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Home and Away: Self-Reflexive Auto-/Ethnography

Christiane Kraft Alsop

Abstract: Studying the unknown involves leaving the familiar. Leaving is prerequisite to transcending self and society, whether studying a far-away culture or the neighborhood culture. However, leaving also enables a different and deeper understanding of what we left at home. In this exploration I will interweave the two very human states of being at home and being away, both in the literal sense of studying one's "own" and the "other" culture, and in the metaphorical sense of studying the known and the unknown within the field of the ethnographic endeavor. The look back home emerges as a chance to practice self-reflexivity.

I will relate scientific approaches to the experience of being home versus being away with my personal experiences of leaving my home-country (Germany) and immersing myself in another culture (the United States) to open up various dimensions of meaning. My contribution includes: (a) the etymology of home and away; (b) cultural psychology of home and away; (c) *Fernweh* versus *Heimweh*; and (d) central auto-ethnographic questions and "Journeys Back

Home" that illustrate the possibilities auto-ethnography opens up as yet another piece of the puzzle in attempting to understanding ourselves and others.

Keywords: *ethnography, auto-ethnography, self-reflexivity, cultural psychology, home, homesickness*

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1. Introduction

Practicing ethnography means shifting one's notion of center and periphery and coping with the complexity of multiple centers with multiple peripheries. In this contribution I will introduce one attempt at interrelating centers and peripheries by interrelating what it means *to be home* and *to be away*. I will do so by referring to different aspects of my identity as teacher and mentor, as ethnographer and writer and as a German immigrant to the United States. By using these different voices I intend to demonstrate that being home and being away are two very human states of being that are intimately connected. By referring to etymology, cultural psychology, psychoanalysis and anthropology I will provide a description of those two states to open up various dimensions of their meanings. [1]

In the wake of colonialism anthropologists came up with the term self-reflexivity to understand ethnographic limitations and potentials. The concept and method called auto-ethnography is an attempt at practicing this self-reflexivity by having a closer look at one's own longings and belongings, with the familiarity that—when viewed from a distance—it can change one's perspective considerably. This change comes about when the auto-ethnographer places the self within a social context by connecting the personal and the cultural (REED-DANAHAY 1997, p.9;

ELLIS & BOCHNER 2000, p.739). In the latter part of this article I will consequently focus *not* on the traditional ethnographic notion of the "other" but on the familiar from the perspective of the person immersed in the life of the "others." What remains is a characterization of auto-ethnography—illustrated by two examples—as an artistic walk along boundaries made up by dialectic connections and paradoxical twists and turns. [2]

2. Roots of Meanings

One approach to understanding the meaning of terms is to look at the roots of the words themselves, their etymology. As a native German speaker I decided to look at the German roots of *being home* versus *being away* as the facets of their emotional meanings are more familiar to me (see BRAUN et al. 1993; KLUGE 1995). [3]

The German language has two words for home: *Heim* and *Heimat*. The roots of both words are found in Old and Middle High German, Old English, Old Nordic, Irish and Russian. These roots point to a meaning that encompasses the material residence (like one's farm, or the village), the material means to make a living such as farmland, as well as the social environment of family and significant people. The word *Heimat* has roots in the Indo-Germanic word for residing but surprisingly also hints at meanings of wasteland, poverty and treasure. *Heimat* consequently has at its poles the rather awful prospect of living in a desert of the familiar, the same; at the other extreme it is a jewel, a gem, something special and very dear and precious to you. [4]

Digging for the roots of its antonym "foreign" holds yet another surprise. The German word for foreign or strange is *fremd*, an adjective formed out of the roots of "away from" and "forward." In its current usage *fremd* means "coming from abroad, not from home, not belonging, unknown" (BRAUN et al. 1993, p.373, Translation C.K.A.). However, the roots of the term also hint at meanings of being brave, strong and competent. There is an aspect to the person coming from far away or leaving for the far away, or the object originating in the foreign, that is considered brave, strong and competent. What is surprising, however, is that hostile reactions to the foreign are not to be found at its roots. [5]

3. The Cultural Psychological Meanings of Home and Away

In his "Skizze zur Psychologie des Heimwehs," Ernst E. BOESCH (1991) looks at childhood as the foundation of *Heimat*. It is most obvious in childhood how interrelated being home and being away are. The child who can return to a safe haven after each step forward can explore the unknown. Crawling on the floor of the family room a baby will frequently turn around to make sure her caretaker is still in sight before crawling around the couch, the chair, or even out of the room.¹ The frightened child, however, will cling to her caretaker and stick to the familiar, unable to further her development (BOESCH, 1991; compare AINSWORTH, 1979). [6]

What makes *Heimat* so special is that it provides the primary experience we are exploring for the first time. And it is so special because the processes of exploration happen simultaneously: we are exploring our physical environment, our selves and our identifications. No other explorations later in life are simultaneous and primary. [7]

Heimat provides the original template that allows for orientation and communication in our mother tongue (BOESCH 1991, p.22). This template is crucial in a double sense. First, it allows us to anticipate. When we perceive others we can *read* their faces, their gestures, their tone of voice in a way that allows projections into the future because we can rely on a long history of experiences. [8]

¹ Here and in what follows I will refer to the grammatically female form. However, throughout the text I will sometimes consciously, sometimes "by chance" go back to the male form of reference. It is up to the reader to interpret those inconsistencies or accept them as idiosyncrasies of my style.

As an immigrant to the United States I become aware of this most painfully in moments of crisis. The tone of voice, the mimic of a speaker and the deep emotional meaning and historical roots the words of another language convey are not, or are barely or only partly accessible to those not native. Listening to the news after September 11, 2001 I found myself missing the familiarity of German radio and TV broadcasts. Not that they convey the golden path to wisdom but their familiarity to me provides a sense of basic orientation in a moment of utter confusion. Shortly after the terror attacks I gave a talk about this very same topic of home and away. Afterwards a woman in her late fifties approached me. She had left her Canadian *Heimat* thirty five years ago. She explained to me that she never felt an urge to go back but at the first awareness of the attacks she sensed an immediate longing to be back in her hometown. [9]

Secondly, from childhood on we make use of the original template provided by *Heimat* by conjuring up fictional worlds of a better home using the stories, fairy tales and movies we encounter while growing up. [10]

Heimat therefore provides security by enabling us to develop an *inner compass* (AMERY 1980, RAUSCHENBACH 2001) that we rely on unconsciously in every second of our life—unconsciously as long as we are at home. *Heimat* becomes significant only when leaving (BOESCH 1991, AMERY 1980, RAUSCHENBACH 2001). Consequently, *Heimat* dialectically links our past and our future (BOESCH 1991, p.26); being home dialectically refers to being away. [11]

In his sketch of homesickness Ernst E. BOESCH (1991, pp.29ff.) goes on to explain that compared to home the foreign is merely an area of projection because the foreign lacks the inner template home provides. The foreign is amorphous and unstructured. It does not allow for anticipation because we cannot read it, cannot interpret what is possible or impossible, attractive or repulsive. We lack the history of personal and cultural experiences. This lack of transparency holds potential for both euphoria and frustration. By immersing ourselves in another culture, we can expand our selves and our identifications by exploring the foreign just like a child explores its new environment. Discovering the unknown environment and unknown parts of our selves makes us feel empowered, empowered by expanding our potential and reinventing ourselves. We can do all this because away from home we get labeled as an outsider. Outsiders can be eccentric. They are even supposed to be eccentric. That way outsiders can be romanticized by the natives or treated with hostility as foreigners.² [12]

I remember my first time at West Beach up in Beverly where I live. I changed from my bathing suit to my normal clothes after swimming by loosely wrapping a towel around my body. A woman on the beach approached me: You must be from Europe, she said. No one on the beach dares to change clothes your way. This and other teachers in culturally correct behavior were amused at the behavior I displayed here and in other situations. And I felt relaxed about those "mistakes." After all, how could I have known? I felt the freedom granted only to fools. [13]

However, the euphoric phase is followed by frustrations. Gerda LERNER (1997), an émigré from Nazi Austria describes:

"Living in translation and lacking both an adequate vocabulary and the sense for the rhythm of the language, it was as though my adult knowledge had to be transposed into the vocabulary of a six-year-old [...] (p.35). To come [...] to the imbecile stammerings of an immigrant American was a fall [...] (p.38)."

And this is just one of many ways of "falling" when abroad.³ [14]

In my childhood girls in Germany, third graders mostly, loved to keep what they call a *Poesiealbum*, a poetry album. You asked your friends to write a favorite poem, quotation or proverb on a page

² American hotel chains abroad ease the pain this lack of anticipation causes in the tourist or the business person; they take away the feeling of being an outsider by creating an environment identical to the one at home (see HELLER 1995, p.2).

³ Here and in the following I am not talking about the temporal challenge of being a tourist but the long-term immersion in other ways of life. Although, tourism is in fact something dear to Germans—they show the highest rate of tourism per population in the Western world. The "itch to get away" is something the material prosperity of modern industrialized countries brought along (RIEFF 1994, p.30).

of your album. I found the following in mine and remember it had been one of the most popular ones (compare RAUSCHENBACH 2001, p.230):

Never forget home where your cradle stands,
You'll never find a second home in the foreign lands. [15]

This wisdom threatens the one who dares to leave that her inner compass will fail to serve her away from home. The wisdom also hints at something all cultures do: they tend to divide the world into a *here* and *there*, *we* and *they*, *the civilized* and *the savage*. [16]

Just like the dialectic of home versus away there is the dialectic of nationalism versus the foreign. Connotations of a nation include the incarnate belonging, to a place and its people, to a heritage, to a community. Nations provide a "quasi-religious text" not only about their historical and geographical landmarks but also about their official enemies and heroes (SAID 2000, pp.176f.). Nationalism, again, dialectically refers to imperialism. Ever since humans have written history there has been the effort to conquer the foreign and incorporate it into the familiar on all levels of being. It remains to be seen what the future brings both for the idea of nations as well as for the idea of *Heimat*. Tommy DAHLEN (2000) ventured some thoughts on the substitution of nations by corporate identities. Jean AMERY (1980) predicts a future of objects without history, foreseeing the replacement of the individual calendar and address book by the universal palm pilot. And Brigitte RAUSCHENBACH (2001, pp.245f.) elaborates on borders open only for the inhabitants to leave and return not for the intruders to stay. *Heimat* she predicts will be substituted by "non-places." [17]

Between the *here* and *there*, the *we* and *they*, the gap of not belonging opens up to the outsider. There are various ways of reacting to this not-belonging. On an individual level we might try to cope with feelings of resentment at those who are at home. The anthropologist Edward SAID (2000, p.181) points at yet another coping strategy. Immigrants, he finds, often create their own world to rule. They become novelists, chess players or political activists. On the cultural level one can often observe the first generation of immigrants attempting to create an imitation of *Heimat* with familiar shops, restaurants, houses and organizations. "In New York City's Washington Heights they created a small Mittel-Europa of familiar shops, coffee houses and organizations. Their cynical stance towards the USA gave them a sense of continuity" (LERNER 1997, p.39). [18]

However, leaving not only turns me into an outsider in the new culture, I also become an outsider at home. My leaving disturbs the order of the divide into a *here* and a *there*. Those who stay at home identify me as belonging to their *we*, whereas I offend them by preferring the company of a *they*. The ones staying react with suppressed dissatisfaction and envy which springs from the conscious or subconscious knowledge that home is not perfect, that it can be limiting or even existentially threatening (BOESCH 1991, p.30). Why is that? I think it is because every person feels the gap between her factual and her fictional home, between the wasteland of the familiar and the treasure of the "promised land." And by leaving I point my finger at that gap for all those who stay behind. Auto-/biographical accounts of émigrés, refugees and expatriates give multiple witness to the difficulties of those left behind (see for example FISCHER 1998, FREMONT 1999, REICH-RANICKI 2000). However, cultures are inventive in their ways of coping with this dissatisfaction and envy (BOESCH (1991, p.30). They invent farewell rituals like presents and the promises of frequent contact via letters and phone calls.⁴ [19]

⁴ There are various reasons to leave home. SAID (2000, p.181) distinguishes between exiles and refugees on the one hand versus expatriates and émigrés on the other—the latter category having a touch of deliberate choice to it. I exclude, however the tourist who goes on an adventurous trip for a week or month. This is not what I consider immersion in another culture.

4. *Fernweh* and *Heimweh*

The dialectics of home and away, of nationalism and the foreign, of insider and outsider become even more apparent when looking at the feelings that emerge when home gets too close and when home is too far away. While hinting in opposite directions of their longing, both feelings are captured in two German words that share the same noun: *Fernweh* and *Heimweh*. [20]

Weh means a cry of pain, of fright, or of surprise at which roots are rage, anger and sadness (BRAUN et al. 1993, p.1545, KLUGE 1995, p.879). And while *Heimweh* easily translates into homesickness, I am at a loss when it comes to the German word *Fernweh*. The English *wanderlust* expresses the longing to leave but it emphasizes the tourist's longing for a week or two of adventure. The German meaning, however, entails a horizon narrowing down on us to a point where home becomes almost suffocating and we wander off. We leave the desert of the familiar. Consequently, we meet the new environment with enthusiasm, experience the widening of our horizon as empowering, and explore aspects of our identity that were buried at home. We fall in love at first sight. However, stuck in the foreign land for some time, the wasteland we left turns into a jewel in our memory, the treasure of the familiar, the compass of our feeling, thinking and acting. We get struck with homesickness, the cry of pain for what we left at home. [21]

How could this happen to us? How could our euphoria change so rapidly into misery? [22]

In what follows, I will walk along part of the way with Brigitte RAUSCHENBACH's exploration of homesickness (2001) as it leads to the central paradox that will open up questions for auto-/ethnographic accounts. [23]

RAUSCHENBACH (2001) explains the meaning of homesickness by referring to FREUD's understanding of the two phenomena, mourning and melancholia. The loss of a significant relationship, whether that be a person or an abstraction like homeland, means that all invested energy is now homeless, producing pain in the bereaved person, followed by an intense longing to continue the relationship, prolonging it even if only in fantasy. A major loss of interest in the world and in other people is the consequence.

"Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition, can be so intense that turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through [hallucinating it]. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit at great expense of time and psychic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychologically prolonged. [...] When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again." (FREUD 1917, p.237)⁵ [24]

While the mourning person experiences an impoverished and empty world, the melancholic person experiences an impoverished and empty "I," not knowing what makes her sad. Therefore she cannot mourn because the loss is accompanied by a major disappointment that can have anger or even hatred at its roots. The melancholic holds on to parts of her early childhood identifications that she secretly blames. Melancholia turns into self-destructive hate that is meant to target someone or something else. [25]

RAUSCHENBACH (2001, p.237) concludes that homesickness is a combination of FREUD's understanding of mourning and melancholia. *Heimweh* has at its roots an accusation against home: It does not provide a living being that in the material, social or ideological sense. Consequently, I am forced to search for a future abroad. However, abroad I rely on an inner compass that my home provided me with. Homesickness, then, replaces the original meaning

⁵ The changes FREUD later made to his theory are not considered relevant in this exploration.

of home with a nostalgic longing which covers up my home's failure to provide the help and security I need in order to explore and find stability in the unknown environment (AMERY 1980). [26]

When I left Germany I was feeling frustrated. To me, this Germany seemed narrow-minded and inflexible. They still refuse to use the Internet, I thought, they cling to a job market of professions that have been invented a century ago, and devoutly believe in authority and hierarchy. However, from this distance that Germany had put on a new face. I found myself glossing over the cracks. I found myself praising the Germans' skepticism towards each and every technological invention, praising their recycling of each and every bottle, plastic or tin can, every shred of paper. Looking back, these German ways seemed glorious to me. [27]

At the center of homesickness lies a paradox: "*Homesickness is the nostalgic longing for a home that symbolizes the happiness that home could no longer provide*" (RAUSCHENBACH 2001, pp.237f., italics added) [28]

The underlying anxiety and rage become apparent when the homesick person blames the hosting culture for the various ways in which it does not provide the security the inner compass guaranteed at home. [29]

When bound by anxiety and confusion at my inner compass not working for me in the United States, I would tear apart what I found was wrong with "the others." I would rant: Americans are stupid. They don't manage to look beyond the rim of their dinner plates and have no idea what deep friendship really means. [30]

Paradoxes, I believe, are the most fruitful states of mind. The paradox of homesickness leads me to the central question relevant to every person who crosses borders, relevant to every person engaging in ethnography:

- What causes my *Fernweh*? What causes my *Heimweh*?
- What were the hopes with which I left? What were the disappointments with home that made me leave?
- And where does my inner compass fail to guide me in my new environment? [31]

I can give a glimpse at my disappointments that I became aware of long after the fact of their occurrence. [32]

First, there were my disappointments with my career. In Germany the academic system demands that—after finishing your Ph.D.—you have to work on another thesis called *Habilitation* that takes another five to seven years to complete. Germany is one of very few countries in the world that clings to this ritual of obedience and control. It led me to blame not only the German academic system but also social science in general for my feelings of being stuck in my career. Away, in the United States, the horizon seemed open and wide. The land of possibilities would be mine. I would reinvent myself. However, when my euphoria evaporated in the distance of my ever so widened horizon in my second home country, after having played with the idea of starting various other careers I realized that what I had hated in Germany was the system of academia, not social science itself, which indeed had become so much part of my identity that I decided to practice it the way I believe is reasonable. [33]

Second, as the daughter of the World War II generation there were the numb, amorphous and undefined feelings of shame and guilt about my country. I wanted to leave those behind, at home, tucked away in the basements and attics of friends who politely offered their storage room for the things I did not want to bring to the US right away. But instead of succeeding in running away from my numb, amorphous and undefined guilt and shame, I found it vibrant, tangible and very conceivable here in the United States. I saw Americans proudly presenting their national flag at the entrance to their houses—back in Germany I had observed this right wing nationalists or Neo-Nazis using the German flag (see PROUD GERMAN? 2001). I saw at the bottom of my mother-in-law's eyes the pain that was still alive at the loss of her brother who flew a bomber over North Africa and was shot down by Germans. And I marveled at the fact that my brother-in-law proudly displayed his father's WWII-military medals in the hallway of his house. My late father-in-law had fought for the winners. [34]

Suddenly stories popped up in my mind I had had no access to while living at home.⁶ I will give an example of one of those stories later on. Let me put it into the words one of my students used: "I became Japanese, she said, after I left my country to relocate in the US." [35]

What I wish to convey with these examples: No matter how strong my *Fernweh*, *Heimat* is in my storage. I cannot leave it back home. No matter how far I venture out, my inner compass travels with me and I experience its constant change. Every person who leaves undergoes these processes. Ethnographers involved in exploring and relating cultures can make use of them systematically. [36]

5. Central Autoethnographic Questions and Journeys Back Home

My first example of how ethnographers can make use of these processes is the analogy of training a psychotherapist. To the best of my knowledge all approved and scientifically respected methods of psychotherapy demand that a therapist explore every angle of her own mind by undergoing a therapy herself (THE BOSTON PSYCHOANALYTIC SOCIETY AND INSTITUTE, BULLETIN, n.d., p.12). The idea is that the therapist has to explore her own secret wishes and fantasies, her anxieties and angers, her joys and delights in order to support others in exploring theirs. After all, how can she help her clients to make peace with themselves, and with their strengths and shortcomings, if she herself does not take a close look at her own? In this case it seems so obvious that therapists need to engage in self-reflexivity. Transferring this self-reflexivity to the level of culture, we—who study other cultures—should explore our home, the wishes and fantasies it provides us with, the anxieties and angers it causes, the joys and delights of our everyday lives, the gaps between our factual and our fictional homes. [37]

Another reason to engage in self-reflexivity becomes obvious when looking at the history of anthropology. Anthropology started as a colonial undertaking. We Euro-Americans examined people in the world to determine their place in the hierarchy of *our* value systems. There is much evidence that when we colonialists went away without reflecting on what we left, we measured the unknown against our own inner compass. And when that inner compass didn't work the others failed, not we. When the Aborigines of Australia failed the psychologists' so called culture-free intelligence test, we thought we had proof that they were just not as smart as we are (COLE 1996, pp.52ff.). And when we found the Ilongots of the Philippines clinging to their ritual of head hunting when one of their loved ones died, we thought we had proof of their savage state of mind (ROSALDO 1989/1993, p.65). It was the atrocities and mass migrations of two world wars that made it difficult for us to simply blame the others. We had to look inward. It was also the critical voices of feminists who pointed at the power hierarchies in our own homes that caused abuse, alienation and exploitation between and among the sexes (see BEHAR & GORDON 1995, NASH 1997, WOLF 1992). And, there were the voices of those we judged. They suddenly faced us as experts of their own indigenous cultures, the ones we had put at the bottom of the totem pole (BEHAR 1996, SMITH 1999). [38]

All this and more caused a major crisis in anthropology and social sciences in general. One way out is the striving for self-reflexivity. That self-reflexivity can take various forms and shapes such as asking ourselves about our frame of mind, about our power position in the network of cultures, about the ways in which we produce knowledge, and about our notion of center and periphery (ALSOP 2001, BEHAR 1996, BOURDIEU 1998, 1990, STAEUBLE 1992, 1996). One possible way to practice self-reflexivity is auto-ethnography, a relatively new concept and method. [39]

⁶ This is a daring hypothesis to pose because who knows, I might have eventually gotten access to those feelings at home as well. After all, it often takes two generations to face the trauma a country has undergone (see the various publications of memoirs by members of the second generation, i.e. SCHAEFER & KLOCKMANN 1999, SCHLINK 1998, SCHMIDT 1999, SEIFFERT 2001). However, there are also the frequent tales ethnographers and authors tell that when gone, with the distance of borders, countries and oceans between themselves and their home, they see what they had been blind to before (see for example WEISS 2001, ARTS IN AMERICA 1998).

Auto-ethnography (ELLIS & BOCHNER 2000, p.739)

"is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographic gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations (...). As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition." [40]

But instead of further defining this genre in the abstract I will give two examples of autoethnographic works.⁷ [41]

My first example of what we can find when we look back home, is the work of the literary critic Svetlana BOYM (1996, pp.264f.). She left Russia, her home country, some ten years ago as a political émigré and returned to better understand the home she left. In her article on *Unsettling Homecoming* she describes a particular event that took place when she was a child and her parents hosted foreigners for the first time. The family lived in a so-called communal apartment. Their neighbors, to whom she refers as *Aunt Vera* and *Uncle Fedia*, were home

"Uncle Fedia," she remembers, "usually came home drunk, and, if Aunt Vera refused to let him in, he would crash right in the middle of the long corridor [...] obstructing the entrance to" the room of her family. On this particular night "we were all in the living room listening to music, to tone down the communal noises, and my mother was telling our foreign guests about the beauties of Leningrad. ... As the conversation rolled along, and the foreign guest was commenting on the riches of the Russian Museum, a little yellow stream slowly made its way through the door of the room. Smelly, embarrassing, intrusive, it formed a little puddle right in front of the dinner table. This scene, with the precarious coziness of a family gathering, both intimate and public, with a mixture of ease and fear in the presence of foreigners and neighbors, remained in my mind as memory of home." (BOYM 1996, p.264) [42]

She then goes on to work with that memory by transferring it to a metaphor. That metaphor captures a feature of the Soviet's culture unconscious *inner compass*. "If a Soviet cultural unconscious ever existed, it must have been structured as a communal apartment—with flimsy partitions between public and private, control and intoxication." (BOYM 1996, p.265) This example shows how taking a look back home helps to understand *Heimat* by having memories crystallize in form of a cultural metaphor. [43]

In my second example I will quote a short part of a story I wrote for a book I am working on. This book deals with the relationship between German World War II participants and the Second Generation, and in this case, the relationship between my father and me.

"It is one of those days when mother is out singing in the choir—a winter afternoon. Again, I have to sit with my father in the living room and listen. He drinks beer, canned beer. He loves it whenever Mother is out, because she hates cans and only buys him bottled beer. With relish he gathers the empty cans on grandma's embroidered tablecloth until they form a semi-circle around him, his fortress against invading memories. Each time he opens one, he rips off the lid and carefully aims it at the trash can under grandfather's oak desk.

Today it's wartime stories. It is war every time he makes me sit and listen. Every beer can, another story. After a while he gets up.

'Shouldn't we go on a walk around the block?' he asks.

⁷ For a good overview on the history of auto-ethnography see REED-DANAHAY (1997). Another excellent example for an auto-ethnographic approach is KENNY (2000). In a recent article on *Power, Anxiety and the Research Process* (ALSOP 2001) I open up yet another way of practicing self-reflexivity. In that article I describe the various phases of my experience with the research process, concluding that it is crucial to write an auto-ethnography of your research process. You can engage in self-reflexivity by interrelating your struggles for power as academics with your struggles with anxiety about not meeting the standards this academic system sets. Approaching the research process in that way one gets a chance at renegotiating the boundaries between the researcher's subjectivity, the academic field and the framework of the society in which one's research takes place.

This request in disguise means wrapping ourselves in thick winter coats, getting the boots out and, armed with hats and mittens, stepping out into the cold of a snowless, late, dim, almost dark, winter afternoon. A walk around the block means turning right at the Weber's house, going up Magdalenenstrasse, and on to the main street alongside the shops. First, we will have a glance into the jeweler's window, then the post office and, right after that, the pharmacy. Between its window and entrance door hangs the thermometer and the barometer. My father needs these tools to validate his state of health.

'I knew it was way below freezing.'

He knocks at the barometer glass.

'No wonder I feel so queasy,' my father says.

And on to the hairdresser's shop and past the village pub. Always his hesitation, here. His longing to dare enter. With a slight touch of his elbow, as if it were my temptation from which he had to dissuade me, we move on to the window of the drugstore. We pause. Always his questions.

'Do you need a hair dryer? Or should we get a new heating pad?'

But these questions come later when I am a student in Hamburg visiting my parents. Here I am eleven, young enough to sit through his stories and accompany him on his walk without opposition, curious to learn about my father and ennobled by his demand for my presence, confused, though, by expectations and meanings that exceed my capacity.

About here, as we leave the drugstore behind, the story begins.

Father is a radio operator. He has been drafted into the war right after his third semester at medical school. It is his first war year. He is in Greece with his unit. Compared to his stories about Russia these times seem golden. Enough to eat, alcohol and cigarettes always at hand. And it is warm. I see the chamber under the narrow corrugated iron roof. Military desks, the simple kind, made from steel. It is night. He is on duty, reading the incoming Morse-coded messages, and passing them on to his lieutenant, the urgent ones; he makes a note of the others in the book for incoming messages and hands them over in the morning to the next officer on duty. I see him stepping out into the night to catch a cool breeze and have a cigarette, leaving the office clerk inside. A woman. Is she Greek? I imagine a dark-haired woman in her late twenties with slightly careworn features. At other times I cannot see her at all, or perhaps just her back. The radio equipment chatters. My father steps back inside to find the nameless woman at the radio reading a message, her back turned towards him. She rips the tape off and holds it in her hands. She lets it disappear. Does she burn it? Throw it in the trash can? How does he tell? I cannot remember. The words weigh so heavily, his story is told so hastily and driven by forces over which he is about to lose control. He doesn't want to, but he has to finish the story. It demands its well deserved ending. Suspicious he is, here, but not yet alarmed. But I must have been. Otherwise I would remember, wouldn't I?

He fishes the tape out of the trash can, the ash tray, the drawer, in to which she has pushed it in panic. He realizes it is a strategically important order. He raises his eyes, meets hers and immediately recognizes the enemy. The enemy of the German Reich, the war criminal, la femme de resistance. He feels torn. He could finally win respect from the authorities by demonstrating faithfulness. He could become the eternal hero in this woman's life by showing mercy. Both ends seem immensely rewarding. He trembles for seconds. And alerts his lieutenant. I hear the pride in his voice, the pride of the righteous one. And now also and painfully perceptible the alarm, the fear. He is afraid of me, his daughter, the involuntary witness, who, tangled up in shame, longs to make herself invisible, turn the clock back and start all over again so that he does not need to be afraid of me.

We are far beyond Sperlings Pond and onto the alley between the orderly houses of the Schmidts', the Beckers' and the Schneiders', where father and I used to secretly steal each fall, with our plotted gangster glances, some asters off the stems that protrude from between the wired fences. Here, it blurts out of me.

'What happened to the woman?'

'No idea. Probably death sentence. They showed no mercy back then.'

They.

Back then.

Silence.

His averted body, the head slightly bent forward under his felt hat. The hat Anne Beyer, my classmate, used to joke about, because he lifts it whenever he encounters one of those well respected members of the community. Those a decade younger than he, the lucky ones who had been too young to get involved in the bloody business of war. His body posture commands that I forget. And I will forget as eagerly as I will listen at school tomorrow when Miss Polinski will feed us more of the gruesome deeds of those Nazi thugs. My fear of losing his closeness turns me into his willing accomplice in our joint mission to widen the gap between him and history. History is something that happens to others. And, walking through the silence emerging from that gap, we turn back onto Birkenstrasse. (ALSOP, n.d.) [44]

What becomes obvious in BOYM's as well as in my memory, is yet another dialectic that auto-/ethnographers have to tackle. It is the dialectic between the personal and the cultural. That dialectic is the purpose as well as the challenge of our work, a challenge as a language is lacking that captures both levels, the personal and the cultural. Auto-/ethnographers who set themselves the task of relating cultures are boundary walkers: they crisscross between the boundaries of being home and away, of being insider and outsider, of being personal and cultural selves. There is nothing more difficult than this back and forth between ways of living, speaking, thinking and feeling. There is nothing more risky than switching between various identities and practices of estrangement. We expose ourselves, we make ourselves vulnerable and we are constantly in danger of remaining on one side of the border:

- Getting personal for the sake of getting personal,
- Sticking to the aloof criteria of being objective,
- Circling our ego or, at the other extreme, circling the "other" without getting any further (see BEHAR 1996, ELLIS & BOCHNER 2001). [45]

However, it is at those crossroads, at the bottom of these difficult paradoxes, I believe, that we have a chance at understanding. [46]

6. Conclusion

Having outlined both the necessity as well as the risks of becoming personal when relating cultures, the question remains: How can this particular form of self-reflexivity—the auto-ethnographic account—be practiced? [47]

In order to answer this question I first have to re-define what it means to practice ethnography. According to EMERSON, FRETZ and SHAW (1995, pp.2ff) the ethnographer in the field gets to know people and participates in their daily routines while regularly excluding herself to reflect by creating written records of others' lives. This immersion leads to some degree of re-socialization. The ethnographer tries to connect the personal life of the observed with their social context and their culture without ever becoming an insider herself. In a way the ethnographer learns a new language but speaks it with an accent. No matter how fluent she feels, she will never blend in completely (see ROTH & HAMARA 2000). The others will always hear the accent both in the literal sense of the word and in the metaphorical sense of remaining an outsider, because the connection between the personal and the cultural is constructed and re-constructed. The daily interactions happen against the background of a different horizon that can only partially overlap with the new one. [48]

The same can be said for the auto-ethnographer, be that the anthropologist who goes native (see KENNY 2000), the social scientist of any provenance (see the historian EKSTEINS 1999) or the auto-biographer (i.e. CHERNIN, 1983). Presenting ourselves and our own culture with a re-defined version of itself changes our language, widens our horizon and makes us an outsider to those we re-visit. We find ourselves re-socialized. [49]

The auto-ethnographer's self-reflexivity comes into play at various levels:

- on the level of the actual ethnographic fieldwork, be that away or at home;
- in the process of writing, both in order to transform the multi-channeled experience to the linear mode of the written language, as well as to translate from one experiential world to the other; and
- in the process of discovery, in the state of creative uncertainty that is present throughout all phases of the research process. [50]

EMERSON et al. (1995, p.27) recommend that in the process of ethnographic fieldwork we should take notes, particularly when events run counter to our expectations, when events excite, shock, anger us, or cause feelings of isolation and alienation. It is in those events that our inner compass fails and we are inclined to refer to our original template for meaning and explanation. Consequently it is in those moments that auto-ethnographic work is needed. [51]

When I first moved to the US, I was not only shocked by the fact that the death penalty is still a legally practiced form of judicial punishment but also by the approval this form of punishment meets at all levels of society. I felt threatened by this cultural practice to a degree that surprised me. It was my look back home, my connecting my personal background with the cultural framework in which I grew up that allowed me to understand the roots of those feelings (see above, and see ALSOP, n.d.). [52]

All ethnographic writing transforms the multi-channeled real life experience into the linear form of the written record. Many things happen in the course of this transformation which lend themselves to auto-ethnographic reflection. I will focus on the inner censorship and the envisioned audience here. This inner censorship can relate to our real or imagined ideal of the proper scientist incarnate, the one who knows it all and has it all. The categories of the good and the bad, the objective and the subjective, the fact and the fiction—all the categories we acquired over the course of our academic training—come along in various impersonations. And we are engaged in an inner dialogue with them while deleting sentences and denying ourselves certain thoughts while others are celebrated and underlined (see ALSOP 2001). And last but not least there is the invisible audience, a significant person or a group of significant people we unconsciously or consciously dedicate our work to. We write for them, we converse with them while writing. RICHARDSON refers to this form of reflexivity as writing-stories or microprocess writing-stories (2001, pp.931f.). [53]

Reflecting on his work as a member of a study panel SHWEDER (1997, p.162) concludes that the central criteria for funding research should be the process of discovery and the creative uncertainty. It is the dormant, the unknown emotional and cognitive structures that are activated in ethnographic fieldwork because of our lack of anticipation, because our inner compass fails us. To unveil these structures is what the auto-/ethnographer is striving for. Post-modernism taught us that when researching we are engaging in a continual co-creation of self and social sciences. "Knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges" (RICHARDSON, 2000, p.929). [54]

In this article I attempted to show one way of being self-reflexive: the look back home. The Turkish psychologist Aydan GULERCE (as in STAEUBLE 2001, p.4) puts it this way: Once "the West has gained sufficient self-reflexivity to prevent further patronizing and the rest of the world has gained sufficient self-assertion for emancipation, we can hope for a genuine intercultural interchange." [55]

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Author

Christiane K. ALSOP works as an adjunct teacher at Lesley University's Graduate Program for Intercultural Relations and as a freelance writer. Her academic interests are interdisciplinary, spanning theoretical and methodological studies in the social sciences to intergenerational and intercultural communication. She has done research in the area of the meaning of objects, places and rituals and the social psychology of love and relationships. She is currently working on an auto-ethnography about the relationship between World War II participants and the second generation.

Contact

Christiane K. Alsop, Ph.D.

Lesley University
GSAS – Program for Intercultural
Relations
29 Everett Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
U.S.A.

Email: christiane@alsop.com

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