

Editor's Note:

Understanding the Criteria for Reviewing and Evaluating Autoethnographic and/or Testimonial Writing and Representation for an Academic Research Journal

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The autoethnographic narratives and *testimonios* in this special issue of the *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* are based on “personalized accounts” of the authors’ transnational lived experiences studying in the United States and Mexico. As such, they provide insight into academic/scientific disciplines and cultures (cf. Holt, 2003). Personal narratives and testimonios comprise a genre of writing that differs from traditional empirical ethnographic writing, which are characterized by the norm of objectivity (Rosaldo, 1989) and the absence of the researcher’s voice (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1997) in the narrative. The strength of personalized accounts comes from firsthand subjective experiences as authors encounter various historical, social structural, and cultural variables and settings (Ellis and Bocher, 2000). Moreover, the writing is more personal because the authors/researchers write in the first person connecting the self to the cultural (Reed-Danahay, 1997) and use their own experiences in a culture to reflexively analyze self-other interactions.

In a similar vein, *testimonios* serve the same function but come from a different tradition. The use of *testimonios* is well known in Latin American writing and has made major contributions within Chicana/o and Latina/o studies (cf. Acevedo, 2001; Alarcón, et al. 2011; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012; Prieto and Villenas, 2012). *Testimonios*, like critical autoethnographies, tell a story that is both an individual story and a representation of a people or a community; the stories capture how, as individuals and as members of a collective, they confront and overcome obstacles of power. The work of Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona (2012) extends our understanding in the use of *testimonios* in education as an approach of how marginalized communities build solidarity to resist different forms of power, which can lead to social change.

In the analysis of autoethnographies and/or *testimonios*, we also discover turning points or epiphanies that explain why individuals pursue or do not pursue certain actions (Denzin, 2001). It is these turning points or epiphanies that are rife with meaning and therefore at the core of research findings. One characteristic of personal writing or “narratives of the self”

(Richardson, 1994) is that authors do not necessarily cite research literature to provide context for a problem or issue. The power of their contribution is that the narratives provide the context for understanding and explaining a problem or issue. Their strength rests in the subjective experience and reflection of the author/researcher in order to gain greater understanding and consciousness of lived experiences and settings.

Narratives of the self are difficult to evaluate as research because reviewers have relied on traditional research criteria: (a) the use of verification strategies, and (b) the use of self as the only data source (Holt, 2003; Sparks, 2000). Traditional criteria used to evaluate and interpret qualitative research on issues of verification include validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, because autoethnographic and testimonial narratives are not of the same genre type as traditional empirical ethnographic research, Holt argues that validity, reliability, and objectivity need to be reconceptualized when evaluating autoethnographic and testimonial writing.

In exploring alternative criteria, he draws on the work of Richardson (2000, pp. 15-16) to identify strategies that includes analysis of both evaluative and constructive validity techniques, which can be used in reviewing personal narratives (cited in Holt, 2003).

The criteria are: (a) Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? (b) Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? (c) Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? (d) Impactfulness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? (e) Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed-out sense of lived experience?

In exploring these criteria, Holt hopes they will serve as "a framework for directing investigators and reviewers alike" (p. 12).

The second problematic issue in evaluating autoethnographic and/or testimonial writing is the use of self as the only data source. Traditional empirical ethnographic writing to a large extent follows the genre of the realist tale (Van Manen, 1988), which is guided by the norm of objectivity and the detached voice of the researcher. These characteristics complicate the review and evaluation of personal writing and the use of self as the only data source. Even though ethnographers, in conducting ethnographic research, occupy the unique position of being "...the primary research instrument through which information is collected and recorded" (Murchinson, 2010, p. 12), they are not expected to use their position as the sole source of data. Traditional ethnographic research expects studies to have substantial "empirical data" collected through participant observation and fieldwork. Because personal narratives rely on the life experiences and memory of the researcher as the only source of data, they are often critiqued as not constituting "proper research" (Holt, 2003; Sparks, 2000).

Scholars who produce autoethnographic and testimonial narratives argue that personalized writing should not be evaluated using traditional research criteria. Richardson (1994) stresses that personalized writing is another form of inquiry where the author discovers something about the self and the research topic. The process of data collection, i.e., being in the field, and writing become blurred when doing ethnography. There is no major difference between the fieldwork experience and the writing process; the two processes inform one another

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Thus, in autoethnographic and testimonial writing, the subjective experience of the researcher in the field is seen as a resource and not as a limitation in understanding a problem (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Writing about the self is both a process of learning about others and the self.

Narratives of the self (Richardson, 1994; Sparks, 2000), whether autoethnography or testimonial, are part of the movement of finding new ways of representing qualitative research. Holt (2003) reiterates that even if reviewers critique the use of self as data, a good autoethnography or *testimonio* should not be dismissed. They provide insight that is both individual and social. Hanson (2004) argues that critical autoethnographic writing emerges from the space between the autobiographical *Here* (the individual self) and the ethnographic *There* (the collective). The former is a self-oriented narrative based on personal experience whereas the latter is an other-oriented one based on systematic participant observation (p. 184). It is through the process of self-reflection that the author gains critical insight and understanding of her or his own self-identity but not in isolation of the sociocultural experience of the ethnographic *There*.

This editorial note has discussed two important issues pertaining to the review and evaluation of autoethnographic and/or testimonial writing and representation for an academic research journal. The two problematic issues include: (a) the use of verification strategies, and (b) the use of self as the only data source. Holt (2003), Ellis and Bochner (2000), and Sparks (2000) have stressed that the use of traditional research criteria may not be suitable in evaluating autoethnographic and/or testimonial writing. Given the proliferation of qualitative research approaches and writing that has emerged since the mid-1980s with the crises of representation and legitimation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Sparks, 2000), it is essential to provide some guidance to both researchers and evaluators in the production and evaluation of personal writing samples. It is our hope that this brief but concise review of the pertinent literature provides context and guidance for the review and evaluation of the personal writing accounts submitted for this special issue on the Becas Para Aztlán Program: Transnational Experiences of Chicana and Chicano Graduate Students.

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