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# Purpose, Power, Politics, Privilege, and Promise: A Review of International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice

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## Purpose, Power, Politics, Privilege, and Promise: A Review of International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice

### **Abstract**

This collection of international critical scholarship seeks to question, provoke, unsettle and reengage with changing understandings of autoethnography, its research and practices. In this review I share my reading of these contributions by highlighting important themes running throughout the book. These involve the shared but differently positioned vulnerabilities present in knowledge making, alongside desires for recognition, visibility or belonging. However, equally present are processes of misrecognition, silencing and othering resulting from unequal distributions of power and privilege. This book reaffirms how autoethnographic research may recognise vulnerabilities, but these are always more than individual suffering. Vulnerability becomes political. The scope and reach of these international perspectives potentially promise grounds for action and resistance much needed from all our research.

### **Keywords**

International, Autoethnographic, Autoethnography, Research Practice

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## **Purpose, Power, Politics, Privilege, and Promise: A Review of *International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice***

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*This collection of international critical scholarship seeks to question, provoke, unsettle and reengage with changing understandings of autoethnography, its research and practices. In this review I share my reading of these contributions by highlighting important themes running throughout the book. These involve the shared but differently positioned vulnerabilities present in knowledge making, alongside desires for recognition, visibility or belonging. However, equally present are processes of misrecognition, silencing and othering resulting from unequal distributions of power and privilege. This book reaffirms how autoethnographic research may recognise vulnerabilities, but these are always more than individual suffering. Vulnerability becomes political. The scope and reach of these international perspectives potentially promise grounds for action and resistance much needed from all our research. Keywords: International, Autoethnographic, Autoethnography, Research Practice*

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### **Introduction**

Edited by experienced autoethnographers, Lydia Turner, Nigel P. Short, Alec Grant, and Tony E. Adams, *International Perspectives on Autoethnography Research and Practice* (2018) is an impressive collection of work from diverse authors spanning five continents. As both forewords from Ken Gale and Pat Sykes suggest, this is a book that takes an insightful, exciting, thoughtful and practical approach to research and inquiry by offering a range of challenging and cutting edge chapters that present a landscape of international autoethnographic work. This makes the book very readable and scholarly for both for those new and for those more experienced with these forms of research and practices. As editor, Lydia Turner argues, this curated collection aims to capture interest, to inspire and to revisit what is known, even old or well-worn in autoethnography. This flow of positions is clearly depicted in the book and is summed up as an encouragement for readers to take “shuffles to the side.” As she suggests, the autoethnographies presented here invite readers to look again, look over here to see something different, something from an unusual angle.

The book certainly achieves these aims and more. Each of the book’s subsequent three sections is introduced by an editor (Nigel Short, Alec Grant, & Tony Adams respectively) to provide both a critical introduction to their own understandings, assumptions and experiences of autoethnographic research and practice, as well as to the authors’ work within. In politically troubling times, with struggles in many western democracies over redistribution, justice and equality, it is immensely pleasing to see a collection of research that explicitly demands we connect our personal issues to public concerns and our research to issues of power and politics. To achieve these ends, authors draw upon a range of known and contemporary theories, and especially queer, Black and women of colour feminism and new materialist/material feminist insights and contributions. In turn these viewpoints deepen our understanding of how the socio-political resides within personal meanings, identities and lives lived at the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, class, disability and age.

## Content

In the first section of the book the authors explore understandings of autoethnography as a research methodology and considers important issues of power and performance, silence and privilege. In the second section the contributors focus on the doing and representing autoethnography and so explores the cultures and political contexts in which such activity takes place. And in the final third area the writers deal with supervising, sharing and evaluating autoethnography. A novel concluding dialogue between the authors closes the collection, with the editors addressing key issues from the book, how such work gets produced and identifying their hopes, aspirations for the collection and future directions. Additionally, I wish to draw attention to the significant themes running throughout the book. I read these chapters as revealing shared but differently positioned vulnerabilities that relate to desires for recognition or belonging, but importantly, also expose the painful consequences of misrecognition, invisibility or silence, arising for example from unchecked power or casual normative heterosexual privilege. Throughout the book these vulnerabilities are always much more than individual “narcissistic” stories of suffering or powerlessness or victimhood. Rather, this book reinforces the politics of vulnerability, showing how it becomes the grounds for resistance and activism (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016). This is a vital condition for any collective struggle seeking to achieve redistribution, recognition and justice (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Chapters range in their style of presentation from artistic, creative to more dialogic understandings, but all work to reveal the relational nature of the personal with the social, sometimes explicitly, others more implicit, or as Karen Barad (2007) would suggest, diffracted for readers to read in to, with, and through other chapters. Many contributions in the first part deal with familiar challenges to autoethnography but go further to interrogate all taken granted assumptions of voice, ethics, or embodied understandings of knowledge or practices in all research. There is the interrogation of our own privilege and position in the performativity of research (doing), to ask how we radicalise such accounts to connect with and tackle entrenched divisions of gender and racial injustice (Norman Denzin), or of invisible, untold stories (Sarah Helps) and the significance of silence as communication (Andrew Herrmann). Then there is the challenge of being “called out” over first-world attitudes and notions of our own privilege and power (Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs), while others have the power to silence, dismiss and ignore lives. And we are reminded of the danger of forgetting those positioned on the margins, and the dangers and damage from feeling more comfortable within the centre, but possibly losing all that is valuable, that needs to be listened to, or connected with (Kitrina Douglas). Then in checking our privilege, as researchers and writers, being required to revisit, re-read and re-understand differently, from a different angle in questioning taken for granted notions of identity or of changing embodied ageing as realised through the visceral nature of swimming (Robert Rinehart).

In the second part of the book chapters deal with power and privilege ever more directly. These contributions importantly expose strategic practices of resistance in, for example, intimate abuse and domestic violence (Marilyn Metta), or deal with uncomfortable truths over voice or authorial intent (Renata Fredinand), of familiar retreats to methodology or theory in the face of such, or the consequences of feeling displaced and misrecognised (Siliva M. Benard). David Carless attempts to bring together the commissioned world of research, as somehow always over there, together with autoethnography. In a deeply insightful, painful yet familiar story, he exposes and documents the casual homophobia present in a period of fieldwork. This will resonate with many LGBTQ+ people, where coming out is a never a fixed point but a constant set of processes requiring effort to navigate, moving constantly between judgements and assumptions in negotiating misrecognition, recognition or belonging. In further interrogations of normative notions of embodiment, of the assumed fixity of identities, several

chapters show how categories of othering, borders or difference and the unsaid are emergent in and profoundly shape their subsequent research (Keyan Tomaselli & Pamela Zapata-Sepúlveda). In Susanne Gannon's chapter, the shift to the more-than-human-world in philosophy is an encounter that reframes and expands her understandings of research and autoethnographic intent. In challenging the privilege given to the human voice or bodies, the displacement from posthuman stances in an assemblage of entangled attachments with companion species, drawing on Donna Haraway's (2008) arguments for this long overdue process of recognition.

In the third and final section the consequences of choosing to use autoethnography are considered. Many of these contributions discuss the purpose, status, value or distinct nature of autoethnography and with this, the politics of reception or response from others. This demonstrated in contributions documenting attendance at a writing group (Laurel Richardson), the nature of the autoethnographic supervisor student relationship (Jonathon Wyatt with Inés Bácnas Taland), or the politics of publishing and consequences for career prospects (Brett Smith). There are the dilemmas of writing autoethnography, of not reading comments, of stories being stolen but then restating how such work is driven by desires to mark our visibility or leave a legacy of existence (Boylorn). Then again there is the revealing of power and privilege, of being White for example and of trying to be accountable for this, but of writing about others and possibly sharing incomplete stories or stories that we have not rights to or do not belong to us as researchers (Sophie Tamas). Finally, the value or quality of autoethnography is considered and we are reminded of the inherent politics of lists or the various criteria generated to reassure standards or quality, embodying as they do things we value, judgements we both desire and are driven to make of the process and product of autoethnographic research and practice (Andrew Sparkes).

### **Conclusion**

Together these contributions and book constitute an invitation to autoethnographic research and practice. In accepting that invite, I was surprised how much I recognised or connected with the stories, but equally how they disturbed or resonated with my own experiences of homophobia, sexism, ageism, racism, and sometimes less visible discriminations of class. Given that qualitative research is frequently diluted, dismissed or marginalised in contemporary western health sciences research, it was a unique pleasure to find a collection of contemporary qualitative research where there is so much use of post-qualitative research and critical contemporary theories and philosophies including queer, Black, Asian and minority ethnic feminist/women of colour, and material feminist scholars (Butler, 2004; Butler et al., 2016; Haraway, 2008; hooks, 1982). This a well-crafted collection of inspiring research that uncovers the scope, reach and potential of autoethnography research and practice. It provides a valuable guide to the messy political, socio-material and moral nature of knowledge making. As Judith Butler (2004) argues, when to exist on the margins can frequently mean living precariously and where assaults, violence or abuse are an ever present threat or actuality, or where who we are can be silenced, dismissed and misrecognised, there is a need for more research that encourages recognition of our shared vulnerabilities and humanity; this book is an invite to that potential and more.

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## Author Note

I am a Reader in the community health programme area in a School of Health Sciences at the University of Brighton, here in the UK, where I lead a postgraduate module in qualitative research. This module aims to introduce health practitioner students and researchers from many diverse disciplinary and professional backgrounds and roles to the philosophy, politics and practices of qualitative research. I have worked in the British NHS healthcare system as a nurse and researcher and in women's health in the community and voluntary sector. Research interests have always included understanding and exploring how inequalities in health relate to intersecting differences, but especially of gender and sexuality. Many of my publications aim to question and challenge widespread assumptions regarding the value of post-feminist theories or social critical theories in healthcare and to advocate their use in qualitative research. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [k.f.aranda@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:k.f.aranda@brighton.ac.uk).

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