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## Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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*Gendered violence is not a special type of torture used only in war. Its roots are well established in peacetime. This article discusses parallels between the patterns of everyday domination and aggression during times of peace and war. Further, it discusses how metaphors and acts of rape in peacetime are transformed into symbols and acts of rape for wartime purposes. During peacetime the individual body, especially its essences—sexuality and reproduction—becomes the symbol of everyday domination and aggression. Wartime transforms individual bodies into social bodies as seen, for example, in genocidal rapes or ethnic cleansing, which are thought to purify the bloodlines. Then, institutions—that is, medical, religious, and government establishments—further reinforce the wartime process by manipulating the individual/social body into the body politic by controlling and defining “human life” and using political rapes to entice military action by the West. The final transformation (at the war’s conclusion) is the reformation of the social body back into the individual body, making the individual body once again the focus of dominance and aggression as the acceptable social “order.” [war rapes, gender, body folklore, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina]*

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Violence against women is not restricted to war; its roots are well established in peaceful times. And use of violence against women in war cannot be understood without first examining its cultural meanings in peace, meanings that utilize metaphors of the body, sexuality, and honor to manipulate the social order. Unlike the work of the theorists who describe wartime rape as an aberration (cf. Brownmiller 1975), my research shows that wartime gender violence highlights preexisting sociocultural dynamics. Indeed, war rapes in the former Yugoslavia would not be such an effective weapon of torture and terror if it were not for concepts of honor, shame, and sexuality that are attached to women’s bodies in

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peacetime. War rape would not work as well as a policy of terror were it not for the cultural salience within the honor/shame complex generalized in the southeastern European cultural area.

### **Brief Political Background**

The political dissolution of Eastern Europe at the end of 1980s exposed military disputes and caused long-term social, political, and economic upheaval. The greatest fallout is evidenced by the political collapse of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

Socialist Yugoslavia (1945–91) was a federation of six republics: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In June 1991, after referendums in both republics, Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence; war broke out shortly thereafter. Bosnia-Herzegovina followed suit in March of 1992 and war broke out one month later. All three states were admitted to the United Nations (UN) in May 1992. Macedonia voted independence in September 1991, but was not admitted into the UN until April 1993. The remaining two republics, Serbia and Montenegro, formed a union and to this day refer to themselves as the “Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” or simply “Yugoslavia.”

Although the war “officially ended” in Croatia in 1992, the occupied Croatian territories (about one-fourth of the country) were under Serbian occupation and were liberated in May and August of 1995. After the Croatian offensive the international community decided to send International Forces (IFOR) troops into Bosnia. As of this writing (1996), IFOR is still in Bosnia.<sup>2</sup>

### **Researcher in a War Situation**

In December 1991 to May 1993, when the war was at its peak, I went to Croatia as the deputy minister of Science and Technology. During my tenure there, I was fully enmeshed in all aspects of day-to-day living in a wartime situation (Olujić 1995a), spending time in bomb shelters and carrying a gas mask (see also Robben and Nordstrom 1995). Since the summer of 1993, I have conducted anthropological research as a H. F. Guggenheim Fellow on violence against women—specifically, war rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.

As both the deputy minister of Science and as a researcher, I was confronted with numerous difficulties in regard to the war and political situation. I was both an insider and an outsider, a U.S.-educated anthropologist and also a Croatian who was thereby expected, because of my ancestry and history, to have a particular allegiance, one subjectively based, in this conflict. Yet no researcher could remain completely unmoved by the horrifying stories told by survivors of tortures. The stories in this article are difficult to read; they were even more difficult to hear in person.

To understand the public violence in former Yugoslavia requires insight not only of a wartime “culture of violence” (Desjarlais and Kleinman 1994:11), but also of the “culture of peacetime.” The two are inextricably interlinked. Desjarlais and Kleinman (1994) point out that the notion of “culture” has been problematic when applied to situations where violent disorder persists. I argue along with them that theorists must link collective action with individual experience to find “a space

where the social body and the physical body intersect” (Desjarlais and Kleinman 1994:11). In the former Yugoslavia, explanation for the dynamics, meaning, and experience of violence requires analysis of the context—peace, war, or postwar time—of violence and honor in gender relations.

### **Methodology and Field Site**

My methods included semistructured interviews with victims-survivors, family member(s), health officials, and religious leaders.<sup>2</sup> Informants included Bosnian and Croatian refugees of both sexes. In sum, I collected 75 in-depth, open-ended interviews, which I call *testimonies*. I refer to these interviews as testimonies because they bear direct witness to wartime violence. Interviews typically lasted for several hours and were often done over a period of several months. Some were series of dialogues that took place between 1992–96. Interviews elicited demographic data and information about informants’ lives before and during the war. All of the interviews were tape-recorded in the Croatian language and then transcribed. Interview data were supplemented with life-history accounts and by observations. For example, as most of the interviews were done in people’s homes, I also observed interactions with members of the household.

In addition, I used an attitude survey of 1,060 informants that also included refugees and internally displaced persons, which focused on questions about the war in Croatia and Bosnia, war rapes, victims, and perpetrators. The survey was a broadly based, short questionnaire that asked questions about respondents’ background and opinion of the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Questions were aimed to elicit opinions or attitudes about the perpetrators of war atrocities, especially war rapes; who respondents blamed for the war; and how respondents would punish perpetrators of war rapes. Analysis of some of the findings from the survey questionnaire have been published elsewhere (Rijavec et al. 1996). Two open-ended questions referred to subjects’ beliefs about *causes* of sexual violence in peacetime and in wartime.<sup>3</sup>

Interviewees lived in border areas where fighting had taken place and where there were no sharp cultural distinctions among the combatant groups. The folklore of all three groups—Croat, Serb, and Muslim—reflected similar motifs, and these motifs remained constant across versions and genres in the folklore of the regions.<sup>4</sup> Despite these cultural similarities, however, interviewees’ ethnic self-identities were distinctive.

### **Traditional Culture in Peacetime: Gender Relations and Family Structure**

Gendered violence in war draws on peacetime meanings of sexuality. In peacetime, even as we near the end of the 20th century, control of women by men and protection of their sexuality continue to be convenient means of justifying the domination of women by men in southeastern Europe.

The dynamic of male protection of female honor is embedded in the complex traditional cultures of the Slavic peoples in southeastern Europe. Here, the center of the patriarchal regime is the extended family, called *zadruga*, a corporate family unit under which all holdings—for example, property, livestock, and land—are held communally by the patrilineage (Byrnes 1976; Hammel 1968, 1972;

Tomasevich 1976). *Zadruga* ideology has persisted for centuries and is the crux of Yugoslavian *cultural* ideologies.

Women marry into their husband's families and are thus outside of the core social unit. They are valued as sex objects, mothers, and workers (Denich 1974; Stein Erlich 1966). This pattern is familiar to much of the Mediterranean: women represent the code of *honor* of the family and the code of shame via the blood revenge for nonfamily member's transgressions, which along with a male-dominated strict hierarchy, provide many behavioral norms and unity (Boehm 1984; Davis 1977; Simic 1983; Woodward 1985).

The honor/shame dichotomy is evident in the highly guarded aspects of women's virginity, chastity, marital virtue, and especially fertility. For women, honor and shame are the basis of morality and underpin the three-tiered hierarchy of statuses: husband, family, and village. In the former Yugoslavia, these traditional values regarding sexual behavior, which condoned rape through honor/shame constraints, took precedence over economic transformations, state policy commitments under communism, and male migration (Olujic 1990).

## Peacetime Metaphors of Sexuality and the Body

### *Sexuality, Courtship, and Reproduction*

One must understand the constructions of sexual violence in peacetime in order to understand the meanings of wartime sexual tortures. In the former Yugoslavia peacetime gender interactions are illustrated in songs, jokes, and stories, which, though different in different geographical regions, have similar messages (cf. Knezevic 1996). A Croatian form of epic singing called *ganga* conveys its meaning through symbolism:<sup>5</sup> "plowing" means intercourse, a cluster of wool symbolizes the vagina, a rifle represents the penis.

*Ganga* is performed by a group of men or women and communicates messages of love and betrayal between young men and young women. Songs are not sung directly to women, but womanhood, especially the sexuality of women, is the main focus. Men generally sing songs about their virility and masculinity. They portray themselves as wanting sex and portray women as withholding it; men depict women as hypocritical objects and depict themselves as powerful subjects.<sup>6</sup> In *ganga*, men express their view of women as sexual objects through symbolic language. For example, in the following *ganga* verse, which draws on the metaphor of baking, a man shows his manly dominance by shaving and cutting a woman's pubic hair on the hearth.

*Ja sam moju i brija i sisa  
na kominu di se pura misa.*

I shaved and cut her [pubic hair]/ I shaved and cut [my woman]  
On the open hearth where the polenta [commeal] is mixed.

Placing a woman on the hearth symbolizes her sexual "hotness" or readiness for penetration, according to the man. The mixing of polenta is also a sexual image. Crucial to making good polenta is artful stirring with a long wooden (phallic) stick (*misac*). When polenta is not properly cooked, it is offensive to eat it or to offer it

to guests. Thus in the verse a man's stick/penis is depicted as controlling a woman's sexual being.

The images of shaving and cutting the pubic hair in the verse quoted above are complicated symbols that men and women interpret differently. For example, male informants interpreted this verse to mean that "the man is able to do what he wants with a woman," that "he's boasting to other men that he is not a chicken, but a macho guy," or that "this means that he is a man." Female informants, in contrast, interpreted the verse to mean that "the man even took the opportunity for sexual intercourse on a *hot* hearth," that "the man was only thinking about sex," or that "sperm is equivalent to foam and his penis is a razor, so he has the ability to shave a woman—get her sexually."

In the current war, the words *shave* and *cut* mean to kill someone. A spray of machine gun fire, for example, is said to "shave" the enemy. Historically, shaving hair, especially women's hair, has also been used to signify dishonor. During World War II if a woman was thought to be a spy, Yugoslavian partisans shaved her head. During the recent war, another metaphor was associated with hair. The word *proceszjati*, which means "to comb through," also refers to liquidating the enemy. Soldiers often state that "First we combed the forest, then the village." Because of the ritual importance of cutting a boy's hair, shaving symbolizes a man's coming of age and circumcision in Muslim areas (Eugene A. Hammel, personal communication, April 14, 1995). In sum, cutting and shaving suggest male power and male sexual prowess.

Another folk song that uses metaphors of polenta making includes the common expression, "blood is not polenta" (*krv nije pura*). This song and conventional phrase warns against mixing together ethnic groups as if they were polenta. The same expression can be used to praise the strength of blood relative ties, similar to the English saying, "Blood is thicker than water."

Images of blood with polenta also make reference to the physically thick (*gusta*) property of polenta. While male blood is considered thick or coagulated (*tvrda* or *gusta*) like polenta, female blood is thin (runny) and soft (*rijetka*, *meka*) like poorly made polenta. Women's blood is thin because they marry out and leave their lineage; men's blood is thick and lumpy because it remains part of the lineage and is passed on to offspring. This is why people of the region consider daughters to be "alien bone" (*tudja kost*) or "alien fate" (*tudja sreca*). They are viewed as the property of another lineage and are therefore seen as valueless to the natal family. The expressions "blood is not polenta" and "blood is not like water" (*krv nije voda*) make reference to not only the importance of the "pure blood" of kinship but also to the superior blood of males.

Historically, in ballads about the distress of war, heroes wrote letters in their blood or wept tears of blood in their fury, which expressed love. In many ceremonies blood is used as a sign of allegiance or bonding. A person may suck the blood from another's finger in the ceremony of "sworn brotherhood" or may scratch his face until it bleeds as an expression of grief. A wrongful act is avenged by "blood revenge" by killing a member of a transgressor's "blood kin." In addition, first brides into a family may assert their rank over later brides by saying, "I spilled my blood here before you did." This is a reference to the blood that virgins are believed to shed on their wedding nights.<sup>7</sup>

The tight control over the expression of women's sexuality in southeastern European cultures does not obviate the widespread discussion of sexuality by both men and women in the form of jokes, songs, aphorisms, and other folklore phrases. Similar to *ganga* songs, jokes and other forms of folklore express the ideas that women are secretly and ardently sexual, that priests are secretly lustful, and that men are publicly sexually powerful, strong, and boastful (cf. Brandes 1980).

Men are preoccupied with their own as well as women's sexuality. They literally "measure" their own sexuality and ways to "measure up" to each other by resorting to various public displays of virility or sexual prowess. For example, men publicly boast to each other about their sexual affairs—imaginary or real—in order to show their manliness and power. Male informants, even from different generations, share in common "competitive games." "As teenagers," one man stated, "while shepherding cows, or just playing around in the woods, we would gather in groups and would compete with each other to see which one of us could ejaculate the furthest. There were also competitions to see which one of us had the longest penis." Another informant added that "There was no ruler, so we devised various measuring techniques. We would use our hand. The distance between the thumb and the index finger when stretched out was (*rogusa*), the thickness or width of one, two, or three fingers (*prst*), the length of the thumb (*palac*), or the area of the palm of a hand (*dlan*)." Men viewed these activities as competitive but nonaggressive games for determining which one of them was the most sexually capable.

Another competitive game involved comparing stories of seeing naked women. "To see a naked woman, especially her bare breasts and her pubic hair, was a desire," said one man, "of every young man. We all strived to visibly accomplish this feat." Another male informant stated that he and his buddies went to a lot of trouble to see a naked woman:

We all knew that each Sunday before Mass the women had to change from their everyday clothes into their Sunday best. We, of course, knew how long the walk took from the village to the church, and approximately how long it would take the women to get dressed. We would peek through the window to get a glimpse of a woman's naked body while she was changing her clothes. Another method was standing below a ladder and watching underneath her skirts when she climbed up. Another method, less common, was putting a piece of mirror on the floor where the woman was standing and performing some labor intensive task. Some men also placed a piece of mirror on the tip of their own shoes.

Measurements were also used to evaluate a women's past sexual experiences. Men told me that they could tell, even without sleeping with a woman, whether or not she was a virgin. One way to "measure" her chastity was to assess her breasts: If she had soft breasts (*meka sisa*), in other words, if they were "hanging," it meant that someone else already perforated her (*probusit*). Another way to decipher whether or not a woman was a virgin was to secretly listen to the sound of her flowing urine. If she "pissed wide" (*siroko pisa*), it meant that she had been pierced (*probijena*).

Rape and symbolic or "play rape" have historically been a part of some marriage rituals in southeastern Europe. Marriage by capture (*otmica*), in which a man kidnaps a woman and takes her to the mountains to sexually express his right over her as his wife, often took place without the consent of the woman or her male kin.

Today, the *otmica* is sometimes a form of elopement, allowing a young couple to marry without the approval of the bride's parents. The theme is also played out in a form of courtship called "chasing" (*gonjanje*), which became especially common after World War II. Male teenagers would run after a woman, knock her down, jump on top of her, pin her onto the floor, roll her over, and then pinch her breasts or grab at her genital region. In public, this physical assault aroused the cheers of men and motivated women to yell out and pull the man off the victim. I was told by women informants that men openly chased women as a way of publicly boasting to other men of their accomplishments (*pohvaliti se*). Since the attacked women usually rejected the men's advances, the play rape became a way for a man to publicly save face and publicly humiliate a woman for rejecting him. In short, it was a game of status in which men had to be on top.<sup>9</sup>

Conversely, if an unmarried woman attracted the attention of a young man, her face or cheek (*obraz*) was dishonored (*sramota*), which in turn ruined the honor (*cast*) of her entire family. The term *shameful* (*bezobrazluk*) literally means "faceless act," and the expression "to sit on one's own face" (*sjesti na svoj obraz*) means to disgrace oneself by an immoral act. Courtship contained an intrinsic undercurrent of dangerous, violent sexuality. While male teenagers had almost unlimited rights of expression, female teenagers were frequently told publicly to contain [barricade] themselves. Mothers might publicly yell lengthy and insulting instructions at daughters suspected of flirting. An example of such a "cool down" instruction is, "If you are so incandescent (*uzarena*), heat up (*mase*) coal pliers or an ash scooper (*ozeg*) and put it in yourself. If you are burning. . . ." These instructions of self-violence demonstrate the extent to which women are expected to keep themselves in control and avoid men's public control over them.

Distrust of female sexuality before marriage is also illustrated by the custom of publicly demonstrating proof of virginity after the wedding night. The blood-stained sheets of the wedding night are traditionally displayed publicly for all to witness. The ubiquitousness of this custom is reflected in the numerous stories and jokes of women who resort to using animal blood or red paint to stain the sheets.<sup>10</sup> One particular joke comes to mind: before the sun came up, a woman displayed her blood-stained sheets during the early dawn. The pitch darkness outside obscured the actual color of the paint she had grabbed, which was green. Two nuns walking by early that morning were the first ones to see the displayed sheets. One nun looked at the other and said, "Oh, my God! Poor woman, this one [man] even penetrated/punctured her gall bladder!"

A woman's blood also reflects men's antagonistic attitudes toward women. Virgin blood, for example, is neutral; menstrual blood is unclean (*necista krv*). When a child is born deformed, such as a baby with cleft palate, it is said that the woman conceived in dirty blood (*zanijela u necistoj krvi*). This statement implies that a woman's sexual activities during menstruation negatively impact her child's physical genetic well-being. Nature thus supposedly determines or judges women's behavior.

Given the importance and value placed on women's chastity, monogamy, and fertility, it is understandable why women, and by extension family and lineage, constitute critical targets in the current war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Aggression or violence against women is a means by which combatants show who controls the "sexual property" and political process through traditional

honor/shame ideology. Women's honor reflects that of men's, which, in turn, reflects that of the nation.

### Recipe for Terror, Culture of Fear: Setting the Stage for the War

In the Summer of 1990, a preplanned sequence of intimidation and *tactics of fear* became a recipe for terror: roads were barricaded, JNA or Yugoslav People's Army helicopters and bombers flew very low over villages and civilians, and individual arrests, tortures, and massacres of small groups of people took place (cf. Suarez-Orozco 1990). In the Summer of 1991, these events culminated in full-scale war.

Before the actual fighting started in 1990–91, the most common form of terror was selection and roundup of the civilian population. Although some individuals testified that the local police and army units merely arrested them and took them to various locations for an "informative conversation" (*informativni razgovor*),<sup>9</sup> most people were beaten and tortured, and many were killed. By the end of the Summer of 1991, an all-out assault with the heaviest artillery—tanks, cannons, bombs, and missiles—began. By April 1992, the war had become vicious and this viciousness persisted until the IFOR were deployed in Bosnia in January 1996. Most of the fighting took place in Bosnia and in the disputed border areas of Croatia.

At the onset of the war in Croatia, *ganga* was used as a means to communicate images of warfare. *Ganga* songs and jokes became very popular:

*Mala moja, materina bona,  
Biz 'po da me, eto aviona.*

My little one, mama's little sweetheart,  
Quickly, run [hide] underneath me there is a bomber airplane [coming].

*Da su na nebu sve zvizdice pizdice  
Svi bi momci bili zrakoplovci.*

If all the stars in the sky were pussies,  
Then all the men would be airmen.

The sexual content, especially the analogy of violent attacks and sexual behavior, is apparent in the *ganga* songs.

On the eve of the war in Bosnia, a number of popular jokes revealed apprehension and anxiety about expected sexual violence. Before fighting or war-related sexual violence began, the following joke was popular: "Haso<sup>12</sup> told his wife Fata 'The tanks are rolling into Bosnia, so go out and lay down on the street to stop them!' Fata replied, 'No, I'll wait for the foot soldiers.'" Haso commands Fata to use her sexuality as a weapon to stop the tanks. Fata's reply implies anticipation of sexual violence as though it were pleasurable. The joke hides the reality that her sexuality does not stop the soldiers, but becomes their weapon.

A second joke, which was current after the war started, reflected the growing recognition that rape is a weapon: "Fata came home naked and Haso asked her, 'What happened to you?' She responded, 'A sniper got me.'" <sup>13</sup> The meaning of the joke is that the worst fears of Haso have been realized—his wife came home naked—which could only mean that she had sexual intercourse with another man. The joke does not make clear whether or not the sexual relation was consensual.



The irony in the joke is that Fata had a sexual relationship with someone other than her husband and that it was her fault for being “taken by the sniper.”

These jokes represent the merger of images of sex and combat and illustrate the importance of rape as both a physical and a symbolic form of terror. The jokes portray women as the objects of men’s military/political aims (Enloe 1992; Farmanfarmaian 1992).

### Gendered Violence in Wartime

The presence of everyday sexual violence in peacetime is absent in most of the literature about sexual coercion. The current literature treats rape in peacetime as a crime against an *individual* woman, and only rape in wartime as a tactic of terror against women in general (Brownmiller 1975, 1993; Nordstrom 1994; Stigl-mayer 1994).

In previous wars, rape did not receive the widespread publicity that it does in the ongoing war in former Yugoslavia, and it was not studied by social scientists. The focus on rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia by the media provides a unique opportunity to study rape in the context of conflict. In this context rape constitutes a physical and moral attack against women, as well as an attack by humiliation and dishonor on the husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons of the victims. Rape demonstrates men’s inability to protect their women. Thus, in wartime, violation of female honor is a weapon used by the men of one ethnic group against those of another. This type of humiliation is especially intense in southeastern Europe where the honor/shame complex is strong and female chastity is central to family and community honor (Boehm 1984; Davis 1977; Schneider 1971).

Men suffer the shame of their failure to protect their property that includes women, family, bloodlines, and soil. Women suffer through their duty to endure the *private stigma of shame*. Their suffering is protection of men’s public shame. Public admission of sexual victimization means public defeat of the honor of the men: the loss of their public, status-focused face (*obraz*); the public admission of loss of their bloodline (*krv*); and the loss of their soil/nation (*zemlja*).

In war individual bodies become metaphoric representatives of the social body, and the killing or maiming of that body symbolically kills or maims the individual’s family and ethnic group. War rapes reinforce the cultural notions of cleanliness and dirtiness associated with sexuality and ethnic affiliation. Through forced pregnancy resulting from rape, aggressors can “purify the blood” of the attacked group by creating “ethnically cleansed” babies belonging to the group of the invading fathers.

In the former Yugoslavia, because meanings of rape are shared by the three ethnic groups (Croats, Muslims, and Serbs), sexual violence is especially salient as a weapon of torture (Olujic 1995b). Elaine Scarry (1985:56–58), in her discussion of the political construction of pain under torture, identifies the creation of state hegemony as part of the torture process, which is based on detachment and transfer of political meaning and significant capacities from the body of the tortured to the instruments of torture that become fetishized symbols of the state. Like Foucault (1977), Scarry sees vestiture and divestiture of the body as modes of domination when performed by the state (cf. Aretxaga 1993; Feldman 1991).

## War Rapes in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1990-95)

### *Dimensions of Violence*

Nobody knows the actual number of the victims of rape and sexual torture in the war in former Yugoslavia (Brecic and Loncar 1995).<sup>14</sup> According to the figures released by the Bosnian government at the end of September 1992, almost 15 percent of the population of approximately one and a half million or 200,000 individuals, had been confined in concentration camps (*New York Times* 1993). Men and women were held separately. Individuals of both sexes were physically and sexually tortured. Tortures included rape and sexual mutilation. Men were forced to watch their female relatives raped multiple times. The same report stated that the number of women who had been raped was at least 14,000. Because it is a shame and dishonor to admit rape, however, many victims probably remained silent. It was estimated that among all the female rape victims 14 percent were girls between the ages of 7 and 18, 57 percent were between the ages of 18 and 35, 21 percent were between the ages of 35 and 50, and 7 percent were above the age of 50 (*New York Times* 1993).

In another report compiled by a fact-finding mission of the European Community in December 1992, Bosnian Serb soldiers were reported to have raped 20,000 women, mostly of Muslim ethnicity. The report noted, "in recent months this was part of a deliberate pattern of abuse [where] rapes cannot be seen as incidental to the main purposes of the aggression but as serving a strategic purpose in itself" (European Community Investigation Mission into the Treatment of Muslim Women in the Former Yugoslavia n.d.:18). War rapes are one of the forms of "ethnic cleansing" (1992:18). The Bosnian Ministry of the Interior places the number of women rape victims at 50,000. While the reported number of rapes varies, all reports agree that rape has been used as a genocidal tool used against ethnic populations.

### *Concentration Camps: Rapists' Attack Centers*

Many mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina have occurred in what the Bosnian government terms *rape camps*, where Serbian soldiers forcibly held and raped the conquered women, who faced either of two cruel fates: to survive repeated rapes and tortures, or to be killed immediately.

The names and locations of rape camps reflect preexisting attitudes toward sexuality and courtship, but in a cruel new context. Rape camps were former coffeehouses and restaurants whose names symbolize both the traditional and the modern, such as "Vilina Vlas" (Nymph's Tresses) and "Kafana Sonja" (Coffeehouse Sonja). To a weary traveler in this part of the world, these names previously symbolized a traditional, quaint, and poetic place of pleasure (Olujić 1995a). The names currently mean brothels, not detention camps, in which women willingly satisfy men's desires. The names of these camps thus blame women for their own victimization.

For women, these places are *pakao na zemlji* (hell on earth). In many camps, the majority of the female victims have been murdered, dying from gunshot

wounds, bleeding as a consequence of gang rape, or dying by suicide motivated by shame.

Although rapes have been committed by Croatian as well as Muslim soldiers, such instances were fewer in number without “preplanned rape camps and women were not imprisoned until they became pregnant,” according to one male soldier. Moreover, rape was not a systematic policy among the Croatians and Muslims, as evidenced from the testimonies collected during the research period.

### *Systematic Violence*

The atrocities committed by Serbian soldiers were systematic. Unwilling Serbian soldiers were sometimes coerced by superior officers to rape or help rape women. One Serbian soldier, for example, recounted that his commander instructed them to rape and then kill Muslim women because it was “good for raising the fighters’ morale” (*New York Times* 1992:1). The purpose of systematic rape was to “clean” women of their ethnic identity and humiliate their male kin.

There are also accounts, although not as common, of forced sexual relations or rapes among related male prisoners. Forced sexual atrocities, especially oral sex among siblings and between fathers and sons, are documented (Brecic and Loncar 1995). For example, Brecic and Loncar, both of whom are medical doctors, cataloged four categories of sexual abuse against men:

1. Injuries of testicles with blunt objects (44% of their sample)
2. Castrations and Semi-Castrations (24% of their sample)
3. Rape (20% of their sample)
4. Perverse sexual acts (12% of their sample)

Rape was the most difficult trauma for men to deal with because they associated male rape with homosexuality. They believed that a man who rapes another man is a homosexual and that only homosexual males are victims of rape. Such beliefs lead men to question the core of their sexual identity. Their homophobia often lead to a prolonged process of healing.

My research points out that among relatives, more common were instances where male relatives were forced to physically torture each other. The following is a translation of an excerpt from a testimony given by a Muslim man during 1993 while he was a refugee living in Croatia:

In their second wave of interrogation (*nalet*), the Serbian soldiers asked [the prisoners] if there were families amongst ourselves. A father and a son stood up. The soldiers said, “Hit yourselves. Fight each other.” They started slapping each other. The soldier said: “It’s no good. Why isn’t it good? Because there is no blood.” The father and the son then started to hit each other harder. The soldier again said: “It’s still not good. There is no blood. This is the way you have to do it.” The soldiers started beating up the son so hard that he fell down unconscious. Then randomly the soldiers asked one of the prisoners: “What is your name?” As soon as the prisoner identified himself, the soldier said: “So, that’s you, mother fucker. Cut his throat.” Five soldiers then jumped on top of him. The man started screaming. They didn’t kill him—they cut off his ears. . . . The man is screaming, the blood is hissing all over us, they are still on top of him—laughing. . . . All of us who were around there, they ordered us to lick the blood that was [spilled] on the wooden floor.

There was a deliberate attempt to impregnate women and hold them as prisoners until it was too late to abort—usually through the second trimester of pregnancy. Today the raped women and their children from rape are constant reminders of suppression and domination. The following is a lengthy and a very difficult translation from Sanela (pseudonym), a 19-year-old woman:

The four Serbian soldiers asked me if I ever had a man [sexually] and I told them that I never was with a man because we are forbidden [to have sexual intercourse] before marriage. . . .

The soldiers told me “You are a spy, not a Muslim. Muslims are shaven down there/below” [pubic hair]. My mother and those older ladies shaved down there, that was some kind of custom, but the younger women didn’t shave, it wasn’t mandatory. At this point, a soldier grabbed me down there [genital area] and started pulling out [the pubic hairs] and said “See you are not a Muslim, if you were a Muslim you wouldn’t have that [pubic hair]. . . .”

And he continued, “You’re not a Muslim, admit who you are.” I said, “I am a Muslim, I swear to God, I swear on my mother, let me go.” “No you’re not.” “Yes I am.” He said, “If you are a Muslim, then we will shave you (*obrijati*).” And then he took out that knife which he carried and threw me down and pinned me on the floor and called the others to come and help him. They were all laughing and yelling, “shave,” “shave her,” “cut that.” They proceeded to shave me, but it can’t be called that. He was plucking, waving the knife, cutting across my body and over my breasts. . . . That was not accidental. Yes it was almost dark, but he was cutting me on purpose [the cutting was not accidental due to darkness]. They are holding me. One sat on my stomach, he was lifting my legs and I couldn’t move. They shoved some kind of rag in my mouth so that I wasn’t able to yell, and every time he plucked [my pubic hair] my body jerked and then he would kick me and pluck even harder. Later when I saw [my genital area] everything was bloody, red, all around, hurting, it was bleeding, and then all night they. . . .

The testimony continues with details of other forms of torture committed by the four Serbian “hero soldiers.”<sup>15</sup> Grazing her breasts with a knife, they told her to get up so that they could better see her. Then they ordered her, like a Playboy bunny or model showing off her body, to turn around, sit, stand, move, lie down, get up, and so on. They wanted her to pose in order to emphasize the tortured body. She was pleading with them to let her go and to give her a piece of cloth to stop the bleeding from the cuts inflicted earlier. Instead of giving her a cloth to stop the bleeding, one of the soldiers told her

Blood is bloody, and you have not even felt what it means to have your blood running. But you will feel it, just you wait a little. And now, you are a real Muslim, beautiful, you have no hair [pubic hair], now you are proper [complete]. And do you know what I do with such types? I slit their throats. And I will also cut, slowly, so that you can truly feel how it is when the blood is running.

Sanela lived to report these terrifying acts and words. The remainder of her testimony reveals more tortures, beatings, and acts of oral sex, which she was forced to perform on all of the men that day. She was also forced to go outside and to lie naked on the cold branches and leaves. She was raped by each of the four soldiers. One of the soldiers told her, “Lie down and shut-up. So, you were never with a man? No? Well, now you will see what is a man, a real man. And not one of yours. . . . Peeled [*oguljeni*]. . . . [this refers to the Muslim practice of circumci-

sion].” Sanela survived their rapes and tortures and was released in a prisoner exchange. She terminated her pregnancy and is now living in a refugee camp in Croatia.

There is a deeper significance of the Serbian soldier’s remark to his Muslim victim about circumcision. Instead of using the word *circumcised* (*sunet/obrezat*), he chose the word *peeled* (*ogulit*), a word more commonly used in connection to bananas and other fruit, implying that unlike the deformed, incomplete, or mutilated circumcised penis of a Muslim, his Serbian penis was whole. His cruel remarks also implied that he regarded his rape of Sanela as a favor rather than an assault. And finally, his remarks also implied that the true object of his torture was her fiancé, who was robbed of his right to take his lover’s virginity himself, and who was demeaned as phallically inferior. Sanela’s account calls to mind the ganga, only here cutting and shaving is literal rather than metaphoric.

In the foregoing testimony, the use of the body as a means of justifying domination of male over female and Serb over Muslim is apparent when, for example, the soldiers “shave and cut” Sanela in order to make her body physically resemble their stereotype of a Muslim woman. They inscribe visible markers of “ethnicity” onto her physical body. The inscription of ethnicity relates directly to the particular tensions of the region, where people believe that they are of different “bloods,” but recognize that they are unable to tell the difference between ethnicities through physical examination. Here, the fear of women being secretly impregnated and fooled into raising a child of another ethnicity is especially strong because people are not ordinarily able to recognize that a child has been parented by an invader.

Pain is often used (or administered) as a symbolic substitute for death in many cultures. “Physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution,” according to Scarry (1985:31). In a similar vein, Theweleit (1993) argues that the effect of torture is double-sided; namely, its purpose is that

The effect of the torture is double-sided: to destroy the victim, to eliminate a “threat” the victim embodies; and to construct the torturer as a new person. The production of a dead person on the one hand is matched by the production of a newborn person on the other. The torturer gets a new body while the body of the tortured is brought into shapes of vexation, the view of which the torturer needs for his own transformation. [Theweleit 1993:300]

Military rapists bind themselves together ethnically by separating their male and female victims through a multitude of sexually violent acts. By acting as a group and by systematically imposing their methods through acts and words of brutality, rapists are a social body that acts against another social body. In short, a purpose of ethnically organized rape is to destroy another ethnic group.

### Transformation during the War Culture

War transforms the political uses of rape. Although the first rapes of women in this conflict occurred during 1991 in Croatia, the Croatian government kept silent. In the spring of 1992, I was told by a gynecologist at a teaching hospital in Croatia that an “ethics committee” in Croatia was discussing the problem of pregnant Croatian women who could not abort their fetuses because they were “too far

into the pregnancy.” This information, he said, was a “private secret” and to be withheld from the press. When the same atrocities on a larger scale occurred in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the matter became a “public secret” (cf. Taussig 1987). Why the difference in the treatment? At first it may seem obvious: the atrocities occurred in greater numbers in Bosnia-Herzegovina than in Croatia. Also, Muslim women were valued more in Bosnia than Christian women in Croatia. But these answers fail to reveal the complexity of the relevant cultural expressions and interactions.

Lack of official disclosure about war rapes of Croatian women enabled Croatian men to publicly retain their honor and their face. Public admission would have required an admission of male weaknesses. There is an expression in the Croatian language that refers to men who are “feminized,” made weaker (*naprviti pizdu od muskarca*—“to make a pussy out of man”). Indeed, when Serb forces burned and pillaged the villages around Dubrovnik, they left signs that read: *Gdje ste sada Ustaske picke?* (Where are you now Ustasha pussies?).<sup>16</sup>

War rapes in Bosnia symbolized an assault on the Muslim social body. While both Croatian and Muslim women were raped by military men in Bosnia, the bulk of the victims were Muslim.<sup>17</sup> The sheer scale of the violence against women and against Muslim women made it impossible initially to hide the reality of these atrocities.

Furthermore, the Bosnian government profited politically from publicizing the aggression against its “own” women. Bosnian women who were victims of mass rapes in Serb-run Bosnian rape camps became bargaining tools of the Bosnian government to entice or persuade the West to intervene militarily. Raped women were also used to manipulate the media and other governments’ actions by male members of the Bosnian government who in effect confiscated the identity of these women, thereby becoming rapists of another sort.

Although divorced women were more likely to talk about their experiences than single or married women, they did not have the same stake in virginity or marital fidelity and therefore did not have the same potential to bring public shame to their families, even though they told me that they could never return to their villages after the violence. The shame of their ordeal was too much to share with family. Like the young girls who are chastised for being “too hot” in peacetime, these women were seen as having brought dishonor to their families through their sexuality. In the ideology of honor and shame, it does not matter whether or not a woman consents to sexual intercourse (cf. Rebhun 1995). What matters is simply that sexual penetration has taken place. And it is through the penetration of a woman’s corporeal body that the social body of her family is permanently and irretrievably damaged.

Some women learned to use their own bodies in ways that deflected their shame. For example, discussion of their “menstrual blood” deterred or spared them from being raped by the Serb soldiers. Statements such as, “I was spared [not raped] because I had my period,” or “it was my time so no one touched me” echoes through several testimonies. The significance of the linkages these women created between wartime and peacetime images and beliefs about blood cannot be overstated. Individual embodiment and its connections to the social body are visible in the desperate attempt of refugee Bosnian women to use their “live blood” to stop the “bloodshed” in the ongoing war: They donated their own blood, which was

mixed with the printers ink of the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (a German daily newspaper from Munich, on November 19, 1993) in a desperate attempt to draw the attention and intervention of the West in stopping the war.

But rape-induced pregnancies present the ultimate crisis of ethnic identity. Women raped refer to rape-produced babies (born and unborn) as *Chetniks* (Serbian extremists from World War II). Many state that they do not want to hold or see their infants for fear that overwhelming hatred would lead them to strangle the babies. These pregnancies also create a crisis for religious leaders. While the head of the Croatian Catholic Church, Cardinal Franjo Kuharic, has expressed his belief that mothers' love should overcome such feelings, a prominent Muslim leader from Egypt urged Bosnian Muslim officials to pass a religious decree (*fadwa*) to allow abortion after the fourth month and to proclaim raped Muslim women as religious martyrs.

### *The Shifting of Violence*

In both peacetime and wartime, the meanings inscribed on women's bodies constantly shift between individual and social meanings (cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). In peacetime, on the one hand, women's bodies are the symbolic repository of their men's honor, the symbolic terrain of male competition. By controlling women's bodies and invading the bodies of other men's women, either symbolically through folkloric boasts, or physically through kidnap and rape, men play out masculine competitions. They achieve status among themselves by stripping women of status (cf. Ortner 1981). Because a woman's body is a microcosm of her lineage, and the body's weak points being its orifices (cf. Douglas 1982[1970]), by dishonoring a woman, a man symbolically dishonors the whole lineage. This is partly due to women's reproductive power. Underlying the whole honor complex is the fear that somehow a man from another group will impregnate a woman and make fools of the whole group by forcing them to raise an "alien" child. In this way the competing lineage would have permanently invaded the victim's lineage.

Raping women and forcing them to bear "Chetnik" babies is the logical extension of the unconscious fears that underlie the honor complex. What the soldiers are doing is making the worst fears of their victims come true: unstated but deep-seated fears are now stated openly and have become a reality.

On a larger scale, in the context of war the concept of lineage can be extended to include an entire ethnic group. In this political context in the former Yugoslavia all ethnic lineages—Croats, Serbs and Muslims—were antagonists. The symbolic "body" of these lineages became a geographic territory in terms of both land and the physical bodies that the military groups were able to hold. "Ethnic cleansing" became a way of "devirginizing" their national territory and then holding it safe from the symbolic rape of invasion. In sum, the rapes of individual women were microcosms of the larger invasions of territory.

### **Discussion**

Rather than being an aberration, the use of rape as a weapon of war comes directly out of southern European concepts of sexuality and honor, and without an

understanding of these concepts in peacetime culture, wartime behavior is not understandable. It is precisely because the ideology of honor/shame was shared by Croats, Muslims, and Serbs that war rapes became such an effective weapon in the former Yugoslavia.

Returning to Desjarlais and Kleinman's comment cited in the beginning of this article, our notion of "culture" is problematic when applied to situations of extreme violence, terror, and uncertainty. This article has attempted to reveal links between collective action and individual tendencies. Further, it has illustrated that metaphors are expressions of the tendencies embodied within a culture, and that they manifest themselves differently during peacetime and wartime. Specifically, the individual body of peacetime, especially its essences—sexuality and reproduction—are the symbols of everyday domination and aggression (cf. Csordas 1994). War transforms the individual body into the social body as seen in genocidal rapes, ethnic cleansing, and purifying of the bloodlines. Further, medical, religious, and government institutions reinforce the wartime process by manipulating the individual body into a body politic, thereby controlling and defining "human/life" and the political uses of rapes in order to entice Western military intervention (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

The origin of war rape and particular motifs of sexual torture in local folklore in no way excuses or condones the behavior of either individual soldiers or army policy makers. Sexual torture magnifies the suffering of people already uprooted, terrified, and acutely grieving.

The greatest atrocity of all, as in all wars and in peacetime, is that individuals are absorbed by the collective actions of the social/political fantasy. The tragedy is that people are tortured, torn apart. Their lives are destroyed and then discarded as the collective fantasy proceeds.

## NOTES

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1. For further reading on the political changes, see Denich 1994, Maass 1996, and Woodward 1995, among others.

2. I am borrowing here the term *victim-survivor* from Winkler (1991, 1995).

3. Preliminary analysis of the survey indicates a gendered agreement on the cause of peacetime rapes but a gendered disagreement on wartime rapes. A significant number of both female and male informants identify the causes of sexual violence in peacetime as a type of “psychological disturbance” (i.e., the most common response given were “sick,” “abnormal,” or “crazy” individuals): 45 percent of women and 33 percent of men. Twenty-two percent of women state that in wartime, however, sexual violence is done out of “rage,” “hatred,” or “revenge,” and another 20 percent gave “anarchy” as the reason. Among male respondents, 32 percent state “anarchy” and 15 percent state “opportunity for violence” as causal attributes of sexual violence in wartime.

4. Great regional differences—even in Croatia alone—do not dismiss cultural similarities among distinct ethnic groups. A discussion and elaboration of both regional and historical differences has been provided by Capo-Zmegac (1995). In this article, I cite the available literature that by no means represents all of the regions of either Croatia or the countries that made up former Yugoslavia.

5. A variant of *ganga*, called *vera*, is found in certain pockets of the Dalmatian hinterland.

6. An example of *ganga* that women sing is “kosa smedja pala do ‘po ledja, moj dragane tvoj me pogled vrijedja” [(my) long brown hair has fallen/reached (my) mid-back, my sweetheart your look is offending/hurting me.] Women told me that their *ganga* are sensual and that men’s *ganga* boast about masculinity, sexuality, and male domination.

7. Besides the reference to the “virgin blood” another meaning is that the woman feels that she has toiled and literally spilled her guts (“blood”) doing physical work, thus establishing herself within the family before the junior bride. Thus she has the right to a higher rank within the family. A similar expression in English is “to work one’s fingers to the bones [blood]” and “blisters from work bleed.”

8. In areas where female genital mutilation is practiced, loud urine stream is considered unladylike (Sandy Lane, personal communication, 1995).

9. These data are collected in the border regions between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially in the Dalmatian hinterland area known as the Dinaric region. The play rape (*gonjanje*) described here has not been popular since the 1960s. Thus, during World War II these men were teenagers and too young to fight in the war. This form of public violence is related to war rape.

10. Similar examples are cited in Carol Delaney’s (1991) work in Turkey, among others.

11. *Informativni Razgovor* is a term from the communist rule (1945–90) where police could arrest a civilian at anytime to supposedly conduct “informative interrogation.” To the people the term automatically implies that they will also be tortured or killed.

12. *Haso* and *Fata* are local names for Hasan and Fatima. Using the names of individuals in the joke connotes their ethnic identity. In the jokes cited, all individuals are Muslim, which is both an ethnic and a religious marker in the former Yugoslavia.

13. These jokes were very popular and I heard them while working in Croatia during 1991 and 1992.

14. The number of rapes in prewar is not available because research was *not* done in that area. It took a war to highlight sexual violence of torture.

15. The informant is using the expression “hero soldiers” to emphasize the irony between the “powerful” and “powerless.” The irony is also in that the soldiers’ violent acts are viewed as “heroic,” and the rape of Muslim women is viewed as a victory in both the masculinization and militarization of Serbian nationalism.

16. Members of the Ustasha movement formed an army and allied themselves with Germany in World War II.
17. There are scattered reports of Croatian and Bosnian war rapes but not as policy.

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