



## Democratizing Academic Writing: A Revision of an Experience of Writing an Autoethnographic Dissertation in Color

marcela polanco

Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, TX USA

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*In this paper, I revise my experience of writing an autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004) dissertation in the field of family therapy as a Colombian mestiza. I discuss how I grappled with my writing, and, in the process, stumbled into matters of democratizing texts. I problematize male-dominant academic standards, telling of the tensions when maneuvering at marking cultural and gender differences in my text. I focus on the storywriting of my storytelling when writing aesthetic, evocative, and emotional stories as a woman of color, at the intersection between autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, 2004). I discern elements of my handicraft as an artisan autoethnographer in training, taking from my local knowledge and family therapy training, in particular narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). I include excerpts of my dissertation to illustrate how my narrative therapy practices, intermingled with my cultural storytelling traditions, assisted me in shaping my idiosyncratic autoethnographic stories. I hope to add to the diversification of writing in the academia to make it more democratic and accessible; and to continue conversations about alternative ways to go about it. Keywords: Autoethnography, Narrative Therapy, Democratizing Academia, Mestiza Writing*

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However strangely fascinating but challenging preparing for and writing my doctorate dissertation in family therapy at Nova Southeastern University was, it was not until I completed it that I came to deeply appreciate my qualitative research design. I wrote an IRB exempted autoethnography (Admas, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), researching my experience, as a Colombian *mestiza*, attempting to decolonize (Akinyela, 2002; Smith, 2006) my preferred family therapy framework, narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), and to indigenize it into my Latin American culture (polanco, 2011). What let me to this study was my sudden realization that while training as a narrative therapist in the U.S. English, my second language, had acquired a monopoly over my practice, displacing my Spanish. My dissertation yielded, among other things, a translation of excerpts of a seminal text, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (White, 2007), from English to Spanish that revealed and, then, interrogated cultural hierarchy between these two languages within the context of the long-standing history of North American colonization in Colombia.

In this paper I discuss how I navigated the complexities of figuring out how to write autoethnographically while doing autoethnography. I present the way in which, in hindsight, I discovered a craft for my autoethnographic accounts, informed by the very decolonizing politics and narrative therapy practices I was studying. Supported by what I came to consider as a shared politics of resistance among narrative therapists and autoethnographers, I here present what resulted as my dissertation writing in *color*. This is by soaking my writing in my Colombian storytelling traditions for it to reveal our multitude of cultural, racial, and ideological roots influenced by Indigenous, African, and European traditions (Anzaldúa, 2008). I proceed by first introducing autoethnography. Following that, I discuss my experience of writing as a *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 2008) woman in collaboration with an Anglo-American dissertation committee, and, in the process, discovering the importance of

democratizing the academia by coloring my writing. I owe a great debt to Doris Sommer (1999), Ira Jewell Williams Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and Director of Studies in Spanish at Harvard. I continue the discussion with an introduction of a framework for narrative therapy and its practices that supported my *artisany* in my autoethnographic storytelling. By artisany I am referring to the handicraft of the artisan who uses local methods in her trade. I include excerpts of my dissertation as illustrations of the abovementioned.

### **Autoethnography**

I adopted autoethnography as a methodological vantage point for my doctoral dissertation after it was suggested to me by David Epston. This took place at a conference in La Habana, Cuba on 2007. David joined the end of a conversation with my colleague Marta Campillo at a moment when I was revealing, with embarrassment, the English monolingual state of my narrative therapy that became subject of my dissertation. Together with my dissertation chair, Jim Hibel, and reviewers, Ron Chenail, Douglas Flemons, and Shelley Green, we faced many challenges. I knew nothing about autoethnography plus it was no secret for any of us that writing, either in Spanish or in English, was not precisely my best quality. To be frank, mischief was far more appealing to me than my teachers' grammatical guidance during my early schooling in Bogotá, Colombia.

Under Shelley Greene's guidance, I went about learning how to write autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) by first learning how to read autoethnography. Autoethnographic texts invited me to reposition myself as a reader. At first glance, these texts didn't look like any of the scholarly texts I had read during my academic career life both in Colombia and in the U.S. With time, I learned that I could no longer hold autoethnography accountable to criteria normally applied to published research (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I slowly began to discern metaphorically in between the lines of their literary styles where science and art intersect. I came to appreciate what Gergen (2011) meant by rating autoethnography as one of the most revolutionary qualitative methodologies. This contributed to my growing enthusiasm for autoethnography that surpassed my belief that iPhone was the most remarkable innovation I had witnessed over the same period of time.

Autoethnographers pour their personal and interpersonal experiences into their culturally embedded texts, in order to subject them to their own systematic analysis to discern intimate understandings of their cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Adams, 2010). Such understandings are not proposed as finite outcomes out of a line of production ready for consumption to resolve social problems. They are offered in the complexities of their stories, with cultural criticisms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), and for broad audiences. They hope to produce enduring echoes with aspirations to facilitate further interpretations and to trigger conversations of social relevance that could lead to rethink social and cultural parameters (Clough, 2000). Some of the cultural experiences that are of particular interest for autoethnographers concern matters of social justice, which gives an emphasis to such research as a political action (Adams 2010; Adams & Holman Jones, 2008) that intends social renewal.

What is peculiar to autoethnography is that its systematic analysis occurs within its writing; "as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1). Writing is the precise location in which both the analysis and the construction of knowledge occur. It combines autobiographical and ethnographic thick stories, with ethical consciousness (Ellis, 2004). This is achieved by writing "meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference...including sensory and emotional experience..." (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). Agreeing with Denzin (1997), emotionality in autoethnographic texts

lies in the plane of the perceptual field that is felt and experienced from within as one face conveys to another how she feels about what she sees and hear in the other's face and voice....What is seen and then felt is itself anchored in historically specific fields of experience that move outward from the person into collective and personal time. (p. 26)

While reading autoethnography after autoethnography it became clear to me that each writer adopted a unique style of writing to achieve their scholarly goals. This excited me as well as wracked my nerves. The freedom of experimenting with my writing distinctly appealed to me but it was matched by a sense of trepidation that I might very well lose my way. I knew then that I was now about to enter a treacherous territory, one I would not had been able to contemplate as a dissertation methodology without the support of my dissertation committee and David Epston to shepherd me along my way and warn me of the perils.

### **Writing in color: Democratizing academic writing**

As expected, my writing was a source of extended conversations with my reviewers, especially with Douglas Flemons, all of them non-Spanish speaking. My drafts would come back after having gone under the scrutiny of Douglas's liquid ink roller ball blue pen. I was comforted that his *blue reviews* lived up, and surpassed his reputation among students in the program as a keen and unrelenting reviewer. "Marcela—I think your dissertation is going to work," he announced as an introduction to his review of one of my drafts. This announcement came almost two years after I had embarked upon my attempts at writing autoethnographically. I can vividly recall the very first meeting we had about my dissertation in his small office, crammed with books up to the ceiling, at the Student Counseling Center at Nova Southeastern University when, at the time, he was the Director and I was one of the staff counselors. That meeting inspired me and I left it facing a challenge that I knew only I could meet. Given his very legitimate doubts about how I might render the complex topic I was proposing, that I realized would be vast in scope, into an acceptable family therapy dissertation, I thought prudent to ensure his involvement in my research interests before proceeding any further.

Either "this also requires some editing" or "this will do with some editing," were commonly the comments of Douglas and generally all my reviewers. I was never discouraged by such comments; in fact, I took them as a challenge. Such comments motivated me to be more interested in advancing my writing skills. As I had left my mischief behind in Bogotá, I decided to make use of my tuition waiver which I qualified for by working at Nova, to start working towards a Masters in Writing. I did so for two semesters. I wanted to learn how to advance my writing to write *well*, knowing this was required if I was to become an autoethnographer. Given my education in Colombia, writing *well* meant writing in the same scholarly fashion as the European and North American male authors who knew nothing about my culture, who wrote almost all the texts I was assigned to read during my undergraduate studies in psychology at Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá. Now I sought to write like my male reviewers Douglas Flemons, Ron Chenail, and Jim Hibel (and also David Epston or Michael White), irrespective of our obvious gender, historical and cultural differences. Much like English had monopolized my narrative therapy practice, male-writing had monopolized all criteria for good writing; turning the already scarce community of Latin American female scholars invisible.

However, gladly through the course of my dissertation my definition of what *good* writing might be underwent a *volte face*. I came to my conclusion that I wanted to see if I could write by way of a decolonizing methodology (see Smith, 2006). This took place during

a particular moment of exchanging drafts and edits with Douglas. With excitement I would re-write my drafts following his blue edits. I would carefully study his changes. I tried to distill from them a theory I could apply to my subsequent writing. At one point, however, I came to a full stop. I saw a blue line slashing across an expression at the beginning of a paragraph that took me about a day to craft. This was in the first of the two plotted chronicles that comprised my autoethnography, in which I include stories about my relationship with English and subsequent relationship with narrative therapy in English: “The exuded coffee aroma I sensed from Michael’s ideas...” I wrote. I found no suggestions about how to re-write it. It was simply deleted. I circled the expression, and I wrote to Douglas a note in the margin accompanied with a check mark: “I left this.” Rejecting his suggested change didn’t have anything to do with the time it took me to craft it. Many phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that I had labored over for weeks didn’t make it into a final draft. Why did I not acquiesce to this edit? I took the blue line as a symbol of what I feared could mean a potential deletion of the cultural encounter between the idiosyncratic writing artistry of a mestiza, bilingual Colombian writer and researcher and the ones of a white, Anglo Canadian male who was also widely-published university professor and reviewer.

In our next meeting after this review, Douglas and I spoke about this. I understood and appreciated Douglas’ emphasis on clarity in order to make my writing accessible to a diverse audience of both Spanish and non-Spanish readers. Also, I fully acknowledged the requirements of the publishing industry. I left the meeting feeling that I might have come across as making an argument in defense of obscure writing, which would force my readers to decipher my text. At this point of my dissertation I was able to discern that it was possible for me to draw a distinction between culturally sensitive writing and simply unclear or obscure writing but I couldn’t quite articulate it. I was unable to get across to Douglas my interest in adopting a writing style that would reveal my idiosyncrasies as a Colombian woman while achieving sufficient clarity to create evocative stories that would engage readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite having no standards to argue a case on what distinguishes obscure writing from culturally forged clear writing, I knew then that I had to revise, rethink, and redefine my self-measuring standards of good writing as defined by white-Anglo-male professors and their widely recognized and published styles against which I measured myself.

I became committed to write autoethnographic stories that would capture the nature of my indigenous and bilingual ways of understanding my worlds, depicted in particular grammatical arrangements that was endowed with “bilingual aesthetics” (Sommer, 2004). I wanted to mark my political and aesthetic differences by substituting the male standards of scientific, academic writing with my Colombian *cuentacuentos* [storytelling] ways. I hoped that by doing so, my writing would be aligned with, at the level of textuality, the autoethnographic, narrative therapy, and decolonizing frames of my dissertation. I will discuss this further in the next sections and illustrate this with excerpts from my dissertation.

Shortly after my conversation with Douglas, the Hispanic scholar, Doris Sommer (1999) came to my aid when I found her, *Proceed with Caution When Engaged by Minority Writing*. Her warning pointed to the importance of a discontinuity between the minority writer and the English reader. She makes explicit the complexities involved when the aesthetics of minority bilingual’s writing undergoes editing by majority criteria. She alerts us to the risks of ironing out the aesthetic differences among minority writing and majority reading for an aspiration of continuity. Sommer considers instead that the discontinuity between writer and reader is vital to “contribute toward a rhetoric of particularism that will appreciate artful maneuvers for making cultural distance...” (p. x). If there were no differences, she further explains, the recognition of one person by another would be blended into a totalizing self with no room for mutuality. The diverse richness of the minority author, as in Barthes (Heath, trans., 1977/1977, p. 82), would die in the hands of the majority reader. Discontinuity, she

continued, resides in the gap between writer and reader and it is in this metaphorical space where democratic negotiations are possible; “Without gaps, negotiation would be unnecessary. And because of them, listening is not easy; it requires patience at the *syncope* of communication in a country where citizens do not always speak the same language” (p. 2).

Sommer (1999) elevates the appreciation of a rhetoric of particularism by cultural distance or discontinuity so as to avoid the particular *charm* and *aromas* of minority writing to be overridden by majority standards. Otherwise, as in claims of continuity, the question of cultural distinction could turn hazy and the culture of the majority reader could predominate over that of the minority writer. This would result in “...miss[ing] opportunities for genuine dialogue with texts and with citizens in public arenas, because presumptuous habits of reading cannot prepare us to listen” (p. x). Sommer points to the direction of the potential richness in cultural knowledge within the aesthetics of bilingual grammar; and steers away from considerations of *uneducated grammar* or lack of mastery of *universalist good* writing. She does so, however, without falling into a relativism of irresponsibility about clarity, about which Douglas knew very well.

Reading Sommer (1999) guided me to an attempt to teach myself how to write in ways to maintain cultural difference by insisting on keeping what Jim Hibel refers to as my *accent* in my writing. This is, my accent as a mestiza writer aiming at writing in color to elevate cultural differences to maintain “political differences that keep democracy interesting and honest” (p. 4). Sommer continued: “Even when they [citizens] do speak English, the range of culturally inflected accents fissures the language community, happily, because our accents safeguard American diversity from the meanness of one standard sound” (p. 2).

In this research, I was seeking to permeate my autoethnographic stories with my Colombian accent and bilingual aesthetics, while remaining committed to also honor my responsibility to *blue-ink-pen's* legitimate demands to clarity. No longer did I aspire to iron out my bilingual aesthetics. Instead I hoped to highlight cultural, gender, historical, social, relational markers in my text in ways that would require negotiations and patience from my readers in recognition that we write differently and speak different languages. By doing this, I then longed to contribute to a democratizing of academic writing via our textual differences. I really appreciated when my dissertation committee and I began to move as far as we might from the *cannibalism* that feminist bell hooks (1994) hints at in her descriptions of white appropriation of minority cultures.

### **Aesthetic, political, and bilingual storytelling**

Through some of my autoethnographic stories, which were ironically in English, I discovered a varied range of meanings I attributed to English prior to migrating to the U.S. and after when *living in English* as an immigrant. Such meanings ranged from demonizing it as a symbol of elitism, discrimination, and colonization in my Colombian culture; to embracing it as a new context for developing meaningful relationships and professional practices in my new life as an immigrant in the U.S. My experiences of living in a language other than my Colombian Spanish provided me with a new vantage point from which to re-engage with my Colombian history, relationships and traditions in ways that it would not have been possible otherwise. Having acquired cultural and linguistic distance from my Spanish language and Colombian culture, I was able to stand back and discern textual differences implicit in my various Colombian *cuéntacuentos* [storytellings] traditions.

By working as a therapist in South Florida, I met with people from many different countries, therefore was an audience to many storytelling traditions. Without meaning to blur the particularities of storytelling practices among the diverse Latin American cultures, I learned that some Latin Americans tell stories in similar ways, engaging in very detailed,

passionate, extended, nonlinear, yet chronological stories without much required from the audience to call them in to being.

During one of my practicums at Nova's family therapy training facility—the Brief Therapy Institute (BTI), some of the particular Latin American ways of telling stories became clearer to me while I sat behind a one-way mirror, screening a session of a colleague working with a different-sex couple. The wife was of Latin American descent and the husband was of South Asian descent. The husband said that he brought his wife along to therapy because he was certain that she was suffering from schizophrenia. He explained the basis for his diagnosis succinctly: “She is delusional. You ask her something and she starts talking about unrelated things that happened a long time ago.” His wife strongly disagreed with his diagnosis. She did so by way of detailed stories woven around episodes and events with the aim of arguing for a nil diagnosis and essentially how wrong-headed she believed her husband to be. She included in her stories a historical revision of their marriage, of their own families of origin and of their lives growing up in their respective countries of origin. Her stories were crafted with minute details; including verbatim passages of their conversations over their years together to fully support her argument. During the course of her storytelling, her husband would constantly interrupt her pointing out to the therapist by way of footnoting her story as further proof of the rectitude of his diagnosis of schizophrenia. For the husband, his wife was displaying in her storytelling style the very same symptoms he identified as basis for his diagnosis. In his eyes, she lacked the skills of succinct description he possessed and revered as the foremost sign of sanity.

There was something too familiar for me in what this man was describing as schizophrenia. To my ears and my way of thinking, what this man was referencing as symptoms of schizophrenia, I called Latin American or Colombian storytelling. *Mi mamá*, Gloria, like many other Colombian mothers I have met, would hardly buy goods or seek out a service without telling a detailed story about the circumstances pertaining to its purchase, its history and those implicated in the transaction. In Colombia, not only my mom's close friends but the woman from the store next door, the doorman in our building, the man at the supermarket, and the young woman in the bakery have become accomplices to my mom's accounts about my family's life. My mom's purchase of a cake very well could also include *toda una novela* (a whole soap opera) about my family's last holidays, upcoming gatherings, and my oldest sister Pato's three children. What this man considered schizophrenic, I began to consider a storytelling tradition indigenous to some Colombian and Latin American women that was very literary and novelistic. In fact, my life partner, Patrick, born and raised in Florida of Italian and Irish decent, had claimed for some time uniquely describes my storytelling style as well. He appreciates it rather than worrying about me losing or having lost my sanity!

I aspired to make my autoethnographic stories as literary and novelistic as my mom's and as engaging and evocative as my aunt Estella's, whom my three sisters and I dearly call Estellín. I have always looked forward to her tales. She always instills in them witty humor and satire, lampooning the injustices of the situation. In her stories, she exposes her emotions some of which she might have kept secret in the actual happening of events so as to not hurt others' sensitivities. Similar to García Márquez' (2002) remarks about his grandmother, Estellín stories could convince anyone that things would happen only because she had told about them, no matter how extraordinary they might be.

My mom and aunt Estellín significantly influenced the artisanship of my autoethnographic stories. Their legacy sustained my autoethnographic writing with *blue-ink* clarity, in color, novelistically, and from what Sommer refers to as a rhetoric of particularism to mark cultural distance. With their assistance, and the assistance of many others, I aspired that by writing my dissertation in my colors I would contribute to “the repossession of the

word by women, and the naming of the life of the body as experienced by women” (Godard, 1984, p. 14). I soon began to seek out inspiration in Latin American women novelists as well, mainly those by Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, but also Gabriel García Márquez. I became immersed in their writing style, which I found so reminiscent of the storytelling of the Latin American woman at BTI, my mom and my aunt’s Estellín. Having now become aware of my storytelling traditions, writing thick autoethnographic stories became far more feasible for me.

In hindsight, my reviewer Ron Chenail with his candid, encouraging and persistent reviews helped me better elucidate the artisany behind my Colombian autoethnographic storytelling: “This is a good start,” he would often say. And then he would continue by inviting me to be more transparent with my artisany, hoping to read more on the movement from “autoethnographic research as a concept, to a set of procedures you followed to go from your data to your chronicles” (R. Chenail, personal communication, October 4, 2010). It was not part of my research design beforehand to adopt narrative therapy practices (White, 2007) as a supporting structure in shaping my colored storytelling ways into autoethnography stories. It happened naturally. Michael White’s (2007) narrative practice maps serve as a scaffold to the construction of my personal and interpersonal stories which are embedded in my Colombian culture.

### **Narrative therapy**

At the outset of my narrative therapy training at Nova, I would dread any of my classmates asking me about my preferred therapy orientation; this was even more disconcerting if it was someone outside the family therapy field who wouldn’t be familiar with this approach. What I feared most was that they would find my account sufficiently intriguing to inquire more about what this approach was about. Although I was slowly becoming somewhat *seasoned* in narrative therapy ideas and practices, I couldn’t quite get around defining it without offering an impromptu 20 minute lecture with a summary of its philosophical foundations and practices. This often put me in a tight spot during my travels to various countries I visited to attend to narrative trainings. When passing through customs, the familiar suspicion of immigration officers over my Colombian passport did not escape their question: “What is narrative therapy?” It was clear that their feigned interest on narrative therapy was in the least sincere but rather about my real intentions for visiting their countries. Their suspicions might have gained some foundations if all the officers to whom I answered that question would have compared notes. No matter how hard I tried, every time I passed through customs, I would offer a different explanation. Sometimes I would mention something about stories, other times about families. For those officers in those countries with very strict immigration policies, I would even offer a more sophisticated explanation about problems not being the person but a cultural construction. This task was even more challenging when visiting a Spanish speaking country. Given the English monopoly over my narrative therapy, my vocabulary in Spanish was considerably limited for an explanation. Fortunately for me, my Colombian passport did not seem to be as alarming for customs officers in other countries in Latin America.

Narrative therapy, an approach that originated during the early 80’s from the work of Michael White and David Epston (1990) in Australasia, was initially proposed by them as a therapy of literary merit. Drawing from the text analogy (Bruner, 1986) and informed by postmodern, poststructural, feminist theory, queer theory and social constructionist paradigms, for White and Epston narrative therapy is based on few guiding principles some of which are as follow: (a) people possess meaning making skills; (b) people attribute meaning to their lives and relationships through stories as plotted frames of intelligibility that connect series of events across history; (c) life is multistoried; each life story holds implicitly multiple

thin traces of subordinate storylines; and (d) life is rich in lived experiences, many of which do not get storied.

As its name suggests, narrative therapy is story focused; “it seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work, which centers people as the experts in their own lives” (Morgan, 2000, p. 2). Based on Michele Foucault’s (R. Hurley and others, trans., 1994) studies of systems of power, narrative therapists meet people’s stories about their existential fatalisms, life hangovers and any other upsetting life ravages with special suspicions about the cultural discourses that may have brought this up for them. Typically, narrative therapists pay special attention to the way in which cultural or social discourses appear to, metaphorically, put down roots in people’s lives, invading their sense of identity, of agency, and of the identity of their relationships. Narrative therapy conversations, agreeing with White (2007), unfold through a series of inquiries that serve as catalysts for people’s meaning making skills so as they are put to work toward the development of rich, unique stories about their lives that go against the grain of the former rooted fatalism. Such unique stories may act as social exorcisms that uproot social discourse out of people’s identities to be planted instead in the cultural, historical, mythical, and relational contexts in which they belong. Consequentially, people can reclaim agency and can take action to address their life’s bad aftertastes thought at first to have no remedy.

Rich, thick, or *robust* (A. Diaz, personal communication October 25, 2009) stories for narrative therapists, as for autoethnographers, include minute details in which each thing breathes life for a second time, with their crackling sounds, aromas, histories, names, characters, beliefs, dreams, aspirations, understandings, etc. And, as in my Colombian *cuentacuentos* traditions, they include as well their superstitious, magical-religious, and mythical natures.

The unique stories of interest for narrative therapists’ that are to be supported (through inquiry) for their robust development are located as thin traces of subordinate storylines that reside in the gaps of the seeming rooted dominant stories. These subordinate storylines are assumed to shape a fluid and always transforming foundation of people’s sense of identity that turns visible and available to them in terms of what they give reverence and value in their life such as in their aspirations, dreams, and hopes (White, 2007). Drawing from this foundation, it is possible for people to live in solidarity with what is most important for them; in turn, they could actively take a position to evaluate, respond, and intervene in their current and any future dilemmas so as to contribute to personal, cultural and political renewals.

White (2007) adopted the analogy of maps of narrative conversations as one among many other possible guides of inquiry to support robust story development. In order for these maps of inquiry to be put to work to exercise the uprooting of social discourse, or social exorcism mentioned above, however, a particular treatment of language is required. Such treatment of language serves as a grammatical means to clearly situate problems in historical, relational and cultural contexts rather than in people’s lives. In autoethnographic terms, it renders autobiographical accounts as ethnographical productions with political consciousness. This treatment of language is widely known in family therapy as externalization (Epston, 1998; White, 2007). By adopting an externalizing treatment of language when shaping narrative therapy questions, problems are grammatically located (historically and culturally) in relationship with the person (i.e., Since when has The Depression been accompanying your life? How did Mischief get in the way of your teachers’ grammatical guidance during your early schooling? Are The Shame’s tactics familiar to you in terms of your cultural, family, religious, etc., traditions?).

Once this treatment of language is adopted, White’s (2007) maps of narrative practice seek to assist a careful craft to develop sustainable robust stories, seemingly dormant in the metaphorical gaps of the dominant stories. The selection of such stories, among many others,



are based on the meaning that people attribute to them as unique expressions that better represent their preferred lives (statement of position map, see White 2007). Thin at first, these unique stories are often accounted by the person in terms of initiatives they have taken in their lives while facing their existential fatalism that result, one way or another, in counteracting its effects. It is not uncommon that such initiatives go unnoticed at first by the person. Their uniqueness and value are highlighted as expressions of people's local knowledges in terms of what they give importance to in their lives and relationships. Narrative therapists set up a context through their questions to assist people in giving these stories back their local life, vocabularies and identities via their own histories (not the official ones) (re-authoring map, see White, 2007), their main voices, characters, legends (re-remembering map, see White, 2007) and witnesses (definitional ceremonies, see White, 2007).

In any way I tried to follow these maps step by step to write my autoethnographical stories, (as this is not how they were intended for in the first place). Instead, some of their premises assisted me in the organizing of my cuentacuentos, therefore, my autoethnographical analysis. I illustrate this next.

### **My autoethnographic artistry: Robust stories in color**

My artistry in attempting to write robust autobiographical and ethnographical cuentacuentos in color begun to unfold as my narrative therapy conversations often do; through inquiry. In this case, I became engaged, for the most part, by my own queries but also by David Epston's inquiries during our conversations about the progress of my dissertation, and by my chair and reviewers'. My narratively informed self-inquiries were geared toward revealing the singlemindedness of the dominant and hierarchical divisions comprised in my monolingual narrative therapy on one hand, and the experience of bilingualizing it and indigenizing it into my local culture on the other.

The excerpts below illustrate some elements of my artistry such as my self-inquiries, my externalizing treatment of language, and the historical and mythical treatment of my stories characteristics of my culture. All of them illustrate the robust-ness of my cuentacuento ways I learned from mom and aunt, and many other Latin American women.

**My self-inquiries.** The following excerpt illustrates the ways in which my self-inquiries unfolded. Here I offer an account of my initial considerations on translation as indigenization. I tell about my first experiences as a sequential translator in one of David Epston's workshops, this time in my hometown, Bogotá, Colombia, on 2008. I attempt at giving life again to a thin trace of my experience in this workshop that I was able to trace back in my memory. Following the excerpt I include the series of self-inquiries behind the shaping of this story.

After one of the *refrigerios* [breaks], a young man, who my memory baptized as Sergio, got a hold of me while I was trying, with difficulty, to pass through the crowd to get an *aguita aromática*—Colombian herbal tea—to warm up. He shook my hand with both his hands, so firmly but so kindly that it felt like an encounter among childhood friends. While looking at me with his big, round, olive green eyes I felt embarrassed for a moment for not remembering him from an old life. I tried to reciprocate his warmth. Then he said: "*Mucho gusto, mi nombre es Sergio*" ["Nice to meet you, my name is Sergio"]. I quickly understood there was no reason for my embarrassment. We were meeting for the first time. "*Oye, muchas gracias por tu traducción,*" ["Listen, thank you very much for your translation."] I remembered Sergio saying. "*Me parece super chévere tu traducción, relajada, y fresca. Es diferente,*" ["I find your

translation very cool, relaxed and fresh. It is different.”] he continued, letting go of my hand. Before we went our separate ways, and after I thanked him as well for approaching me, he explained: “*Solo te queria agradecer*” [“I just wanted to thank you.”]... My memory, supported by the video recordings of the workshop, reassured me, however, that, while my intentions, maybe sensed by Sergio, were to use this lexicon, my actual translating for David live for the first time was still a long way from a *lengua ladina* (tongue used by mestizos/as)...My struggles at times to find on-the-spot words both in English and Spanish made it difficult. My brain felt as if it was for the first time at Penn Station on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. & 34<sup>th</sup> St. in Manhattan, NY, during peak time, getting pushed from one side to the other, not knowing what direction to take, yet taken by the flow. My numbers of years in Spanish might have mistakenly jumped on the Long Island Railroad to go on holidays to the Hamptons for those days. They became unreachable.

Below is the line of self-inquiries that shaped my artisanship of the developing of my story above:

- At what point during the translation during David’s workshop did I first realize that I was attempting at crafting an indigenous translation? What was it about that moment?
  - A special moment during the first day of the workshop shed some light on my reflections. After one of the refrigerio breaks a young man,
- If I were to ask my memory about what was the name of this young man, what would she say?
  - who my memory baptized as Sergio,
- If my mom or aunt Estellín were telling this story, what sort of details would they want to add to this moment? How would they paint that image to communicate it in a narrative?
  - got a hold of me while I was trying to pass through the crowd with some difficulties to get an *aguita aromática*—herbal tea—to warm up.
- What was that encounter like for me? What were its effects? How could I characterize it? What am I experiencing now while rejoicing in this memory?
  - He shook my hand with both his hands, so firmly but so kindly
- What was this moment like? Was it like any other memory? What sort of sensation does it resemble, either within the same cultural or gender context or any other, that would better help me embody its expression to share it with the reader?
  - that it felt like an encounter among childhood friends.
- Would my mom and aunt Estellín say more about this? What was my response like?
  - While looking at me with his big, round, olive green eyes I felt embarrassed for a moment for not remembering him from an old life. I tried to reciprocate his warmth.
- What does my “poetic memory” (Kundera, 2008, p. 224) say about the transcript of this exchange that would allow me to make my *cuentacuento* more robust?

Then he said: “*Mucho gusto, mi nombre es Sergio.*” I quickly understood there was no reason for my embarrassment. We were meeting for the first time. “*Oye, muchas gracias por tu traducción,*” I remembered Sergio saying. “*Me parece super chévere tu traducción, relajada, y fresca. Es diferente,*” he continued, now letting go of my hand. Before we went our separate ways, and after I thanked him as well for approaching me, he explained: “*Solo te quería agradecer.*”

Later on, my account continued after speculating on my encounter with Sergio, which led me to the realization that I had attempted to use a *lengua ladina* (Oliviera Castro, 2007) (tongue used by mestizos/as). I continued:

...while my intentions were such, and maybe sensed up by Sergio, my actual lexicon translating David live for the first time were still long ways from a *lengua ladina*.

- What makes me think that I was still a long way from this practice?  
My struggles at times to find on the spot words both in English and Spanish made it difficult.
- If my aunt Estellín would be the one telling this story, I would really want to know more about what was going on in her head while going through this struggle? How could I depict it for my reader? What sort of culturally embedded experiences of mine would find an echo in my reader, to clearly resemble the emotionality of this struggle?

My brain felt as if it was for the first time at Penn Station on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. & 34<sup>th</sup> St. in Manhattan, NY, during peak time, getting pushed from one side to the other not knowing what direction to take, yet taken by the flow. My numbers or years in Spanish might have mistakenly jumped on the Long Island Rail Road to go on holidays to the Hamptons for those days. They became unreachable.... interesting to me, is you speak in these queries of the lines that rang the strongest for me...

**Externalizing treatment of language.** Adopting an externalizing treatment of language became a critical element in my autoethnographic artisanship. It was critical in allowing me to bring to the forefront the ethnographic aspects of my autobiographical accounts. Those experiences that I once thought to be exclusively of my private property, with warning signs against any attempts at trespassing outwards the boundaries of my skin, were instead located at a public intersection of history, culture and relationships.

The following excerpt recounts my experience with The Shame. Rather painfully, after I realized that my narrative therapy training was exclusive to my English, this made me profoundly ashamed. I wasn't sure if this meant that I was becoming North-Americanized, but certainly English-ized. This felt like the bitter taste similar to the one of the Colombian fruit *guayaba agria*:

...I began to understand more clearly that The Shame was breathing life in an adjacent field of *outsideness*, whose effect I sensed as anti-patriotism to my Colombian-ness, defined in great part by me almost denying my Colombian Spanish. This sense revealed how dear my Colombian-ness had become for me, in foreign territory; and that English had gained its own meaning in my

Colombian culture. During one of my visits to Bogota, I had a conversation with a very dear friend of mine, Carolina, and her family. I hadn't seen them for the last several years, so we met over dinner at *Crepes & Waffles* on 19th Avenue and 122th street—a popular restaurant in Bogotá, whose personnel are only women, mostly heads of households. While talking about my work at Nova and life in the U.S., Carolina commented on my speech. She said: “*Usted esta empezando a usar el “umm” que la gente que se va a vivir a Estados Unidos usa.*” Turning to her family, she concluded: “*La Marce se nos esta agringando.*” Laughing nervously at her comment, I disputed her conclusion: “*Nada que ver.*” Still, I felt the presence of The Shame. My throat started to feel a bit tighter, only allowing the passage of their healthy *lulo* juice. I briefly commented that I found the notion of one becoming *agringado/a* very undesirable... This conversation stayed with me during the unraveling of my monolingual English narrative therapy. I found it interesting, and felt curious about what English meant in Colombia to some of us through its *settlement* in some areas in Colombia.... Having learned the code [English] became very advantageous. For most of the time I didn't even have to prove that I understood it or knew how to use it. The name of my [private bilingual] school was proof enough. It gave me entrance to the stream of this social status from which my education and employment benefited. When studying psychology at Universidad de Los Andes I was able to read in English the imported materials my professors thought apt to teach us. When graduating, I was offered a job at a large and prestigious international food company, for which English was required to communicate among branches all over the world. In Colombia, an international company offered better salaries and benefits; and people said it would be good for my resume...The code demarcated notions of privilege, elitism, and social class. I learned about this more clearly once I started working at a national, large, food company later on, where their administrative offices were in proximity to their factories. As an organizational psychologist, I worked with the factory workers who taught me many valuable lessons my private education failed to teach me; among these lessons was the outrageous, injustices of the rhetorical violence and discursive rape of privilege. I sensed more strongly the wrongness of this.

**Historical treatment of my stories.** As in narrative therapy, my autoethnographic stories led me to re-engage with my own history (White, 2007), expanding my narrative resources to change my relationship with my histories anew. In the following excerpt I tell about the moment I first learned about narrative therapy. I situate the emotionality of that experience by bringing to the forefront historical and cultural elements that sets up a stage for my later accounts about my personal interest in narrative therapy being a cultural interest as well:

My first encounter with narrative therapy was a sensory one. It was much like those times after I had migrated to the U.S. when I would enter a Juan Valdez coffee shop located in midtown Manhattan, New York. Overcome by the aroma of Colombian coffee, I would be immediately transported into the heartlands of Colombia. The aroma of my country's coffee, which for me smells softer than other coffees (only Italian coffee comes close), takes me back home though I am not physically there. Even surrounded by the gray concrete streets of New York, the Colombian coffee aroma, accompanied by a

tune of Juane's, would echo me back to the nostalgic idealized days of my family's holidays in Honda, Tolima, a small town in Colombia where my father was born and raised during part of his childhood. Four hours away by car from the capital, Honda was a place my family and I would visit with some frequency. Close to the end of the long drive in my father's 1954, army green Volkswagen that he later painted red, through the intricate Andes Mountains quite near the edge of very steep cliffs, my three sisters and I would be invaded by an exhilarated sensation that followed my father's calling our attention to the muddied, rapid waters of the river Magdalena. This was a sign that the welcoming Honda bridge was approaching and we knew the real adventure was about to start. Meeting narrative therapy was equally exhilarating.

The historical treatment of my stories, agreeing with White (2000), are not with purposes of reframing my experiences of living, or offering a revision of my history, instead it is a "rewriting of history that constructs another total account of history that displaces and cancels out the original account" (p. 35). Within the context of my Colombian culture, the space to displace original accounts of history is quite critical. Giving lived experiences a second life, rather than visiting an old one, allows me as a mestiza to reclaim a history previously kidnapped by official white versions. These are official versions of our history that have been shape by male, white, historians experts. In their versions, mulatas and mestizas of marginalized communities, if they appear at all, they do not do too well, and middle class mestizas are whitened or robbed of their mestizaje natures. The kind of historical treatment in my artisany, as in Uruguayan, journalist Eduardo Galeano's (2010) *Memory of Fire*, attempts to be not one of a painful atonement of the past, but of imagining the future rather than accepting it as chained to an official version of a static past.

Writing history in present tense allows for this kind of re-engagment with history. It keeps alive the experience while allowing it to happen again in a new life (Galeano, 2010) from the vantage point of the wisdom of the current time. The following excerpt tells about my experiences attempting to indigenize White's analogy of maps into my local culture. I start by revising its relevance into my culture, or lack thereof, and possibly searching for more fitting analogies to confer Colombian meaning to White's Australian maps meaning:

I remember a family trip in 1982 when I was 9 years old. It is not the first time I would see the ocean, but the first time I am old enough to remember it. My parents take the four of us to Barranquilla and Cartagena in my dad's 54 Volkswagen Bug. Driving the Colombian roads is a two-day trip, though covering a distance that by air would take about an hour. With no GPS, Google Earth, iPhone apps, or any sort of MapQuest tools, *por entre las tiendas* [stopping to smell the roses], we make it to Barranquilla. Our map seems to remain on the floor under my mom's feet for most of the trip. Instead, my dad seems to know something about how to get there. A map is being drawn instead on our way, while coming across the few rather confusing and poorly maintained road signs. He can tell if we are going in the right direction most of the time just by driving through various remote small towns. These towns lead us in our direction; towns with unpretentious architectures, smells of *plazas de mercado* or marketplaces, people's faces that speak to their history, and the sounds of their forest. They reveal a mosaic world of fantastic, intimate, and mythic secrets of the heartlands of our country, still untouched by the influences of those beautiful faces [of the *gringos* men] on the posters on our bedroom walls in the city. At the end of the first day we find ourselves

searching for a place to stay for the night. We arrive at one of the small towns, this one between Bucaramanga and Barranquilla. We see no signs. My dad pulls to the side of the road and my mom rolls down the window to ask to *cualquier cristiano/a* or any peasant for the name of the town. This is not too difficult as the roads in Colombia seem to pass through the middle of neighborhoods where there are often cattle, dogs, or people wandering around, working, or going about their business simply by sitting in a rocking chair watching cars pass by. Every pedestrian offers a different name and none appears on our map. It is as if this town has not yet been invented and discovered. Perhaps the locals are waiting to agree upon a suitable name to make it officially onto the map, at the same time uncertain about the implications of becoming official, even resisting this. We are directed by the locals to a relatively good and safe hotel to stay the night. Not knowing where we are, my parents need more assistance to get to Barranquilla the next day. This assistance, however, still doesn't come from the map. Every now and then my mom, again, rolls down the window to ask anyone we pass for the road to Barranquilla. Since most of the streets of these small towns are not named or numbered, the directions often include points of references to be on the lookout for: *la tienda de doña María, la droguería, la casa azul de don Jacinto, o el perro o la vaca pastando en la esquina*. Guided by the locals' *sabiduría* or popular wisdom we finally cross over the Río Magdalena through the seemingly never-ending Pumarejo Bridge into Barranquilla. My dad seems very proud to have made it all the way there in his car, while my three sisters and I are anxious to make it to the beach.

**Mestiza mythology.** As a mestiza writer, my particular externalizing and historical treatment of language comes with a hint of mestiza mythology also characteristic of my culture. The mestiza mythology (Ocampo Lopez, 2010) reveals a range of hues and characters that grow out of the syncretism of various cultural imaginations, some with religious connotations, as a way to understand the word as we know it and experience it. Such mythology opens room for contradicting realities to flourish such as in the magical and the real; and the superstitious and the religious; they integrate human, natural, and supernatural characteristics of understanding. Historically and linguistic in nature, a mestiza mythology has the effect of deforming and of defamiliarizing realities to organize and reorganize our relationships with our worlds as we see fit. Our imaginative labor prevails in shaping knowledge over any academic production; taking from it, a sense of responsibility to write clearly can adopt *blue-ink-pen's* character, therapeutic theories can give out *coffee aromas* and black words typed in a blank screen could be read in *color*. Such mythical descriptions are not metaphors that represent known knowledge or an objective reality, they are the real reality, now defamiliarized and deformed into new idiosyncratic identities with lives anew. The following excerpt offers an account of the history of my learning of narrative therapy from my initial resonance with its politics and practices. In this account some of the above elements start to crawl up my autoethnographic writing.

The exuded coffee aroma I sensed from Michael's ideas on narrative therapy awakened a whole world of dormant memories and yearnings....The narrative therapy worldview, I thought, would allow me to take a stance in actively addressing the often invisibly sown social laws of *pudor*, gender, social class, etc., of which I had some expertise growing up in Colombia. I was reminded of how much this mattered to me. Since even prior to having been conceived, I

had been under the servitude of these social laws, as the idea of my identity had already been gendered. I came to be because of my parents' hopes to have a fourth child—this time a brother to their already three daughters. After shifting their gendered hopes, on May 18, 1973, I was born under the requirements of womanhood, at the Palermo hospital in Bogotá. This was the same year that the Vietnam War came to an end, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses, and democratically elected Chilean and Marxist president Salvador Allende was overthrown by the Chilean military led by General Augusto Pinochet. These cynical social laws, operating at a time of lawless genocides, corruption and poverty, were like little, invisible, but annoying angels whispering very softly and quite persuasively their juried orders. With the passing of time, I could no longer tell which one was my voice and which one was theirs. Their juried orders were shaped as constant reminders of the Colombian social norms of *pudor*. The escape from these social norms would only be followed by shame and dishonor. It was like living tormented by a bunch of whisperers who knew nothing about my soul... One of these whispers would sound very much like the voice of my chemistry teacher in high school, who, in short and firm words, disciplined my young women friends to be demure. This was mostly argued as the foundation of a good candidature for a different-sex marriage—the kind of marriage in which only a *lady* in her early 20's could have the luck to be chosen by a *good* man, from a *good* family, whose decency comes imprinted on his last name.

### Final remarks

My incursion as a scholar via my dissertation, transformed me. With the guidance of my dissertation committee and many other important characters who tried new lives in my stories, I learned that my mestiza words are worthy of a public life. I learned that I no longer have to be apologetic about my accent, and neither do I have to iron it out. Yet, I find myself justifying it in what I write, and convincing myself about its significance. This is an indication to me that I still have much more to unlearn from my education.

With this transformative experience, I hope for my artisanship in autoethnographic writing in color to continue taking different lives. I hope to add to conversations about Latin American, feminist, scholarly writing so that, as women of color, we position ourselves in our unique ways to express our words no longer having to pull up our skirts, bleach our history or become male-women to be visible. I hope to add to a conversation about exploring new options to write rigorous research that teach us to read in an academia that may better look like a carnival of many accents, aromas, rhythms, colors, and tastes that keep democracy interesting and honest, hence more equitable and accessible. In closing, I share the words of mestiza Gloria Anzaldúa (2003), which are as relevant as 30 years ago:

My dear *heramamas*, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose—we never had any privileges. I wanted to call the dangers “obstacles” but that would be kind of lying. We can't *transcend* the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance. (pp. 79-80)

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### Author Note

marcela polanco is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, Texas. She is a bilingual narrative family therapist. She can be contacted at 411 SW 24<sup>TH</sup> Street, San Antonio, TX 78209; Telephone: 210-431-4059; E-mail; [mpolanco@lake.ollusa.edu](mailto:mpolanco@lake.ollusa.edu).

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