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Abstract

Croatian-born Dragica Rajcic has received several awards for her poetry and short prose works. The author, who writes in German, permanently resides in Switzerland since fleeing war-torn Croatia in 1991. Rajcic's Heimat, she claims, is in language, not any place defined by geographical boundaries (Rajcic, 2009). Often praised for its sharp irony and cutting insight, Rajcic's language artfully deconstructs the reality it circumscribes. Defiant of the linguistic rules of grammar prescribed by High German, Rajcic's voice revels in its foreignness, in its ability to comment and critique precisely because it stands outside the realm of the familiar and expected. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Dragica Rajčić, German poetry, war poetry

Disciplines

German Language and Literature | Poetry

CHAPTER TEN

DRAGICA RAJČIĆ: WRITING WOMEN AND WAR IN THE MARGINS

LAUREL COHEN-PFISTER

Croatian-born Dragica Rajčić has received several awards for her poetry and short prose works. The author, who writes in German, permanently resides in Switzerland since fleeing war-torn Croatia in 1991.¹ Rajčić's *Heimat*, she claims, is in language, not any place defined by geographical boundaries (Rajčić, 2009). Often praised for its sharp irony and cutting insight, Rajčić's language artfully deconstructs the reality it circumscribes. Defiant of the linguistic rules of grammar prescribed by High German, Rajčić's voice revels in its foreignness, in its ability to comment and critique precisely because it stands outside the realm of the familiar and expected.

While most of the attention directed toward this writer revolves around this position of foreignness and the questions of identity associated with a literature of migration (Nelson, 2010; Baumberger, 2010; Niklas, 2005) this study relates this foreignness more specifically to the author's experience of war, violence, and hegemonic structures of oppression. It is difficult, if not impossible, to define Rajčić's position as a writer in the margins based solely on language and nationality. Rajčić's position has been continually that of the oppositionist: as a woman in patriarchal social orders, both in Croatia and in Switzerland; as an antiwar activist horrified by territorial aggression; and as a so-called migrant writer of a minor and minority literature.² I see in Rajčić's war poetry an aesthetic that challenges patriarchal myths of conflict, combat, and heroism, just as it connects the overt violence of war with a private violence against women and with social constructs that maintain gendered spaces. Rajčić's war poetry conveys the sorrow and pain of personal tribulation. It does not slide into passive lamentation, however. Rajčić's masterful use and misuse of German attacks the notion of war with linguistic fodder and lays bare its

rhetoric and mechanisms. Her writing offers active resistance and protest, even if it cannot create a counter-vision.

There is irony in an attempt to analyze the oppositional aesthetics of a female, migrant writer.³ Rajčić's work itself defies neat categories of "prevailing analytical paradigms," which, Leslie Adelson notes, "are inadequate to grasp the social dimensions that ... inhere in the literature of migration" (2005, 1). Azade Seyhan also writes that the:

emergent literatures of deterritorialized peoples and literary studies beyond the confines of national literature paradigms have as yet no name or configuration. In fact, ... contemporary forms of complex nonterritorial and transnational alliances and allegiances cannot be defined within the lexicon of available political languages (2001, 9).⁴

Seyhan points to the inadequacy of labels like "*exilic, ethnic, migrant, or diasporic*" because none completely grasps "the nuances of writing between histories, geographies, and cultural practices" (2001, 9). Inherent in Seyhan's reference to cultural practices lie certainly the socially constructed roles of gender and the differential created when these roles traverse cultures. Yet, the intersection of gender, nationalism, ethnicity, and memory within the parameters of set geographies, let alone the added dimensions of cultural and geographical displacement, is a growing field of research for which analytical paradigms are still being constructed and contested.⁵ In revealing the tensions and interconnections between gendered spaces and national and individual identities, Rajčić's poetry defies any unidimensional categorization as marginal. It is precisely this complexity that leads us to pursue and question the multiple "centers" of power that elusively exert, as Russell Ferguson notes, "a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it" (1990, 9).

In a personal interview, Rajčić asserts that the trauma and violence of war creates one of her greatest impulses to write (Rajčić, 2006). In 1991, the outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia sent her fleeing to Switzerland, a country she had previously lived in from 1978-1988. Although exile spared her from physical harm, the riveting images of the conflict broadcast daily on Swiss television and the forced separation from family and friends created emotional wounds—"diese[r] kopf voll wunden" [this head full of wounds] (Rajčić, 2000, 51)⁶—that have found outlet in her writing. There Rajčić exemplifies what Edward Said calls "the things to be learned" from the exile experience. Calling to mind Theodor Adorno's reflections on exile, Said explains that "to stand away from 'home'" is "to look at it with the exile's detachment":

For there is considerable merit in the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they actually produce. We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. [...] Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.” (1990, 365)

Considering the ethnic divisions that wrought violence in the Balkans in the early 1990s, “the exile’s detachment”—which for Rajčić should not be misconstrued as emotional distance—expresses itself in anger, frustration, and desperation at humankind’s ability to destroy its own. An early poem revels first in the headiness of acknowledging a long suppressed ethnic identity:

Ich bin eine Kroatin
 ich bin eine Kroatin
 noch tausend mal konnte ich diesen Satz
 mit Vergnügen schreiben
 zu einem
 es wahr lange verboten
 zu zweiten
 weil ich mir
 als etwas besonderes vorkomme
 etwas wie Pandabär
 Seltsames Tier (1992, 27)⁷

Simultaneously comes the realization that the label itself isolates and makes its party foreign, a “seltsames Tier” [a strange animal]. Thus, for the author, a purely ethnic identity is ultimately too isolationist. The concluding lines of the poem reunite her with humanity at large: “dann lege ich mich schlafen / träume / ich bin allemenschen zusammen” [then I lay down to sleep / dream / I am all people together] (1992, 27).

Poems such as ‘Bosnien 92, 93’; ‘Bosnien 95’; and ‘Nach der Besichtigung der Krajina’ [After Viewing Krajina] reference the historical reality of the Balkan Wars. Yet their critique of violence as a means for settling conflict places them and the writer in a larger context of antiwar activism beyond national frameworks. As a “menschens kind” [child of humanity], she wrestles with the senselessness of intentional brutality:

will glauben
 kann nicht glauben
 fest halten
 das gut für etwas ist
 der schlag aufs gesicht
 auf hinterkopf

das alles einem so mir
 verborgenen sinn
 zeigen wird
 hinter her wenn es nicht mehr drauf an kommt
 zu leben wie menschens kind
 will
 fragen
 fürwas das gut
 krieg Toten ist (2000, 21)⁸

The political machinations that justify territorial expansion are labeled “waschmittel für hirn” [detergent for brain] (‘Bosnien 92, 93,’ 2000, 7). With bitter irony, the writer ridicules in ‘Pfahnen sind unentberlich [Flags Are Indispensable],’ nationalist divisions that seem rooted in whimsy, not justified by tradition or heritage:

Wessen ein fall es war
 beim Gipfellsturm
 stuck stoff aufzuhengen
 der Mond hat die Ehre
 eine mit sternern drauf zu schwingen
 vielleicht hatte Mond lieber eine mit
 halbmond
 wenn alles so weiter geht
 heng jeder von uns eine
 aufs kopf
 dass alle wissen
 das wir holzkopfe sind (2000, 43)⁹

Rajčić’s detachment from the “dogma and orthodoxy” of nationalist palaver removes her perhaps to a transnational or postnational state, but perhaps better to a, as Seyhan labels it, “paranational” state,¹⁰ where violence is perpetrated by human ignorance (“holzkopfe” [blockheads]) and is beyond the comprehension of one “menschens kind.” In writing against the dominant national “*discourse of sacrifice* for freedom and sovereignty as the highest national ideal” (Jambresić Kirin, 1996, 66), Rajčić’s poetry emerges “as its [effect] [...], its errat[um], its counternarrative” (Said, 1986 cited in Ferguson, 1990, 11). If, as Said writes, “we appear as dislocations” when we “read ourselves against another people’s pattern” (1986, cited in Ferguson, 1990, 11), how more so alienating when the pattern is inscribed with one’s own national narrative.

Rajčić defies the premise of living and writing “between two worlds.” This popular conceit for migrant writing presumes, as Leslie Adelson tells us, “a delimited space where two otherwise mutually exclusive worlds

intersect” and “originary, essentially intact worlds” (2005, 3-4). Rajčić’s originary world is neither intact—indeed, it is itself in the early 1990s socially and politically fragmented—nor is the violence that defines it alien to the world she inhabits as a so-called foreigner. In the poem ‘Suisse like home,’ Rajčić connects the civilized, tidy world of Switzerland with her homeland of Croatia, noting that domestic violence in Switzerland replicates the violence of war in Croatia:

Suisse home
 im haus gegenüber meinen
 dunkelen fenster
 ein mann hat bevor er nerven verloren hat
 frau blau geschlagen
 polizisten brachten mann
 brachten frau
 mit dem auto
 fort.
 spaeter war es ruhig

es geht mir
 licht auf
 wie
 zu hause. (2000, 45)¹¹

Rajčić’s “two worlds” come together so completely, in fact, that the writer finds herself squeezed out of both. She is unable to identify with either since neither provides a safe haven. Disorientation and dehumanization characterize the state of the world.¹² What manifests itself palpably in the Balkans in civil unrest is mirrored less visibly in the supposed “peace” of Western Europe in the breakdown of the human spirit:

zusammenbruch in osten
 einzelbruch in Westen
 nach und ach

zivilisation verbraucht
 wörter
 wo mensch bleibt
 fragt sich teufel” (2000, 49).¹³

Common space is broken; brokenness consumes language, the human being is diminished.

While Rajčić’s poetry speaks on one hand for humanity in general—beyond specific national values—on the other, it is very much gendered in

its representation of the social spaces and roles that men and women occupy. It mirrors the spaces deemed “feminine” and “masculine” in patriarchal discourses—spaces that recognizably reflect “the power relations of gendered identity” (Blunt and Rose, 1994, 3) familiar to Rajčić from the former Yugoslav federation and from Switzerland.¹⁴ “Feminine” and “masculine” spaces appear in one sense polarized: women occupy the home and sustain family continuity; men perpetuate and sustain nationalist conflict, either as activists or pawns. In ‘Der krieg ist zu ende’[The war is over], women wait passively as guardians of the homefront, the embodiment of a love and nurturing that lose the object of their desire:

Die Mutter wacht in der nacht auf
 Stille erschreckt.
 [...]
 die frauen haben auf niemandem zu warten.
 [...]
 Die tochter umwickelt ein stein
 falls es traurig wird
 zeihnet sie ihm eine träne (2000, 11)¹⁵.

Men, as another poem claims, “über holl[en] die sternen / in wettkampP” [pass the stars / in competition] (2000, 55). They are either born to battle or forced into the role through nationalist patterns of thinking passed down from one generation of men to the other:

Der Vater verkauft geschichten
 von gestern und heute
 sigesreich.
 [...]
 Der Sohn spielt Hände hoch. (2000, 11)¹⁶

It would be preliminary, however, to sense here a naïveté that ignores women’s complicity in war making.¹⁷ While women stand outside the violence, they must still question their guilt for atrocities committed by others in their name. So one reads the speaker’s lament in ‘Nach der Besichtigung der Krajina’: “meine finger trugen schuld meines bruders” [After Viewing Krajina: my fingers carried guilt of my brother] (2000, 17).

In her introduction to *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women’s Writing as Transgression*, Deirdre Lashgari explains how those in the margin create new perspectives on violence by:

making the margin the new center of their own subjectivity. ...Shifting the vantage point of the subject allows one to see forms of violence that had been invisible, or to see in unfamiliar ways. When the gaze is redefined, what it encompasses changes, deconstructing the master narrative (1995, 2-3).

Rajčić's portrayal of gendered spaces acknowledges the role space plays in both "masculinist power" and "feminist resistance" (Blunt and Rose, 1994, 1). Women are charged to see things "differently" so that they can offer an oppositional discourse: "neues denken braucht Frau / (wie bekannt Menner Denken zu viel)" [new thinking needs woman / (as we know men think too much)] (2000, 23). Women resist the essentialist war myth of glory, heroism and patriotic duty by politicizing the private space they do occupy: the home, the family, and their bodies. Within the "feminine" space of family and children, the mother can oppose the war machine with her own private power: "bleib ungeboren mein sohn" [remain unborn my son] (2000, 7). Although Rajčić's war poems primarily give voice to the marginalized—mothers, daughters, sisters, and children—they simultaneously entreat the center to redirect its gaze and join the space of refusal. "Schrei / nein, danke" [scream / no, thank you], insists the poem 'Bosinen '92, '93,' which reframes the narrative of national defense and defense of family into a narrative of inescapable death:

vatermuttereschwesster land verteidigung
 vatermuttereschwesster auf beerdigung
 rufen Dein name einziger sohn
 hat deine geburts uhrkunde
 für dein Land
 Todesanzeige bedeutet (2000, 7)¹⁸

Rajčić rallies against "die eiserne Sprache der Macht" [the iron language of power] and "Tod als letztes Mittel des Kampfes / Als heiligend zu zelebrieren" [celebrating death, the last means of the battle, as sanctifying] (2003). While she doubts that her writing can save either herself or others ("im schreiben ist auch kein versteck" [writing offers no hiding place, either] [2000, 51]), writing remains an attempt to deconstruct hegemonic structures of oppression and to regain life and substance lost to seemingly monolithic power struggles. One senses in Rajčić's poetry the idealist's hope that humanity can indeed conquer its own tendency toward destruction and receive "Lebendigkeit Ihre zurück" [Getting Back Her Living] (1992).

One must in the end question which margin houses this writer. Which analytical paradigm suffices to encompass her oppositional aesthetics? As a woman who fights against the patriarchal dimension of war and violence, as a foreigner who fights for the rights of those without representation, or as a human being who recoils at the injustice and perpetuation of oppression, Dragica Rajčić finds herself not in any one margin, but in many. Her home is everywhere and ultimately nowhere. This self-proclaimed “weltmensch” [person of the world] (2000, 31) is paradoxically “Entweltet” [de-worlded], and “Welt” [world], she notes sadly, “ist nur / in Traum schön” [is only / beautiful in dream] (1994, 75). For Rajčić, that “alternative space,” or “third geography” (Seyhan, 2001, 15) beyond the borders of homeland and host country (Seyhan, 2001, 15), is, if anything, the “space of refusal” (Hooks, 1990, 341) created by language. There, she lives and writes “in eigenen Deutsch aus Trotz und Neugier, aus Verzweivlung” [in own German out of spite and curiosity, out of desperation] (cited in Kummer, 1987, 162).

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Notes

¹ Rajčić resided for a ten-year period (1978-1988) in St. Gallen, before returning in 1998 to Croatia.

² "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1990, 59).

³ For more on the oppositional aesthetics of literature in the margins, see Petra's Fachinger's work on *Rewriting Germany outside the Margins* (2001).

⁴ Seyhan refers here to Arjun Appadurai's work in *Modernity at Large*, 1996, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 164.

⁵ "The question of the effect of war on women and women's literary response to war has been the subject of extensive study in recent years" (Hawkesworth, 1998, 312).

⁶ All translations are my own; I have tried to retain some of Rajčić's orthographic and grammar idiosyncrasies, but could not entirely.

⁷ I am a Croatian / I am a Croatian / a thousand times I could write this sentence / with pleasure / for one / it was long forbidden / for another / I feel special / like Panda bear / Strange Animal

⁸ want to believe / can't believe / hold fast / that it is good for anything / the blow to the face / the back of the head / that all that so hidden meaning / will reveal itself to me / later on / when it no longer matters / to live like a child of humanity / want to / ask / what good is it for / war Killing

⁹ whose idea was it / when storming the summit / to hang a piece of cloth / the moon has the honor / to wave one with a star / maybe the moon would rather have one with / half-moon / if it keeps going like this / each of us will hang one / from his head / so that / all will know / we are blockheads

¹⁰ Adhering to Appadurai's usage of the term, Seyhan defines transnational literature "as a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addresses issues facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in what [she calls] 'paranational' communities and alliances. These are communities that exist within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and the host culture" (2001, 10).

¹¹ Swiss home / in house across from mine / dark windows / a man beat before he lost nerve / his wife blue / police took man / took wife in car / away // later it was quiet // inside me / a light goes on / like / home

¹² "The search for a safe haven for the self becomes an increasingly critical undertaking, and the individual must build and continuously rebuild her/his 'home' in the face of the surging flux of events and relations" (Melucci, 1996, 2). The twentieth century is marked by mass scale migration brought about through war,

political unrest, social upheaval and economic instability. "Losses incurred in migration, dislocation, and translation," writes Seyhan, are "those deeply felt signs and markers of our age" (2001, 4).

¹³ Total collapse in east / individual collapse in West / bit by oh / civilization consumes / Words / what is left of the humanity / only the devil knows

¹⁴ Gendered spaces are understood "less as a geography imposed by patriarchal structures, and more as a social process of symbolic encoding and decoding that produces 'a series of homologies between the spatial, symbolic, and social orders'" (Blunt and Rose, 1994, 3; they quote H. Moore, 1988, *Space Text Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, p. 1).

¹⁵ Mother watches in the night / silence frightens // ...the women have no one to wait for. / The daughter swaddles a stone / in case it gets sad / she draws it a tear.

¹⁶ The father sells stories / from yesterday and today / victorious. // ...The son plays hands up.

¹⁷ For more on polarized gender systems, see Cooper, Munich, and Squier, 1989, viii-xx. Cooper, Munich, and Squier state that "the basic polarity of man as fighter and woman as peacemaker miscarries" in the present age (1989, xv). On the other hand, as Hawkesworth notes, the Balkan wars "made visible the impact of war on women and children through rape, bombings, and expulsion, and their vulnerability to enemy factions as symbolic representations of the nation. The peace groups that sprang up throughout the territories of Croatia, Bosnia, and what is now the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were run for the most part by women, as were many of the practical voluntary groups providing help for victims of the war and refugees, as they continue to do today" (1998, 312).

¹⁸ fathermothersisster country defense / fathermothersisster at funeral / call your name only son / your birth certificate / meant for your country / announcement of death.