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Autoethnography – making human connections

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Sigmund Freud once said that 'Everywhere I go, I find a poet has been there before me.' When I write I find myself searching for that poet, desperately hoping to be graced with the voice, the words, and the insight to proceed. Given the current writings about autoethnography I think I am probably not alone in this quest. I take this interest as a symptom of a profound discontent on the part of some International Relations (IR) scholars with the dominant modes of research and writing and with the presumption that the writer must be absent from his/her own work in order to be considered legitimate. I believe this dissatisfaction is a good sign. I hope it continues and I am honored to have the opportunity to be part of this conversation.

My own alienation began on a stretch of Highway 80 about thirty miles north of the Arizona-Mexico border on a warm March afternoon in the year 2000 before the latest, post-9/11 round of full-blown anti-immigrant hysteria had spread across the country. About 25 migrants were huddled on the side of the road surrounded by Border Patrol vans. Men, women, and teenagers were sitting on the ground, dressed in winter jackets though the temperature was near 80 F. This seemed odd to me until I recalled how cold the desert can get at night and that these people had surely walked the desert the night before. I pulled over to the side of the road to take some photos, feeling a little guilty like a tourist watching some grotesque roadside show. I was straddling that fine line that Elizabeth Dauphinee refers to between 'fieldwork and tourism between scholarship and voyeurism'.[1] But photos help me remember; sometimes help me capture a feeling, notice some details I may have missed.

[1] Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'The Ethics of Autoethnography, *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 799–818.

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Later as I started to write about this encounter in the journal I had with me, my pen hung limply over a blank sheet of paper and I was at a loss as to where to begin. The journal was one I used for non-academic writing and I pondered whether or not I should share this precious writing space filled with poems, snippets of stories, memoir, and stream of consciousness ramblings with something related to my professional and academic writing. It seemed that one might corrupt the other. A minor dilemma to be sure, but one that pointed to a troubling divide, a boundary between the kind of writing deemed acceptable for scholarship and the kind of writing in my journal. I was troubled by the fact that they were so radically different, that I was clearly 'there' in one, but anonymous in the other. Something else gnawed at me. Who the hell was I to even try to write about the situation of the human beings I had seen on the side of the highway? As Elizabeth Dauphinee asks 'what expert am I?' I didn't even know their names. I had not even seen their faces very closely. 'They' were just a huddled mass of humanity, objects for my research. They were at the heart of everything I had written about borders and immigration but they were invisible in these writings. And perhaps the most troubling thing was that I could continue writing as if they were invisible and this would not make any difference at all in terms of publishing and carrying on with my scholarly career.

That afternoon changed the way I thought about my academic writing, about my own voice as a writer, about my presence and absence in my own writing. As I stood snapping photos I felt the presence of statecraft in its immensity, its pervasiveness, its relentless quest to penetrate even the most remote places and unremarkable lives. This was not an intellectual reflection on the ever-central thing we call 'the state' in academic IR circles, but rather a pure gut level awareness that washed over me like the glaring afternoon sun. And it hit me that statecraft pervaded almost every academic journal I had ever encountered and that it was devouring my words.

Since that day I have tried to 'write differently', to be as much a writer as a scholar. I am often not very satisfied with how I write. I am plagued with a deep dissatisfaction about the immense distance between my words and the 'things' these words try to capture and what these words do or do not do. I have struggled with how to have a presence in my own writing, not necessarily to learn about myself but without such a presence I do not think it is possible to connect with the human beings at the centre of what I write about. And this brings me to what I think is one of the most significant things about this turn to autoethnography, *connection*. I think this idea runs through all of the pieces in this forum to varying degrees. In the remainder of this article I offer a few thoughts on making connections in our writings.

Making connections entails a personal aspect and this comes through clearly in autoethnography. Brigg and Bleiker, Dauphinee and Lowenheim are all concerned with 'the absent self' in academic writing and their pieces illustrate ways of bringing the self into one's writing. While I believe that the self is really always present in academic writing it is usually only present by virtue of its absence. A power inheres in this absence, a power that enables scholars to present their work as authoritative, objective, and neutral. Autoethnography shuns this power and makes it clear that writers are part of their work, part of the story they tell, they are *connected*.[2] Lowenheim makes connections with his powerful and touching

[2] This, of course, does not mean autoethnography is devoid of power.

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autobiographical story of how he developed an interest in IR and how he came to study it in a particular way.[3] Elizabeth Dauphinee makes connections in a much different way. In her piece we learn very little about her own personal background, but she nonetheless has a strong presence in the piece. Through her voice which conveys the story of Stojan Sokolovic we sense a 'writerly presence' that not only connects her as a writer with her subject matter but connects the reader with the human beings she writes about in a way that a King, Keohane, and Verba driven 'methodology' could never achieve. Her creative, poetic voice creates a real world of flesh and blood, of human frailty, tragedy, doubt and uncertainty. She is part of this world and she makes her readers part of this world as well.

These pieces are just two examples of how one might put the self into one's writing and thereby make connections that are generally severed in conventional IR writing. The self can have a strong presence without dominating the story. I think this is important to be aware of because, as Brigg and Bleiker point out, there is the very real risk of engaging in self-indulgence with authoenthnography or any kind of writing which includes the self.[4] The discipline of IR already silently screams the words, 'It's all about us.' Those doing autoethnography do not want to perpetuate this. While Lowenheim certainly makes a valid point that autho-ethnography might enable us to better understand ourselves, I do not think this should be the primary goal. For me personally the goal of writing differently is to try and do justice to the human beings at the centre of what I write about, to do justice with my words. This is a constant struggle. If in the process of trying to do justice we learn something about ourselves this would not be a bad thing. We might even change. We may decide to do more than write or to use our words in different ways, to reach different audiences, to go beyond the academy. We may become activists. We may become public intellectuals. These would all be positive things, but I do not believe they should be the primary motivating factors for doing autoethnography. It must be about much more than 'us'.

There is no clear methodology for having a presence in one's own writing or for making connections. I would hate to see the doors that are being opened by autoethnography slowly swing shut because of too much concern with methodology. I realise that this statement probably puts me in the 'far-fetched and radical' category that Brigg and Bleiker mention in their introduction but I have a deep-seated suspicion and distrust of 'methodology' as it has come to be thought of in the social sciences. This does not mean I do not think it is important to be up front and honest in one's research, but I think we often get distracted with endless discussions of methodology. In one sense this is insulting to the reader because it is often fairly clear what the writer has done. Readers are generally intelligent people who can figure out how the writer has gone about his/her research. Elizabeth Dauphinee's piece is a good example. She tells the reader that she has not recorded Stojan Sokolovic's words and that the words she writes are the result of her impressions. This is all I, as a reader, really need to know. It is clear that she has engaged in some sort of interviewing/participant observer process. It is clear she has 'been there' which lends a great deal of authenticity to

[3] Oded Lowenhein, 'The "I" in IR: An Autoethnographic Acount', *Review of International Studies*, 36: 4 (2010).

[4] Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, 'Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 779–98.

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her as a writer. As a reader, I do not want to be distracted, jarred from her powerful story by a lengthy discussion of methodology. Such discussions often smack of attempts at justification and concession to the primacy of science, which implicitly reproduces a science vs. art dichotomy and all that it entails. I think it is important to recognise that adhering to social science sanctioned methodologies may erect severe limitations which could undermine the very promise of authoethnography. It is very difficult to 'draw upon the full range of faculties' as Brigg and Bleiker suggest autoethnographers should do and to adhere to many of the methodological maxims of the social sciences. There are no methodologies for accessing intuition, emotion, and bodily sensations. In my view the problem lies not with drawing upon these things but with subjecting them to a presumed rigor of 'methodology'. My own way of going about research has become, 'go there, hang out, talk to some folks, see what happens'. I hesitate to refer to this as 'methodology' and admittedly it does not facilitate many research grants, but it sometimes results in good stories and insights into concrete political problems. There are always sacrifices.

In my opinion one of the most exciting promises of autoethnography is the potential it has to change the way we write. Including the self, accepting things like intuition and bodily sensations and felt experience are bound to affect our choice of words and the way we put these words on paper. Our voices are very likely to change and this I think would be a most positive change. I believe there is a current within many academic circles and outside the academy to make scholarly writing more accessible to wider audiences, less dry and boring to read. Last year I attended a series of writing workshops at the university where I work. The facilitators of the workshop were mostly university professors who had published for wider audiences often in non-university presses. This does not mean 'dumbing-down' what we write, but rather making it interesting to a broader group of intelligent readers who may not be steeped in disciplinary jargon and may not want to read pages and pages of methodological reflection and discussion of ontological debate. One of the first things we were advised to do was to stop reading academic writings at least for a while so that our minds could begin to imagine another way of writing. The other thing that was emphasised was the importance of story. A good story is essential and it can carry a great deal of weight. Scholars can convey many important issues, including perhaps things like ontology and methodology within the context of a story. Many of the debates that IR scholars have spilled much ink on in our academic journals are actually quite significant, but their connections to the world of human beings is lost in sterile writing that reaches a small group of select readers. Autoethography has the potential to create spaces that challenge the *status quo*, make our work more interesting, and connect in more meaningful ways to our subject matter and the human beings that inhabit the worlds we write about. It also affords us the chance to connect with our readers in ways that may make them care. In the process of doing these things we will surely become different kinds of scholars.

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