

Title VIII Final Report
Challenges to Nationalism and Fundamentalism
in Bosnian Women's Postwar Cultural Production

Introduction

The aim of my postdoctoral research was twofold: to learn more about how women writers, visual artists, and scholars are re-framing debates in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina's public sphere about cultural identity, and to strategize ways in which U.S. decision-makers could strengthen these women's voices as a key component in building civil society. After conducting background reading and consulting with individuals engaged in Bosnia's cultural life, I focused on writers Adisa Bašić, Fadila Nura Haver, Alma Lazarevska, Nermina Omerbegović, Šejla Šehabović, Tanja Stupar-Trifunović, and Ajla Terzić; scholars Anisa Avdagić, Alma Denić-Grabić, Jasmina Husanović, and Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać; visual artists Šejla Kamerić, Alma Suljević, and Jasmila Žbanić; and producers Amra Bakšić-Čamo and Dunja Blažević.

Before outlining my preliminary findings, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which these women's works challenged me to re-examine the terms through which I initially conceptualized my research topic. I conceived of this project as focusing on "*challenges to nationalism and fundamentalism*," and while I found plentiful material polemicizing with nationalism, I came across far fewer discussions of Islamic fundamentalism or even of Islam per se (or of Catholicism or the Orthodox church, for that matter). My conclusion is that Islamic fundamentalism, while a source of concern to Western observers and highly visible due to imported styles of dress and architectural idioms, in fact exerts a negligible influence in Bosnia's greater social and cultural sphere. The transition to capitalism and effects of globalization represent a far greater concern to the women whose works I examined, and my sense is that the ideology of nationalism is now seen less as an impediment to "normalization" than as a reflection of the new norm—that is, as a cloak for the introduction of a version of capitalism that offers few protections or guarantees, has been tainted by rampant corruption, and has furnished unprecedented opportunities for the enrichment of the political elite and organized crime.

I intended to limit my research to “*Bosnian women*” because of their under-representation in social, cultural, and political institutions. However, this category may be too narrowly conceived to do justice to the diverse social networks that cultural producers are forming in their efforts to make society more inclusive. Focusing on Bosnian women excludes from consideration the work of like-minded male colleagues,¹ as well as individuals and organizations in the other former Yugoslav republics that are working with their Bosnian counterparts on projects that transcend national borders.² Following the lead of many regional scholars on gender issues, I looked to Yugoslav feminist Dubravka Ugrešić, who was vilified during the war for daring to criticize Croatian nationalists and who refuses to identify as “Croatian,” for direction in conceptualizing my research; the frequency with which her work is cited testifies to the fact that ideas never respect borders.

I wished to look at “*postwar*” Bosnia because it seemed to me that this era represents a particularly fraught period of social change, one in which numerous ideologies and identities are vying for “market dominance” in the public sphere. However, the work of scholars Jasmina Husanović and Damir Arsenijević led me to interrogate my uncritical use of this term. They argue that the notion of a “postwar” era constructs an artificial sense of rupture between the periods before and after the war, obscuring the many types of historical, social, and political continuity that bridge the “pre” and the “post.” This rupture represents a key strategy for inducing the kind of historical amnesia that the political elites rely upon to distract ordinary people from their misuse of power (Husanović, “At the Interstices” 271; Arsenijević 159).

And finally, my focus on the field of “*cultural production*” suggests an intrinsic link between culture and politics in Bosnia, one which no Bosnian artist or writer could deny given the complicity of the cultural sphere in the creation and dissemination of ethnonationalist

¹ For example, Damir Arsenijević’s work on poetry and gender was of great help for this project.

² One such example is the long-term interdisciplinary research project “Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art,” whose participants include art collectives from across the region: kuda.org from Novi Sad, Prelom Kolektiv from Belgrade, WHW from Zagreb, and SCCA/pro.ba from Sarajevo.

ideology. However, the women featured in this research generally fall into two distinct camps in their conceptualization of this relationship. The first approach views any form of collective identity with suspicion and fiercely defends the private and the individual as the only refuge against various forms of fascism; their works focus on self-exploration and personal memory, and they tend to situate themselves within a greater tradition of Central European modernism.³

By contrast, members of the younger generation tend to consider this approach hopelessly apolitical; instead, they call for new forms of collective identity, solidarity, and action in order to transform society, an approach summed up nicely in the title of Šejla Šehabović's collection of short stories: *Feminine Plural*. These individuals—a loose network of scholars and writers associated with the University of Tuzla,⁴ the University of Sarajevo, and progressive NGOs like *Cure* (Girls) and MediaCentar Sarajevo—essentially collapse the cultural and the political. They argue that a separate cultural sphere never existed in socialist Yugoslavia, which used its writers and intellectuals to manipulate political identity, nor does it in the postsocialist era—regardless of the fact that official institutions seek to defuse the potential of writers, artists, and intellectuals to expose the abuses of the new system by relegating them to a cultural realm deprived of political relevance.

Key Fields of Artistic Intervention

Husanović has emphasized the need for new perspectives in order to transcend the “triple bind” plaguing postwar Bosnia: the culture of amnesia, lies, and denial that continues to dominate the public sphere (“At the Interstices” 271). Artists may be best suited to this formidable task, as their very vocation involves the creative scrambling of received codes in ways that can be

³ This approach has been eloquently articulated by Bosnian diaspora writer Aleksandar Hemon, who affirms the “sovereignty of the individual” in the face of all forms of fascism (see his interview with Boro Kontić in *Sarajevo Notebooks*).

⁴ The journal *Razlika/Différance*, produced by the Society for Literary and Cultural Research (an offshoot of work conducted in the University of Tuzla's Literature Department), is an important venue for the work of progressive scholars and writers. Anisa Avdagić, Damir Arsenijević, Šejla Šehabović, and Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać (at University of Sarajevo, recently deceased) serve on the journal's editorial board.

productive of new social relations and structures. While contemporary Bosnia offers few official venues through which cultural producers can reach a wide audience, many still persist in tackling urgent social issues in works that perhaps only a small number of people will ever read or see.

The following emerged in my research as the most important fields of artistic intervention:

Memory—A key strategy of nationalists during the run-up to the war was the revision of collective memory—from the shared struggle against fascism portrayed in official Yugoslav histories, to newly invented narratives that exaggerated the historical victimization of individual ethnonational communities. Ordinary people faced tremendous pressure to suddenly “forget” fifty years of everyday co-existence and to replace those memories with new ones fabricated by ascendent nationalist elites. This drive only intensified during and after the war, when expressing solidarity with other ethnonational groups, or even worse, refusing to identify with one’s “own” group, could brand one a traitor. Writing just after the end of the war in 1996, Ugrešić argues: “The political battle is a battle for the territory of collective memory” (227-8).

Indeed, memory is arguably the most significant theme in the works examined for this research. Responses to the hijacking of collective memory range from the intensely personal and domestic to the unabashedly public and political. The former approach is exemplified by Jasmila Žbanić’s *Plum Preserves*, a hybrid work that is part cookbook, part photo album, and part family journal. Žbanić, known primarily for her films, juxtaposes an old family recipe, photos from her grandmother’s life, and a narrative of her grandmother’s memories of her youth and eventual exile from the town of Bijeljina, which was ethnically cleansed by Serbs during the war. While Bosniaks were purged from Bijeljina’s public memory through the destruction of mosques, revisionism in museums, and changing of street names, the memories of Žbanić’s grandmother live on in this intimate family text. *Plum Preserves*—whose very name evokes practices of conservation—employs a technique used by many Bosnian women artists and writers in their challenge to the ethnonationalist historical narratives imposed by official institutions: the

preservation in the private, feminine sphere of alternative histories that have been passed down from generation to generation through domestic rituals like cooking and storytelling.

Other artists are staging more overtly political interventions in order to reclaim public memory. For example, the art project “De/construction of Monument,” led by visual artist and producer Dunja Blažević under the auspices of the SCCA (Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art), aims to counter the manipulation of history accomplished through the destruction of old monuments and creation of new ones (*Leap Into the City* 574). This project has held several competitions for unusual new monuments intending to alter the landscape in a manner that subverts official historical narratives; winning entries have included a giant can of processed meat as ironic tribute to foreign aid received during the siege of Sarajevo, and a monument of Bruce Lee in Mostar. Other artists are fighting against cultural amnesia by preserving collective memories that have been officially suppressed. In her exhibit “Dead Head Tongue Speaks” (June-July 2011) at Sarajevo’s Collegium Artisticum gallery, for example, visual artist Alma Suljević screened video clips in which surviving political prisoners from Yugoslavia’s infamous internment camp Goli Otok recount their ordeal. These survivors hailed from all of Yugoslavia’s ethnic groups, and their stories represent one of the countless variations of shared historical experience that ethnonationalist histories aim to erase.

The young novelist Ajla Terzić displaces the issue of memory from the context of war to a more contemporary register. Her novel *Lottery* portrays the evacuation of collective memory not as the cynical product of nationalist historical revisionism, but as an impersonal mechanism of multinational capitalism that tends to induce states of chronic distraction through an endless barrage of invasive ads, images, and jingles. The novel’s narrator struggles to discern her own desires in an environment that alienates the individual from herself, from others, and from the realities of her social context. The only solution is a personal one: to “unplug” from the media matrix and strive to be more fully present.

Epistemology—In a society in which official institutions replaced one version of the truth with its opposite overnight, ensuring that “every newly established lie eventually becomes the truth” (Ugrešić 70), it is incumbent on artists and writers to pose politically dangerous questions: How do we know what we know? What are the sources of our knowledge—firsthand experience? Family lore? Official ideology? Media institutions like radio, television, journalism, and books? Religious doctrine? How do we evaluate the credibility of these sources?

In her short story “Seven Fat Aunts,” Fadila Nura Haver gets to the foundation of this issue by exploring how a child adopts new knowledge of the world. The young narrator overhears an argument between her parents in which her father calls her mother’s aunts “whores,” a word that her mother reacts strongly to but whose meaning the girl does not grasp. The narrator seeks to comprehend this term, and through it the kernel of her parents’ conflict, by listening to those around her, learning about her family tree, and querying a religiously-indoctrinated relative. Ultimately, the story ends with the narrator no closer to comprehension, and the reader has the impression that it will take her years to understand the epithet, along with its implications for her family relationships and larger social structure.

Haver’s personal take on the issue of epistemology is a common one in the works of Bosnian women writers and artists, who consistently turn to firsthand experience as an antidote to the manipulations of official narratives. In her short story “Blind Doors, False Streets,” Alma Lazarevska describes her preferred method for orienting herself in a strange city: by asking ordinary people on the street for directions rather than consulting maps and guides (371-2). Šejla Kamerić’s video installation “What Do I Know?” recounts three tragic love stories through a series of domestic scenes in her grandparents’ traditional Bosnian house: a woman making pies, men repairing a car outside, and stills of rooms furnished with typical everyday household objects. These tales have no doubt been worked over in the process of passing them down from one generation to the next; the scenes are projected onto screens simultaneously, creating an

atemporal effect that suggests that “what we know” results from an ongoing negotiation between the sources of our knowledge and the contingencies of the present context.⁵

In “Call Numbers of Death and the Ethics of Women’s Writing,” scholar Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać poses a key epistemological question: Is there such a thing as “women’s writing”? In other words, do women have access to a specific kind of knowledge, and are they capable of special types of social critique, from which their male counterparts are excluded? Moranjak-Bamburać rejects a gender-essentializing approach but insists that women’s historical experience as an underprivileged social category and as objects of male violence do equip them to challenge the “symbolic violence”—exemplified by masculinist war discourse—that lies at the root of actual violence in everyday life (114). She argues that, in the Bosnian context, the fact that not just women but an entire community was subjected to violence grants women’s imagination special status, rendering their voices the privileged vehicle for speaking out against violence on behalf of society as a whole (115). According to Husanović, “in a context of enforced amnesias and enforced memories around us, asking critical questions about our past and future and problematizing the official narratives dominant in the public and institutional sphere of Bosnian society is the crucial first step that forms of cultural resistance to exclusionary conventional politics must take” (“At the Interstices” 273). The very fact that most women writers and artists speak from outside official institutions may make them better able to do just that.

Trauma/The Body—In the aftermath of a war in which the primary targets were civilians and an estimated 20,000 women were raped, it could be argued that Bosnian society exists in an extended state of post-traumatic stress. Unfortunately, the multicultural discourse enforced in Bosnia’s public sphere only exacerbates this situation. The aim of multiculturalism—to reduce interethnic tensions—may be laudable, but in reality this ideology has had some unfortunate consequences: the reification of ethnonational identities that were largely constructed in the 1980s in order to incite war; discrimination against members of Bosnia’s minority groups, like Jews and

⁵ I owe this insight to Anselm Wagner’s article “Remakes of Memories” at www.sejllakameric.com.

Roma; the delegitimization of other, non-national identity formations that could lead to greater political, economic, and social progress; and the imposition of a policy of “equal blame” for war atrocities, making it taboo to openly discuss what actually happened and preventing true justice for war crimes.⁶ The mass denial in the mainstream media of individual and collective trauma makes it all but impossible for society as a whole to move forward. The task falls to writers and artists to explore these issues in their works. It is especially key that women do so, as the war strategy of mass rape targeted their bodies in particular; social and religious taboos have only inflicted further violence on victims by making them feel ashamed of talking about what they suffered. In her film *Grbavica*, Žbanić breaks the silence by depicting a woman who was interned in a Serb camp, brutally raped for months, and forced to give birth. Years later she is raising her teenage daughter, who believes her father was a Muslim war martyr, when a series of events forces them both to come to terms with the girl’s origins. The film represents a powerful critique of the ways in which others—whether local nationalists or the international community—co-opt victims’ trauma for their own purposes, and affirms the transformative potential of trauma when it is owned by the individual who experienced it.

The importance of dealing with trauma on one’s own terms is echoed in the works of many women artists and writers. Šehabović explores the relationship between collective and private trauma in her short story “Rujejda,” which depicts one woman’s unconventional decision not to give a blood sample to a laboratory to identify her grandfather’s potential remains from a mass grave. In Haver’s story “Horses,” a young woman gang-raped by her neighbors during the war can only recall the incident through symbolic dreams that allude indirectly to the incident. And Adisa Bašić’s poem “Trauma-Market” responds to an accusation by an overprivileged Harvard blonde that she’s “just a victim selling her trauma” with the defiant affirmation that her

⁶ Visual artist Šejla Kamerić points out that the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the siege of Sarajevo was publicly suppressed by local and international political players, leaving the field open for interpretations of the traumatic event by nationalists. In response, during Fashion Week in Sarajevo Kamerić organized the theater project “The Siege Collection 92-95,” in which models wore clothing that people had worn during the war. (Husanović, “At the Interstices” 273-4).

trauma is in fact her most valuable possession (36). In a society in which public discourse about the war is dominated by tropes such as rape, mass graves, and weeping village women, Moranjak-Bamburać and Husanović both emphasize how crucial it is that women find their own voice and their own vocabulary through which to narrativize the silent, traumatized body—the most authentic witness to violence—in an empowered manner (Husanović, *Između traume* 190-1, 221; “At the Interstices” 280; Moranjak-Bamburać, “Call Numbers of Death” 113).

Poet Nermina Omerbegović writes the female body in another, equally radical way—as a desiring subject rather than the passive object of desire or violence. Her collection of erotic poetry *Invocations of Touch* reverses the traditional gender roles of lyric poetry by speaking in a first-person female voice about passionate yearnings that can never be wholly fulfilled by the male lover’s body. In the poems, the female body is a source of endless enjoyment, not pain; the poem “Hand,” for example, celebrates the taboo topic of female masturbation (29). In a metaphor for women’s art, the poem “Act” depicts the female poet molding a man for herself out of clay, suggesting that men exist for women’s enjoyment, not vice versa (31). Omerbegović even takes on masculinist mythologies and histories, rewriting the Samson and Delilah myth from the perspective of an empowered woman fulfilling her own desires in “Lie” (66), and tracing the history of her own erotic development in “Return” (72). Omerbegović’s seemingly apolitical eroticism in fact represents a powerful political statement in an era of neoconservatism. The question she asks in her poem “Barbie” is a radical one: “Everywhere they offer me advice, recommendations, instructions, how to become a woman others dream about. I ask myself how to be a woman who loves herself?” (79).

Identity—The issue of identity is a famously vexed one for Bosnia, the most ethnically mixed of the former Yugoslav republics, as it was for Yugoslavia as a whole, which struggled to balance ethnic and trans-national identity formations through its “brotherhood and unity” ideology. In the 1980s, nationalist elites from Belgrade and Zagreb convinced Bosnian Serbs and Croats that their “essential” identity lay in their ethnoreligious background rather than in their ties

with their neighbors. Bosnian Muslims played catch-up during and after the war, when cultural elites worked to link Bosniak identity to Islam and the Ottoman heritage. Bosnian women faced particular pressure from both nationalists and religious institutions to sublimate their individuality in order to serve as the primary bearers and reproducers of collective identity. In “The Origin of Silk,” Lazarevska explores the dynamic between individual and collective identity by discussing the assumptions that were made about her as a child with a Macedonian name growing up in Bosnia. Although she did not speak a word of Macedonian, she was expected to represent the Macedonian people in an assembly put on by her elementary school for “Republic Day.” From this humorous event, the reader can extrapolate the more serious consequences for Bosnians later who did not fit neatly within ethnonational categories. Lazarevska insists on her right to construct her own sense of identity, based not on where she was born but on her own personal experiences and memories. Haver takes a similar approach in her stories about growing up in Maglaj, a predominantly Muslim town in north Bosnia; she writes about memories of her childhood, which were inflected by her Bosnian Muslim cultural heritage, without making any greater claims to an essential ethnonational identity that would define and limit who she is as an individual.

While the choice to affirm one’s own private memories and to eschew any sort of collective identity represents in itself a political stance, some women are staging more public interventions. Ugrešić writes that, when war came, many public intellectuals turned into nationalists overnight, fearing that those who stood on the border would be lost (36). Alma Denić-Grabić argues that in fact the central issue addressed in the contemporary Bosnian novel is that of surviving on the border (290). Many Bosnian women writers and artists have chosen the difficult and sometimes dangerous path of publicly inhabiting that very border zone. In her poetry collection *Another Country*, Vojka Smiljanić-Đikić, editor of the literary and cultural journal *Sarajevo Notebooks*, depicts the pain of losing a common Yugoslav language. To help counter the provincializing tendencies of national institutions in the former Yugoslav republics, the mission of *Sarajevo Notebooks* is to “re-establish broken communication between various regional and

ethnic communities in the Balkans, and secondly, to focus on the creation of regional public forums that will facilitate and contribute to the process of reconciliation in the countries of the Former Yugoslavia.”⁷

The work of many younger artists points toward the increasing urgency of shifting the focus of public discourse—from unproductive debates over ethnonational identity that date back decades, to more contemporary issues related to the transition to a democratic capitalist system and to participation within larger networks, like the European cultural-economic space and the international community. Rather than grappling with the simple dichotomy of national/non-national identity, the works of many women—such as Terzić’s *Lottery* or Šehabović’s story “I’m Leaving in Three Days”—deal with the sense of rootlessness and profound lack of identity engendered by the postmodernism of contemporary Bosnia, a geography marked by loss of collective memory and identity, the emigration/exile of a quarter of its population, the absurdity of local politics, and the shock of the sudden ingress of ideas, institutions, and products from elsewhere. The female narrators of these two works no longer feel at home in Bosnia, but they know that they will feel equally lost in whatever locale to which they arbitrarily choose to move.

Media Contexts

It is difficult to understate the importance of the media in Bosnia and in the entire former Yugoslav region. Ugrešić describes the conflict in the ‘90s as a media-provoked war (71), a comment which reflects the extraordinary influence that Yugoslavia’s state-controlled, and later nationalist-controlled, media exerted over its audience.⁸ Moreover, Bosnian women continue to be under-represented in Bosnia’s mainstream media institutions. This combination of factors ensures that women’s voices are far weaker than those of men in the public sphere and have less

⁷ “About Sarajevo Notebook.” www.sveske.ba. 15 Aug. 2011. *Sarajevo Notebooks* publishes a rich melange of fiction, poetry, and critical works by and about individuals from all over Southeast Europe; topics have included “Transitions and Culture,” “Writers on the Border,” and “Women’s Writing.”

⁸ See Kurspahić’s *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace* for an excellent discussion of the role the media played in the 1990s Yugoslav war.

power to shape discussions of political and social issues. One major insight gleaned from this research is the extent to which the media in which women work determines the horizons of possibility of what they can say and who will hear it. Women working in traditional, male-dominated media like print literature and journalism struggle to get their words published; a glance at the works published by Bosnia's major publishing houses reveals few women's names, there are few female opinion-makers in Bosnia's newspapers and political magazines,⁹ and male critics tend to focus on works produced by men.¹⁰ Bašić's poem "Young Poetess" paints a damning portrait of sexist educational and publishing institutions whose male leaders are far more interested in the young writer's potential for sexual exploitation than in her words (62).

Women working in new media have had far more success in building a prominent public stature by skirting traditional media institutions; in fact, Husanović points out that young artists not only possess technical skills but are media entrepreneurs ("At the Interstices" 273). Media like video and the internet require less funding for production and dissemination than do print and film, enabling women—especially members of the younger generation—to quickly reach a broad audience, to forge informal networks with one another, and to collaborate on collective projects.¹¹ Interestingly, women working in the visual arts—even in the more traditional medium of film—have broken through to an international audience in ways that deserving women writers have not and probably never will;¹² notable examples include filmmakers Jasmila Žbanić and Aida Begić, and visual artists Šejla Kamerić and Maja Bajević.¹³

Producer Amra Bakšić-Čamo asserts that what is specific about the experience of Bosnian women artists is their common need to rebel against the identity models available to

⁹ An exception is Fadila Nura Haver, who writes a column for the political magazine *Slobodna Bosna*.

¹⁰ For example, in his review of new Bosnian fiction in *Sarajevo Notebooks*, prominent literature professor Enver Kazaz relegates the few women he deems worthy of mention to a ghetto at the end of the article.

¹¹ Prominent Bosnian women bloggers include Asja Bakić and Tamara Zablocki.

¹² By contrast, male Bosnian diaspora writers like Aleksandar Hemon, Miljenko Jergović, and Semezdin Mehmedinović have been extraordinarily successful at crossing over into "world literature."

¹³ Bosnian women are also using traditional print media as a vehicle for non-traditional content through alternative publications like the journals *Razlika/Différance* (Tuzla), *Patchwork* (Sarajevo), *Kolaps* (Mostar), and the regional journals *Sarajevo Notebooks* and *Album* (Arsenijević 162).

them in the country's public discourse (Husanović, "At the Interstices" 282). The collection *Stereotyping: Representation of Women in Print Media in South East Europe*, published by MediaCentar Sarajevo, represents an important step in this direction. In her introductory essay, co-editor Moranjak-Bamburać argues that the media not only reflect but produce cultural beliefs about gender roles (13), a feat accomplished through the pervasive use of gender stereotypes. According to Moranjak-Bamburać, the gender issues addressed in this volume are transnational in scope, as "the rigid gender regimes of countries in transition acquire additional immunity because of the priority of ethnic identities" (33); as such, the text represents a collaborative project that brings together the work of scholars from across the region. The articles in this collection find that the media in Bosnia, and in the Balkans generally, primarily presents men as engaged in political and social life, and women either as "ethnically ideal" or as entertainers (such as turbofolk singers, actresses, and sex symbols) (35). Moranjak-Bamburać's article represents not just a scholarly analysis but also a call for action, arguing that "if we want to change social relations, we must first change the stories that identify us" (20).

Discursive Strategies

Regardless of medium, Bosnian women working in the cultural sphere today are employing a variety of discursive strategies in order to challenge male-dominated metanarratives and institutions, gain greater purchase in the public sphere, and effect social change. The following are some of the most common:

Challenging Binaristic Thinking—Bosnia, located at the intersection of disparate cultural, religious, and political systems—East and West, Islam and Christianity, socialism and capitalism—has historically been characterized by its liminality. Husanović calls for politicizing this very quality in order to undermine the binary discourses that destroyed so many lives in the 1990s and continue to prevent the country from moving forward: "center/periphery, identity/loss of identity, prosperity/poverty, power/ subjugation and belonging/alienation" (26). The works

examined for this project universally reject binaristic thinking. Denić-Grabić, for example, has written of the helpfulness of postmodern theory in fracturing metanarratives built upon the exclusionary logic of “self/other” (286-9). In her public installation “EU/Others” (Ljubljana 2000), visual artist Kamberić erected signs for “EU” citizens and for “Others” on Ljubljana’s famous *Tromostovije* (three bridges), and switched the order of the signs for pedestrians approaching from the opposite direction; this work highlighted the absurdity of the arbitrary binary “us/them” within the larger context of Europe, as well as the injustice of the travel restrictions placed on Bosnians and other non-EU citizens living under the “visa regime.” Moreover, Kamberić’s characteristic “copy/paste” method involves uprooting material from its home context and transferring it to a new, unfamiliar one, thus destabilizing the notion of a fixed subject untainted by its “Other.”

Giving Voice to the Excluded—Many Bosnian women artists are seeking to reclaim the cultural sphere by moving those who have historically been marginalized to the center. For example, producer Bakšić-Čamo, associated with SCCA, the multimedia laboratory pro.ba, and the art project “De/construction of Monument,” is intent on creating alternative spaces in which new types of subjectivities and identities can be formed; her television show *Kitchen* features stories about subcultures, the underground scene, and alternative lifestyles (Husanović, “At the Interstices” 280-1). Some younger artists express solidarity with the movement for gay rights by depicting homosexual characters in their works (most notably Šehabović) and by working in collaboration with progressive NGOs like *Cure* and *Organization Q*. And Anisa Avdagić has written about how Fadila Nura Haver’s stories depict contemporary society’s most truly marginalized subjects—the rural poor, who have been left behind during Bosnia’s transition to transnational capitalism (“Bosnian and Herzegovinian Fiction” 266-268).

Rethinking Motherhood—The experience of motherhood was particularly politicized during and after the war, when women were enjoined to give birth to male warriors and then to dutifully replenish the population. Reducing women to their biological role depoliticizes them as

subjects, a strategy that achieved its most extreme expression in wartime rape camps.

Motherhood represents a key theme in the work of several women artists, especially in Žbanić's film *Grbavica* (described above) and in the thoughtful columns written by Tanja Stupar-Trifunović for the Banja Luka newspaper *Nezavisne novine* (anthologized in *Adorno's Magpie*). These women depict mothers as active subjects who are highly conscious of the dilemma of investing in the future of a society plagued by inequality, injustice, and chauvinism.

Insisting on Gender as a Category of Political Identity—In socialist Yugoslavia, the category “woman” was considered a class, which meant that the successful implementation of socialism on the economic level would automatically redress all social inequalities, including those between women and men. Although gender equality was an explicit platform of the Party, feminism was at best not encouraged, and at worst condemned as a bourgeois manner of conceptualizing the individual; as a result, women were given legal rights but did not learn how to be active political subjects (Papić 154). Ultimately, the Party failed to transform ingrained cultural attitudes about gender roles, and women remained under-represented in leadership positions and concentrated in certain professions, like healthcare and textiles (Ramet 97). In the 1980s, women were just beginning to imagine themselves as having political agency when nationalism and the war set progress back. Many younger Bosnian women are taking up the fight once again by consciously embracing the unpopular label of “feminist” and by expressing solidarity with other women. Šehabović's story “Everything Will be Ready by Dinner,” for example, depicts the still taboo topic of domestic violence and its legacy, ending with a widow's radical act of solidarity with her daughter-in-law.

Focus on Everyday Life/Domestic Spaces—Nationalist ideology deploys the concept of “home” (and its concomitant concept “homeland”) for purposes of emotional and political manipulation. However, Avdagić argues: “In the cultural-ideological complex, storytelling has... constructed a counter-balance to the radical ideology of home which in political discourse is equivalent to the ideology of shared blood, and which in this context forms a nationally-defined

collective and in the same manner a marked territory” (“Bosnian and Herzegovinian Fiction” 268). Many women artists and writers have re-accentuated the concept of “home,” turning to the rhythms, rituals, and small interactions of everyday life as a source of alternative epistemologies and histories and as a site of resistance to dehumanizing, universalizing optics like nationalism or capitalism. In their almost ethnographic insistence on the significance of the domestic and the local, Haver’s collection of stories *May I Laugh When I Die* stands out as a particularly rich example of this approach. While Haver’s stories, along with Terzić’s novel *Lottery* and Stupar-Trifunović’s columns, portray the potentially redemptive moments buried within everyday life, Bašić’s collection of poems *Trauma-Market* takes a different stance, depicting the hopelessness, banality, and mind-blowing tedium of domestic life in postwar Bosnia.¹⁴

Re-coding Language—In literary studies it is a truism that the language in which one speaks is inextricable from the content of what is said. The same is true of Bosnian politics, in which seemingly minor choices of vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax in fact serve as markers of ethnic belonging and ideological identification. The nationalist project to differentiate Serbo-Croatian, the major language of socialist Yugoslavia, into the ethnically “pure” languages Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and most recently Montenegrin, inevitably renders the language in which one speaks a political statement.¹⁵ For this reason, Denić-Grabić turns to Russian structuralist M. M. Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism—that language itself always contains the speech of the “Other”—as an antidote to nationalist linguistic ideology; if the subject creates itself through language, and language itself is heterogeneous, then the self is always, inevitably hybrid (286). Haver’s short stories in particular are dialogic in nature, making abundant use of local dialect and slang, and ventriloquizing the voices of individuals from all three of Bosnia’s

¹⁴ Compare, for example, Stupar-Trifunović’s vignette “Staka’s Wardrobe,” in which a woman keeps a community’s memories alive through the objects she stores in her inexhaustible wardrobe, with Bašić’s poem “My Room,” which describes objects in her room that she inherited due to others’ death and misfortune. In these two works, household objects can serve either as redemptive carriers of personal memory or as tombstones marking histories of trauma.

¹⁵ See Greenberg’s book *Language and Identity in the Balkans* for an exhaustive discussion of the language differentiation project.

ethnoreligious communities; in her works, however, speech is far more a product of class and of local milieu than of national belonging. In an era in which mainstream academic and publishing institutions too often evaluate the quality of manuscripts based on conformity to the newly-prescribed norms of national idioms, Haver's approach represents a radical political gesture.

Husanović looks to another aspect of language—trope—as a site of resistance to the official narratives that dominate the public sphere. She holds that metaphors enable imagination to become action, making them crucial for producing new structures, concepts, and collectivities. However, when metaphors become institutionalized in public discourse, they prevent fresh approaches to urgent problems. Husanović argues: “Many dead metaphors besiege everyday life like vampires—we must identify them as such, delegitimize them, and open up a space of hope” (*Između traume* 123). Interrogating and re-inflecting ossified metaphors, then, represents a political act—one exemplified by the volume *Stereotyping: Representation of Women in Print Media in South East Europe* (mentioned above) and by Husanović's call to rework tired metaphors for Bosnia like “crossroads” and “bridge” in order to transform its liminality from a source of anxiety/insecurity into a site for social change (*Između traume* 105-116).

Shattering Mythologies—Metaphor is closely related to mythology, a highly metaphorized mode of history that has served as an effective vehicle for nationalist ideology due to its collapsing of past and present events into the atemporal, eternal “now” of ethnonational antagonisms.¹⁶ Avdagić argues that collective history—especially marginalized historical experiences, forgotten tales, and taboo subjects—can serve as an archive of “ready-made” stories which can be dragged to new contexts for subversive purposes (“Politics of Representation” 321), including destabilizing the set formulae of mythological thinking. Haver's stories exemplify this tactic, recounting tales of the bizarre, the supernatural, the forgotten, the grotesque, and the unclassifiable that could never find a place within official literary canons.

¹⁶ See Michael Sells' *The Bridge Betrayed* for a discussion of Serbian nationalists' revival of the mythology of Kosovo to rouse nationalist sentiment.

Calls for Action/Tactics for Change

Bosnia’s young generation of politically conscious cultural producers is working to effect social change through both ideas and actions. One note that resounds throughout many scholarly and artistic works is the need for new forms of networking, community, collaboration, and solidarity. Both Husanović and Arsenijević highlight the need to bridge the gap between theory (academia) and praxis (activism); without theory, argues Husanović, praxis has no voice (*Između traume* 236). Within academia, she calls for more projects that bring together critical thought, research initiatives, and pedagogy in interdisciplinary spaces that encompass fields like political and cultural theory, literary and gender studies, sociology, and anthropology, in order to create new kinds of knowledge about the ways in which “cultural praxis as political praxis” produces Bosnia’s past, present, and future (*Između traume* 258-9; 263). Arsenijević echoes the need for new modes of producing knowledge, such as the creation of electronic archives and the recording and digitizing of oral histories (197). Some concrete tactics that scholars, editors, and artists are employing to make the cultural sphere more diverse and inclusive include critically analyzing the works of women writers and artists in academic journals; publishing women’s works in alternative journals and anthologies; holding events at which women serve as speakers and panelists; organizing collective actions and projects that involve scholars, artists, and NGOs; and opposing the nationalization of literature by constructing alternative canons.¹⁷

Relevance for U.S. Policy and Decision-Makers

Given the profound interrelationship between culture and politics in Bosnian society, it is essential to increase women’s participation in cultural life in order to build civil society, strengthen democratic institutions, and tackle the many issues facing the young state. Most prominent women artists and scholars of the younger generation are politically engaged and eager

¹⁷ The critical works of Moranjak-Bamburać, Arsenijević, and Avdagić in particular endeavor to create alternative canons that include authors who would never make it into postwar anthologies that seek to enshrine so-called national traits.

to play a more active role in the public sphere—not just to criticize the media but to harness its power, not just to interrogate the tattered tropes bandied about in official discourse but to produce new ones, not just to complain about the “old boys club” but to create new types of networks and institutions. Women’s exclusion from mainstream institutions cuts both ways—enabling them to break taboos, take risks, and talk about issues in new ways, but limiting their ability to finance projects and disseminate their ideas. This is where outside support could make a difference.

Potentially effective strategies for strengthening Bosnian women’s voices include: providing start-up funding for new media projects, unofficial institutions, and alternative publications and art venues that could help produce a more open public discourse; offering fundraising training for artists and alternative institutions so that they can eventually become self-sufficient; encouraging mainstream media institutions to achieve greater gender-inclusivity through educational seminars that raise awareness of gender stereotypes and of the need to expand topics covered and increase the participation of women writers and analysts; creating more opportunities for artistic and academic exchange with U.S. institutions; helping universities organize interdisciplinary conferences that address pressing social issues; providing funding for archives, libraries, and other initiatives to preserve public memory; and organizing events that highlight the achievements of Bosnian women.

On a more abstract note, my research suggests the extent to which the younger generation is weary of the ethnonational paradigm. Young artists, writers, and scholars, who I believe speak for the majority of young Bosnians, view a political system dominated by ethnonationalist ideology as a dead end, one that fails to reflect the realities of people’s everyday existence and offers no hope of escape from social, political, and economic deadlock. Fifteen years have passed since the end of the war, and it is time to move on to a new type of politics; there is no other way that Bosnia can realize the goals of democracy, justice, and transparency set by the international community. Rather than deferring to local nationalist leaders and tiptoeing around so-called ethnic sensitivities, I believe that young Bosnians would welcome U.S. policy initiatives and

cultural programs that encourage their society to embrace the realities and experiences that bind all Bosnians together, regardless of ethnoreligious background.

Research Challenges and Suggestions for Future Scholarship

The major challenge that I faced in conducting this research was that of accessing materials. As Bosnian women have been largely excluded from mainstream cultural institutions, their works are naturally more difficult to locate; women writers tend to be published in small journals whose issues disappear almost as soon as they are released, and women artists often exhibit their work in alternative spaces that do not archive records of the event. The journal *Sarajevo Notebooks*, which has an online archive, was invaluable in bringing lesser-known women to my attention, but it was a challenge to subsequently track down more complete versions of their works, as even those that had been released by major publishing houses were generally out of print. Fortunately, I was able to locate copies of some of these works in the private collections of acquaintances, at the regional book fairs that take place in Sarajevo every few months, and in the national/University of Sarajevo library.

My research suggests several areas that merit further investigation: the relationship between the ownership/structure of media institutions and the kinds of content that gets disseminated; the creation of non-official venues for cultural production, such as academic and underground journals, online blogs, and alternative event spaces; the new forms of networking and collaboration that are transcending borders of all kinds; and the potential of new media to furnish opportunities to look at important social issues from new perspectives.

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Appendix
Suggested Contents of an Anthology of Postwar Bosnian Women's
Literary, Artistic, and Critical works

I propose that this collection, rather than offering an arbitrary assortment or attempting to achieve a “representative” sample of women’s cultural production, provide a more in-depth selection and analysis of the works of a small number of artists, writers, and scholars. Each section would focus on one woman, including a brief biography, a critical analysis of her oeuvre, and a sample of her works in English translation. I suggest the following women, most of whom belong to the younger generation and who hail from diverse regions and ethnic backgrounds:

Writers: Short Stories, Poetry, Novels, and Journalism

Šejla Šehabović, from *Stories: Feminine Plural*

- “Branching Out”: Two women, friends and lovers, survive the war together and continue a complicated relationship afterward, when one has emigrated to the U.S. and the other to Norway.
- “Ruvejda”: A woman decides not to leave her blood sample with a laboratory that seeks to determine whether remains found in a mass grave belong to her grandfather.
- “I’m Leaving in Three Days”: A professor of Bosnian language, frustrated by the realities of life in postwar Bosnia, contemplates emigrating but does not know where to go.
- “Day for a Bullet”: Recounts an incident experienced by village women left behind during the war from multiple perspectives.
- “Everything Will be Ready by Dinner”: A widow who was the victim of long-term domestic violence ends her life in a radical act of solidarity with her daughter-in-law.

Fadila Nura Haver, from *May I Laugh When I Die: Stories*

- “Snake’s Den”: Depicts the truly marginalized: a bizarre offshoot of the narrator’s family that lives in rural isolation and has an unusually close relationship with the natural world.
- “Partisan Čakrama”: A portrait of a family relative who was an absurd hybrid of identities, and a depiction of the power of laughter in the face of authority.
- “Sarajevo Spirit”: A divorced, middle-aged woman who has moved to Sarajevo to start her life over spends long hours watching a pigeon teach her chicks to fly.
- “Horses”: A girl who was gang-raped by neighbors during the war can only revisit the traumatic incident through symbolic dreams.
- “It was Revealed to Bekir”: Ghost stories from around Bosnia told in a variety of voices and dialects, alluding to the existence of phenomena that defy existing frameworks.

Tanja Stupar-Trifunović, newspaper columns from *Adorno’s Magpie*:

- “Third A”: Finding an old class photo leads her to contemplate how the entire community in which she grew up disappeared.
- “Journey”: Fantasies about the possibility of re-inventing yourself somewhere else.
- “Thumbelina and Inspiration”: How fairy tales betray girls by obscuring the reality of the kinds of men they will likely marry—men who haunt bars and are obsessed with soccer.
- “Why I Hate Orhan Pamuk”: On the lack of institutional support for writers in Bosnia.
- “Staka’s Wardrobe”: A woman keeps memory alive through the objects in her inexhaustible wardrobe.
- “Kitchen Sink, Slayer of Optimism”: On the realities of domestic chores and child-rearing.

- “My Australia”: A member of the Bosnian diaspora finds himself trapped between nostalgia for his homeland and disgust for what it has become.
- “How the Transition Ate the Pioneers”: Compares her childhood participation in an event honoring Tito with an assembly at her child’s school focusing on how to forge a career in the contemporary capitalist system.

Nermina Omerbegović, poems from *Invocations of Touch*:

- “Reaction”: On unrequited female desire.
- “Like a Lighter”: Woman as desiring subject.
- “Hand”: On the pleasures of female masturbation.
- “Act”: The poetess molds a man for herself out of clay.
- “Connoisseur”: Woman as a connoisseur of pleasure.
- “Lie”: Rewrites the Samson and Delilah myth from the perspective of an empowered woman fulfilling her own desires.
- “Return”: Traces her own personal erotic history.
- “Barbie”: With everyone advising women how to make themselves desirable to men, the poet asks how to become a woman who loves herself.

Ajla Terzić, excerpt from the novel *Lottery*:

- Chapter One: “We meet the heroine. On commercials, Konzum tuna, the carousel in one park and mail that arrived this morning.”

Adisa Bašić, poems from *Trauma-Market*:

- “Trauma-Market”: The poet affirms that her trauma is her most valuable possession.
- “Poetess in a Trolleybus”: The paradox of a young poet who lives on the border of everyday banality and infinite imagination.
- “Young Writer”: The men who run media and publishing institutions are more interested in the young female writer’s potential for sexual exploitation than in her words.
- “Dead-End Street”: No exit from the banality of everyday life in postwar Bosnia.
- “My Room”: An inventory of the objects in the poet’s room that she inherited through others’ death and misfortune.
- “Room’s Silence”: In her room, the poet is bombarded from all sides with the sounds of the hopeless banality of everyday life.

Visual Artists: Hybrid Texts, Video Installations, and Public Interventions

Jasmila Žbanić

- “Plum Preserves,” reproduced in *Leap Into the City*: A hybrid work that is part cookbook, part photo album, and part family journal, and emphasizes the feminine/domestic/personal as a site of resistance against manipulative public histories.

Šejla Kamerić

- “What do I know?”: Stills from a video installation that recounts three tales of tragic love through a series of domestic rituals and scenes.
- “EU/Others”: Photos from the 2000 public installation in Ljubljana that drew attention to the injustice of travel restrictions imposed on Bosnians and others by the European Union.

Dunja Blažević

- “The Bruce Lee Monument in Mostar,” from *Leap Into the City: A debate over the selection of a new monument for construction* by “De/construction of Monument.”

Scholars: Articles from Journals and Books

Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać

- “Call Numbers of Death and the Ethics of Women’s Writing,” from *Sarajevo Notebooks*: Explores whether “women’s writing” exists and whether it facilitates special kinds of knowledge and social critique.
- “The Unbearable Lightness of Stereotypes,” from *Stereotyping: Representation of Women in Print Media in South East Europe*: Identifies the problem of gender stereotypes in the Balkan media and offers potential solutions.

Anisa Avdagić

- “Politics of Representation,” from *Sarajevo Notebooks*: An overview of the ways in which recent Bosnian fiction is effecting key interventions in the fields of identity, culture, and historiography.

Alma Denić-Grabić

- “The End of the Twentieth Century: The Bosnian and Herzegovinian Novel Between the Global and the Local,” from *Sarajevo Notebooks*: An examination of how postmodern theory offers an escape from monologic forms of discourse like ethnonationalism and mythology.

Jasmina Husanović

- “At the Interstices of Past, Present, and Future: Cultural and Artistic Practices of Traversal in the Work of Šejla Kamerić, Jasmila Žbanić, and Amra Bakšić-Čamo,” from *Leap Into the City*: An overview of artistic interventions in Bosnia’s cultural sphere that aim to transform society, based on Husanović’s interviews with three women artists.