

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

SAFET HADŽIMUHAMEDOVIĆ, 2018. *Waiting for Elijah – Time and Encounter in a Bosnian Landscape*. New York: Berghahn, 294pp. ISBN: ISBN 978-1-78533-857-1 ebook.

“Syncretic Poetry” and Particular Synergies: A review of Safet Hadžimuhamedović’s *Waiting for Elijah*

Keywords: uncertainty, schizochronotopia, time, In-Other, syncretism, festivals, former Yugoslavia

While moving through the introduction of Safet Hadžimuhamedović’s engaging work of research and resistance, readers familiar with anthropology can be forgiven for wondering what realms of the discipline the author decided *not* to engage with in *Waiting for Elijah – Time and Encounter in a Bosnian Landscape* (2018; Volume One in “Articulating Journeys: Festivals, Memorials, and Homecoming”). The expertly-crafted opening salvo of encounters-to-come moves through (cosmological) time, ethnicity, nationalism, post-conflict sociocultural considerations, waiting, friction, a multi-dimensional meditation of landscape, and “cross-temporal syncretic forms.” Indeed, “syncretic” is a concept Hadžimuhamedović returns to repeatedly in a treatise that delves into the interplay of encounter, time, and proximity with(in) one particular landscape of Bosnia today. In particular, “encounter” comes to encompass for the author “exchanges, alliances and intimate proximities between the bodies of ‘different’ characters” (2018, 234-235). In assembling its own (self-reflexive) syncretism, the introduction (re)turns the reader to the works of Tim Ingold, Michel De Certeau, Alfred Gell, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Anna Tsing, Ghassan Hage, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Their voices and Hadžimuhamedović’s initial remarks build a frame of engagement for what the author refers to as “the Field.” A field that is host to the celebrations for the titular “Elijah” – a georgic harvest festival day that relates a nexus of waiting, time, uncertainty, and *communitas*.

Clearly enjoying and employing a double entendre, Hadžimuhamedović follows with his interlocutors in taking “the Field” as general reference to the Field of Gacko, a wide plain in the southeastern highlands of Bosnia, while also signaling the more abstracted notion of the “field” with regard to ethnographic engagement and participant observation. Refreshingly, Hadžimuhamedović carefully unpacks and articulates his asserted structuring of multi-sited

ethnography *within* the Field of Gacko thereby opening the Field to multiple considerations and “disruptions” (2018, 30) of the “site” concept. A concept that is thus found in time, in the virtual, and in the physical manifestations of geography and post-war ethno-religious politics today. As such, “multi-sited” means in one regard to follow “time through space” (2018, 31) or to move through “different locales, which experienced no active interchange” (2018, 32). “From following place through time,” writes the author, “the investigation thus extended to following time (the annual cycle) through space: it was like piecing together a time puzzle using a particular multi-sited approach [that] allowed for more elaborate questions” (2018, 4).

In looking and listening for answers to these elaborate questions, Hadžimuhamedović discerns alternative dimensions of the Field and develops a discursive toolkit that speaks along the lines of “sacrosapes,” “ethnosapes,” “chronotopes,” and, “In-Other.” While I will refrain from any spoilers regarding the scapes, I will touch on two other concepts from the toolkit. For Hadžimuhamedović, chronotope – first used by Mikhail Bakhtin to indicate the indivisibility of spatial and temporal categories (2018, 58) – is employed “as a heuristic device to think of the divergent social currents in the Field” thus each “chronotope has its own story” (2018, 58). Moreover, he introduces that “people and landscapes are sometimes trapped between discursive timespaces and thus ‘schizochronotopic’ (from the Greek Σχίζειν – *skhizein* – ‘to split’)” (2018, 58). As intended by the author, both chronotope and schizochronotopic frame the reading of what he refers to as “the syncretic poetry of the Field’s warm season” (2018, 7) that is the central theme of Chapter Five.

However, a brief endnote touches on a reservation that I apparently share with one of his colleagues who “reproached [Hadžimuhamedović] for ‘pathologizing’ the Field through the apparent similarity of the terms ‘schizochronotopia’ and ‘schizophrenia’” (2018, 77-78). Certainly not unique to *Waiting for Elijah*, it is a valid point that cuts across the social sciences and speaks to an often uncontested habit of medicalizing terminology. Moreover, this reaches out to another concern with schizochronotopic as reflective of what his interlocutors experience: would they see themselves in such a word? Does the term retain viability or veracity if released from what is, at times, an academically dense work? Hadžimuhamedović himself notes the “anthropological advantage of spatial and temporal closeness and in-depth inductive analysis helps researchers avoid the abyss of ideological projects” (2018, 115). While he may be speaking of “ideological projects” in a different sense than myself here, I cannot help but wonder if “schizochronotopic” does not also further deepen the “abyss.” Without wanting to sound overly critical, we (anthropologists) must constantly question what is the use

of “closeness” if when we seek to amplify life-worlds we do so in a manner that defies transparency for a spectrum of audiences.

Speaking of closeness, if Chapter Three is “the heart of the book” (2018, 6), then Hadžimuhamedović’s concept of “In-Other” is the heart of Chapter Three. As his development of In-Other runs for several pages and engages several conceptual horizons, I will but excerpt a brief selection:

Given that I want to primarily focus on difference that is not positioned as antithetical, but inclusive of proximity, difference reiterated by my interlocutors as integral to the meaning making of the Self, I invent here another handy term, ‘In-Other’, which should be read interchangeably as a noun, verb and an adjective.

...

I tell my Self and grasp the flux of my Self by way of In-Other, which includes all the ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ outsideness by which my body is anchored into the World. So, it is ontological through and through.

...

Time is In-Other in shifting proximities – a landscape moving through the body – approaching and engaging the world of the I.
(2018, 115-116)

Hadžimuhamedović is clear in his sense of imperative vis-à-vis the development and deployment of In-Other. And the In-Other is embedded and operationalized throughout the rest of the work thus emerging as a central trope aligning many of the grounded reflections presented in the book. With this in mind, I am led to reflect upon the conceptual utility (or, perhaps more accurately, the conceptual clarity) that the author places with(in) the In-Other.

For example, as Hadžimuhamedović brings forth for readers an intricate discussion of *kumstvo*, a concept that “resists its English translation, as it carries certain idiosyncrasies in Bosnian contexts” but can be “translated as ‘godparenthood’” (2018, 129), a captivating narrative emerges that can be held up as an example of exemplary ethnography. The narrative is populated and propelled by such detail, research, and integration of interlocutor life-stories that one is carried along quite freely. Yet when Hadžimuhamedović returns to In-Other at varying points in the *kumstvo* discussion, it appears considerably more a “disorientational device” (to employ the author’s own dialectical framing of intent (2018, 237)) than a revelatory point of “orientation” toward encounter for the reader. It is difficult to tease out of the text exacting illustrations of this (dis)orientation, but one segment highlights the “memories of communication between Serbs and Muslims,” and moves to show “how the In-Other positions

not only the Self in ontologically specific Time, but also how it establishes the substance and structure of time as such. This proximity with the In-Other is ritually confirmed, for, without In-Other one is timeless and placeless” (2018, 120). Though I accept that I cannot do full justice to a term that is a noun, verb and adjective in this review, the above excerpts will hopefully engage a potential reader’s curiosity as well as demonstrate the cause of my hesitation; a hesitation that I leave open to swift remediation depending upon future writings or integrations of In-Other¹.

Shifting gears, I would like to suggest but one possible positioning of *Waiting for Elijah* within the broader reaches of social science research.² Admittedly, this suggested positioning emerges from my own research within anthropology of peace (see Kwon 2020; Sponsel & Gregor 1994) and the constellation of connections developing between anthropology and peacebuilding (see Belloni 2020; Denskus & Kosmatopoulos 2015; Richmond 2018). As time is a core theme for Hadžimuhamedović while his fieldwork facilitates deep insight into what peace(building) literature has come to call “the local” or “the local turn,” I see in his research crucial lines of consideration. For example, Christie & Algar-Faria (2020) argue that the “direct engagement with the conceptualization and enactment of time has been remarkably absent from the study of peacebuilding” (2020, 155). Furthermore, there is an understanding of “localisation not simply as a tool of peacebuilding, but as fundamental to an emancipatory peace” (2020, 155). Placed into conversation with these claims, Hadžimuhamedović’s work acts as counterpoint yet engaging partner to Christi & Algar-Faria’s considerations of timescapes framing methodologies of peace. All considered, *Waiting for Elijah* will resonate with anthropologists working within peace studies while those in intersectional disciplines will be driven to ask hard questions about their own methodology, ethics, and encounters.

I noted in my introductory paragraph the book’s intimate research and resistance that in the end argues for “two anthropological ‘turns,’ toward affect and proximity” (2018, 235) and I want to conclude by returning to my use of the word “resistance.” Traces of what I call resistance can be encountered throughout the text, such as in Hadžimuhamedović’s articulated hope that his “grounded” research has “softened [his] own generalizations, and made [his

¹ Full disclosure: Though *Waiting for Elijah* was published in 2018, this is my first encounter with the term “In-Other” and I have intentionally not sought out nor searched for any other potential usage or development of the term in social science literature prior to writing this review.

² As noted in the introduction, the book is Volume One of “Articulating Journeys: Festivals, Memorials, and Homecoming.” So noted and in the interest of policing the length of this review, I point back to this designation in a footnote to briefly but clearly indicate that researchers engaging festivals as spaces to encounter and examine cross-communal/ethnicity/religious proximities and uncertainty (especially in post-war societies) will find *Waiting for Elijah* a rich, if not mandatory, read.

research] project useless for the prevalent forms of identitary violence in Bosnia” (2018, 31). As he continues to frame *Waiting for Elijah*, there is recognition-thus-resistance to “ethnicized research” that implicitly accepts a “nationalist modus operandi” (2018, 38) while the work is “significantly divergent from the nationalist imaginations of pure traditions” (2018, 47). Read as such, Hadžimuhamedović states the “‘success’ of this work will lie in its uselessness for the various identitary and developmental projects on the Gacko horizons” (2018, 174). Speaking specifically to anthropology, the author also sees his research as attempting to “offer a ‘grounded’ comment on the ethics of anthropology of the fictitious ‘post-conflict’ space” (2018, 77). And it is in these notes of resistance to the normative or the “known” that I find another dimension to the “syncretic poetry” of Hadžimuhamedović; a dimension of meta-narration that further aligns proximities and provocations in the Field with particular synergies of anthropological praxis and ethnographies of time, encounter, and the Other.

Works Cited:

- Belloni, Roberto, ed. 2020. *The Rise and Fall of Peacebuilding in the Balkans*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- Christie, Ryerson, and Gilberto Algar-Faria. 2020. “Timely interventions: Temporality and peacebuilding.” *European Journal of International Security* 5:155-178.
- Denskus, Tobias, and Nikolas Kosmatopoulos. 2015. “Anthropology & peacebuilding: an introduction.” *Peacebuilding* 3(3): 219-223.
- Kwon, Heonik. 2020. “Anthropology and world peace.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10(2): 279-288.
- Richmond, Oliver P. 2018. “Rescuing Peacebuilding? Anthropology and Peace Formation.” *Global Society* 32(2): 221-239.
- Sponsel, Leslie E., and Thomas Gregor. 1994. *The Anthropology of Peace and Nonviolence*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Charles O. Warner III is a doctoral researcher with the Faculty of Social & Cultural Anthropology and Leuven International & European Studies (LINES) at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He holds a fundamental research grant from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) with research emphases on veterans studies and strategic peacebuilding in former Yugoslavia. Prior to his turn to academia, Charles served as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician in the U.S. Air Force for six years, conducting counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, and force protection missions in South Korea, Iraq, Germany, and the United States. charlesoscar.warner@kuleuven.be

