'Togetherness' and its discontents. Connectivity (as well as belonging, cooperation, conflict and separation) in biographical narratives of adult education and learning

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BEYOND BORDERS: EDUCATING AND EMPOWERING BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES. A BIOGRAPHICAL CASE STUDY

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1. The Context: Migration and Professional Mobility of University Scholars from the Global South

In recent years, migration and mobility have become widespread. Economic globalization, new means of transport, growing inequalities, conflicts and wars have led to international migration flows that have affected all countries of the world. International migrants, travellers and students are giving rise to new forms of mobility and interdependence, the development of transnational corporations, increased cultural diversity and recent forms of bilateral, regional and global cooperation. In 2007, the United Nations estimated that there were 200 million international migrants, defined as people who had lived at least one year outside their country of birth. This represented about 3% of the world's 6,500 million people (Castles and Miller, 2009: 2-7). These migrations are part of a large, complex and changing global phenomenon that affects both those who migrate and those who receive migrants, and that transforms the social and cultural conditions of all citizens.

This paper explores the issue of academic migrants of Mexican origin (or more broadly Latin American origin) working in universities in the United States. To better target our theme, we present here some data and benchmarks on migratory movements in the United States as a host country. From 1850 to 1914, most of the migrants arriving in the United States came from Ireland, Italy, Spain and Eastern Europe, areas where industrialization began later. The United States of America had the dream of becoming a farmer or independent trader on the New Land of Opportunity The most intense period is the period from 1861 to 1920, when 30 million people arrived to the US (Castles and Miller, 2009, 84).

In recent decades, total immigration, referred to foreign nationals with permanent legal residence status in the United States, has been 4.5 million in the 1971-1980 period, a figure that rose to 7.3 million between 1981-1990, and increased to 9.1 million between 1990-2000. By nation, the largest number of migrants who

obtained citizenship in the United States came from Mexico, India and the Philippines (Castles & Miller, 2009, 120). For Mexico, the population from that country that arrived in the United States increased from 2.2 million in 1980 to 11.9 million in 2010. The United States has the highest levels of immigration in the world. Among these migrants, Mexicans are the majority group, accounting for 27.6% of the total population of the North American country (Delgado Wise, 2013; Delgado Wise & Chávez, 2016).

The internationalisation of universities and academic mobility are often presented as ideologically neutral, coherent and disembodied policies. The conceptualization of people as resources to be moved and relocated around the world with limited attention to identity, community, care or emotional issues has social, ethical, financial and equity implications. Urry (2007, 12) argues that mobility has been a "black box for the social sciences" and is generally seen as a neutral set of processes. There is, he says, often a minimization of the meaning and consequences of the profound experiences, including bodily ones, derived from mobility. On the other hand, in the field of higher education, we note a lack of studies on mobility from sociology and ethnography. The literature on student mobility in the global academy is highly developed (González-Monteagudo, 2016; Chang, 2011 and 2015). However, only a few studies explore the perspectives and testimonies of the mobility of migrant teacher-researchers (Kim 2010). The paradigm of new mobility is beginning to be noticed, within a dynamic and open sociology (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Sheller, 2014).

2. Methodology: Biographical-narrative approach

This case study was conducted in the context of a research on Latin American migrants working at universities in the United States. The interview of this Mexican university lecturer took a qualitative and narrative approach, but included semi-structured questions to better target specific nuances. To gain a better understanding of and better understand the experiences and perspectives on mobility and internationalisation, we explored the following issues: the family and social context, the training itinerary, the history of migration and mobility, motivations for mobility, personal and professional advantages and disadvantages of being internationally mobile, the factors that have contributed to making mobility experiences positive or negative, social experiences, and the profile as a teacher and teacher

The interview was conducted during a research stay in the state of Texas, USA, in 2015. It covers about 10,000 words and lasted 75 minutes. Although the interview was conducted in English, Miguel used Spanish on numerous occasions, particularly about the family, its Mexican roots and questions of identity, culture, and personal and social development. This constant change between English and Spanish is one of the distinctive features of this interview and it intensely reflects the issues of cultural diversity, border crossing, hybridization and bilingualism.

The interview paid particular attention to the narration of experiences, personal perspectives, cultural and professional contexts, career paths and the interaction of internationalization with particular identities. The interview was conducted in English and then transcribed and thematically coded. The analyses of the biographical interviews explore the dialectic between personal dimensions and social structures, trying to explain and understand the dynamics that link subjectivity with society and culture (González-Monteagudo, 2016).

To construct the narrative of the case and considering the need to be concise, we decided to tell the subject's perspective in a manner close to the content of the interview transcript, but without writing precise literal quotations. We hope this choice will be able to convey something of the freshness and deep truth that is found in this interview.

3. A successful itinerary: dialogue, identity, training and development for autonomy and cooperation

Miguel, of Mexican origin, is a community leader and an academic working at a Texas university. The case revolves around the central ideas of border crossing, cultural crossbreeding, building the cultural identity of minority groups and critical pedagogies in formal education and community development.

Miguel's father was born in 1936 in the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon and he had 10 brothers. The father was a shepherd during his childhood. His father's father and the father's brothers grew up during the period during which the Bracero Programme was created. The program was an agreement between the governments of the United States and Mexico to promote the hiring of Mexican farm workers to replace American workers who were involved in the Second World War, depending on the labour needs of the different agricultural seasons. Hired as farm labourers, they were called mojados[mojados], a term that refers to irregular and undocumented migrants who cross the border to work temporarily in the United States.

Miguel's mother was a Mexican-born mother, but she was born and lived north of the border. As a result, she was a U. S. citizen. Due to the illegal activity of the maternal grandfather as bootlegger, the family had to flee the United States and hide in Mexico. Miguel's father and mother met in Mexico, married and had four children. In 1968, the whole family had to leave Mexico and settled in Texas, forty kilometres north of the border. Miguel was born in Mexico in 1963. He started living in the United States when he was five years old. Initially, the parents spoke only Spanish and frequently crossed the border in both directions, mainly to visit parents who were still living in Mexico.

Miguel summarizes his family history by expressing that he and his three brothers were transnational children, with a cross border culture. Miguel emphasizes the importance of preserving Spanish and not losing it as a condition for maintaining the Mexican identity. Miguel and his brothers went to public school in Texas, in an environment he describes as very "Mexican". Miguel insists on the importance the father attaches to raising children. Miguel proudly expressed that the four brothers have obtained four university degrees, three masters degrees and two doctorates. It should be noted that Miguel followed an educational and professional itinerary very close to his brother Francisco, born in 1964, and that the two brothers worked together on many educational and development projects.

Miguel emphasizes the importance of the values held by the family and the community, elements that had a decisive influence on him and his brother Francisco: "The origin of our education is the family and the community". He and his brother Francisco studied at the University of Texas in Austin, the state capital. Miguel recalls that in the 80's of the last century there were 48,000 students in this university, but only 2,000 were Mexican. The training was good, but Miguel points out that they learned nothing about themselves, because the university turned its back on cultural and social diversity. In the mid-1980s, this was one of the reasons that brothers Miguel and Francisco, during university studies, encouraged the father to write his autobiography. This story should be based on stories, memories and anecdotes that the father used to tell. This autobiographical writing process of the father was a critical incident that profoundly influenced Miguel's future personal and professional journey. During this process, a new consciousness emerged in him and began to develop a far-reaching learning process. The way the father used to use anecdotes and stories as teaching aids encouraged Miguel and his brother Francisco to explore how dialogue (plática, in Spanish from Mexico) could be redefined in educational and community contexts. For Miguel, dialogue, conceived as a cross-cutting dimension of human existence, has implications in three different contexts: research, education and community development. Miguel's experience in elementary school, middle school, high school and university confirmed that his knowledge of the students' social world was largely lacking. In order to intervene at the same time from a pedagogical and political point of view, Miguel highlights the need to work on the formation of personal and collective identity, helping the Mexican community to be recognized as a major actor of their own progress. This leads Miquel to recognise the need to develop political work, promoting language and criticism as means of empowerment and agency. Throughout the interview, Miguel continually points out that his understanding and practice of research comes from the stories and experiences inherited from their parents and loved ones. It states that the migration perspective and border crossing is cultural, political and technical. It involves ideology and geography in a concomitant way. The lack of social and economic capital, an issue

highlighted by Miguel on several occasions, has been compensated by the commitment to his own community and the territory. This hybridization, typical of cross-cultural and border-crossing contexts, has fostered a very inclusive approach to teaching, learning, research and community development, based on significant attention at the macro and micro levels and their interaction, constantly moving from analysis to synthesis and synthesis to analysis. Much of Miguel's research in these projects is autobiographical, often in the form of oral histories. The integration of people's stories, power and wisdom produces very powerful transformative processes. Putting subjects at the centre of the process implies, Miguel manifests, supporting a constructivist and interpretive epistemology, incompatible with the myth of objectivity. It is important to redefine and broaden the meaning of knowledge, which implies, in addition to the cognitive domain, the world of emotions, the quality of interpersonal relations and the care of others.

Miguel defends a critical perspective that transcends cognitive aspects and is transformed into a political and cultural attitude, promoting diversity and disruption. Critical dialogue between the different groups is very important in educational and political work. Good learning, as taught to us by cultural anthropologists, says Miguel, is mainly social; secondly, good learning is cognitive; and finally, it is a technical issue. Miguel supports the need to promote teachers' capacity to think and create knowledge.

This community leader sees himself as an academic in a delicate position about his status. He recognizes the need to innovate in the university, promoting group-based educational processes and empowerment of participants. He promotes innovative programmes, fostering self-awareness, agency and alternative learning, as opposed to conventional approaches. He particularly highlights efforts to broaden the participation of vulnerable or disadvantaged minority students in the University, working with families and local community groups. On the other hand, Miguel criticizes the traditionalism of universities, which continue to reproduce very classical models of learning and management, and which are unable to respond adequately to the social and cultural changes of recent decades. In this area, Miguel proposes a comprehensive redefinition of pre-service teacher education, with the aim of adapting models of teaching and university learning to the needs of future educators as well as innovative intellectuals and critics.

His viewpoint is very critical of knowledge and research that considers itself objective, neutral and distant. On the other hand, he advocates an epistemology based on social constructivism. He believes that universities risk becoming insignificant institutions in the decades to come if they are not able to reconfigure teaching and learning modes, the conditions for the transmission of knowledge. In this context, he believes that the neoliberal approach that has affected primary and secondary schools is spreading in recent years to university.

4. **Engaged accounts of academic mobility: contributions and possibilities.**

The increasing use of auto/biographical approaches and life histories in research on travel, migration and mobility fulfils different functions:

- It promotes the production of knowledge: developing knowledge of migratory processes and complex dynamics of socio-cultural and identity change.

- It promotes awareness of the issues raised by this phenomenon and fosters inter-comprehension: the life stories of migrants and their communities (families, generational groups) promote a better understanding from the point of view of others, facilitate the distance between ethnocentrism and increase the level of tolerance.

- It allows contextualization of situations: the collection of life narratives makes it possible to compare different contexts: societies of origin and host societies, generations at different points in the life cycle, different ethnic and cultural groups that have emigrated within the same country or region, comparison of the same cultural group from a diachronic point of view.

- It promotes a good posture of intervention and training: professionals involved in accompanying and advising migrants and people in mobility need to know more about this subject from a scientific and nuanced

perspective. This can facilitate better professional positioning by health professionals, social services, police, justice, teachers, trainers, psychologists, labour counsellors and intercultural mediators.

- It gives access to a good level of theorization and problematization: the objective of the research is also to produce theories that can help us better explain and understand intercultural processes. Life histories are a useful approach to deepening, at the meso and micro levels, issues related to travel, mobility and migration, as well as the relationships between these levels and macro-structural elements such as membership of a social class, gender, ethnicity and age group.

- Finally, biographical research can contribute to the study of fluid, changing and heterogeneous identities of late modernity (Bauman, 2000). For this, biographies should be seen as historically and socially shaped and conditioned. Transformations of biographical identity depend on the biographical resources of the individual interviewed, conceived as experiences and knowledge gathered throughout the life cycle. In this way, the researcher will be able to better generate interpretive strategies and deal with the cultural differences and conflicts that may arise in the life story. It will pay more attention to the "narrator" and "narrator" relationship, to the different biographical opportunities of the narrative, to the conditions in which the interviewee finds himself at the time of the narrative. Biographical analysis explores the different narrator's discourses, the sensory structures and models of belief that the subject sets up; these discourses are culturally conditioned and lead to the construction of a personal narrative identity, but rooted in a particular social and historical context (González-Monteagudo, 2016). The case presented in this paper shows the possibilities of an experiential, biographical and qualitative approach to the experiences of migration and academic mobility from the point of view of a committed teacher and researcher, who theorized and practiced narration as a fundamental dimension of training, local development and the construction of a tolerant and open identity, in the context of a connected and globalized world (Breton, 2014; Kim, 2014).

Miguel's story raises a great diversity of themes. We would like to highlight the challenges and opportunities for training arising from migration and academic mobility. Here are some of the central dimensions that appear in the story. We try to place these dimensions in a broad context, with the aim of identifying positive traits that can contribute to improving training policies and practices in contexts of academic mobility and intercultural diversity.

- The first question concerns the importance of cooperation, community and group. Faced with the dominant neo-liberalism, which emphasizes competitiveness and the achievement of individual objectives, we need to favour collective initiatives, both inside and outside formal educational institutions. Community values are necessary to create appropriate contexts for development and training. This includes an improved relationship between schools and local contexts, favouring learning communities. On the other hand, the creation of community links and networks can be an important factor in compensating for the lack of social capital by disadvantaged individuals and groups.

- Cross-border and multilingual contexts constitute ecosystems of great socio-cultural complexity. These contexts offer many opportunities for experiences that can contribute to improving tolerance, cultural shock management, understanding of differences, acceptance of intercultural diversity, flexibility and shared management of identities. In the Miguel's story we find political, cultural and methodological elements to advance in the construction of an eco-pedagogy of border crossing.

- Travelling, nomadic and experiential pedagogy should be based on dialogue as a central principle. The proposals of Célestin Freinet, Lorenzo Milani, Paulo Freire and Matthew Lipman, among others, can help us to identify methodological processes based on reciprocal understanding and exchange. From this dialogical perspective, knowledge is constructed in interaction, it has a contextual character and it serves to transform reality. Autobiographical methodologies and life hitories show us a form of educational work based on collaboration, promoting and enhancing the construction of identity, knowledge and community.

- We need to adopt a historical and comparative perspective, placing cultural and educational processes, training experiences and biographical itineraries in broad temporal and social contexts. Until about 30 years ago, universities have been limited to middle classes and elites. In recent years, there have been important

changes in higher education, with the development of policies and practices that favour the inclusion of non-traditional students. At times, we lack a historical perspective to contextualize in a more pertinent way processes that we don't fully understand if we limit ourselves to considering them in an isolated or timeless way. Migration and crossing borders are part of these processes that we should understand in their complex and changing temporal dynamics.

- Universities, like other formal educational institutions, tend to reproduce traditional and outdated models of management and learning. Migration poses major challenges to higher education. Compared to institutions that have historically turned their backs on cultural diversity, the Miguel's case shows us the need to develop and deepen an approach to social inclusion and broadening the traditional audiences of universities to include non-traditional, under-represented, vulnerable and disadvantaged students. This task is a major challenge because it requires innovative approaches in management, curricular content and learning methodologies. Despite the difficulties, we need to overcome the routine inertia of universities, favouring diversity and adaptation.

Donald Trump's arrival in January 2017 to the presidency of the United States of America makes it even more timely and pertinent to work on the issues researched in this paper, since its content focuses on the border between Mexico and the United States. In the face of the authoritarian, xenophobic and exclusionary aberrations that are taking place in Europe, America and other geographical areas, we need initiatives of collective resistance and organised struggle to build alternatives based on equality, pluralism, tolerance, cooperation and respect for human rights.

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