

## *Introduction*

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# Autoethnography – A Necessary Challenge

Autoethnography is a form of writing and research that I have long engaged in. I find in the form a way to dance back and forward between the personal and the wider political analytic perspectives. It isn't for everyone, but it is worth a try once and a while. This issue of *New Proposals* contains seven amazing examples. These papers were selected from among three cohorts of graduate students enrolled in a required history of theory course I had the privilege of teaching at UBC (2013-2016).

There are many ways to teach a theory of anthropology course. Typically students will be assigned a genealogy type assignment – something that asks students to delving into the linkages and histories of particular schools or theorists. They might also be asked to critically review past theories against current fashions. Or perhaps they will be directed to explore some specific theoretical issue and how its treatment may have changed through time. These are only some of the exercises that might be assigned. I have from time to time drawn on them myself, but I feel there are other things we can also do given these kinds of courses are, in part, professional development courses.

At some point during the course I have students track down peer-review publications of departmental faculty, but the caveat is that these

papers have to come for a sub-discipline unfamiliar to the student. A further condition is that they are not to ask either the faculty member in question or someone potentially knowledgeable to recommend a paper. Rather, the students must find one themselves that captures their attention in some manner. Once they have found a paper then they must present the paper to the class – not a summary – but a highlight of what was interesting, what stood out, what didn't make sense to them (in a meta, not specific sense). This exercise is paired with a second one in which they are charged with reading a work by a class mate (a thesis, a class essay, a publication) that their classmate provides to them. Both of these exercises are designed to explore our self conceptions of our discipline, to evaluate these perceptions against the creations of others, and to find one's place in some way in this field of textual productions. But I don't think that goes far enough.

Sociocultural anthropology delves into other peoples lives. We ask questions, collect data on lives of others. We talk about situating ourselves in our work. Yet I have observed over the years that anthropologists are among the most protective of themselves when it comes to being asked questions similar to those we ask our correspondents of research. This is where autoethnography comes in.

I consider autoethnography as a necessary challenge for all of us. While it isn't the same as having someone else interrogate us and then write up our lives, it is a nice proxy. Autoethnography allows us to apply the same kinds of analysis and disembodied objectifications upon ourselves as we might sometimes be accused of doing to others. The experience of using our own lives, experience, and knowledge as the data for an analytic paper can be a useful experience. Each of the students in the three versions of the course I taught jumped into this exercise wholeheartedly; some expressed discomfort at first; others found it a delight. They all did amazing jobs. The seven papers here cover a diversity of sub-disciplinary vantages points, subject matters, and writing styles. I commend them to you as striking professional pieces of reflection and introspection.