

Impossible returns to Kosovo? An intersectional approach to Kosovo Serbs' protracted displacement

Author: Dr des Marija Grujić (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Email: marija.grujic@gmail.com

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Introduction

Contrary to the 60-year old prevailing attitude by the UNCHR that populations displaced by conflicts and wars ought to return to their sending societies, going back ‘home’¹ is often impossible and even unwanted. In my empirical research conducted among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Kosovo who have been residing in Serbia since 1999, I recorded a similar trend. Namely, only 5% of those who fled after the NATO bombing and Kosovo Albanian paramilitary appraisals returned.² The majority of my interlocutors stated that the reasons that led to forced displacement remained unchanged. The second wave of displacement (2004) and the independence of Kosovo (2008) further discouraged any plans for return. In Serbia, the IDPs’ status is addressed predominantly within the policies of “durable solutions”, which UNCHR defines as “Any means by which the situation of refugees can be satisfactorily and permanently resolved to enable them to live **normal lives**” (my emphasis).³

In the context of protracted displacement⁴ due to territorial disputes, return is a norm of protection and solution for which international/national actors aim, even when, in reality, no return is foreseeable. How do (im)possibilities of going back to spatialities and temporalities of a past homes impact individual plans and attitudes about no return?

The paper will address this question by taking an intersectional biographical approach to narratives about displacement/emplacement and belonging to home(lands) to which one ought to return (Grujić 2022 forthcoming; Lutz 2018; Lutz and Davis 2005).⁵ To do so, I chose the case of Olivera – a middle-aged woman, former municipality employee and novelist who fled

¹ For being concise, in this article I write home without any special punctuation even though I acknowledge the complexity and weight that this notion implies. On this topic I wrote together with Safet HadžiMuhamedović, See (HadžiMuhamedović and Grujić 2019).

² Statistics on the number of Kosovo Serbs are unreliable but, considering the number of IDPs (among whom they are the majority), it is possible to estimate a rough picture. A small number of people (under 10%) consider return. The most common reasons stated were security, reconstruction, employment and property restitution. See, (Serbia 2018)

³ Commonly, international actors pursue three central “durable solutions”: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. Return is the overarching norm for ending displacement and solving refugee/IDP status from the standpoint of both national and international actors. See UNCHR Glossary of Terms (2006) <https://www.refworld.org/es/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=5d82b8fa4>

⁴ I use protracted displacement and protracted internal displacement as synonyms to connote legal categorization of the IDP status. In the context of the status quo of political conflict over territory, both – the notion of protracted and prolonged internal displacement – emphasizes the temporality of IDPs status and uncertainties of return.

⁵ This article and discussion about return in the context of Kosovo Serbs’ protracted displacement is part of a wider research and fieldwork I conducted in Serbia (2012-2014) for the purposes of my doctoral thesis under the title *Belonging in unhomey homelands – intersections between gendered nationalism and internal displacement among Kosovo Serbs*. It questions discursive assumptions about the homeliness of belonging to supposed ethno-national homelands, as well as the gendered aspects of the notions of home and homeland among people who, ever since they have experienced flight, reside in internal displacement and have no returning plans. (Grujić 2022 forthcoming).

Kosovo's capital of Priština in 1999. The multifacetedness of her biographical account offered rich materials for discussing various points of intersections between gender, nation/ethnicity/religion, age and socio-economic background.

I divided the article into three sections. **Section one** summarises Olivera's biographical account. To signal the reader the descriptive part of Olivera's life storytelling – reconstructed from the material gathered from multiple sources – I employ an italic script.⁶ In addition to the interview I did with Olivera in 2012, I quote the Kosovo Oral History Network (KOHN),⁷ to whom Olivera gave an oral history interview a few years after I met her.⁸ **Section two** is on Olivera's familial narratives and the flight experience as a memory frame. Transformations of gender relations – i.e. differences between Yugoslav socialism and post-socialist re-traditionalization of family norms and gendered aspects of IDPs' women's inclusion/exclusion to the collective are discussed in **section three**. In the concluding remarks, I bring together my findings by interconnecting Olivera's narratives about return with those of two other daughters' and academic authors who engaged with the topic of familial narratives of return – Marianne Hirsch and Lila Abu-Lughod. Their fathers, like Olivera's, transmitted their experience of flight and return to their children. These intergenerational transmissions about the return demonstrate the significance of the situated context for understanding the outcomes of protracted displacement – as it is with the Kosovo-Serbia conflict.

The political status of Kosovo Serb IDPs in Serbia is not a univocal marker of national belonging or nonbelonging – in Serbia, they are among co-ethnics. As poignantly summoned by one of the most-heard statements in Serbia since the 1980s, “Kosovo is Serbia”, and according to this official nationalist politics, the IDPs' homeland is Kosovo and Serbia is their host society. Their displacement/emplacement suggests specific, as Zala Volcic notes, “spatial reconfiguration of belonging” (Volcic 2005).⁹ Kosovo Serb national belonging/IDP nonbelonging situates their relations to the hosts, as the latter are ‘at home’ while the first are

⁶ Besides the interview Olivera gave me in 2012, she published diaries on her 1998–1999 experience of war and NATO bombing in a book called the *Labyrinth of Life* (In Serbian: *Lavirint života*) See (Budimir 2011). Also, during the analysis, I learned that some parts of her life-story appear in a short video production financed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (Red Cross) as part of the project on Women Facing War (2001), which she did indirectly mention in the interview.

⁷ The reference to this material is clearly stated, and unless stated otherwise, the rest of the quotes is from the interview I conducted with Olivera

⁸ In 2016, they published an oral history interview with Olivera, which became available online in English, Albanian and Serbian. <https://oralhistorykosovo.org/olivera-budimir/#:~:text=Olivera%20Budimir%20was%20born%20in,the%20aftermath%20of%20the%20war.>

⁹ Other scholars also elaborated on IDP/refugee nonbelonging in the context of wars that led to the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia by focusing on the othering of co-ethnic IDPs/refugees in “ethnic homelands” (Čapo Žmegač 2005; Carolin Leutloff-Grandits 2015; Duijzings 1996; Leutloff-Grandits 2010).

waiting to return, and thus are at home and not at home'. Namely, belonging depends on the right to stay/ return, and none is a guarantee of homeliness of either home or the supposed ethno-national homeland (Grujić 2022, forthcoming).

Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos (2015) argue that in the displacement/emplacement, the notion of home is multi-layered and simultaneously refers to territorial belonging, family status, property, and country of origin interconnecting over different gendered registers. In this vein, the authors adopt a feminist standpoint to home and refer to gendered aspects of daily routines; they differ between making a home and homemaking to stress relevant power hierarchies that these social processes involve and the role of cultural reproduction of ethno-national and religious traditions. IDPs continuously reformulate, as Brun and Fábos (2015:10) note, the day-to-day practices of home and homemaking due to a "...precariousness of insecure leaving space..." and a long-term "stuckness" in liminal categories.

Transformations of home amid displacement/emplacement contribute to a sense of unease regarding – as Stef Jansen writes for the context of post-war Bosnia – possibilities of returning to what people sense as "troubled locations" because homes are a dynamic social process and not some static, fixed point (Jansen 2007:16).

These various meanings of home in the scholarship on protracted displacement sharpened my reading and attentiveness to linkages between gender and age in narratives about return, and as the next section shows, for some IDPs, it is a rather unmaking and unbelonging home that mark attitudes toward return as a spatial and temporal project.¹⁰

"Home is something else" - Olivera's familial traumas and unbelonging home

Olivera (54) was born in Serbia as her father was a refugee from Kosovo who fled in 1943. Her parents met shortly after WWII, and when the war ended, he was about to go back to Priština – his hometown, but, due to a snowfall, had to stay in the area where Olivera's mother lived (circa 200 km away from Priština). The couple married shortly after and would in the next ten years parent four children, of whom Olivera was the only daughter.¹¹

¹⁰ Together with other scholars, I understand temporality a crucial aspect for interpreting unbelonging – a discomfort and (dis)attachment – a static notion of home/homeland (HadžiMuhamedović 2018; HadžiMuhamedović and Grujić 2019).

¹¹ In the KOHN interview, she firstly stated that they married in 1946 and then changed in another paragraph to 1956. See KOHN (2016:9).

Olivera did most of her schooling between 1962 and mid-1970s. She was a good pupil, so after secondary school she continued on to the medical high school in Priština. Although her parents had no formal education (her father was a tinsmith and mother a housewife), Olivera's schooling, as a female child, was not a topic of discussion between her parents, i.e., it was normal that she should go to school. She attended the medical high school but did not mention any aspiration to become a doctor or nurse; however, she continued education in the same field in Belgrade. She travelled to Serbia only to take exams and lived in Kosovo where – parallel to these studies – Olivera also pursued degrees in two further fields; nonetheless, she did not finish these studies and opted for a different career path.

In 1971, Olivera got a permanent job in Priština; she was then in her early twenties. She did not explain the circumstances under which she decided to apply for this job and not pursue further education, but she did mention that a “secure track” was preferential. In her words: “[Yes,] it was [my] first [job]. And the only one that I...[had] and as I got a place [in] the public sector, and [work] places such as Priština City Council, offered safety. So, I stayed there, and it was great, as I had a good status, and it was good.

*In the 1980s Olivera, like other members of the Yugoslav urban working class, worked and travelled on holidays. She became a passionate traveller (something she said tried to continue now, after becoming a novelist and almost being retired). On one of the holidays she met her future husband, who was a travel agent and also from Priština. The husband's family, like her own, had a migration history and Olivera emphasised that they were settlers from Lika (today's Croatia). She said that he was not “**originally from Kosovo**” but that he was born there.¹²*

After the marriage, Olivera moved for the first time out of her parental family house to live with her husband. The couple lived in a small apartment that Olivera continuously wished to change but, as they did not have children, her husband assumed the housing application would not be eligible.¹³ Eventually, they sold the apartment in the mid-1990s; amidst the state of war

¹² In her words “his parents were little when King Alexander populated Kosovo with Serbs because there was lack [of people] at that time due to the fleeing and emigration, I guess, I don't have knowledge about that time, of course I don't know, I only know it historically” (KOHN 2016:11). Such aspects of Serb migrations from and to Kosovo (e.g., her father's refuge or in-laws settlement) suggest that spatiality of belonging – and its histories – are important for Olivera's sense of belonging and home. These she often linked to the family's background – place one's “parents” come from, as I explain in the next sections. Her mother was from Serbia, but she understood herself as primary from Kosovo – place she lived longest and experienced the most important parts of her life. In her words: “In fact, I have always lived in Priština with my parents, my brothers and then my husband, that's where I got married [...]”

¹³ In socialist Yugoslavia, workers had an option to apply for state funded housing, which was mostly subsidized by the state. The size of the apartment was linked to one's social location: marriage status, number of children

in Kosovo and official regulations of not selling property, the two of them began their homing in a newly acquired property. As I understood from Olivera's description, this apartment was situated in a modern and ethnically diverse housing block in Priština.

Olivera did not say much about their life before the war that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia (1990–1995). Until 1999, she and her husband had, in her words, a “settled and normal life”, and she repeated six times “normal life” at the opening of the interview. Their life was harmonious, and as Olivera explained, they lived as they wished, under their own terms. Olivera admired her husband and emphasised that his views were “cosmopolitan”, underlining that he embodied a peaceful and gentle character and that, importantly, he did not object to them not having children.

*In the interview she gave me in 2012, I did not perceive the topic of children as central to her self-presentation and their life, but I was hesitant about asking further questions. I sensed it was important, even though Olivera hardly spoke about it, and this intuition made sense after reading her book and the KOHN interview. In the latter, she stated that she had “**huge psychological trauma**” from not being a parent, and that she “**couldn't get over it**”, which led to her efforts and persuasion to do everything possible for her to conceive. Her husband did not agree and was surprised by her fixation on parenthood, while she commented on his reluctance thus: “**As if men always have the right to ask questions, and [we] women [...]** there's **nothing** we should ask about. **But I am not that type** (KOHN 2016:13, my emphasis).¹⁴*

Between 1997 and 1998, at the highest point of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, Olivera's husband finally agreed for them to undergo IVF (in vitro fertilisation), thus reversing her unfulfilled dream of having children. Therefore, one of the probable reasons for them acquiring a bigger apartment in this highly unstable period was that they expected to become parents; sadly, she had a miscarriage.

In late June 1999, Olivera fled to Serbia with her brothers and their sick father, underlining the impossibility to bring the body of her dead mother, which was left behind. At the last

and accommodation status. Thus, those who resided in multigenerational households, with parents and who owned property, had less chance of getting an apartment or a bank loan for building a house.

¹⁴ Olivera thought of herself as having control over her body – which was not uncommon for women of her social background who had full access to contraception and abortion being liberalised in Yugoslavia in 1969 (Rada Drezgic 2004) – and that she needed him to agree on finding alternative ways for them to have children. To stress her personal ways of conforming/resisting the existing norms, Olivera often employed an expression of her being a specific “type” and, hence, not like other women. This characteristic supported her to achieve her goals in the past; however, in the present – post-flight settings, it was something that she related to her gendered nonbelonging and power relations in post-socialist Serbia, as I further elaborate in the next sections.

moment, without prior discussion and contrary to Olivera's wishes, her husband decided to stay behind and not flee to Serbia. Olivera did not state the exact reasons for his decision. They never met again. Just a month later, he disappeared, and Olivera would not know what happened to him for almost two years until the Red Cross excavated a mass grave near Priština. The impossibility to do anything from a distance was devastating for Olivera, and she felt like "drowning".

Between 1999 and 2001, Olivera entirely dedicated her life to finding her husband, dead or alive. In 2001, the long DNA identification process of human remains confirmed her husband's identity, as he was found without head. Olivera then decided to accept his remains; however, she continued to feel like she was a lack of closure. In her words: "Sadly, but until today, I cannot know – until today – was that [the DNA process of identification] for real [and if it confirmed that] I [...], and if I really collected my husband, or somebody else... **I did what I could, and I could not do more.** Next to that fight – to find him – I also had my **inner fights**" (my emphasis).

In 2010, under the auspices of the NGO from which she shortly worked, Olivera travelled to Priština, which was the first time she had returned to her hometown since 1999. "I do not even know if I would go again 'down there', 'down there' again", described Olivera her discomfort, clearly stating that a return was not something she foresees in the future.

When I met Olivera in 2012, she was settled in Belgrade and had no plans to ever return to Priština but not because her home was in Serbia. In her words: "My life stopped there, because my life, **my home was in Priština, my life was in Priština.** I have an apartment here, **but I don't have a home, it's not a home**" (KOHN 2016:35).

This summary of Olivera's life story situates her decision not to return to Kosovo and her agential positioning amid a precarious displacement/emplacement settings. It shows that what happened to Olivera's family is a memory frame for how she remembered the home she shared with her husband and evaluated the present living arrangements and the future (e.g., return).

Before 1999, the couple did not experience the events in Kosovo as a radical political transformation, nor did they significantly change their way of living, as they had daily obligations and also continued to travel. Olivera explained that "normal life" ended with the NATO bombing when "hell" began. She noted that they had thought of leaving Kosovo and

going to Serbia even during the bombing, but they were afraid of losing their jobs. When the bombardment stopped and KFOR entered Kosovo, a sense of normalcy was not recovered.¹⁵

The NATO bombing (March to June 1999), the flight and the tragedy regarding her husband, would intensify Olivera's traumatic experience as they did not have time and opportunity to continue with the procedure. I will further explore this aspect of her flight positioning in the following sections about Olivera's unbelonging and usage of the notions of trauma, thus the dissociation from a possibility of homely home without her husband and after the violence they experienced during this period.

Olivera unbelonged home – and what homeliness meant to her in the past – within a multifaceted context that also transformed what home and 'normal life' meant for other people in post-socialist Serbia and Kosovo. Also, a gendered nationalists' refashioning of familial norms devalued Olivera's personal achievements – education, employment, mobility – all gained during socialism when a young woman from a lower working-class family could study and live independently. As I will further argue in the next sections, familial experience of flight – her father's forced displacement, their return and material and symbolic loss of belongings – contributed to Olivera's disassociation from the possibility of a return to her hometown because she detached herself from home (i.e. spatiality of a family house, apartment) so that she can symbolically take back the "control over [her] life" (Brun, Fàbos, and El-Abed 2017).

Olivera's narratives show that home represented what she built through her employment and cultural investments i.e. mobility, travels; it also embedded Olivera's experience of violence and loss. In addition, home referred to the familial background and origin. In narratives about her father's and husband's migration background, it connoted family roots, ancestors, i.e., belonging to designated localities, towns and regions and not necessarily only to national or ethnic belonging. In this context, Olivera emphasised that she, her father and her brothers are from Priština. However, she affiliated her husband to the family's colonial-settler migration from Lika to Kosovo and her mother to Blace and Priština– her birthplace and place of burial.

In Olivera's narratives, return and home were framed by and through an intersection between, on the one side, a heteronormative, nuclear family gendered ideal; on the other side, Olivera's

¹⁵ To understand the locality of her belonging and the perception of Kosovo Serbs' status among other Kosovo nationalities during this period (1990s) in Kosovo, and specifically of Kosovo Albanians, it is important to note Olivera's silence about the contrast between her perception of an end of "normal life" (NATO bombing), and of the majority of the Kosovo Albanian population. They could not maintain regular employment nor had a "normal life" during almost ten years of Serbian governance under Milošević (cf. Mertus 1999); however, Olivera did not elaborate those socio-political changes.

autonomy and ‘modern’ femininity– all gained through education and financial autonomy. In the past, these were facets of her national belonging in socialist Yugoslavia. But, in the present they articulated gendered nonbelonging of an IDP woman of a “certain age”, to use Olivera’s expression. Overall, home referred to intimate and familial relations. However, these were not clearly separated from home in its political meaning (e.g. the ethno-national homeland, host society). Olivera’s oscillations of belonging between nonbelonging and unbelonging thus situated these dissonances between the past and present opportunities – importantly, she did not speak of herself as a victim.

To understand how remembering home impact this absence of wishes and hopes about return, in the following sections I will first contrast Olivera’s and her father’s flight experiences and situate their return journey by employing Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory. Second, I will discuss gendered aspects of Olivera’s status of nonbelonging – as an IDP, a woman of a “certain age” and a widow.

Postmemory of home and return

In Olivera’s narratives, flight experience and return plans intersected with the recollections about her father’s narratives – and him passing them on to his children – about life of a refugee as well as of a returnee. In 1943 he returned to Kosovo after twenty years, and his longing to go back, Olivera described as follows:

“[The father] wished to return, because **we** [Olivera’s family] **have roots in Kosovo, in Priština, so we returned** – I and my brothers, everybody” (my emphasis). If she was not born in Kosovo, how could Olivera describe her father’s return as a family’s return to a place that she had never visited before?

In *Ghosts of Home*, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer reported on a similar view about return – to a place that Hirsch had not visited before and yet felt connected to through acts of postmemory transmission. Hirsch stated that her father understood their return journey/visit to his hometown in Ukraine as a homecoming and that he (together with his wife) hoped to transmit to their daughter a sense of homeliness of belonging to a specific – familial – location.¹⁶ For Hirsch’s father, home was an intimate and familial place, and it also had a political meaning – it was “homeland” as the usage of the local German word “Heimat”

¹⁶ In his words: “The truth of the matter is, we would not have decided to go back there now if it were not for Marianne – because Marianne doesn’t have a Heimat [home], and we want to show her ours because ours is also in some ways hers” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010:8).

suggested. To return meant a recuperation of belonging which was symbolically damaged, but not lost.¹⁷ It was an affective and cultural investment in the sense of belonging to the next generation – his daughter and her children. This return project was also something that he shared with the daughter through the transmission of knowledge about attachments to local languages, affiliation to people and their birthplace and hometown.

Hirsch's parents' nostalgic yearning for their lost sense of homeliness of homeland invoked for their daughter a traumatic experience of *their* loss that they transferred in remembering places where they came from and from which they had escaped.¹⁸ The past home of the parents, the place of which they had fond memories, was their "unhomely homeland", to use W. G. Sebald's terminology.¹⁹

Similarly, Olivera received from her father a sense of attachment to his hometown of Priština and the warning about this sense of homeliness to particular locations and materiality. To his children, he e.g. transmitted knowledge about interethnic relations in Kosovo and sorrows about his dispossessed family's house. Olivera said the following about her father's return and experience of violence:

He [father] has never got over of this **youth trauma**, and always told us [Olivera and her brothers], yes, you work now, but eventually, you will leave everything to Šiptars [Kosovo Albanians].²⁰ And we [Olivera and her brothers] would tell to him: **"Let it go, the war is over, long time ago, you continued to live in another time"** [before

¹⁷ A similar wish for a return journey often occurred among Jewish persons whose family survived persecution or were death camp survivors. When the socio-political context permitted and movement across borders was possible, some, like Hirsch's family, brought children or grandchildren to show them where they or their parents came from. These were places of belonging in what used to be a hostile territory and are still remembered/transmitted through ambivalent affective registers of homely/unhomely homes where they/family experienced violence and expulsion.

¹⁸ Familial narratives about violence, Nazi persecutions, displacement and longing for the familiar places also transformed the meaning of home and affected how homeliness/unhomeliness intertwined with people and places. As the authors noted (ibid. 154): "Such myths of origin tend to undergird the identity of children who grow up under the shadows of their parents' stories of survival, transmitted to them in unconnected fragments". In this and her other writings on postmemory, Hirsch explained that when she was a child, she began to know and remember Jewish persecutions (in an act of postmemory) and thus inhabit ghostly memories of times before she was born, places she had never directly experienced but still felt conflicting attachments. Ukrania and her parents' hometown were such places. Thus, 'bringing memories back to their place' is as dangerous as it can be rewarding (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010:11).

¹⁹ This phenomenon is recorded in the analysis of the literature of Jewish refugees who distanced themselves from "unhomely homelands", "*Unheimliche Heimat*" (Sebald 1990).

²⁰ See KOHN (2016:3) The Serbian term for Kosovo Albanians has a pejorative meaning and its use in Serbia and Kosovo is intended to downgrade their status as a minority group (Guzina 2003:50). Olivera, like some other of my interlocutors insisted on this derogatory term for Albanians and employed it persistently (cf. Grujic 2022).

socialist Yugoslavia]”. And he would respond: “All right, all right, but you will see” (my emphasis).

Olivera described her father’s trauma as something that marked him. According to Olivera, he could not get over the loss of the family’s house – for which he lacked proof of ownership – even though the trajectory of his return suggested that he voluntarily decided not to reclaim the property. He had his reasons, but what the father tried to convey to his children, they could understand only after a personal experience of flight. She further noted: “Sadly, during the war [1998-1999], **we could not tell him that he was right**, as he was already senile, and could not understand. **And then we fled, he got out together with us** [Olivera, her brothers, their wives and children], we also got him out to Blace [a town in southern Serbia]” (ibid.)

As a memory frame, flight marked a point in which Olivera began to re-learn the context of her past home. Even though the last quote at a first reading might suggest a specific generational transmission of loss and the violence of the Other – Kosovo Albanians – as those in the past expelled and took Kosovo Serbs’ property, it is crucial to situate Olivera’s narrative of her father’s loss and her usage of a pejorative name for Kosovo Albanians in the context of hegemonic discourses on suffering. In her biography, Olivera re-articulated her father’s flight and set it in a ready-made narrative framework formed by Serb propaganda of the 1990s (Čolović 2016; Jansen 2003; Živković 2011).

Intimate trauma of not having children and the father’s trauma emerged within differently gendered registers of home. The latter embedded loss within a family history with its narrative framework of their collective victimhood as Serbs, cyclically forced out by the Albanians. But it was Olivera, and not her father, who labelled this experience as “youth trauma”. In the past, she understood the father’s distancing from material belongings as a warning to his children that they should not attach to their houses and apartments, but only from the present (post-flight temporalities), she related this to unhomeliness and trauma. Olivera did not describe her father’s sense of homeliness as the joy of parenthood, but she emphasised that he opted not to seek the return of his family property as his sons’ wellbeing was more important to him than a (material) house or other property.

An intersectional perspective to Olivera’s narratives of return supported me to understand how different types of power relations (i.e. gender and age as social categories of difference) impact Olivera’s views about return and gendered registers of home. Her remembering of the father’s return exposes differences between her (a member of a socialist urban class) and her father’s

(traditional, patriarchal, masculine) struggle to belong to and “make home” (Brun and Fábos 2015). From an imagined standpoint of her father’s lack of socialist upbringing – the loss of the family house also meant trauma because it endangered his masculine status as a breadwinner and property owner. For her (from the standpoint of her personal flight experience), this struggle meant finding employment, being an independent woman; for him – according to Olivera’s postmemory, it meant residing in the same place where the family house was – coming back to familial symbolic roots of her ancestors.

Hirsch noted (2008:106): “Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up”. The assemblage of postmemory layers of past, present and future home before and after multiple forced displacement(s) and return(s) contained Olivera’s remembering of hers and father’s flights as well as possibilities of returning to one’s hometown and spatiality of belonging in the displacement/emplacement.

For these reasons, Olivera’s postmemory of returning home rested on the ambivalence of the socio-political context of an urban Yugoslav upbringing. In the quote above, Olivera described this generational difference as “living in another time”. Importantly, Olivera did not nuance these differences but focused on family matters and partly depoliticised the context of her flight experience. Her present situation and uncertainties confronted Olivera’s remembering of the past and future plans or sense of loss. The belated character of these memories was linked with her recollections about father’s narratives about home and return, and Oliver’s readings of his, as she said, “youth trauma” which stayed with him until the end of his life, and which he transmitted to his children.

Contrary to Olivera’s interpretation, the narrative about her father’s return project suggested that his intention was similar to that of Hirsch’s father. He returned to live in the town he remembered and felt as his familial and intimate home. Nevertheless, the ideas and hopes invested in his return project are overshadowed by Olivera’s re-reading of her flight without a husband and her experience of his violent death. Her father’s return was seen through the lens of her experience of violence. This repetition of familial traumas of displacement also explains an absence of return plans in Olivera’s life trajectories.

In this tension – between past and present knowledge about return and violence– emerged her disbelief in the possibility of having a homely home and this was also a source of her resilience,

political awareness and even sense of pride. In Olivera's words: "But I somehow **managed to subsist** [after the flight to Serbia] and, well, **to live again from my own work** and again **to create my own rhythm; I mean, to have my own apartment, to have my own roof**. This does not mean that I have my home. **Home is something else** (my emphasis).

To return to her hometown would require hope and a plan that she would either recuperate or start over (as her father did). Olivera's social status of a married working woman had a different meaning in the present context of post-socialism. She described her homing and post-flight life in Serbia as a fight – for the truth about her husband and for herself. As she said, "**next to that fight – to find him – I also had my inner fights**" (my emphasis). She did not finish her thought, and she left out the details of this – her fight – but she noted that it was not easy to find a job in "her age".

In Olivera's postmemories of flight and return, home stood for safety but also for norms of femininity and longing to be accepted as you are, which is often not the case in either the parental or designated ethno-national homeland. That is how she understood the treatment that her father experienced during his 20 years of exile in Serbia. They called him "klonfer",²¹ said Olivera, "He was everywhere, but had his roots nowhere" (cf. KOHN 2016:9). Later, when she recounted her post-flight emplacement and their decision to stay in her mother's family property, she commented that a "refugee is a foreigner everywhere" (ibid.)

Olivera connected homeliness to economic independence and an autonomous life under her own terms ("my home") and her pace ("rhythm"), security ("roof"). At the same time, Olivera disassociated herself from these single elements of what home was to her before the flight, as she could not recuperate her losses. Like her father, Olivera was a breadwinner and a fighter, and she found employment in Serbia – despite the gendered obstacles she faced (e.g. age). But this imagined future home without her husband – in the post-socialist society with its re-traditionalised norms of home and family – could not receive the recognition of her past home.

In sum, Olivera received (in an act of postmemory) a knowledge of flight and fragility of a project of return to spatiality and temporality of the homes left behind. For her, as for her father, home connoted materiality of a particular house, apartment and locations of her familial histories, however, not in an absolute manner. Home was not a house, nor just a spatiality of belonging, in Olivera narratives, it was a temporality of gendered body in time – both of her

²¹*Klonfer* is a colloquial term for a master who works with tin or tinplate, a tinsmith or tinman. See KOHN (2016:9)

ageing body and her husband's dead body. On the one hand, oscillations of belonging – i.e. nonbelonging (as an IDP, newcomer, refugee) expose a tension between context and politics that define inclusionary and exclusionary state practices, including handling “durable solutions” – i.e. resettlements to the Serb dominated areas in Kosovo.²² On the other hand, the notion of unbelonging aims to stress agential positioning in precarious settings and limited spaces of opportunities.

Gendered nonbelonging and return

Olivera's traumas – her father's trauma of having to leave Kosovo, her trauma of not having children and her trauma of losing her husband – are significant elements of how she experienced protracted displacement. She openly expressed loyalties of national belonging, but she was not bounded by them and was open in her criticism of the state's treatment of IDPs, including the process of “durable solutions” – including the conditions in the collective centre of refugees for IDPs, lack of assistance – as well as plans to resettle the population to the Serb dominated areas in Kosovo.²³ Nevertheless, there is another aspect of her sense of nonbelonging, which she links to her femininity and symbolic embodiment of difference.

I employ the notion of gendered nonbelonging to emphasise various dissonances between the past and present modes of homeliness/unhomeliness that are implicated in the return as a future-looking project (in Olivera's words, “Home is where the family is, where there are creations, where there are plans”).

Together with other Serb IDP women, Olivera was exposed to the ‘burden of representation’ of national trauma and feminisation of war violence as they became symbolical signifiers of the nation's loss of a ‘primordial’ homeland (Nagel 1998; Yuval-Davis 1997). Despite these gendered nationalist discourses, Olivera wanted to achieve, in her words, a more “contemporary” view on Kosovo Serbs' personal losses. For these reasons, she told me in the interview that she intentionally opted not to use a cover photo for her book on which she would be in front of a church or dressed black or next to ruins and other remnants that symbolise conflict and its destructions. According to Olivera, such ‘cover-image’ would be a ‘traditional’ representation of women. These were known images of what she termed as “Kosovo story”,

²² In the broader context of my empirical study, oscillations of belonging or lack of return plans do not imply that my Kosovo Serb IDPs interlocutors' past homes were either homely or unhomely or that homeliness of their dwelling at the presently inhabited places always meant estrangement.

²³ Kosovo is unofficially divided between the majority Serb region in northern Kosovo and majority Albanian region in southern Kosovo. Importantly, such nationalists' division oversee Kosovo's multiethnic past and leads to erasure of difference and polarisation between univocal ‘us’ and ‘them’.

and she wanted to, as she said to “trick the people” and inspire them to learn about a “different Kosovo story” – her life-story, individual pain and struggles.

Olivera was aware of the hegemonic discourses about suffering and their patriarchal and gendered nationalist context – an assumption that men should ‘protect’ women. Her position in her family/state was an exception to the norms that she described as embodying character traits of a specific “type”. In Olivera’s words: “**I am such a type that I have the feeling that I protected my three brothers more than they protected me**, because [my parents thought] “She can do everything on her own, she doesn’t need protection ...” (my emphasis).

Olivera presented herself as a woman from Kosovo who was actively reversing gendered roles (“can do everything on her own”). In socialist Yugoslavia, women had equal rights; however, not all women had equal opportunities to enjoy these rights, and urban/rural differences continued to play an important role in women achieving economic independence (Bonfiglioli, Kahlina, and Zaharijević 2015; Hofman 2011). Belonging to a “specific type” of women supported Olivera to achieve personal goals, e.g. to obtain the education and employment of her choice and to travel.

In Olivera’s positionings, Serbia was a place where she – the resident of Kosovo – felt nonbelonging in the past and present. She said: “I remember once when I went to [Belgrade to] submit or present an exam, I don’t know, I don’t remember. And while I was at a kiosk buying a [post]card to send to Priština, the saleswoman asked me, ‘Where are you from?’ I said, ‘From Priština’ [and then] she asked [me], “Are there **such girls** in Priština?” (KOHN 2016:7).

Yugoslav symbolic geographies classified Kosovo women as “backward”. However, Olivera was a member of a Kosovo urban class; she was educated and embodied what the saleswoman perceived as ‘modern’ and not traditional femininity – her imagined image of women from Priština. This interpretation of the saleswoman’s reasoning and reaction to an embodiment of Olivera’s femininity demonstrated an intersection between gendered nationalist narratives and “nesting orientalism” (Bakić-Hayden 1995) of Yugoslav symbolic geographies.

Olivera was successful at “passing” (Ahmed 2004; Ahmed and Anne-MarieFortier 2003) as someone else, but that was not a guarantee of belonging – she was ‘at home and not at home’ in Serbia. Olivera’s social status contributed to her imagined proximity and distance to Kosovo women and the symbolism of their gendered nonbelonging. In her words: “I didn’t feel any need for Belgrade. I loved my place, my Priština: I mean mine, I don’t say mine, the city belongs to no one but some of us embrace it”. Olivera’s recollections note a gaze to which the

population from Kosovo was exposed within the Yugoslav symbolic geographies. As she said: “Maybe **those** [Serbian residents] here in Belgrade thought that **we ‘down there’** [Kosovo residents] **were something [different] as if we had fallen from another world, I don’t know, from the under-ground**”. This “down there” lower status of was intensified through nationalists’ propaganda about Kosovo Serbs’ oppression and Kosovo Albanians’ as the backward and violent Other. Olivera did not invest in the reproduction of one-sided discourses on Serb collective suffering, but this also meant that she silenced narratives about othering that predominantly addressed the backwardness of Kosovo Albanian women and men as ethnic Others (Žarkov 2007).

Also, Olivera belonged to a class of women from Kosovo’s urban areas who had a sense of control over their bodies and means to pursue their goal – including engaging in the IVF procedure that she did in Belgrade. However, she needed her husband’s approval and cooperation; still, as someone autonomous and economically independent, she also felt she was in a position to convince him on the matter of biological reproduction.

In the context of Yugoslavia and post-socialist Serbia, Rada Drezgić (2004:109) describes such gendered division in heteronormative partnerships as “female centered procreative accountability”. She further states (ibid.) that during the 1990s in Serbia, such practices were “reinforced by a confluence of expert, popular and religious discourses in Serbia”. The author argued that this did not imply that they were “passive victims” of masculine domination but that they were active in reproducing hegemonic gender roles and relations. But, times have changed, including the scope of possibilities and opportunities that women (and especially IDP women) have had in post-socialist Serbia. In the past, women like Olivera could study even if their parents did not have university degrees or money to support their living costs. Education was free in socialist Yugoslavia and working-class children whose parents did not have formal education themselves have attended university and had a choice to become economically independent.

Olivera learned first-hand about Serb nationalists insisting on collective suffering and neglecting of social rights. For these reasons, her autonomy was central and thus she did not expect protection from either family or state. Her gendered position of a middle-aged widowed IDP woman situated Olivera’s nonbelonging within nationalists’ discourses. The inability to become a parent intensified other losses and unwillingness to return as her former – pre-flight social status was completely transformed. What she used to have before the flight was devalued

in the new settings (post-war, post-socialist Serbian society). Instead of being praised for being a survivor, she felt excluded because her gendered status of a wife of someone who died in Kosovo did not correspond to hegemonic discourses about Kosovo Serbs' suffering. In Olivera's words:

I constantly try, but ... **ones who suffer** [in the dominant discourses about Kosovo] **are mainly mothers, sisters**, while the **wives only allegedly suffer**. Yes, I lost my husband, but I also **lost the right to be a mother, to be a grandmother**...my life stopped there, because life, **my home was in Priština**, my life was in Priština. I have an apartment here, **but I don't have a home, it's not a home. Home is where the family is, where there are creations, where there are plans** [...] (KOHN 2016:35, my emphasis).

Moreover, not occupying either a mother or sister role, and her gendered status of a widowed Kosovo Serb did not 'qualify' Olivera for a nationalist image of a woman as a passive mourner that symbolises the nation's loss. Like in the epic poems about Kosovo heroism and victimhood, noted Aleksandra Sasha Milićević, in her research on masculinity, nationalism and war participation during the 1990s: "Women are seen as a support for warriors, who let men go to fulfil their duty (to fight) and are subsequently prepared to nurse them, or quietly honour them in death" (Sasha Milićević 2006:270). But, as she added, "mothers are the only women who really mattered".

In a gendered nationalist setting where Serb women are seen as bearer of the nation, the lack of children and Olivera's infertile age placed her lower on the gendered hierarchy of victims that can represent the grandeur of the Serbian nation's loss. She was not seen as either a biological or cultural reproducer of the nation, but a reminder of the absurdness of war, and for these reasons, also absent from hegemonic discourses on collective suffering.

In her narratives, Olivera linked Kosovo Serb nonbelonging to the past and present of their living conditions to both Kosovo and Serbia. She also self-reflects about her past naïve thinking and trust in the Serbian politicians. These recollections stressed the Kosovo Serbs' status in Kosovo – and that the IDPs were victims of Serb nationalists' politics of exclusion, but she did not connect them with violence against Kosovo Albanians during the 1990s in Kosovo. Therefore, neither Olivera nor others who were complicit or had participated in the enforcement of the Slobodan Milošević-led exclusionary politics of belonging, were obliged to go beyond personal discomfort when remembering the past and thus act from a position of

political responsibility as those who had witnessed important political events and had linked to an imagined national Self.²⁴

The violent loss and the spectrum of violence that followed the husband's disappearance have shaken Olivera's world. Imagined gendered hierarchies place women 'lower' than men, and they are represented as requiring masculine protection in peace and war. Her facets of belonging – identification with hometown, employment and everything else that constituted home as material, symbolic and emotional investments – did not vanish, but they lost the value they previously had: certainty, security and homeliness. For these reasons, return is not an option for Olivera, and she was unbelonging home and disassociating her Self from a possibility of homemaking at “troubled locations” (Jansen 2007).

Conclusion

This article addressed different temporalities of home in the aftermath of violence and amid (im)possibilities of return. In particular, it focused on the intersection between gender and age in the familial narratives about violence and unbelonging home. By drawing on the case of Olivera, I showed that the project of return and a hope of its success depends on home and its gendered logic of the domestic sphere and heteronormative ideals.

Olivera had an apartment but for her, having a “roof” over her head was a reminder that, in her words, “home is something else”. Home was not only a place for home making – something she could have in her apartment in Belgrade. At the same time, she explained that she could not make home either there or back in Kosovo. Olivera struggled with return and dissociated herself from a possibility of recuperating home she had in the past with her husband. Her home project was frozen in the impossibility of going back to home as a place. In narratives about the flight from Kosovo, traumas and postmemory of her father's flight and return, Olivera employed a notion of home which shifted between different gendered registers of embodiment and temporality – living in bodies, place and time.

There are multiple returns in Olivera's biographical accounts and most of them refer to the ghostly presence of what she gained with her father's return to Kosovo and what she has lost since her husband went missing and his body was recovered in the mass grave. Those intimate

²⁴ In her narratives Olivera employed an expression “to lose one's Self” to describe gendered nonbelonging that she experienced as an IDP and a woman who lost her husband under extremely violent conditions. Thus, flight from Kosovo and husband's disappearance felt like a loss of Self, but these experiences also contributed to Olivera's political awareness about past events in Kosovo. On the misuse of the past and the difference between history and memory, See (Traverso 2016)

recollections about violence contributed to Olivera's disassociation from the possibility of returning home amidst all the losses. In her postmemory of her father's flight, Olivera learned that temporalities of home are related to body and, as such, gendered internally and externally by the familial and its existential cycles: marriage, birth, death. "Home does not disappear into thin air; it is continuously generative of the place and time (or the placelessness and timelessness) of its aftermath" (HadžiMuhamedović and Grujić 2019:5). Olivera's thinking of home had a deeply temporal meaning; it referred to both her aging and her husband's dead body. For these reasons, home was predominately a site of unhomeliness that she linked to her and father's traumas of flight and return. Nevertheless, Olivera's unbelonging home is an agential response to violence and remembering what has become for her an unhomely home – a hurtful memory of past home she had with her now-dead husband.

Like home, violence and trauma are socially defined and emerge within a political context about the established rights and the possibilities for the safe return. Due to national/international actors' accentuating of homes as a spatiality of the ethno-national homeland and materiality of habitual places, many IDPs are symbolically and materially trapped for endless years in limbo in IDP camps while 'waiting' for the "durable solutions".

Extended conflicts minimise the chances of a return to past lives, to what one felt as home. Alternatively, as in Olivera's case, violence contributed to a desire of no-return, as home was not only destroyed but also erased as a possibility: the past and present Self has lived and re-lived experiences and histories of violence which continuously return and hunt a person. Lila Abu-Lughod (2007) named such conditions as struggles with "the past that has not yet passed" (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007:79). Abu-Lughod, like Marianne Hirsch, also engaged with the topic of return journeys. In her essay on her father's return, Abu-Lughod notes that Hirsch's work on postmemory and "the transfer of traumatic memory across generations among Holocaust survivors" (ibid.) is important; nevertheless, she also adds that Hirsch, in her research about Jewish persecutions, "describes is of parental memories of events that have passed", which brings a specific recognition of the place of their homes and the right to make a home at these new locations, I would add. In Abu-Lughod's case and words, "The world has denounced that genocide and those horrors. What I, as the daughter of someone who lived through the Nakba learned from my father's return to Palestine, was that, for Palestinians, both memory and postmemory have a special valence because the past has not yet passed" (ibid.). She wrote about her father's longing to go back to Palestine and his in Abu-Lughod's words "insertion of memory into the historical present [that] made possible a

different knowledge and identification for his children as well”. Nonetheless, returns after protracted displacement to a place one remembered as home are ambiguous because one cannot go back in time and place, and can only return to an imaginary home (or its ruins) of her/his past. Unlike in Hirsch’s case, Abu-Lughod had less understanding for her father’s return to unhomely, as she writes, “half ruins”. As with Olivera’s father, she might, from a daughter’s point of view and time, think of him as “belonging in another time” with its myths of return and home.

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