Towards Critical Analytical Auto-Ethnography
Global Pandemic and Migrant Women (Im)mobilities in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the usefulness of critical analytical auto-ethnography in studying migrant (im)mobilities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the auto-ethnographic genre has boomed during COVID-19 times, the authors of auto-ethnographic texts usually focus on their own experiences of the pandemic, engaging in an evocative style of writing. Following an overview of auto-ethnographic writing genres, this article discusses complex issues of insider/outsider status in pandemic research. It calls for a critical and analytical auto-ethnographic approach to the study of migrations and mobilities in a context in which they are currently unevenly distributed.

KEYWORDS
analytic auto-ethnography, gender, insider/outsider, migrant women, mobility, pandemic, Northern Ireland

The global pandemic has affected the process of ethnographic fieldwork, bringing about a sudden shift in relationships with the Other and with the social world. The socially distanced world has provided us with a new context for our research (Iyer 2021). During the lockdown, when face-to-face contact was limited, researchers began documenting various individual and collaborative auto-ethnographic accounts of the pandemic and its consequences on the social, economic and cultural aspects of their lives. In this context, Iyer argues that during the pandemic, auto-ethnography ‘has emerged as a make-shift methodological mid-point of sorts, with accounts of quarantine, the experiences of medical workers at the frontlines, and students stranded away from home being documented across the globe’.

In a similar way, my own experience of the pandemic has defined a research question. Being a Polish migrant woman in Northern Ireland, I had a sense of rupture with my family in Poland. I felt that
my sense of existential security had been shattered. I felt that the pandemic had changed migrants’ lives considerably, and *nolens volens* I embarked on an auto-ethnographic research journey. I decided to take an analytical approach to autho-ethnography, mostly as it allows for innovation, imagination and representation of a range of voices in the field, but also because it adheres to the rigours of academic research. I also chose to frame my research within the wider context of critical ethnography.

This article discusses the methodological issues that emerged during the process of my auto-ethnographic research on (im)mobilities of migrant women in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and June 2021. To this end, it will include a metanalysis of my research process, pointing to the usefulness of critical analytical auto-ethnography in the studies of transnationalism, mobilities and migration. The first section will point to differences between evocative and analytical auto-ethnography and the importance of engaging critically with socio-cultural phenomena. It will also discuss the limitations of evocative auto-ethnography, reflecting on intersectionality and insider/outsider status. I will then talk about my specific methodological choices and rationales for them. I will also delve into the questions of critical auto-ethnography and particular social positionings that my auto-ethnography entails, exploring how this in turn has affected my methodological choices.

**Auto-ethnography: Insider/Outsider Perspectives**

Auto-ethnography is a research method that uses self-observation and reflexive investigation for the purposes of extending sociological understanding (Sparkes 2000). In a similar way to traditional ethnography, auto-ethnography intends to connect the self with others, the self with the social, and the self with context (Ngunjiri et al. 2010; Reed-Danahay 1997). The aim of auto-ethnography from this perspective is to emphasise the researcher’s social connections related to the topic under study. In auto-ethnography, there is a considerable emphasis on personal reflections, memories and the evocation of feelings. This may contribute to the creation of accounts of auto-ethnography that can be imbued with emotions for the author and reader alike (Atkinson 2015).

Auto-ethnography has been critiqued as narcissistic and navel gazing (Roth 2009), and has been referred to as a lazy preoccupation
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(Delamont 2007, 2009). Gary Fine in this vein argues that using a highly reflexive approach can turn ‘the intensive labour of field research into the armchair pleasures of “me-search”’ (1999: 534). However, this argument has been reputed as auto-ethnography might involve greater honesty and in some cases a more robust and rigorous approach to self-reflection (Stephens-Griffin and Griffin 2019). An explicit discussion of auto-ethnography and self-narratives should make us more conscious of the subjective aspects of research (Ehn 2012). Similarly, Judith Okely suggests that ‘self-adoration is different from self-awareness and a critical scrutiny of the self’ (1992: 2). She further contends that the opposite is true – those who do not reflect on their own situation can be labelled as self-satisfied and arrogant, assuming that their relations with others are unproblematic (1992: 2). In this sense, auto-ethnography is about lived interactions, participatory experience and embodied knowledge.

In auto-ethnography, the author also faces ethical dilemmas regarding the appropriate presentation of the self, and how much biographical information and ‘self’ to reveal (Ellis 1999). As a result, ‘autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto) such that different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 740). It represents a mix of artistic representation, scientific enquiry, self-narration and ethnography. However, one could argue that some forms of auto-ethnography, particularly in the way they are written and conveyed, lean more toward art, whereas others make more purposeful attempts at scientific analysis.

Some scholars categorise these differences as evocative versus analytical (see Anderson 2006). Leon Anderson (2006) called for an analytical approach in auto-ethnography, which includes, but is not limited to, the reflexively positioned self of the author/ethnographer. He argued that ‘autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption’ (2006: 385). Paul Atkinson presented a similar approach, lamenting that ‘the goals of analysis and theorizing are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions for subjective and evocative ethnographic work’ (2006: 400). He upholds that evocative accounts lack any sense of encounters, denying the possibility of sustained understanding of ‘the Other’ (2015: 468).

Similarly, Sarah Wall (2016) also highlights the importance of taking a balanced and moderate approach to auto-ethnography. She is critical of an ‘overreliance on the potential of a personal writing style
to evoke direct emotional responses in readers but offer no deeper levels of reflection or analytic scholarship' (2016: 11). She contends that since the emergence of auto-ethnographic methods, the methodological discussions about it have been polarised, and so ranges from evocative to analytic auto-ethnography, with evocative auto-ethnography being more prominent.

Whereas analytical auto-ethnography is seen as taking a realist approach to writing in anthropology, the difference is that realist ethnographers would concentrate on the context and phenomena studied. They would take a distant and detached point of view, excluding the analysis of their emotions from the final product. In contrast, analytical ethnographers concentrate on their experiences as insiders to a given culture, and they draw on their experiences to relate these to experiences of people under study. Seen from this angle, an analytical auto-ethnography provides very rich ethnographic material. While it does reflect the ethnographer’s inner feelings/emotions, it also sketches the broader context in which the ethnographer finds him or herself.

On the other side of pendulum, there are those scholars who embed auto-ethnography in the post-modern, interpretative approach to writing, and advocate a narrative form of auto-ethnography that ‘shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning’ (Ellis and Bochner 2006: 433). They critique Anderson’s approach, highlighting that he advocates a realistic mode of enquiry, whereas auto-ethnography has been designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious and creative, and that he wants to bring the latter under the control of reason, logic and analysis (2006: 433). This perspective has been influential in the field of auto-ethnography, and in fact the discourse on this genre of research ‘refers almost exclusively to evocative auto-ethnography’ (2006: 373).

The main danger of an evocative ethnography is that auto-ethnographers in their research might rely too much on their own essentialised identities in their accounts. They consider themselves as insiders, and as such they reflect on their personal experiences. The category of insider/outsider status has been unpacked by different authors (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1993; Narayan 1993). Okely (1992) argues that anthropological fieldwork is as much about the experiences of people as representatives of different cultures as it is about the experiences of specific individuals. She notes that the race, sex,
class origins, age and persona of the anthropologist are all significant. From this perspective, all ethnographers are positioned subjects (Hastrup 1992).

Migration scholars using an intersectional approach have demonstrated the complexity of the identities of individuals who migrate, recognising intra-group difference in migrant communities and the way in which public narratives of migration shape identities (Bas-tia 2014). In the context of the research process, different aspects of people’s identities come into play, including class, gender and rural/urban origin (Kempny 2013).

This process is intersectional, that is, these categories are interdependent when it comes to contributing to people’s marginalisation and oppression (Crenshaw 1991). From this perspective, gendered identities are also classed, racialised and ethnicised. These categories intersect to reveal power asymmetries between and across groups. As Katherine Botterill (2015) aptly puts it, one should be aware of multiple intersectionalities in the methodological spaces of migration research between researcher and research participants.

What is important here is that individuals usually develop many intersecting identities simultaneously and therefore are unlikely to share all aspects of their identities. In this context, evocative autoethnography can be seen as producing only a partial account, falling into the trap of essentialising migrant women. I will address these issues in the next section, when I discuss why I believe that it was essential for me to take a moderate, balanced approach to the topic of (im)mobilities in the context of a global pandemic.

At an Intersection of Analytic and Critical Auto-Ethnography

When I started my auto-ethnographic journey with the question of the global pandemic, my initial intention was to write an evocative account on the lockdown. My own identity combines aspects of being a Polish migrant in Northern Ireland, an academic and a feminist to produce a unique viewpoint. Initially, I was going to write an account of my separation and displacement from my family in Poland. I thought that these experiences of separation and displacement were very strong, deeply personal and imbued with a myriad of emotions. I started describing how the onset of the pandemic had affected my emotional well-being and made me wonder if migrating was the
proper choice after all when it would mean having to face separation from my family members in Poland.

However, something did not seem right to me. I felt that, while I was engaging with my own introspection, there was a broader story missing to the overall picture. Ritupana Roy and Shinya Uekusa (2020) argue that whereas the general goal of qualitative research is to give voice to others, especially marginalised people, this research agenda needs to be carefully reconsidered in the context of crises. I disagree with this argument. Whereas it is more difficult to reach out to marginalised groups in the context of a pandemic, I think it is equally vital to include their viewpoints, given that the pandemic has reinforced existing social inequalities. I felt that it was necessary to locate my narratives of experiences of the pandemic within larger, more macro-level socio-cultural political spaces, particularly in the context of uneven mobilities.

Access to mobility has been unevenly distributed for a long time. Different scholars have focussed on the ways in which ‘differential mobility empowerments relating to who can travel, when, where, and how, reflect structures and hierarchies of power’ (Hannam et al. 2006: 3). In this context, Peter Adey and colleagues (2021) remark that unfolding effects of the pandemic will contribute to the restructuring of socio-spatial relations and mobility regimes. With these concerns in mind, I felt that focussing on my own personal experience and deciding to write up my research in an evocative way would not do justice to other migrant women, whose situation was different than mine. This links to the question of the crisis of representation (Marcus and Fisher 1986) and a question about to what extent researchers can represent social reality, particularly that of marginalised populations, without further marginalising them.

To some extent, I consider myself a member of a marginalised group, as I am a Polish migrant in Northern Ireland, and on numerous occasions I have felt that my Polishness is often a source of my unequal treatment in a society where structural inequalities are ingrained in the everyday fabric of society. However, I strongly believe that my situation is relatively privileged in comparison to those of other migrant women, and that focussing on my particular account of pandemic (im)mobilities would produce an incomplete account of a new social reality. For these reasons, in my research on the COVID-19 pandemic and migrant women im(mobilities) I saw merit in the analytic perspective. My commitment was to observe the field and go beyond my own ethnocentric gaze. As in any kind of ethnography,
sketching the context is crucial; having a rich experiential case study, I wanted to cross-reference this case study with other women’s experiences of immobility in the context of the global pandemic. I felt that interviews would provide external data that would give contextual information to confirm, complement or question my gathered data.

My Situatedness within Critical Auto-Ethnography

I consider myself a critical auto-ethnographer. Jennifer Potter argues that, at first glance, adding the term ‘critical’ to auto-ethnography may seem redundant (2015: 1436). However, this addition is extremely important, as it connotes an explicit focus on how power intersects with one’s personal experience and on the structural forces that helped to create those experiences. Critical auto-ethnography can be seen as a genre of research and writing that becomes a ‘cultural critique’ (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) in this context argues that auto-ethnographies should not be taken at face value but, instead, interrogated for the social positionings they entail within the systems of inequality.

In a similar way, Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe (2014) merge critical auto-ethnography with critical theory to situate experiences within larger systems of power. Critical ethnographers often aim to defy and deconstruct the existing social order. Therefore, I aimed at clearly positioning myself in the framework of mobility and bordering processes, providing a balance between insider and outsider perspectives. My goal was to question the inequalities that emerge from regimes of control at borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, using analytic auto-ethnography helped the interpretation of the data in terms of thinking about questions of (im)mobility, and my commitment to the research stemmed from the fact that I experienced im(mobility) myself. In my research, I take an intersectional approach to understanding im(mobilities): I examine the interactions of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, age, etc.

To demonstrate the value of analytic auto-ethnography in pandemic research, in this section I will problematise complexities inherent in my insider status to give specific examples of how different migrant women may experience (im)mobility during the pandemic in different ways. First of all, it was important for me to avoid essentialist categories in defining both migrants and women. Both differences within different migrant groups and differences amongst migrant
women were critical in my study. Helen Callaway (1992) in this context argues that it is always impossible to separate what in a woman’s experience is due to being a woman from what is due to being middle-class, being married, etc. In a similar way, as Okely aptly puts it, the meeting points of shared gender depend on the wider context of individuals which ‘does not occur in a vacuum, but is shaped by history, and … class, age, race and culture’ (1986: vii). In the context of transnational migration, being a woman intersects with other aspects of people’s identities, such as race, ethnicity, legal status in the United Kingdom and occupation. This, of course, has an enormous effect on how women experience (im)mobilities.

For example, an important aspect of my identity was my particular professional situation. In 2020, at the time when I started conducting the interviews, I was precariously employed by universities and also worked part-time at a local charity sector organisation. The only way that I was affected by the pandemic was that my hours at the local charity sector organisation were reduced and I had to move to remote-working mode. However, I was still fortunate in gaining some income. This gave me relative freedom, as I was able to go to Poland and work from home during the summer time after the semester was over. I did not have to worry about questions of self-isolation upon arrival, as I was able to work from home. Even though in the meantime I lost my job within the charity sector organisation due to public spending cuts, I was very fortunate to get engaged in research consultancy the following summer in 2021.

When I think of the summer of 2021, my concerns over immobility boiled down to a couple of issues. First, I was worried that my unvaccinated four-year-old son Daniel would have to take the COVID-19 test upon arrival in Poland, but the regulations were changed in Poland and he could travel freely provided that I had two vaccines. I was also worried that, in the event that cases went up, there would be some additional border closures and that we would have to take repatriation flights back to the United Kingdom so that Daniel could start his pre-school on time. Both these worries were inconsequential – the COVID-19 rates did not go up drastically in Poland, although local scientists were predicting a second wave, and the rates seemed to stay at the same level in Northern Ireland as well.

When I interviewed other migrant women, I found out that some of them were much more constrained in terms of their options. Some of them lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. This placed them in a very vulnerable situation. They could not afford to visit home or have
family over. In this way, their mobilities were constrained by different differentials of power. One of my informants, Katarzyna from Poland, complained that her mother was not able to visit her because she lost her job. Katarzyna is a community sector worker and, as we knew, the community sector had been badly affected by the pandemic. She could not afford a plane ticket. It took a year for the family to reunite, and it was not until she found a new job following an intensive period of job hunting that she was able to pay for her mother’s travel.

I also heard from my other interlocutors, who had cleaning jobs, that travelling nowadays was a luxury and that not everyone could afford that. ‘If you think about it’, said Sonia, who was a 50-year-old cleaner, ‘you have to spend 330zł for a COVID-19 test (about £65) and another £50 for a Day 2 test this year’. This is an additional £100. For me, £100 pounds was a hassle, and given that I was in precarious employment I was not too happy about spending the money, but the extra expense did not constrain my options, nor was it a major factor in my decision to go to Poland. Sonia in the end did have to travel to Poland, because her father-in-law suddenly died. When he was still in the hospital, both she and her husband intended to travel to visit him. Sonia commented that ‘all these COVID-19 procedures freak me out. I am not sure if I will be able to manage with this’.

Even though Sonia, after living many years in the United Kingdom, speaks English at a good level, she was worried that she was not tech-savvy enough to get the COVID-19 certificate and book the Day 2 test online. To transgress mobility regimes, Sonia decided to travel from Dublin. She did not fill out the UK travel locator form and due to the existence of a still-invisible Irish border, she was able to travel more freely. The Republic of Ireland has different restrictions than the United Kingdom, and does not require double-vaccinated travellers to have PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) test taken seventy-two hours prior to departure, or to have the Day 2 test taken upon arrival. Had I only focussed on my own experience of COVID-19, going for evocative ethnography, these important details might not be included in my write-up. Or, this would be just a snippet from my own reflections, raising ethical concerns of confidentiality.

I was in a very lucky position. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 App and the Day 2 test online booking were not user-friendly, it did not deter me from visiting my family. Social class affects digital skills, and excluding these kinds of stories from my research would have obscured questions of how unevenly COVID-19 immobilities are distributed. I think that emphasising how particular migrants often
struggle to maintain their transnational connections with family back home, and how this is embedded within the unequal social structures, calls for an analytic approach.

Also, questions of Brexit and settlement statuses did affect women’s abilities to travel at the end of 2020. I spoke to several women who wanted to visit their countries of origin and come back before the end of the year 2020. Some were still waiting for responses from the Home Office and did not want to risk difficulties on their way back in case of flights being cancelled. For these women, uncertain immigration statuses did limit their options to travel. I was in a fortunate position of being a British passport-holder. Even though I was a British passport-holder, I felt uneasy when going through passport security control in Northern Ireland. I was worried that I would be interrogated at the border. However, my situation was strikingly different from the situation of these women who did not have secure legal status in the United Kingdom at that time and who had to put their travel plans off in fear of UK national border controls (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

Another aspect that intersects with migrant identity is race. I feel that being white I have taken advantage of white privilege, or ‘an invisible package of unearned assets, to which I was meant to remain oblivious’ (McIntosh 1990). On the contrary, many women of colour had their options constrained. There was a public outcry when a woman from the East Timorese community died contracting COVID-19 at the manufacturing chain where the social-distancing norms were not followed. Of course, this is an extreme example of diverse experiences of the pandemic by various women, but it does point to an important fact. Namely, women of colour are more likely to be engaged in manual/low-paid jobs than other migrant women (Almeida et al. 2021).

This may have implications for their mobility. For example, I spoke to a Spanish-speaking Black woman who was employed as a manufacturing chain operator in May 2020. She originated from Equatorial Guinea, and then moved to Spain to finally migrate to Belfast to look for a better standard of living. She told me that it would not be feasible for her to quarantine herself upon arrival to the United Kingdom as she could not take so many days of annual leave at once. For these reasons, she decided not to visit her relatives in Spain. Seen from this angle, migrant women’s immobilities are often embedded within structural racism.

Finally, different countries are at different stages of the pandemic, with some of them being on the red list. I have recently received a
request from an Argentinian interviewee to sign the UK petition to allow fully vaccinated people coming from red-list countries to self-isolate at home. Hotel-managed quarantine is an expensive choice, and significantly constrains women’s options. My interviewee expressed her exasperation with the situation, saying that it would never end. Time for her seemed to have stalled. This categorisation of the countries into red and amber categories appears to feed into the Western perception of the non-West, which can be seen as comprising legacies of European colonisation and imperialism.

As one can see, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic the differentials in access to mobility and in the possibility of travel amongst different members of the society are reinforced. In this context, the question of insider/outsider status is very complex and involves many intersecting aspects of people’s identities, including class, education level, country of origin, ethnicity and race. This raised my concerns about the evocative form of writing, as I felt that choosing this particular style would prevent readers from hearing other voices. My knowledge is situated, and I believe that complementing my own personal experiences of mobility with interviews with other migrants seeks to provide a more balanced and just story in the context of a global pandemic which has only escalated and exposed structural inequalities.

**Conclusion**

This research note endeavoured to examine the usefulness of the autoethnography genre in studying migrant women’s mobilities in the context of COVID-19. I consider that critical analytic auto-ethnography can most accurately represent the voices of migrant women whose options to travel have been largely constrained. Whilst evocative autoethnography has its merits, in that it produces a rich, vivid account of social reality as seen through the ethnographer’s eyes, evocative texts remain fixed in a first-person narrative (Atkinson 2015: 472).

Atkinson laments that evocative auto-ethnography is a genre of selfhood, which is all about the author (2015: 472). In the evocative genre, the self is the subject matter to such a degree that the ethnographer ‘becomes more memorable than the ethnography, the self more absorbing than other social actors’ (Atkinson 2006: 402). As a result, there may be a lack of critical, analytical engagement with one’s subjectivity and positionality in the field. Furthermore, while an evocative ethnography is compelling to read, it does not necessarily make the world a
better place. I strongly believe that in the context of my own research on pandemic (im)mobilities, such hyper-reflexivity would obscure an analysis of what kind of obstacles migrant women may find when trying to engage in transnational mobilities. My personal experience does not subsume many important aspects of COVID-19 (im)mobilities.

In the context where mobilities are unevenly distributed, I position myself as a politically engaged ethnographer who is committed to social justice and resistance to inequalities. A critical analytic form of auto-ethnography allows one to express a myriad of emotions on the topic of (im)mobilities, but it also gives a voice to the marginalised, whose voices also need to be heard. Only through an engagement with the Other is an auto-ethnographer able to create an account of social reality that is non-essentialising. I believe that analytic auto-ethnography has placed me at a vantage point that facilitated richer analytical understandings of COVID-19 (im)mobilities in the context where these are determined by complex intersections of race, class and immigration status. Seen from this angle, a critical analytic auto-ethnography in such a research context should go beyond placing emphasis on the self/the author, capturing the perspectives of the unvoiced and powerless. It should be a change-orientated methodology that seeks to contextualise an auto-ethnographer’s experience and critique power and privilege.

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