

Book review: The value of the ethnographic tradition and the need to look forward

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Writing ethnographically

by *Atkinson, P*

2020

Sage

Los Angeles, etc.

194 pp

£22,20

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Crafting ethnography

by *Atkinson, P*

2022

Sage

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Paul Atkinson's third and final fourth book in his series on ethnography (for a review of his first two books in this quartet, *For ethnography* (2014) and *Thinking ethnographically* (2017), see *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* (2022), 11(3), 332–333), continue with his main themes. Atkinson argues again for respecting, learning from and taking to heart the tradition of the ethnographic craft that he has been part of for so many years. As in the first two books, he reveals a preference for ethnography as it developed in the context of the discipline of sociology, from which he himself emerged, and is, as a result, less well connected to ethnography within the anthropological discipline.

In these books, he repeats his critique of more recent developments in ethnography that have, according to Atkinson, become too focused on the personal and the revelatory, and too little on analysis. In particular, autoethnography bears the brunt of Atkinson's criticisms of the "emotional" and "personal". This is ironic, given the fact that the third and fourth books are largely devoted to his own texts and data. He describes, illustrates and explores several genres of ethnographic writing (third book) and his own experiments with taking beginners courses in various crafts (glass blowing, clay and porcelain craft, wood and metal work, nude drawing and photography, in his fourth book). The main difference with autoethnography seems to be that Atkinson is not as reflexive of his own work, subjectivity and positionality, as some more explicitly autoethnographic texts are. A reflexivity, we might add, which Atkinson himself prescribes as conditional for all ethnographic research.

These two books, like the first two, give the reader the impression that ethnography is not situated in this world. Geo-political turmoil; current public concerns, such as the climate crisis or the undermining of democratic institutions; the ongoing migration crises; or the digital and artificial intelligence revolution (including the crypto world) are not featured in Atkinson's



descriptions and analyses of “the everyday” of this world. Not even political and economic turmoil in the UK can distract him from his favourite topics: the arts (opera); ethnographic research methodologies; (medical) knowledge construction; or the defence of the ethnographic tradition.

In his particular approach, he becomes quite personal. His third book ends, under the guise of showing what the “epistolary mode” of textual form is, with two fictitious, but highly critical, if not vindictive, letters to two fellow ethnographers. The first is to Ronald Pelias on his 2004 *A Methodology of the Heart*, and the second is to Ruth Behar on her 1991 *The Vulnerable Observer*. The tone of these letters seems rather “out of place” in this book, as he appears to use this epistolary mode to “settle a score” with these two colleagues. It is not very graceful for someone who can be considered a Nestor of ethnography. Earlier in the third book (Atkinson, 2020), he also aims a critique at the ethnographic work of Timothy Pachirat, and particularly his book *Among Wolves* (2017). In this book, Pachirat compiles texts out of “extracts from the writings of leading figures [in ethnography]” (Atkinson, 2020, p. 162). Atkinson casts doubts on the ethical integrity of this work without presenting substantial evidence for such a strong allegation (as Lubet (2018) would like to have it). Atkinson (2020: 162) just writes that “(t)he ethics of such an exercise seem dubious”. But it seems that Pachirat challenged Atkinson on this. There is an inlay sheet in recent copies of *Writing Ethnography* that reads: “Corrigendum[:] On page 162 Paul Atkinson has inadvertently misrepresented Timothy Pachirat’s *Among Wolves*, where it is stated that Pachirat did not make himself one of the characters in his play. That is not the case, and consequently the implication that his text has unethical aspects is unfounded”.

All this is about days gone by. The quartet seem to end as if the ethnographic book can be closed now Atkinson is in the later days of his career and has secured his legacy in this series – a little like Fukuyama writing about *The End of History* in 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is no room for reflections on or any vision for what ethnography has to offer in the years to come or what recent scientific evidence in other disciplines might mean for ethnography. One example of the latter, for instance, is the abundant scientific evidence that comes from biology that dethrones the human as a unique species that would justify an anthropocentric ethnography. Ethnography will have to adapt to researching the everyday where humans are “just” a species-amongst-other-species and are *by definition* only social in multispecies ways. This is, perhaps, an ethnography that has something to offer us as we look at a world in the stranglehold of climate crisis. Or an ethnography that not only describes and analyses, as it used to do in Atkinson’s times, but also gives concrete advice in a world that faces many dangers undermining the rule of law and, in some cases, democratic freedom itself. In this context Charlotte O’Brien, for instance, argues for an “advice-led ethnography” (keynote at the 15th Ethnography Symposium in Ipswich at the University of Suffolk, 23–26 August 2022) based on her research into the treatment of individuals affected by post-Brexit changes to citizenship, settled status and associated entitlements. Her research questions and her ethnographic approach steer a course between research, data, advocacy and activism. She does that in the true spirit of ethnography, having no respect for traditional academic disciplines, being trained as a lawyer and working in the social (and political) sciences. And what about an academic future for ethnographic research where Institutional Review Boards, Data Management Systems and equivalents will increasingly decide what kind of research is ethical and what is not? No hint of a perspective at the end of four books devoted to ethnography. Ethnography ends, according to Atkinson, with Atkinson’s letter to Ruth Behar critiquing her take on vulnerability in ethnographic research. What is the need for these four books if they present no perspective on the future of ethnography?

In conclusion, the third and fourth books by Atkinson continue what he started in his first two books, showing the beauty and the highlights of the tradition of ethnography, the conceptual, methodological and analytical golden nuggets that have so far withstood the ravages of time. But, in our current time and age, ethnography is forced by events in the world

to not only look back and take stock. We have to actively look forward, keeping up with ongoing scientific evidence and offering our ethnographic perspectives on the various crises of our time. We cannot afford to turn our back on the future. The ethnographic tradition has too much to offer, as Atkinson makes clear in his quartet, to not actively take part in what the future has in store for ethnography and ethnography for the future.

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