



Freedman, Diane, and Olivia Frey, eds. *Autobiographical Writing Across the Disciplines: A Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. 487 pp. ISBN 0822332132, \$24.95.

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The last dozen years have witnessed a growing trend toward autobiographical academic writing. Dianne Freedman and Olivia Frey, in a previous book with Frances Murphy Zauhar on autobiographical literary criticism, questioned “the place and impact of autobiography and subjectivity” in other scholarly fields. This led to the current edited volume, which consists of 26 chapters and spans three decades. The contributors represent the humanities, social, behavioral and natural sciences, and mathematics and range in discipline from literature and law, history and art history, religion, music, film, and philosophy, ethnic studies and anthropology to psychology, biology, mathematics and medicine.

Freedman and Frey intend to explore relations between subjectivity and life history in the work of these scholars and how “autobiographical knowing directly challenges the methods of the fields and institutions in which the writers work” (p. 2). While writing as an autobiographical self, each of the writers, they maintain, is “socially situated, commenting on a larger group, time and place” (p. 4). Far be it from engaging in solipsism, the writers, they suggest, are reaching out more fully to their readers by acknowledging that “the examined object reflects the examining subject” (p. 4). This connects them more closely not only to their objects of study but to their readers. Freedman and Frey admit that there is nothing new here, that this is a discourse that has deep roots in feminist and black scholarship, post-modernism, reader-response criticism. Not mentioned, but of special relevance to anthropologists, are its early post-colonial roots in reflexive writings by Marxist critics like Stanley Diamond and Talal Asad in the 1960s and 1970s.

In this volume the editors invite “other means of knowing, trusting other facets of ourselves, however suspect...” (p. 14). At stake here are deep epistemological questions that challenge the Cartesian divide and demand a reintegration of oneself into questions of knowing about the world. The various writers in their own ways question the detachment, objectivity and extirpation of self demanded by the *objectivist* perspective and the authoritative outside expert that, the editors explain, have pervaded higher education in the United States since its beginnings. They argue that while the writers of this volume may forfeit *objectivism*, they gain a “strong objectivity” that involves a



reflexive accounting and sharing by the researcher of the contextual shapings of the knowledge and the personal interplay with what is studied (p. 33). For critical natural scientists this means an appreciation of science as a human activity and a rejection of the mainstream public view that science is the “objective...verification of ‘fact’”

(p. 28).

The Cartesian battles are far from over; indeed, they are constantly resurfacing. Those in the academy affected by the demands of learning assessments tied to “objective” instruments of time-fixed “outcome” measures can attest to this fact. Seymour Papert’s contribution to the volume astutely comments on the failings of such instruments. Consider as well Naomi Weisstein’s piece, which discusses her marginalized career as a promising research psychologist. Upon arriving at Harvard, her professor announced, “Women don’t belong in graduate school.” Who would have guessed that almost fifty years later Harvard President Larry Summers would place genetic limitations over discrimination to explain women’s continued dim presence in the sciences? Make no mistake, in today’s political climate, “hard” facts and objectivism exert a muscle that serves to exclude, eliminate, and withdraw resources and advantage from those least positioned to oppose its consequences. *That is why this book is so important.*

The editors put together a volume of excellent contributions. However, they organized the book along disciplinary categories, which they reject, in order to “beg the question” (p. 2). Thus, after reading the volume, I was left frustrated as to how to connect the contributions beyond their shared autobiographical content and anti-positivist leaning, and where their possible linkages and departures might lie. I also wondered whether changes may have occurred between the time a piece was written and the present. For example, since Perri Klass’s chapter was written in 1987, had consumerism become a force against using technology in birthing, or did it preserve or even strengthen its use? I wondered further how much each speaker stood alone or represented a larger movement within her discipline. If the latter, what were the contexts of its emergence and its intellectual threads? By ignoring these issues, the editors miss, I fear, an opportunity to explore deeper intellectual connections and divides as well as the potential social implications of the combined challenges of the contributions.

The writers from their various disciplinary perspectives address similar concerns. What have been the implications of ignoring these concerns? How do their concerns fare next to objectivist discourses that continue to pervade academic and public discourses in ways that oppress and disempower? It is these issues that link many of the contributions and require further theorizing.

In her foreword, Ruth Behar states the concern that we have reached a time when personal voices may once again be regarded as “irrelevant” or “frivolous” and the detached authoritative voice of the past may become prominent again. It is for this reason that a volume like this is immensely important today. With so many voices from



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so many disciplines holding similar concerns, there lies the potential for productively pulling their intelligence and making a forceful claim for the broad relevance of their common insights. This holds hope as well to defeat the return of the bemoaned objectivist epistemologies and their potential damage.

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