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Review of Self+Culture+Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies, Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney, editors

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By implementing the creative process model juxtaposed with the composing process model, instructors will inspire knowledge transfer and creative problem solving, thereby encouraging students to gain “some measure of control over their individual writing processes” in order to “master finer points of rhetoric, genre analysis, style, etc.” (152). I am excited to implement these concepts in my expository writing classes, as I already view my students as incredibly creative, highly intuitive, and inventive. I am also excited to engage in some metacognitive reflection about my own writing and creating processes, and this text is designed for anyone who wishes to do the same.

Work Cited

Pope, Rob. *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*. Routledge, 2005.

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

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This volume brings together a compendium of works that explore autoethnography and its emerging applications. A qualitative approach that first appeared in the social sciences, autoethnography has recently gained traction within other disciplines over the last two decades, including rhetoric and composition studies. However, due to its theoretically and methodologically amorphous qualities, over the years researchers have struggled to firmly define autoethnography, especially as the field continues to evolve. Still, many within writing studies have championed the method and now understand it as a recursive tool for studying “the relationship between self and other and all of its dimensions” (Kafar and Ellis 134). As more work has been published in the autoethnographic tradition, so too has the need for a deeper understanding of its current function and future possibilities, a task the editors and contributors take up in this timely collection—the first of its kind in the field.

Writing in their introduction, Jackson and Grutsch McKinney explain the project’s origins and their interest in reframing this method, noting the glaring absence of codified literature in the broader discipline: “We’d both looked unsuccessfully for years for books on autoethnography we could use in our undergraduate and graduate writing studies courses...but there was no robust or sustained discussion of autoethnography in the field of writing studies” (3). Accordingly, the book is separated into three parts, with topics ranging from autoethnographic explorations of the self to autoethnography and multimodal compositions to autoethnography as a method for historical recovery.

As a method historically invested in disrupting conventional narratives focused on dominant social groups, namely white and middle-class, autoethnography is particularly valuable when applied to experiences underrepresented in the mainstream, for it encourages individuals “to engage in various forms of systematic reflection on experiences

and memories to craft richly reflexive personal accounts that map onto or interrogate cultural attitudes, ideologies, practices, and times” (8). Thus, when situated within the larger critical theory movement, autoethnography becomes a crucial lens for continued shifts toward more socially conscious and just practices within writing studies.

As a Latinx scholar and adjunct college instructor having taught a variety of composition and rhetoric courses—ranging from first-year writing to computers and writing to editing—I embrace inclusive pedagogical practices that platform students’ lived experiences and language as significant rhetorical artifacts worth examination. With experience teaching primarily at HSI-designated institutions with large first-gen populations, I find this mission to be particularly essential in reaching students of color, nonbinary and queer-identified students, and students from working and middle-class backgrounds. Genres like personal narratives are indispensable as they invite students to contemplate the intimate, metacognitive qualities of their research and writing processes. Likewise, autoethnography thoughtfully builds on this principle as a broader, systems-oriented mechanism for reflection and, within rhetoric and writing studies, becomes a vital method through which to probe institutional power and influence over language, identity, and culture. Thus, upon scanning the collection’s table of contents, I was encouraged to see the editors’ consideration of these issues and purposeful curation at play that gradually builds over three major sections, moving from methodological concerns to the teaching of writing and finally to practical applications.

Fittingly, the collection’s first section opens with Tiffany Rainey’s “Her Own Words: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder,” a compelling meditation both on the triumphs and trials of living with a disorder that is often stigmatized, including within academia, and on how we might use rhetoric to refute harmful ideas about mental health. Following the evocative autoethnographic form, Rainey uses plain, vulnerable language to capture its pathos-driven style and lift the veil on mental illness in hopes that “readers are able to see themselves in us [and] us in themselves” (43); in other words, to establish a channel through which both audience and subject can engage in meaningful discourse about and establish a shared understanding of bipolar disorder. This introductory piece sets the tone for the remaining works in the first section, which explore a variety of autoethnographic forms and styles: evocative, analytic, and collaborative, among others.

Responding to calls for greater equity and inclusion in academic learning spaces, the chapters in the book’s second section explore disruptive, critical strategies for shaping a new pedagogic paradigm. Situating the writing classroom as a contact zone (see Pratt), Amanda Sladek’s “Say What You Want to Say!/: Teaching Literacy Autoethnography to Resist Linguistic Prejudice” unpacks the complexities surrounding multilingualism within the canon of Western discourse and first-year writing. As with other pertinent discussions within the discipline—namely regarding linguistic expression, code-meshing, and the role of writing-centered discourse communities—knowledge-creation through personal narrative can serve as a powerful tool for multilingual and international students. Refashioning and recasting the well-known literacy narrative assignment as a literacy *autoethnography*, Sladek claims the distinguishing factor between the two is that the autoethnographic form, generally, has a vested interest in engaging with culture in a way that “puts the author’s representation of their literacy acquisition into

dialogue with the ways their literacy is represented by the dominant culture” (127). As a result, this technique equips student writers with greater autonomy to parse out their often-contentious relationship with the English language. Other chapters in this section extend this mission, including Sue Doe et al.’s “What the Students Taught the Teacher in a Graduate Autoethnography Class,” which takes a Freirean approach to responsive, collaborative student-teacher research, and William Duffy’s “Agentic Discord in Writing Studies: Toward Autoethnographic Accounts of Disciplinary Lore,” a fascinating reckoning with the cognitive dissonance between one’s own lived experience and interpretation of disciplinary norms—in this case, composition studies and professional writing.

As the collection comes to a close, the editors make way for future-oriented contemplations of autoethnography’s potential for theoretical, pedagogical, and practical use. Specifically, these final chapters challenge the construction of traditional autoethnographic work, envisioning a narrative landscape that embraces embodied experience, especially by those who have been historically marginalized. Visceral and unapologetic in its criticism, Louis M. Maraj’s “You Can’t Do That Here: Black/Feminist Autoethnography and Histories of Intellectual Exclusion” confronts the reality that autoethnography and other reflection-based approaches have, in part, emerged from earlier storytelling modes—namely those found in the Black polyphonic narrative tradition. Ironically, as a method meant to allow for greater metacognitive awareness of one’s identity, culture, and language, current interpretations of the form unfortunately foster experiential erasure and bias, especially against people of color, womxn and queer-identified people, and people with disabilities. Consequently, Maraj argues, these groups “create knowledge that should not be dismissed as lesser than, untrue, or stereotypical based on white heteropatriarchal conceptions of what it means to consciously be” (184).

As the collection demonstrates in both scope and eclecticism, autoethnography may fulfill a few important roles: as a powerful tactic for “making meaning, as a method of inquiry, [and] as a teachable genre” (20). Gradually, what was once thought to be an exclusive method has emerged as a transformative practice many seem willing to take up in their own writing, research, and pedagogy, an evolution I’ve seen first-hand as my own department prepares to implement the genre in its first-year writing curriculum. Thus, when examined from different vantage points, one can forecast the potential for future autoethnographies that expand on current forms to deepen our understanding of language and culture—and that cultivate respectful and representative writing practices that honor our shared collective. While some scholars may contest autoethnography’s legitimacy as a method, those who side with Jackson and Grutsch McKinney will clearly see its significance to the field, paving a path forward for researchers and practitioners alike interested in joining this promising disciplinary movement.

Work Cited

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