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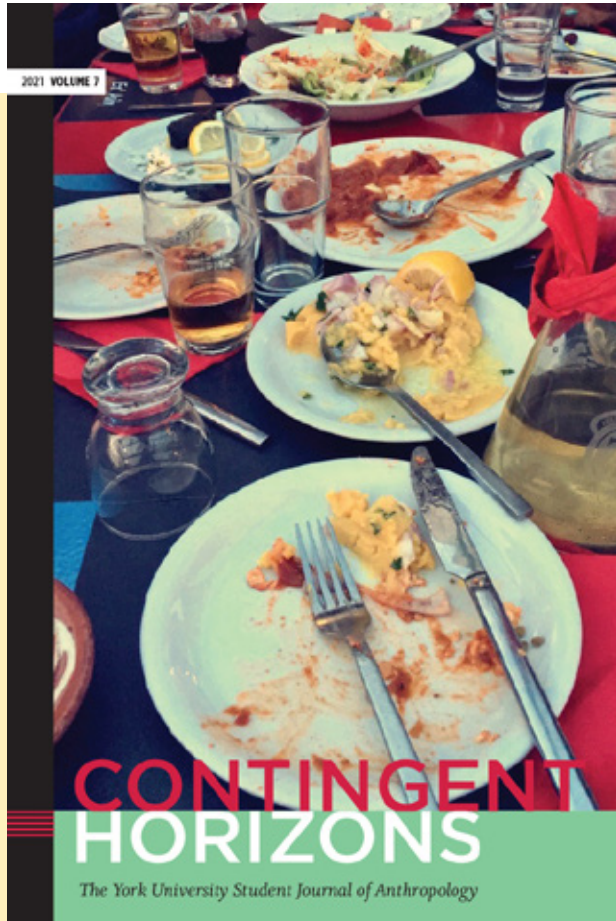
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DISRUPTION

## Rethinking War: Autoethnographic Accounts of Disruption, Debris, and the Ongoing Impacts of War

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# Rethinking War

## Autoethnographic Accounts of Disruption, Debris, and the Ongoing Impacts of War

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This paper looks to the ways in which memory works as an ongoing force within disrupted and displaced lives. Based on storytelling and conversations with family, I tie together the mundane and everyday experiences of living and leaving Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Yugoslav Wars of Secession. Here, in the banal moments of disrupted lives, the waiting and going-on that mark an everyday struggle for survival and wellbeing extends into the present. An autoethnographic working, this paper adapts personal and generational experiences to discuss the complexity of war and migration. In doing so, this paper highlights how the effects of war and migration processes, including feelings of fear and uncertainty, remain active hauntings. Tales and retellings come to demonstrate the debris that lingers as forces of history, drawing the body through memory production passed on generationally through remnants like memory, habit, and language. This paper illustrates the messiness of such traces, where storytelling and memory work come to reflect the normalized yet innately disordered life. Ultimately, moving away from seeing the debris of war and refuge as wholly disruptive and violent, this paper instead focuses on how the workings of temporality and storytelling within the migratory experience reveal active modes of being-in-the-world. In such modes, memory and storytelling evidence durational or nonlinear temporalities, as the past mundane experiences of survival continue within the present.

**KEY WORDS** Immigration, displacement, war, waiting, debris, memory, storytelling, autoethnography, Yugoslavia, Bosnia

**I**n 1993, my family left Bosnia. In 1991 the republics of Slovenia and Croatia left the nation of Yugoslavia. In 1992, the war began in Bosnia. Understood as an interethnic conflict, religious divide motivated aggression from Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian military forces, assuming nations, communities, and families could easily divide and fall between these lines. In 1992, as the war in Bosnia began, my family left. This departure was not and is not simple. It is complex and ongoing with debris that may remain active and apparent on both those doing the leaving and the places left. Debris scattering and clinging to memories, habits, language, and even physical and bodily traces.

This paper looks to unsettle and reinterpret conceptions of war that focus on violence. This is a privilege. It is a privilege to reflect on war as a personal or familial experience and

to name only particular traumas – traumas that have caused no physical harm and only emotional ones. However, there is something to speak and expand upon: to recognize even mild cases as a particular occurrence that may be widespread. This paper is a generational and personal working at heart as it looks to how memories of disruption, displacement, and waiting change and alter through storytelling.

I have no interest in discussing the details of the Yugoslav Wars of Secession or the Bosnian War. To do so creates lines and sides, ignoring the fact that (this) war intended to divide and segregate relationships and livelihoods in unnatural, messy, and unnecessary ways. Rather, this paper intends to examine this mess: the disturbances and reactions of war on civilians. In moving away from seeing debris and disruptions of war as wholly destructive and violent, this paper will, instead, focus on themes of waiting, stillness, and decision to demonstrate that the most potent elements of humanity exist in the liminal periods of war.

My family's history has always been a complex topic for me. I have only ever heard partial stories—stories that would be conferred amid elaborate tales of my dad's childhood. Like the father-son relationship in the movie *Big Fish*, I never truly had a sense of what was real (Zanuck et al. 2003). The imagery I had developed of my family was always influx. Deaths, locations, even family members were always unstable and unknowable. At some age, I realized and accepted I would never have a complete or coherent description and understanding of my family. Like Lauren Berlant's discussion of the "good life fantasy," I am reminded that the "dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life" are messy—not fitting neatly into premade conceptions and descriptions of family and lineage (Berlant 2011, 15). Maybe, in the same sense, my parents could never neatly share their stories. Their stories never aligned with the ones I was accustomed to hearing. There was no comparison; never the worst, while never being extremely interesting either. The stories changed each time they were told as if these memories were not finished but ongoing, still being felt and understood by my parents.

I learned to be creative: when to ask questions, what kind of questions would be answered, and which ones would never get a response. My parents' memories and stories created a flowering of images and narratives, which came together when I pushed for answers. Never neat, never whole.

This paper reflects a methodology that looks to balance the migrant narrative and the *autoethnographic* experience of long-term listening. In rummaging, dealing with, and reflecting on the vignettes of my parents' experience escaping civil war, this approach reflects data collection that lacks clear boundaries between familial accounts and my own. Here, conversational details such as dates are approximate. In mirroring a lack of precision in storytelling, where aspects such as dates, duration, and simultaneous events are not used to mark personal storytelling, my methodology looks to reflect the heterogeneous timeline given.

Such an approach adapts Kathleen Stewart's notion of nervous ethnography, where the space of alterity can be approached but never arrived at because of the always-partial knowledge and shifting way of things (1991; 1996; 2008). As is evident in the redundancy of my parents' portrayals, and what Stewart argues through the approach of nervousness, storytelling becomes a means to note *mimetic representations where events are organized temporally and further locate narrators in space and time*. This parallels Stef Jansen's (2002; 2006) analysis of interviews in the Post-Bosnian War context, where catchphrases,

practiced storylines, or vagueness can be seen as a coping mechanism as straightforward stories reflecting dominant discourse provide comfort in uncomfortable times. In this way, storytelling becomes a critical method in witnessing self-making through its maintenance of nervousness and the contaminated.

The use of narratives post-crisis evidences how the overheard, repetitive, and echoes of my family's stories lend to Ann Stoler's conception of imperial debris and duress, "what is left and what people are left with" (2016, 17). In this conception, stories and ways of simplifying complex and uncomfortable experiences that exist outside hegemonic attention are produced and managed through these narratives. In order to access and trace the debris evident in storytelling, I specifically look to Stoler's (2009) method, "reading along the archival grain," where the focus is on the granular rather than the seamless texture of such accounts. The uneven and nonlinear retelling in this approach becomes a means to witnessing the ways in which duress and the past continue to exist in traces and hauntings of the intangible.

### **The Event/ Event-ness of War**

War is often characterized by violence and destruction. There is not necessarily a fault in this characterization. War does allow and produces violent acts, atrocities, and loss. However, these elements of violence do not occur at all moments; there are moments of rest, silence, maybe even peace during war.

My father describes war as always existing. He explains that this was a projection of his grandmother who always bought extra food knowing that war would come, and when it did, there would be little left for people. Fear of war and its potential to occur is inherent to this geographic location, he explains. My father was in a bar, having a beer with his friends when war was declared in Bosnia. They had just finished their weekly basketball game when they found out that they were now a part of a nation at war. My father rushed home to my brother and mother.

For months there was an anticipation of war beginning in Zenica. And, in some ways, it did: life sat in fear. Fear over the lack of food in emptying grocery stores. Fear of attack perpetuated by constant sirens signalling threat. Fear of harm and subsequently moving to impromptu bomb shelters in apartment basements for safety. Crisis alters conceptions of time and space. These moments only become smooth over time, with perspective, where an understanding of form can be uncovered and conceptualized. For my family and Bosnians alike, the crisis was their state of existence, occurring around them, threatening them. War became a force of movement.

Like Brian Massumi's discussion of George W. Bush's colour-coded terror alert system, life in Bosnia restlessly settled in a state where safety does not "merit a hue," and fear is the new norm (Massumi 2005, 31). Whether bomb or terror alerts, these signals worked as "signals without signification," activating bodily responses through modulating feelings (32). Moreover, the power of this fear and its activation, resting on what Massumi labels a "perceptual mode of operation" (34), permits fear to be an autonomous force of existence, becoming its own self-sufficient power, or ontogenetic (42).

Such an approach to crisis highlights Janet Roitman's (2013) notion of crisis as a "transcendental placeholder" of a state of emergency, an empty signifier without positive

content itself. Yet, for Roitman, while crisis is always asserted after the fact and seems self-evident, crisis is not a decisive moment but a chronic condition that is not locked into time (2013, 9-10). Beyond its structural framing, crisis can be seen as moments of exception – the minor – allowing for moments of muted registers of the otherwise.

Here, despite Vincent Crapanzano describing fear and how we act out of fear as due to a “much more primordial fear that comes from the absence of any possibility,” life moves on (1985, 21). My father describes the stillness that emerges with alarms: “there was nothing to do... there was nothing [he] could do.” But, by the 221st or 222nd siren, my parents moved on, deciding to play tennis instead of waiting for an end.

## Waiting

We linger because we know from past experience that we can do nothing.  
We linger because we know that ‘the forces of history’ will have their way.  
(Crapanzano 1985, 45)

The concept of waiting in war appears contradictory or tactical. Waiting in war appears with soldiers waiting to attack or for the perfect plan of aggression to unfold. This waiting is brief, with an expected end. Civilians face another concept of waiting. Waiting for the war to end. Waiting for food. Waiting for loved ones to return. Waiting for stillness, even peace. The civilian in war appears to be perpetually in a state of waiting. As Vincent Crapanzano discusses in *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, within the horror and fear which renders lives in times of crisis, whether the Apartheid or Bosnian War, the tales are perpetuated by the media, becoming a time of folklore (1985, 42). At the same time, these narratives neglect the reality of waiting: “[w]aiting for something, anything, to happen” (42).

Authors who examine the effects and rebuilding of Post-War or Post-Dayton Agreement Bosnia and Hercegovina, such as Stef Jansen (2015), place focus on the lingering feelings of waiting evident through the sensation of “not moving well enough.” Here, feelings of stuckedness appear as a desire for normality. Jansen’s work takes up Ghassan Hage’s (2009) notion of *stuckedness*, where waiting is read as a forced temporality and experience of time. *Stuckedness* in crisis becomes an *endurance test* for those willing to stick it through.

My parents felt as though they were nothing during the war – their lives meant nothing in this state. Waiting occurred after the decision to get out. Fear of losing their life, of losing each other to a nation at war that did not care about their well-being, their lives were constrained, determined to some degree by factors that did not care if they truly existed or not. So, they carried on by waiting.

Waiting during war is an *in-between-ness*. As Crapanzano notes: “waiting... must be appreciated in all of its banality. Therein lies its purity – its humanity” (1985, 43). I notice how my parents’ story focuses on the moments that maintained a sense of normal in their day-to-day lives. Their renderings remove focus from the prominent and evident events of crisis in war: they avoid mentioning the impromptu bomb shelters in apartment building basements, the lineups for food, and the distance or worry for family scattered around

Bosnia in similar situations. Instead, they define their experience based on events that were once mundane tasks that would come to mark loss during the war: the end of weekly basketball games, tennis matches, and the number of sirens.

In these terms, waiting is not described as a stuntedness. Instead, akin to Brian Massumi's conception of waiting as a movement, waiting here is regarded as a force both involuntary and allowing potential, in turn emphasizing that even stillness allows for "severe twists" (2002, 5). In these familial stories of waiting during the war, life and experience are marked as happening, going-on—a hopeful continuing. When these mundane moments of sanctity or ritual are challenged, the structure of waiting changes for them, like when their tennis matches were interrupted by bombs sounding off closer and closer. This moment of convergence forces a restlessness, where waiting in the meantime is now marked by a need to get out.

Distinguishing waiting as an active being-in-the-world and thus distancing from notions of the concept as solely passive and reactive, highlights the complexity of the temporality of waiting. Following notions of "durative unfolding," accredited to Henri Bergson (1889) and further adapted by Brian Massumi (2002; 2005), where time is conceptualized as heterogeneous with multiple potential unfoldings, waiting can be accounted for as allowing hope in the "not-yet" (cf. Bloch 1959). In this sense, waiting in war may not necessarily be a choice but a power that decides this fate "doesn't just force us down certain paths, it puts the paths in us, so by the time we learn to follow its constraints we're following ourselves" (Massumi in Zournazi 2002a, 223).

While the act of describing and narrativizing waiting in itself may be a way to homogenize history and experience into linear events, the focus on waiting through the lens of the mundane emphasizes another timeline of other events unattended and left behind by dominant narratives. This maintains a margin of maneuverability. As Jarrett Zigon (2018) argues, endurance and feelings of hopelessness highlight how being-in-the-world consists of continuous temporal shifts and slips, where hope cannot easily be conceived as passive or active, or simply as a hope for a better future. Such understanding emphasizes that hope is a temporal structure and not just an attitude, where hope becomes a method of witnessing the expression of being-in-the-world and acting in the world. Here, hope is not solely tied to ideas of a better future, but instead towards an orientation to present moment making, where hope is necessary.

## **Movement and Hope**

The breakage of routine and the mundaneness surrounding such events as the last tennis match initiated a desire for my parents to find a way out. The stories of leaving Bosnia are scattered and thin: moments of intense fear over safety, over a sense of future, over leaving family, and over the potential mistake being made, left little desire to recall. The memories that remain and are shared, are painted as the most painful parts of the war. My father recalls having to make the difficult and risky decision to drive through the war alone in order to find resources and the paperwork to leave. The heartache and distress surrounding their separation was an intense reminder of their fragility within the circumstances.

After weeks of separation and arduous travel through the ongoing war, my parents were able to secure Croatian documents and a place to stay in a distant acquaintance's



*vikendica*, or cottage, in the Croatian peninsula region of Istria. A temporary resting spot in a demilitarized zone, Istria would act as a space to dream, be still, and live again. There they would continue to wait for permission to enter Canada.

The retelling of the near year spent in Istria is hazy and clouded with a filter of serenity and mostly nostalgia. The configurations of these memories hold weight in that these were the stories that were told to me over and over again—cherished, relived, and held in reverie. After the worst of it, the period of stillness in Istria profoundly shaped a sense of dream-like living.

I am reminded of Kathleen Stewart's (1996) study and conception of a space on the side of the road. Stewart looks to the remnants of biopolitical production in attending to and unfreezing narratives of "other America" by imagining spaces like the Appalachians as real and desired. Here, Stewart recognizes cultural acts of poesis, or the creation of the new through acts of mediation, in aspects such as storytelling and gossip, noting how attachments in memory and imaginings come to formulate a world uncontained. Similarly, the consistent retelling and focus on this period by my parents flowers a romanticized image. The waiting, the stillness, the fear culminates and is overshadowed by an image of Istria concocted in storytelling and familial clichés. Such memory work in itself is inherently contaminated in its edited, illuminated, fantasy-like formation. Yet, as a moment and act of poesis, what is thrown together and pinned down in such fantasy is also a generative force and modality allowing for "worldings of all kinds" (Stewart 2008, 73).

These formulations, created both in the moment and in hindsight, demonstrate, as Berlant argues, how slow death signifies and allows for multiple subjectivities and potentials in its initiation, event-making, progression, and affect (2011, 100). Rather than a submission into a *stuckedness*, this conjuncture emphasizes agency, in Berlant's apt description as, "...an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; and embodying, alongside embodiment" (100). The production of storytelling, peace, and joy, evidently opposing a sense of uncertainty and loss inherent to war experiences, formulates the role of self-making as an activity exercised within the ordinary and taken for granted moments, like sharing stories with one's child.

Recognizing how self-making prospers not in moments of major crisis or the traumatic but in everyday experiences, emphasizes a world that is not reduced into *discrete components*, but rather one where its *manyness* remains at the forefront (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xiii). Here, space is "open-ended," meaning people can "rise up at any point and move to any other"; this world is "immersed in a changing state of things" (xii-xiii).

These portrayals of event-making allow for and are modes of potential in that these moments of *other* or *openness* emerge to create *some things* (Stewart 2008, 76). Here, expressions of fear or stillness challenge notions of an "already-formed system" or mode of experience through modification and change (cf. Little 2020, 65). Choice and agency exist in the ordinary *some things* of war. Despite there being nothing to do, as my father describes, to live with persistent fear, the time of war for my family was not just a time of insecurity but also a time of possible joy in his eyes. Time in crises operates in these *some things*, where even with a coinciding fear of losing everything, my father narrates that they were somehow "living in peace every day."

This was a narrative my dad often portrayed. Early memories of my dad opening up about his experiences during the war revolve around the idea that escaping to Istria was one of the happiest times in his life. Central to this imagery he would conjure up was the closeness he had to my mother and brother at the time. He would repeat that in the most “challenging moment in their lives,” he and my mother were never closer. They knew they had each other and knew they would only find their way together.

For many years this was the only account I had of my family’s experience of that time, and I remember feeling confused and unsure of how to understand joy and peace in clear moments of crisis and uncertainty. Ghassan Hage’s description of hope in hopeless times as the capacity to experience life transition and movement begins to situate the conflicting and almost contradictory experience (in Zournazi 2002b). Hage here reminds us that hope exists alongside uncertainty, where doubt can formulate a will to live. In parallel, for Janeja, Manpreet, and Bandak (2018), endurance or waiting are categories and experiences that coexist with doubt and uncertainty. While such a rendering sheds light on the inherent ties of hope, doubt, and uncertainty, they furthermore allow for critical approaches to precarious existences in allowing recognition of how these feelings can be forces of social movement and energy.

From my knowledge, my parents have three pictures from this time. With not many cherished goods kept or surviving this period, these pictures are a rare reminder of an in-between life lived in a small Istrian coastal town. Unlike the others, *one photo in particular maintained a special status in that it was always on display in our home*. Slightly back lit, the picture shows my brother standing on a short-stone wall, my dad supporting him with a hug. In the distance, the sun sets over the Adriatic Sea. The peace and stillness desperately fought for at the time signified and captured in this moment. My dad explains a feeling of being overwhelmed by the happiness on both his and my brother’s faces. He would remind whoever was listening that my brother was only four at the time. This point, a seemingly minor aspect in his narrative, nags and unravels the years he *wrestled the complexity of my brother’s ability to handle the stress of the time*. He explains that my brother never complained about the life lost, of the series of drastic movements and changes. My dad states his worry that my brother may have lost a part of his childhood, but maybe this photo marks the hope that in Istria, he was able to experience it again.

## Memory and Storytelling

“Yet we remain haunted by the historic past, as if those who lived long ago had permeated the earth, continuing to speak to us in ghostly whispers, their presence felt in the dank air that recalls their dying breath” (Jackson 2013, 105).

Important memories are often passed on through generations. They become hauntings that continue to speak to others as ghostly whispers (cf. Jackson 2013, 105). While feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and vulnerability are prevalent and remain constricting, it is the daily release from these feelings that creates *something*. This release occurs in “often magical ways,” like storytelling (Crapanzano 1985, 44). In storytelling, “we pretend ourselves that we are indifferent to the object of waiting” (44).



Storytelling as inciting a *something* recognizes that “despite our rage for order,” our reflecting on memories makes clear the innately disordered life (Jackson 2013, 54-55). These fragments and debris of happenings that constitute the unfinishedness of life, puts at the forefront the unfolding effects of life, where the uncertainty and vulnerability of ourselves are the force (Little 2020). Storytelling reminds us and becomes evidence of the ways we change and shape-shift. Self-making occurs through these processes in the ability to contaminate and “transgress the constancies of space, time, and personhood” by stretching ourselves over loneliness, the mysteries, and what is unknown (Jackson 2013, 3). As Michael Jackson notes, it is through stories we, “summon these very resources to break down the walls that hem them in” (86). These feelings, objects, landscapes, instances are not static, and through storytelling, we are able to see and feel the potentials that have and may currently exist.

When I tell my story, I share remnants of memories present in my parent’s storytelling. I am the celebratory child. Months following my family’s arrival in Canada, I was born. I grew up immersed in the continuing of the *somethings* that exist for immigrant parents. I learned a mix of Serbo-Croatian and English, which I was able to retain from day-care and school. My parents worked two to three jobs during the initial years after their arrival. Eventually, they would go back to school to achieve accepted Canadian degrees or certificates. Life moved on. For a long time, this moving-on was all I was attuned to, not aware it was a moving-on. Stories of the old country changed as I grew older, as the gaps and breakage highlighted that these were not normal stories. Departure was not normal. Their departure, in particular, was not normal. The things left unsaid in these stories were not normal. As Jackson reminds us, there are “certain events and experiences of which we choose not to speak,” not because we fear them or our fragility, but because we have no words to adequately describe them (2013, 23). “Silence is sometimes the only way we can honour the ineffability and privacy of certain experiences” (23). Over two and a half decades since they left the war, the debris and memories managed to collect has allowed me to curate a story of my parents’ departure and experience in war.

There is one memory in particular my parents have shared that I remember by heart. It was told to me so many times as a child that today it has become my own. It always begins with: “You know, Lea, we only had one cassette tape in our car when we were in Istria... Me, your mother, and your brother listened to it non-stop...” When I hear this story, my mind starts to play Neil Young’s “Harvest Moon” as if it was the only record I, too, owned. I hear the story and the song hum simultaneously in my ears. Both begin slowly; it is an immersion. There I go, subsumed. I feel like I am in the same car—at least what I imagine the car to look like as a child again, being driven, almost sunken into the back seat because my body is once again small. I hear my father talking to me from the driver’s seat. His salt and pepper hair and the tips of his ears poke above the head rest. I look adjacent to him, my mother is in the passenger seat. I get a glimpse of the side of her head. It is blonder than usual. It looks sun-kissed. I have to shift and extend myself to see through the car window. The sun is setting, and we are on a narrow, winding road. I do not give much attention to the details of this landscape. Sometimes we are driving along the seacoast. Other times I focus on the rocks and pebbles that in my mind characterize Istria’s roads. But the colours of the sunset, the sound of Neil and my father combining – how I feel – becomes my memory, a product of my father’s storytelling that I, too, would go on to share.

## Notes

1. Post-Dayton is referring here to the temporal period following the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia.

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