

Hartblay, Cassandra. *I Was Never Alone or Oprorniki: An Ethnographic Play on Disability in Russia*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 218pp. \$26.95 (paper). \$21.95 (ebook).

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I Was Never Alone is not an ethnography. Rather, Cassandra Hartblay's text offers readers a play—a scripted, theatrical production about disability in Russia, performed for an audience in the United States. Within the volume is a script, stage directions, scene notes and prop lists, photographs of production and development, literature reviews on embodiment as—and through—performance, and deep reflections on what it means to “translate” the lived experiences of people who are Russian and disabled to an audience of people who are very likely neither. It is a text, but it is not an ethnography. It is, in Hartblay's own words, “the *practice* of ethnographic knowledge production [and] the *process* of interpreting and sharing meaning” that *I Was Never Alone* is designed to encapsulate (p.85). It is a text, yes, but the text is not the object. The ethnographic play—as an artifact of knowledge production and bodily praxis—is, very literally, the thing.

I Was Never Alone opens with a cast of characters: “Vera: a woman in her early thirties...her husband is a ‘Real Russian Man’ type;” “Vakas: Ladies’ man...Likes poetry and anything else about love. Walks with a shuffle and poor balance” (p.3). These persons, six in total, are the protagonists of the play. They are all real people living in northwest Russia, classified by the state as *invalid-oporniky*, or persons diagnosed with a disability related to a musculoskeletal condition. They were the focus of Hartblay's dissertation fieldwork, a dedicated, years-long effort that resulted in the intimate portraits that make up the ethnographic script contained in this book. Each portrait is meticulously crafted—and appropriately so. Hartblay took her original scripts to her informants for them to edit and revise. She hosted public readings of the script (in Russian) in St. Petersburg. Her informants were later flown to San Diego to consult on the staging and production of their scenes being performed (in English) for American audiences. The play depicts informants who, literally, wrote their own representations. This process, as well as reflections on the cultural dialogue generated by the play's many performances, is detailed in Hartblay's thoughtful essay “Rituals of Vulnerability: Reflections on Method as Theory in Action” in the latter half of the book.

The stage direction in the script is very tight, very direct, with little room for ambiguity. This is also by design. In the final vignette of the play, Anya, a psychologist and social worker living with a progressive muscular disorder, accepts a drink of water from Larissa. The stage directions read:

[LARISSA] places the straw in the cup and adjusts the bend. She turns and puts the cup in ANYA's hand. ANYA slowly raises the cup to her mouth, puts her lips around the straw, and drinks. (p.58)

Hartblay is clear in her essay that this very detailed stage direction for an action most would find mundane exists because the action is, in fact, mundane. That is what makes it important, why it must be gotten exactly right. It is a key moment that demonstrates Anya's unique techniques of the body and demands a careful, curated embodiment of Anya's character by the actor cast in this role. "Look at each other, more drinking," instructs the director of a production in San Diego. "And then sort of, Anya, just take your time drinking until you're done" (p. 109). Hartblay, present for this rehearsal, adds, "Make sure this plays as something familiar, something you've done a million times before, that you do every day." The result of this careful work is a scene that many in the audience might find awkwardly paced—a phenomenon that Hartblay connects to what disability scholars have called "crip time." Anya moves slowly. She lifts the cup slowly. She drinks slowly. It is a seemingly unnecessary diversion from the dialogue that is necessary *because* of the mundanity of the diversion. This is Anya's embodiment of the everyday. After the performance, audience members spoke of this as a turning point for them in the play, a moment when they experienced a "jolt" and were forced to adjust their interpretive frames. That representation, that knowledge, is not found in the text of the script but is co-produced between actor and audience through the production in which they both took part.

Hartblay writes her play for multiple audiences. She anticipates, on the one end, the naïve audience member who knows nothing of the experience or politics of disability and nothing of Russia. She acknowledges, on the other end, her interlocutors and co-authors represented in these scenes. Somewhere in the middle, she hails fellow scholars of and from Eastern Europe who occupy some place in between, who will find so much that is new and revelatory in this script and will chuckle at the little details like boxes of Ahmad tea and knock-off Adidas *tapochky* in every scene. In this way, the book is, despite my opening claim, very much an ethnography. An authentic portrait of urban Russian life has been written with precision into every aspect of the play—the

dialogue, the stage direction, the set design. But the play does not explain itself. Which is to say, the script alone, this flesh-less index of a live theatrical production that is not (at least not while being read in a library or at a kitchen table) actually being produced, is not the ethnography. The ethnography—the praxiography—that the book represents only comes to life when the scripted dialogue is read, when the theatrical conversation between actor and director, between play and audience, is carried out. The text is ethnographic, but the full meaning is only conveyed when embodied on the stage.

I Was Never Alone can, therefore, be engaged as an ethnography of disability in Russia. Hartblay has beautifully and lovingly rendered everyday Russian life in the play. She further invites her readers (implicitly in the play, explicitly in the essay) to consider the images of Russia they find most familiar. In the U.S., our colonial and Cold War logics have taught us to consider Russia the Other to America's self-declared brightness and prosperity: cold, grey, corrupt, impoverished, repressed. Hartblay conscientiously constructs her theatrical world in opposition to these stereotypes, offering rich points at every turn, creating a thick, lived-in place through the thin simulacra of theatrical space. A close read and guided dramaturgy of the script would be a memorable and effective addition to any Eastern European area studies classroom.

I Was Never Alone is also a commentary on ethnographic methods. Key questions that anthropology has asked since the ontological turn motivate this text from start to finish. What stories are being told? What knowledge is being produced? Whose insights are these, and who is engaged in telling them? Hartblay does not resolve these questions, per se, but she offers a different answer than I and many other readers had expected, one more grounded in practice and collaborative in nature than, I think, most of us have thoroughly considered. Hartblay's work is just so very different, but also so very sharp and relevant. Was there room for more discussion of embodiment? Yes. Could Hartblay have taken the reader on a deeper dive into the disability literature or the politics of representation? Absolutely. But *this was not the point*. The point of *I Was Never Alone*, as I see it at least, is to introduce readers to novel ethnographic and interpretive methods and to lay out the reasons why this sort of innovation matters. And I am convinced. It very much, very deeply matters.

For this reason, it is best to describe *I Was Never Alone*, I think, as an invitation. It is an offer to share Hartblay's reflections on her own praxis as an ethnographer, collaborator, and theatrical producer. It is a blueprint for reproducing that production and undertaking her co-

scripted ethnographic praxis anew, looking forward into new possibilities even as it looks back on what has already been accomplished. It is scholarly permission to try new stuff and do weird things and really *work* with the people you work with to create something truly shared—even if it is also something ephemeral. It's an invitation into a humbler ethnographic practice, into different kind of conversation about epistemic equity than many of us have been having. It's not an ethnography, but it invites us to reconsider what ethnography could—and should—be.