

Loving Women, Fighting War

A Serbian Lesbian Examines Militarism and Homophobia

by Lepa Mladjenovic



Lepa Mladjenovic from Ms.,
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A talk given on the occasion of the awarding to her of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission 1994 Felipa da Souza award, the award is given to outstanding activists worldwide.

'In wartime, lesbian love has no language.'

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 night, and in the morning, they give a 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. 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 in their work places, and live in constant fear. And still, if I want to work with

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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 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.

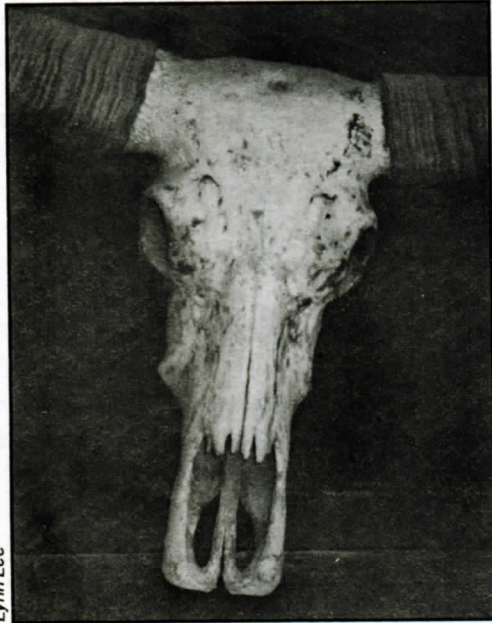
Working in wartime poses a dilemma for us feminists. How do we avoid the role men give to women during war: nursing the wounds of war survivors? How do we interpret the war torture if for some of us the world is gender divided? Does compulsive heterosexual construction of roles make one gender produce 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 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 lesbian, who are not identified with the role of nation or mother, who do not want to think 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.

Women In Black

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

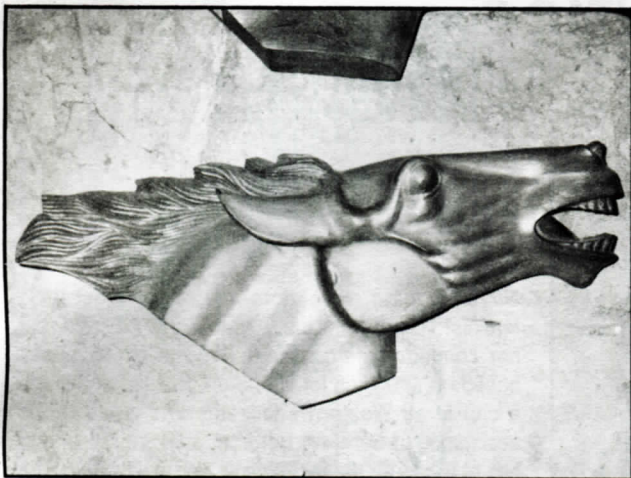


Lynn Lee

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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.

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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

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 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.

'...when they hate you for who you are, this is the beginning of a war against you.'

In April this year, about a month and a half after our Lesbian and Gay group ARKADIA shared a flat with a group of psychologists who work with refugees, ARKADIA was

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 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. I 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 house!*" They wouldn't have more than an hour or so; feeling humiliated and not knowing why, they would have to leave their own



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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 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 that the force of our togetherness will be, we would say, food for my soul.

Source: *Off Our Backs*, October 1994, 2423 18th Street, N.W., 2nd Floor, Washington, D.C. 20009, USA.

SUSAN SONTAG Commences The Twenty First Century With Sarajevo



Susan Sontag represents one of the most lucid feminist voices from the 70's in North America, but her commitments have extended to other causes based on struggles for liberation. In 1993 she made a call to all Western intellectuals to come to the assistance of Sarajevo but from a very long list only two responded, *Juan Goytisolo* and *Annie Leibovitz*. Without feeling discouraged, in Sarajevo Sontag produced *Samuel Beckett's, Waiting for Godot*. Here is her experience.

Q: Why your two visits to Sarajevo since the initiation of the war?

Susan: I was introduced to the city last April as a result of my son, *David Rieff*, writing a book on the Bosnian war. Before that, I was already feeling moved by what was occurring there through my own sense of horror and indignation. I must admit that I had never thought of going to Sarajevo, what can you do there if you are not a journalist or working on behalf of a humanitarian organization? I have never had any fantasies of being an ambassador of goodwill for the United Nations. On my first visit, I spent two weeks in Sarajevo, it was an extraordinary experience. What made the most impression, aside from the immense suffering of the people, is that you can establish a strong connection with the Bosnians and their ideal that they can still be one country. I searched for a reason to return and to spend sometime doing something morally decent.

On my first stay, I asked people from the theater if they were interested in my returning to work with them for a period of time. They answered yes, the play *Waiting for Godot* came to mind without having to dwell on it for too long.

Q: Why waiting for *Godot* in Sarajevo?

Susan: Because it has an obvious impact that does not have to be explained. Everyone always smiles when they hear the story. People moving towards death wait day in day out for something that never seems to arrive. The people who with careless humor respond to their life, without hope, but without regard

continue to move forward. It would be difficult to find a play with such resonance, and not only because of its symbolism.

The second reason for producing *Waiting For Godot* is that it entails only one scene. I would like to produce a Shakespearean play, but it's impossible to do Shakespeare in a diminutive setting, with only candle lights and in a theater that could be bombed the next minute. As a matter of fact, I am situating the public in the scene itself because it's safer than sitting them out in the auditorium. The theater has some mortar damage on the roof already and on one day that I was there a mortar projectile fell close to the building and it shook. I will not put the public in jeopardy.

Q: What will be the significance of this city at the end of the twentieth century?

Susan: I believe the century began in Sarajevo and that the 21st century will also commence there. It has been a brief century, World War 1 was initiated in Sarajevo. The centuries do not begin with two zeros, the 19th century really began in 1815, with the restoration after Napoleon's downfall. Therefore, the 19th century is from 1815 to 1914 when the renewal of the world order after Napoleon was destroyed. I would say that the 21st century began in 1989 with the suicide of the Soviet empire but you could also be more ironic and say that it began with the war in Sarajevo....

Source: *Story and photo, Mujeres en Accion* 2-3/94, Isis International, Santiago, Chile. Translated by *Luz M. Martinez*, Isis International-Manila.