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Introduction to the RIS Forum on autoethnography and International Relations

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This Forum Section deals with a fundamental puzzle that remains largely unexplored in International Relations scholarship. On the one hand, we as authors are clearly involved in the production of knowledge. We choose a particular topic that is of interest to us. We then decide how to approach this topic and opt for the methodologies best suited to do so. Along the way we make countless choices about how we select, interpret and then present our data. Even if executed meticulously and systematically, this process involves an inherently personal dimension. Authors make different choices, even when engaging the same topic. On the other hand, scholarly conventions in International Relations have it that such personal components of the research process are to be excluded from the research result. The final texts we present to colleagues are supposed to hold up on purely scholarly grounds and be free of personal biases.

The Forum Section not only questions the usefulness of this deeply entrenched scholarly assumption, but also goes a step further. It explores how the personal experience of a researcher can be used as a legitimate and potentially important source of insight into International Relations. Best known as autoethnographies, such inquiries explore the rich ground that opens up in the relationship between a scholar and the production of knowledge. While discussed intensely in numerous disciplines, autoethnographies remain almost unknown in International Relations. A few isolated scholars have tried to explore how their own experiences can help them – and their readers – to illuminate key dilemmas in world politics. But such attempts remain rare.

Our main aim, then, is to introduce autoethnographic approaches and demonstrate their relevance for International Relations scholarship. We want to show that autoethnographies are not as far-fetched and radical as they might seem at first sight, and that they can, in fact, be employed alongside other methodological approaches. To make this point, and to reach an audience which is likely to be unfamiliar with autoethnography, the texts that follow complement each other in a particular way. The first article, by Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, is consciously written for a mainstream audience and in a conventional manner. It outlines why authoethnography should be seen as a legitimate method and how the ensuing insights might be evaluated. Doing so is essential in order to separate scholarly significant knowledge from personal story telling. The two subsequent articles, by Oded Löwenheim and Elizabeth Dauphinee, enact autoethography in a more radical manner: they actively draw on the authors' own experiences to engage particular topics in International Relations.

We do not pretend to offer a comprehensive take on autoethnography in International Relations. We see this forum section more as an attempt to start

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debates about the issues at stake. We fully expect that both autoethnographers and more traditional social scientists will passionately disagree with some of the propositions advanced in these essays. This was, at least, the reaction we frequently encountered when circulating drafts of these essays: some autoethnographers scolded us for not being radical enough and for holding their work up to inappropriate standards of evaluation; social scientists, by contrast, feared that inserting the 'I' would erode these very standards and lead to self-indulgent story telling. While the final texts are unlikely to resolve this tension, we hope that such disagreements – and the debates that might ensue – will help to make autoethnography a more widely accepted method in the study of International Relations.

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