*Lepa Mlađenović*

# Notes of a Feminist Lesbian in Anti-War Initiatives[1]

*2001*

This is the text that took me the longest time to write. I have never been in my whole life so profoundly shaken as during the wartime: I was a woman with a Serbian name in Serbia, in Belgrade, throughout the war on the territory of Yugoslavia, from 1991 to 1999, engaged in antifascist activism and, at the same time, I was a lesbian. I have wanted for so long to explore the connections between these two ways of being, these two identities that were sometimes so difficult to reconcile, but it took me years to have the courage to even start.

When I started to write in 1997, I realised I was writing in English, and that is not my mother tongue. Maybe a foreign language gave me enough space and distance to think about myself. Maybe, when I decided to write in English, I made the imaginary feminist lesbian international community my audience, and it felt safe. Wanting to write meant wanting to understand myself and the world around me, wanting to work through my own homophobia, making transparent the places of unknown fear and guilt with my new lesbian desire, and the will to understand my own life within the jaws of Serbian nationalism.

As I reread this text four years later, in 2001, I understood that the war has deepened the meaning of my lesbian existence. Writing it meant getting out of the choking nationalist and fascist realities and stating that there are lesbians living in the war zones and in war affected regions like mine. I realised that very little has been written about their life realities, the decisions they have to make, to hide, to leave if they can, to stay or to became politically active in the peace movements. I write this essay in the hope that more women will tell their stories and reveal their ways of surviving.

I wish to dedicate this essay to all women grounded in war zones who love women and choose to support their families and neighbours by staying in war torn regions, and who have never had the opportunity to hear about their struggles, their anxieties discussed in a public way. As well as to those

1 This is a revised version of the paper: "Notes of a Feminist Lesbian during Wartime," *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 8 (2001) 3, pp. 381–92. The text was written in Belgrade in 1996/1997. It was revised in 2001 and 2012.

who had to make a difficult decision to leave their loved ones, and move out of the war zones in search for the new meaning of life.

I dedicate this essay to my lesbian-sister feminist Igballe Rogova, founder of the women's rural group Motrat Qiriazi, who worked all throughout the war years as an Albanian activist in Kosova with women and girls and never denied her lesbian self. Her life was set to be on the other war-side of mine, as the Serbian regime fought for 20 years to humiliate and then exterminate the Albanian population from their territory. And in all those years the two of us have kept a sister-loving lesbian bond.

*1997*

The military orders that started the war in the summer of 1991 came from the authorities in Belgrade where I live. There was no shooting here, but yes in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo. From the beginning of the war, everything started to change, first of all, the newspaper headlines and TV news. All of a sudden, some men who walked down my streets became killers and rapists. You got on a bus, entered a cafe or a shop, you looked around and you did not know whether the man standing next to you was a war criminal or not... Some of these men were in uniform, some with crutches and I was not sure if I felt anger or pity. Violence in family and violence on the streets increased and reality became so male dominated. Being out on the streets had lost all joy. Completely. The bookstore windows showed only Serbian titles, theatres featured only Serbian plays, music to be heard in shops was no more Yu–Rock, rock bands from Yugoslavia, but turbo-folk, Serbian new folk. The air of oblivion with regard to the crimes across the border was unbreathable. What was happening in the neighbouring regions, in towns which just the day before had belonged to our common homeland, today seemed of no importance: Sarajevo, Zagreb, Osijek, Prizren, Dubrovnik... many citizens of Belgrade agreed with the logic of nationalism: to forget the Other. The regime in Serbia demanded that its citizens must not care about the injustices in these towns any more. Nor about anything else but what was given under the title of the nation. Women and lesbians were absent from public matters. This is nothing new, but in wartime, your absence from social representation intensifies your feelings of exile.

From the time the regime in Serbia became openly fascist, the public space for lesbians — which never really existed — diminished even further. In the region where I live most of the women who love women are at a stage where they are fearful of discussing their lesbian desire. They do not have the social conditions which would permit them to name their identity as that of a lesbian or see the political implications of loving women. Many do not permit themselves to simply enjoy their love. In fact, they often feel guilty about who they are. Many try to protect themselves by using drugs or drinking.

Some of us feminist lesbians were active in the gay lesbian group Arkadija, formed just before the war, and we moved on in 1995 to found a lesbian group, Labris. Labris still did not have an office, but we permanently organised workshops in different feminist spaces. In fact, in these workshops lesbians finally met each other for the first time to talk about our so much desired and longed for lesbian love.

*Hierarchy of discrimination*

One of the things we learned very early was that war creates a priority of survival needs. The right to be alive and the right to survive become the first priorities. This is a fact in war-torn countries: there is no social space for naming identities. The rule of nationalism imposes nationality as the only identity with political meaning. For lesbians who are hiding in their private homes, behind their masked faces, behind their names, the war, as another institutionalised ritual of hatred, is like a monster outside of the closet waiting to strengthen their feelings of guilt. Lesbians do not have many options. Some of them join the nationalist machinery, others refuse to participate and either become apolitical or, if they have the means, they leave the country. If they leave, they often feel guilty. If they stay, they often regret not leaving. The war is a terrifying human machine, destroying hope and self-esteem.

In my case, I have a Serbian name and the Serbian regime was running the war. It is a great privilege if during the wartime your name belongs to the group of those in power, and it is a great source of shame. And I have used it sometimes, but not as a lesbian. Because, if you are openly lesbian, you are erased from the institutions of the totalitarian regime; because violence was the legal mechanism to "communicate," "the different" was seen as the enemy and "homosexuals are a threat to the system".

In Serbia, when the war started, the peace movement, women's movement and human rights organisations, apart from responding to the urgent needs of the people who survived the war, also became the nuclei of a future civil society. Feminists expected that the human rights organisations would be based on the policy of working against all kinds of discrimination, including sexism and homophobia. And that the principle of indivisibility of human rights would be respected, so that all human rights would be considered equal. However, in the initial years of the anti-war movement this was not the case. The human rights groups that were formed in our cities worked hard to deconstruct nationalism and support refugee rights, but still did not touch the rights of other social groups. We, therefore, came to the point where we could observe that war urged a priority of needs for safety, shelter, food, that the destructive regimes set up a hierarchy of violence, destroying people's lives. Responding to this new terror, the human rights organisations also set up a hierarchy of human rights.

In this impossible social context in which you are forcibly nationally defined and all your other identities are erased, the lesbians in Belgrade were confronting acts of homophobia. In 1994, Arkadija, a lesbian and gay grassroots group, was thrown out of the space used for its meetings by a human right organisation working with refugees on grounds of alleged "incompatible projects," including their objection to using the same toilets. In 1995, some lesbian activists were beaten up on the street by young fascists yelling "You, lesbians, clear off!". In 1996, police were sent to a Lesbian Studies lecture on "Legal aspects of the lesbian movement in Europe" with charges that, as they said, "orgies and indecent activities were taking place". Despite all of this, the group met regularly, published four newsletters, essays, gave interviews to TV and newspapers and organised workshops.

*Lesbian responses to the war*

During the war years, as I have said, lesbians found different ways to survive. Some distanced themselves by saying "This is not our war – it's a male business". If they had to hide their lesbian self, if their social face was a mask, if they were not allowed to recognise any of their lesbian dimensions in public — why should they care who wins the war, or which nationality they should identify with? They did not see themselves in the imagery of the war. Therefore, a part of them chose to remain locked in silence, "in the closet," and some chose to leave the country.

Others got involved in nationalist institutions in order to become agents of their lives and get a social identity. The phenomenon of lesbians entering a nationalist mechanism is a specific one because most lesbians, before becoming nationalists, already live with silence, guilt, fear and self-hatred specific to women who love women. Institutionalised hatred, like nationalism, offers to citizens, as well to lesbians, the reward of being part of national system, of belonging to the larger group. Therefore, being a part of the group that glorifies one's self and produces hatred of the Other opens a possibility for a new set of socially accepted emotions: to become "Ours" in national way if there is no "Ours" in a lesbian way. To gain the feeling of belonging and being accepted. Even if that means new layers of pain, numerous women who love women become nationalists in the heterosexual way, in Serbia and Croatia, in Kosova, Rwanda, Kurdistan… Some of them even join men's killing squads. We do not really know if any of this gives them the comfort they seek. That is another reason for which it is so important to begin this public conversation, so that we can hear other voices and learn how these women have survived the contradictions created by war.

*Responsibility of feminists*

Those of us who were feminists derived strength from our mutual understandings. Feminist politics inspired many women to emerge from the desperation and pain that created with the first news of war crimes.[2] In 1992, feminists in Belgrade and Zagreb took multiple responsibilities: to form organisations for direct support for women war survivors — we needed to organise matter-of-fact good care of them, and some of us worked at this full time. Since political activity was taking place in the streets, feminists organised in the anti-war movement to speak on rape in war and on women's solidarity beyond borders. In the case of Serbia we, the feminists in Women in Black in Belgrade, chose the language which directly named the Serbian regime as the one responsible for the war. Every Wednesday we stood in the street dressed in black using our bodies to protest: "Disobedient to our fathers, to political leaders and God" was one of the banners that summed up our politics. Our feminist friends were translating *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. We were reading these works on guilt and responsibility in war, searching to understand the content of our politics. As well, we, feminists, took responsibility for creating spaces for differences among us, including our lesbian lives. This meant, for example, that both the Zagreb and Belgrade Women's Studies Centres covered lectures on lesbian politics in their agendas. Also, at every annual international meeting organised by Women in Black throughout the war, the programme included a workshop with a theme on lesbians in the anti-war movement.

*Separate realities*

I will now express a few personal thoughts and images regarding the splitting of identities I experienced. In our lesbian group in Belgrade it was difficult to talk about war. Some lesbians thought the meetings should be a safe place uncontaminated by war issues. They wanted, at least in the lesbian group, to talk about lesbian themes and not to be divided with regard to politics. On the other hand, in the peace movement, only the war and nationalism were topics of discussion — feminism and lesbianism were avoided. Many evenings after the hard work of counselling women survivors of war and violence, I would

2 Between 1991 and 1996 feminists were creating new organisations that were as well encouraging lesbian rights. In Zagreb: Centre for Women War Victims [Centar za žene žrtve rata], then B.a.B.e. — Women's Human Rights Group [B.a.b.e. — Grupa za ženska ljudska prava], Centre for Women's Studies [Centar za ženske studije] and the Women's Infoteka [Ženska infoteka]; in Belgrade: Women in Black [Žene u crnom (ŽUC)], Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence [Autonomni ženski centar protiv seksualnog nasilja], SOS Helpline for Women and Children Victims of Violence [SOS telefon ze žene i decu žrtve nasilja], the Centre for Women's Studies and the Incest Trauma Centre [Incest trauma centar].

walk home, sometimes crying and then dropping by the Centre for Anti-War Action [Centar za antiratne akcije] for an update on latest news. Women activists were working until late at night there, with great passion and dedication. "But no, not now about lesbians, let's not spoil the cause," was something that was unsaid among us.

I also remember that in the very beginning of the war, I was in a feminist group — the SOS Helpline for Women and Children Victims of Violence — and with the first war news we found ourselves surprised. Every time we tried to talk, activists reacted differently and it seemed that everything separated us: nationalism, war, and pacifism. Each theme was so crucial to our individual feelings of identity that we could hardly even talk about it. Was I Serbian only because I have a Serbian name? Was I still "Yugoslav" — as I used to identify myself — now that Yugoslavia had fallen apart? "Yugoslavs" were now considered traitors. I felt split: in each context I could show only one side of my face, and the rest of me was unwanted or dangerous. Only in my flat, in my room I felt at ease, whole.

And, still, I remember losing my mind in that same room. At times, I would be making love to a woman and the transistor radio would announce the latest news from the frontline. The only news to listen to about the war were broadcasts from Prague, London, Paris. I would be in bed and not know what I should do, should I get up from the warm bed and leave my lover, turn off the radio and continue our pleasure? I am a lesbian, I am of Serbian name, how can I turn off the radio? Human beings, my neighbours are being slaughtered in my name and I must know about that. If I do not turn off the radio, there is no more lovemaking today, only my deep sadness at the terrible news from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I would light another cigarette in bed and make another coffee for both of us. Do I show respect to the dead by not turning off the radio? Is lesbian lovemaking in that very moment inappropriate? And why? I was torn by these feelings, these contradictions, my body was hurting all over.

Later, I would write solidarity letters to an unknown woman in Sarajevo who lived under the siege, thinking whether one day she would be embarrassed if she saw the lesbian who wrote her letters in front of her? Would she be disappointed with me? Would she regret that she ever received words of friendship from a lesbian? Many times this worry would seize me so strongly that I would shudder. Why was it always so difficult to say that some humanitarian aid came from lesbians? Some said it was not important — but from what political basis does this hypothesis come?

It went on like that for years. I did not know what to do with fragmented identities, desires, motivations… I would remember an essay which I read back in the 1980s, in which a lesbian writer from the United States, who went for a year to work in Nicaragua came back and said something like this: "No, I could not talk about my lesbianism in Nicaragua, there is a war going on there, they have other priorities". I replayed this sentence in my mind a thou-

sand times asking myself what I would say now. Every time when I thought: "No, it is not right, a lesbian should always be a lesbian," I would feel uneasy and shameful. Then, I would change the argument and think: "Maybe it was right, we should not talk about it, only not in wartime!" — then I would feel even worse, the guilt would come and I would be confused, asking myself if that was a moment of internalised homophobia.

*Dirty streets*

One night in 1995 we had a Labris action in the old part of Belgrade, Dorćol, a few blocks away from my flat. Three men stopped four of us while we were writing lesbian graffiti. They came and attacked us because we were lesbians. Two of them were in the back with hockey sticks and one of them stood in front of me. He watched me, I watched him and thought "This is a face that demands war, a face that kills. There are weapons of hatred behind him." I had never faced such fear inducing direct look in my life. He pushed me to the wall, broke my eyeglasses and shouted: "You dirty lesbian, I could throw you in this door and kill you — no one would know. Clear off!" When I asked, "Who are you?", he exclaimed: "Don't you utter your dirty words in my street! The mosque is the place for you." My "dirty words"! My dirty words were dirtying his street! His words echoed in my brain the entire night. Lesbians and gay men were dirtying his straight male street, just as Muslims were dirtying his straight Serbian street, and Roma people too. What about wives? Are they dirtying hetero husbands' marriages?

It took me some days to recover. After that I wrote a short report about the attack for our anti-war e-mail circular of correspondence in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, named ZaMir. We got support as lesbians and one of the first replies came from a man I had never met in my life: he was hiding from snipers and trying to connect his computer dialling a hundred times a day in his flat in Sarajevo where Serbian killers were not only persistently shooting him but cutting off electricity for up to two hours a day. He wrote to me: "We from Sarajevo send you support, take care of yourself, we know men like him are very dangerous."

At the end of 1995, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was ending, and different acts of hatred and solidarity were connecting with each other in me. As I worked with women who had survived war all throughout these years, I was filled with war stories of women refugees who came to the Autonomous Women's Centre Against Sexual Violence where I work. Stories of women from the war zones who were thrown out by soldiers from their homes in full hate, "In ten minutes!". Only because in that place and at that time they had a "wrong" name. I was full of stories of women who had suffered through ten, twenty years of male violence. I started to read about concentration camps and the Holocaust. And I thought I could draw the line from the beginning to

the end showing how dynamics of power and control logic connects nationalism and homophobia, violence in family, incest and genocide. These images of violence boiled in my body and my mind while I was slowly connecting different threads of the fascist production of terror and beginning to understand the ways in which they intersected in me, until not only my understanding of this kind of fascism told me, and my own body also made it clear, that the face of the man who attacked me could be the face of a killer in a war, a killer in the family, batterer of his wife, rapist of a girl, lesbian hater.

This was my process, I was split at the roots all throughout the time of war, and somewhere near the end of it, after this event in Dorćol, I went through the beginning steps of integrating all my identities as a feminist lesbian.

*Lesbian solidarity*

Yet in the midst of all this anger and brutality, the gift of the international lesbian movement came to us. All during the war, lesbians from many places in the world were in solidarity with the anti-war movements in the former Yugoslavia. First, we lesbians from Serbia longed to meet our sister lesbians from Croatia, Kosovo and Slovenia. There were only a few of us, but longing was deep and it was only at international conferences that we would embrace each other. Serbian borders became difficult to cross. Nevertheless, the lesbian support continually arrived at our addresses: letters, packages, gifts, coffee, chocolates with words of tenderness. Often from lesbians we had never seen and perhaps may never see, sometimes from women we knew. There were books, journals, newspapers from lesbians in France, Spain, Italy, and the United States that were sent to lesbians in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Letters of support. The anti-war song *Universal Soldier* with the voice of Buffy Sainte Marie which we played a hundred times. Music cassettes of beautiful Cris Williamson and Lavender Jane were the most loved ones and were replayed in my kitchen again and again. Also funny lesbian stories by Kate Clinton. Enough to keep us tuned in to the tender love of lesbian sisterhood and sometimes — in the midst of work with refugees and fascist politics — also reminding us that we were also lesbians.

In addition, many lesbians from other countries supported the women's groups even though they never identified their support as lesbian. They came to our women's centres to volunteer, to witness our misery and courage and make us feel less alone. There is not yet a study on the high percentage of lesbians becoming international volunteers. But we surely met many of them in our region.

Tanya Renne was one of the first to come. In the autumn 1992 the news about war rapes and concentration camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina arrived. For me in Belgrade it was unimaginable — I did not yet know fully what

those facts really meant. In those months, the fear in Belgrade was spreading, people were saying that the borders would be closed down and that nobody would be able to get out. No news could be checked out, no one knew what the borders of the state we lived in were. I remember, it was winter, we were lying in one bed near each other, two friends, lesbians, Tanya and I, talking about what we should do if they closed the borders... In those days I was working with women survivors of male violence and war during the day, listening to the news about war crimes in the evenings, and reading *A Litany for Survival,* Audre Lord, Joan Nestle, Adrianne Rich and looking through lesbian cartoons of Mo and photographs by JEB in the night. Joan Nestle and some lesbian poets wrote the truth about lesbian pleasure which seemed far away, yet possible and real. And in that bed, that night Tanya and I, we thought: "How can we escape from here? How can we pass to the other side illegally? What shall I do? What shall she do?" We wanted to have a scenario in reserve. Then we tried to remember all of the stories we ever heard of crossing borders... nothing new in times of war. I recalled how one Roma women used to tell me how earlier, in Italy, she got there with a "green passport", and when I asked her what that meant, she said: "Ah, passing through the woods, sister!" We would remember any story of wise escapes... We had to invent a lesbian resistance fantasy to overcome this fear. So we did. Tanya had a US passport and was free to live anywhere else, but she decided to write a book about sisterhood in Eastern Europe and she came to support us. She was in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana during the first three war years. Lesbians like her made life less fearful and more lesbian.

Another story takes place in the same room three years later. My friend Ria Convents, a feminist lesbian lawyer, used to come all the way from Belgium with her car full of needed material for women. One day in 1995 we were packing the boxes to make packages to send to women in Sarajevo. Ria and I spent hours organising the items: "This is a box for a woman who lives on the seventh floor and there is no electricity and heating, who is a biologist and has an old sick father... this box is for a woman who is an actor and has a young daughter and a husband... this one is for an older woman living alone with many neighbouring friends... what shall we put in which box, knowing who the box is for, who the neighbours are, what might a woman like her be surprised or happy with." Placing inside beans, dried vegetables, nuts, expensive chocolates, famous cigarette brands, coffee... carefully, with warm hearts, with all our intelligence and patience of caring for the other we had acquired during our lesbian years of loving each other.

Some other lesbians gave their money, carried heavy luggage, some phoned to ask how we were doing, sent letters and cards with lesbian humour, *dykes to watch out for*, some wrote about our activities, some came to us to teach us different skills, especially therapy trainings for working with trauma, then for working with computers, e-mailing, writing proposals... Some of them drove trucks. Yes, some lesbians drove big trucks all the way

from Great Britain filled with food and clothes for refugee women and activists. Some of those dyke drivers even had beards. Anyway, they were the first lesbians with beards I had ever seen in my life! In these six years... Tanya Renne, Juditka Hatfaludi, Ria Convents, Ingrid Foeken, Laurence Hovde, Rachel Wareham, Julia Penelope, Liza Coven, Shian Jones, Ippy, Therez Bloechlinger, Fabienne Hidreau, Béatrice Breitschmid and Judith Falusi, Charlotte Bunch, Chris Corrin, Rosa Logar, Masha Gessen, Antonia Burrows, Kathryn Turnipseed, Murph-Martha Ehman, Joanne, Stefanie, Monique, Nicolle, Jessica Hauff, Rebecca Johnson, Rebecca Casanova, Rina Nissim, Julie Mertus, Haya Shalom, Sandra Butler, Maite Irazabal, Marta Brancas, Gaby, Nelly, Shelly Anderson, Fran Peavy, Tova Green, Sarah Hartley, Katrin Kremmler, Julia, Dagmar Schultz, Anna Pramstrahler, Antonia Ciavarella... all of them came to inspire us and give us strength.

If you ask me, I can tell you a story of war and lesbians behind every one of these names. Like Laurence Hovde, who came from New York here in 1994 for a peace meeting and stayed with us in the movement, until she co-founded a new feminist group in Belgrade and is now widely loved by activists. Lesbians like her, like all those mentioned here and those I have forgotten to name, were essential for keeping our lesbian desire alive. They reminded us of what Audre Lorde told us many years ago: “We need to come out as lesbians as the summer soil needs rain”.