

Kosova's Goddess on the Throne: Critical Fabulation as an Anthropological Method¹

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Abstract

In this article, I describe one of the objects I encountered while working briefly in the National Museum of Kosova: the *Goddess on the Throne*. In addition to being an important Neolithic artifact, this enigmatic figurine has become the symbol of Prishtina, Kosova. Empirical evidence from the Balkan Neolithic can help theorize aspects of the goddess's usage and meaning, but little can be known definitively (for example, the perceived gender of the figurine). Nevertheless, I aim to track how it could have been used then, and how it is being used now. Paradoxically, the figurine's significance and meaning (as a "goddess" deity) exist in direct contrast to the lived reality of contemporary Kosovar women. My case study invokes the material object as agent of its own narration through tracking historical processes that destabilize notions of linear time, connecting the past to the present in interesting, sometimes disconcerting, ways. I use the method of critical fabulation, specifically the medium of poetry, to reveal key points of rupture surrounding the goddess's role as a modern symbol, but also to demonstrate how poetic exercises can serve as alternatives to museum labels. This approach aims to decenter fixed notions of cultural identity, femininity, and time, and recenter the valuable contradictions that live within the elevated status of certain cultural icons.

Keywords: *critical fabulation, material culture, alternative archive, Kosova, feminism, poetry, art history*

She is small
The way she manifests outside of museum walls is even smaller
Mass produced
Keychains, lighters, shot glasses, bric-a-brac
Miscellaneous after thought
Designed to be thrown around

The world tells me I'm designed to be thrown around
But she is made of the earth and so am I

And so are all the women I know
A kind of magic

Geometric lines are etched into her body
Meeting at a point in the center of her chest
An orb
Below that orb
Two lines circle each other like arms in an embrace
On her lower belly
A sun rises
Perhaps a son rises

Buried for centuries
Time eroded what was on the surface
Perhaps appropriate metaphor for womanhood

We don't know if she was ever painted
The indentations of her eyes, then, can be seen two ways
Are her eyes closed in prayer, in reflection?
Lowered in piousness, even grief
Or
Are her eyes open in silent but active observation, wide
all seeing
terrifying

Hands on her hips
I imagine her
Waiting for me at an open doorway
As my mother has done and still does
Ladle in hand
Lovingly chiding me
For the run in my tights
For being so busy all day I forgot to eat
For the remnants of my own daily, little wars

Once an old man
Began assailing me
On the streets of Pristina
Perhaps because I was drinking water during Ramadan
Perhaps because I was wearing red lipstick
Perhaps because he detected in me
An errant air of "the West"

Swirls, twists, concentric circles zeroing in on a goddess center
Yet closing in on her like a snake coiling around its victim's neck

I know of mothers murdered by fathers
I know of their children
They are women and so is our goddess
And we are all at times killed
In some way

In Albanian pagan belief
The snake is a sacred animal that dwells inside the walls and frames of homes
Apotropaic
It seems the line between protector and danger can be volatile in the imagining

Hiraeth is the longing and nostalgia for a home long gone,
or one that has never existed
In a patriarchal society
With strict religious edicts on a radical upswing
The presence of an ancient goddess deity
Has subversive implications
Of pagan roots
Of alternative worlds

Is it possible to long for that home?
One long gone
One that never was
Or one perhaps that was never allowed the space
to exist in our collective psyche

Introduction

Goddess on the Throne (Figure 1) is a Balkan Neolithic figurine (circa 6500-3500 BC) found near the capital city of Kosova, Prishtina, in excavations dating to the 1950s and 1960s, by a team of archaeologists (Berisha 2012, 26).² This small artifact, measuring only 18.5 cm in height, has become a prolific icon, looming large and sometimes incongruently in the Kosovar-Albanian identity. This is only one of many paradoxes she embodies; paradoxes I attempt to untangle in this essay. What physical characteristics does this enigmatic “goddess” possess that enable her mass distribution and cultural projection and what are the historical processes that have led to her iconographic (omni-)presence? In this article, I will examine her significance in both ancient and contemporary contexts. I begin with an exploration of her material and Neolithic significance.

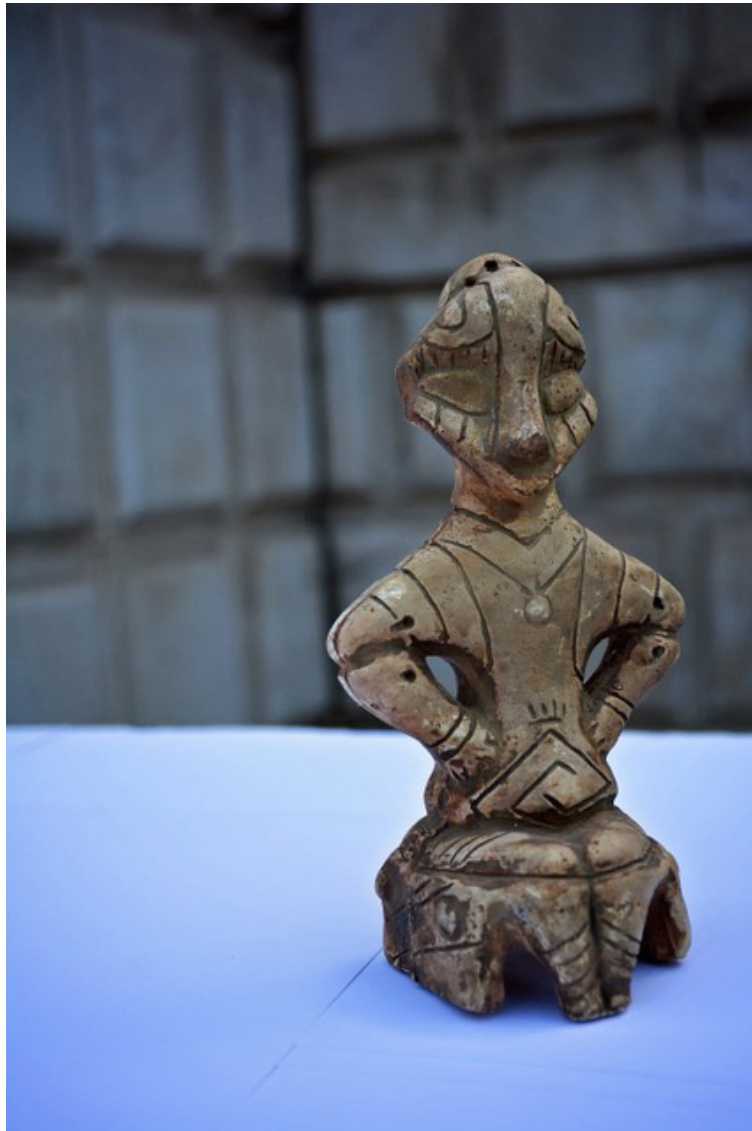


Fig. 1. *Goddess on the Throne*, dated 5700–4500 BC, terracotta, 18.5 cm. National Museum of Kosova, Prishtina. Photograph by Ardian Lumi.

The Goddess is made of fired clay. With loosely articulated legs, her upper body is supported by a pedestal integrated into the structure of the figure. Unlike other Neolithic figurines, which cannot always stand upright without supports, this goddess's form could indicate an intended sedentary nature. Thus, one could speculate that the figurine resists circulation. Curious, then, that she is observed in a myriad of circulated contemporary media: on government documentation, on notary stamps, on posters for cultural events, in souvenir shops, on brand marketing for döner places, on traffic lights.³ The Prishtina Film Festival (PriFest), having just completed its 15th year, awards the “Golden Goddess Award” to each winner in their respective categories. In 2005, Albanian rap artist Etnon featured Lyrical Son and DJ Blunt on a track entitled “Albanian” in which the chorus proclaims, “Red and black I dress, eagle on my chest, I’m proud to be an Albanian.” The video cuts between footage of the UÇK (Kosova

Liberation Army), geographical maps, soccer matches, and notably, the goddess (Etnon 2005, at 1:22).

Who was she, this “Goddess”? Who has she come to be? Most importantly to me, how has she become such an important, powerful symbol in modern-day Kosova, given the dissonance generated by her identity as a venerated female and the lived experience of modern Kosovar women?

To ask the question of who this goddess was is to open a Pandora’s box of daunting questions. The Neolithic can sometimes feel as distant temporally as it does conceptually. Exploring a time and space before the advent of moveable type (i.e. printing press technology) and modern nation-state ideology (the two are inextricably linked; see Anderson 1991, 37), requires a suspension of our conditioned notions of linear time, of archival evidence, and of our usual, everyday means of understanding. For this reason, it has been beneficial to my inquiry to center an approach that engages primarily with material culture. Before asking what this object *does* in the contemporary context, we must first ask what can we imagine the artifact *did*? What is revealed to us through the physical properties, the very materiality of the object? As Bailey (2005, 2) so poignantly puts it, we can imagine Neolithic figurines, “as dynamic visual events.” What can we imagine transpired during these events?

During the Balkan Neolithic (6500-3500 BC), people expanded their use of material objects, laying the foundations for ensuing millennia of collectivist social structures, ruptured markedly in the 20th century, something to which I return later in the essay. The development of “ceramic pyrotechnology” or the firing of clay to make things (Bailey 2005, 5; see also Amicone et al. 2021) opened the possibility of further rooting memory and human presence into the wider landscape. Bailey (2005, 6) writes, “Creating a permanent medium from an impermanent one and making the perishable durable are significant material and spiritual transitions.” Transforming clay (the land) into physical manifestations (pottery, talismans, figurines, like the goddess) created an intimate relationship with the landscape and facilitated the interpersonal exchange of goods (resource sharing). In other words, making clay into objects represents a kind of magic.

I am invoking “magic” here to mean what Nakamura (2005, 39) describes in her chapter in *Figurine Worlds*, as something enchanting “not with the truth, but with the possible made real.” The magical lies in a realm just beyond reach where the cognitive and the material coalesce to produce “experience, belief, and value” (Nakamura 2005, 21). Thus, the transformation of matter transforms relationality, both to space and to those relating to the space. Magic, then, lies at the intersection of socially-constructed meaning and the agency of matter itself (Nakamura 2005, 22). We can, with some sure footing, propose that Neolithic figurines were born of this indexical effervescence, of this socialized objecthood.

The figurine proposes a unique, active objecthood and thus bears a paradoxical nature. It is rendered in human likeness and yet, it is *not* human. We both recognize ourselves in its human form and must confront our distance from its inanimate presence (Bailey 2005, 42). This negotiation of miniaturism and dimensionality engages the imagination and alters space-time. Hierarchies of scale help us conceptualize our “physical spacing of relationships” (Bailey 2005, 68). In handling figurines and dolls, we enter an altered

state of being in which scale and time are congruently compressed (Bailey 2005, 37): a form of ritualized play.

In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga (1949, 7) isolates three key elements of play, all of which are linked to one another. First, play is a voluntary activity subsequently granting the player freedom. Second, this player-agency situates the activity of play outside of the processes of ordinary life in an ephemeral sphere that harbors its own unique nature (Huizinga 1949, 8). Third, because play is limited to a time and place, it has its own durational temporality outside of ordinary time (Huizinga 1949, 9). Play only becomes possible through imagination, which helps the player to better understand and conceptualize reality by transcending reality itself. Though we cannot know the definitive purpose of playing with Neolithic figurines, we can apply Huizinga's determinations of play to postulate that they served, in some form, to enter an alternative, perhaps magical sphere that would aid in understanding the human and/or cosmological order.

The markings on the goddess's body echo the similar, though smaller, forms prevalent in Albanian materiality (sewn into the *xhubleta*- a woolen dress worn by some Albanian women-woven into tapestries, carved into wood structures for homes). It is imperative to recognize, however, that I am not articulating an unchanging, standardized aesthetic vocabulary. Rather, I note a well of images from which artisans draw. Forms inspired by the natural world — sun disks, vegetal patterns, moons, and cult animals, that demonstrate a cosmological order with "...clear connections to pagan practices" (Galaty 2018, 120) — populate this well of images.

Figurines, in requiring the use of imagination while simultaneously offering negotiations of space, invite us to occupy a zone situated both inside and outside of time. This shifts the player-viewer's conceptions of reality. Whether or not the Goddess is the embodiment of a specific deity or an individual (a long-debated theory first proposed by archeologists such as Marija Gimbutas in *The Language of the Goddess*) seems almost irrelevant to the matter at hand. Regardless of the object's identity, the implications of tactile negotiation remain the same. The figurine offers an opportunity to negotiate humanity through a materiality that echoes identity's transmutability, its uncanniness, its durational nature (existing both within and outside of time). Perhaps it is the goddess's very paradoxical, ambiguous, and fluid nature that facilitates its imaginative projection of national Kosovar-Albanian identity. In further pursuit of this idea, I first discuss how the Goddess and figurines in general are presented in museums, and then I apply a method inspired from my studies in art history, critical fabulation. Critical fabulation, in this case through poetry specifically, lays bare the inherent connections between, and irruptions caused by, using a Neolithic figurine, as interpreted above, as a modern symbol in a country where women are still, to this day, disadvantaged and under-valued.

Museum Label

One moves through the dimly lit halls of the National Museum of Kosova to a corner with encased, silent figurines, small and unassuming. The large museum cases look unfit by comparison. Leaning forward to get a closer look at the *Goddess on the Throne*, one sees their own reflection in the glass, and the barrier becomes a kind of meeting

point between the past and the present.

The museum label is standard and straight forward. Date, material composition, dimensions. Whereas the figurine was once meant to entice the imagination, here it becomes sterile, clinical, unattainable. Reducing the object to a mere set of scientific data strips the figurine of its true dynamic potency, yet simultaneously reinforces the authority of its enshrined (museological) status. Pearce (2002, 145) draws from Stransky's definition of a *musealium* in her book *Objects of Knowledge* to discuss how artifacts are divorced from their original contexts and implanted in a new reality—that is, that of the museum. The museum framework endows an object with meaning, as the object and museum work together to create “an ideologically active environment” (Duncan and Wallach 2004, 30). Of course, this approach to material culture generates a host of ensuing problems.

Though a comprehensive museum critique merits its own fully realized essay, here I will attempt to be succinct in my assessment. It is important to acknowledge that among the main features of the museum is to bring objects into a fixed state through: verification, conservation, recoding, and exhibition (Pearce 2002, 145). This treatment has frozen *Goddess on the Throne* in time and space, negating its potential as a tool for ongoing negotiation and imaginative work. I wonder if there are more imaginative ways to, at the very least, engage its corresponding label.

Given the Goddess's status as a national symbol, it is imperative that the National Museum of Kosova take a discursive approach to museum objects, in addition to the present observational method. One could then derive meaning from an object that goes beyond the factual archaeological information provided. Pearce (2002, 51) writes that a museum label may perhaps answer the “what” of an object but does not necessarily address the “why” of its significance: “...we must provide the concept of ‘signification’, which can be described as an object having a meaning which is not inherent in that object, but which is socially assigned to it”. I posit that this fixity of “providing the what while negating the why” is one of the elements responsible for the dissonance between the assigned meaning of the object (venerated female deity) and the lived reality of Kosovar women.

A critical approach to museum display, “advocates the use of academic expertise to identify those features of social situations which can be altered in order to eliminate certain injustices, frustrations and mystifications people experience” (Pearce 2002, 161). Critical fabulation is my suggestion for alternative museum labels. The goal is to integrate the material, the social, and the personal reality of the object, to suitably grapple with its many nuances and expose those “certain injustices”.

Methodology: Critical Fabulation

In the first half of this article, I isolated the mechanisms that fix objects in time and space, from which I believe contradictions may arise. So, for example, how the *Goddess on the Throne* is exhibited creates dissonance between its interpretation as a Neolithic artifact and its use as a modern, national symbol. In this second half of the article, I hope to destabilize these fixities by expanding upon the use of critical fabulation as a methodology.

In my academic inquiry, I have always felt that the necessary research was inaccessible, especially as it pertains to Kosova. A myriad of factors coalesce to create this distance. The primary challenge is the lack in Kosova of a written archival record, which is a consequence of epistemological genocide, clandestine operations/shadow statehood to ensure survival, systemic and economic crisis resulting in low literacy levels, and an over-arching oral tradition to boot.⁴

As poetry can suture meaning through parsing language, I felt that it was the perfect vehicle through which to address the fragmentary nature of the historical truth I am seeking. Ong (2002, 13) describes oral discourse as that which has often been thought of as a “weaving or stitching.” To do justice to the oral traditions of Kosova, which have upheld the affective craftsmanship of my case study, the Goddess, I needed to think of writing itself as my affective craft. This reflexive process brought me to a methodology that promises an entry point: critical fabulation. For the remainder of this section I will be discussing the methodology’s possibilities.

Critical fabulation is an emerging method developed by scholar Saidiya Hartman.⁵ Critical fabulation is a creative writing style that integrates research with fiction. A critical engagement with the archive reveals that history is constructed, centering the voices of those in power and silencing the marginalized. Hartman is a scholar of African American history, with a focus on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Her work aims to give voice to the historical figures erased by the record, searching for fragments of information and “fabulating” a rich inner life that situates her “characters” in the historical moment she wishes to interrogate. I am interested in using critical fabulation to give voice to the Goddess but also to Kosovar women, whose voices are ignored or silenced.

Chartier (1997) asserts in *On the Edge of a Cliff* that an age is dawning in which historians are becoming increasingly aware that they produce texts. In Chartier’s terms (1997, 7) a “text” is a reflexive form that is both material and spatial, as well as representative. Texts construct and occupy a temporality, and thanks to the preceding groundwork of scholars such as Michel de Certeau, Chartier (1997, 7) is able to track fundamental categories that are shared between fiction writing and historical writing, primarily: narrative, “characters”, and conceptions of causality (Chartier 1997, 7).⁶

Figurines also negotiate the material, the spatial, and the representative—much like writing. This aids in the conceptualization of reality. It is for this reason that critical fabulation is an appropriate method for this case study particularly, as it requires an engagement of the imagination by both writer and reader, situating the act, as with play, inside and outside of history (time), conceiving of new possibilities.

To expand upon the parallels between critical fabulation and the *Goddess on the Throne*, I highlight another important paradox of both history and figurines. Figurines have an innate three-dimensionality and thus a tactile presence that brings the object into the intimate sphere of the observer. This implies an innate knowability and yet, one can only view a three-dimensional object from one perspective at a time. Bailey (2005, 40) offers a helpful counterpoint in painting. The two-dimensionality of painting *requires* a perspective (even if the perspective is intentionally negated or rejected).⁷

What is important to my discussion is the paradox of three-dimensionality and history, that its knowability is both within (literally in our hands/situated within it)

and beyond (it cannot be understood in its entirety) reach. This is an apt metaphor for history, and further, identity.

Historical Processes and Meaning

Imagination-based work is the basis for memory systems that have preserved the Kosovar-Albanian identity in the face of numerous occupations. Galaty highlights archeological evidence for “composite” landscape structures (Galaty 2018, 22, 112). New settlements were meticulously built on top of preexisting structures, burial mounds unearthed layers of funerary materials and intergenerational resting places. These cyclical rearticulations of communal loci, “established links between living and past generations of village residents” (Bailey 2005, 4). Memory was developed through the landscape and through tribal genealogies that linked a historical continuity less to historicism (as we understand history today) and more to a familial network of cultural expression.

This cultural memory embodies a unique negotiation of both stringent codes of conduct and ephemeral negotiations of historical understanding. *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* was an oral, moral code governing the Albanian people that emerged in response to Ottoman occupation in the late fourteenth century.⁸ By rejecting state and imperial universalizing ideologies, the Albanian people kept values and traditions within the hands of the populous, while allowing the space for memory negotiation between individual and community. The honor code set strict boundaries, yet left room for an improvisation necessary to address life’s contingencies. What lay at the heart of Albanian identity was not economy, military prowess, or land expansion, but rather, familial honor. This created a collective identity that was not marked by political developments, but by an accountability to one’s family and by extension, tribe.

Galaty (2018) tracks the effects homogenizing modern nation-state ideologies have on imagination. Imaginative historical work does not, in fact, disappear in the face of state formation. However, imagination does become controlled to spin a new narrative of a mythic past, to incite feelings of nostalgia, to mobilize a selective memory, and leave little room for disparate regional identities (Galaty 2018, 21). Imagination is, in other words, a powerful tool that can be centralized and harnessed as a vehicle for either identity preservation or elimination. The determining variables lie within the projects of (inter-)colonialism and imperialism.

Memory networks in Albanian identity experienced irreparable damage in the Twentieth century. In overly simplified terms, the historical trajectories of Albania and Kosova starkly split in the 20th century, as a newly independent Albania emerged in accord with the Great Powers during the First World War in 1912 (Malcolm 1998, 256). Meanwhile Russia protected Serbia’s claim over the Kosova territory, as well as over other ethnically diverse communities of the region, giving shape to Yugoslavia.⁹

Both Albania and Kosova fell prey to the military strategies of the Allied powers during the Second World War, each eventually responding with a counter-resistance of rising communist and socialist sentiments (Malcolm 1998, 288). Eventually, both Albania and Yugoslavia (thusly, Kosova) broke with the USSR and followed very different historical paths. As our goddess was found at Tjerrtorja near Prishtina and has

become the symbol of Kosova, I will focus on Kosova specifically.

Kosova fell under the umbrella of an increasingly centralized Yugoslavian state. This meant that the Albanian language, mnemonic systems of material culture, elders who embodied oral histories, school systems, public spaces, where murdered, destroyed, restructured, and sanitized to disappear the Kosovar-Albanian identity under the Yugoslavian-socialist banner of “brotherhood and unity” (Malcolm 1998, 269).

While the Goddess was found by a multi-ethnic Yugoslavian team of archeologists, the dig was funded and realized by a Yugoslavian administration. The identity of the figurine was initially framed as “Yugoslavian.” After heated repatriation debates, she was returned to Kosova from the National Museum of Belgrade in 2002 (Peza 2019). In contrast to the over 1,200 artifacts still waiting to be returned, *Goddess on the Throne* has come to mark a victory in the fight for cultural heritage, first, as a rejection of a specifically Yugoslavian past, and second, as an acknowledgement of Kosovar territorial legitimacy rooted in the land demarcations of the excavation site. This may lie at the heart of her contemporary potency.

Azoulay (2019, 18) writes in *Potential History* that, “the condition of imperial modernity is to be always in motion.” This modern motion, however, does possess a particular direction, “forward.” Modernity’s ideological project is intrinsically linked to notions of “progress.” (I purposefully place these terms in quotation marks as these ideals are generally unilateral and oftentimes destabilizing). Intrinsically embedded in the push for modern progress is the accumulation of capital (Azoulay 2019, 17). Repatriation does not halt the mechanisms of imperialism. To address properly the violence of stolen cultural property, one must unlearn conceptions of cultural “property” altogether. Accepting imperialism (neoliberalism, nation-state ideology, financial capitalism) as fact, enables the perpetuation of its violence and allows it to go unchecked. Though *Goddess on the Throne* was returned to Kosova, she is still subject to the emptied treatment of global capitalist imperial ideology that led to her displacement in the first place. She circulates in motion with modernity. Lorde’s (1981, 99) words come to mind here, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

In his article “Materials Against Materiality” Ingold (2007, 1) discusses how objects become active through their circulation in various networks. Ultimately, what defines an object as “artifact” lies in the application of “*mental* realities upon *material* ones” (Ingold 2007, 5). Artifacts become “cultural property” (Buchli 2020, 9) when the conceived reality of nationhood mobilizes these objects as evidence of persistence, unity, or cultural significance. Objects are precisely *chosen* as proof of national or ethnic identity.

It seems it matters less who the goddess actually is, and rather who she is *believed to be*: evidence of an ancient mythic past, a token of severance from the recent, painful memory of Yugoslavia, a symbol of land rights. To quote Galaty (2018, 26), “...myth without memory is sterile and bereft of meaning.” In circulation, our goddess is now everything and nothing.

Why Female?

Our mysterious Goddess is anthropomorphic, yet scholars like Gimbutas have posited that this figurine may be donning a ceremonial mask as her head is bird-like in the rendering, with a sharp nose and angular face. On her body are etched markings of chevrons and spirals, gathering at the center to illustrate a medallion. According to Gimbutas (1989, 12), her medallion indicates high societal rank and importance. Gimbutas's prescription of "deity" status is just as unstable as the figurine's gender identity.

And why do most contemporary viewers understand the Goddess as a female? Gimbutas has long been posthumously criticized for fabricating a grand narrative of a matriarchal mythic past (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 216; Tringham and Conkey 1998, 44) and most modern archeologists consider the interpretation of Neolithic figurines as "fertility goddesses" deeply unstable (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 213). Considering the lack of corresponding evidence that Kosova's Goddess is, in fact, female, the scholarly backlash against its founding epistemology, as well as Kosova's patriarchal power systems, I find myself wondering, why does the feminine ascription persist? What mental realities are at play? After all, the sheer volume of female figurines does imply some relationship between sexed imagery and collective understanding (Goodison and Morris 1998, 19) situating them as "political" tools.

I found a conceivable working theory in Federici's (2004) book *Caliban and the Witch*. Federici tracks the early modern transition to capitalism that led to the construction of new labor stratifications and the systemic politicization of the body. With the rise of mercantilism and nation-state ideologies in the 17th century, anxieties surrounding the distribution of labor, population growth, and property ownership and wealth foregrounded a "bio-regime" (Federici 2004, 86) that aimed to police the female body. What eventually occurred was the continual exchange of meaning between two bodies (Douglas 2004): that of the woman and that of the nation. The weight of the nation falls onto the feminine body as a site for reproduction and control. Following Federici, I believe that Kosova's Goddess represents the nation's (feminine) body, to be understood as the "mother of the nation." To understand the Goddess is to understand her as a cultural process.

What can be observed through the goddess figurine is Kosova's entry into the Twenty-first century global, capitalist market economy in which participation is predicated upon nation-state recognition and its reinforcement through empty regurgitations of what is ostensibly "brand marketing". And though I am proud and relieved to have gained independence after centuries of tumult, I wonder if there is a way to integrate lost memory systems into our newly developed state identity so we can continue to negotiate creatively our past *and passing* history, centering and confronting present challenges? Ultimately, what preserved our culture through various occupations was the flexibility to hybridize as well as preserve, to be in dialogue with the land not as resource but as living entity. I fear that global capitalism will be the final frontier of homogenization. How can we maintain our historically-marked "permanency in change" (Galaty 2018, 118)? What is at stake?

Counter-memory in modern statecraft requires a "pure" ethnic mythos, excluding

marginalized identities such as the Romani people, and, additionally, in a patrifocal society like Kosova's, women. Anderson (1991, 6) defines the nation as a body politic that is imagined, and thus not in existence *a priori*. In fact, Anderson (1991, 43) links the origins of modern nation-state consciousness to the appearance of print culture, the standardization of language, and its capacity to produce capital relations. Anderson (1991, 16) uses the word "imagined," stating that most members of a nation will never know all their fellow members, and what ultimately links them is the conceived "image of their communion." Though inequality and exploitation may be present, the image of the nation supersedes reality through the mobilization of a, "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, 7). In Kosova, *Goddess on the Throne* is the image of communion, while "horizontal comradeship" supersedes the needs of actual women.

This perhaps accounts for the implicit contradiction embedded in the Goddess, a female deity celebrated as the face of Kosova, while gender-based violence remains at the center of Kosovar relations. In every stage of revisions for this essay, new cases of femicide emerge. Most recently, the tragic murder of Liridona Ademaj, orchestrated by her husband, has left Kosovars and Albanians at large grieving (Begisholli 2023). Violence against women is no new phenomenon as *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* is laden with honor codes that permit the punishment of women through violence, inscribing them as mere extensions of property. That being said, if we have arrived at a place of elevating female identity (Goddess), what is the imaginative and creative jump that needs to occur for femicide to stop?

This schism is what I am hoping to address in my use of critical fabulation. Galaty (2018) asserts that in prehistory, for states to take shape, leaders would harness the collective imagination. Manipulating the collective imagination would lead community members away from traditional pasts towards newly conceived futures. To accomplish this, leaders would enlist, even co-opt, the imagination weavers, that is, "the artists, the storytellers, shamans, and elders, who did most of the imagining and also instructed the young" (Galaty 2018, 25). Can I address a new generation as I sit at the intersection of artist, historian, woman, Kosovar? For what history-making/ imagination-weaving am I responsible? Can I take a page from the book of my ancestors and use poetic form to address the contingencies of (modern) life while still honoring the collective Albanian identity? My poem and this article represent an initial contribution to this effort: imagining and creating a new future for Kosova's women, and for the nation itself.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which projects enhanced by imperialism, such as the global market economy, statecraft, museological structures, create ground for the circulation of objects based on rigid hierarchies of identity. In her PhD dissertation "Seeking Independence: Making Nation, Memory and Manhood in Kosova", Nita Luci (2014, 93) tracks the ways in which gender was mobilized in occupied and post-war Kosova to return to traditions that were believed to preserve the integrity of a nation resisting the colonization of the Serbian regime. The domestic sphere, within which the feminine was embedded, became a politicized space to be protected, as it maintained

connections of kinship and ensured the perpetuation of the population. “Womanhood” (as mothers of the nation) and “manhood” (as fathers of the nation: martyrs, military heroes, etc.) (Luci 2014, 22) took on more static categorical meanings.

To follow Luci’s discussion, Kosova’s historical trajectory over the past half-century can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase was Yugoslav socialism, which shaped the country’s political and economic systems. The second phase was marked by a brutal war in the late 1990s, during which Kosova broke from Yugoslavia and subsequently suffered a genocide. This war led to significant human suffering and displacement, leaving a lasting impact on the region and the collective psyche. The third phase is characterized by Kosova’s journey towards an open democratic republic with an open market economy. This transition represents another significant shift in the country’s political and economic landscape.¹⁰

These dramatic shifts, punctuated by foreign intervention and the entry into an open market economy, have left Kosova grappling with its identity in unprecedented and often contradictory ways. Art and artifacts provide a grounding point through which the new nation-state can bolster continuity in the face of tumultuous change.

Though Luci’s exploration isolates a particular historical moment, the impulses to confine gender and cultural identity appear in various forms and moments throughout Kosovar-Albanian identity. Though tracking the entire depth and complexity of these processes throughout history is beyond the scope of my project, my article is an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the past is implicated in the present and could therefore manifest in the future—how these processes endure and how they can be observed in visual culture.

It is noteworthy that the cultural artifact I have selected for my discussion is connected to the portrayal of women. With no empirical evidence confirming the figurine’s gender identity, one must examine how this was precisely *chosen*, as opposed to existing *a priori*. In Yugoslav socialism, women were depicted as fruitful and hardworking contributors to the socialist project. During the war in the late 1990s, they embodied victims in need of protection, “Kosova witness a substantial use of sexualized violence against women as a warring tactic... to attack the very fabric of the target society in order to dissolve it, and as a part of ethnic cleansing” (Nemec 2022, 142). In the late capitalist era, the embodied concept of motherhood is crystalized, signifying the site of national production *and* consumption.

My deconstruction of *Goddess on the Throne* as a Kosovar symbol has allowed me to explore the ways in which femininity is venerated in the popular, national milieu, and how this veneration is, actually and ironically, contradicted by the lived experience of Kosovar women. Despite celebrating this artifact and its associated symbolism, femicide and domestic abuse continue to occur on a significant scale in Kosova. Although changes in the judicial system have led to increased documentation of violence, it is important to recognize that femicide is still a pressing matter, with roots in the *Kanun*, a traditional set of laws. In the face of drastic change Kosova has doubled down on certain “traditional values”, while simultaneously entering a phase of modern progress. Though violence may be increasingly documented, justice for women is still occurring at a glacial pace, “Michael Foucault notes, the state’s perception of the gravity of a crime is mirrored in the way its courts decide on a punishment” (Nemec 2022, 147).

The interdependent relationship between the state's apparatus and its agents within the larger structure of government reinforce the cycle of violence. According to studies by OSCE and UNFPA, in the years between 2014-2019 domestic violence rose by sixty percent, "seventy percent of femicide victims were previously subjected to intimate partner and domestic violence committed by the same perpetrator" (Nemec 2022, 146), nineteen percent of Kosovar men believe women "want to be raped", "twenty percent of Kosovar men witness intimate partner violence against their mother in adolescence and have incorporated this "problem-solving method" into behavior with their peers" (Nemec 2022, 145).

The numbers are staggering and yet the face of Kosova has been *designated* as female. Though the object's status reflects the static categorical projections I previously mentioned, femininity and the object itself resist these fixed meanings and thus, many paradoxes arise from and within the *Goddess on the Throne*.

I argue that *Goddess on the Throne* has gained her status through a myriad of processes. First, as a Neolithic figurine whose great age is mobilized to evoke a notion of enduring presence for the culture. Second, creation of the mythos of female deity, ascribed to the past by archeologists such as Marija Gimbutas, which feeds the construct of modern women as "mothers of the nation". Third, its mere presence as a figurine, evoking a materiality that allows for the use of imagination, creating fertile ground for cultural projection. Last, its circulation in the open market economy as a "brand". All these processes have made the Goddess prominent in circulation, while simultaneously divorced from the lived experience of Kosovar women.

Through my writing, I hope to destabilize the notions of fixed categories such as culture and femininity in a dual practice of academic intervention and an exercise in alternative feminist knowledge production—critical fabulation. In dialogue with my own cultural and personal genealogical heritage, I attempted to create a mosaic of meaning, one that moves between the singular and the collective, to reflect the fluid nature of identity.

Despite achieving independence, Kosova finds itself in a transitional phase, as it continues to face challenges in maintaining its sovereignty. Serbia's campaign against Kosova and its refusal to recognize the war's brutality pose ongoing obstacles. As I write this, tensions continue to rise in northern Kosova. Serbian protestors look to prevent Kosovar-Albanian mayors from taking up office, despite sanctioned democratic elections that led to their terms. Since northern Kosova (Mitrovica) has been a long-contested territory due in part to its rich resources and proximity to Serbia, the protests escalated quickly as NATO and the Kosova state military were mobilized (Schlee 2023). Only two months ago, Serbian paramilitaries ambushed Kosovar police patrols killing one officer and exposing a state organized criminal network in what the Kosovar government can only describe as terrorist activity (Bechev 2023).

The memory of the recent war has left everyone on edge. My family gathers around the television set shooting each other uneasy glances and speaking in hushed tones; yet another example of the way in which the past is implicated in the present and thusly could manifest in the future. The threat remains all too real for Europe's youngest country, Kosova. The unanimous concern among my family and friends is the reality that before having a chance to develop fully as a country, we could be thrown back into

another war.

In conclusion, it is crucial to learn from the contradictions embodied by the *Goddess on the Throne* and incorporate these new meanings into the state-building process. This includes addressing the issue of femicide and working towards achieving gender equality and women's rights in Kosova. By holding ourselves accountable to the values represented by this cultural object, Kosova can move towards a more inclusive and just society. I wonder if the way to stand strong in the face of imminent conflict is to embrace the fluid memory and identity systems of our ancestors, to ardently *not* adopt the language of colonizers. Of course, this is easier said than done as we do, in fact, live in a global imperial-scape. And although my museological intervention may be but a drop in a vast pool of water, what we know of a drop are its inherent rings, expanding beyond the point of contact, undulating across the surface, creating a lively disturbance, resulting in a dynamism of movement.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors of *Kosova Anthropologica* and the two anonymous reviewers who helped refine this paper. I would also like to thank the professors at the University of Illinois at Chicago for their mentorship and the National Museum of Kosova for aiding in my studies.

ENDNOTES

1 This article derives from an unpublished master's thesis at the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2023.

2 I was able to determine that the dig was institutionally sanctioned, but have yet to locate the names of the archaeologists who led the project. Berisha's (2012) archaeological guide provides three years during which Tjerrtorja was excavated: 1951, 1955-56, and 1962.

3 Gardner, April. 2017. "The Goddess on the Throne." Hello from Kosovo: A Peace Corps Kosovo Blog 2016-2018 (blog). March 14, 2017. <https://hellofromkosovo.com/2017/03/14/goddess-on-the-throne/>.

4 In *Orality and Literacy* author Ong (2002, 8) defines orality as a form of apprenticeship learned through listening and repetition, from which proverbs, stories, expressions are mastered by combining and assimilating them into other "formulary materials." And though strictly oral cultures (that is, those that do not use writing) no longer exist, many preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality (Ong 2002, 11). The mentality of orality has its contemporary reverberations made manifest in things such as the lack of digital archives. Directors of entire institutions (universities, museums, theatres) have said to me that if I desire information, my best bet is to be here "live". All this to say that the metaphorical distance I feel in engaging with Albanian art history and culture is exacerbated by my physical distance from the land. Addressing this distance has vexed my studies, my art practice, ultimately my very identity. I often feel I am weaving together wisps of wind, stringing together the soft mists that settle over Kosova's rugged mountain tops.

5 Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, Hartman published *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* in 2020. The book interrogates Black life at the beginning of the Twentieth century, reinscribing Black lives from "errant" to "revolutionary", crediting Black people for shaping important cultural movements. Hartman combines historical research and literary prose. She considers the categorical distinction between "Art" and "Academia"

to be not only problematic within her own discipline but also limiting in its (constructed) oppositionality/mutual exclusivity. Interdisciplinarity is a long-discussed and heralded institutional shift, accompanied by a recognition that categorization is arbitrary. That is not to say, however, that categorization does not harbor potential violence, for a framing device can oftentimes be a lethal weapon (this, of course, is not arbitrary). But interdisciplinarity attempts to defang that violence, laying bare the nature of imposed distinctions. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* demonstrates that ultimately, reality has little interest in our human, institutional tinkering (Hartman 2020). I am employing critical fabulation in interdisciplinary fashion to interrogate the relationship between symbols, like the Goddess, and violence against women in Kosova.

6 In *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature*, Winterrowd (1990, 41) posits the work of fiction and history to be much more akin to one another than perhaps disciplinary boundaries would have us believe. He draws his argument from White's (2004) "The Fictions of Factual Representation," which argues that the process of integrating imaginary events to create poetry is much like the process of fusing together "factual" events to create a cohesive history (White 2004). In other words, both are constructed narratives. In a 2021 NPR interview Hartman poignantly described what she does as a "historical poetics".

7 I am speaking specifically about the modernist tradition of linear perspective in which a modern subjectivity is born (Crary 1999, 17). Linear perspective utilizes geometric convention to center the viewer and to render an illusionistic and thus, knowable picture plane. Crary (1999) takes this notion up in his book *Suspensions of Perception* in which he tracks the historical transformations of vision and the subsequent manipulation of a viewer's attention. He draws from Rosalind Krauss when isolating empirical vision and pure form as the two operating forces producing the "all-at-oneness" of modern perception (Crary 1999, 46).

8 It is important to mention that Dukagjini was one of nine tribal families that mobilized as a guerilla military sanction in times of foreign attack, and as communal conflict moderators in times of inter-tribal strife (Malcolm 1998, 17).

9 The name "Yugoslavia", however, was officially adopted in 1929 (Malcolm 1998, 264).

10 Kosova's independence was achieved with the assistance of foreign involvement, particularly through NATO intervention. However, it is important to acknowledge that the nation-building efforts of the Kosovar people, including those who fought in the civilian organized liberation army, also played a crucial role.

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