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Writing Philosophical Autoethnography: A Review

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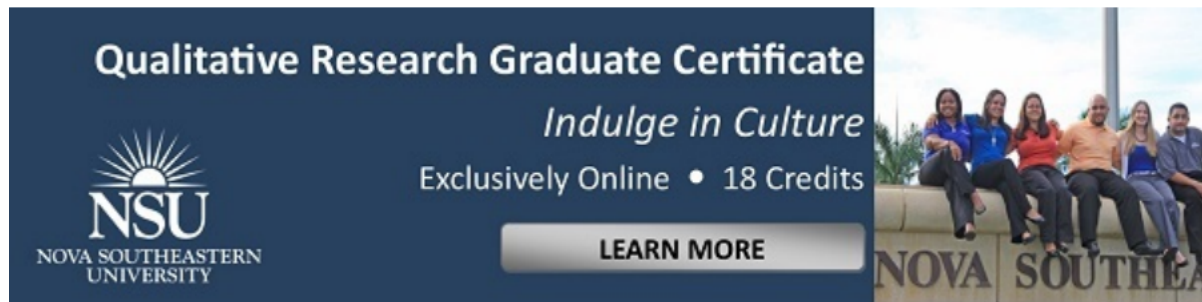
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Abstract

As a book reviewer, I am penning down my thoughts restlessly on the book, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, with a diverse audience in mind, encompassing readers, writers, and researchers of all levels from various disciplines in the social sciences and education. This groundbreaking work, edited by Alec Grant and published by Routledge, masterfully blends philosophy and autoethnography (Grant, 2023). The book distinguishes itself through its philosophical depth, with each chapter demonstrating a profound engagement with philosophical debates and theories rooted in Western philosophical traditions. This approach sets it apart from other autoethnographic works where philosophical concepts often appear to be secondary. However, the strong focus on philosophy might render the content somewhat challenging for readers who are not well-versed in philosophical theories. Despite this, the book is an indispensable resource for autoethnographers, offering practical examples of how to weave philosophy into their writing. Overall, this book expands the horizons of autoethnographic research and encourages researchers to delve deeper into the philosophical aspects of their autoethnographic work.

Keywords

philosophical depth, writing philosophical, autoethnography, debates and theories, western philosophical traditions and philosophical aspects

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Writing Philosophical Autoethnography: A Review

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As a book reviewer, I am penning down my thoughts restlessly on the book, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, with a diverse audience in mind, encompassing readers, writers, and researchers of all levels from various disciplines in the social sciences and education. This groundbreaking work, edited by Alec Grant and published by Routledge, masterfully blends philosophy and autoethnography (Grant, 2023). The book distinguishes itself through its philosophical depth, with each chapter demonstrating a profound engagement with philosophical debates and theories rooted in Western philosophical traditions. This approach sets it apart from other autoethnographic works where philosophical concepts often appear to be secondary. However, the strong focus on philosophy might render the content somewhat challenging for readers who are not well-versed in philosophical theories. Despite this, the book is an indispensable resource for autoethnographers, offering practical examples of how to weave philosophy into their writing. Overall, this book expands the horizons of autoethnographic research and encourages researchers to delve deeper into the philosophical aspects of their autoethnographic work.

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Diving into the Book: A Journey Through Its Chapters

The book *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, edited by Alec Grant, shatters conventional boundaries by seamlessly interweaving philosophy and autoethnography in a singular volume that is as groundbreaking as it is intellectually stimulating (Grant, 2023). This anthology distinguishes itself by not merely using philosophy as an optional or auxiliary lens but by deeply embedding it into the core fabric of its autoethnographic narratives. Each chapter serves as a testament to this fusion, with twelve contributing authors from fourteen chapters, including three chapters from the editor—Alec Grant, skillfully intertwining philosophical doctrines, theories, and ethical considerations into their tales. Unlike other works in the genre, where philosophical elements are often tacked on, this collection is indispensable to the narrative, deepening the engagement with societal, cultural, and material worlds. Contributions come from a rich tapestry of scholars hailing from diverse academic fields within the humanities and human sciences. Their stories function as personal accounts and as narrative frameworks, conceptual roadmaps, and analytical templates for budding autoethnographers by challenging the grand narratives. In doing so, the book boldly charts new terrain for the further infusion of philosophical rigor into autoethnographic research and writing. This book serves as an indispensable guide for students and academics in disciplines ranging from the humanities and social sciences to communication studies and education. It lends the genre of autoethnography—often seen as the intersection of personal narrative and cultural critique—a newfound gravitas. Autoethnography, in its essence, elevates the individual experience to the forefront of cultural scrutiny, going beyond mere storytelling to enact thoughtful cultural,

social, and emotional analyses (Luitel & Dahal, 2021). *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* takes this approach a step further by offering a robust philosophical framework that transforms personal experiences into deeply insightful narratives, making it an invaluable asset for anyone engaged in autoethnography or qualitative research. For this review, I have summarized each chapter below.

In chapter one, the author aims to advocate for philosophical autoethnography within the autoethnographic community and beyond. He expresses his concerns about the narrative autoethnographic work he encounters in print and at conferences, critiquing the key conceptual premises of evocative autoethnography. The author argues for enhancing the philosophical sophistication of narrative autoethnography to improve the scholarly rigor of narrative autoethnography. He discusses the shared concerns of philosophy and autoethnography, advocating for a more philosophically sophisticated approach to autoethnography, particularly in the contexts of narrative selfhood and cultural selfhood.

In chapter two, the author presents a dialectical concept of suffering happiness that can elucidate autoethnography's existential beliefs and ethical obligations. Autoethnography should foster an ethical connection to others' suffering and a desire to change their distressing circumstances, thereby enhancing the potential for happiness and a good life. The author emphasizes that happiness is not decontextualized or merely affective but is closely linked to narrative and moral judgments about the quality of life.

Chapter three, presented as a series of "letters to the editor," discusses auto theory - a notably literary approach to theorizing the relationship between individuality and sociality - as a transitional aesthetic object. The author uses Chris Kraus's "I Love Dick" as a reference point to offer a reparative reading of the epistolary play, highlighting the contradictions inherent in letter writing, which has been both dismissed as a woman's pastime and appropriated by male authorship. The chapter explores the social potential of reading's intersubjective promise by aligning epistolary address with auto-theoretical aesthetics.

In chapter four, the author explores the journey of using her evolving feminist body as a philosophical tool to understand and embody the unfamiliarity and familiarity of others. Through four distinct phases of her life, she employs incarnate thought and agentic corporeality to produce transformative feminist concepts that challenge the male-dominated spaces she inhabits. These phases include coming out as a lesbian in the 1970s, activating lesbian feminism in her work in the 1980s, embodying a lesbian perspective in academia from 1990–2010, and choosing feminist retirement from 2011 to the present, each corresponding to different lesbian identities she has embodied throughout her academic life.

In chapter five, the author reflects on her own experiences of delving into the concept of the "crooked room," as explored by American writer and political commentator Melissa Harris-Perry, which suggests that some Black women contort themselves to fit into racial and gender stereotypes, discussing the creation of two distinct identities, Renata and Pinkie. The chapter offers an introspective analysis of these identities and underscores the broader issue of recognition, influenced by historical and philosophical forces, and how societal, gender, and racial factors continue to shape her perception and navigation of the world.

In chapter six, the author reflects on the profound influence of philosopher Paul Ricoeur and others on their personal and intellectual development, acknowledging that their thinking is largely "derivative" of these influences. They embrace this "colonization and appropriation" of ideas, viewing it not as plagiarism but as a testament to the interconnectedness of thought and the "irrevocable otherness" within oneself. The author concludes that there is no solitary thinking, only "thinking-with," celebrating this as a beautiful insight into intellectual indebtedness and selfhood.

In chapter seven, the author explores the concept of "hindsight work" proposed by Mark Freeman, using it as a tool to uncover the nature of one's character through examining

seemingly unrelated memories. Through the narration and subsequent philosophical analysis of three personal stories, the author identifies his character as “trickster-carnavalesque.” The author concludes by critically evaluating his findings from various perspectives, including mainstream qualitative inquiry and the philosophy of autobiography, ultimately assessing the moral implications of his trickster identity within dominant cultural narratives.

In chapter eight, the author delves into the concept of organizational sensemaking, emphasizing the importance of understanding it as a process rather than just its outcomes. Drawing on Karl Weick’s work, the author explores the role of identity in organizational sensemaking, particularly in new contexts. The author illuminates the connections between organizational sensemaking and autoethnography through narrative vignettes, making implicit links explicit.

In chapter nine, the author reflects on the increasing tendency to dwell in the liminal spaces of life as they age, embracing the mystery before acting. They are guided by existentialist philosophy, which has been a profound influence since their youth and continues to resonate through memory and story. This philosophy infuses their autoethnography and life with creative vitality, bridging gaps between various existential dichotomies, as they hope to demonstrate in this chapter.

In chapter ten, the author, a transdisciplinary scholar with expertise in various fields, including philosophy, law, literary studies, education, and sociology, uses this diverse background to explore intersections and connections that advance social justice issues impacting marginalized communities. The chapter delves into issues of identity, self-definition, and the social construction of race and gender categories. Through a Black feminist and Black Girl autoethnographic lens, the author examines the personal evolution of their identity as a critical Black Girl feminist scholar-activist.

In chapter eleven, the author intertwines autoethnography and existential phenomenology to examine his/her personal experiences during the Trans Day of Visibility event in Carbondale, IL, which unexpectedly transformed from a celebration into a protest. Drawing on the works of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the author uses these philosophical “hammers” to enhance their autoethnographic self-reflexivity and analyze their protest story. The author argues for the necessity of considering the open-ended nature of public gatherings in autoethnographies and demonstrates how existential phenomenology can strengthen this process by incorporating others’ voices alongside our own.

In a critical autoethnographic essay in chapter twelve, the author employs existential phenomenology to delve into the significance of embodied knowledge in effective advocacy. Through a blend of storytelling, poetry, and theoretical analysis, the author underscores the importance of lived experiences in responding to cultural marginalization. The essay concludes with a compelling comparison of the author’s response to ableism directed at her physically disabled son versus her able-bodied partner’s response, ultimately advocating for a greater appreciation of embodied experiences.

In chapter thirteen, the author, a unique figure as one of the few Māori-speaking senior school science teachers, utilizes philosophy of education and autoethnographic methodologies to examine the Māori science curriculum. Drawing from personal experiences teaching science through *te reo* (the Māori language), the author explores the concept of “assimilation” and its impact on the Māori way of life. The chapter employs a blend of narrative and analytical genres, using storytelling and philosophical analysis within a Māori method of inquiry framework to delve into how assimilation influences Māori thinking and identity.

Finally, in the concluding chapter—fourteen, the author revisits the themes of selfhood and culture introduced in Chapter 1, analyzing them through the lens of four guiding questions. The author acknowledges the book’s limitations, particularly its lack of non-Western

philosophical perspectives. The chapter concludes with a call for a future text focusing on the philosophical underpinnings of image- and performance-based autoethnography.

Reviewer's Observations

I realized *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, is a pioneering book that masterfully blends Western philosophies and autoethnographies in a way that has never been seen before. In the book, the contributing authors of each chapter attempts to distinguish their philosophical depth, showcasing a deep engagement with philosophical debates, theories, concepts, ideas, and corresponding ethical stances. This is a refreshing change from many other scholarly autoethnographic works (e.g., Adams, 2017; Adams et al., 2022; Adamson & Muller, 2018; Anderson, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Whitinui, 2014) among others. Recently, there has been a surge in the development of various forms of autoethnographies (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Paudel et al., 2023). These include “analytic,” “art-based,” “critical,” “critical socialization,” “community,” “evocative,” “impressionistic,” “indigenous,” “interpretive,” “metaautoethnography,” “poetic,” “performance,” “performative,” “phenomenological,” “poetic,” “psychoanalytic,” “collaborative autoethnographies,” “joint autoethnographies,” “coautoethnographies,” and “duoethnographies.” In these autoethnographic works (Adams, 2017; Adams et al., 2022; Adamson & Muller, 2018; Anderson, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Chang et al., 2013; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Luitel & Dahal, 2021; Paudel et al., 2023; Whitinui, 2014) philosophical ideas often appear to be merely tacked on or additional. So, the book also acts as a useful guide for autoethnographers on their writing journey, connecting philosophical traditions and providing narrative, conceptual, and analytical models. It sets the stage for future trends in making autoethnography more philosophically rigorous.

Contrary to what some might believe, the role of a book reviewer necessitates an unbiased and open-minded approach to the text (Dahal, 2023). This is essential to deliver insightful feedback that benefits both the author and prospective readers. In my review, I considered various aspects of the book, such as its genre, intended audience, purpose, and message. I also considered the contributors' backgrounds, their previous works, and any pertinent historical or cultural contexts. The book's organization, writing style, pacing, strengths, and weaknesses were also evaluated. As a reader and reviewer, I perceived the book as a robust platform for the integration of philosophy and autoethnography. The experience was captivating. However, it's worth noting that crafting a book review is no easy feat for reviewers. This task presents challenges that provoke critical thinking, enabling the reviewer to thoroughly evaluate the book (Chenail, 2010; Dahal, 2023).

As a book reviewer, I found *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* to be an indispensable tool for academic scholars. Its standout feature is its philosophical depth, with each chapter deeply engaged in debates and theories stemming from Western philosophical traditions. The book presents a compelling blend of philosophy and autoethnography, contributing significantly to the advancement of philosophical debates and theories rooted in Western traditions. In essence, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* serves as an exceptional guide for academic scholars aiming to impact education through the combined use of philosophy and autoethnography. However, the book's heavy emphasis on philosophy could potentially make it less accessible to readers who are not familiar with philosophical concepts and theories of Western philosophical traditions. It might also be less attractive to those who favor a more conventional approach to autoethnography.

This review primarily seeks to bring the discourse of philosophy and autoethnography into the qualitative research mainstream. Autoethnographies, in their various forms (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Paudel et al., 2023), are increasingly employed in educational research, albeit

with less emphasis on philosophical traditions. This is evident even at the Kathmandu University School of Education in Nepal, where I serve as a lecturer. As a scholar, academician, and teacher of research methods to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as a supervisor and examiner, I am well-versed in autoethnography approaches. My familiarity with these ethically challenging methodologies of autoethnography stems from my master's research project in 2013 (Dahal, 2013; Dahal et al., 2019; Dahal & Luitel, 2022). As a reviewer, I found that the book *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* lays a robust foundation for integrating philosophy and autoethnography for envisioning of bringing the disciplines of philosophy and autoethnography together. It serves as a valuable resource for professionals, including readers, writers, and researchers at both novice and veteran levels.

In summary, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* is a revolutionary work that broadens the scope of autoethnographic research. It encourages autoethnographers to explore deeper into the philosophical aspects of their work. The narratives in this book, contributed by scholars from various humanities and human sciences disciplines, serve as excellent guides for autoethnographers in their own writing. Autoethnography is generally described as a research method that puts the self at the heart of cultural analysis (Dahal & Luitel, 2022). It goes beyond simple self-narration to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation. It is research and writing method that aims to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in different contexts, thereby understanding their cultural, social, and emotional significance. All in all, *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography* is a must-read book for students and scholars of autoethnography and qualitative methods across various disciplines, including humanities, social and human sciences, communication studies, and education.

Finally, this review aims to guide researchers either currently employing or considering using various forms of autoethnography in their research. The increasing prevalence of diverse autoethnographic approaches in educational research, as evidenced by works such as Cooper and Lilyea (2022) and Paudel et al. (2023), is a trend and even I have personally observed in my university at Kathmandu University School of Education, Nepal. Having meticulously read all 14 chapters of *Writing Philosophical Autoethnography*, I strongly endorse this book for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of philosophy and autoethnography methodologies in social sciences and educational research. However, it is worth noting that the perspectives and practices presented are predominantly Western. The book advocates for the integration of philosophy and autoethnography as a potent instrument for contextualizing and enhancing educational methodologies. It encourages scholars to envision a fusion of philosophy and autoethnography to prepare students to navigate a rapidly evolving world and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable global society. I extend my gratitude to Alec Grant (2023) for this significant contribution in scholarship. The book serves as an invaluable resource for researchers across various social sciences and educational disciplines, from novices to veteran researchers.

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