

FOREWORD TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

To be expelled from home and then to return, virtually or physically, occasionally, seasonally or permanently, only to discover that home has changed into something unhomely, is to be forced to reflect on what was lost and what one may hope to regain. This is the opportunity Gacko Field, the limestone valley at the southeastern corner of Bosnia, offered HadžiMuhamedović: with his interlocutors sharing with him what they, often painfully, try to figure out for themselves, he is able to glimpse and convey to us a lifeworld of intimate encounters among communities oriented to a mythological grid of landscape-attuned seasonal rhythms.

This book is then about what it takes to rebuild home when home as place and home as past get violently divorced. And when upon return to the place that was home it is no longer home. When it only lingers as memory as a phantom limb. Home and hope are inseparable, and both depend on a tissue of exchanges, a pattern of habitual encounters organized in “a system of proximities”—all undergirded by a syncretic cosmology. Syncretism is one of HadžiMuhamedović’s keywords, a defining feature of the lifeworld he openly defends against the anti-syncretism of ethnonationalist imaginary.

It is only when confronted with anti-syncretic ideologies, of which the nationalistic imaginaries that destroyed Yugoslavia are only the last incarnation, that syncretism comes to the fore and becomes a strange thing in need of explanation. HadžiMuhamedović quotes Bosnian writer Abdulah Sidran’s words: “I found that I have a neck only when they started strangling me.” Syncretism was abruptly revealed only when strangled.

Home meant hope, hope meant revitalizing the lost past, regrowing the phantom limb, regenerating at least a part of the torn tissue of prewar sociality that hung on the traditional cycles. Thus, for home/hope to exist, it was necessary to transmit the knowledge of the “communal life, economics, intimacies and mysteries that the landscape made possible,” or more vividly, the knowledge of “which hilltops are haunted, which caverns provide shelter and which plants may kill or save your life.” In the absence of the young, already starting other homes elsewhere, the old were glad to transmit their mastery to the author.

Anthropologists often feel torn between their scientific and their poetic calling, between the need to explain and the need to persuasively evoke different lifeworlds. In the most memorable accounts, the two felicitously converge. The book before you is one such rare convergence.

The interested reader will find in this book important contributions to the anthropology of time and space, of ethnic nationalism and of displacement, of mobility and memory, or most profoundly, of home and hope. The rarest achievement of this book, however, is that these scholarly refinements of our understanding get transformed, by a rare alchemy, into a poetic evocation of a way of life that brings a lump to your throat.

Imperceptibly transforming himself from an ethnographer to a poet throughout the book, in his last chapter HadžiMuhamedović gathers his interlocutors from the Field into a chorus of voices that sing the progression of warm season celebrations—lightning and thunder, the willows, girls and swings, nettle and marriage, water and cornel, cattle and bonfires, flirtation and fistfights, aspens and swallows. With Virgil of Georgics acting as his poetic guide and inspired by the sinking river that begins its life in the Field and breaks forth into multiple directions, attaining a new name with each new surface, HadžiMuhamedović then interlaces this present-day ode with the “spaces and times of George and Elijah,” a Frazerian journey through Classical Antiquity, Indoeuropean and pre-Christian Slavic Religion. What emerges from this long and purposefully meandering chapter is the “grand cosmological interlacement,” embedded in seasonal agricultural activities and patterns of encounters across the religious divides. To talk about sociality in Gacko was to talk about visitations, flirtations and fights, mutual care and help, and of spiritual kinship, which were all organized by agricultural, ecological temporalities and rhythms. For HadžiMuhamedović, this was the shape, the mode, the flavor of sociality violently torn asunder and forced to retreat before the purifying ideologies of national imaginaries. For him as for his interlocutors, the Georgic Saints become not just codes and cyphers of lost sociality but warrior patron saints of possible revitalization.

How does the author accomplish this alchemical transformation of a scholarly anthropological account into a poetic evocation of a lifeworld shimmering as ever vanishing and ever hopeful of rejuvenation?

I suggest that the poetry of the book comes in part through what I see as the nesting chiasmi of the “articulating journeys, the festivals, memorials, and homecomings” (to invoke the title of the series of which this is the first volume), HadžiMuhamedović uncovers in Bosnia.

To start with, the landscape is another face of time, and time is another face of space. Both time and space, furthermore, are about tasks and agricultural work which are in their turn embedded in, and embedding modalities of socializing, the nearing of the Other, the proximities and intimacies that

depend on distance and distinction. And the nesting of chiasmi doesn't end there.

The space (the Field) is also the space of "coffee and cigarettes" with its "long silences and sudden punctuations." It is a narrative space and HadžiMuhamedović dwells lovingly in the tension between presenting this narrative space as a single story or many diverging stories. Nor is it ultimately all about language and stories; for from another angle, it is precisely the tacit, non-discursive bodily habitus of "minute details of daily practices as evidence of landscapes rooted in the past" that is the most "resilient to contemporary political and historical discourses."

Thus, calendars are embedded in and imply stories; stories hinge on landscape and temporal cycles which are about encounters and socialites, which are in turn embedded in seasonal agricultural/pastoralist tasks. Each take turns in being both context and content, the encompassing and the encompassed, each other's figure and ground.

It is this kaleidoscopic, Rubik-cube-like shifting of chiasmi within chiasmi that is the particular power of this text. And it is often the powerful images that effect these shifts back and forth from time to space from time-space to encounters, from encounters to stories and bodies, from home to hope. It is particularly fascinating to see how, for instance, plants perform one of these perspectival shifts once the attention foregrounds them. Now, everything in the book could be seen as revolving around plants.

HadžiMuhamedović characterizes his work as "neither an ethnography nor a historiography," but rather a chronography. But why stop there? Since it is about time as space and space as time, isn't it rather a chrono-topo-graphy? Furthermore, since the Field is a site for a battle of chronotopes, thus the book is more appropriately a schizo-chrono-topo-graphy. And it is also an incipient herbarium as imaginarium (or is it imaginarium as herbarium), a study of the social and political life of karst geology, a mythological speleology. . . .

It is this deliberate writing strategy of shimmering between opposites, of meandering like the sinking and reemerging river of many names, that makes this book so poetic, but there is a pragmatic, political reason HadžiMuhamedović chooses to write in this way. The form of the book itself is an argument against the purifying, un-mixing, de-syncretizing ideology of ethnonationalism, and a counterpoint to the tendency to analyze Bosnian religiosity through the nationalist divisions. In his own words, this way of writing, says HadžiMuhamedović, makes the book "useless for the prevalent forms of identity violence in Bosnia."

Lingering memories as phantom limbs, shared life felt as one feels one's neck only when it is strangled, the sinking and reappearing river, Virgil's bud burgeoning from the stump of a chopped olive tree. The poetry of these im-

ages that jointly evoke the silhouette of Gacko prewar lifeworld, comes from their incongruity. This incongruity I take as an intimation of something real and alive because multidimensional and irreducible to simplifying flatlands of ethnonationalist ideology. May the reader, just as I did, resonate both painfully and hopefully with these intimations of Gacko lifeworld and leave the chair for Elijah.

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