

The Academic Tourist: An Autoethnography

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The essay argues that academics, similar to tourists, often only manage to get to the surface of any area of inquiry they pursue, in part because of the nature of what constitutes full understanding and in part because of the habits of academic life. Written in an autoethnographic style, the essay offers a sociology of the academy through descriptive details. It invites emotional identification.

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Students just keep coming and you think you will remember them, but most of them fade, like the class lectures you keep using, even though you always plan on writing new ones with new ideas and new strategies that will make for an even better class, and sometimes you do, but mostly you rework what you've done, copying again what you know has worked and hoping you can bring enough enthusiasm to teach this once again, and you figure since there is nothing but new faces out there, it really doesn't matter, but you really think it does, but you just don't have the time to do anything about it, so there you are standing in front of the class saying what you've said before, caring about what you are saying, but feeling a little bored and trying not to show it, and having said it so many times that you have forgotten how it might be complex, because it surely isn't for you anymore—it's more like the Lord's prayer or the pledge of allegiance that you can recite without thinking—but you sense that they aren't getting it or that they don't want to get it, so you try explaining it in a new way, and you find yourself getting excited about the ideas and in the middle of what you take to be the key point, a student asks if this will be on the test, and you feel tired, but you push on thinking about how the test in your file drawer can be adapted to make sure this will be on the test, and you're glad that you only have fifteen more minutes before the bell will ring, and when it does, you rush to say a few last things, as if it mattered, and then you leave, chalk dust on your pants and fin-

gers, knowing that you've only scratched the surface of the subject and knowing too that at a time when education is more about packaging, more about FTEs, more about supplying the economy with a labor force to build the American industrial complex, little is likely to be complex; instead, your lectures are postcards from the classroom, your supportive words are photographs to be placed in the family album, and the diplomas you hand out at the end of the year are souvenirs for hanging on the wall, and you are, at best, the tour guide who really never knew your way around, and as you begin again, you will see again what everyone else sees, you will go down the same path that everyone else takes, and you will know that you could read more—it's surely available—but you probably won't, because who wants to read an article when *Friends* is on, or when friends are available for a drink, or when you could just be taking a nap, and so you will use that old script you learned long ago, the one that has you saying things that everyone takes for granted and keeps most students from asking any questions, but even if they do, you have a ready answer you've learned long ago—until the semester comes to an end and you let yourself believe that much has been accomplished, which, of course, gives you permission to do it all over again because the students just keep coming.

And when you are not teaching, you're asked to do service for your department, university, community, or professional organizations, which often simply means that you're asked to sit in committee meetings and to take, like everyone else, your work too seriously since most of the decisions the committees are supposed to address have already been made, but you go and listen and try not to play with your pen to a point of distraction since you do want to be a good citizen, really, but it's hard when you have so little information and no funds and no power to make anything happen, and you do want to do your share, because it just wouldn't seem right to say no, and there are some things that you do think matter, like who should get a university fellowship, or who should be tenured, or who should become chair of your department—such things impact your daily life so you're glad when you have some voice—but often when you're sitting there you think that you just don't have good criteria for making a good decision, in part, because you don't have enough information and there is nowhere to get it and in part because any single decision seems to get swallowed in complexity of the university system, and so you try to fulfill your service obligations by doing things in the community and you discover that the university really doesn't want you to do that; it only wants enough done so that it might appear to have a great working relationship with the community, and in that desire, it creates programs, like Service Learning, that seem to establish a great working relationship with the community but actually just exploit students, which you aren't necessarily against if it is for a good cause, because you want to think that your work matters in the world, that you can be of some service to someone, even though you're not sure how what you have to offer is of use in the

greater scheme of things, but you push on knowing the arguments you've used to justify what you do and hoping that your arguments carry more truth than your feelings, and you accept that you'll probably never be able resolve your uneasiness, and you accept that service doesn't really count anyway, and you accept that you'd really rather not be doing it, particularly when *Friends* is on, or when you could be having a drink with your friends, or when you could just be taking a nap.

And when you are not doing service for your department, university, community, or professional organizations, you are supposed to be doing research, such as writing a paper like this one, since you are supposed to be a scholar and scholars do research; research that is supposed to develop a particular argument like the one in this paper that asserts that academics function as ethnographic tourists in that they, like tourists, like ethnographers, never get beyond the surface of things, even when they spend a lifetime at their sites, in part, because lifetime habits of participant-observation are perhaps more blinding than initial participant-observation, in part, because the work academics should do is just too hard to do given that most only live into their seventies or eighties, and, in part, because academics, in their greatest display of arrogance, think that they can get beyond the surface of things; and scholars do research that is supposed to look a certain way and you know that this paper isn't one of the ways because you don't have any quotes and a friend of yours just recently said, without meaning to be critical, that she wished she could do your kind of research because then she wouldn't have to go to the library, but you heard it as critical and so you begin to think of who you might quote and you remember one of your favorite lines in "A Hippocratic Oath for the Pluralist" from Wayne C. Booth's (1979) book, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*, that reads, "I will publish nothing, favorable or unfavorable, about books or articles I have not read through at least once" (p. 351), but you feel a little guilty using it since you've used it before and it is a fairly dated source—1979—but you believe it is still relevant since you know you are guilty of breaking the oath, an oath you believe in, but you wonder what does it mean to have "read" someone, like Derrida for instance, who you've quoted but only read in translation, only read all of a few of his many books and parts of a few others, read some summary books on his books, and read without fully understanding everything you encountered, so you wouldn't want to claim that you have more than a partial grasp of his work, if that; even still, you know the tradition of quoting that is supposed to prove you know something and you know that you aren't doing enough of it here to prove your case so you think you might cite some of the giants in ethnography, like Gerry Philipsen, Dwight Conquergood, or James Clifford, but then you remember what Clifford (1997) wrote in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*:

A certain degree of autobiography is now widely accepted as relevant to self-critical projects of cultural analysis. But how much? Where is the line to be

drawn? . . . Writing an ethnography of one's subjective space as a kind of complex community, a site of shifting locations, could be defended as a valid contribution to anthropological work. It would not, I think, be widely recognized as fully or characteristically *anthropological* in the way that work in the externalized *field* still is. One could hardly count on being awarded a Ph.D., or finding a job in an anthropology department, for autobiographical research. (p. 88)

and you know you sure don't want to quote him, even though you don't think you're writing autobiography, maybe autoethnography, which lets you use yourself to get to culture, but these distinctions get blurry, and so you decide to just forget the whole quoting thing, even though you know you could cite scholars such as H. L. Goodall, Jr., Carolyn Ellis, or Norman K. Denzin that would support what you are trying to do, and as you are making that decision, you flash on another way to write this paper that turns the speaker of the essay explicitly into a tour guide:

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. Step right up. See the academic in the front of the room reading his paper, his eyes buried on the page and his nervous hands shaking, mumbling on and on in words and sentences that never seem to end. He is typical of his kind. Notice too those who are also in the room. A few nod now and then, trying to show some interest, but most are restless in their straight-back chairs. They are anxious for everything to be over, so that they might get some lunch or visit with an old friend. Later, over dinner, they will have forgotten what they heard so they will spend their time gossiping about others of their kind.

and you think that the tour guide strategy might work, but you have already written more than you planned to write, and you know you are pushing the amount of time you have for presenting an essay in this or that style, and you really don't want to start over, and then Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998; Franklin, 2001) claim that display constitutes its subject comes rushing toward you, and you wonder if you have become what you have argued and you know that if you let yourself, you'll feel depressed, but you also believe with her that "the first order of business is . . . to examine critically the conventions guiding ethnographic display, to explicate how displays constitutes subjects and with what implications for those who see and those who are seen" (p. 78), and you think you are doing that, at least implicitly; but you don't want to get into it any further than you have, at least not now, because *Friends* is on, and you plan on having a few drinks with your friends a bit later, and you are hoping to get in a nap before then.

And just when you decide you're finished, just when you're feeling pleased with yourself because you managed to come back for the magical third time to that line about friends, and you feel you've made your case about how academics, like tourists, never see the world beyond its surface level, your friend, the one who made that comment about citations, comes by and you tell her your argument, and she says, as if she were quoting a line straight from T. S. Eliot's "The Long Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "That is not it

at all," and goes on to suggest that the concept of tourist takes its definition in the notion of leaving home and your argument centers around seeing in a superficial way while at home and you believe she is right and her remark gets you wondering what reviewers might say if you ever decide to send this paper out, and you imagine them wanting you to consider the tourism research that tries to take away the easy dismissal of tourism as necessarily problematic, even though that misses the point of your paper, and you feel exhausted, but you want more than anything else for this essay to be off your desk and you think that you'll just cancel having a drink with your friends tonight and that you'll just take a nap because you're feeling tired, even though *Friends* is on.

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