

Rhetoric of Silence in American Studies

Retoryka ciszy - perspektywa amerykańistyczna

7 (4) 2020 EDITORS: KATARZYNA MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA, KLARA SZMAŃKO

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What Is (Not) Told: Memory and the Rhetoric of Silence in Domnica Radulescu's *Country of Red Azaleas* as an American Émigré Novel
To, czego się (nie) mówi: pamięć i retoryka milczenia w *Krainie czerwonych azalii* Domnicy Radulescu jako amerykańskiej powieści emigracyjnej

Abstract

The essay discusses rhetoric and multiple functions of silence as a means of remembering and forgetting in Domnica Radulescu's novel *Country of Red Azaleas* as a typical example of exile fiction. Silence in the novel is presented as a blocker of traumatic memory transmission and expresses the untranslatability of trauma. Silence also becomes constitutive in the formation of characters' new identity based on forgetting. The essay analyzes other forms of non-verbal/silent memory, such as memory of places and sensory memories and emphasizes their social and political dimension.

Tematem artykułu jest retoryka i różnorakie funkcje milczenia jako instrumentu pamiętania i zapominania w powieści Domnicy Radulescu pod tytułem *Kraina czerwonych azalii*, która jest typowym przykładem prozy emigracyjnej. W powieści milczenie zapobiega przenoszeniu się pamięci traumy oraz wyraża niemożliwość jej przekazywania. Ponadto odgrywa ono kluczową rolę w formowaniu się nowej tożsamości postaci, opartej na zapomnieniu. Autorka analizuje również inne formy niewerbalnej/niewyartykułowanej pamięci, takie jak pamięć miejsca i pamięć zmysłowa, podkreślając ich wymiar społeczny i polityczny.

Key words

silence, traumatic memory, forgetting, memory of places, memory transmission, sensescape
milczenie, pamięć traumy, zapomnienie, pamięć miejsc, przekaz pamięci, sensescape

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Received: February 27, 2020 | Accepted: September 17, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2020.4.5>

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1. Introduction

Silence is most typically viewed as a deliberate strategy aimed at forgetting. However, very often it is also one of the languages of remembering. Luisa Passerini in her essay “Memory Between Silence and Oblivion” speaks of silence which is full of memory, thus warning against a simplistic equation of silence with amnesia (Passerini 2006, 246). Scholars of memory emphasize a connection between silence as a means of remembering the unmendable past and an effort of reshaping it into more acceptable forms. This process is aimed at consensus and reconciliation but inevitably poses ethical dilemmas, in which silence becomes an expression of recognition, acceptance and sometimes humiliation (Hodgkin and Radstone 2006, 237). When it comes to the transmission of traumatic experience, the rhetoric of silence is often more expressive than traditional verbal means. For descendants of old and more recent immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe, traumatic experience often determined a decision to leave their respective “old countries” as for them exile was frequently not only an economic but also a political choice. Traumatized by the Great Famine of the 1930s in Ukraine, First and Second World Wars, brutal Soviet “liberation,” life in DP camps, the Yugoslav war, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Croatia, characters in Askold Melnyczuk, Irene Zabytko, Domnica Radulescu and Aleksandar Hemon’s (to mention just a few names) fiction escape to America to start a new life. In their eyes, America was a good place for exiles of all kinds. They saw it as “a project of displaced people with a short-term memory that is still in the works” (Radulescu 2016, 245). Silence becomes constitutive in the formation of their new identity (Connerton 2008, 63) – one based on forgetting or painful disremembering of everything that language has failed to express. Other significant forms of non-verbal/silent memory that participate in creating immigrant identity include memory of places and sensory memories.

The rhetoric of these elements contributes to the complexity of mnemoscape of émigré fiction that will be analyzed in the present essay through the prism of silence.

For Domnica Radulescu, the most significant representative of Romanian American literature, exile was a conscious choice. She came to the USA in 1983 as a political refugee from Ceausescu's Romania. Her fiction is full of references to Romanian and East and Central European political realities and reflections over dilemmas and challenges of immigrant life. The writer integrates her personal experience of immigration in her novels and at the same time does not make it a normative frame of social and cultural reference. While forgetting by silence is crucial in shaping her characters' émigré identities, silence itself has multiple expressions in the mnemoscape of the Radulescu's fiction. Her *Country of Red Azaleas* (2016) offers multiple readings of silence and its role in memory preservation and transmission.

2. Silence and transmission of traumatic experience

Marija, one of the protagonists of the novel, is taken to the USA by her friend Sally Bryant, a psychotherapist from California. They met in Belgrade shortly before the Yugoslav war broke out. Marija, who was a Bosnian Muslim, spent the entire war in besieged Sarajevo working as a journalist for a local newspaper. When in July 1995 the UN announced the area around Semizovac a safe zone, she went there with her parents and grandparents, and after a few days the entire family was slaughtered by Serbian soldiers, while Marija herself was raped and severely injured. Her optic nerve was crushed, she lost one eye and nine months later gave birth to a son, a "rape baby." The reader learns Marija's history from her diary and fragmented stories she is telling her life-long friend Lara Kulicz now married to an American and living in Washington, D.C.

It took Marija more than nine years before she could finally share her story with others. Sniper shootings, shortage of food, and life in underground shelters were not so traumatic as a few hours of murder and rape in the allegedly safe place, as well as long months of balancing between life and death, carrying a child of rape fathered by your parents' murderer. Marija's unwillingness to speak about what happened to her on a sunny day in July underscores the limits of verbal and literary representation of violent history (war, terror, genocide, and rape) (Erll 2011, 79). The traumatic experience of the character resists both reconstruction and transmission. A "constitutive failure of linguistic representation" of traumatic experience (Ruth Leys quoted in Erll 2011, 80) stretches beyond the limits of signification and, in consequence, language – whether written or spoken. As a result, a once joyful, articulate and sociable Marija experiences a small-scale personal "crisis

of representation” (Cathy Caruth’s (1996) term used in *Unclaimed Experience* in relation to traumatic experience). Lara calls her friend’s memories “unbearable” and “undealable” (Radulescu 2016, 238) as if emphasizing the impossibility of putting them into a frame of everyday existence. Marija herself is aware of verbal and cognitive limits of her memories’ transmission, even though she speaks about them with characteristic irony:

She had told me once [...] that having gone through what she had turned her into something of a repulsive monster and that once they found out her story, most people wanted to run away from her, Fearing they might be contaminated by her black destiny. “That’s why I don’t want to tell my fucking bloody story to anyone,” she’d said, laughing. (Radulescu 2016, 292)

Marija’s American psychotherapist believes she suffers a very unusual kind of post-traumatic stress disorder that makes her “cut out the past” and “live in a frozen present” (Radulescu 2016, 174). At the time Marija was leaving Sarajevo she was forgetting “entire blocks of life” (Radulescu 2016, 173). Although she knew that one day she would return for something very important she left behind, forgetfulness became an escape and a salvation:

Some psychologists call that state emotional blunting [...]. I had found a niche in a dark bath of forgetfulness. I wanted to go to the country of forgetfulness and large billboards, to Sally’s land of yellow dresses and California oranges. The most desperate wretches of the world had gone to America over the centuries to escape from something [...]. It made sense for me to be like those other wretched forgetful individuals. (Radulescu 2016, 174)

Physical relocation made forgetting both easier and more difficult. However, Marija’s silence that lasted for many years and was expected to lead her into a state of defensive forgetfulness failed to bring a desired effect. The young woman cannot become a “wretched forgetful individual.” There is no chance for her to forget what happened in Semizovac: her son who is alive and whom she wants to join, and her glass eye made by an American plastic surgeon to substitute the eye she lost are the permanent and very physical reminders of the past.

Marija is traumatized not only physically but also psychologically and emotionally and not only because of the rape, but also because of her inability to protect her parents and grandparents. She blames herself for taking them to a “safe place,” which became the place of their death. Her unwillingness to speak can be defined as humiliated silence, although according to Connerton (2008, 69) the latter term is typically used in relation to societies and not individuals. Helplessness and despair, a sense of guilt, though groundless and unjustified, torture Marija from the inside. Years pass before she finds words to narrate her story and that narration, at all times, is accompanied and interrupted by unstoppable cries that sometimes verge on hysteria.

Breaking silence means embracing tragic and painful experience. Marija disconnects herself from the past only to be forced to face it a few years later. When she is finally able to talk and share her memories, the flow of her stories and emotions is incessant as if she is trying to get rid of their burden as soon as possible: “There was something detached and unnaturally poised about the way she rushed through the telling of those events as if recounting someone else’s life” (Radulescu 2016, 224). Abandoning the realm of silence even when it is not silence of forgetting but that of temporary survival is traumatic by itself and is followed by long days of violent crying that is almost tearing Marija apart. “Torrent” is the noun Radulescu often uses describing Marija’s response to the past that now and then re-emerges in the memory, no matter how she tries to suppress it. Overwhelmed by memories and emotions, Marija loses self-control and seems to be seized by the past:

A torrent of sobs erupted from her like the flood of doomsday. The sobs were a creature in themselves, taking full possession of Marija and tearing every bit of her reconstructed self apart. I was afraid that parts of her were going to fall off like in my nightmare, as if she were splintered by a bomb from within (Radulescu 2016, 247).

The language of natural disasters that dominates this description underscores the violent power of memories. A reference to the past as a frontier to be crossed over only reinforces the feeling of helplessness and despair in dealing it. Even after Marija seems to have restored her ability to speak about the past, every encounter with it means silent inner struggle that can also be identified as an expression of “embodied memory” (Passerini 2006, 248). Body language that substitutes a verbal expression of emotions is equally expressive and overwhelming:

she wrung her hands and cracked her knuckles. When I looked at her, I saw the full horror of that day in July 1995 displayed glaringly on her face. The gushing of blood, the obscene panting, the muffled screams, flesh, organs, guns, screams, begging for death, sighing for death, screaming the sharpest scream across the black earth. It all passed for one second on Marija’s face like an apocalyptic cloud. (Radulescu 2016, 276)

Memories of the brutal and unpunished murderers of her entire family and dozens of other Muslims who found themselves in Semizovac on the fateful day in July 1995, haunt Marija’s consciousness and overpower words, therefore silence is the least painful option of dealing with the past:

I lost my parents, both sets of grandparents, I lost all my homes, my pathetic little country and my beloved native city. I lost the wholeness of my body, part of my mind and my soul, I lost an eye and I am trying to regain my lost son. Why the hell do you want to know all of this stuff, all these little details? What does it matter? (Radulescu 2016, 233)

Marianne Hirsch argues that since “trauma, in its literal meaning, is a wound inflicted on the flesh” memory is “located” in the body: “The wound inflicted on the skin can be read as a sign of trauma’s incommunicability, a figure for the traumatic real that defines a seemingly unbridgeable gap between survivors and their descendants” (Hirsch 2012, 80). Although Marija’s traumatic memory is not a slave mark burned into her skin, it is locked in her body in a different but equally humiliating and durable way. Her glass eye inscribes the experience of rape in her physical self. Although Marija pretends to feel all right with her new eye, it becomes a mark of the untranslatability of experience (Hirsch’s definition) and, subsequently, the untranslatability of trauma. Though Hirsch (2012, 80) agrees with those theorists of trauma (Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman and others) who see “literary language as a privileged medium for the transmission of trauma,” she also underscores a prevalence of visual figuration of trauma that “often takes the shape of a bodily mark, wound, or tattoo” (Hirsch 2012, 80). If a verbal means fails to be sufficiently expressive, the body language and material objects remain reliable media for preserving and transmitting memory. Since the “mark of untranslatability becomes the untranslatability of the mark” (Hirsch 2012, 81), Marija is both the carrier and narrator of her traumatic experience by mnemonic means.

Marija’s son is a “silent” character. In the novel, he is mostly a blurred photographic image that only twice becomes an acting character: when Lara sees him in a gloomy house in Sarajevo without knowing who he is and at the very end of the novel when Marija returns to Semizovac to collect him. However, the angelic malnourished blond boy with watery-blue eyes who must have taken after his Serbian rapist father is not given any voice. He has no story to tell and his coming to the world was emotionally problematic. Indirectly and against his will, the boy also became a victim of violence. After the war, the “rape children” were not safe: if their mothers did not abort them, they were often abandoned, taken to seedy orphanages or taken away from their Bosnian mothers by Serbian authorities or their alleged fathers.

Hirsch (2012,16) in her study of the generation of postmemory and its artistic representation writes about the sentimentality of the child-figure and its extreme vulnerability. In the novel, Marija’s son is not a witness of his mother’s suffering or his father’s crime. He is the fruit of both, thus the reader is more likely to sympathize with his mother’s difficult choice to keep him than with the boy himself. Although Mario is a flat character, he becomes an emotional trigger and a silence-breaker who makes Marija launch into action:

It was time to take possession of my child. The one I had given birth to in a state of semi-coma somewhere in one of the houses where the woman kept hiding me that year. It was time for me to come to terms with that reality and embrace it. [...] Remember everything and own it like it was actually happening in my own life. [...] I am back from the dead. (Radulescu 2016, 206)

Marija's silence and the untranslatability of trauma also have public and political dimensions. As it often happens with witnesses and/or survivors of genocide or other extremely traumatic events, the power of public history crowds out personal stories (Hirsch 2012, 158). Marija's experience of violence is emotionally overpowered by the memories of those women who were mutilated even worse or did not survive the brutality of Serbian military in rape hotels and rape camps in Bosnia¹. Mental and emotional shock caused by the scope of Serbian atrocities against Bosnian Muslims and the awareness of individual powerlessness crowd out and suppress Marija's own pain, silencing her voice. At a certain point, after her son's birth Marija engages in the activities of human rights organizations and collects witness stories of women who suffered physical and psychological violence during the war. Her records are the voices of the silent ones: "I wrote them down almost despite my will, mechanically, and when I got out I thought that at some point when I felt a tiny bit more normal I was going to reveal them to the world. I think they actually helped me recover. Most of them were more horrific than my own" (Radulescu 2016, 231). These notes are also a means of breaking silence and transmitting memory. Hirsch argues that feminism and other social movements not only reveal the "particular vulnerabilities of lives caught up in historical catastrophe" but also "scrutinize and refuse the sentimentality attached to the figure of the lost child [...], enjoying us to queer that figure and to engage in alternative patterns of affiliation beyond the familial, forming alternate attachments across lines of difference" (Hirsch 2012, 16). Marija not only records victims' stories, but also sends them to the media and international human rights organizations. Her engagement in women's antiwar movement helps her transform her experience and perspective. Her personal pain and loss acquire a collective dimension and give the young woman a sense of mission.

Victims' stories represent material textual memory that may exist independently from its creators but can be activated only at someone's will. Writing down memories instead of narrating them is an emotionally safer way of dealing with the past as writing disables the audio aspect of remembering and one does not observe the reader's immediate reaction. It is the reason why Marija had kept a diary long before she regained ability to narrate her experience. Silent transmission of

1. Although Radulescu's novel addresses a particular experience of a Muslim woman, it must be noted that females of all ethnicities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of their religion, suffered military brutality and were victims of rape crimes. Rapes were perpetrated by soldiers on all three sides of the conflict. Radulescu uses in her novel information provided by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights about sexual violence crimes committed during the war.

memories in writing was paradoxically both less painful though riskier: handwriting mediated a transmission of memory but it also made possible returning to it now and then.

A sense of self-imposed guilt for being alive while others are not makes silence a better option for Marija. For her, silence becomes the language of remembering that often resists verbal expression. Blank pages in Marija's diary signify those days when not only speaking but also writing was unimaginable. However, those pages are not really blank: they contain no words but there are stains that "could have been anything from tears, to coffee, to blood" (Radulescu 2016, 170-172). The silent, stained pages make Lara, who is their first reader, squirm with discomfort as they are even more eloquent than the written parts.

The rhetoric of Marija's diary with its economical language and a seemingly detached unemotional manner of expression creates the opposite effect that only reinforces a sense of despair and awareness of the inescapability of violence, and reveals the vulnerability of the victim. The matter-of-fact tone of Marija's writing paradoxically contributes to extreme emotional tension of her descriptions. Her notes do not immediately follow the events. Although Radulescu calls them a diary, in the strict sense, they are memoirs. Marija wrote them after her son's birth and kept doing it for a few years after the war. The reader may only guess the depth of the character's physical and emotional wounds and the degree of inner strength required for summoning those events from her memory: "One is so often mistaken about what is real and what is not real. But a boot kicking you in your stomach is always real and you can't mistake it for not real. And you can't mistake the dead bodies strewn next to you for the images flickering on the walls of a cave" (Radulescu 2016, 171). A straightforward description and simplicity of the utterance emphasize the horror of the events that for many years were silenced and inaccessible to others. Narrating and thus exposing them is a challenge as linguistic means fail to render the intensity of physical pain and emotional despair.

4. Silence and non-verbal forms of memory

Passerini (2006, 248) writes about the importance of non-verbal forms of memory transmission, such as gestures, objects, images, etc. and identifies them as "examples of silences which are connected with remembering, not with forgetting." In her diary, Marija often mentions "the damn red flowers" – red azaleas. They were part of the pre-war cityscape of Sarajevo and later underscored the contrast between the world before the war and during it. Red azaleas as a recurrent image are a powerful element of the material memoryscape. They belong to silent mnemonic objects that link the past to the present. Pots with red azaleas invoke

memories of peaceful past and the nonchalance of summer vacations Marija, Lara, and Biljana spent in Sarajevo and the image of red azaleas designates an irreversibly lost past. Thus it functions both as a metaphor of remembering and a material link with the past:

For a brief second I was ten-year-old Lara and Natalia was ten-year-old Marija. The darkest waters of the last decades had washed over us and left us grieving and begging for wholeness. Clusters of red flowers were hanging on the white houses even in November, though the non-coniferous trees were barren. [...] I had not been to Sarajevo since I was in college. The hills around us were sprinkled with hundreds of fresh white tombs of Sarajevans killed in the siege. (Radulescu 2016, 159)

Characters' memory is anchored in specific places and time. Even mutilated by the war, Sarajevo remains an atmospheric place and its cityscape evokes diverse emotions. In the novel, the silent memory of places manifests the power of its emotional impact. Sarajevo seems to remember its tragic past and is capable of transmitting its memory to others. As Lara roams its streets, the topography of the city, even distorted by the war, its smells and colors trigger bodily and emotional memories. Hirsch argues that a reencounter with the material texture of refugees' and exiles' daily life in the past reanimates habits and sense memories and recalls the embodied practice of everyday life: "Ordinary objects mediate the memory of returnees through the particular embodied practices that they re-elicite. And these embodied practices can also revive the effect of the past, overlaid with the shadow of loss and dispossession" (Hirsch 2012, 207). Lara's physical re-immersion in Sarajevo after many years of absence is painful as the city speaks to her in the silent language of ruins and death:

The streets started to become familiar, a corner house that seemed to emerge from a dream, a tiny bridge that needed repair; some of the houses were rebuilt or new, built to look like the old ones, others were still dismantled or under construction, or studded with bullet marks and abandoned. [...] A corner of my memory opened up like a window to the image of two little girls running around and gorging on fruit, a grandmother with a babushka picking up weeds and fallen apricots in the violet dusk of a summer afternoon.

I realized I was on Farah and Kemal's old street. [...] The layout of the streets was in my blood and in my flesh, every cobblestone and every fence, every garden and every pine or chestnut tree. There was the same peachy color of the roof, part of it had been blown off, and the windows were smashed like a mutilated person that was still uncannily attractive, like a person you wanted to repair and care for and hold in your arms despite the broken limbs and the bleeding wounds. [...] Everything was overgrown with weeds and ivy, dark red from the cold autumn [...] giving the place a surreal mix of beauty and unbearable sadness. (Radulescu 2016, 165-167)

Memory of places includes sensory memory of sounds and odors, although describing these elements by means of languages is a challenge. Mădălina Diaconu calls it an almost impossible task because we "visualize smells and thus translate

sensory data from one register into another” (Diaconu 2011, 227). From this perspective, the concept of atmosphere that Diaconu uses in her research is very helpful as it encompasses and validates the elements that are generally considered fluid and abstract. Diaconu (2011, 228) recognizes the “fundamental ambiguity” of atmospheres that express emotional qualities of spaces and emphasizes that the experience of atmosphere is not abstract knowledge. Even though atmosphere of a place can only be described vaguely, it may still be experienced in an intersubjective way (Diaconu 2011, 229), therefore it is not an entirely abstract notion. For all their subjectivity, elaborate descriptions of olfactory perceptions of Radulescu’s characters are qualifiers of fictional mnemonic practice and express specific silent interaction between the subject(s) and the object(s).

The descriptions of Sarajevo in *Country of Red Azaleas* visualize not only urban landscapes but also objectify and visualize a sensescape of smells: “Everything was dripping with red azaleas, honey, coffee, and apricots, and the silks in the store windows undulated lusciously” (Radulescu 2016, 11). Even though atmospheres refer only to a diffuse quality of the environment and lack any structure (Diaconu 2011, 229), they invoke feelings in those who have the experience of the place. For Lara, these feelings are even more intense as they are rooted in her memories verified by time, distance, and experience of immigration. She does not need words to interact with the city:

Sarajevo was an enchanted garden that shimmered and sang. With Marija in Sarajevo I fell inside a fairy tale, the movie that hadn’t yet been made, the Balkan-Hollywood film that hadn’t yet been made. The creamy white mosques with the half-moon on their towers looked like wedding cakes as we chased each other in and out of the coquettish gardens [...]. The Ferhadija mosque in particular with the honeyed glow of its illuminations at dusk sparked in my mind fantastical images in dreamy pastels. In the old center the copper pots glinted with reddish sparks in the sun, and red azaleas and geraniums cascaded from balconies and fences everywhere. (Radulescu 2016, 10)

The descriptions of the pre-war Sarajevo that re-create its atmosphere are instrumental in shaping both the characters’ mnemonic practice and their further perception of the place. Lara’s memories are connected with people, events, and objects but also with odors. The latter are objectified, i.e. assigned to their source. In many cases, the source was destroyed or murdered and there was no way of reviving or recreating it. A sense of an irreversible loss of a specific element of the atmosphere not only changed it, but also made memories of the place poignantly painful. Similarly to narratives of trauma, language often failed in recreating memory of places as well as their odors, therefore characters’ presence *in situ* and silent observation were used as substitutes of verbal descriptions of emotions and sensory perceptions.

5. Political and identitarian dimensions of silence

Scholars of memory note that remembering and forgetting are “two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is memory. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering” (Erll 2011, 8). In this sense, amnesia, oblivion, silence, and forgiving are the ethical aspects of forgetting as a form of memory (Erll 2011, 9). Silence in the novel is not only Marija’s personal strategy for dealing with the past. It has also a collective dimension and is a political choice. Thus, silence becomes a means of forgetting in a sense that Connerton (2008, 62) describes: in his typology, forgetting is constitutive in the formation of a new identity. Therefore, the “emphasis here is not so much on the loss entailed in being unable to retain certain things as rather on the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes” (Connerton 2008, 63). When Lara comes to Sarajevo a few years after the war and is trying to find out something about Marija’s fate and her whereabouts, she discovers with surprise that war rapes and Serbian atrocities are a taboo subject. Her and Marija’s friends and acquaintances avoid the topic and even representatives of international human rights organizations do not want to discuss it:

I started calling anyone who knew Marija in search of a lead. I called Ferida, the sculptor Mirza, a cousin of Marija’s Sonja, Sabina our old friend from middle school, and people from the list Biljana had given me [...]. No one would share anything, let alone tell me about Marija or anything that had to do with the war. Only Ferida lingered with me on the phone in a friendly way [...]. But when I’d mention Marija, there was a hole of silence as deep as my father’s grave. (Radulescu 2016, 106)

Forgetting as a shared strategy among those who survived the siege of Sarajevo and brutality of the war is presented from both emotional and political perspectives. Radulescu’s characters crave forgetting as a psychological escape: “What is allowed to be forgotten provides a living space for present projects” (Connerton 2008, 63). For Lara, who spent the war in her Washington duplex, was never really affected by it and was only a second-hand observer (Hirsch’s term), forgetting is impossible as for her the hills around Sarajevo are “sprinkled with hundreds of fresh white tombs of Sarajevans killed in the siege” (Radulescu 2016, 159). Gradually, as she learns to notice less conspicuous traces of the past war and read memories imprinted in the cityscape, she understands the desire to forget. According to Connerton (2008, 63), forgetting that silence makes possible over time is not random but patterned, therefore we can speak about both shared past and shared forgetting. As Lara does not share the war-related past of the Sarajevans, she cannot share their forgetting:

Ferida said she hadn't seen Marija in over five years. I didn't believe her [...] but I was learning to live with half-truths. Ferida didn't want to talk about the war, what it had been like living among sniper bullets and shells, with no water, no electricity or gas for three years. "We made do," was all she said. Then with an almost angry tone she also said: "People here want to move on." I understood, she didn't want American tourist Lara Kulicz who had spent the Sarajevo siege years safely cuddled in her American husband's lush Washington apartment to come now, almost ten years after the war, to gather information and shower compassion. [...] "There is nothing to tell," Ferida said. "She [Marija – M.K.] survived, that's what matters [...]" (Radulescu 2016, 161-162)

When viewed from the perspective of cultural mnemonic practice, the imposed silence of Bosnian women inevitably poses questions regarding limits, context, and reference of their silence (in respect to whom and to what is it a silence) and, consequently, brings into focus the links between forms of power and forms of silence (Passerini 2006, 249). Although Radulescu's characters respond to these questions from their respective personal perspectives, the novel conveys an important sociopolitical message of the imposed silence. According to Hirsch, memory as a form of counter-history offers

a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress. It promised to propose forms of justice outside of the hegemonic structures of the strictly juridical, and to engage in advocacy and activism on behalf of individuals and groups whose lives and whose stories have not yet been thought. (Hirsch 2012, 15-16)

Therefore, the links between forms of power and forms of silence stretch beyond the limits of private lives into the area of the public. To an extent, this connection derives from the crisis of memory and experience and is associated with totalitarian regimes (Passerini 2006, 241).

Silence in post-war Sarajevo that dominates both private and public spaces is not always imposed. It is also a voluntarily selected option to make forgetting and subsequent construction of the new identity easier. Thus, it is a "self-decided attitude taken by a whole community and society" (Passerini 2006, 244) both as a political survival strategy and inability of confronting the past and finding means of narrating it. The context of silence that Passerini (2006, 249-250) identifies as one of its meaning-making elements is established by its agents, i.e. those who choose silence. When the women speak about bullet and shell marks left as a sign of remembrance on the façade of a renovated building in Sarajevo, neither Ferida nor Marija like the idea: "People want to start over and go on living – if they survived, if they are still alive – why stick the painful memories under their noses every single day of their lives? [...] I don't need to be reminded. I remember everything pretty damn well" (Radulescu 2016, 281). Silencing the past is seen as a survival strategy that will eventually lead to the creation of new identity and erasure, or at least suppression, of the past.

Silence performs yet another function in the novel aimed at remembering rather than forgetting – that of angry and desperate resistance. This particular expression of silence shapes historical and social background of the “Yugoslav” part of the characters’ story. When Lara is desperately searching for traces of Marija in Belgrade, she learns about the activities of *Women in Black*. It is an antiwar organization of mostly Serbian women “who every year on the anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre stood in public places in Belgrade dressed in black and wrapped in silence. Not a word, just silent resistance” (Radulescu 2016, 158). In spite of a seeming insignificance, a brief mention of the organization and its silent protests embed Marija’s story in a broader political context and transform silence into a tool of resistance and a means of both remembering and memory transmittance.

The following comment by Passerini seems to be a logical summary of the above discussion of Radulescu’s novel: “silences, oblivions and memories are aspects of the same process, and the art of memory cannot but be also an art of forgetting through the mediation of silence and the alternation of silence and sound” (Passerini 2006, 250). Whether silence is the language of remembering or forgetting is determined by its context, but in each case it opens ways of reading the past and creating identity. Radulescu’s novel links silence with mnemonic practice and identity formation and manifests a plurality of cultural dimensions of silence as a means of both remembering and forgetting.

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