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The Self as Subject: Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture, and Academic Librarianship is a work that is evidence of an ongoing change in paradigm occurring within the research traditions of LIS, which are increasingly recognizing and emphasizing human-centred ways of creating knowledge. The focus of the book is the research method of autoethnography, which is a qualitative observational method “where the researcher is also the subject of inquiry” (2). While traditional ethnographies explore cultures and societies, autoethnography is a research method that examines one’s personal self (i.e., embodiment, experiences, feelings, thoughts) in a reflexive but rigorous manner to answer a research question. The work consists of a collection of 16 article-length autoethnographies broadly related to academic librarianship identity. The collection arose from an online learning community spearheaded by editors Anne-Marie Deitering, Robert Schroeder, and Richard Stoddart, established in the summer of 2015. The editors brought together a variety of voices of academic librarians from across the United States as well as two Canadian voices from the University of Windsor.

The collection serves as an excellent entry point for those interested in exploring autoethnography as a research method in general and its use in LIS research in particular. In her introduction, Deitering emphasizes the high suitability of autoethnography for conducting LIS research. She argues that autoethnography’s focus on the local context and on stories and storytelling are commitments that are shared by librarianship, that the method is appropriate in challenging the classically “neutral” stance of the librarian, and that it finds a happy balance between the dominant paradigms of postmodern relativism and positivistic reductionism. She asserts that autoethnography is an effective way to advance both the theory and the practice of librarianship, as the method involves critical reflection on the thoughts and actions of academic librarians.
Each chapter within the collection was contributed by a different academic librarian. To those librarian-scholars new to autoethnography, who are the primary audience of the book, the chapters serve as examples for the great variety of research outputs that can be accomplished when using the autoethnographic method; as Deitering notes, “there is no right way to do autoethnography” (11). Among the chapters, some traditionally “unconventional” research outputs are presented, namely, a comic, a piece of speculative fiction, and a diary. These chapters demonstrate to the reader the versatility of the autoethnographic method. These autoethnographies also demonstrate to the reader how autoethnography can be a research method that is at once personal and reflective as well highly rigorous through the inclusion of literature reviews, explanations of methodologies, and citation of expert authorities.

The chapters demonstrate that there are multiple ways to ask and answer questions about librarianship, culture, and identity, especially when the affective and reflective components of these questions are given a measure of validity in these larger conversations (the current lack of which is lamented by the editors). The chapters revolve around three themes: racialized and minority identities and their intersection with the librarian identity, the academic librarian’s identity as a teacher or information literacy instructor, and academic librarians’ experiences of burnout. The chapters display profound honesty, vulnerability, and humour that sustain the attention of the reader. Many of the chapters contain reflection on the autoethnographic method itself, noting the inseparable relationship between the authors’ experiences in and of the world and the knowledge that they are creating and sharing. Particularly valuable is one of the terminal chapters by Robert Schroeder, who explores the evaluation of autoethnographies as part of the peer-review process. This chapter is valuable not only for those conducting autoethnographic research, but also for all scholar-librarians who may be reading and evaluating this type of research in the future as the method becomes more acceptable. Schroeder presents a series of evaluative questions for autoethnographies based on the essential components of an autoethnography: the quality or degree of self-revelation and reflection (**auto**), the observations on culture or society (**ethno**) and the quality of the storytelling (**graphy**).

While the collection contributes positively to the existing discourse on the professional identities of librarians, the weakness of the work is revealed in its failure to adequately consider the tenuous, and at times problematic, nature of academic identities as they exist in the neoliberal university. Incorporating the voices of those with the job title or academic rank of librarian is an easy and logical way to provide focus to this sample of voices. However, to rely entirely upon these qualifiers of the contributors to define the boundaries of academic librarianship, and subsequently to
determine which voices are included and which are not, leaves this collection with a noticeable gap in perspective from those at the boundaries of the profession, such as LIS degree-holding paraprofessionals or LIS students preparing for careers in academic librarianship. Autoethnographies from the perspective of this liminal space have as much to contribute to the conversation on academic librarians’ identity as do those of employed librarians, in part because they share qualifications, education, and experiences of academic work, but also because they are keenly aware of the boundaries of academic librarianship and how a job title impacts or shapes one’s identity.

While the work is excellent in many other ways, it may also have the unintended consequence, to some, of contributing to the perpetual self-identity crisis in which librarianship seems to find itself embroiled. Librarians often defend the boundaries of their identity, leading to concern when these boundaries are breached. The collection does not provide clarity on the issue of identity but instead concedes that “identity is messy,” as Derrick Jefferson notes in his chapter. It instead supplies additional narratives to continue to add complexity to the issue. In fact, the work advocates that autoethnography is a useful method for further exploring one’s own identity as an academic librarian, acting as a guide to those librarians who may lack the institutional support or training in research that would allow them to otherwise pursue autoethnography. The collection certainly invites the reader to explore and reflect upon their own identity as a library professional, perhaps viewing themselves in the experiences of the contributors.

Barbara Fister, who composed the foreword to the work, says it best when she notes that reading this was a “refreshing and surprising experience” (xi). This work is important for all scholar-librarians who must prepare for this changing paradigm and is especially recommended to those who value and appreciate introspection, meditation, and reflexivity in their lives and work.