

A Review of *Essentials of Autoethnography*

Poulos, Christopher N. (2021). *Essentials of Autoethnography*. American Psychological Association, [ISBN 978-1-4338-3454-7. 100 pages.]

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Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that has gained popularity in recent years, largely within the field of communication studies (Poulos, 2021, pp. 13-14). It has its foundations in the social sciences when many researchers began to question the notion of objectivity and “capital T Truth” (Scott-Pollock, 2020, 0:50). Carolyn Ellis, one of the pioneers in adapting the genre of the autoethnography to communication studies, posits that all human communication is autoethnography, and she championed this genre as a way to move away from the scientific, rational study of communication and into communication as an art and a way that people come to understand each other and themselves (Ellis & Boucher, 2006). Many journals such as the *International Review of Qualitative Research* and *Qualitative Inquiry* regularly feature autoethnographies as a prominent form of published research. In Christopher N. Poulos’s 2021 monograph, *Essentials of Autoethnography*, he illuminates this fascinating genre and offers tips for “how to get started conducting autoethnographic research and how to begin writing compelling autoethnographic texts” (p. 17).

Essentials of Autoethnography contributes to both scholarly and pedagogical conversations in communication studies and rhetoric and composition. As the genre of autoethnography is by nature inter- and multidisciplinary, so too is the appeal of this book. *Essentials* offers a more expanded overview than the 2011 article “Autoethnography: An Overview” by Ellis, Adams, and Boucher which appeared in the journal *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, and it would serve as a useful supplemental text to Melissa Tombro’s 2016 *Teaching Autoethnography: Personal Writing in the Classroom*. There have also been several other recent publications that address the uses of (auto)ethnography in the composition classroom. Michelle LaFrance’s 2019 *Institutional Ethnography* is one such text, though note that she refers to her practice as an ethnography and not an *autoethnography*. The difference here is that, while LaFrance studies the sites where writing occurs, the level of self-reflexivity and self-exploration that autoethnography requires is more muted in this text, making it an ethnography rather than an autoethnography.

Composition studies would benefit from bringing the self further into such studies and Poulos’s (2021) book is a guidebook on how to do this work, demonstrating the benefits of bringing a deep self-exploration into a study of a group or institution of which we are a part. Rebecca Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney take this next step in *Self+Culture+Writing* (2021), demonstrating that autoethnography does have a useful and needed place in composition studies. This book contains examples and analysis of the practice of doing autoethnography as a writing instructor and of using autoethnography in the classroom and would therefore be a useful companion text to *Essentials of Autoethnography* for anyone seeking to write and/or teach this genre themselves. Poulos states his goals for this book on the first page as “to show you that autoethnography is a worthy endeavor” and

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to “answer your questions about how to go about it and help you get started” (p. 3), demonstrating that this text would be well-suited to both students and academics wishing to try their hand at autoethnography. This book is accessible enough to be used as a teaching tool and sophisticated enough to serve as a guide for professional academic writers.

Essentials of Autoethnography (Poulos, 2021) begins with a chapter entitled “Conceptual Foundations of Autoethnography,” which introduces readers to the genre and its theoretical, philosophical, and historical underpinnings. This chapter gives a history of the genre and offers multiple definitions for what it is and what it can be. This is no ordinary how-to textbook, however—Poulos gives the reader the tools while showing how he uses them, pulling numerous examples from his many published autoethnography articles and from his monograph, *Accidental Ethnography, an Inquiry into Family Secrecy* (2019).

Poulos (2021) has a nice balance of showing and telling in this text; he instructs and then he demonstrates. In Chapter 2, “Doing Autoethnography: Design and Data Collection,” Poulos instructs the reader, through providing both advice and examples from his own and others’ work, how to go about engaging in this method of research. He outlines a step-by-step process which he elucidates throughout the chapter: a seven-step, reflexive process of collecting autoethnographic data. In each subsection, he offers readers examples from his own work and thus demonstrates the showing vs. telling imperative that he sets forth for composing a compelling text. Then in the following chapter, Poulos instructs the reader as to the actual writing process, emphasizing “writing as a method of inquiry” (p. 31) and clarifying that the writing is “a method of inquiry and reflexive research practice” (p. 32) just like the methods of data collection he illuminates in the previous chapter. Poulos also sets forth autoethnography as “a way of life...a complex and captivating struggle to come to grips with the meaning(s) of human social interaction” (p. 32).

Much of the section entitled “Assumptions” could double as a how-to manual for any aspiring creative writer, containing statements such as “Stories are Active,” “Stories are Provocative,” and “Stories are Transformative,” expanding upon these phrases in their respective subsections. Poulos (2021) successfully illuminates that autoethnography is art as much as it is research, asserting that, “To be an autoethnographer requires a willingness to surrender to the creative process and the spontaneous and imaginative memory-infused life of the writer as social commentator” (p. 37). Many of his suggestions for what makes effective writing cut across disciplinary boundaries and contain similar suggestions to those offered in many creative writing manuals (Lamott [2007], King, [2000] Burroway [2019]). Much of what is contained both in this chapter and in this book as a whole could easily find a place in the composition classroom, as it contains ample instruction and evidence for how to make writing in any genre come alive for the reader, and thus for the writer as well.

Since *Essentials of Autoethnography* is an overview of the genre, Poulos’s (2021) findings are more in the realm of what he hopes the reader will discover through embarking on their own autoethnography journey. However, he also illuminates his own discoveries along the way, which he details throughout this text. The fourth chapter, “Process and Craft” assists the reader in shaping the narrative that they presumably began constructing in Chapter 3. In this way, Poulos literally guides the reader step-by-step through the entire process of constructing an autoethnography, starting with defining the genre and ending with a finished text. Chapter 4 is where he invites the reader to begin shaping the data and the rough draft into something that considers audience, purpose, and genre in specific ways. Then, in Chapter 5, he offers “Variations on the Method” and describes some of the unique and creative ways researchers have gone outside the box and composed things like “Performance Autoethnography” and “Autoethnography as Social Fiction,” further expanding the boundaries of this ever-evolving genre. Poulos’s concluding chapter, “Methodological Integrity, Summary, and Conclusions” offers suggestions to the reader for evaluating their own finished products, assessing things like contributions to the field and aesthetic merit. From there, he touches

on ethical considerations, emphasizing the need to “strive to practice peaceful, non-harming action in and through our writing” (76). All of these chapters would be highly useful for anyone looking to not only compose their own autoethnography, but to teach this methodology to students. Even instructors who do not assign complete autoethnographies will find much useful information about writing that could be adapted for a composition class.

In the spirit of instruction and demonstration, Poulos’s (2021) methodology in this text involves showing as much as telling; he offers very specific and personal examples for how he has arrived at his various autoethnography projects. For example, in explaining the role of artifacts to autoethnography, he starts with a baseball, moves into what looks like dialogue from a screenplay, and then concludes with a very personal reflection on how he was able to compile all of this data to draw conclusions about the nature of father-son relationships (pp. 45-50). Through this process, he demonstrates how “autoethnography actively and reflexively uses writing as an integral part of research and as a primary method of inquiry” (p. 4). In each example from Poulos’s own writing, he emphasizes that he did not know what he was going to discover when he started; the discoveries were made through the writing process itself. For composition instructors, this can give rise to further ideas for how to convey this idea of writing as discovery to students, and how to also fold this into the importance of drafting and revision.

Autoethnography is making inroads in the field of rhetoric and composition in much the same ways that the literacy ethnography became prominent both as a research methodology and a teaching tool (Radway [1991], Brandt [2009], Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater [2011]). The other primary reason that autoethnography is of interest to rhet-comp scholars is that “a primary focus of autoethnography is the writing process itself” (Poulos, 2021, p. 13), meaning that autoethnography emphasizes writing to discover rather than researching and then reporting the results of the research. Poulos continually emphasizes this feature of autoethnographic writing, thus making this book a particularly useful manual explicitly tying autoethnography to the concerns of writing studies.

Autoethnography is of particular interest to WAC/WID scholars in both scholarly and pedagogical pursuits, as LaFrance’s work demonstrates. In terms of pedagogy, the autoethnography straddles the line between communication studies and anthropology, and these are both disciplines within the social sciences. Autoethnographies can be excellent assignments for a WAC/WID composition course, especially following a humanities unit where narrative writing is emphasized. As a unique blend of scholarly and creative writing, assigning an autoethnography to students teaches them that these intra-disciplinary boundaries are more fluid than they may have thought, and it allows students to bring some creativity to their scholarly writing. And, as writers and scholars, writing an autoethnography ourselves can help us do the same.

Ultimately, therefore, Christopher Poulos’s (2021) *Essentials of Autoethnography* has utility for teachers, scholars, and would-be autoethnographers in many disciplines and would be a perfect supplemental text for a composition course that seeks to utilize this complex and unique genre as well as a primer for scholars who wish to emulate the form in their own work.

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