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Finding My Feet: An Autoethnographic Study of a Kosovar Student

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of the Arts

School of Communication Studies

May 2020

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“I carry [our] home on my back (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 21).”

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## **Abstract**

Utilizing creative analytic practices of poetic vignettes and personal narratives (Richardson, 1999), throughout this autoethnographic thesis project I illustrate how I talk about my lived experiences, as a refugee, a child of war in Kosovo, and as a Kosovar international student in the U.S. I was forcibly displaced in 1999 when the Serbian government began a campaign of ethnic cleansing and oppression in Kosovo with the goal of erasing our culture, history, and language. Twenty years later, I still sense a reluctance of those in my family and culture, including myself, to give voice to the most difficult times in our history, a lack of ownership of our own stories, and a feeling of transgenerational trauma that still ripples through me and every child born in Kosovo. Carrying the residue of trauma in my body and my mind, I draw upon fragments of memory from my childhood juxtaposed with present-day experiences to explore moments of my life as a Kosovar international student in the U.S. while rendering the deep impacts of war trauma and cultural adjustment.



## Preface

When I read the word “Preface,” I skip ahead. That is, only after I grapple with the correct pronunciation. ‘Is it preh-fuss or pre-face?’ I think to myself. In my native Kosova, my teachers have read it to me as “pre-face,” but as a graduate student in the U.S., most people say “preh-fuss.” I have learned many lessons from pronouncing words incorrectly and making a fool of myself, so when the instinct to call this a “pre-face” kicks in, I know I must not follow it. After I decide what to call it, I usually check its length. If it happens to be longer than two or three pages, I do not even skim it. I simply move ahead to the Introduction, believing the preface is unnecessary. ‘I’ll figure this out on my own.’ I often think. As you can predict, I am usually proven wrong, and so might you be, if you decided to skip ahead. Now, I can’t force you to read my preface. Let’s face it, they aren’t the most exciting things to read, but forging ahead into the next few pages might provide some context of what comes next if you plan on reading the following hundred.

So, let’s start with: what exactly is this? This thesis is an autoethnographic project that aims to explore my experiences both as an international student in the U.S. and as a refugee and child of war in Kosova. This work is exploratory and preliminary, and I hope to continue developing it as a Ph.D. student. I hope this project will give a nuanced understanding of moments of my life as a Kosovar international student while rendering the deep impacts of war trauma and cultural adjustment. My way of knowing and conveying these experiences is through storytelling. So, you will find narrative, figurative language, and dialogue throughout this work because I am trying to share my story and my sense-making process authentically.

The lifeblood of this thesis is two sections of narratives, one about Kosova and one about the U.S., and I have connected these narratives through a methodology and theoretical

framework that contributes to communication research on international student experiences.

Throughout my thesis, I heavily use the Albanian language and only sometimes translate it. As a reader, you might find this a little disorienting, but that is intentional because I am a little disoriented too when I use English.

My Kosova narratives detail my experiences at five-years old being displaced by the Kosovo War that began in 1998. Serbia did not recognize Kosova as a sovereign and autonomous nation and attacked Kosovar towns and villages in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The narratives described my family's evacuation from the village of Broliq where I was raised to temporary housing in Isniq and Peja until finally reaching Montenegro as refugees. These are not intended to be hyper-detailed historical accounts, but instead true to my memory, my emotions, and my personal interpretation. I do not want to claim this is how every Kosovar has, or should, interpret these events.

My U.S. narratives do not tell as linear a story and instead describe vignettes from my life as a graduate student in the United States, processing the residual trauma from my childhood experiences and navigating my present cultural adjustment. Because I am right now experiencing this, in the messy middle to use Freeman's words (Freeman, 2007), many of these narratives are free-form and poetic as my means of processing and telling these stories.

I hope my readers will come away with a deeper understanding of the many traumas, cultural cues, and rituals that international students may carry with them when they come to the U.S. and be willing to listen and avoid labeling or stereotyping the "international student."

## Introduction

*“Everybody here speaks a different language than I do. I’m not talking about English. Or, am I? It seems like every person here speaks an English that is different from the English I have been exposed to my whole life. I’ve never had conversations back home about how a language is an oppressive tool and how we should encourage the use of gender-neutral and non-binary terms, let alone conversations about social constructionism, autoethnography, Hegelian dialectics, or... Kenneth Burke.”*

This is a journal entry from two semesters ago in grad school. I remember I jotted down those words one freezing Friday in December. I was drunk, homesick, yearning for connectedness and longing to speak my mother tongue. I had just gotten back from a class in which I was struggling with participation and I was on the verge of a breakdown. I should have anticipated I would eventually burn out and cry my eyes out, considering I was barely sleeping four hours a night, and I was setting up camp in Carrier Library from 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM.

On my way home, braving the snow and cold weather, I decided to go to the only store that was within a walking distance from my apartment and buy a bottle of rosé. I was going to get drunk as soon as I changed into more comfortable clothes. I had already made up my mind. ‘It is Friday, Goddamit!’ I thought to myself as I chose an eight-dollar rosé over a six dollar one. ‘Treat yourself!’

I walked back home, carefully, as if I was walking on stepping stones. I was the first person to leave footprints on the snowy sidewalk. I struggled to keep my balance as a huge snowplow kept getting closer and closer. It was piling snow up on the sidewalk with no sympathy for the people walking to get home. It reminded me of my winters as a kid. My two brothers and I loved snow, so after every heavy snowfall we would go out first thing in the

morning, put on our handsewn wool mittens and head to the park behind our house. At exactly 9 in the morning, on Saturdays and Sundays, a tiny, old and rusted snowplow would go around clearing the sidewalks from the heavy snow. That was our clue to run behind it as fast as we could and push each other on all the piles of snow that the snowplow had helped build. I kept looking at the snowplow in anger, shaking my head and pursing my lips, as if it was its fault I was walking alone, unimpressed by the piles of snow, instead of jumping on them as I once did when I was a kid, back home, with my brothers.

‘K’tu kërkush spo ecë. Veç unë. N’Prishtinë krejt ecin, gjethka, bashkë. Krejt pijnë t’premtën, bashkë. K’tu unë po eci, veç unë, vet. Po pi...vet!’

---

‘I see nobody walking around here. It is just me. Back home, everybody walks, everywhere. Together. Everybody drinks on Friday nights, together. Here, I walk alone; I drink alone. On Friday nights, I am alone.’

I hold the neck on the bottle of my rosé tightly. I am scared I’ll drop it and ruin my Friday plans. My fingers can barely stand the cold. They’ve turned purple, or grey, or some color I cannot clearly see in the poorly lit street lights. My feet are now wet, too.

‘Me m’nirthë komt m’nerth krejt trupi.’

## **The War Breaks Out**

For readers to be able to connect the dots between my lived experiences with war and those as an international student in the U.S., I feel it is of importance to give some context of the genocide and the struggle of my people to resist ethnic cleansing and oppression.

In the period between the late 1980s to 1999, Kosova was dominated by the Serbian authorities, with complete discrimination and parallelism (Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003). Kosova was an autonomous province within Serbia and had a population of 85 to 90 percent ethnic Albanians. In 1989, the Serbian President Slobodan Milošević denied Kosova's status intending to seize control of the autonomous province (Friend, 2001).

On July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, Kosova declared itself as “an independent unit in the Yugoslav community.” However, two months later, Serbia adopted a new constitution to gain greater control over the province (Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003). Mass protests began and 1,350 Albanian miners went on strike. Despite the widespread protests where twenty-two protestors and two policemen lost their lives, the autonomy of Kosova was still revoked since the Serbian National Assembly had the right to “suspend any branch of the provincial government if its policies appear to conflict with Serbia's constitution and laws” (Friend, 2001; Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003, p. 64). Throughout this period, the Serbian authorities did not give ethnic Albanians the right to work. Over 85,000 Albanians were fired because of political or ethnic motives. The accusations consisted of arrests, detentions, physical violence and other illegal and unjust measures (Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003).

Amnesty International witnessed a significant increase in human rights violations in Kosova in 1998. The vast majority of the victims were ethnic Albanian (Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003; Friend, 2001). In the summer of 1998, circa 250,000 ethnic Albanians were forcibly

displaced and some 50,000 were in the open (Friend, 2001; Ronyane, 2004). Human Rights Watch began documenting torture, killings, rapes, forced expulsions and other human rights violations committed by Serbian government forces against ethnic Albanians in 1999 (Human Rights Watch, 2001). According to Ronyane (2004), the tensions and genocidal fervor culminated on 24 March 1999 with the American-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) attack on Milošević's Yugoslavia. Yugoslav forces launched a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosova and through terror and violence forcibly displaced circa 1.5 million people from their homes in Kosova. Ronyane (2004) notes:

Hundreds of settlements were burned and looted. Massacres led to innumerable mass graves in Kosovo and in Serbia proper. Mosques, religious sites, and schools were systematically destroyed. Rape re-emerged in the Balkans as a tool of organized, deliberate terror. At least 6,000 and as many as 11,000 Kosovar Albanians were murdered, with bodies buried in over 500 mass graves. This was not improvised violence or a mob reaction. A covert Serbian plan, code-named Operation Horseshoe, to expel Kosovo Albanians from their homeland had been drawn up months before and showed that while Milosevic was engaged in political theatre at Rambouillet, his forces had been preparing to destroy the Kosovar Albanian. (p. 63)

A report written by Human Rights Watch (2001) further reveals the coordinated and systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosova. The campaign terrorized, killed, and displaced ethnic Albanians and was organized by the Serbian and Yugoslav governments in power. Human Rights Watch (2001) maintains:

No one predicted the speed and scale of the expulsions. Within three weeks of the start of NATO bombing, 525,787 refugees from Kosovo had flooded the neighboring countries,

according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). All told, government forces expelled 862,979 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, and several hundred thousand more were internally displaced, in addition to those displaced prior to March 1999. More than 80 percent of the entire population of Kosovo-90 percent of Kosovar Albanians-were displaced from their homes. (p. 13)

On June 10, after seventy-eight days of bombing, the agreement under which Serb forces would withdraw from Kosova was finalized. Kosova would remain part of Serbia but under the protection of UN/NATO. Ethnic Albanians who were forcibly displaced were allowed to return to their homeland.

In the year 1999, when the war broke out, I was five.

### **Background and Literature Review**

What we study as communication scholars is messy and, sometimes, how we write is messy. Writing, as Richardson (1994) maintains, “is a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516). Longing for “a way of knowing” is how this thesis topic emerged as I was approaching the end of my first year in graduate school. I was the only first-year international student in my department, so I didn’t feel like anybody could really relate to me. My fellow domestic students would not understand me. My professors, no matter how supportive and willing to help, were off the table. I come from a high power distance culture where the student-professor relationship is highly formal, so I didn’t even consider going to my professors for help. I could only go talk to them about things that were specifically related to class discussions, assignments, or exams. Or so I thought. Lost and longing to be understood, I turned to research on international students, hoping I could come across stories about students like me. I wondered if others, too, felt a lack of belonging, an absence of home, if they considered themselves

marginalized, and if they learned at all how to navigate this novel experience. I immersed myself in the world of international student literature by spending hours skimming through a plethora of quantitative articles full of Likert scales and generalized patterns of social loss, isolation, and identity negotiation to only realize numbers were not “my way of knowing.”

The literature on international students offers a limited number of research methods which mostly include quantitative studies that examine international student experience by using variables, Likert scales, pretests, post-tests, and other statistical procedures (Guan & Dodder, 2001; Ye, 2006; Gargano, 2012). Tests like the *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory* (Hammer, 2003) and *Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory* (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992) have been used to assess the effects of studying overseas. Thus, much of the research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s has been quantitative survey approaches to the experience of larger numbers of students.

In contrast, qualitative, in-depth investigation of this experience of a smaller number of students is encountered less often (Montgomery, 2010). Survey-based research has resulted in a range of general findings but has lacked depth in several aspects of the international student experience (Bochner et al., 1997). In addition, a gap in literature with regard to the multifaceted and dynamic identities of international students exists and that gap cannot be filled in with international students “checking boxes” but rather with “listening to their stories” to understand how they construct meaning across borders (Gargano, 2012, p. 2). I craved stories. “Thick description” (Geertz, 1973). Denzin (1989) notes:

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an



experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.” (p. 83)

International student scholarship has an abundance of quantitative and qualitative studies that indeed carry value for international students and are significant in measuring life satisfaction, cultural adjustment, and academic challenges amongst other things. However, there are not many studies that render the complexity of the international student experience in thick description the way autoethnographic studies do. And if you’re an international student coming from a developing country, chances are you’re underrepresented in this body of knowledge, even in autoethnography.

As I was skimming through articles, often I could not find emotionality, detail, and enough context even in the qualitative realm of the literature. I did find the same generalized patterns of social loss, isolation, identity negotiation which are crucial towards understanding international students, but which failed to invoke in me any feelings of verisimilitude, findings that lead readers to “cognitively and emotively place themselves within the research context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). I was an international student and I still did not feel as if I was fully part of the context, neither cognitively nor emotively. As a student coming from the developing Kosova and studying in the U.S., I did not fit well in the typical international student context. I was unrepresented.

Dervin (2011) maintains that quantitative studies on international student experience remain at the surface of the conversation and the cultural contexts are rendered in an objective way, and he pleads for researchers to acknowledge their biases in data analysis by being more self-reflexive and admitting their subjectivity. This plea for an alternative approach to

international student research is challenging to scholars who “want to keep doing things the way they’ve always done them” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 442).

This thesis answers Dervin’s plea for an alternative, more self-reflexive approach to international student scholarship. I utilize autoethnography as a method that allows for experimentation, as it “is learned by going” (Anderson & Coffin, 2013, p. 58). Thus, it is not shaped by scholarly traditions, but by the lives of scholars, their fields of experience and the context of their lives as well (Anderson & Coffin, 2013, p. 58). It starts with the personal life, focusing on thoughts and emotions to try to make sense of a lived experience. Then that experience is rendered alive through a story (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography then, allows me to share my experiences through a story to make a contribution to a body of literature that does not completely honor the complex, multifaceted experience of the international student (Ellis, 2004).

In this journey, I am mindful of my positionality to be aware of my own biases, power, and privilege (Madison, 2005). To acknowledge my positionality, I ask myself the following questions: “What is your location, positionality in the story, to the story, to the happening? What is your sense of empowerment or entrapment, agency of oppression in this situation/context? What are the power structures at play in these moments (e.g. time, place, relationships)?” (Alexander, 2011, p. 105). I address my experience as a white, able-bodied female, a graduate student who easily visually passes for an American graduate student, which in itself carries privilege that I had not realized before starting this journey. I investigate the role of this privilege especially in contexts where I grapple with shame and guilt in the classroom environment. I investigate the ways I can afford to stay quiet and not participate in discussions because my skin color and my appearance allow me to “get away with it.”

I seek to make a contribution to the body of literature on international students by giving

voice to my social and academic challenges, to transgenerational trauma and the struggle of my people to preserve language and culture. I explore how significant challenges, struggles, and trauma influence my sense of self, as crucial to understanding how I construct the complexity of meaning in my lived experience as an international student coming from a developing country. I reflect on epiphanies and journal entries from my first and my second year of graduate school and I craft evocative narratives to investigate gaps in knowledge and to render visible thick description of the personal and the cultural context I was and I am part of. Allowing my own story to set the tone for this project, using an autoethnographic approach, initially utilizing the Cultural Adjustment model for framing the identification and adaptation experience of cultural students and then switching to Borderlands theory, I aim to present an alternatively nuanced understanding of the Kosovar international student in the U.S.

Cultural Adjustment is a four-stage process that was initially identified by Trifonovitch in 1997 (Trifonovitch, as cited in Mesidor & Sly, 2016). The first stage is the “honeymoon stage” and comprises of feelings of excitement from being in a new culture. The second stage is the “hostility stage” where international students begin to become hostile and cannot bear cultural differences and misunderstandings. The third stage is the “humor stage” where the student overcomes the previously felt hostility towards the host culture and can reflect on it. This stage is characterized by a sense of belonging, enjoyment of academic activities, and a more satisfactory social life. The last stage is the “home stage” where students feel accepted in the new culture, often, as the time to go back home approaches (Trifonovitch, as cited in Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

The beauty of an autoethnographic project is the transparency of the writing process itself. Rather than present my writing process as a linear process of moving from purpose statement, I render the messiness of my writing process as an autoethnographic choice of moving

through raw experience. I admit to making mistakes, to have wanted this thesis project to solely be about my experience as an international student living in the U.S. but to having it evolve and take me where I needed to go, to my homeland, to my people's hardships, pain, and suffering. As much as the Cultural Adjustment theory captures my experience as an international student, it does not capture Kosovo for me or the complexity of my experience as an international student coming from such a developing country, having overcome a war, bearing the residue of trauma, and living "in-between," in the borderlands, in two geographical areas, in two opposite cultures, speaking two wildly different tongues, belonging simultaneously in both spaces and strangely enough in neither one.

A theory I discovered which better honors the complexity of the life I left behind and the new one I am embracing in the U.S. is Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands theory. Keating describes the Borderlands theory as follows: "For Anzaldua, the Borderlands- in both geographical and metaphoric meanings represent painful yet also potentially transformational spaces where opposites converge, conflict, and transmute (Anzaldua, as cited in Keating, 2009, p. 9)." The focus of this theory is on the struggle and dilemmas of colonized people and the process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, and the creation of a new self (a new consciousness).

\*\*\*\*\*

I can't possibly change or unlearn, in one graduate seminar, what I was taught my whole life. I can't possibly change it even in ten, fifteen, or a hundred seminars. I can't stop overthinking and feeling anxious whenever I am about to say something in class. Participation requires vulnerability and confidence and so much energy. I feel drained whenever I speak in class. I was taught to think twice before I speak out, for fear of being wrong. Instead, here, I think twice and twice and twice and twice, until I lose momentum.

‘You should think very hard because you can’t be wrong or else you’ll be embarrassed in front of the whole class.’ I keep telling myself as I try to muster all the courage within me to just express my goddamn opinion. ‘But what if they don’t understand you? What if you’re not as clear or as articulate as everybody else? And you’re not. Because you were not born here. You were not raised here and your vocabulary is not as rich as theirs. You have an accent so that makes it even more difficult for the others to understand you.’ When I speak, I give myself away as a foreigner and my privilege as passing for an American graduate student slowly fades away.

‘I would say this...’ I speak out without raising my hand (Who thought raising my hand would not even be expected in graduate school?). As I express my opinion in a shaky voice and with the lowest tone possible, I can see, out of the corner of my eye, that everybody is staring at me. I get all of these strange looks and I feel alien, as if I’m from outer space. Never before had it crossed my mind that, indeed, I am a legal alien here in the U.S. My brain decides to freeze as I think about my immigration status instead of what I had raised my hand for. ‘Everybody’s now staring at me! I don’t think they understand.’

‘Krejt po m’kqyrin! Spo m’kuptojnë, po m’doket!’ I feel a rush of heat. My face betrays me. I turn red. The whole cohort is focused on what I, the legal alien, have to say and it seems they are all being even more attentive because of my foreign accent. I feel self-conscious and I am afraid I am taking up too much time and space. So, I stutter and I reiterate my whole argument and I stop mid-sentence. I smile embarrassed, apologetic as if I am asking for everybody’s forgiveness that I had taken up that much time and space without significantly contributing to the conversation.

“To build off of what Eri just said...” I hear somebody else speak and I feel relieved the attention is not on me anymore. My heart’s rhythm goes back to normal, the heat flux declines

and the redness in my face starts to fade away. I force a smile as I nod to what the other student was saying as if I want them to know I perfectly understand what the conversation is about. I feel validated. Less alien. I had accomplished so much because I spoke up. Because I spoke up in class. Yay me, right? ~~Yay me, right?~~ I cross through my text.

\*\*\*\*\*

Throughout my writing, I have come to realize this internalized need to make things okay even when they are not. I sense a lack of ownership over my anger, inferiority and shame, and I feel tension from wanting to express these emotions on one hand, and trying to make it okay, on the other hand. Therefore, to investigate this tension, I use Borderlands theory to guide my reflection on the cultural context in which I was brought up and also to analyze the cultural context in which I currently am. Finally, I explore how this “internalized need to make things okay” has impacted my acculturation in a new environment and my overall experience as an international student. I further problematize this need and I look at the extent to which it has been transmitted to me from my ancestors. My people have always carried struggle and trauma in their bones. Their fight to preserve language and culture, to resist ethnic cleansing and oppression, is transgenerational. My grandparents’ fight had become my parents’ fight and my parents’ fight has now become mine.

### **International Student Scholarship**

Montgomery (2010) maintains that over decades, a variety of research has been conducted with regard to international students and their experiences studying overseas. The majority of methodologies comprise large-scale quantitative projects rather than qualitative-oriented ones (Khanal & Gaulee, 2018). Over the last two decades, international student mobility

has shifted from “an interesting and appealing component of an institution’s profile” to “a core issue of concern” (Rumbley, Altback & Reisberg, 2012, p. 3).

In the United States, it is unimaginable that an institution has not already employed a strategy of internationalization (Hudzik, 2011). Deardorff defines internationalization as “an integration of international or intercultural dimension into the teaching and research of an institution (as cited in Montgomery, 2010, p. 4). Strategies of internationalization focus primarily on the recruitment of international students on F-1 visas as well as offering accommodations to students coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Stohl, 2007). Professors play a crucial role in internationalization and, as Stohl (2007) has observed, without strong faculty engagement, the project of internationalization “will not deliver the learning, discovery, and engagement that we seek” (p. 360). Mesidor and Sly (2016), as well as Nilemar and Brown (2017), assert that the number of international students has increased by 72% from 2000 to 2014. This increase has corresponded to more research on international students (Hudzik, 2011; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Nilemar & Brown, 2017).

In 2003, Yi, Lin, and Kishimoto identified five areas in which international students might undergo adjustment issues: academic, physical health, financial, vocational concerns/needs and personal/social concerns (pp. 333-334). Academically, international students face challenges with writing essays and taking notes during classes due to limited language proficiency (Yi et al., 2003). Moreover, Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung (2008) assert that international students struggle with classroom communication because in American classrooms they are expected to communicate differently than they did at home. For instance, international students might feel more comfortable speaking in lecture format classes rather than seminars that encourage participation and discussion (Wadsworth et al., 2008).

Prieto maintains that with regard to physical health, international students struggle with healthcare providers because of language barriers during the interaction as well as lack of knowledge about the way the healthcare system works (as cited in Yi et al., 2003). International students also face financial troubles due to immigration regulations that prohibit them from working off-campus (Mori, 2000). Their vocational concerns are closely related to their future employment. After the completion of their studies, international students face challenges in deciding whether to seek employment in the U.S. or back in their home countries (Wehrly, 1986).

Finally, the most common effective concerns of international students are loneliness, isolation, homesickness, and irritability (Wehrly, 1986). Sandhu (1995) maintains that these social and psychological concerns in international students are closely related to a profound sense of loss, inferiority, uncertainty, cultural shock, and a loss of the social capital back in their countries of origin.

Students begin the transitional journey by having unrealistically high expectations of their new culture and surroundings and that negatively impacts their emotional wellbeing (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Ward, Bochner & Furham, 2001). These expectations include interactions with professors and students, adaptation in their new environment and expectations with regard to their academic goals (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Distress is significant when new surroundings do not meet international students' initial expectations (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Ward et al., 2001). Negative emotional reactions are also triggered by language barriers, unfamiliarity with the new academic setting and resources, and lack of social support which then results in depression, loneliness, and isolation (Wei et al., 2007).



Cross-cultural loss is a term coined by Wang et al. (2015) to describe the process in which international students lose familiar things such as language, social capital, identity, familiar environment, and educational system, as they try to adjust to their host culture (p. 42). Newsome and Cooper (2016) claim that adjusting through cross-cultural loss can be a positive thing. This process shapes international students' identity navigation and improves their functional skills (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). The benefits of cross-cultural loss are manifested long-term by preparing international students to handle socio-cultural issues and becoming competent in interculturality (Kim, 2001). Wang et al. maintain that cross-cultural loss reduces with the increase of acculturation or cultural adjustment. When the international student finds a community within the host culture, gains self-efficacy, and adjusts to the academic setting, the international student has then obtained transformative potential, cross-cultural understanding, and tolerance (Nilemar & Brown, 2017). Usually, the international student's degree of change is dependent on the duration of the stay overseas (Brown & Holloway, 2008b). If the stay is longer than a year, then a change in cultural outlook and cultural adjustment is more probable.

Adjustment, then, as seen from a variety of studies (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Nilemar & Brown, 2017), can be uncomfortable and stressful in the beginning (due to cultural differences and misunderstandings) but its outcomes are transformative with regard to the international student's way of thinking and behaving, of gaining intercultural competence and shaping identity negotiation potential (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Kim, 2001).

### **Ethnography**

*"We... say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards this observation that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more,*

*even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them."*

(Wittgenstein, n.d., as cited in Geertz, 1973, p. 316)

Finding their feet is one goal that the self-reflexive researcher seeks to accomplish by employing ethnographic research. They seek to not only understand people, not only to talk to them, but to converse with them, which is more difficult than it is usually acknowledged (Geertz, 1973). Pink (2007) defines ethnography as:

A process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (p. 22)

Ethnography is "a written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 1). What defines ethnography is not only taking fieldnotes, transcribing texts and establishing rapport with people, it is instead the comprising of thick description (Geertz, 1973).

Doing ethnography, for Geertz (1973) is like attempting to read a foreign and incoherent manuscript. Writing ethnography, Geertz asserts, is interpretive (1973). Thus, ethnographic descriptions are interpretations of interpretations, and should not be seen as absolute representations of reality (Geertz, 1973). Nothing we know is free from interpretation. We interpret our surroundings and utilize symbols to write about them. We interpret culture based on our fields of experience, where we have been, what we have read about, based on our values and beliefs (Goodall, 2000). One either grasps the interpretation or one does not; one either accepts

it or one does not (Geertz, 1973). One interprets what one finds meaningful (Goodall, 2000). Ethnography is decoding and recoding of interpretations, inclusion, and exclusion, it turns the exotic to familiar and makes the familiar strange. It questions the boundaries of civilization, culture, race, and gender (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Classical ethnography, or traditional ethnography was concerned with objectivity, “the detached observer” using neutral language to write, in great detail, about a situation unfolding through time (Conquergood, 1991). The final, published manuscript would be considered an identical representation of the situation, without taking into consideration the subjectivity, the fields of experience of the detached observer and how they impact the detached observer’s representation of the situation (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). At times, some scholars still express a neutral discourse that depicts the reality “exactly as it is”, unfiltered through our own lens and interpretive schema, as an ideal for ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The traditional ethnography’s pretense about the detached observation and scientific method conceals the messiness of the field and reduces the likelihood of describing ethnographic fieldwork and situations as they are, instead, this pretense is used to bolster ethnographer’s sense of self in disorienting situations (Conquergood, 1991).

Fabien (as cited in Conquergood, 1991) asserts ethnographers should rethink themselves as communicators, not scientists, because only through communication practices can ethnography generate new knowledge about another culture. This rethinking of ethnography, as essentially about speaking and listening instead of observing, has challenged the visual bias of positivism (Conquergood, 1991). Being too close signifies the loss of perspective and judgment. Detachment and distance are vital for getting perspective on something. “Sight and surveillance

depend on detachment and distance” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 41). I aim to move away from this perspective and to embrace subjectivity and involvement in my project.

In the wake of postmodernist critiques, ethnography has undergone a shift in meaning and writing. Ethnography has undergone epistemological, methodological, and ethical self-reflexiveness (Conquergood, 1991). The ethnographic genre “has been blurred, enlarged, and altered to include new ‘species’ of writing like autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama to name but a few” (Richardson, 2005, p. 962). Postmodernism makes claims that writing is always partial and situational and that our selves are always partially present in our texts because we repress parts of ourselves and exclude them from the paper (Richardson, 2005).

“New ethnography” projects, such as autoethnography, encourage the writing that gets to the “truth” of experiences. It situates the author’s self within the context of others (Goodall, 2000). It is concerned primarily with speaking and listening, instead of observing and “it shifts the emphasis from space to time, from sight and vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 183). Pink (2009) suggests that new ethnography projects should be multi-sensory, not only concerned with vision and sound, but with all senses in general, including touch and smell. These new projects should acknowledge the body as significant to human experiences and academic practices, as a way of knowing and as the primary orientation to the world.

These new projects are humanly situated, filtered through the lens of a human and influenced by the perception of a human, bearing both the strengths and the limitations of the feelings of a human (Richardson, 2005). Scholars working in such new ethnographic projects acknowledged the importance of stories and rendered stories as complex phenomena that taught new ways of thinking and feeling and helped people make sense of their experiences (Ellis,

Adams & Bochner, 2011). Thus, gradually, scholars began to turn to autoethnography to produce research that is meaningful to them and that is based on personal experience. Scholars began to utilize autoethnography because it also acknowledges and welcomes subjectivity, emotions, the scholar's immersion and critical role on research rather than attempting to "hide from these matters and assume they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274).

Therefore, autoethnographic inquiry uses stories as a significant method to render embodied personal experience. Stories, then, were not used as a representation of an experience, but rather as a sensemaking process.

### **Autoethnography**

*"Something Is Missing*

*Where and why?*

*What is the problem?*

*I feel a need—that is not being met*

*Now, you might not be wrong*

*I hear the tale you are telling*

*But it's partial, incomplete*

*...something is missing."*

(Douglas & Carless, 2013, p. 85)

The missing piece Douglas & Carless (2013) could be referring to is the understanding of the subjective accounts of personal experience in academic research. These personal experiences of researchers set the foundations of autoethnography (Chang, 2013). Autoethnography has evolved in an abundance of directions since the term was first coined by anthropologist Hayano in 1979 (Chang, 2013). Jones, Adams & Ellis (2013) maintain autoethnography is an approach to

writing that challenges traditional ways of doing research. Fledderus (as cited in Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013) asserts that traditional academic writing is often inaccessible and full of jargon, defining it as “elite,” “esoteric,” and “impenetrable.” Traditional research is more oriented towards intellectuals and academics, and uses “the pragmatic logic” that ignores subjectivity and the arguments for “why the heart needs to accompany the head” (Tillmann, 2009, p. 223).

Autoethnography is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). It combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. While autobiographers write selectively and in retrospect about epiphanies that have a transformative impact on their lives, autoethnographers write about epiphanies that emerge from being part of a culture and carrying a cultural identity (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers do not simply write about epiphanies, instead, they analyze them by using methodological tools and literature, as well as by making these epiphanies resonate with other people (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography aims to analyze common cultural practices, values and beliefs, uses of space and place, ways of speaking and relating and cultural artifacts in general (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). It is distinguished from other types of personal writings that are used to examine culture (cultural patterns, artifacts, practices and so on) by characteristics such as (1) purposefully critiquing culture and cultural practices, (2) contributing to existing research, (3) embracing vulnerability with purpose, and (4) cultivating a relationship with audiences to incite a response (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 22).

Autoethnography is not a method as much as it is “a way of life” (Bochner, 2013, p53). It allows the researcher to express their subjectivity, to immerse themselves in the story and

experience of others, and to integrate parts of themselves like emotions, spirituality, intellectuality within their work to not only respond to “an existential crisis” but to also perform meaningful work (Bochner, 2013). It consists of the new characteristics of qualitative inquiry, welcoming researcher’s subjectivity and the depiction of self on the page, self-reflexivity, vulnerability and a lack of concern for finality and closure (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). This is especially crucial since it helps facilitate understanding of experience by discerning patterns such as stories, emotions, cultural practices as evidenced by journal entries, field notes, interviews and artifacts (Jorgenson, as cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

The purpose of autoethnography is not solely to depict personal stories and experience. Instead, its purpose is to make possible the understanding of social realities through the researcher’s lens of personal experience (Chang, 2013). Moreover, its purpose is to challenge traditional norms of research and representation, to work from insider’s knowledge, to navigate through pain, vulnerability, uncertainty, to break silences and to make sense of lived experience (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). The aim is to make meaningful work that leads to a meaningful life (Bochner, 2013). Autoethnography challenges traditional modes of inquiry by allowing the researcher to embrace subjectivity, to render visible their thoughts, feelings and emotions as well as to acknowledge mistakes and accidents that are part of the researcher’s experience (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Bochner, 2013). By working from insider’s knowledge, researchers utilize their personal experience to craft a “thick description” of cultural experience to make those experiences easy to understand (Geertz, 1973). Working from insider’s knowledge produces thick description in a way that would be impossible to produce from the perspective of “the detached observer” (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013).

Using autoethnography to make sense of a painful experience can be a cathartic process,

while simultaneously providing reflection for others going through the same painful experience, giving them insight and hope, and welcoming them to bear witness to the struggles and the messiness of that experience (Spry, 2011). Autoethnography is also utilized to break the silences ingrained in traditional research, to challenge and critique hegemonic traits and to embrace emotionality and uncertainty, as a means to help the sense-making process and understand the ways our identities impact what we do and what we say (Soukup, 1992; Ellis, 1991). To make meaningful work means to produce work that is not only read in academic settings but to produce work that appeals to various and diverse audiences (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). It is to render the fullness of living and to welcome others to show concern for other's life, to care and to become involved in "the life-giving gift of acknowledgment" (Bochner, 2013, p. 54).

*"So you read my words*

*Sketched on the page*

*And learned of entanglement*

*Well, here now is my flesh*

*What say you, as I sing my song?*

*Where do you belong?"*

(Douglas & Carless, 2013, p. 93)



## **Theory and Method**

### **An Attempt at Cultural Adjustment Theory**

Madison (2005) asserts that theory is used to “interpret or illuminate a social phenomenon” (p.15). Throughout my paper, I wanted to initially utilize the framework of Cultural Adjustment to help me craft my narratives and aid my sense-making process. This framework, I believed, provided the structure for my narratives as it allowed me to situate them in the four stages I have gone through as an international student, while also simultaneously facilitating my sense-making process and allowing me to witness my transformation throughout these stages. Cultural Adjustment is a four-stage process that was initially identified by Trifonovitch in 1997 (Trifonovitch, as cited in Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This four-stage process influences the level of satisfaction international students find in their academic experience in the U.S. (Wadsworth, Hecht & Jung, 2008).

The first stage is the “honeymoon stage” and comprises of feelings of excitement from being in a new culture. The international students have positive attitudes about themselves and have a heightened sense of accomplishment because of managing to study overseas. They are interested, excited and motivated to be in a new culture. However, this excitement is short lived. Because of cultural and linguistic challenges and barriers the international students withdraw and lose the cooperative spirit. They feel disconnected in this stage as cultural differences and misunderstandings emerge. The professors will also no longer tolerate cultural misunderstandings and will treat international students based on the norms and patterns of behavior of their host culture (Trifonovitch, 1997; Mesidor & Sly, 2016).

Utilizing the honeymoon stage I wanted to depict narratives from my first semester in grad school and to investigate cultural shock, seeking belongingness, and making sense of my

new surroundings. Since I came to realize that the cultural adjustment was not a linear process, I could not craft narratives that explicitly derived from my first semester in grad school. I did however craft narratives that render the themes of seeking belongingness in a time of war and a time of peace and struggling to make sense of new surroundings as a child of war as well as a 25-year-old Kosovar who assumed the identity of an international student in the U.S.

The second stage is the “hostility stage” where international students begin to become hostile and cannot bear cultural differences and misunderstandings. In this stage, the international students are impacted by feelings of anxiety, anger, confusion, frustration, and depression. Students also develop a tendency to mistrust the culture, exert less effort in the academic setting, and become less motivated and cooperative (Trifonovitch, 1997; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). In this stage, I aimed to craft narratives from my second semester in grad school. I wanted to critically think about cultural differences and misunderstandings that I have encountered at this stage and how they have impacted my sense of self, as well as how they have impacted the way I navigated academic and social life.

The third stage is the “humor stage” where the students overcome the previously felt hostility towards the host culture and can reflect on it. The international student is influenced by feelings of belongingness, enjoyment of academic activities and lead a more satisfactory social life. They have made friends and created their community (Trifonovitch, 1997; Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Throughout my narratives, I wanted to analyze instances that have led to this feeling of belongingness. I meant to retrospectively continue to craft narratives from my first and second stages of the cultural adjustment process while simultaneously acknowledging that I am writing them from the third stage and investigating the impact this has on my stories. On days I felt I was in the third stage, basking in this sense of belonging, I wrote in my journal about the support I

was getting from my committee, other faculty members, and my close friends. It was reassuring to have the support of my community in a time when I was physically unwell from all this embodied writing. I was crafting narratives from the war and as I kept writing, I kept revisiting painful memories and trauma from twenty years ago. The revisiting of transgenerational trauma negatively impacted my health and made me question whether storytelling and poking old memories was a way to heal or whether it would keep exacerbating things for me.

The last stage is the “home stage” where students feel accepted in their new culture. Norms and standards of the host culture are combined with the ones of the home culture, and the international students feel settled in the new environment. They begin to feel “at home” and have developed biculturality. They can operate according to the new norms and patterns of the new culture while interacting in that culture and they can utilize old norms and patterns of the old culture while interacting with their home culture (Trifonovitch, n.d., as cited in Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This would be the last stage of my stay in the U.S. In this stage, I wanted to investigate my old and new identities that were formed in grad school and analyze the ways I navigated these identities. I was going to be mindful of the cultural norms that have stuck with me from home and the ones I have adopted in the U.S and would try to understand why certain norms have stuck with me while others have not. While I did not specifically investigate my identities because I was on the fourth stage, I did investigate my old and new identities throughout my writing. In the process of crafting narratives from the war, I paid attention to gender and cultural norms in Kosova and did the same thing as I was crafting narratives of my experience as an international student in the U.S.

Finally, since international students either adjust and become culturally competent, meaning they can understand new cultural norms and patterns and can operate successfully in the

new culture, or fail to adjust and experience acculturative stress I aimed to reflect on situations where I felt like I was culturally competent and, on the ones, where I fell prey to acculturative stress (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Acculturative stress is one kind of stress that is closely related to acculturation and which is characterized by patterns of stress behaviors such as lowered mental health status (confusion, anxiety, depression), feelings of marginality and alienation, and identity confusion (Berry et al., 1987, p. 492).

### **Borderlands**

*“To this day I’m not sure where I found the source, the mother, to disengage from my family, mi tierra, mi gente, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so that I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.”*

(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 16)

When I first started writing this thesis, I was unsure if the Cultural Adjustment theory would be the right fit. My thesis advisor, Dr. Broderick, kept telling me that the right theoretical framework would emerge from writing so I had to be patient and keep writing more. As a novice autoethnographer and as a person who needs structure and certainty, I was uncomfortable proceeding without a theoretical framework to keep me grounded. I wanted to believe that the Cultural Adjustment theory would be the right fit because it would help me compartmentalize my experiences as an international student in the U.S. I wanted to believe I was in the humor stage and I was finally over my anger towards the U.S.

My committee also burst my bubble by pointing out that the acculturation process was not linear but recursive. I would still go through the anger stage and not only that; I could go through the anger stage in combination with the humor one or the honeymoon one. Deep down, I knew they were right. I was fully aware that the Cultural Adjustment theory would not be useful

in covering the complexity of my experience as an international student in the U.S. while also doing justice and honoring my background in Kosova and my country's history with preserving language and culture and resisting ethnic cleansing and oppression.

Murphy (2016) claims that Borderlands theory is a multifaceted discursive process that entails confrontation, challenge, reaffirmation and liberation. The focus of this theory is on the struggle and dilemmas of colonized people and the process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction, the creation of a new self (a new consciousness) that transcends imposed socio-political, economic, and gender predeterminations. Furthermore, Anzaldua depicts the historical processes of dominant people and how they represent the identity of "the other" as inferior and how they create stereotypes about "the other" (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). Coming to the U.S. as an international student was my first encounter with a dominant culture that treats non-Americans as inferior. My people, on the other hand, were forced to face a dominant culture long before I had to. They learned to resist the Serbian regime in Kosova and fight marginalization, ethnic cleansing, and oppression. They were "othered" in their own houses, in their own socio-political and economic systems, and their homeland, but never lost the fight. Today, Kosova enjoys twelve years of independence because our parents and grandparents adopted a new consciousness that, as Anzaldua (1987) claims, does transcend imposed socio-political and economic predeterminations.

Some of my narratives for this thesis project are written with feelings of inferiority, shame, and silence in mind. Being a woman from a developing country, or as Anzaldua renders us "Third World women," there is a presupposition that I cannot speak for myself, I cannot express my struggle, my suffering, and my concerns, therefore women in western countries must become channels for women like me to have a platform to speak up in public (Keating, 2009, p.

47). This renders western women as dominant and superior to women like me and praises their privilege and power. Third World women are depicted as voiceless and throughout my narratives one can see the ways I have also internalized this sort of mentality. As Keating (2009) would, say “this act [of dominant women speaking for Third World women] is rape of our language” (p.47).

I reflected on Keating’s (2009) feeling of having one’s “tongue ripped from [their] mouth, left voiceless. [Their] name stolen from [them]” early in graduate school (p. 47). “Ariana, Aryonna, Arjona...” I almost felt scratches in my flesh with every lazy attempt people from this dominant culture made at saying my name correctly. In my first year of grad school, I remained voiceless. My language was illegitimate, my name was butchered in the mouths of the Americans, my nationality was unknown to them, foreign, abstract. I would not speak up in class or participate in discussions because I was convinced my opinions were not as legitimate as the opinions of my fellow classmates. I would not speak up because I had an accent that “othered” me. I would not correct my American friends who ascribed to me the identity of “an immigrant” rather than a Kosovar national merely studying in the U.S. because I was taught to not question their power and authority. I was, and, indeed, became even more voiceless. As Anzaldua (1987) would say:

She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. And though she was unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now the sun has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she continues to tend the flame. (p. 22)

It was not until I read Anzaldua that I realized that, just like any woman from my country, I had agency within me and I had to use that agency to resist and defy the politics of the more dominant structures:

There is a Rebel in me... It is that part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 16)

I realized that deep down, I have inherited the rebellious traits of my people who have undergone oppression and have been colonized for centuries. My ancestors have passed this sort of rebellion and bravery from generation to generation (the rebellion does come concealed behind the transgenerational trauma). In my narratives, I depict this agency and rebellion when I talk about my Grandmother's confrontation with the Serbian paramilitary soldiers, her refusal to take orders from those authorities and her verbal fight with "the devil" that could have been the death of her.

But like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into the unknown and possibly dangerous terrain.

This is her home

this thin edge of

barbwire. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 13)

Indeed I might have inherited the rebellious traits of my people but I have also inherited their cultural and traditional norms that women have to conform to. Anzaldua renders that to avoid rejection from our culture, we suppress the unacceptable parts and conform to the values of the culture. I have witnessed my people's struggle to preserve our language and culture and I feel it is my duty and responsibility to keep them alive and pass them to my children and their

children and so on. This duty falls in contradiction to the individualist culture I have been exposed to in the U.S. In one of my narratives, I depict the fear “to be found out” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 20). “What He Doesn’t Know” aims to show familial and cultural silences around still-taboo topics in my developing country and the reconstruction of “a new consciousness” and identity that I have to navigate to keep hidden and suppress an unacceptable aspect of the self that my family and culture will reject. Therefore, in this instance, I do not attempt to break the silence. I embrace it. I become one with it.

### **A Calling to Come Home**

*“To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own... I am a turtle. Wherever I go I carry “home” on my back.”*

(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 21)

‘Academia is not a piece of cake, I don’t know what kind of a researcher I am and my research interests are vast and not particularly consistent’ I sigh in exasperation, as I try to wrap my wandering thoughts to focus on my Research Methods class. We are waiting in anticipation for our guest lecturer to begin introducing us to the unfamiliar world of Autoethnography. Little did I know it at that time how that moment would immensely impact my understanding of the kind of researcher I wanted to become.

Coming from a developing country meant that I was not exposed to the same knowledge as my fellow graduate students. I was not familiar with the variety of research methods I could possibly entertain, and I felt disadvantaged ever since I stepped foot in the multifaceted world of academia. We were already on week 9 and I still did not feel at home with any of the methods we had talked about. Berry (2011) maintained that when researchers used methodological



practices that were meant for them, they would feel at home. If they used other methodological practices, those practices would feel strange and weird, kind of like “cold homes that are awfully distant” (Berry, 2011, p. 173). I knew for a fact that I was not a quantitative researcher. I care more about depth than breadth. I care more about stories and thick description than about numbers. However, since I deemed myself to be organized and structured, I assumed, despite logic and reason, that I might feel some kind of belongingness within the quantitative realm. I thought that I should have had a home by then, so I assumed, reluctantly and brimming with uncertainty, that the quantitative realm was home. Even though it felt strange and weird and “awfully distant” (Berry, 2011, p.173).

The anticipation hadn't declined as Dr. Melissa Aleman began introducing us to the world of Autoethnography. I had read the article on *Dementia* that she provided for us as class reading and I remembered how I had never in my life felt that a scholarly article could resonate with me to the core of my being the way that single article had. I couldn't fully understand if I felt that way because I had personally been involved in family hardships with dementia and had undergone pretty much the same things as Melissa had depicted in her article. Or was it because the article was evocative in itself and had triggered emotions in me that I had unconsciously suppressed throughout my life? I know for a fact that I could not get enough of it. I did not skim it. I read it twice, slowly and carefully. I was armed with questions for Melissa.

Listening to her talk about her article on dementia with such love, appreciation, ease, and comfort gave me a feeling of warmth. “Home,” was it? I didn't have a word for it. I got goosebumps all over my body as I was listening, in awe, to the story of Melissa and her matriarchs. ‘She is most definitely home.’ I think, resting my red cheek on my left hand, and

dreaming of my ever-developing abilities to speak and to write with as much humility, love, and devotion as she did.

It did not cross my mind until a year later that the way I wrote was organized and structured and I did not like it. I wanted my writing to be a little messier, in the sense that it did not conform to criteria as much. Through writing, I wanted to embrace how complex experiences are and learn to value unpredictability, uncertainty, and messiness. I always took great pride in the fact that I was organized and structured and I abhorred unpredictability. In the slightest threat of uncertainty impeding my perfectly-ordered little bubble, I would close off, become distant, unreachable, proud, and I would stop writing. My objective writing was impacting my level of being a raw, unfiltered, vulnerable human being. My structure was also my silos. It was keeping me safe, but distant, and isolated. My writing was calculated and very much predictable.

Autoethnography, on the other hand, is home to the writing of my experience. This method is a search for the very thing I have lost. It allows me to construct a place I have been longing to find throughout my time as an international student. It provides me with space to slowly set root and begin building blocks that bring a sense of belongingness. Autoethnography, to me, is a facsimile of home. This method allows me to be my authentic self and to bring to the fore the things I deemed carried no value in the U.S. One of those things is the use of my mother tongue, Albanian. Through autoethnography and Borderlands theory, I can utilize Albanian as an extension of home. This building block (Albanian), this wall, is used as a means to create resistance towards the more dominant structures. It is a way for me to let you in, but to also keep you out. It lets me take a break from being in constant translation mode. It empowers me to not constantly translate my marginalized state for you, the more dominant structures. I choose not to italicize Albanian for the same reason Gloria Anzaldua did not italicize Spanish in her

Borderland book. Keating asserts "...As Gloria often explained, such italics have a denormalizing, stigmatizing function and make the italicized words seem like deviations from the (English/white) norm" (2009, p. 11).

Utilizing autoethnography as an approach towards making sense of my own lived experience, a female who was born and brought up in a developing country, in a predominantly hegemonic and patriarchal society, who has navigated identities as a refugee, immigrant, legal alien, and now international student, enables me to come to terms with these unfinalized, ever-changing identities. Moreover, autoethnography permits me to build bridges and to immerse myself in the worlds of Others like me. Anzaldúa claims that "...there are no bridges. One builds them as one walks" (as cited in Keating, 2009, p. 73). I build bridges as I engage in autoethnography; Bridges with foreigners like myself, graduate international students who grapple with alienation, otherness, and isolation, amongst other astronomical standards and expectations that academia, graduate domestic fellows, our families back home, and we have set for ourselves.

### **The Process**

Autoethnography is a process and a product of the intersection of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Denzin (2014) argues that we must learn to make a connection between autobiographies and our life's epiphanies. Autobiographies are written selectively and in retrospect using epiphanies of the situations that leave a mark on the writer (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Epiphanies, Denzin asserts are the experiences that affect a person at a deep level to the core of their being. Writing about lives, we bring into existence differences, oppositions, and presences which help strengthen the illusion that we have rendered "real experiences of real people" (p. 7). Writing, as Richardson (1994) maintains, "is also a way

of knowing—a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516). Writing creates space for the autoethnographer to fully grasp and depict “real experience” (Denzin, 2014).

Depicting “real experience” as “exactly how it was lived” is less crucial for autoethnographers than making meaning from that experience (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). Pollock (2008) asserts that experience is socially constructed and is dependent on language and interaction. Experience, therefore, is not to be taken as an absolute fact or “accurate rendering of the real”. It is “at once already an interpretation, and something that needs to be interpreted” (Scott, n.d., as cited in Denzin, 2014, p.7). The autoethnographic approach seeks to render evocative and aesthetic thick description to facilitate understanding of personal and interpersonal experience, for insiders and outsiders, through field notes, interviews, or artifacts (Jorgenson, 2002).

I render my experiences as an international student intertwined with the war trauma I carry from back home as my interpretation, rather than absolute experiences that all international students go through—an interpretation instead of “an accurate rendering of the real” (Scott, n.d., as cited in Denzin, 2014, p.7). I utilize my subjectivity, along with self-reflexiveness and positionality to create meaningful, evocative narratives that also bear in mind ethical autoethnographic practices.

I thought I would be writing this paper from the third stage of the Cultural Adjustment theory, the “humor stage,” and it would be compelling to see how writing from this position impacted my perception of my whole experience as an international student. At this stage, I still take notes to help my analytical process. The more notes I take and the more I write, I realize that my acculturation process was not linear. I was in the “humor stage” as much as I was in the “honeymoon stage,” the “hostility stage,” and the “home stage.” Adjusting to a new

culture is a complex circular process rather than a simple linear one, therefore it has been tremendously difficult for me to make sense of this experience while living it and being in the middle of this chaos. Furthermore, I investigate how my body (gender, skin color, ableness) plays a role in the situations/contexts I depict throughout my project and how the writing of this project has been an embodied experience that has impacted my ability to keep crafting narratives.

In addition, I think it is significant that I could have worked with faculty within our department that were international students (now international faculty) but I chose to work with Dr. Michael Broderick because of the method I wanted to use. Dr. Broderick plays a crucial part in this journey as he is a white male working in academia, who carries privilege differently from me, and who has no way of fully understanding my experience as an international student coming from a developing country and having overcome a conflict of war. I take into consideration that the person I chose to help me extract meaning of my experience as an international student, could not actually help me in all of the ways I needed him to, and there is nobody else I could ask for help and resources in my meaning-making process. I also believe it is of importance to bear in mind that Dr. Broderick's fields of experience are drastically different from mine and it is undoubtedly challenging to make my story resonate with him. Despite this challenge and the fact that he can never fully understand my perspective, we do have another way of communicating and understanding one another, and that is through our method, autoethnography.

Since I am a new autoethnographer, as Goodall (2000) asserts I have an "obligation" to write about my life with self-reflexivity, to be credible and to examine myself while rendering my observations of myself, others and of cultural accounts. My narratives then show "not only

how I see the world” but also “why I interpret it as I do? (Goodall, 2000, p. 95). Throughout my project, I have thought about the ways I represent others in my narratives, what I am achieving by choosing to depict certain stories, what I am learning about myself and my experience in the process and how I am implicating other voices and stories. Thus my writing is a continuous self-reflection of the way I speak, for whom I speak, and to whom I speak, by also recognizing my fallibilities and biases. Leeds- Hurwitz (1995) maintains that reflexivity can result in the “I” of the researcher to come to the fore with a multiplicity of voices and meanings. Therefore, I tried to be mindful of this multiplicity of voices and the way that influences what stories I write about.

Throughout this paper, then, I utilize autoethnography as a method to grasp a more nuanced understanding of my journey as an international student but not only that. I use autoethnography to investigate the embodied transgenerational trauma I carry to this day, to depict the struggle of my people to preserve language and culture, and to resist assimilation, ethnic cleansing, and oppression. Specifically, based on memory recollection and journal entries from my first and second year in grad school, I craft evocative narratives and vignettes that depict thick description of my experience as an international student intertwined with my experience as a child of war (See Appendix). Since I did not know it last year that I was going to use journal entries to make sense of my experience, those entries did not follow any format or any specific theme and pattern. Instead, they were simply entries of when I needed to write and to record what I was going through. To use them as my fieldnotes, I began editing and reflecting on them. As I began reading and analyzing, I was able to recognize emerging patterns and take notes of things that connected. As I did that, I also added references to the pieces I have been reading from literature on international students, trauma, acculturation, as well as from literature on ethnography and autoethnography. These emerging patterns followed by literature helped me

craft my narratives and vignettes to make sense of my story as an international student. I used autoethnography to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I aimed to simultaneously understand emotional patterns that I have grappled with, as well as explore academic challenges, social relationships, culture and language and their influence on my sense of self, as crucial to understanding my lived experience as an international student and as a child of war.

The process of writing this thesis has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding processes of my entire experience in grad school. I came to face my limitations, inferiority, and shame. I was reluctant to begin writing and I was worried my skills were not good enough.

“Can I just put a disclaimer for the reader that English is not my first language?” I hesitantly asked Dr. Broderick one weekly meeting in November.

“Think about why you would want to do that. Is it to ease the judgment of the reader? Is it to hide behind the potential comments and critique?”

I had started to get used to him becoming familiar with my thought process. He called me out on things I wanted to hide from him and even from myself, and my writing has been much more vulnerable and rich because of that. He brought clarity and opened new horizons I had not thought possible when I initially decided to ask for his help. I had no idea that autoethnography would become our “bridge,” or that we would “build it as we walked it” (Anzaldua, n.d., as cited in Keating, 2009, p. 73).

Dr. Broderick did not disregard my desire to write or become better at crafting narratives. He believed in me and pushed me to write in thick description. His untiring support and encouragement were exactly the things I needed to find my feet in this new culture, as well as to find the desire within me to remain in academia. I think he sensed in me a calling to write and to

share the stories of my homeland. He knew I wanted to leave a mark. He also knew all about my doubts and writing dilemmas when I wasn't even able to give voice to them until I found Anzaldua. She resonated with me not only with regard to writing but also to always living "in-between," in *Borderlands*, in the middle of two paradoxical cultures, in the peak of cognitive dissonance and the tensions that arise due to the differences between these cultural spaces.

My cognitive dissonance stemmed from a place and a mentality of inferiority clashing with a thirst to write, to change my people's reluctance to revisit memories and stories of the war. Just like Anzaldua, I felt it in my bones that writing was unnatural for me. Just like Anzaldua, I did anything I could to put it off. Unlike her, I did not know the hidden reason I was doing that. Anzaldua writes:

Why does writing seem so unnatural for me? I'll do anything to postpone it- empty the trash, answer the telephone...How hard it is for us to think we can choose to become writers, much less feel and believe that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does not our class, our culture, as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us. (Anzaldua, as cited in Keating, 2009, p. 11)

Pelias (2019) asserts that we write and are brought to the page because we need to know and to figure something out. "We need to know what we think, what we feel, what something means... To sympathize with the pain and suffering that has been endured and to envision that what can be done to make life better (p. 80). As much as people around me understood my willingness to pour my heart out and honor the pain and the residue of transgenerational trauma I carry to this day, they did not hesitate to warn me about embodied writing and prepare me that I was going to reach a point where I would be exhausted, mentally and physically drained to write. I was too thrilled that I had found home within a method that I failed to consider their genuine



warnings. I used the metaphor of a dance to depict the process of writing and my committee member, Dr. Aleman, specifically told me that a martial arts metaphor would suit me better. I chose not to believe him. “Wait until you reach hostility and have to cut pieces out of your thesis, it won’t be a beautiful dance anymore.” He said as I was defending my proposal.

I wanted to make sense of my suffering as a war child and as an international student. I knew there was a connection but I could not see it. I could not bring it into existence until I kept writing and, as my mentor, Dr. Broderick would like to always reiterate, “until I trusted the process.” I had heard all about the frustration, the pressure, the messiness of writing and how I was supposed to bring the messiness to the fore and make sense of it without cleaning it up, without trying to hide it. I promised I would be open and honest with my reader about the thesis process and the best way to do that was to keep taking notes so that I could eventually go back to track my sense-making and render the process of writing through frustration and physical pain.

“You would eventually need a therapist. Do you have a therapist?” Dr. Broderick asked on one of our first thesis meetings. He said this would be a long and painful project and I should think twice before I commit to it. He told me he was not a therapist so he could not help me if I struggled.

“I don’t have one. I don’t need one. I have a good support system here and back home, and, honestly, I’m optimistic that I will be just fine. I have overcome much more difficult things than this.” I told him in a reassuring tone.

I couldn’t tell him I was scared and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I wanted to tell him that people need to know about Kosova and the war conflict and trauma. But when he brought up trauma and vulnerability, my first instinct was to tell him that I do want to explore

and unpack that trauma, but later on, when it sunk in, I was scared to dig deeper. There's trauma concealed behind the abundance of "It's okay," "I'm okay," "Yay me!" "I'm strong."

It turns out, I am strong and I do have a great support system. I cannot count the times that I broke into tears as I was crafting my narratives and revisiting my past trauma. I remember one Sunday as I was jotting down a vignette based on a memory I had of the war, I could not stop crying as I was writing it. It was painful to think of all that had happened and what my people had endured. My body got so scared and weak and small and it felt like I had been taken back to that tractor covered in the blue tarp that we used to run for our lives. My body remembered what fleeing felt like. I had flashbacks of holding hands and clasping knees to make room for everybody. I could hear Grandmother cursing and throwing small rocks at my uncles who were forcing her to hop on the tractor. I could hear the cries of the adults and how oblivious we as kids were.

Is this what doing autoethnography is like? Is this supposed to heal me? To help me sympathize with the healing and the pain I have endured (Pelias, 2019, p.80)? To build empathy? It feels like I am being stabbed with a knife, I am shattered to pieces, forced to relive the hardships I thought I had overcome. I wonder if I am doing the right thing. Am I going to hurt myself and other people with my research more than I am going to do better? Why do I want to revisit war trauma? What good comes out of remembering? My people have suppressed the suffering, fear, and terror of what happened to them, of what they saw, of what they heard, for twenty years now. Why do I want to dig into it? What good does unraveling of hurt and pain do?

Hunt (2010) asserts that there is complexity in war trauma and a person who looks back at the war experiences the full range of emotions with regard to the war:

The complexity of war is such that these symptoms (rage, avoidance, emotional numbing, etc.) may not always be present; the pattern changes over time, partly as a result of the person dealing with their memories, partly as a result of environmental change. (p. 60)

Cognitive dissonance again jumps to the fore. I do not know precisely what to make of the contradictions and the tensions that take place within my flesh and blood. Once again, I remain in a space of “in-between”, at the border of wanting to do good and fearing I’ll harm instead, wanting to quit and equally wanting to keep writing and see what parts of me and my memories unravel in my sensemaking quest. Once again, I blame myself, I terrorize myself, I hurt, and I seek Anzaldua’s (1987) help:

As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something “wrong” with us, something fundamentally “wrong”. In order to escape the threat of shame or fear, one takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself...(p. 45)

My repetitious activity was the writing of this thesis.

*“Is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?”*

(Milan Kundera, 1984, p.5)

## Homeland Narratives

### Lightness and Weight

I awake to the creaking of the hardwood floor in the other room. I yawn and rub the sleep from my eyes, exhausted and upset to be awake this early. My face is numb from the crisp air permeating the thin walls of my parents' old, now undecorated room. The only room, in our ten-bedroom house, in which I used to find comfort.

I remember scattered fragments from the week before:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

I peek outside the window and discover that snow is piling on the ground. I start to smile imagining adventures outside. Last winter, after each snowfall, my two brothers and I would wake up as early as we could, put on our handsewn wool mittens, and head to the park closest to our house, leaving tiny footsteps in the fresh snow. Some days, we would trace these footsteps to get back home. Most days, we would follow Lara, our border collie, when she didn't have to herd my uncle's cattle. We would frolic in the snow with her and then she would lead us home when we cried from frostbite.

I snap out of my daydream remembering that just yesterday mother told us we could not go out and play.

"There are bad people outside. Po na shohin çka po bojme!" she said, her voice cracking as she wrapped her arms around me and my two brothers and held us tightly.

I wanted to ask her who they were, why they were watching us, or if they wanted to play in the snow but held back.

I shiver and pull my weighted blanket closer in an attempt to feel warm and to fall back asleep. I always hated how plain, thick, and heavy this blanket is. I feel suffocated underneath it, as if I were an ant being crushed by a rock, unable to move. I whined about it to mother last night after she told us about the bad men. She nodded, but she was only half-listening. Her arms hung loosely at her sides and her gaze grew distant and cold. I felt as though I couldn't have picked a worse moment to complain.

I hold my cold cheeks in both my hands to warm them up. I learned that from father. Often, when I came back from playing in the snow with Lara and the boys, I would run to him crying that my face hurt from the cold and he would just flash one of his it's-gonna-be-okay-baby smiles and hold my chubby, rosy cheeks in the palms of his big, warm hands and we would wait for the cold to go away.

I pull my face back under the blanket, leaving only my watery eyes peeking out. Somehow I am feeling as if I must stay awake and alert for what is about to come. I am anything but alert. I am sleepy, whiny, and lethargic. Usually, I am the first of all four children to wake up and bother my mother or my aunt for gurabija, a simple-to-make breakfast pastry. Today, I feel different. I have no desire to move. My body is heavy under the weight of the dreadful blanket. I want to stay in bed and cling to warmth for as long as I can.

I am petrified that if I step outside, the world as I know it is going to change. Strange, unexplainable things have been happening over the past couple of days, but nobody talks about them. The adults seem anxious and scared. Mother seems a million miles away. Two days ago, I remember her frantically searching the house, going from room to room saying, "The pictures?"

Where did I leave the pictures?” and not noticing that she still was holding them firmly in her hands. Father still hasn’t returned home in days. Normally, his job at the emergency care doesn’t take this long.

A dark aura has seized our house and I can’t find the words for it, but there is *something* wrong. I pull the blanket over my head and tuck my knees up in search of comfort. The under-the-blanket darkness shelters me and makes me feel safe.

‘Stop being so scared of the bad men, close your eyes and go back to sleep already. It’s that simple!’ I think to myself. My eighty- five-year-old Grandmother taught me a prayer last week before bed. I don’t remember anybody praying in our house before. Now, we all do.

“Pray before you go to sleep, çika jeme.” she spoke very softly, playing with my hair as I refused to stay put. She brought both of her wrinkled hands together in front of her face and began rambling words in a language I didn’t understand.

Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.

I looked at her, lowering my eyebrows in confusion and annoyance. I folded both of my tiny arms across my chest and rolled my eyes.

“I don’t get any of it, I don’t want to say it!” I felt a lump in my throat and my lip trembled as I barely found the strength to question Grandmother’s authority and utter those words.

“Do it for me, çika jeme.” she whispered as she caressed my rosy cheek.

I remember her bringing both of her wrinkled hands together in front of her face. Yet now, I bring both of my hands together in front of my face and begin rambling words in a language I don't understand. I say the sacred prayer in hope of going back to sleep.

“Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.”

I can't breathe; the air under the blanket is stifling. My heart races as I gasp and quickly uncover my head. It is still snowing outside and the only light, apart from the magical twinkles of snow, is coming through the one-inch opening of the bedroom door. I hear somebody's steps grow louder as they walk up the stairs and enter the bedroom. Pretending I am fast asleep, as to not draw any attention, I hear my mother and aunt running around the room, sobbing. I shut my eyes even more tightly and a picture of them standing on the tip of their toes, pulling out books from the umber, wooden bookshelf occupies my mind. I think they are packing up my father's possessions.

I remember scattered fragments from the week before:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

“Albumat e librat e Rrustemit po i majmë, a po i mshefim?” I hear my mother ask my aunt. I picture her holding on to some of my father's tomes from his medical school.



“We’ll bury all of them. It’s only safe if we do it this way.” My aunt whispers in a more subdued tone. My mother’s sob intensifies and the picture in my mind becomes more real. My heart sinks. I clasp my legs firmly and I wonder why they need to bury my father’s things. The blanket crushes me harder now. Heavy. Heavy. Heavy.

I wait for them to leave before I head to the kitchen, the warmest place in this cold, soon-to-be abandoned, two-story house. I hide myself in a corner by the window and stare outside.

“What did I say about staring at the window? Keep your head down! Better, just stay away, Goddammit! Why don’t you ever listen?” I imagined my mother yelling if she saw me here. But she doesn’t.

I hear the hurried slosh of my father’s winter boots and mother comes running to the kitchen, panic-stricken, rapidly clearing all the glasses, spoons, and forks from our old, wooden kitchen table. “Twelve gunshot wounds!” my father shouts as he and three men struggle to lay the injured body of a young soldier on the old table creaking under his weight. Blood covered socks wrapped around the soldier’s wet legs. My father, barely maintaining composure, asks for rakija, vodka-like alcohol, to disinfect the wounds. My heart races and my stomach turns as I hastily move away from the corner, bring him a half-empty bottle and watch him pour it into a clean pair of old socks. His hands, red, both from the cold winter frost and the steaming blood dripping down the soldier’s leg, tremble as he gently presses the alcohol-soaked cloth to the bullet area to staunch the bleeding. The soldier’s piercing shrieks echo through the white walls of the unfurnished room.

“Shhh, shhh,” I hear my father say, repeatedly, with a rush of color to his face. “More rakija.” He looks at me frantically.

I stare at him. I cannot move. More blood splashes in my father's white coat and spills over the red and white-checked tablecloth.

“More rakija!” He raises his voice as I turn my back on him and run away.

I storm out of the house, frightened, leaving the frost-covered door wide open. I swiftly step on the snow and tiptoe around a trail of paw prints covered in fresh droplets of blood. Dog whimpers drown out the sound of snow crunching under my worn-out boots. I look around, anxiously, and my gaze settles on the dying body of Lara.

*I forget:*

I shouldn't be outside.

My jaw drops in disbelief and terror as my eyes widen, retracing the path to the frost-covered door I left wide open.

‘Oh, Zot! Will I die too?’ I let out an ear-splitting scream of pain and wild panic and look up to the sky, asking a God my Grandmother had promised existed.

I bend forward and kneel down, panting in synchronicity with Lara. The flurries of snow land on both of our resting bodies and a heavy silence fills the dreary, cold afternoon. She stops breathing.

*I forget:*

to bring both of my hands together in front of my face.

to ramble words in a language I don't understand.

to pray for Lara.

*I remember:*

I am a war-child. I am five.

## The Mind Forgets

I call father to ask him about the war. I have been doing this faithfully for a month now, but we have not been in sync. On days that I feel inclined to ask good questions, he does not feel inclined to give good answers and vice-versa. I thought it would take at most two days to talk to my father and gather the necessary information to build my narratives and enhance my understanding of the war but this process has taken close to a month.

Talking about the war is difficult for us. I try to be understanding when either of our moods don't allow us to go to those dark places. I try to not be too hard on him for not giving me the answers I expect, and on myself, for feeling like I'm not asking him the right questions. Yes, talking about the war is difficult for us, especially through a social media application where our first two minutes are typically spent asking, "Can you hear me now?" "Are you able to see me?" "Is your camera turned on?"

Although he hasn't explicitly stated it, my father hates turning on his camera when we chat about the war. He says he does not know what button to push, but I always feel like he doesn't want me to see him. At times, I don't turn my camera on either—Solidarity.

Yesterday, I was at my favorite coffee shop in town. No one was around me at the long table at which I often work in the center of the coffee shop. I enabled the video function on my phone while chatting with him, just in case he missed me. After we performed our small ritual of asking everyday questions varying from, "What did you have for lunch today?" to, "How much money do you have left?" he asked how my thesis project was going.

"A je tu lexu hiç për luftë, babush?" he asked me if I was reading about the war. I sensed hesitation in his subdued tone, and didn't feel like talking with him about my thesis.

“Ehem, mirë po shkon.” I told him yes, and that it was going just fine. I was hoping he wouldn’t ask any more questions.

“Spo di valla, babush, çka me t’ndihmu unë,” he said he didn’t know how he can help. I rolled my eyes. I wanted to say, “Did I even ask for your help?” but held back. I was trying to be mindful that some difficult conversations charged with emotional pain and trauma were not suitable for speaking over the phone.

“I really can’t do anything to help you,” he keeps going. His sentences are filled with an air of guilt.

“Jo jo, ski çka me m’ndihmu ti,” I told him there was nothing he could help me with, but he was not convinced.

“Kallxoju babush, ti çka ke pa. Çka ke majt n’mend,” he told me I should write what I remember from back then. I rolled my eyes again. Why is he telling me what to write about? He does not share his stories. Instead he probes me to share mine.

He said, “You should tell them what you saw. I know you remember. Tell them about your uncle’s murdered cows that we all saw in the valley as we were hopping on the tractors flee run for our lives. You looked at me, you were scared, but you didn’t shed a tear.

You kept asking:

‘Why are they dead?’

‘Why are they bleeding?’

‘Why aren’t you helping?’

I couldn’t answer.

I had a lump in my throat, and I was holding back tears.

I am the man of the house.

I cannot break down.

I held your hand more firmly.

I don't know if you remember that.

I took you to your mother.

She told you to sit in the back of the tractor.

She wrapped you in blankets and turned you toward her so that you would not be able to see the war.

That's why you only remember parts of it." He paused.

"Do you remember that you and your brothers thought we were leaving for vacation? I told you we were going somewhere by the sea. You had never been to the sea before. You asked, 'Are we all going on vacation?'

'Why doesn't grandma wanna come?'

Do you remember how grandma was crying and cursing? She did not want to leave. She said she was going to stay and keep the house safe. We can't all leave. Somebody must stay. Somebody must feed your uncle's cows and the sheep. She begged for us to let her stay. Your uncles and I had to force her into the tractor. She kept cursing and crying. We asked you and your brothers to talk to her and tell her about the sea. But she pushed you away. Do you remember how she had this long stick she used for walking? She would flail the stick to keep you away."

"Poooo, po m'kujtohet. Krejt po m'kujtohet qetash." I replied.

I remember scattered fragments:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

“I remember. I remember all of it now.” I said in a quivering voice. I immediately hung up the phone and burst into tears. I ran to the bathroom, locked the door, grabbed some tissues, and blew my nose. I tried to control my breathing. I heard a knock on the door and saw the knob moving. I stopped.

‘This is a public space. I cannot cry in a public space.’

I threw the bathroom door open and kept my head down as I navigated through the other tables on the way to mine. I pressed the home button on my phone to see three missed calls from father. ‘I can’t call him now.’ My hands shook as I stuffed my school books and my phone back into my turquoise backpack. Before I left the coffee shop, I draped myself in my long, tattered black coat that I got from Mango in Prishtine last year and used my yellow wool scarf to wipe the tears from my face.

‘It is all coming back!’ I thought as I blew my nose again, rushing to get home.

I remember, for a fleeting moment, that I was genuinely happy when I thought we were going to live by the sea. I could not understand why everybody was crying. My mother, aunt, and all of my older cousins were crying, yet, my brothers and I were joyfully making plans to build sandcastles and dip our toes into the water. I was so confused. Deep down, I hated every single grown-up for their crying. They were no fun at all. They were all embarrassing, and annoying, and they kept brushing off our plans. Sulking, I avoided eye contact with all of them and kept a straight face, my lips pursed together, my chin up and my arms crossed.

They kept saying:

“Kuku!”

“Zot runa!”

“Mjert na çka na gjeti!”

I kept thinking, ‘why would we need to be saved and protected if we were going on vacation by the sea?’

‘Would the water be too deep?’

‘Would the waves be too high?’

I had never been to the sea, so I didn’t know what it would be like. I sat in the farthest corner of the tractor, gazing up at the blue tarpaulin that was tethered from one side to the other. The tarp was not there only a few days ago on my last tractor ride. Now, all of my close family members were there in the tractor with me, the grown-ups and the kids. Fifteen people tucked into that tractor covered in the blue, waterproof tarpaulin. I pulled my knees to my chest to make room for everybody else.

I remember thinking about Lara’s resting body and my favorite lambs that I used to play with every morning. We left them all behind. The grown-ups said we were going to come back for them. They said we weren’t going to stay forever by the sea. They told Grandmother they wouldn’t leave anybody behind.

Yet, Lara’s resting body, and the lambs, and the rest of the cows...

Grandmother was saying:

“This is our home.”

“Nobody can take it from us.”

“Nobody!”

“Ngom çika jeme, mos u mërzit ti, se kthehem na. Hajt, mos baj dert. Qetniku e shkau kurrë dritë  
s’kanë me pa.”

“Zoti na run neve!”

“Zoti na run!”

It was all coming back. As soon as I stopped my tears, I picked up the phone and called  
father back.

“Can you hear me now?”

“Are you able to see me?”

“Is your camera turned on?”



## The Cruelty of Hands

I clasp my arms firmly around my knees and lay my chin on top of them. ‘How am I still shivering?’ I count on my fingers all the layers mother made me wear this morning: an itchy turtleneck, a knitted pullover, the black wool cardigan that fits me too tightly, and my favorite, now-ripped, red, puffy jacket with Donald Duck on it. I look at the tear on the right sleeve and suddenly have flashbacks of Lara biting it as we were frolicking in the snow once.

*I remember:*

Lara’s dead now.

When I first got this jacket, I didn’t know what Donald Duck meant. My father said that it was in English; it was the name of a cartoon kids watch in America.

“A mundemi na me shku në Amerikë?” I remember asking father if we could go to America even though I really had no clue what America was.

“Me dashtë Zoti, po, shkojmë, po jo qetash.” shrugging his shoulders, he said that if God was willing, then, yes, we could go, just not right now.

“Do-na-ld D-u-c-k. Do-na-ld D-u-c-k.” my father repeated a few times until I get it right.

Now, in the freezing tractor I think about this moment and start to whisper it again, “Do-na-ld D-u-c-k. Do-na-ld D-u-c-k.” I close my eyes tight to distract myself from the loud crying of the grown-ups and imagine what life would be like if I were a kid in America watching Donald Duck in a warm living room instead of being here. ‘I hate the grown-ups.’ I don’t know what America is like, so all that appears in my mind is the living room we abandoned.

I remember scattered fragments from the week before:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

The pictures are down, the books are buried, the two couches by the window are covered in white floral sheets and the one close to the old wood-burning stove is covered in a pile of clothes that I assumed to be Grandmother's. Her opinga, the black shoes that she said were made from cattle skin, were on top of the pile. She never wears them outside the house, so maybe that's why she left them behind.

'Is she crying because father left her clothes behind?' I wonder. Before we left, I heard father telling her she can't wear her pështjellak anymore. It "attracts attention." I don't know what that means. I felt sad that Grandmother was crying. I wanted to tell father he could leave some of my things behind and take Grandmother's instead. I love Grandmother. She talks a lot, so all of the women and men in my family listen to her and always do as she says. Except today. Today, the men dragged her into the tractor while she was crying and cursing. I wondered why.

Grandmother is a small woman who always wears these strange clothes that she makes herself: a long white shirt and two brown handwoven pështjellak that look like aprons, but are nicer and made of better material. She is never cold because of her white tëlina that she wears underneath her shirt and her long black woolen socks that go up to her knees. She was always adjusting her vest, jelekun, which stayed open in the front and was buttoned by beautiful golden clasps. She always wore her shokë, an embroidered belt that she knitted in loom, and shaminë, her white, triangular headdress. Pështjellak gives Grandmother a bitter and older look and it takes her forever to put it on. I think father left her clothes behind because they were too thick and too many. When we go to the sea, it will be too hot for her. Father said we would need light clothes.

He said I won't need to wear my Donald Duck puffy jacket by the sea either. I am happy he lets me wear it now. It keeps me warm. The thought of being warm by the sea makes me feel even colder now. I put my hand in my pockets but still can't stop my jaw from clenching. For a split second, I wish I had the weighted blanket with me.

"Bima çikën qitu, Rabije, bima çikën qitu," I hear grandma asking mother to bring me closer to her.

"Mjert na, na shkun dom fmija," she mutters under her breath, something about kids being cold.

"Era, çu, çu, shko te gjyshja, Era." I look up when I hear mother calling my name, asking me to go sit by Grandmother so that she can blow on my hands to keep them warm. I look at mother crying, and look at Grandmother crying, and I decide not to move. I am also scared Grandmother is going to hit me with her walking stick. I was trying to tell her all about the sea earlier, but I just made her angry. She was flailing her long stick at me and my brothers to keep us away.

"S'po du. Mirë jom, mirë jom." I cross both of my arms, hold up my chin, and tell her I am fine here. I don't want to go to them.

"I just want this to be over. I just want this to be over." I say quietly knowing mother can't hear me.

The tractor hits a pothole and stops moving. My little brother bumps his head on the tarp and we both giggle.

'Is this over? Maybe this is over.' I think, still giggling. 'What if we are already by the sea?'

"Kuku, mjert na!"

"Kuku, çka na gjeti!"

“Sadri. Pse u nal traktori? Sadri?” Grandmother yells loudly in a shrieking voice, asking uncle why the tractor had stopped moving.

“Nalu, nalu, nonë. Mos del nihere!” mother grasps both of Grandmother’s arms stopping her from exiting the tractor.

“Shhh. Shhh. Hec, çikë. Ndihmom. Mos del jashtë. Kërkush s’bon me dalë jashtë.” mother utters in exasperation, asking for somebody strong to help calm Grandmother.

“Nobody can go out!” she orders.

I wonder why everybody is holding hands all of a sudden, whispering and looking at each other in terror, yet nobody is talking to me and my brothers. ‘Why did the tractor stop?’

“Brži, brži,”

“Quick! Quick!” I hear a sharp, manly voice from outside the tractor. I didn’t know that word, but it frightens me. My heart almost stops beating. I stop giggling. This voice must be why the tractor stopped.

“Brži, brži, jebeni Šiptar,” the manly voice grows louder.

“Aaaaah! Molim, molim, gospodine,” my uncle’s shrieks permeate the thin tarp. He seems to be in pain.

“Aaaaah! Molim, molim, gospodine!” he gets louder and louder.

“Shhhh, nona jeme, shhhh!” mother grasps Grandmother even more tightly, then suddenly everyone goes quiet and stares at the back opening of the tractor. The tarp is violently pulled aside revealing a muscular, grey-haired man wearing a soldier’s uniform, who is holding my uncle by his collar, waving a rifle at all of us in the tractor, and yelling loudly in a language I don’t understand, “Hajde, hajde, brži, jebeni Šiptar!” My uncle’s forehead and his nose are both

covered in blood. The soldier looks at us, fearless, eyes burning with hatred, and flails the rifle from left to right laughing and yelling incessantly.

“Izači!”

“Izači!”

“Izači!”

“Brži, žene i muškarci!”

“Hajde bre, jebeni Šiptar,”

He throws my uncle to the ground and forcefully grips my sister’s arm and drags her out of the tractor.

“Hajde bre, jebeni Šiptar,” he screams in a higher pitch.

“Jebi majku, prljava Šiptar!” he kicks my sister onto her back, and she falls to the ground next to my uncle.

The cries in the tractor grow even louder. I look at my mother; She is kneeling down, pulling at her hair. Her shrieks drown out the soldier’s laughter:

“Kuku!”

“Zot runa!”

“Mjert na çka na gjeti!”

She crawls to my brothers and pushes them closer to me. We bundle up, hold each other’s trembling hands and look away.

“There are bad people outside. Po na shohin çka po bojme!” I remembered mother saying the other day, her voice cracking as she wrapped her arms around me and my two brothers and held us tightly. I remembered I wanted to ask her who they were, why they were watching us, or

if they wanted to play in the snow but held back. ‘These must be the bad men mother told us about.’

“Hej, a jon qita njerëzit e kqi?” I turn to my older brother and whisper. I ask if he agrees that the soldier is one of the bad men.

“Shuj bre, Era, shuj!” he asks me to keep quiet.

‘Do-na-ld D-u-c-k. Do-na-ld D-u-c-k.’ I close my eyes and repeat this in my head, hoping it would help me block out the bad man.

“Shuj bre, Era, shuj!” my brother sounds angry and pokes me with his elbow.

“Be quiet!” he pokes me again.

I close my eyes and hold them shut for what seems an eternity. Then, the harsh sound of the tarp falling completely down startled me into opening my eyes. Nobody is here. No grown-ups. Just my brothers and I. ‘This can’t be real.’ I close my eyes, rub them in disbelief, and open them again. Nobody else is here. Nobody. ‘Does this mean this is over?’ I think, but I still hear the pained cries far off in the distance:

“Kuku!”

“Zot runa!”

“Ju qetnik e shka kurrë dritë s’keni me pa!”

I hold my little brother’s hand more tightly and rest my chin on his head, my tears running down his cold forehead.

“Hej, what is ‘attention?’” I ask my older brother, hoping he wouldn’t get more mad.

“Father told Grandmother she could attract ‘attention.’ Do you think that’s why the bad man took everybody with him?” I speak more slowly now, crossing my fingers that he wasn’t going to yell at me this time.

“Do you think they will die too?” I poke him with my elbow. I just need him to tell me that they won’t.

‘I saw blood in uncle’s nose and forehead. When I saw blood in Lara, she died. The young soldier father brought into the kitchen was also bleeding, and then he died, and the men buried him in the backyard, and the cows and sheep were also bleeding, and I think they died. They made no sound.’ I want to tell him all this, but I hold myself back.

I don’t know what to do if they all bleed,  
like the cows and sheep we saw in the valley,  
like the young soldier father brought into the kitchen,  
like Lara.

I didn’t know what to do if they all bled.

## The Body Remembers

I am lying in bed and my legs and back hurt today. In my sleep, I dreamed that somebody kicked me hard in the side. When I first awoke, I screamed “Mother! Mother!” but she was not in the room. The house in Isnig where we now stayed was two-stories of unfurnished rooms. Each room was lined wall-to-wall with mattresses on the floor and usually mother was here in the room we shared when I woke up. I slowly lift myself up from the bed and raise my pajamas and the itchy vest that Grandmother knitted me to see if I had a bruise like the one Tina has. Tina says her bruise doesn’t hurt, but I see her wet a cloth with rakija and press it on her lower back in the mornings, afternoons, and before she goes to bed.

Maybe my mother is not in the room because she is kneading the dough for gurabija. She is always the first one to get up and bake them for us to eat as soon as we wake up. The thought of smelling warm gurabija again and eating them, soft, dipped in honey, with a glass of lukewarm milk that mother would set on the table after milking uncle’s cows, makes me want to jump out of bed. I can hardly call it a bed. Now, I only have a thin foam mattress for a bed. It is as thin as my four fingers put together. I might as well sleep on the floor. Back in our old house, I would pretend to fall asleep on the floor next to the wood crackling in the old stove because I knew father would carry me to the bedroom. He would think I was sound asleep. The first night here, I chose the spot where I wanted to sleep and left my hajmali, the handmade good luck charm that our hoxha, imam, gave me and my brothers to protect us from the Devil’s eye.

When we first received our hajmali, Grandmother took my brothers and I to the mosque in our village to meet the hoxha. He wrote words in Arabic on a piece of paper, made us blow air into it, moved his hand three times above our heads in a circular motion, folded the paper, and then sowed it to a piece of material from the pajamas Grandmother had brought for us. The imam



gave it to us on a safety pin. We carried it during the day, and, at night, we kissed it two times and pinned it under our pillows.

When we first arrived and I was told we would be staying here for a while, I made sure I kissed the hajmali two times to claim my sleeping spot, then I sneakily laid down in my brother's mattress across the room. I waited for father to come carry me back to mine; I waited and waited, closed my eyes, and opened them over and over again hoping he would be there. 'He hasn't carried me once since we came to this strange and empty house.'

"He is too busy being a doctor!" mother says when I ask why father isn't with us. "He is curing people. He'll be back soon," she says to silence my thread of whys.

My arms hurt today. I don't have a pillow.

"Use your arms as pillows!" mother would say when I asked her where my pillow was. But when I put my head on my arms, they fall asleep under the weight. I feel them tingle as they go numb. I sometimes can't feel my fingers either, but I learned to put them under the blanket to keep them warm. Except, the blanket smells like bagla, cow manure. It makes my stomach turn. Every night, I wish I had my weighted blanket with me. When we first left, I wanted to ask father to bring it to the tractor, but then I heard him tell Grandmother to leave her pështjellak behind and she was crying and cursing, so I kept quiet.

My nose is sniffly today too. The room is chilly because there is no wood-burning stove here. There is no glass in the windows either, only grey, worn-out blankets hung on each side. I think they are hung there, not to protect us from the wind or the cold, but from the bad men. I thought we left them behind, with Grandmother's pështjellak, Lara, and the cows and the sheep.

"There are bad people outside. Po na shohin çka po bojmë!" I remember mother saying the other day in our old house. Her voice was cracking as she wrapped her arms around me and

my two brothers and held us tightly. I remember I wanted to ask her who they were, why they were watching us, or if they wanted to play in the snow but held back. Last night, I couldn't stop thinking about our old house.

I remember scattered fragments:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

Every night, as I go to sleep on these thin foam mattresses, I am scared the bad men will come in from the windows, shout at us, or drag us and kick us outside in the knee-deep snow.

I know who the bad men are now. They are watching us because they want our old house. 'Why doesn't father give them the house? We are going to live by the sea anyway. We don't need it.'

I know who the bad men are now. They all wear big black winter boots and olive green jackets and pants.

I know who they are now. They carry guns on both their hips and they hold rifles to their chests. They are paramilitary soldiers. They are holding us here. They walk around and look at us sometimes. Sometimes they bring us food. Grandmother says we can't eat what they bring.

"Shejtani i ka qu!" I heard Grandmother say yesterday that they are the Devil.

She knows why they are here: to poison us, the children.

I remember yesterday, as they walked by, she went up to them and confronted them. She told them to kill us all instead of torturing us.

“Merrna shpirtin, merrna!” Kill us once and forever.

Memories of the day before start to creep into my mind. I am still lying in bed, not ready yet to look for my mother. My arm tingles and the tips of my nose and ears hurt from the cold. I switch arms and pretend I have a new, more comfortable pillow. I stare at the worn-out blankets hanging on the window and can't stop thinking about somebody, one of the bad men, pushing and pulling them while peeking at me. I tuck my head under the blanket for warmth and safety, and I pinch my nose to stop the smell of bagla.

‘What if the bad men listened to Grandmother and wanted to kill us all now?’ I thought they would murder Grandmother yesterday when she talked to them. I thought they would murder me for seeing them talk, for secretly spying on Grandmother even though I have been told to stay with the rest of the children. I try to breathe quietly so that they think nobody is here. I feel unsafe, so my instinct makes me bring both of my hands together in front of my face, just like Grandmother taught me. In my head, so nobody would hear, I repeat the words in the language I still don't understand. I say her prayer, hoping I wouldn't die.

‘Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.’

I still don't smell gurabija. I smell bagla when my head is under the blanket, and, when it is not, I smell bleach. ‘Is this how a new house smells?’ I think it is the smell of bricks and cement. This seems like a new house, but it is not ours. My head hurts today and the more I want to forget about Grandmother and the bad men yesterday, the more I think about it.

My Grandmother's curses:

“Shejtani ju ka qu!”

“Merrna shpirtin, merrna!”

“Ju qetnik e shka kurrë dritë s’keni me pa.”

silenced the soldier’s:

“Jebeni Šiptar!”

“Jebi majku, prljava Šiptar!”

I shuddered under the covers. I remembered what happened the last time I heard those words when we were in the tractor. I remembered the blood and the cries. Yesterday, I hid behind the trunk of a tall pine tree as it swayed slowly and snuck glances at Grandmother. She never left her pështjellak behind when she left the house even though father insisted that she might attract the attention of the bad men with it. I didn’t want them to take her away.

Yesterday, from behind that pine tree, I saw Grandmother walk up to the bad men. I wanted to run away, but couldn’t go backwards towards the valley because behind me were fifty tractors maybe more. I was worried the people in the tractors would see me and tell Grandmother and I would be in trouble for following her. I couldn’t run forward because of the line of autoblinda, the armored tanks that encircled us in this awful valley. I looked behind and saw the blue tarps on all the tractors, so close to each other they seemed glued together. From where I stood, the tarps looked like the waves of the sea. Father said the sea would be blue, as blue as the sky.

Then, my Grandmother’s voice snapped me from my daydreaming about the sea. Grandmother started yelling at one of the bad men, a young, well-built soldier easily two times taller and four times younger than her.

“A pe shihni çka po boni? Me kon jeni tu liftu? Me kon? Me gra e me fmi? Pse s’po shkoni n’mal me luftu si burra? Po ktu po na frigoni fminë? Po na helmoni fminë? Po na boni

gratë me vaj. Po na përdhunoni. Po na merrni me zor. Po na leni me barrë. Po s'po na vrani. Pash dinë e nimon, na vrani. Na vrani! Pash kon ki t'gjallë, na vrani!"

"Do you have eyes to see the evil you're doing? Who are you fighting with? What are you fighting for? You're fighting with women and children. Go fight in the mountains! You're weak. You frighten our children. You poison our children. You make them weep. You make our women weep. You rape us. You take us by force. You impregnate us. Yet, you don't kill us. Better to kill us, I beg of you. I beg of you it is better to kill us!" Grandmother yelled and begged and held both of her arms over her head. She bent forward and knelt down, her pështjellak sank in the snow.

"N'dy lufta kom rru, e luftë ma t'poshtër e t'fliqt me sy s'kom pa! Shkoni në mal! Pse spo shkoni n'mal?"

"I survived two wars. None as filthy and disgraceful as this one! Go fight in the mountains! Why don't you go fight in the mountains?"

"Oh, Zot! Vrajëm. Gjnjëm pushkë. Merrma shpirtin!"

"God. Kill me. Shoot me. Use your Goddamn rifle. Take my soul!" she sobbed, her shoulders shaking. She pulled up her chin, thrust her chest forward and looked at the soldier with her bloodshot eyes.

"Hajde bre, jebeni Šiptar," the red-faced soldier crooked his thick frozen eyebrows, shouted, and pulled Grandmother up by her arm.

"Jebeni Šiptar. Idi kući!"

"Fucking Šiptar. Go back home. You are free to go back home." He spoke in anger, his face red like the blood I saw on my uncle's forehead. He kept flailing his rifle to his left as if showing Grandmother the way back.

“Na keni djegë shpinë, na keni bo shkrum. Qysh me çu fminë në shpi? Qysh me çu te lopa që i ka dhonë tamël, edhe lopt na keni vra? Qysh me çu te qeni që ka luft me to? Edhe qet na keni vra! Qysh me çu n’ shpi pa kulm? Pa dritare? Na keni lonë pa shpi. Na keni bo shkrum! Ku me shku, kallxom ku me shku?”

“You burned our house to the ground, to ashes. How do we bring our children home? How do we bring them to the cows that gave them milk? You killed our cows. How do we bring them to the dogs they played with? You killed our dogs. How do we bring them to a house with no roof over our heads? No windows? You turned our house to ashes. We are homeless. Tell me where to go? Where do we go?” Grandmother moved his rifle down as her screams got louder.

I turned my back on Grandmother and the bad man. My footfalls crunched the snow on the ground, and I ran towards the distant blue “sea” with as much speed as I could muster.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

“Kuku, nonë, gjyshja”

“Gjyshja, nonë, gjyshja!”

Then, I saw mother running towards me, stumbling, getting up, getting closer. I couldn’t breathe.

I sobbed and all I could say was,

“Kuku, nonë, gjyshja”

“Gjyshja, nonë, gjyshja!”

“Kanë me vra, edhe ato kanë me vra!”

Like Lara’s resting body, and the lambs, and the rest of the cows...

She will be left behind.

Bleeding.

Dead.

---

Mother must have taken me home and put me to bed, but now here I was waking up and I couldn't find her. I tucked myself back under the blanket my body too sore and tired to move.

“Era, çu me hongër kafjall, Era!” I thought I heard my mother's whispering voice from outside the window. I open my eyes.

“Era, kafjalli osht gati, Era!” it was her voice. She pulls open the blanket hanging on the window and smiles at me. I was so relieved. When I think of this window opening, I so often think of the bad men coming to take us away, but, here was my mother. She must have been cooking on the camp oven in the mess tents set up outside of the house.

“Breakfast's ready.” She says.

I don't want to move today. Everything hurts and I am sleepy, whiny, and lethargic. I want to stay here in bed for just one more minute, but I so want to see my mother and eat breakfast with her.

“Era, çu me hongër gurabija, Era!” mother whispers as she rests her pale face on the wooden window pane.

I muster the energy to get out of the thin foam mattress I have for a bed. I pin my hajmali under my knitted vest and run to the door. Following my mother's voice outside, I run, coatless, into the winter air.

## **This Is Our Home**

“Era, Era, boni gati teshat e tua se sonte kemi m’u nisë!”

“Pack up your stuff, we’re leaving tonight!” my mother yells to me from the window of our new bedroom on the second floor of a three-story brick house in the city of Peja.

“Ku po shkojmë?” I ask where we are going, and I slouch against the wall, the same wall where I would press my forehead, close my eyes, and count when playing hide and seek. I don’t want to leave now. This house is warm and all of my cousins are here: Berati, Arta, Goni, Doni, Imeri, Zeneli, Besiana, Fatjoni, Fatmiri, Tina, and the rest. Much of my family, almost 40 people, has been living together for nine nights now. Over 15 of us are children. When it is not too dark outside, we play hide and seek, have snowball fights, and build snowmen. We have Arta go ask Grandmother for carrots to use as their noses, and we steal burnt wood chips from the stove in the living room to use as their eyes and the buttons of their sweaters.

“Po shkojmë n’deti sonte. Hajde mbledhi rraqet e tua se s’kemi shumë kohë.” Mother says, “We are leaving for the sea tonight. You should pack up. We don’t have much time.” I cannot believe my ears.

‘Is this over? Maybe this is over.’ I think. I look down and breathe out in disappointment as my Donald Duck puffy jacket droops from my shoulders.

“N’deti a? A kanë me ardhë edhe k’ta?” I keep looking down and ask if everybody is coming as well. Mother doesn’t answer so I look up and see she has already gone inside, turned the light off, and closed the window.

“Phu, Era.” I hear Doni say my name.

“You’re the next seeker.” He says laughing and pointing at me.



“I wasn’t playing. Didn’t you hear what mother said? We are leaving. Let’s stop playing now. Plus, it’s getting dark outside.” I said this half because I wanted to heed my mother’s words and half because I wanted to pretend to not play anymore as a defense for losing the last game. I run inside to help mother pack up our stuff.

I remember scattered fragments:

*Take the pictures off the walls*

*Bury*

*them!*

*the pictures, the books, the documents*

*Burn the frames, quick, burn the...*

I look at mother taking down the clothes from the rope above the lit stove and throwing them on the foam mattress covered in blankets, blankets that, this time, don’t smell of cow manure. She seems awfully quiet today. She isn’t shedding any tears, she isn’t running around the house in panic, but I can feel she is sad by the way she folds the laundry gently, slowly, while staring at the window.

“Nonë, nonë, a krejt po shkojmë a?” I hesitate but still ask if we’re all going to the sea. No response. “Nonë, nonë, a krejt po shkojmë a?” I raise my voice and ask again. I don’t know if she can’t hear me or if she just doesn’t want to respond. I walk on my knees and get closer to her. I put my hand on her shoulder. She flinches and turns to me.

“Çka bre, nonë?” She raises her voice in anger and I do not dare ask her any more questions about the sea.

“Hajde, bonu gati se ki me shku me marrë ineksjonin. Tina e Goni jon poshtë tu t’pritë.”

“Get ready. You’re going to the doctor’s. Tina and Goni are downstairs waiting for you.”

For the past five nights, every morning at 5:00 am and every night at 5:00 pm, Tina and Goni have been dragging me to a Kosovar doctor to give me an injection for the cough that I got at the old house in Isniq. I hate the feeling of the injection. My leg becomes numb and I have to limp when I walk back home.

I meet Tina and Goni downstairs and each of them holds one of my hands. On our way back, they still hold my hands and help me slide on the ice so that I don't have to walk. I keep saying my leg hurts while they keep rushing me and muttering something about a curfew and the Serbian paramilitary, a phrase I have come to associate with the bad men. I still don't fully understand everything, but it seems they are in a rush to get home because they keep saying we shouldn't be out at this hour of the evening. They seem scared and don't answer when I ask them to walk slower and they still don't slow down when I am coughing my lungs out. They keep dragging me. As they hurry me along, I think I hear them say Grandmother's prayer, but they don't put their hands in front of their face.

“Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.”

They keep saying:

“Kuku!”

“Zot runa!”

“Mjert na çka na gjeti!”

“Ora policore, o Gon, shkau s'don me ni. A ke ni çka tha Violeta për shoqën e vet. E kanë rre e kanë bo llom.” Tina says Serbian paramilitary soldiers beat my cousin's friend the other day for being outside after the curfew. They stop talking. The narrow path we are walking

in is unlit. The only light we can see comes from the reflection of the moon in the snow. A cat's meow breaks the silence and Goni and Tina hold my hand even tighter. 'Do I tell them they are hurting me?' I don't think we are allowed to talk, so I keep quiet and look around to see if there is anyone behind us. I've been wanting to cough so badly, but I've been holding it inside. I don't want to attract attention. I remember what happened to us when Grandmother attracted attention. I remember the bad man came after us. I had thought we left them behind, with Grandmother's pëshjtjellak, Lara, and the rest of the cows and the sheep.

"There are bad people outside. Po na shohin çka po bojmë!" I still vividly remember mother saying, her voice cracking as she wrapped her arms around me and my two brothers and held us tightly in our old house in our village a few weeks ago. I remember I wanted to ask her who they were, why they were watching us, or if they wanted to play in the snow but held back. I know who the bad men are now. I know why they were watching us. They speak a language I don't understand but they always say the same things.

"Ovo nije tvoja zemlja, jebeni Šiptar."

"Uzmi svoj imetak, prljav Šiptar."

They want our house. They say it is not ours.

They want our land. They say it is not ours.

They want us to leave Kosova. They say it is not our country.

They are wrong. This is the only house I knew before I was forced to go to Isniq and Peja. This is the only land I have played in. The only country I have ever been in.

As Tina and Goni hurry me along, we see a man smoking a cigarette in an old, abandoned storefront.

“Hajde, hajde, brži, brži!” he says in a deep voice. He smells of sweat and rakija the closer we get to him.

“Molim, molim, gospodine.” Tina and Goni say in unison keeping their heads down, nodding.

“Izvini, izvini, gospodine.”

“We’re sorry, Sir.”

They hold my hand even more tightly now but I don’t think of it. All I can think of is the faces of the bad men, of Lara’s resting body, of the lambs and the cows... I can’t see well. I am dizzy and my knees are weak. I know I need a break. I catch a strong whiff of rakija and my dizziness suddenly disappears...along with my vision.

---

“Era, Era! Mos u tut, n’shpi je.” I open my eyes to see the silhouette of Grandmother hovering over me. She is holding a cold cloth dipped in rakija on my forehead.

“Ku jom? Ku jon Goni e Tina?” I ask where Goni and Tina are. I don’t remember anything. I don’t remember how we got home. I remember the doctor. He didn’t wear a white lab coat, but he reminded me of father. He was older and had grey hair and his hand was light so I only felt a tiny pinch, like a bee’s sting, when he gave me the shot.

“Ku osht babi? Pse se kom pa qe pesë ditë?” I ask where father is. I haven’t seen him in five days.

“I told you, Era. He is too busy being a doctor!” mother says from across the room.

“He is curing people. He’ll be back soon. Kupto edhe ti mos u bo qishtu.” she asks of me to understand the nature of his work and not to ask questions like these.

“Ku jon Goni e Tina, pra?” I ask where Goni and Tina are.

“Ku jon Goni e Tina, pra?” nobody answers. The house is strangely quiet, and empty.

“Ku jon Goni e Tina, nonë, ku jon?” I stand up abruptly, dropping the cloth dipped in rakija, which is now burning hot, to the floor. I run to their room. They are not there. I run from room to room and everyone has already left. I don’t understand. They have left us behind. Like we left others behind the day we first stepped onto the tractor.

The grown-ups said we were going to stay together as we traveled to the sea. They told Grandmother they wouldn’t leave anybody behind.

Yet, my Grandmother, my mother, my brothers and I,

Yet, Lara’s resting body, and the lambs, and the cows...

Yet, now my mother, Grandmother, and I were sharing an empty house.

---

I found out later that the Kosovar police, sympathetic to the plight of Kosovar Albanians, had mobilized buses and other transportation to evacuate entire neighborhoods to Albania. The rest of my family had left to cross this border that night, while I was incapacitated from my fever. My sister, Tina, had gone with them and my uncle’s daughter, Violeta, had stayed with us in Kosova.

Even as I write this as an adult, I am unsure of exactly why the grown-ups made this decision to have my sister and almost everyone else leave to Albania while only my mother, Grandmother, and one cousin remained in this house in Peja, Kosova. I have heard from Grandmother that we didn’t all go to Albania for two reasons: The first was that Grandmother refused to leave the house in Peja. She said she wanted to die nowhere else but our homeland. The second was they wanted to separate the men in the family in case any of us were killed. If the Serbian paramilitary forces killed my mother, my siblings, and Grandmother, the Gashi

lineage would still be carried on through my uncle and his children in the sovereign nation of Albania.

As for my mother, siblings, and Grandmother, the ones left behind, when the time came to leave Peja, we traveled north on foot for hours until we reached the neighboring nation of Montenegro. One way or another, we had all been forced to leave that city and our homeland.

## By the Sea

We arrived at the apartment in Montenegro late last night. I thought I saw my father for moment when we arrived, but I realize this morning that I had dreamt it. This morning, I wake up late and run to the window, hoping I would catch a glimpse of the sea. I move the beige curtains aside slowly, expecting to be yelled at for opening them, expecting to be reminded of the bad men. I manage to open the long window and step outside on the balcony. I feel disoriented. It is too bright and sunny outside and too awfully quiet. The air smells different, the people I could see at the other end of the street are speaking an unfamiliar language. It is similar to the one of the paramilitary soldiers, the bad men, except it doesn't sound harsh to me. Mother walks in the room, she comes up behind me, gives me a kiss on the forehead, and caresses my hair.

“Get dressed, uncle’s taking you to the water.” She says in a soothing tone.

“Are you coming?” I ask. I haven’t been able to spend time with my mother for days now. She is always busy with cooking, cleaning, and washing everybody’s clothes. I know she is tired because she always has dark circles around her eyes and complains of headaches.

“Next time.” She said, “I promise.” She shrugs her shoulders and purses her lips.

We leave for the beach soon after, my uncle doesn’t let go of my brothers’ hands for the entire walk. I walk alone beside them. I tell him I don’t need to hold hands anymore.

The closer we get, the bigger the blue becomes. It is a hundred times bigger than the sea of blue tarps in the field in Isniq. There is endless water and sand. The sea is so big. I have never seen anything like it. The waves rise so high before they loudly crash onto the shore. I ask my uncle if we could go to the rocky side of the beach and stand under the waves. I wanted to hear the noise.

The grown-ups seem calmer, safer.

We are here, finally, by the sea.

‘Even though Grandmother doesn’t say this is our home, I hope it is.’

I hope we have left behind the bad men with rifles, the tractors with blue tarps, the too-thin mattresses, the screaming, and the blood.



## U.S. Narratives

### Departure

It is 3:00 AM and I leave in three hours. My heart is beating like a rock rattling in a box. like a rattling rock in a box. My mind is grappling with fear and excitement sending shivers down my spine. I am anxious. I slow my breathing, but can't seem to have any control over my panic. My heart increases the beats.

I leave in three hours and I have not gotten any sleep yet. It is one of those scorching summer nights, a night so hot you can't possibly find a middle ground, it's either too hot or too cold, nothing in-between. 'It's too hot,' I think to myself as I exhale loudly in frustration, and I move my sheet aside trying to make this unbearable temperature slightly more bearable. I uncover myself, and, a couple of minutes later, I feel a draft in the room. I reach over and pull the sheet around me again in frustration. I move my sheet aside and reach back for it, repeatedly, for a solid hour before I finally give up.

This is what summers in the capital city (the concrete jungle) of a still-developing country feel like. My family is not a big fan of air conditioners. Apparently, they're unnatural, expensive, and take up quite a lot of room. So, we face the heat. Naturally. Just like we do with all other things in life. We are used to not being comfortable. We are used to overcoming insurmountable struggles. We are used to doing things one way: as we always have.

I don't think it is what is outside as much as what is inside that is causing my utter discomfort. My reflexive self comes to the fore. It is not the heat of the night as much as it is the uncertainty and the fear of leaving everything behind boiling inside my body. I sigh in despair. I've been doing this (sighing and fidgeting) for two hours now, but my brother and sister, with

whom I share a room, seem to not have heard anything. It makes me wonder if they're sound asleep or just pretending they can't hear me. I hope it's the latter. I don't want them to interpret my sighs as me being scared and having second thoughts about my departure for the U.S.. Even though, this is exactly the interpretation that my sighs are desperately trying to convey to anybody who is willing to lend them an ear.

I am scared.

I am anxious.

I am having serious second thoughts about departing for the U.S.

Nobody knows. Nobody should know.

I leave in three hours and I have not gotten any sleep yet. The room seems to be shrinking, and with each sigh, and the room shrinks some more. At least I will have my own room once I go there, I try to comfort myself and gain back some control from this creeping anxiety. I've always wanted a room of my own. The room I share with my siblings is small, cramped, and messy. Our room is filled with books from our childhood and clothes my sister refuses to give away and yet has no interest in ever wearing. The room brims with material things but it overflows with hopes, some tended to, some abandoned forever. The room is small; it is small; it is small; it makes me feel small. It makes me not want to occupy any more space than is absolutely necessary.

'Will I still feel this small when I leave?' I don't want to feel small. I exhale again and the room shrinks. My innards keep boiling and I can feel my ears are warm and my eyes are welling with tears. I count to ten and then backwards. I hold my breath and release it slowly. My chest feels tight. I panic. My heart keeps rattling...uncontrollably. I think of the great things I will be exposed to once I am in the U.S.; the people I will meet, the places I will get to go, the

independence I will have. I inhale and exhale again louder, and if I'm trying to make a statement. Only, this time, when I exhale, the room does not shrink. This time, I sigh in relief. 'I will be going to the U.S. in three hours,' I remind myself and a wave of pure joy spreads through my whole body. I reach over and pull the sheet around my waist. I feel calm and warm as I drift away to sleep. And so does my anxiety.

## Mish edhe Perime

My father called me back today. I had called him earlier but hung up when he didn't answer. He was probably watching the news. As I hung up, it crossed my mind that, until this point in the year, he had never called me first. I believe it is partly because he doesn't want to disturb me and partly because each of our conversations tend to revolve around money...or the lack thereof.

Once I answer, he says:

“Po t'i çoj do pare, babush. Edhe sa t'kanë metë?”

He asks if I still have money left. Money left from when exactly? Or from where?

“Po po, kom pare. Mos ki dert! Hala as si kom prekë t'Kosovës.” I lie to him.

It's a white lie. I tell him I haven't even touched the money I got from my sister, which she took out a loan to give me. I'll pay her back, of course. I used the loan, at first, to pay for my unreasonably expensive health insurance fee and to treat myself to some good food and nice coffee, then, somehow, the rest just vanished. It lasted me two weeks, not even. I don't have any money from back home, but I can't tell father that. I can't tell anybody that.

So, I keep telling him white lies. I keep telling anybody who asks white lies. One after the other.

“A ke hongër sot, babush?” He asks if I've eaten yet.

“Po, po. Kom hongër mirë.” I reply (a lie) that I have.

My brain works quickly to fabricate a healthy meal so that I do not worry him.

“Kom hongër, mish, edhe perime.” I tell him I've already eaten meat and vegetables, a hardy food, a staple food, as I, instead, swirl my spoon in a bowl of shrimp-flavored top ramen noodles I bought on sale last week for \$1.49.

“E pse se merrshe edhe do jogurt e do djathë, ose ni lang, babush? Aiii, ha mire! Mos ta ninë për pare!”

“You should have gotten yoghurt, or juice, and some cheese. Get vitamins!” He advises me, clueless about the price of anything in the U.S..

“Eat well! Don’t worry about the money.” He reiterates.

“Jo, babush, mirë po ha!” I reassure him that I’m eating well, as I once again look down at a bowl of shrimp noodles.

“Po ti çoj do pare, babush. Edhe sa t’kanë metë?” He asks again if I still have money left from back home. He always asks again. I offer the same white lie.

This is a sign our conversation is coming to an end. So, as per tradition, I promise to tell him when I need money, but I am sure he knows I am too proud to do that. He knows fairly well I would rather eat noodles for two weeks straight than ask for more money. I look at my noodles again.

For a moment, I wish things were different.

I imagine myself asking whether he has any money left.

I imagine myself asking him if he is eating well.

I hear him breathe from the other end of the phone but he remains quiet. He is waiting for me to hang up.

I tell him I’ll call him again soon and I hang up.

I’ve lost my appetite. So, I put my "meat and vegetables" back in the fridge.

## Talisman

“Good luck charms are transmuted,” Broderick said to me in a text message the other day. We were talking about the hajmali that I used to carry with me during the war. It brought me a sense of safety and security. It protected me from the Devil’s eye, at least that’s what Grandmother said, and I, a five-year-old child, believed her. Now, as an adult, I think the good luck charms Grandmother made me and my brothers wear were superstition with no real chance of protecting us from anything. However, as a scared child, when the world seemed horribly unsafe and frightening, I used to kiss myhajmali twice and say Grandmother’s prayer before I slept every night.

“Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.”

I had forgotten all about the prayer until I began crafting my thesis narratives. I could not remember the point in my life where I decided I didn’t believe in a prayer to make things better, need a good luck charm to protect me, or believe in anything blindly.

When did I stop being afraid of life?

Why was I afraid in the first place?

Does this all go back to the war?

This writing process keeps bringing questions to the surface, and I remain with few, if any, answers.

“Okay, we know we are not telling the stories of your past anymore. We are telling the stories of your present... What charms do you carry now?" Broderick texted to me, "Tell me about your backpack."

“Hmm... How do you know about the backpack?” I inquired, blindsided that he would accuse me of still carrying good luck charms. I am not a child; I am not Grandmother (even though, at times, I wish I were), and I do not need anything of that sort to protect me. I felt I had unconsciously revealed too much to him. I did not feel prepared to delve into the importance of the good luck charms I, or anyone in my family, have carried.

Besides the mental and emotional struggle of writing my narratives, I had been in physical pain for almost the whole month: lack of sleep, fatigue, body aches, and the feeling that gravity was somehow heavier and pulling me down. I refused to think that, I, to this day, carried a good luck charm to ward off the war trauma that I take with me wherever I go. In reliving my experiences through these narratives, I began to feel trauma like leeches sucking my blood. I have to keep feeding them and I know they are taking more than they need to survive, but, I can't quite figure out how to make them stop.

"I'll reflect on this backpack idea. To do that, can I not come to class today?" I asked. I didn't want to go anymore because I knew Broderick would want me to talk about my backpack, and, by extension, the charms I carry--and the leeches they are meant to ward off. But, at the same time, I wanted to go to class because I knew that I needed to spend time with the leeches to write meaningful autoethnography. I learned that this sort of writing hurts me and I didn't want to go back to it ever again. But I had to. And I did come back. Day after day.

“Michael Broderick understands many things. I imagine there is ritual and order with your backpack, and dependence...” he replied. I am even more shocked now that he knows the inside of my backpack: tidy, clean, and in a specific order.

“How do you know? My friends tease me about my turquoise backpack. I carry it everywhere. Even if I am only briefly leaving the car and I don't need it, I won't leave without

it.” I decided to confess. If I had learned anything, it was that I cannot trick him. He’s observant. He’s an ethnographer, for God’s sake!

“Charms transmute. The objects change...the need for safety objects does not. I imagine that if you were plucked out of class at a moment’s notice, your bag would be in complete order. Ready to go!” He said.

“I use my backpack as a safety object even when I absolutely know there is no need for me to bring it. It’s always in perfect order. Never messy.” I said.

“You’re still ready to go...”

“I’m always ready to go, I guess...”

“It’s hard work, isn’t it? It’s the real deal!”

“It is. It has made me realize I need therapy in the future. I still have so many things to figure out!”

I had something else I wanted to tell him about my backpack, but I looked at the time and it was almost midnight. I decided to leave my advisor alone and let him rest. It’ll have to wait. The funny thing is, though, that, even as I was having this text message conversation about the importance of my backpack, the item itself was ruined. I had no classes for the rest of the semester while writing my thesis, and, since I would not need it as often, I decided to wash it for the first time since I bought it. When I took it out of the washing machine, I saw that it had been dismembered. The zipper had fallen off and the fabric was torn in three places: three huge holes in my favorite backpack. I showed it to my roommate Laureta, another Kosovar and my dearest friend in the house, and she couldn’t stop laughing.

“I am so sorry, dude. It’s your favorite. I don’t know why I’m laughing.” She said.

“Meh, I’ll get a new one.” I calmly replied.



I went to my room and hung my backpack in the closet. I had never sequestered this backpack away before. I knew that she had served her purpose. She was ready to let go of me, and I was ready to let go of her. I felt calm, but a thought kept buzzing in my head: that even now, even without this backpack, I am always prepared to leave.

“You’re still ready to go...”

“I’m always ready to go...”

I closed the closet door behind me and felt a sense of relief. I am ready to go. I was not sure whether that was a good or a bad thing. All I knew was that I am not that scared child anymore. However, I will always need safety and protection, and I may always need a good luck charm, even if it wears a different shape.

“Good luck charms are transmuted.” I could almost hear Broderick saying it. I had a hopeful thought; I cannot wait to see the next transmutation. I am ready to go, knowing it is hard work, and knowing it is the real deal.

“You’re still ready to go...”

“I’m always ready to go, I guess...”

I felt like I was not hiding anymore, and I could feel the leeches stop sucking my blood.

## Lonely in America

I used to think of my future and how free I would be once I lived on American soil. I would go to bed imagining how my life would turn out once I got to study where and what I wanted. I used to look at pictures of colleges in the U.S. and dream of what it would be like to wander around their campuses, go to events, and make friends with the other graduate students. I used to go to bed dreaming about how carefree and easy my life would be. If only I was ready to go...

“Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.”

I would pray to Grandmother’s God. “Please help me go.” I would put both hands in front of my face and mumble the prayer until I fell asleep.

Now, in the U.S., I can’t remember the last time I mumbled the prayer. I feel distant...from prayers, my religion, my old ways of being, my people. I don’t pray even when it gets cold at night, when all I need is to be surrounded by my people, but they are continents away and hours ahead of me. I don’t pray even when it gets lonely on a late Spring afternoon, when the smell of flowering dogwood trees permeates the air and reminds me, with every beating of my heart, of Kosovar spring, where my friends and I would sit outside of the Miqt Pub drinking peja and soaking in the aroma of linden flowers in bloom.

There are people in America. There are plenty of people where I live: good people, smart people, funny people—but not my people.

I just wish, on a breezy afternoon like this one, when life sucks and nobody speaks my tongue, that I could be back home and grabbing a drink with the ones who warm my soul.

She is weary.

Tired. Othered. A legal alien.

Yet, she doesn't pray.

She needs familiarity, people.

She aches.

She cries.

I'm lonely. I'm scared. I'm brave.

She needs a break.

Yet, she doesn't pray.

Or maybe a kind soul; togetherness.

I remind her:

It's time you stopped being alone.

It's time you found support.

It's time you found your new people.

“Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar.”

Yet, at times, she slips into her old ways when she thinks of her future. She puts both hands in front of her face and mumbles the prayer until she falls asleep. She prays to her Grandmother's God.

“Please help me go.”

“Please help me find my new people.”

**What He Doesn't Know**

"Dinner on me tomorrow to celebrate."

My brain has been scattered:

A little here,

A little there.

I am everywhere.

My body is in Harrisonburg.

My mind is in Kosova, Ohio, Arizona, South Florida.

Fully in panic mode.

Wondering.

Fantasizing.

Dreaming.

It feels like a dream.

My mind is

In

Kosova

With

My

Family

Calling,

Congratulating,

Me.

I did it.

They're proud,

All of them.

At least one of us is doing well in school.

I wash my face with cold water.

I pinch my cheeks.

I have Laureta read my acceptance email.

"Is this real life?" I ask.

Life has been so sweet lately.

My inner child is so happy;

She loves sweet things

Be it

Life, candy, chocolate, people.

Oh, sweet people,

With their,

"Urime, t'u gzofte zemra."

My heart is overjoyed and full.

I wonder what I did to deserve this.

Father's happy but doesn't push me to reach for the stars.

He reminds me to stay humble and grateful:

"Ask your advisor."

"Please thank him."

"Please listen to him."

"Please choose the first school that accepted you;"

"Be loyal."

"They believed in you."

He's scared.

I put myself in his shoes, and I get a heaviness in my heart:

Emptiness, nostalgia, fear, and blame.

He is losing me.

I am

slipping

away

One

Day

At a time.

Gone!

Lost to the western world.

One fewer child at home, one more thing to worry about.

"Are you sleeping well? 8 hours? What did you have for breakfast? How's your iron level? Milk, are you drinking milk? Are you stressed out?"

"Don't take things too close to heart."

"Take more naps."

"Don't study too hard."

"I'm sorry I can't send money,

but, by winter, I'll get paid and send it all your way."

My heart sinks, and I almost can't speak:

“I have money, I swear!”

“Pasha krytë tem, kom pare!”

"I worked a catering shift last night.

It wasn't too tiring.

My body can easily handle it."

I choke back tears.

I turn the camera off.

I mute my microphone.

He hangs up.

I have time to pull myself together.

I didn't tell him anything he couldn't handle.

I didn't tell him I couldn't move my body last night.

I couldn't roll into bed; I couldn't do laundry.

My body was fragile, burnt out.

I didn't tell him I've been having a whole life he does not know of;

I didn't tell him about my dating life.

What he doesn't know cannot hurt him.

I didn't tell him I met a guy

Who is maybe all I ever wanted

In a human being,

Sweet as honey,

Loving and caring.

He brings me peace, and softens me, takes my stoicism away,

And tells me he is proud of me.

He says I am

Incredible,

Amazing,

Smart.

And, sometimes, when I tell him I wish he spoke Albanian

(because my brain can't function as well in English),

He switches to Spanish and I to Italian. Solidarity.

"If you struggle, I struggle, baby."

He empathizes with me and wears my shoes.

For a change, I don't push him away.

I don't shield myself behind my defense mechanisms.

For a change, I don't deprive myself of sweetness,

Honey drippings, happiness.

For a change, I pull myself together and I convince them to stay:

Calm,

Collected,

Present,

Here.

I remind them this is what they once prayed for:

To stop being alone.

To find support.

To find new people.



## What We Don't Say

Sipping Baffled King, a milk stout,  
Chatting in my mother tongue,  
Sharing a moment with my friend from home,  
Sending notecards to our people.  
It's Thanksgiving break and we are each other's family here.  
Through laughter and tears,  
Anxiety and stillness,  
Our friendship helps us stay afloat in the tides of graduate school.  
We talk about how we want to hold on to this moment,  
We appreciate where we are now and how we got here.  
We cheers  
And  
Give gratitude  
To family away from family,  
To people, community, the Christmas tree already displayed at Pale Fire Brewing,  
The bartender with the rose cheeks & to the U.S.  
We're hopeful.  
We talk about life,  
Roadtrips,  
Seattle & Philadelphia,  
New jobs,  
Boyfriends,

PhD programs.

We're in such positive atmospheric attunement.

We smile wholeheartedly.

We cheers

To us

For the fifth time.

I smile at the bartender,

Hoping he'll see me,

Hoping he doesn't.

"Now is good, now is good, now is good."

We keep repeating the phrase as we talk

About life,

About America,

About struggle,

But we never talk about

Finding our way back.

We never talk about returning to the bittersweet home

Kosova.

We don't say Kosova is home, because it is not,

It hasn't felt like it in a while.

I jot this down and I think of Solstalgia,

"The feeling of distress caused by involuntary change."

I crook my eyebrows, put my pen down,

And remember being displaced from Kosova.

I remember being five, and I remember the war

I chug the Baffled King

To numb it all. We become silent.

## Gurabija for One

"To make 15-20

Ingredients

70ml oil

1 egg

140g sugar

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

70ml yoghurt

500g plain flour

Preheat the oven to 220 degrees. Mix ingredients together to make a stiff dough. Form the dough into balls of 5-8 cm diameter and coat with egg yolk. Bake for 15 minutes until golden" (Gowing, 2011, p. 217).

Over Thanksgiving break, I have been reading *Travels in Blood and Honey*, a book about Kosovar culture and Kosova right after the war. I haven't given myself a single day off since this semester started, so yesterday, Thanksgiving day, I decided to make myself some gurabija, a cookie-like pastry that I remember my mother making when she was still alive so that my father and us kids could eat on the weekends. I hadn't thought about gurabija dipped in honey with a glass of lukewarm milk for years until I came across them in that book. I felt a sudden tightness in my heart as I skimmed over the recipe. Was it because I missed my mother's gurabija? Was it something else? I put the book aside and decided I was going to bake some.

'Silly girl, nobody bakes gurabija for themselves.' In a collective society like mine, the recipes are meant to feed five to ten people, but I was only feeding myself.

I was alone with no place to go, as I usually am during Thanksgiving break in the U.S. All of my roommates and close friends went back to their parents' homes and were spending their time off in that warmth. 'I wish I could go home as often as they could.'

Leaving the comfort of my bed, I went to the pantry to make sure I had the right ingredients for gurabija. I was afraid I didn't. For the past two weeks, I have been thinking about going grocery shopping but didn't have anybody to take me. Every morning, I have clumsily opened the fridge and told myself, 'I should go grocery shopping soon.' Back home, I never needed to go shopping. My father, the man of the house, bought all of the essentials: eggs, milk, chicken, beef, yogurt. That was the norm. I was well fed and I never had to cook, whereas, in this house, I always have to cook and I am never well fed. I get by with whatever I have. Peanut butter and jelly? That sounds great! If father saw me eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, he would be saddened. He has seen me eat much worse though. He just forgets.

"That's not decent breakfast, Era. Have some yogurt and eggs!" I can almost hear my father say every single time I accompany a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a glass of milk from the free food pantry in the graduate lounge. I have no yogurt and no eggs most of the time. Father doesn't know grocery stores are scattered and not within walking distance here. I tell him this about grocery stores. He just forgets. He has gotten better at suppressing anything that makes him think I have a hard time in the U.S. He wants me to be well. I know that. It's just... sometimes, I'm not well.

I looked at the quasi-empty pantry and stood on the tip of my toes to reach for the flour on the top shelf. I knew I had sugar, oil, and eggs, but I did not have any baking soda or plain yogurt. I checked to see if the store across the street was open so that I didn't have to walk somewhere further to get what I needed. There were no buses working. I think people in this

country believe every single person owns a car and nobody fully relies on city buses to go places. Well, I do!

I was a little anxious and kind of ashamed to go out alone. I was ashamed I was spending Thanksgiving, this bullshit American holiday, alone. I thought the cars passing by would judge me for not being someplace inside with family and friends and instead wandering South Main Street.

To my surprise, there were three people waiting in line at the store. Was I not the only one alone today? 'We are the misfits.' I guessed.

I was on a mission, so I quickly bought what I needed and headed back home. I threw the door open and beelined for the kitchen. I preheated the oven and mixed:

"70ml oil

1 egg

140g sugar

1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda

70ml yogurt

500g plain flour."

This was the book's recipe. Since mother passed away when I was a child, I did not learn any recipes from her. 'I inherited nothing!' I thought. I was almost holding a grudge that she passed away too early, but I knew that, in truth, I must have inherited something, but I didn't know what or from whom. My terrible cooking skills? Probably from my father. My silence? Most likely my traditional mother. My bravery? Perhaps Grandmother.

I started to whisk the ingredients in a blue bowl that I never even knew we had and think more about my mother and Grandmother. I felt something within me change. The

excitement began to vanish the more I whisked. 'It's about time I got my hands dirty,' I thought as I rolled up my sleeves. A sudden lethargy spread through my limbs and I thought for a second it was the sunshine getting to my head. As children in Kosova, we were not allowed to play out in the sun for too long. We were told it would get to our heads and make us sleepy and dizzy. I didn't feel sleepy or dizzy. Simply lethargic and jittery. I blamed all of the caffeine that has been getting me through graduate school. As I used my hands to knead the dough for gurabija, a lump was slowly forming in my throat. My mouth was suddenly dry and my brain foggy. A tarp, a blue tarp came to mind, but I could not understand why. I kept kneading the dough until it got stiff.

“Form the dough into balls of 5-8cm diameter and coat with egg yolk,” the book said. I took a piece of dough from the mass, put it on the palm of my left hand and pressed it in a circular motion with my right. I thought I remembered what yet-to-be-baked gurabija looked like, but I was wrong. I kept repeating the same steps for the rest of the dough. Just as the book said, 17 gurabija, when I only needed a handful. I put the pan in the preheated oven and gave myself a pat on the back. I stretched and then sat on the leather couch overlooking the kitchen, waiting for the lethargy to go away. A minute after I put the gurabija in, I walked back and placed my head by the oven door and stared at them. They had not even started to rise. I went back and made myself comfortable on the couch for another couple of minutes. This pattern kept on for a while though, with me going back and forth for fifteen minutes until, finally, the gurabija were thick enough and golden brown.

During my pacing to and from the oven door waiting for the gurabija to change hues, I was jotting down notes in my journal. “Bittersweet atmospheric attunement,” I wrote. I wanted to

come up with phrases to describe this affect that I was deeply grappling with. As expected, I did not have the vocabulary to do so. Instead, I frantically scribbled:

"I was stuck in this atmospheric attunement for a purpose. I have been running like a chicken with its head cut off and I have not been honoring my time and my effort here. It's Thanksgiving break, and I have been ignoring my body's warnings. Two days ago, I sprained my ankle and I still refused to sit down and take a break. Take a breath. Nurture myself. Be gentle. Thank my shoulders for carrying all of this weight and my legs for getting me here. Thank my arms for the days when they bring enough water and nourishing food to my lips. Thank my eyes for the days when I read Kathleen Stewart and gain new appreciation for the little things, everyday life, the real world. Thank all of my body for functioning well, for allowing me to walk, to run, to roam free, and, especially, for not giving up on me on that surgical table."

I took the gurabija out of the oven and poured myself a glass of milk. After the gurabija had sufficiently cooled, I took one and dipped it into the milk before taking a bite. I carefully chewed the gurabija and attempted to wash it down with a gulp of milk. But, as I was swallowing, I felt my throat muscles tighten and the food get stuck. It started to feel like I was drowning and more and more food was piling up in my throat. I couldn't stop coughing. My hands were trembling, and I put them around my neck. I stopped being able to breathe. I was choking. I tried to maintain my calm. I used to choke quite often before my esophagectomy. I had learned to massage my throat and wait for the food to go down.

'Don't panic, don't panic. You are fine.'

I remembered that sometimes kneeling down as if I were tying my shoelaces would help, something about the angle, so I bowed. At long last, saliva-coated pieces of gurabija came back up, and I could breathe again.



I sat down on the kitchen floor, my hands still shaking, my heart still rattling, and, my face streaked with tears.

I picked up the tray with the rest of the gurabija and threw them in the trash.

“Silly girl, nobody bakes gurabija for themselves.”

## Discussion

### Impetus for the Research

*“...still you have to trust the process. You have to believe that somewhere in the material of these two mysterious stories — the life story and the research literature story— you will find a clue that leads to a connection. You will locate a gap in the existing literature...You will, eventually, write your way out of your personal conundrum. But you have to trust the process. And the process begins with locating a gap.”*

(Goodall, 2000, p. 51)

This thesis project began, like most do, by locating a gap in the literature: I could not find enough autoethnographic or qualitative studies on the experiences of international students in the U.S. I first identified this gap because of my personal experiences as the only international student in my graduate cohort. At times, I felt othered and alienated and could not often make sense of my situation. Due to the nature of my culture, I was not used to asking professors for help, so the only way I could begin my meaning-making process as a graduate student was to consult the body of literature. I remember skimming through articles, hoping I would find stories that would resonate with me. I was craving narratives that would reassure me I was not the only international student struggling with cultural adjustment in the U.S. The literature on international students offered an abundance of quantitative studies, but, as numbers were not “my way of knowing,” they didn’t help me make sense of my situation in the way that qualitative and autoethnographic methods could (Richardson, 1994). All the Likert scales and tests that I found in the literature (such as the *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory* and the *Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory*), although useful in assessing the impacts of studying overseas, did not offer the in-depth investigation of the international student experiences that I longed to find

(Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Montgomery, 2010; Hammer, 2003). I was unable to come across enough studies that depicted the complexity of the international graduate student experience in “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). The gap in literature regarding the complex experiences of these students could not be filled by “checking boxes” but rather by “listening to [their] stories” to understand how they construct meaning across borders (Gargano, 2012, p. 2).

A second, critical gap in the literature that I observed was the lack of scholarship on international students from developing nations. I, as a Kosovar studying in the U.S., was entirely unrepresented in this body of knowledge, even in autoethnography. I have a life story as an international student that I believe adds value to communication scholarship, but the current literature does not adequately give voice to international students, like me, from developing countries. The lack of autoethnographic research on students from developing nations drew me to begin working on this thesis. Having found a connection now between my life story and the research literature story, I took a leap and trusted the process.

### **Border-Crossing: the Evolution of my Research Methodology**

*“Human existence frequently involved a delay, or “postponement,” of insight into its affairs: realizations, narrative connections, are made after-the-fact, when the dust has settled. The result is that we are frequently late in our own understanding of things.”*

(Freeman, as cited in Bamberg, 2007, p. 160)

As a novice autoethnographer who needs structure and certainty, I was uncomfortable being in this writing process without a theoretical framework to keep me grounded. As I have mentioned throughout this thesis, I initially wanted to employ Cultural Adjustment theory to compartmentalize my experiences as an international student in the U.S. I was going to frame my progress in cultural adjustment as being in the “humor stage,” having finally overcome my anger

towards the U.S. (Trifonovitch, as cited in Mesidor & Sly, 2016). However, crafting my narratives brought me to the realization that, for me, and perhaps many other graduate students, cultural adjustment was not a linear process and sometimes didn't fit neatly into these categories. The more I became immersed in writing, the more I realized I was moving away from my theory. The Cultural Adjustment theory has served as a sensitizing agent for me, forcing me to think about my lived experience in positive and negative ways, but, ultimately, the more I wrote, the more I was pushed to cross theoretical borders.

From the Cultural Adjustment theory, I crossed over into Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands theory. Anzaldua's theory was a better fit for me because it captured more of the complexity of my experience being in between academic and geographic cultures and spaces—in the “borderlands.” Anzaldua's theory helped me honor my lived experiences both in the developing country of Kosova and in the U.S. and helped me achieve my goal of fighting cultural erasure in my thesis because it gave me a framework to assert my mother tongue's legitimacy and incorporate it in my writing.

### **Major Themes**

*“Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a traversia, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape “knowing”, I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. “Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.”*

(Anzaldua, 1987, p. 49)

In keeping with the idea that autoethnographers do not hide the process, this section explains concepts that were key to the creation of my narratives and the transformational effect that writing them had on me.

### *Otherness*

Anzaldua's Borderlands theory is particularly adept at examining the historical processes of dominant cultures and the ways in which they represent the identities of "the other" as inferior and create stereotypes about them (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). I have experienced this idea of otherness both in Kosova and the U.S. During the "Parallel System," the time leading up to the war in which Kosova's Serbian minority controlled the government, the people of my country were othered in their own houses, in their own socio-political and economic systems, and in their own homeland. In the U.S., I felt othered when I would speak in classroom settings. My whiteness granted me privilege, as long as I stayed silent. To reduce this sense of otherness and to keep my "fake" white privilege intact, I often remained quiet and ashamed. I have internalized this otherness and throughout my narratives, I render it and its accompanying feelings of inferiority.

### *Silence*

From staying silent in class for fear of disclosing my accent and otherness, to not sharing certain information with family and friends, the idea of silence recurs throughout my narratives. Familial and cultural silences manifest in my narratives through my father's reluctance to talk about the war ("The Mind Forgets"), the adults not explaining the situation to the children while evacuating the family home ("The Cruelty of Hands"), and the concealment of my dating life, financial, academic, and professional struggles from my father ("Mish edhe Perime," "What He Doesn't Know").

The role silence played in my narratives was a means to shield one's self and others from pain. I first reflected on this with my father and the feeling that he was not willing or able to give me details about the war. I came to realize through interviewing him that I could not possibly grasp the complexity of his lived experience through phone calls, and I even came to feel like he just wasn't telling me what I needed to know ("The Mind Forgets"). Throughout this process, I realized that silence was a protection mechanism. It helped him not revisit memories of the war and, in turn, he believed he was protecting me through his silence. This was a challenge for the writing because this is not only my trauma to make sense of; I wanted to make sure I was doing right by my father and my people's story, but could not if no one would speak to me about it. Then, I realized that the silence itself helps tell this story of vulnerability and protection, and so silence became an important component in all of my narratives.

### ***Trauma***

While crafting my narratives, I uncovered trauma I was not prepared for, not only trauma from my lived experiences during the war, but also from my surgery and the transgenerational trauma that I pick up on when I talk to other Kosovars—the trauma of my parents, and their parents, and their parents.

This trauma left me in physical and emotional pain. At the time I was crafting my Kosova narratives especially, I felt heavy. I had continuous headaches, fatigue, and lack of sleep. I spent at least one day a week not getting out of bed except to feed myself. I needed to recharge and gain back my mental and physical capacity to keep going. By the time I had to craft my U.S. narratives, I was emotionally drained. I felt very similarly to Anzaldua who describes the painful process of her writing thusly:

“...because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can’t stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make “sense” of them, and once they have “meaning” they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 70).”

This trauma also was capable of manifesting in different and unexpected ways. Hunt (2010) states that the complexity of war trauma lies in the lack of visibility of its symptoms. He maintains that the patterns change over time as a result of the person processing the memories or from social and environmental factors. Sometimes when I was alone, I would start to feel paranoid or unsafe even in my own home because I had been spending so much time reflecting on these feelings of danger from my childhood. Soon, I found that seemingly unrelated situations in my everyday life would bring me back to the traumatic experiences of my childhood. For example, I stopped being able to sleep with my bedroom window open because the cold breeze would remind me of when I stayed in the cold house with no windows in Isniq, Kosova as my family was fleeing the Serbian forces (“The Body Remembers”).

I rendered these everyday trauma flashbacks in my narratives with “Gurabija for One” where I describe the returning of past trauma, both from the war and prior physical illness. In the narrative, I associate gurabija both with my surgery and with my childhood rituals and experiences during the war. In the narrative, I imply that gurabija may even have had a strong enough association for me that it caused my body to reject it. I also describe that the first time I saw the recipe in Gowing’s book, I pictured the blue tarp that I describe in “The Cruelty of Hands” and “The Body Remembers.” These details are an attempt to capture the ways that small

things throughout my life, like an open window, a passage in a book, and a beloved childhood pastry would trigger these traumatic flashbacks.

Trauma not only affected me through the duration of writing my narratives, but informed their value and function. Hunt (2010) maintains that “after a trauma, memories remain unconscious ideas until they have been translated into narrative form through conscious action, or processing” (p. 80). Research indicates that narratives help people come to terms with their experiences. In my case, these narratives forced me to revisit painful memories, to alter myself, to break boundaries, and to build bridges. For example, in my narrative about hajmali (“Talisman”), I convey that as a child I carried a good luck charm to protect me from the “Devil’s eye,” but as an adult, still needed protection, that now is in the shape of my backpack instead.

### ***International Student Identity***

This project also allowed me to confront my relationship with my identities as an international student and as a Kosovar. Throughout the process of writing this, I was able to transform my perspective on aspects of my identity and uncover identities that I had been unwilling or unable to identify with before.

International students in the U.S. are expected to let go of all of the baggage they carry from their homelands. They are expected to begin a new life in the U.S., to start with a clean slate, to assume an “international student” identity, and, in doing so, put themselves into a box in which they are always inferior to the native students around them. I had spent a year in that box, angry and ashamed of my accent, background, and my attempts to integrate into the dominant culture. However, through the process of writing this thesis, I have come to see the validity of the international student identity and I am no longer ashamed of it.



When I was ashamed, it was because I was constantly comparing myself to native students, not acknowledging that our cultural differences would always make that an unreasonable comparison. What I see now is that being an international student does require me to work hard to navigate cultural boundaries, which can be difficult, but does not need to be a source of shame. If I am not delegitimizing my own culture and feeling inferior to the dominant one, it opens possibilities for cultural exchange and enables research like this. Through doing this research, I have felt more at ease with my identity as an international student and less restricted by the “box.” I hope, by my sharing these narratives, other international students who are experiencing tensions like I was can also transform their relationship with the stigma of this identity.

### *Cultural Erasure*

Throughout my research, I have made preserving my language and culture central. I once took my country, my language, and my culture for granted because I grew up in a post-war, recovering Kosova, a homogenous country where I have always been part of the dominant culture. When I came to the U.S. as an international student, I, for the first time, intellectually understood what it was like to have my culture be at odds with the dominant culture. This was the first time I could truly understand some small piece of what it must have been like to fight to preserve one’s language and culture the way my parents and grandparents did from Serbia’s attempted cultural erasure. I came to believe it is my duty and the duty of all my people to preserve our language and culture, to resist erasure and ethnic cleansing, and “to always carry home on [our] back[s]” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 21).

In writing these narratives, I wanted to honor not only my story, but that of my people, and to depict their struggle to preserve their language and culture. To do this, I did not italicize

Albanian words as is conventional for non-English words in academic writing as a way to lend legitimacy to both my English and my Albanian. I have also referred to my homeland as Kosova, instead of the often used Kosovo because Kosova is the name the majority of Albanians use to refer to it as an independent nation rather than an autonomous province of Serbia. I have also tried to render my memories of Kosova in “thick description” as a means of bringing them to life and transporting readers, many of whom I imagine are unfamiliar with it, to my homeland (Geertz, 1973). Central to my narratives has been the idea that, after having experienced attempted cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing as a five-year-old, I would not permit myself to perpetuate it in my thesis as a 25-year-old.

Personally, writing these narratives has helped me process and come to terms with my trauma, but also helped me develop stories that address a gap in scholarship. I hope that sharing these narratives in my thesis will have implications for communication scholars and anyone else who reads them. I hope this thesis builds the body of knowledge in communication studies related to the experience of international students from developing nations. For readers who do not have similar lived experiences to my own, I hope that these narratives will build empathy for the psychosocial, financial, emotional, and cultural struggles of international students, especially those from war-torn countries. For readers who perhaps are international students, from Kosova, or who share some other elements of my lived experiences, I hope these narratives serve as story exchange to create a space of solidarity.

Although, this work is my first foray into autoethnography, I hope that I have told and analyzed these stories in a way that is meaningful, and enriching to outsiders, and also respectful and culturally competent to the Kosova that I want to render. That was my commitment to indeed, “always carry home on my back” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 21).

## Appendix

### The Writing Process

As a novice autoethnographer and in the interest of "not hiding the process," I am including this appendix in order to make more transparent the specific processes of my writing the "Homeland" and "U.S." narratives, which I consider to be the lifeblood of this project.

After realizing this project lent itself to autoethnographic reflection, I had to familiarize myself with best practices for that methodology. When I began this project in September, I had never taken an ethnography or autoethnography course before, so I was unfamiliar with the conventions and literature related to these methodologies. In order "to find my feet" as a novice autoethnographer, I read *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). The next step I took to familiarize myself with the literature was to informally audit my advisor's undergraduate ethnography course. In the fall semester, I learned about Geertz, Clifford, Conquergood, Goodall, Ellis, Bochner, Tracy and other scholars well-known for these methods. My work began to be informed by them, particularly Goodall, Ellis, and Bochner. By reading *Writing the New Ethnography* (Goodall, 2000), *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004), and *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), I learned about the criteria of autoethnographic writing, the ethics of it, and the importance of self-reflexiveness, resonance, and evocative writing.

In addition to all the reading to familiarize myself with ethnography, I also read a collection of literature relating to important, emerging concepts for my thesis: books and articles on international student scholarship, such as *Understanding the International Student Experience* (Montgomery, 2010), *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), and "Factors That Contribute to the Adjustment of International Students" (Mesidor and Sly, 2016);

books and articles on the war in Kosova, such as “Understanding the War in Kosovo” (Bieber and Dasalovski, 2003) and *No place like home: echoes from Kosovo* (Friend, 2001); and books about trauma such as *Memory, war and trauma* (Hunt, 2010). As I spent these two semesters immersed in this literature, I met with my advisor once a week to talk about my readings and discuss how to incorporate ideas from them into my own writing.

I chose not to interweave literature between any of my narratives because I believed that a layered account would disrupt the powerful flow of the stories. I, with my advisor’s help, identified themes as I explained the stories to him before beginning the process of writing. This helped us maintain an aesthetic thread throughout the thesis but it also helped to frame meaning. Once we identified themes of cold, heat, light, darkness, and weight, we used them as signposts throughout the narratives. Repetition was another important signpost that we used throughout our “Homeland” and “U.S.” narratives. Repeated curses, cries, specific sentences in Albanian language, and Grandmother’s prayer were intended to help the reader make sense of the context where this sort of language was used and to direct them towards making the necessary connections throughout my journey as a child of war.

The first essential process of writing about this journey was determining what to write about in the first place. Goodall (2000) maintains that “You write what you have been *attracted to* and *convinced by*. You write what you have read as *meaningful*; you interpret what you have read as a meaningful *pattern*” (p. 87). So the subject matter, imagery, and themes woven throughout my narratives are ones that I have read as meaningful patterns throughout my life and that have stuck with me through my lived experiences. Similar to Goodall, I have chosen to write about moments that I felt were important to my life, those that I often think about, those

that have patterns that have been repeated throughout my experiences as an international student in the U.S. (“U.S. Narratives”) and as a child of war (“Homeland Narratives”).

Journaling was an essential component of my writing process. Journaling was a tool for me to keep field notes, brainstorm, and write early drafts. It has been part of my sensemaking process even before I began this project. I have kept many personal journals including a WordPress blog. In these personal journals, I would scribble about my day-to-day experiences as an international student and happenings in my personal life. At the start of the fall semester, I began a new personal journal specifically with my thesis in mind where I reflected on significant day-to-day events as an international student and aspiring autoethnographer and started writing snippets that I believed could be later developed into narratives.

At this time, I also started keeping what I called my "professional journal" where I copied quotes from my readings that resonated with me and wrote musings and notes about certain articles that I believed would inform my writing. This became one of my reference management tools where I was able to keep track of what I had been reading, prioritize what I felt was the most relevant information for my project, and store relevant page numbers and quotations. This professional journal helped me stay grounded in the scholarly conversation, observe my writing development, and practice autoethnographic inquiry.

Crafting the “U.S. Narratives” I did not have distance and detachment to allow me to write narratives based on recollection, the way I did with “Homeland Narratives.” As I was developing these narratives, I looked back at older journals and blogposts to reflect on what my mental and emotional states were at the time of writing and to identify themes and patterns. Most of the “U.S. Narratives” are, then, inspired by journal entries and from conversations I had with my father, advisor, and friends. These narratives are more free form and poetic because I have

written them at different points throughout these two years. Since I have not had any distance or detachment from them, I have not been able to process and craft them in a chronological order, as I have done with my “Homeland Narratives.”

I have had many more journal entries and rough drafts of narratives that I chose not to include in the “U.S. Narratives” section because I thought they did not have much emotional force, did not weigh much alongside my “Homeland narratives”, and would only add additional themes that are not cohesive and in conversation with my thesis topic and other narratives that had already emerged. The ones that I chose to include in this project are informed by my day to day struggles, worries, reflections, articles, and books that I read in the span of two years.

For instance, “Mish edhe Perime” was a journal entry that I wrote after a conversation with my father about financial struggle. I wrote it down only because I needed to take the load off of my chest and I did not know I was going to include it in my thesis. When I read it, it stuck with me and it was meaningful. It made me think of the many conversations I have with my Kosovar friends in the U.S. about lack of money and the financial insecurity we face in our day to day life as international graduate students. After I decided to bring “Mish edhe Perime,” into my thesis project, I copied it on my laptop and revised it. I checked grammar, tense, structure, and worked on the details of the dialogue with my father. Then, I waited a day and went back and read it out loud. I refined it and made connections to the articles I was reading at the time. I tried to make larger connections to the literature and write about them on my professional journal. These were my field notes.

Goodall (2000) asserts that the role of field notes is to help one make connections between things that one studies, to help answer questions and to influence one’s inquiry. It is to let emerge from the field notes the story of one as a researcher. He maintains “...it's called the

story of the "I-search," a journey of self-discovery, a way of using the writing of fieldnotes to connect the story of culture to the story of yourself within the culture (p. 121)." I was, then, trying to find connections between my life story and my research story and I kept doing that throughout my project.

To better understand my research story and to develop my evocative, narrative writing skills, I took an independent study course with Dr. Melissa Aleman in January. The course was structured to present me with articles on narrative writing such as "Fingers on the Keyboard... Developing Narrative Structures," "Narrative Inheritance: A Nuclear Family with Toxic Secrets," "Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life" and to present me with writing prompts as a means of practicing the types of narrative writing that would inform my thesis (Goodall, 2000; 2005; 2008). "Lightness and Weight," my first homeland narrative, developed from these writing exercises.

After I completed my first homeland narrative, I agreed to send Dr. Aleman one narrative per week. Every day while I was drafting the narratives, I would go either to a local coffee shop, my office in Roop Hall, or my bedroom and write for several hours. Including occasional breaks, it would take me about a full day to write a completed draft of a narrative. I crafted the "Homeland Narratives" based on recollection. Throughout my life, I have had five or six war memories ingrained in my mind and I wanted to develop them in my thesis to make better sense of them. In order to translate those memories into a story, I would jot down as many keywords as I could that would guide my writing. For instance, for the "Lightness and Weight," I wrote on my professional journal keywords such as table creaking, cries, blood, rakija, lara, snow, father, and other relevant ones to help the set up of the story and to remind me to write in rich detail.

These keywords were important elements that I needed to include in order to stay true to my memory and my story.

At times, when I was not sure about what had happened in the events I chose to explore, I called my father and had conversations about the war. When he was in the mood to revisit memories of the war, I kept notes in my professional journal as he talked about them. I mostly included questions that I asked, phrases and details that he repeated, and sentences that I thought were relevant in enriching my narratives. Then, I waited a day so that I could look at the draft with fresh eyes, reread, make edits, and send the edited drafts to Dr. Aleman over the weekend. She would give me feedback on Mondays and, then, we would meet on Thursdays to discuss the drafts in person.

I was intentional about the interconnectedness of “Homeland Narratives.” I intended to bring the reader with me in my journey being displaced from Broliq to Montenegro, so I crafted these narratives in a chronological order. I was able to structure them in such order because I had enough distance to do so. I was more self-reflexive because I was detached from the events I was describing. As Freeman (2007) maintains “...only by stepping out of the flow of concrete, flesh and blood life, with its steady stream of small stories...that big ones could emerge (p. 155). “Homeland Narratives” are my big stories because I wrote them twenty years after the events had occurred. I was already out of them, not in “...the flow of concrete, flesh and blood life...” (Freeman, 2007, p.155).

In short, my process of crafting both “Homeland” and “U.S.” narratives consisted of: data gathering, extensively from the literature, but also from my recollection, old journals, and conversations with my father and other Kosovars; spending long periods of time drafting in isolation; seeking feedback from as many people as possible (primarily Dr. Broderick, Dr.



Aleman, and a colleague from JMU's University Writing Center, Rodolfo Baret); and making substantive revisions based on their feedback. Over the span of two semesters, this was the process I used to craft each of the narratives featured in this thesis.

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