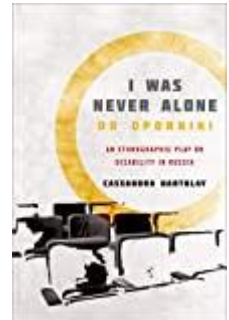


**Cassandra Hartblay.** *I Was Never Alone or Oporniki: An Ethnographic Play on Disability in Russia.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 218 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4875-8840-3.



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In recent years, anthropology and its flagship method, ethnography, were subjects of reconsideration as the imperial and colonial legacy of the discipline cast a shadow on its current state. There was a deeply embedded inequality in the methodology between expert researchers and their subject. This disparity is seen both in gathering data and reporting results in the classical format of academic papers or monographs. This lack of balance has been recognized within the discipline and addressed by approaches such as participatory research, emancipatory research, and performance ethnography, all challenging the traditional modalities of knowledge production. They share this ground with disability studies, which highlights the expertise of people with disabilities.

Cassandra Hartblay's startling book addresses the problem of agency, expert mediation, and giving voice to the Other in both ethnographic and disability studies knowledge production and writing. *I Was Never Alone or Oporniki* is the result of field research conducted in a community of people with disabilities living in Russia. It is not,

however, a standard ethnographic monograph (a report from the field presented from the distance of an academic professional) but a script of an ethnographic stage play accompanied by a set of additional texts. Hartblay's narrative gives voice to her interlocutors, turning the interview transcripts into a theatrical script, instead of interweaving them into her academic narrative in which the interlocutors' words might appear sterile when separated from the expert's voice by quotation marks. Hartblay withdraws her ethnographer/disability researcher persona from the text, letting the audience experience the voice of the Other, a person of different nationality and with a disability. The act of retracting the researcher's text of the play exposes the audience to the storytellers themselves and—using the formula of the theatrical script and possibly a performance—remediates the ethnographer's experience of encounter with the interlocutor and listening to their story. At the same time, this act reveals “ethnography [itself] as a kind of cultural performance” (p. 100).

*I Was Never Alone or Oporniki* consists of three parts. The first is the play script, which is preceded by the production history and a description of the cast of characters. The script includes six portraits—of Vera, Vakas, Alina, Sergei, Rudak, and Anya—that take the form of monologues. The settings—apartment, music club, or coffee place—are provided and described. The author encrusts the text with “Russianness,” stating that some props or elements of the scenography come from the “Soviet era,” just as she intersperses monologue with Russian words, sentences, and dialogues (transliterated from Cyrillic, provided with phonetic transcription and translation). Particular portraits/monologues vary in length. Sometimes they are interrupted with the utterances of other characters, such as in the case of Alina’s mother, who orbits Alina, resonating with her daughter’s story; or the case of Rudak, who occasionally chats with a drummer while their band is getting ready for a concert. All characters are positioned self-consciously in front of the audience, addressing it directly and constructing it as foreign, non-Russian.

The leading theme of the monologues is the lived experience of the characters as people with disabilities in Russia. They relate to the isolation, to the representation of people with similar disabilities in media and popular culture, to the inaccessibility of public spaces and services or adjustments that Jay Dolmage would call passive-aggressive.[1] Most prominently, however, they relate to friends, people they encounter, clients, or parents—the latter often overcontrolling and overprotecting them (Sergei repeatedly ignores his mother’s calls and, as also do other characters, imitates their conversations). The characters are part of the social network that accompanies and supports them—the first part of the title, *I Was Never Alone*, signals this kind of support and protection. At the same time, the characters themselves are significant elements of these networks; they sustain them and contribute to creating “nonnormative interdependencies and kinship relations” (p.

94). This is addressed by the second part of the title, *Oporniki*, which in Russian suggests an element that supports a construction. The reciprocity of social interactions and relationships, highlighted by the title of the book and repeatedly referred to by the author, seems one of the most prominent elements of the book that reimagines disability “as a source of strength and social interconnections” (p. 95). The script is followed by a set of photographs presenting a city in which the field research was conducted, images documenting the process of script creation together with the interlocutors, and finally, documentation of the stage readings of the script in the United States and in Russia.

In the second part, entitled “Ethnographer’s Essay,” Hartblay reports on the challenges she faced as an ethnographer, disability researcher, and author of intercultural translation. She places the project in the context of large-scale categories, such as disability and health management in everyday life, and postsocialist transformation. Therefore, looking at reconfigurations of power and vulnerability, *I Was Never Alone or Oporniki* may be situated within both the anthropology of disability and the anthropology of postsocialism. At the same time, by presenting the everyday experience of Russians with disabilities to an American audience in English, Hartblay seems to raise the question of a cross-border disability culture based on lived experience.

Several times, readers are encouraged to read the script aloud. In this way, the very act of storytelling is being recreated (not only in the case of stage reading but also in individual reading experiences), exposing the crip time of the narrative: “the temporal specificity of nonnormative embodiments navigating social relations with people and things” (p. 107). Another aim—or rather, a challenge—is representing Russia (and what it means to be a person with disability in Russia) to a North American audience. As Hartblay states, “developing the script ... has served as an experimental

laboratory for observing North American perceptions of Russia, and as a collaborative project to decolonize representations of the affective life of the Russian citizen-subject” (p. 130). As does Claire L. Shaw in *Deaf in the USSR. Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917-1991* (2017), *I Was Never Alone* challenges Western-originated disability concepts, definitions, and advocacy-driven expectations, in which global universality is still taken for granted.[2]

The author reveals the behind-the-scenes processes, not only in regard to conceptualization of the research project and issues concerning the collaboration with interlocutors on the script, but also her ethnographic research methods and the negotiation of live-performance accessibility for audiences with different disabilities. With regard to the latter issue, Hartblay highlights the principle of integrating accessibility into the inalienable aesthetic element of the performance.

The last part of the book consists of a comprehensive set of appendixes that include disability terminology and Russian and Soviet historical references—both to provide the reader with some basic context. Most importantly, Hartblay designed the book not only for the stage but also for classroom use in anthropology and disability studies courses. In this respect, she provides readers with an outline of eight exercises in performance ethnography and suggestions for reading the script in the classroom. The book is supported by a website, <https://iwasneveralone.org/>, that provides additional materials: recordings of the performances at the University of California San Diego and suggested feature and documentary films, music videos, books, and articles. It all adds up to a well-crafted trans-discourse narrative. *I Was Never Alone or Oporniki* may be read as a part of a complex project but also as a self-sufficient, stand-alone work that may be read and performed.

Hartblay places vulnerability and openness at the center of ethnography, theater, and research on disability, all considered as knowledge produc-

tion processes. Her book can serve multiple cognitive, methodological, and educational aims and adds to current discussions on local aspects of disability, transcultural communication practices, postsocialism, and the methodology of field research and the various possibilities for reporting results.

#### Notes

[1]. Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

[2]. Claire L. Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community and Soviet Identity, 1917-1991* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

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