

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

October 2017

This month we welcome Monica Sesma, a member of the Taos Institute Board of Directors, as she shares her thought on...

### Social Construction, Emotions, and the Bodily Reactions of the *Few-Many*



By Monica Sesma

I wonder how many of you have lived in different countries. For those who have had that privilege or forced condition, how has that experience shaped you or contributed to who you have become and how you experience things? To those of you who have lived in more than two countries, how many years have you been far from where you were born, where your “family” resides, the place where you were socialized in certain ways, and the people who speak your same “language”? How many have been away from “home” and “family” for several years and then traveled back? Perhaps a few, perhaps many.

I am one of those *few-many*. I have lived by choice and luck in three countries so far: Mexico, where I was born and raised, two years in the US (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) in the late 90’s, and four years in Canada (Calgary, where I currently live). This year I went back to Mexico after four years of “being away.” I experienced what I think many *few-many* potentially experience: a wide variety of weird/new/confusing/interesting emotions that I could not name in either Spanish, English, French, or Italian. (It is not surprising that the *few-many* learn more than one language.)

As a *few-many*, what names have you assigned to those emotions? Have you wondered who decides how to name that spectrum of “emotions,” what communities establish how many emotions humans can experience, or how we consensually determine what emotions humans can possibly experience? When I ask myself these kind of questions, I feel so grateful that I am immersed in social construction ideas. Social construction helps me to enjoy these reflections.

In the Brief Encounter piece last month, Duane Bidwell discussed his reactions to recent natural disasters and how people express their concerns and support to others using social media. He concluded his piece with this question: “Do we attend adequately to the embodied ways that meaning is constructed prior to being voiced through words? Experience—of our bodies, through our bodies, of other bodies—remains central to social construction. It precedes and shapes language, and it’s shaped by language as well.”

[www.taosinstitute.net/Websites/taos/files/Content/5695186/2017-9\\_Brief\\_Encounter - Duane Bidwell - alternate stories.pdf](http://www.taosinstitute.net/Websites/taos/files/Content/5695186/2017-9_Brief_Encounter_-_Duane_Bidwell_-_alternate_stories.pdf)

His question resonated with me. I vividly remember when I was recently in the Calgary Airport waiting to board the plane with Nina -my oldest child- to Mexico City. I was experiencing something new in my body. I felt some weird reaction in the muscles of my face, in my eyes, in my legs. Then Nina told me: “Mom, I do not know if I want to smile or cry. I feel an extreme emotion which I think could be happiness but I am not sure what it is. Maybe it is because I love to travel. But I also think this is because I cannot wait to see the family, mi Abu, after so many years... or maybe this is because...” We spent many minutes talking about our different bodily reactions, trying to make sense of them using our Spanish and English words

and local meanings, trying to match our bodily responses to our cultural and socially informed emotional dictionaries. To understand them, we were comparing these emotions with others that we had previously experienced. Were these the same or different? Were we experiencing these for the first time or not? And particularly, were we creating/inviting these emotions as we were speaking? Kind of an “emotions-forming-as-we-speak?” The flight boarding process interrupted our reflections. I decided not to label/name my emotions. At the moment, the words that I found for these bodily reactions were very limited and could not capture what I think I was living in that moment. When we were taking off from Calgary, when we were landing in the impressive Mexico City after four years, when we were leaving again the people we love and miss, The. Body. Reacts.

And then, Duane again said: “Experience—of our bodies, through our bodies, of other bodies—remains central to social construction. It precedes and shapes language, and it’s shaped by language as well.”

I am socialized to experience, perform, and discursively make sense of emotions in certain ways, according to the scenarios and the people with whom I am relating. However, as a *few-many*, I am struggling to name and make sense of them. How do you make sense of bodily reactions when you think they are contextual? Do you use the narratives of emotions to describe them? Are these narratives a good fit? What is missing if they do not fit? In the example that I share with you here, we were bodily responding to something impacted by our being a *few-many*. Something very contextual, of course influenced by our intersections, but where our migratory experience is playing a major role.

