

## **Ethnography, Travel Writing and the Self: Reflections on Socially Robust Knowledge and the Authorial Ego**

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Review Essay:

**Laurel Richardson & Ernest Lockridge (2004). *Travels with Ernest: Crossing the Literary/Sociological Divide*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 259 pages, ISBN 0-7591-0597-9 (paperback edition), £ 22.99**

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**Abstract:** The art of ethnographic writing has become more complex in the period following post-modernity. Whilst issues of authorship, alterity and similarity, and the ethnographic ego were addressed in the Writing Culture debates of the 1980s, new forms of ethnographic writing are currently being developed. The reviewed book suggests a crossover between sociological/ethnographic and creative/literary writing. Eight chapters take the reader on journeys to Europe, the Middle East and parts of the US. The authors describe their journeys whilst relating what they see to their own experiences. This technique is examined by asking what kind of readership is envisaged. A critique of the authorial ego is attempted and a way out of the self-centredness of the ego-centred style of ethnography is offered.

### **Table of Contents**

- [1. The Challenges of Ethnographic Writing](#)
- [2. Hiking in Death Valley](#)
- [3. Post-modern Literature, Poverty and War in Ireland](#)
- [4. A Wedding in Beirut](#)
- [5. On Being a Stranger in Denmark](#)
- [6. In Capitalist Russia](#)
- [7. St. Petersburg Beach, Sedona, and Ohio](#)
- [8. Conclusion: Reflections on the Authorial Ego, Writing, and Ethnography](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

### **1. The Challenges of Ethnographic Writing**

*Travels with Ernest* is an experiment in sociological, ethnographic and literary writing. As an anthropologist who also has a degree in literature, I was very much thrilled to see both of my interests represented and discussed in one book. Just like the authors of this book, I had also been struggling for years with the problems and challenges of writing ethnography: the accuracy of the voice of the other, my own cultural bias, and how should I represent myself in the text? Is ethnography a science or an art form? Should ethnographic writing adhere to rules laid out by the academy or should the anthropologist be able to claim the

freedom of the artist? Is good travel writing better than good ethnography? Those are the questions that I have been grappling with for years, just like the authors of this book. I was, therefore, very much looking forward to reading it. However, whilst reading the book, some emotions kept coming up: there were some joyful reading experiences, but also some moments of doubt. Even though during and after reading the book, I felt as if I had known the authors for a long time and had been part of their debates, the book left me with an unfulfilled promise. A feeling of unease kept creeping up on me and I was starting to wonder what had caused this uneasiness. Was it because I felt that this book is about the feelings of the authors and not an ethnography, which would explain why I had reacted with strong emotions to it? Was it because I felt that important issues had, again, been dealt with in a mistaken way? Was it because I felt that I had been let down by the promise of the book? [1]

Before I describe the contents of the book, I would like to introduce two issues that presented themselves whilst I was writing this review. The first issue is the question of the nature of auto-ethnography. This is tied up with the role of the writer and his or her imagined audience. The second issue is about the role of academic writing and its relationship to society. Let us thus start with a short definition of auto-ethnography. Let us describe it as a mixture between autobiography and ethnography. I would like to suggest that any description of a social phenomenon turns into an auto-ethnography "at the moment when the writer starts to understand his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes" (see RUSSELL 1999). Auto-ethnography is also an attempt to understanding one's own culture by turning her/himself into someone who plays a role in given social and cultural circumstances. When one starts to write about oneself, this role becomes clearer because writing in itself is an alienating process: we extrapolate our thoughts and turn them into literary symbols and figures. We then hope that other people, if they belong to the same culture and can decipher the system of letters and grammar that we use, manage to reform these innermost feelings. We hope that our written thoughts, which no longer belong to us, are re-translated into similar figures of thought. Writing auto-ethnography is thus an alienating process in a twofold way: it not only turns the writing ego into an author, written language also alienates thoughts by default because thoughts become written symbols, i.e. words (see BROCKMEIER 1999). Paul RICOEUR (1992) taught us that narrative identity is always elusive as it is tied up in time. The self we write about is turned into "an Other" when we progress in time. Thus, who we think we are when we write a text is already another self. We can thus know and write about our selves from a limited perspective. However, when we write ethnography, we have the opportunity to create ourselves in the text as members of a particular society, which is what good auto-ethnography is supposed to do. If we create ourselves as an ego in the text, we should be aware that it is not always our selves we are talking about. Even though the writer and the protagonist in the text consist of the same person, there is a difference between the two. It is important to keep in mind that both of these roles are fictional. These issues are clearly more complex and I cannot do justice to them in this book review essay, but let us take them as

a starting point to distinguish between auto-ethnography and what, for sake of a better term, I want to call ego-ethnography. [2]

Secondly, let us take a look at the role of academia in contemporary society. As the social study of science has taught us, even "natural scientists" are always part of their culture and their world-view influences their theories, their findings and their analysis. To draw a distinction between scholar and private person is thus completely arbitrary. This insight into the production of scientific knowledge is even more valuable for the socio-cultural scholar. Writers such as Donna HARAWAY (1994) have also made us aware that the "citadels of science" are breaking down: the distinction between academia and the rest of society are no longer as clear-cut as they used to be, or as they were imagined. Helga NOWOTNY (together with Peter SCOTT and Michael GIBBONS 2001) has famously argued that we live in a mode-2 society in which socially robust knowledge is no longer only produced in the Ivory Tower but has to be proved in social forums. Her point is that beyond the positivist/post-modern divide, socially robust knowledge is that which is socially agreed upon to function. The book *Travels with Ernest* is actually part of this process. The authors use the knowledge they gained as academics and reflect on it from outside the Ivory Tower. They also reflect on academic knowledge production when they talk to other students and peers about the Ivory Tower. These reflections take place outside of the academic environment and are among the best parts of the book. However, as this is a relatively new form of writing, the reader feels as if s/he is in a non-space: s/he is neither addressed as a peer nor as a casual reader interested in travelling. Initially, the book leaves the academic reader startled: what role are we supposed to take on? Should we be literary readers who enjoy discussions between two emeriti professors? Or should we be academic readers wondering where the academic value of the book lies, where the scholarly writing is contextualised, how ethnographic observations are analysed? Or should we see it as a travelogue? [3]

In *Travels with Ernest* each chapter is divided into three subsections: Ernest LOCKRIDGE describes their adventures in a literary style and then Laurel RICHARDSON talks about their experiences from an ethnographic perspective, or vice-versa. This is then followed by discussions about their actual journeys: their journeys into writing, their feelings, their experiences and their relationship. These discussions sometimes take place years after the journeys. They are married couple; she is an emeritus professor of sociology, he is emeritus professor of English and creative writing. They report, discuss and depict their experiences of travelling together. They travel to and walk in Death Valley, in Dublin in Ireland, in Beirut in Lebanon, in Copenhagen in Denmark, in Petrozavodsk in Russia, in St. Petersburg Beach in Florida, Sedona in Arizona and Worthington in Ohio. The authors seem to have a deep relationship and try to convey a sense of connectedness to the reader. As is common knowledge within qualitative social science, ethnographic writing has gone through a major crisis in the 80s and 90s and this book seems to be a belated experiment in dealing with the issues that were raised in those debates. How much is the ethnographer part of any research? How much does s/he influence the outcome

of the analysis? How much can the person be seen in the writing? Is the researcher allowed to be seen, noticed, and heard as a literary ego? These are the debates that these two have with each other. However, the debates seem somehow outdated for a European readership, and the fact that we are not told where Death Valley is located is a first clue that this book is mostly geared towards an American readership. Let us now take a closer look at the chapter. [4]

## **2. Hiking in Death Valley**

The first chapter of the book is a reflection on their hikes in Death Valley. The first paragraph of the chapter (written by LOCKRIDGE) deals with the fears and anxiety of getting lost on their hike. The narrative is about the observations that they make and Ernest's sudden confession that he always hated teaching and lecturing. Now that he is retired, he confesses to his wife of years, "[i]t is true confession time, Laurel. I've battled with stage fright most of my life" (p.8). The text then goes on to their discussions about his ailing mother and his brother's battle with cancer at the age of 27. However, the retelling of these experiences is not linked with the setting of the conversation, apart from the name of the location. "Death Valley" seems to present itself for these discussions. In fact, these are conversations that happen every day in millions of households, at kitchen tables and in front of televisions, amongst very ordinary people. As a reader, I started to wonder what is "literary" about these conversations, let alone, what is ethnographic? Surely one cannot expect that every piece of literature works like an ice axe to break the frozen seas inside our souls, as Franz KAFKA once put it. I also started to marvel at what kind of marriage this is: a couple of professors, both retired, and the wife never knew that her husband suffered from severe panic attacks throughout his working life? And what has this got to do with Death Valley? On second thought, I concluded that it was not their marriage that was not working, it was the composition of the narrative—there was no suspension, no beginning and no ending. Later on in the book they explain that they had met later in life and had not been married throughout their careers. This may explain the conversation that they had about anxieties throughout their working careers. However, an explanation at this stage of the book would have been very welcome. [5]

## **3. Post-modern Literature, Poverty and War in Ireland**

I then moved on to read the chapter on Ireland that starts with Laurel's revelation that she is always very nervous when she has to give a paper to a feminist conference. Parts of this section were written 16 years after they had travelled to Ireland and parts of it are written as if they are reliving the moment when they both struggled with their academic duties and Ernest was thinking about retiring. Dublin was bleak, cold, and depressing, even though it was July. Laurel explains this by saying that "Dublin is at war with Northern Ireland" (p.28). Laurel's narrative talks about the search for her Irish heritage and she tells us the stories of hardship which her ancestors had to face. Ernst's piece about their journey starts with his observation of a lump in his groin—something he didn't want to share with his wife at that particular moment. So he goes on to tell us about

Dublin's greatest son, James JOYCE. They both found it incredible to be on the trail of Ulysses "just being there on the actual site" (p.37), but with it comes the confession that, of course, neither of them had read the book to the end. Ernest laments the fact that students "these days, are taught to look for myth, symbols, philosophy, but little or no story" (p.39). In between consulting and following the Ulysses' steps, they talk about experiences of lecturing and their visits to pubs. Then they ventured out into Ireland's green hillsides and were enchanted by the B & B's, and even considered having one of their own once they retire. They discovered ruins and met other fellow Americans. They visited a medieval tower where Ernest announced his intention to leave another tower, to the amazement of his wife. He was talking about the Ivory Tower: he was thinking about giving up teaching. In 2003, some years after this journey, they have a conversation about it. Only then does Ernest come back to the opening scene: no, he did not have cancer. So why did he mention it? "It got me seriously thinking about how I might and might not want to spend the remainder of my life" (p.64). The conversation that follows is about the fact that Ernest, now that he has retired, feels very differently about literary theory and the academic discourse. When he goes to literary conferences, he finds himself wondering if a lot of modern fiction, including JOYCE's Ulysses, is unreadable. They discuss PYNCHON and the fact that he is a prankster and never shows up at award ceremonies, which makes Laurel wonder if that is "maybe why she had devoted much of her academic career to epistemological questions" (p.67).

"On what grounds can anyone claim to know anything?' she wonders, 'reason is no longer the ground of truth, for me. Nor logic [...] I have dismantled the binary in my own soul between 'Reason' and 'Feeling'. They're interconnected. One is pretty useless without the other'" (p.68). [6]

I would like to go back to Ernest's criticism that literary students these days are not taught to look for a story. I agree with Ernest that a storyline is essential, both in ethnographic writing and in creative, literary writing. Good travel writing is also about suspense, about making the reader want to find out what is going to happen. We all know that things happen. Yet, another important question also is: Why do they happen? As a social anthropologist and as a private person who reads this book, I would have been pleased to get some analysis of the reasons why things happen. Even an appendix of books that deal with the places they visit would have been helpful. Yet, I find none of this. [7]

The issue of storyline comes up again in this chapter. I mentioned that he draws our attention to the lump in his groin at the beginning of his narrative about Ireland. In this piece of writing he never returns to this unsettling observation. If he does not want this observation to turn into a McGuffin, an empty device to distract his reader, why does he not return to it at the end of this particular piece of writing? Everybody experiences unsettling observations about changes in their body at some stage in their lives. Shouldn't great literature be able to make sense of these experiences, link them with emotions and how this is manifested in everyday life? [8]

#### 4. A Wedding in Beirut

Chapter three is about the journey to Beirut in August 1999. The cause for the journey is a happy one: Ernest's daughter is getting married to a "Phoenician" (p.75), a man who obviously comes from a rich Lebanese Maronite (*sic*) Christian family and who refuses to be associated with the "bomb-happy Hezbollah and Palestinians" (p.75). The chapter is divided in four paragraphs: the first is by Ernest, written as a letter to his brother, reporting about the wedding. The second is by Laurel, written as an e-mail to a friend of hers. A conversation then follows about Beirut, dated September 1999, and a fourth paragraph is dedicated to a meta-conversation, held a year later. Whilst Ernest's letter is full of positive reports about the beauty of the country and its people, Laurel's e-mail is an attempt at coming to terms with what she perceives as the nastier side of the country: war, bombs, the clashing of cultures and misogyny. Ernest tries to emphasise how beautiful and well-educated his new relatives are and how much everybody shows grace in a difficult situation. Both report how thoroughly they were searched at the airports upon return. Ernest makes his daughter promise that she will learn how to shoot because she and her new husband will have to live in Mali for some time. In the US, he had always advised her against the use of firearms. Ernest concludes that Mali must have a similar problem to Rwanda because like the Hutu butchers of Rwanda, Mali has a problem with the Tauregs (*sic*) "creatures of French foreign policy" (p.78). [9]

Laurel starts her e-mail to her friend by saying that she is home safe but not sound. Her shoulder is hurting and obviously she did not find Lebanon as enjoyable as her husband. Whilst being there she was reminded that she has a Jewish mother with every step she took. If *they* had known, she would have been arrested immediately, so she claims. She describes the wedding, "everybody was beautiful", she claims (p.80). She also marvels at the villagers lining the street to see the bridal car. The next day they all go sightseeing and Laurel marvels at Lebanon's porno district. She observes Saudi men frequenting clubs with American sounding names. "Here they find proof that the American way is the way of the devil", she presumes (p.81). However, the Saudis have brought their wives who "sit on hotel steps in *purdah*, bodies and heads covered in heavy black wool garments. I catch one woman's eyes. I see pain. I no longer think the dress is simply custom; I feel its misogynist origins, its practice as abusive" (p.81). Both Ernest and Laurel refer to the Lebanese Christian as "Maronite" instead of "Marianite". Laurel goes on to describe a scene in which Syrian guards stop them and check them. "What must it be like for Jean-Paul [their son-in-law, A. STÖCKL], a descendant of the powerful Phoenicians, to placate a Syrian soldier?" (p.81) Laurel wonders. At the end of her e-mail she concludes that Lebanon is too full of contradictions and she admits that "all of my academic theorizing about breaking down oppositions, deconstructing binaries doesn't help me now, in any practical sense. [...] You can tell I am home again—at home, again—using my life as entry to the realm of the untheorized" (p.82). In the conversation they discuss how the same experience is reconstructed differently by both of them through the process of writing, which leads them to a meditation on how much letter writing is different to other kinds of writing and they both

agree that they "wrote to enlist the healing power of writing" (p.86). Again, they make references to post-structuralism. Laurel touches on the notion of authorship, truth and discovery. She claims that writing can be a method of discovery because she wants to write about things she does not know. Then she makes a detour into American individualism. What follows is one of the pivotal sentences of the book and I let Laurel speak for herself:

"I suppose it is this American individualism, or something, but I like saying I did this myself. My 'truth' was not constructed through my conversation with someone else—a therapist, say—but rather through my conversation with my multiple selves, my history and so on. It's a very different sense of owning what I claim to feel and know" (p.84). [10]

At the end of the chapter, they discuss their feelings about "the others" and Laurel claims that she recognizes the others in herself through linking of experiences. It is no surprise, so she claims, that she ends her letter by seeing the other as herself. "A vision of non-difference" (p.87), as she refers to it. [11]

As a reader of an auto-ethnography, I would have very much liked to see a discussion of what it means to travel as an American person in the Middle East. I felt that all of the post-structuralist theorising did nothing to illuminate the fact that they felt very unhappy whilst in Lebanon. Even though Laurel reflects on the fact of having a Jewish mother, the way that Christians are described is very antagonistic to the descriptions of the Muslims. The Christians are described as "beautiful and brave", the Muslims as "misogynists and enemies of the 'American way of life'". [12]

## **5. On Being a Stranger in Denmark**

Chapter four is about their visit to Copenhagen and Laurel's lecturing experience at Copenhagen University. I related to this chapter best because the protagonists are female, feminist students at the University of Copenhagen. The description of this journey seemed so familiar to me and was very close to home, so to speak. For me, chapter four is the only chapter that really worked, that brought together ethnographic detailed description of everyday life in a strange town of strange people, literary description of poverty, and genuine linking of Laurel's and Ernest's emotions of the situations they find themselves in. [13]

Laurel was asked by a feminist sociology student if she would like to teach a course and then participate in a conference. Upon arrival in Copenhagen, they are shocked about the poverty that these feminist students have to endure. It reminds them of their very first days of being students themselves. Whilst holding her seminar, Laurel is confronted with a situation that seems only too familiar to feminist these days: she tells the students to interview each other and one of the male students produces a sexist piece of work, threatening to stalk one of the female members of the group. Instead of participating in the seminar, the male student disrupts the class, faking an ethnographic interview which he was supposed to lead with one of the students. He turns it into a description of how he

would stalk the interviewed female student. Laurel is shocked and tells the student that in her own country—the US—he would be called a stalker, only to find out that this word is not even known in Denmark. She then discovers that there is a huge backlash against feminist students and feminism in general because women do not want to get married any more. They apparently have decided to raise children on their own in order to benefit from the welfare system. Young men not only feel excluded from the public life, but also from private lives, and they react with anger. Laurel is obviously shocked but she discovers that she would only make the situation worse for the female students if she talked openly about the incident. So she decides to do what the female students do: she keeps silent and is shocked. [14]

Ernest, meanwhile, walks through the city and feels like a stranger in a strange land, reminiscing about his poverty when he was doing his Ph.D. at Yale. These memories are interwoven with thoughts about the Little Mermaid and Hans Christian ANDERSEN. He explores the Arab quarter and the adult bookshops, including the Museum of Sex. In their conversation about their essays on Copenhagen, they wonder why they never talked about the statue of the Little Mermaid. They also had not seen the bohemian district nor any art museum. This raises an issue for Ernest about the nature and aim of this book and Laurel answers: "Aren't we using our travels as objects for our gaze"? They talk about how depressing Copenhagen made them and how much it reminded them both of their early days as students. Again, Laurel states the obvious: "Like the gazing ball in our backyard, what we see is not the ball, but ourselves and all the desiderata behind us" (p.119). [15]

## **6. In Capitalist Russia**

Chapter five is about their visit to Petrozavodsk, a town in Russian Carelia. The chapter starts with Laurel's musings about her Russian grandparents and their escape from Russia. Ernest's daughter got married to an Evangelical missionary and they had moved to Petrozavodsk in order to bring their religion to Russia. Petrozavodsk is full of poor people who live in Soviet style apartment blocks with elevators that don't work. People seem depressed when they go out for walks. They have an interchange with a Russian tutor who tells them about her journey to America and her surprise that she was not shot. The tutor goes on to say that both Russians and Americans had been taught to fear each other during the cold war. Laurel answers that Americans were not taught to hate the people, only the Soviet government, and she tries to tell a joke: "What is the difference between Russians and Americans? In Russia, man oppresses man and in America, it's vice versa" (p.133). Nobody laughs. [16]

Ernest's piece is about an elevator in which he, Laurel, their daughter and son-in-law got stuck for two hours. They communicate with a woman who sits on the other end of an intercom and is reluctant to help them. This gives Ernest a chance to reflect on poverty in the US and his daughter's job as social worker, in which she was overworked and underpaid. Later on, once rescued from the elevator, he has a debate with his son-in-law and an artist who sold Laurel and



Ernest antique icons which they then smuggle out of Russia. They talk about how Russia has been sold out to the capitalists and his son-in-law states, "In lots of ways capitalism really does suck. Unfortunately, everything else seems to result in these really terrible tyrannies". [17]

This above statement makes me again wonder why the authors do not reflect upon their nationhood as Americans. How can such a strong statement be left without any contextualisation in a work that claims to be ethnographic? [18]

## **7. St. Petersburg Beach, Sedona, and Ohio**

For the remainder of this essay, I give a short summary of the chapters six to eight before coming to a conclusion on the issues raised in the introduction. Chapter six is about a visit to another St. Petersburg, this time it is St. Pete's Beach in Florida where they stay in a condo and go for walks on the beach. Laurel describes the beach and the hotel at the tip of the beach, the Don CeSar hotel. The main part of Laurel's narrative is taken up with recounting an exchange she had with another sociologist about writing literature instead of writing for a sociological audience. They discuss the sad tale of writing venues and literary magazines that are no longer stocked at the big bookshops. Their last day coincides with a visit by George W. Bush to Florida, which features heavily in Ernest's narrative because he discovers that George W. Bush and he had been at Yale at the same time. The chapter is taken up with him wishing that he, hopefully, had never met GWB or even taught him. Chapter seven is about a holiday in Sedona, Arizona, a place in which they had spent their holidays for thirteen years. They spend a lot of time with hiking and finding trails, discovering that the place has become more and more kitschy and touristy. Apart from this, not a lot happens in Laurel's account. Ernest's piece is full of excitement: they spot a lot of celebrities. Kate Moss, Johnny Depp and Richard Gere are among the stars they see. The last chapter, number eight, is written in the style of a film script, as Ernest later explains. The scene is set in the Great American Kitchen in Middle America, in which Ernest and Laurel, discuss their lives and travels. They muse about the process of writing and Ernest admits that the more he wrote, the more he found himself exploring the "in here" alongside with the "out there [...], something I had no intention of doing when we initiated this project. [...] So this is new to me, travelling through the world, and openly through myself" (p.216). They talk again about how they felt whilst travelling and suddenly there is a fade-out, yes, this chapter is written as a script for a movie, and we see little Laurel talking to her Jewish grandparents in Chicago in 1940. Mother and Grandparents are having a debate about not talking in Yiddish any more. "We are Americans now". And yes, indeed, they are. [19]

## 8. Conclusion: Reflections on the Authorial Ego, Writing, and Ethnography

Let us recall the issues I raised in the introduction: auto-ethnography and writing in itself are, and have to be, alienating processes. Processes that make us aware of our role in society and of our cultural backgrounds. However, writing does not make us aware of who we are, of our essence. At some stage in the book, Ernest confesses the following: "What I want to write about are my own experiences. Experiences I'm trying to understand. Whether I communicate them to someone else is secondary" (p.143). Whilst this is a legitimate desire and understandable from the point of view that writing really brings out unknown sides of our past selves, it begs the question why he ever published the book. Publishing a book is not only a privilege held by a few people who have access to networks of editors and funding bodies, it is also a communication with an audience. The writer thus enters into a contract with his readership. [20]

In the introduction to this essay, I mentioned NOWOTNY's claim that we live in a mode-2 society in which socially robust knowledge is produced in social forums. Academia and the rest of society form a place of discussion which she refers to as the Agora (see NOWOTNY et al. 2001). Members of the Agora come from all walks of life, they all shape knowledge and they all have equal rights to knowledge. However, some members of the Agora have, of course, better access to distribution of knowledge. I have introduced this term to argue that this book, to my mind, does not always contribute to socially robust knowledge, to stick with this terminology. As much as we can debate the differences between truths and realities from a post-modern perspective, as much as we can claim that positivism is outdated; it is important to get facts right. Let me thus start with the very first and most obvious criticism of this book: there are grave mistakes that should have been double checked or edited by the editor. The war between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain had been over for more than 55 years when RICHARDSON mentions that Dublin is at war with Northern Ireland. The Christians in Lebanon refer to themselves as Maronites, not Marianites; the Tuaregs just don't exist at all. From the context of the chapter on Lebanon and Ernest's mentioning that his daughter is moving to Mali, I presume he talks about the Tuaregs. I am a member of the Ivory Tower, so I can check this for myself because I have access to information. But what do other members of the Agora do? The scholar in me cringes at such inaccurate reporting; the ethnographer in me knows how insulting it can be for any kind of group or tribe to be described with a wrong term. The casual reader of travel writing wonders why they went there in the first place if they could not be bothered to give me, as a reader, appropriate information about the place. [21]

Now let us, again, take a look at the usage of the concept of ethnography, auto-ethnography and the self of the writer. The concept of ethnography has famously been renamed by Clifford GEERTZ's (1973) as "thick description". However if we look at ethnography not just as minute reporting but also as a hermeneutical practice, as GEERTZ did, we have to ask questions and try to make sense of them. What do things mean? Why do they happen? What is the cultural

background? Why do things seem strange to us and perfectly normal to others? It is not just enough to describe rituals, situations and objects. The scholar in me wants to be enlightened why these things happen in exactly this way and not in another way. What do objects mean? Why are Icons important to Russia? Why is it a sacrilege to sell them? This leads me to the second point of my criticism: RICHARDSON and LOCKRIDGE do not provide us with interpretations about their observations, however much they might be speculations. Most of the time they talk about how they themselves feel. Thus, if Ernest's and Laurel's Russians don't laugh at their jokes, is it because Russians have no sense of humour or is it that they just don't understand American wisecracking? [22]

I would like to suggest that RICHARDSONS and LOCKRIDGES' book could have benefited from reflecting on RICOEUR's ideas about the narrative self which I alluded to in the introduction. It seems to me that in all their debates about the authorial ego, the authors, instead of scrutinising their own epistemology whilst thinking and writing, put themselves at the centre of their narratives. As I also mentioned above, auto-ethnography is, with few exceptions, understood as a method of understanding your own role in your society by way of exposing yourself to other cultures. Whilst the authors expose themselves to other cultures and also sometimes manage to give us a good impression of how they felt in these encounters, they fail to reflect on their own culture as Americans. They sometimes reflect on their status of being children of poor immigrants, yet having made it to the elite system of academic knowledge and rituals. To me, this feels as if they pay lip-service to the reader. For me, as a European reader, they only once reflect on what it means to be American in the modern world: Laurel mentions the American idea of individualism which she interprets as coming to a truth through conversations with her multiple selves (p.84). [23]

However, it seems as if they are not aware that their style of writing is perceived as very American outside of the US: focussing on and talking about your own feelings, your concerns with your own body and its illnesses, and your depressions is a specifically cultural way of constructing an ego. This confessional character of American public life can be seen as a social construct and product of conditioning equal with the reported "misogyny" of some Arab countries or the allegedly "melancholic" Russian soul. However, this blind spot in their writing is part and parcel of RICOEUR's dictum of Oneself as Another. It is thus questionable whether it can be held against the authors. It can also be simply the case that this book is intended for an American readership. [24]

Let us now go back to the problems that cross-over publications might face. As I mentioned before, it is futile to uphold a distinction between academia and general society because the walls of the citadel called science, if they ever existed, have become even more permeable, and not only in the natural sciences. Publications written by academics that are intended for the general public are not only welcome, they are also a natural consequence of this process. However, I wonder if some of Ernest's and Laurel's debates would be understandable to the general public. I imagine that, in some chapters, they are using too much jargon. For instance, they talk a lot about The Gaze when they

are sitting at home at their kitchen table. Which non-academic knows what this term implies? Which non-academic knows its history, its meaning? I assume that some concepts of continental philosophy found a way into common parlance, but it would have been helpful for a non-academic audience to find some of these concepts explained in an appendix or a glossary. Likewise, the academic reader is also startled to see that there is no section for references or secondary literature. [25]

I would like to end this review essay with one of feminist scholar Teresa BRENNAN's wisest observations: she once famously claimed that we live in an era of the ego, the ego that is as psychotic as the social and collective that it underpins. To quote BRENNAN: "the ego begins its progress to the centre from the wings, seeking to make over all that exists in its image" (1993, p.1). I believe that auto-ethnographic approaches can produce interesting work if we take into account that the alienation of the authorial ego is a necessary process and if we manage to take on the challenge that the written ego, the one that appears on paper, is not "me" or "us". My concern thus is not with the question of how the authorial ego can be written into a text. I suggest that the question needs to be reframed: First of all, following from BRENNAN's statement, we need to ask why we think that we have to appear in a text? Why can we not go beyond our own importance? Why do we constantly have to refer to ourselves in order to understand the other? Secondly, we need to take into account that if we write about ourselves, we can only write about a fictional person, even if we think that it is "me" who we are writing about. Only by alienating ourselves from our culture can we return to it. If we are not prepared to do this, any attempt to write auto-ethnography will actually only be another "ego-ethnography". [26]

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