Narrating Victimhood. Gender, Religion and the Making of Place in Post-War Croatia by Michaela Schäuble. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2014

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1 Ignoring any warnings of potential dangers that might lurk in the supra right wing and Eurosceptic Dalmatian hinterland, anthropologist Michaela Schäuble set out to explore the rural margin of the Croatian nation. For many months, the town of Sinj became the author's home, where she built close relationships with the locals. In comparison to many urban liberals, Sinj's inhabitants have made Croatia's violent history, marked by the Homeland War, the Communist past, and the Ottoman invasion, their personal trademark. Stuck in their pasts, the locals display pride in understanding themselves as victimized people – people that will always exist at the margins of political or economic power. Schäuble conducted the biggest part of her research in 2012, which means that Croatia had recently applied for membership in the European Union. The locals anticipated economic exploitation of their farmers if Croatia would fall under EU leadership. In general, the socio-economic situation in rural Dalmatia leaves much to be desired. The majority of the population is poor, with homemade produce providing an important source of income and being a necessity to bolster the kitchen table. As a result of their mistrust in contemporary political developments, Sinj's inhabitants revitalize conservative family values and local traditions, all of which idealize strict definitions of masculinity and femininity. In my opinion, the strength of Schäuble's work lies in uncovering the pitfalls of these gendered notions. The author paints a sad picture of the once oh-so sexy dandy soldier who bravely defended Croatia during the Homeland War. Today, his sex appeal is as good as gone. Instead, he is an aged veteran without hope or financial security. Sadly, he has turned into a mere mockery of masculine heroism. As a result, the rate of domestic violence and suicide in veteran families has risen tremendously in the postwar years. Women, on the other hand, are expected to provide psychological support both for the nation and their immediate families. Femininity means to embrace and live out the role of eternal self-sacrifice in the form of the mater dolorosa. Women's Marian identification represents the dignity and aesthetics in lamenting the loss of a child – in the case of Dalmatia's women, this equates to the loss of their sons who fell as soldiers. Hence, women embrace and reproduce the local's self-image of victimization.

2 In the first chapter, Schäuble illuminates the significance of the Sinjka Alka, a yearly tournament held in Sinj that celebrates the successful resistance against the Ottoman invasion in 1715. The Alka is a celebration of pure masculinity, underlining Croatian men's destiny to defend their nation. According to the legendary tale, the inhabitants of Sinj had a Marian painting in their possession, which assisted them in fighting against the Turkish invaders. As legend has it, the painting came alive and a floating lady in a white dress appeared, causing the Ottomans to flee the battlegrounds. Ever since, the events of the past have been retold, modified, and translated all over

the world. Schäuble observes that the locals whole-heartedly believe in folkloric tales connected to Ottoman resistance; the Sinjka Alka celebration has turned into a mutually political and religious statement. As a strictly gendered event, men occupy the sphere of politics, representing their status as the nation's defenders, while women represent the spiritual side. Only men are allowed to re-enact the town's history in traditional dress and proudly ride the horses at the tournament. The reader learns from Schäuble's vivid depictions of the traditional festivities that the self-deprecating image of victimization has temporarily vanished when the reader looks at that open display of male excellence. Women, on the other hand, keep the image of victimhood alive. They openly pray at the Marian painting, exemplifying their close identification with the suffering of the Virgin Mother. Their expressive mode of worship, almost ritual-like, is not echoed by the cheering masses that accompany the men at the Alka tournament.

3 The notion of eternal female suffering finds its starkest expression in chapter two, "Marian Devotion in Times of War." Here, Schäuble depicts the life of Marija, who has literally become the embodiment of the mater dolorosa. Marija lives in Gala, a neighboring town of Sinj. In 1983, a few children witnessed a Marian apparition close to Marija's home; among these young seers was Marija's son Jurica. Under Communist rule, state authorities pressured the inhabitants to ignore what the children had witnessed. Marija, however, firmly believed in the apparition. Her religious devotion has strengthened even more since her son Jurica died in his thirties. In order to cope with his death, Marija identifies with the Virgin Mother who also lost her son at a young age. On a regular basis, Marija visits a nearby Marian statue. There, she prays and mourns for her son. On the way, Schäuble accompanies Marija. This is one of the first times in Schäuble's work where she shares her personal emotions with the reader, admitting that Marija's life has touched her deeply. Moreover, Schäuble gives the reader an intimate depiction of Marija's interaction with the statue: "Praying, for her, is a sensory and an aesthetic experience: the way she touches and caresses the statue conveys a deep love and connectedness" (114). Besides portraying an empathetic picture of Marija in this chapter, Schäuble manages to give a voice to the Marian apparition in Gala. Ever since 1983, this town has been ridiculed for believing in the children seers, which the author attributes to local competition for pilgrimage sites.

4 In chapter three, "Re-Visions of History through Landscape," Schäuble discusses Croatia's stark resistance to acknowledging wartime perpetrators, particularly in the right-wing circles of the Dalmatian hinterland. According to the locals, Croatia cannot be viewed as a nation of war crime committers since the country has always served its role as defender and not invader. Commemorative rituals that take place on massacre sites of the Homeland War where thousands of Croatians lost their lives underline Dalmatia's self-image of a victimized people. As the author demonstrates, in Sinj and its surroundings, the living hunt the dead and not vice versa. In other words, the dead are utilized as a political statement; their slaughtered bodies stand for Croatia's eternal suffering as an innocent people. In the right-wing circles, any allusions or hard evidence to wartime crimes committed by Croatian soldiers during the Homeland War, which incidentally became a crucial concern when Croatia

applied for EU membership, are viewed as an insult against the nation. On September 3 of 2005, Schäuble took part in the Mass for the Victims of the Communist Regime at one of the massacre sites. Here, she observes that the Franciscan minister overtakes more of a political role than a religious one. In his speech, he shows solidarity with former Homeland War generals Mirco Norac and Ante Gotovina, who were both convicted of wartime crimes. While men, like the Franciscan minister, commemorate the dead by utilizing their suffering for contemporary political purposes, women commemorate on an emotional level. They publicly act out their sorrow for Croatia's lost sons by gathering around the massacre sites, lamenting aloud, and thereby constituting a counter-image to male self-control.

5 In chapter four, "Of War Heroes, Martyrs and Invalids," Schäuble runs a call against the government's treatment of its veterans. She uncovers how indifferent the state reacts to the physical and psychological ailments of Homeland War's ex-combatants, resulting in almost no outreach programs in the rural areas of Dalmatia. Hence, the author comes to a deflating reality check: domestic violence and suicide are not uncommon among veterans in the rural regions. The younger men especially have little hope for a better future. Schäuble demands for the government to urgently provide support for these men and their families who also suffer from secondary wartime trauma. As the author demonstrates, the Mr. Clean image that many former soldiers enjoyed when they entered the Homeland War has left a bitter aftertaste, even feelings of guilt, due to the public discussions of wartime crimes committed by Croatians. While giving male veterans a voice, Schäuble also raises awareness for female ex-combatants. In contrast to men, their military contributions have never inspired the country to acknowledge women's heroism. In Dalmatia's strict gendered society, women are solely portrayed as worried brides and mothers during the war, while their husbands and sons serve the state. Still, these women deserve acknowledgement, especially in the form of state support in order to fight their wartime traumas.

6 "Mobilising Local Reserves" is the concluding chapter of Schäuble's work. The hinterland's Euroscepticism is the main focus here, which ties into the author's depiction of the veteran's negative view of the immediate future. Taking into consideration that the author conducted her research shortly before Croatia became a member of the European Union, Schäuble is able to give first-hand depictions of the locals' fears of exploitation. In that context, the author demonstrates that the inhabitants regard rural simplicity and the search for autonomy as powerful counter-images to urban neo-liberalism. They express their anti-European Union course by going as far as equating the EU to Yugoslavia in public campaigns. While rejecting any approximation with the EU, the locals emphasize their close connection to the Mediterranean. Schäuble views this identification "as a particular form of regionalism" (265), which helps the population to put a positive spin on their marginal position. In other words, relating to the Mediterranean offers a connection to the romanticized ancient Europe. This identification secures Western recognition, a recognition that does not need to be officially sealed with a membership of the European Union.

7 In sum, Schäuble delivers a well-rounded account of the Dalmatian hinterland and Sinj's inhabitants in particular. Her focus on victimhood and gender differences shed light on a marginal population who idealize their past and rely on their traditions as a safety net for an unpredictable future. The strong suit of her work lies in Schäuble's sensitive and non-judgemental approach of sharing the world views of the locals, whose right-wing and anti-liberal beliefs, as the authors openly admits, she does not share. Schäuble's detailed account highlights Croatia's multifaceted culture and its struggle to find a unified identity, an identity that is able to represent the country beyond its borders.