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# Expanding the Possibilities of Qualitative Inquiry: A Review of Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life

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## Expanding the Possibilities of Qualitative Inquiry: A Review of Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life

### **Abstract**

Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life is a groundbreaking collection in which Boylorn and Orbe expand the possibilities of qualitative inquiry by including 13 page-turning chapters that merge autoethnography with critical theory to situate lived experiences within larger systems of power. Throughout this review, I provide a brief overview of the collection, describe the strengths in terms of writing and organization, as well as critique the pragmatic potential. I conclude by describing how and why this collection is a valuable resource for those who practice qualitative methodology for the sake of social change.

### **Keywords**

Critical Autoethnography, Qualitative Inquiry, Social Change, Resistance

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## **Expanding the Possibilities of Qualitative Inquiry: A Review of *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life***

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*Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* is a groundbreaking collection in which Boylorn and Orbe expand the possibilities of qualitative inquiry by including 13 page-turning chapters that merge autoethnography with critical theory to situate lived experiences within larger systems of power. Throughout this review, I provide a brief overview of the collection, describe the strengths in terms of writing and organization, as well as critique the pragmatic potential. I conclude by describing how and why this collection is a valuable resource for those who practice qualitative methodology for the sake of social change. **Keywords:** *Critical Autoethnography, Qualitative Inquiry, Social Change, Resistance*

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In their groundbreaking collection, *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, Boylorn and Orbe (2014) merge autoethnography with critical theory to situate lived experiences within larger systems of power. Their primary goal is to encourage those who write autoethnography to do so with a critical lens, therefore endorsing the method of critical autoethnography. Boylorn and Orbe introduce the collection by defining and explaining their affiliation with autoethnography, a method where the self becomes a site for interpreting cultural experiences (Ellis, 2004). Like autoethnography, critical autoethnography entails providing cultural analyses through personal narratives. In these analyses, a critical lens is encouraged throughout process to open up a space of resistance between the individual and the collective (Jones, 2005). In this space, the critical autoethnographer's goal is to not only focus on how their lived experiences are impacted by the dominant social order, but to defy and deconstruct this order.

In various ways, the aforementioned goal of critical autoethnography is accomplished throughout this collection, which consists of 13 chapters that are divided thematically into four sections. The chapters within section one, "Complicating Mundane Everyday Life Encounters," reflect on seemingly mundane moments, such as planning for a holiday photograph, that become life-changing. Section two, "Embracing Ambiguous and Nonbinary Identities," is composed of narratives that entail the resistance of normative and restrictive identity constructions and the interpersonal challenges that arise as a result. Section three, "Negotiating Socially Stigmatized Identities" includes essays that discuss how stigmatized identities are experienced, marginalized, and negotiated across cultural contexts. The final section, "Creating Pathways as Authentic Selves," consists of three self-reflexive autoethnographies that describe the process of "becoming," or rather reaching a greater understanding of self, other, and society.

Boylorn and Orbe (2014) gently guide readers by introducing each section with a brief description of the theme that unites the chapters within. They also include and succinctly describe three theoretical frameworks to structure the reading of each section. The organizational logic is sound; however, many of the chapters could fit into two or more sections based on their similarities. As Boylorn and Orbe explain, the section divisions are meant to guide readers, but all of the chapters share commonalities. For example, each chapter provides powerfully thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to make sense of how identity,

relationships, and culture are interconnected. Additionally, all of the authors take an intersectional approach to reveal the complex nature of identity: interactions of race/ethnicity, gender/sex, socioeconomic status, sexuality, nationality, age, age, spirituality, and/or abilities come to life. Vulnerable, evocative, accessible writing is another shared trait among the chapters, making this collection a page-turner that appeals not only to people within the academy, but those outside as well.

Despite the appeal of this collection, it lacks the pragmatism it promises. In the introduction, Boylorn and Orbe (2014) mention that the collection is guided by three central features of critical theory, one of which is “to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (p. 20). While the authors incorporate theory to frame and describe the oppression they have encountered, they provide few suggestions about how to combat this oppression. Had the authors been more pragmatic, this collection would provide readers with a greater sense of hope. Regardless of this minor disappointment, Boylorn and Orbe’s collection expands the possibilities of qualitative inquiry and provides an excellent resource for those who practice qualitative methodology for the sake of social change. The stories within inspire readers to open their hearts and minds to difference and to recognize that autoethnography has a unique capacity to resist mythical normative perspectives that don’t account for the diversity and complexity of lived experiences.

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