

1 **Ethnographies of Academic Writing Research: Theory, methods, and interpretation,**  
2 **Ignacio Guillén-Galve, Ana Bocanegra-Valle (Eds.), John Benjamins, Amsterdam**  
3 **(2021), 162 pp., ISBN: 978-90-272-1007-4. \$US 49.95, £UK 40.90**

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5 Academic writing researchers' growing interest in ethnographic approaches reflects a  
6 convergence of 'methodological rich points', "those times when researchers learn that their  
7 assumptions about the way research works and the conceptual tools they have for doing  
8 research are inadequate to understand the worlds they are researching" (Manchón, this  
9 volume, p. 87). Concepts and tools from ethnography have allowed writing researchers to shed  
10 new light, for example, on the consequences of the social turn for understanding situated  
11 writing expertise and how individuals learn to negotiate socially-situated language resources.  
12 Other rich points investigated include the time-distributed nature of writing and how its less  
13 visible features may negatively impact the processes of text production, control and  
14 gatekeeping. Ignacio Guillén-Galve and Ana Bocanegra-Valle's *Ethnographies of Academic*  
15 *Writing Research: Theory, methods, and interpretation* furthers this development by  
16 supporting both initial forays into ethnographic approaches and establishing a standard of  
17 practice among EAP writing specialists. The volume, published in John Benjamins' Research  
18 Methods in Applied Linguistics (R. Manchón, series editor) summarizes the state of the art  
19 with theoretically-grounded discussions and empirically-driven explorations of the  
20 methodologies and concepts relevant for carrying out ethnographically-oriented academic  
21 writing research.

22 This 162-page volume's appeal is underpinned by thought-provoking reflections from  
23 Theresa Lillis (Foreword) and Dwight Atkinson (Afterword) on the opportunities and  
24 challenges afforded by ethnographic approaches, while the volume editors' overview makes a  
25 solid case for their timeliness. Six further chapters by Christine Tardy, Jennifer Sizer, Sofia  
26 Alberio-Posac and María José Luzón, Rosa Manchón, Baraa Khuder and Bojana Petrić, and  
27 Natalia Ávila Reyes each contribute practical reflections on particular aspects of  
28 ethnographically-oriented research. Contributors clarify key concepts like emic perspectives,  
29 thick description, thick participation, deep-theorizing, reflexivity, sustained engagement and  
30 trustworthiness while demonstrating how data triangulation, reflexivity, member checks, text  
31 histories, textographies, personal literacy histories and talk-around-text can be integrated into  
32 research practices.

33 Five core themes as intertextual threads engage readers across the chapters: ethnography  
34 as method vs. ethic, reflexivity, trustworthiness, the value of storytelling, and negotiating the  
35 degree of alignment to ethnographic approaches. The first theme reflects a discussion largely

36 initiated by Lillis' (2008) characterization of ethnographic approaches as 'method,  
37 methodology, or deep-theorizing', and illustrates epistemologically-driven questions about  
38 whether the ethnographic methods adopted by writing researchers constitute ethnography. In  
39 partial response, Atkinson (this volume) notes that Clifford Geertz' interest in doing  
40 ethnography was not about the methods as much as "the kind of intellectual effort it [entailed]:  
41 an elaborate venture in thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6, in Atkinson, p. 147). Likewise,  
42 Lillis (this volume) sets the stage for exploring how ethnography goes beyond methods when  
43 she identifies it as a powerful intellectual endeavor that pushes researchers to "constantly  
44 question the value (or not) of the particular methodological and conceptual tools we are using"  
45 (p. ix). Tardy picks up on this thread by observing that the ultimate goal of thick description,  
46 and thus of ethnography, is to strive to "sort winks from twitches and real winks from  
47 mimicked ones" (Geertz, 1973, p. 317, in Tardy, p. 23). Getting to this level of detail, however,  
48 requires not just adopting the right techniques but fundamentally shifting outlook: how one  
49 considers the people one is studying and critically integrates those considerations as research.  
50 Developing an ethic of this sort requires "investigating the social world while treating people  
51 with respect" (Atkinson, p. 149) and appreciating the vulnerabilities created by an "intimate  
52 engagement with participants' public and private lives" (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-Valle,  
53 p. 8). Practicing this ethic entails being conscious of the precariousness of digging into  
54 people's personal space, as poignantly demonstrated in both Khuder and Petrić's study of  
55 vulnerable researchers in exile and Albero-Posac and Luzón's review of the challenges in  
56 digital academic discursal practices. Beyond issues of privacy, cultivating this ethic from the  
57 individual researcher's point of view means practicing a mindset learned over time, to be  
58 constantly revisited and "worked at" (Lillis, p. ix). For Atkinson, "the ethic *is* the method" (p.  
59 150, original emphasis).

60 Two empirically-driven chapters demonstrate how the ethic of ethnography can be put  
61 into practice by taking readers through a practical exploration of the second theme: reflexivity,  
62 the cornerstone of ethnography. Ávila Reyes, for example, shows how reflexivity can be used  
63 to understand the researcher's intellectual journey, acknowledging that "direct answers to our  
64 questions [do] not necessarily lead to significant findings" (p. 140). Likewise, Khuder and  
65 Petrić present a blueprint for practicing reflexivity throughout the project life-cycle. In  
66 addition to questions of ethic, reflexivity also contributes to data quality by enabling  
67 trustworthiness, which constitutes the volume's third theme. Drawing on Guba (1981) and  
68 Lincoln and Guba's (1985) work on naturalistic social data, volume contributors repeatedly  
69 underscore how validity in social scientific research is obtained through trustworthiness  
70 instead of truth value, generalizability, replicability or objectivity: "Rather than making

71 generalizability of findings the responsibility of the researcher ... it is up to the reader to judge  
72 if and how the research applies to their own situations” (Atkinson, p. 148). In collecting and  
73 reporting on their data, writing researchers can work toward four criteria readers use to  
74 establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, concepts  
75 outlined by Sizer (p. 53) and demonstrated by Khuder and Petrić (pp. 116-119). Fleshing out  
76 the construct of trustworthiness further, Sizer and Atkinson each discuss how validity is  
77 created in ethnographic approaches as compared to the scientific method.

78 An important part of achieving trustworthiness through reflexivity relies on storytelling  
79 and personal research stories, where “researchers are not simply shadowing participants but  
80 acknowledging their situated presence in the research account” (Guillén-Galve & Bocanegra-  
81 Valle, p. 7) by making their researcher voice part of the text. Regarding this fourth theme,  
82 Sizer underscores how storytelling continues to impact evaluations of ethnographically-  
83 oriented academic writing research, noting that “some researchers from more positivist and/or  
84 deductive research backgrounds may dismiss ethnographic methodology, including  
85 textography, as mere storytelling” (p. 53) lacking validity and objectivity. Rather than shy  
86 away from storytelling, however, several authors (Atkinson, Ávila Reyes, Khuder and Petrić)  
87 highlight how it strengthens research transparency, credibility and trustworthiness. In their  
88 illustration of researcher reflexivity, for example, Khuder and Petrić demonstrate how to  
89 construct a compelling research narrative, showcasing various techniques as opportunities for  
90 reflexive storytelling. Explicitly recognizing ethnography’s narrational character is central  
91 because doing ethnography ultimately entails “getting to know people for research purposes”  
92 and “involves learning how to listen to their stories [...]. Ethnographic research is part of an  
93 ancient human practice – storytelling – and will ultimately be judged and evaluated on its  
94 storytelling capacity” (Atkinson, p. 150).

95 As the final theme, the degree of writing researchers’ methodological alignment to the  
96 aforementioned principles remains a key issue for many writing researchers who, like volume  
97 contributors, are trained as linguists, not anthropologists. Although the need for “academic  
98 border control” (Atkinson, p. 147) or arbiters of “whether specific procedures should be  
99 regarded as ethnographic” (Albero-Posac and Luzón, p. 77) is considered unnecessary,  
100 Tardy’s observation that writing researchers rarely encounter material conditions conducive  
101 to ethnographic research presents an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities afforded by  
102 ethnographic approaches, whether as ‘ethnographically-tinged’, ‘ethnographically-oriented’  
103 or thickly descriptive. To this end, the chapters provide concrete guidance for helping  
104 researchers decide on the degree of methodological alignment appropriate for their unique  
105 research purposes and argue for those choices while supporting trustworthiness.

106 Although the volume leaves little to be desired, the fluctuating terminology observed in  
107 Sizer, Albero-Posac and Luzón, and Khuder and Petrić raises the question of whether it is  
108 pertinent for academic writing researchers to continue using ‘qualitative’ and ‘ethnographic’  
109 interchangeably. Previously, this distinction was used as a hedge to signal writing researchers’  
110 hesitation in qualifying their work as ‘properly ethnographic’, as seen in Tardy’s analysis of  
111 researchers’ self-characterization practices. However, the well-argued standpoint exhibited  
112 throughout this volume, with its constructive discussions about validating degrees of  
113 alignment through reflexivity, clearly speaks for claiming the latter. Another small issue  
114 concerns the occasional mingling of research traditions which risks masking original  
115 contributors’ roles. Sizer’s historical overview of textography, for example, cites the 2018  
116 edition of Swales’ *Other floors, other voices*, but not his initial 1998 publication. This becomes  
117 problematic in the ensuing literature review which discusses textography through the lens of  
118 recent publications which appear to pre-date Swales’ original contribution.

119 Such issues notwithstanding, this volume presents an invaluable reflection on good  
120 research practices and presents a map of current thinking about ethnography in academic  
121 writing research. It provides a solid foundation for moving the field forward, e.g., suggesting  
122 how reflexivity, storytelling and personal research stories might be consolidated as scientific  
123 practice for achieving trustworthiness. With the contributors’ backgrounds in applied  
124 linguistics, EAP and academic literacies, this book will be useful reading for those interested  
125 in viewing second language writing through an ethnographic lens. Given its robust theoretical  
126 and methodological foundation, it also has broader applications to first language writing  
127 research and will prove worthwhile reading to scholars in Writing Across the Curriculum and  
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