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Escaping Binarism: The Bosnian War in the Canadian Imagination

Zusammenfassung

*In diesem Aufsatz werden Darstellungen des Bosnienkonflikts in der neueren kanadischen Literatur untersucht – bruchstückhafte, moralisch mehrdeutige Erzählungen. Jim Bartleys *Drina Bridge* (2006) zum Beispiel stellt Augenzeugenberichte den Erfahrungen eines (kanadischen) Beobachters gegenüber; dadurch verdeutlicht er die Diskrepanz zwischen den Leiden eines vom Krieg Betroffenen und der Selbstbezogenheit der distanzierten Analyse. Steven Galloways *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (2008) erzählt ebenfalls überkreuzte Geschichten, um die Beweggründe ethnischer Konflikte und Kriegsmüdigkeit auf der minimalistischen Ebene von Straßengerangel und Heckenschützen darzustellen. Darüber hinaus deutet *The Cellist of Sarajevo* auf Geschlechterrollen hin, die in Kriegzeiten umgestoßen und reaktiviert werden. Madeleine Gagnons *My Name is Bosnia* (2006) ergänzt Bartleys und Galloways Fokus auf die narrative Kristallisierung der Vergangenheit durch einen Einblick in das kanadische Leben bosnischer Immigranten. Gagnons Roman stellt männliche Ansichten zu Konflikthanftung und -lösung weiblichen Ideen der Widerstandsfähigkeit durch affektive Friedenserhaltung gegenüber; damit bietet sie eine geschlechterbezogene Deutung ethnischer Kriegführung und transnationaler Wege der Versöhnung.*

Résumé

*Dans cet article, je me propose d'examiner les perspectives canadiennes sur le conflit bosniaque telles qu'elles sont présentées dans la fiction canadienne actuelle à travers des récits fragmentés et moralement ambigus. *Drina Bridge* de Jim Bartley (2006) par exemple, fait ressortir le contraste entre les récits d'un témoin direct et les expériences d'un observateur distant (canadien), exprimant le fossé entre la souffrance intense du participant direct à la guerre d'un côté et l'autoréférentialité d'analyses distantes de l'autre côté. *Le violoncelliste de Sarajevo* de Steven Galloway (2008) évoque de façon similaire des récits entrecroisés, pour étudier les motifs et la lassitude d'un conflit ethnique au niveau populaire d'échauffourées de rue et du danger de tireurs embusqués. *Le violoncelliste de Sarajevo* joue également sur les stéréotypes de genres qui sont successivement renversés et rétablis en temps de guerre. C'est un aperçu des vies canadiennes d'immigrants exilés de la guerre de Bosnie que *Je m'appelle Bosnia* de Madeleine Ga-*

gnon (2006) ajoute au point de vue de Bartley et de Galloway sur la dispersion narrative de la mémoire. Le roman de Gagnon oppose des idéologies masculines d'instigation de conflit et de résolution à des concepts d'endurance féminine à travers un maintien affectif et intérieur de la paix; ainsi est envisagée une perspective distinguant les genres sur une guerre ethnique et sur des pratiques transnationales de réconciliation.

He knows the sniper will fire again, but he isn't afraid. At this moment fear doesn't exist. There's no such thing as bravery. There are no heroes, no villains, no cowards. There's what he can do, and what he can't. There's right and wrong and nothing else. Shading will come later. (Galloway 2008, 205)

Thomas Hobbes would have understood Yugoslavia. (Ignatieff 1993, 23)

Although Canada has had its share of ethnic conflict, in recent years Canadian writers have often looked beyond their country's borders for stories of internecine nationalist violence.¹ Implicitly, all such stories entail a transnational gesture – particularly with Bosnia, itself a hybrid nation where ethnic identities “assert themselves in territorial pockets beyond the regions nominally associated with those identities” (Allen 1996, 54) – and presuppose a binary set of adversaries that do not include Canada itself. When Canada does make an appearance, as in recent Bosnia-centred fiction by Jim Bartley, Steven Galloway, and Madeleine Gagnon, it serves to contextualize the conflict by helping to compose a triangulation through which the war's motivations (to the extent that they can be discerned) are thrown into sharper focus.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) evidently hinged on a type of binarism – a straitjacket imposing two mutually exclusive yet world-defining perspectives (independence vs. adherence to multicultural Yugoslavia, Christian vs. Muslim) – whose justification was that “enemies need each other to remind themselves of who they really are” (Ignatieff 1993, 22). While this concept of binarism can be refined as to what exactly is being set in opposition (and this essay will undertake precisely such a calibration), its overall relevance in the context of the Balkan conflict appears incontestable. For one thing, the doctrine of moral equivalency, which was central to the failure of UN response to the Bosnian crisis, rests on a balancing

1 Certainly the mix of ethnic groups in Canada has harboured a potential for dissent, unrest, and discrimination, as the Ukrainian Canadian internment under the War Measures Act of 1914, the internment of Japanese-Canadians in the 1940s, or the 1990 Oka Crisis amply demonstrate. More recently, however, Canadians have been in the global spotlight more frequently for their involvement in ethnic clashes abroad than within Canada. This statement is not meant to minimize Canada's ethnic issues on the domestic front, but to reorient the discussion toward a transnational reading of contemporary Canadian fiction, whose investment in international conflict opens up new questions for the literary scholar.

act that “allows peacekeepers to pretend that they are dealing with two equal sides in a conflict, not with aggressors and victims” (Off 2001, 167). This binarism, coupled with an understanding of ethnicity bordering on the geometric, allows the Bosnian conflict to appear as a scuffle among “real-estate agents run amok” (Off 2001, 131), and seems all the more absurd when tallied against the fact that “very few people could tell you their national origin, much less explain why on earth it mattered” (Off 2001, 131). What exacerbated this ethnic friction even further was the Balkans’ location at the chafing point of Europe and the Orient, a location that often sees them violently rejected by both and is probably the chief reason for Western indifference to the area and for the reluctance to become involved in it. Adding to this perilous in-betweenness, as Maria Todorova has shown, another dichotomy is created by the Balkans’ function “as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the ‘European’ and the ‘West’ has been constructed” (Todorova 1997, 188). Like Michael Ignatieff in his study of modern nationalism, the three novelists I discuss here push beyond a glib dismissal of the Balkans as “sub-rational zone of intractable fanaticism” (Ignatieff 1993, 23), exploring the war’s validations across spaces and time scales, of which Canada is a part.

As Sherene Razack points out, in recent years Canada has sought to negotiate a delicate balance between pacifism and global authority, a balance that its peace-keeping mission in Bosnia has helped sustain:

Peacekeeping offers an imperial personhood and statehood, and ultimately membership in the family of civilized nations. For a middle power such as Canada, it is perhaps doubly compelling. How else can a nation, without wars and colonizing ventures outside its borders [...] prove its grown-up status and earn its place on the world stage? (Razack 2003, 208)

Yet the more immediate reasons for Canada’s involvement in the Bosnian war – a Prime Minister (Brian Mulroney) who married a Sarajevo-born Serb and honeymooned in the Balkans; Canada’s affinity with Yugoslavia as an empire-defying middle power; strong Serb and Croat communities within Canada – are not, I believe, of the kind that have had a long-lasting cultural resonance. So the first question to answer before moving on to explain the triangulating techniques of Bartley’s *Drina Bridge* (2006), Galloway’s *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (2008), and Gagnon’s *My Name Is Bosnia* (2006) is why the Bosnian war would feature in Canadian fiction at this time. Notably, all three novels discussed here were written and published before Radovan Karadžić was captured in July 2008 and brought before Belgrade’s War Crimes Court. Particularly in the context of the global war on terror, the Balkan conflicts are thought to have set the tone for the radicalization of Muslims in Europe, as they revealed the extent to which the Christian population of former Yugoslavia – both Serb and Croat – ruthlessly deported, tortured, and slaughtered Muslims. Of course,

the history of the Bosnian war is also inextricably entangled with the routes of immigration that brought large numbers of Muslim and Croat refugees to North America, as well as with the fraught diplomatic mission and peacekeeping intervention under the helm of the UN that unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the carnage. The Canadian General Lewis MacKenzie was in fact the first to head the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which was deployed in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina from February 1992 to March 1995 in “probably the most dangerous mission Canadian soldiers had faced since the Korean War” (Off 2001, 177). As enthralled reporters gushed in the *Saturday Night*, the general embodied “the qualities Canadians think they share – modesty, tolerance, fair-mindedness, and a capacity to make the world a better place” (Off 2001, 141). What set MacKenzie apart from his fellow countrymen, however, was a flair for the dramatic, the spectacular, and a penchant toward self-promotion, which made him the most interviewed person in the Balkans during the war, a media star and globe-trotting expert on all things Bosnian, applauded and mobbed for autographs in Serbia (although by the end of the war he would become *persona non grata* in Sarajevo).² With Western observers like MacKenzie, the binarism I am using to conceptualize my discussion of Bosnia-related fiction does not always seem to register: The general famously admitted he didn’t “really know the players in these events” and hilariously helped himself remember the Bosnian president’s name (Izetbegovic) with the phrase “It’s a bagel” (Off 2001, 151). The issues of wilful ignorance and partisanship permeate Canadian narratives of the Bosnian war, all the more acutely when related to the controversial persona of General MacKenzie.

Beyond the understandable interest on the part of some Canadian writers in the visibility and reputation of the Canadian military (and, implicitly, nation) overseas, Bosnia also offers an enlightening perspective on North American geopolitics in the transnational era that followed upon the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The war in Bosnia, as Michael Ignatieff has observed, in many ways reframed and largely dissolved the binarism upon which much of the Cold War landscape was predicated – that “last imperial age, the last time when the nation-states of the world were clearly allocated to two opposing spheres of influence, the last time when terror produced peace” (Ignatieff 1993, 4). By exploring connections between recent Canadian history (especially overseas involvement) and the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, the three novels I examine here resonate in important ways not only with the larger trajectory of Canadian postmodern aesthetics, but also with the intensification (especially after the Cold War) of Canadian writers’ interest in historical events that played themselves out beyond their nation’s boundaries.

2 “I have been interviewed more times, over the previous ten days,” MacKenzie claimed after the airport opening in Sarajevo, “than anyone else in the world in the last half century” (qtd. in Off 2001, 198).

Bosnia through Canadian Eyes

The title of Jim Bartley's *Drina Bridge* invokes the location immortalized by Nobel Prize-winner Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945), a historical cross-section of conflict in the area from the sixteenth-century to the First World War. Bartley updates this panorama through the Second World War and the Yugoslav conflicts. It was, in fact, along the valley of the Drina river that the first major onslaught against Bosnian civilians, mainly Muslims, occurred in the early 1990s (Gallagher 2003, 90). Bartley focuses on these events by recounting the journey to Serbia and Bosnia of Toronto-born Chris Maitland, interrupting his mainly epistolary narrative – culled from Chris's letters to Canadian friends – to tell the Second World War adventure stories of a Bosnian man named Slobodan. While quartered at an Orthodox monastery in Serbia, close to the border with Bosnia, Chris investigates the family background of his dead lover, Pimm, who succumbed to AIDS some years before. At the same time he reads the instalments of the fragmentary narrative that Slobodan is writing in the psychiatric wing of a Sarajevo hospital. Slobodan's is an impassioned, surreal tale sprinkled with much sardonic and ambiguous hyperbole to the point where readers are compelled to question the accuracy of the narrative; Chris himself gradually morphs into a wily storyteller closely resembling the unreliable narrator of Slobodan's purportedly autobiographical war stories. Both narrators are not only unreliable, but also morally ambiguous and politically subversive. The Canadian's four-year journey achieves its climax, spiritually and erotically, in a harrowing trip to Bosnia, after which he renounces his Canadian roots, the memory of his lover, and just about everything that tied him to civilization. He decides to remain at the monastery and, even though his faith in religion is tenuous to say the least, apathy, weariness, and the long alienation from home prompt him to join the rituals, if not the belief, of the orthodox community he now feels part of.

In a similarly multi-centred narrative, Steven Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo* recounts the siege of the Bosnian capital in the mid-1990s through the eyes of three of the city's inhabitants: a woman sniper who calls herself Arrow; Kenan, a father on a trip to fetch water for his family; and finally, the cast is joined by Dragan, a baker on his way to work who has to pass through the crosshairs of Serb snipers multiple times as he dashes about gathering necessities. Pulling the three narrative threads together is the figure of the "principal cellist of the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra" (Galloway 2008, 3), who plays each afternoon outside the Sarajevo opera house (now in ruins), where twenty-two people queuing to buy bread had been killed by several mortar shells.³ Not only is the musician determined to play for exactly twenty-two days, in commemoration of the victims, but he becomes the centrefold of the narrative and an object of attraction for people overwhelmed by war fatigue,

3 This event, along with the cellist's performances, formed the object of harrowing media coverage. See Gallagher 2003, 92. Galloway's fictional character is based on Vadrán Smailović, a cellist in the Sarajevo Symphony.

shuffling in to listen with a muted somnolence that signals their desire for a respite from the violence. The audience members are drawn into a tense solidarity by the mere news, shared at street corners while waiting for the snipers' fire to relent, that the cellist has survived yet another day without being shot.

Like the cellist, who attempts to cover the crater left by mortar shells with pacifying music, the three protagonists constantly try to suppress their fear and to maintain a semblance of civility in a city ravaged by absurd and random cruelty. This sense of self-control rubs off on Galloway's narrative and on his subtly crafted, minimalist style. It also tends to limit the stakes implied in the pact the novel initially seems to presuppose: that this will be a story of multiple viewpoints about ordinary people in wartime. The only perspective we get, however, is that of "Sarajevans" dodging fire from unidentified "men on the hills." Due to this ethical simplification – a binarism that adds little to the military and cultural record of the Bosnian war – and also due to the betrayal of the promise contained by the narrative's multi-focal structure, the reader looks for clues that might provide a more nuanced view of this mundane battlefield. And thus the secondary characters, what the film industry would call cameos, end up providing some of the novel's most poignant moments: Kenan's cantankerous neighbour, who expects him to fill her water bottles as a sign of self-evident solidarity; or an old man hunting pigeons by baiting them with small pieces of bread hooked to a fishing rod. The old man's strategy, Kenan learns, is to catch only a limited number of pigeons every day, so the birds will return the following day – rather than intuit the massacre and stay away. Of course, the tactic induces in Kenan a sense of kinship with the pigeons: "He thinks it's possible that the men on the hills are killing them slowly, a half-dozen at a time, so there will always be a few more to kill the next day" (Galloway 2008, 55).

In contrast to these two novels, while Madeleine Gagnon's *My Name is Bosnia* begins in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina, it finally deposits the reader, on the novel's last pages, in Quebec – a narrative emollient meant to not only make the war crimes described in the book more bearable but also to derive from them some sense of justice and redemption. Sabaheta, the novel's protagonist, changes her name to Bosnia before leaving the country and with it her brother's Islamic radicalization as well as the war-induced insanity of her Romanian mother – "who had become mute under the tumult and cacophony of the weapons" (Gagnon 2006, 27).⁴ Unlike *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, this novel makes no bones about revealing its protagonists' ethnic identity, addressing at the same time the crucial issue of how Muslim women in particular were affected by the Balkan conflict. Even more, Gagnon – indeed the only Canadian female writer to deal with the Bosnian war so far – draws analogies not only between violence and religion, but also and especially between violence and sexuality. The central gender trope which the novel adduces is that of rape,

4 In her non-fictional book *Women in a World at War: Seven Dispatches from the Front* (2003), Gagnon interviews women whose suffering resembles Sabaheta's narrative.

perpetrated in this case by Sabaheta's uncle in an "indelible scene that had sowed the very death of desire in her and infected her with a desire for death" (Gagnon 2006, 78), yet synecdochically standing in for the genocidal rapes carried out by all parties involved in the civil war.⁵ Gender, then, acquires national significance here, as the purpose of rape was not only to inflict pain and humiliation, but also "to destroy the woman's relation to her family and community, in part by provoking her family and community to reject her" (Doubt 2006, 35). In the weeks that followed the rape, Sabaheta remembers, "her father told her never to tell anyone this story that had dishonoured the family. He told her that she, Sabaheta, was the source of his dishonour and that it was his duty to punish her" (Gagnon 2006, 79).

All three novels, then, employ various "third figures" – in terms of gender, space, and history – working in harness to fracture the binary distinction that lies at the core of the Bosnian conflict itself and of the international response to it. These are not merely three different views on the Balkans embroiled in conflict in the early 1990s, but also narratives that highlight the virtues of triangulation, and how it challenges the "prism of 'moral equivalency' through which the conflict was viewed by too many for too long" (Gallagher 2003, 104). As a third point on the starkly black and white military map of the Bosnian conflict, the Canadian approach mediates and complicates the relations among the local warring factions on the one hand and between post-communist Yugoslavia and the international community on the other. Specifically, Canada refracts and disturbs commonly accepted positions on the Bosnian war as an isolated pocket of ethnic feuds that could be contained through ignorance or outright vilification of all individuals involved. In the following I will suggest three contexts in which the triangulation process I am describing here becomes most palpable: memory, transnational ethics, and gender.

Balkan Histories

To begin with, all three novels suggest the inaccuracy of memory as a container and vehicle of personal and collective history. They do so by enacting what may be called, to borrow from an argument by Stjepan G. Meštrović, the "Balkanization" of history, understood here as the "breaking up of a unit into increasingly smaller units that are hostile to each other" (Meštrović 1994, ix). *Drina Bridge* in particular constantly shuttles across time between the early 1990s and the Second World War. This trajectory is far from accidental. As Teresa Iacobelli points out: "At times the Serbian leadership portrayed, and the media often reinforced, the idea of the Balkan crisis as merely a continuation of old antagonisms from the Second World War" (Iacobelli 2009, 263). According to this theory, the Bosnian war involved ethnic clans that

5 It is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 rapes occurred within Bosnia-Herzegovina during the course of the war (Goldstein 2001, 363). Teresa Iacobelli describes genocidal rape as not only "meant to cause terror in Bosnian communities, inciting Muslims to leave with the desire never to return," but also as means of torture prior to murder and part of a forced impregnation campaign (Iacobelli 2009, 264).

were just settling old scores; in Bartley's words, the wars are "going back to the Flood almost" (Bartley 2006, 6).⁶ This foregrounds not only the historical determinants of the conflict but also a potential parallel between the killing of Bosnian Croats and Muslims on the one hand and the massacre of the Jews in the Second World War on the other. Indeed, although he initially opposed this analogy, prominent Holocaust survivor, writer, and activist Elie Wiesel emphatically encouraged President Clinton in 1993 to intervene in the Bosnian bloodshed (Kofman 1996, 92; Cornwell 1993). Yet international policymakers looked even further back than the 1930s and 1940s for clues that would account for the carnage, pinning Balkan violence on ancient ethnic conflicts and a vague sense of the region as perennially prone to hostility and aggression, sometimes even sowing the seed of global conflict. Sarajevo is, of course, the scene of the assassinations, seventy years before the Bosnian crisis, which helped to ignite the *First World War*. In Maria Todorova's words, the shots of Gavrilo Princip are the Balkans' original sin, leaving "an indelible mark on all assessments of the region" (Todorova 1997, 118). In *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Kenan admits to being "slightly ashamed that, for a generation, when the world thought of Sarajevo, it was as a place of murder," and doesn't see any vindication in the city's current plight: "It isn't clear to him how the world will think of the city now that thousands have been murdered. He suspects that what the world wants most is not to think of it at all" (Galloway 2008, 51). Significantly, both Chris and Slobodan manipulate their stories to record multiple versions of the same event; as they both conclude, it is only "chance that divides the actual from the true" (Bartley 2006, 29), a sense of contingency that Galloway's *The Cellist of Sarajevo* reinforces.⁷ In Slobodan's memorable phrasing, "history is all thumbs" (Bartley 2006, 7), wreaking havoc on innocent people's lives, randomly forcing them down paths that end in cruelty and bloodshed.

The historical depth of Galloway's novel also transpires in the composition that the cellist has decided to perform – an incomplete sonata discovered by an Italian musicologist in the ruins of the Dresden Music Library in 1945 (Galloway 2008, 1). Believing the notes were the work of seventeenth-century composer Tomaso Albinoni, the Italian spent twelve years reconstructing the piece. The Adagio thus becomes a metaphor for Galloway's own forensic-literary project: to rummage through the ruins of Sarajevo and bring to light four complete, undamaged lives. The prehis-

6 Additionally, the memory of Vietnam was urging absolute caution among Western powers about UN intervention in Bosnia. Second World War analogies were also drawn in this context, particularly revolving around the fact that Hitler himself was unable to control Yugoslavia despite the deployment of 100,000 troops – much more than the number of ground forces the UN was willing to sacrifice.

7 Even Slobodan Milošević, it appears, has been dealt a rough hand. Warren Christopher, U.S. Secretary of State from 1993 to 1997, is alleged to have said, in Milošević's defense, that if only "fate had dealt him a different birthplace and education, he would have been a successful politician in a democratic system" (Holbrooke 1998, 235).

tory of the cellist's Adagio also provides a temporary, soothingly repetitive escape from the stark, binary contrast between pre-war Sarajevo and the present shellings, a contrast that plagues and perplexes Dragan: "If he looks around him, it's hard to see what once was, or maybe was. More and more it seems like there has never been anything here but the men on the hills with guns and bombs. Somehow that doesn't seem right either, yet these are the only two options" (Galloway 2008, 27). Western intervention temporarily destabilized this perception, redrawing the map of the region to achieve some degree of consent among the warring factions.

Territorial Triangulations

Writing on the Yugoslav Wars, Beverly Allen describes the conflict as "the ultimate in citational practice, in historical collage" (Allen 1996, 42). "Not even the borders of the fighting and the slaughter can be said to correspond to national territories of memory," she observes, and concludes by establishing a connection between the ethics of war and the aesthetics of contemporary culture: "This eclectic reality, this mortal sea of paradox, this undoing of history in the name of brute aggression, is truly a postmodern war" (Allen 1996, 42). Unlike postmodernism, however, the Bosnian conflict fed on an absolute morality which dictated to the local populations that others needed to evacuate territories imagined to fulfil long-standing nationalist fantasies, and to international powers that the Balkans were nothing but a cauldron of violence that should be allowed to seethe into destruction. Sherene Razack, for instance, insists that "for the better part of the last decade, Canadian peacekeepers have been encouraged to frame their activities in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Croatia as encounters with 'absolute evil'" (Razack 2003, 205). Throughout the Bosnian war this moral binarism attained such proportions that even Susan Sontag, who staged Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in August 1993, was accused of epistemological colonialism and cultural arrogance. In Jean Baudrillard's flippanant words:

Susan Sontag admits that the Bosnians do not really believe in the suffering that surrounds them. They end up finding the whole situation unreal, senseless, and beyond their understanding. [...] But, of course, Susan Sontag is from New York, and she must have a better idea than they of what reality is, since she chose them to incarnate this reality. Perhaps it is simply because this reality is what she and the Western world most lack. To re-create reality, one must go where the blood flows. (Baudrillard 1996, 81)

We are dealing here with two discrete worlds whose visions of truth and certainty are violently at odds, while also depending on each other for their own validity. It is this ethical and epistemological dichotomy that the three Canadian novels discussed here seek to disrupt.

Take, for instance, *Drina Bridge*. Here is a man, not from New York but its closest Canadian counterpart, Toronto. Driven by longing and bereavement, he arrives in Serbia where he becomes increasingly involved in the war he now watches from a voyeuristic front row seat – listening to radio news and watching TV, witnessing the burials of slain Chetniks (Serbian nationalist paramilitaries) and civilians, finally joining his new lover on a hazardous trip to Bosnia. His posture in fact recalls General MacKenzie's position as a spectator during the early stages of the conflict, when he described the drama in his diary as "riveting stuff" (qtd. in Off 2001, 140). Yet Chris remains untouched by the war's most devastating manifestations thanks to the protection his Canadian citizenship bestows on him. His quest to experience what is at stake for the locals is foiled by his inability or unwillingness to empathize with one side or the other. "Problem is, you search but not believe, never make your committal" (Bartley 2006, 125), his Serbian lover rebukes him, thereby also taking a swipe at the 'neutral' UN-Canadian peacekeeping forces. Their commander is referred to elsewhere in the novel as "Hot-Rod MacKenzie out there playing favourites" (Bartley 2006, 156). Clearly one man's neutrality is another's favouritism, a duality of vision that further amplifies already entrenched ambiguities around local alliances and enmities.

Even though he pricks his ears to the rumble of war around the monastery, in treating the occasional burst of artillery as if it were a natural catastrophe, impossible to avert or interfere with, Chris recalls the attitude of Western governments who "dealt with the war as though it were a flood or an earthquake, enthusiastically addressing the symptoms of the conflict, without making any real effort to challenge its causes" (Silber/Little 1997, 256). Chris witnesses the war in disparate instalments gleaned on television and further mediated by Axel, a friend back in Toronto with whom he has kept in touch and who is "wired in to the latest shocks" (Bartley 2006, 9), much more so than Chris himself. Within the limited space of letters and phone conversations, the conflict can only be painted in stark, uncompromising colours, which simplistically reduce it to nuggets of information totally at odds with the fine gradations of the feuds involved. Casual contact with Serbs, which only reinforces general prejudices about their barbarity, creates in Chris what Ellen Strain calls "the illusion of demediation" and "the false promise of communion with authenticity" as core components of the tourist gaze (Strain 2003, 4). Chris is, of course, stationed at a monastery, and his contacts with people other than monks are few and far between; as Elizabeth Dauphinée remarks, "physical isolation from the host environment is possibly the most insidious form of mediation" (Dauphinée 2007, 45). So despite his efforts to learn Serbo-Croatian and blend in with the locals, for the pampered and sophisticated Canadian being at the ground zero of the European conflict does not coincide with the traversing or erasure of boundaries, even though the local borders dividing a sum of ethnically hybrid states are rather porous. Instead, Chris's presence and comfort are secured by the *maintenance* of boundaries, which is how he becomes aware of his own freedom of movement in

crossing the Bosnian border. It is thus his incarceration inside the monastery that ultimately underwrites the range of his transnational mobility.

Yet this incarceration also facilitates transgressive acts of a kind other than the merely geographic, positioning Chris as an alluring figure of the third: neither Muslim nor Croat, but something that the local Serbs more openly (and recklessly) respond to. In political terms, his sexual relationship with a monk and various flirtations with other locals can be read as a metaphorical subduing or domestication of the wild Serbs, who readily engage, sexually and otherwise, with this harmless “inconsequence from cushy Canada” (Bartley 2006, 47). Indeed, the question of sex figures squarely in the novel. Chris is constantly on the lookout for new sexual experiences through which he seeks consolation in the aftermath of his lover’s death. His stint at the monastery is marked by a series of sexual interludes with locals uniformly characterized as rugged and redolent – a breed of barbarians. During one such encounter, for instance, Chris imagines his partner “might pull a knife and slit [his] throat, chop off [his] dick, the full Balkan horror show” (Bartley 2006, 46). Indeed, Chris’s feelings for his lover do not congeal into emotional and religious commitment until their epiphanic experience of street violence in Bosnia, which suggests the tenuousness of the lines between violence and sexuality both in the novel and in the war itself. *Drina Bridge* can even be seen as investigating in love the agencies of war, its ambiguousness and hence the necessity to acknowledge, as Judith Butler writes, “the limits of acknowledgement itself, that when we claim to know and present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are, and that we cannot expect anything different from others” (Butler 2005, 42).

This investigation lacks, however, a sense of purposefulness: The affair happens by the by, at the margin of the narrative, love and sex developing in a way that implies little agency and responsibilities. For Chris, his own experience of Toronto’s gay scene already predetermines the terms of engagement at the monastery, such that the local monks’ voices can hardly be heard independently of Chris’s sexually keyed interpretation. “I’m supposed to find beauty, and I do, but my mind leapfrogs to sacrilege” (Bartley 2006, 42), he confesses. His reflections jump seamlessly from Bosnian propaganda on the radio to yet another “lad to ponder” (Bartley 2006, 44). When the monks ignore him even at close range, Chris opts to interpret this distance as merely a potential signal that his homosexuality may have been exposed. His attitude toward the “butcher’s boy” (54) – a young man he casually meets for sex – is symptomatic of how he perceives the local Serbs, with manifest disinterest in their curriculum vitae unless it shares something essential with his own. Even the choice of Bosnia as a travel destination for Chris is founded not only on his desire to track down his dead lover’s original family (he soon loses interest in this search) but also and especially on the ways in which Bosnia, with its muddled conflict and indiscriminate carnage, provides an incisive illustration of the inability to locate justice in any immutable way, an inability to which Pimm’s death from AIDS testifies. “I’m beginning to find corpses in my dreams,” Chris remarks toward the end of the novel:

"They're in my bed, or in the garden, or I'm driving in a car over them. Sometimes it's all mixed up with Pimm. Pimm dead or almost dead, and talking to me, his mouth moving silently" (Bartley 2006, 321).

Both in love and in war, then, *Drina Bridge* moves toward an ethics that precludes fixed identities, thus denouncing violence as the impulse to over-identify (oneself or the other) as something hardened and unmovable. In *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, identity is similarly mutable: none of the characters that supply the narrative voice/s is introduced, which leaves them equally suspended and, in their suspension, ultimately equal. On the other hand, the novel seems to rely heavily on dichotomies of all kinds: temporal (the surreal present and the idyllic pre-war time) and temperamental (Arrow, for instance, forces herself into a starkly different mindset in order to be able to kill, and returns to her initial self shortly before being killed). Yet in one important respect, *The Cellist* is a monolithic, monotone narrative, set only in Sarajevo, and featuring exclusively local people.

Gagnon's novel, by contrast, is much more difficult to pin down, moving as it does away from Bosnia as if trying to escape, literally and metaphorically, the binarism of civil war. In this it recalls the last sentences of Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*: "If Europe has produced not only racism but also antiracism, not only misogyny but also feminism, not only anti-Semitism but also its repudiation, then what can be termed Balkanism has not yet been coupled with its complementing and ennobling antiparticle" (Todorova 1997, 189). Gagnon seems to propose Canada as Balkanism's antiparticle, and, to pre-empt accusations of further binarism, complicates this pattern by depositing her protagonist first in France, then in Quebec. Sabaheta concomitantly moves toward the margin and the centre, leaving a politically marginalized nation (Bosnia) in search of freedom closer to the heart of the Western world, while also steering away from Quebec's overruling cultural centre, France. Even this simple antinomy, that of margin and centre, the novel suggests, is impervious to dialectical reasoning. A journey is shaped not only by an origin and a target, but also by the multiple points at which it strays from a predetermined or expected course: the point of origin is not only Bosnia but implicitly also Romania, where Sabaheta's mother was born. The endpoint is reached via France, further entangling the direct trajectory that might have whisked the protagonist more securely to North America.

Back in Bosnia during the war, Sabaheta dreams of a place "where there were fields of reconciliation as far as the eye could see" (Gagnon 2006, 30). Quebec fits this description with uncanny accuracy. Seen through Sabaheta's eyes, Quebec resembles a Levinasian image of infinite alterity: "the dream of virgin lands and arctic snows, of absolute non-violence, of full presence utterly unmarked, unmediated, unmodified [...] the dream of absolute presence in the mode of absolute absence, the dream of a world without *différance*, without textuality, without phrases, without horizons, contexts, settings, frameworks, or any form of mediation" (Caputo 1993, 82; emphasis in original). This, Caputo fears, is an impossible, dangerous

dream, which makes it all the more attractive despite its echoes in Gagnon's novel of a return to insanity, that of Sabaheta's mother and of the war itself. Precisely because her plunge into pristine Canadian snow is so radical, Sabaheta's immigrant experience fails to offer a compelling counterpoint to the warring dichotomies of her native land. She thus finds relief not in a peaceful balance between contesting identities but in the abolition of identity itself. To Sabaheta, Canada is "the deserts of snow where the only blood you'd see was that of the animals people killed for survival [...] where [...] you didn't have the time or the desire to think about war, because the landscape forced you to contemplate the end of the world every day" (Gagnon 2006, 217-218). Ominously protruding from beneath the snow is the wound of war, a dull pain that prevents the young woman from considering pregnancy as a means of symbolic purging (230). Canada is thus at once a retreat and an abdication of responsibility, revealing yet another side of its complex function within the pattern of triangulation.

Gender and Victimization

Extrapolating from the physical defilement of Sabaheta's body, Gagnon writes: "Sarajevo had become an old woman who had mourned too many dead, her beauty vanished, recognized only by a few familiars and lovers from fragile clues" (Gagnon 2006, 92).⁸ Considering gender helps dispel the even-handedness with which the strong and the weak, the aggressors and the victims were treated during the Bosnian war. As the American line went, "there are places where a lot of men prefer war, and the looting and raping and domineering that goes with it, to any sort of peacetime occupation. One such place is Afghanistan. Another is Yugoslavia" (Rieff 1995, 42). Advisedly or incidentally, this formulation italicizes the masculinity of the said combatants, which indirectly associates aggression with manhood, and implicitly, the absence of conflict with effeminacy. It is hardly surprising that women were the first victims of this hyper-masculine conflict on the ground.

Many professional Muslim women, such as judges, attorneys, teachers, doctors, and economists, were raped in Bosnian camps (Gutman 1993, 147) not only because of their religious affiliation but also due to their social status, which challenged the deeply patriarchal Serb mentality. Victims who did not become pregnant by their Serb aggressors were often murdered (Allen 1996, 63). In 1990, Belgrade's feminists had appealed for the demilitarization of Yugoslavia, and issued a protest against new textbooks that emphasized nationalist, patriarchal, and sexist values, as well as against homophobic behaviour and language in the media (Ramet 2002, 260). Such hostile rhetoric – partly related with the rejection of socialism, which advocated women's equality, and with the enthusiasm of the newly liberated Christian Church-

8 The novel abounds in gender metaphors relating Bosnia to the appearance or nature of a woman. For instance: "Bosnia Herzegovina, having given birth to peace with the help of the forces of the international community, was suffering from past-partum depression" (Gagnon 2006, 205).

es – pivoted on a sharp sexual dichotomy that repressed homosexuality, vilifying it as a national betrayal due to the absence of procreation it entailed.

Bartley, Galloway, and Gagnon all respond to gender trouble in the Bosnian wars; homosexuality in particular was not unheard of as a ground for sexual discrimination and mistreatment during the war. As one character in Gagnon's *My Name Is Bosnia* reminisces, "[in] my Catholic Croatia, homosexuality is either a sin or an illness or a crime. In your Bosnia-Herzegovina, it's not much better, your imams are as hypocritical as our priests" (Gagnon 2006, 143). In a rape camp close to Sarajevo, for instance, a separate bunker reportedly housed mostly male prisoners who were forced to perform sexual acts on each other (Allen 1996, 67). Especially in the context of rape-related war crimes, however, writing – as Bartley does – primarily about wilfully incarcerated gay monks who are not likely to rape anyone may appear to de-vilify the Serb male population. But the pecking order in the monastery, headed by an authoritarian abbot, accurately reflects the values of Serbian nationalism animated by charismatic hyper-masculinity and the "willingness to follow, and unconsciously seek to merge with, a ruthless and seemingly omniscient and omnipotent leader like Slobodan Milošević" (Schoenfeld 1996, 160).

Unsurprisingly, male characters in *The Cellist of Sarajevo* also base their actions on their interests rather than on moral principles – much like the international powers that practiced *realpolitik* by hesitating to intervene in the Bosnian conflict – while Arrow, the female sniper, displays a more humane understanding of ethics. Working to defend Sarajevo against snipers that decimate the city's population day by day, Arrow relies on a kind of intuition which, she thinks, sets her apart from her predominantly male opponents: she "doesn't take measurements, she doesn't calculate formulas. She simply sends the bullet where she knows it needs to go. She has trouble understanding why other snipers can't do this" (Galloway 2008, 8). Also in contrast to the snipers on the hills, who shoot unarmed men, women, and children in an effort to chip away at the city's morale, Arrow follows a strictly military code of behaviour, shooting only soldiers. This selectivity may seem ethically sound, yet it resides separately from Arrow's pre-war, 'authentic' selfhood, a distinction marked by her name change:

To hate people because they hated her first, and then to hate them because of what they've done to her, has created a desire to separate the part of her that will fight back, that will enjoy fighting back, from the part that never wanted to fight in the first place. Using her real name would make her no different from the men she kills, it would be a death greater than the end of her life. (Galloway 2008, 10)

So while Arrow is decidedly a female sniper, at a far remove ethically from her male counterparts – described as "discussing the outcome of a recent football match [...] throwing bombs instead of balls" (Galloway 2008, 13) – she is, however,

not a “woman” (“Alisa,” as she is called), a gender marker that comes to stand for a time of innocence and peace.

Just as Arrow enters the fray of the male-dominated sniper business, Sabaheta joins her father and the guerrillas in the forest, where she dresses like a boy and fights side-by-side with the men. Her own fearlessness leads her to wonder “why it was so difficult for girls to kill” (Gagnon 2006, 46). Like Arrow, Sabaheta divides her personality into a side that does not recoil from the dirty business of war, and a subliminal femininity which is revealed once she has left Bosnia in favour of more peaceful, easily habitable territories. While fighting alongside her father and other men to support the Muslim resistance, “her hair short like a boy’s and [...] a dagger in her belt” (Gagnon 2006, 79), Sabaheta would much rather be “leading commandos of women patrolling all over the world, emasculating the rapists of women and children” (Gagnon 2006, 46). When she does encounter an abuser of women (unexpectedly, in France), Sabaheta chooses to write him a formal letter condemning his cruelty rather than aggressively take him to task – a response that confirms Sabaheta’s newly regained confidence in the pacifist mechanisms of equity and justice. The escape from Bosnia, for which Canada provides an attractive destination, thus incorporates the promise of unfettered sexual expression in accordance with natural inclinations (peaceful femininity, or homosexuality in the case of Bartley’s Chris) away from the gender upheavals and permutations enforced by civil war.

Art of In-Betweenness

While travelling on foot from Bosnia to France, Sabaheta and her companions use their books (except, of course, the Koran) as fuel for camp fires: “to keep them from going mad, they would each learn chapters by heart and recite them by the fire” (Gagnon 2006, 28). It seems inevitable, then, that Sabaheta should become a writer, as indeed she does. There are many reasons why Sabaheta turns to writing, foremost among these her mother’s condition – “walled up in the great silence of the psychiatric asylum, and in her own silence” (Gagnon 2006, 16). In fact, all three novels deal in some way with art-making, which becomes important for the protagonists partly as a result of their dwindling faith. Sabaheta, for instance, would join the ranks of believers only “if God were a woman” (Gagnon 2006, 97). After the war, all religion becomes for her “a hell of savagery and tortures that defied all imagination” (Gagnon 2006, 186), prompting her to avoid all churches as “branded with the weapons and tools of death” (186). Chris, despite staying at an orthodox monastery, is “not going gaga about God.” To him, “[t]he world is rudderless. [...] It’s a world of generous, breathtaking, miraculous gifts, snatched away” (Bartley 2006, 78). Both the death of his lover and the horrors of war fit his description of the “random, unchecked misery” (83) that a loving God would never allow. Religion being so obviously an incentive to mass murder, Chris, the cellist, and Sabaheta seek to distance themselves from it by devoting themselves to artistic pursuits: Chris to the perma-

nently shifting story of the Second World War adventurer Slobodan, the cellist to his adagio, and Sabaheta to re-writing the books she has burned.

Considering that during the war Bosnian Serbs made a point of destroying buildings of cultural significance, including, for example, the National Library in Sarajevo (Ramet 2002, 264; Gagnon 2006, 40),⁹ Sabaheta's wish to reconstruct personal memory acquires broader cultural significance, as does her wish to become both a writer (to tell her own story) and a psychiatrist (to heal war-related conditions like her mother's): it is almost as if Sabaheta attempted to re-write or repress the profile of Serbian ultra-nationalist Dr. Radovan Karadžić, a psychiatrist who specialized in treating depression, and a published poet. This is a happy enough ending for Gagnon's narrative, but taken together, the Canadian fictions I have been discussing again hold a sense of triangular nostalgia for precisely the kinds of dichotomies they struggle to resist: the sniper for conventional peacetime femininity, the Toronto-traveller for the stability of romantic liaisons and of religious commitment, Sabaheta for the sense of permanent endangerment that prompts her to see in the Darwinian cruelty of Canadian wilderness an affinity with the ravages of war. The transatlantic connection thereby mutates into something very much like the Drina Bridge: not a passage to liberty but a chain binding in place entities that would much rather be apart.

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9 In a gesture that chimes with the cellist's memorial performances, former conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic orchestras, Zubin Mehta, led the Sarajevo Symphony Orchestra and chorus in a televised performance of Mozart's *Requiem* in the ruins of the National Library in June 1994 (Ramet 2002, 264).

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