

## Book Reviews

---

*The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia.* Dubravka Žarkov. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 286pp. ISBN-13: 9780822339663

Andrew Graan  
University of Chicago

Dubravka Žarkov's *The Body of War* is many books at once: a media study, a investigation of nationalisms and their gendered and sexualized figures, and a critical reflection by a feminist on some blindneses within contemporary feminist theory. The work chiefly unfolds through the fine analysis of news reports, political cartoons and commentary from Serbia and Croatia (or better, from Belgrade and Zagreb) pertaining to the prelude and then the prosecution of the Yugoslav wars. Žarkov's attention is directed at how representations of ethnic difference within media texts depended on particular framings of gender and sexuality and of self and other. Žarkov argues that by recognizing how ethnicity, gender, and sexuality would triangulate at different moments, around different issues, and from different perspectives, one can see how media narratives were central to the production of "ethnicity" and ethnicized understandings in the former Yugoslavia.

In the beginning of the book, Žarkov justifies her emphasis on news media by pointing to the existence of a "media war," i.e., the production of oppositional or antagonistic media narratives from the republican centers of the former Yugoslavia in which ethnic difference emerged as an interpretative framework for current events and news issues. The complicity of media organizations—often due to their seizure by government or party forces—in the Yugoslav wars is a well-attested fact. Žarkov does not, however, argue that print media from Belgrade and Zagreb were mere propaganda tools for Serbian and Croatian interests. Rather, she illustrates the subtle levels on which news narratives privileged certain representations of gendered and sexualized bodies that, in turn, grounded moralized distinctions between ethnic selves and others.

Žarkov thematizes three categories of corporeal representation that she sees crucial to producing narratives of ethnic difference—the maternal body, the victimized body, and the armed body. Most chapters of the book thus focus on how images of mothers, rape victims, soldiers, etc. would appear differently in the Croatian and Serbian press, ultimately contributing to divergent nationalist narratives. For example, Žarkov argues that reports in the Serbian press on the rape of Serbian women coalesced with nar-

ratives of Serbs' victimization: in a sexist logic, the rape of Serbian women produced Serbian men as the victims of outside aggression and thereby valorized the defense of an ethnicized, Serbian collectivity. In contrast, Žarkov argues that the rape of Croatian women was next to unrepresentable in the Croatian press. Instead, Croatian reports of wartime rape focused on Bosnian Muslim women as victims and Serbian men as atrocious, brutal perpetrators in relation to whom Croatia emerged as a humanitarian bastion of civility. Across its detailed chapters, *Body of War* demonstrates how ethnicity during the Yugoslav wars never boiled down simply to distinctions between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims, but always appeared in composite forms, e.g., as righteous Croatian mothers, suffering Serbian men, pathetic Muslim rape victims, and barbarous Serbian soldiers, each according to different, emergent nationalist perspectives.

At the center of *The Body of War* is thus an important argument on the concept of ethnicity. Although the constructed (or imagined) character of national and ethnic identities has become a platitude within much of anthropology and its allied disciplines, Žarkov draws on feminist scholarship to demonstrate how "ethnicity," in practice, is never an independent category, but one that emerges in constellation with gender and sexuality to produce moralized conceptions of self and other. This move allows Žarkov an impressive feat: she writes a book on ethnicity, gender, and media regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia that still has a novel contribution to make.

Furthermore, insofar as such narratives of ethnicity during the break-up of Yugoslavia so often pivoted around depictions of women and their agency, Žarkov commendably reflects back on how feminist approaches to contexts of war too often smuggle in loaded presuppositions about female agency. Tied to a progressive agenda of women's empowerment, Žarkov suggests, feminists have failed to adequately address how women support, and even violently participate in, nationalist wars. Instead, feminist literature tends to reproduce tropes of female victimhood and wartime suffering. Žarkov argues that awareness of these tendencies should inspire scholars concerned with gender and violence to interrogate their own attachments to concepts of agency, empowerment, and liberation and to recognize the value of alternative conceptual anchors in evaluating diverse female subjectivities and practices in the context of war.

For all of its merits, however, *The Body of War* falls prey to the traps that plague many works reliant on media analysis. First and foremost, while Žarkov claims that media

narratives were central to the production of “ethnicity” in wartime Yugoslavia, she gives little sense of how this was so. How did these narratives circulate outside of the press? How did they develop or obsolesce in different contexts? Her silence on these questions leaves one wondering whether the mass-mediated nature of these texts was integral to the narratives they contained or whether it simply rendered them a convenient data-set. Relatedly, Žarkov’s analysis of a particular issue as presented in Serbian and Croatian newspapers and magazines often reads as ahistorical. Žarkov’s emphasis is so much on demonstrating a narrative logic common to Serbian or Croatian reports on

a topic that their relation to the world of practice appears as an irrelevant afterthought. As such, textual logics (i.e., precisely those that produced “ethnicity”) appear to hold an autonomous will for self-realization, independent from interests and power relations on the ground.

Despite its limitations, *The Body of War* is, nonetheless, a valuable work. By destabilizing the self-evidence of ethnicity as a concept, the book works to open up new ways to think about media, gender and agency in the context of war. Whether read with an interest in gender and nationalism, feminist approaches to war, or media studies, *The Body of War* will surely both enlighten and provoke.

*Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, and the Politics of Belonging.* Catherine Nash. Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, NY. 2008. xii + 352 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8156-3159-0, ISBN-10: 0-8156-3159-6.

Robin Whitaker  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Let me confess up front a cranky history of dismissing many genealogy-based identity claims as a violation of the ABCs of anthropology. Of course, my sentiments echo a quarter century of leftist cultural theory in which fluidity, mobility and hybridity figure large. Trouble is, this critique approaches genealogy as “a set of politically problematic perspectives on place, culture, identity, and belonging rather than as a popular social and cultural practice” (p. 14)—genealogy “in theory” rather than “in practice.”

In contrast, Catherine Nash examines actual genealogical activities and the ideas that animate them for people searching out Irish roots in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the United States. This “asymmetrical analytical triangle” allows her to explore how specifics of history, culture and politics make genealogical practices local even as genealogical accounts “travel, meet, and are mutually refracted” (p. 22). Nash’s approach foregrounds “the inescapably political dimensions of all accounts of origins and ancestors” (p. 22). By tracing genealogy’s role in debates about who is or can be Irish, she shows that those politics can be conservative or critical, restrictive or expansive.

Recent changes to Irish citizenship law are a case in point. The 1998 Belfast Agreement amended the Republic of Ireland constitution to recognise the “birthright” of anyone born in Ireland, including Northern Ireland, “to be part of the Irish nation.” The new text also declared: “the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural

identity and heritage” (quoted in Nash, p. 26). It thereby challenged the bounded state-nation along with cultural nationalist depictions of an essentially Gaelic Catholic Ireland. The opening didn’t last. In 2004, Ireland passed a referendum removing the right of automatic citizenship for those born in Ireland to non-citizens. As citizenship by descent remains available to qualifying overseas residents who may never have been to Ireland, the legal exclusion of children born there works to racialize Irishness at home and abroad.

Nash’s book thus locates diasporic Irishness in the interplay of state policies, transnational networks and popular discourses. The latter range from ideas about genetic inheritance—“Irishness is in my blood” (p. 46)—to narratives about history and culture: claims to native generosity and wit, a legacy of anti-colonial struggle, Celtic mysticism and ancient kings and the idea of US America as a nation of immigrants. Census categories produce simplified ethnic collectives: 40 million Irish Americans, 70 million Irish descendents worldwide. If the idea of diaspora can be used “to emphasize cultural complexity and hybrid identities, it can also suggest a model of single ethnic identification,” that overrides diversity in a way that is “simultaneously inclusive and limited” (pp. 42–43). Likewise, Nash finds that genealogical pursuits can “feed and be informed by the most conventional renderings of national history, character and culture,” or “provide evidence for the costs of those national narratives and the complexities of identity, belonging and experience that they eclipse” (p. 64). Irish ancestry offers an easy ethnic option for some: white privilege absolved of guilt by historical oppression. For others, it opens a path to social and political complexity, including awareness of Irish lives excluded from stock nationalist narratives.

This diversity is well illustrated in Nash’s work on genealogical quests by overseas—mainly US American-Irish descendents. Some people start from the idea that