Out of Place: An Autoethnography of Postcolonial Citizenship

NURAAN DAVIDS
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Out of Place is a deeply personal book that adds to the growing genre of literature on autoethography. The book consists of eight chapters and a glowing foreword written by one of South Africa's leading public intellectuals, Jonathan D. Jansen. In the "post-apartheid" South African context, the place in which the author is located, the "embodied" narrative style of writing in which the book is couched is rare and precious. But what exactly is an autoethnography?

The author, Nuraan Davids, a professor of philosophy of education at one of South Africa's premier universities, the University of Stellenbosch, provides her readers with a clear idea of what an autoethnography entails in the subtitle of chapter 2; it is a "counter-narrative of experiences." A narrative that debunks the framing of herstory and challenges her "othering" by "theoretical debates and arguments which [are] about me, but [fail] to recognize me" (p. 5). The autoethnographic approach provides Davids with a dais to audaciously articulate her embodied lived experiences in a world of "othering" in which she is relentlessly marked out as a "coloured" Muslim woman wearing a hijab.

Drawing on the theoretical insights of the American sociologist Carolyn Ellis et al., Davids construes autoethnography as challenging hegemonic research methods that falsely claim objectivity; "I am countering and disrupting conventional approaches to research, which persist in claiming that research is somehow neutral and impersonal, and that it is possible for the researcher to stand outside of her research" (p. 19). By placing herself right at the center of the book the author makes herself vulnerable by unveiling intimate parts of herself. This is a positionality and precarity Davids consciously embraces and is willing to endure in her journey for self-discovery. "Autoethnography," Davids avers, "demands a particular kind of integrity and exposure, which, once revealed cannot be retracted" (p. 21). The resultant narrative is at once healing and restorative.

Davids embraces autoethnography as a productive research method since "it disrupts the inscribed binary between science and art, between theory and imagination, and between rationality and emotion" (p. 9). But

perhaps the paramount value of the autoethnographic research method for Davids lies in the fact that it affords her an opportunity not only to "sensitize her readers to issues of identity politics" in post-apartheid South Africa but also to engage with this fractious fixation at a deeply personal level.

The autoethnographic approach also provides Davids with a process and product not only to tell her own personal story but also to produce a "thick description" (à la Geertz) of the "Cape Muslim culture" within which she is located. Her story is unique and yet shares much of the frustration and dehumanization that marginalized hijab-wearing Muslim women experience at schools, shopping centers, airports, and other public places all over the world. The palpable humiliation and infuriation that hijab-wearing Muslim women experience in navigating public spaces is vividly captured by the author's troubling questions: "What is it about the hijab that makes it so off putting? Why does it elicit the kinds of responses or commentary that it does?" (p. 104).

Davids attributes the intolerance and "othering" experience by hijab-wearing Muslim women to the dominant ideology of liberalism in the West. She contends that liberal democracies' claim to integration is hypocritical, "since it is not embracing of any other identity that does not resemble itself" (p. 107). Her critique extends to that of Western feminism, which she claims fails to recognize agency in Muslim women and thus assigns to itself the task of being saviors of the oppressed and subservient "other."

The penultimate chapter 7 of the book is provocatively titled "Patriarchy as Religion" and provides the reader with some powerful reflections of the author's agency in fighting patriarchal practices within her own local Cape Muslim community. She laments the huge chasm that exists between what she understands Islam to espouse about the status and role of women and that of the patriarchal Muslim praxis she witnesses on a daily basis within her own community. In particular, she identifies the exclusion of women from a number of mosques around South Africa. To protest this "despicable treatment of women by a few men, self-ordained as the custodians of mosques" she describes publishing a letter ("How Muslims betray Islam by not allowing women in the mosque") in a national newspaper (p. 114). Unsurprisingly the letter unleashes hateful responses from the patriarchal Muslim establishment. Undeterred, however, Davids perseveres in her fight "to disrupt the exclusion, marginalization, humiliation, and pain" in her quest "for cultivating a world of mutual regard" (p. 133).

Out of Place employs the power of cutting-edge critical theories such as critical race feminism and postcolonialism in explicating how meanings and bodies are made in our world, "not to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life" (p. 133). For the most part, the theories summoned by Davids do their work seamlessly in reclaiming herstory through her embodied lived experiences. However, Davids's deployment of H. K. Bhabha's interpretation of postcolonialism as not a time *after* colonialism might have been augmented and enriched by utilizing the novel and emancipatory insights and discourses found in the avant-garde (de)colonial theory developed by Latin American scholars Walter Minolo, Anibal Quijano, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Curiously, Davids does reference the latter scholar's thesis that colonialism and decolonization are not episodes that are locked in the past but ones whose legacies and effects continue to haunt us in the present, but then quickly reverts to her preference for postcolonial theory because of what she claims is its embracing of "messiness" (p. 7).

Out of Place: An Autoethnography of Postcolonial Citizenship is a must-read for anyone concerned about identity struggles, social integration, and the full affirmation of the dignity of marginalized peoples.

A. Rashied Omar
Associate Teaching Professor
Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN

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