

Book Reviews

Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies edited by Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney. Utah State University Press, 2021. 230 pp.

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While ethnography and autoethnography are subjects often covered in qualitative research manuals and mostly in social sciences, *Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies* is, to my knowledge, the first book entirely devoted to autoethnography (literally translated to self+culture+writing) in the discipline of writing studies. It is essential reading if one is interested not only in writing autoethnography but in learning more about how this research method is grounded epistemologically in writing studies as a field. Divided into three parts with a thorough critical introduction, the book aims to “define and explain autoethnography as both a method of inquiry and a genre of writing . . . [showcasing] autoethnography as both a research process and product” (3). In other words, the book contains models of the genre as well as writing about autoethnography both as a research method and as a teaching tool.

As a researcher who writes autoethnography and a teacher who assigns the genre, I was keenly interested in seeing how the editors would position it in writing studies. The critical introduction serves as a guide to the form’s evolution, providing both history and several definitions of autoethnography, focusing primarily on analytic and evocative autoethnography. The history is comprehensive, including explorations of other narrative genres, such as autobiographies and other self-reflexive work. Most important for the framing of the book, they define writing studies autoethnography as a form in which “the author writes from personal experiences within writing/writing studies”; “the author uses an inductive, qualitative approach for project design, data collection, and analysis”; “the author writes in conversation with other texts”; and “the author writes back or intervenes in a cultural narrative or conversation” (11). The key element that distinguishes this form from other autoethnographies is the first criterion: writing from within writing/writing studies. This includes “personal experiences with(in) the discipline or practices related to language and representation, literacy, writing, teaching writing, studying writing/writers, being a writer; and/or other related experiences at the heart of the study” (11). It is easy to see how the sample autoethnographies and other work in the book fall under this definition.

Part 1 contains six autoethnographies, each demonstrating a different way of melding research, personal narrative, and cultural analysis or critique. For

instance, in “Her Own Voice: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder,” Tiffany Rainey provides a personal narrative interspersed with scholarly contextualization in a vignette-style piece; she calls on other rhetoricians to write about their experiences with mental health and/or disability stigma and to use autoethnography as their research method. In Chapter 2, Shereen Inayatulla writes what she calls a “vulnerable auto*myth*nography,” which employs “autobiography, literacy narrative, myth, and embroidered memories” (45). Inayatulla’s writing is nearly all personal narrative—it’s self-professed goal is storytelling, with very little scholarly intervention. Her piece is a good example of autoethnography’s investigation of brown, queer, Muslim cultural practices. Like Rainey, Inayatulla’s autoethnography “centers the body as a site of knowledge production” (45). Rebecca Hallman Martini, in Chapter 3, neatly weaves scholarship into narrative in her chapter, “When Things Fall Apart,” which she classifies as an evocative autoethnography. She “uses personal experience to understand the intersections of labor conditions, mental health, and activism among graduate students in writing studies” (58). For Martini, examining the intersection of personal and academic opens space for broader understandings of the discipline of Writing Studies. This holds true for the remaining chapters in the section. Readers will find an autoethnographic study of a student in Leslie Akts’ piece, a collaborative autoethnography written by Elena Garcia and her father, and another autoethnographic teaching project in Chapter 6 by Soyeon Lee. While diverse in their presentation of information, all of them write from within writing studies and fulfill the criteria for writing studies autoethnography as defined by the editors in their introduction.

In Part 2, readers encounter five essays that make arguments for teaching autoethnography in a variety of contexts, all writing studies related. In Chapter 7, we learn about an assignment in a two-year college in Kristen Higgins, Anthony Wanke, and Marcie Sims’ essay. They argue that teaching autoethnography to their students is social justice work in its pedagogy and assessment, and they appreciate how it “emphasizes creativity, self-study, and narrative techniques [that] becom[e] a tool for our students to explore their identities in tension with the cultural narratives that contribute to the self or perception of the self” (117). In Chapter 8, Amanda Sladek also teaches an autoethnographic assignment to marginalized students: multilingual writers. The literacy autoethnography she teaches allows students “to explore their communities through their own lenses and using their own Englishes” (126). Chapter 9 describes a graduate student autoethnography. Written by Sue Doe and her students Kira Marshall-McKelvey, Ross Atkinson, Caleb Gonzalez, Lilly Halboth, and Jennifer Owen, it describes an autoethnographic approach the goal of which is to “represent and empower voices of graduate students who worked alongside faculty members and informed that faculty member of the

experiences of those on the margins (and beginnings) of disciplinary identity development” (136). William Duffy, in Chapter 10, provides a discussion of autoethnography to tell the stories of the discipline. Lastly, in this section, Trixie Smith contributes a “collage essay” (159) describing how autoethnography has been used by the National Writing Project.

Arguably, the most compelling section is the last, where readers get a chance to see autoethnography “extended” to places where we, perhaps, have not experienced it before. These include black women’s slave narratives and other writing as autoethnography in Louis Maraj’s chapter. He argues that the way these women analyze culture means they were writing autoethnography and that attention should be called to these texts where “intersections with culture laid the groundwork for a Black and Black feminist tradition of autoethnography in the fields of rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies” (176). Importantly, Maraj is interested in how these autoethnographies demonstrate the blurry line between creative and analytical (176). In Chapter 13, “Writing With Not About: Constellating Stories in Autoethnography,” John Gagnon calls upon a “native/Indigenous paradigm” (188). He posits a cultural studies theory of constellating or constellational autoethnography, that which focuses on “presently describing encounters, the dynamics of those encounters, and attending to the other forces at work that manifest in each encounter” (189). Like native or Indigenous writing, Gagnon’s constellating autoethnography demonstrates that “stories are what we are” (191). Autumn Laws, in Chapter 14, also pushes autoethnography to new territory, as she uses disability, Chicana, and queer lenses to argue for “models of disability autoethnographies that resist traditional writing techniques” and “resist the dominant narratives in writing studies” that are traditionally “white-supremacist and heteronormative” (200). In the last chapter, readers are brought into the multi-modal realm when Alison Cardinal, Melissa Atienza, and Aliyah Jones reflect on experiences, affordances, and constraints of using participatory video as a research method. They describe “the power of participatory video as an autoethnographic method to cocreate knowledge” about literacy (211).

According to the editors, while there are many ways into autoethnography, no book exists that defines autoethnography in writing studies as a discipline, until now. The book explores autoethnography from a variety of perspectives, in a diversity of places, and from a wide range of voices. *Self+Culture+Writing* serves as a resource manual to the genre, an argument for why we need autoethnographies in writing studies, and an example of how they make meaning in the discipline.

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