

## RECKONING WITH THE 'BOSNIA TROUBLES':

### TRAUMA, WITNESSING, AND POLITICS

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Engaging in a continuous drama of culture, as well as reckoning with the critical traumatic contents of political reality is the state of the Balkans.<sup>1</sup> The paradoxical (im)possibility of justice is the trouble with the Balkans. Because in this knot of traumas, cultural crises and political injustices we are repeatedly called to judge, we also find ourselves permanently situated at a site where imagination, memory, and agency may and should coalesce into emancipatory gestures that traverse violent deadlocks of conventional phantasmatic politics.

Over my discussion in this paper looms a specter of a very particular 'face' and, I would add, 'body' that universalizes the predicament of being violently excluded from the dominant political/symbolic orders, not only in the Balkans but also globally – the face of a woman from Bosnia exposed to (post)war traumas. This 'face/body' is a symptomatic subject of the oxymoronic Bosnian political community – she who is hit by the twin crises of trauma and destitution, who is constantly 'waiting' (on the waiting list, in the waiting room...) for justice to be enacted – to return home, to have her 'missing' found, to see the war

criminals punished, to feel safer in her everyday life and more confident about her life prospects, and so forth. She experiences multiple political dislocations and marginalizations finding herself at the end of the chain – if we agree that the Balkans embody a paradoxical liminality of Europe/modernity; that Bosnia has, in many respects, become a dislocated, traumatic kernel of the always-already liminal Balkans; and that the 'face/body' I use as a point of departure in my metaphorical universalizations of injurious predicaments stands for an exception even within (the dislocated/liminal) Bosnia, as an excluded remainder of conventional political registers we find in Bosnia, in the Balkans, in Europe and globally. My 'face/body' is truly an alien life inhabiting the earthly political communities of our times. What is her voice, where is her space, how is her politics? This discussion of emancipations and justice relates to the speechless and solitary terrains around her where words and company must be found.

To relate this to an insight offered by Judith Butler, women have always known very well the question of how a

collective deals with its vulnerability to violence. [...] There is the possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself. There is the possibility of becoming violent. But perhaps there is some other way to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to all Mak's 'aunties' and 'uncles' at Škofja Loka (Slovenia) Summer School 2004 within the *HESP Regional Seminar on Postcolonial and Post-Socialist Context in Social Scientific Teaching and Writing*.

live in such a way that one is neither fearing death, becoming socially dead from fear of being killed, or becoming violent, and killing others, or subjecting them to a life of social death predicated upon the fear of literal death. Perhaps this other way to lie requires a world in which collective means are found to protect bodily vulnerability without precisely eradicating it. Surely, some norms will be useful for the building of such a world, but they will be norms that no one will own, norms that will have to work not through normalization or racial and ethnic assimilation, but through becoming collective sites of continuous political labor. (Butler 2004: 231)

Casting a look at the symbolic and political constitution of Bosnian/Balkan realities may prompt us to think of the Balkans as a trauma, particularly in relation to sovereign biopolitical fractures that our political bodies/subjectivities struggle within and against. At stake here is a complex dynamics between political community and trauma with regards to the ‘survivors’ and their urge to witness, to speak, and/or to act. However, the interstices of law, literature/art, and politics, when it comes to witnessing trauma and ‘speaking to power’ not only in relation to the war crimes tribunals but also within larger deliberated public spheres in our societies, are poorly researched. This has huge implications for any endeavor to reinvigorate politics and empower agencies dealing with trauma and justice.

### **Witness to Trauma: Beyond the Dominant Political/Symbolic (Dis)Orders**

Faced with the impossibility of representing the trauma, and yet urged to bear witness to it, we are bound to mark this very impossibility in our speech and through our acts, and seek justice from a radically uncertain ground. The process of encircling trauma instead of gentrifying it produces a space for radical repoliticizations of violent exclusionary political and social deadlocks

around us. As Jenny Edkins succinctly points out, in the circuit between trauma, violence, and political community (which falsely promises wholeness and safety), something may be qualified as traumatic if there is a dramatic gap between our expectations and the event, which produces a new structure of feeling / cognition / subjectivization, experienced as both incredible betrayal and radical helplessness (Edkins 2003: 9). (In this sense, the Balkans as a ‘mismatch’ or ‘liminality’ uncover its traumatic livability). Rather than the causes of trauma, its ‘measurement’ or ‘hierarchialization’, of concern here is the process of reckoning with the trauma through practices of memory, such as remembrance, memorialization, and witnessing. What this implies, as any production of meaning does, is a struggle between a myriad of ways in which we inscribe and reinscribe trauma into various narratives, official or personal, dominant or marginalized (Edkins 2003: 15).

Moreover, the political trauma uncovers a hidden dimension within the interlocking texturing of political community and violence – we are faced with the inherent traumatic dimension of the political which various ideological technologies and disciplines mask, repress, or silence. Such an experience of personal, social, cultural, and political fracturings through trauma painfully illustrates the dynamics between biopolitics and gender within the regimes of power, as well as the fact that the experience of being reduced to bare life without political relevance is proximate to women both in times of war as well as of peace, in family as well as in community. Political community, like family, is a form of togetherness that regularly produces the subjectivizing formations of powerlessness and betrayal of trust, and turns itself into a prime site of violence and source of danger to our sociality, our political/cultural being (Edkins 2003:2-4).

Considering that these social contexts give meaning to our lives and underpin our identities, when the illusion of certainty,

security, and safety they provide implodes, we uncover the traumatic kernel and the relationships of power below them – in other words, we face the radical contingency of social and political edifices, as well as of meanings ascribed to ways and forms of life which were previously considered as a given (Edkins 2003: 4-5). We feel radically dislocated from the Balkans, from Bosnia, from what is imposed to us as our ethnic or gender identity or political community. We feel a sense of not belonging to the matrices around us – and the urge to bear witness and testify to this not-belonging which may be universalized to all members of a community/society/state, and to the contingency of political orders around us. This is a political act of such a degree that it can shake up and reshuffle the fundamentals of conventional political registers and matrices. Therefore, it is only to be expected that the kinds of witnessing that do shake and reshuffle our quests for social and political transformation are continually resisted and suppressed by those agents and structures, those discursive/practical arrangements, that are themselves threatened by any attempt to undermine and destabilize the patriarchal identitarian exclusionary phantasms embedded in state and family.

What I want to emphasize here is the fact that trauma which happens within family as well as within political community is outside the possibility of conventional communication, because the language we have to use belongs to the very community and the very relationships of power that traumatized us in the first place (Edkins 2003: 7-8). The paradox of having to witness both inside and outside the vocabulary of power produces a further sense of dislocation, of never fully belonging to a community whose registers of communication and discursive arrangements we cannot use to express or politicize our own experience. Often the attempt to witness to trauma brings us back to the position of powerlessness, speechlessness, and renewed betrayal of trust. These are the themes that come back

to fore when discussing the delicate interstices between law, trauma, art, and witnessing.

The survivors, on the other hand, seek ways of resistance, speaking and acting outside of the institutional registers where the subjection to depoliticizing technologies of power and the circuit between victims and torturers/criminals will be eschewed (Edkins 2003: 8-9). Contrary to that, the sovereign structures of biopolitical power strive to achieve the normalization of the survivors – the aim is to recover the victims and to include them again into the structures of power and belonging in a way that will gentrify their trauma and make them a harmless part of the reproduction of these sovereign identitarian (be they gender, ethnic...) matrices. Also, considering that the concept of trauma always oscillates between victimhood and protest, the overall atmosphere of victimization around us means that sympathy and pity are offered to the survivors in return for their surrender of authentic political voice (Edkins 2003: 9).

The situation with the women traumatized by the war in Bosnia and their attempt to witness to it in politically relevant ways is more than discouraging. It is far from surprising that their experience is that of a person hitting a wall of the waiting room, never proceeding beyond it. What their practices of remembrance, memorialization, and witnessing attest to, embody, but may also challenge is this very dynamic between trauma, violence, and political community in Bosnia, as well as in the Balkans and universally – after all, reckoning with the trauma in an emancipatory fashion implies the reformulation of identity and community. Behind the crises of testimony, whose very structure challenges sovereign power, lays the inevitable routinization and codification of testimony that occurs within the public sphere, where we are faced with three strategies of coping with testimony: mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance (Tal 1996:6).

Mythologization happens when a traumatic event is reduced to a set of controlled and

contained narratives (notions of rescue, redemption, and overcoming in museums, documentaries, and so on); medicalisation perceives testimony as a symptom of an illness (like the post-traumatic stress disorder) and blunts its political edge - survivors are treated through various psychiatric and medical practices that aim to rehabilitate them and reinscribe them into social orders of normality; disappearance is a strategy of a refusal to recognize trauma, which undermines the credibility of survivors (Tal 1996:6-7). All three strategies are in different degrees present in the complex and regionally-varied interplay of practices of remembering in Bosnia.

Witnessing as a political act that threatens the status quo is always met with an attempt on behalf of dominant political, social, and economic forces to retain control over the interpretation of testimony. After the codification of traumatic events, they are appropriated, whereby appropriation governed by the official practices of sovereignty and identity turns trauma into an acceptable and in many respects, depoliticized, story. On the other side,

bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change. If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure (Tal 1996:7).

Moreover, this challenge of witnessing does not come only from the survivors of traumatic experience, since there are three distinct 'levels' of witnessing: being a witness to the experience itself; being a witness to the testimonies of others, and 'being a witness to the process of witnessing itself' (Laub 1996:61-75). Such an interpretation renders us all witnesses. One

of the priorities of any politics of social transformation is to bear witness to sovereign biopolitical traumas through unappropriated and authentic political voices. Its transformative potential must (continue to) draw on an ongoing critique and traversal of omnipresent and powerful mythologizing-medicalizing-disappearing strategies that gentrify, codify, and appropriate the Bosnian/Balkan traumas and thus reproduce the sovereign biopolitical matrices - heterocentric/patriarchal, ethnonationalist, and so forth...

### **Law, Art, and Trauma: Is There a (Legal *versus* Literary) Language of Witnessing?**

The conjuncture between law, collective and individual trauma, art, and justice in the Balkans is a theoretico-practical knot whose unraveling deserves more serious and active engagement from practitioners and theoreticians. The ever-increasing obviousness of the link between the previous, ongoing and awaiting trials and traumas shows us that we not only need the reestablishment of the law's monopoly on violence, but also must seek justice, to use Shoshana Felman's words here, "not simply as punishment but as a marked symbolic exit from the injuries of a traumatic history: as liberation from violence itself" (Felman 2002: 1). Histories of political, domestic, and sexual violence (in the Balkans and wider) amount to our collective traumas, and they permeate all spheres of deliberated public life in our societies, thus turning into a matter of culture, literature, art, and politics. It is not only the exercise of justice by trial and by law that we use to come to terms with the wounds incurred by the violence in the Balkans, although the promise of legal justice remains in many respects a vital response to the traumatic legacies and collective injuries that shape our everyday living to an unprecedented degree (Felman 2002: 2-3). How, then, is one to enter this nexus between trial, law and justice, trauma, collective or private, memory, forgetfulness, forgiveness and the repetition of trauma? My argument is that of all the Balkan troubles and quandaries, this

one is most crucial and also the one in respect to which we feel most marginalized and disempowered by various regional and global political and symbolic economies.

With regards to collective/private traumatic histories and states of injury, “what has to be heard in court is precisely what cannot be articulated in legal language” because the claims to justice go beyond consciousness and cognition and the need to arbitrate and decide on guilt and punishment (Felman 2002: 4). The critical legal events in the Hague and soon in our own courts (on a presumably much larger scale) represent not only the drama of law but the drama of much larger cultural crisis too; they encircle a critical traumatic content that polarizes “the cultural, the political, the moral and the epistemological crises” of legitimacy and truth amongst our generations (Felman 2002: 4-5). In contemporary trials dealing with the public and collective legal record of mass trauma, we see that the two poles they address – private trauma and collective trauma- keep reversing into each other, because trials always at the same time not only have a collective echo, calling upon collective identifications and generalizations, but also bring to the public stage and give voice to the ‘bearer of the silence’, the individual traumatized subject (Felman 2002: 6-7). The ways in which the law attempts to contain the trauma by framing it through legal-conscious discourse, or how the trauma gives a new jurisprudential dimension to the drama of the law, or how the trauma addressed by the trial transforms the relationship between what is presumed to be private and collective/public trauma, are beyond the scope of this article (see Felman 2002 for more elaboration on these topics).

I will, therefore, briefly turn to the potentiality of feminism to engender new ways of thinking memory and theorizing trauma – or to the fact of how one can follow in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin or Hannah Arendt, arguing with them and beyond them, so as to act as a cultural witness who turns “trauma as experience

into insight and whose innovative concepts [can give us] new tools with which to think” our Balkan troubles and current times (Felman 2002: 8). In addition to this, essential for such witnessing is the dimension of literature as a very specific dimension of meaning correlative to, yet distinct from, the interstices between law and trauma (Felman 2002: 8). In any case, the cultural significance of historic trials, like the ones at the International Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, is always accompanied by the complementary dimension of literature and film.<sup>2</sup> “The testimony of some literary writers in the face of trauma and in the face of the events of law corroborates and complements the testimony of critics and the thinkers, the theorists of trauma,” because “legal meaning and literary meaning necessarily inform and displace each other” (Felman 2002: 8).

One can even talk of a literary justice, and not only a legal one, that emerges when literature does justice to the trauma in a way that the law does not or cannot, because literature does justice to the refusal of the trauma to be closed, because it does not gentrify the abyss of the trauma but keeps encircling it and casting a look over it in new and repoliticizing ways. I will extensively quote Felman here:

Literature is a dimension of concrete embodiment and a language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but precisely what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot be closed. It is to this refusal of the trauma to be closed that literature does justice. The literary writers [can] stand beyond or in the margin of the legal closure, on the brink of the abyss that underlies

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<sup>2</sup> An example of problematic dealing with trauma in literature are Slavenka Drakulić’s novels (see References). On the other side, a promising way of tackling trauma is to be found in the films of Jasmila Žbanić, such as *Red Rubber Boots* and *After, After*.

the law, on whose profundity they fix their vision and through whose bottomlessness they reopen the closed legal case. (Felman 2002: 8)

Literature is what sits at the tension between consciousness and unconsciousness, language and silence pertaining to the trauma, because it is constantly engaged with the failure of words; the literary can act as a gaze cast at the trial through a dimension of speechless embodiment, silence, it can encapsulate any site of memory to the trauma where traumatic histories start speaking beyond the limits of speech (Felman 2002: 9). Not only trials, but also other forms of testimony and bearing witness are at the same time memorable discursive scenes and dramatically physical theatres of justice: testimonial voices always-already relate to the “body of the witness [as] the ultimate site of memory of individual and collective trauma – because trauma makes the body matter and because the body testifying to the trauma” always matters in new ways (Felman 2002: 9).

How are we to give politically relevant and potentially emancipatory voices to that which cannot be said, to trauma as an identity and a dimension of the Real/the political, in a way that traverses the symbolic master-signifiers of Balkanization experiences? Legal remedies can never fully overcome and subdue a traumatic past simply because trauma refuses closure – this is why practices of remembrance, memorialization, and witnessing, as well as literature and art, continually address the unmastered and unmasterable past seeking the promise of justice. There is no trial that can ever bring closure to our Balkan troubles and traumatic histories and presents. From law to art, from an event in law to an event in art, from evidence in law to evidence in art is a movement between two poles of language – a language of abbreviation, limitation, and totalization and a language of infinity, irreducibility of fragments, embodiment, incarnation, embodied incantation or endless rhythmic repetition (Felman 2002: 153). In the

repoliticization of biopolitical fractures through art, we see the exercise of the testimonial power of a bodily reality and presence of the witness that fractures the totality of facts sought through the law, which fractures and traverses the legal muteness by giving incremental meanings to our silences (Felman 2002: 153-4). Only together these two modes of coping with mad and nightmarish traumatic history – the literary and the legal language of witnessing - engage us in a dialogue with the limits of experience and our liminal subjectivities, with what is incomprehensible, untotalizable, uncontainable, unsayable, impossible to narrate, and yet whose very registration, dramatization, and enactment endows new meanings to the pursuits of justice (Felman 2002: 156).

Perhaps the local processing of the war crimes will make justice ever more seen (rather than just done) than the processing done in the distant Hague, because in the perspective of a larger cultural and historic visibility of testimonials we will be able to see jurisprudential drama around the body of the witness as a site of memory (Felman 2002: 162). The physical dimension, the witness’s speech, the petrification of her body – these are the moments through which history as injury dramatically and traumatically speaks to us as the audience and impresses itself on our memory (Felman 2002: 164). Speaking through the explosion of the legal framework, through the moments of its rapture, offers legal and conceptual breakthroughs – it is in these moments in which both art and history speak beyond the legal tool (Felman 2002: 165-6). The necessary failures of the trials caused by the legal categories that cannot comprehend collective trauma or translate it into consciousness and cognition through legal tools point to something else – to the events of witnessing, witnesses’ bodies and voices, which have a literary, cultural, and jurisprudential speaking power of a higher order (Felman 2002: 166).

There are many examples to support this, and a prominent one is one of the proposed

designs for the Memorial Complex at Potočari, Srebrenica, which prominently figures in the everyday imagination and was used for the public fundraising campaign in the local media. It offers a vision of postcolonial recuperation of identity and belonging away from sovereign biopolitical matrices, in line with the anthropological depth of Mak Dizdar's poetic reconfiguration of modern Bosnia.<sup>3</sup> In this design a series of embroidered pillows is placed on the grassy mountain slope, which is a scene that evokes Bosnian medieval tombs, *stećaks* (see Buturović, 2002, for more details on this). It is important to note that Srebrenica women hold a silent public protest on every 11<sup>th</sup> day in a calendar month, carrying the pillows on which they embroidered the names of their missing. These embroidered pillows, waiting for their missing sleepers, play with the notion of memory as embroidery, and as typically women's work. The music accompanying the public appeal was the old Bosnian folk song *sevdalinka* "Vezak vezla," which talks about a woman waiting for her beloved whilst embroidering. Such memorialization of the experience of trauma is a heretical resistance to the canon – it is an affirmation of the liminal and the defiant tropes in Bosnian cultural habitus; it is a response to the injury and violence that traverses the logic and phantasms resulting in trauma. Therein lingers the potentiality of a new form of commonality and solidarity at the crossroads between the dead and the living, the missing and the remaining, the excluded and the included, the past and the future, forgetting and remembrance, silence and speech, disappearance and continuance. Indeed, responses of this order (with respect to the predicaments of traumatized subjects) instantiate the promise of justice with regards to the cultural drama of liminality, historical injury and not-belonging in politics, and call for a political act of metaphoric universalizations and

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<sup>3</sup> Mak Dizdar is one of the most prominent Bosnian poets. See References for further reading.

identifications with the excluded where identity and community are reformulated.

In such interstices between testimony/witnessing and literature/art, together but not only with reference to the law, there is a potential to recast our own speaking and acting power in the overall appeals to justice, by starting out from the face and body as a site of memory and trauma. The space for this is the deliberated public life of our societies at large, where new specific synergies between culture, art, literature and politics should be intensively sought and enacted against the backdrop of our own traumatic historical (im)possibilities of justice.

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