

Counternarratives and Community Building

Recognizing Better Selves: A Reparative Reading of Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Queer Literature

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“You have to know: because you were there, it was easier for me.

Moreover, know this: [...] [t]here are better and more courageous ones to come.”

Lejla Kalamujić¹

In her short prose text “Bella Ciao” (2015),² Lejla Kalamujić’s autobiographical narrator describes her distant yet still strangely intimate encounters with Bella, a woman in her Sarajevo neighborhood who fascinated her when she was a young girl. Tenderly, she remembers observing Bella from the corner of her eye, finally discovering her name and occupation as a musician by overhearing the grown-ups talk about her. All dressed up in a festive red blouse with ruffles, she even expected Bella to come with the band to her aunt’s wedding and thus waited for

1 “Jer moraš znati: zato što si ti bila tu meni je bilo lakše. A znaj i ovo: [...] [d]oći će bolje i hrabrije od mene” (Kalamujić, *Zovite* 63).

2 The intertextual allusion to the well-known, anti-fascist song “Bella ciao” is evident. It can be understood as the ideological background against which the narrator reflects the marginalization of queer people. She even declares: “They say, the time of struggle will come. I know it will.” — “Kažu vrijeme borbe će doći. Znam da hoće” (Kalamujić, *Zovite* 62).

her arrival. Later on, disappointed by Bella's absence, the young narrator deliberately looks for her in the nearby streets and cafes. But only after the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina do the two women meet again. At that time, the narrator is already a teenager, conscious of her feelings and fully aware of what she previously described as the normality of wanting to be close to Bella (Kalamujić, *Zovite* 59).

Not articulating her lesbian identity explicitly, the narrator makes use of "the language of silence" ("jezik tišine"; Kalamujić, *Zovite* 62), familiar to generations of queer people and reflected in Bella's reserved behavior. Retrospectively, she recalls wanting to ask Bella about her life, her experiences with other women, and the historic meeting points of their community. However, at every chance of an encounter, the narrator herself eventually withdraws. Accordingly, she witnesses the same restraint in other—especially elderly—queer people she meets in public: "I want to ask them, where did your loves sprout? Which passages, which hallways, which curtains hid you? I understand the fear in their eyes. And that they act like they do not see me, do not hear me. That they make sure that our bodies don't accidentally touch in passing. I understand. I learned the language of silence."³ Only after Bella's death does the narrator address her in thought, asking Bella to forgive her for taking so much time to express her gratitude for Bella's mere existence, which made it easier for the young lesbian narrator to understand herself.

3 The text "Bella Ciao" is published in Kalamujić's prose collection *Zovite me Esteban* (2015), which was translated into English by Jennifer Zoble as *Call me Esteban* (2021). Nonetheless, the English translations in this essay are mine, D.S. — "Ja bih da ih pitam, gdje su nicali vaše ljubavi? Koji su vas to prolazi, koji haustori, koje zavjese skrivale? Ja razumijem strah u njihovim očima. I to što se prave da me ne vide, da me ne čuju. Što paze da nam se tijela slučajno u prolazu ne dotaknu. Ja razumijem. Naučila sam jezik šutnje." (Kalamujić, *Zovite* 62).

In the chapter “Zlato mamino” (2016, Golden child),⁴ Lamiya Begagić’s narrator Alma describes a similar scene. After suffering an injury, the former table tennis player visits her Bosnian-Herzegovinian hometown, Zenica. Her girlfriend Ivona, with whom she lives in Zagreb, joins her. During their visit, the two women find themselves in a sports center in Doboj to support the young athlete Hana at a table tennis tournament. While waiting for the match to start, they drink coffee on an outdoor terrace surrounded by a handful of other spectators. Carried away by the moment, Alma starts to vividly fantasize about passionately kissing Ivona in front of everybody else. Interestingly, her fantasy is quickly interrupted by Ivona’s smile, implying that she understood what was on Alma’s mind: “She is smiling at me and winking. She knows everything, she understands everything . . . Ivona understood that secret language of looks we had to use in places like these. All these years of life on the margins, in the hallways of the lesbian underground, have refined her senses to perfection.”⁵

Both Kalamujić’s and Begagić’s narrators offer insight into queer lives in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century. In reaction to the marginalization they face, queer people have developed protective strategies of passing that the narrators refer to as “the language of silence” or “the secret language of looks.” Begagić’s narrator understands these strategies as communicative codes of their own, allowing her and her girlfriend to share a sense of intimacy and belonging in the public sphere. At the same time, as Kalamujić’s narrator implies, this silence makes it more difficult for queer people to

4 “Zlato mamino” (Golden Child) is a chapter in Begagić’s first novel *U zoni* (2016, In the zone), which can also be read as a collection of stories. Interestingly, Kalamujić’s *Zovite me Esteban* is a collection of short prose that can be read like a novel. Both authors’ short texts function as complete pieces of literature in themselves, but at the same time, they form a greater whole by telling selected aspects of their protagonists’ lives.

5 “Smiješi mi se i namiguje. Sve zna, sve je shvatila. . . . Ivona još kako razumije taj tajni jezik pogleda koji moramo voditi na mjestima poput ovog. Sve ove godine života na rubu, u hodnicima lezbejskog podzemlja, istesale su joj čula do savršenstva.” (Begagić, *U zoni* 126).

connect and exchange their experiences since they cannot openly approach one another or address their particular concerns publicly. Instead, they are left alone with the unpleasant feeling of uncertainty, wondering whether they interpreted the silent communication of bodily movements and looks correctly. Investigating strategies and structures of queer life writing through the example of autobiography, Brian Loftus describes this phenomenon as “speaking silence.”

This oxymoronic syntagma can be construed in two ways: a speaking *silence* encloses so much of the unspoken as well as the unspeakable that it proverbially speaks volumes, while *speaking* silence accentuates the act of articulating the previously unspoken and unspeakable. The selected literary texts address both aspects: the first by acknowledging the phenomenon of “the language of silence,” the second by telling their queer protagonists’ stories as a means to break the silence. Furthermore, as Kalamujić’s lesbian narrator implies, learning about other queer people’s lives and recognizing oneself in their life stories can provide the affirmative feelings of reassurance, relief, and reparation: “You have to know: because you were there, it was easier for me.” Moving from the literary text to its audience, the narrator’s realization serves as an impetus for further reflections about affirmative reception processes. By combining Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of *reparative reading* with Rita Felski’s definition of *recognition* as a particular “use of literature,” the present essay aims at understanding what the articulation of queer experiences in contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature, as a means of challenging the mentioned silence—or rather silencing—might mean for its readers in general and its queer audience in particular.

Understanding Recognition Through Reparative Reading

In her groundbreaking essay, “Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You’re so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you”

(1997),⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes what Paul Ricoeur has termed “the hermeneutics of suspicion” as the dominant approach in literary criticism, which has been so influential that it can be understood as being synonymous with critique itself. Characterized by a sharp-witted reader, a true critic who is ahead of all others, urging to disclose systems of oppression and to deconstruct power relations in texts, Sedgwick calls these methods of interpretation—purposefully exaggerated—*paranoid readings*. Such readings are anticipatory, reflexive, and mimetic; they constitute a strong theory of negative affects; and they place their faith in exposure. In turn, theorizing out of any other stance than the suspicious or paranoid, as Sedgwick states, has been devalued as “naïve, pious, or complaisant” (Sedgwick 126). Without denying the gravity of oppression, Sedgwick replies to this reduction by introducing her idea of *reparative reading* (124–130).

Sedgwick develops her notions of paranoid and reparative reading following psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s distinction between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position as a means to describe interpersonal relationships starting in early childhood (object relations theory). While for Klein the paranoid-schizoid position is characterized by alertness to dangerous part-objects in one’s surroundings, “the depressive position is an anxiety-mitigating achievement . . . : this is the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole” (128). Accordingly, Sedgwick transfers these observations into the realm of literary studies and interprets the mentioned shift as a “*seeking of pleasure* (through the reparative strategies of the depressive position)” (137), manifested in forms of literary critique that are centered around positive and affirmative affects.

6 Wiegman shows that this essay’s origins lie in the introduction “Queerer than fiction” of the 1996 special issue of *Studies in the novel*. In a revised form, the essay was included in Sedgwick’s 2003 collection *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (8–9). Here, Sedgwick’s 2003 edition is cited.

Speaking of the “reparative turn” in queer studies,⁷ Robyn Wiegman points out Sedgwick’s long-lasting influence on queer theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, and Elizabeth Freeman, who approach their objects of study through “affection, gratitude, solidarity, and love” rather than focusing on “correction, rejection, and anger” (Wiegman 7). Keeping in mind the present essay’s interest in reading queer literature in a reparative manner,⁸ Sedgwick’s often-cited illustrative closing remarks seem to be of particular importance: “What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (Sedgwick 150–151).⁹

While building on Sedgwick’s critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion in her book *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski surprisingly does not mention Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading in her observations. Felski solely determines that it is time to “risk alternate forms of aesthetic engagement” (Felski, *Uses* 4). Referring to John Guillory to strengthen the position of the lay reader, compared to the professional literary critic, Felski describes four possible affective responses to literary texts under the heading of “uses of literature”: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. Formulating a phenomenology of

7 Despite her emphasis on reparative reading, Sedgwick gives credit to paranoid reading styles as being crucial constituents of queer theory in the 1980s (126), which concentrated on the investigation of homophobia and heterosexism.

8 Sedgwick addresses queer reading practices explicitly: “Where does this argument leave projects of queer reading, in particular?” (146) In this context, it is important to stress that queer reading and the reading of queer literature are not necessarily the same. In the present essay, the latter is in focus.

9 Ann Cvetkovich describes holding on to the positive aspects, in spite of the negative ones, as “a profoundly queer sensibility”: “Thus, if I began with depression and close on utopia, I have not necessarily shifted topics or even affective registers—the point would be to offer a vision of hope and possibility that doesn’t foreclose despair and exhaustion. It’s a profoundly queer sensibility and one that I hope can enable us to tackle the work that needs to be done and to create the pleasure that will sustain us.” (467).

reading, Felski looks at how certain phenomena disclose themselves to the reader through literature (Felski, *Uses* 12–17).

Asking what it means to recognize oneself in a book, without falling into the trap of self-centered narcissism and risking a trivialized interpretation of art, Felski explains that the literal meaning of recognition is “knowing something again,” adding: “we make sense of what is unfamiliar by fitting it into an existing scheme, linking it to what we already know” (25).¹⁰ Therefore, recognition is a cognitive process through which readers get to know themselves better after reading a book. Literature plays a particularly important role in recognizing oneself when other forms of acknowledgment are missing in one’s direct surroundings. In this case, individual as well as collective readings offer long-desired solace, relief, and escape from the fear of invisibility, or—to evoke Kalamujić’s and Begagić’s texts—from silence, “confirming that I am not entirely alone, that there are others who think or feel like me” (33). Here, the meaning of recognition in literary studies coincides with its definition in political theory. For political theorists, recognition does not mean knowledge but acknowledgment. Thus, the claim for recognition is a claim for acceptance, dignity, and inclusion in the public sphere. While recognition in reading is oriented toward the self, in political theory, it is oriented toward others. As shown, this distinction is not a dichotomy since “the question of knowledge is deeply entangled in practices of acknowledgment” (30).¹¹

In her subsequent book, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Felski explicitly builds her argument on Sedgwick’s theory of reparative reading, understanding it to be one mode of what she defines as *postcritical reading*: an engagement with the literary text that goes beyond the dominant hermeneutics of suspicion without being uncritical, by combining critical reading practices with the consideration of positive affects. Conse-

10 Felski criticizes the assumption that recognition requires direct resemblance by emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of literature with its multifaceted, metaphorical, and self-reflexive dimensions (Felski, *Uses* 44).

11 Felski investigates the correlation between feminist literature and feminism as a social movement in her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989).

quently, instead of interrogating what a text undermines, the postcritical reader, according to Felski, is eager to comprehend: “What does this text create, build, make possible?” (*Limits* 182).

Reading Queer Literature in Bosnia-Herzegovina

In 2017, the activist Nera Mešinović, one of the organizers of Bosnia-Herzegovina's first pride march in 2019, wrote an article for the online platform *lgbti.ba* about a public reading of Lamiya Begagić's novel *U zoni* (2016, *In the zone*) at one of the biweekly LGBTI-meetings at the NGO *Sarajevski otvoreni centar* (Sarajevo Open Center, SOC). The article is accompanied by a photo probably taken by one of the organizers or spectators, maybe even by Mešinović herself. Judging by the quality and angle, the photo was likely taken with a phone, while sitting on the floor next to the author. It shows a group of young people sitting closely around the author. The venue seems to be the office of SOC, transformed into a space for public events (like this literary reading). In the background, there are bookshelves and working desks. A carefully arranged rainbow flag is hanging on one of the walls, next to organizational information printed on white paper. Furthermore, there is a cardboard figure in the background, maybe a leftover from a previous art installation or activist intervention, or maybe just a piece of decoration. Begagić smiles softly while some of the participants take notes and others pictures. All of them seem to be listening carefully. The depicted atmosphere feels intimate since people sit close to each other, leaning towards one another, smiling or looking curiously at the author and moderator, Sandra Zlotrg. Some of the participants even stand in the hallway, which implies that all seats in the room were already taken, indicating that the event was well visited.

Mešinović begins her report by acknowledging the day of the reading—March 27th, 2017—as being a milestone in the history of queer art in Bosnia-Herzegovina, due to the presentation of Begagić's text as the first Bosnian-Herzegovinian lesbian novel. She emphasizes the novel's significance by describing the participants' lively

involvement in the discussion and their collective bodily resonance to the text, in moments of synchronized laughter. Situated within SOC's biweekly LGBTI-gatherings, it is not surprising that the literary reading attracted members of Sarajevo's queer community, opening up a discussion about queer literature in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When asked about her novel's classification as queer literature, Begagić answered that the novel's queerness is not indicated by the fact that the protagonist is lesbian but rather the lesbian protagonist's confrontation with the society in which she lives. In this respect, Mešinović reflects upon the novel's political implications: "The context within which the novel is written, and within which the story takes place, is Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, for which it is indispensable to write about lesbian heroes to conquer the public space as well as space for political activity."¹² Read in a Felskian manner, Mešinović's closing remarks touch on aspects of recognition through literary readings, as she interprets the participants' engagement in the discussion as a confirmation of the power of art to create space for questioning one's own identity.

Speaking about queer literature in an interview with Bojan Krivokapić for the Belgrad-based leftist magazine *Mašina* (Machine), Kalamujčić emphasizes the emergence of queer literary festivals and writing contests in the post-Yugoslav space after 2000: *Šarolika pera* (Colorful quills) in Sarajevo, *Write Queer* in Podgorica, *Srećanje LGBT literature ex-YU* (Meeting of LGBT literature of Former Yugoslavia) in Ljubljana, etc. While she observes an expansion of queer literature as a specific genre through these platforms, she also notices its integration in the literary mainstream, manifested in the inclusion of queer authors and their texts in anthologies, as nominees for literary prizes, etc. She explains this recent development through a focus on the intersections of queer, feminist, and class-related issues as the most challenging questions in contemporary post-Yugoslav societies. She argues that, by putting

12 "Kontekst u kojem djelo nastaje, i u kojem se odvija, je kontekst bh. društva za koje je neophodno pisati o junakinjama lezbejkama da bi se osvajao javni prostor i prostor političkog djelovanja." (Mešinović).

the minoritarian discourse about queer lives into perspective through broader questions of class, it becomes evident that the deprivation of rights forms the basis for a common struggle of a disenfranchised majority. Taking into account that neoliberal capitalism promotes the idea that society has reached a supposedly post-ideological state, characterized by individualization, she states that imagining alternatives to the current conditions becomes almost impossible. Therefore, Kalamujić highlights the political potential of literature to stimulate readers to imagine—we might quote one of Begagić's titles here—"better selves," since literature offers an enormous spectrum of different contents and forms. Without reducing literature's value to plain utilitarianism, Kalamujić sees literature's main function as returning to readers what they feel they have lost: "To offer us a broader picture of the world and ourselves."¹³

In an interview with Tamara Zablocki for the aforementioned website *lgbti.ba*, Begagić similarly acknowledges literature—besides having multifaceted aesthetic value—as a platform for political activism, stressing the importance of hopeful narratives that nurture optimistic visions of the societies they depict. Her newest collection, *Bolji mi* (2020, Better Selves), bears witness to the author's reparative stance: never fully neglecting the disheartening aspects of queer lives, Begagić's text, "Siguran Space" (Safe Space), talks about the openly lesbian teacher Nina who supports her student, Sanjin, in his coming-out process. His family's accepting reaction, which comes as a surprise for the student, is contrasted with Nina's experiences of being open about her sexuality in her public life as a teacher, while being unable to talk about it to her father in the private realm. Similar to Bella and Lejla from Kalamujić's story, Nina and Sanjin belong to two different generations. In this regard, the transgenerational change in their own perception, as well as their surroundings' perception of queer sexuality and identity, implies a hope for the better—or as Kalamujić's narrator puts it: "[t]here are better and more courageous ones to come."

13 "Da nam ponudi neku širu sliku svijeta i nas samih." (Kalamujić in Krivokapić, "Queer").

Queer Literature, Community Building, and the Public Sphere

Understood in a reparative sense, the selected examples of contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian queer literature reveal two dimensions of recognition offered by literary texts. First, recognition in a classical Felskian sense comprises the potential for readers to recognize themselves in literature. It's this dimension of recognition to which the two authors Kalamujić and Begagić, as well as the activist Mešinović, refer in their readerly practices, when they stress the reader's ability to question their own identity through literary examples that offer them a more nuanced picture of themselves. Second, the representation of moments of recognition in literary texts constitutes another dimension of recognition. In this sense, Begagić's character Ivona recognizes her girlfriend's desire to kiss her in public as her own, in a similar way as Kalamujić's narrator Lejla apprehends her own sexuality and identity by recognizing Bella as a lesbian: "Then, I could already understand you. Understand myself."¹⁴ Based on the previous considerations, the first dimension can be defined as recognition *through* the text, whereas the second can be identified as (a representation of) recognition *within* the text. As marked by the intimate public reading at SOC, both dimensions are intertwined in multifaceted ways. This opens up further questions about the correlations between queer literature, community building, and the public sphere.

In this regard, Mešinović's claim to "conquer the public space," when referring to the publication of Begagić's lesbian novel, as well as the lesbian protagonist within this novel, can be understood more profoundly through Felski's, Fraser's, and Warner's queer/feminist revisions of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere theory. Namely, these scholars emphasize narratives in general and literary narratives in particular as being constituent elements of *counterpublics*, which Nancy Fraser defines as "discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and

14 "Tad sam već mogla razumjeti tebe. Razumjeti sebe." (Kalamujić, *Zovite* 60).

needs" (Fraser 67). Highlighting the correlations between feminist literature and feminism as a social movement, Felski (*Beyond* 167) demonstrates the manifestation of a specifically feminist counterpublic. When considering literature's role in the constitution of counterpublics, Felski's work can be effectively connected to Michael Warner's understanding of publics—and, therefore, also counterpublics—as text-based “mediated publics” (61), “mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (56–57). To summarize, I return to Felski's previously mentioned question: “What does this text create, build, make possible?” (*Limits* 182). By breaking the aforementioned silence and narrating queer people's marginalized life stories from queer perspectives, a queer counterpublic is being established *in* as well as *through* the selected literary examples of contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature. Similar to Kalamujić's narrator, who believes that there are more courageous ones to come after her, I believe that these future authors' life writings will inspire further and more detailed investigations that connect literary studies, affect studies, and public sphere theory.

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