

20 Home and Away: Self-reflexive Auto/Ethnography

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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 introduce one attempt at connecting 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 provide a description of those two states to open up various dimensions of their meanings.

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, at the familiar that—when viewed from a distance—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 (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). In the latter part of this chapter 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.

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 (Braun et al., 1993; Kluge, 1995).

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, 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 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.

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." 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. However, hostile reactions to the foreign are not to be found at its roots.

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. The frightened child, however, will cling to her caretaker and stick to the familiar, unable to further her development (Ainsworth, 1979; Boesch, 1991).

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,