

Essay

On Being Too Close to It

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Abstract: This essay explores the dominant expectations of “objectivity” and “distance” that continue to penetrate classrooms and academic journals, and conferences and public spaces. In the process, I argue, they (re)produce everyday violences that stretch their slippery tentacles, keeping in suspension those who think, feel, write, and relate otherwise. In order to trace the lived effects of these processes, I focus here on several instances, their articulations and permutations, where I and those close to me were reminded, suspected, even accused—jokingly, scoldingly, teasingly, lovingly, and/or violently—of “being too close to it.” Here, “it” stands for a geographical location (“the field”), lived experience, and particular sensibility, struggle, and commitment that comes from being proximate—nationally/ethnically, geographically, politically, and affectively—to the field/home.

Keywords: anthropology; fieldwork; halfie; native; violence; field; home; self; other

1. Introduction

This essay explores the idea of a researcher being “too close” to the subject of their research. This phrase is something that I frequently hear—either as a critique of a “native” researcher’s “problematic” proximity to “the field” (other people’s homes and lives), or as a recognition of field advantages that this proximity apparently produces. Proximity is, it seems, a “mixed blessing” (Redfield 2012, p. 364) in academia.

In what follows, I focus on several ungeneralizable yet related instances, their articulations and permutations, where I and/or those close to me were reminded, suspected, even accused—jokingly, scoldingly, teasingly, lovingly, and/or violently—of “being too close to it.” Here, “it” stands for a geographical location (“the field”), lived experience, and particular sensibility, struggle, and commitment that comes from being proximate—nationally/ethnically, geographically, politically, and affectively—to the field/home. While I was often confused, bothered, hurt, or elevated by these instances of suspicion and/or acknowledgement, I was also naturalized into the western academic world where these and many related issues were often sidetracked, referred to in passing, trivialized, and ignored (also see Simpson 2014; Todd 2014, 2016, 2018). Therefore, I did not write about them until recently. Rather, I abstained from thinking of them as significant and tried to mitigate them.

Almost no one in my graduate school cohort studied “their own people” (and those few who did, often focused on the U.S. Most of them did not get jobs in anthropology departments following graduation). As a result of these tacit logics, I was advised not to focus on the Balkans; my mentor at the time thought that I was simply “too close to it” and in danger of “going native.” Initially I concurred, even though I was troubled by ethnicity-preoccupied, ethnographically thin, political-science dominated, largely Balkanist¹ (Todorova 1997) scholarship of and on the Balkan region. Similar to Zoe Todd’s experiences, during my anthropological training (and still today) I faced critiques that I could not “maintain objectivity when working with our own political, legal and intellectual concerns” (Todd 2016, p. 11). In short, as Franz Fanon has observed, “for the native, objectivity is always against him” (cited in McClintock 1992, p. 97).

As a result of these concerns, I initially decided to focus on the Middle East—a region “similarly” caught in the “cycles of endless violence” but one I was not equally invested in.



Citation: Hromadžić, Azra. 2023. On Being Too Close to It. *Genealogy* 7: 76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040076>

Received: 26 August 2023

Revised: 7 October 2023

Accepted: 9 October 2023

Published: 12 October 2023



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Following this advice, I spent a semester abroad in Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, exploring the possibility of future research in the region. However, this productive, generative, and formative experience only deepened my desire and commitment to do ethnographic research in the Balkans.

Now I understand that my initial “acceptance” of the norms of “detachment and objectivity” that ostensibly allows one “to see things more clearly” was also my subconscious embodiment of these scholarly perceptions. (I would learn later, from Pierre Bourdieu, that this was “symbolic violence” at its best—a naturalized, normalized, misrecognized form of violence that is often mistaken for emotion, where even those who are subject to it see it as “just” and contribute to its perpetuation.) I felt that these critiques were often problematic, but I did not know how to infuse my responses to them with what I thought was necessary: geographical distance, theoretical weight, and anthropological jargon that magnetizes an audience. However, there is an ethnographic proximity and relationality that is not reducible to auto-ethnography, “going native”, nor to the politics of representation. There are other authors and audiences, and a growing “crowd of thinkers” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 2) who are relating to and practicing ethnography differently. Here, fieldwork becomes a site of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), “interruption and refusal” (Simpson 2014), an “active site of engagement” (Todd 2014, p. 217), “embodied theory” (Turner 2000), and “embodied ethnography” (Holmes 2013). These scholars interrupt the “problematic proximity” narratives and highlight the often mutually constitutive relationship between the researcher and their field site. Consequently, many “native,” mostly indigenous researchers, such as Todd, TallBear, Puig de la Bellacasa, and Simpson, are frequently and openly identifying—however complexly and unevenly—with the places and people they study (with). From this “proximate location” they “activate the heart” (Christensen et al. 2018) and employ a different repertoire of knowledge and engagement that decolonizes ethnography. Encouraged and supported by these thinkers, and against some others, I now write².

2. The Origins

Historically, anthropology has been predicated on a seemingly “non-adversarial” (Abu-Lughod 1991) and clearly differentiated relationship between the (male) researcher and his cultural (non-Western) “other.”³ This assumption frequently obscures the fact that positionality, audience, and power are inherent in distinctions of “self” and “other” (Abu-Lughod 1991). Since the 1970s, however, anthropologists and others have been critiquing this approach to cultural difference suggesting that “culture” often enforces separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy (Abu-Lughod 1991; also see TallBear 2019). As a result, scholars have argued that we need to move “beyond culture” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), embrace “the erosion of classical norms” (Rosaldo 1989), and “give up the Geist” (Rodseth 2005). In the process, academics avidly critiqued the production of cultural differences that often mask the forces—such as colonialism and imperialism—that generate the differences in the first place (Rosaldo 1989).

Feminist anthropologists (see, among many others, Hurston 1935; Rosaldo 1980; Strathern 1987; Mahmood 2011) and literary critics (Bhabha 1990; Hall 1992, 2016; Said 1978) confronted the anthropological assumptions about the self–other distinction and placed these formations in the context of a discursively produced, unequal relationship between “the west” and “the rest” (Hall 1992). These scholars emphasize that the naturalized distinctions that “invent the east” as always lagging behind “the west” have enormous material effects (Said 1978; Hall 1992).

Inspired and provoked by Said and Hall, some anthropologists have accentuated the congruence between “an ethnographic eye” vs. the “I” of Imperialism (Turner cited in Rosaldo 1989, p. 41; Spivak 1988; Scott 1999). In the process, these academics emphasized the importance of “ethnographies of the particular” as instruments of accountability and tactical humanism (Rosaldo 1989, p. 41), claiming that there is no perfect distance or seamless “outside” since one is always positioned, however (un)equally, in relation to

“the other” (Abu-Lughod 1991). These interventions unleashed scholarship on hybridity, the anthropologies in/of “the west” and in/of “non-places” (Auge 2008). These works highlighted “contact zones” (Clifford 1997), “incommensurable contradictions” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 18), and interstitial zones of displacement and deterritorialization that reveal “third spaces and hybridized subjects” (Bhabha 1990).

Pushing these theoretical and methodological interventions further, Abu-Lughod (1991, p. 468) asks: “what happens when ‘the other’ the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, self?” She calls this type of anthropologist a “halfie:” one “that cannot possibly be objective about one’s own society” (Abu-Lughod 1991, p. 468). Abu-Lughod’s interventions sparked discussions about the positionality of a researcher, power relationships in “the field”, and our commitment to the place we study. Much lip service has been done in the name of “decolonizing anthropology” that acknowledges, reflects on, and assumes responsibility for the historical, violent classifications and/or erasures of “others”—near and far. This generated calls to carry out anthropology otherwise, an invitation to do two things at once: (a) recognize past inequalities between “the west” and “the rest” and anthropologists’ significant contributions to these disparities, and (b) advocate for collaborative, publicly committed, subaltern-driven anthropologies. Indigenous scholars have been spearheading these efforts, refusing to treat Indigenous lands and histories as data repositories. Rather, they use Indigenous knowledges and ethnographies to write in the way of theory (Biehl 2013). More specifically, they interrupt and refuse, and intellectually engage and relate otherwise.

These changes are welcome and potentially tectonic. In what follows, I suggest that these transformations are (still) partial at best, however. The old expectations of “objectivity” and “distance” continue to penetrate classrooms and academic journals, and conferences and public spaces. In the process, they (re)produce everyday violences that stretch their slippery tentacles, keeping in suspension those who think, feel, write, and relate otherwise. In order to support my claim, this essay traces five particular situations in which I, a native/hybrid/halfie anthropologist, and those (seen as) attached to me, have experienced the effects of these anthropological transformations, continuities, and assumptions.

3. The Brother

I was 16 years old when the Bosnian war (1992–1995) started in my hometown of Bihać, a city in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴ During the war, together with my family and the people of Bihać, I spent three and a half years under siege, with no electricity or regular food supplies. In my memories of those times, pictures of violence, destruction, hunger, deprivation, long lines for humanitarian aid, and refugees pouring into our town are intertwined with the reminiscences of friendship, family support, neighbors cooking together, dance group rehearsals under heavy bombings, and my first date under a rain of bullets.

During the war, we continued to live together. Our schooling was sporadic. We read books and did homework using the light produced from a shoelace dipped in kerosene. Heavy shelling coming from the surrounding hills frequently interrupted our school days. The hardest moment of the war came towards the end when my 24-year-old brother was terribly injured and unable to walk for six months. His legs were pierced with numerous pieces of shrapnel, some of which caused substantial wounds. We nicknamed the biggest wound on his leg “the schnitzel”—laughing despite the pain, and hunger. Our laughs and dark humor—the greatest tool of *communitas* in frightening conditions (Turner 2012, p. 80)—overlapped with injury, death, and dying.

My brother was very lucky to survive the war. After the war, he finished his degree in journalism at the University of Sarajevo, and then moved to Slovenia to continue his Ph.D. studies. In the late 1990s, as a promising Ph.D. student on a Soros stipend, he attended one of the numerous Soros sponsored conferences for young scholars in the region. The idea behind these gatherings was to have young, talented minds come together, think about

(and hopefully overcome) war-produced divisions, and engage in contemplating common, democratic futures.

At one of these events, I believe in Bulgaria, a young scholar approached my brother. She said: "I hear you are from Bihać. I am from Banja Luka [the capital of the Serb Republic in Bosnia]. My uncle came from the Bihać frontline, decapitated." The room grew quiet, suspended. Everyone was listening, everybody was watching. Calmly but directly, my brother responded: "I am sorry about your uncle, but I have to ask, what was he doing 5 km from my home and 155 km from his?" The silence, short and heavy, stretched through the room. Then a more senior scholar approached the young woman from Banja Luka and said: "It is ok, he [slightly gesturing at my brother] was badly injured during the war. . ."

This was the moment my brother decided not to study "it." He told me that he realized, in that instant, that he would always be perceived as a subjective, Bosniak researcher—and a former, heavily injured, albeit unwilling, soldier—whose words, even if packaged in distancing academic jargon, would be perceived as suspect and "too close to it"—his war experiences and his wounds.

4. The Student⁵

In 1996, I came to the United States at the age of twenty. After the war ended, I received one of the scholarships given to selected Bosnian youth to study at American colleges and universities. Two main organizations—the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Nyack, New York and the Community of Bosnia in Haverford, Pennsylvania—oversaw this project.

The hope was that most of us would return to Bosnia and Herzegovina upon graduation (most of us did not) to help rebuild and reconstruct our devastated homeland. This experience of coming to study in the U.S. alone, without family/community to offer support, is in contrast to the common experience of Bosnian refugees; the majority of these individuals resettled in the U.S. with families, usually surrounded by other Bosnian families, forming communities, learning the language, navigating bureaucracy, pursuing jobs, raising children, and intensely longing for home while assimilating into the U.S. The predicaments of these refugees, who came to the United States with an intent and promise to stay in the country, were different from the experiences of those of us who arrived on student visas and whose mission was to get the best education possible and then return home.

In addition to full scholarships at some of the best colleges and universities in the United States, we were given American host families who provided emotional and financial support. Having the support of top American universities and families gave us, the Bosnian non-refugees, access to many things American that were not available to "proper" refugees, nor, for that matter, to most less-privileged Americans. In these spaces of privilege, we often felt special: we were invited to dinners where our stories were told and repeated; we were interviewed by local and regional newspapers; our experiences were listened to and consumed with interest, amazement, shock, care, and worry. We had a special voice that demanded and received respect, but that also painted us as "anomalies"—Bosnian non-refugees, war survivors with scholarships to prestigious universities. We were elevated and admired but categorized as different and consumed as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966).

As I progressed through my undergraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania, I realized that I wanted to develop a deeper understanding of my own experience of the Bosnian war. I wanted to think more systematically about why, when, and how ethnic conflict, violence, and suffering take place in diverse historical and cultural contexts. I chose anthropology because it would teach me how to theorize and investigate these issues empirically, while at the same time listening and relating to the people who live and grapple with these questions.

The complexities of this choice became visible once I entered the graduate program in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. In this caring and inspiring environment, and especially in its intellectually intense yet friendly graduate seminars, we often discussed hot topics of the time in social sciences, especially ethnicity and nationalism. In these

moments, I felt privileged: I was often invited to speak and, thus, recognized as the “knower.” My words were listened to and recycled by my professors as instances of how ethnicity works through people, and my unforeseen “self-discovery as a Bosniak during the war” was used to support the thesis about the constructed and contingent nature of ethnic identity. On the one hand, I was at the epicenter of knowledge-production, basking in the privilege of studying anthropology that was teaching me how to be in the world ethically and how to respectfully approach “others” (those I studied) who are differently positioned in relation to power. On the other hand, in these spaces I was also being “studied,” observed, approached as an informant, and at times described as someone who was importantly yet problematically “too close to it.”

The effects of this tension became especially clear after my dissertation proposal defense. One of my dissertation committee members told the rest of the committee (who did not share his view), behind closed doors, that I would probably become a future president of Bosnia but that I would never finish my Ph.D. degree because I was too close to the subject matter. This comment, both condescending and somehow complementary, angered one of my younger, female mentors. I, however, was numb to it, already conditioned to accept it as normal and just. I was, indeed, “too close to it”—dominant norms and expectations of academia and the world at large.

5. The Gatekeeper

It took me a long time to send my work to some of the more visible, more “highly ranked” anthropology journals. I felt inadequate—my anthropology too young, my English too slippery, my academic jargon immature. However, publishing in these journals, I was told numerous times, was necessary to gain and retain tenure-track academic jobs. After I published a relatively visible piece in a solid anthropological journal, I felt encouraged to send my work to one of the top anthropology journals in the U.S. I sent my work and, as it is commonly the case, I waited—anxiously and uncomfortably—for almost six months to get the reviews back.

There was much constructive criticism and much encouragement in the detailed reviews I received, but one review stood out. I had to read it multiple times to try to understand the words behind its tone. The tone felt needlelike: jabbing, aggressive, seemingly objective, and impatient. I recognized this reviewer since this person had reviewed my articles before—their tone was always problematic (one journal’s editor apologized for it, saying that the reviewer’s tone does not reflect the journal). But this time, the reviewer—to whom, in my head, I started to refer to as “the Anthropologist King”—was bolder, more frustrated, doubly annoyed.

I remember one of the comments in particular: “This piece was obviously written by a Bosniak!”, they wrote with an exclamation mark. This seemingly simple sentence is in fact very suggestive. The sentence was not explained further, supported by further claims, or qualified; it was apparently sufficient, clear, self-explanatory. By saying that the work was obviously written by a Bosniak, the reviewer implied that it was somehow flawed. That being a Bosniak—here used in a homogenized, simplified, and dismissive fashion—precluded expertise and prohibited “objectivity.” In my head, this sentence implied that there was something deeply problematic about the relationship between the subject matter (postwar Bosnia) and the researcher (interpellated, nonchalantly, as a Bosniak)—that this relationship was too proximate, incapacitating an allegedly desirable, objective, scientific anthropological vision. The editors, who were new to the journal, said that they were not sure how to respond to the accusations by the reviewer that the article was written by a Bosniak and, by extension, somehow deficient. They qualified their lack of constructive response by saying that the Balkan context was “too complex, too sensitive, too hard for the outsiders to understand.” Interestingly, this reply closely mirrors the (lack of) meaningful response of some U.S. diplomats (including then President Clinton) to “the Balkan crisis:” too much history, too much ancient hatred, and too much primordial sentiment that results in rhythmic cycles of violence.

I struggled with how to respond to the reviewer (and to the editors who did not live up to the responsibility of their office). I postulated that the reviewer probably knew who I was—in the age of the Internet and small groups of scholars who review each other's work, one can assume that the reviewer knew perfectly well whom they were attacking, making their interventions perhaps even more viscous when attacking junior, halfie, women scholars. I faced a dilemma. Do I get hooked and plummet—intellectually and personally—and write back, crudely: "Reviewer 1 is obviously an [Identity]." It was tempting, I admit. However, the idea of doing this also made me feel nauseous, unwell, and somehow dirty. Instead, I did nothing. . .

Eventually, I published the piece elsewhere, but I remember promising my bruised self that one day I would write about "the Anthropologist King," one of many gatekeepers/academic bullies out there who, armed with access, "objectivity," distance, and assumed righteousness, vehemently interpellate and aggressively silence those perceived by them to be "too close to it."

6. The Diplomat⁶

In December 2015, a conference took place at Brown University's Watson Center. It was one of numerous conferences taking place at North American and Western European universities acknowledging the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. This agreement brought "peace" to Bosnia in December 1995. By constituting the state as a consociational (ethnic power-sharing) democracy, the agreement solidified, legitimized, and naturalized a violent partition of Bosnian citizens into ethnic groups rooted in ethnic territories.

The Brown conference was perhaps unique because it ambitiously brought together diplomats, policy makers, NGO workers, and academics, hoping that they could engage in a dialogue and perhaps publish an edited volume together. The conference was open to the public and invited all participants to reflect on the complexities of Bosnian political and social life after the end of the war. The meeting opened with a keynote address by the Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Christopher R. Hill, who assisted the late Richard Halbrook in "bringing peace" to the Balkans, but "failed" to do the same in the Middle East. His opening remarks celebrated "Bosnia as an example of a 'success of US diplomacy'" saying that we should think how to best apply successful "lessons learned from Bosnia" to Syria and Iraq.⁷ He talked about nationalism and ancient hatreds in the Balkans, and when I asked him why he omitted many centuries of challenging yet real coexistence, and decades of socialist life together, he told me that was "constructivist history." Then he added, "When you kill 230,000 people, you kind of lose your right to complain that you are being patronized. . . . Painful stuff, I know."

This exchange was a prologue to my panel, which included Philippe Leroux-Martin, Anna Ohanyan, Aida Hozić, and myself. By this time, I had already acquired some academic capital. I was an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at a well-regarded university in the U.S. I had published a book on post-war Bosnia that was well-received by many in academia. The book was an ethnographic investigation and a critique of the internationally directed postwar intervention policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It zoomed into the responses of local people, especially youth, to these outside policy efforts.

The panel at Brown focused on many problems and conundrums of post-Dayton life in Bosnia, so my expertise was fitting. My co-panelists and I carefully reflected on what everyday life is like under the rigid, bureaucratic, and segregationist consociational model of democracy that was imposed on Bosnia by the "International Community." We all articulated our personal, professional, and academic experiences and points of view. The former ambassador was outraged, however. Red in his face, his voice raised, he said: "do you know who we had to negotiate with there? They were all hard-core nationalists."

Not surprisingly, most of his anger was directed at Aida and me, even though all the panelists expressed their critique of the "International Community's" (di)vision of Bosnia. Under his gaze, Aida and I became thankless subjects of aid, "too close to it" to

be perceived as experts. I felt the audience shifting in support of the ambassador, and one person, echoing the room's sentiment, passionately and loudly asked us, Aida Hozić and Azra Hromadžić, with our impossible (unpronounceable, too similar, acronyms identical) names, "why do not you, the Balkan people, take things into your own hands? Did not the International Community do enough for you?" The question painted us as recipients of aid, always ungrateful, too critical, too passive, and as always, too subjective. A colleague who was in the audience, Kimberly Coles, stood up and said she was embarrassed by the audience's tone and attack on the two women scholars. She was also embarrassed, she said, because she had to speak for us, since she knew that she would possibly be heard—her name pronounceable, words unaccented, "objective." In that room at a "progressive and liberal" Ivy League university, I witnessed the failure of recognition and common grammar. Rather, we experienced a passionate and hurtful closing of a dialogue and erasure of history. Aida and I, who under the audience's gaze yoked into one person (A.H. + A.H. = A.H.), are still recovering from this event. Needless to say, the jointly edited volume never materialized.

7. The Cousin

In 2015, Bihać was enveloped in a spirited political protest. Thousands of people got together to object to the city's decision that gave concession to a joint Russian and Bosnian Company to build a dam on the city's river Una. The Una is famous for its beauty, fast currents, emerald color, water quality, and for keeping Bihać's population sane and safe during the 1990s war. Armed with love for the river, the protest led to a politically significant outcome—pressured by the people, the government reversed its decision to grant the concession. This was the only reversal of a city government's decision in its postwar history.

I joined the 2015 protest; my partaking in it was both energizing and paralyzing. I happened to be in "the field" at the time of the protest, and my decision to join in was "simple"—as someone who was born and raised in Bihać, I felt I had a duty to join my co-citizens to help protect the river I love and that makes me who I am. Due to the 2015 protest, the Una River is, at least for now, safe from damming. This accomplishment felt like a major victory in the Balkan context, where close to 3,000 hydropower plants are projected to be built across the region in the near future. My new book, tentatively titled "Riverine Citizenship: On Love and Politics in Multispecies Relationships", emerged from this moment—the protest—when the political rule stumbled, to examine rivers as a site of environmental politics and what I call "riverine citizenship" (see [Hromadžić Forthcoming](#)).

And yet, the success felt bitter-sweet: the then mayor of Bihać, who was later found guilty on corruption charges, learned about my participation in the protest. Angered, he refused to renew my second cousin's annual contract with one of the city's agencies. My cousin, who wholeheartedly supported my participation in the protest was, however, left unemployed for almost a year. This act of retribution and an attempt to silence significant diasporic support for the protection of the river, reminded me, once again, that we, "native" researchers, are in a precarious position while in "the field/home." On the one hand, we enjoy significant advantages of access and familiarity. On the other hand, we lose the privilege of being perceived as outsiders, seemingly disconnected from often intricate and convoluted historical, social, and economic relations in "the field." Rather, we are (seen as) "too close"—deeply implicated in them, and, at times, we and perhaps even more importantly, those perceived as connected to us, experience socio-political pressures, manipulation, silencing, punishment, and extraction. The experience of having an extended family member punished for my participation in the protest left me field-paralyzed for a year. It also reminded me that "who you are" matters in ways that exceed questions of anthropology, epistemology, and expertise.

8. Conclusions

Are there ways to employ proximity—in fieldwork, academia, theory, epistemology, expertise, and collaborative work—in ways that liberate us from the deep, sedimented legacies of colonialism, sexism, nativism, familiarism, and positivism that continue to permeate our classrooms, conference venues, and public squares? As the vignettes in this essay (hopefully) demonstrate, these legacies continue to work through academic institutions (and beyond), and through the bullies and the bullied, in forms of everyday, symbolic violences. They are often concealed by humor, compliments, recognitions, sciences, jargon, facts and rigor, conditional inclusions, and partial tolerances that even those who are painted as “too close to it” contribute to, often subconsciously. Unearthing these instances and exposing their logics is a massive, complicated task.

What are possible ways of thinking and relating differently in anthropology, ethnography, and academic endeavors? In searching for solidarity and inspiration, I find hope in Puig de la Bellacasa’s meditations on “matters of care.” In the book with the same title, the author argues that attention to care is “something we can do as thinkers and knowledge creators” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 41). Perhaps even more instructively for this essay, Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that being attuned—theoretically, methodologically, epistemologically, and otherwise—to “matters of care,” reveals that *what we care for as researchers has material consequences* (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 41; emphasis mine). Caring for—being in sync and proximate and being moved and marked by others—is therefore a profoundly ethical, social, anthropological, and political act. It requires unearthing everyday violences to those who are deemed “too close to it” while being attuned to care—creating solidarities and commitments to relate differently across geographical and generational estrangements. This is a massive, complicated task. Shall we?

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In her seminal work, *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Torodrova builds on Edward Said’s depiction of Orientalism to develop the critique of “Westspaining” (Garcevic 2017) the Balkans. Her painstakingly researched work shows how the Balkans have been imagined, approached, studied, and documented for centuries as a “somewhat brutal and uncivilized forecourt of Europe” (Garcevic 2017).
- ² I recognize that my approach to writing this essay could be interpreted as auto-ethnographic. This is postmodern, “avant-garde method of qualitative inquiry” (Stahlke Wall 2016)—which is both celebrated as polyvocal and imaginative as well as widely critiqued as self-indulgent and narcissistic—uses personal experience to “extend sociological understanding” (Sparkes 2000, p. 21). While there are similarities between auto-ethnography and my approach in this essay (and calling it an “essay” instead of “article” is intentional), auto-ethnography is much more intentional, ambitious, methodical, developed, and structured than my present meditations and reflections. More specifically, the goal of this essay is not to provide a wealth of personal experiences related to a particular social phenomenon, nor to offer a sociologically grounded, systemic critique of academia. Rather, the main reason for offering these fragmented, eclectic, disconnected, and fleeting reflections is to ignite kernels of recognition that *might* spark solidarity and, perhaps, some collaborative, interdisciplinary conversations.
- ³ Since I am an anthropologist and an ethnographer, my conversation will mostly engage with that field. The attitudes, evaluations, gestures, and discourses captured in the vignettes that follow should be familiar to researchers in many other fields, however.
- ⁴ After the declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Bosnia-Herzegovina found itself faced with a choice between independence (supported by the majority of Bosniaks and Croats) and remaining in the Yugoslav federation (supported by the majority of Serbs). In February 1992, a state-wide referendum for independence from Yugoslavia took place, which was boycotted by the majority of Serb leaders. Regardless of the boycott, Bosnia-Herzegovina became an independent state on April 6. On the same day Bosnia-Herzegovina was officially recognized, Serbian paramilitary units and the Yugoslav People’s Army attacked Bosnia-Herzegovina’s capital, Sarajevo, and started the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The army of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska within Bosnia-Herzegovina, with the help of troops and weapons from Serbia, succeeded in conquering close to 70 percent of the country’s territory by the end of 1993. It also perpetrated some of the most brutal acts of violence exercised against the non-Serb populations, which involved mass killings, ethnic cleansing, rape, and torture. After more than three years of failed negotiations, bloody conflict, over 100,000 deaths, and the displacement of approximately 2 million people as refugees, on 14 December 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement, brokered by the U.S., brought an end to the Bosnian war.

By constituting the state as a consociational (ethnic power-sharing) democracy, it also solidified and legitimized a shallow state model in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

⁵ A part of this section was borrowed from (Hromadžić 2017).

⁶ This section was borrowed from (Hromadžić 2020).

⁷ The Bosnian public and the majority of scholars in/of the region, however, see post-Dayton Bosnia as a disastrous state, and not as a site of international success.

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