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## Review: Self+Culture+Writing

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## R E V I E W

**Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies,**  
edited by Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney*Samira Grayson*

From the first page of their introduction to *Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies*, editors Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney are very clear about their reason for writing this book: it didn't exist, and they wanted it to. Although autoethnography has a long and much-discussed history as a research method within the social sciences, the field of writing studies had yet to produce a comprehensive piece of scholarship that explores the possibilities and implications of engaging in autoethnography as both a process and product, as both a research method and genre. As the field of writing studies continues to question how we engage in research, considering how scholars should focus more on RAD (replicable, aggregable, data-supported) research methods instead of relying on narrative, anecdotal evidence, this volume will certainly be of use to scholars interested in how to do both.

The editors present two aims for their collection based on whether the reader is already familiar with autoethnography. For those who've encountered autoethnography before, either by way of personal narrative in writing studies or autoethnography in other disciplines, the editors hope this collection will "inspire new thinking and new questions about teaching, doing, and reading autoethnographies in writing studies" (p. 4). For readers coming to autoethnography for the first time, the collection will "offer solid grounding in autoethnography as a process and product and introduce them to emerging conversations about autoethnography in [writing studies]" (p. 4). The majority of the examples that the contributors give speak to the teaching of autoethnography, which makes this book ideal for graduate students and early professionals in the field of writing studies and writing center work; however, more experienced instructors of writing will also appreciate the

anecdotes, reflections, and questions that the contributors of this collection share.

The collection will also be of interest to writing center tutors and administrators, offering much to think about in terms of how autoethnography can be harnessed as a method when working with student writers. Chapters 7 and 8 both explain how "autoethnography can provide marginalized student writers with an opportunity to work through their relationships with the English language, writing, the academy, and the culture at large" (p. 127) and can be used to make a space for student empowerment and voice (p. 122). Readers who work in writing centers may also find Gagnon's chapter on constellational ethnography particularly useful when thinking about ways student writers and writing center tutors can find "common ground through which meaning can be made" (p. 190).

The introduction provides an overview of autoethnography (research that places self-reflection at the center of cultural analysis) and could work well as assigned background reading in undergraduate and graduate writing courses that are undertaking autoethnographic projects. The editors begin by presenting two competing accounts of the origins of autoethnography, one stemming from the social sciences as a response to the "crisis of representation" in the latter half of the 20th century (p. 4), and the other beginning with Black women writers and speakers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. From here, the editors attempt to offer a complete definition of autoethnography by synthesizing definitions, as well as identifying central components and approaches, from scholars in various disciplines who've written about and "done" autoethnography. Jackson and Grutsch McKinney then detail the two main types of autoethnography: evocative and analytical. Imagined on a scale, evocative autoethnography reads

Review

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Grayson

Review

—  
Grayson

closer to creative nonfiction, while analytical autoethnography aligns more closely with conventional social science writing. The genre is a complicated one, and the book wrestles with where evocative autoethnography in particular belongs in the IMRAD tradition. The editors draw attention to common critiques and questions that are often raised about the methodological rigor of autoethnography and ethics (p. 10), and readers who hold similar reservations to those described in the text will likely appreciate the editors' transparency as they explain that "none of these limitations can be solved, only acknowledged and mitigated" (p. 10).

Finally, the editors move from autoethnography in general to writing studies autoethnography, drawing from existing scholarship to offer four central components of writing studies autoethnography. While these four central components are described in detail, the approach yields a complex definition that may feel at odds with the goal of staking out a nonhazy definition (p. 11). Readers who are fairly new to the idea of using autoethnography in writing studies may be frustrated by the lack of a compact definition that they can refer back to or provide to their undergraduate students. Alternatively, those who are looking for their notion of autoethnography to be challenged and complicated will appreciate the way the book embraces the multiplicity that autoethnography can offer writing studies.

This points to the titular challenge this book is wrestling with: defining autoethnography as/for writing studies. In explaining why it is necessary to "bracket off" autoethnography from similar genres like the literacy narrative, the editors draw a comparison between this challenge and the problem scholars in the field have faced in defining multimodal texts (p. 12). Because this is the first book of its kind in the field, the editors lay out an overwhelming number of goals: to define and explain autoethnography as both a method and genre, distinguish between autoethnographic texts and autoethnographies, include examples of both as not only method but genre, and explore how to teach it (both?) to a range of student writers. This is an ambitious set of tasks, and different readers may find that the book is

more successful in meeting some goals than others.

Following the introduction, the collection is divided into three sections. Part 1, titled "Writing Studies Autoethnographies," includes six chapters that are organized to begin with primarily evocative autoethnographies and end with primarily analytical ones. Because the chapters take different approaches in method and form, the editors explain that they asked each author to include a brief discussion of how they conducted their autoethnography, which I appreciated as a reader. As a first-year graduate student with a teaching assistantship, Tiffany Rainey's chapter "Her Own Voice: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder" and Rebecca Hallman Martini's chapter "When Things Fall Apart" spoke to experiences and emotions that I was familiar with, and I can imagine other graduate student readers will appreciate these chapters as well. Situated firmly in the evocative autoethnography side of Chapter 1, both use personal experiences to explore intersections of mental health, trauma, and labor (in)equality. Later, in Chapter 10, William Duffy notes how autoethnography offers a "useful roadmap for systematically narrating personal and professional experience side by side" (p. 153), and this rings true when looking at the examples of autoethnography presented in this first section.

Part 2, "Teaching Writing Studies Autoethnography," consists of five chapters that collectively explore the benefits of teaching autoethnography. These chapters explore what writers—teachers and students alike—gain from engaging in autoethnography in educational contexts. In Chapter 7, "Empowering Autoethnography in Two-Year College Reform," Higgins, Wark, and Sims describe their efforts to become "rhetorically attuned" to their students, assigning evocative ethnography as a way for students "to write themselves into, and also reshape, academic discourse" (p. 116). This chapter included practical, useful details about how to assign autoethnography in first-year writing, including what readings can be used to frame the conversation, what heuristic questions can be posed, and where the project falls in the larger structure of the class. For instructors of first-year writing in particular, portions

of the second part of this book serve as useful material, especially in the way it illuminates the benefits and affordances that literacy autoethnography assignments offer students. In Chapter 8, “Say What you Want to Say! Teaching Literacy Autoethnography to Resist Linguistic Prejudice,” Amanda Sladek works to unpack the complicated relationship between literacy narrative and literacy autoethnography while simultaneously celebrating its messiness (p. 128). Beyond an “autobiographical narrative explaining the author’s reading, writing, and language development” (p. 127), literacy autoethnography assignments ask students to use qualitative methods and make a cultural point. Shifting from the undergraduate to the graduate student, Chapters 9 and 10 show that, similar to how autoethnography can offer students a soft entry into college-level writing, it can help graduate students “understand and interrogate their complex, often contradictory, positions as newcomers to the discipline” (p. 18).

Part 3, “Extending Writing Studies Autoethnography,” includes four chapters whose authors seek to “extend, and . . . challenge, conventional histories of and methodological approaches to autoethnography” (p. 19) in addition to proposing new ways of thinking about and doing this type of work. Anyone who is skeptical about the academic rigor of autoethnography can look to John T. Gagnon’s chapter, “Writing With Not About: Constellating Stories in Autoethnography.” Gagnon tells the story of how, despite his early refusal to embrace autoethnography, he found that a constellational approach (stemming from cultural rhetoric) made possible the vulnerability that was necessary to connect with his research subjects. Gagnon’s proposal of constellational autoethnography as one of “dozens” of approaches (p. 189) is illustrative of the work done overall in Part 3. Bottom line: autoethnography as a way of making meaning is filled with seemingly endless possibilities.

While the book succeeded in meeting its goal of demonstrating how autoethnography might be used within the writing classroom, it was not as successful in distinguishing between autoethnographic texts and autoethnographies. The editors explain that there’s a history of critical scholarship in writing studies that uses the personal “as a vantage point to understand/rewrite cultural narratives” (p. 12), and these can be considered ethnographic. However, autoethnography is different in that it “not only engages self and culture but is situated firmly within the qualitative tradition . . . an autoethnography is a research study” (p. 12). After laying out the difference between the two, the editors explain that “though [they] think the distinction is relevant, this collection contains both autoethnographic pieces and autoethnographies” (p. 12), and they point readers to Appendix O.A: “Evaluating Autoethnography.” The appendix, located at the end of the introduction, lists six criteria (Subjectivity, Credibility, Reflexivity, Resonance or Impact, Contribution, and Aesthetic Merit) with bullet points under each that offer explanation. However, how to apply this evaluative criteria is unclear. Does a text have to meet every bullet point for each category to be considered an autoethnography? What does evaluation mean in this context? Readers looking for a clear distinction between autoethnography and autoethnographic texts may finish this book with some questions unanswered.

In its hopeful tone, this book pushes for autoethnography as a way for research to mean something to its readers, as a way to correct dominant narratives, to harness storytelling as intellectual currency, to incite social justice. Autoethnography for/as writing studies holds the promise that moving toward RAD research does not mean letting go of our desire to make meaning through the stories we tell.

Review

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