



Alisse Waterston's HARMONY

by *Adrienne Anifant*

The common adage “all good things come in threes” is true for Professor Alisse Waterston in the Department of Anthropology because 2013 has been a year of very good things.

Waterston published her capstone work titled *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century*, she was elected president of the American Anthropological Association, and she became editor of the experimental online scholarly journal, *Open Anthropology*. In addition to this trinity of accomplishments, she made full recovery from a near fatal car accident on a narrow, winding road in the mountains of Tbilisi, in the Republic of Georgia this past March.

My Father's Wars is a visionary leap into storytelling and learning. “I came to this project as a daughter and as an anthropologist. I tried to portray my father as I knew him — with his flaws and his virtues, his strengths and his vulnerabilities, neither all-good nor all-bad, just real. There are many layers to his story and to my motivation,” said Waterston. “It’s about relationships but also

about social history — the conditions within which he lived out his life and enacted his beliefs.”

Through this “intimate ethnography,” an academic term she coined with a colleague, Waterston uses her multidimensional exploration of a man’s life — her father’s life — to examine the ways socio-political and cultural forces form the contours of an individual’s memory and experiences. By following the arc of her father’s experiences — a Jewish boy growing up in Jedwabne, Poland, a young man owning a business in Havana, an old man in San Juan, Puerto Rico — she attempts to understand the powerful forces of war, genocide and structural violence, and compassion, survival and goodness in shaping the contour of human lives. She probes into the circumstances of a person’s life in which he or she is born through the ethnological narrative of her father, the analysis of a seasoned anthropologist, and through the personal narrative of a daughter who is forever watching, studying,



reaching to understand her father and the violent century that framed his life.

My Father's War is published by Routledge in a series called Innovative Ethnographies. Waterston said that this series is a perfect fit for her book because it addresses a growing conundrum among anthropologists who have questioned their authority to represent others in writing and who increasingly question for whom are they writing.

"I don't want to write or talk to only my academic community. I seek to write in a way that reaches larger audiences, to share my knowledge and communicate something about the world to the world. After all, anthropology is the study of humankind. I hope *My Father's Wars* accomplishes this goal."

This is a very unusual project for a scholar to endeavor, she acknowledges. It is personal, yet it offers history and anthropological analysis. It is her father's history in relation to a larger history and the

multimedia approach in which she wrote it.

Waterston's book is also innovative in that it has a Web component that enhances the reader's experience. In the print version, symbols are imbedded in the text directing the reader to various URL addresses. On a tablet, hyperlinks bring readers to a story companion on her website (<http://myfatherswars.com/>) or an external link, such as a YouTube video or an audio excerpt of her father telling her a story.

"I'm interested in using any tool that helps transcend different fields and sectors of society and to bring the reader into the analysis of history," said Waterston.

Waterston, who is also a John Jay-Vera Fellows Program faculty member and a Soros International Scholar, was elected President of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) this year, which is the largest professional organization for anthropologists in the world. She will serve for four years with the first two years of her tenure as President-elect.

Waterston has served in various leadership roles at the AAA for over 15 years, participating in the digital transition that began 10 years ago to transfer the AAA's archive of scholarly journals to an electronic database called AnthroSource. Waterston says that contemporary leading issues that anthropologists and the AAA face include finding new ways to disseminate scholarly knowledge, while at the same time ensuring a sustainable publishing program in the context of tight budgets throughout all of academia for journals and university libraries.

"I am deeply honored to come into this presidency. AAA is operating amidst great change — the digital revolution. I believe I have a good understanding of the critical issues facing it over the next four or five years, and hope I can play a positive role in facilitating smooth transition with any changes that may occur."

Waterston was also selected to be the editor of the new experimental online journal *Open Anthropology* (<http://www.aaapenanthro.org/>) that will be published three times a year. The journal was created to make anthropology more accessible to a broader audience in part by opening up the AAA's archives that are generally behind a pay wall. Waterston as editor will curate each issue on topics that have relevancy for contemporary issues.

For each issue, Waterston will select 12 articles related to the issue's theme across time and the AAA's 24-plus journals. Anyone can have access to this material online anytime, anywhere for at least six months; some content will remain open in perpetuity.

"The launch issue is titled 'Marriage and Other Arrangements' and the fall issue is 'On Violence.' Topics for future issues will be immigration, health care, and sports. This journal is not only about experimenting with different models of publishing, but about engagement with contemporary issues. Anthropologists want to be part of the conversation, and we want to bring anthropology to public conversations," said Waterston. JJ