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Finding Home in Memory: Stories of Immigration, Diaspora and Dis/location

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Introduction

What bothers critics [about autoethnography] is the intersection of personal stories into what we have been taught to think as the analysis of impersonal facts. [Imagine you are researching for a class and ‘discover’] the deed of sale of your own great-grandmother to a white lawyer, that bitter knowledge certainly gives ‘the facts’ another twist of urgency and poignancy. It undercuts the notion of a contract as an abstract [...] it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied. (Behar, 1997, p. 12- 13)

For an immigrant in the United States, a resilient Latinx passionately engaged with a decolonizing project (Anzaldúa, 2012) this project is both personal and professional. The memories, stories, the tragedies, the hopes, and the dreams reported in this piece, were lived, shared, and collected ethnographically in the Wisconsin dairyland, the canneries and the agricultural fields of the North and South East of the United States, on the ‘Bible belt,’ and ‘the Deep South.’ However, the poetic performance narratives are my own rendering, my interpretation, and my translation of the testimonies of un/documented people who are part of the “11 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. in 2015” reported by the Pew Research Center (Krogstad, J.M.; Passel, J. S.; and Cohn, D. (2017)).

One of Many, María--sin apellido

maría was born crying
cries of fear, cold, and hunger
calmed by mother’s warm tits
warmed by few found rags

maría’s childhood came with more
fear, cold, and hunger
maría’s life-long true companions
fear, cold, and hunger
taught her tricks to get fed and clothed

fear presented survival talents
cold demanded crawling into warm places



unbearable hunger coupled with begging
a child in a well-developed body
maría became a woman before her time
raped by father, stepfather and other men
maría learned more tricks to survive (author, 2018)

Our stories are different because our bodies and voices are treated differently... (Atay, 2018, p. 21)

María, the Oldest

maría es la primera
the oldest of her parent's children

i remember her,
i remember me,
dreaming about the snow and the crystal heart of the arctic circle babies...
the ballet dancers on the ice
the white geese flying south...
the running deer
the little dwarfs getting diamonds from their mine...

dreams of a child growing up
looking smelling listening
the pacific ocean every moment of her life.

hay dos menores
two little siblings
calling cuddling demanding love
abrázame hermanita
distracting maría from discovering the world
in the collection of *cuentos de hadas*
she got for christmas—a year ago
arctic ice dancers run maría's head

swimming, diving huge ocean waves
tumbitos
coming down sun,
goldest tones orange reflection
got children all blind
little *pejerrey*
wanted to get out and fly.

I chose poetic performance narratives to create provocative pieces, to have 'captured' readers be seduced into the 'un/comfortable' yet beautiful memory world of un/documented immigrants. The poetic performance narratives give face to the numeric data, increase awareness about power and privilege, and present an opportunity for readers to experience and feel the stories (Richardson, 1997) that may become not only representation of the events but "the event itself." (Rosaldo, 2014).

Grandpa's Home

our house is like a full peruvian bus
if one gets off, four get in!
grandpa says
with a voice and laugh
that fill the hallways
grandpa's home
has a door that never locks
like his heart
big enough to love and care for us all

*nuestra casa es como un microbus
si baja uno, suben cuatro.*

no matter the country politics
or the martial law imposed last month
or money that is never enough
or all the jobs we need to hold
grandpa's house is always filled
with the *hijos* and the *nietos*
the *sobrinos* and the *ahijados*
every loved-one who has lost a part of life in a country whose government
doesn't recognize our rights
nor its own rules
nor has any respect

it's almost a ceremony that repeats
each time that a familia arrives from cries and desperation
to soft giggling
to full laughs at sunday lunch
to shared pride

our house is like a peruvian bus
if one gets off, four get in!

boiling basil, tomatoes and carrots
fresh fish and potatoes
enough to feed twenty-five
it has to be sunday
sunday is the smell of tomatoes and basil
fish and potatoes
all boiling hard getting ready for lunch.

*nuestra casa es como un microbus
si baja uno , suben cuatro.*

it's our turn to be at grandpa's
a bunch of children whose *papi* just went to heaven
whose *mamy* is too sad
she knows only to sit and cry
once in a while she sips a little tea
from a cup that gets magic refills
at grandpa's we get to laugh
and his hugs bring *mami* back sitting near us

listening to stories
before he gets all tucked-in
a sweet kiss and *que duerman bien*

our house is like a peruvian bus
if one gets off, four get in!

cousins genaro, cristina, and genarito just arrived
with a lot of crying
some suitcases and a huge perol
all of what they've saved from the *el niño* storm
genarito carries their saved treasure
a pot bigger than him
to cook the potatoes, he says
that is your room, the one with the blue canopy
grandpa instructs
the miracle of our *familia* does it again
cristina dares a timid smile
while entering her new little blue room

potatoes boiling getting ready for lunch
this time we are more than twenty-five
a loud, happy, hopeful crowd squeezing for a place
sundays have their own sounds and smell

our house is like a microbus
si baja uno, entran cuatro
in my mind, i corrected him
our house is like a city-bus
none gets off and thirty are to stay!

Reale (2015) reminds us that, the task of the poet/ethnographer is extraordinary yet intimidating as there are as many possible representations as there are stories. In addition, it is important to emphasize that truth and authenticity are fully respected while crafting these renderings as they are in my entire work. These stories/testimonios weave the familiar and extraordinary embodied immigrants' lives. However, "[testimonios are] disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated" (Felman & Laub, 1991, p. 159).

Running Blue

mundane time
playing indolent with a week,
a whole month
or even couple years were around the neighborhood
forgot to do the greetings...
and flight-passed through me
inspiring weather
where blue is the color
that we could be
 i am blue
 i run, rest, work,
 i'm there
 and never here...
 there and never here

fast, slow, static
the color of the sky and the ocean
the color that surrounds us,
that has wrapped us
only a color, a total color

such is life
be where you are requested
not where you want to be
time, life, blue, is just there...
keeps running... keeps circling around
with a rising yellow
a thrilling red
a pitch-black
and a luscious purple too
dressing all in a dance
in a laugh
and i love
my presence here
my presence there
here and there
alive!

comes back in a flash
years are minutes
in which 1000s things are done
more are half done
and more are coming
and more doing
not only to live
but feeling alive
stopping to breathe
to prepare
and to wait for the next blue space.

Pescadoras Mañaneras

a soft whistle breaks the cloudy *amanecer*
well tucked in
hidden in wool covers
maría is a presence
witnessing the market
women the *pescadoras*
taking over the *malecón*

kerosene lanterns
loud voices
explosive guffaw
irreverent jargon filling the air
goose bumps run over maría's spine
accomplice to their burst of life...

the kerosene smell
the shadows
the laughs
the cursing

the shouting
the chants
magical as in *cuentos de hadas*,
the dwarfs
the north pole...

... There is a need to hold on to this dialectic, this movement between fragmentation and integration, the part and the whole, without desperately seeking resolution. (Frosh, 2007, p. 639)

I Can't Believe it... Yes! I'm Getting Adapted...

isn't that amazing?...
isn't that amazing how much of me is in this town?
isn't that amazing how much i've becoming adapted to this culture?
to this comfort?
i bitch about it...
i bitch a lot
but at the same time
i have to recognize that
i have found a space
a place...

a place to become
somehow closer
to the woman i wanna become
a place and a time
makes me closer to what i didn't plan
yet surprised by my strengths
happy--remembering i've survived

i'm writing and i'm thinking
in a city, in a university-town—madison, state college, urbana, ithaca, ann arbor...
at my breakfast place, at my coffee place...
how much comfort that for a second
an image came to me
it terrified me! i couldn't take it
it was me...
in lima, in guatemala, in cdmx, el salvador, managua.... at home!!

terrified because
i could NOT imagine myself there
i could NOT imagine myself with
no job
no house
no life of my own!
more terrified because
i do NOT want to ride the little micros
micros with the smell of
poverty
frustration
abuse
micros that would crash you
as *sardinas*
avanzan, avanzan, al fondo hay sitio!

i cannot imagine
not being able to walk home
stopping to think
sitting by myself
having breakfast alone
writing my journal

i cannot imagine
to be portrayed as
rara weird
vieja old
gorda fat
i cannot imagine
POVERTY
taking over....

this is so difficult.
i'm just grasping,
 i'm just seeing the access door
but now
i have to confront this...
i have to confront myself becoming
 wanna-be academician...
having a great excuse
for a nice life

this is so difficult
being sensitive
because because because
i've become part of this parasite world.

shit! that's the right noun
PARASITE!

am i ready to become a first world parasite?!
 shit! this is too much...
 i need a break...!
fuck! really?
there is... danger!
i may lose myself!

Of relevant 'findings,' these stories depict dreams, hopes, violence, and discrimination associated with all types of border crossings as well as the trauma of living restricted lives with full awareness (Anzaldúa, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Spener, 2009) of having no legal rights or legal protection.

María Whatever

hospital waiting room
all filled with green plastic chairs
to maintain the patients in place
waiting straight to be called by their names

a girl dressed up all in green

matching color with the chairs,
the room walls, and the clock
is calling the next person to be seen
maría... maría... maría....
no one responds
i checked the people in the waiting room
all looking green but I couldn't see
no maría-looking woman there

ten minutes have passed
the green dressed medical-girl-assistant
comes back seriously looking
armed with a fat health-story chart
i recognized it as mine
she calls a name again
maría... maría...
grimace face, grimace attitude
the silence is turned into a new call
this time she incorporates a last name
maría... maría whatever...

i felt the flush on my face
the anger in my heart
and shame
shame for all the marías of the world
for all the latinas in the states
whom in one second
the green-dressed medical-girl-assistant have raped, torn apart
becoming no-one
with right for a last name

maría whatever is today my given name
maría whatever is my name for one
and for many who do not understand
why this latina likes to dress all in black
with a long-silk-embroidered skirt
with an exquisite matching blouse
all strangely beautiful
reminding the world of the moche women
barefoot princesses of the sandy desert
powerful women of the deep blue ocean
who wore black to preserve within
the colors of the desert
the sounds of the ocean
the smells of the heat

this maría whatever is a moche woman
who wears all in black too
to dress in memories and forbearance
traditions and pride

i answered the call
- miss, you might be calling me

- are you maría?
 - no, i am not maría, i am not whatever
 yet, that chart belongs to me

the sounds of the moche desert overran the hospital sounds
 the power of the moche ocean overflowed the waiting room
 finding a no-longer powerful, arrogant, racist girl
 but a fainthearted green looking, dressed medical-girl-assistant
 feeling the power of unknown traditions
 blazing by the heat of her own ignorance
 maría had reclaimed the right to hold her name. ⁱ(Espinosa-Dulanto, 2000)

Finally, I humbly recognize the absolute limitations of these retellings as they should be considered neither as attempts to resolve the immigrants' predicaments nor as oversimplification of their lives/stories. Rather, they are attempts to "present vividly and poetically, their plight, as people who will forever be far from home" (Reale, 2015, p. 1).

Beginning to Talk about Mom

la angustia se ha quedado en mi garganta,
 giving me only asphyxia to look for
 no reason for my tears
 it doesn't stop them
 no reason for my anguish
 it doesn't stop it either
 no reason for my sadness
 it doesn't need a cause
 it takes over
 i must feel it
 when we become too old to stop looking for mother's womb?
 i'm old enough to be a grandma
 still i'm looking for mother's approval
 my sadness is her absence
 my emptiness is knowing
 i was late on loving her
 in my new home
 in this foreign landⁱⁱ

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ⁱ An earlier version of this poem was published in author 2000: 103-105.

ⁱⁱ An earlier version of this poem was published in author 2018: 179.