BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Susan V. Wall, Northeastern University

The history of Composition over the last forty years would be unthinkable without the contributions of ethnographers, case study researchers, and their theorists and advocates. But their work also has its own particular history. The first generation of qualitative researchers in the 1970s and 1980s successfully challenged the dominance of quantitative approaches to research on literacies and learning. They redefined writing as a process and gave us a body of research to show us how it might be studied and taught. By the mid-1980s, however, the practices of qualitative researchers were called into question as postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist theories began to transform academic scholarship. This second stage of development, detailed in this volume’s final essay by Stephen Gilbert Brown, produced what the editors call “theory shock,” an onslaught of by-now familiar ontological, epistemological, political, and ethical challenges that call the very enterprise of ethnography into question. Ethnography Unbound both marks and makes significant contributions to the third, current stage of ethnographic research on writing and literacies. Unwilling to continue spinning in the postmodern vortex, its sixteen contributors from English and Education aim, the Introduction says, to “‘talk back’ to postmodern theory to answer the fundamental questions the postmodern assault on traditional ethnographic practice raised” (2).

The editors claim that critical ethnography is the kind of research best suited to offer that kind of countercritique and produce a revised research praxis. But since “critical” is defined here by so many different terms—“rhetorical,” “liberatory,” “place-conscious,” “political,” “transformative,” and so on—readers might usefully abandon hope of a coherent definition and, instead, appreciate the range of meanings these chapters offer. That would be more in the spirit of their authors, most of whom avoid arguing what ethnography “should” be. Instead, they typically ask what ethnography might become for particular researchers, informants, and readers who will bring different purposes and positions to the ethnographic “scene.”

The opening essay by Bruce Horner sounds this pragmatic note, and so do many of the following chapters. Horner observes that critical ethnographers’ response to the postmodern critique has been to raise an impossible set of ethical dilemmas about how to conduct and represent their work. Rather than call for yet more “strictures” to address these dilemmas, however, he argues that critical
ethnographers have actually failed “to be materialist enough in their conception of the work of ethnography” (13). Proposed solutions such as self-reflexivity, multivocality, and collaboration with informants define ethnography in terms of textual gestures and “good” character, residual idealisms that keep us from understanding ethnography as entailing different kinds of labor in the material world. An ethnography defined as socially negotiated *praxis* rather than individual *ethos* will allow us to develop an “ethics of labor” that would be not only more pragmatic but, I would add, far more rhetorical in nature.

The most important chapters that follow might be classified as (to borrow terms from Lance Massey’s chapter) either metamethodological essays or postethnographic reflections (271-72). In the first group, three essays propose definitions of what ethnography does and is. Mary Jo Reiff turns to theories that treat genres not as textual classifications but as forms of social action that function both pragmatically, to carry out a group’s purposes, and epistemologically, to reproduce and interpret those acts and the ideologies they embody. We can, then, define ethnography as a “metagenre,” at once a kind of text and a method of rhetorical analysis. Lance Massey identifies two strands of ethnography in Composition: a social science tradition that seeks more precise ways to analyze contexts; and an interpretive tradition influenced by postmodern theories that “problematises the relationship among reader, text, and world” (270). Rather than demonize one or the other, Massey proposes that we read both kinds of ethnography as “imaginaries” that supply the terms through which Compositionists struggle over the identity of our discipline. Bronwyn T. Williams and Mary Brydon Miller call for “participatory-action research” in which literacy researchers work with marginalized communities “to identify important issues, generate knowledge that belongs to everyone involved, and work toward tangible social change” (243). Their chapter offers a valuable overview of such projects, although they are more willing than other contributors to claim their favored approach is the right one rather than simply appropriate for specific purposes and contexts.

Two additional essays in this group address how we write and read ethnography. Janet Alsop explains how personal narratives emerged in ethnographic accounts to address issues of ethics and representation. She suggests that researchers can engage in “reciprocal” forms of self-disclosure with informants for “mutual understanding” and with readers to shape mutual expectations (229). Neither form of reciprocity will be effective, however, unless ethnographers realize that all subjectivities are “protean” and nonunitary, shifting among different rhetorical contexts and purposes. Finally, Min-Zhan Lu considers “The Ethics of Reading Critical Ethnography.” Just as researchers have ethical responsibilities toward their informants and audiences, readers can, as teachers and scholars, be said to participate in the research project and so share similar responsibilities: to become more self-reflexive about their expectations and material locations; and to respect the conditions under which the ethnography was researched and written and its intended
purposes and audiences. She writes, “How we labor as readers of ethnography matters” (296).

Three more chapters take up similar issues, but through the lens of particular research experiences. Invoking Kenneth Burke’s rhetoric of “identification,” Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg narrate how their ethnographic work has re-formed them as “regionalists,” enabling them to achieve a “consubstantiality” with their informants (Hogg) and co-researchers (Brooke) that made a difference to their research sites. Drawing on Gestalt theory that sees metaphor as the way our unconscious mind understands relationships and forms habits to deal with them, Gwen Gorzelsky suggests that writing ethnography can bring researchers’ own relational rules into consciousness and place their metaphors in dialogue with those of the people they study. Recalling her work with a community literacy group, she argues that such dialogue can avoid paternalism and colonialism yet “potentially alter relational habits that perpetuate inequity, social conflict, misunderstanding, and disrespect” (86). Finally, Sharon McKenzie Stevens, in a double-voiced essay, alternately recalls her rhetorical research on debates over cattle grazing in Arizona and discusses issues of ethnographic writing, knowledge, and authority she encountered. Calling on the socio-epistemic rhetoric of James Berlin and on Donna Haraway’s metaphor of “refraction” to name “writing that makes a difference in the world” (169), Stevens argues that ethnographers produce different kinds of knowledge than the ones circulating in the communities they study. By putting their own cultural logics in dialogue with the logic of those communities, ethnographers alter the scope and terms of their arguments. All three chapters, then, suggest that revisions of the researcher’s ethos can effect real social changes, not just textual gestures.

Taken together, these nine sophisticated, complex, and thoughtful chapters make *Ethnography Unbound* a landmark volume for compositionists who are already immersed in the methods and issues of contemporary ethnographic work. Compositionists concerned with the uses of ethnography in writing courses, program design, and educational research, however, may be disappointed. John Lofty’s study of teacher professionalism in the United Kingdom and the United States is fascinating, but little connected to issues other contributors raise. Five discussions about approaches to writing instruction—Christopher Schroeder on postmodern literacies, Christopher Keller on multisited research, Lynée Lewis Gaillet on civic rhetoric, Susan S. Hanson on critical auto/ethnography, and the second half of Reiff’s chapter on ethnography as metagenre—advance promising ideas, but their development seems thinner than many essays in Composition’s major journals. Most troubling of all from my standpoint as an educator, though, is this book’s failure to give teacher-research the same sustained consideration it gives to other forms of ethnography. Given that the teacher’s material labor makes her both an insider and a major “author” of the classroom context, how, then, might teacher-researchers respond differently to the postmodern critique? How can their work be re-theorized? Is teacher-research ethnography? Whether this failure reflects a
theory/practice split in Composition, the segregation of college composition from K-12 teaching, or something else is hard to say, but it’s regrettable.

Despite these reservations, I still believe that this is a very important book, and not just for its arguments. While the editors portray critical ethnography as a “liberatory struggle of countercriticism against postmodern theory” (Brown 303), their Promethean rhetoric is not shared by most of the book’s other contributors. Their rhetoric is better described in terms of that dimension of ethos that the Greeks called phronesis, the “practical wisdom” a speaker displays in a given situation, inspiring confidence that what that speaker says will lead to sound decisions and wise actions. Modest, respectful, thoughtful, and committed to finding pragmatic as well as theoretically sound approaches to research in a postmodern age, the collective ethos of the authors represented here is evidence that the fate of ethnography in Composition is in very good hands.

Boston, MA


Reviewed by Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar, Washington State University

Five years ago I was directing a busy, mid-sized writing center at a mid-sized university in the midwest. Like any university, we saw our share of students for whom standard English was not their first language. It was hard finding resources to help my tutors avoid giving purely prescriptive feedback since most training guides, journals, and newsletters tended to overlook the essential differences—linguistic as well as cultural—between tutoring an immigrant, international, or an American-born student of color. Since each of these groups was implicitly lumped together as ESL in the literature, the advice was rarely useful across those lines, especially for tutors. Finally, a book has been published that breaks that disturbing trend. With the release of ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors, editors Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth have compiled a series of essays that offer practical training advice as well as detailed explanations of the sociolinguistic and cultural contexts that always affect the tutoring of ESL students.

In their Introduction, Bruce and Rafoth define an ESL writer as “anyone whose native language is not English, who is visiting the United States from another country to study at a college or university, and who is in the process of learning to write (and speak) in English” (xiii). From the beginning, then, they acknowledge the immigrant, international and American-born student of color difference. They even wisely remind (or inform?) readers that native speakers of English come from all parts of the colonized world, and that the English varieties spoken in these countries are just as “right” as the western varieties. It is important that they