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innocence and victimhood: gender, nation, and women's activism in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina

Elissa Helms, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI and London, 2013, 348pp., ISBN: 978-0-299-29554-7, \$26.95 (Pbk)

Elissa Helms' *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* takes a hard look at the concepts of innocence and victimhood by examining their gendered political manifestations in a post-war society. The book is a major contribution to the developing field of critical human rights and humanitarianism and is based on Helms' intensive long-term fieldwork centred on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the small country of Bosnia-Herzegovina in southeast Europe, following the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s (Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995; Croatia 1991–1995; Kosovo 1999–2000). Three aspects of the book will be of particular interest to people whose work engages with feminism: (1) the productive links between sex, gender and ethnicity in nationalist political formations; (2) the politics of representation within marginalised groups; and (3) the concept of 'agency' and how a focus on particular forms of resistance may simultaneously reveal and obscure structures of power. A common thread connecting these analytical arenas is the widespread and well-documented use of sexual violence—in particular rape—during the Bosnian Wars.

Helms' primary endeavour is to trace the ways that both local nationalisms and the international-led NGO 'civil society' circumscribe women's involvements in post-war reconstruction by establishing victimhood as the primary social status through which Bosniak (Muslims who trace their origins to conversions under the Ottoman administration of Bosnia and Montenegro) women in particular may become visible as political actors. She depicts the nuances of women's various positionings within this victimhood framework by providing an account of the different dilemmas women confronted in the post-war context in their interface with the many foreigners/*stranci*—the (mostly Western) 'internationals'—who converged on the country as NGO employees and volunteers in the immediate post-war period. She is well situated to tell this story; in addition to her numerous field research visits to Bosnia since 1997, she is a foreigner who worked for international NGOs (INGO) herself, first in a refugee camp for Bosnians located in Croatia during the war (1993–1994) and then with a youth project in the Bosnian city of Mostar in 1996. Helms is trained as an anthropologist, and uses ethnographic field methods such as participant-observation, various types of interviews and discourse analysis to develop an understanding of how victimhood becomes a significant normative framework through which people define and evaluate morality. According to Helms, this paradigm is established *vis-à-vis* a logical link people make between victimhood and innocence that relies on a heteronormative understanding of a sexually violated—and ethnically designated—female body:

Claims to victimhood are a double-edged sword, precisely due to their gendered connotations: the point of such claims is not victimhood itself but its association with innocence, distance from responsibility, and thus moral purity, which in turn affords a basis for claims to legitimacy in the field of the social. (p. 4)

Helms is treading on tricky territory here because she asks us to take analytical distance from the victimisation of a group of people through mass rape and other forms of collective violence in order to grasp how reconstruction resources supporting women's activism and 'women's issues' often promoted ethnic distinctions based on portraying oneself and one's ethnic group as victims, as innocents. This victimisation itself is gendered, as was the wartime violence, where men were more often killed, and women attacked, but left alive. This flattened identity in fact further dehumanises survivors of rape, in part because, as Helms notes, the claim to victimhood and innocence requires that 'no ambiguity is allowed' and effectively erases women's own ethical grappling with how to deal with their rape and its aftermath (p. 32). Thus, despite the often well-intentioned efforts of development workers on projects funded by other countries including Germany, the United States and Sweden, Helms persuasively argues that such 'interventions' have actually reinforced the status of 'victim' for Bosniak women in particular. And, like all symbols, this icon of victimhood generates material conditions as it guides topics of scholarship, forms of activism and types of policy directed at the post-war state (p. 27).

Helms' research contributes to a well-established body of scholarship showing that the governing structure established at the US-brokered Dayton Agreement has done much to entrench and intensify ethnic-religious modes of identifying and belonging over other regionally familiar forms of identification such as city/village, regional origins, occupation and education, and Yugoslavism. This phenomenon is apparent in political party formations, as well as in mandates for 'ethnic diversity' in NGO work. Indeed, 'work' is a key domain here, as governmental and non-governmental jobs are allocated according to a person's affiliation with one of the three majority ethnic groups: Bosnian Serb (Christian Orthodox), Bosnian Croat (Catholic) or Bosniak.¹ The NGO sector was a significant employment sector in the post-war economy, where unemployment estimates run as high as 42 per cent (*Balkan Insight*, 2010), with many households heavily reliant upon remittances from the quarter of the population displaced by the war and living abroad. Not surprisingly, women activists seized upon the NGO sector as an avenue to realise economic and political well-being. Yet their efforts here are delimited by local and international gender paradigms that see women's motherhood—or their potential for it—and their wartime victimisation as females as their most persuasive public personas.

In this part of her discussion, Helms joins feminist scholars and activists who have critiqued modes of nationalism that sideline women in this way. She makes use of familiar concepts like 'affirmative essentialism' (Fox, 1996), which she favours over 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak, 1993) for analysing the case of women's activism in post-war Bosnia. In a break with much of the scholarship on post-war Bosnia that ignores the communist era (1944–1991) and modes of belonging under socialism, Helms delineates the history of feminism in the post-WWII period through Antifascist Front of Women (AFŽ), which was active in public and domestic reforms such as family planning, including abortion (1952), and promoting women's access to all sectors of the workforce and to equal compensation for their work. This familiar feminist agenda operated in tandem with other socialist-era approaches to women's involvement in society that through party-affiliated groups called *aktiv žena*/activist women emphasised their roles as 'wives, mothers, and workers' (p. 101).

¹Bosnian Jews and Bosnian Roma have a legal suit pending against the state, charging that this system violates their citizenship rights.

According to Helms, women in post-war Bosnia affirm an essentialised female status that stresses roles connected to heteronormative reproductive capacities, yet their efforts to establish a foothold as ‘workers’ in the NGO economy is sidelined due to an emphasis on affective services like talk therapy and handicraft micro-enterprise, as well as the need to deal with people in crisis, whether financial, physical or medical. Their attempts are also thwarted by the particularities of funding mechanisms in the NGO sector where funding streams are unpredictable and dependent on grant writing, and organisations must respond to the changing mandates of their funders. Thus, an organisation may have received a grant to establish a resource archive and support group for refugees who are trying to locate the bodily remains of family and friends who were killed during the war, but the next year’s funding cycle may stipulate that the organisation must develop a programme for multi-ethnic ‘reconciliation’. The previous year’s programme then is often put on hold indefinitely so that resources can be directed to set up and administer the new programme. Furthermore, many Bosnian women are reluctant to enter the world of government that is perceived to be monopolised by corrupt nationalists—a corruption that people describe through gendered metaphors like ‘politics is a whore’ (p. 159), and where open public discussion of rape and sexual violence remain taboo subjects in contrast with the travails of the largely male veteran population, and with women’s loss of male family members. Thus, while particular female images act as powerful political symbols for political parties and for INGO interventions, these were the all-too-familiar polarised depictions of women either as the utmost symbol of morality: the suffering mother; or the embodiment of corruption: the whore.

One wonders at times whether Helms herself is caught in this bi-polar narrative of symbols, even as she attempts to dis-embed a country, its people and most especially a diverse group of Bosniak women from ‘gatekeeping’ concepts that have acted as a dominant lens for perceiving the region, like ‘ethnicity’, ‘war’ and ‘nationalism’ (p. 37). For example, in my reading, I wondered what it might look like to frame and analyse these women’s experiences in a way that centred on the multi-vocal qualities of such symbols/ ‘gatekeepers’ that point to ambivalent, contested and unresolved meanings, similar to Kurtović’s (2011) ‘What is a nationalist?’ and Mahmood’s (2001) essay on feminist theory and embodiment, whose critique of the concept of ‘agency’ predates that of Žarkov (2007) cited near the end of Helms’ book. And, yet, her own focus on these topics perhaps mirrors the degree to which many Bosniak women feel their worlds to be tethered to such frames in the post-war period. On occasion, Helms does linger in the ambivalent spaces, and it is here that Bosnian women’s humanity is most apparent. That said, this is a difficult story to live, to tell and to read. And Helms tells it beautifully, combining rigorous scholarship and field research and deeply felt engagement with Bosnia to create this exceptional book that is a tremendous contribution to feminist scholarship, and to people engaged in the work of reconstruction and reconciliation in post-war societies.

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