

Sensitive Objects of Humanitarian Aid

Corporeal Memories and Affective Continuities

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In his book *Lifeworlds*, Michael Jackson (2013) quotes a woman who survived Ravensbrück: ‘the presence of bread today never erases the memory of the absence of bread in the past’ (ibid. 272). The people quoted in this chapter also talk about the absence of bread and their manifold experiences of receiving humanitarian aid during the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s. Their accounts, retold some twenty years later, confirm that these experiences have not been forgotten. On the contrary, they contain vivid and often gripping descriptions of sensual memories of humanitarian aid – of tastes and smells of food, of clothing items received from distant donors, and of the lingering affective power these things still have today.

My empirical focus is Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina – a country that due to the war in the 1990s attracted one of the largest humanitarian operations of that decade involving many of the significant international humanitarian organisations (Forman and Patrick 2000). The so-called ‘air bridge’ to Sarajevo was closed after 13,000 flights transporting 167,677 tonnes of humanitarian aid from twenty countries (*Hronologija* 2012). This aid sustained the life of civilians who stayed behind in Sarajevo during a siege that lasted for over three and a half years (Maček 2009).

During the war, 90 per cent of the population relied on international humanitarian assistance for their survival. However, countless articles on war and postwar aid to Bosnia and Herzegovina predominantly promote

the perspective of the so-called ‘donor side’ (see e.g. Forman and Patrick 2000). In contrast, this chapter focuses on the ‘recipient side’, with an interest in the micro level of individual experience in the local context of Sarajevo during the war years.

In a pilot study undertaken in collaboration with the Sarajevo Centre for Refugee and IDP Studies, fifteen people were interviewed between November 2013 and April 2014: nine women and six men of varying ages and different educational backgrounds who lived in Sarajevo during the 1990s war.¹ Five interviews were conducted with people now aged 30–36 but who during the war were children approaching their teens. Two research participants were in their mid-forties, three in their mid-fifties, three in their mid-sixties, one was 72 and another 92 years of age. One had completed primary school only, nine had completed secondary school education, three had graduated from university and two had a PhD degree.

The interviews were explorative. The question relating to what the interviewees remembered about receiving humanitarian aid in the 1990s was open and enabled them to raise any issue they found relevant. The transcribed material encompasses 180 pages of text that is exceptionally rich and facilitates several angles of analysis. The local perceptions of the effects of humanitarian aid, conceptualised as a specific realm of global interconnectedness, have been discussed in a paper framing humanitarian aid as an aspect of global moral and political order that affected local sociocultural orders (Povrzanović Frykman 2016). Another paper (Povrzanović Frykman 2015) addresses the finding that the same kinds of aid are sometimes framed as charity and at others times as help, which suggests that their social meanings are ultimately defined by the (im)possibility of reciprocity. This chapter sets out to explain why some objects in the collected narratives emerge as sensitive objects, and to show how war memories are preserved and communicated through affective relations to such objects.

Material circumstances

An in-depth description and analysis of life in wartime Sarajevo is provided by Ivana Maček (2009) in her book *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime*. This book is an essential read for anyone wanting to understand the context of experiences focused on in this chapter.

As an eyewitness, she captures many of the paradoxes of civilian life in wartime and the peculiar tension that existed between destruction and creativity. Offering an account of individual experiences of war, she discusses the norms of behaviour and the perceptions of reality that were continuously defined and redefined as people tackled life in cold apartments and survived on meagre and basic foodstuffs, never knowing when running water or electricity would be available again and being at the mercy of the forces attacking Sarajevo. The *Sarajevo Survival Guide* (1993) – a sarcastic imitation of a Michelin city guide produced during the war – offers abundant examples of life in a town under siege. Appreciated gifts include a bottle of clean water, a candle, a bar of soap, shampoo, a clove or two of garlic or an onion. At the time when the monthly salary of those still working was between 10 and 30 DM (ibid. 68), 1 cubic metre of wood cost 200 DM (German Marks) with 50 DM added for home delivery. A kilo of garlic cost 120 DM and a litre of oil 40 DM. 40 DM was also the cost of a kilo of beans, a children's bicycle or a humanitarian aid ration pack (ibid. 45).

The woman I interviewed described their material circumstances by stressing the resourcefulness of Sarajevans living under siege. Reflecting on the events some twenty years later, she consistently used the present tense to describe them:

We are incredibly adaptable, I think, more than animals. Really, there is no electricity, there is no water, there is no food – so what? You don't see anything, of course, it gets dark at five o'clock and you are collecting that oil used for frying, and you make a wick from some rope to make a lamp. Then you remember to take the battery out of the car that had been totally destroyed, and connect it to a small lamp – I mean, the one from the battery – and then you are really happy, you have light in the house, yeah! So, it is a very strange experience.

She also recalled the lasting effects of some of the bodily sensations related to the war:

I remember I was freezing in 1992, because when the winter came it was terribly cold. I tell you – the windows – they don't exist [they were all broken by the shelling]. Terribly, terribly cold. I mean,

since then I have not been able to stand two things – I cannot stand the cold, definitely, not even today, not for a second. And the other thing is that I can't stand dim lighting. There can't be a romantic light in the house, it has to be at least 100 watts! Even today, it is strange, when, say, the radiators stop working; something happens, something needs repairing, and the temperature starts falling – I freeze at the very same moment, even if the radiators are still warm. But when I hear that they are not working, or someone says, that repairs will be needed ... It's the same with water. If there is no water, you freak out. You run to the shop to buy water that same second; you think about buying a jerrycan with 5 litres of distilled water, because it can be used for washing. It is not a problem, it is not a problem, don't panic, everything is OK! So, I think – I know – this is some kind of reflex-fear, a trauma that, in a way, triggers it, not only in my case, no, no, it is really the same for everyone who was here. Absolutely, you still react to such things today.

From an individual perspective, the claim that 'everyone' living in Sarajevo under siege reacted in the same way to a change in their material circumstances has to be thoroughly corroborated.² It can also be treated as a narrative device to describe the magnitude of the negative experience.³ However, this woman's descriptions of being unable to stand the cold – 'definitely, not even today, not for a second', and her 'freaking out' at the lack of running water are genuinely related to personal experience. Moreover, they show that the wartime difficulties are still deeply engrained in her body.

Corporeal memories

Although an individual's remembering occurs in socially inscribed settings and frameworks, a discussion about how subsequent experiences and public discourses of war may have influenced individual memories and how they are narrated is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, the point of reflection concerns the tendency of memory studies to prioritise 'the cerebral, the representational, and the cultural', which results in 'our thinking on memory often remaining fixated on a point outside the body' (Burton 2011: 9).

The narrative quoted above is a conscious articulation of a personal experience and is presented as something that was shared by others who experienced the siege of Sarajevo. It is thereby placed in a wider framework of narrating war from a victim perspective – a framework that is likely to be influenced by the many representations of the 1990s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina that this woman has been exposed to over the last two decades. It could have been influenced by her own retelling of the same story (with a good-to-be-told structure) to other people before repeating it to me. However, this does not necessarily mean that her past and present bodily feelings are *only* constructed as a useful narrative device, or that she only remembers the war non-discursively through her terror of freezing, darkness and thirst, or the rush of panic triggered by what Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes as fragments of sensory experience. The above quote is actually an apt illustration of what Stewart sees as the sudden awareness of the ‘edge of the ordinary’ that is triggered by things resisting routine use.

According to Blackman and Venn (2010: 7), bodies are ‘thoroughly entangled processes, and importantly defined by their capacities to affect and be affected’. As any engagement with material culture is always embodied,⁴ the issue in question is therefore ‘how people remember through the body and the intercorporeality of person and object’ (De Nardi 2014: 447). As shown by Maria Tumarkin (2013), an individual’s remembering may engage person–object interactions that constitute a bodily remembering; bodies can be ‘inhabited and structured’ by an ‘active immanence of the past’ (ibid. 315). Tumarkin reminds us that ‘much is being missed when we think about the intrapersonal forms of remembering and transmission either in exclusively declarative and representational terms or as profoundly overshadowed by trauma’ (ibid. 312) and suggests that we ‘do not buy into the opposition’ between representation and affect (ibid. 318). While mnemonic processes operate ‘on various levels not fully reducible to cognition’, their products are ‘exceeding representational form rather than being completely outside or beyond it’ (ibid. 313).

Tumarkin’s work shows that memories can be transmitted discursively as well as affectively, and that this can be done separately or at the same time (ibid. 315). This also applies to the narratives analysed here. Documented in the audio recording and described by the interviewer who also transcribed the interviews are the tears shed, the deep sighs, the facial expressions and gestures accompanying the statements of disgust or

happy excitement; all of which escape representation through language. They are neither outside nor beyond it, but rather an integral part of the intentional communicative effort that, by evoking corporeal memories, also solicits bodily (re)actions in the course of narration.

Even if said in the context of a formal interview, turned into a text, translated into another language or cut out of a wider narrative context, the fragments of narratives quoted here still witness to the intensity of people's experiences, which in some cases still feel very real due to the act of narration.

Yet another attempt to explain the engagement of body in remembering is of relevance here. In proposing an understanding of chronic pain as a form of corporeal (body, somatic) memory, Tess Burton (2011: 7) adopts Edward Casey's phenomenological stance, which is that corporeal memory is not something we merely 'have', but 'something that we *are*; that constitutes us as we exist humanly in the world' (Casey 1987: 163). In other words, the body 'remembers its own activity' (ibid. 147) and body memory 'includes its own past by an intimate osmotic intertwining with it' (ibid. 178; see Burton 2011: 27).⁵ Or, as Blackman and Venn (2010: 9) formulate it, an enfleshing and embodying affect is 'a particular kind of process-in-practice'.

Widening Burton's considerations to other kinds of corporeal memories, the analysis attempted here sets aside the question of which bodily experiences were shared by many or most people in Sarajevo under siege, and how they might be included in the institutionalised representations of the victims' suffering (thereby affecting the narratives analysed here). Instead, my analysis pursues how the act of narration of a particular person-object interaction activates corporeal memories and establishes affective links – resonances in body and mind (Seigworth and Gregg 2010) – between *then* (when the experience was acquired) and *now* (when one narrates about it), between *what* the research participants talked about (their humanitarian aid-related experiences) and *how* they did it (affects that were revived in the course of narration some twenty years later).

Affect and narration

For Brian Massumi (1995: 86), affect is 'intensity' – 'a state of suspense, potentially of disruption'. He associates it with 'nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback which momentarily suspend the linear progress of

the narrative present from past to future' (ibid.). As will be shown below, this 'resonation' – which I call *affective flashbacks* – can be discerned in the narrative material.

Massumi's claim that affect (or intensity) is 'qualifiable as an emotional state' (ibid.) is relevant here. He defines emotion as 'the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal' (ibid. 88); as a culturally shaped 'insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action–reaction circuits' (ibid.). Even though affect is not entirely 'containable in knowledge', Massumi sees it is 'analyzable in effect, as effect' (ibid. 107, n. 2). It is thus possible to pursue affect in the narrative material presented here.

If naming/defining affect enables a culturally appropriate emotional reaction (see Cichosz 2014: 56), the ambiguous 'openings' – the moments of grappling with words, along with the changes of voice and facial expressions – make it possible to understand the occurrence of what I call *affective surplus* in these narratives.

Sarah Ahmed, on the other hand, takes clearly circumscribed emotions as the starting point when analysing affects, since 'naming emotions involves different orientations towards the objects they construct' (Ahmed 2004a: 14). Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) is also interested in the emotions engendered amongst Turkish Cypriots inhabiting the seized Greek dwellings, the affects generated by the assumed objects and the broader postwar environment itself. Stef Jansen (Chapter 3 in this volume) explains how Navaro-Yashin employs affect theory without embracing the 'turn' away from what has been called 'representational thinking'. She explores affect *and* subjectivity, human *and* non-human agency and values both evocation *and* signification. A similar exploration is attempted in this chapter.

This chapter also frames affect hermeneutically in constellations of meanings specific to the setting in which it arises. I maintain that focusing on the affective layers of the narratives discussed here – in discursively presented reminiscence, but also in non-discursive aspects of narration – helps to explain why some objects of humanitarian aid emerge as sensitive. However, such an explanation needs to recognise the intertwining – discernable in the narratives – of emotions as understandings of affects that are firmly embedded in a particular socio-historical context, and where the affective quality of the experiences narrated has no clear or unambiguous socio-linguistic fixing.

In Sarajevo under siege, meanings were destabilised and emotions as cultural devices were inadequate for grasping the realities of threat, lack and destruction. Talking about it in terms of fear and sadness does not seem to be adequate, because recalling these emotions does not capture the affective quality of the situation some of my research participants call ‘absurd’ and the people Maček (2009) met in Sarajevo talked about as ‘surreal’.

The presence of tense smiles and strained laughter is striking in this material.⁶ I see it as a way of dealing with the perceived absurdity of the experiences narrated, with the ambiguous quality of a situation of siege. On the one hand, a retrospective description of life under siege often produces surprise and disbelief. On the other hand, by framing it as a set of funny events or recollections to be laughed at, the narrator occupies a distanced, empowered position. Being able to laugh at oneself is a sign of strength. There is an abundant documentation of war humour, notably in Sarajevo (Kapić et al. 2006; Maček 2009; *Sarajevo Survival Guide* 1993; Sheftel 2012). Humour makes sense of absurdity by denying the straightjacket of an imposed, troublesome reality. It constitutes a platform that stabilises one’s existentially elated position, from which the conditions of siege and destruction are observed and laughed at. However, as one middle-aged woman said:

Now, more often than not, war experiences are turned into anecdotes or jokes. But there is a big difference between then [and now]. We now use anecdotes to talk about it ... we have a different feeling now than we had then.⁷

In their introduction to the special issue of the journal *Body & Society*, Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn (2010) note that ‘affect is invoked to gesture towards something that perhaps escapes or remains in excess of the practices of the “speaking subject”’ (ibid. 9). These authors warn against an ‘exclusion of processes which might be characterized as less visible to the particular technologies of observation, seeing and listening that characterize the humanities, and particularly the reliance of many of our qualitative methodologies on language and sight’ (ibid.). This is connected to the critique of ‘representational thinking’ (Stewart 2007; Thrift 2008; see also Jansen, Chapter 3 in this volume), which assumes that the discursive representation of a research object is sufficient (Black-

man and Venn 2010: 9). Referring to Stewart (2007), Blackman and Venn compare 'representational thinking' to 'a particular academic and analytic training in *attention*, which excludes other ways of 'noticing' and attending within our research endeavours' (Blackman and Venn 2010: 9).

Relying on interviews, the interpretations offered in this chapter are 'based on the practices of the "speaking subject"' (ibid. 18). Here, the researcher's knowledge about how people feel remains tentative and the representation in a text 'closes off' potentially different meanings. However, it is both possible and necessary to engage the registers of affect by examining people's visceral and affective responses to an interview. This entails paying special attention to 'feelings that are incongruous when examined alongside the content of an interviewee's account', or that direct the interviewer to 'what is left unsaid but that is communicated through other forms of bodily knowing' (ibid.). Both affect and emotion are 'immediately embodied' (Massumi 1995: 85).

Affective continuity

When recounting their experiences of receiving humanitarian aid, several interviewees expressed ambivalence and frustration: tears and laughter sometimes accompanied one and the same narration. They were grateful for the help received and recognised this as crucial to their surviving the siege. But a highly emotional tension between the feelings of gratitude and humiliation was obvious (see Povrzanović Frykman 2016). Some interviewees struggled with notions such as pride, personal integrity and human integrity, yet used the word 'humiliation' without hesitation and in a straightforward manner. To paraphrase Seigworth and Gregg (2010: 8), they refer to an 'ethico-aesthetic space' that is opened up by affective encounters with humanitarian aid.

A psychologist who worked through the war but was still in dire need of aid is a case in point. She recalled the time when her husband fainted after not having eaten for days in order to save food for their two small daughters. She recollected a situation when her five-year old daughter telephoned her at work to ask whether she could cut herself another slice of bread:

It was horrifying for a mother to have a child call in order to ask
– mummy, may I cut one more slice of bread? That was terrible,

because she knew that if she ate it today there wouldn't be anything for tomorrow [tears]. And that was a child five years old, it is terrible to be in such a situation, but, as much as that humanitarian aid was humiliating, it was valuable. I did understand the value of it. On the other hand, it has had its ... well, effects, in the feeling of integrity, some human, basic, pride. It does not have to be pride, but somehow a feeling [sigh] that you are helpless, that you can't do anything.

Here, the statement 'it was horrifying' represents a complex emotion of fear and horror. Describing it in such strong terms communicates the overwhelming negativity of the situation. Moreover, by saying that 'it was horrifying for a mother', the narrator calls on a culturally embedded understanding that she assumes is also shared by the interviewer, namely that mothers want to protect and provide for their children. This makes it even clearer why not being able to feed them is represented as 'horrifying'. The reflections on feelings of humiliation, integrity, pride and helplessness indicate past emotional work and give a succinct insight into the ambivalence experienced by this recipient of humanitarian aid. But what about her sighs and the tears shed in the course of the interview some twenty years later? Although an evaluative and emotional import is standard for any autobiographical narrative, an affective surplus seems to be contained in the emotionally charged situations described here. This is especially obvious in the continuation of this woman's narrative, even though unlike the previous excerpt it presents a more general picture and does not relate to a particular event:

I still remember those queues in the winter; we would stand outside and wait in those queues. I often discussed this with my husband, for him too standing in those queues was humiliating – that someone would see us waiting for food [sigh]. Because we were people who earned our living [laughter] it was very humiliating. I didn't want to go, because it was really terrible that someone should see me receiving aid. And I remember those queues where people sat, and, of course, we had to sign, and [I remember] the bags that we then carried, that *meant* life to us [said with emphasis] and [sigh] they really were very significant, they were welcome. I am not saying that they were not *important* [uttered excitedly]! Yes,

they were, and we would probably not have survived without that, but the humiliating feeling that someone is giving you the basic things you need for living, even now when I tell you about it I have that ... that feeling, I have difficulty breathing [laughter, then a sigh], because it's all coming back, the memory of it comes back, of what that period was like ... we were happy to receive things, without them we wouldn't live!

The interviewer (see note 1) noted that the woman's narration was speedy and uncharacteristic of her usual way of speaking. Talking about difficult memories seemed to make her agitated. Her narration involved laughter, tears, sighs and heavy breathing, all of which suggest an affective flashback resulting in bodily (somatic) reactions that were beyond the narrator's control. The act of narration thus created an affective continuity between what was said and how it was told, between the past lived experience and the present experience of talking about it. I insist on the importance of paying attention to (the effects of) corporeal memories – their sensory and affective dimensions – because this is where the explanation of affective continuities over a long period of time lies.

'Continuity' here refers to the intensity of affect and not to its quality. If the experience had only been stored in the body, the same affects would have been relived. But the experiences narrated here have been psychologically processed, which means that the quality of the affects may have changed.⁸ Laughter, tears and sighs belong to the now – the narrating moment. At the same time, they suggest that the intensity of the experiences is retained. The statements quoted above about feeling humiliated during the war are cognitive statements, whereas the tears shed in the interview stem from the sadness and frustration emerging now of the revived intensity of the experiences then. I therefore argue that a two-decade-long exposure to a variety of representations of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1990s does not taint or falsify the kind of affective continuity that emerges at the personal level in the recorded narratives.⁹

At the same time, intertwined with the dominant narrative topic of humiliation is the materiality of basic things (the food depended on), bags (in which these things were carried home) and queues (connecting the war-imposed lines of bodies in the street and the personal – bodily – experience of suffering the cold while waiting). Other interviewees also tended to focus on the sensual qualities of particular objects of

humanitarian aid (negative but also positive, as will be shown below). As explained above, the senses involved in person–object interactions constitute a bodily remembering. It is these interactions' affective charge that makes the objects appear sensitive, even in narrations that occur a long time after the war.

Sensitive objects

Sarah De Nardi (2014), in her research on Second World War veteran storytelling as 'feeling', pays attention to things relating to memories. Her work highlights the importance of mementos (such as a scrapbook or a dead brother's scarf) for embodying the narrator's memory, rather than simply being memory aids that facilitate storytelling. De Nardi's interviews with members of the Italian and British Second World War resistance activists suggest that their experience was grounded 'in the body and the world, and is shared through storytelling that is also perforce grounded in the body' (ibid. 443). This researcher shows that the 'worlds of feelings' of veterans are established through their interactions with mementos used in storytelling, and that these objects are not just sites of memory or relics but also 'sites of feeling'.¹⁰ Consequently, engagement with mementos is 'a route to understanding and expressing the ways in which persons, memories and objects are interconnected an mutually constitutive' (ibid. 461).

The people quoted in this chapter did not use and did not need to use any physical mementos in the course of the interviews. Instead, they engaged with their corporeal memories while reviving fragments of sensory experience. The person–object interactions constituting these memories seem to have had a lasting and easily revived affective impact.

Brian Massumi (1995: 96) defines affect as synaesthetic, which implies 'a participation of the senses in each other'. Ben Highmore points out that senses and affect 'bleed into each other', that every flavour has an emotional resonance (sweetness, sourness, bitterness) and that the bio-cultural arena of disgust 'simultaneously invokes a form of sensual perception, and affective register of shame and disdain, as well as bodily recoil' (Highmore 2010: 120). Highmore asks, 'When emotions are described by flavors, ... are these simply metaphorical conventions? Or does the emotional condition of bitterness for instance release the same gastric response as the ingestion of bitter flavours? How do we make our

way from one modality to another?’ (ibid.). He notes that it is hard to imagine even trying to untangle the physical experience of touch, feel and movement or passionate intensities such as love or bitterness in order to subsume them ‘to discrete categories in terms of their physicality or their ideational existence’ (ibid.). Indeed, it is a matter of interpretation as to whether a particular word uttered in an interview denotes a revived affect or is used as part of a by now locally well-established ‘emotionally correct’ way of representing the experience of innocent victim and deserving recipient of aid. We can only guess why an interviewee shed a tear while talking into the voice recorder two decades after the war. It is, after all, not certain that she would know herself if asked about it, since tears reflect an affective, open-ended state.

However, it is certain that the narrative material discussed here offers several examples of how ‘to have your attention being gripped by the goodness or badness of your circumstances, ... is to be gripped by what *matters* to you, by something you *care* about, and – crucially – in a way that essentially involves and appreciation of that mattering’ (Helm 2009: 253; emphasis in the original). This pertains to significant others, close social relations and things. Descriptions of tastes and smells of food and clothing received as humanitarian aid are abundant. These are mostly the objects that are in direct touch with bodies or are incorporated by being eaten, such as lentils remembered as disgusting and rice rejected as repulsive (‘I need it, but would not touch it! I can’t, I couldn’t eat one spoonful, not even if I was dying of hunger!’), or heaps of smelly old clothes at the Red Cross to ‘dig in’ in order to find useful clothing:

I still have memories of stinking clothes at the Red Cross ... Well, that part, of the clothes that were arriving – with the best intention of those people who were giving away second-hand clothes – for me, that smell, I still seem to have it in my nose [she laughs tensely]. The mountains of clothes that I rummaged through in order to find something suitable for my children ... it was very humiliating.

As in the quote in the previous section, the experience recounted here is perceived as negative and framed as humiliating. We cannot tell whether the woman ‘really’ felt humiliated when searching for clothes at the Red

Cross in Sarajevo during the 1990s war, or whether this framing – captured some twenty years later – ‘convinces’ Sarajevans that they were humiliated, or whether they were actually very pleased to have access to anything that was scarce. However, such considerations do not question the authenticity of this woman’s experience of the unpleasant smell that still activates an olfactory memory in her body. The fact that she laughs tensely while talking about it suggests her ambiguity towards this revived experience, i.e. she would like to laugh it away but cannot truly do so because it is (also) her corporeal memory.

A pensioner recollected how he ate mouldy bread:

I remember the hunger, when there was nothing but mouldy bread, we ate that, so that the little [good] bread we got could be given to the children. I ate those *mouldy crusts* [stressed by being uttered very slowly] and I lied to the children that that it was live penicillin and that I liked it.

Here, the affective flashback makes the man talk more slowly, as if mentioning the mouldy crusts makes him retaste them. Another person said:

We got a big can of smelly fish. I haven’t been able to eat fish since then; the smell of fish makes me vomit.

The statement ‘the smell of fish makes me vomit’ establishes a direct affective continuity between the past and the present. By not adding ‘still’ to the statement, the narrator seems to recognise and admit the permanent nature of the memory. Borrowing Tumarkin’s formulation (2013: 315), here we can see how the body is ‘inhabited and structured’ by an ‘active immanence of the past’.

Sensitive symbols

There is a clear tension in the material between acceptance out of necessity, the repulsive objects narrated about and the attempt to distance oneself from the former experience. It seems that disgust is not only communicated due to corporeal memories revived in the interview situation, but also to establish that one has not sunk so low in war as to stop caring about the smell and taste of food.¹¹

An object gathering layers of humiliation in the interconnected experience of hunger, necessity and charity is canned minced meat called ICAR. As summarised by one of the interviewees:

The famous ICAR, of course, no one could avoid it. It was eaten because it was necessary, but there were a lot of stories told about ICAR. It was like dog food, they sent us food for animals. People talked a lot about it, but everyone had to eat it, you had to because there wasn't anything else, no meat or anything else ... so, that's how it was.

Referred to at length by most interviewees, ICAR features among the most important objects in the virtual war museum (*Sarajevski ratni predmeti* 2010) and has iconic status. It has been analysed in scholarly articles (Sheftel 2012), presented in the Bosnian media (Bošnjaci.net 2007) and at tourist information sites (Sarajevo 2012) and discussed at length in web forum groups (Forum Klix.ba 2013). The popular consensus in Sarajevo and beyond is that ICAR symbolises the relation between international political actors and people living in Sarajevo in the 1990s – a relation of uneven power that has to be shielded by cynicism and black humour. It is a symbol of Sarajevans' position as the generic other in relation to those sending them survival rations – as an indiscriminate mass of desperate people in dire need of any kind of food (see Povrzanović Frykman 2016).

ICAR is generally remembered as disgusting, as something that even cats and dogs refused to eat but that Sarajevans had to. 'A monument to the international community' (by Nebojša Šerić Šoba – a Sarajevan visual artist now living in New York) signed by 'the grateful citizens of Sarajevo' (see Bošnjaci.net 2007) was erected in an attempt to resolve this ambivalence and frame the experience. The object represented is a can of ICAR. This 'monument' can be regarded as a cynical materialisation framing a difficult experience to gain visibility.¹²

It is uncertain whether or how much the narratives analysed here are affected by the iconic status of ICAR. However, when it is evoked in the interviews it seems to produce a 'kick in the stomach'. With few exceptions, people talked at length about their hatred of ICAR, even if they admitted to eagerly consuming it because they were not in a position to reject it (the taste could be improved if one was lucky enough to have access to onions or spices).

Some kind of minced meat, in some smelly salty sauce, I mean, with no tomato ... It was just minced meat, I mean, I don't know what it was, but some kind of sauce with meat, salty, with some spices, possibly ... the spices were hardly noticeable, but they disguised the taste of the meat.

The woman quoted above joked about her cat's reaction to ICAR (and in doing so used the present tense):

Those are the most disgusting cans! You share the can with the animal, because it also has to eat something. And the cat sniffs at the can and then looks at you as if to say are you nuts? I'm not going to eat this!

Another interviewee framed her experience differently, in spite of having talked about a dog whose hair started to drop out after eating ICAR:

I can tell you, ICAR was to us ... getting ICAR was a feast! Because, even if it was the most common thing [a common part of humanitarian aid], it wasn't certain that we would get it.

In a web forum entitled 'Has the riddle of ICAR ever been solved?' (Forum Klix.ba. 2013) the participants try (in 2011–13) to find out who produced ICAR and what exactly it contained. The humorous entries are numerous and black humour is prevalent. A straightforward connection is made by some participants between the bad quality of food received as humanitarian aid (ICAR being iconic in that sense as well) and the present-day perceived magnitude of cancer-related deaths in Sarajevo (an established folk belief on this matter seems to feed into the general victimisation stance), whereas some forum participants remind the others that 'in spite of everything it was super food' (ibid.).

For the discussion in focus here, it is relevant to mention that the person saying this describes how he found an unopened can two years after the war and tried it 'in order to remember the taste – and the taste was disgusting. However, at that moment (during the war) it was superb' (ibid.). Another participant in the forum presents himself as a chubby teenager in war who devoured ICAR in great quantities. As none of the neighbours would eat it, they gave their rations to him.

In the interviews, the affective connection between then and now can be discerned through its effect on the body. That effect can be negative – a certain smell makes the person vomit – or positive. The material contains plenty of descriptions of excitement and joy caused by the encounters with items of aid. The following story about a tomato blurs the borders between its symbolic and pragmatic value, but nevertheless depicts it as a sensitive object. It is a story about a tomato grown on the balcony and solemnly shared by three neighbours who ate their respective parts of the tomato with a knife and fork.

Aunt T., myself and granny *shared* [emphasised] a tomato that we had *grown* [emphasised] in a flowerpot. It was like a small ball and was pink, it wasn't even ripe. We put it on a *big plate* [expressed very slowly] and then we took *small plates* [expressed very slowly] and cut it into *three pieces* [expressed very slowly], and each of us put a piece on our plates, picked up a fork and a knife and cut that tomato piece by piece. Can you imagine that? ... We enjoyed this *small* [expressed very slowly] tomato [laughter]. The three of us! It was a special pleasure. I don't think I have ever eaten a better tomato in my life [laughter]!

The potential symbolic value of this tomato is strengthened by the anchoring of the narrated memory in sensual experience. At the same time, a positive corporeal memory is interlaced with the happy memory of solidarity and togetherness that was reconfirmed by the material practice of sharing 'a meal'. Yet, at the same time, the way the three women consumed the tomato re-established them as civilised people (eating with a knife and fork) and thereby symbolised their pre-war normality.

A matter of generation

As shown above, the objects that emerge as sensitive in the narratives told by people who lived through the siege of Sarajevo are not 'sites of mourning' (De Nardi 2014: 446). Here, they are analysed as 'sites of revisited experience' involving ordinary things that acquired extraordinary importance in the context of war. Their importance stems from the fact that they were scarce and difficult to obtain, although the framing of how they were experienced is not only negative. The material suggests the importance of the

age of the interviewees during war, in that it seems to be the main reason for the difference in the affective charging of their narrations.

People who were adults at the time of the war mostly talk about their experiences in terms of difficulties and humiliation, whereas those who were children in the 1990s tend to talk about the excitement and joy of getting sweets, toys, or a pair of secondhand jeans that were ‘just perfect’ and so dear that it was ‘impossible’ to throw them away after the war. Children take the world around them – its materiality – as it is, as it unfolds for them through their senses.¹³ When asked about humanitarian aid, most of the younger research participants talked animatedly about the moments of pleasure experienced when receiving precious tidbits from humanitarian ration packs. One of them added:

You know, perhaps I talk a bit differently about it now ... You see, when you are older, then perhaps you talk differently, but we [those of us who were children] talk about it all as joy, and the tidbits that made us happy.

What were known as Vietnamese cookies have a similar status to ICAR in the local narratives. A woman whose children were very young in the war said:

I remember those cookies sent by UNICEF that were some 50 years old ... they were very dry and white, we tried to do something with them, make cakes out of them combined with something else. That was terrible too. I saw how old they were, I saw how terrible they were, but I simply had no choice but to give them to the children to eat, because I didn’t have anything else. If I had I would certainly not have made them eat them, and that also makes me angry, because I had the feeling that they just wanted to get rid of them ... I had the feeling that the people sending us that help, humanitarian, were in fact manipulating us because they sent us something that they would never eat themselves.

However, the same cookies were a favourite of a younger man, who said:

There was this famous ICAR that is often mentioned, but I actually remember the ration packs – *aaaand* [prolonged] those cookies, American, some 40–50 years *old* [emphasised], in metal tins, and

which we [children] ate, ate, ate, because they were so sweet [smile] and we were pleased *when they were available* [emphasised]. They were sweet, and we children liked those sweets, and they were *eaten* [said very slowly].

His most cherished wartime objects were the ration packs (originally made for the American military):

Those ration packs that contained several things were something special, they contained, as one says, both the salty and the sweet. Some sweets, small *bars of chocolate* [said very slowly], those *dishes* [said very slowly] that were there! Those ration packs remained for me ... because they were packed in a special manner, in some *plastic* [said very slowly], *foil* [said very slowly], then in some, I don't know, material that was probably heat-resistant and water-proof. So I remember that a lot.

Another young man cherished the second-hand shoes from the humanitarian aid. Although they were too small for him (and thus hurt), he loved them because they enabled him to play football with the neighbouring boys. Also, the following example shows how the unpleasant bodily experience of a material object is acknowledged, but its function perceived as more important. It illustrates how the memory of bad smell is pertinent, yet it is not the reason for framing the experience as negative (the mix of tenses reflects the original):

My parents would go a couple of times, and bring ... not really clothes, but they brought some kind of *plaids* [said very slowly]. We called them *horse blankets* [said with emphasis]. They were *red* [said very slowly] and they were quite coarse.

Why 'horse' blankets?

Well, I don't know, they were so ... like, they were so *coarse* [said very slowly] and so *ugly* [said very slowly]. Well, you couldn't – if you used them to cover yourself – you simply couldn't breathe, they were *smelly* [said with emphasis], and therefore people called them 'horse *blankets*', because in the past plaids like this were used to cover horses.

Oh, I see.

So, folk would say – we have now reached the point where we have to use what was used for horses. But it was war – cover yourself with whatever ... There was no heating, there was nothing to heat with, no central heating, of course, or anything we have today – cover yourself with that! So I remember a lot of such plaids coming in, and since they were *big* [said very slowly] they were warm but also very smelly, and in the war it was not possible to wash them because there were no detergents or electricity for the washing-machine to work... So they would make from it ... I remember from our neighbourhood, they [women] would make some kind of overall for us [children] that we would wear in the winter. Some people had sewing machines in the home, and they used this plaid and cut it a bit, here, there, and made ... like ... for the winter.

Like an overall?

Yes, like an overall. We would then – I mean, it is normal for a child to go the very moment there is a ceasefire – run out, roll in the snow, we were just playing, getting rid of energy. And we were *warm* [emphasised], but oh that *smell* [emphasised, smiling]. So, I remember those horse blankets, as we called them, very well.

For the younger interviewees the war experience was not a break with the everyday that made them aware of material losses and changes in their environment, or a challenge to their identity and dignity. It was the world they knew, the only world they had first-hand experience of. Twenty years later, the young people's stories about humanitarian aid revived the excitement felt at the 'aid arriving!' and the commotion in the long queues. Their memories of parcels are happy memories, because they remember the joy of getting a brand new dress or a new notebook that was the prettiest they had ever seen. Their sensual recollections focused on, e.g. 'ration pack no. 7', which ranked high in their version of the practice of collecting things and trading the collectables.

Most importantly, it contained a bar of chocolate. As noted above, the taste of chocolate is remembered by young people for its deliciousness – for its very materiality and not as a memento of the normality of

chocolate consumption lost due to the war. While the bar of chocolate helped children to establish the world as they knew it – and themselves as individuals who liked chocolate – through their palates, the same bar of chocolate served to effectively remind the adults that the world as they knew it was no more. The realisation of a moment of pleasure, formerly a regular part of everyday life, becoming something exceptional and evoking the all-encompassing nature of loss made the adults, as one of them said, aware of ‘how much you are in fact abandoned, how insignificant you are’.

Conclusion

Taking the examples of past experiences of receiving humanitarian aid, this chapter shows how person–object interactions activate the bodily remembering that involves affective relations to particular objects.

This chapter contributes to ‘enfleshing and embodying affect as a particular kind of process-in-practice’ (Blackman and Venn 2010: 9). It shows that in the narratives about past war experiences, the objects in direct touch with the body and those sustaining the preservation of bodies are given a central place. In line with De Nardi’s claim (2014: 458) that the memory of the body is inseparable from the living (present-day) memory of a past war, the analysis shows that senses engaged then retain a lingering affective dimension that is communicated in the narration now, and at the same time affects the person in the act of narration.

The analysis of my examples offers a general explanation of the experiences illustrated by the introductory statement that the memory of ‘the absence of bread in the past’ – the deep, overwhelming hunger of those who were starving – is not erased by ‘the presence of bread today’. Such experiences are not erased – and sometimes cannot be erased – because they constitute corporeal memories. Such memories in turn reveal how deeply people are entangled with a surrounding material world.

The analysis further shows that the objects that people single out as important are sensitive due to their ambiguous nature, i.e. due to people’s ambiguous attitudes towards them. Some objects were necessary but at the same time foul-tasting or smelly. Others brought about sensations of pleasure, but were scarce. Either way, the senses involved in engagement with those objects constitute corporeal memories that ‘resonate’, even two decades later, in meetings with particular smells and tastes, or

due to sudden ruptures in the expected material circumstances (heath, light, running water).

However, these corporeal memories also appear to be reactivated by the very act of narration. This suggests that the affective power of past experiences remains gathered in some of the objects of humanitarian aid, i.e. in the memories of them. These memories are both positive and negative. However, for the people who were adults at the time of the war, particular objects of humanitarian aid also emerge as sensitive because they are so basic and part of a normal existence in the sense of 'normality as people know it' (Nordstrom 2004). At the same time, the objects were highly desired regardless of their repulsive traits. In the *post festum* narrative effort of sense-making, they become the nodes of realisation of the fragility of any kind of taken for granted materiality in which 'normal' social and emotional reactions are supposedly safely embedded (see Povrzanović Frykman 2002).

It is noted (in line with Tumarkin 2013) that person-object interactions constitute a bodily remembering, that mnemonic processes also operate at levels that cannot be fully reduced to cognition, and that the products of these processes exceed representational forms rather than being completely outside or beyond them. This chapter shows that in addition to the what – the words that qualify the experiences and the ways they are rationally (and morally) framed in the narrative act of sense-making – the how also needs to be observed – the physical and physiological dimensions of the act of narration.

Tears were shed during several of the interviews. However, perhaps most importantly, the tense laughter and smiles of disbelief offer glimpses of the lingering ambivalence stemming from the revived memories of deprivation and pleasure alike. They highlight – for the narrators themselves as well as for the researcher – the affective power, retained as corporeal memories, of the utterly precarious situation of the siege. They also confirm openness as a core character of affect: the objects of humanitarian aid remain sensitive precisely because the (older) narrators could not (always) decide how they felt about them. Twenty years after the war they were not quite sure how to 'fix in words' their experiences of humanitarian aid, whether they should feel grateful or angry, happy about surviving or humiliated. Regardless, the act of narration creates an affective continuity between what is said and how it is told, and between the past experience and the current act of narration.

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Notes

- 1 Thirteen interviews (one with a married couple) were conducted in Sarajevo by the psychologist Dr Nina Bosankić, who acted as research assistant. She is assistant professor at the International University of Sarajevo and senior researcher affiliated to the Centre for Refugee and IDP Studies in Sarajevo. A native of Sarajevo, she was in her teens during the war. The people she interviewed were not her close relations, but her own or her relatives' acquaintances. She had not talked about the matters discussed here with the fourteen interviewees before, but they could all presume her familiarity with the subject matter. I interviewed the fifteenth participant by Skype, also in Bosnian, the native language of all the interviewees. The translations of the interview excerpts are mine.
- 2 Observe also the term 'trauma' in this quote. The discussion of how this term is and can be used is beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 3 Ivana Maček (in her comments on this text) observed that the narrative device 'and everyone would tell you so' was often used when people in Sarajevo said something that was politically/publicly ambiguous. By using the narrative device of magnitude, the woman I interviewed may have wanted to make sure that I (an outsider who did not share her experiences of the siege) did not regard her reactions as strange, but like those of 'everyone else'.
- 4 In line with how it is used by Thomas J. Csordas (1990), embodiment refers to the body as the main means of interacting with the world. For Csordas, 'the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture' (ibid. 5). His approach is developed from the perspective of psychological anthropology and 'leans strongly in the direction of phenomenology' (ibid.).
- 5 Burton (2011: 8) sees chronic pain as the antithesis of the commemorative, embodied ritualisation described by Paul Connerton (1989) as essential for the maintenance of social memories and for defining collective identities. 'Instead, chronic pain is marked by an almost complete absence of communal performance or formal significance within the life of a community. Its meaning is located within the four corners of the (modern) individual, symbolically banal, corporeally profane and devoid of meaning, for everybody except the sufferer, and sometimes even for the sufferer as well' (Burton 2011: 8). See also Linda Green's description (1994) of illness among Guatemalan Maya as the only unpoliticised way of remembering political violence and pain/loss.
- 6 This was also well documented in my former research on war experiences; see Povrzanović Frykman 2002 and 2008.
- 7 Ivana Maček (in her comments on this text) observed that the quality of the affect is changed in the narrative – for the purpose of distancing and thus also integrating an otherwise too psychologically disturbing experience. Other ways of coping with disturbing experiences include forgetting them, or ignoring them as much as possible – not talking about them.
- 8 When commenting on this text Ivana Maček observed that people in Sarajevo were happy

when they received their humanitarian aid packages but felt ashamed at having to queue for them. However, at the time they did not laugh or feel suffocated.

- 9 The connections between personal and collective experiences and their subsequent representations are not pursued here, but would benefit from Fischer and van Kleeef's work (2010), where the social dimension of emotions is seen as fundamental. The analysis of such connections would further benefit from Richard and Rudnycky's emphasis (2009) on the relationality inherent in affect – its transactional and intersubjective character that forges new subjectivities and new collectivities. Richard and Rudnycky's notion of affective collectivities might also be useful in interpreting solidarity in war. The same applies to Sara Ahmed's discussion (2004b) of affective economies. Stories cherishing solidarity are prominent in the interviews and the related affective collectivities can be discerned on different scales (see Povrzanović Frykman 2015).
- 10 De Nardi therefore concludes that memory is not just retrieval from or of the past, but has a regenerating aspect that is 'encapsulated' in mementos as the veterans' 'best tool to reach out with their stories and emotions in order to establish a meaningful connection with the contemporary world – to feel that what they did *matters*' (ibid. 460; emphasis in the original). My examples reveal what mattered to people living under siege, but also open up the question of how the experience of being dependent on humanitarian aid mattered, and might still matter, with regard to people's emotions and attitudes in the context of postwar socio-political developments (see Povrzanović Frykman 2016).
- 11 In his research on Sarajevans' postwar yearnings for 'normal lives', Stef Jansen (2013) shows that this dynamic is central to everyday war memories in Sarajevo more generally.
- 12 In a PR statement issued by the Centre for Contemporary Art in Sarajevo, the institution that authorised the placement of this sculpture in a public space, the part about Sarajevans 'still today remembering these cans with disgust' is followed by a reminder of the arms embargo imposed in the 1990s by the international community. The point made is that instead of allowing them to fight back and defend themselves, the international community was 'feeding the endangered population with the long out-of-date canned meat' (Bošnjaci.net 2007).
- 13 See Frykman, Chapter 7 in this volume, on how an affective relation to the environment is analysed in terms of worlding.

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