

Beyond Self-reflexivity: Autobiography and the Construction of Self and Culture

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Abstract

This paper discusses the constitution of the autobiography as a blend of self and culture by exploring its inherent ethnographic nature and that of other self-narratives. It posits that beyond the established fact that the autobiography is not inferior to ethnography and other forms of life history because of its reflexivity, the autobiography is itself a form of life history due to its constitution as a narration of the author's self, space, gender and other aspects of culture. Self-reflexivity as a theoretical stance in the study and writing of culture became popular in the late twentieth century as a result of developments in postmodernism, post-colonialism and feminism. The view addresses the relationship between the self and social forms and how these are culturally constructed through the genres of self-narratives. Stemming from this premise, postmodern ethnographers have questioned the claim to objectivity and impersonality by traditional ethnographers and established the self-reflexive nature of all cultural writings and researches. This resulted in the conceptualisation of this practice and writing as 'Autoethnography', which describes the ethnography of the autobiography and other self-history and self-reflexivity of ethnographic research and writing. This paper conceives and projects this dimension of autobiography as Ethnoautobiography, a concept that describes a genre of life writing that blends the self and culture.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Autoethnography, Ethnoautobiography, Nigerian Literature, Self and Culture.

Introduction

Until recently, autobiography was considered unacceptable when it comes to the writing of social history because of what has been described as its somewhat personal and subjective dimension to its construction of realities (Harris 39). However, recent studies have underscored the ethnographic quality of autobiography resulting in its description as "self-ethnography" –source material that is useful for the investigation of peoples and cultures (Harris, 2005; Cobham & Collins, 1987; Stanley, 1993). Autobiography is, thus, accepted as an excellent

tool for the “study and discovery of cultures “(Harris 39); a means of understanding “the self” and “the others” and for disseminating this self to others. According to Harris,

The writing of autobiographies as self-ethnographic, cultural, and self-reflexive process can serve as a new way of interrogating personal experiences and for the purpose of exchanging cultural knowledge, especially in multicultural settings (39).

This is corroborated by Stanley (1992) who described autobiography as an “ideological account” in which lives interact with societal conditions and projects the common and everyday perceptions and understanding of social experiences of both common and “special” people; what Stanley described as “common lives” and “extraordinary lives” (3). The idea of self-reflexivity in cultural studies is a theoretical stance that became popular in the late twentieth century as a result of developments in postmodernism, post-colonialism and feminism (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This view in cultural studies addresses the relationship between the self and social forms and how these are culturally constructed through the genres of self-narratives. Reed-Danahay describes the idea of self-reflexivity as one that raises “provocative questions” in regards to several issues that concern contemporary scholarship on subjects of authenticity of voice, ethnographic authority and “the degree to which autoethnography constitutes resistance to hegemonic bodies of discourse.” Rosanna Hertz (1997) observed that these new methods and conventions in the manners in which the ethnographer’s self and their respondents are presented have engendered a revision of issues of ethics that surround social research (viii).

The idea of reflexivity, when related to ethnography, borders on the active involvement of researchers in the cultural activities and space they studied and reported. It also implies the active construction of interpretations of the experiences acquired in the field of study by the researcher or ethnographer and how these experiences are got (Hertz viii). In this case, the researcher is not seen as an ambivalent reporter of cold and unmediated “facts” or “truth” but as a creative and self-engaging writer of rather mediated and interpreted data. It is from this standpoint that Helen Callaway describes reflexivity as a

perspective and practice that opens “the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge” (33). Thus, according to Callaway, is because other factors such as gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, class, and age affect the researcher and writer’s interactions with their subject and textual strategies, the issue of reflexivity in cultural writing has become “a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness” (33). The implication of this position is that the claim to absolute objectivity by any writer of social history is a fallacy because all kinds of research process and writing of culture are self-reflexive, although in varying degrees. When related to creative writing, the idea of reflexivity underscores the fact that there is no separating the author from the process of creative writing. According to Charlotte Davies (1999), the personal involvement and influence of the ethnographer in the composition of their report underscore the reflexivity of the narration or account (7).

Thus, reflexivity is the awareness of researchers and writers that there is an unavoidable connection between them and the research or writing situation and consequently their influence on it (7). This is what Leon Anderson (2006) described as “reflexive ethnography” or “evocative autoethnography” which suggests the possibility that self-reflexivity “can take us to the depths of personal feeling, leading us to be emotionally moved and sympathetically understanding” (385). In this vein, it is understood that the writing of a culture is inseparable from the writing of the self and that “subjective experiences are intrinsic part of research and writing of culture” (Davies 5). According to Anderson, this is a quality that all first-person narratives such as fiction, autobiography, poetry, and ethnography share. It is also described by Tami Spry as ‘Performing Autoethnography’; that is, the convergence of the “autobiographic impulse” and the “ethnographic moment” which are represented through “movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity” (Spry 706).

Autoethnography, (Ethno) autobiography and the Self-reflexive Writing of Culture

Traditionally, the relationship of the researcher or author to the subject being studied and the process of writing the story or report are supposed to distinguish autobiography and other autobiographical writings from ethnography. This is supposed to determine the authenticity or otherwise of their writing of social history. As seen in the positions discussed above, there is a strong argument on the side of the subjectivity of ethnographic studies and other social science researches. This is the core of the theoretical stance on the issue of self-reflexivity. More and more studies on ethnography have revealed its increasingly autobiographical nature, a view that has been championed by postmodern anthropologists who observe that ethnography has become increasingly self-reflexive and personal, thereby further bridging the gap between it and the autobiographical writings. Judith Stacey, for instance, describes this dimension of ethnography as “postmodern ethnography” which, according to her, is “critical and self-reflexive ethnography and literature of meditation on the inherent, but often unacknowledged hierarchical and power-laden relations of ethnographic writing” (Stacey 24). Postmodern ethnography is influenced by deconstructionist posturing to cultural studies and concerns what James Clifford has described as “Partial Truths” (Clifford 7). This understanding of ethnographic research demonstrates its subjectivity as self-reflexive writing. It is also, as is the case with feminist “methodological reflections,” acknowledges the limitation of cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding and representation (Stacey 25). The admissions that ethnography is inherently subjective and self-reflexive informs the different approaches to contemporary ethnography which embraces the idea that other or alternative genres of cultural narratives such as short stories, novels, and poetry as well as traditional scholarly reports of personal experience can be used to express cultural experience, provocative and powerful cultural phenomena. This alternative method of representing culture and self, which combines both the elements of ethnography and autobiography, has been conceived as “Autoethnography”.

Autoethnography is a concept that has multidisciplinary meanings and has been employed variously by literary critics, anthropologists, and sociologists. Autoethnography is employed as a research method, as a text, and/or as a genre of writing (Reed-Danahay

4). The conceptual history of the term can be traced along two directions: one, as a primarily ethnographic concept and two, as concerning life history (4). In this vein, Autoethnography has been described as a genre of writing and research that connects the self to a cultural and social context (9). As a text, and like the autobiography or autobiographical writings, Autoethnography is usually written in the first person narrative point of view and “features dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational stories affected by history, social structure, and culture” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). According to Reed-Danahay, whatever the emphasis of the writing on the *graphy* (the research process), *ethnos* (the culture), or the *auto* (i.e. the self), what is peculiar about Autoethnography is that authors employ their personal experiences in relation to a culture reflexively in order to explore the interaction between the two. The concept of Autoethnography, thus “reflects a changing conception of both the self and society in the late twentieth century” (2; See also Giddens 1991).

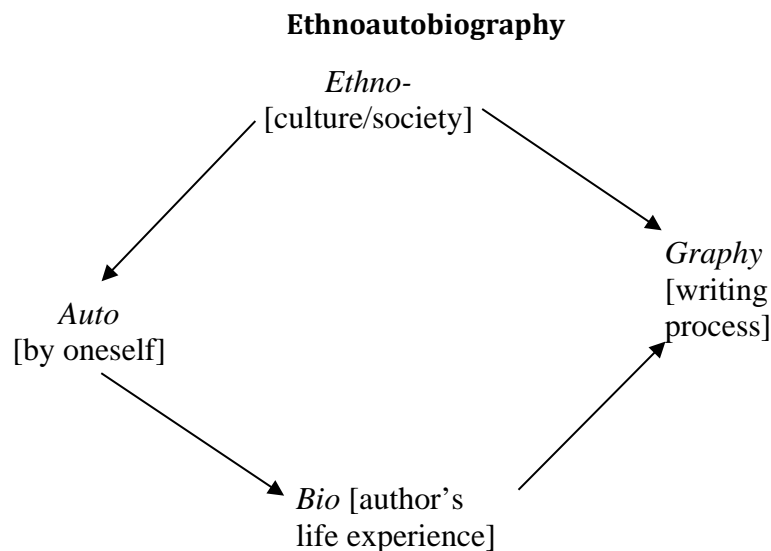
The capacity of Autoethnography to combine the qualities and functions of both the autobiography and the ethnography (as it is assumed) so that it is characterised by the narration of the self and the representation of culture has been described by Reed-Danahay as its critical and synthetic nature. According to Reed-Danahay,

[Autoethnography] synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question (2).

In other words, the concept of Autoethnography is a site where both the essence of ethnography and autobiography are merged. This also underscored the fact that although the main interest of ethnographers is the study of the cultural other, it is nevertheless also the ethnographer’s critique of that culture. It is believed that ethnographic knowledge is the product of the social situation of the ethnographer. Therefore, while the ethnographer studies and narrates the culture of the other, they invariably and indirectly narrate their own story, the story of their perspective on the culture studied and their involvement

with it. Even in the case of an interview with the cultural ‘others’, the ethnographic record produced from the interlocution is essentially constructed by the ethnographer and as such is mediated. This informs the position of post-modern and reflexive ethnographers that there is an autobiography in ethnography. It is this interface between the native text and the active psyche of the ethnographer that Autoethnography stresses.

On the other hand, Autoethnography also emphasises the inherent ethnography of autobiography. This position addresses the socially situated nature of all knowledge and knowing and the importance of specifying the knower. Autobiography constructs the self as the product of culture. It is a genre of social history that is constructed culturally and self-reflexively. In other words, it is ethnoautobiographical. The concept of Ethnoautobiography stresses the ethnographic and autobiographical qualities of the genre.



In the above diagram, the *ethno*, which prefixes autobiography, underlines the cultural contexts, the space (s) within which the life that is narrated is situated.

The writing of autobiography is about the construction of identity through creative processes, which Tracey notes “occur in a range of spaces and contexts, from the individual to the cultural and political,” (Tracey 177). Thus, as ethno-autobiographical writing, it

identifies “the educational, psychological, biographical, social and cultural factors that impact on personal creativity” (178). This draws attention to the universality or connectedness of autobiography as a reliable source and means of knowing about social realities and experience. Thus, while autobiography may address the experience of particular individuals, it also in the process communicates universal truths that are very relevant to the experiences of readers. Tami Spry also describes these qualities as constitutive of a good and effective Autoethnography (713). According to Spry, a good and effective Autoethnography should have at least two qualities: First, “as in any evaluation of any literary genre, the writing must be well crafted” and “capable of being respected by critics of literatures as well as by social scientists” (713). Second, a good Autoethnography must be emotionally engaging (see also Behar, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Ronai, 1992), “*as well as* critically self-reflexive of one’s socio-political interactivity” (Tami Spry, 2001). This ability to reflect on the subjective self in context through interactions with others is the unique quality of Ethnoautobiography.

Ethnoautobiography

challenges the traditional anthropologists’ and social scientists’ notion that autobiography is too self-indulgent and subjective to be a reliable source of social history. Whereas, ethnography, also suffers the same fate of self-reflexivity and as such subjectivity, is seen as objective and reliable writing of social history. Developments in postmodernism, post-colonialism, and feminism and the growing dialogue across disciplinary boundaries have shown that this notion is problematic. Ethnoautobiography articulates how autobiographical writings constitute selves and social form culturally. As Reed-Danahay states, “Ethnic auto/biography, self-reflexivity in ethnography, and native ethnography” have raised many provocative questions about these issues (7).

Therefore, Ethnoautobiography constitutes a form of resistance to hegemonic bodies of discourses and master narratives. Well-written autobiographies, as well as other forms of self-narrative, whatever the genre, offer very interesting and challenging insights into the construction and transformation of identities and cultural meanings (Reed-Danahay, 1997: blub). This is adequately demonstrated in autobiographies of migrants who are concerned with the negotiation of space, race and culture in the construction and transformations of identity. Jürgen W. Kremer (2003) described ‘Ethnoautobiography’ as a

discourse that exists within various contexts, namely decolonisation, deconstruction of Whiteness, ecology, social world, gender roles, shamanism, and transpersonal psychology (4). According to Kremer, Ethnoautobiography is a visionary and imaginative process that grounds itself in time, place, history, ancestry, and stories of origin and creation.

As a creative and self-exploratory writing which also includes oral presentation, 'Ethnoautobiography',

grounds itself in the ethnic, cultural, historical, ecological, and gender background of the author. Part of such writing is the investigation of hybridity, categorical borderlands and transgressions, and the multiplicity of (hi)stories carried outside and inside the definitions and discourses of the dominant society of a particular place and time. As creative and evocative writing and storytelling, ethnoautobiography explores consciousness as the network of representations held by individuals from a subjective perspective and brings them into inquiring conversation with objective factors related to identity construction. (9).

As a post-colonial writing and discourse, Ethnoautobiography deconstructs the centres and creates multiple margins. It deconstructs hegemonic and colonising consciousness and master narratives to put an end to racialism, and essentialist identity politics. This privileges cultural root and indigenous knowledge and perspective of place by stressing the history of the place. As Kremer further explains, "ethnoautobiography facilitates the demise of narcissistic individualism, the emergent modern norm, and resolutions of antagonistic constructions of individual and community" (3). Within the context of gender roles, ethno-autobiography implies the deconstruction of bipolar categories, which serve the male supremacy (3). As such, Ethnoautobiography is a critique of the self, of that which is personal and conceives the construction of the self as a participatory event (3).

As a creative writing of self and culture, Ethnoautobiography conceptualises the cultural constitution of autobiography and other autobiographical writings. By virtue of its coordinates: history, myth, place, culture, and identity, it obviously concerns more than the narration of a self as it indicates the interaction of the self with various contexts. It interrogates the episteme and discourses of the dominant

society of a particular place and time. According to Kremer (2003), autobiographies and memoirs, for instance, are life stories that may or may not be described as Ethnoautobiography, depending on how well-crafted they are, and whether they address the various dimensions of ethnoautobiography:

Notions of ethnoautobiography and autoethnography, using these and similar terms have emerged in recent years as part of interdisciplinary courses and classes addressing issues of race, multiculturalism, etc. as well as in the field of literary criticism (9; see also Shirinian 2001; Ellis and Bochner 2000).

While Kremer described ethnoautobiography as inquiries into roots and origins, (12) and expressed or constructed as poetry, or/and prose. The *ethno-* that prefixes autobiography in this concept suggests its cultural constitution.

In her description of biographical writings, Birgitta Svensson (1997) observed that biography which means simply 'writing life' has acquired a normative power in modern society, as a way to order life and time just as a map orders the world and space. She, however, argues that the constructions of biographies are not just subjectivisations but also objectivisations; and that there is a need "to consider what constructions are socially, historically, and politically possible and how they are part of a larger metanarrative" (99).

The Cultural Constitution of Nigerian Migrant Autobiography

Literature is an interrogation of the social sphere either in fictional or biographical mode and it is the modern disposition to life. This is more so because we live in a biographical era in which everyone is involved in the scripting of their own life stories in a bid to shape our present existence against the "background of earlier history" while we project into the future (Svensson 99-100). People seek to tell their own stories and reflections in a bid to either correct misrepresentations about them or as a means of self-identification. The need for self-inscription and identification is felt more in the present world situation where globalisation and the resultant trans-acculturations and displacement have created serious identity problems. While narrating their own stories, writers incorporate social and cultural landmarks that are

important to their identity formation. In other words, they inject certain details of the society life as they know or experience them. This tendency is particularly evident in Nigerian migrant and travel literature, which is spatially transnational, and transcultural and it defines the cultural constitution of the literature.

The sociology and cultural constitution of Nigerian migrant and autobiographical travel poetry, for example, is defined by the dynamics of memory and how it helps in the understanding and interpretation of the present as a basis of identity formation. This is also enhanced by its engagement with trans-spatiality and cross-cultural relations, which qualities define migratory experiences in general and contemporary experience in particular. This aspect of the literature was underscored by Onokome Okome when he described Nigerian migrant poetry as that which “refigures the tensions of home and exile in a way which is both personal and communal,” such that the poet’s “personal universe is constantly invested with the mythic history and cultural matrix of home,” (Cited in Obododimma Oha, 2009: 183). According to Okome, this *home* is not only historical; it is also mythical, cultural and political having its “special spiritual essence too” (Cited in Oha, 2009: 183). Home, therefore, becomes a cultural map on which the migrant writer’s personal life history, desires, hopes, and frustrations are situated; a map “which guides his weary body in the geography of exile” (183). It is this quality of the poetry that underscores its self-reflexivity and cultural constitution at the same time. It situates the poet’s experience within specific historical moments and socio-cultural contexts.

Attah Agbali (2008), addressed the cultural constitution of autobiographical writings in particular and of literature in general when he noted that every literary work is defined in relation to particular historical moment and context and that the reality that such writing addresses usually transcends the writer’s own immediate space of experience. He noted that such literature also negotiates other experiential spaces, which underscores its universal connectedness and inherent ethnography. According to Agbali, despite the fact that every literature embodies and is embedded within a particular geo-space and the realities of such context, it also transcends the localized context. He observes that beyond this primary geo-space, the literature feeds “upon different imaginations and modalities that flow recurrently from diverse global processes, as well as the unique intrinsic subjectivity of the writer” (33). Essentially, what defines the particular context and locality of a literature is the kind of imageries and circumstances that

“shape the explanatory contours that map the literary landscaping and crafting of the idea that give birth to literary productions” (33).

In the works of migrant and Diaspora writers, the biographical writings are usually connected to the image of multiple geographies – the homeland and the adopted geography of exile or Diaspora. In other words, it transcends the narration of self and includes the relation of the self to a past that is collective in its historicalness and to a present that is transnational and nebulous in its complexity. Such writings are generically characterised by ambiguity as they have dual ethnographic and auto/biographic nature, which is actually difficult to define in a world where ethnography has been defined as a text about a people and auto/biography as a text about a person. Traditionally, the distinction between these two genres is that “the author- ethnographer is *not* one of those people described, while the author of an auto/biography is the main subject of the life portrayed” (Reed-Danahay 127).

The interplay of literature, history and the personal experience has been the defining factor of these forms of writing. What in a sense constitutes a historical and auto/biographical narrative is the shaping and restructuring of life experiences, the body of verified facts, known artefacts and records that connect in some sense with ours and others’ experiences of life. This form of writing demonstrates the changes that characterised the late twentieth century and defines the twenty-first century, which have been conditioned by the dynamics of globalisation.

The sociology or cultural constitution of Nigerian migrant autobiography is underscored by its mediation of the history and culture of the geo-spaces that define the writing. As Abiola Irele (2001), notes, these “serve as a constant reference” for the writer’s creative imagination (ix). In the face of contemporary reality, and because of the complexity of the experiences that this literature mediates, these references have undergone various transformations. The historical and cultural dynamics of contemporary reality and migrant experience demonstrate a complex combination of oppositional and subversive reactions to the challenges of modernity. The existential challenges of this situation are fraught with tensions at every level of both collective consciousness and individual apprehension (Poirier, 1994; Gyekye, 1997; Irele, 2001). Thus, as Irele further argues,

It is hardly a simplification to observe that literature has come to be regarded less as a purely aesthetic phenomenon, enjoying an ideal status in an autonomous realm, than as essentially a mode of discourse that, for all its particular character, shares with other modes of discourse a common ground in social and cultural practice (xiv).

This propositional aspect situates the literature and discourse within the framework of life and its articulation in connection with other forms of the social production of meaning in the contemporary world. Thus, the cultural constitution of Nigerian migrant autobiography is in its ability to respond to contemporary situations and experience. As the late Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo noted, there are two dimensional natures of poetic composition as its self-reflexivity and its universal connectedness. According to him, “any writer who attempts a type of inward exploration will, in fact, be exploring his society indirectly.” This is acceptably so because the writer does not live in isolation, but interacts “with different groups of people at different times” (Agbetuyi 533). This form of connectedness or universality has been described as the exploration of the collective historical memory, which is transformed as counter-memory to engage the experience of contemporary reality.

Auto/biographies written by migrant provide a very interesting and unique perspective from which to view the relationship between culture, space and the construction of identity. They reveal how the auto/biographers have to cross cultural and physical borders and bridge gaps between these borders. This representation highlights the problem faced by migrant auto/biographers in straddling the divide between the past and the present. The 'long geographical perspective' of migrant auto/biographers and their displacement from their homelands or reference points force them to live with what Eva Hoffman (135) has described as 'double vision'. By narrating their experiences in such a manner that they connect the two cultures that they straddle, migrant auto/biographers actually write ethnographies for their new country and the one they left behind. Essentially, in this context, auto/biography is meant to bring a sense of the past to the present. Migrant auto/biographers also bring their old world to their present, new world, in both cases a very different culture.

The inevitability of writing about the country one grew up in is a strong one for migrant writers and can be characteristic of migrant auto/biographers. Usually, immigrant auto/biographies show the interplay between dominant and marginal countries, cultures, languages and identities. Common and contemporary themes of migrant writings are those that border on issues of cross-cultural relations such as dislocation, problems of identity, the psychological impact of crossing borders, and language. In migrant auto/biographies, the central question is “who am I?” and “where do I come from?” These are characteristic of Nigerian migrant/travelling poet and auto/biographers who are engaged with the expressive problems and possibilities that the act of self-writing entails. It is evident in Nigerian literary auto/biography from its inception that the tendency to explore and define oneself in terms of patriotic values and national goals, to equate one’s development with national destiny provides the central structural metaphor of post-colonial Nigerian literary auto/biographies.

However, recent Nigerian literary auto/biographies and travel writings, while indicating cultural affinities with the country, are very critical of the post-colonial disillusion resulting from failed decolonisation and perpetual neo-colonialism. Nigerian post-colonial auto/biographies and travel writings combine both the patriotic and nationalistic tone of the early twentieth-century with the critical and multicultural nature of the late twentieth-century and twenty-first centuries. This practice of relationship the individual to the communities, according to Stephen Butterfield (1974) is characteristic of black auto/biography and has been demonstrated in several studies. According to Butterfield, “in black autobiography, the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition.” And, as he, therefore, argues,

The appeal of black autobiographies is in their political awareness, their empathy for suffering, their ability to break down the division of “I” and “you,” their knowledge of oppression and discovery of ways to cope with that experience, and their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self. (3)

The bottom line is that the traditional definition of auto/biography as a product of individualism is problematic. The counter-hegemonic disposition of post-colonial autobiographies is a conscious deconstruction of the “master narrative” and an interrogation of multiple paradigms and epistemologies. As Maria Lopez Roper (2003) notes, the post-colonial travelogue, which is autobiographical and is the product of the late twentieth century, is involved in socio-political discourses and has become a powerful instrument of cultural critique (51).

Conclusion

One of the basic characteristics of the autobiography is that it involves the negotiation of borders and boundaries such as that, which exists between the public and the private. It concerns the question of identity and the issue of multiple and shifting identities, which is very current in cultural studies, literary criticism, and postcolonial studies. There has been a continued negotiation of spaces, be it cultural, narrative or psychic. The reconstruction of the self in relation to others is dialogical and involves movements from one narrative construction to another. Because of the chaotic nature of human experiences, there is a need for multiple ways of making sense of it. Self-reflexive narratives like the autobiography and autoethnography would be useful in this regard as it is capable of providing space for the emancipation of silenced voices and ensuring a plurality of social story, history and production of knowledge and academic discourses. This would make it possible to articulate the “intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity” (Spry 727).

Ethno-autobiography, which underscored the ethnography of autobiography, concerns the construction, negotiation and re-negotiation of social reality and spaces, which involves the crossing of multiple boundaries and borderlines, both physical and psychological. Migrants’ autobiographies address issues of displacement, place and space and “illustrate why racial identity formation occurs at the intersection of a person’s subjective memory of trauma and collective remembrance of histories of domination” (Mostern 31).

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