

Skyler Inman

Global Cities

Wai Chee Dimock

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Three Lazarus Projects

“Cities are marked with specific architecture from specific dates, and this architecture, built by long-vanished others for their own uses, is the shell that we, like hermit crabs, climb into. [...] Cities [...] do not project a harmonious version of themselves, because they cannot—the conflict is ever present and indelible. Hence they’re uncontainable, like language or literature—no experience or interpretation can be final, no delimiting or closure ever available.”

–Teju Cole, in conversation with Aleksandar Hemon
BOMB Magazine, Spring 2014

I. The Problem of Memorialization

On one morning in May of 2015, I am walking, loose-legged, down a cobblestoned incline near the *Pijaca Markale*, an orange-canopied open-air market near Sarajevo’s city center. I have just left Hostel Massimo, a tiny backpackers’ hotel where I am staying with a group of undergraduate journalists, and am headed towards *Baščaršija*, the old town. It is just past ten o’clock and, although jetlagged, I am feeling alert in the way one only really feels alert in a new city. I am also feeling troubled.

Walking through Sarajevo, one is constantly confronted with the problem of memorialization, I write in my journal that night. The problem of memorialization, as it occurs to me in this moment, is thus: I am walking approximately two blocks to the Sacred Heart Cathedral in downtown Sarajevo, where I intend to pick up a friend who will accompany me on the remainder of the walk. Already, in the space of one block, I have passed three monuments to the dead.

The seemingly cheery *Pijaca Markale*, where dozens of vendors stand with tables of fruits and vegetables: the site of a gruesome bombing in August of 1995. Underfoot as I wait for a tram to pass through the *Katedrala* stop: A jagged splatter of red wax known as a Sarajevo Rose. (These spot the city's roadways and sidewalks, filling the gashes left by exploded mortars and marking places where Bosnian blood was spilled during the war of the 1990s.) As I look up from the wax-filled pavement, my eyes catch the ruins of a bombed-out building, intentionally left as it was when the war ended. In the nearly twenty years since the fighting stopped, the building, which is missing a ceiling and a street-facing wall, has begun to sprout weeds.

One cannot simply go on a walk in Sarajevo, I write. Every promenade is a vigil.

The memory of this walk came back to me in vivid detail as I read Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*. Hemon's narrator, Vladimir Brik, shares many characteristics with the author—not the least of which is the fact that both escaped Bosnia before the war began. Due perhaps to Brik and Hemon's mutual guilt over this fact, it is a work of fiction that is preoccupied with the ghosts generated by the conflict. Much of the novel, however, doesn't take place in Sarajevo at all.

Like two other novels we have studied this semester—Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*—Hemon relies heavily on a frame story (“story within a story”) structure. In each of these three works, this secondary tale (or, in the case of *The Kitchen God's Wife*, the primary tale) is a flashback, which brings us, in every case, to an entirely different time and place.

In *The Lazarus Project*, this narrative takes place in Chicago during the aftermath of the 1908 murder of Lazarus Averbuch, a young Jewish immigrant. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, we are transported to Oskar's grandparents' youth in Dresden. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Winnie reveals her traumatic life in World War II-era China. All three writers are preoccupied with memorialization, and all three works feature protagonists who are, in one way or another, using methods of memorialization to raise the dead from their graves. In *The Lazarus Project*, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, we can see three different models of memorialization, and can hold them up against one another as three attempts at raising the dead. To memorialize—which is to say, to give narrative to the dead—is to bring them back to life.

II. Memorials in Public and Private

I should begin by defining the terms of this discussion. Memorialization is almost always tied to trauma; trauma, in turn, is almost always tied to loss. When it comes to these three novels, the losses in question occurs on two levels: On the macro scale, you have societal—what we might call cataclysmic—loss: World War II, the Japanese occupation of China, the Holocaust, genocide against Muslims in Bosnia, the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and the Dresden bombings. On the micro scale, you have personal loss: the death of a husband, the death of a lover, the loss of a pregnancy, the loss of a marriage, rape (which is to say, the loss of bodily autonomy), a miscarriage. In turn, each kind of loss begets its own kind of memorialization; mourning the loss of an individual looks entirely different from

mourning the loss of a country, a culture, or one's sense of self. Memorialization, in other words, can have different forms, different intents, and different outcomes. The kind of memorialization at work in the streets of Bosnia is akin to the kind one can see at Birkenau and Auschwitz, or at the site where the Twin Towers once stood. This kind of memorial is a warning. It commands that we Never Forget. It is built into our cities like scar tissue. It is arrived at by consensus, by committee, by commission of an artist or an architect. There is an opening ceremony. It is official and formal in a way that private memorialization is not always.

In some instances, memorialization is the accumulation of physical objects that are imbued with the essence or memory of a person. Oskar, for example, holds on to his father's last voicemails, which he hides on a tape recorder in his closet, unbeknownst even to his mother. He transforms his father's last words into a Morse code bracelet, using "sky-blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between letters, violet beads for breaks between words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps," an elaborate artifact to freeze and maintain the last moment of his father's life.¹ The creation of this object is an act of memorialization, and it underlines an important distinction: What is the difference between a memorial and a relic?

A relic is anything that the dead leave behind—photographs, personal belongings, voice recordings, or even vivid memories. In its original definition, a relic was a part of the remains of a saint, most commonly a saint's bones—proof,

¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2005), 35.

supposedly², that the saint had corporeal form.

When Oskar and his mother go to clear out his father's storage unit, for example, they are dealing with relics—items that once belonged to Oskar's father, and which are indeed imbued with some essence of him. They get into a fight over the fate of a disposable razor, pondering why he would have saved it in the first place. Despite the inanity of it, Oskar wants to keep it: “she said it should go in the ‘throw it away’ pile and I told her it should go in the ‘save it’ pile. She said, ‘Save it for what?’ I said, ‘It doesn't matter for what. [...] So it will be OK if I throw away all of your things and forget about you after you die?’”³

Oskar regrets the emotional outburst almost before he is done saying these words, but it is clear that these relics hold real emotional weight. Memorials are relics with added intentionality. Private memorials can be symbolic items that have been newly created (like Oskar's Morse code bracelet), or existing relics that have been consciously preserved and used in a way that calls back some aspect of the departed. Memorials seek to keep the dead alive. Thus, the voicemail is a relic, but Oskar saving and listening to it repeatedly is an act of memorialization. In this way, a *memory* is a relic, but a *story*—a memory given narrative purpose—is a memorial.

² This may seem like a bit of a tangent here, but it is useful to note, especially as we go on to discuss authenticity and truth in post-mortem narratives, that false relics were quite commonly traded in medieval times. As Chaucer references in *The Canterbury Tales*, animal bones (frequently pig bones) were sometimes used in the place of real relics. Proving the authenticity of such items (or lack thereof) was difficult, much as we see from these novels that it is difficult to refute or prove memorialization narratives.

³ Safran Foer, 102.

III. Gendered Narratives of Memory

So, how do the three texts in question relate to one another? I propose that the three be set up as a sort of triangulation of the matter at hand, *The Lazarus Project* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* contrasted to *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Not only do the former two exhibit a wide range of parallels (both in form and content⁴), but when set up against Tan's novel, they reveal an interestingly gendered dynamic. It's no coincidence that the two novels featuring a protagonist who embarks on a voyage of discovery, the main character is male.

In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, by contrast, Winnie is forced to reveal her narrative. Winnie's story could be called the opposite of memorialization. Indeed, telling her story involves bringing abuse, rape, and trauma back to life. Whereas male protagonists across these novels are given leeway to not only valorize their trauma, but discover and write memorializing stories of other men, women like Winnie and Pearl are expected to hide their pain, suppress their trauma, and carry the burden of their secrets alone. Even in Winnie's story, we see men accustomed to having their pain count for more than the pain of women. "Don't you see I am a war hero?" Wen Lu demands of a nurse when he is visiting Winnie in the hospital.⁵ Winnie, who has just given birth to Yiku, soon discovers that during her stay in the

⁴ The fact that Brik and Oskar are searching for impossible-to-find subjects leads both to turn towards the cities where the dead once lived. There, they look for their subjects in the signs and patterns of the cityscapes. Both Oskar and Brik are driven by a sense of survivors' guilt: Oskar feels implicated his father's death, and Brik, who left his home country rather than staying and fighting as Rora did, is anxious about his self-perception as lacking a national identity.

⁵ Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (Chivers Press, 1993), 256.

hospital, Wen Fu had begun to rape their servant girl, who “knew only how to blame herself.”⁶

Indeed, much of *The Kitchen God's Wife* is specifically about the suppression of female pain. Wen Fu beats a six-month-old Yiku so hard that she regresses developmentally. Winnie and Hulan both hope that the little girl will be healed when the war is finally over:

She became a strange baby. She never looked at people's faces. She pulled out hair from one side of her head. She banged her head on the wall. She waved her hands in front of her face and laughed. And when she learned how to walk, she stood on her toes, like a ballerina dancer. [...] Hulan kept telling me, 'When she's older, she'll change. [...] Everyone's the same way. When the war is over, she'll change.'⁷

Women in this world are expected to experience pain—physical and emotional—and be able to absorb and incorporate that pain without voicing it.

Not telling a story, then, also holds great power. In *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Tan presents us with a counterexample to Hemon and Safran Foer's male protagonists. Tan's novel is a story about Winnie's suppression of the dead, of trauma, and of loss. “As the bus moved down the road,” Winnie recalls, “everyone but me looked back at our house one last time. Why would I want to see the place where I had lost my hopes? I was twenty-seven years old and I already wanted to forget everything that had happened in my life. I looked only ahead.”⁸ At every turn, Winnie resists ‘looking back’—which is to say she avoids memorializing at all: “This

⁶ Ibid, 259.

⁷ Ibid, 263.

⁸ Tan, 316.

was China. A woman had no right to be angry.”⁹ In fact, it is only the poor women of Shanghai who break with the assumed social contract and, out of desperation, take the opposite tactic, displaying their pain on placards:

“[A]fter the war, you could see all kinds of beggars, many of them women, sitting on the side of the street. Some had signs printed with their story, like advertisements: This one’s husband left her. This one had her whole family wiped out during the war. This one’s husband became an opium addict and sold everything, including the children.”¹⁰

Almost the entire plot of *The Kitchen God’s Wife* occurs within Winnie’s story—making it the novel that is, of these three works, the one that is most based in a single character’s recollections. Thus, if narrativising one’s loss is a way of memorializing it, Winnie does a more in-depth memorialization of her own pain than any of the other protagonists. This is no small irony when we consider the fact that Winnie is, by far, the most reticent narrator of the three.

But even though the models of memorialization differ quite a bit between Tan, Hemon, and Safran Foer, one thing Winnie does have in common with Brik and Oskar is her acknowledgment of the tenuous relationship between the reality of a traumatic time and one’s memory of it. Of her old life and acquaintances in China, only Winnie and Helen survive to tell their stories. Often, their accounts of the same events vary greatly. But “how can I argue with Helen’s memory?” Winnie asks, “Her truth lives in a little confused part of her brain, all the good things she still wants to

⁹ Ibid, 170.

¹⁰ Ibid, 333.

believe.”¹¹

VI. True (And Untrue) Stories Of The Dead (And Undead)

“I don’t make notes. I rely on memory and its failure.”

—Aleksandar Hemon, *BOMB Magazine*, Spring 2014

When it comes to memorialization, the issue of truth is a vexing one.

To borrow Winnie’s question, how *can* one question the reality of a survivor?

In a situation of great loss, whether personal or communal, to what extent does a survivor have free reign of the facts? To what extent, in other words, is truth allowed to be subjective? The journalist in me bucks at this question. The underlying principle of nonfiction is that there is an objective, discoverable reality. There is a truth—or at least the essence of a truth—that one can convey through responsible reportage. One does due diligence when constructing a story, and, often, allows an impartial fact-checker to double back and comb through the facts a second time. It is tempting to take survivors’ accounts at face value, but one cannot be lazy with the truth—or so the unwritten creed goes.

In a 2014 interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Hemon argues that this is a fundamentally American distinction. “In Bosnian, there are no words that are equivalent to ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction,’ or that convey the distinction between them,” he says. “This is not to say that there is no truth or falsehood. Rather, the stress is on storytelling. The closest translation of nonfiction would really be ‘true stories.’”¹²

In *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon’s modern-day “true stories” spring from the

¹¹ Tan, 253.

¹² Aleksandar Hemon, “Teju Cole,” *BOMB Magazine: Artists in Conversation*. Spring 2014.

conflict of the 1990s. He depicts Bosnia at war (Bosnia of the recent past, in other words) as a chaotic place that allows its inhabitants to reinvent their stories and start over anew. “The one thing I remembered and missed from the before-the-war Sarajevo was a kind of unspoken belief that everyone would be whatever they claimed they were—each life, however imaginary, could be validated by its rightful, sovereign owner, from the inside,” Brik reminisces.¹³ This validation from the inside is a particularly tense concept for Brik, who struggles to pinpoint exactly in which country he belongs. In the same way that Lazarus is caught between death and life, Brik is suspended in a state of non-belonging between his native Bosnia and his new home in Chicago. He conceptualizes his national identity as a fiction—a “self-deception” that he can don for an afternoon that allows him to pretend he belongs “to one nation and not the other.”¹⁴

Brik’s obvious foil is Rora, the lady-charming, risk-taking, tale-telling photographer who belongs wherever he exists, and who, most importantly, remained in Sarajevo during the siege. As a writer, Brik is fascinated by Rora’s oral stories. Rora, however, refuses to deal with the written word. “You’re making up these stories, I said. I wish, he said. You should write it all down. I took photos. You must write it down. That’s what I have you for. That’s why I brought you along.”¹⁵ The humor in this statement, of course, is that it is in fact Brik who invited Rora to come back to Sarajevo with him, but it hints at the tense power dynamic between the two characters: Rora, self-assured in the validity of his memories, his truths, and

¹³ Aleksandar Hemon, *The Lazarus Project* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

his Bosnian identity, dominates Brik, who pesters him with existential questions.

Having these two characters represent such different genres—Brik embodying literature and Rora embodying photography—is indicative of the push and pull that Hemon sees between American and non-American interpretations of fiction and non-fiction. For Rora, seeing is enough, because it jogs his memory. He produces countless images, relics, to use my earlier terminology, which he can at any time narrativize as he wishes. Brik craves a more precise record. The anxiety of photography is a constant theme: what can one do about the endless interpretability of a photograph whose context has been removed? The black and white images that pepper the novel serve as a way of proving Hemon's point about fact and fiction: They are not such distinct categories as Americans might believe. The act of memorializing is the act of fictionalizing. "Once I abruptly realized that we could give him any batch of photos and describe whatever it was he was willing to see." "[H]e was in my power for as long as he listened to me."¹⁶

Lazarus is the obvious entry point for these images, as it is his post-mortem portrait that sparks Brik's curiosity. To Rora, every image is a death portrait. The act of taking and printing a photograph is intimately tied to the act of memorializing. "The thing is," he says, "everybody who has ever been photographed is either dead or will die. That's why nobody photographs me. I want to stay on this side of the picture."¹⁷ In refusing to be photographed, Rora is refusing to be memorialized. He is resisting fictionalization. He is also resisting the (perhaps American) urge that Brik feels to take photographs as evidence. Rora finds this a particularly troubling habit.

¹⁶ Hemon, 206-207.

¹⁷ Hemon, 189.

“What you see is what you see, but that is never everything,” he admonishes Brik. “Sarajevo is Sarajevo whatever you see or don’t see. America is America. The past and the future exist without you. And what you don’t know about me is still my life. [...] Nothing at all depends on you seeing it or not seeing it.”¹⁸ Seeing something does not make it real, and not seeing something does not make it unreal.

It isn’t until the close of the novel, following Rora’s death, that Brik realizes this point. As he speaks with Azra, Rora’s sister, his faith in Rora’s stories unravels. “Well, at least something is true, I said. Something is always true, she said.”¹⁹ Seeing Rora’s photographs did not substantiate his stories. The photographs of Lazarus and of his contemporaries did not substantiate those. Photographs without correct context cannot function as memorials to anything. And now Rora, who made himself impossible to memorialize, was gone.

But memorialization is, by definition, imperfect. As Hemon argues through Lazarus Averbuch’s story, death causes a proliferation of fictions. The first event to follow Lazarus’s murder at the hands of Chief Shippy is the creation of a new narrative. He becomes Lazarus the Anarchist, and his assumed political motivations completely reshape the narrative surrounding his death, but also the narrative surrounding who he was in life.

Memorialization, in other words, is fictionalization. Narratives give comfort. In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar finds himself drawn to writing in the aftermath of his father’s death: “A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don’t know why, but it was one of the only things that made my

¹⁸ Ibid, 209.

¹⁹ Ibid, 291.

boots lighter.”²⁰ Oskar’s ‘boots’—his grief and depression—follow him, as Brik’s PTSD followed him, “like a shadow, forever,” and only a handful of things—writing and searching New York for the lock that fits his key—lighten them.²¹ Oskar finds comfort, in other words, by finding meaning in patterns and narratives. He tries to fit disparate artifacts into some cohesive story, but what he collects instead are a cryptic group of signs, which Safran Foer supplies to us in the form of images: handwriting, flocks of birds exploding into the sky, a cat in mid-leap, the back of a woman’s head, a roller coaster just before the fall. Locked doors. Hundreds of anonymous keys. And although Oskar achieves the impossible by finding the owner of the key in question, it does not open anything pertaining to his father. He was connecting signs, perhaps, but not to the end goal he imagined.

Oskar’s search thus concluded, he finds another way of getting closure: he narrates a fantasy narrative in which he keeps his father alive, making the world run in reverse. At the close of the novel, he has tucked his father away in this imaginary timeline, immortalized and safe.

V. Sifting Through Relics

The problem with memorialization as it now strikes me is that it is simultaneously a grasp for closure and a way of keeping the wound of loss fresh. It is an attempt at finding peace with the dead, but it does so by keeping them alive.

The paradox of memorials, is that they simultaneously seek to bring back to existence the thing whose inexistence they rely on. A memorial must be a stand-in

²⁰ Safran Foer, 11.

²¹ Hemon, 68.

for something—a person or an event—that has passed. You cannot memorialize an event that is still occurring, nor a person who is still living, nor a relationship that still exists. In wartime, the crumbling building across from the *Katedrala* tram stop in Sarajevo was not a memorial; it was a sign of the current state of affairs. It was only when the war was over that passersby began to memorialize it, imbuing the structure with added meaning, and in doing so, keeping the memory it represents alive.

In pinpointing the role of narrative and memorialization in these works, we run into another issue inherent in these three stories: split narratives. Each work unearths more dead individuals than we originally bargain for. Why is it that the stories of Winnie and Pearl, Brik and Lazarus, and Oskar and his grandfather (“the renter”) unfold in tandem? Why is it, for example, that in order to reveal Brik’s struggle with his own ghosts, Hemon brings us Lazarus’? Why is it that in the process of Oskar coming to peace with his father’s death, Safran Foer shows us Oskar’s grandfather’s trauma? Why is it that for every story that takes place in New York, we get a Dresden, for every Shanghai, we also have a San Francisco, and for every Sarajevo, we also receive a Chicago?

Does every city become a memorial to the traumas that occur within it?

To answer this, I return to the conversation between Aleksandar Hemon and Teju Cole in *BOMB Magazine*. “Cities,” Cole says, “Are marked with specific architecture from specific dates, and this architecture, built by long-vanished others for their own uses, is the shell that we, like hermit crabs, climb into.”

I had not yet read this quote when I walked down the cobblestoned incline in

downtown Sarajevo on that morning in May of 2015. I wish I had. As I passed the *Pijaca Markale*, that seemingly cheery open-air market, I knew that it was also the site of a bloody bombing. As I side-stepped the Sarajevo Rose, I knew that some anonymous Sarajevan had died there, simply for standing, as I now stood, in that spot. The city troubled me, because the city felt full of ghosts.

Sarajevo, like Chicago and Shanghai and San Francisco and New York and Dresden, is a Lazarus Project all its own.

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