Trauma Transmission and Sexual Violence

This book grapples with the potential impacts of collective trauma in war-rape survivors' families. Drawing on interethnic and intergenerational participatory action research on reconciliation processes in postconflict Bosnia-Herzegovina, the author examines the risk that female survivors of war-related sexual crimes, now mothers, will breed hatred and further division in the postconflict context. Showing how the historical trauma of sexual abuse among survivors affects the ideas, perceptions, behavioral patterns, and understandings of the ethnic and religious 'Other' or perpetrator, the book also considers the influence of such trauma on other attitudes rarely addressed in peacebuilding programs, such as notions of naturalized gender-based violence, cultural scripts of sexuality, and support for dangerous or violent aspects of the patriarchal social order. It thus seeks to sketch proposals for a curriculum of peacebuilding that takes account of the legacy of war rape in survivors' families and the impact of trauma transmission. As such, *Trauma Transmission and Sexual Violence* will appeal to scholars of politics, sociology, and gender studies with interests in peace and reconciliation processes and war-related sexual violence.

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Trauma Transmission and Sexual Violence

Reconciliation and Peacebuilding in
Postconflict Settings

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Preface

This research is based on ethnographic work in Bosnia-Herzegovina, conducted between 2011 and 2019. It combines data collected from the group interactive workshops, individual conversations, semistructured interviews, spontaneous gatherings, participation with observation, and my own pedagogical practices in prevention of (sexualized) violence.

Throughout the book I refer to mother-survivors simply as ‘survivor’ if not otherwise stated. In order to minimize the narrative fetishism and to protect people that participated in the research, I provide initials of the first name, sometimes age, and the geographical region. Should the reader require more data or information on ethnographic content, she can contact the author directly.

For the scope of this book, I refer to heteronormative families that consist of a biological mother, father, and children. I do not ignore or deny other forms of families and family relations, nor diverse sexualities and gender spectrum. As my ethnographic work did not include any form other than the one mentioned, I wanted to avoid generalizing or drawing conclusions without any concrete research evidence. However, I hope that this book, despite its limitations, can be a departure point to conduct more research on trauma transmission with all forms and shapes of families in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

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1 I will not raise my child to kill your child

Introduction

The beginnings of this book go back to 2015, to a village in central Bosnia-Herzegovina when I was leaving the country after finalizing my previous research. I was visiting women with whom I had worked for half a year to thank them for a fruitful collaboration and the mutual trust, exchanges, and conversations. I traveled with one of them, whom I will call Alma, to a village where another woman that I had worked with, here called Senka, lived with her husband and two daughters. When we arrived, she had just come from the hen house after finishing her morning routine and was changing from her plastic boots to comfortable slippers in front of the house. She warmly invited us to enter, and as is very common in the region, we gathered on a couch, sipping coffee and snacking on wafers. Her husband brought an orangeade from the cellar and then, after briefly shaking our hands, left the house. It was late morning, and the two daughters, aged 13 and 9, were in school. Glancing at the framed pictures of the two girls, Alma expressed how lucky Senka was to have two daughters, while she – although still thankful for her children – had two boys. “They get to help you with your chores, and you have nothing to worry about when you get old as the girls will take care of you,” said Alma. “I have worries, more every year,” responded Senka. “Every time they are about to return after dawn, I fear they will get attacked. You know how men are here and what they want.” This conversation continued back and forth between them, but they never directly addressed their own experiences with men. Yet the shadows of their memories were somehow present in the room.

Signaling that she wanted to get away from the topic, Alma lit another cigarette and, while exhaling, turned to Senka. “I don’t know what kind of mother raises her son to go against the woman. You know that I am not raising my boys to hurt, let alone kill, your girls.” After a short pause, she added, “Or any girl, ever.” It was hard for me to understand if her expression was anger, guilt, blame, or frustration. But it seemed important that she gave her word to Senka to be a mother who would never raise a murderer. Or a rapist.

For a moment, there was a feeling of sudden estrangement, a stop in time. Perhaps there was the realization, a brief reflection of the burden of a survivor, now mother, and her everyday preoccupation with how to prevent the transfer of

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this burden of trauma, to her offspring. If they were to have met outside of the house, they would perhaps easily agree that they understand each other because they share the same memory of the war, because they both had the same experience. They were both raped. Now, they shared another similar role – that of mother. Yet one was a mother to boys; the other was a mother to girls. What they feared was that one of them would raise victims; the other would raise perpetrators. For both, there was perhaps a sense of responsibility and a feeling that it was all about them, the mothers. Perhaps the onus was on them to raise a generation that would not be haunted by the past but, rather, would learn from their mothers' pasts and never repeat those circumstances in the future. This burden of a responsibility born of their pasts, although mostly uncommunicated in a cognitive way, is real for not only these two women but also for many rape survivors who are now mothers. *What do I tell my kids about my past? How do I share with them my story but keep them from feeling rage? Or disgust for me? Not to shame me or abandon me?*

Despite rich feminist scholarship and widespread pedagogy, in most of the world in the twenty-first century, mothers are still the main pillars raising the family. While giving their best through mothering, many women have to cope with their own traumas in order to spare their descendants the hostile results of intergenerational effects from the trauma transmission. Both Alma and Senka survived captivity, sexual violence, and rape, and, afterward, both were internally displaced. They each remarried and started families but were never able to return to their places of origin.

I had a chance to meet them at their regular occupational therapy group, where they and other survivors meet to knit and spend time together. One of them is receiving financial compensation as an officially recognized survivor; the other is unemployed and still in the process of obtaining this status. In their aspirations for restorative justice, they have both contributed to different state and international institutions by giving their testimonies. Both have collaborated with individual researchers and journalists. In addition, they regularly attend protests, sign petitions, and have been otherwise proactive in giving a voice to the issues of the stigma, public recognition, and social ostracism of women who are war-rape survivors.

Regardless of this activism, mothering is their priority, a part of their life where they feel they have agency. Sometimes, they act as if the lives they led during the war have been frozen in the past for years. It is true that in those frozen years, they were assigned new roles that, in fact, radically changed their life paths and perhaps forever labeled them as survivors of war rape. But becoming a good mother in the aftermath, with the power to teach their kids what they perceived to be good values, useful skills, and vital knowledge about the world, was evidence that a "normal" life had returned. Before the war, many had seen their future in mothering. For those who eventually did become mothers, despite the violent interruption of the war and despite the devastating damage to their sense of self, becoming a mother after the war was a sign of overcoming the past. For some, it was proof of their survival.

Today, Senka and Alma, and many other mothers I have met on my research journey, fully indulge in mothering, keeping their kids and grandkids at the center of their attention with a determined mission to teach them what their mothers taught them – to be not just good humans but also good husbands and wives, and, for their daughters, to become good mothers. What was not expressed as often by those who had sons was raising their boys to be good fathers. More often, they emphasized that they hoped to see their sons become fair and righteous men who do not steal or beat their wives and who do not drink or participate in murky business dealings.

Returning to certain traditional values and lifestyles, taking over the social roles that they are familiar with, is a prevalent trend for many postconflict societies. This return to the familiar not only symbolically denies that the war ever happened but also offers safety and known and predictable life situations. After spending years under chaotic and anarchic circumstances of war, traditional cultural patterns help survivors regain a sense of control over their lives, and this becomes particularly overt through mothering. Most of the mothers in peripheral regions where I conducted the majority of my ethnographic research apply the traditional hegemonic patriarchal rules in their maternal practices. Despite their war rape experiences, they feel that they have to fulfill their duty as mothers, and the role came effortlessly to them soon after the war. For some, motherhood was a revival of sorts, a return to normal. Others believe that it helped them move on and heal. Some did not want to look back and wanted to focus only on the future and the well-being of their children. Still others use the past to spur their resistance – which they pursue for the sake of their children and a better future.

But surprisingly, very few researchers have paid attention to how mother-survivors of war rapes navigate life between their own process of healing from trauma, their struggle for restorative justice, and their role as a mother, especially as it pertains to socialization in terms of gender and sexuality. While the subject of their children continually arose in conversations and encounters I'd had with survivors since the beginning of my research back in 2011, it had only recently occurred to me how deeply their experience of war rape was embedded in their mothering when it came to socialization about gender roles and sexual scripts. Until that very moment when I was listening to Alma and Senka, I had mostly thought of survivors as *survivors*, encompassing how they embraced (or not) the experience of war rape, how they co-created the collective memory, how they established new identities in the aftermath of the war, and how the healing process helped them reintegrate into the broader society. Only rarely had I reflected on the ways each woman's violent past interlaced with the role of mother in the aftermath of the war and the unstable present day of their children and grandchildren.

In the aftermath of the war, motherhood has been recognized in today's collective memory of Bosnia-Herzegovina as mainly (although not exclusively) in two contexts. When referring to mothers, one will most probably first come across the Mothers of Srebrenica, a grassroots movement of mothers searching for their loved ones and demanding the truth about, and recognition of, genocidal crimes perpetrated against their family members, particularly their male family

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members: sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers. Although testimonies about sexual crimes and violence have also been reported in relation to the Srebrenica massacre, and several scholars have critically examined the abuse of power and sexual exploitation of local women by Dutch UN peace-keepers, the question of rape has been somewhat alienated from the main focus of the group. In fact, I have personally experienced avoidance of this topic when I sought more evidence on war-rape survivors among mothers from Srebrenica. While one of the surviving mothers shared with me her story of being asked for sexual and emotional compensation in exchange for some essential household goods she needed after being internally displaced, she then changed the topic whenever I tried to bring sexual violence and motherhood together in the same conversation.

However, interest has recently begun to increase on a national and international level with regard to mothers who gave birth as a direct consequence of war rape. Those women and the stigma related to this issue came to prominence in great measure because of help from their now adult children, many of whom decided to engage in activist work and speak openly about issues related to the long-term legacy of war rapes. Contrary to the mothers of Srebrenica, who committed their lives to searching for the remains of their lost sons, mothers of children born as a result of war rape have struggled with losing their children by giving them away at birth. In a culture where women can only be fully accomplished through acts of self-sacrificing caring and nurturing, giving away an unwanted child is yet another trauma for the war-rape survivor to carry with her in the aftermath. The struggle of those mothers in accepting the guilt and stigma is constantly reinforced through socially favored myths of ideal motherhood, wherein a mother, the “primal giver of life,” subjugates her own needs to those of her offspring. While these traumas are socially inflicted and perpetuated, most of the mothers are left to their own devices to cope with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and taking care of their own healing and social reintegration.

Unlike the mothers from Srebrenica, who after years of efforts to gain restorative and retributive justice started to receive recognition, respect, and honorable status in the international community, mothers of children conceived through war rapes remain in the shadows. Other than these two mothering experiences related to the war, little to nothing is said about survivors who became mothers only in years after the war. While they perhaps did not lose their children in combat nor had to decide whether to keep or give away the “perpetrator’s” child, they also carry the burden of traumatic experiences of war rape and sexual violence. But all of those mothers, in one way or another, question how to incorporate their war rape experience into mothering in such a way that prevents the transmission of destructive emotions like rage or hatred but, rather, results in their children giving them loving support and safe shelter but also working toward reconciliation and sustaining peace in the aftermaths of the conflict.

A common characteristic in the narratives of mothering experiences from women who were sexually traumatized during the war is their struggle between two seemingly incompatible identities, a *war-rape survivor*, on the one hand, and a *mother*, on the other. Despite these split identities, for many women, mothering

has been a crucial step toward embracing healing from the trauma. It has helped many survivors to make sense of the aftermath of the war and provided them with a reason to move on and live again. The decision to focus on mothering after a war rape experience often presents a survival strategy through which one is able also to postpone the systematic and intentional process of healing and coming to terms with the trauma. By being fully occupied with taking care of children, and later, grandchildren, survivors have been able to suppress their experience of rape for many years. For those who suppressed these traumas, *did they succeed in protecting their offspring from potentially transmitted trauma? Did any of the children or grandchildren suspect or feel something in their mother's past and search for more information? Was suppressing the trauma beneficial for the descendant's future?*

Although being haunted by the legacy of rape and facing difficulties in denying their personal history was part of the everyday struggle, most of the survivors I spoke to had never disclosed their experience to their children. In the years immediately following the war, the sociopolitical denial of war rapes was so prevalent that disclosure was impossible. Furthermore, many survivors were preoccupied by the survival of their loved ones first. They were busy with rebuilding, emotionally and physically, their now destroyed world, and, at the same time, they feared stigmatization and being abandoned. Unfortunately, this was what actually happened to some of the survivors who were courageous and trusting enough to hope for the support and understanding of their families. But it happened also to some of the survivors who faithfully believed that silence would help them bury their past and the trauma and live only with their postwar newly attained role of mother. After years had passed, the tool of silence had bounced back and become so defining for their identity that today, although there are more opportunities and better chances for disclosure, some survivors cannot establish their identities and social relationships outside of the social expectation of silent/silenced survivor.

I address this in the very beginning of the book through the prism of "narrated silences," as I believe that this intentionally created and systematically reproduced discursive mechanism attached to the experience of the survivors has had an important influence on the production of knowledge and the representation of survivors that we have today. But in addition, it has influenced how we approach incorporating questions about the legacy of war rape in today's (peace) education. Societal preferences for silence, with the implication that silence is the most dignified position for survivors, has allowed everyone in society, particularly survivors, to confirm that opening up to their children is not going to be beneficial for anyone. Narrated silences help with the reasoning that sharing testimonies with survivors' family members only causes the children to have confused feelings toward their mothers and risks alienation of the mother-child relationship or creates mistrust of maternal authority. In addition, many believe that the silence in fact protects children from the toxic legacies of the violent past. While sharing the story would perhaps ease the survivor's pain, it also risks the pain of becoming owned by their children. At worst, the pain might get turned into revenge fantasies and biases that could lead to intergroup hatred with ethnic profiling based on the

roles that the ethnic groups played in the war and the postwar criminal proceedings: those of survivors or of perpetrators.

The narrated silences also explain the paradoxical social statement about war rapes today: while survivors are supposedly silent, the persistent resistance of local and international activists, scholars, artists, and engaged civic populations have made the crime of war rape visible and widely discussed. The rights and political demands of women survivors are being slowly, yet increasingly, met, and there is social progress against denial and stigmatization. The topic is brought to public attention through street protests, events, and public commemorations. For the descendants and postwar generations in general, this means that no matter how strong the intentions originally were to ensure that the silence remained unshattered and unbroken and how persistently these mothers kept their mouths shut, when growing up in today's Bosnia-Herzegovina it is almost impossible to not learn about war rapes and the long-term trauma of survivors. Not only are today's postwar generations exposed to the continuous flow of information on social media but also the developments in memory politics have made active participation much easier and activities related to this topic more accessible. While I believe that children are not merely passive receivers of their parents' collective memory, the ethnographic evidence for how families can contribute in either ideological consumption or critical learning when dealing with violent pasts is still vague and sometimes discrepant.

Despite their different experiences, understandings, and perceptions of surviving war rape, most of the mother-survivors have never been able to fully recover from the trauma, and as a result, the trauma has, despite their efforts to the contrary, become persistently present within their families. No matter how great the joy of seeing children and grandchildren grow and prosper in their lives, the burden of surviving war rape and how to share this with their kids remained. So the stigma attached to survivors of war rape remains and is passed on not only by one survivor to another but also from one generation to another. From the time that girls are born, we are told that we are not safe. You know that you are at risk because of your gender and are taught that it is your sexuality that makes you vulnerable. If most of our mothers told us this because their mothers had told them the same, what do mothers who were not told the same story but experienced it in their own bodies tell us? If our identity as women includes the shared experience of fear of *potential* male inflicted sexual violence, *how do survivors of war rape, who are victims of this in a very immediate sense, incorporate these experiences into their mothering practices? How do survivors for whom justice has never been done and whose attackers have never been prosecuted manage to negotiate their complex emotions, calls for forgiveness, and the nurturing of a positive attitude toward reconciliation?*

The importance of intergenerational dialogue has been widely promoted, but in practice, it is hard to get parents and grandparents on board when they have never had access to effective methods of healing their own traumas. In the case of survivors of war rape, this is made even more difficult due to mothers whose experiences are hidden behind the wall of silence and who have not openly shared

their experiences, even with other women who experienced the same trauma or in spaces where they could receive support services. I remember one of the first encounters I had with a group of women when I was presenting the purpose of the research. The leader shut me down, saying, "No woman has ever spoken to their kids, so they have nothing to say in this research." However, with persistence and by posing semi-rhetorical questions, I asked them, "But would you like to share with your kids what happened to you? Do you think this would be something important for you?" After a moment, the silence broke, and I was unable to catch everything they said because the women were talking over each other. It was clear that, in fact, those women *had a lot to say in this research*. There was a need to have space to talk about this, and so we started to meet.

Researching and understanding the impact of these mothers on their children and grandchildren in a cultural context where women still represent one of the most important pillars of the family seems to be of the utmost importance prior to embarking on any efforts toward peace education. Years ago, when I was engaged in various multicultural and peace education programs as a youth worker, I began to question our time-limited impact during the occasional workshops and summer programs in comparison to that of family members and peers who remained in a young person's life long after our educators' intervention was over. Young people would stay in our programs for a week or two as we covered a hyper-energized and optimistic schedule prioritizing peace, tolerance, diversity, and equality. Afterward, they would return to the close-knit environments of their families, schools, and peers. But how sustainable can such youth peace programs be in postconflict zones if we do not consider the threat of trauma transmission in families? While a critical approach to dealing with the ideologically loaded history curricula in the postwar context is now a preoccupation of many educators and scholars, in most cases, family is still the first and most important factor in socialization. It is important for all of us who work in education to learn how to cope with the transmitted, learned, and internalized war legacies that children bring to the schools.

This book grapples with the complex nexus of the potential impacts of collective trauma in war-rape survivors' families in the midst of reconciliation processes in postconflict Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the illustration of ethnographic data, I debate arguments and restraints regarding evidence of risk, whereby survivors of war-related sex crimes who are now mothers might become breeders of hatred and further division in the postconflict context. In the first part of the book, "Social (Ab)uses of War-Related Sexual Trauma," I introduce the idea of narrated silences mentioned earlier as part of the collective memory of survivors and how this has manifested in social realities, values, and relationships. This introduction presents the reader with a further understanding of how, for many survivors, silence has been argued to be a protective mechanism and a conscious act of not telling in order to avoid stigma or vicarious trauma for their family members, especially children. In this way, the silence of survivors becomes a conscious act intended to prevent trauma transmission. However, the mass rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina are now a public fact, notwithstanding the number of survivors who

remain silent. If not directly from their family members, postwar generations can obtain the stories about these events from the media, their peers, and their friends. Thus, narrated silences might operate as a crucial and sometimes the only source of information for those youngsters to access the stories of their parents. As such, they can intervene powerfully in the spheres of informal education and socialization. They not only inform about the past but, more importantly, they imply how to incorporate the lessons and experiences from the past into their existing sets of values, viewpoints, and cultural (sexual) scripts. For this reason, any recreation and/or reproduction of narratives that can communicate the normalization of harmful social relations, dynamics, or processes holds us as creators responsible for fortifying the efforts of critical mediation and the reading of constructed social realities.

The second part of the book, “Mothering with the Trauma of War Rape,” shows, as mothers and grandmothers, women remain a primary pillar of the foundation of family and home as they organize daily life and build relationships with children and grandchildren. Despite much excellent work on the psychosocial repercussions of war trauma, displacement, and the postwar mother–child dyad, little is known about how these factors transfer collective memory in terms of continuous hatred and a violent (sexual) culture. Based on these premises, this part of the book looks more closely at the family dynamics of women survivors of war rape and war-related sexual violence and focuses specifically on the potential correlations between child-rearing, trauma, and the transmission of hatred as a response to frustrating postwar injustices. Furthermore, it attempts to answer the question of the impact of a traumatic family past on the children’s upbringing, particularly in the understanding of gendered roles and the reestablishment of normative sexuality, which as long as it is based on patriarchy, is arguably inherently violent. I ask, *what effects do feelings of hatred and revenge toward the ethnic other have on boys, and what effect does the display of determined victimhood have on girls/victims, especially the gendered idea of powerlessness, innocence, and shame and, hence, the idea that women are inherently rapable?*

The third part of the book, “Intergenerational Effects of Trauma Transmission and Continuation of Violent Sexual Culture,” moves away from the intimate family environment and focuses on wider questions regarding the willingness and urgency to forgive in order to reconcile. Previous research has found the act of forgiveness to be crucial for releasing feelings of anger and revenge toward perpetrators. The act of forgiveness can promote a positive view of reconciliation and lead to postconflict stability; however, the question remains whether real forgiveness is possible before justice is achieved. As those chapters illustrate, most of the survivors continue to fight for justice. At the same time, forgiveness given before perpetrators are prosecuted might lead to further denial as well as forgetting. I reflect on knowledge, emotions, beliefs, and values that second and third generations have potentially internalized, either consciously through conversations or unconsciously through random assumptions and individual searches for information. I attempted to show also how transferring traumatic

memory that is derived from war-related sexual violence differs importantly from other war- or genocide-related traumas.

The last part of the book, “War Rape Legacies: Transmission, Agency, Education,” presents how different social actors with a specific focus on youth have taken over the processes of the long-term anti-stigmatization of war-rape survivors by incorporating new knowledge and generationally specific narratives on gender, sexuality, and violence. In introducing several projects, I question why specifically peace education in the region today focuses on enhancing interreligious and interethnic dialogues but rarely focuses on identity in relation to sexuality and gender. Furthermore, evidence shows that peace education is not intergenerational when it comes to mother-survivors, as they merely participate in one of the youth programs and almost never let their struggles for justice intersect with the broader field of peace education. This applies as well to the questions related to trauma transmission in families – while it gets addressed as a potential risk and a threat, peace education programs do not really focus on working with mothers and mothering to deal with this.

Before focusing on the main themes of the book, I also wanted to start with a brief reflection on my own voice and methodologies used throughout the ethnographic work. The research approach, ethical concerns, and communication with research participants before, during, and especially after the research, are always my greatest concern. Questioning, adjusting, testing, and evaluating new research approaches has, for me, always been of equal importance as the research theme itself. As I strive to engage more than a traditional researcher, I am always excited to understand the variety of social practices used, for example volunteering with survivors or teaching in summer school with young people in the region, and I see them as an opportunity to reflect on those activities as data collection experiences. Exploring diverse methodologies is, for me, important because I do not think that academic language always translates into fulfilling the immediate needs of research participants. This concrete research, for instance, cannot bring the immediate change that people with whom I collaborate sometimes want in return for their contribution. When you have nothing concrete to offer in return – such as therapy, changes to legislation, the advancing of survivors’ rights, or similar actions – it is unreasonable to expect that participants will feel the same level of enthusiasm for participating in a new piece of research as you do. If a survivor has participated since the end of the war in a variety of investigations, reports, networking, and so forth in the belief that life will finally bring her some type of compensation for what she lost and how she suffered, and then finds herself 25 years later still living in the same mostly impoverished circumstances, it is understandable why her first and/or only reaction to a proposed new research project is exhaustion and annoyance. However, I am happy to note that most of the survivors have been motivated to collaborate in this project as they have recognized the importance of incorporating legacies of war-related sexual violence and transmitted traumas from mothers, in peace education, and consequently how with the help of survivors we can develop intergenerational education to

break down stigmas related to sexuality and gender and the cycles of historically repeating violence.

For young people, however, talking about a war that happened some ten years before they were born is a double-edged sword. Some of them are very interested in the topic in the sense of avoiding history repeating itself and looking positively to a future of peace and coexistence. These young people attend summer schools and peace education programs to learn ways of promoting reconciliation and social reconstruction. While discourse analysis of the (social) media might show a much less optimistic prognosis for sustained peace in the country, such programs are always an inspiring and motivational force for every peace educator. However, in between these two edges, there is a group of young people who feel indifferent and perceive the topic as irrelevant. They feel this was not their war and, hence, they want nothing to do with it. And I believe this is a fully legitimate and relevant position as any other.

We could learn from the extensive scholarship on trauma transmission in the case of the Holocaust that the third generation becomes particularly vulnerable to the influence of the violent histories of their grandparents, yet I remain puzzled as to whether peace education should help to suppress the pain and trauma of the survivors until they pass away and then construct memories that their descendants will be able to live with, or if we should persist in digging into these personal histories and exploring the kinds of educational and community projects that we should be working on in order to process these emotions and traumas constructively. What kind of pedagogy do we need to develop and employ to ensure that descendants will not be afraid to dig into this long-buried pain but, rather, will accept it as a part of the intergenerational story that we want to learn from but not live again?

This is where my story and my passion come in. I am not a survivor nor a mother. I am writing this book as an educator in the field of humanities and social sciences, with a specific focus on the prevention of (sexualized) violence. Through my teaching, I emphasize the importance of historical legacies in contemporary practices of (sexualized) violence and (gender-based) oppression. Even if they were not directly exposed to war, a student's family history is often reflected in their values, viewpoints, openness, fears, frustrations, and unease. Having the privilege to teach in diverse contexts all around the world, I feel anxious entering a class, knowing that there may always be a student who grew up in a family that suffers from any type of collective trauma. There has been so much collective/political violence and so many mass atrocities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that it is almost impossible to be socialized without any reference to the traumatic memory. I was surprised myself in conversations with my father, for instance, himself part of the third post-World War II generation, full of anger and bitterness about current political situations. And I discovered, step-by-step, that it was a reflection of his family traumatic history.

It is not comfortable to commit to the deconstruction of what our students bring to the classroom; it is not comfortable to question the traumatic burdens of our parents and how this (unconsciously) shapes our values, beliefs, and the

relationships we establish with others. Despite theoretical and empirical attempts at critical pedagogy, institutional education still avoids perceiving and supporting teaching as a mutual (emotional) exchange that includes unpacking the baggage that we bring into our shared spaces. I believe teaching peace and social coexistence in the isolated, safe space of the classroom, as if there were no memory and heritage attached to it, is not sustainable. I would like to see unpacking happening in my classroom and in the classrooms of my fellow teachers. But before we can do this, we need to have a conversation with those who pack the baggage. I decided to ask mothers first. It was not necessarily the best, let alone easiest way to find these answers, but it certainly took me on an exciting and insightful journey.

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