

# **Refrigerator Graffiti @EmilyCarrU: A Critical (Auto)Ethno&graphic Re/view of Nomadic Subjectivities Within One Transnational Family**

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## **Introduction**

With increasing globalization, the number of multi-ethnic transnational families is increasing (Sigad & Eisikovits, 2010). We are one of those families. We are nomadic; our family practices across/to/through/between national borderlines interrupts traditional ideas of family and of nationality. We are curious about these interruptions. Our trans/national mobilities are crucial to us as critical and feminist theorists. Re/thinking and re/imaging our practices of family, we are engaged in relationships across axes of age, gender, ethnicity, language, and religion. Rosi Braidotti (2011) writes, “nomadic consciousness... consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent: the nomad is only passing through; he... never fully takes on the limits of one national, fixed identity” (p.64). Our encounters create new dimensions within our relationship that do not necessarily belong to either of the national identities where our practices of family began. We have become more than Canadian and more than Turkish through our relationship, and our “always already” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 132; Brogden, 2010, p. 375) multiple identity locations.

This paper is a critical (auto)ethno&graphic re/view of one “provoking mo(v)ment” (Sellers, 2013, p. xx) of a Canadian international schoolteacher, Sherrie, and a Turkish son/friend/co-author, Kerem. Avoiding the pitfalls of nostalgia, we together trace

our perceptions of early transnational experiences at linguistic, cultural, gender intersections at home (Braidotti, 2013). Designed as an excerpt from ongoing conversations, we have re/viewed old and new photos, early and recent art/ifacts from our family time together in Turkey and Canada. Re/membered are private discussions about graffiti on the refrigerator in the year 2000, subsequent cartographies to public tweets and Facebook posts about an appearance in a 2016 UK Vogue magazine, and an in-class exhibition at Emily Carr University. We re/call our former public and private subjectivities as we shift and transform, continually becoming academics (Braidotti, 2013; Brogden, 2010) in Canada. There are multiple shared border crossings into critical feminist material studies as a PhD student at the University of New Brunswick and making practices of an International Baccalaureate (IB) undergraduate student of design at Emily Carr University. This paper contributes to the understanding of intersections between relationships and research within transnational families.

### **Why critical autoethnography?**

We choose critical studies because we are interested in exploring how power flows and circulates, privileging some and marginalizing others. We acknowledge that the opportunity to study at university is a privilege; time, resources and access to the expertise and support of our professors are all privileges. We are interested in exploring how we are continually constructed by discourses of culture, language, religion, age, gender, ability and ethnicity. “Critiques of power locations, however, are not enough” (Braidotti, 2013, p.164). We discuss our own situatedness as we engage with hierarchies, neo-colonialisms, neo-liberalisms, and complicated world politics. “The point of critical theory is to upset common opinion (*doxa*), not to confirm it” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 87). We hope to interrupt common opinion through writing

critical cartographies and “arts-based” (Lafrenière & Cox, 2012, p. 319) research methods. Our experiences are anything but common. “A cartography is a theoretically based and politically informed reading of the present” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 164). Critical cartographic writings and visual art practices need the analysis offered by autoethnography to reveal the social and cultural significance of/with/in our family practices.

Autoethnography, as a research method, feels familiar. We write and converse, recognizing some autoethnographic approaches that resonate with our early play, conversations and art/craft making practices. We have “always already” (Brogden, 2010, p. 375) analyzed our selves and each other at intersections of language and cultural roles/practices within our family. We have played, photographed, written and drawn about our analysis. For us, “as a method, autoethnography is both a process and a product” (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, p. 273). We continue to be, engaged in (auto)ethno&graphic processes. Bachelor and graduate studies have provided us an opportunity to become familiar with the literature, and to help us deliberately engage in autoethnographic research through performances, presentations, exhibitions and writing. Auto, in autoethnographic, refers to the deeply autobiographical nature of our research. Ethno speaks to our engagement with/in traditional, emerging transnational experiences. Graphic, in terms of research method, refers to our continued analysis. It refers to the visual and print modes of mapping cartography. Graphic also refers to Kerem’s visual art-making practices and the parts of our relationship that grew through/with/around Kerem’s visual art practices as a child and as an adult.

We met in the year 2000 when Sherrie was traveling as a Euro-Canadian, native English speaker recruited to teach at a private national school on the Aegean coast of Turkey (Harper &

Cavanagh, 1994; Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Kerem had just turned three. Avoiding nostalgia (Braidotti, 2013) is highlighted in our description of this research. Cross-cultural blended-family tensions are frequent and varied. Political tensions in Turkey are paramount in our lives, even though we reside primarily in Canada. Tensions propel us into analysis of our shared experiences. If we were to imagine life together without tensions, much of the motivation for interrogating our experiences would be lost. Carolyn Ellis' (2013) description of autoethnography in the *Handbook of Autoethnography* resonates deeply with us. She writes:

Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions (p. 10).

Daily autoethnographic engagements we/a/re a part of our family practices that sustain/ed our relationships. Willingness to interrogate what we think and believe, and openness to challenging our own assumptions, remains crucial to engaging in the complexities of our family life. "Entering into a relationship requires responsiveness and responsibility. Being responsible - we are building a participatory relationship of trust and cooperation" (Elliot, Ashton, Hunt, Nason, 2011, p. 36). If we avoid the tensions, our research is unethical, incomplete and "misleading" (Elliot et al., 2011, p. 44). The provoking moment we have chosen to share demonstrates how, at age three, Kerem engaged in analysis of our shared emerging cultural experiments at home. It

demonstrates how Sherrie embarks on a journey of experimenting with maternal pedagogies (Green 2009) that begin to become a part of a transnational family.

### **Complicated Documentations**

The appearance of words on paper, in English, is seductive. Although we seem to be authoring a single text, there are many texts layered within. We each experience co/authoring and re/writing differently. We contest one another's translations and memory of detail. Recent conversations are multiple and occur across several platforms or "plateaus" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.22). Some plateaus are in the past. When we lived together, we doodled and acted out charades at mealtimes before we spoke a language that both of us knew. We eventually learned the new-to-us languages. There were many misunderstandings and negotiations over meaning and intention that ensue/d when we used the wrong words or created new words by mixing languages. We call/ed new linguistic incarnations Turk-ish.

The ideas present/ed herein trace shifting cartographies of conversations. Images and texts from saved sketchbooks, family journals and photos are now shared between St. John's and Vancouver via iMessenger, whatsapp, Facebook, Viber, Skype and email. Within the past four years, we have shared PhD and IB course content, research articles, new visual art works and our own papers. Where as we once played games and completed homework assignments in the kitchen, we now meet in cyber spaces to write trans-Canada. We enjoy the richness of our multiply intersecting cartographies.

One Sunday afternoon, in the winter of 2016 we visited together on Skype to do homework. Kerem's assignment was to storyboard an impactful experience from his childhood. After entertaining a couple of ideas, we discussed possible drawings

depicting our first Easter together, in Izmir. We discussed the significance of celebrating Easter, and what it meant for us culturally. Kerem's storyboard, titled *The Martian*, was exhibited as a part of a Creative Process class at Emily Carr University of Design. The 2016 Atlantic Education Graduate Students Conference, hosted by The University of New Brunswick, was an opportunity to publically present "traces" (Whitty, 2009, p. 37) of a theorized version of that conversation.

### **Provoking Mo(v)ment - Kerem**

My art-making practices have been a part of my whole life. As I write, one of the furthest moments I can go back in time, in my memory, is the exact moment I met Sherrie. I came home from pre-school and there was an extremely tall blonde woman sitting on our cream colored couch. With the life experience of a three-year-old, I understood that my mom and dad were not going to spend much time with each other anymore. By telling one another that children are resilient, adults are reassuring themselves and validating their own choices. I remember over-hearing adult conversations about children being resilient (Ruddick 1995) that had nothing to do with me. I was quite okay with that, even though I felt lonely, because I had my coloring books and drawing utensils. Keeping myself busy was never a problem.

When my dad left me in Sherrie's care, the first couple of times, we had difficulty communicating. We both did not understand the other's language. While Sherrie did try, I simply would not bother with the 12-foot-tall woman. She would ask me, for example, if I wanted some water. When translated into Turkish, *are you thirsty* is *susadın mı?* She accidentally asked me *susar mısın?* She had basically told me to shut up. We both came to terms with the idea that spoken language was not the route we were going take. Sherrie figured out that I really enjoyed drawing,

painting and other crafts. She took her whiteboard markers out, like the teacher she was, and we started to draw on the refrigerator. She documented my refrigerator graffiti with photos. They are faded, now, but we still have them. I made drawings that were the size of myself on the refrigerator door. That was the first time I felt like she truly understood what I wanted, but most importantly what I needed. I needed a scale that was larger than an A4 printing paper to imagine and to create. That is how the refrigerator graffiti began. That is also when I accepted the fact that we were becoming a family. In fact, this was one of the many ways we were a family. Through art, singing on long drives in the car, reading together, and questioning whether the Easter Bunny was real; those are some of the activities that made us a family. We continue being a family by attending university, researching and writing together. Our activities are transforming into activism.

We develop/ed alternative ways of communicating, depending on what we need/ed. Some routines were regular, like breakfast. At these regular occasions we were able to interact with our invented communications. We now understand that breakfast is a privilege, in the world, and there are many who do not have regular access to food. An occasion that was once routine, is now rare. Other situations, like holidays or religious occasions, were less usual. Many cultural practices were puzzling. We sometimes needed direct translations. We both learned that translations sometimes complicate, rather than alleviate, puzzlement.

On one complicated occasion, the parents arranged for a family meeting in the living room. My father translated an elaborate warning about a giant rabbit that would break into our eighth floor apartment in the middle of the night, while we were sleeping, to hide chocolate eggs. There would be baskets of grass and small treats left in commemoration of an historic event. A well-known religious man had been murdered, by hanging on a

cross. He was dead for a short period of time and subsequently resuscitated. The duration of the event was one weekend. It was confusing. Thankfully, I never did see the rabbit or the resuscitated zombie man with the cross. The chocolate eggs and the baskets, however, continued to appear for many years.

### **Con/Collusion**

There are several discoveries within this research. We began “collaborative life writing” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 159) through a variety of marking making and drawing before we could communicate together with spoken words in English or Turkish. We have always been co-authors, co-creators and co/e/laborators. Today, our relationship is situated in two languages and multiple shifting methodologies. We “slip and slide” (Sellers, 2013, 3) between languages and theoretical locations as we enjoy, and sometimes endure, each other. Sherrie posts hard copies of critical feminist research articles to Vancouver and Kerem emails links to Lady Gaga interviews and art exhibitions to St. John’s. We once took photos in front of the refrigerator together in Karşıyaka, Izmir. We trace new cartographies to photos taken in Vancouver, British Columbia for *Vogue* Autumn/Winter 2016-17.

Belongings, in our trans/national family, have grown and nurtured distinct humours, shared intercultural knowledges and intersecting memories. Memories are transposed into multiple new version of our collective memory as we share and re/share them, write and re-write them. With each move, or shift to a new plateau of life, we simultaneously re-invent past and present enactments of what it means to be/come with/in this family. We are always already becoming family.

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