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Autoethnography as a Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling: A Book Review

Abstract

What do a lighthouse and an autoethnography have in common? Whether symbolically or literally, both elements seek to help to navigate through rough waters by providing warnings and guidance. Using this powerful analogy, the editors Stephen Hancock, Ayana Allen, and Chance W. Lewis (2015) crafted a powerful narrative, titled *Autoethnography as a Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling* as a volume in the book series *Contemporary Perspectives on Access, Equity, and Achievement*, edited by Chance W. Lewis and published by Information Age. As poignantly stated right at the beginning of the introductory chapter, the primary aim of this collective work is to “move from invisibility to visibility and silence to voice” (Hancock, Allen, & Lewis, 2015, p. 3). Ultimately, this book attempts to lend voice to often marginalized and “othered” scholars who conduct autoethnographic research from a racial, gendered, and critical theoretical framework, which is the so-called culturalized autoethnography. Equally important, however, this edited volume aims to serve as a lighthouse to the readers—illuminating pathways through which readers might navigate more knowledgeably and consciously through the deeply entangled intersections of race, research, and school politics.

Keywords

Critical Autoethnography, Lighthouse, Intersectionality, Lived Experiences

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Autoethnography as a Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling: A Book Review

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*What do a lighthouse and an autoethnography have in common? Whether symbolically or literally, both elements seek to help to navigate through rough waters by providing warnings and guidance. Using this powerful analogy, the editors Stephen Hancock, Ayana Allen, and Chance W. Lewis (2015) crafted a powerful narrative, titled *Autoethnography as a Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling* as a volume in the book series *Contemporary Perspectives on Access, Equity, and Achievement*, edited by Chance W. Lewis and published by Information Age. As poignantly stated right at the beginning of the introductory chapter, the primary aim of this collective work is to “move from invisibility to visibility and silence to voice” (Hancock, Allen, & Lewis, 2015, p. 3). Ultimately, this book attempts to lend voice to often marginalized and “othered” scholars who conduct autoethnographic research from a racial, gendered, and critical theoretical framework, which is the so-called culturalized autoethnography. Equally important, however, this edited volume aims to serve as a lighthouse to the readers—illuminating pathways through which readers might navigate more knowledgeably and consciously through the deeply entangled intersections of race, research, and school politics. Keywords: Critical Autoethnography, Lighthouse, Intersectionality, Lived Experiences*

What do a lighthouse and an autoethnography have in common? Whether symbolically or literally, both elements seek to help to navigate through rough waters by providing warnings and guidance. Using this powerful analogy, the editors Stephen Hancock, Ayana Allen, and Chance W. Lewis (2015) crafted a powerful narrative, titled *Autoethnography as a Lighthouse: Illuminating Race, Research, and the Politics of Schooling* as a volume in the book series *Contemporary Perspectives on Access, Equity, and Achievement*, edited by Chance W. Lewis and published by Information Age. As poignantly stated right at the beginning of the introductory chapter, the primary aim of this collective work is to “move from invisibility to visibility and silence to voice” (Hancock & Allen, 2015, p. 3). To accomplish this, the authors deemed autoethnography as the most effective methodology to not only identify but also dismantle traditional barriers that keep diverse epistemologies from being heard and seen by a wide audience. Ultimately, this book attempts to lend voice to often marginalized and “othered” scholars who conduct autoethnographic research from a racial, gendered, and critical theoretical framework, which is the so-called culturalized autoethnography. Equally important, however, this edited volume aims to serve as a lighthouse to the readers—illuminating pathways through which readers might navigate more knowledgeably and consciously through the deeply entangled intersections of race, research, and school politics.

Hence, the authors took a critical look at each of the ten chapters that were contributed by a diverse group of scholars on a variety of areas, specifically to get a better understanding on how autoethnographic research is deeply intertwined and tied to culture significance and the “bigger picture” as well as personal revelations. Emerging themes pertaining to cultural patterns and conceptual understanding in autoethnographies from the chapters were identity,

racism, and critical storying, which the editors dubbed as “common threads” (Hancock & Allen, 2015, p. 5). Agreeing with the editors, I believe the element of critical storying appears to be the most enthralling method. Not only does it help readers to understand the nuanced lived experiences of individuals, it also exposes the often invisible yet dominant forms of micro-aggressions that continuously dehumanize individuals from targeted and marginalized groups.

The book is divided into three parts: Illuminating racialized inquiry through autoethnography, Voicing of the silenced through autoethnography, and Investigating identities in schools through autoethnographic lenses. Each chapter within the sections highlights a particular critical theoretical framework applied in exemplary stories. For instance, chapter one on “your inquiry is not like mine” contributed by Stephen Hancock (2015) zooms into constructivism, narrative and teacher research (pp. 11-24). Similarly, contributor Lisa R. Merriweather (2015) employs critical race theory in chapter three titled “Autoethnography as Counter Narrative” to debunk myths in the academy from an African American female perspective (pp. 47-66).

One of the book’s most significant contributions to the current body of literature is its emphasis on the overlapping concept of race and culture as undeniable influences in the conduct of autoethnographic research. More precisely, the introductory chapter of the editors states the following: “The significance of this book can be grafted from its attention to new ways of thinking about doing research...Burdell and Swadener (1999) contend that autoethnography should interrogate the subjective nature and question master narratives and empirical assumptions” (Hancock & Allen, 2015, p. 4).

So did the authors of this book interrogate the dominant ideology on how it permeates autoethnographic inquiry and interpretation? According to the editors, very much so. After having carefully read the volume, I tend to agree with their assessment that all chapters are situated “in socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts and purposes to humanize the research milieu through radicalized, gendered, and social justice concepts” (Hancock & Allen, p. 4). What stood out to me the most, however, was the overarching theme of the lighthouse and autoethnography as a tool to illuminate pathways to provide guidance to readers to better grapple with the deeply interwoven intersectionality of race, identity, research, the educational system, as well as gender, which is often rejected due to its innate discomfort and threat to privileges.

Based on this brief review, I found the book insightful and eye-opening, discussing theories and methods on how to remove barriers to marginalized scholars’ visibility and voice through stories. Ultimately, this is the strength of autoethnography that always intrigued me and captured my full attention. The editors did an excellent job in integrating and connecting the chapters to one another through the introductory words that indicated emerging themes from chapters that were called “common threads” and the closing chapter that looked into implications of autoethnographic research for access to equity and achievement. My only criticism would be related to the potential overload of theoretical frameworks discussed within the brevity of 187 pages.

All in all, this book is extremely valuable for scholars, helping professionals, and educators ranging from kindergarten through K-12 to higher education, as it provides an intimate glimpse into the lived experiences of those that are often seen as “others” or not even seen at all. In a nutshell: “When equitable access to emancipatory narrative is granted to culturalized others, traditional mainstream narratives will no longer solely shape ideology” (Allen, Hancock, & Lewis, 2015, p. 181).

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