

*Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies*, edited by Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney. Utah State University Press, 2021. 238 pp.

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A new method of qualitative research that takes into account the personal experiences and insight of researchers, called autoethnography, is gradually gaining more acceptance in academia. Autoethnography has been defined in a variety of ways. For example, Carolyn Ellis, et al. define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (273). Robin M. Boylorn defines it “as a way to talk about embodied, critical, and culturally situated research that begins and/or ends at home, in the bodies we live in, the people we live with, and the social circumstances we live through” (46). Autumn Laws, one of the writers featured in *Self+Culture+Writing*, defines it as “the ways the blending of theoretical scholarship and personal narrative can bring about new ways of thinking about cultures and those within them” (199). In this collection, editors Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney present a range of forms of autoethnography, thereby revealing the potential applications of the genre in research. The ambitious goal of the editors is to “define and explain autoethnography (translated literally as self+culture+writing) as both a method of inquiry and a genre of writing” (3). Acknowledging the social and cultural context of the researcher as well as the participants in the research is the key factor in setting autoethnography apart from other forms of qualitative research. As one of the contributors, John T. Gagnon, writes, “By acknowledging researcher stories and positionalities through the deployment of autoethnographic approaches in our research, we can draw meaningful lines of connectivity between researchers and participants” (188). The chapters in this collection effectively represent not only different ways of writing autoethnographies but also the disparate ways each researcher utilizes the genre to argue for more inclusive and just research practices in academia and in society at large.

One of the appeals of writing an autoethnography is the opportunity to use a wide array of methods. While this is a great opportunity for writers, the wide range of possible methodologies is one of the criticisms of the genre. To address this issue, the authors of each chapter in the collection preface their research with an explanation of their methodology, “discussing how they conducted their autoethnography and what they see as defining characteristics of autoethnography in writing studies” (16). The prefaces are especially helpful

for students who have an idea about writing an autoethnography but are not sure about how to go about doing it. Reading these prefaces can give them ideas to start with and encourage them to devise their own methodologies using the prefaces as a starting point.

In the introduction, the editors identify what differentiates autoethnography from other genres such as personal narrative and autobiography (even though autoethnography shares generic qualities with both). The editors trace the beginnings of the genre to Zora Neale Hurston's work among the African American communities she lived in during the 1930s. Hurston's *Of Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) can be considered proto-autoethnographies due to the manner in which she conducted her research. The editors also cite scholars such as Arthur Bochner, Louis Maraj, and Heewon Chang for generating expansive, though not limitless, characteristics that qualify research as an autoethnography. Indeed, as the editors point out, the definition of autoethnography threatens to become so wide that the term can become useless (11). For instance, in distinguishing an autoethnography from what can be considered merely autoethnographic, they write, "autoethnography not only engages *self* and *culture* but is situated firmly within the qualitative tradition...an autoethnography is research study" (12). The collection is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on writing studies ethnographies, which are written by faculty, graduate students, and a writing studies researcher (16). The second part presents arguments related to teaching autoethnographies. In the final part, the writers challenge traditional approaches to autoethnographies while also positing alternative ways and purposes of doing more "inclusive, nuanced, and media rich" autoethnographies (19).

Part one features six chapters with an overall theme of writing from marginalized spaces. Writing outside of the safe and traditional confines of academic discourse, the autoethnographies in this section expose academia, particularly writing programs, and the politics and economics involved in them. For instance, in "When Things Fall Apart," Rebecca Hallman writes, "Graduate student overwork and exploitation are not new. It's how English Departments and universities work. It's part of our culture" (69). Autoethnography allowed the writers featured in this part the opportunity to mix their insightful scholarship with their personal story with honesty and passion, the opposite of traditional forms of research that emphasize a dispassionate methodology. Tiffany Rainey writes, "Autoethnography allowed me to investigate rather than look" (42). Additionally, part one also features a collaborative effort between a working-class father and graduate student daughter that helped highlight the workings of power and the feeling of powerlessness felt by the working-class workers of a food company. The writers in this first third of the volume dispense with the linear, overcoming narrative often expected of academic writers. For

instance, Soyeon Lee admits, “My transnational teaching practice that values global-local dynamics is still fraught with the deficit model [she grew up with]” (105). Thus, while the noble intentions of the writers are prominent in their projects, a relatable sense of vulnerability and uncertainty is also prominent. This, arguably, makes the process of research as insightful and engaging as the findings of the research being conducted.

Part two features five chapters and focuses on how writing studies programs use autoethnographies. Additionally, the chapters in this second part explain and apply evocative, analytic, and literacy forms of autoethnography. The major theme in most of the chapters is how autoethnography helps center the voices and experiences of marginalized students, particularly international students and graduate students. One way this is done is through analyzing the connection between culture and literacy. In “Say What You Want to Say,” Amanda Sladek writes about four international students who wrote about their experiences learning English and/or adjusting to US culture (129). These multilingual students, writing literacy autoethnographies, examined how the impact of learning English in another country affected their lives in the US. The students wrote in their own version of English, “giving them an opportunity to advocate for their own linguistic agency” (126). Another key theme is the applicability of writing autoethnography for teachers as well as students. For instance, in “Collaging the Classroom, the Personal, and the Critical,” Trixie Smith writes regarding the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) of the National Writing Project: “In the ISI, we weren’t just asking teachers to write about their teaching. We were asking them to analyze and theorize their experiences, their beliefs, their lives” (160). Thus, educators used autoethnography not only to explore their academic careers, but also to work through past and present personal experiences (and the attendant inner workings) in a holistic way that makes clear how all aspects of life are connected.

Part three features four chapters that focus on expanding the bounds of what can be considered autoethnography. Louis Maraj writes about how the writings, speeches, and experiences of Black feminists should be considered autoethnography. For instance, in writing about Sojourner Truth, he argues, “By intersecting her African American Vernacular English with the political discourse of her day, Truth reveals how Black feminist autoethnographic texts can critique dominant notions of humanity and dominant language systems that oppress Black women” (181). John T. Gagnon’s “Writing With not About” proposes the practice of constellation autoethnography as “an approach to research that values the identities of the research participants and researcher” through valuing the stories of both parties as an essential component that can “inform the research process, findings from the research, and the presentation of those findings” (189). Gagnon’s chapter on constellation autoethnography

emerges from realizing how his story impacted his participants' interactions and storytelling. Finally, Alison Cardinal et al. consider participatory video as an autoethnographic method in investigating student literacies. They write, "Taking a participatory approach to video data gives both researcher and participants the opportunity to discover different aspects of literacy that composing written autoethnographic text alone does not" (22).

Autoethnography is a genre that uses self-exploration as a launchpad for exploring the world that the self interacts with and finds meaning within. The chapters featured in the collection demonstrate not only how to apply the various forms of autoethnography to research but also the rewarding (and often surprising) realizations that take place during the process of writing and researching. The ultimate reward is often the realization of how much each writers' individual story relates to and sometimes completely contradicts the stories of the participants in their research. Yet, in each case, both parties are changed from the interaction.

This collection will be helpful for students of all levels as well as researchers. The wide range of autoethnographies presented can give students and researchers ideas regarding the potential methodology of their own research. Additionally, the accessible manner in which the chapters are written can potentially give permission for the researcher to write in a creative and more relaxed, even conversational, manner while maintaining rigorous research standards. This collection would be appropriate for research courses for both undergraduate and graduate levels. *Self+Culture+Writing* presents autoethnography as a welcome intervention in the conducting of qualitative research that manages to put the human back into the humanities.

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## Works Cited

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