

Loving Women, Fighting War:

A Serbian Lesbian Examines Militarism and Homophobia

I come from a country where there is a war in which all the sides speak the same language and war rape means usually raping and killing women from the neighborhood. One hundred thousand people dead, ten times more injured. Five million people displaced.

In wartime, the image of love, apart from being heterosexual, has an additional quest of reproducing the nation. The image of sex, apart from being heterosexual with lots of pornography, violence and Hollywood movies on TV, has an additional element—war rape. The women I spoke to talked about being raped in private prisons, in soldiers barracks, in soldiers warehouses, in concentration camps. Their homeless souls and courage haunt me in the nights, and in the morning, they give political framework to my work and strengthen my will.

In wartime, lesbian love has no language. Out lesbians should swallow their own words. Every word about lesbian existence is taken as a desecration of the pain of war survivors. Therefore, where I live there is no such social phenomenon as an out lesbian.

Where I come from, there is the rule of the nation-state. All of the possible wide range of identities have been reduced to national codes; those who either are faithful to or betray the regime's policy of ethnic cleansing.

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in the symbolic sense, but legally so.

When the war started, I came out on the streets to let my body speak that I am against a government that kills. When the war continued, I felt that I had to work with women war survivors. So some of us feminists from Belgrade, supported by many women from non-war zones, opened the Autonomous Women's Center and many women fleeing their families, male partners or war zones come there.

In front of refugee women, I become the witness of their tragedy. I listen to their stories of lost children and lost lives. Some of them lost their homeland. They are revising their past, searching for the lethal errors they think they might have made, always from the beginning researching the anatomy of their destiny. We talk, at moments we create togetherness by tears. The recognition of two women's souls is a possibility for me that remains a place of hope in the deepest pain.

Two weeks ago, a woman called the Center. She was from Bosnia and had already spent a year and a half as a refugee with her two daughters. She spoke to me for the first time about the horror in the war prison. She had a tender voice that was hiding trembling and screaming. The daughters were in school, she was alone and it was her birthday.

Working in wartime poses a dilemma for us feminists. How do we

known for ages.

Probably many feminist lesbians who live in countries of poverty and war share similar experiences with me. Trying and failing to understand why there is war. Encircled with images of the dead that appear with the sharp blowing of the wind or an unexpected sound. Where soldiers, proud of killing, still wear uniforms on buses and in markets. Where people are hungry and sick, and funerals become events one has to get used to.

Many times I wondered over women who love women in my town who are not identified as lesbians, who are not identified with the role of nation or mother, who do not want to think

group of psychologists who work with refugees, ARKADIA was thrown out. The arguments that were spilled at us and at me relied on the fascist Criminal Law 110. The psychologists ordered us to leave—"We share the same bathroom!" they said. They said that their reputation was being ruined by our presence at the same address. The words used were supposed to mean that we were contagious, suspicious characters. The final comment was that lesbians are not supposed to work with minors who are rape survivors.

So I thought, in pain to the bone, when they hate you for who you are, this is the beginning of a war against you. When the psychologists wrote a

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about war nearby. They walk down the same streets and I don't see them. I ask myself what are the words I could say aloud to make their faces and voices rise from their sheltered silent chambers. In the state statistics, they are probably counted as something they are not.

Where I come from, a small group of women got together, again supported by many women from different countries, and we formed Women In Black Against War. We stand on the street every Wednesday and show that we disagree with the government. Some of us are harassed by police from time to time, just to be reminded that "they are watching us." There are no more peace demonstrations on the streets of Belgrade; we are the only persistent positive warriors who believe that small acts of public disobedience are meaningful. We know they don't change any political decision, but they change our lives and they matter to other women. Women in Black also have a men's support group, formed by two gay men.

But I am not a war survivor, I

letter to announce their disapproval of ARKADIA, they wrote, "IMMEDIATELY stop activities." I was surprised, my stomach was shuddering, my face was in danger of losing its shape. For a moment I thought, if all pedestrians tomorrow in the streets knew I was a lesbian and they all thought the same as these psychologists, how would I keep my face whole? How will I open my eyes and not be affected by their disgust? How will I not feel disgusted about myself too? Maybe the woman in the post office would want me to leave immediately if she knew I was a lesbian. Maybe the woman at the market, if only she knew, would not sell me her strawberries. If felt so very bad; I was fighting with myself in order to revive my own dignity for my passion and my politics.

Then I remembered the stories of women from the war zones and how they left their homes. Soldiers of different national colors would come to a village to be cleansed and order, "Immediately leave your houses!" They wouldn't have more than an hour or so; feeling humiliated and not knowing

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Where I come from, the regime permanently produces a false reality. They say Serbia is not at war, while women's projects deal with women abused by killers who come back from the front. They say all the human rights in the country are being protected while two million Albanians have no right to schooling or to the medical system and live in a state of siege; while thousands of Gypsies for years live in dark cellars and shanty barns; while half a million refugees are second class citizens. There is still Criminal Law 110 that criminalizes sex between adult males. Lesbians and gays do not have the benefits of marriage, are not safe at their work places, and live in constant fear. And still, if I want to work with women, I need to compromise with state institutions, knowing that in the Serbian parliament and government there are men who are killers, rapists and war criminals —not

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avoid the role men give to women during war: nursing the wounds of war survivors? How do we interpret the war torture if for some of us the world is gender divided? Does compulsive heterosexual construction of roles make one gender produce the conditions and means of destruction of everyone and make the other gender maintain and feed that same destruction? I know that many women I see on the streets are in conflict between their role as mother and the demand for faith in the nation. But they do not have any social or historical means to articulate their conflict. Women then plunge into deeper silence —the place they have

am not a refugee, I am not a Serbian mother. The city I live in was not ruined. I am not identified with the regime, nor with the nation I come from. When the regime's paper named me a "traitor of the Serbian nation" it hit the hidden smile in me.

Where I come from is not the nation I was born in, but the lost lesbian country I never had and somehow still manage to create. So if they cannot insult me on a national basis, they certainly can insult me as a woman and as a lesbian. And they do.

In April this year, about a month and a half after our Lesbian and Gay group ARKADIA shared a flat with a

women from the war zones and how they left their homes. Soldiers of different national colors would come to a village to be cleansed and order, "Immediately leave your houses!" They wouldn't have more than an hour or so; feeling humiliated and not knowing why, they would have to leave their own homes, they would be made to feel awful for who they are and where they are. And in all that surprise, they would have to pack and run, and maybe remember to take only a few photos, some coffee or an apple for the road. No warrant. Immediately. I was cleansed in an instant.

After three years, the essence of war I experienced from my colleagues in the hatred of gays and lesbians is just around the corner.

But lesbians will remember and I know there were lesbians living in the wartime before me. Most of them did not leave me their guidelines. Women who loved women in my town a long time ago did not leave any traces of their voices, that I know. So sometimes in the moments of weakness I read Audre Lorde in her "Litany for

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Survival", or I remind myself that "there must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors" (Adrienne Rich). Many lesbians, feminists and pacifists from this country and other countries have supported us, sent post cards, packages (before the embargo), letters, books and journals and words of love. Then, when it all arrives, we sit in my kitchen, which we call the Free Lesbian Republic, we look in awe at the beautiful books and papers, we eat macaroni and some of us dance. And we still dream of how to bring the codes of the kitchen Republic into the streets.

Here I am in New York, so happy that there is a place where we can all be together —it is so fantastic and magic. And I have a feeling that the force of our togetherness will be, we would say, food for my soul.

by lepa mladjjenovic
for the occasion of the "Felipa da Souza" award for activism at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Stonewall in New York City.