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## Review of The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture, and Academic Librarianship

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**Anne-Marie Deitering, Robert Schroeder, and Richard Stoddart, eds. *The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture, and Academic Librarianship*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2017.**

Academic librarians have complex and numerous professional identities. We are researchers, teachers, artists, administrators, and technologists. Many of us have advanced degrees in other fields, in which we may or may not remain active. We grapple with burnout and impostor syndrome, experience and confront racism in our workplaces, and are strongly affected by university politics and bureaucracy. In *The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture, and Academic Librarianship*, the authors tease out these complexities using autoethnographic methodology.

What is autoethnography exactly? Broadly speaking, autoethnography as a methodology “uses personal experience (‘auto’) to describe and interpret (‘graphy’) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs and practices (‘ethno’).”<sup>1</sup> The term appeared in the 1970s and became widely used in the 1990s in a number of fields. Autoethnography is not a mainstream research method. It is often labeled “self-indulgent” and shunned in favor of positivist research, which “valorizes the researcher as a dispassionate observer, capable of keeping their subjective understanding out of the research process” (4). While positivism has been the subject of criticism for decades, it remains a strongly accepted and highly valued research method by institutions of higher education.

For readers unfamiliar with autoethnography, the essays in this volume will seem less like academic writing and more like storytelling. The writing is highly personal, often including the author’s inner voice, and sensitive topics like racism and workplace conflict are discussed openly. Autoethnography requires a leap of faith from those more accustomed to positivist research. It also demands a lot from readers in that they create their own meaning from the text, through reflection and interpretation (4).

In keeping with the book’s purpose and spirit of transparency, I want to explain how I came to write this review. I am fairly new to the library profession, and like several of the authors in the volume, I came to librarianship from academia. I am an ethnomusicologist, and while I do not remain closely connected to the field, ethnographic methodology strongly informs my work as a library professional. It is also why I proposed to review this book. I believe that academic librarians benefit greatly by engaging with qualitative research methods like ethnography, as it is a necessary supplement to the largely quantitative methods widely used in libraries. When I saw this book listed for review for the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, I was immediately intrigued. Like the authors of these essays, I have struggled to find my professional identity in an academic library, and I have experienced burnout doing so. I also feel strongly about the agenda of the book: to uncover voices that are not supposed to be audible in the workplace (xi). As a union steward at the library where I work, I hear these voices often. Staff training in “diversity

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<sup>1</sup> Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, and R. F. Potter (New York: John Wiley, 2017), doi: 10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011.

and inclusion” and “conflict management” does not preclude an open forum for these inaudible voices.

Writing a book review that places evaluative criteria on autoethnographic material is highly problematic, in that it would undermine the book’s methodology and purpose. Again, the interpretation and value of each essay is highly dependent on the individual reader—not on an outside evaluation. In this review, I reflect on the value of autoethnography to academic librarianship and provide brief descriptions of the essays, with the main goal of providing a topical roadmap for the readers of these essays.

*The Self as Subject* contains sixteen essays, all autoethnographic in nature, and varying in style and format. Descriptions are rich, and the authors are candid. I have identified five themes in the essays: (1) juggling multiple roles as an academic librarian; (2) librarians as teachers; (3) racism, micro-aggressions, and library culture; (4) burnout and the academic institution; and (5) constructing identity. The essays are preceded and followed by chapters written by the book’s editors, and an insightful foreword is included. Each chapter is packed with poignant and astute thoughts about librarianship, academic institutions, and autoethnography itself.

In the foreword, Barbara Fister confronts a theme that underpins many of the essays in the book: how do we as librarians help students navigate the culture of higher education? And perhaps more to the point, “Is coaching students to mimic the social life and customs of academia the best way for academics to give students a good education and serve the public good?” (viii). How does academic culture downplay the importance of what a diverse body of students can bring to the academic experience, and how can we support these students? Directly related to this process is Fister’s view of the importance of the autoethnographic essays that follow: “What a lot we have to gain by opening the door to different forms of reflective writing, to experience the diversity of voices among us” (xii).

Anne-Marie Deitering’s introductory essay follows, taking a deeper dive into what autoethnography is and providing readers with various helpful definitions. Deitering begins by questioning the methodology itself and describes how she became familiar with it—an experience likely echoed by readers unfamiliar with autoethnography. “Can a method like this be research?” she asks (3). Deitering goes on to assert that librarians “lack a shared understanding of why we do research in academic librarianship.” Connections between research and practice are unclear: “Many librarians are never taught how to use research or theory to inform practice, and many librarians never see this modeled” (5). As a result, librarians tend to produce the kind of research they think their institution wants, especially if promotion or tenure is involved.

Deitering also describes the process of how *The Self as Subject* came about. Thirty academic librarians formed a “learning community” in which members discussed the problems of positivism, a “crisis of representation,” subjectivity, exploitation, and the agenda of the researcher. Deitering, paraphrasing earlier work by Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, lists the following activities of the autoethnographer:

- Examines culture—what people do and believe—through the lens of their own experience.

- Positions themselves as a social being, interacting with the world and with others.
- Reflexively examines their experience(s), moving back and forth between the unique and particular to the social, political, and cultural.
- Uses creative and evocative expression to show (as opposed to tell) the meanings that are attached to experience.
- Balances rigorous analysis with honest emotion and creativity.
- Contributes to making the world a better place (1–2).

Three of the essays in the book focus on the process of juggling multiple roles as an academic librarian. In “Many Hats, One Head: Considering Professional Identity in Academic Library Directorship,” Maura A. Smale writes about the various tasks that make up her role as a library director, as well as her background in anthropology. She admits that she is becoming less comfortable at anthropology conferences and more “at home” at librarianship conferences. Jolanda-Pieta (Joey) van Arnhem writes about merging her identities as a librarian and performing artist in “The Intersection of Art and Librarianship: ‘Filling in the Gaps.’” Using critical theory as a springboard, van Arnhem stresses the importance of teaching students how to apply their research strategies to real-life scenarios. In “Librarian Origin Story,” Mita Williams recounts her personal experience becoming a librarian, delving into her interests in environmental and civic causes, as well as technology and user experience. These three chapters provide a window into the complex interests and backgrounds that academic librarians bring to the profession.

A number of authors discuss teaching in the context of librarianship. In “Admitting What I Don’t Know: An Autoethnographic Study of Teaching, Fear, and Uncertainty,” Anna Esty writes about her trepidation as she assumes the role of teacher. She takes on impostor syndrome and provides a retelling of her teaching experiences—including her inner voice of self-doubt during a teaching session. The chapter “Carving Out a Space: Ambiguity and Librarian Teacher Identity in the Academy,” by Janna Mattson, Maoria J. Kirker, Mary K. Oberlies, and Jason Byrd, provides the reader with a multinarrative transcript. It includes conversation, analysis, and self-reflection, which all coexist within a single text. The group discusses a number of issues including micro-aggressions from faculty, librarianship as a professional identity crisis, impostor syndrome, the teacher as facilitator, and the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. In “Away from the Library,” David H. Michels considers the practice of doing law research outside of the library. He steps back from his judgment of students and faculty who prefer Google to specialized law library resources, and documents his own experience using online, open-access tools. Michels addresses the question “What does my experience researching beyond the library and teaching others to do the same mean for my own sense of identity as an academic librarian?” (181).

Three authors delve into issues surrounding race. In “When Worlds Collide,” Derrick Jefferson writes about being a gay, black man in the library profession, in the context of assisting a student on a paper about identity. Jefferson recounts his experience as an embedded librarian, working with students on progressive topics, while reflecting on his own past. La Lora Konata writes

about race in the library profession in her essay “Looking through a Colored Lens: A Black Librarian’s Narrative.” Konata talks about code-switching in the workplace, adjusting to white professional work culture, stereotypes, and micro-aggressions. She provides accounts of interactions with colleagues and students that illustrate her points, and stresses that it is not enough to get black librarians “in the building”; professional development is essential. In “You, She, I: An Autoethnographic Exploration through Noise,” Michele R. Santamaria writes about language, library etiquette, library spaces, and noise—specifically, noise complaints in the library against black and Latino students.

Several authors write about burnout and academic culture. In Benjamin R. Harris’s essay “Avoiding Ethnography: Writing toward Burnout,” he describes a moment in his career when “everything fell apart.” Harris was up for promotion while organizing a conference and preparing documentation for an external departmental review. Faced with an overwhelming number of responsibilities, Harris decided to conduct his own library research on burnout. The essay “Academic Rejection and Libraries” by Emily Rogers describes her experience with burnout, as a result of mismanaged library services. Rogers was denied tenure by her institution. She recounts how this occurred, as a result of changing promotion requirements, and a lack of support from library administration.

The final theme in the book I describe as “constructing identity.” Sarah Hartman-Caverly’s essay “Version Control” is a work of dystopian fiction, centered around governmental control of information and the dangers of a data-driven society. In “Finding Boomer Harding: An Autoethnography about History, Librarianship, and Reconnecting,” Heidi L. M. Jacobs tells her story of becoming a librarian and how her academic passions came full circle. Jacobs describes the role she played in uncovering the history of “Boomer” Harding, a gifted athlete of color in the early twentieth century. Erin Leach, in “Cataloger’s Judgement and Cataloger’s Bias: On Lived Experience and Metadata Creation,” writes about cataloging government documents related to drug-related incarceration. She thoughtfully describes the process of cataloging these materials and includes her own inner voice, questioning the ethics of the process.

In the last two chapters of the book, the editors explain the review process for the book and discuss the broader agenda of autoethnography in librarianship. In “Evaluative Criteria for Autoethnographic Research: Who’s to Judge,” Robert Schroeder explains how the book came about, including the initial pushback that he faced after submitting the book proposal for publication. The journal editors were concerned about how autoethnographies would be reviewed, whether they should be treated as “opinion pieces,” and whether autoethnographic research was at all rigorous. After some research, Schroeder came up with the following categories of criteria for autoethnography:

- Revealing the Self (*auto*)
- Exploring Culture/Society (*ethno*)
- Storycraft (*graphy*)
- Ethics
- Social Justice and Transformation
- Unclassified Criteria (321)

Using these criteria, each of the essays in the book was reviewed by another author plus one of the editors. The review process was an open conversation.

In “Shuffle the Cards, Save the Cat, Eat the Cake,” Rick Stoddart writes about the current state of academic libraries and reflects on autoethnography and the agenda of the book. Libraries, Stoddart observes, “typically define success in terms of sharing, not by profit. This economic anomaly places strain on how libraries and librarians can convey their value” (348). This in turn complicates the process of finding one’s identity as an academic librarian. About autoethnography he writes, “Autoethnography also rattles the psyche of a discipline attempting to mimic the rigor, validity, and empirical method found in the sciences and other subject areas. At the core of autoethnography is a critical reflective stance that necessitates a deep qualitative exploration of identity. This autoethnographic expedition into librarianship requires pushing boundaries, creating new pathways, and rewriting the maps about how we define ourselves as librarians” (350). Stoddart posits that it is a transformative methodology—moving from indifference to engagement and motivation through immersion in critical reflection (352). He then forwards the “unhidden” agenda of the book: to empower. In turn, the purpose of librarianship is to empower. In summary, Stoddart’s hope for the book is that it will inspire librarians to “undertake a critically reflective journey like ethnography” and “employ a diversity of evidence in their scholarly endeavors” (356).

*The Self as Subject* provides a crucial platform for voices that are largely unheard in the library profession, as well as a pathway forward for the field of librarianship. By addressing issues of professional identity, race, and library culture from highly personal viewpoints, the authors uncover broader issues within the field of library science, as well as in higher education. This makes *The Self as Subject* essential reading for all academic library professionals.