of Ethnography methodology during a cultural immersion in Mexico City in the summer of 2002. González (now de la Garza) facilitated the study; Mexico City guided my experience. The purpose of the cultural immersion was to experience the Four Seasons approach by investigating an aspect of Mexican culture. I chose to focus on the connections between place and identity (see Basso, 1996, for an excellent work on this matter). Through the process of the Four Seasons methodology, I found, however, that as I was focusing intently on Mexican identity, my own identity was focusing intensely on me. That is, despite my attempts to focus solely on the "other," my identity became increasingly salient to me as I progressed through the Four Seasons methodology.

The Four Seasons of Ethnography

Surprisingly, in the decade since its publication, there have been no major ethnographic works reporting on the adoption and significance of the Four Seasons approach. It deserves attention as a rigorous, socially important, and humanly sensitive approach to ethnography. The Four Seasons is an ontologically-based methodology that centers on the awareness of the researcher as human instrument and the natural cycles of knowledge and ethnographic research. This methodology offers an alternative to traditional, linear approaches to ethnography in favor of a more organic process nested in indigenous meanings and natural cycles. Organic, "or natural," as González (2003) describes it, means "finding its order from the signs and signals provided in one's environment...requir[ing] a development of attention to the small details of one's everyday contexts, rather than simply to one's ideas, intentions, or desires" (p. 503). This approach necessitates sensitivity to self and other, but also to the natural process of (re)discovery (González, 2000). As such, natural experiences are guides in how the research is done and what it will look like when it is complete (González, 1998). The Four Seasons includes all phases from preparing to enter the field (spring), to "experiencing" data (summer), creating meaning (autumn), and finally writing up reports (winter). Honoring the methodological rigor and ontological humility of the Four Seasons approach necessarily results in the honing of the human instrument and a greater appreciation for the role of self and identity in research. It also means critically (and sometimes painfully) examining how power, privilege, and dominant ontologies also influence the research process.

The representation of self and identity processes in the field have vexed ethnographers across time. For example, in 1943, William Whyte, author of *Street Corner Society*, recognized that published reports offered:

Little attention to the actual process whereby the research was carried out. . . [and] with a few exceptions, they place the discussion entirely on a logical-intellectual basis. They fail to note that the researcher, like his informants, is a social animal. He has a role to play and he has his own personality needs that must be met in some degree if he is to function successfully. Where the researcher operates out of a university, just going

into the field for a few hours at a time, he can keep his personal social life separate from field activity. His problem of role is not quite so complicated. If, on the other hand, the researcher is living for an extended period in the community he is studying, his personal life is inextricably mixed with his research. A real explanation, then of how the research was done necessarily involves a rather personal account of how the researcher lived during the period of study. (p. 279)

This criticism of some ethnographic work has continued until the present. For example, in 2011, Shulamit Reinharz argued for the representation of self in ethnographic work and identified three “selves” ever present in the field: research selves, personal selves, and situational selves. While identity plays a significant role in all phases of ethnographic work from rapport building to exiting the field, the processes of identity (re)negotiation are rarely illuminated in final reports. Practicing the Four Seasons of Ethnography allows the researcher to recognize and attend to identity needs and dilemmas by focusing on the interconnectedness between self and all that surrounds the self (e.g., people, places, objects, and physical, emotional, and spiritual experiences).

Although it might not be a natural way of being for many who are trained to think and experience in terms of “Western” logic, González (2000) speculates the Four Seasons ontology can be learned in the same fashion that people with a predominantly non-Western ontology have learned to “use” Western logic. Ontology “involves far more than a difference of opinion; it is the basic structuring set of assumptions of what can be taken as real” (González, 2000, p. 628). As such, González (2000) identifies four taken-for-granted assumptions (she calls these “ideals”) that guide a Western approach to “science:” Opportunism, independence of researcher, entitlement, and primacy of rationality (see Table 1). These “ideals” are manifest in the assumptions about the process, success, and heuristic value of research. In other words, for those of us trained in a traditional western social scientific approach to research, these assumptions are likely to emerge in the field because they are so pervasive to our thinking, even when we are pursuing more interpretive/humanist approaches.

The first ideal, opportunism, is described by González (2000) as the assumption that events (should) proceed in a linear and predictable manner that lead to “real” outcomes. It reflects a “doing” cultural orientation that privileges outcome and activity over process and patience (p. 630). The tension between “being” (Four Seasons) and “doing” is revealed when one senses rigid time structures, desires to “take an opportunity” even if it is unclear what the exact purpose is, and/or favors action over patient waiting. This impatience can result in an unfocused, haphazard investigation driven by the researcher’s fear of missing out on something even if s/he is unsure what that is. The second ideal guiding Western science is that of the independence of researcher. This ideal is manifest in the assumption that the researcher is (should be) outside of what is being researched. More specifically, González (2000) writes it is the perception of “‘researcher in contact with culture’ and not more radically, ‘researcher as part of cultural context’” (p. 630). Independence is pervasive even in classic ethnographic studies, as seen in the writing of Margaret Mead (1943): “The dispassionate study of culture, of the whole way of life of a people seen as a dynamic pattern, is dependent upon a degree of detachment which no one can attain concerning his own society and remain a

normal, participant member of that society” (pp. 3-4). Entitlement, the third guiding ideal, is the sense that a researcher has the “right” to conduct research simply because s/he has a curiosity. Entitlement is manifest in the belief that the researcher is in control and has ownership over information, free access to research sites and social borders, and the right to represent informants (González, 2000). The final guiding ideal is the primacy of rationality and privileges “rational thought” (mind) over the embodied physical, spiritual, and emotional experiences (body) (p. 631). In the field it is manifest in the desire to classify information into existing categories. When the ethnographer begins to impose her/his own structure of meaning on information, s/he privileges outsider knowledge over indigenous knowledge, invariably reifying culturally accepted knowledge claims. Again, classic anthropologic ethnographers favored this approach, as seen in the writings of Bronislaw Malinowski:

In the field one has to face a chaos of facts, some of which are so small that they seem insignificant; others loom so large that they are hard to encompass with one synthetic glance. But in this crude form they are not scientific facts at all; they are absolutely elusive, and can be fixed only by interpretation, by seeing them sub specie aeternitatis, by grasping what is essential in them and fixing this. Only laws and generalizations are scientific facts, and field work consists only and exclusively in the interpretation of the chaotic social reality, in subordinating it to general rules. (Malinowski, 1916, as cited in Young, 1979, pp. 8-9)

The preceding “Western scientific ideals” are obstacles to the more indigenous ways of knowing proposed by the Four Seasons of Ethnography. In opposition to classic anthropology favoring dispassionate and objective research, González’s (2000) work reflects the critical turn in ethnography (Conquergood, 1991) that favored (a) “the body as a site of knowing” (p. 180); (b) the blurring of boundaries and borders where “identity is more like a performance in process than a postulate, premise, or originary principle” (p. 185); (c) the performance of everyday selves and culture; and (d) rhetorical reflexivity in which “contemporary ethnography is extremely interested in and self-conscious about its own text-making practices” (p. 191). The Four Seasons contribute to what Goodall (2000) termed new ethnography, the “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (p. 9). Situated in what Denzin and Lincoln (2008) labeled ethnography’s sixth moment, the Four Seasons approach was part of a post-experimental moment in ethnography that centered on a narrative turn with a concern for storytelling and writing ethnography in new ways (Denzin, 2010).

The four ideals that underpin this methodology are distinct from the dominant “Western” scientific approach in that they value intuition as a way of knowing, patience and harmony within the field and with the research process, and the researcher’s presence in all aspects of the work. The first guiding ideal is natural cycles or appropriateness. González identifies this as the most central guiding ideal “rooted in the belief that all natural experience is ordered in cycles, which are then reflected in the processes and experiences of all living beings” (p. 632). Ethnographers operating under this ideal exhibit sensitivity to seasonal cues and an ability to know when it is time to rest or to

work. From this perspective, opportunity can neither be lost nor created; it simply exists in one season or the next. One must be patient to wait for appropriate timing for all research activities.

Table 1. Traditional Guiding Ideals vs. Four Seasons Ideals*

Traditional Assumptions/Ideals	Four Season Ontology Ideals
<p>Opportunism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges “doing” over “being” • Privileges linear procession of events and predictability over organic unfolding • Privileges outcome over process 	<p>Natural Cycles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriateness • There is a natural cycle to experience • Must wait for the cycle to unfold • Cycles are natural, inevitable, and multiple
<p>Independence of Researcher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges researcher-researched separation over connection • Focus on unitization and manipulation of the world 	<p>Interdependence of Researcher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness • “all that exists and occurs within a culture is data” (p. 633) • Recognizes boundaries, but focuses on interconnection of all things/experiences
<p>Entitlement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher is dominant in social hierarchy • Perceptions of control over data and environment 	<p>Preparedness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of personal reflexivity in preparing for the field • Rich description of personal and experiential context
<p>Primacy of Rationality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges mind (thought) over body (spiritual, emotional, and physical experiences) 	<p>Harmony/Balance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline • “All forms of experience must be respected and given attention, due to their independent nature” (p. 634) • Privileges rational <i>and</i> spiritual/emotional/physical

*Note. Table is adapted from González, M. C. (2000). The Four Seasons of Ethnography: A creation-centered ontology for ethnography. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24, 623-650.

The second guiding ideal of the Four Seasons is the interdependence of all things, or awareness. This guiding ideal is centered on understanding that all things are interrelated and that boundaries that do exist should be recognized, but not privileged (González, 2000). Moreover, in recognizing the interdependence of all things, “one recognizes that all experience is part of the whole process” and that “a discipline for one’s life as an ethnographer must develop which respects the process and eventual report as a demonstration not just of the focus of the study, but also the nature of the researcher, as part of that study” (p. 633). Preparedness, or the notion that one cannot enter the field until she/he is properly prepared, creates the third ideal (González, 2000). Paramount to this ideal is the ability to let nature guide the inquiry. Preparedness most closely relates to readying the human instrument, and can be evidenced in “the appearance of personal reflexivity in the reports of one’s ethnographic research, and the value given to rich descriptions of personal and experiential context for one’s ‘findings’” (p. 634). The final guiding ideal is harmony/balance or discipline. Discipline refers to the awareness that an authentic and honest report can only be achieved if the ethnographer has accepted that all forms of experience (spiritual, material, emotional, physical) are important to the research process and should be honored (González, 2000). “This discipline will be rooted, not in the expectations of one’s academic field or career, but in the awareness that what is not taken care of now will inevitably be dealt with again in a future cycle of seasons” (González, 2000, p. 634).

As evidenced in its guiding ideals, the Four Seasons methodology privileges natural cycles of discovery, experience, and knowledge and recognizes that “the phases of nature can be observed to provide wisdom about the phases of all human experience” (González, 2000, p. 637). These phases, or cycles, create a rhythm for human behaviors, although humans can be more or less attuned to them. One powerful natural force that drives all living activity is the seasons. Just as we can maximize the rewards of our labors by being in harmony with the season (i.e., right season, right time, right mind, right activity), we struggle and increase our labor with fewer rewards when we are not in concert with nature. González draws a comparison between ritual/ceremony and the research process using the seasons metaphor. Just as any ritual has natural phases (preparation, action, celebration, rest), so too does the research process. What follows is a description of each season of ethnography and my experiences (sometimes in concert and other times out of sync) with it.

The Spring of Ethnography – Emergent Identity

The spring of ethnography is marked by preparation, anxiety, excitement, hopes and desires for a successful ethnographic journey. During this time, the ethnographer asks, “Who am I? What are my strengths and flaws as a researcher? Am I prepared to enter the field” (González, 2000)? I spent my “spring” studying texts devoted to Mexican identity, cultural and language practices in Mexico, and polishing my Spanish skills. I wrote an essay on the identity and migration practices of indigenous Mexicans. I attended graduate seminars on language and identity in Latin America and on ethnography in cultural anthropology. I felt prepared, but I took little notice of who I was upon entering the field. Like other animals in spring, I embarked on my quest unworried and confident in the potential the future would hold. My naïveté was offset only by an honest desire to

uncover some sacred “little t” truth. What was unknown to me then was the importance of balancing “knowledge” about culture with knowledge about my primary research tool – the human instrument. The spring of ethnography is important because it marks the beginning of the journey. And, like all journeys, ethnographic journeys must first begin by taking stock of what tools are already in the satchel (who you are) and what tools need to be acquired.

Although I had not fully embraced notions of appropriateness and preparedness, nature has a way of providing subtle (and not so subtle) hints. My own identity, first as a non-Mexican, then as a woman, emerged as I glided onto Aeromexico’s jetway from the international terminal at Dallas/Fort Worth. I was immediately taken out of the comfort of “my” language and surrounded by the sounds and sights of a language that was largely unknown to me. I was stripped of the strength of my own voice by my own doing. This fact, though clear to me now given the time and distance, was easily suppressed (no doubt for mental survival purposes) only to emerge with force midway through my fieldwork.

After re-reading my field notes, I realized that I occasionally focused on certain aspects of my identity over others, though at the time I was unaware of this. I wrote frequently about being the target of stares by men, women, and children. Young and old male vendors alike whistled at me, grunting remarks at the *gringa* walking by. I could only catch a few of their words as I stood in the middle grasping for their meaning, like a game of cultural “keep-away.” Some were harmless, *jay que bonita!* Others were vulgar and whispered so close to my ear that I could feel the moisture of breath. But, this was only a part of the hodge-podge of sights and sounds that circled me daily. That instant of disgust or humor I found on each occasion was no worse than walking through the streets of Manhattan. I was quickly swept into the scenes of life in Mexico City, able to transform myself from tourist-target to purposive researcher. Rather than honoring the importance of interdependence, I gave in to independence as a form of protection. I became a scientist in order to protect myself from being the subject under investigation. I became the observer. They became the other.

I found these continual sidewalk commentaries intrusive. People were watching me, commenting about me, socially constructing my identity, intruding on my real identity. Who is the researcher now? Who is the observed? The observer? When they create my identity at least it is only said – words easily carried off in the next breeze. When I do the same thing, I write strenuously in my journal on archival paper with permanent ink. (Theoretical Memo; June 22, 2002; Home)

The soil I prepared in the spring was only loosely covering the bedrock of unrecognized personal identity issues. Over time, I spent more effort trying to bury the rocks that surfaced than dealing with them.

The Summer of Ethnography – Observing and Participating

The summer of ethnography marks what is traditionally known as the ethnographic process – the fieldwork. Observations, interviews, journaling, field notes,

memos, thick descriptions, and cultural experiences are all part of this season (González, 2000; see also Geertz, 1973, for discussion of “thick” vs. “thin” description). The researcher endures the difficult work of “summer” to be able to harvest meaning in the autumn. For me, this not only meant observing, participating, and talking with participants, but it also meant staying rested, nourished, and healthy despite the long days of work and an uncooperative stomach. I spent my first days of summer somewhere between the ideals of independence and interdependence as I entered sites of everyday living in Mexico City. The observations below demonstrate that I was in the scene, but not, more radically, part of it.

First Observations – Early Summer

The juxtaposition of modern and traditional, recent and ancient, young and old in everything I sensed was overwhelming. Generations of families engaging in traditional spiritual ceremonies and rituals were speaking in indigenous languages and Spanish, listening to Aztec drumming and Ricky Martin. I was interested in the changing masses of people from La Basílica de Guadalupe to El Zócalo. Who were these people? I wondered as I wandered into each of these places, notebook in hand, detailing thick descriptions. I was searching for identity – theirs, not mine. At first I just observed, sitting for hours in each cultural space jotting down everything I could absorb. These scenes were always only meant to be “glimpses” into everyday activity and “small holograms” (González, 1998, p. 489) of my experience – never presuming to be more than a moving portrait in a moment of time.

La Basílica de Guadalupe. The rough beauty, of people and place, at La Basílica de Guadalupe held my attention so well I found it difficult to focus on much else.

I want to stare into the dark creases mapped into their skin. Men and women, both beautiful- truly created by Mother Earth. Eyes deep and steely with an unmistakable profoundness. Eyes that sparkle like damp pools offering a glimpse into their lives - what they live. Their skin, hair, eyes, and hands are beautiful. They tell stories by themselves. Ancient tales. (Field Notes; May 12, 2002; La Basílica de Guadalupe)

People walked en masse up the hill toward La Basílica de Guadalupe. They followed the curved staircase that seemed to trickle like a winding stream endlessly from the top of the hill. Families stopped occasionally on flat landings for children and elders to rest or to look over the wall at gardens and water cascades below. The stairs were covered with meandering magenta bougainvillea that draped across the path from overhead arches. Arm in arm, families climbed the hill, laughing and teasing. Generations of people dressed in generations of clothing decorated the hill below La Basílica with their colors and sounds like a parade. Young lovers leaned kissing against the walls along the path, as groups of nuns dressed in tan and burgundy hurried along the long staircase. Teenaged girls in short skirts and skin bearing tops steadied the uncertain and short steps of their grandmothers swathed in long, brightly colored skirts and petticoats, thick blouses, shawls and stockings.

Nearing La Basílica at the final landing, almost everyone stopped at the large fountain and pool of water to refresh, play, toss coins for wishes, and douse themselves in holy water before walking up the final steps. Arriving at the top, families crowded into the tiny basílica and circled around statues of La Virgen de Guadalupe, Jesus, and Juan Diego. Men and women were crying, holding babies in their arms pointing to the virgin and telling the story of their Mother. Children copied their mothers, seconds delayed, as they made the sign of the cross entering La Basílica. The basilica was solemn inside. There was no horseplay, no teasing, and no laughter. It seems this was all left at the fountain below. Mothers with infants exited quickly to sit and wait for the rest of their families. Older couples spent nearly half an hour in the small room, kneeling in prayer and touching the statues with a gentle hand. Families, then, moved as one down the staircase rambling around the hill. The laughter returned and voices rang back up the hillside. I became lost in the serenity, my thoughts drifted with their laughter.

El Zócalo's Calle Moneda. The whistles and whirrs of Calle Moneda, a large street that spun off the main square of El Zócalo, contrasted with the gentle pace of La Basílica de Guadalupe. El Zócalo, and especially Calle Moneda, was alive and vibrant with colors and sounds that seemed to only get richer and louder with each step. I sat on a stoop amidst the heavy traffic, street vendors, and hawkers. I was swept into the scene like the dirt on the street, caught in a tiny whirlwind. My head was spinning from the energy spilling over. I found it difficult to focus on the social interactions – too many colors and sounds barked for my attention.

Forcing my eyes up from the goods for sale, I interrogate their faces...People look expressionless as they move along the filth covered street with gray, black, or brown eyes staring forward. Their dark brown skin contrasts with their bright clothing. Moneda is a flood of color, sounds, and movement. (Field Notes; May 13, 2002; Calle Moneda)

Calle Moneda is paved with street vendors and blankets. Bright colored clothing, food, and trinkets were piled on blankets thrown across the sidewalk. Hordes of people were walking toward and away from El Zócalo where trash covers every speck of the hot concrete somewhere underneath. Vendors leaned against walls, cars, and carts watching people pass swiftly through, waiting for someone to stop and rummage through their square pile of treasures or necessities.

In early morning hours, vendors return to the same spot to sell their wares. At dawn they begin calling – sounding like auctioneers hollering out in a deep, resonating voice a tune that always followed the same melody. The sound of “*a quince, a quince, a quince*” or “*diez- pesos-*” rippled through the streets and alleys. Men and women tilted back their heads and shouted the contents of their wares and the price. Tape, men’s underwear, books, stockings, pens, bags, clear plastic bra straps, water faucet knobs, anything and everything was for sale on Calle Moneda.

Families moved along Moneda as they did at La Basílica, but more harried. They were shopping for household wares, picking up rolls of duct tape and kitchen towels. Parents held the hands of children and toddlers as they shopped hurriedly, sometimes swooping down and picking them up, or pulling them along by their unwilling little arms.

School girls dressed in navy and white uniforms walked in small groups down the road chirping and flirting gaily like finches. They dodged vendors and goods gracefully, stopping only occasionally to pick up a CD or book that caught their eye. Old women walked together sharing a basket between them. Many people stopped at the fruit and drink vendors in the afternoon heat, walking away with a bright-orange mango dusted with deep red chili or a cola in a plastic bag with a straw. This continued until dusk when the mass of people slowed to only a crawl. The colors, sounds, and smells dissipated into the evening on El Zócalo absorbed by the fiery reds of the sunset sky swirling above La Catedral Metropolitana.

Seven Interviews – Late Summer

Summer is vibrant and full of possibilities. Hot and exhausting, summer is also the time of conflict and culture shock (González, 2000). At first, summer unfolded peacefully with rich descriptions, but I became greedy. Opportunism called. Observations led to participant-observations and eventually conversational interviews. Comfortable with the way early summer unfolded, I began to want more from the experience. To get at the heart of identity, I felt it was necessary to go beyond observing social interaction and engage with the people. Late in the summer of ethnography, I felt ready to conduct interviews. I was anxious to hear the narratives that I hoped would give depth to the observations I made, but identities are difficult to coax out and untangle. In this moment of challenge, I was vulnerable to the assumptions of Western science: Opportunism (concerns about time remaining in the field), independence (my unawareness of the fallibility and sensitivity of the human instrument), entitlement (a sense that my search for answers was justified), and primacy of rationality (feeling that I needed a theoretical framework to understand identity).

My language (in)abilities afforded me little opportunity for “real” conversation. I was unable to conduct interviews in Spanish; thus, in order to learn about place and Mexican identity, I sought people willing to talk with me about their identity in English. I settled on the small American library located on the second floor of a gray stone building in La Zona Rosa. The Benjamin Franklin Library housed, along with its many English books and recordings, a range of English “students.” The anxiety and embarrassment I felt before approaching a potential cultural informant should have been a sign that timing was inappropriate and I was unprepared. Yet, I ignored the intuitive human instrument and favored a more rational approach. Feeling entitled to the answers, I continued.

I sat at a table near the large English dictionary in one wing of the library and developed three questions to guide my inquiry: (a) What does identity mean to you? (b) When does your identity change? (c) How does going to different cultural locations affect your identity? Then, I watched and waited. I approached a handful of friendly-looking patrons, and a few approached me. Not wishing to be intrusive, I chose to take notes rather than audio record each discussion. After each discussion, I wrote descriptive and interpretive notes reflecting the conversation, and provided additional detail to the original notes. I tried to capture the participants’ expressions by writing down their exact words and phrases when possible. Each conversation unfolded into a dialogue about identity as we began to negotiate our identities with one another. Acknowledging some sense of appropriateness, I tried carefully to invite informants to share with me their

stories without crossing the boundary of intrusion. I embarked (naïvely) on a research quest embedded in U.S. American cultural assumptions and methods for extracting stories. And, in this manner, I “extracted” seven and dutifully gave each one a pseudonym.

Miguel. Miguel was the first person I approached. I spotted the 43-year-old man while I was jotting descriptions of the library. He walked past the round table where I was sitting several times en route to the dictionary. He was decoding a novel; I guessed that he was at the library for leisure rather than work. He was eager to speak with me in English, immediately disclosing that he was both studying and teaching English. Miguel believed that identity, like everything Earthly, changes. “Only God is immutable,” he instructed me. Since his move to Mexico City, he realized an identity as a poor man unable to get help in the city. According to Miguel, the “capitol culture” in Mexico City serves to remind many impoverished peoples that they are merely objects used to make money for someone else. He said, “they don’t see people as enabled, as partners, they see people as a thing, a machine, an object, where they can get money.” People are not enabled to be productive, and therefore do not feel they are capable of it. We spoke together for an hour and a half. He narrated heart-wrenching tales about his alcoholic and abusive family, his awkward shyness, and search for a greater family and purpose in God. He found comfort in an Evangelical church, committing his life to between five and seven different Christian services a week.

Yolanda and Juanita. I approached two young women at a round table sitting just behind my original station. They were reading textbooks and jotting notes while intermittently talking, giggling, and peering over one another’s books. Their relaxed appearance signaled to me it was okay to interrupt their studies. They watched me, smiling, as I approached the table. It seemed they knew what I was going to ask. They told me they were university students studying for a marketing exam in English. Each agreed to participate, making disclaimers in almost flawless English that they were not very fluent. They were. Yolanda and Juanita told me that Mexicans seek cultural, spiritual, and archaeological sites to get in touch with their heritage and that “people were different in every state.” They explained it was common in Mexico to reject any indigenous ancestry, but also believed many people engage in the continuation and celebration of that heritage by engaging in ancient traditions and rituals and visiting historical sites. “Some Mexicans,” Yolanda said, “feel proud of [their] ancestors, others feel not proud – embarrassed.”

Esther. Feeling satisfied with my interviews for the day, I packed my bag and made my way toward the exit. Just then, Esther approached me. She inquired if I was offering English lessons and was disappointed when I told her I was not. When I disclosed my purpose, she stood on tiptoes, smiled broadly, and blinked her large brown eyes at me. I invited her to participate. “Yes,” she exclaimed, she would be very happy to speak in English. Esther’s English skills were nearly as rough as my Spanish skills, but we managed to negotiate a conversation about Catholicism and the importance of higher education. She explained that she “feel(s) more Catholic in church, participating in ceremonies, in that moment,” but that she “feels more important” working as a senior

accountant. Esther, too, believed that churches, parks (Chapultepec), stadiums, and museums (Bellas Artes) were sites where Mexican people experience heightened cultural identity.

Xavier. During my second visit to the library, I met Xavier, a 51-year-old man who recently returned to Mexico after living in California. He returned to Mexico City to settle affairs after his father's suicide. Xavier had been attempting to locate his four brothers and three sisters across the U.S. and Mexico to inform them about their father's death. He had not, as of then, located any of them. Upon approaching him, he quickly shut the book he was reading and greeted me. He said he would be honored to speak with me about his heritage, but immediately opened a fat manila folder crammed with a potpourri of papers. He pulled out a document and pointed to the word FAIL stamped in bold, red lettering. He told me he would not be of any use to me because he had failed his G.E.D. in the U.S., and had the document to prove it. I assured him that I was interested in his story and that was more important to me than his education. He opened up to me, speaking for over two hours about his life struggles and desire to return to the U.S. He regretted leaving the U.S. and was studying to improve his English. He told me, "Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, and sometimes you have to fight yourself." The problems he had experienced since his return to Mexico City made him bitter toward the city and her inhabitants. He wanted to make a change for the better, "to do the right thing." For him, that meant an eventual return to the U.S. Until then, he said, "I have to be strong, I have no choice, to teach myself, to talk to myself. Don't give up, fight till the end."

Martha. I spotted Martha as she was copying information out of an encyclopedia about the geography of the U.S. I offered to answer any questions. Then, I asked if she could help me with my research. She thanked me for talking with her in English, and then quickly apologized for hers. We chatted for about 15 minutes, during which time she disclosed to me that she was a 23-year-old university student studying international commerce. She was shy, and slightly nervous throughout the interview. She seemed only to relax when I began to thank her for her time. To Martha, architecture and archeology were reminders of her heritage, but globalization and pressures of time and work make it difficult for many people to enjoy and participate in traditions. "We like old traditions," she said, "but don't have time to read, to see important places – we always think of freedoms, but don't think of real situations of life." However, she believed that places like Teotihuacán and La Catedral Metropolitana offer spaces for tranquility and the freedom to reflect on the past. But she added, "The problem is time, many people can't enjoy this."

Roberto. My final interview took place outside of the library. In fact, it was outside of Mexico City in the town of Puebla. Roberto had completed high school in the U.S. and then returned to Mexico. He described himself as a jazz musician, a writer and a Buddhist. He was born and raised in Northern Mexico, but had lived with his mother throughout his high school years in Monterey, California. Roberto believed that people had a core identity that remained with them, but also that place influences which aspects of that identity are stronger at any point in time. He said, "You're not from where you

were born, you are from where you want to know who you are.” Although he practices Buddhism, he also participates in multiple indigenous rituals to honor his Mayan and Huichol roots. He described the rituals as a process of centering that embraces self and place. While discussing the intersection of place and identity, he made himself very clear: “Places are made of people, and you must know the people to understand the place.”

The Autumn of Ethnography – Multiple Identities

Excited to make meaning out of the data collected during the “summer” of ethnography, I hurried into the “autumn” of ethnography. Autumn is a time for harvesting what has been learned – a time to organize, a time to prepare for a long winter of writing. I started interpreting/analyzing the data at the end of my time in Mexico City rather than carefully weighing and reflecting upon my experiences. The autumn season should have been refreshing after a tumultuous “summer” collecting heartwarming (and heartbreaking) stories and observing the beauty and ugliness of life in Mexico City. However, autumn proved the most challenging season. Autumn began with my attempts to impose structure (primacy of rationality) on the observations and narratives I collected and ended with a not-so-subtle reminder that I was not in control (entitlement) of this experience. The guiding ideal of preparedness “incorporates the notion of letting go of control, giving the upper hand to ‘nature’” (González, 2000, p. 634). I was reluctant to flow with the natural order of learning, but in the end I had little choice.

I became aware of the seasonal change as I completed the final interviews. At first it was difficult to maintain a conversational flow during the unstructured conversations. I was intent on capturing the identities informants spoke about rather than the enactment and embodiment of identity through our communication. Eventually I realized that it was not only impossible to write down every word, but I was missing meaning. The people I spoke with disclosed parts of their identity to me through narrative tales. Several times I felt one of them was leading me astray and not answering my questions only to find that by the end of the story, if I had listened carefully, an answer was there. I was trying to impose my own sense-making on their narratives, expecting a clean question-discussion-answer format. Instead, I should have followed Riessman’s (1993) recommendation on narrative as data for which “the purpose is to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (p. 2). Informants were enacting their identity through narratives; I only needed to listen more. I began to write more impressionistic interview notes, focusing on how they were saying something rather than what they were saying. Eventually, I became more sensitive to the inherent cycle of knowledge and gave in to the natural flow of conversation and disclosure.

Conversations with cultural informants centered on the questions of place and identity. The seven people I interviewed expressed a great diversity in cultural/ethnic identities. This diversity included the depth to which individuals expressed Mexican, Spanish, and indigenous identities, as well as the acceptance or rejection of belonging to any specific national, cultural, or ethnic group. Not surprisingly, the library context and my own position as a U.S. researcher also influenced narratives that reflected the importance of education and identity. Education level, aspirations, and failures emerged in all of the interviews. Catholics and non-Catholics cast their identity in terms of

religion, allowing it to surface in conversations as a part of a core identity. Issues involving social class identity were also present. In various ways, the participants disclosed their own social class standing and/or a generalized perspective on what they believed about other Mexicans in different cultural spaces. Narratives were “rich” in details of the social and economic disparity in Mexico City. Finally, family seemed to be a powerful influence in the lives of each informant as they narrated stories of family rejection, acceptance, and loss.

Whose Voice?

Together, participants and I shared and negotiated aspects of our identities. We shifted identity frames, peering through one frame in order to discuss a specific identity, while allowing other identities to escape through open frames (see Hecht, 1993, for description of identity frames). My goal as a researcher was to give voice to their stories, to their identities. I wanted to represent them as they presented themselves to me. With my researcher identity, I was able to take their words and expressions and interpret the meaning. As a researcher, I was “allowed” to turn library patrons into scientific subjects. My desire for control and sense of entitlement, “information gathered throughout one’s ethnography is in the control of the owner, as ownership is a manifestation of dominance,” was overwhelming (González, 2000, p. 631). I invited, interviewed, and perhaps even invaded participants’ identities. I maintained control during all of my observations and interview sessions. I chose location. I chose participants. I chose what to observe and record. I chose what to ask and how to steer the responses. I was able, in my researcher’s voice, in the U.S. American library, to direct social interaction. I conducted interviews in the safety and familiarity of a library, in my own language. I was able to set boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate disclosures. I privileged only the voices I was not afraid to hear. (Un)fortunately, all the control and safety I found in this setting disappeared as soon as I left the library.

Day Ten: The Turning Point

My interviews with Xavier and Martha took place on the tenth day of my research – the turning point. That afternoon, I left the library happy with the interviews I conducted. Musing over my theoretical memos, I walked confidently into the metro station impressed with my ability to package identity into tidy boxes. This is perhaps why González (2000) warns that autumn can be “dangerously misleading” (p. 644). My good fortune at the library and self-confidence increased my disconnectedness from the surrounding environment – I felt protected enacting researcher-as-independent. I did not know then that I would soon be aware of exactly how much I was avoiding my surroundings and my identity. Only minutes after I left the library, an aspect of my identity, the part that I had been avoiding throughout this research process, came leaping out.

I had, the day before, engaged in an exercise for which the purpose was to find and interact with my Shadow Identity (a concept similar to alter ego; Zweig & Abrams, 1991). The pedagogical purpose was to hone the human instrument by identifying strengths and weaknesses. Tuning the human instrument is necessary because “aspects of

the self not known or understood could be seen as unwelcome intrusions, therefore making honest reflection difficult” (González, 2000, p. 631). For my shadow-work, I was encouraged to search my inner self for something I had hidden long ago. This thing, I was told, could take the form of something I loathed or something I admired, perhaps irrationally. I chose to focus on my aversion to touch. Although my initial selection of this topic seemed to be uninteresting and difficult, I jotted what would become a very important note in my field journal. I made the unguided realization that my shadow was not touch at all, but rather, control. I wrote, “I want to be the one in charge – the one in control – and I do not like other people taking over my body, my space.” Perhaps I tempted the ethnography gods too much by creating such an easy prophecy. Perhaps “they” knew I was not taking my shadow-work seriously. Perhaps they helped me revisit my shadow in a real way, because I was unable to “play along” with the exercise. By fate or coincidence, on day ten my space was violated. My strength was violated. My voice was violated.

Walking into the metro, I allowed myself to explore my shadow and chose to ignore my own foreboding intuition sensing it was only a withdrawal from my shadow. Zweig and Abrams (1991) call the shadow a “psychic immune system.” Having “accepted” my shadow on this day, I was not immune. I was trapped in a metro terminal as people flooded down the stairs, because a metro line had stopped running temporarily. Instead of retreating because of the chest-to-chest shoving, I stayed. The worst that could happen would be that someone would steal my backpack, right? The alarming moment I recognized I was in a dangerous situation a train came. I was shoved – hard – from the back of the terminal onto the train. I became the front body space of a large man wearing a red t-shirt who reeked of body odor. He forced me into the corner of the train, pinning me between his body and a metal rail – hands and tongue all over me. I was surrounded by other sweaty bodies. Everyone was gasping for air. I was gasping from fear.

Voiceless Rage

I just wish I had a voice.

A choice.

Screaming in my head

isolated

because I felt I couldn't fight.

I never fight.

Trapped, pinned, caged

like a bird.

Only, a bird has a voice.

A song.

And wings,

to fly away from YOU.

I silenced my own voice because I don't speak your language.

Not Spanish –that is only syntax and grammar,

but profanity.

Vulgar profanity and violence.

Heart beating, voiceless, powerless.

Alone among millions

In voiceless rage.

(Writing Exercises; May 21, 2002; Sanborns Café)

Suddenly my identity came jolting forward. I became, for I rarely make the realization that I always am, vulnerable. I was struck at the recognition of the feeling, but even more so at the familiarity with suppressing that feeling. Day ten released the glaring aspects of my identity I was stoically bracketing with such fervor that I was left weak and pitiful. I was a woman shaken. I was no longer a researcher, but a white, English-speaking, frightened, woman. In one instant, my identity became more salient and more mentally demanding than the identity of the people I was trying so hard to understand.

In that single moment, I physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally experienced the interdependent nature of fieldwork – that the human instrument is wholly influenced by her culture and surroundings. That was when I decided to stop ignoring the personal experiences of my fieldwork. At once everything seemed to make sense. I could see the connections between my identity and theirs. I understood, finally, that I was engaged in a cultural environment that was shaping my identity in the way that I had wondered about location affecting theirs. I was asking about their identity salience in cultural locations, while I was experiencing my own. Had I been more “in touch” with the human instrument, I would have been able to read the signs of physical and methodological danger much earlier.

About autumn, González (2000) writes, “from a creation-centered perspective, all knowledge is valuable, but wisdom is only attained from completion of cycles” (p. 645). Consistent with González’s description, autumn offered a sense of clarity as I began to chronicle and interpret my experiences. As a researcher, I captured some essences of identity, I even tried to bundle them nicely into a theoretical framework. During my first few days of fieldwork I was uncertain that I was “getting it.” I felt there was something missing. Unfortunately, it took a violent act to shake me enough to realize that I was too much researcher and not enough human. Aspects of my identity, powered and disempowered, became real to me, as I no doubt made aspects of identity real to my participants. It was not until after intensive writing that I knew where to find meaning in the “data.” In a fit of scribbles and lines, it occurred to me:

Looking back into the writing – I wonder where this leads me as far as my research? I’m not sure I am dedicated to the idea of other people’s identity. I wonder if this whole thing isn’t about me? I mean after all, so many of the activities and exercises have been about centering and finding our SELVES. Maybe I should just do that? It might be better for me to “know thyself” than to use the little “knowledge” I have been able to gather about people here. A piece that is written half and half – a search for identity – mine and theirs – side by side. (Reflective Memo; May 22, 2002; Hotel La Moneda)

The (Five Year) Winter of Ethnography

Having experienced a significant transformation in knowledge and existence, I plunged into winter ready to put into print the cultural knowledge I gained. I tried to force winter like a gardener forces spring bulbs. In fact, I tried this several times with the same result - a deep winter freeze at the cost of my careless writing (González, 2000, p. 645). During the winter of ethnography, the ethnographer emerges from the field with knowledge about culture and knowledge about the self. The ethnographer retreats, writes, and rewrites, and brings together all the fruits of the season. It is in this stage that the ethnographer is reminded of the sacredness of words. She must ask, "What do I have to say that is important, that is authentic" (González, 2000)? I tried several times to write an authentic report, but I was stuck on the idea that my report should center on Mexican cultural identity. Disappointed with my inability to reflect cultural knowledge I kept returning (to) what I thought were "the data" (e.g., observations, interviews, field notes). I did not realize that with each re-write I was distancing myself from authenticity by foregrounding empirical data. With each edit, I cut personal experiences and bolstered objectivity. Eventually the report centered almost solely on theories of identity that loosely framed the patterns I saw and heard in Mexico City. I experienced what Goodall (2000) described as "the tensions that guide the ethnographic writer's hand lie between the felt improbability of what you have lived and the known impossibility of expressing it, which is to say between desire and its unresolvable, often ineffable, end" (p. 7).

My own disenchantment with the final report was reflected in reviewers' concerns about the depth of my findings. I knew in my heart that I was not telling the whole story and that the story I was telling cheated me and cheated my informants of the experience—a dangerous prospect knowing the value and power of words. "The human instrument has done something which will reflect back on him or her, and the culture about which is written...What one writes about the people will inevitably come back to the writer in his or her life" (González, 2000, p. 646). It is now time to write the report that reflects honesty and that honors the experience. I am no longer attempting to paint a cultural portrait, but rather to reflect the process. It took five calendar years to be able to write this report, because knowledge and ethnography are not bound by the calendar. Rather, "the duration of seasons is determined by the subjective, spiritual experience of readiness on the part of the human instrument during a cycle that has its own rhythms" (González, 2000, p. 646).

In my exploration of the relationship between cultural space and identity, I found it impossible to escape the fact that I too was part of the cultural space and my identity was equally affected by cultural landscape. While I was stretching outward and growing as an ethnographer, I was also reaching inward, forcing myself to stay the same, to remember who I was, to become who I am – a part of the natural cycle. The mere fact that I tried to escape to the comfort of my own identity was in opposition to the Four Seasons approach, whose central principles are to respect the natural cycles of ethnography and to recognize the interconnectedness of researcher-participants-context. By design, rather than by choice, I explored my own identity as much as I did Mexican identity. This process was the natural outcome of the Four Seasons approach.

Lessons Learned

As a student of the Four Seasons of Ethnography, I felt the tensions between the Western scientific research assumptions and the more organic ideals of the Four Seasons ontology. I could not understand that in my eagerness to learn, I was impatient, unprepared and selfish, all in the pretense of doing what I thought was “good scholarship,” but was really my own tendency to privilege Western logic. Part of me was trying to resist the temptation to force an experience. I wanted the experience to “unfold naturally” without me imposing structure on it. But, I was unable to give up control and trust the process. “You have to trust the process,” says Goodall (2000) in *Writing the New Ethnography*, and “you will, eventually, write your way out of your personal conundrum” (p. 51). But, it took me a very long time to trust the process.

Revisiting my field notes years after the initial experience, the pervasiveness of “Western” ideals in my thinking, as well as the tension that resulted from trying to manage two “scientific” systems, appears obvious, although at the time it was not. For example, the excerpt below reflects my struggle to balance my desires for opportunism (a Western ideal) with natural cycles (Four Seasons).

In frustration, I sought a location to do my first official observation. As other students left the park behind Belles Artes, I felt nervous and anxious, even jealous because it seemed that they knew exactly what their purpose was – that they were in the right place and the right time, and I was, in many ways, lost. Disappointed and discouraged I walked toward the hostel to get my guide book, to brainstorm about possible places to go. I sat on the floor unable to focus on my ideas or get any sense of direction or purpose. Looking back, I probably should have quieted my mind and really chosen an observation location, but I couldn’t because I was worried about completing the assignment on time and getting back to meet the class at 3:30. (Field Journal, May 14, 2002, Hotel Moneda)

Although I was somewhat attuned to natural cycles (i.e., appropriateness), sensing, for example, that certain questions or certain cultural sites were off-limits, I often gave in to the powerful influences of opportunism and entitlement (Western ideals). My sense of entitlement enabled me to ask personal questions of strangers in an effort to answer my curiosities about place and identity, while putting up a barrier around my own researcher identity. I plunged forward even though there was a part of “me” warning against it. For example, in my desire to seize every opportunity for cultural experiences and data collection, I ignored the importance of preparedness (Four Seasons). Upon arriving in Mexico City I became very ill (as many *turistas* in Mexico have). My sickness in the field was a sign that it was not time for me to work in the field, but rather to heal my body. Instead, I answered the opportunist calls and repeatedly entered the field physically exhausted and mentally unprepared.

The strong pull I felt toward researcher independence (another Western ideal) over interdependence (Four Seasons) resulted in seeking a site for cultural contact on my terms, rather than focusing on my interaction, influence, and involvement in the entire cultural context I was experiencing each moment. Independence is evidenced in my field notes, where all of my attention is directed at what is going on around me and not more radically within me or between me and Culture. My field notes read like traffic lights.

Green: Observations begin when I arrive at my pre-determined destination. Red: Observations end when I leave. This stop-go reporting style suggests that I privileged some forms of data (those I selected and “controlled”) over others (those I experienced or avoided as part of my daily routine in Mexico). Had I embraced the interdependence over independence earlier in my research journey, I would have been closer to appropriately honoring experiences and feelings in the field that were part of my every breath in Mexico City, but were happening outside of my self-constructed research frames. This also highlights my lack of balance/harmony (Four Seasons) in the field which embraces rational thought and spiritual, emotional, and physical experiences as meaningful. I imagine now that dancing barefoot at midnight in El Zócalo with Aztec spirits would have made it into my field notes. Yet, since it happened on the eve of my departure from Mexico City, outside of the research context, it never made it in. What a loss. Finally, the primacy of rationality (also a Western ideal) was strong as I struggled with all four ideals in my attempts to force an “authentic” experience rather than letting it unfold in a natural manner:

Sitting here on my rear writing about what I don’t know [independence] is not what I should be doing... I thought I was being patient, waiting for a calling toward some great idea. Probably because I want to do more than I am able in the time allotted [opportunism]. But, this is too important to me [to wait; entitlement.]... Just because I’m not really seeing any “themes,” or the fact that nothing cultural contact-wise is really popping out, doesn’t mean it’s not here [rationality]. (Field Journal, May 16, 2002, Hotel Moneda)

The many drafts of this report are evidence that what is not taken care of in the moment will resurface. I long struggled with the desire to write in a manner that honored my experience and the stories I was given. But, I was using rigid, traditional frames that did not provide space for personal reflection. Through several iterations of the writing, I tried to force my experience into a tidy box of assorted themes espousing to represent diversity in cultural identity in Mexico. In doing so, I ignored the voice telling me that the text lacked authenticity despite authoritarian conviction. González (2003) writes that traditional research models can “hamper” learning and is often reflected in “attitudes of certainty, in broad claims, rigid methodology, and concrete reports” (p. 497) that prevent the more “mystical” experiences of learning. For me, this resulted in an unconvincing narrative and the kind of personal disappointment that is only known by a person who has cheated herself. Yet, in the years since the initial experience I have returned to it again asking myself why the cultural experience held so much personal meaning, even though it did not result in an authentic text about cultural practices. The resounding answer is because my ego refused an honest reflection of what the experience really was in the first place—an introduction to a new way of “being” an ethnographer and “doing” ethnography.

This is how it came to be that five years after the initial fieldwork I experienced two awakenings from what González might have called a long winter hibernation. First, I recognized that the initial writing of the ethnographic report was, frankly, shallow (an adjective earlier reviewers were too kind to bestow, but true just the same). The second

awakening happened when I realized I did uncover something meaningful in the process, rather than the outcome, of the ethnography. It would have been easier to just read González's prophetic preface to the experience, but this is not how we learn.

[Your] texts will uncover some of the rich ways meaning is constructed and maintained, not just in Mexico City, but in you, the researcher...the observer...the ethnographer...the ultimate cultural site. [...] Your ethnography might be "about" Mexico...but there is one thing for certain. It will be about YOU. [...] Get to know yourself. Listen for each and every little response you have. [...] Trust the process. [...] This is sacred work. Because it involves how we create reality and interact with others in the realities they create with us. [...] If you can do that, you're well on your way to being able to write culture...to write meaning...no more "reports on others" ...we're going for the heart here. We're at the site of the major temple of the Aztec peoples. And the smoking obsidian mirror will not allow us to see anything but that which is there...even when we don't want to see it. (González, 2002)

Ethnography is more than observing and writing. It is experiencing. It is allowing the human instrument to experience time, place, culture, relationships, and spiritual connections in the field. Only then can the ethnographer offer an authentic narrative – one that honors self and other.

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