

CDTLI Workshop Report

Writing the Self: Incorporating Autoethnography across Disciplines

Shampa Biswas (Coordinator)

Inspired by the feminist slogan “the personal is political”, the aim of this workshop was to explore the integration of self-reflective writing into our teaching and scholarship in ways that are both rigorous and creative. We read work that explored “autoethnography” as method as well as a series of works (including by members of the group) that exemplified different forms of writing the personal as political. In a session devoted exclusively to the exploration of creative writing, we finished our semester-long project by working closely with two visiting writers.

The workshop generated some intense discussions and occasionally sharp disagreements, but also provided an opportunity for faculty from many different disciplines to work through (without necessarily resolving) some quite complicated questions related to thinking about privilege and voice, the forms of presuppositions and preconceptions underlying different modes of deliberation and interaction, the importance of subject-positioning in personal and professional work, and the possibilities of dialogue in working through various kinds of tensions in connecting the self to others. For me, all these questions reiterated the importance of engaging with self-reflective writing in ways that are honest and productive. As may be expected, there were a few consistent themes that workshop participants raised and grappled with throughout the semester: how to distinguish and disrupt the possibility of self-reflective writing lapsing into self-indulgence; the uses and pitfalls of different disciplinary forms of storytelling; ways to incorporate analysis and critical thinking into self-reflection; and productive and enabling means to move away from self-centeredness and toward “worlding” the self (as relational and connected). I was quite moved by workshop participants’ willingness to discuss the challenges that their different disciplines and subject matters posed to the incorporation of the personal as political, and the generous insights offered by colleagues to deal with those challenges. Our two visiting writers also helped generate a wonderful and enlightening conversation on form and aesthetics, on the process of writing and editing, and on different kinds of writing techniques and exercises. As seen in the individual reports below, most participants came away with very concrete ideas for incorporating some of the ideas and materials generated during the course of these discussions into their courses, and some were inspired to try out new forms of pedagogy and scholarly writing.

I personally benefitted a great deal from this workshop. I have been experimenting with a very particular kind of self-reflective writing – the development of a “critical inventory” - in one of my seminars and left the semester with some very specific ideas on how to improve that assignment, as well as create new kinds of similar assignments more appropriate for my introductory courses. In addition, I am interested in playing more with form in my own writing. I am scheduled to serve on a roundtable on the challenges of incorporating narrative approaches into the scholarship of international politics at a forthcoming conference, and hope to use some of what I learned in this workshop in my presentation.

Melisa Casumbal

In my experience, the workshop clearly achieved the goal of facilitating thoughtful cross-disciplinary conversation on how auto-ethnographic writing can be incorporated into courses in Politics, Anthropology, History, English, and Composition. As an inquiry into how “Writing the Self” can be approached in a trans-disciplinary way in scholarship and teaching, the CDLT was an unequivocal success.

I plan to incorporate several of the texts we read into my course syllabi, as they model brilliantly the ways in which auto-ethnographic writing can function as grounded political analysis and critique. Fatema Mernissi’s “Size 6: The Western Woman’s Harem” and Kiese Laymon’s *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* will both be added to my syllabus for POL 100: Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Politics of the Body. I am also considering the possibility of adding a Sorayya Khan piece to my POL 236: Concepts of the Political in Southeast Asia syllabus, and excerpts of the Laymon text to my POL 351: Necropower and the Politics of Violence syllabus.

As a consequence of our cross-disciplinary discussion of various models for students’ “writing of the self,” I also plan to incorporate into all my classes at least one auto-ethnographic writing assignment. This writing assignment will vary in its focus from class to class. For POL 100, the focus will likely be on having students write a phenomenology of their experiences as a raced, gendered, and sexualized body. For POL 236 and POL 337: Globalizing Southeast Asia, the focus will likely be on having students track how their pre-constituted, “common sense” knowledge of Southeast Asia alters over the duration of the course, and how they can situate Southeast Asia as an “absent presence” in the material and symbolic economies of their everyday lives. For POL 351, the focus will likely be on having students track how their understanding of violence evolves over the duration of the course, while also encouraging reflection upon how certain modalities of violence are rendered hypervisible, invisible, or unapproachable in their everyday lives. The courses I teach often deal with content that can be “emotionally triggering” (i.e., racism, gendered violence, mass killing), or with content that is distant from students’ personal experience (i.e., Southeast Asia). Thus my aspiration, and challenge, is to make auto-ethnographic writing an opportunity for students to situate themselves as vulnerable beings in the course material in ways that are both safe, and that push them to exceed the horizon of their imagination of difference.

Lydia McDermott

I think that overall this workshop was successful in encouraging both creative approaches to teaching difficult material as well as in sparking our own innovations in the writing of our scholarship. I also enjoyed the personal connections we made with faculty across disciplines, and hope we can continue to foster these relationships.

This workshop has provided me with valuable information as both a professor and the Director of the Writing Center. Currently, I teach composition courses that I hope to make valuable to students across disciplines. Learning from my colleagues about the challenges they face in incorporating personal writing in their own scholarship as well as their concerns about grading such writing from students helps me to better understand my students who are majoring in their fields. I generally incorporate some kind of “genre analysis” assignment in composition courses and in my tutor-training course. I would like to focus the students’ attention more on the issue of

the personal within political writing. When is it acceptable to offer personal experience? When is it not? Why? I may consider asking some representative professors (such as the participants in this workshop) to visit my class to offer their perspectives on this issue. As the Director of the Writing Center, this workshop sparked my interest in trying to form a reading/writing group for faculty interested in writing pedagogy. I have not yet fully planned this, but I will be pursuing this in the coming year.

Suzanne Morrissey

In my original proposal to participate in the CDTLI on “Writing the Personal,” I expressed the following: “Since [teaching in the Writing Across the Disciplines program at Cornell University in 2008], I have been committed to exposing students to creative forms of academic writing, working with students to approach their own writing in creative (e.g., self-reflective) ways, and asking the same of myself. (In fact, I am presenting a paper on ethics and autoethnography at the Society for Applied Anthropology Meetings in March 2014.) While these represent teaching and learning goals that I embrace, I do not feel adequately prepared to operationalize them in my classes at Whitman. Participation in this CDTLI will help focus my attention on relevant texts in a context of productive dialogue with my peers so that I can make desired changes to my syllabi.”

Broadly, I can in fact say that the group gave me tools for innovations in the classroom to expand students’ exposure to and “play” with multiple writing styles as well as new ways to be reflexive in my own scholarly writing. Along the way, the group agreed to read methodological and creative works in the genre of autoethnography (particularly relevant to my discipline of anthropology and central to my questions and challenges in teaching and producing creative academic writing). By reading along with me works that are central to my own teaching and learning, group members were incredibly helpful in interpreting ideas from their own disciplinary backgrounds and expertise, and relating them to the combined goals of becoming better writing instructors and better writers ourselves. In addition, I was given opportunities to present and receive feedback on a very personal piece that I did, indeed, present at the SfAA Meetings in March. With the group’s support and encouragement, I wrote something that felt both rigorous in its ties to theoretical work in medical anthropology on the embodiment of illness and satisfying on a personal level, allowing me to connect to my audience and consider the ethics of self-exposure in ethnographic research. Group members suggested attention to the themes of vulnerability, responsibility to research participants, and the ways in which autoethnography can destabilize the language of social sciences (possible in ways different than in fiction, which *assumes* a degree of vulnerability already in its making). Moreover, I was introduced to the ways my writing could benefit from considering/reconsidering the works of Temple Grandin, Margery Wolf, Olive Sacks, Melanie Thernstrom, and Jeffery Berman.

To launch our semester-long meetings, I led the group in discussion of authoethnography: what it is, how it has the potential to produce narratives of proximity to connect subject to audience in productive ways, why it can be used to contest hierarchies of power in the representation of others, and what shortcomings of the genre have been identified. The process of reading and preparing for this discussion represented an important step for me: to stop talking about the potential value of authoethnography in my classrooms and in my scholarly work, and begin

moving in the direction of actually doing something with it. Simply put, without the group interest, shared goals and encouragement, I would have remained in a state of inaction. Instead, outcomes were produced.

First, I have a completed conference paper that is ready to be expanded, perhaps, as a book chapter or stand-alone article. And, second, I have concrete teaching tools for course development. To this end, certain group sessions were particularly helpful. One of the most informative and inspiring involved visiting writers Sorayya Khan and Everett Maroon. Through their candid descriptions of the ups and downs of their own writing as well as through reading their *process* (e.g., Everett walked us through various draft stages of a piece, from early journal entry to the final published product), we were handed lessons on choosing and teaching subject, genre, audience and engagement. I found the visitors as well as other group members tremendously helpful in thinking about constructive failure (that is, writing through a draft process that gives the author permission to accept necessary revisions on a “journey toward focus” and reconceptualizing the narrative), and pushing students to realize that even when they think they are representing a reality objectively, they are still present in their writing; therefore, it is our responsibility to get them to ask, “who are we *before* we write” and how does that affect *how* we write? In practical terms, Sorayya and Everett presented ideas for the classroom including: writing across genre exercises; teaching students to focus less on how they place “I” in their writing and more on verb choice, working toward fuller description and concrete movement in narrative (i.e., “participating in the action rather than simply observing it”); exercises in which they “write themselves” in the 3rd person to see themselves as characters; encouraging (perhaps requiring) multiple drafts of pieces and including peer-to-peer workshops to teach sharing and responding; work on giving students an audience *other than* the professor and having them write what they enjoy reading most (e.g., if they love reading poetry, have them write poetry); and, rather than actually correcting every grammatical error (which becomes impossibly onerous and time-consuming, especially with larger classes), flag sentences where errors occur and offer general comments at the end of each draft.

Thinking about writing – my own or how I teach it – often occupies my mind. That said, I need encouragement to produce it and effectively integrate it into my syllabi. Participation in the writing CDTLI meant that I spent time reading *about* writing, reading *good* writing, having fascinating and fruitful discussions with my peers about how to teach content and writing simultaneously, and actually writing myself. Indeed, I left the group with concrete ways to enjoy the creative process of writing (rather than approaching it with dread), and how to design writing assignments that are much more than stand-alone projects but rather, innovative ways to have students insert themselves in the critical review of course material as well as consider their relationship to the production of knowledge.

Katrina Roberts

I’m grateful to Shampa Biswas for initiating inquiry into the possibility of cross-disciplinary learning, and for inviting me in. I found the workshop’s dual premise – to explore the potential of incorporating the creative into the critical, and to examine the political in the context of the personal – to be both engaging and ambitious; given the cross-disciplinary nature of all creative writing classes, however, this idea/project felt extremely familiar from the outset, for versions of these goals lie at the heart of almost every exercise we assign in writing classes. Throughout the

term, the conversation seemed more one concerning navigating the “validity” of content and perspective in writing (both student and scholarly), rather than an open-minded study of methodology into how writers introduce the personal through creative approaches. I did, though, very much appreciate Suzanne Morrissey’s introduction of “Autoethnography: An Overview” and her perspectives on the potential power of sharing personal experience while writing about the illnesses of others; I also greatly valued Lydia McDermott’s generosity in sharing her provocative and resonant piece addressing drug-use and class.

In our discussions, discipline-specific distinctions in approach quickly became evident; it seemed participants in non-humanities disciplines were struck especially by the visiting novelist’s emphasis on both “telling” *and* “showing,” and by the potential impact of introducing this (and other) creative writing tactics into critical courses; this CDTL study reaffirmed to me the potential (and significant) benefits of having creative writing classes open to students in all disciplines. If non-humanities professors were to invite creative writers (both colleagues and visitors) into their classrooms for future collaborations, I can imagine similarly fruitful connections across disciplines occurring. I appreciated Soraya Khan’s visit, and found that group members were receptive to the sorts of exercises/approaches (resembling those we assign routinely in creative writing classes on campus) -- which leads me to believe that should colleagues want to incorporate creative writing into their critical courses, there might be opportunities for rich cross-disciplinary teaching, though I felt no direct nor immediate connections for specific future plans for such collaboration emerging from our time together this term. Courses in the writing of poetry, composition, the lyric essay, hybrid forms, etc. routinely address issues of interweaving the political and personal across the bounds of discipline, and there’s a wide body/genre of existing creative literature that might be more-fully integrated into critical courses; additionally, it could be interesting to consider how we as colleagues might team-teach courses in creative writing to address specific content or themes (as our Special Studies in Craft courses already welcome) that would enrich courses in non-humanities disciplines – such that, for instance, team-taught courses in writing “the poetry of illness” or “political poetry” might emerge. I would welcome discussion about these possibilities.

Elyse Semerdjian

In our discussions of “Writing the Self” within the CDLTI group, I found myself able to explore more tangibly the ways in which I could bridge subjective and academic writing in my own teaching and writing. My discipline has a strong aversion to subjective forms of writing, yet after this workshop, I am far more aware of the few historians who are using the “I” in their writing. This discovery, along with our readings that ranged from the subject of women who love their dogs to the poetry of Iraqi war veterans has given me confidence to experiment more with this as a scholar and instructor. The best forum for this kind of experimental writing would be my History 325 “Women and Gender in Islam” course where I have already used a “critical inventory” assignment. I have some ideas about how to better use this tool in my classroom, to create a more sustained discussion of the ways in which knowledge about the Middle East—and particularly our understanding of Middle Eastern women as oppressed, veiled, and generic Other to the Western woman—is a discourse in which we all participate. Reading articles within which authors play with subjectivity, as well as the session in which we all shared a piece of our own subjective writing was particularly enlightening. If anything, I wanted to read more texts with my colleagues rather than finish the project in May.

In our last discussion on writing pedagogy, I was able to think about yet another writing tool - a staggered paper writing assignment that I have used in my 400-level course. This assignment demands that students set a writing agenda early on in the semester and submit a draft paper mid-semester. This drafting tool, although not directly related to the “writing the self” project, if revised, could create multiple stages of writing and rewriting the same project throughout a one semester span. The rewriting of a longer project in stages could produce a better final product as well as create a feedback loop between me and the students to improve on paper writing. I plan on developing a rubric for this assignment and sharing it with participants.