

## Subjectivity and the Sensing of Geopolitics

James Riding's *The Geopolitics of Memory* opens with a dedication to the author's recently deceased father and to two aid workers from the UK who died in 1995 when taking supplies to Sarajevo in 1995. As such, the book is itself clearly embedded in assemblages of memory and memorialisation that stretch from the personal to the geopolitical (if those can be distinguished). The book's structure has academic 'bookends' at the start and the end with an experimental middle that is unlike anything I have read before: a Georges Perec-inspired account of a square in Sarajevo over three days in 2016, with things seen and heard in the square used to launch into the author's memories of stories he had heard, videos he had watched, and sights he had seen on a trip to Bosnia to examine memorials of the 1990s war. Most of the book is, therefore, a series of flashbacks occasioned by the sensory experience of the square, or at least that is the conceit of the format. It is a remarkable experiment in geopolitical form.

The result is an account of the Balkans — past and present — in which time is folded in, around, and by the author in a fashion that is both refreshing and also problematic. Before I turn to what I see as problematic about the book, however, I want to attest to the labour of love that clearly went into the volume. It is clearly a personal story, told with verve and beauty. Making my way through the book I was frequently moved by passages in a way that is rare in academic writing. Various elements of the book — such as the discussion of *Spomenik*, or very timely discussions of the temporalities of everyday life for refugees — are incredibly enriching. However, I found that by rooting the book in an experimental Perec-inspired phenomenology that has been largely bypassed in Geography in favour of more critical post-phenomenological approaches, Riding thwarts many of his own aims, even as the overall work is invigorating in its originality.

In the preface to the book (itself an interesting folding of time as the author addresses his manuscript reviewers), Riding says that he aims to 'give over a sense of what Bosnia itself is like. On the one hand, it feels heavy with the weight of history, and yet on the other, it is an inspirational place with radical emancipatory politics,' (13). His goal, then, is to give Bosnia a presence where it is

otherwise insensible. This is, of course, a classic trope of both geography and travel writing, which is a genre to which the volume is much indebted – even drawing psychogeographical inspiration from past British ‘explorers’ of the Balkans such as Arthur Evans and Rebecca West. Alongside this aim must be laid another, which Riding articulates later:

Here, in contrast to so much recent geographical writing, which has sought to define the view of the self in a location in terms of *presence* in various forms, seeking out absent-presences that are ‘haunting’ spectral traces, I aim instead through a Perecquian geographical practice to describe another more ‘essential’ or ‘everyday’ Sarajevo. (28)

Here we detect an effort to eschew the relational approaches to space found in the (now, not so) ‘new’ cultural geography. *The Geopolitics of Memory*, then, is caught in the tension between its objectives — to both re-present to readers the absent-presence of Bosnia and to avoid tired geopolitical metanarratives of the Balkans in favour of the everyday, actual present-presence of the people of Sarajevo.

The hinge that makes this tension work in practice is, of course, the author himself. It is Riding’s phenomenological sensations of Bosnia that are being presented to readers, rather than Bosnia itself, and it is Riding’s field notes from the square in Sarajevo that serve as the scaffolding of memory. Indeed, the author is found throughout the book, front and centre — it is, after all, an auto-ethnography. However, readers are given very little sense of Riding, his connection to Bosnia, how he came to be here, and how his life prepared him as a certain kind of sensing subject in the landscape. This is really only addressed in a single sentence of the preface (which was, again, written in response to manuscript reviews): ‘I recognise in writing this now, my own positionality as an outsider, which perhaps enables a different reading of this place, yet at the same time means some sentences may jar,’ (14).

Of course, the implications of this positionality go far beyond adding in a reflexivity statement — although that would be welcome. A post-phenomenological approach to this Perecquian methodology begs several questions about the intra-actions between Riding and Bosnia.

Riding's observations of the square in Sarajevo are — as he notes — not exhaustive of the site's eventful-ness. The flat banality of his observations is intended to fulfil the aim he sets out in the preface: to communicate the elements of everyday life that are not overcoded by collective memory, to free Sarajevo of its history and enable a more emancipatory politics to unfold. 'This form of constrained description is a significant antidote to the "trauma-spectacle" which has arguably become the dominant way of attending to the landscapes of "trauma-sites" like Sarajevo, or Berlin' (31). I can understand his concern that his research topic — memorialisation of trauma in the Balkans — might re-iterate the kind of harmful nationalist politics that tore Bosnia apart and which is held in place discursively through the Dayton Agreement. But the accounts of the everyday 'infra-ordinary' in Sarajevo are equally overcoded in their seemingly apolitical formulation. Men play chess, pigeons steal food, children play. What might a Sarajevan see in this scene? What kind of politics is at play, but in a register insensate to Riding? How does sitting in a café alter Riding's perceptual registers? What micro-aggressions are unfolding? What subversive acts are lurking behind the pillars? How is Riding's own (racialised, gendered) presence altering the atmosphere in the café from which he observes? Maybe Riding has been so immersed in Sarajevo for so long that he could detect these nuances, but the overcoding of the scene is so complete that I am not sure it matters.

The conceit of the book — that Riding's immersion in the landscape causes memory to emerge within his subjectivity — is a real strength of the book in that the excursions into various pasts are substantial and indeed give voice to various characters whose memories (or lack thereof) are re-presented to the reader. After all, the project here is to re-member Bosnia, in opposition to its ongoing dis-membering. But in his effort to portray the place in its flat banality, without the absent presences of relational geography, the author instead looms as a ghost haunting the book, as those whose experiences are present-ed are manifested through Riding's perception. Throughout the volume, Riding is front and centre, but with little discussion of method or its implications. How were these people first encountered? How did their memories come to be rendered in print? Their

connection to the author — either in England or in Bosnia — appears crucial but remains offstage. As Emerson (2001, 92) wrote regarding Perec:

While space, to Perec, is the armature of experience, it remains fragile and ephemeral. As a result, a meticulous attention to the physical world is necessary in order to create character and, more importantly, protect it from erasure and disappearance. If Perec is so concerned that his characters are constructed by spaces and things, it is because the characters, in themselves, are incapable of remembrance. Space is the locus of memory (and history) and it must, therefore, be protected in order to prevent erasure.

This inattention to the actual stories of the people in the square appears as a kind of constant distancing. An indicative passage, taken from field notes in the square, indicates this manoeuvre:

Circular saw

A child screams

I hear people talking.

A man sits next to me.

He asks why I am here. Why does this place concern me? I remembered an aid-worker in 1992 who was asked a similar question [...] (145)

In what follows this passage, Riding briefly tells the story of Stuart Laycock, who delivered aid during the Bosnian War and made videotapes of his travels throughout the war, which were provided to Riding. The narrative shifts to a phenomenological account of Riding viewing the videotapes, a Perecquian analysis of a Perecquian medium: 'The films display in their entirety the seemingly inconsequential and inadmissible, the apparently irrelevant things in and stories from a country at war' (146). But do they? Do they display 'in their entirety'? To what kind of sensing body is this 'entirety' perceptible? Does it matter that this is a second order viewing by an Englishman of another Englishman's videos? I would argue that it does.

Riding has indeed followed in Perec's footsteps, producing a detailed — and at times incredibly moving — account of the way memory and trauma are unfolding in both Bosnia and its

diaspora. But the experimental effort to break free of the metanarratives of war and ethnic conflict instead substitute another mediating frame — the overriding experience of the author, whose relationship to the place is one of an ‘outsider’ (14). The artifice involved rather unnecessarily detracts from understanding either the ‘weight of history’ in Bosnia or the region’s emancipatory politics.

### **Bibliography**

Emerson, T. (2001) ‘From Lieux to Life...’ *AA Files* 45/46: 92-97.