

## BOOK REVIEWS

**James Riding, *The Geopolitics of Memory. Journey to Bosnia*, New York/NY: Columbia University Press 2019. 192 pp., ISBN: 9783838213118, \$ 30.00**

James Riding's *The Geopolitics of Memory: A Journey to Bosnia* offers an innovative approach to ethnographic place-writing, exploring the human geography of a post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina through the synthesis of experimental methodology and meticulously detailed research. Borrowing from a practice developed by geographer George Perec on the study of the 'infra-ordinary', or a space's habitual 'background noise' that is often overlooked when that space is examined (29), the author builds his narration around Sarajevo's well-traveled square Trg Oslobođenja, which he repeatedly revisits and comprehensively illustrates. The text foregoes a traditional chronology for a non-linear narrative form, discussing a series of impressions, recollections, and memories (179) that are connected solely through Riding's own associations with what he sees in his chosen public space. The text hereby transports the reader on an erratic journey through a landscape filled with the once-prosperous *Boska* factories, which now stand abandoned in the manufacturing town of Novi Travnik, the World War II *Spomenik* monuments, the dangers of wartime Mostar, the commemorative practices of the Prijedor camps, and all the way to the optimism sparked by the *Plenum* protest movement of 2014. Using the transmitted memories of those connected with these spaces as anchor

points, Riding accomplishes the goal of linking the physical, historical, and human geography of modern Bosnia and Herzegovina in a surprising yet powerful manner.

Riding's journey is guided by a theoretical framework built on the tumultuous travels of geographer Arthur J. Evans, supporting his experimental approach with a broad spectrum of analytical concepts. The author draws on the work of a number of scholars, including geographer Fred Singleton's insights on the region, David Campbell's ontopological studies, and the aforementioned work of George Perec. Working with the idea of a 'cultural geopolitics' (180), the experiences of former Yugoslav citizens are recounted in a manner that explicitly 'seeks to deconstruct a fixed identitarian politics' and questions the role of ethno-nationalist borders (180). One of the more impressive characteristics of this book is this combination of an experimental literary style with a meticulously documented theoretical framework. Although the tendency toward exercising caution when it comes to experimental texts is, to a certain extent, justified, *The Geopolitics of Memory* is one of the cases where taking an unorthodox approach makes it possible to fill a gap in knowledge in an unprecedented manner. Riding's study of memory in a post-genocide landscape goes beyond simply stating that the region's most recent wars were more complex than a tragic inevitability, instead focusing on the complexities of the personal experiences which, in Sarajevo as in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, are

constantly overlapping, shifting, merging, and moving apart as a result of the thousands of factors shaping the social fabric of the region. Embracing his subjective role as an outside observer, Riding provides a transparent transcription of the voices of others without claiming objectivity in a narrative where objectivity cannot exist. This allows the reader to easily follow his erratic and unorthodox process. The text is divided into three unequal sections, the first of which is based on a meticulous introduction to the project and the theoretical foundation on which it rests. This is followed by three chapters representing the three days Riding spent at his chosen square, describing his surroundings in free form followed by descriptions of associated memories. Finally, the author devotes the last pages of his text to discussing and contextualizing the motive behind the development of his study.

A seemingly fragmented narrative style creates a pastiche of geographical descriptions, historical context, and contemporary lives, and has the effect of painting a hyper-detailed picture of a moment in time in a specific place (such as the Trg Oslobodjenja), while simultaneously transporting the reader to a series of other moments removed from one other. While experiences of war, siege, aid workers, refugees, or those of the Novi Travnik factory workers are not universal, the interaction between the personal and collective aspects of these experiences are part of a local consciousness and shape the way in which a location's inhabitants live and understand their place in a postconflict society. The construction of a solid theoretical framework based on a well-researched and relatively comprehensive literature is supplemented with insightful analyses of Bosnian cultural elements, including thoughtful references to the work of artist

Mladen Miljanović or Miljenko Jergović's book *Sarajevo Marlboro*. It is clear that Riding is intimately familiar with his subject: a fleeting reference to the 'dancing guy' (157) who regularly shows off his eccentric moves in the streets of Sarajevo makes this very clear. At the same time, the originality of his descriptions of the central square in Sarajevo are especially captivating, not only on a theoretical but also an aesthetic level, creating an interplay between shifting styles and narration that delineate and create overlaps between chronological ambiguities.

This approach nevertheless has some shortcomings: while special attention is paid to local networks and grassroots organizations, the text's focus on visible traumas could have been improved with the inclusion of the voices of those with limited access to memorialization communities. The approach taken by the author means that he is only able to describe the people, events, and places with which he has had direct contact, making it likely that certain stories remain untold, despite a determined attempt to present a balanced image of his subject matter. At the same time, the dominant presence of the *Plenum* movement in the text appears, in hindsight, somewhat overly optimistic. The movement's relevance has seriously declined in contemporary Bosnia, and while its importance as a postconflict bid for autonomous democratic organization should, without a doubt, be acknowledged—the fact remains that its influence on the local sociopolitical landscape has been much smaller than presumed by Riding. While the author does refer to the disappointing outcome of the movement, repeated comparisons with Evan's travels during a period of Herzegovinian peasant revolts tend to color the narrative with a disproportionately nostalgic approach.

Nevertheless, in spite of some overly hasty optimism, Riding's account of the complicated sociopolitical landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina achieves its goal of bringing both past and present closer to the reader.

Ewa Anna Kumelowski (Berlin)

**Yuson Jung, *Balkan Blues. Consumer, Politics after State Socialism***, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. 192 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-02914-0, \$ 35.00

Yuson Jung's book, which is based on her doctoral thesis, focuses on postsocialist consumer policies in Bulgaria. Her central question concerns Bulgarians' experience of the construction of a postsocialist consumer market society. Here, she concentrates on those aspects that shed light on the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first sets out the ethnographic framework and defines the issue. The second chapter provides the reader with the historical context of consumer policies during socialism and during Bulgaria's integration into the European Union (EU). The next two chapters form the core of the book: the author analyzes the transformation of the postsocialist consumer sector and associations, but above all she presents an ethnography of the daily practices of consumers providing examples such as housing, heating, and summer holidays. This enables her to illustrate what citizens expect from the state and how the rights and responsibilities of the citizens are represented. Finally, in her last chapter, Jung explores the insights that her analysis of the Bulgarian situation provide with regard to contemporary consumption. The

book concludes with an epilogue on the role of the state followed by an appendix describing Jung's fieldwork experience and her position as a South Korean researcher.

Jung carried out her fieldwork in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. After a preliminary visit in the summer of 1999, the author conducted the core of her ethnographic research in 2001, 2002, and again in 2008. She then returned regularly to the country for periods of varying length until 2016. Facilitated by her progressively improving language skills and a wide range of informants who she met through her landlords, Jung has been a volunteer member of the Bulgarian National Consumers Association (BNCA) since 1999. This has allowed her to observe their efforts to transform the status of consumers and to introduce the legislation required by European Union membership.

The author argues that postsocialist Bulgaria's consumer policies can only be fully understood by considering the state's role and how citizens conceptualize consumer rights and responsibilities. She shows how relations with the Bulgarian state are lived and reproduced in everyday consumer behaviour. Indeed, the state is seen as a regulatory body, an authority that monitors the consumer market, and protects consumers from market abuse. This protection implies that it respects its obligations towards its citizens through a binding social contract. This contract, however, is being undermined by the disruptive norms of consumption introduced by market capitalism. In particular, citizens' expectations of the state that developed under socialism are not being met. In fact, the transformation of state institutions and consumer policies imposed as a result of accession to the EU run counter to these expectations.