

**Bakke, Gretchen. 2020. *The Likeness. Semblance and Self in Slovene Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 196 pp. Pb.: \$29.95/£ 25.00. ISBN: 9780520320048.**

Book review by

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*The Likeness* is a craftily written, delightful book in which Gretchen Bakke discusses copy, imitation, and lack of difference as constitutive of subjectivity rather than irreconcilable with it, as the argument would usually go in dominant debates, in which the self is understood as something deep, clean, inner and authentic, as something of essence. Written to 'critique the social-symbolic system that couldn't recognize the power and effort of non-differentiation' (Bakke & Fehérváry, 2020), the book is based on the author's fieldwork in Slovenia's capital city Ljubljana from January 2001 to October 2003.

The book consists of a preface, introduction, five chapters, an afterword, and a brief chapter titled *A Break in the Pattern*, placed between the *Introduction* and the *First Chapter*, in which Bakke explains her choices regarding the book's form, content, and her writing strategy. She describes that she opted for a 'small, copacetic book of its own' because 'nobody really wants to read a whole book about Slovenia' (p. 38) and points to a necessity to counter the tendency largely present in ethnographies that people whom anthropologists research become just a source of information, while (European and North

American) anthropologists become a source of analytic knowledge (p. 38). The following five chapters discuss the specifics of the Slovene understanding of the self through a different case, subject, or practice.

In *Chapter One*, Bakke analyses a lecture Walter Benjamin gave on Mondrian in Ljubljana in 1986, while in *Chapter Two* she discusses the avoidance of Slovene artists of presenting themselves publicly. *Chapter Three* presents the art project *Name Readymade* by the artists Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša. *Chapter Four* is dedicated to Slavoj Žižek and his ability to force everyone to pay attention to the constraints of the context. The last chapter discusses a series of performances by Ive Tabar entitled *Evropa I-V*, in which the artist surgically intervenes into their body.

The afterword, which the author offers to readers ‘mostly just for fun,’ focuses on Melania Trump and argues that ‘some robust local analysis’ would help (the Americans) understand that the first lady was ‘doing herself and everything else just right’ (p. 40).

The book offers a witty, insightful discussion of subjectivity and the ways copying, multiplying, pluralising offer means to counter pressures to be in this world as a whole, pristine, authentic, inner self. It also reveals non-differentiation and lack of originality as expressive and productive of social and cultural meanings. The author could place her analysis within the growing body of academic works discussing the ways mimicry, imitation and mimetic practices constitute both subjectivities and political realities (see, e.g., Boyer & Yurchak, 2010; Lempert, 2014; Petrović, 2018). However, Gretchen Bakke – somewhat surprisingly, given her dedication to breaking the pattern with the ethnographic approach, form and manner of writing – offers an interpretation of these practices that is quite narrowly framed and two-foldly so. First, it places them in an exceptionally tight national framework, and second, it firmly links them to the transitional processes of Slovenia’s accession to the European Union.

Exploring non-differentiation and the ways it provides alternative understandings of subjectivity, Gretchen Bakke seems to simultaneously struggle with it when her ethnographic research and narrating about it are concerned. According to Bakke, ‘there are two problems with Slovenia for the anthropologist. First, is that nobody has heard of it, nobody cares about it, and it’s weird [...] My problem was,’ she states further, ‘that whenever I talked about Slovenia nobody believed me. It was an impossible place to make abstract claims about (for the then-me) because of the second problem, which is that it is/was insanely recognizable. Repetition in the idiom of the same meant that outsiders felt – at a gut level – like they understood it. The weirdness of the place was lost in the fact that it appeared not to be different at all’ (Bakke & Fehérváry, 2020). This

problem with lack of difference Bakke solves by making Slovenia legible to (Western/American) readers through two Slovenians recognisable and known to them: Slavoj Žižek and Melania Trump. Slovenia, its artists, philosophers, and nationals who made into the White House could provide a magnifying lens to observe universal conditions in the political and social fabric of our time, which make extensive use of copying, mimicry, and doubling viable and useful expressive strategies. Instead, the author has chosen to firmly bind these strategies to locality, cultural specificity, and presumed notions of ethnic distinctiveness, homogeneity, and immobility. In this ethnography, likenesses are related to issues such as national traits of mental health (Introduction) or peculiarities of grammatical structures of the Slovene language (*Chapter Three*). The way Schwarzenegger performed his role in *Terminator* is related to the fact that although an Austrian, 'he was born and raised in what is considered traditionally Slovene lands' (p. 34); Slovenes are depicted as being comfortable only when 'speaking among themselves and to other locals, usually culturally and linguistically integrated Croats' (p. 56). Making a tiny, weird place called Slovenia legible to foreigners that the author sets as the primary imperative rendered complexities of the local life in that place redundant and irrelevant, and accuracy in describing that life unnecessary; many references to Slovenian language expressions, names of artists and theoreticians are misspelt, even including the name of the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito (p. 1) – which inevitably casts doubt on the author's resolution to change the dominant paradigm of instrumentalisation and objectification of people researched by anthropologists.

The interpretative framework in which Slovenian likenesses are placed is thus tightly local(ised), but also temporally narrow: it is defined by the processes of Slovenia's accession to the EU, its 'moving into Europe' (p. 56), roughly coinciding with the period of Bakke's fieldwork in Ljubljana: 'Likenesses here,' the author writes, 'tie the geopolitical transition to the more intimate register of self-conception and self-performance as these mattered to local experiences of social, cultural, economic, and political upheaval' (p. 2). Understanding this process as 'changing [Slovenes] into Europeans (recognisable as such)' not only ignores manifold and complex ways Europeanness was negotiated in Slovene society and (post)socialist Europe in general but also obscures the fact that the strategies this book explores reach beyond this period in both temporal directions.