Book Review

Everything Is Connected: A Review of *Institutional Ethnography*

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LaFrance, Michelle. *Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Studies Researchers*. Utah State UP, 2019. 151 pages.

In his foreword to Michelle LaFrance's monograph, Tony Scott (author of *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*) writes: "While the premise of scholarly influence on [composition and rhetoric] practice continues to be an important rationale sustaining the production of scholarship in the academic discipline, important questions surrounding the degree of actual influence of scholarship on practice remain very much open" (ix). He proceeds to acknowledge that the majority of those producing scholarship are tenure-track faculty, whereas the TAs, adjuncts, and other contingent instructors—those most deeply entrenched in practice—are not actively producing scholarship *on* said practice. It is this precise tension that lays broad groundwork for *Institutional Ethnography*. Questions of who should be responsible for bringing praxis into conversation with scholarship, what socio-material infrastructures provide space for that dialogue, and how "ideas about writing and writing education manifest in the actual activities of teachers, students, and the educational ecologies they encounter and create" (ix) persistently haunt the text. The three studies at the core of LaFrance's analysis shed light on the complex processes surrounding the work of institutional writing practices, as well as those who enact them, from the WAC/WID administrators who work with faculty on course content, to the faculty who in turn shape the syllabuses, prompts, rubrics, and day-to-day classroom activities with which their students interact. LaFrance argues that not only bureaucratic structures, but *all* individuals within a system affect how it works. The differences in perception to which practitioners, particularly instructors and students, are subjected keenly affect "the flexibility they have to interpret their work in relation to scholarship" (x)—hence the timeliness of LaFrance's ethnographic lens.

Institutional Ethnography speaks to a body of work already in progress, one intimately concerned with how writing research processes and

environments influence writing pedagogy, and vice versa. Recent books such as *Economies of Writing* (Horner, Nordquist, and Ryan), *Transnational Writing Program Administration* (Martins), *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* (Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser), and *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* (Horner) have taken on the challenge of applying ethnography to Composition and Rhetoric. This conversation has focused heavily on social justice issues within the field for instructors and students alike, and rightly so. The intersections of race, identity, class, and economic injustices comprise the emotional/psychological sites of our work as writing educators and scholars. In reshaping the landscape of this dialogue to explore how we approach our institutional processes and the spaces in which those processes operate, LaFrance reveals how inextricable our theory is from our day-to-day practice. The inseparability of our teaching from our scholarship forms the basis of LaFrance's ethnographic inquiry. This book challenges us to resist the urge to gloss over the complex interplay between people, events, and environments in our field. Instead, LaFrance guides us in a concretely researched interrogation of *how* our roles as individuals within a system create the conditions under which we act as administrators, teachers, students—and, above all, as collaborators and colleagues.

Following Scott's foreword and LaFrance's acknowledgments, *Institutional Ethnography* consists of an introduction and four main chapters. LaFrance's choice of the immortal Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" for her epigraph ("*Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in*") feels momentous, acknowledging from the outset that human imperfection is one of the meaningful, necessary elements in the processes she sets out to examine (or, if nothing else, suggests a stellar soundtrack for while one reads and works). In her introduction, "Twenty-First-Century Exigencies: Materialist Methods for Writing Studies," LaFrance establishes elements from the work of Dorothy E. Smith, a Canadian sociologist, as the guiding principles of her study:

> Positivist paradigms and universalist models of empirical research in the social sciences, Smith (2005, 9) argued, frequently oversimplified and reified the material conditions of sites of study, objectifying research subjects. Instead, the model of ethnography Smith developed drew upon principles of feminist cultural materialism to focus the researcher's eye on the unique personal experiences and coordinated practices of individuals, as these revealed recurrent patterns of social organization, . . . elements of everyday experience that

> were often otherwise occluded, elided, or erased by qualitative models that sought to study predetermined aspects of culture and community. (3–4)

Acknowledging ethnography's long use in the field of writing studies, LaFrance sets out to distinguish her chosen model, institutional ethnography (IE), as a tool for discovering and articulating "*how things come to happen*" and how institutions "*coordinate the experiences and practices of individuals*" (4). Writing instructional practices are always produced within specific contexts by specific individuals, with specific ends in mind. Therefore, LaFrance argues that "IE allows us to bring our concerns for pedagogy, professional identity, disciplinary practice, labor, and other forms of materiality into conversation" (25). In a field where reflective writing practices comprise so much of the work we do—regardless at what specific level, or in what specific role—this feels fitting. LaFrance promises that the case studies subsequently examined in the book "demonstrate the ways conceptions of writing (ruling relations) constitute the space studied and how people then use writing and a variety of related professional practices and identities (standpoint) to negotiate the landscapes they are situated within" (26).

Subsequently, LaFrance spends chapter 1, "Institutional Ethnography: A Theory of Practice for Writing Researchers," adapting the sociological framework of IE into a tool for studying work within institutional sites of writing (writing classrooms, writing centers, writing programs, assessment initiatives, etc.) She demonstrates the unique value of IE to our field, in that it permits us to simultaneously theorize about our work *and* "understand the actualities of that work that live below the layers of our materialist discourse" (30). Through the use of several narrative vignettes (a TA struggling to approach teaching commentaries as a genre; a HR representative seeking to clarify confusion over a writing center director's precise title; an instructor's frustration over the process of designing a FYC library writing assignment), LaFrance spends the remainder of the chapter laying out how our perceptions of the university, depending on where we are situated within it, vary. Living examples effectively demonstrate that "these central concerns for the field of writing studies are always produced within situated contexts by actual people who are negotiating any number of professional, institutional, and highly individual ideals toward specific ends" (35). Finally, LaFrance identifies seven core concepts integral to the use of IE in sites of writing: ruling relations, standpoint, social coordination, problematic, work and processes, and institutional circuits.

With her methodology thoroughly set down, LaFrance dedicates each of her remaining three chapters to a different case study, putting her methodology to thorough use in each. For example, chapter 2 ("How Work Takes

Shape: Tracing the Work of a 'Shared Assignment' in a Linked Gateway") takes an in-depth look at how following an assignment's trajectory (from the course catalog description and assignment prompt, all the way through to how students ultimately interact with and respond to it), alongside examining institutional data and interviewing key participants, can "tell the story of work" in a collaborative setting. LaFrance focuses on patterns of labor, disciplinary identity, and ideals of writing instruction in that particular site of writing, with an eye toward revealing what it can tell us about both labor conditions in the field and linked-course initiatives—"to turn up particularities that are highly relevant to the concerns of writing program administrators but often less visible in the scholarship of curricular initiatives and WAC/WID work" (51). Thanks to LaFrance's insightful, IE-oriented annotations to texts and interview transcripts, one gets the sense that if TAs, teaching at ground level in the linked courses, could more freely discuss their concerns and confusions with tenured faculty, the designers of that gateway "at the top," there would be significant benefit to how participants *do* the work of teaching and designing respectively. Adjuncts, who may occupy the same niche as TAs and/or be engaged in some of the same curriculum design work as tenured faculty, would in all likelihood benefit most significantly across the board.

Furthermore, TAs and adjuncts are not the only demographics that stand to benefit from LaFrance's groundbreaking analysis. This book also has the potential for immediate, visceral resonance with writing program administrators, particularly in its revealing use of concrete, detailed examples from existing writing programs. Understanding composition and the teaching of it as "cultural material work" may sound arduously theoretical, but it provides a framework for examining the complex interplay between our experiences as practicing teacher-scholars and the experiences of our FYC students. As program leaders and curriculum developers, we are not the only individuals who will teach the assignments we design. LaFrance asks us to be mindful of our work's evolution from start to finish, which entails consciousness of and communication with each group of colleagues and students who interact with it. Often, it will mean accepting criticism and feedback from colleagues whose work we oversee—and, yes, from our students.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic has transitioned our classrooms into virtual spaces, radically changing the way we interact with each other and our students, it has *not* fundamentally changed the work that needs to be done. There are genres to be taught, examples to be discussed, assignment sequences to be scaffolded, revisions to be made—and, hopefully, if we've done a thorough job of all that, future collaborations to hatch. Even as our

new paradigm has resulted in budget cuts and reduced work for those in non-tenured ranks, it has resulted in an increased workload for still others. At the best of times, our vocation is fraught, yet rewarding. We encourage students to persist, guiding them while they grow as writers. At the worst, what was previously fraught may become disorienting, discouraging, and downright stressful, especially when our chains of communication fracture or collapse.

In breaking down the *how* and *why* behind our institutional writing research and instruction processes, LaFrance offers a blueprint for our troubled times and beyond. As Scott puts it in the foreword to the book, "We have theories of relations carrying considerable authority in the scholarship that blur distinctions between people and our environments . . . but we don't have enough qualitative research that tracks how theory emerges as activity in the institutional environments within which we and our students actually work together on a daily basis engaged in acts of composing, meaning making, and knowing" (x). LaFrance has made a dedicated project of engaging in that meaningful work so that we can continue to meaningfully engage in ours.

Works Cited

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