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Narratives of destruction and survival: writing and reading about life in urban war zones.

Rachel Woodward

After a night of Israeli Defence Force bombardment in Ramallah, drinking coffee to fight off fatigue, Suad Amiry had a telephone-disrupted morning.¹ Fifty-three phone calls from family and friends establish for them that Amiry is safe, despite her close proximity to Israeli artillery. We, her readers, can all perhaps identify with the grumpiness that comes from lost sleep and repeated interruptions by the telephone.² What is unrecognisable to most of us, though, is the experience of waking in the early morning to the sound of tanks rumbling into our neighbourhood. The power of Amiry's account of domestic life in Ramallah in 2001 comes to a large extent from the ways in which she engages us as readers with her routine domestic circumstances and troubles – dealing with an elderly parent, edgy friends and anxious neighbours – and uses the identification that this produces to shock us with descriptions of routine domesticity played out in a context that is otherwise unimaginable. Amiry's memoir, and others like it, urges us to think 'what would I do?' when faced with the unthinkable and unimaginable.

The unimaginable under discussion here is urban warfare – armed violence played out within the confines of the city. This paper is about autobiographical narratives describing life in urban war zones – narratives such as Amiry's. It explores the possibilities and politics of the genre for communicating the experience of living in a city under fire. My argument is that although many of the material and social effects of urban warfare can readily be imagined by the reader, who by the act of reading is already engaging with another's experience, their real power and significance lies not only in the descriptions of familiar urban lifestyles being slowly destroyed, but also in the identification they urge the reader to feel with the writer. They encourage us, with varying mixtures of subtlety and blatant expectation, to consider our own reactions under such circumstances. They enable this identification by connecting and juxtaposing the familiarities of contemporary (primarily Western or westernised) urban life, a life assumed to be broadly recognisable by the reader, with the

unfamiliarities and unimaginable consequences that follow for people living this urban life in places that are being forcibly ripped apart. Furthermore, this is not just an issue of individual identification and the political purposes that this may serve (however significant that might be). This splicing of the familiar and the strange, through the medium of the narrative and through the message of the text, disrupts the normality of armed violence that discourses around urban military deployments try so hard to promote. This in turn makes such narratives more than individual survivor tales, and gives them a political force of much greater significance than critics of this genre and of these individual writers would suggest.³ They resist cynicism about the positionality, partiality and subjectivity of their authors, and they also resist the cynicism bestowed by those dismissive of the impulses that these memoirs provoke.

The narratives: some amongst many

The texts discussed here are autobiographical narratives or memoirs written by civilians whose cities of residence are being disrupted and destroyed by military action. Autobiography, 'an unruly and even slightly disreputable field', is a genre about which there are on-going debates about authorship, selfhood, representation and authenticity.⁴ Here, I am interested in the function of these narratives, their purpose and utility.

These narratives are part of the literature of war, about which in turn there is an ever-increasing critical scholarly engagement, particularly in terms of the possibilities and limits of representations of armed conflict.⁵ The experience of armed violence is a constant in English language autobiographical writing, just as it is across other literary forms and genres such as fiction, poetry and reportage. Within this genre of autobiographical narratives about war, soldiers' tales of combat dominate; for some, they occupy privileged position within the genre, reflecting the cultural primacy of the figure of the male soldier.⁶ Their consistency as bookshop perennials, describing varieties of conflicts, military roles and experiences, is testament to their popularity amongst identified readership and market.⁷ Significant too in shaping cultural memories and understanding of specific conflicts are journalists' accounts of their experiences of observations of armed conflicts, written to describe how it was, for them, there.⁸ Humanitarian and aid workers, state- and self-sanctioned, document their trials to make sense of the experience.⁹ And there are, too, the accounts of citizens caught up in conflicts, and it is these that I examine here.

These accounts appear as books (usually) and web logs (sometimes) written by non-combatant civilians living lives in places that are in the process of being reconfigured by armed violence. This is the literature of urbicide, characterised (very crudely) as the output of (predominantly) an educated elite, eschewing victimhood through communication. Many of the narratives discussed here started life as diaries and letters. This literature is not the preserve of either male or female writers, although the literature of urbicide is gendered. The authors of the texts discussed here are reflective to varying degrees about the consequences for their writing – in topic, subject matter, format and style – of their own subject positions as men or women, the dominant social conventions in the contexts in which they write shaping male and female behaviours, and the disruptions that urbicide brings to that.¹⁰ The choice of autobiographical narratives discussed here is an eclectic sample, chosen for their narrative power, for the range of contexts they represent, and for their diversity in form and style. It includes Slavenka Drakulic's *Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War* (1993), Anna Cataldi's edited collection, *Letters from Sarajevo: Voices of a Besieged City* (1994), Dzevad Karahasan's *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City* (1994), Zlatko Dizdarevic's *Sarajevo: A War Journal* (1993), Elma Softic's *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights* (1996), Suad Amiry's *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries*, (2004); Riverbend's *Baghdad Burning* (an on-going web log, starting in August 2003), Nuha Al-Radi's *Baghdad Diaries* (2003) and Valery Tishkov's *Chechnya: Life in a War-torn Society* (2004). This is not a representative or comprehensive list, but as I go on to show, there a number of themes and ideas which these narratives share despite the disparity of the urban conflicts that they describe, lending weight to the idea of their collective status as the literature of urbicide.

The significance of narratives of destruction and survival

These narratives, I contend, are useful for what they tell us about the lived experience of urbicide and the intentional destruction of the city and citizenship, and for what they tell us about the disruptions this brings to daily life, to social and familial relationships, to ways of being in the city, and to the practices and negotiations of urban living.

The experience of urbicide, in terms of its impacts on life and daily living, could perhaps be imagined by many of us through reflection, perhaps with reference to the imagery of urban destruction so readily available from print and broadcast media.

What these narratives do is explain in varying degrees of detail how disruption works. But this, I would argue, is not the limit of their utility. The real power and significance of these narratives grows out of the meeting point where what is imaginable and recognisable to the reader is spliced with the unimaginable and strange. In this paper I describe three features of these narratives, signposting the junctions between the familiar and unfamiliar. These are, first, pursuit of mundane routine acts of daily living in circumstances of extreme and terrifying physical danger; second, the mirroring of damage to the urban fabric in the psychological disruptions endured by people living with urban military operations; and third, the struggle to assert the right to the city through ways of being in the city, in defiance of the militarization of urban space.

That meeting point between the familiar and the strange is crucial; it forces (and sometimes denies) identification ('what would I do?'). These plays on identification are strategic, in that they disrupt the 'normality' of armed violence. They de-normalize war, make it problematic. Militarism's great trick, of course, is to make the prioritising of military actions (planning, development, expenditure, activities, institutions) appear simultaneously normal and unquestioned, possibly unreal.¹¹ What these narratives show, by connecting the everyday with the strange, is that war is not normal. There is a moral force to this; as Michael Ignatieff argues, if war becomes unreal to us, will we care enough to stop the violence carried out in our name?¹² Narratives of destruction and survival make war real. They make us care. They are a sharp alternative to the dull prods made by much mainstream corporate news coverage to our consciousness of these conflicts and our conscience and culpability. The capacity of much established news media to make violence distant from us, geographically and politically, has been well documented.¹³ These narratives connect us to what militarism and its effects makes distant. They are strategic interventions in wider (and often deliberately diffuse) arguments about the morality of armed violence and the exercise of power through military means. They are also interventions about urbicide, making it real. Drakulic makes this point in her writings about Zagreb in 1992, when she considers how unimaginable the destruction of the city could be. 'We thought, for no good reason, that it couldn't happen, not in Zagreb.'¹⁴ In this populous city, a metropolitan area, a capital city 'coordinating the life the entire republic'. '[...] we couldn't have imagined how exposed and vulnerable any city could become.'¹⁵ But things did happen, there and across the former Yugoslavia, hence the need to write. What else could she do but bear witness to atrocity? 'We write to affirm our humanity, even if it changes nothing.'¹⁶ She was not

alone: for Zlatko Dizdarevic, '[p]ersonally, I consider it a duty to remain in my city until the end, and to go on writing about it as long as I am able.'¹⁷ Al Radi and Riverbend's descriptions of Baghdad under bombardment and occupation seethe with fury and shock at the reduction of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city reduced both physically and spiritually. As educated Iraqi's with extensive international personal networks they despair at the realities of destruction and disruption played out in their home town.

Normal life and living with abnormality

These narratives describe the difficulties of daily life and the acts of daily living in circumstances of extreme physical danger. These are often routine things, the day-to-day and mundane tasks that go into the reproduction of the self, the household, the family, the local community. This is a constant theme shared across Softic's besieged Sarajevo, Riverbend's Baghdad and Amiry's Ramallah.

For example, Cataldi's *Letters from Sarajevo* present a litany of lack and a battle for basic needs, expressed through letters sent from those trapped in the besieged city in April 1992 to their kith and kin beyond. There is little food, and finding food is a difficult task. The only things available are rice and pasta. There is no fruit, no vegetables, no milk, no eggs, no butter. When food comes, Softic despairs because of what emergency relief means, in tandem with the joy of receiving American food packets:

[...] have I and my family sunk as far as this? We who used to enjoy caviar and shellfish, fine cheeses and wines, fresh vegetables and rare steaks, all sorts of pastries and exotic fruits, now we are grateful for charity in the form of ready-to-eat food, packaged who knows when, and crammed with preservatives.¹⁸

Softic writes of bread queues and the transformation of a mundane act of normal life – shopping at the bakers – into something strenuous, abnormal: 'I waited for hours for bread'.¹⁹ She writes of a man dying of hunger in the middle of Sarajevo because there is simply no food, and those without stocks starve:

[...] old as he was, he wouldn't have been able to get any bread – not long ago Mom came close to getting suffocated while she was standing in line for bread; she came home completely beside herself and white as a sheet.²⁰

Shopping for food becomes dangerous, not only because of the risks of shelling and sniper fire. Yet food takes on new significance; Al-Radi refers to the necessity of resistance through the 'cultural authority' of regional, indigenous food, the comforts bought by traditional dishes, and the resistance this signifies to the 'culinary colonization' infiltrating Iraq as the invasion and occupation proceeds.²¹ Riverbend posts traditional Iraqi recipes as a marker of resistance, explains in detail the rituals around Ramadan and the breaking of the fast at sunset, disrupted but not curtailed by bombardment and occupation.²²

As deliberate strategy or unintended by-product, urban operations disrupt utilities, water, for example. Thirst, the lack of water for cooking and washing, and the extraordinary lengths people have to go to get a supply of water are a features of the Sarajevo siege narratives:

Elegantly dressed and made-up ladies on their way to work in the morning are carrying – instead of purses – flasks, bottles, and pails for water. In the afternoon, dressed casually and carrying large buckets and canisters, they'll set out with their husbands for a stroll to the nearest fountain. The water bucket – the latest fashion statement. These days this accessory is a must for the trendy Sarajevan.²³

There is no (or limited) electricity, and therefore limited light, heat and energy. A limited restoration of the Sarajevo electricity supply makes the neighbours of a trio writing to their children happy because 'now they don't have to light a fire on the balcony to cook their meals'.²⁴ Riverbend's tales of life in occupied, war-torn Baghdad chart the constant search for fuel, for cooking gas, the disruptions to contemporary Western urban living when the power goes out. She wonders how her forebears survived the Baghdad summer without air-conditioning.

Urban services, the things we take for granted as a benefit of urban living, also disappear:

At night I watched the fiery trails of the grenades as they screamed overhead on their way to destroy all the trams and buses of the public transport services. They hit the milk distribution centre, the maternity hospital and the

'Vijecnica', our great, beautiful library where a hundred thousand volumes were reduced to cinders. Then it was the turn of the bakery. The city was gutted.²⁵

This writer, Dzavid Husic, tracks the loss of the water supply, electricity (so frozen food supplies spoil), the way that grass grows over unused tramlines, how the offices of the newspaper *Oslobodjenje* are bombed and burnt, how shops are wrecked and looted. The final indignity is the inability of the mourning to bury their dead:

The teacher Stojan Tomic is also dead. His son carried him to the cemetery all on his own. He dug the grave, was driven away by a hail of bullets and returned later to fill it in. There is no more room to bury the dead even in the parks. They have now begun to use the Kosovo football ground.²⁶

Daily life, even at its most basic, is disrupted when sleep is denied. Softic, Riverbend and Amiry all talk about the terrible consequences of simply not getting a decent night's sleep because of the noise of shelling, the fear that this provokes and how difficult this makes getting through the next day.

Fear and terror, as we can imagine, accompany the litanies of lack. Fear seeps in and disrupts peoples' abilities to do the most basic things. Riverbend, for example, describes a routine visit to an aunt's house in another district of Baghdad, a straightforward car-journey of about 20 minutes before the war, becoming by August 2003 a major enterprise. Familial permission has to be sought to make the journey. They choose a battered car to lessen the chance of it being hi-jacked, stolen. The party of five watch constantly for trouble. The carload of people arrive at their destination late and terrified by the forces unleashed by the American invasion and occupation of Baghdad.²⁷

So: if narratives of destruction and survival are, first, about routine acts of daily living in circumstances of extreme terror and danger, what does this brief review tell us about identification, urbicide and the utility of these narratives?

First, that there is an urgency to them in the ways that they urge identification. They were written in the moment: Riverbend's account is a web log, Amiry's book collates emails sent to friends as the process of military occupation continued; Softic's book is a collection of letters to friends, plus the parts of a diary that she wants to communicate; Cataldi's book edits together a collection of letters from many different people in Sarajevo to many distant families and friends. There is an urgency about

communicating mundane daily activities undertaken in extreme circumstances: this is what urban warfare is like, they say; these are the fault-lines created and marked out by the disruptions brought by armed violence.

Second, they are strategic acts written to bridge the fault-lines and to dispute the process of othering that these fault-lines impose. These narratives are written because their writers want us to identify with their experiences; their writers don't want 'us', their readers, to see them as 'them', as 'others'. Slavenka Drakulic, for example, writes explicitly about this regarding her friend Dražena, a refugee and potential 'other'.²⁸ In bridging those fault lines, these narratives are written with the purpose of bridging the gulf that the deployment of military power opens up, between those who experience it and those who don't. They are about communicating information about the effect of the disruption on daily life, and they are alert to the act of communication as a strategic practice. Because, as Drakulic observes, war is our responsibility, all of us. If we ignore what is going on, we allow the process of othering to proceed unchecked, it ceases to be shared. As she points out, military power's great achievement is to allow this to happen; she argues that out of the opportunism and fear brought by armed conflict, 'we all are becoming collaborators or accomplices in the perpetuation of war'. War causes fault lines between people. The strategy for resistance is limited and politically profound: 'Our defence is weak, as is our consciousness of it. There are no them and us, there are no grand categories, abstract numbers, black and white truths, simple facts. There is only us – and yes, we are responsible for each other.'²⁹ Narratives are necessary acts of resistance. As Suad Amiry says, at one point she can pursue the only act of resistance open to her: she refuses to leave her house to go shopping during the lifting of an IDF curfew, and she tells as many people as she can about this simple act of defiance.³⁰

Urbicide is soul-destroying

These narratives, then, are not just about describing the privations imposed by urban military operations, but are also about urging us as readers to identify with the experiences of the writers of these narratives. Indeed, inculcating identification between reader and writer is, for some narratives, an explicit political act, a strategy of resistance to armed violence and its associated rhetorics of othering and exceptionalism that hegemonic power (in particular) deploys so readily to describe its

objects of domination. Material deprivation is not, by any means, the only consequence of armed conflict that we are being asked to identify with when we read these narratives. Armed conflict maims, physically and mentally. Furthermore, as these narratives make explicit, there are consequences to the physical changing of the urban fabric for the people who live there.³¹

This is not just about physical changes to the urban fabric and urban morphology, although this is significant. In Sarajevo, for example, all the trees are chopped down for fuel, and places and spaces of leisure, relaxation and renewal, such as urban parks, are removed. This has consequences for how the citizens of Sarajevo can endure the siege of the city.³² In Baghdad, as in Sarajevo, football grounds become burial grounds, spaces of celebration and joy become spaces of mourning and grief, and this of course has consequences for how the citizens use the spaces of the city.³³ Urban operations entail destruction: 'some streets have simply disappeared', the street corners are no longer there and the vistas through urban space, one of the sources of aesthetic pleasure in any cityscape, have been removed or altered because of the absence of trees and buildings that used to frame the view.³⁴ For Softic, the absence of the railway station and of schools implies quite clearly what is happening to Sarajevo; communications and education are being denied.³⁵ Amiry is blunt, and notes her shock: 'Ramallah and al-Bireh looked like a war zone'.³⁶ This remark illustrates well the point about identification; we her readers, habituated by media coverage to an imaginary of the Occupied Territories as near-total battlespaces, see these places as little more than war zones. That Amiry is shocked by this sight forces us to reconsider. The place looks like a war zone because 'electricity poles are turned upside-down, there were dozens of flattened cars scattered on the road, and glass and debris everywhere.'³⁷ We, her readers, are reminded in this that Ramallah and al-Bireh are, first and foremost, residential areas; although much of the story around Amiry's life in Ramallah in 2001 is woven around encounters with family, friends and neighbours (that is, encounters that we ourselves would recognise), it is this observation about visible change to the urban fabric that really makes us stop and think.

The narratives of destruction and survival also explore the personal, psychological changes that go with the destruction of urban fabric; they link the effects of fear with ways of being urban. For Softic, bodily displays of urban sophistication and the plaster dust and broken glass of bombarded Sarajevo fit together strangely the day after a heavy bombardment:

It's a gorgeous day, and people are walking and looking around. They all have a fearful air about them, despite the fact – and this really caught my eye – that they're generally well dressed, the women are wearing make-up, no-one is in a hurry.³⁸:

For Riverbend, daily acts become battles with fear, the urban onslaught and its effects wreak physical and mental havoc, and determine how (and whether) urban space can even be used in ways it once was. Writing of the journey across Baghdad, outlined above:

By the time we got to my aunt's house, every muscle in my body was aching. My eyes were burning with the heat and the strain. E.'s brow was furrowed with the scenes we had left behind us on the street and the cousin's hands were shaking almost imperceptibly- knuckles still white with tension. My mother said a prayer of gratitude for our safe arrival and the cousin's wife, T., swore she wasn't going to leave my aunt's house for another three days and if we planned to go home today, we could do so without her because God needed to look out for other people today, not just us...³⁹

Friendships change, as armed violence and its consequences forces the re-evaluation of others. Dizdarević explains how this happens:

Our modest intimate exchanges in this everyday existence, when we're not busy saving our skins, revolve around stories of people who still live here, and stories of those who no longer dwell among us, for one reason or another. About those who are here, we soon learn more than we've ever known before. We unearth old stories that for years have only served to accompany an occasional nod. We identify with our own past in a new way: we realize the emptiness of some friendships, and the need to return to others which now appear in a new light.⁴⁰

There's a solidarity of survivors at work:

In this world consisting only of a street with no phones or freedom of movement, you see the only thing that matters – (in)humanity. And from this perspective, we ask the questions: who left, why, and where have they gone? Who stayed simply because he or she did not want to leave? Today you include those who haven't been able to leave in the category of those who didn't want to leave. And that is as it should be.⁴¹

The effects of military violence on children is seen as being particularly acute for their mental health.⁴² A common theme in Sarajevo's siege narratives is the anxiety over the benefits of children leaving the city, and the horror of the act of leaving for the children and the parents that remain. The letters collected together by Anna Cataldi are heartrending. Mothers write to their children, explaining how much better it is for them to be where they are, safe, than there with their parents in Sarajevo:

Thousands and thousands of boys and girls here in Sarajevo go to sleep with the boom of explosions in their ears, they have no time to play, and they smile less and less.⁴³

It is dreadful for the children here. The city is shelled every day and the children spend nearly all their time in cellars or shut up in their apartments. Try to imagine what it's like when the sun is shining outside and you're not allowed out of the cellar.⁴⁴

Softic notes the death of two children killed whilst playing. 'They were sledding: How can you shut a child up in an apartment...'⁴⁵ Karahasan sees not only the misery of a parent's inability to perform the most atavistic act of parenting in protecting their own children, but reflects on what that actually means for the city. He writes of his neighbour, Mrs Maria, weeping because her children were with her:

When I finally understood her, I realized that my city ceased to be real at that moment, because it turned our familiar reality around the way a mirror reverses an image: all the joy, pleasure and beauty of real life turned into pain today.⁴⁶

If it takes a village to raise a child, then children in turn make the city.

The wider cultural consequences of the damage to individuals' senses of self, as an intent and effect of urbicide, is a recognised theme in commentaries on the Bosnian war. As Coward argues, deliberate targeting of symbols of heterogeneous urban culture in Bosnia was itself a move towards killing heterogeneity and the conditions which make that heterogeneity possible.⁴⁷ Zdravko Grebo talks of this when he writes in the (January 1993) manifesto of an alternative Sarajevo radio station, Radio Zid, about images of Bosnian destruction:

[...] what could not be recognised in those images was the slaughtering of the civic spirit and culture of the country's urban parts. The demolished buildings,

collapsed bridges and other edifices will be restored, more easily than the urban and civilisational spirit that had been created over the centuries.⁴⁸

'And yet my city survives', says Dzavid Husic, after describing the burial of Stojan Tomic (see above).⁴⁹ War as an extreme form of life, war as a celebration of survival, is a motif in soldiers' tales. It is there, too, in these civilian narratives. Softic talks of how strangely energising and exhilarating artillery bombardments can be.⁵⁰ Tishkov, writing about Chechnya:

The Chechen conflict shows how war can be conceived of, not only as death and destruction, but as an extreme and dramatic form of life. Air raids, artillery bombardments, battles, torture, executions, fears and grieving merge with human experiences like peace, victory, joy, songs, humour and boredom. Seen from this perspective, the disasters of war engender a culture of survival, which manifests itself not only in the trenches and on the battlefield but also, for example, among people hiding in cellars fearing that they may not be able to dart out for drinking water fast enough to escape death.⁵¹

The city survives, but in ways that leave its inhabitants searching for appropriate metaphors and comparisons for the way in which the destruction of the city is (often quite literally) doing their heads in. The comparison and metaphor of the concentration camp is used by Karahasan, Softic, Cataldi's correspondents and Drakulic to try and explain how both urban space and head space are reconfigured. Drakulic writes of 'the way [war] changes us slowly from within' in parallel with the physical destruction of the city.

Both Sarajevo under siege and Auschwitz represent a closed system, with their own sets of rules and patterns of human behaviour. And every closed system where people get killed and one is uncertain about the future, produces a certain kind of psychology that is not easy to understand.⁵²

For Drakulic, narratives of destruction and survival are often the only option available for those who would at least try to understand what it going on around them. In addition, by dwelling on unseen hurt and invisible damage, they offer a response to platitudes which talk about the ease with which a city can be rebuilt purely through physical reconstruction. They are a challenge not only to militarism's naturalising tendencies to legitimise the state-sanctioned exercise of lethal force, even where (or

especially where) a response may be disproportionate and utterly destructive, but to the discourses of reconstruction that follow.

The right to the city

Urbicide, as others have argued, is about more than physical damage and mental distress; it is about denying the right to the city.⁵³ The narratives make this clear. They also sketch out empirically how this process works.

The narratives do this, first, by showing how simple things such as the ability to communicate through urban space are disrupted, the flow of ideas disjointed. The right to the city is the right to communicate freely, and this is denied. Riverbend's narrative is full of complaints about the consequences of disruptions to communications networks for civic life as well as family life: 'We live in the same city, feel that we're world's apart'.⁵⁴ Softic too hears news from other Sarajevo districts that she feels are now a world apart. Dizdarevic talks of the lack of telephones and freedom of movement, and of the new (old) forms of personal, unmediated communication that spring up in their place. Riverbend writes of the significance, for example, of the grocer's stall on a local street, where news of the progress of the invading and conquering US armed forces can be read from the varieties and quality of fresh vegetables on sale.⁵⁵ Communications networks, when restored, make 'life in Sarajevo [...] recognizably 'urban''; after armed intervention following the Markale market shelling in February 1994, trams run, access roads are opened by the UN, merchandise reaches the city again, prices drop, utilities are improved and shops and cafes open again.⁵⁶

The city as a place of leisure and pleasure, and the destruction of that by urban military operations, is a second theme here. I have already mentioned the children killed whilst sledging in the Sarajevo snow; Anthony Loyd, in his account of the first Chechen war, writes of a listless dead-eyed child sledging alone in the slush and rubble of Grozny, unable to take joy in play.⁵⁷ Loyd and Carter both talk about the parties and nightclubs of Sarajevo under siege, of people frantically grasping for fun in places where piles of crutches lie amongst discarded winter coats in hallways and cloakrooms.⁵⁸ '...[W]hen it's all over, this will be an accursed city of cripples who will drift like ghosts amid the ruins'.⁵⁹ Popular culture may be a site of resistance (Carter was instrumental in U2's engagement with the Bosnian war), but it is a tense place to

be for Softic, who is gloomy and angry at what the destruction of her city implies for a culturally sophisticated city, a place she calls 'the worldliest in the world' because 'it accepts differences as value, and ridicules prejudice and rigidity as so much nonsense'.⁶⁰ Her narrative smoulders with anger at what the incursion of snipers means for this city of pleasure and cultural sophistication:

The type who at some point forced their way down from their mountain caves and shambled into the city. The asphalt gave them blisters, the traffic made their heads spin, the elevators terrified them, the apartment buildings and high-rises made them claustrophobic, the books proved their intellectual inferiority, and now they have their revenge! They kill and destroy. Perhaps the doctor of philosophy, the professor at the University of Sarajevo [a reference to Nikola Koljevic, Karadzic's deputy] supposedly an expert in German classical idealism, a man who might have been my mentor, has interpreted Rousseau in a manner incomprehensible for a civilized being. He has understood the return to nature quite literally: that is, he is quite literally destroying the city (remember, Professor, the city – is civilization).⁶¹

The city as a place of refuge, of safety, is a third theme. Drakulic, in a piece written in response to the first air-raid warnings in Zagreb in September 1991, mourns the loss of this urban function. She writes of an experience common to many of us, of eating pasta and drinking red wine with a friend one September Sunday. The air-raid siren sounds, and with her fork poised mid-way between plate and mouth, sees an image of a roofless house and bedroom, an image she knows from television news coverage of other wars in other places. She sees this as indicative of 'the perversity of war stripping away from us all intimacy' through the exposure of the bedroom, a place of privacy. The next day, a Monday, on hearing air raid siren whilst out on the central city streets, she dives into the first building she can and makes her way downstairs, looking for a cellar. The place is damp, with exposed wires on the walls and permeated with the smell of 'moisture, boiled potatoes and cabbage stew' indicating habitation. She sees a woman with a child, and realises that this cellar is this woman's home. She leaves the building and walks home, thinking how the woman 'didn't need war to be forced underground, she was already there.' On hearing the second siren of the day, she stays in her room and it dawns on her that there really is no place to hide. 'I wanted to hide, but instead I just covered my head with a blanket'. 'This whole city after all was a place people built to be a hiding

place. Its vulnerability therefore is a measurement of our own vulnerability, our own fragility.¹⁶²

She decides to leave the city; the city has ceased to be a place of refuge. This was not something that she had intended, but ‘a decision brought about at some deeper level so that I was barely aware of it.’ Using the metaphor of the city as a body, corporeal and sentient, she sees Zagreb as silenced and suffocated, along with its citizens:

Like so many others, I was suffering together with the city: our trembling pulse was getting weaker and weaker, our nervous system seizing up, our blood circulation slowing, our eyes blinded, our mouths shut.¹⁶³

For Drakulic, the silencing of the city (the piece is called *Dead Silence of the City*), the ‘terrible absence of noise’ in the siren-induced blackout, is its death.

Urban populations and other difficult distractions

The most powerful of these narratives of destruction and survival are not just those that are well written. They are the ones that deal with the things that could most easily be overlooked, shrugged off, assumed, made commonplace, naturalised. They are the narratives that disrupt the normalization of war (a clumsy term), in that they disrupt the strategies deployed by state and sub-state actors to make armed violence appear normal, proportional and legitimate. What these narratives of destruction and survival do, by forcing our identification (our attention), is disrupt the easy rhetoric of militarism. They are discomforting to us as readers, in their demands that we reflect not only on the experiences related by their authors, but also on our own potential reactions and activities were we to be faced with their authors’ situations.

Militarism, the prioritising of military objectives and imperatives in civilian economic, social, political and cultural life, is material and spatial, but it is also discursive. These narratives disrupt that discursive logic by joining together the familiarities of urban life with the strangeness of armed violence and its consequences. Therein lies their significance and their power, as strategic interventions in an otherwise rather muted conversation about the effects of contemporary modes of military violence. Their very focus on the details and tedium of daily survival are a counter to the

fascination of much print and broadcast media with what is novel, exciting, 'newsworthy' in urbanized warfare. At the very least, to repeat Drakulic, '[w]e write to affirm our humanity, even if it changes nothing.' That affirmation of humanity would seem particularly important given dominant (primarily US) thinking about who and what the people of cities actually are. This view recognises people primarily as a challenge or an obstacle to urban military operations:

The four functions of command; control; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and communications are all fundamental to success in any environment, but the urban population's dense populations, many manmade structures, and other challenges act to severely impede each in several ways.⁶⁴

An edited collection on *Urban Battle Command for the 21st Century* presents these urban populations, as 'a difficulty for the modern commander' who, in having to 'worry about the welfare of multitudes of civilians', faces a 'distraction' not faced by, for example, commanders in the First World War.

How much different when one's actions influence the safety and survival of tens, hundreds, or even tens of thousands of noncombatants while the enemy is no less malevolent in his intentions.⁶⁵

These narratives affirm the humanity of these difficult distractions. Ultimately, they negate the cynicism of those who dismiss representational acts for their profusion, or would prefer to focus on war's spectacle rather than its lived experience. Susan Sontag is scornful of efforts to deny identification and engagement, because of what this implies for our collective empathy and for what this means in turn for our ability to make connections between privileged safety and suffering:

Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity. Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one's chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority.⁶⁶

The literature of urbicide is powerful precisely because of the identification work it promotes, which keeps such distancing at bay.

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¹ Suad Amiry *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries*, London: Granta Books, 2005, pp.119-124.

² By this I mean the readership of the published book, rather than the much smaller circle of readers of the emails around which the book is built.

³ Complaints about the subjectivity and atypicality of narratives is a common response to autobiographical writing, including writing about war: see Alex Vernon Ed., *Arms and the Self: War, the Military, and Autobiographical Writing* Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004. Riverbend's weblog, for example, notes from time to time the accusations made to her by correspondents complaining of her subjectivity and atypicality. Riverbend is the pen name of an Iraqi woman resident in Baghdad, whose weblog, 'Baghdad Burning', has documented the allied invasion and civil war as they have unfolded since August 2003; see <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>. Other blogs commenting on Iraq and the lived experience of urbicide include 'A Family in Baghdad', writing from November 2003 to the present (<http://afamilyinbaghdad.blogspot.com/>) and the writer Salam Pax, whose postings from Iraq in the early stage of the invasion were published as *The Baghdad Blog*: London: Atlantic, 2003.

⁴ Linda Anderson *Autobiography*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.2.

⁵ For an excellent introduction, see Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000.

⁶ Samuel Hynes, for example, prioritises the memoirs of the combat soldier to the exclusion of others; see Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, London: Pimlico, 1997. Vernon is more sceptical about such strict parameters, celebrating a broader definition of military autobiography; see Vernon, *Arms and the Self*, op. cit.

⁷ Examples range from the writings around the First World War by Siegfried Sassoon (*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, London: Faber & Faber, 1930) and Robert Graves (*Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), to contemporary soldier tales by writers such as Andy McNab (*Bravo Two Zero*, London: Corgi, 1993) and Anthony Swofford (*Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*, New York: Scribner, 2005).

⁸ See, for example, the writings of Michael Herr (*Dispatches*, London: Picador, 1978), Anthony Loyd (*My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, London: Doubleday, 1999), Martha Gellhorn (*The Face of War*, London: Granta Books, 1993), Janine di Giovanni (*Madness Visible: A Memoir of War*, London: Bloomsbury, 2005) and Tim O'Brien (*If I Die in a Combat Zone*, London: Flamingo, 1995).

⁹ Lynne Minion *Hello Missus: A Girl's Own Guide to Foreign Affairs*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2004; Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlethwaite and Andrew Thomson, *Emergency Sex (And Other Desperate Measures)*, London: Ebury, 2004; Bill Carter, *Fools Rush In*, London: Corgi, 2004.

¹⁰ I don't offer an explicitly gendered reading of these narratives here, but don't deny the possibility of this. For an example of an explicitly gendered reading of Al Radi's

Baghdad Diaries, see Brinda J. Mehta “Nuha Al Radi’s Baghdad Diaries: dissidence, creativity and embargo art in Nuha Al Radi’s Baghdad Diaries” in *Meridians: Feminism, race, transnationalism* Volume 6, no 2, 2006, pp. 220-235.

¹¹ Militarism can be defined as a process that operates materially and discursively to prioritise military objectives in civilian economic, political and social life. See Chalmers Johnson *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003; Rachel Woodward “From military geography to militarism’s geographies” in *Progress in Human Geography* Volume 29 no 6, 2005, pp.718-740.

¹² Michael Ignatieff *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

¹³ See for example David Miller (Ed.) *Tell Me Lies: Propoganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq*, London: Pluto Press, 2003; David Edwards and David Cromwell *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media*, London: Pluto Press, 2006.

¹⁴ Slavenka Drakulic ‘Dead silence of the city’, in *Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War*, London: Hutchinson, 1993, p.22.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Drakulic, ‘Afterword’ in Dzevad Karahasan *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City*, Yowkr: Kodansha International, 1994, p.120.

¹⁷ Zlatko Dizdarevic *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City*, New York: Fromm International, 1993, p.8.

¹⁸ Elma Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, St Paul Minesota: Hungry Mind Press, 1996, p.57.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.30.

²⁰ Ibid, p.38.

²¹ The phrases are Mehta’s, *Nuha Al-Radi’s Baghdad Diaries*, op. cit..

²² Riverbend, 31st October 2003.

²³ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, p.74.

²⁴ Anna Cataldi, *Letters from Sarajevo: Voices of a Besieged City*, Shaftsbury: Element Books, 1994, p.54; letter from ‘Nadja, Mia and Sefik’ to ‘our dear children’, 31st August 1992.

²⁵ Ibid, p.41, Dzavid Husic to friends in Belgrade from Vienna, August 1992.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 42, Dzavid Husic, August 1992.

²⁷ Riverbend, 30th August 2003. Riverbend refutes the idea that the invasion is a willing coalition exercise.

²⁸ Drakulic, *Balkan Express*, ‘High Heeled Shoes’, pp.137-146.

²⁹ Ibid, p.146.

³⁰ Amiry, *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law*, p.130.

³¹ The metaphor of the injured body features prominently in many narratives about the destruction of the city.

³² See for example Karahasan, *Sarajevo*.

³³ Riverbend 9th April 2004.

³⁴ Dizdarević, *Sarajevo: A War Journal*, p.39.

³⁵ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, pp.98-99.

³⁶ Amiry, *Sharon and my Mother-in-Law*, p.132.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, pp. 1-12.

³⁹ Riverbend, 30th August 2003.

⁴⁰ Dizdarevic, *Sarajevo: A War Journal*, p.19.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Riverbend’s assessment of the reactions of children to the sound and impact of explosions, 16th November 2003.

⁴³ Cataldi, *Letters from Sarajevo*, p.48. Aunt Jasna to a niece, 1st September 1992.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.55. A mother writing to her children, 17th September 1992.

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- ⁴⁵ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, p.131.
- ⁴⁶ Karahasan, *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City*, p.41.
- ⁴⁷ Martin Coward "Urbicide in Bosnia" in *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards and Urban Geopolitics*. Edited by Steven Graham, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp.154-171.
- ⁴⁸ Quoted in Janine Di Giovanni *The Quick and the Dead: Under Siege in Sarajevo* London: Phoenix House, 1994, p.3.
- ⁴⁹ Cataldi, *Letters from Sarajevo*, p.42, Dzavid Husic, August 1992.
- ⁵⁰ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, p.81.
- ⁵¹ Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press, 2004, p.128.
- ⁵² Slavenka Drakulic, afterword in Karahasan, *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City*, p.114.
- ⁵³ Graham, *Cities, War and Terrorism*.
- ⁵⁴ Riverbend, 5th November 2003, 9th November 2003.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, p.162.
- ⁵⁷ Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*.
- ⁵⁸ Carter, *Fools Rush In*.
- ⁵⁹ Softic, *Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights*, p.63
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. p.56.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, p.15
- ⁶² Drakulic, *Balkan Express*, pp.23-26.
- ⁶³ Ibid, p.26.
- ⁶⁴ Russell Glenn and G. Kingston, *Urban Battle Command in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2005, p.iii
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, p.x.
- ⁶⁶ Susan Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin, 2003, pp.99-100.