Stories of Everyday Resistance, Counter-memory, and Regional Solidarity: Oral Histories of Women Activists in Kosova

Thesis

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Abstract

Narratives of Albanian women activists involved in different forms of local, national as well as regional activism have continuously been excluded from official historical accounts in Kosova. This thesis, by focusing on the oral histories of 10 women activists, contributes to a deeper understanding of women’s subjectivities, who in one way or another were engaged in the social and political processes in Kosova. Drawing from memory studies, oral history, and local feminist research in Kosova, I analyze how the life stories of these women intersect with broader events that characterize the history of the second half of the 20th century in Kosova. I particularly trace the ways how these women construct their subjectivity and civic engagement as women’s rights activists in relation to nationalist movements, civil as well as armed resistance against the regime of Milosevic, war-time experience, and post-war period in Kosova. In this regard, I pay attention to forms of counter-memories that their life stories enact, which oppose both male-dominated historical accounts in post-war Kosova and the pejorative Serbian media discourse about Albanian women in the former Yugoslavia.
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Map of The Republic of Kosova developed by the Kosovar Agency of Statistics, showing the main regions and municipalities.
Chapter 1

Introduction

After almost two decades since the end of war in Kosova¹, research on women’s subjectivities and the presence of women’s narratives in the public discourse in Kosova still remain sidelined. Even though there is a general preoccupation with a construction of a collective narrative of national liberation, women’s voices are not present in these conversations. Same as in postwar Bosnia (Helms 2013), discussions about women’s position in the former Yugoslavia are mostly defined by the politics of victimhood which appropriate the figure of the female victim in the function of nationalist sentiments and legitimacy. Despite the fact that there were important civic initiatives speaking about sexual violence during the war beyond the fetishizing of female victimhood (Di Lellio 2016; Tran 2015), the public and institutional discourse is dominated by essentialist gender tropes. Deemed as only victims by the state as well as by the international community, the articulation of women’s social and political agency is almost absent from the discourse of national identity and state-building in the postwar Kosova.

Despite this continuous marginalization of women’s subjectivities from the state as well as academic institutions, feminist counter-public and scholars in Kosova (Farnsworth 2008; Luci and Gusia 2015; Luci 2005) have collected, documented, and written about oral histories which belong to women activists who were engaged in different social and political movements in Kosova, such as the campaign for women’s literacy, national liberation movements, civic resistance against the regime of Milošević, as well as activism for women’s rights across ethnic borders. Demanding a proliferation and a critical interrogation of memory landscapes, feminist

¹ Throughout the thesis, I use the name Kosova as spelled in Albanian language, instead of the English version Kosovo, which is associated with Serbian reference to the region.
researchers in Kosova have opposed the male-dominated politics of remembrance and have emphasized the regional character of women’s activism during the 1990s.

Conceiving this thesis work as a continuation of feminist conversations and research in Kosova, I analyze women activists’ narratives in an attempt to answer two main questions. The first one is primarily preoccupied with the ways how women articulate their positionality as activists. Reading through their life narratives, I am interested in the stories they choose to tell about themselves, and how they communicate their agency as activists of women’s rights and national liberation movements. Second, I map how these women’s narratives are positioned in the larger national memory landscape in Kosova. Tracing a history of women’s subjectivities that most of the times is not officially remembered and valued, I particularly focus on stories that are not known in the public sphere in Kosova.

In the first chapter I analyze what I call stories of acts of everyday resistance – those stories which speak about everyday actions that women activists undertook in order to “understand their conditions, improve their lives, help each other, or fight against the limits put on them by their historical situation” (Buss 2017, 35). These stories vary from disobedience at primary school or running away from home, to resistance against Milosevic’s police forces. Thinking through them, and ruminating about different forms in which resistance is manifested, I realized how much of women’s every day struggles are left unnoticed. In this sense, the chapter seeks to excavate some of these brave experiences that are deemed insignificant by the mainstream public discourse and official historical accounts in post-war Kosova.

In the second chapter, I focus on narratives that I consider constitute counter-memories to national historical narratives and the discourse about Albanian women in the former Yugoslavia. I view these counter-memories as feminist epistemic intervention in the post-war political
memory in Kosova that oppose “memories which are constructed, staged, used and abused for political action and formation of group identities” (Assmann 2010, 41). In this respect, the chapter affirms feminist local knowledges that challenge actual politics of remembrance in Kosova.

1.1 Brief Historical Background

Women’s civic activism in Kosova is inseparably linked to the national resistances against the regime of Milošević’s Yugoslavia/Serbia during the 1980s and the 1990s in Kosova. For this reason, I will briefly historicize the political context of these two decades during which most of women’s activism took place.

In 1974, after decades of having a subordinated position within the Kingdom of Serbia, and then Yugoslav Serbia (1946-1963), Kosova gained the status of the autonomous province of Serbia within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Despite this positive change brought about by the constitutional amendments of 1974, Kosova remained the poorest region in Yugoslavia. The harsh economic conditions and the unequal political status compared to other units of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia) which had the status of republics, led to the organization of a series of mass demonstrations.

The most well-known protests are those organized by Albanian students in March 1981, in a number of cities of Kosova. The protests started as an articulation of students’ discontent with the conditions of life at the University of Prishtina, but gradually gained a more political character. Slogans such as ‘who does Trepca [the biggest miner in Kosova] work for?’ or mass shouting ‘Kosova – Republic!’, signaled that the reasons of people’s discontentment were much
larger than the life conditions at the University of Prishtina, and had primarily to do with the economic and political inequality of Kosova within Yugoslavia. The protests were violently suppressed and more than 500 people – most of them students – were imprisoned. Among them was also one of the women activists I write about in this thesis (Malcolm 1989).

These events led to a tense political atmosphere in Kosova and to a “differentiation” process through which a large number of Kosovar Albanians were expelled from the structures of the Yugoslav state. In March 1989, this situation culminated with the constitutional amendments which withdrew Kosova’s autonomous province status. After the suppression of the massive demonstrations that opposed the withdrawal of Kosova autonomy, Serbian authorities initiated a state of emergency and a series of new measures which harshly impinged the position of Albanians in the institutional and civil life of the country (Malcolm 1989).

The years that followed these events are known as the period of civil resistance of Kosova Albanians against the politics of Milosevic. During that time, the segregation of the educational system along ethnic lines, the expulsion of the Albanian faculty members from the University of Prishtina, the shutting down of Radio and TV “Prishtina,” and the removal of Albanian workers from the factories and health services, left the Albanian majority outside the state institutions and the public sphere. In this situation, the Albanian community formed parallel institutional structures maintained by ties of social solidarity, located in private spaces, such as houses and shops. This period of parallel Albanian society in Kosova, when alternative forms of civic mobilization substituted for institutional life, was characterized by an increased involvement of women activists in street demonstrations, political forums, literacy and health centers. By supporting the national cause, women activists constituted themselves as political agents and created new channels through which they could articulate their demands for women’s
rights (Clark 2000; Kostovicova 2005).

In 1997, after almost a decade of “peaceful resistance,” students at the University of Prishtina organized a massive demonstration as an alternative to what they considered to be a passive approach, demanding the end of the parallel life and the return of the Albanian students and professors to the official building of the University. The gathering of around 15,000 students was violently dispersed by the Serbian police forces. In 1998, the discontent of the Kosova Albanian population culminated with the emergence of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA), and armed confrontation with the Serbian forces. The war led to military NATO intervention and the withdrawal of Serbian forces from the territory of Kosova. With over 12,000 victims, 100,000 destroyed houses, more than 800,000 forcibly displaced people, and around 20,000 raped women, the war left Kosova in a state of emotional and economic devastation (Spiegel and Salama 2000) (Rizvanolli, Bean, and Fransworth 2005). On 17 February 2008 Kosova declared independence from Serbia. Prior to that, for eight years Kosova was administered by the UN Administration Mission in Kosova. Today, the Republic of Kosova is recognized by 115 states, although is not a member of the UN.

1.2 Methodology

The ten oral histories of Kosovar Albanian women activists that I analyze in this thesis were conducted by Oral History Kosovo Initiative, a collective of researchers of different nationalities and professional backgrounds, located in Kosova. Created initially as a research project in 2012 from a collaboration between the Kosovo Women’s Network in Prishtina and The New School for Public Engagement in New York, Oral History Kosovo collective gathered around a shared aim of gathering, recording and archiving individual life stories which intersect
with broader local as well as global historical events. The first set of interviews conducted with women activists was thought as a feminist intervention in the official collective memory of Kosova, which in most of the cases does not account for women’s subjectivities and their presence in the civic activism of the country. In this respect, Oral History Kosovo’s research on women’s activism encompasses a broad spectrum of women’s engagement in different aspects of the public sphere in Kosova, including activity in the nationalist movement, the struggle for girls’ literacy, or the regional mobilization for women’s rights in the time of Milošević’s regime in the former Yugoslavia.

The interviews on which I focus were conducted from July 2012 to June 2015. Their length ranges from 54 to 388 minutes. I chose these particular interviews because I considered that they are illustrative of the intersection between women’s activism and national resistance in the 1980s and 1990s in Kosova. Furthermore, I was drawn to these specific personal stories as examples of everyday struggles that women undergo which most of the time are left unnoticed in daily encounters. There are narratives which I do not cite or closely analyze throughout the chapters, but which nevertheless played a crucial role on giving me an overall context of women’s civic engagement and their activism for human rights.

The video recordings and the transcripts of the interviews in Albanian, English and Serbian language are presented on the online, open archival platform of Oral History Kosovo Initiative. Before each interview, an informed consent form was given to each interviewed woman, explaining the aim of the research, the process of video recording and transcribing, and asking for their consent to publish the interview online. Before publishing, the video recordings and the transcripts of the interviews were sent to the interviewees, asking whether they would like to keep fragments of the interviews unpublished. There were cases when some of the
interviewed women required parts of their interviews to be cut from the video recordings and transcripts, and their requests were respected by the Oral History Kosovo team. During the interviewing process, women activists were asked to narrate broadly about their childhood, youth, activism, professional life and war time experiences. Thus, their life stories offer a rich insight into their private experiences as well as great public events that occurred specifically in Kosova and in the broader region of the former Yugoslavia.

I joined the Oral History Kosovo team in 2015, hence most of the interviews with women activists that I use in this project were done without my participation. Nevertheless, I have contributed in the transcription of some of the women’s oral histories. In this regard, I am appreciative of the alternative, open, online archiving practice of the Oral History Kosovo that enabled me to access these women’s narratives. I believe that my interest in this topic is a modest contribution to the shared aim of the feminist community in Kosova to document, value, and give visibility to a history of women’s activism in Kosova.

Being a local young scholar interested in women’s and gender studies, and familiar with Kosova’s recent history, I consider that the lack of first-hand contact with the women activists does not affect my interpretation of their personal life stories. As part of the feminist community in Kosova, I had the chance of listening to some of the women activists narrate their activist work in different local events, so their stories were not entirely unknown to me prior to reading their narratives. Nevertheless, I share my broadest agreement with Alessandro Portelli who asserts that “each interview is an experience before it becomes a text” (1997, xiii). In this respect, I am aware that I do not share this experiential aspect of the process of interview and field work. Furthermore, knowing that “an inter/view is an exchange between two subjects” (Portelli 1991, 31), I am conscious that my presence in the interview process might have
produced a different conversation, and as a result different narratives of women’s activism. This said, I am aware that the narratives I analyze do not present the lives of the women activists, but instead are just the stories they chose to tell about themselves during a particular intersubjective exchange. I consider that this intersubjective character of the oral sources is best explained by Portelli, when he asserts that “Oral testimony, in fact is never the same twice. This is characteristic of all oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview. Even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times” (55).

In this research project, I mainly use the English translation of the transcripts of the interviews. The translation from Albanian into English was done by translators who are familiar with the non-standard form of the spoken Albanian in Kosova. In this sense, the transcripts, both in Albanian and English attempt to preserve the structure and the rhythm of the spoken word of the women activists. As the team of Oral History Kosovo states in their online archival platform, “the transcripts are texts that reflect the pattern of speech, with paragraphs and the punctuation that the transcriber proposes in order to make sense of the narration” (Oral History Kosovo). Nevertheless, despite this commitment to the originality of the spoken word, I am aware of the textual transformations that a narrative undergoes when its medium changes, first from orality into a written text, and then from Albanian into English language. Portelli rightfully notes that, “Oral sources are oral sources…The transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies changes and interpretation… Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations” (1991, 47). In this respect, capitalizing on the fact that Albanian is my native language, during my analyses, I also go back to the video recordings as the first layer of
representation of these life stories. In addition to listening to the spoken word of the women activists, the video recordings enable me to notice other paralinguistic communicative acts, such as: face gestures, gaze shifts, pauses, sighs, hand movements, and, most importantly, the two-person conversational context of the narrative. This visual channel, places me in the position of a distant hearer of an encounter between two persons. In this case, in Erving Goffman’s words, it might be said that I constitute an “imagined recipient” – a hearer that is not present in the social occasion of the conversational encounter, but listens to it through electronic media (1981, 138).

Ten women activists – despite their shared organizational space of feminist politics and activism in Kosova – do not comprise a homogeneous group. Reading through their personal histories, I could notice that they occupy different class geographies, educational backgrounds and cultural capital. Most of them, when recalling their childhood memories, talk explicitly about class position. Clothes, food, toys, gifts, and living spaces, are often used to index poverty or the lack of it. For example, Nazlie, a human right activist, describes the same class shame feeling around clothes that bell hooks talks about in her book Where We Stand: Class Matters (2000),

Our parents always thought of getting us clothes that would last for the next winter as well, while we children always thought the clothes were only for one season. And when we were in the clothes shop to try on winter jackets, the sleeves got down to here [shows the length of the sleeves with her hands]. They were big, and we said, “Dad, but the jacket is big.” He said, “Raise your arms up.” And when you raise your arms up, the sleeves get shortened of course. And then he said “Eh, it fits you perfectly.” This was repeated until we were older and we didn’t have to use the same jacket for two or three years.

On the other hand, Vjosa, also a human rights activist, narrates different experiences regarding the possessions of material goods in childhood:

We would go from Gjakova – those were excellent trips – we would take buses, trains, to go to Belgrade to see our father every two-three month. So, we had good memories, they
used to buy toys at that time, all things for children. When we went to Belgrade to [visit] our father, we would find many toys waiting for us, many clothes, many things.

Noticing these differences, a question that informed my analysis throughout this project was how to write about a narrative body that speaks about a particular intellectual, political and social endeavor without rendering invisible personal experiences and the differences that exist among women activists. This question becomes even more important to me when I recall Portelli’s assessment that “oral history is a science and art of the individual” (1997, 57). In his book, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Portelli emphasizes that the respect for the differences of the individual narrative is at the core of the ethics in oral history. His idea of the value of individuals differs significantly from the neoliberal deployment of the concept of the individual. He notes that what oral history teaches “is not the abstract importance of the individual proclaimed by liberal competitive capitalism, but the equal rights and the importance of every individual… Oral history as an art of the individual, then, directs us both to the recognition of difference and to the recognition of equality” (58). Following this line of thought, I aim at making visible the multiplicity of women’s stories of activism, while at the same time looking for the commonalities in their experiences.
Chapter 2

Stories of Everyday Acts of Resistance

Oral history is considered as a methodology and research field that allows for and is interested in the articulation of individual subjectivities. Generating long accounts of personal memories as well as personal reflections upon certain historical events, often the process of conducting oral history serves as a narrating practice through which narrators construct their own selves, and position those selves in their social milieu. Historian Lynn Abrams considers that this aspect of “self-construction” through storytelling of personal histories, constitutes one of the main preoccupations of researchers using the methodology of oral history. Abrams notes that, “in the oral history context we are especially interested in how the interviewee constructs an identity – or subject position – for him or herself by drawing upon available cultural constructions in the public discourse” (2016, 54). The importance of acknowledging peoples’ subjectivities when accounting for an historical event is also emphasized by Haitian anthropologist. Theorizing the complexity and ambiguity of historical narratives, Trouillot considers that any historical description that does not center subjective narratives of people who were engaged in a historical event is a partial one. This said, oral history, as a research practice creates the space where people historically neglected from the writings of history can articulate themselves as subjects, “that is, as voices aware of their vocality” (Trouillot 1995, 23).

Following Abrams’ and Trouillot’s thoughts on the historical narratives of individual subjectivities, the questions that guided me while reading the life stories of women activists were: how do these women construct their subjectivities as women’s rights activists in relation to nationalist movements, civil as well as armed resistance against the regime of Milosevic, wartime, and post-war period in Kosova? What kind of stories do the women choose to tell for
themselves when asked to narrate their life stories? What meaning do they ascribe to their experience of activism?

In my attempt of answering these questions and understanding the subject-positions enacted by women’s narratives, I was well aware that the stories that they tell about themselves are inseparable from the intersubjective context of the interview process and the larger cultural discursive frames within which the women position themselves. As Abrams points out, “it is precisely the relationship between subjectivity and discourse that engages the oral historian, who understands that memory and the creation of memory stories can only be undertaken by calling upon certain sets of ideas, interpretations, and representations which are meaningful to the narrator” (2016, 64). This said, I am conscious that in other intersubjective contexts women activists might have constructed different subjective positions about themselves, and might have emphasized different aspects of their activism. Thus, I consider that the fact that the women were chosen to be interviewed as women’s rights activists affected the way they constructed the meaning of their life stories.

Reading through the narratives, it seemed to me that what the women were mostly emphasizing in their reflections upon past events in their lives were their everyday acts of resistance. Recalling their memories of childhood, youth, activism, and professional life, and contemplating on the structural obstacles that they faced in their everyday life, the women constructed their selves as subversive actors in their day-to-day relationships in family, professional career and civic activism.

What I call stories of everyday resistance in this thesis is mainly informed by the work of sociologists Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey. Looking at narratives of law and the ways people make sense of their engagement with legal authority, Ewick and Silbey (2003) argue that
narrating practices, specifically stories of resistance, create the discursive spaces where structures of power can be exposed, opposed, and transformed. For them, the subversive potency of the narrative derives from the reflexive character of the act of narrating. The authors note that the critical perspective retrospection enacted by stories of resistance, enables the narrators to articulate their own agency and imagine the possibilities of unsettling their everyday reality. This said, stories of resistance should be understood as those which trouble the well-established, dominant social relations. As Ewick and Silbey put it,

"Stories that are capable of countering the hegemonic are those which bridge, without denying, the particularities of experience and subjectivities and those which bear witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed. Subversive stories, then, do not oppose the general and collective as much as they seek to appropriate them; they do not merely articulate the immediate and particular as much as they aim to transcend them. Subversive stories are narratives that employ the connection between the particular and the general by locating the individual within social organization (1995, 220)."

Focusing on the dialectics between the individual and the broader social structures, Ewick and Silbey suggest that the stories of everyday resistance, with their potency of revealing the structures of domination and generating “counterhegemonic narrative,” (222) may offer the possibilities of renegotiating and reshaping the relationships between the individuals and their social, political, and economic milieus. Referencing the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) on the intersection between biography and history, Ewick and Silbey consider that subversive stories should be understood as subjective accounts of history that enable the narrators to articulate, define and critically assess their autobiographical role in broader historical processes. Similar thoughts about the relationship between personal subversive narratives and the possibility of structural changes are shared by black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins. In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins argues that self-definition as an empowering
practice is intrinsically linked to a critical epistemology that originates from narratives that historically have been put to the margins of historical records. Discussing a story of a black female domestic worker who resisted her employer’s unfair treatment, Collins considers that the sharing of these narratives enables black women to “refuse relinquishing control over their self-definitions” (205). Thus, just as Ewick and Silbey, Collins emphasizes that subversive epistemologies enacted through stories of everyday resistance allow individuals to self-define their positionality within society.

The subversive potency of stories of everyday life, to a large extent, comes as the result of the reflexive character that the process of remembering the past entails in itself. For this reason, memory-work has been considered an important aspect of feminist methodology. Feminist scholars such as Frigga Haug and Richa Nagar, argue that the recalling of personal memories is not just a mere description of past sequences of life, but also is a critical tool that allows for the scrutiny of that past. Using memory-work as a research method that blurs the division between the subject and the object of the scientific inquiry, in *Female Sexualization*, Haugg together with Das Argument Collective, aimed to legitimize the use of “experience as a basis of knowledge” (1987, 34). Through a cooperative process of reflection and writing of their memories, the authors investigate the ways female sexuality is socially constructed. By doing so, Haugg believes that the conventional division between theoretical work and everyday life would be disrupted, leading to a methodology that uses the past experiences as a basis for the articulation of a feminist critique. For Haugg, the reflexive recalling of memories allows for an exposure of structures of power, social forms, and conventional judgements that most of the time, in the dynamic of everyday life, are left unexamined. Haugg and Das Argument Collective argue that the deliberate story-telling constitutes a practice of “living historically” (50) that
enables the narrators to critically analyze the past, with the aim of creating change in the present. A similar methodology of memory-work is also used by Richa Nagar and Santign collective (2006) in their book Playing with Fire. The book is conceived as an intellectual, political and emotional journey of nine Indian women with different experiences of privilege and oppression who come together with the aim of troubling the divisions between theory and praxis, academy and activism, “experts” and other people. By undertaking a process of autobiographical storytelling and reflective activism, Nagar and eight rural women activists in India, unravel their past experiences and investigate how caste-ism, classism, communalism, and sexism intersect in their daily lives. In both of these feminist memory-works the process of looking back into the personal and collective memories serves as a way of understanding and using past experiences as a foundation for critical knowledge-production.

In what follows, I discuss narrative fragments of women activists from Kosova that I think constitute stories of everyday resistance. Deploying the above-mentioned works of Ewick and Silbey, as well as those of Haugg and Nagar, I argue that through the practice of narrating subversive stories, women activists position themselves as subjects who—in different periods of their personal and professional life—resisted different structures of power in their everyday milieus. Considering that the women activists exercised their opposition in various spaces and within different social and political structures—such as in their families, in the prisons of Milosevic’s regime, or in the post-war institutions of the Republic of Kosova—I use Louis Althusser’s (1970) terminology of repressive state apparatuses and ideological state apparatuses to categorize the power structures that the women activists opposed. For Althusser, repressive State apparatus consists of power mechanisms, such as police, government, courts and armed forces, that are controlled by the state, whereas the ideological state apparatus consists of
educational institutions such as schools, religious and social clubs, media, and the family.

Althusser argues that the ideological State apparatus with its discursive power, serves the function of an imaginary representation of reality, interpelling individuals into “always-already subjects.” Reading through their subversive stories, I suggest that the women activists, with their everyday acts of resistance, opposed both the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus.

One of the most distinct stories of resistance is told by Xhejrane, a midwife and a women’s rights activist dedicated to women’s health issues. Coming from a large family, Xhejrane narrates that her preoccupation about gender equality and social justice started early in her youth when confronted with a patriarchal social order in her surroundings. Raised among her sisters without a brother, Xhejrane felt the social pressure that her mother had to undergo because she didn’t give birth to a boy. At the end of the elementary school, in the 1960s, Xhejrane was faced with obstacles to continue high school. Most of the time, women in her village were supposed to get married early in their youth, and the continuation of education was not an option for them. Recalling her reactions and emotions toward arranged marriages, Xhejrane narrates that back in her adolescence, she always said to herself, “Oh God, when I grow up, do I really have to get married? Should I do nothing else with my life?” This question, and her belief that education is a nonnegotiable right, pushed Xhejrane to undertake something that was almost unimaginable at that time in her village: to run away from home in order to get enrolled in high school. This is how Xhejrane remembers the night she left behind her family, and went alone to the nearest city:

It was the end of September, and I felt a strong desire to go to school… One night, when all my family was sleeping – something that only a young person would do, and today I would still do it – I woke up from bed, without money of course; we never had money in
our hands. I only had my school certificate with me, and I went straight to the police station in Deçan. It wasn’t easy because our village was five or six kilometers away [from Deçan]. And I had only one request: I wanted to be educated and my family did not let me. Some other women also did what I did – three or four women, one from Podujeva, one from Prishtina. That’s what the newspaper wrote about them. And I saw it as a solution, so I did it too. My family’s reaction was horrible, but I stayed at my cousin Halil Haxhaj. He had an apartment in Deçan and I stayed there for a few days. The institutions dealt with my case; the police banned my family from seeing me. I never saw them, even though they continuously tried to see me. What I had done was a disgrace at that time, and my father felt very bad. He felt himself judged by the tradition and other family members. I was considered a stubborn, rebellious girl, and what I had done was a shame for the family and the punishment was very harsh. It was a concern for other relatives too. The situation wasn’t easy at all, but I still would act the same today. Some possibilities were explored, since the deadline for student registration in high school had passed. That time, only few girls had the chance to get educated: the principal’s daughter, the teacher’s daughter, and the mayor’s daughter. It was a surprise that I – a daughter of a villager – went to high school. But I did go to school with the daughters of politicians of that time, and thanks to my cousin Hateme – to whom I own a lot and I am indebted without ever being able to repay – I ended up in the medical high school in Prizren.

In this fragment Xhejrane articulates her personal struggle for education. She is well aware of the structural obstacles that she had to oppose. Her father, her broader family circle, the patriarchal tradition and the class position for Xhejrane were the main power structures that impeded her from continuing her education. Nevertheless, what seems significant for me is the fact that Xhejrane also mentions the structures of support and solidarity, such as her cousins and the educational institutions. In her story of resistance, Xhejrane notes that the subversive acts of other women were what encouraged her to seek an education. Stating that “some other women also did what I did… that’s what the newspaper wrote about them,” Xhejrane articulates the importance of the sharing of resistance stories among women. In this case, the newspaper served as a medium that encouraged solidarity and groups of support when they were absent in Xhejrane’s village. Xhejrane’s story also complicates Althusser’s accounts of repressive state apparatuses. In her case, village’s police served as a supportive structure that countered restrictive power of her family. The statement “I went straight to the police station in Deçan”
indicates that for Xhejrane the police station constituted a safe place where she could articulate her request for education. Nevertheless, being familiar with other women’s stories from Kosova who were not supported by the justice system (Marku 2016), I consider that Xhejrane’s case is not representative of the relationship between women’s security and state institutions in Kosova. Albanian anthropologist Eli Krasniqi (2014) also argues that in the post-war period, even though significant changes were made in the legislation for gender equality, patriarchal practices are still well ingrained in the justice system. Analyzing cases of divorce, gender-based violence, and inheritance, Krasniqi emphasizes that often state mechanisms that are called to protect women reproduce patriarchal structures in the name of preserving traditional family values.

The subject position of a “rebellious girl” that Xhejrane talks about is present in the narrative of Nazlie as well. Nazlie, now a member of the leadership in charge of women’s issues in the Self-determination Movement in Kosova, recalls that in a time of political tensions, being labeled as a rebel could have serious consequences. She narrates an episode from her elementary school when her “misbehavior” was used as an excuse by state authorities to take action against her family:

I remember that every year we had to observe a minute of silence for... I can’t remember the exact date in May... On May 25, the schools observed a minute of silence. I was in seventh grade, and during a moment of silence sometimes it happens that kids smile or burst into laughter that they cannot stop. So that one time, I laughed during the minute of silence and the teachers convened a meeting to condemn me as a counter-revolutionary, a rebel, because I did not keep quiet during the minute of silence. After that meeting, I was expelled from school. I was expelled in fact because I laughed during the moment of silence. Then after that, they took action against my father who was the head technician of the Ramiz Sadiku health center. They demoted him to a simple technician, and the purge continued, targeting some other family members.

Despite the cases when what is rebellious was defined by state authorities as in the above fragment, Nazlie also narrates how the position of the rebel was deployed by the youth as a way
of identifying with international counter-culture movements that emerged in the 1960s and as a political stance against the politics of Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia. Proudly and smiling she states that she “was a kind of punk girl,” remembering the kinds of clothes she used to wear as a way of expressing her political discontent. Nazlie’s narrative of the deployment of fashion for political purposes, reminds me of Tanisha Ford’s (2015) research on politics of style among black feminist activists in the 1960s, in the U.S. In her book, Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul, Ford argues that during the Black Freedom struggle, black women deliberately incorporated beauty and fashion into their politics, as a strategy of claiming visibility. Ford considers that alongside formal politics, nonconforming cultural practices of beauty and fashion were essential to black everyday struggle for liberation.

Stories of Shukrije and Zahirje illustrate a kind of resistance that confronted directly the authority of Milosevic’s regime in Kosova. Being both political activists, their narratives are full of stories about underground political mobilization, participation in mass protests, dissemination of critical pamphlets, and so on. Both of them were political prisoners, even though in different periods of national resistance. In the beginning of the 1980s, Shukrije belonged to the groups of students who openly articulated their discontent with the position of Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, which led to the organization of the massive demonstrations of 1981 (Schwandner-Sievers 2013). As I emphasized in the historical background section, the demonstrations were violently suppressed and a large number of Albanian students were imprisoned, Shukrije among them. In her more than six hours long oral history, Shukrije narrates in detail her attempts to avoid arrest by the Serbian forces. One of her many stories is this one:

The next day, early in the morning we went to buy shoes. I made sure the shoes were comfortable, so I could run easily (laughs) to avoid the danger. I was looking in different shops, when my uncle’s daughter had noticed an agent who was following us. The person
who was selling in the shop had also noticed this move, so he asked me to get in the
dressing room. The shop assistant knew that he was one of the notorious agents of UDB
[State Security Administration of the former Yugoslavia], so he went to the front of the
shop to make sure the agent was leaving. Then he called me and told me, “Fast please,
get out through the upper part of the building!” And that’s what we did. Then, from there,
we started running and again from afar, my uncle’s daughter saw some other people of
UDB who were on the move. We managed to get home through side streets. At that
point, we agreed that the danger was now imminent and should do something to avoid the
arrest (sighs).

Shukrije continues her story of resistance, narrating about all her hiding places and her life in
illegality. Most of the time she stayed at the houses of her cousins, or with families who were
considered as trustworthy by the nationalist movement. Nevertheless, despite her resistance, in
1983 she was arrested and sent to prison. Shukrije notes that her political persecution was
tougher also because at that time she was in a romantic relationship with one of the main student
organizers of the nationalist movement, Nuhi Berisha, who in an armed confrontation with
Serbian forces was killed in 1984. Being one of the closest persons to Nuhi, Shukrije’s arrest was
also an attempt of the police forces to find out Nuhi’s location. Shukrije narrates about many
interrogation sequences in prison where she was asked to tell the names of other people involved
in the movement and give information about their activities. Recalling these hard moments of
her life, Shukrije with pride emphasizes her decision not to reveal any information that could
harm her friends or the movement, despite the continuous warning that she would not be allowed
to continue her education:

I already had decided not to talk. Whatever he [the prison interrogator] said, I continued
to keep silent. He said, “Do you know what waits for you since you don’t want to
cooperate?” I said, “No, I don’t know! I know nothing, because I have done nothing!” He
then said, “Why are you with Nuhi Berisha? Why did you collaborate with him?” I said,
“Nuhi Berisha? Everybody has a right to have… every girl to have a boyfriend. Is it a
crime to love someone?” He said, “Don’t avoid my questions! Respond to my questions!”
I replied, “I gave my answer.” Then he started to read the Criminal Code of Yugoslavia
and the other Kosova law on criminal procedures, article 136 and so forth, to frighten me.
He said, “what do you think as a future lawyer? Nobody in this room should be worried more than you?” I said, “I will repeat it once more. Whatever you intend to do, do it! Because I am not bothered by that. Whatever punishment there might be, I have nothing to say.”

Fifteen years later after Shukrije’s arrest, Zahrije, a volunteer of the Council for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, and a member of the Kosova Liberation Army, would live almost the same experience as Shukrije. Zahrije was arrested by the Milosevic regime in 1998, and was kept in prison long after the war ended, in 2001. Recalling her memories of her time at Lipjan’s prison, like Shukrije, Zahrije also emphasizes her total refusal to reveal information to the police:

I didn’t admit anything. They presented me with the photo of me that they took when they photographed me at the bus station. And they said to me, “Do you know them? Who is she?” I said, “Me.” “And this other?” I said, “I don’t know her.” They described her to me, “She’s thin, she wears jeans, she has a slim body.” “I don’t know who she is, nor where she is!” I said, “You freely kill me, because I don’t know anything about her.” And it was a fact that I didn’t know. And for three months straight during my stay in the Lipjan prison, they either came and interrogated me from ten in the morning, or in the evening from seven until ten, eleven. Sometimes they interrogated me until twelve for about three months straight.

The intersection between Albanian struggles for national liberation and women’s activism in Kosova is evident, too, in the narrative of Vjosa, a pediatrician, founder of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children during the 1990s, and since 2012 Kosova’s Ambassador to the Netherlands. Being politically engaged since her youth, throughout her narrative Vjosa constructs her life story as a continuous struggle for national and women’s liberation. In a moment of her story, reflecting upon her activism and personal identification with the struggle for national liberation, Vjosa rhetorically asks: “Has anyone lived a life in which they experienced several communist systems, the martial law and repressions, the apartheid in Kosova, the war, the liberation and independence? To me it feels like I have lived many lives.”
She depicts how even normal everyday activities such as reading Albanian literature, attending college, celebrating national holidays, speaking in native language, or seeking healthcare would be counted as acts of resistance.

What interests me the most in Vjosa’s narrative is the clear articulation of the autonomy of activism for women’s rights from other organizational structures that operated in Kosova in the 1990s, such as the Democratic League of Kosova, and the Kosovar Liberation Army. Without diminishing the importance of political structures of national resistance, Vjosa is well aware that in many cases male-led structures prioritized the general security at the expense of women’s needs. She narrates a moment during her fieldwork as a medical doctor when she resisted to follow the orders of the Kosovar Liberation Army:

We went to do fieldwork for example and the KLA would stop us {changes the tone of the voice} “Where are you going? Let us check the medicines. Who gave you permission to enter our territory?” For example, once in Malishevo they stopped us and they would not let us leave. There was the case where the army had intervened in Rahovec and the whole population was leaving, they were going to Malishevo. We had entered Malishevo, we knew where to go and help people. Back then I was the only one with a car, since I did not want to put other women at risk, but I had an English activist with me. We went to the hospital of Malishevo and practically we just treated the wounded with the director of the Malishevo hospital. But later on, KLA soldiers arrived and without asking who I was, they started, “Who has allowed you to enter our territory? Where is your permission from Adem Demaçi? Where is your written permission?” I got very upset and told him, “Go away, I am Vjosa Dobruna and I will not recognize your legal authority here. This is my place as much as yours. I have as much right as you do, so do not approach me.” Even though we delivered some babies, some babies had died, a woman died … I mean it was a catastrophic situation. And they came and said, “Who has given you permission to enter?” So, for us as women there were many doubts.

This passage illustrates that the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, which had the status of an NGO, operated independently from other political structures, and had clear focus on the issues of women’s rights and women’s health. Vjosa notes that male leaders of that time
often criticized her, arguing that her work is not contributing to the overall political situation in Kosova. Recalling those moments, Vjosa says, “They [Democratic League of Kosova] did not see it as valuable. In the beginning, I would go when they called me, then I started to completely ignore them.” Besides the resistance toward Albanian male politicians, during her work as medical doctor and human rights activist, many times Vjosa was confronted by the Serbian police forces. She narrates how the police would raid the offices of the NGO. In one case, she tells how she was called to the police station and her courage depended on a pair of shoes she loved:

I had a pair of shoes, I will never forget it, I had a pair of shoes with a brand – I always wanted to buy expensive shoes, dark Bruno Magli. Everyone said that when they were questioned in the police, besides being beaten, they also were sexually harassed. The first time when they sent me to the police station I was wearing those shoes. I left the police station in the center of Prishtina and I was walking, looking at my shoes the whole time, saying “Oh, these shoes brought me luck. I will never stop wearing them.” And many times, when I talked with the now-deceased Bajram Kelmendi², he told me, “Vjosa, tell me immediately when they call you, do not go to the police without me.” And we always laughed with Bajram when he said, “Are you wearing your Bruno Magli shoes?” I would say, “Yes.” “Did they beat you up?” I said, “No, no. I passed this time without sexual harassment, and the shoes are bringing me luck.” Even when they deported me from Kosova, I wore the same shoes. Those shoes lasted for a long time, and I kept them since I had this fixation that they protected me. One creates all kind of mechanisms to protect oneself from fear.

Vjosa’s almost irrational belief in her shoes as luck bringer objects reminds me of what Croatian anthropologist Ivana Maček (2009) in her ethnography of Bosnian war, Sarajevo Under Siege, calls “magical thinking.” For Maček, in wartime, because of its uncontrollable dimension, people

² Bajram Kelmendi was an Albanian lawyer, human rights activist, and one of the founders of Council for Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms in Prishtina. In 1998, he filed the charges at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia against Slobodan Milosević for war crimes committed in Kosovo. In 1999, Kelmendi and his two sons were arrested by the Serbian police at his house, and the next day they were found executed in Prishtina: [http://articles.latimes.com/1999/mar/28/news/mn-21931](http://articles.latimes.com/1999/mar/28/news/mn-21931)
create all kinds of everyday resistance mechanisms, or personal “magic” routines that helped them oppose an objectively unbearable situation. In her book, Maček narrates about her own “magical ritual” for the time she spent in Bosnia during the 1990s. Interestingly her story coincides with Vjosa’s love for her shoes, suggesting for a universality of resistance stories:

The first time I was on my way to Sarajevo, my grandmother, who had never read horoscopes and certainty did not believe in them, said that my horoscope was good for the period I planned to remain there. Although we acknowledged our skepticism with a chuckle, we were both glad the horoscope was propitious. Knowing there was nothing I could do to improve my security, I also looked for a protective amulet to take with me. I did not find one, but when I left Sarajevo I realized that the shoes I had worn were the same ones that I had worn during my visits to Croatian and Herzegovinian front lines in 1993. From then on, I wore my anti-sniper shoes every time I was in Sarajevo (49).

In both Vjosa’s and Maček’s stories, the wearing of favorite shoes is a call for everyday life normality, and a rejection of the panic that wartime induces. As personal belongings, in a time when everything dear is devalued and at risk, their shoes indexed their claim to self-definition and their refusal of being subjected to a threatening political setting. Narrating these stories, Vjosa and Maček, enlarge the scope of imagined practices of everyday resistance, and position themselves as opposers of impersonal structures of war.

The narratives of Xhejrane, Nazlie, Vjosa, Shukrije and other women activists who are not explicitly mentioned in this chapter indicate that their subject positions are multiple and contextual. Even though all of them narrate experiences of resistance, their encounters, aims, and temporal-spatial situations where they act are not the same. In this respect, the positions they enact for themselves also differ. Xhejrane presents herself as the young girl who rebelled against the oppressive traditional norms in her family and village community. Revisiting her youth memories, Xhejrane fiercely asserts that “I would still act the same.” Her determination to seek
an education defines her as a fighter for emancipation who now is committed to work as a women’s rights activist. On the other hand, Nazlie in her story is portrayed more as an “accidental rebel.” Her laughing in school is not as intentional as Xhejrane’s decision to run away from home. Nevertheless, she is well aware of the unjust treatment she and her family undergo because of her act. In this sense, through her story, she becomes a denunciator of the repressive state regime. Shukrije’s prison stories emphasize her strong commitment to her fellow anti-regime activists. Claiming that “I had already decided not to talk,” Shukrije positions herself as a militant for the collective cause. Vjosa narrates herself above all as a women’s rights activist. Refusing to accept the authority of the soldier of Kosovo Liberation Army, she positions herself and her duty in service to women as legitimate and significant as any national cause.

The stories of resistance in this chapter manifest women’s agency and show that agency operates in different forms and in different settings. They indicate—and specifically the prison stories of Shukrije and Zahrije—that in many cases individual agency is inseparable from collective agency. Nevertheless, Vjosa’s story tells that collective national resistance not always had the issue of women’s rights on its agenda. In this sense, her narrative indicates a distinct space of women’s activism in the 1990s in Kosova.
Chapter 3

Narratives of women’s activism as counter memories

It is widely accepted among social sciences and humanities scholars that practices of remembering and forgetting, and the deployment of certain narratives of the past should not be studied separately from the historical, political, economic, and social contexts in which those practices/narratives take place. Authors interested in history and knowledge production, postcolonial contexts, and social dimension of memory and its manifestation in public sites, have argued that what and how events of the past are remembered in the present, to a large extent, comes as a result of the constellation of larger power structures (Ricoeur 2004; Fuchs and Cosgrove 2006; Rothberg 2009). In this sense, excluded from the sites of knowledge production, less privileged people have historically struggled to articulate, record, and document their experiences and their side of history.

Often, oral history as a research method that is not dependent on the usage of historical written sources—which most of the time are created by and belong to institutional structures of power—has served as an excavating tool of marginal narratives (Portelli 1997; Buss 2017). Along oral historians, scholars engaged with the debate on the archive, which some years ago started as the “archival turn,” have argued that a focus on the resurrection of memories of slavery contributes to undermining the epistemic authority of the colonial archives, and in the articulation of a postcolonial subjectivity (de Jong 2014). Following this line of thought, and deploying the work of Eduard Glissant, French anthropologist Christine Chivallon (2016) argues that “the traces of living memory supplant archival documents, allowing access to the imprint left by past events whose presence today is to be found in expressions of remembering (68). In this respect, memory and practices of remembering of suppressed subjectivities are considered as

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epistemic interventions that create alternative spaces of knowledge production. In Patricia Hill Collins’ words, “alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth” (2000, 271).

In line with these arguments, in this chapter, I trace memories of women activists which offer an alternative historical account of the 1990s civic resistance in Kosova. I argue that there are three main interventions that these narratives produce: first, they counter tropes of racist discourse against Albanian women in the former Yugoslavia; second, they challenge the male-dominated master-narrative in the post-war Kosova; and third, they expose the oversimplified accounts of western scholars and international community on interethnic relations in Kosova.

I deploy the notion of “counter-memory” to claim that memories of women activists constitute “every day, taken-for-granted knowledge” (Collins 2000, 269) that confront the totalizing character of official historical narratives in the former Yugoslavia and post-war Kosova. Michel Foucault in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” conceptualizes counter-memory as an alternative form of remembering that goes against the totalizing tendencies of traditional historical narratives. He considers that counter-memory contributes to an “effective history” that is more focused on distinct events of the past than on a predestined singular historical continuity. Explaining his genealogical approach, Foucault claims that “a use of history that serves its connection to memory constructs a counter-memory” (1977, 160) that opposes the historical master-narratives or what Foucault names as “suprahistorical history” (160). Counter-memory—as a concept that calls for a focus on the discontinuous events of the past—is closely related to another genealogical idea of Foucault’s. In his 1975-76 lectures, Foucault introduces the notion of “insurrections of subjugated knowledges” to refer to “historical contents that have
been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations” (2003,7). According to him the “subjugated knowledges”—which are local and discontinuous—have historically been excluded, disqualified, and deemed unscientific and unworthy of theorization. Thus, he argues that the primary aim of genealogical research consists of challenging the monopoly of scientific discourse by “reactivating local knowledges” (10). In this way, counter-memories should be understood as critical genealogies that disrupt the unitary historical discourses.

Arguing for an “epistemology of resistance” philosopher José Medina (2011) notes that Foucauldian genealogical approach—specifically the concept of counter-memory—is essential for understanding practices of remembering in relation to power dynamics. He argues that memories of subversive experiences are the foundation of counter-histories:

Critical genealogies contribute to the production of counter-histories, which are centered around those experiences and memories that have not been heard and integrated in official histories. The counter-histories that critical genealogies can produce are possible because there are people who remember against the grain, people whose memories do not fit the historical narratives available. Counter-histories feed off such counter-memories and at the same time transform them, revitalizing practices of counter-memory and offering them new discursive resources to draw on (12).

This idea of “revitalizing practices of counter-memory” has also been used by scholars interested in spatial dimension of memory and memorializing. For example, feminist scholars Bold, Knowles and Leach (2002) examine how feminist memorializing of violence against women in Canada enacted a “cultural counter-memory” and enabled feminist activism. Deploying Caffyn Kelley’s concept of “anti-monumental monument” they argue that feminist public acts of remembering can serve as sites that oppose “hegemonic cultural memory” and engage communities in active reflection about the past. James Young (1999) also explores the embodied manifestations of counter-memory in the forms of counter-monuments. Focusing on the
Holocaust memory in Germany, Young argues that counter-monuments—as unconventional artistic forms of remembering—intervene in the public space by indexing and exposing the absence and the oblivion of certain memories from the mainstream narratives.

Having discussed these aspects of the concept of counter-memory, I turn to the narratives of women’s activism in Kosova, and analyze how their life stories oppose both the racist and sexist tropes of Serbian state’s discourse in the 1990s, as well as the post-war hyper-masculinist practices of remembering centered on local codes of glorified manhood.

Among critical scholars interested in the correlation between Balkan Studies and postcolonial Studies it is generally accepted that the position of nations in the space of the former Yugoslavia was determined by a presupposed closeness or distance to the construct of “Europeanness.” For example, in his article “Our Negros, Our Enemies” Serbian writer Vladimir Arsenijevic emphasizes that in the former Yugoslavia, geographic spatiality determined one’s “Europeanness,” with far northerner Slovenians being at the top of a “European vertical” and Kosova Albanians at the very bottom of this social and political hierarchy. Arsenijevic, metaphorically calls Albanians “the Negros” of the former Yugoslavia, criticizing what he considers to be a “Yugoslavian brand of racism.” He further argues that the racializing tropes that were especially intensified under the Milosevic regime, constructed Kosova Albanians as “the absolute outsiders” of the former Yugoslavia. Arsenijevic’s argument is in the same line with Milica Bakić-Hayden’s (1995) concept of “nesting orientalism.” Hayden considers that in the former Yugoslavia the complex west/east dichotomy was reproduced in the form of a “gradation of ‘Orients’” and the discourse of Orientalism was appropriated by those who themselves had been its objects. She uses the concept of “nesting orientalism” to examine how the question of who qualifies as European shapes cultural hierarchies that render some people as
less “civilized” than others in the former Yugoslavia. This complex relationship between categories of race and ethnicity is well-elaborated by Fatima El-Tayeb in her book *European Others*. Looking at the experiences of Muslim and black migrants in the post-WWII Europe, El-Tayeb argues that their social, cultural and economic differentiation is a result of a “process of ethnicization that closely interact[s] and overlap[s] with longer-term, in part pre-capitalist processes of racialization” (2011, xiv). She notes that “ethnicization” is primarily linked with hierarchized structures of labor that produce, use, and maintain the category of “racialized minorities.” Taking into consideration the fact that most of Kosovar Albanians belonged to the underclass in the former Yugoslavia (Strohle 2016), I consider that El-Tayeb’s accounts are helpful on understanding the racialized underpinnings of Milosevic’s regime.

The ultimate target of the derogatory discourse circulating mainly in the official Serbian media were Albanian women. They were portrayed and perceived as “backward” and without participation in the public sphere. Through a Malthusian rhetoric, they were accused of a high-rate of natality which was used as a justification of stigmatizing perceptions about Kosovar Albanians. This atmosphere is also present in the memories of Vjosa. Narrating about her time in a medical residency in Zagreb, she states:

I will never forget when I was in specialization in Zagreb in 1986 together with three doctors from Kosova. For the first time three Albanian women went into pediatrics for specialization: Zina Mekuli, Flora Brovian and I. Professor Tifembah was happy to see us, and he told the head nurse to assign us to our rooms. We changed our clothes in the rooms of resident doctors, and went to the nurse. And the nurse said, “Oh I thought you were darker!” This is what the Yugoslavs thought about us. They couldn’t understand that there were educated Albanian women.

Similar experience to Vjosa is narrated by Sevdije, one of the founders of the Independent Women’s Association (IWA) in Kosova:
So, I tell you a story. I was in Belgrade on July 1st, 1997. I was to take a visa for Austria to go to a conference. A man was staring at me. He was... this man approached to me and said, “Hello, I must apologize to you.” I said, “Why? You didn't do anything to me?” He said, “No! I have publicly an apology!” I was shocked! I didn't know what for. He said, “The way you look, the way you are dressed, the way you talked at the Austrian embassy... the way you are speaking, I am shocked that you as an Albanian to find you in such a way. So, I owe you a public apology.” I said, “This is not your fault! This is the fault of these two directors, and I pointed out to the two TV directors that were also waiting with us. They show us in different ways.

In this sense, women’s activism in the 1990s, besides providing basic health services for Albanian women, was also focused in troubling the racialized underpinnings of Milosevic’s politics in Kosova. Kosovar feminist scholars Nita Luci and Linda Gusia (2015) note that social agency of Albanian women served the function of countering the stereotypical propaganda of Milosevic’s media. Depicting the work of Sevdije, they write:

Sevdije Ahmeti remembers the anger she felt for the ways that Yugoslav and international media represented Kosovar women: “they created new stereotypes about Albanian women as Muslims, birthing machines who did not know anything except how to be submissive to the family, [they were] basically uneducated slaves.” Countering the negative stereotypes produced in the Yugoslav media and, additionally, showing the world that Albanian women had social agency, was one of the main objectives of the Independent Women’s Association (202).

In this sense, the public visibility of women in street demonstrations and civic engagements countered the stereotypical figure of oppressed Albanian women. One of the most important events that signified women’s social agency was the march “Bread for Drenica” where around 12,000 women marched, carrying loaves of bread in their hands, showing solidarity with the most war-torn region of the country (Clark 2000, 175). Before this demonstration, women activists had protested in front of the US Information Office against the violation of rights in Kosova. These demonstrations were visually very present in the international media and this media coverage played a significant role in countering the stereotypical discourse propagandized
by the regime’s media.

In the postwar Kosova, this contribution of women activists in the civic resistance during the 1990s was left outside the official historical narratives. Centering only the role of the male soldiers in the national liberation movement, the memories of other categories such as civilians, familiars of unknown persons, and raped women were marginalized (Berisha 2018; Krasniqi 2011; Sweeney 2015; Luci 2014; Luci and Kasniqi 2006). Their experiences, loss and contribution were not included in the political memory constructed in the postwar period.

Anthropologists Schwandner-Sievers and Di Lellio (2006) argue that postwar remembering is constructed around the dominant heroic male figure. They consider that the centralization of narratives of militant resistance narrowed the public space for alternative practices of memory and reproduced local patriarchal codes of manhood. Luci and Gusia (2015) also note that the civic and political engagement of Albanian women was excluded from the narratives of state-building in Kosova. According to them, “woman’s civic engagement and contribution in Kosova has been continuously silenced by mainstream remembrance and historical accounts. Most feminist scholars in the region are still unable to speak about Kosova and have created superficial accounts of women’s experience there” (218). This sentiment is also present in the life story of Shukrije, a former political prisoner and a social worker for conflict resolution. Remembering her active involvement in the political students’ movement of the 1980s, she considers that after the war in Kosova, space was not created for active participation in political life of the country. She states that “Albanian women still don’t have the sufficient space to feel that they are equal participants in the political processes.”

For Kosovar Albanian sociologist Vjollca Kasniqi (2013) the sidelining of women activists’ contribution in the state building processes in Kosova was not done only by male local
politicians and local gendered public, but by international mechanisms of peacekeeping as well. In her article, “Neo-Colonial Regimes, Gender Politics and State-Building in Kosova,” Krasniqi (2013) argues that by pushing for gender mainstreaming, the international community—mainly consisting of The United Nations Interim Mission—has excluded the experience of local women’s activism, thus creating mechanisms for gender equality that did not correspond with women’s needs on the ground. Women’s activism in the 1990s also counters the unhistoricized approach of the international community regarding the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosova. Reducing the problem between Serbs and Albanians to interethnic hatred and cultural misunderstandings, the international approach undermined the political and social dimensions of the conflict. In this respect, regional communication of feminists in the space of former Yugoslavia opposes the narrative of century long ethnic hatred, and instead emphasizes the efforts for cross-ethnic borders solidarity against Milosevic’s regime. As a young feminist from the region, I was more closely introduced to this part of history when in 2016 in Prishtina, women activists form Kosova, Serbia and Croatia, who were active during the 1990s, came together in a day-long panel to recall, account and reflect upon official histories and their own memories of the 1990s. Their narratives of activism, mobilization, cooperation, differences, and war experiences offered me an alternative perspective on the historical events of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. Differently from the national historiography, which has the tendency to mythologize Albanian history (Gashi 2016; Abdullahu 2014), and the paternalistic international discourse (Libourel 2013), women’s narratives gave me the perspective of civic solidarity and resistance against the regime of Milosevic. In the publication of the panel discussion it is stated that the feminist conversation was conceptualized as a “way of intervention in the history making and memorialization and as an attempt to open epistemological and historical questions on how
we understand our fluid identities, lived experience, memory and agency in the time of war and peace” (Gusia, Krasniqi and Luci 2016, 9). In the panel, sharing her story of regional feminist cooperation, Sevdije notes:

How we worked together? We actually were very much in need of each other, with Serbian activists, Croatian activists. Even though we had disagreements, we had conflicts in conferences, we supported each other. Why? Because of the need that we had in the same environment and the same problem, which was Milošević and the war. Secondly, we in Kosova as we were isolated, no one could come in Kosova. Not a foreign woman and let alone the foreign journalists. So, we used the opportunities of our sisters in Belgrade and said, “Please send the letter or invitation to such and such person”, or they [foreign journalists] would ask them to get the permission in Belgrade, to stay in Belgrade and then in secrecy visit Kosova. It was so hard for everything.

In this respect, women’s feminist activism in the former Yugoslavia served as an alternative channel of regional and transnational communication that opposed the regime of Milosevic. Thus, activists’ stories of cooperation, differences, and solidarity constitute countermemory to the nationalist mythologized historical narratives and the de-historicized paternalistic discourse of the international community.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

During the 1980s and 1990s, women’s activism in Kosova was manifold and part of different local, national, and regional geographies. It was engaged with girls’ literacy in rural areas, women’s health issues during parallel social life, campaign for blood reconciliation, movements for national liberation, and regional feminist networks against Milosević’s regime. During this period new spaces were created for women’s public engagement that confronted the regime’s politics. Women activists were organizers of the highly visible march/protest known as “Bread for Drenica” where they marched with loafs of bread in their hands as a form of protest against the military siege of the region of Drenica. They were founders of parallel structures to the institutions of the regime such as the Center for the Protection of Women and Children where health services for women were provided and transnational networks were maintained. These alternative material spaces allowed for a public articulation of women’s political and social agency that was not present previously.

Nevertheless, in postwar Kosova, mainstream practices of remembrance have not accounted for the role and contribution of women activists in the struggles for national liberation. Women’s activism is not part of the national master-narratives and most of the public monuments honor only male solders. In this respect, life stories of women’s activists included in this thesis constitute alternative local knowledge and express a specific history of women’s subjectivities. They indicate the absence of women voices in conversations about the national past. Analyzing their narratives, I have sought to understand the intersection between their activisms and broader historical events in the late twentieth century Kosova. I have conceived this work as an exercise of “epistemic disobedience”; that is, as a “dwelling and thinking in the
borders of local histories” (Mignolo 2011). In this sense, women’s subjectivities challenge the totalizing and homogenizing tendencies of mainstream historical accounts in Kosova. They leave room for contradictions, nuances, and combinations that resist the appropriation of “what happened in the past” for benefit in the present. Serving as “bearers of living memories” (Chivallon 2016, 67), through their stories of resistance women activists disrupt the discursive authority of official narratives that center only the male heroic figure.

In their stories of everyday resistance, women activists express multiple subject-positions. They self-identify as rebellious, militants of collective cause, or as women’s rights activists. All the same, they recognize the oppressive power structures that intersect through their daily lives. In this sense, they do not avert stories about sexist family members, sexual harassment, or fearful situations of police interrogation. They resist a linear narrative that moves them from the position of the victim to that of the survivor. By doing justice to their real lived experiences, they narrate the moments of subject-making in all their complexity and ambiguities.

Stories of resistance of women activists constitute counter-memories to the post-war nationalist construction of historical narratives, racist tropes of the regime’s discourse in former Yugoslavia, and paternalistic discourse of international missions. Troubling these dominant narratives, they create what anthropologist Marie-Aude Fouere calls a continuous “process of archive making” (2016, 84)—a discursive collective space that explores the history of the 1980s and 1990s in Kosova through the multiplicity of everyday lived experiences of women activists. As feminist interventions in the unexamined knowledge of the past, counter-memories of women activists invite alternative conversations about “the production of historical consciousness and political subjectivities” (Fouere 2016, 83). Opening up these new ways of talking about the past, they reveal different chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981)—configurations of time and space that enable
the imagining of new engagements with reality.
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