AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHY AND REVERSE MIGRATIONS IN SOUTH TEXAS: An Anthropologist's Testimonio About Method and Meaning in the Gathering of History

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In a discipline in which a debate continues about subjective versus objective methodologies and textual representations, auto/ethnography marks an inherent bias in anthropological study. Deborah Reed-Danahay defines auto/ethnography as a "form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (1997, 9). She asserts that auto/ethnography, functioning as both a method and a text, may either refer to those anthropologists who study their "home" communities or to an autobiography that provides relevant cultural information. In my work on La Feria, Texas, I make no claims to objectively studying and/or representing a town to which I have a personal historical connection. It is important to note, however, that my subjectivity has granted me access in a small town often suspicious of outsiders. As a prodigal daughter of sorts, I received respect and cooperation for my research endeavors from many community members, which undoubtedly benefited my work. "Returning" to my mother's hometown to conduct research touched a chord with town residents, many of whom have seen migrant streams from South Texas to places like California, never to return.

Embracing the practice of auto/ethnography has had an unexpected impact on my research questions. Though I initially envisioned this project to be a historical and contemporary study about race relations in La Feria, Texas, my

auto/ethnographic positionality and bias led me to delve more into issues surrounding segregation and the process of racial integration of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants to this town.[i] Although the method of auto/ethnography pushed me into a certain historical period, I found these historical particulars to be a strong base from which to understand contemporary relationships between Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and Anglos in the Rio Grande Valley.

Approaching Auto/ethnography

My mother was the first American-born child in a Mexican immigrant family, and she was born in South Texas. Their story of immigration and assimilation in the border town of La Feria is, in many ways, typical of the Mexican experience in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1940s through 1960s. They were employed by an Anglo farmer to work in the fields, migrating summers to earn extra income for their growing family. They lived in a small town whose railroad tracks bisected it into two racially stratified communities—one Mexican and one Anglo. Like the majority of Mexicans in the towns along the Rio Grande Valley, they experienced segregation in their schools, in their places of worship, and in many other public realms.

While my mother's story may have been typical of the Mexican experience in the Valley, it was foreign to me, her California-born, middle-class, Mexican American daughter. Her stories did not carry historical weight for me until I made my own migration to Texas to attend graduate school. One late August, shortly before classes were to begin, my mother drove me to South Texas, and, in doing so, helped me to see those stories as history and ethnography.

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We make the long drive from Austin to the Texas-Mexico border on a heavy summer afternoon. We exit the expressway and turn right into a residential area. My mother drives me by Sam Houston School, where she and her sisters attended elementary school.

"Esta era la escuela mexicana," she tells me. "And here, this is where Emilio's store used to be. Todo esto era el pueblo mexicano."

The wood-framed houses in the area are modest but generally well-maintained, some with manicured lawns and bright flowers. There are some empty lots overgrown with grass and junk, as well as some dilapidated houses. Parked cars on either side of the road further crowd the narrow neighborhood streets.

As we drive, my mother continues to indicate to me where various things used to be.

"All along here there used to be packing sheds. Aquí era el cotton gin."

She navigates us to the small green house that her family had built in a neighborhood they called Colonia La Bonita. It does not look like a very sturdy house. It is small, wood-framed, and still green, though the paint is chipping away.

"See that addition? My dad built that."

Her street in La Bonita now faces a relatively new junior high and high school. She comments, "That didn't used to be there."

Soon we are heading south and cross the railroad tracks. South Main Street looks incredibly preserved. One can imagine that the storefronts look the

same now as they did thirty years ago. We turn west into another residential area and I notice a marked difference in the width of the streets, the size of the lots, the landscaping. My mother tells me, "Esto era el pueblo americano." At that moment, it occurs to me what she had meant earlier when referring to the other side of the railroad tracks as "el pueblo mexicano." She was literally distinguishing a Mexican "town" from an "American" one. The spatial differences between the residential areas on the north and south side of the tracks were staggering. I thought, 'this is how segregation is mapped onto a city.'

Later that evening, we head to the rancho where she and her family spent many years living and working. We meet her padrinos, who still live in the same house as they did years ago. We spend the evening with their memories of my grandparents and my aunts, listening to the buzz of fireflies and enjoying the evening as the heat of the day begins to wane.

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Those conversations held in the summer of 2000 sparked my personal and professional interests in La Feria. I learned my mother's family left La Feria in 1965, before Mexicans had gained equal footing with their Anglo counterparts. I knew the stories about the discrimination they had faced as poor Mexican farmworkers in South Texas. I did not know, however, what happened after they left. As an anthropologist whose research interests include U.S. experiences of immigration, race, and ethnicity, I wanted to investigate and understand how people had dismantled the segregationist structures that previously governed the town. On a more personal level, I was deeply motivated to conduct a community study in La Feria simply because I wanted to know my mother's community. I wanted to know where my family had worked. I wanted to see the house they had

built, the schools they had attended, the paths they had tread. These romantic interests fueled my desire to formally study the community of La Feria.

Autoethnographic Methodologies

Before arriving in La Feria in the summer of 2002, I had conceptualized methods for the historical and contemporary aspects of my study. For the historical portion of my project, I planned to conduct oral history interviews with longtime residents, corroborating their stories with written sources, such as local newspapers, school board minutes, and other archival materials that would be available to me. In order to attain a sense of contemporary inter- and intra-racial relations, I planned to use typical anthropological methodologies, conducting qualitative interviews and practicing participant observation. Upon arriving in town in the summer of 2002, I realized that while I could conceptualize the way my fieldwork should occur, my research would be highly contingent upon the relationships that I would develop with people in the field. Though I arrived in La Feria with key people to contact, I had no relationships.

Because La Feria is a small town, boasting a population of just over six thousand, most people know each other or at least know of each other. Either they have attended school together or their children have attended the same schools. Despite my mother and her family's history in the town, I felt very much the outsider.

I did what I could. I made appointments with those key contacts. I attended school board meetings. I chatted with people at the laundromat. I volunteered at the Catholic church. In this way, I began the slow process of developing relationships with people in town. I soon found that people were just as curious about me as I was about them. People frequently asked me why I had come to town. I would tell them about my study.

"But why La Feria?" they would ask, genuinely baffled that a scholar would want to study their small town.

"My mom is from here," I would say, and I would feel the dynamics of our conversation change.

Then they would ask her name. Was she related to this family? Where did she live? What year did she graduate from high school? When did she leave?

Many people did not remember her, nor did they remember her family. My mother's family had come from Mexico and was only in town for eighteen years, a short amount of time, especially to those residents who had lived there for several decades, even generations. Nevertheless, there was something about my familial connection with La Feria that resonated with many people. There were many *mexicanos*, mainly farmworkers, who had left La Feria for California to look for better opportunities, to escape communities plagued by racial segregation. I could tell that it meant something to them that I had, in a sense, made a reverse migration.

I believe that once people knew who my mother was, a Mexican woman who had been born and raised in La Feria, they began to trust me. Trying to follow my research agenda, I felt increasingly comfortable asking questions about how the town had come to be integrated. I also asked questions about the Mexican immigrant population. I soon realized, however, that my interview subjects had their own agenda, their own stories to tell. Invariably, their stories were about a La Feria past—a racially segregated La Feria. Perhaps they sensed that I would recognize these stories because of my mother. Perhaps they knew that I would listen. Though I did try to push my contemporary research, they pushed back.

I eventually surrendered myself to their stories of segregation and decided to investigate them more fully.

I came to believe that to shift my research toward a more historical angle was an academically sound decision. If I were to have insisted upon my original diachronic study, I would have covered neither the history nor the contemporary aspects of race relations in La Feria with the depth that these stories and situations merited. I decided to continue to be a participant observer and gauge people's attitudes about race, immigration, and social issues, planning to save the information I learned for a later project. My primary focus, however, became the history of segregation and the process of racial integration in town.

Mexican people's stories were integral to my understanding of segregation in La Feria because of the scant documentation of segregationist practices. I reviewed editions of *The La Feria News* from the 1920s through the 1970s, and, especially in the first few decades of newspaper reporting, found scarcely any mention of a Mexican-origin population in town. There was, however, documentation that La Feria was part of a Spanish land grant belonging to Rosa Maria Hinojosa de Ballí (Chavana 1998; Government Service Agency 1999), and the first house built in La Feria belonged to a Spanish-surnamed family (McNail 1975). The local written histories I found, however, focused almost solely on the Anglo population, documenting their settlement and development of town. In order to construct a narrative of the town's history that included Mexicans, I had to rely on oral history interviews with long-time Mexican residents. I corroborated the information I received in these interviews with whatever documentation I could find in the local newspaper, school board minutes, city commissioner minutes, and property records. I also conducted a survey of high school yearbooks from the mid-1940s to the mid 1970s, noting the racial composition of students in the freshman and senior classes.

Positioning the Autoethnographer

I believe that my position as an ethnic insider whose mother was from La Feria inspired a certain degree of trust among the Mexican American and Mexican immigrant residents who would tell me their stories. In these oral history interviews, Mexican people were very forthcoming with me about the discrimination they experienced in the early part of the twentieth century by Anglo residents, their memories still extremely vivid. I could not help but think about the classic South Texas ethnographies, *The Mexican Americans of South Texas* (Madsen 1973) and *Across the Tracks* (Rubel 1966) and wonder if Mexican people had told these Anglo anthropologists the same stories they were telling me. The representation of Mexicans in South Texas in the aforementioned ethnographies did not reflect the experiences of discrimination prevalent in the stories Mexican residents of La Feria were recounting to me. It could be that the Mexican people who participated in their research did not entrust the same kinds of stories to them, or that, perhaps, Madsen and Rubel were not as receptive to these stories because they did not relate to them as I did.[ii] Another possibility is that anthropologists of different generations and ethnicities were asking different questions. I did come to believe that being an ethnic insider affected the kinds of stories recounted to me.

While being an ethnic insider made me privy to a different narrative of the historical experiences of Mexicans in South Texas, it also at times brought a sense of discomfort because it positioned me as an ethnic outsider among Anglo residents, especially as I was investigating mistreatment that occurred at the hands of members of their racial/ethnic community. Racial segregation and discrimination were, understandably, uncomfortable issues for me to discuss with Anglos. I made the decision not to press the issue of discrimination with Anglo residents; instead, I aimed to gather other, broader, information from

them about the economy, politics, and major events in the town's history. There was one older Anglo woman, however, who interrogated me about discrimination during our oral history interview.

She had been recounting stories about her family farm and how they employed several Mexican farmworkers. She insisted that her family treated the farmworkers well, and, in fact, viewed them as part of their family. She emphasized how upset it made her to hear all of these allegations about past (and, ostensibly, present-day) discrimination. Then suddenly, she focused her attention on my family's personal history.

"Your mother grew up here. What did she have to say about all of that?"

For the first time, I felt that conducting an autoethnography had placed me at a disadvantage. I could not feign ignorance about past discrimination with this woman; she knew that I must have heard stories from my mother. I did not, however, want to alienate her by telling her that, actually, many farmworkers *were* resentful of the way farmers treated them. Many did not feel part of the families for whom they worked.

I chose my words carefully. I explained that it was difficult for my mother because they had been very poor. I told her that she had some negative experiences in the schools, especially within the Mexican school. I gave as brief an answer as I could.

The woman demonstrated vague sympathy but basically dismissed my answer as an exception rather than a rule.

I did not press the issue.

This interview was pivotal in helping me to more fully understand my position as a Mexican American autoethnographer in La Feria. [iii] I realized that perhaps part of the reason that people entrusted their stories to me was because they believed that I would understand, relate, and, ultimately, affirm them. When Mexican origin people told me stories about the discrimination that they had experienced growing up in La Feria, I was sympathetic and could often offer as confirmation of their shared historical reality a similar kind of experience that my mother's family had endured. However, when this Anglo woman presented her narrative, I was unable to affirm it via my family's story. In fact, our family history stood in strong contrast to hers and called attention to the significance of perspective in the recounting of history. To this point, I had largely enjoyed the benefits of ethnic "insider" status within La Feria, a town with a Mexican-origin population that hovered around seventy percent. Being an ethnic "insider" within the Mexican-origin community, however, meant that I was an "outsider" to the Anglo community. Perhaps I was privy to more Mexican American stories than Madsen and Rubel had been, but I began to more clearly understand my access to—and even understanding of—Anglo stories as being much more limited.

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There are costs and benefits to any positionality within ethnographic study. Notably, my position as an autoethnographer enabled me to more quickly forge relationships with La Feria residents. I believe that people respected and trusted me as a kind of prodigal daughter in the community, and, as such, they were generally very helpful and warm to me. If interview subjects did not

appreciate the academic element of my study, they certainly respected it as a family history project. During the course of my fieldwork, I developed many close relationships in La Feria that I continue to sustain. To date, there is scant documentation of the Mexican-origin population in La Feria. Significantly, the racially, culturally, and geographically specific stories I was able to gather enabled me to construct an historical narrative inclusive of the Mexican-origin community. Of course, there were some drawbacks to my autoethnographic project. The aforementioned interview indicated a problem I encountered as an ethnic "outsider" to the local Anglo community and my inability to affirm the Anglo historical narrative. One might also argue that my sympathies to the community run *too* deep, that I do not have enough critical distance. But any methodology has its shortcomings—blindspots. I do not argue that I provide a more "authentic" account of La Feria's history. Rather, I provide a unique perspective, one that both complements and contradicts other historical accounts of race relations in South Texas, granting us a deeper understanding of the time and place.

Epilogue: Fotografía La Feria

It is a bright and heavy afternoon in late August. The South Texas sun brutally streams through the car windows, defying the air conditioner on its full setting. I am driving my mother and my Aunt Lupita along an isolated country road north of the border town of La Feria. We are looking for the house where they spent most of their childhood years, where my grandfather earned two dollars a day working sun up to sun down for a local German farmer. They lived in a small house on his property, a house neither of them has seen for decades.

"It's down that road," my mom tells us, "pero se me hace que allí es private property."

"No, it's not private property," I tell her, having already done some investigating

of my own. "It just looks that way because it's a dirt road."

I make a difficult U-turn on the caliche road and maneuver my car down the path that will take us to their house. We drive slowly down the road, partly because we are not sure where we are going and partly because small and sharp rocks impede our smooth passage. We creep by the main house on our left, which they tell me used to look much nicer when they lived here. On our right there is a cluster of dilapidated wood-framed houses that look abandoned. I notice, then, that there are clothes hanging out to dry in some of the yards.

"I think that's it."

"Is that it?"

They remember that the house was white, but it seems that layers of paint from the houses in that cluster have chipped and faded away, probably several times throughout the years.

"Yes, that's it. Look there's the diche. And the porch where we used to sit."

I make another difficult U-turn on the narrow road and we pass the houses again. The second time we drive by, my aunt notices the old barn. It is still a tall, imposing building, but the wood is now a gray color and the structure looks as if the next hard rain would take it down.

"That's where my dad would go to milk the cows and feed the pigs after he would work all day in the sun," my aunt tells me as she fumbles in her bag for her camera. "Slow down. I'm going to take a picture."

"Why do you want to take a picture?" my mom asks, not even trying to conceal the exasperation in her voice.

"Because," my aunt insists, "I want to take a picture."

"I don't know why you want to remember this place. These are just oppressing memories."

"I want to take a picture. I dream about this house. I have to take a picture so that I won't dream it any more."

In many ways, this project has been a picture that I am taking for myself. Much like my Aunt Lupita, I am taking a picture of this place so that I won't have to dream it any more.

Notes

[i] My oral history interviews revealed to me that, during the period of segregation, Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans were often simply viewed as "Mexican," especially if they were working class.

[ii] Octavio Romano-V. (1968; 1970) has written very persuasively that the Madsen and Rubel texts pathologized the culture of Mexicans in South Texas. Américo Paredes (1978) later critiqued the Madsen and Rubel ethnographies, citing problems stemming from language deficiencies and cultural misunderstandings.

[iii] I continue to learn from authors who have published in this journal including Monica Russel y Rodriguez and Michelle Tellez.

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