

Breathing: Violence In, Peace Out

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Published

2016

Journal Title

Queensland Review

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

DOI

[10.1017/qre.2016.40](https://doi.org/10.1017/qre.2016.40)

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forensic eye, snaring the precise moment of change in her characters' mostly ordinary lives. Her stories offer no easy solution to the problem of human yearning; rather, she inspects it in all its messy permutations, giving it shape and substance, showing us the range of consequences — good, bad and sometimes horrendous — yielded by unchecked desire.

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Reference

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doi [10.1017/qre.2016.40](https://doi.org/10.1017/qre.2016.40)

Ivana Milojević, *Breathing: Violence In, Peace Out*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2013, ISBN 9 7807 0224 9693, 296 pp., \$39.95.

This is a rare type of book that interweaves personal narrative with critical commentary on violent conflict and the possibilities of peace. The author, while reflective and mindful of her narrative, does not shy away from the bite of reality. As she says in the introduction:

Writing my stories and their stories made me suffer, made me cry and made me struggle with how much I was allowed to reveal. It made me ask tough questions about authenticity and ethics, self-serving attributional biases and the politics of victimhood, as well as whether I was a traitor or a truth seeker. (2013: 3)

However, this is not a book meant for anyone in need of immediate positive affirmations. It is grounded in grand violent narratives and the author's attempt to make sense of them, and the possibility of a more peaceful future for her and the planet. Chapters include 'in' sections where the personal story — of the author and her community — is told alongside an 'out' section where the external world is theorised. We breathe the story, slowing down and speeding up, and pausing when required.

The first narrative is focused on communism and the possibility of utopia. The chapter deals with oppression and terror caused by totalitarianism and seeks alternative understandings behind oppression. It also suggests factors that may prevent it in the future. In addition, this chapter 'starts an inquiry into another central theme: the ways our individual and collective images and views about the future impact our actions that, in turn, help manifest particular preferred futures' (2013: 5).

The second narrative focuses on war and dystopia. This chapter exposes the mechanisms behind acts of collective violence — militarism, imperialism and nationalism — and explores their long-term implications. Its central theme is hierarchy. While we may be aware of critical accounts of war, what makes this chapter

and other chapters striking is the ‘in’ part — the personal context. In this chapter, the author writes of her paternal grandmother Zora, who was in her mid-eighties at the time of NATO’s three-month bombing campaign of Serbia and Montenegro. Zora recalls, ‘I heard the bombs and the explosions, of course.’ The author writes of her grandmother’s equanimity: ‘She would sit on her sofa bed, the very same sofa bed that she’d been sitting on for over 60 years. She would sit and listen. “Sometimes the explosion was to the right, sometimes to the left . . . If they were to drop the bomb on my house, why would I care? . . . I’ve been ripe for many years now, it’s about time.”’ (2013: 115–16).

However, while Zora may have exhibited equanimity, most suffered profound psychological trauma. Indeed, a whole society can behave as if it has post-traumatic stress syndrome (2013: 242). Such unhealed traumas at the collective level subsequently serve as a fertile ground for the recreation of cycles of violence, which the author discusses in this and subsequent chapters.

The third narrative of the book is ‘Feminism, Eutopia’. Much of the text tells the inspiring stories of peace and anti-war women’s organisations in the former Yugoslavia. However, the author skilfully reminds us that men do not just act in violent ways: they are also the objects of violence.

The ‘in’ part of this chapter tells the story of the author’s uncle, Slobodan. On 27 February 1993, while taking a train, he was asked twice for his identification. He did not think anything of it. He found out later that a Serbian paramilitary group was removing a group of men from the train and murdering them.

Out of some twenty ‘in’ stories, the vast majority deal with the author’s or her family’s direct dealings with various acts of violence. Each of these stories is subsequently followed up with a sense-making analysis to find ways of creating more peaceful futures.

This is a remarkable book. It tells the stories of violence and war, torture and brutality, but ends with hope. The author holds the pain inside her — her breath. She asks us all to breathe in violence and breathe out peace. The key is in transformation and transcendence for the best possible outcomes. The other option — retaliation or revenge — only succeeds in creating more ‘in’ stories of violence.

The author concludes her fourth chapter, ‘Living Trauma’, with the following quotation from William Simon: ‘Peace is strangely ephemeral. It is something like breathing; one only becomes acutely aware of its importance when one is choking’ (2013: 200). Milojević reminds us that environment and social support are critical strategies for dealing with trauma from war. Internal and external factors both count. How we see the world and the nature of the world we see are equally significant. The author suggests that we move to an ecological understanding of peace and violence, of suffering and trauma. In this approach, like breathing, internal and external factors are interrelated; they are connected, weaving in and out. I strongly recommend this book. The social commentary is brilliant and the inner stories fascinating. You will be challenged in every way possible. Read it. Change. Breathe.

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