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## *My Father's Wars*–Are Our Wars

Review of the book: Alisse Waterston (2014), *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century*.  
New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

### Abstract

The book *My Father's Wars* by Alisse Waterston is a structural expression of the need for a new anthropological orientation in history. Waterston chooses to gradually weave the narrative through the methodological directions of *intimate ethnography*. More precisely, it is a story about the importance of the relationship between micro-history and the fluidity of historical particularisms, between the relations of matrixes of power and reflections on anthropocultural systems of the higher kind. It is here that the value of the complex focalization point in the work is accommodated; it lies in the question in what grammatical person to tell an individual story (which at the same time leaves a strong seal the identity of the descendants) embedded in Jewish cultural history as part of the larger history of war(s) and migration trajectories in the 20th century.

**Keywords:** intimate ethnography, anthropology of migration, war, genocide, macro- and micro-history, narrative of the diaspora, ego-documents, antisemitism, violence.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor-in-chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing of this issue: Aleksandra Twardowska, Katarzyna Taczyńska

One of the most essential features of anthropology as a discipline is its interest in studying the manner (or manners) of human behavior, from the point of view of people's belonging to a particular territory, history, and cultural tradition. The heart of this qualitative determinant is woven from the deeply intimate (mental, spiritual, emotional) layers of the question of *I*, or: Where is my *self*? This question, in turn, embraces the focalization from *below* – a gaze aimed directly at the center of the *self* and, in this context, to what is revealed from this deep place. On the other hand, the question of *I* is closely related to the fluidity of historical particularisms, the arrangement and rearrangement of ideas and themes that characterize certain ideological schemas, often violent and genocidal in their embodiment, as well as their relations of power and reflections on anthropocultural systems of a higher multitudes. In any case, the *human* remains in the very center, as a distinctive existence surrounded, localized as well as marginalized by certain constructs of power(s) and violence(s), in which historical facts become the frontier realm of personal and cultural history. In such a constellation, organized between the anthropological qualitative determinant of the *self* and the war, migratory, and cultural-ideological matrixes, Alisse Waterston lays the foundational, methodological, structural and hermeneutical basis of her work *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century* (2014).<sup>1</sup> It is also at this center that the author, also as a cultural anthropologist, locates the message to the reader, namely that:

This is a story that is also a history. It is the story of my father's travels across continents, countries, cultures, languages, generations, and wars. It is a daughter's account of a Jewish father whose life was shaped, framed, and torn apart by the upheavals of the twentieth century. It is an anthropologist's narrative constructed from other people's stories. ... And it is a reflection on the forces of history, the power of memory, and the meanings people attach to events, things, words, and others. (Waterston, 2014, p. XV)

The spectrum of structural relationships in the narrative – organized between the anthropological view of the *whole*, or the view from *above*, and the expansion of the life story of the individual from *below* (to above) – stays with in the dialogical posture of the author's narrative focus. More precisely, the dynamic shift of the narrative focus of the author is coordinated by the

<sup>1</sup> *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century* received the Book of the Year Award from the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in 2016.

movement of the sequence of events presented in the story of her father in 12 chapters: from personal to transnational history, experienced and “written” across the geographical coordinates of several nation-states, sociocultural, linguistic, generational and intergenerational implications, as well as the events of the two wars and one revolution that her father experienced. Waterston chooses to gradually weave the narrative through the methodological directions of *intimate ethnography*, a notion that the author herself, together with Rilko-Bauer, constructed previously (McLean & Leibing, 2007; Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006). Focusing on the story of her father as an *intimate Other*, Waterston creates a simultaneous platform for the dual position of *daughter-anthropologist*, or, as she underlines:

I came to this project not just as a daughter but also as an anthropologist seeking to understand the violence in its various forms and how it is implicated in individual lives. Embedded in my father’s life history are the issues with which we still struggle: the causes and consequences of political and structural violence, past and present; migration and experience of refugees, transnational movement of people, ideas and economies; and the simmering tensions and major conflicts between groups—ethnic, racialized, religious, and nation state conflicts. (Waterston, 2014, p. XVI)

The contextualization of the story in Waterston’s book is positioned on the perplexing connection between the *life* of the individual (her father) and the historical whole. And, it is a legitimate position (Irwin, 2006; Lerum, 2001). In taking this approach, Waterston overcomes the narrative challenge by creating a hybrid work through the interest in *micro*-history. The need to understand the individual or individual human activity through a focus on individualized questions, Waterston opens up the possibility of *macro*-history to answer questions posed by cultural anthropology itself. It is here that the value of the complex focalization point in the work is accommodated; it resides in the question in what grammatical person to tell the individual story (which at the same time leaves a strong stamp on the identity of the descendants) embedded in Jewish cultural history as part of the larger history of war(s) and migration trajectories in the 20th century. As the author points out: “writing in the third-person omniscient, past tense, privileging the primacy of my father’s experience” (Waterston, 2014, p. XVII).

In parallel, as this is also a narrative of the daughter-anthropologist, the grammatical use of the first person singular appears necessary to convey personal experience with her father as well as to describe events that color the broader cultural, war, and migration history. Within this interrelationship, or, to define it in terms of literary criticism – the *citation* – of contextualization of the *twice personal* (of her father and the author as

a daughter) and at the same time marking a boundary line of distance as an anthropologist, the book becomes a dialogical process between the single narrative (twice *I*) and belonging to the wider complex of existence: as a time, as a place, as an ethnicity, as a race, as a religion, as a war, and again, as a life and as a death, and as a *memory*.

*My Father's Wars* begins with the fact of the birth of her father Mendeleh and a description of the place he was born:

In a little town, the *shtetl* Jedwabne. He arrived just at the start of the spring season when the northeast of Poland is still biting cold. Jedwabne lies in the Podlasie Voivodship, not far from Lomza and Bialystok... (Waterston, 2014, p. 1)

The narrative procedure of constructing a story in the book contributes to the emergence of a rapid successive turn of events: The historical fact acquires the cultural attribute of her father's Jewish history:

Mendeleh was a beautiful baby born on March 3, 1913 on the eve of World War I. We are not all that certain of the exact date, and there is no birth certificate. It was around Purim time. (Waterston, 2014, p. 1)

From a narrative point of view, the two cultural facts that appear as a substitute for historical ones: Purim (as a cultural coordinate for the birth of the father, since there is no birth certificate) and the *shtetl*, bring an *echo*, a reminiscence of something that is not anymore. From a structural point of view, this presents one of the most important *cuts* in the narrative of *My Father's Wars*, since it highlights the argument (discussed above) that while the *I* remains in the very center, as a distinctive existence surrounded, localized as well as marginalized by certain constructs of power and violence, historical facts become the frontier realm of personal and cultural history. Namely, the *shtetl* represents a specific *locus* from where the long migratory and thus identity path of Mendeleh begins. The *shtetl* represents the set of all points whose location is determined by certain conditions: Mendeleh of Jedwabne (Poland) becomes Miguelito in Mangito in Cuba, Miguel in Havana, Michael in New York, and Don Miguel in San Juan. The two intertwined narratives: *migratory* and *identity*, are characterized by *pluralism* – each narrative acquires its plural form, each narrative is fluid as well, in the literal, grammatical and existential sense. The category of a constant does not exist. The dialogical process between *I* (my father's) and the fluidity of the migratory-war(s) and ideological flows in which the *I* dwells, is constantly moving to a new platform of existence, defining its changing character on a personal and macro-historical plan.

In this context, acceptance of pluralized identity and migration fluidities strongly marks the understanding of both micro- and macro-

diasporic Jewish history. In the frame of this *narrative of the diaspora*, by weaving the story of *my father* across latitude and longitude within the three-dimensional qualities of human existence, Waterston offers an in-depth understanding of the broader historical-social, political and social structures as well as opening up her work to the reception of a great humanistic message. The author, though apparently put in a complex dual position: daughter-anthropologist, does not, however, explore the intellectual and physical dimension of person-centered ethnography from a firm distance. Waterston as author and through the position of daughter-anthropologist equally participates in the story, in the narrative itself by including a personal grammar on a tripartite level. As an anthropologist, as a daughter and as author, by asking personal questions of her father and of herself, Waterston reflects on life itself:

Like my father's life, his perception of it and his narrative, my motivations are layered and complicated involving who I am as anthropologist and as daughter. I am at a point in my life where the urge to reflect on personal history is quite strong. (Waterston, 2014, p. XVI)

In support of this, it becomes important to point to the documentary layer of *My Father's Wars*. The work presents itself rich in a palette of *ego-documents* used in its creation. It is the set of material used that stays close to speech, expressed in the first person singular, and it also includes forms of expression that contribute to forming a link between oral and written discourse:

My intimate ethnography is based on the following data sources gathered over the dozen years of this project: (1) intimate ethnography: listening to my father, interviewing him, getting his voice on audiotape and on video, taking journeys back to the multiple settings of his life—with him (Cuba) and without him (Poland), and having many conversations with my mother; (2) ethnographic research among Polish Christians in Lomza, Poland, and Greenpoint, New York City; (3) family archives collected over the lifetimes of both parents: letters, photographs, financial papers, legal documents, claims, scraps, diaries, and my mother's unpublished Memoir... (Waterston, 2019, p. 17)<sup>2</sup>

This respectable corpus of ego-documents throughout the layers of the narrative, by analogy with *silva rerum*, serves the function of inspecting

<sup>2</sup> In addition to this corpus, Waterston also specifies the following sources: My intimate ethnography is based on the following corpuses: (4) archival documents, such as testimonies, government papers, newspapers, and specific legislation, found online and in brick-and-mortar institutes, organizations, and libraries; and (5) relevant scholarly works in anthropology, history, psychology, cultural studies, gender studies, Jewish studies, and literature. Please see: Waterston, 2019, p. 17.

the language of history from below, and thus the emotions, the processes of the inner *self*, and the suffering of the individual placed in a multiplicity of social flows, historical movements and the violence of a century (Baggerman, 2002). The ego-documentary layer of *My Father's Wars* gives a deep insight into the religious, cultural and social practices of personal and collective identity that affect all layers of human life, expressed in the first person singular. Throughout the multiplicity of the ego-documents corpus embedded in the narrative, the author is, at the same time, a *subject* in the work: she is a daughter. However, this is not an autobiographical work. *My Father's Wars* is a structural expression of the need for a new anthropological orientation in history: It is a story about the importance of the relationship between micro-history and the fluidity of historical particularisms, between the relations of matrixes of power and reflections on anthropocultural systems of the higher kind. This work is also a chronicle of remembrance – it is a link between micro- and macro-history, a deep intersection at whose center resides *trauma*. In the title of the work, in plural form, we read: *wars*. How many? It is not just about the literal counting of *my father's* lived experience(s). *Wars* are also about the deep, ontological moment of the constant warfare of the personality within *self*, of a human life intersecting with the external factual reality colored with the issues of war, migration, antisemitism and many-[geno]cides in the century of violence. Our century of violence. And, again: our centuries of violence. And life. That is why *My Father's Wars*– are our wars. That is why we should read Alisse Waterston's *My Father's Wars*.

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## ***Војните на татко ми – се наши војни***

Книгата *My Father's wars* [Војните на татко ми] од Алис Вотерстон претставува структурален израз за потребата за нова антрополошка ориентација во историјата. Авторката одбира постепено да го ткае наративот преку методолошките насоки на *интимната етнографија*. Попрецизно, ова е приказна за важноста на врската меѓу микро-историјата и флуидноста на историските партикуларизми, за односите меѓу матриците на моќ и рефлексите на антрополошките системи од повисок ред. Токму во овој простор е вперена вредноста на сложената фокализација на делото; таа претстојува во прашањето за тоа во кое граматичко лице да се раскаже личната приказна (истовремено, со силен печат на идентитетот на наследниците), вградена во еврејската културна историја како дел од (по)широката историја на војната (војните) и миграциските траектори и во дваесеттиот век.

**Клучни зборови:** интимна етнографија, антропологија на миграции, војна, геноцид, макро и микро-историја, наративна дијаспора, его-документи, антисемитизам, насилство.

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## ***Wojny mojego ojca – to nasze wojny***

Książka *My Father's wars* [Wojny mojego ojca] autorstwa Alisse Waterston jest wyrazem potrzeby nowej orientacji antropologicznej w historii. Waterston decyduje się na stopniowe splatanie narracji, wykorzystując metodologiczne kierunki *etnografii intymnej*. A dokładniej, jest to opowieść o znaczeniu związku pomiędzy mikrohistorią a płynnością historycznych partykularizmów, między centrami władzy i refleksją zawartą w systemach antropologicznych wyższego rzędu. Właśnie na tej sferze jest skoncentrowany cel tej książki; zawarty jest w pytaniu, w jakiej kategorii gramatycznej opowiedzieć indywidualną historię (jednocześnie

naznaczoną przez tożsamość potomków), osadzoną w żydowskiej historii kultury jako części szerszej historii wojny (wojen) i trajektorii migracyjnych w XX wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etnografia intymna, antropologia migracji, wojna, ludobójstwo, makro- i mikrohistoria, narracja diaspory, egodokumenty, antysemityzm, przemoc.

Przekład z języka macedońskiego  
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The preparation of this article was self-funded by the author.

No competing interests have been declared.

### Publication History

Received: 2020-06-02; Accepted: 2020-12-04; Published: 2020-12-31