

# TALES OF AN ACADEMIC IMMIGRANT: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT

**FREYCA CALDERON**

Penn State University - Altoona

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## **ABSTRACT:**

I've struggled for quite a bit with my urge and reluctance to write about my experiences as an immigrant in the south and how they shifted when I came to the northeast. I am working within the resistance to better understand my self and positionalities within and outside of the social, cultural, and political context of the academe, both as a graduate student and now as a faculty member. I have been compelled to work on this piece with the hope that the process helps me theorize and understand what it means to be [perceived] as a racialized woman. I theorize the possibilities that spaces create for me (or any other person) to freely express the self, to be/come and grow, or the constraints such spaces could impose that erase and silence us.

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[T]he woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self.  
Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*,  
the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.  
Gloria Anzaldúa

Working toward a decolonial feminism is to learn about each other as resisters to the coloniality  
of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of  
meaning from which resistance to the coloniality arises.  
Maria Lugones

I've struggled for quite a bit with my urge and reluctance to write about my experiences as an immigrant in the south and how they shifted when I came to the northeast. I am working within the resistance to better understand my self and positionalities within and outside of the social, cultural, and political context of the academe, both as a graduate student and now as a faculty member. I have been compelled to work on this piece with the hope that the process helps me theorize and understand what it means to be [perceived] as a racialized woman. I theorize the possibilities that spaces create for me (or any other person) to freely express the self, to be/come and grow, or the constraints such spaces could impose that erase and silence us.

In this autoethnographic reflection, I work dialectically with “impossible knowledge” (Haig-Brown, 2003) emulating the work of the Latina Feminist Group (2001) exploring ways in which my identities express and represent the complexities of the communities I am part of, and the perceptions that others may have of me. Autoethnographic stories demonstrate “how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experiences” (Adams et al 2015, 3). Thus, I portray how I know and interpret the lived experiences as I embody my intersectionalities and the significance of the collective work in those communities to help me better understand my roles, belongingness, connections, and positionalities. Following Audre Lorde's advice about seeing poetry as “a vital necessity of our existence” (2007, 37), I use poetry to convey the theorizing of this exploration. I share the radical and daring reflections through poetic testimonios interweaved in this autoethnographic work in the efforts of unsettling the performative-I, as a polyvocal being (Spry 2016).

### **DE DONDE VENGO – BE/COMING**

Two aspects from my upbringing, among others, influence my teaching practice and scholarly work. First, being raised by two extraordinary women whom, by example and unconsciously, taught me about feminism and indigenous experiential knowledge. The second was my first teaching job. It was at a non-traditional school based on a humanistic personalized pedagogy focused on developing autonomy and responsibility. Its philosophy was based on respecting students' potential and decision-making by learning at their own pace. These events set the foundation and my interest in decolonizing epistemologies and pedagogy – although I didn't know

those terms at that time. Understanding there are other ways of being and doing in educational settings and knowing the crucial role of experiential knowledge was critical as a teacher, but even more vital as a transnational educator. Thus, it has been one of the issues I embody and advocate for as I became an immigrant.

Leaving a life behind is not easy  
I came with hopes and optimism  
    Ilusiones y aspiraciones  
    con ganas de trabajar y “triunfar”  
    con la idea del famoso “sueño americano”  
What I encounter is no paradise  
Nothing is familiar  
The first barrier is the language  
that barrier never lifts  
    but by no means is the only one  
    there’s another invisible barrier  
the omnipresent prejudice  
that comes with being “otherized”  
I became an “alien”  
always a foreigner  
    many times invisible  
    other times noticeable just to be outcast  
    I learned to live in the borderlands  
    developed a new consciousness  
I became a mestiza.

Being a foreign graduate student in a predominantly white university is not easy. As Haig-Brown indicates I had to deal with impossible knowledge “knowledge that is beyond our grasp because of the limits of our language and our lived experience” (2003, 415). Learning to navigate such spaces, to legitimize my background and experiences, and to create “a new story to explain the world and our participation in it” (Anzaldúa 2007, 103).

Going to graduate school is a scramble  
juggling multiple roles  
meeting expectations  
proving I’m worthy  
learning the language and the “right” moves  
to play the game of white, westernized academia.  
Being an outsider puts me on the spot  
having an accent makes scrutiny more rigid  
professors carefully questioning and examining  
my knowledge and experience

because it's from another country, from the Global South  
my grammar is more important than my ideas  
my articulation is more significant than my elaboration  
students want proof that I can actually teach them something  
but they don't pay attention to the content  
or the pedagogical approach  
or the educational tools and resources I bring to class  
they only hear my accent  
not my words  
Vacillations constantly haunt me  
the imposter syndrome whispers  
las dudas siempre están ahí  
gritando, ahogando  
cuestionándome, volviéndome frágil, vulnerable  
me pregunto si vale la pena  
todo el esfuerzo, la fatiga, la nostalgia... para qué?

How to describe the systemic oppression since it is so subtle and elusive, yet so vivid and conspicuous? Every single interaction could be an aggression, from the squinty glances, sharp looks, or sneaky peeks. To the innocent comment, intense inquiry, or acute inquisition full of animosity disguised as politeness. The feeling of being under scrutiny is endless and inescapable. I am keenly aware of my foreignness, my accent, and my speaking mistakes because people around me have forced me to have this permanent awareness. Their judgement of me is what sets the bar higher and higher every time. The standard goal set for a stranger is to become part of the mainstream with or without his/her consent. In this case, the ideal goal for an immigrant in the U.S. is to assimilate and try to be as white as possible in the least amount of time. Kendi (2019) suggests that assimilationist ideas are racist because they position a group as a superior standard that other groups should be trying to reach. Resisting assimilation was one of my biggest learnings as an immigrant. My language, culture, and experiential knowledge are an invaluable asset, and I must keep legitimizing it.

Resisting, persisting, surviving,  
in their eyes

I was what they wanted me to be  
another Hispanic

invisible, dismissible

Resisting, persisting, surviving,  
in my eyes

I was another success story

I became part of the 2%

the two percent of Latina women in academic settings

The three letters at the end of my name (PhD) are supposed to make a difference? In westernized academe the degree is what validates my knowledge. However, I didn't have the opportunity to teach in the South after I graduated. The academic job took me to the Northeast, a small town, completely different context.

Resisting, persisting, surviving  
moving to the Northeast  
    another migration  
    more foreign  
still alien  
with the cold  
the alienation feeling goes deeper  
embodied difference is evident  
still sometimes invisible  
no more dismissible  
but I continue  
resisting, persisting, surviving

The new context was unexpected. Still a predominantly white institution. Yet, people around me are not jumping to their judgements immediately. The racialization of my being switched, and I can't quite fully describe it yet. My students are predominantly female, white, middle-working class. They come from rural, semi-rural and suburban settings with Christian values and Eurocentric ideologies from mostly homogeneous communities, and almost all of them overtly expressed not being exposed to any diversity. Students don't seem to be bothered by my accent or mistakes. They never even mention it. Are the three letters after my name making this difference? Is that their way of complying status or showing "respect"? Do they even care about different accents and speeches when they are not exposed to them frequently? How is the white privilege working here? I always thought I would work with students from minoritized and diverse groups. Thus, situating my teaching practice in this new context has been both challenging and rewarding. Still, enacting my philosophy of teaching, that is, following my beliefs and ideas about teaching and learning that includes decolonizing and indigenizing my praxis as teacher educator is a permanent endeavor.

My epistemological and pedagogical approaches to my academic work repeatedly challenge dominant paradigms and traditions in education. As a mestiza, woman of color, and teacher educator my scholarly work aims at developing critical consciousness and enacting decolonial epistemologies and pedagogies that are centered in the values and principles of indigenous ways of knowing and being (Rodríguez 2021; Kulago 2021). Certainly, in this process I must constantly work on decolonizing my own ways of thinking, being, and doing.

Academic freedom  
but don't go too outside the box  
Be creative  
but within the limits of traditions and standards

Think and teach critically  
but don't disturb students

Academy is a site of resistance  
as long your student's rates are good  
and meet the requirements for tenure  
produce innovative scholarly work  
but within the limits of hegemony

My college students, as many others in this country, come from at least 12 years of schooling, training within a western, capitalist, hegemonic knowledge and traditions, such as benchmarks and standardized testing, accelerated reading programs, and pressure to achieve and meet curriculum standards. This indoctrination does not pay attention to theories that urge us to consider and include individual interests, abilities, pace of learning, and diversity among other aspects that will help learners to develop to their full potential. Hence, my pedagogical approaches are perceived as foreign as me. Inviting students to think critically, to engage in analytically demanding discussions, or to design their own path for learning without specific step by step directions and/or a single "right" answer becomes challenging. Doing this work is uncomfortable, pushing them out of their comfort zone. Ahenakew (2016) warns us that indigenizing and decolonizing teaching practice is only welcome when it does not try to change the status quo. This way of doing school is not the standard for them. So, now students' comments are not about my accent or my knowledge. They complain about the lack of structure because there are no benchmarks. It is hard for them to engage in a relationship with the content, with me, with the context, with other learners in a meaningful and intimate way that allows us to being-in-relation (Patel 2014). I, along with the students, am coming into being in this decolonizing learning process. I am learning how to be/come an indigenizing and decolonizing teacher educator, disrupting traditional westernized ways of knowing and being, valuing and acquiring relational knowledge as we walk side-by-side (Chung 2019) grounded in our realities to transform our subjectivities and creating other ways of existing.

Being a foreigner is no longer a sin  
still resisting, persisting, surviving  
still an alien  
I am not afraid of discomfort  
I welcome challenge and impossible knowledge  
I push to ways of knowing outside the mainstream  
I go out of the frame of western epistemologies  
resisting, persisting, disrupting

Coming from the field of curriculum studies that claims to be praxis-oriented with a subjectivity-focused perspective, my teaching uses a decolonizing and indigenizing framework in which learning begins from personal experiences and it is filtered through students' identities. Therefore, we need to explore and analyze their own ways of knowing and being challenging the traditional notions of knowledge producers. It also means making visible what has been

unnoticeable, like the lack of diverse representation or the indoctrinating school practices that they/we are/have been subjected to.

This autoethnographic account reflects on the ways I make room for other ways of knowing, doing, and being, centered in and supported by indigenous knowledges, embedded in my teaching and scholarly work. However, doing decolonial work disrupting traditional practices and exploring other ways of knowing, being, and doing is diving into the unknowing (Ortega 2017). These indigenizing and decolonizing pedagogies create space for other possibilities of being, feeling, doing, thinking, looking, listening, knowing, and existing (Walsh 2013). Enacting decolonizing praxis and indigenizing teacher education is an ongoing endeavor that I embrace and embody to not only resist but also exist.

### **CONTRIBUTOR:**

**Freyca Calderon** is an associate professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Penn State Altoona. Her research centers around linguistic diversity and multiculturalism in education through the lens of critical-dialogical pedagogies aiming to address social equity and justice. Her scholarship privileges intersectionality approach and qualitative methods exploring possibilities for community building for marginalized and under-theorized groups and contributing to the education field by linking theoretical perspectives with everyday experiences and developing culturally relevant understandings.

**ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3636-3906>

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