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Outside of Memories We Belong, Women of Yugoslavia

Bionote: Ivana Mancic is a Ph.D, researcher in Fine Art, School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University, U.K., with the focus on art practice aimed at the production of multi-disciplinary artworks, videos and installations the purpose of which is to display the personal narrative to address the issues of war, loss and belonging, related to the specificity of the ex-Yugoslav context in order to contribute to developing of the female voice of artists and pacifists in contemporary art. The personal narrative is presented in the written form through artworks, texts, essays and reflections on war experiences and current world crises through intersections between the present and the past.

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Abstract: This article addresses the issues surrounding the Yugoslav Civil War by offering my personal narrative in relation to loss and disappearance resulting from the exposure to war and sanctions in the nineties and the "Merciful Angel" operation of bombing of Serbia by NATO in 1999. It thus focuses on the female interpretation of people, ways of life, buildings and human artifacts belonging to the historical period of communist Yugoslavia which once were, yet no longer remain. The work with archives, especially the photographs which originate from my personal family possession, brings closer these ghosts of the past times to the present moment. At the same time, photography is a means to investigate the position and treatment of women during and after the period of Yugoslavia, their efforts and struggles for emancipation. The usage of photography as a visual narrative allows an insight into the lives of women during communism through the lens of my closest female family members. The article tackles different issues of concerning women in communist Yugoslavia, and follows certain steps in their history, from the emancipation following the Second World War and participation of women in battle as combatants and nurses, their efforts in rebuilding the country and subsequent

re establishment of patriarchal values which occurred at the start of Yugoslav Civil war and conflicts that marked it. Autoethnography as a research method combined with personal narrative allows a deeper understanding of culture and values of Yugoslav society and their subsequent clash. In addition to this, it celebrates the importance of female voice and activism in the constant battle against patriarchy and women who chose to defy it by acknowledging responsibility and patriarchal nature of war. Photographic practice-based research allows an insight into individual stories which form a deeper understanding of the pre- and post-war Yugoslav society and political circumstances surrounding it.

Keywords: autoethnography, personal narrative, emancipation of women, Yugoslavia, photography, family archive, practice-based research, female voice

Storytelling is an activity which 'reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it'¹ - Hannah Arendt

Autoethnography as a research method focuses on self, uses memory as a source of research data and as such is a highly personalized account that draws from the experiences of a researcher in order to extend social understanding. Without a personal story, knowledge and theory become disembodied words.² The usage of autoethnography as a research method enables witnessing and testifying on behalf of my personal experience in order to illustrate facets of cultural experience.³

Nevertheless, it is located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and is therefore frequently questioned as a valuable research method which still needs to fight for its status of a proper research methodology.⁴

Auto ethnography focuses on an understanding of culture and society through the self, the personal experience is primary data while

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in dark times* (Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 94.

² Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography an Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35. 4. (2006): 429-449.

³ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12.1. (2011): Art 10.

⁴ Andrew C. Sparkes, "Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17.1. (2000): 21-43.

the individual narrative forms a bigger story of the society. The goal of an auto ethnographer is to achieve a wider cultural understanding on the basis of individual experience, self-reflection, analysis and reflective writing.⁵

Personal narratives are works of history, society and individual and this very intersection of the personal and the societal is a new vantage point that allows for a unique contribution to social science. As such, they deal with both social and individual since the lives lived within the society were shaped by the very values and qualities of the society itself. Systems of language, values, power, culture, symbols, geographies and histories are integral parts of a life within the society. Personal lives were set within the social relationships with family and community, therefore the narrators that recall them and their impetus are elements of the society as well.⁶

In relation to this and using autoethnography as a research method, my personal narrative addresses the issues of loss, memory and belonging that have marked the historical chapter surrounding the Yugoslav Civil War, and, as such, investigates the steps of emancipation of women in Yugoslavia, while photography, as an element of practice based research, serves as a medium to enable witnessing and allows me to testify on behalf of my personal experience in order to illustrate facets of cultural experience.

My testimony derives from the consequences of conflicts and migrations during and after the Yugoslav Civil War and the NATO Bombing of Serbia in 1999. Loss of identity, loss of a sense of belonging, loss of possessions, physical life, and loss of dignity are at times determined by the quality of my memories presented through the written narrative.

One of the pitfalls of autoethnography is that memory is not always linear, and it is at times hard to identify and describe it using a linear narrative even though the language we use to present it, requires linearity. Therefore, alternative means of expression are sometimes needed⁷ and photographic practice-based research can help in this

respect, as it also allows me to test the quality of some of my memories. While explicit memories are based on episodic knowledge and their aim is mainly to inform, they do not affect daily activities and preferences. Unlike them, implicit memories emerge as an emotional response to an association or a cue related to the context in which the traumatic experience occurred, and their retrieval is experienced as a current emotion with properties similar to the initial emotions. Memories such as these can directly influence attention, behaviour and thinking and are immediately aimed at protecting a person and at avoiding danger.⁸ Some therapeutic treatments of implicit memories suggest that they can be dealt with by re experiencing them and in that way change the way in which they are interpreted, thus framing them in a flexible narrative by integrating memories of trauma into someone's life story and the totality of a person's identity.⁹

The Yugoslav Civil War, known around the world for its horrors and immense brutality, as well as ethnic cleansing, mass rapes, lost homelands, lost hope and identity—both national and gender, had a great impact on both feminists and women across the world and its effects were of huge transnational importance.¹⁰ With regards to this and as a response to war, certain women, pacifists, and artists from ex-Yugoslav countries, appeared on the public scene using art to criticize the patriarchal nature of the society and war. This emerging female voice represents a unique step of acknowledgment, responsibility and memory.

The "male paradigm" is characterized by "impersonal abstraction." According to traditional academic male-centred forms of scholarship based on male systems of logic and morality, female writing is more personalized but as such, might at times, be silenced and delegitimized.¹¹ Contrary to masculine energy that "intimidates, constrains, demands, objectifies, and enforces," the energies work-

⁵ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (London: Routledge, 2008), 49.

⁶ Barbara Laslett, "Personal Narratives as Sociology," *Contemporary Sociology* 28.4. (1999): 392-401, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2655287>.

⁷ See: Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ Lawrence J. Sanna and Edward C. Chang, *Judgments Over Time: The Interplay of Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 285.

⁹ Onno Van der Hart, Paul Brown and Bessel Van der Kolk, "Pierre Janet's Treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2.1. (1989): 195-210, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312699643_Pierre_Janet's_Treatment_of_Post-Traumatic_Stress.

¹⁰ Jelena Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War: The 'Yugoslav Case' in Feminist Texts," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3.1. (2001): 1-23, <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol3/iss1/1>.

¹¹ Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown and Leslie A. Baxter, "Disciplining the Feminine," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80.4. (1994): 389-409.

ing through feminine writing can create the potential to allow vulnerability, and new forms of subjectivity to emerge as an element of theoretical work. My feminine voice inside guides the process of writing about events from my past that were buried deep within. By bringing them out into the light of day, their true nature could be witnessed, and they would be permitted to heal.¹²

Jane Rendell, on the *Site Writing* website, in her essay "Conductor: A Tribute to the Angels, *Jane Prophet: 'Conductor'*," quotes Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray, two feminists who explore the relationship between space and subjectivity, and state that these two categories are naturally connected. In their opinion, women were confined by male principles of logic, law and language. As a consequence of this and/or as a result of it, they started questioning the organization of patriarchal time and space. They started rethinking it and accepting "a kind of knowingness or unknowingness that refuses fixity, that allows us to think between, or to think "as if". These female researchers are mediators, who contrary to male approaches "go between and bridge rather than cut through."¹³

Women in Yugoslavia

After the Second World War in Yugoslavia, the main postulates of the new-born political system which insisted on class equality, also assumed the equality between women and men. "Women have rights by law, so they already are equal"¹⁴ The fact that women fought in the front lines, side by side with men, allowed for the basic steps of emancipation. At first, they were mobilized in order to support the Partisan War effort against the Nazis, and an estimated 100,000 women actually participated in battle.¹⁵

According to Pantelic, most of them were deployed as nurses but those that actually participated in combat are the ones who conquered another sphere of the public domain and ensured the future

position of women in public life. By leaving the house in order to work, women potentially managed to conquer the sphere of the public domain, as after the war they were engaged in the rehabilitation of Yugoslavia and also had a task to propagate the socialist ideology.¹⁶

After the FRY proclaimed the Five-Year Plan of rebuilding the country from the consequences of the war there was an increased need in the workforce. In these new circumstances, women gained special importance. They participated in voluntary work to help rebuild the country. These voluntary actions organized by the Communist party of Yugoslavia allowed and welcomed women to build roads, railways and perform work in the factories. The need for fast industrial development required women to leave housework and enter the public sphere. This sudden emancipation allowed women to have their work appreciated and respected.¹⁷

The Communist Partisan movement during the war promised equal rights to women, seeing gender equality as an inevitable by-product of the unfolding communist revolution.¹⁸

¹² Dwayne Custer, "Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method," *The Qualitative Report* 19.37. (2014): 1-13, <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=tqr>.

¹³ Jane Rendell, "Conductor: A Tribute to the Angels, *Jane Prophet: 'Conductor'*," *The Wapping Project* (2000), <https://www.janerendell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/conductor.pdf>.

¹⁴ Rada Iveković and Slavenka Drakulić, "Yugoslavia: Neofeminism—and its Six Mortal Sins," in *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 734.

¹⁵ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."

¹⁶ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."

¹⁷ Aida Spahić, Amila Ždralović and Arijana Aganović, *Women Documented: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century* (Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2014), 74.

¹⁸ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."



Figure 1. Voluntary Action in 1977 Yugoslavia, my mother Mirjana Kvaic (on the left) with a friend, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.



Figure 2. Shoe Factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, Yugoslavia, my grandmother Milica Kvaic (on the left) with colleagues working, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

In reality, what appeared as emancipation during communism actually meant that most women had to spend their lives working in both the public sphere and in their homes. In addition to this, the same opportunities were not offered to men and women equally, both in politics and the self-management system which existed in factories. Women were given roles which required little responsibility and offered them limited prospects of building a career.



Figure 3. *Women and Tito*, my grandmother, Marija Puskas, second on the right, with colleagues from a shoe factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, photograph from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

Both of my grandmothers worked their whole life in a shoe factory and after their hard work they had to continue taking care of their children, house chores and agriculture as they produced most of their food. Some factories introduced Workers' cards in which all of the extra work hours would be noted, and every worker was expected to fulfil these. Emancipation offered to women the belief that they were equal to men so that they could work even harder at the price of feeling respected.

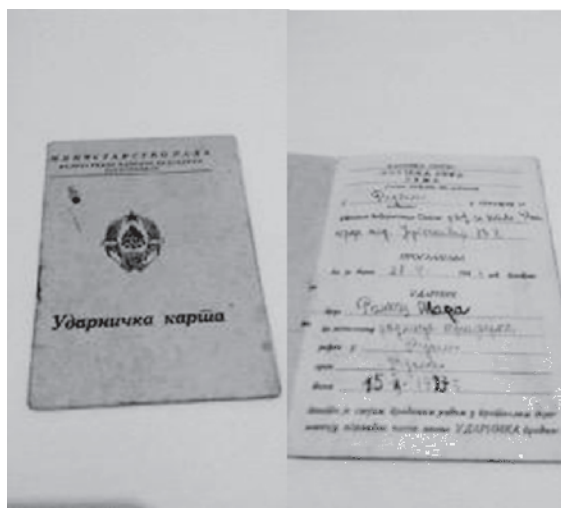


Figure 4. The inside of the Female Workers' Card Shoe Factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, 1947, Yugoslavia, with the name of my grandmother Mara Rakos, photograph of items from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.



Figure 5. My grandmother Mara Rakos, in 1944, age 16, working in a shoe factory, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

In Hemon's words: "My experience of Yugoslavia and experience of people in my vicinity was shaped very much by propaganda, but not only propaganda. For my family and many other families, the new socialist system marked the leap from poverty because the progress and optimism which arose after WW2 led to the creation of the middle class and some of these people, our parents, were born in houses with dirt floors."¹⁹

The communist regime allowed citizens to get an education, college degrees, steady jobs, cars, weekend houses, and to take summer holidays on the Adriatic coast. People believed in this communist ideal and lived it. My mother, like many other women, also stood with this belief and she still believes that these subtle ideas of brotherhood and equality are noble in their core.

She believed (and still does) in social justice, generosity, and a fair distribution of wealth. She believed in the system committed to making the country better; Tito and the Party were that system.²⁰



Figure 6. My mother Mirjana Kvaic (on the right) in 1985 Yugoslavia, skiing with friends, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

¹⁹ Aleksandar Hemon, "My Mother and the Failed Experiment of Yugoslavia," *The New Yorker* (June 05, 2019). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-mother-and-the-failed-experiment-of-yugoslavia>

²⁰ Ibid.

After the divorce, my mother eventually managed to acquire one of the free, state apartments, but I remember her struggle through life, being a divorcee in the communist system. These apartments were not always easy to gain, especially for women. The one she lived in did not have a bathroom, and I remember this well, and I remember feeling this sense of unfairness and today I understand why. Through her struggle I realized how obvious these inconsistencies within the communist society were and how the emancipation of women in communism did not run smoothly.

Aside from that, and despite the fast emancipation of women in socialism, the subsequent re-establishment of the old premises of the patriarchal society and the rise of nationalism soon followed, preceding the armed conflicts of the 1990s.²¹

The ways in which women were treated depended on the circumstances and needs of the society and therefore the road to emancipation was not linear, but rather, turbulent. The relatively peaceful period in Balkan history, from the end of WW2 to the armed conflicts in the nineties, was marked by the jump from patriarchal values to the sudden emancipation of women. This ostensible emancipation was followed by a subsequent decadence marked by the reinvention of the patriarchal values for developing nationalist discourse, which preceded the Yugoslav Civil War.²²

The pre-conflict era had seen the re-patriarchalization of Yugoslavian society and an essentialist conceptualization of dominant gender roles. This was the basis for the militarization of society and mobilizing the population for war.²³

The rejection of communism meant that many values, including that of gender equality were to be discredited. The role and expectations of women changed as the tendency of seeing them as mothers and symbols of the nation occurred, thus emphasizing their biological role as those in charge of the reproduction of the nation.

²¹ Spahić et al., *Women Documented*, 81.

²² Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulić, "When the Word for Peacemaker was a Woman: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia," *Research on Russia and Eastern Europe* 2 (1996): 111-139, <https://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/en/publishing/online-material/women-s-studies-journal/296-when-the-word-for-peacemaker-was-a-woman-war-and-gender-in-the-former-yugoslavia>.

²³ Maja Korac, "Is there a Right Time for Gender-Just Peace?," *Gender and Education* 28.3 (2016): 431-444.

As a result of the rise of nationalist ideology, the idea of patriotic womanhood was born, and a woman's task was no longer to build socialism through work and defend its values but to regenerate the nation through the role of mother.²⁴

These new gender roles adapted individuals to war roles and for the war system to change fundamentally for the sake of ending wars, profound changes in gender relations are necessary.²⁵

What followed were dark times and rainy days. Sometimes it rains in a different way and it is peaceful and solemn, the rain that purifies. But those days that marked the dusk of Yugoslavia were simply gloomy. That rain had nothing in common with the simple pleasures of childhood, when one rejoiced just by seeing the merry dance of the raindrops on the concrete and the surrounding nature breathing together with the soaking soil. That rain could not wash off the dark days. It did not bring any good, but instead, gloomier and gloomier news from the war zone. Yes. They did really wage wars only an hour away. I did not know about it as I was only eleven, and on the other hand it was there, in the air and we all sensed it. The dark days of our childhoods. The days in which we were to forget that we should be equal. The days in which brotherhood and equality were condemned by men who wanted to play war. The days in which we were so poor and some of them suddenly so rich. Those days were heavy, with lead skies that do not promise anything good. At the edge of my childhood there it was, the foresight of horror. The irony of it all is that it did not really happen to us, we did not get killed but parts of us died. There, at the edge of my childhood were the worried faces of my parents trying to make some sense in madness.

I also remember the bombing. I was nineteen. All the bridges that connected Serbia and the northern province of Vojvodina were already destroyed. There was fire and smoke everywhere. Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina, was covered in flames. It felt as if I was turning grey from the inside—as if someone took all of the colours away. As if all the sense disappeared. We, the ordinary people, could not face it. The psychological strain, the burden was too much. When I

²⁴ Wendy Bracewell, "Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18.1-2. (1996): 25-33.

²⁵ Charlotte Bunch, "Feminism, Peace, Human Rights and Human Security," *Canadian Woman Studies* 22.2.(2003): 6-11.

look back to those days, they simply have no colour. They feel like someone had stripped them of every meaning.

I remember looking at my country burn through the windowpane. I remember the factories burning in the distance, the effort of so many communist workers disappearing. The dream disappearing. Their hopes and beliefs disappearing in flames. Thick black smoke elevating towards the sky. I was aware that that bomb could hit us at any second. I was aware of all the senselessness of hiding. But human beings are miraculous in their willingness to prevail against all odds and that is how I survived- through the flames, and I became resilient to sorrow and pain, to hunger, to humiliation, to misery. I sometimes think that this is how I travel through life, in smoke, always through smoke. Regardless of realizing the frailty of our own existence, we, the women of Yugoslavia I knew, prevailed, through flames and smoke.

Nevertheless, even today, in the era of the migrant crises, with the migrants stuck in Serbia in their attempts to cross the borders with EU countries, women are remembered again, in frequent narratives about the refugee men who are raping "our women." It is this hypocritical relationship that marked the treatment of women in and after Yugoslavia, by always involving them in political discourses and using them for media purposes. Therefore, women in Yugoslavia and in post-Yugoslav era were betrayed and misused by political systems. From mine and the experience of the women around me, I can conclude that women have been dragged into the political circumstances of their time, most of them forced to simply coexist with war, hunger and crises.

Nevertheless, through the constant clashes and conflicts, some women realized that, as a half of humanity, they do have the right to have their voice heard and to participate in the decision-making, both in peace and war, and therefore should have a say in all of the activities that have an effect on their lives. In that sense, gender balance, as a democratic principle, is essential to the right of women to engage in peace building and it should ensure that women can reject nationalist discourses and projects and choose to act against them. Regardless of this, activists are still seen as traitors and are subjugated to the general contempt and rejection by their own

communities²⁶ and those women who choose to defy patriarchy and thus undermine the existing order, such as Women in Black, Serbia, are deprived of support and appreciation.²⁷ Fighting patriarchy and war as its product is an ongoing process and in this fact lies the importance of female activism and the female voice.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Vjolca Krasniqi et al., *Feminism and Nationalism, Yugoslav Feminisms* (Belgrade: ProFemina, 2011), 57.