

## **I Don't Want to Die Before Visiting Graceland: A Collaborative Autoethnography**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we use collaborative autoethnography to reflect on the different perceptions that can exist about the same event. We narrate our shared experience during a violent episode in which issues of race, class, and inequality of opportunities were present, involving not only our minds, but also our bodies and emotions. We reflect on the impossibility to remain objective and neutral when observing reality.

## **I – Introduction**

This paper is the product of a long trip and a short trip. It was inspired by a physical confrontation between a group of black boys and the manager of a hotel, which we witnessed on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2013 in Memphis, Tennessee, as well as other events that we have been watching in the news. We wrote this article to highlight the different perceptions two individuals can have of the same event.

In previous articles we have reflected on the intersections of various objective conditions of existence, including race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality (Martinez & Merlino 2012; Merlino, Martinez & Escanes 2011), but without describing our subjective personal experiences and reactions in the form of autoethnography as we do now. Our desire to understand social reality requires us to reflect on our own representations and points of view (Ellis 2009, Ellis & Bochner 2003, Holman Jones 2008, Spry 2011, Denzin

2006). In the following pages we relate a violent episode in which issues of race, class, and inequality of opportunities were present, involving our minds, bodies, and emotions. Our description of a first-hand experience is why this is not a normal academic paper. Disappointment and sadness led us to write this piece. Indeed, this incident happened while we were still wondering why a black boy walking home in the rain represented such a menace to someone, inciting him to take a life.

This article locates in the context of the increasing intellectual productions referred to the trial in which George Zimmerman was acquitted. The paper recovers some of the questions made by people as Patricia Williams (2013a, 2013b), DeWayne Wickham (2013), Patrick Johnson (2013), Jonathan Turley (2013) and Kenneth Walsh (2013), among other academics and journalists. These authors discuss the judicial process from different political, ideological and even religious positions, but they have something in common; they agree in their doubts about a trial in which controversies abounded.

## **II- Writing a Collaborative Autoethnography**

*We have been wanting to write*, as Ken Gale says (2013), and we have been *needing* to write about injustice and race after our recent experience. From the first moment we decided to write this paper, we knew that there was no way to do it except autoethnographically. We understand that by choosing this perspective we deliberately expose our feelings, weaknesses, and fears (Holman Jones et al. 2013, Ellis 2009, Feliu 2007), but we but we do so in light of the fact that we were personally involved.

Norman Denzin describes collaborative autoethnography as “the co-production of an autoethnographic text by two or more writers, often separated by time and distance” (2013, 125). In this paper we reflect on an event we witnessed next to each other, but “separated” by our objective conditions of existence. As two individuals of different ages and genders and with different family and educational backgrounds, we observed the violent incident from contrasting perspectives. Even our physical perception is unlike – Aldo is taller and stronger than Alejandra – and because of these dissimilarities our perception of the proximity of violence differed. These divergent perceptions are why we focus on our bodies and embodied anxiety in this text (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis 2013). We have chosen to write collaboratively to show how reality can be interpreted differently, even when the same experience is shared. By doing so we demonstrate how our individualities interfere with our perceptions. We abandon all pretenses of objectivity and neutrality (Ellis 2004, Ellis and Bochner 2003). The certainty that *there are no such things in human observation* struck us like a bullet after reading each other’s version of the event. We started writing about it the day after it happened. Even so, both of us remembered the event differently. We had both erased from our memories certain aspects of the incident, and we did not even agree on such “objective” data as the number of people involved. Aldo believed he had seen two people and Alejandra thought three. We have tried to reconstruct the situation by writing autoethnographically.

As Denzin says, autoethnography re-tells and re-performs significant life experiences, then, the life story becomes a “re-presentation, an historical object often ripped or torn of its contexts and recontextualized in the spaces and understandings of the story” (2013, 126). According to Tamy Spry, it is the “intentional and critically reflexive

connection of this narrative to larger social issues, to the politics, pleasure, and pain of other people” (2011, 498). In that sense, “clarity, connection and change” (Holman Jones 2008, 207) is what we want to achieve with these reflections. Autoethnographic texts include emotion, action, introspection, self-consciousness, and the body itself. We agree with Spry when she says that autoethnography “provides an apparatus to pose and engage the questions of our global lives” (2011, 499). We hope that our autoethnographic collaborative work “becomes the vehicle for moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members into new, critical, political spaces” (Denzin, 2003b, 198).

### **III- The News**

*MIAMI HERALD - March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

The 911 tapes released by police Friday show neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman called in with a problem: there had been a few break-ins lately, and now there was another suspicious guy in his Retreats at Twin Lakes neighborhood.

He looked like he might be on drugs and “up to no good.” (...) “It’s raining. He’s just walking around, looking about,” Zimmerman told the dispatcher. “He’s just staring looking at all the houses.”

Later, he lamented: “These arseholes always get away.” (...)

Then Zimmerman said the suspicious person, who appeared to be black and in his late teens, had his hand in his waist band. “Something’s wrong with him. He’s coming to check me out.”

As he narrates where the man was headed, the dispatcher asks, “are you following him?”

“Yeah,” Zimmerman said.

“You don’t need you to do that.”

*Urbana, Illinois. July 2013*

During the first weeks of July 2013, the most frequently featured news on American television referred to the trial in which George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, was judged for the death of an African-American teenager named Trayvon Martin. This case was new to us as it had not been discussed on the news in Argentina. George Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges on July 13th, 2013. At the time of the verdict we were dining and watching TV in our hotel room in Memphis. The jury's decision had a significant impact on us.

#### **IV– A Long Trip to Illinois and a Short Trip to Memphis**

We live in the city of Cordoba, Argentina. We are both colleagues and a couple, and we are lucky to share most of our trips and projects. In May of 2013 we arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as visiting scholars. For a few months we have been working with Norman Denzin and his team. We share rooms 209 and 210, Timpone's pizza, and Jazz music. We are writing these pages in our office, and the influence of this academic space, surrounded by intellectuals and scholarly texts, encourages us to approach this article from a collaborative autoethnographic perspective. Following Denzin, we try to inscribe "the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life" (2003a, 268). We believe that these pages reflect just that.

One Saturday in July we decided to go on a quick trip to Memphis, Tennessee. We were interested in getting to know the city of Elvis Presley, Sun Studios, and the local lifestyle. We rented a car and booked a hotel room on the road. At almost 8 p.m. we arrived at our destination. Right after we arrived at the hotel we experienced the event that we relate below.

**Alejandra:** Aldo and I arrived in Memphis last Saturday evening. It was the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 2013. I asked him if we could visit the home of my beloved Elvis Presley, so we rented a car and drove 400 miles south from Urbana-Champaign. As an Elvis fan, I didn't want to die before visiting Graceland.

We hadn't planned the trip in detail so we made a last-minute reservation for a cheap hotel. When we arrived, we could see that the property was located in a deserted neighborhood, close to the Mississippi river. The parking lot was packed, so we left our car on the roadside by a ruined building. Maybe in the past this structure was a factory – one of many abandoned industrial units. The image of a crumbling chimney, embraced by green morning glory, impressed me. Everything I had read about the harshness of American industry came to mind: unemployment rates, ghettos, poverty, and desperation. All of those ideas came to mind while looking at the boarded windows of that huge structure.

Before our trip, people had told us that Memphis was the third most dangerous city in the U.S., but we tried not to think about that. We allayed our fears by remembering that we have survived trips to most of the big cities in Argentina; we had enough experience to deal with Memphis, Tennessee.

**Aldo:** We arrive at the hotel. The heat is unbearable. We enter the lobby and there is no one to receive us. There is just a sign that says “Manager:” followed by a name of Indian origin. We wait over ten minutes and no one appears. There is a bell to call the manager, but I have never liked using it, because I think it is disrespectful. It reminds me of a king who is calling his page. I definitely don’t like it.

Fatigue seems to multiply as the minutes pass. Suddenly, the manager appears, carrying a stunt bicycle like the ones used in the X-Games. The man’s face is contorted. With a heavy accent he shouts:

*Motherfucker, I’m taking your bicycle, motherfucker!!!*

I don’t understand what is happening, but my body starts pumping adrenaline as it has each time I have witnessed a violent situation. I always avoid violence. Behind the man there are two black boys who are about 14 or 15 years old. They scream at the manager:

*Man, give us the bike back!*

The boys are shirtless, wearing a pair of soaked jeans as if they had been in the pool. They look sloppy, which saddens me.

**Alejandra:** Three black boys between 15 and 17 years old and the receptionist are having a dispute. They scream their lungs out:

*Manager: Get out of here, you motherfuckers!*

All of the teens’ clothes are drenched, and they are dripping water on the carpet.



Boys: *That's my bike! Come on! Give me my bike!*

We try to understand what all of the violent interaction is about, but our listening comprehension of English is an obstacle. We identify only few words, harshly spoken...

*motherfucker... bike... get out of here...*

Angry gestures abound, but we can't understand what the argument is about. Trying to understand a foreign language in a stressful situation and not being able to feels like opening one's eyes wide in the dark and not seeing anything.

Everybody ignores our presence.

**Aldo:** The distance between them is becoming smaller. They move dangerously close, while screaming at each other. I do not understand what the boys say because they speak very fast and use slang. I can only catch:

*Motherfucker, give us our bike back!*

The picture freezes, and I have the feeling that time stands still. The discussion takes less than a minute, but to me it seems to be an eternity.

*Come on, man!*

Now they raise their arms with clenched fists, in a clearly threatening position. The Indian manager is not intimidated. He takes the bike to a room located behind the counter.

*I take your bike motherfucker, get the hell out of here!*

*GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!*

**Alejandra:** Another man comes into the lobby screaming something about the boys trespassing. I get a general idea now: three teenagers have been found playing in the hotel swimming pool. One of the employees has taken one of the boys' bikes hostage and has put it behind the front desk. The receptionist now screams:

*I will call the police!* (followed by non- understandable words)

*Get away from here!* (more non- understandable words)

*Motherfucker!*

Two of the boys leave the building and then come back to the front desk once and then again. One of them stays.

Boy: *Give me my bike, man! Just give me my bike!*

Receptionist (screaming his lungs out, covered in perspiration): *Get the hell away from here motherfucker! I said I will call the police!*

The receptionist then turns to us. We are standing by the front desk, our eyes very open, looking like idiots, I am sure. The boy is standing just by our side struggling to open the small desk door that separates him from his bike. The receptionist says to us politely:

*“Can you give me five minutes, please?”*

His accent seems to be Indian. Aldo and I mumble:

*“Of course... sure, no rush...”*

**Aldo:** The manager faces the boys, also raising his clenched fists. I fear that physical confrontation is inevitable.

My heart beats so fast that I can perceive the bumps in my chest.

Then my mind and my body are prepared to intervene but... in favor of whom? Who is the weakest? Who is the victim? Is it the manager or the boys? Many thoughts pass through my mind. Suddenly I feel confused. If I intervened I would not know whom to defend. The air can be cut with a knife.

**Alejandra:** We squeeze into a corner of the lobby, astonished because of the violent scene happening in front of us and still trying to understand what it is all about. The place is quite small so we are still rather close to the action. The boy stretches onto the desk, trying to catch the door lock that separates him from his bike. The receptionist shakes his fist in front of the boy's face while he dials 911...

*Manager: The police is coming motherfucker!*

*Boy: Give me my bike and I'll leave, man!*

...the other two boys enter the room and shout something I can't understand. Then they leave. One stays. Maybe he is the bike's owner.

*Aldo: Maybe we should take off...*

*Me (very nervous): Where? We don't know any other hotels nearby...*

(Thoughts race through my overexcited brain: it is a Saturday evening in Memphis, which is the third-most-dangerous-city-in-America, it is summer... we won't do better than this).

The boy groans: *Come on, man!*

**Aldo:** Suddenly the manager returns to his position behind the desk, picks up the phone, and calls the police. He says something like:

*"I need the police right now in Hotel X. Some boys from the hood have trespassed on the property and now they are threatening me! Send someone now, please!"*

*SEND SOMEONE RIGHT NOW!*

**Alejandra:** The boy extends his hand again, trying to open the door that keeps him away from his bike.

The receptionist (shouts to the 911 operator): *Now he is trying to hit me!*

*Please, send someone!*

**Aldo:** As the manager is speaking to the operator, it seems that the two black boys had robbed or hurt someone. The manager has told the operator something that sounds serious, so police presence may be necessary. Then I understand. The manager isn't telling the whole truth. The boys just went to hotel pool for a swim and to recover from the terrible afternoon heat, but the manager reported trespassing on private property. The police will come, and if the boys get caught they will be arrested for trespassing. There isn't an offense called "swimming in a pool on a hot afternoon." Once again, two black boys are stigmatized with far reaching

consequences. It will impinge on their future possibilities for work and social inclusion. And just for having gone for a swim in a hotel pool.

**Alejandra:** I am shivering, but we are in a strange city, and it is almost dark. We have driven 400 miles and are exhausted. We wouldn't know where else to go. Hollywood images cross my mind while the manager and the boy shout at each other, louder each time. I am now sure that the boy will pull a gun from his shorts and shoot the receptionist, and then maybe us, too, in order to not leave witnesses of his cold-blooded crime. Will I die without visiting Graceland, after all? I have waited so much...

for this moment of my life...

for this trip...

...it doesn't end right here, does it?

- Maybe I will die in Memphis, where Elvis died (for some reason the idea comforts me).

Now the King sings *Amazing Grace* somewhere in my head...

Violence becomes more intense with every second. My mind doesn't project images of the receptionist shooting the boy. I wonder why. Maybe it is because we don't see that kind of thing in movies so often. Later, I felt awful because of the uncontrollable mental images of the boy handling a gun. "This is horrible," I thought, "I don't feel like that! I am not that kind of person!" But culture, its bias, stereotypes, and representations nest in the bottom of my head. They were inculcated from so many

sources! (I can think of some members of my family, my teachers, and the media). I wish those images weren't there.

**Aldo:** The two teenagers run away to avoid the police. The manager is visibly disturbed. We remain on the side, as silent witnesses of the incident. The man now looks at us.

*“Checking in?”*

**Alejandra:** Now the lobby is silent. The manager says: *“Good evening. Do you have a reservation? Good. Last name? Can I have a credit card, please?”* He doesn't apologize, but we receive a mysterious ten-dollar discount.

The room number is 500, on the fifth floor.

The elevator is on the right.

Breakfast is 6 to 9.

Good night.

**Aldo:** And so, through a small refund, the manager hinted that something bad happened. Apparently we deserve to pay ten-dollars less. Then I think that is what the hotel believes to be the cost for staging a social and racial injustice: ten miserable dollars.

We go to our room. I am deeply saddened.

I have trouble to breathe normally.

I can't stop thinking about the two black boys with their wet jeans, screaming for their bike. They are already out of the system. What about the Indian manager? He is inside, poorly paid, working 12 hours a day. But he is inside. Maybe that's why he reacted so violently. Maybe if his boss had seen the two boys from the neighborhood swimming in the hotel pool, he would have fired him. If he gets fired he would be out of the system and would be marginalized like the two black teenagers. I understand now that my sadness comes from having witnessed a fierce fight between two marginalized groups, foreign and black, both of whom are struggling to remain in a system that tries to exclude them. Each is attacking the other, and we, as white-Hispanic tourists, are on the side, feeling speechless and helpless.

**Alejandra:** Ten minutes later we go to the lobby to get a couple of Cokes from the vending machine. Two police cars are parked by the front door of the hotel.

*MIAMI HERALD - March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012*

Trayvon Martin, 17, died Feb. 26 in a dark pathway some 20 minutes after a neighborhood watch volunteer called police saying he thought a young stranger looked suspicious. It was raining, and the volunteer thought the kid in the hoodie walked too slow and peeked in windows.

**Both:** That Saturday evening in the hotel in Memphis we felt heartbroken because of the boys' fate, which will probably include profiling, arrest, incarceration, and ultimately unemployment. We felt sorry for the hotel manager, too, an immigrant worker, desperate to keep his job in a neighborhood that probably isn't easy. We still

wonder what would have happened if the boys had been white. Some teenagers on a hot summer afternoon are trying to refresh in the nearby hotel pool. We imagine them challenging each other to break the rules. Teenagers (black and white) do that kind of thing. If these kids had been white would the situation have been different? Would the receptionist have called the police?

This exact situation could have happened in Argentina, where “darker” skinned young males are frequently booked by police just because of their looks. Arbitrary arrests, or “preventive detentions,” as the government calls them, are popularly known as “carrying a face” (like carrying a gun) detentions. Is there no hope for those who cannot change the color of their skin? They know that they will be judged for their appearance before they can do anything to prove who they are... in Argentina and in the U.S... it is just the same everywhere, sadly. What condemnation the color of one’s skin can bring! In our world, gender, age, poverty, and race combine to define the fate of a person.

*MIAMI HERALD - July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013*

George Zimmerman was acquitted Saturday in the shooting death of Miami Gardens teenager Trayvon Martin after a wrenching five-week trial that provoked a national discussion around the thorny issues of race, profiling, self-defense laws and gun control.



## V – A Few Final Words

We believe that the beauty of autoethnography is that it “creates a space for a turn, a change, a reconsideration of how we think” (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis 2013, 21). It has the potential to question all representations that are stuck to our brains with the thick glue of culture. It allows us to reflect on our own points of view as people as well as social researchers. It is hard, but absolutely necessary, as our words are performative and pedagogical, thus, political (Denzin 2003a, Denzin and Giardina 2008). As social scientists, we do things with our words (Denzin 2003b). They have the potential to reproduce the differences and injustices, or they can help make the world a better place. We are struggling to be part of a movement of social scientists, including Denzin, Ellis, Bochner, Holman Jones, Spry, and so many others, who are working hard to change this reality. We hope to all succeed.

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