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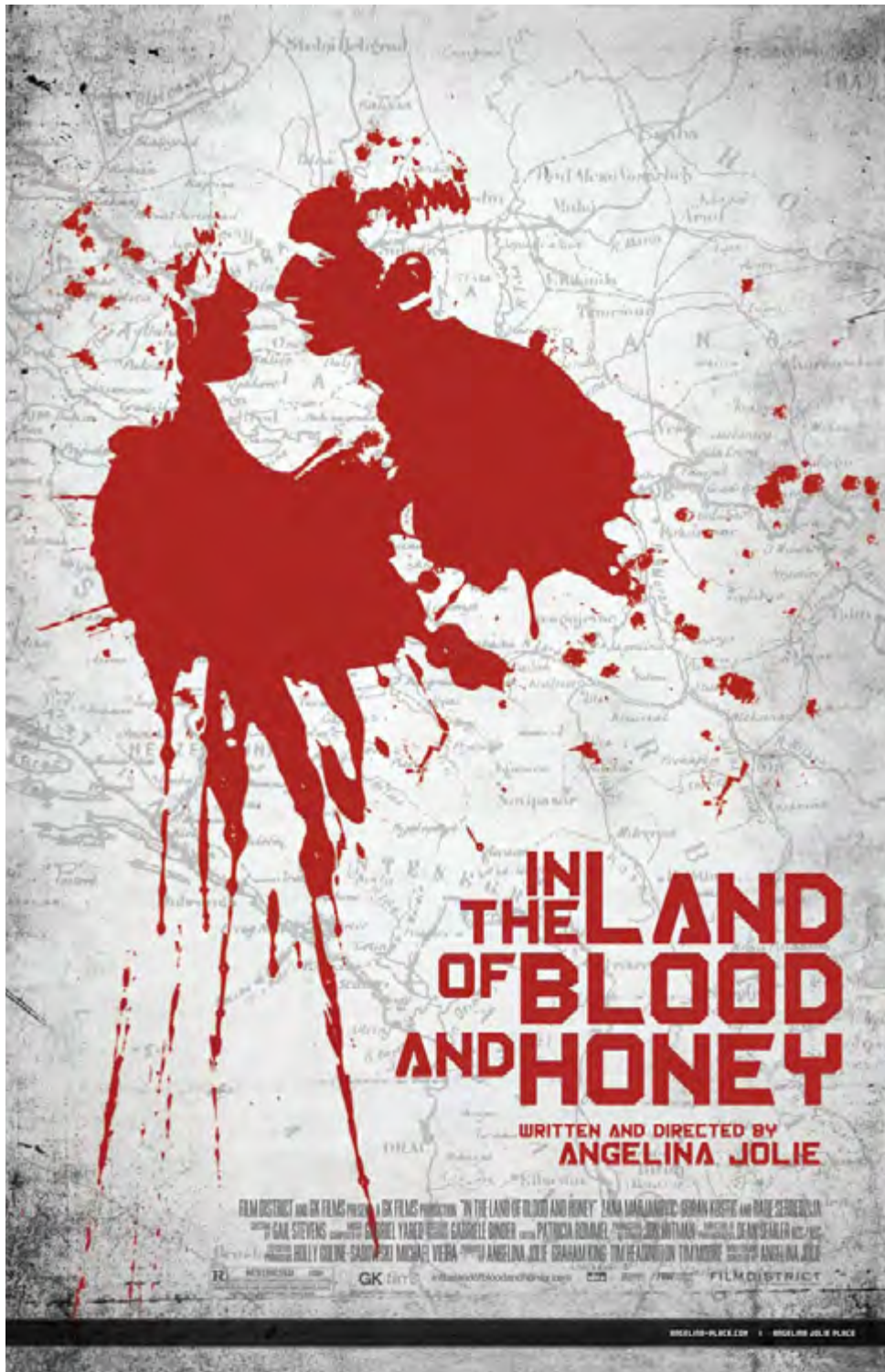
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**OF WAR
+ LOVE**

**IN THE
LAND OF
BLOOD
AND
HONEY**

**A PERSPECTIVE
BY DENISE ROMAN**





A GOOD FILM CAN CREATE A TIME WARP, WHERE HISTORY CATCHES UP WITH US, CRASHING INTO OUR PRESENT WITH ITS LOAD OF METAPHORS, TRAUMA, AND HOPES.

This is how I felt when viewing Angelina Jolie's *In the Land of Blood and Honey*. I was invested in the film from the very beginning, not only because it was written, directed, and produced by a well-known celebrity but also because although I am not a native of former Yugoslavia, I was born and raised in the neighboring country of Romania and lived there while the war in Bosnia mercilessly unfolded in the early 1990s.

As CSW research scholar with research interests related to the film's themes, I was invited to attend the L.A. premiere, which was hosted by CSW and the Burkle Center for International Relations at UCLA and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. When told that the film concerned the Bosnian war, I became uneasy. For me, this war meant massacres and mass rapes. How was Jolie, who is probably most well-known for playing Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* movies, going to deliver on the daunting task of representing such events? A *New York Times* article, "Behind the Camera, But Still the Star," from December 7, 2011, did not relieve my unease. I then remembered that Jolie has served as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees since 2001 and received the first Citizen of the World Award from the United Nations Correspondents Association in 2003 and a United Nations Global Humanitarian Action Award in 2009.

When Jolie introduced *In the Land of Blood and Honey* at the premiere, my earlier associations between her and Lara Croft disappeared and I started to see a strong woman, a filmmaker, even a researcher. As the film started, my heart skipped a beat at the sound of the music, which was composed by Gabriel Yared. It immediately brought me back home to Eastern Europe. I

had last visited Yugoslavia in 1988 as a teenager, when the country looked like the Italian seacoast, with young people on Vespas, private shops (a rarity in the Soviet bloc at the time), blue jeans (another rarity), even high fashion, and generally good times. Then it all disappeared in the smoke of ultra-nationalism and war.

In the *Land of Blood and Honey* is a dual story: one of war and one of love. The macro and micro stories intertwine throughout the movie as the love story becomes the canvas on which the tensions of the war are inscribed. The film's events concern Ajla (Zana Marjanović), a Bosnian Muslim, and her lover and captor Danijel (Goran Kostić), a Bosnian Serb, and the son of ruthless General Nebojsa Vukojevich (Rade Šerbedžija). Ajla is a painter; Danijel is an army officer torn between his love for Ajla and his duty to the "Fatherland," which means fighting for Serbian ethnic purity and the merciless killing of Bosnian Muslims.

Shot in Budapest, Hungary, the film captures the flavor of the region before the war, with its old European architecture, the streets, the blocs, and the museum of art. The dialogue is in Serbian and the cast is made up of actors who are from the former Yugoslavia, including Serbians, Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, and Croatian Serbs. Members of the cast were subject to violence in the war (Vanessa Glodjo, who plays Ajla's sister), saw their family perish (Alma Terzić, who plays



Hana, lost her family in the war), or served in the Bosnian army (Fedja Stukan, who plays Petar, refused to fight and left the army). By bringing together these actors who lived through the war, the film enacts a moment of political and human triumph.

The history is accurate, revealing the major themes and overarching metaphors of the region, recalling Rebecca West's political anthropology of Yugoslavia before WWII in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and David Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*. The region's central myths of martyrdom, sainthood, sacrifice, and innocence are revealed in concise declarations, especially those uttered by Vuko-

Angelina Jolie on the set of *In the Land of Blood and Honey*. She wrote the screenplay, as well as directing and producing the film. Photo courtesy of GK Films, 2011

jevich, who refers to King Stefan Lazar, King of Serbia and the fight against the Ottoman Empire at the Battle of Kosovo in the fourteenth century, and by Ajla, cites the role of Bosnian Muslims in opposing the Nazis during World War II.

In addition, Ajla and Danijel's own love story is exemplary for having crossed ethnic boundaries, which was often the case in the region before the war, in a community where intermarriage and intermingling was not uncommon. In one scene, some soldiers harbor feelings of shame for what they are doing, refusing to shoot, and even recognizing their Muslim neighbors, whom they appreciated before the war (Tarik, played by Boris Ler, was a baker before the war, and his pastries were famous within the community). These moments of deep human introspection reveal the duplicity and the intricate texture of such a war.

Two topics resonate with me after seeing this movie. The first is that mass rape is perhaps a perpetual accompanying tool for destroying the enemy in war. During the Bosnian war of 1992 to 1995 (when around 110,000 people were reported killed and 2.2 million displaced), 20,000 to 50,000 women were systematically raped. In consequence of the Bosnian war, rape as a weapon of war was recognized as a war crime by the International Court of Justice, along with ethnic cleansing and genocide. Confirmation that mass rape accompanies other acts of brutality in war also comes from recent evidence that more than

8,000 women were raped in 2009 in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, according to statistics released by the United Nations Population Fund.[1] Some voices in Holocaust Studies have recently raised the issue of mass rapes having accompanied the Holocaust.[2] Perhaps this is why a representative of the Holocaust Memorial Museum introduced the film at the premiere, as recognition of Bosnian women's holocaust and as a moment of solidarity in suffering

The second issue is that women all over the world need protection against rape and they need the Rape Shield. The Rape Shield Laws limit the admission of a rape survivor's sexual history in court, as a means to encourage women to report rape, to be able to stand in court with dignity, and to not be afraid that their past could be used as a weapon to humiliate them. The Rape Shield Laws that do exist protect some women (mainly in the Anglo-American legal systems, with the United States having a pioneer role). We should extend a dialogue to women worldwide, in the hope that one day the Rape Shield will become, like the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a matter of international treaties, not local legislation.

I am glad that I started from a place of unease and skepticism before seeing *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, because that unease allowed me to evaluate the reality and metaphors of the

film from a political and feminist perspective. I can now affirm that I consider Jolie a colleague in feminist research, with this film being a cinematic doctoral dissertation on the anthropology of war written on the bodies of women. That she was able to immerse herself in a different culture up to a point of identification reveals a deep artistic sensibility. Her commitment to depicting the pain of these women shows her to be a profound human being and a speaker for the wronged ones, whose stories might otherwise be buried in history's infinite memory until the end of time.

Denise Roman is a CSW Research Scholar and the author of *Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania*. Her current research focuses on the Rape Shield Laws.

Photo on page 18: Zana Marjanović (Alja), *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, GK Films, 2011