Book Review

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

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As a researcher with an interest in questions of identity and some experience with ethnographic methods, I was excited to read this edited volume on autoethnography and academic librarianship. I would like to acknowledge my gratitude for being invited to participate in a conversation with the volume's editors and their online autoethnography learning community in October 2015. Even at that exploratory stage in developing what would become this edited volume, the editors and contributing authors asked critical questions and shared insightful comments about the value that autoethnography can bring to LIS research and work, and how studies that apply this methodology should be evaluated.

Edited by Anne-Marie Deitering (Associate University Librarian for Learning Services at Oregon State University), Bob Schroeder (Associate Professor and Education Librarian at Portland State University), and Rick Stoddart (Library Assessment & Strategic Communication Coordinator at University of Oregon Libraries, who completed doctoral research on reflective knowledge creation methods in librarianship), *The Self as Subject* is a collection of essays by academic librarians on the implications of professional values, social norms, and personal experiences for library instruction, cataloging, and reference and research services. The volume is less about finding a single solution to improving library services. Rather, it brings together various perspectives on assumptions and values that librarians hold, and how these assumptions and values affect the work librarians do. While the chapters are not confessional, they are also not dismissive of the emotional and personal aspects of library labor.

The book opens with a foreword by academic librarian and blogger Barbara Fister, which sets the tone for the following chapters by emphasizing the importance of

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conducting ethical fieldwork to help us understand one another at a time of political opposition. Fister also reminds the reader that autoethnography offers the opportunity to identify assumptions and practices that are so widespread that they often get taken for granted.

Each chapter is written by a different practicing librarian (or, in the case of Chapter 8, a group of librarians). Stylistically, chapters vary from speculative fiction and comic scripts to vignettes based on lived experiences, and from reflective journal entries and dialogues to more traditionally academic essays and summaries of research findings.

Thematically, chapters explore a variety of issues in varied contexts. Two chapters focus on positions of privilege. Heidi LM Jacobs articulates her positionality while being involved in a digital archive project as a white woman teaching and preserving stories of a group who has been historically silenced. Erin Leach's chapter focuses on "cataloger's judgment" and the power of technical services staff over patrons' experiences. Leach's chapter asks whether certain cataloging decisions are made to bring justice or simply to make oneself feel more comfortable. Both chapters remind the reader of archivists' and catalogers' "affective responsibilities…to understand and appreciate"[1] the experiences of community members who are impacted by digital preservation and classification decisions.

Several chapters apply autoethnography to consider their professional, cultural, racial, gender and sexual identities—and the intersections among these identities. Derrick Jefferson's chapter reflects on librarian identity, race, sexuality, and privilege, along with the lack of inclusion in the profession. Jefferson includes a narrative around a reference interaction with a student who was assigned to reflect on their identity to explore the importance of being a reflexive instructor. La Loria Konata's chapter similarly focuses on themes of identity and race, but with specific attention to the author's experience of separating personal and work identities in a predominantly white culture in libraries. Michele R. Santamaria's chapter includes personal reflections on the need for quiet library space as a student, and considers patrons' competing perceptions of the library as a community hub and a space for quiet study. By reflecting on particular personal experiences and survey data, Santamaria highlights how noise complaints issued against students of color point to a longer history of discrimination in American libraries. Maura A. Smale's chapter explores the liminality of professional identity as an academic library director. While Smale's chapter articulates "paired categories" of in-betweenness such as "anthropologist and librarian" and "faculty and administrator," it notes that the tension between these paired categories can be productive. Jolanda-Pieta (Joey) van Arnhem's chapter continues the discussion of professional identity by presenting a comic script

[1] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 24-25, https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557.

about merging identity performances, namely as "artist, professor, and librarian." Mita Williams's chapter traces professional identity through a "library origin story" about becoming a librarian. Referring to the *Whole Earth Review* as the "most important librarian in my life," Williams discusses the importance of being involved in civic causes and engaging in blogging as a form of "public writing" to work towards a more equitable and inclusive library practice.

Other chapters in this volume reflect on affective aspects of academic librarianship, such as managing impostor syndrome, self-doubt, uncertainty, and burnout. Anna Esty's chapter reflects on concerns and experiences related to team-teaching, and provides a transparent account of the emotional labor, time, and preparation involved in instruction. Emily Rogers' chapter frames the issue of burnout around the author's experience of tenure denial and subsequent promotion as library instruction coordinator. By articulating this deeply personal and emotional experience, Rogers attends to broader issues such as socialization into librarianship, power structures in the workplace, transparency about behavioral standards and expectations, and bringing empathy (a key aspect of a feminist ethics of care) to leadership roles.

In addition to privilege, identities, and affect, this volume explores social and technological issues that affect contemporary (academic librarianship) work. Sarah Hartman-Caverly's chapter draws upon themes of constant surveillance and biometric tracking to explore how censorship, big data, restricted access to content, and behavioral analytics about media consumption can be intertwined with librarianship. David H. Michels' chapter follows the author's experiment to test one professor's claim that it is possible to find enough scholarly materials online to answer research questions without referring to library collections. Michels describes his experience of non-library searching for legal research materials, and the importance of building capacity for students after their graduation.

This volume also includes methodological reflections on pursuing autoethnographic projects. Deitering's introduction outlines the challenge of the positivist ideal of the researcher as detached observer, the rationale for autoethnography, and the crisis of representation in social science research. The introduction also discusses how autoethnography aligns with the values of librarianship and shares key lessons learned among the learning community that started in 2015. Schroeder's chapter returns to the question of evaluative criteria for autoethnography, and to the question of self-reflection as a valid way of knowing. By reflecting on what librarians can learn from Indigenous research and circular narrative methods, Schroeder suggests that while different criteria may be applied for evocative as opposed to analytical autoethnography, the main goal in using autoethnography should be "understanding and transformation." In the final chapter, Stoddart invites the reader to apply autoethnography as a methodology to help define liminal spaces, record lived experiences, and empower voices. Stoddart suggests that autoethnography is "not the

recipe, but the cake," in the sense that it is more about an overall experience than it is a set of static instructions.

Finally, at least two chapters aim to address combinations of the above dimensions. Benjamin R. Harris's chapter describes negotiating the exploration of personal experience in autoethnography, and the issue of privacy in this research genre. It documents Harris's initial concerns about pursuing an autoethnographic project, including how colleagues might feel about how they are represented in the work. Chapter 8 features a dialogue among four authors—Janna Mattson, Maoria J. Kirker, Mary K. Oberlies, and Jason Byrd—about librarian-teacher identity in academia. In particular, this chapter discusses influences on identity from microaggressions based on role and credentials, and the insecurity that comes from experiencing impostor syndrome. This chapter serves as an example of co-created research output, and how autoethnography need not be limited to one person's experience, but can be an opportunity to share reflections about interconnected professional practice.

Overall, I was impressed with the range of topics and perspectives that this volume includes. Although I enjoyed reading the chapters by Hartman-Caverly (a speculative fictional account of biometric tracking and censorship) and Santamaria (a five-part reflection on standards about language and noise in the library, including a noise sensitivity scale), I found that the styles of these chapters made it challenging to transition to and from the accompanying chapters. In comparison, the chapters by Jacobs, Leach, and Konata resonated with me, as they offer coherent and compelling narratives about the authors' individual experiences with library work, framed by ideas from writers such as Sara Ahmed, Paulo Freire, and Gene Demby on positionality, code-switching, diversity in higher education, interrogating embedded biases, and working to minimize oppression. I also appreciated Chapter 8's dialogue on what it means to be a teacher-librarian, as it included multiple points of view through conversations, analysis, and self-reflections.

While *The Self as Subject* focuses on autoethnography from the perspectives of practicing academic librarians, it is relevant to library and information literacy practitioners in other sectors (including public, school, special, law, and health libraries), archivists, and records managers who wish to reflect on their work and the people this work affects, and who seek to transform their institutional spaces into empathetic, affective, and "community-centered service space[s]."[2] This volume is also an excellent resource for LIS and archival studies scholars and students, and methodologists from other disciplines who wish to learn more about autoethnography. The bibliographies throughout the volume direct readers to additional materials on autoethnography and examples of autoethnographic research. In an era of heated debates about freedom of speech, scholars and practitioners need to engage in autoethnographic research with attention to theoretical rigor. However, this volume demonstrates that autoethnography

[2] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,"24.

can be an effective tool for including emotion in academic writing and recognizing scholars as fully human and as part of their communities. By applying a methodology that aims to critically decode encoded assumptions and values in academic discourse communities and institutions, this volume speaks to the transformative potential of libraries and librarians' work.

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