

Un-forgetting the carnival, remembering home

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to indagate the role of memory and nostalgia in the field while doing au-toethnography. Navigating through the memories of the author, readers follow her and her son as they attempt to create a costume to celebrate the Spanish carnival; an ac-tivity which also embodies her childhood nostalgia and her connection with her home-land. The process raises questions about identity and the complexity and guilt surrounding the dynamics of a mother who tries to transfer the feeling of belonging, community, and an appreciation of the traditions of the native country to a child raised in the diaspora.

Neyzan is nervous. He asks me again for the umpteenth time if I will finally start building his costume. He has been waiting for this moment for two months. When I, by chance, went on Etsy and found upon the template of Hiccup's helmet and saw the photos of the final product I knew that it was going to be the perfect birthday present for Neyzan. I contacted the seller to see if he believed the project was possible for a 10-year-old child to undertake, and he sent me a tutorial he had created on YouTube explaining how to make it. Unfortunately, my son saw it days later and he started to ask for my help and the materials he needed to build it. After putting him off several times, hoping he would forget sooner or later, I finally had to confess that it was meant to be a birthday present. He was a little upset that the surprise had been ruined, and he did not ask about it anymore. However, he made sure to remind me frequently over the month that was left until his birthday that I must make sure that I buy all the materials on time for when the date arrives. Children can be very insistent when they want something, and for sure they have a better memory than adults.

Our creation will be the costume he will wear in the 'carnival', a traditional festivity which is celebrated in several countries around the world, including our own country, Spain. During the carnival the streets are filled with music and large floats and people in hundreds of colourful costumes parade along the roads of cities and towns. Neyzan was three the last time we celebrated the carnival, so his recollections of the event lie hidden in the depths of his memory. As a child, it was one of my favourite festivities and traditions. Selecting the perfect costume for the occasion, showing it to your friends, and walking and dancing through the streets surround-ed by dozens of playful, extravagant and colourful characters could bring joy that was beyond measure. This joyful experience also connected us as a community and is part of our shared

experiences as people who have grown up in Spanish society. This year I want to come back home to celebrate it before he is too old. I want him to experience the same joy I felt as a child.

It is not the first time that I have helped him create a costume, but this time feels different because this project now embodies the nostalgia of my childhood and of the traditions of a home that I left more than 7 years ago. First, I need to cut out one by one each piece of the template. I have done it at different moments throughout the days we have been waiting for the other materials to arrive. I trace each line very carefully by drawing the outline of the first piece of the template on the huge sheet of black EVA foam. I am happy to see that the white ink pen I have chosen is shows up perfectly on the spongy surface, which makes my job much easier when cutting out the piece. Neyzan is sitting right next to me, painting a character from one of his current favourite animes, 'The Rising of the Shield Hero', but also supervising my progress; making sure that I do not distract myself too much from my work and waiting for the time he will get the chance to participate. I have chosen to start by a specific piece that has to be decorated with craft foam, which will be Neyzan's work. Once I have finished drawing each contour over the foam sheet I pass it to him, as he needs it to create the shapes of the scales that will be glued onto the piece to give it a texture that emulates the skin of a dragon. Once finished with the whole project, it will be the helmet that allows my son to put himself in the shoes of Hiccup, the dragon master and protagonist from 'How to Train your Dragon': one of his favourite book sagas. It would have been easier to just go to a shop or do an online search and buy the costume, but Neyzan loves creating; he is a very imaginative and innovative child. He watches the tutorial attentively to make sure that he is following the steps thoroughly, while modelling, with the utmost care, each scale with the craft foam, that afterwards will be glued onto the pieces I am cutting out.

As I advance, I think of my father. I remember the time when I was 8 and he created Halloween costumes for my siblings and I. He did some weapons with cardboard, and he dressed me up as a mummy, for which he just covered me entirely with toilet paper and put some transparent tape to try to hold it all together. A futile attempt in the end, as the whole thing started to fall apart bit by bit as soon as I left the house. But despite that, I loved my mummy costume. Gladly, I smile to myself: I have better resources and materials than he had back then. But this manifests how "the field is evoked in and through memory", and how "[m]emory organises our experience of past and is put to use in multivariate ways of recall" (Haripriya 2020: 3). In this case, memory and the field have a double meaning, and are intertwined as method and product; my memories and the childhood nostalgia that they bring to me are the triggers of this project, for carrying out this project brings those memories back to me. Thus, my memories become the phenomena that trigger the immaterial product of the process, while our creation is, at the same time, the process that triggers memory and the material product: the costume. This project is carved out entirely from memory (Haripriya 2020).

I am aware, however, that the carnival will never mean for him what it means for me. He will possibly remember it as a one-off event of his childhood: he will not feel the sentiment of belonging that the festivities trigger in me. After all, our lived experiences are grounded in place (Kusenbach 2003: 456), and the places we both have grown up will never be the same. Those memories that connect me with my childhood and community are part of my identi-

ty construction. However, for him, as a Spanish child of the diaspora, Spain is a place that he visits once or twice per year: a lousy place where, for a few weeks, he is surrounded by relatives who ask him to “speak with them in Spanish”, although, with his dyslexia, he does not differ English from Spanish, and he mixes both while speaking. Spain is the place everyone asks him about, and he only knows to respond that “it is very hot”, because that is what he hears everyone say. His Spain is very far from mine. All this is making me wonder if an autoethnography that grounds itself in a present geographical space and memories of events of a past, which occur in a different location, could be considered as a multi-sited ethnography?

Using phenomenology as a research method through the process of autoethnography has helped me, not only to gain insight into how our life experiences shape our perceptual spaces, but also how those experiences and perceptions have geographical roots. Our construction of the life, world, and culture are grounded in places. For that reason, even if we would have decided to travel to another country to celebrate the carnival, we would for sure enjoy the experience, but it will not be my carnival: the carnival from my childhood. This is a bitter sentiment which migrants must navigate constantly: the guilt and sadness of never being able to fully share our culture with our children because of our decision to migrate, whatever the reasons might have been. The knowledge that we have taken from them could have formed the sentiment of belonging to their native homeland. But I try to convince myself, with little success, that this trip will bring to some extent, a hint of what carnival means for me, to him. And creating this custom with Neyzan has not only brought back the nostalgia and the memories, but it has also helped me understand what reflexivity means to anthropology and ethnography, and to comprehend that “as a method autoethnography is both process and product” (Ellis et al. 2011: 273) and that writing can be a way to un-forgetting (Mackinlay 2019).

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KUSENBACH, M. (2003) Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography* 4, 3: 455–485.

MACKINLAY, E. (2019) Writing, a-way to un-forgetting. In *Critical writing for embodied approaches*, 135–152. London: Palgrave Macmillan.