

# The Resilience of History

The  
Yugoslav  
Wars  
through  
Art

..maska

EDITED BY  
Blaž Kavšek and  
Gregor Moder



Blaž Kavšek and Gregor Moder, eds.

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# 1 The Resilience of History: The Yugoslav Wars Through Art

BLAŽ KAVŠEK AND GREGOR MODER

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the abandonment of the communist project in Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20th century, it seemed that the political economic regime of liberal democracy, specifically in its neoliberal variant as envisioned and championed especially by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, stood without a viable competing alternative. It seemed that the specific mixture of parliamentary democracy, economic liberalism, and cultural Protestantism succeeded in securing its own perpetuity in the global theater not only politically, but also, and more importantly, ideologically. It was the political scientist Francis Fukuyama, one of Reagan's key advisors and an early supporter of American global unilateralism, who expressed this jubilant moment of capitalism in its purest form when he argued in an article from 1989 and a book from 1992 that the long history of human progress had finally reached its endpoint. It was the End of History! His main point was that, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was history itself that effectively *demonstrated* that the idea

of liberal democracy could not even be significantly improved upon over the course of time, much less replaced by a superior model of sociopolitical organization (see Fukuyama 1992).

Fukuyama's victory cry of liberalism, articulated as a theoretical claim, has been heavily criticized ever since it was made, on almost every point of the argument and from every possible angle.<sup>1</sup> There isn't much sense in repeating the discussions that in many ways defined the terrain of political thought in the 1990s, especially since no new argument has been presented in a while; instead, with Jürgen Habermas and Steven Pinker, the debate about the future of the Enlightenment project shifted away from Fukuyama's framework (see Habermas 1995 and Pinker 2013). We accept the criticism of Fukuyama's claim as fully justified. What motivates this book, however, is that there was nevertheless something that Fukuyama *got right*, even though not in the sense that he thought he did. The first thing that we should commend Fukuyama for – a point that was often, and easily overlooked – is the fact that he brought the very idea of history back to the table. This idea landed with a thunderclap at a time when many felt that the era of “grand ideological narratives” had passed, that the Enlightenment's project of human emancipation had finally played out all its permutations and failed, and that it was finally time to accept pragmatism as the only sensible political outlook. And frankly, Fukuyama's idea of the end of history could be easily mistaken for just another version of the claim about the end of grand narratives. However, what separates Fukuyama from so many other theorists of this vein is that he explicitly understood the idea of the end of grand historical narratives *as another grand historical narrative*

1 See especially Samuel Huntington's argument about the future of armed conflict after the end of Cold War era as a clash of cultures or civilizations (Huntington 1993) and Slavoj Žižek's argument that the liberal idea of the end of history was first refuted in the form of tragedy with the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001 and then debunked in the form of farce with the global economic crisis of 2008 (Žižek 2009).

in and of itself. The main appeal of Fukuyama's thesis – for liberal apologists, but also for anyone interested in the philosophy of history – always lay in the claim that it was not communism but liberal democracy that was the ultimate goal of human progress. In other words, contrary to those who proclaimed the end of grand narratives and meekly suggested the acceptance of the “natural” order of things, Fukuyama did not give up on the Enlightenment's idea of human progress. (Whether liberal democracy as Fukuyama describes it could actually be considered as the fulfillment of this progress is a different matter.) And in truth, as soon as his thesis was published, everyone – not only ardent enthusiasts of liberalism – openly engaged in a discussion of history as a conceptual development with an inner purposiveness, and not simply as a series of events that occurred. Whether he wanted to or not, Fukuyama thus reinvigorated the notion of history as discussed by German classics like Kant and Hegel, and revolutionized by Marx and by Lenin, namely the notion of human history as an opaque process of the gradual actualization of a concept. “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational,” writes Hegel in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, and if actuality turns out to embody the idea of liberal democracy, well then this already implies that it was historical reason itself that was revealed in this idea (Hegel 1991, 20). Even though Fukuyama's aims in this move may have been subversive, using the Hegelian–Marxist notion of historical progress against revolutionary Marxist thought itself, he nevertheless endorsed the proposition that political *actuality* is the ultimate test of the validity of a political *idea*.

But this was not the only thing Fukuyama “got right.” In terms of theoretical and philosophical claim itself, Fukuyama's thesis gained support only from liberal thinkers, while it was always rejected or heavily criticized on the left. But *in the practical sense*, in the sense of lived experience, one could claim that, at least for a brief moment in time, there actually was a region in the world that lived the fantasy of the “end of history” as its immediate, unreflected reality. It was,

of course, the very region where the dramatic historical shift took place – Eastern Europe. For the most part, the 1990s were a time of prosperity for Eastern Europe. After a series of regime changes and implementation of capitalist reforms, the region caught global attention politically, economically, and culturally; and for a while, at least for those who would seize them, there was indeed an abundance of opportunities for all kinds of grassroots initiatives. Businesses were opening, cultural and artistic creativity was booming, and everyone felt empowered to have and to share their opinion, political or otherwise. Many countries enjoyed a time of renewed independence, whether independence from the Soviet Union, like Poland, or independence from the rule of domestic dictators, like Romania; some countries were re-joined with their historical cultural space, like East Germany, and in some cases, the countries became independent, truly, for the first time in history, like Slovakia and Slovenia. There was a price to pay, of course. The gradual but steady erosion of social rights (especially reproductive) and social welfare was documented and seriously discussed, just as was the continuous growth of the divide between the poor and the wealthy and the decline of social mobility. In the context of refurbishing national mythologies, there were several instances of suppression of ethnic or religious minorities – the treatment of Roma people and other minorities being perhaps the most universal example of “sacrifices” that were made in the process of nation-building fervor.

Nevertheless, the overall image of Eastern Europe in the (early) 1990s was one of revival and reinvigoration, and as long as the majority of the population was enjoying a *perceived* improvement in their quality of life – mostly in the form of access to goods deemed luxurious not so long before – those “sacrifices” seemed only minor, or simply unavoidable. While the political left in Western Europe began its long, still unfinished journey of self-doubt and self-marginalization in 1991, a process epitomized in formulations of the “new left” or the “third way” even when socialist parties came to power, the political left in Eastern Europe was in an even worse

state – discredited or even completely abandoned as a viable political position. Western Europe had a long tradition of non-governmental organizations that attempted to resist globalism, or at least its most hurtful effects. There was almost no such infrastructure in Eastern Europe, making it the perfect breeding ground for the most radical liberal ideas. It is in this practical sense only that one can perhaps claim that the dream of the end of history toward which human progress flowed was, to an extent, the actual political and social reality of Eastern Europe, even if only for a very brief period.

In the early 1990s, there was only one real problem, only one glaring exception that defied an easy explanation, only one piece of the puzzle that did not fit into this picture of Eastern Europe, only one case where history appeared to have taken an unfortunate detour – the wars in Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup> No one appeared to have a good answer as to how those wars were even possible, much less why they were fought, especially as the violence rapidly escalated into mass torture and genocide. It was especially unhelpful that Yugoslavia had been the most Westernized among the socialist states in Europe, one of the most economically developed (albeit unevenly) and politically open-minded, and one that had split with the Soviet bloc as early as 1948 and sought an independent path between the doctrines of planned and market-oriented economy – the path of self-management. Alongside political and economic reforms taking place during the 1970s and especially the 1980s, and with its history of multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic prosperity, Yugoslavia had every chance to become the “star” of the transition to neo-liberal capitalism.

2 The wars in Yugoslavia were, of course, not the world’s only instance of armed conflict in the 1990s. The Gulf war (1990–91) and the Rwandan civil war, including the genocide against the Tutsi (1994), were especially important in shaping European public opinion at the time. The wars in Yugoslavia were an exception only within the otherwise more or less peaceful transition from socialist economic systems to capitalism in Eastern Europe, although one should mention conflicts in the neighboring Caucasus region, the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–94), and the First Chechen War (1994–96).

How could it have become practically the only former socialist country in Europe that took a completely different path? The Yugoslav wars seemed out of place, and especially out of their own historical time.

Fukuyama himself vehemently insisted on the idea that liberal democracy is the best cure against wars in general, that war as a concept thus also belongs to human past (Fukuyama 1992, xx). This notion, advocated in some sense already by Kant, even though he speaks about a federation of republics (Kant 2006, 81), was later shared by Steven Pinker and many others (Pinker 2013). But for the countries emerging from the remains of Socialist Yugoslavia, the transition to capitalism was inextricably connected with war and destructive malice. One of the cultural products that captured this uncanny conjunction of war and capitalism with true effect was a series of postcards made by TRIO Sarajevo, a group of designers, called “Ironic Postcards from a City at War,” sent from a besieged city struggling in fear of murderous snipers and heavy bombardment between 1992 and 1995. Many of these postcards play with the relations between mass culture, mass production, mass consumption, and mass murder. One of the posters was a paraphrase of the global “Enjoy Coca-Cola” advertisement, except that the text says, “Enjoy Sarajevo” (FIGURE 1). The substitution of Coca-Cola with Sarajevo does not only establish a link between mass consumption and war, but it also underlines the split within Eastern Europe itself, the split between the part that got to enjoy the fantasy of the end of history, and the part that got to enjoy the very outrage of history itself.

Judging by how the Yugoslav wars were reported on and discussed especially in the West – as basically unintelligible, pre-modern ethnic violence – one would be safe to assume that they were considered a kind of strangely resilient remnant of some long-forgotten past, of something that humanity, just as Fukuyama suggested, had essentially already overcome and left behind. Wars as such seemed of questionable importance at a time when the Cold War was over and the US and the newly

FIGURE 1



Enjoy Sarajevo, "Ironic Postcards from a City at War," TRIO Sarajevo, 1993–94.  
Published with permission from Bojan Hadžihalilović.

formed Russian Federation had agreed to continue reducing their nuclear stockpiles. The global elites in London and New York called the very status of nation-states into question, making the national wars in Yugoslavia seem utterly atavistic, even primitive. From the globalist perspective, it looked like Yugoslavia somehow had not received the memo that it was ideologically lagging behind.

But we would be equally justified to claim that the glitch in the historical time that was revealed in Yugoslav wars was one from the future, rather than from the past. While the idea of the end of history has always been *theoretically* suspicious, it took many years – a decade – for the cracks in the imaginary structure of the *political practice* in Eastern Europe to become fully apparent and culturally acknowledged. This was perhaps most directly thematized in the 2004 film *Czech Dream* (*Český sen*, d. Vit Klusák and Filip Remunda), where the film directors, who play themselves, convince an advertising company to launch a huge media campaign for a new hypermarket called Czech Dream. The campaign is “honest” in the sense that it explicitly warns that people should “not believe it” and that they “shouldn’t come” to shop there. When 3000 people nevertheless show up for the grand opening and start walking toward what looks like a large building in the distance, it is revealed that it was all a hoax, and the building promising the dream of pure consumer happiness is nothing but a large canvas, supported by scaffolding. The notion that the political economic regime of late capitalism is neither a natural occurrence nor the historical fulfillment of humanity’s destiny could not simply be *explained* by philosophers and political scientists, it had to be *experienced* publicly and culturally, in accordance with what Hegel described as the process of the labor of the concept.

We can find another example of such cultural experience in the 2003 German film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (English in original, d. Wolfgang Becker). The film is set in East Berlin between two events, the fall of the wall in 1989 and the reunification of East Germany with West Germany in 1990. The film is a comedy



with a sense of cultural nostalgia, and features some truly wonderful scenic elements, such as the one where, practically overnight, a city covered with huge red flags promoting communism begins displaying huge red flags promoting Coca-Cola. This simple substitution, employed in the film for comic effect, reveals a deep truth about the functioning of ideology as such. It is not just that there is an element of radical, irreducible contingency in any ideological formation, and that in the practical sense, much like Louis Althusser argued, ideology only exists in its completely material institutions and practices, precisely in what it displays as absolutely evident (Althusser 2020). In a deeper sense, the substitution of communist red with Coca-Cola red indicates that ideology functions precisely as the minimal difference, or even as one simple signifier which becomes the central one. In other words, the vast complexity of institutional, historical, cultural, social and political differences can be ultimately reduced to one minimal difference, no bigger than the difference between two shades of red. From this point of view, the effort of ideology critique may be ultimately described as the attempt to discern the complexity of the given ideological formation as a specific shade of red. *Good Bye, Lenin!* succeeds in this effort, not because it alludes to how cheaply Eastern Germans sold themselves (as if saying that “they exchanged their communist project for a soda drink”), but rather in showing that what appears at first sight merely as a soda commercial in truth reveals a complex ideological structure that requires enormous social and political effort to maintain. A Coca-Cola commercial can substitute for a poster of Lenin only because it shares the poster’s structural logic, its ideological function.

The proper cultural effect of films like *Czech Dream* or *Good Bye, Lenin!* should not be described as disillusionment, because it would be too naïve to assume that they speak from some sort of ideologically neutral perspective, from a position of “naked truth.” Their effect is, nevertheless, critical, because what they manage to do is to make palpable a certain glitch in the ideological structure; they create a short circuit within

the ideological current, revealing that the ostensibly “evident” or “natural” order of our reality is, in fact, constructed. This glitch or short circuit can also help us understand the specific un-timeliness that can be observed when discussing Yugoslav wars within the (Eastern) European context, the fact that they appeared in their own time as strangely belonging to the past, but that we can discuss them, from the perspective of the 2020s, as a prefigurement of what was to happen much later, on a much larger scale – foreshadowing the rise of nationalism and populism, as well as the “return” of war and genocide. We can refer to this glitch as indicative of some traumatic kernel of our contemporary capitalist modernity. *Enjoy Sarajevo*, the poster that produced a condensation of mass consumerism and mass murder such as defined much of the space of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, functioned so well precisely because it clashed with the dominant liberal fantasy of the time, but can also be read as an eerie reminder that modernity as such is yet in an unfinished state, that its historical trajectory has still yet to be revealed to us. But even if we understand it in a much more modest framework, as merely a visual document that perfectly captures the contradictions of its historical moment in the Eastern Europe of the early 1990s, it is a perfect illustration of what this book seeks to engage with: the historical trauma of the Yugoslav wars as mediated in cultural and artistic practices. Our objective in analyzing and discussing this mediation is double. Firstly, our volume aims to contribute to the understanding of the relationship of art to trauma in general and to examine specific cases of how art works with war and migration trauma in particular. But, secondly, this volume should also be read as a contribution to the argument that artistic mediation, especially theater, potentially offers a privileged entry point towards understanding trauma as a social and historical phenomenon.

The question of the exact relation of art, especially theater, to trauma has been part of the history of theater since its beginnings in Greek tragedy. Is it art’s task to cushion the blows of fortune and to help us process the problems we face in our

daily lives? Or does art, on the contrary, offer us only abstract aesthetic forms, poetic formulas that have no direct use value and which only have an effect within the framework of aesthetic experience, without any promise of usefulness for our everyday concerns and real-world sorrows? What is the status of practices such as drama therapy, the theater of the oppressed, and theater workshops for marginalized or traumatized groups, practices that do not focus on aesthetic goals at all, but on social and political ones? And, finally, how should we understand the effects of theatrical and other artistic practices, such as those that are particularly characteristic of contemporary art, where it is precisely their social engagement – their drawing directly from the vessel of human suffering, even by placing deeply traumatized individuals in the glare of the spotlight – that is placed in the context of the aesthetic, “disinterested” reception of art festivals and biennials, theater premieres, and exhibition openings?

This series of questions will probably never be answered definitively, because each practice has its own logic and justification. Our monograph is thus limited by necessity. We decided to focus primarily on the specific traumatic experience of war and genocide in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and then on the associated migration to lands of relative peace and prosperity, on the experience of searching for a new home and living a very real homelessness. We also had a methodological reason for narrowing the scope of our research: we are particularly interested in those phenomena and practices that can be understood neither as a mere attempt to alleviate and heal real human pain nor as a formula for purely aesthetic pleasure, but rather those that fill an impossible zone in between, a kind of no man’s land between the two. We are interested in art as a form of confrontation with a collectively shared trauma, specifically as a confrontation in which artistic processes do not (only) play the role of consolation, do not heal wounds, and do not alleviate symptoms. Instead, they are the way or the medium in which that traumatic core comes to the surface and articulates itself as precisely that

– a traumatic core. It is only because art, precisely as art, has the power to *enact* our confrontation with trauma that its effects can emerge as comforting, healing, restorative, and reparative, but also as destructive, painful, and even irritating. When a work of art is downright gut-wrenching, even though it was a well-crafted and well-executed work, it is very likely to have expressed something essential about us.

Our claim is that theater and theatricality have in some sense a privileged role to play in confronting shared trauma precisely because such confrontation always takes the form of “staging.” In part, this was aptly pointed out by Sigmund Freud, who built his theory of psychoanalysis on the very experience of the theatricality of what he called “hysteria,” and understood the place of the unconscious as the “other scene” or the “other stage” (Freud 1953, 535–36). But the theatrical nature of the artistic confrontation with trauma is also a reminder that such a confrontation must be thought of as completely open, as radically undecidable, as a descent into the unknown, and as taking a risk. For the result of such a confrontation is by no means a guaranteed success, it is by no means necessary that this confrontation will relieve our pain or console us, because in confronting the traumatic core we run the risk of failing, repeatedly, and of our whole construction of the world collapsing in the face of it.

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The first idea for this volume was sketched out in 2020, well before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Hamas attack of 2023 which has been used to justify a destructive and unprecedented response of Israel. Although we wanted to focus on what we considered an important aspect of the wars and migrations within and from the space of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s: the way they were mediated in artistic formats, especially in theater. The subsequent events and

the rapid escalation of the conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East surprised us, and we wanted our monograph to address these war zones, too, since they profoundly define *our* time and our contemporary outlook on war and migration. What also surprised us was that, at some point during the process, we no longer considered the theoretical question of the relationship between trauma and art as merely a secondary one of primarily academic interest. We fully admit that artistic practices cannot prevent wars or solve conflicts, and that they can even, in certain cases, help foment tensions. However, once a war has started, it is clear that other practices – political practice, specifically – are either rendered ineffective in equal measure or have been exploited, in fact, to garner even further support for war. The value of artistic practices becomes important precisely retrospectively, when war-related trauma has already struck and needs to be addressed or even articulated for the first time. Art, and especially theater, might be said to alleviate the trauma, but, at least in certain cases, as we argued above, it even opens the very space where the trauma might be engaged with. Our initial call for contributions was thus amended and extended to include chapters from Marina Johnson and Sofiiia Rosa-Lavrentii, who report on the resistance practices of theaters in Palestine and Ukraine. Although these two wars are very different from one another, they nevertheless attest to the fact that, perhaps counter-intuitively, theater is sorely needed for a people under (existential) threat.

We organized the main corpus of contributions in sections called Relocating Trauma, Repeating Trauma, Healing Trauma, Humanism vs. Antihumanism, and Theory in Exile. Both chapters in the first section (Relocating Trauma) focus on art's ability of art to help illuminate phenomena by placing them out of their initial context. Quite coincidentally, they also have in common the fact that they set the scene of the beginning in 1989, the year both the Berlin Wall and Nicolae Ceaușescu were brought down, setting the stage for

the tumultuous final chapter of the 20th century, which was to become the historical setting of the Yugoslav wars.

Gregor Moder bases his analysis on three dramatic texts known as *The Balkan Trilogy*, published in 1997 by Dušan Jovanović, a renowned Slovenian theater director and playwright. The chapter explores how, in the context of Jovanović's poetics, theater establishes itself as a medium of staging the separation between the traumatic immediacy of history and the mediation of art. Paradoxically, precisely by distancing itself from the historical and political context, the three plays manage to confront the audience with something urgent and intimate. *The Balkan Trilogy* not only deals with the wars in Yugoslavia by way of a detour through the myths of Antigone and Sisyphus, but also with a reference to Bertolt Brecht's classic anti-war play *Mother Courage* (1939), a play that itself benefited from a strategic distancing, engaging with the horrors of the ongoing war (WWII) through a detour to an older one (the Thirty Years' War). In his careful analysis of Jovanović's plays, Moder recognizes traumatic experience as something that cannot fully be grasped in direct engagement with it, but only by making evident the very remoteness of the original trauma to its representation.

Branislav Jakovljević also focuses on three literary works from the 1990s, namely three novels by the Serbian poet Vojislav Despotov, all of which depict different wars or phases of wars, from the end of the Cold War to various facets of the Yugoslav wars. The logic of relocation, or, more accurately in this case, replication, is not only key to understanding Despotov's literary output, but also to Jakovljević's narrative of the break-up of Yugoslavia, which the author constructs in the course of the chapter. At the center of the analysis are two fictional versions of Europe, one ("New Europe") from *Jesen svakog drveta* (*The Autumn of Every Tree*, 1997) and one ("Europe Number Two") from *Evropa broj dva* (*Europe Number Two*, 1998), which are continent-sized copies of Europe that Russia has constructed in the vast Siberian expanses. By reflecting on the fictional relocation of Europe in Despotov's

novels, Jakovljević draws attention to the historical logic of the Siberian labor camps, the marginalization of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde scene, as well as to questions about the purpose of art, the way in which it permeates all other aspects of society, and – linking Despotov’s novels to Despotov’s theoretical project, manifested in the essay *The Hammer of Tautology* from the late 1980s – to the nature of tautology as one of the principal formal procedures of conceptual art.

In the second section (Repeating Trauma) we consider repetition, a central concept in Sigmund Freud’s understanding of trauma, as closely related to the process of relocation, but explicitly speaking to the property of traumatic experience not only to keep returning to, but also to profoundly change its victims, whether collective or individual, to fundamentally determine their responses to new traumas, which the individual or society must somehow incorporate into their experiential repertoire.

Ana Antić makes a point in her chapter precisely about the deep connection between the individual and the social level of experiencing trauma. She zooms in on two recent Serbian novels, Saša Ilić’s *Pas i kontrabas* (*Dog and Double Bass*, 2019) and Mirjana Drljević’s *Niko nije zaboravljen i ničega se ne sećamo* (*No one is Forgotten and We Remember Nothing*, 2022), which both place former soldiers from the Yugoslav wars in psychiatric contexts. By juxtaposing two schools of psychiatry as embodied in two central characters of Ilić’s novel, the first subscribing to the decontextualizing logic of reducing traumatic experiences solely to an anomaly of an individual’s brain functioning and the other integrating social context into its strategy for understanding and treating the patient, Antić brings to the fore the necessity of Serbia’s reckoning with its history, indicating that not doing so can only result in the endless retraumatization of veterans who, in order to function in their society, need to be acknowledged and treated, but cannot find in that same society the resources they need for said treatment since Serbia never declared either victory or defeat.

Blaž Kavšek addresses the unusual explosion of interest in, research on, and remembrance of the Holocaust in the 1990s, comparing this process with the counterintuitive rhythm of establishing the dominant narrative and imagery of the First World War in the 1960s, as the former coincided with the need to address a new genocide on European soil. Drawing on articles by John F. Burns, Roy Gutman, and David Rhode, all of whom won Pulitzer Prizes for their coverage of the Bosnian War (1992–95) and the Bosnian genocide, as well as comments of their critics (Noam Chomsky), Kavšek seeks to determine how the enthronement of the Holocaust as the defining event of the 20th century manifested itself in the perception and interpretation of the genocidal violence of the Yugoslav wars.

In their collaborative chapter, Damir Arsenijević and Saša Asentić delve into the intricate nexus of art, trauma, and so-called transitional justice in the context of post-war, post-genocide Bosnia and Herzegovina. Analyzing how select artistic pieces encircle the traumatic core of war and genocide, the chapter is oriented towards a critique of the current production of victimhood through the post-war local ethnic authoritarian and international bureaucratic management of trauma. Central to this collaboration is a collective endeavor to contemplate the transformative potential of art in navigating the aftermath of trauma and to contemplate the conditions of art in which and through which the following develop: the affect of love, the principle of accessibility, and ethics of care and responsibility.

The title of the third section (Healing Trauma) is as self-evident as the topic it describes is important. The chapters, each in its own way, consider the role of the newly established Republic of Slovenia in directly addressing the war and exile traumas of the refugees from the disintegrated Yugoslavia. Unlike the previous chapters, which either analyze trauma in its manifestation through the sifting of historical or aesthetic distancing, the chapters in this section mainly emphasize the capacity of art, both theater and literature,



to serve as a first line of resistance against the destructive power of war and exile.

Zala Dobovšek highlights the theater group *Nepopravljivi optimisti* (Incorrigible Optimists), run by theater actor Draga Potočnjak in Slovenia between 1992 and 1997, as one of the key exceptions of the national theater scene that was not particularly active in discussing the Yugoslav wars. By means of interviews, Dobovšek examines both the methodology used by Potočnjak and – in the person of Damir Murathodžić, a former member of the *Incorrigible Optimists* – the perspective of the participants. By intimately depicting the dynamics of the theater of the oppressed, she reveals several interesting outcomes in how art functions in healing trauma and outlines the problems faced by the intended beneficiaries of the healing process.

Katja Kobolt also writes about the refugees who took flight to Slovenia (and Germany) in the 1990s, pointing out their appetite for books and literature and the fact that about a quarter of them were children. The need to work for and with these children soon became very apparent. Displaced writers and artists answered the call and started this work. As different literary polysystems collided in these historical circumstances – the new and the old national polysystems, the older Yugoslav literary polysystem, etc. – Kobolt analyzes this collision in order to determine the “literary agency” of the displaced writers and artists, including the young refugees, to assess their level of integration into the new polysystem and to judge the extent to which it followed the practices of the previous literary polysystem. The chapter identifies how writers with a migrant experience can maneuver their multifaceted role, torn between different regimes of aesthetic and literary education, and, ultimately, how art can offer a means of alleviating the pain of this rupture.

The Humanism vs. Antihumanism section emerges from a long-standing opposition in discussions of migrant literature. On the one hand, these discussions revolve around investing hope in the redeeming inspiration that potentially

arises from literary engagement at the margins of multiple cultures; on the other hand, they are about reminding ourselves, either of the material conditions and complex historical causality of this transit between countries and cultures, or simply of the potentially unproductive presuppositions of such metaphorical extensions of the discourse on migration.

Aleksandra Starcevic chronicles the migrant experience of the writer Marica Bodrožić and shows how her autobiographical book *Sterne erben, Sterne färben: Meine Ankunft in Wörtern* (*Inheriting Stars, Coloring Stars: My Arrival in Words*, 2007) addresses issues of identity and belonging. Starcevic explores how Bodrožić's maneuvering between two cultures and languages allowed her to bear witness to the lives of former Yugoslavs in Germany and how they, as a united community, coped with loss and held on to one another, trying to preserve their memories. Particular emphasis is placed on the flexibility of the concept of *Heimat*, which, as the author of the chapter shows, in Bodrožić's case is eventually linked to a rejection of the identity prescribed by the political elites in the recently recognized countries that once formed Yugoslavia and the adoption of a more inclusive, personal residence.

Djordje Popović's chapter analyzes how the Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon champions inherent bilingual and bicultural advantages. Popović expresses suspicion of Hemon's suspicion of any human capacity to "will our way out of history," which the writer then fatalistically, albeit through enthusiastic assumptions about the prestige of literature, places in the aesthetic sphere, ultimately abdicating them. In this hypostatization of language, Hemon disregards the historical coordinates of his intercultural position and overestimates the extent to which the burden of changing the world can be not only entrusted but completely handed over from the hands of a historical populace, who are supposed to have betrayed their task, to the hands of literature.

The final section of the monograph is called Theory in Exile and consists of an exchange of letters between Bojana Kunst, Janez Janša, and Bojana Cvejić (in order of appearance).

All of them are theorists of theater and performance arts, all of them have extensive experience with multiple art forms, especially with contemporary dance, and all of them have migrated at some point in their lives from the place of their birth in Yugoslavia and work today in Europe at large in higher education: Kunst works at the University of Giessen, Germany, Janša works at the Berlin University of the Arts, Germany, and Cvejić works at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Norway. None of them migrated as a direct result of the wars; the “exile” in the title of their exchange refers to the fact that they all find the cultural space of former Yugoslavia, their shared legacy, not only as a vast reservoir of important artistic research and work, but also as a well of enormous potential for the future of the region and the artistic practices in general. We invited them to engage in the exchange of letters precisely with the aim to use their shared passion, experience, and cultural heritage to discuss the prospects for the future, or, to use the term discussed in the performing arts journal *Maska*, to indulge in the practice of *Yugofuturism*.

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helped us articulate the idea and suggested many potential contributors. We were delighted that our proposal was met with an overwhelmingly positive response – we would like to thank all the contributors to this volume for taking on their task so seriously and with such dedication, especially given the very strict timeline. Aleš Mendiževc, our series editor, was very supportive of our project and we profited greatly from his counsel. And finally, we would like to thank Maska Ljubljana for agreeing to serve as both the host institute for our research and as the publisher of this volume.

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# Relocating Trauma





## 2 War and Representation: On *The Balkan Trilogy* by Dušan Jovanović

GREGOR MODER

We are in the great hall of the Ion Luca Caragiale National Theater in Bucharest, Romania, and it is 19 April 1995. The country is still in shock after the events of 1989, which saw the violent suppression of protests in the city of Timișoara and the death of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his spouse Elena. The couple held a firm grip over Romania for decades but were ultimately accused of genocide (among other crimes) by a court marshal and sentenced to an immediate death. The audience members in attendance at the theater in Bucharest were visibly reminded that night of the power Ceaușescus once held over the country: the grand state box where the couple typically appeared to watch the show was covered with a curtain. Dignitaries no longer wanted to sit there anyway; it was a seat deliberately left empty. The show scheduled to take place was called *Antigone*, written by Dušan Jovanović and performed by the ensemble of the Slovenian National Theater Drama Ljubljana from the western-most part of what used to be Romania's neighboring country of Yugoslavia. The war in Bosnia was in full swing, and everyone knew that the play's mythical framework was simply an oblique way of addressing the concurrent events. What the audience did not know, however, was that

the show's director, Meta Hočevár, had decided to employ a very special effect: the final scene of the performance was not played out on the stage itself, but in the very state loge that was supposedly left evacuated. When the curtain over the former Ceaușescu box began rising, the audience responded with an audible gasp; the ghost of the dead appeared that night.<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, this chapter is all about that gasp, for the production of such an effect is the very purpose of the theater as a performing art. There is something quintessentially theatrical in the fact that the gasp was not so much about what was actually seen or heard from actors on the stage, but about the lifting of the curtain itself. Something dead and buried was conjured into existence with a single stroke – with the raising of the curtain at precisely the appropriate moment – and the quasi-mythical story that was played out on stage in the multiplicity of living colors turned out to be nothing but a blank canvas for this “other scene,” played out in the dead gray of the unconscious thought of the people in attendance. In other words, the gasp was audible proof that the performance of Jovanović's *Antigone* in Bucharest succeeded in producing a kind of fissure, a palpable difference between the apparent, obvious performance on the stage and another performance, one taking place in the timeless present of what may be perhaps referred to as the social unconscious.<sup>2</sup> It is this other theater

1 This anecdote was related to me by Milena Zupančič, who played Jocasta in Jovanović's *Antigone*.

2 The term “social unconscious” was first used by Erich Fromm to refer to the shared values of a society. I am borrowing it from the field of therapeutic practice, where it is used today – albeit cautiously and perhaps experimentally – to refer to traumatic experiences that surpass the individual psyche, especially in group analysis (Hopper and Weinberg 2017). What I mean by this term here, however, has little to do with therapeutic practice. I understand social unconscious as designating a kind of a violent rupture, much like a revolution, which lies unacknowledged at the core of a set of practices and values that define a given community, such as a nation, practices that are completely self-evident to that community. Social unconscious is therefore something that was dead and buried by a society “since time immemorial,” that is to say in an eternal or perhaps timeless past; keeping it dead and buried is precisely what constitutes the immediate structure of that society, of what is deemed self-evident in that society.

that touches the real, traumatic kernel of the social texture, making it palpable for a fleeting moment in time. The point is, of course, that this other staging cannot be apprehended directly; there is nothing to be “seen” or “heard” there, its presence can only be sensed in traces, and its only appearance is the fissure itself: a gasp.

We must strictly separate between two stages. There is the obvious, apparent one, which concerns the plot and the spectacle, taking place out there, in front of our eyes. And there is another one, which remains hidden but touches us intimately. One of the basic theatrical effects, I claim, is in producing the fissure that makes the separation between the two stages palpable. This does not mean, however, that the plot and the setting of the visible stage are unimportant. Quite to the contrary; as is clear in the case of Jovanović’s *Antigone* guest performing in Bucharest, this effect was produced quite deliberately. And it was not just the question of raising the curtain over the Ceaușescu’s box. It was also the fact that the stage was literally split in two, separating the main part, taking place in front of everyone’s eyes, from the other part, situated in the center of the audience itself, effectively suggesting that the drama played “out there,” performed by guests from a foreign country, was simply a reference to another drama, a drama that sustains the traumatic kernel of what may be referred to as “home.”

What at first appears as something that comes from the outside as a guest performance turns out to have made its home in our very midst. This is what Oedipus must have felt when it turned out that King Laios’s murderer, whom Oedipus has been pursuing, is none other than Oedipus himself. And ultimately, the fact that Jovanović’s text refers to war and genocide in Bosnia and evokes the siege of Sarajevo by displacing them into a mythical conflict in the archaic past is not simply a way for the playwright to lend a sense of gravity and an air of importance to contemporary events. This procedure is also clearly not a case of the convention of decorum – it is not an attempt of the dramatist to save the audience from the harm of real-world horror. Death and destruction were televised daily,

sometimes live. In fact, the early 1990s, following CNN's live coverage of American intervention in the Gulf War (1990–91), significantly redefined war itself as something that takes place “live” in the midst of our homes, while we go about our everyday business.<sup>3</sup> And most importantly, the displacement in the mythic past should not be confused for an attempt to depoliticize the war, to forget about the causes and the laws, and to reduce the war to a basic animalistic instinct or to some primordial nature of man. But then, what purpose *does* this strategic distance serve? I suggest that we read this deliberate displacement, this uprooting of the traumatic event, precisely as the carefully selected way to speak about the horrors of war. Moreover, the hyperbolic distance is there, paradoxically, not to shield us from the war trauma, but precisely to allow the dramatist to speak about, and the audience to engage with, something radically intimate and traumatic.

## The Forced Laughter of Antigone

Dušan Jovanović (1939–2020) was one of the most celebrated playwrights, directors, and theatrical innovators in the Slovenian – and to an extent (former) Yugoslavian – cultural space after World War II. His *Antigone* is the first play in *The Balkan Trilogy*, a series of dramatic works dedicated to the war, survival, and exile in the context of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. *Antigone* was followed by *The Riddle of Courage* (1994) and *Who Sings Sisyphus* (1997). The plays were staged by Slovenian National Theater Drama in Ljubljana (or simply Drama) between 1993 and 1997, and the texts were subsequently published in book form in 1997.<sup>4</sup> The greatest significance of

3 I want to thank Blaž Kavšek, the co-editor to this volume, for alerting me to the importance of the concurrent development of the internet and new televised formats with the ongoing Yugoslav wars in the 90s.

4 *Antigone* was co-produced by The Vienna Festival and its opening night was on 9 June 1993 at the Theater an der Wien in Austria. It was a successful show both domestically and internationally; *The Riddle of Courage* and *Who Sings Sisyphus* were not.

*The Balkan Trilogy*, in my opinion, lies in the fact that they were produced on the grand stage of Drama, the main theater hall in the Slovenian capital. In a time when the Slovenian political, economic, and cultural focus was heavily concentrated on strengthening ties with Western Europe and the wider world, enjoying the revival of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union and the communist project, when there was everything to gain and nothing to lose by disassociating Slovenia from the rest of former Yugoslavia, in particular from the war zone, Dušan Jovanović was the glaring exemption, the only one who believed that the Yugoslav wars did indeed intimately concern Slovenia and its population.

The plot of *Antigone* loosely follows the events of Euripides's *Phoenicians*, rather than Sophocles's famous play. The title of the play might therefore be somewhat misleading. It features an attempted ceasefire between the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, brokered by their mother Jocasta, and a live duel, which ends with both of them dying. This plot, as weaved by Euripides, fits surprisingly well to how the warring sides in Bosnia continued to agree to a cease-fire, usually brokered by some Western European power, only to continue fighting even "before the ink on the paper was dry." The choice for the title can be attributed to external reasons, such as the fact that *Antigone* is not only much better known to the general audience and carries the weight of the Theban myth in its entirety, but also specifically because of the prominence of the play and its heroine in the Slovenian literary canon.<sup>5</sup> But there are also what we could call internal reasons; by emphasizing

5 It was *Antigone* by Dominik Smole (first performed in 1960 by Oder 57) that established the play as a living metaphor for the contemporary state of the world, or at least the country. Smole's play is important because it (indirectly) discusses the fate of numerous collaborationist forces, including rank and file soldiers, who were not only killed without trial in the final weeks of World War II and some weeks after by the new (communist) Yugoslav government, but whose bodies were thrown in mass graves and never spoken about. Poetically, the play is extremely potent because the heroine, Antigone, never appears on the stage. Meta Hočevar, the director of Jovanović's play, was personally close with Smole and, reportedly, deliberately put the two plays in dialogue.

the role of Antigone, the heroine who sacrificed her life to bury her dead brother, the play artfully shifts the focus from war itself to the work of public mourning – the kind of work poets might be best suited to perform. Furthermore, by zooming in on Antigone, the reader and spectator are subtly guided toward the relations of kinship between warring sides, and even to incest. Given that SFR Yugoslavia's official motto was "brotherhood and unity," the wars, and especially the war in Bosnia, were perceived by many, especially by those from mixed marriages or with all-Yugoslavian history, as wars among brothers.<sup>6</sup> The excessive emphasis on the kinship between Southern Slavic nations in the state of Yugoslavia is perhaps what makes the myth of Antigone all the more appropriate as the drama's backdrop.

In the first scene of Jovanović's play Antigone feels very uncertain about herself. In a pathetic attempt to change the general morose atmosphere, she is trying to cheer her sister Ismene up by telling her about an incident in a tavern where a man was shot, and the masked person who stole his wallet proceeded to ask Antigone for a donation.

ANTIGONE *trying to cheer Ismene up*

[...] "Madam," he said, "I need your money for humanitarian purposes. Our homeland is suffering!" Well, isn't that funny?

ISMENE

I haven't the slightest sense for patriotic humor.

ANTIGONE *grinning, trying to be comical, walking in a funny way*

Aren't I funny?

6 Jovanović was born in 1939 in Belgrade of mixed ethnicity, his father was Serbian, his mother German. After World War II, in 1951, Dušan moved with his father to Ljubljana where he spent most of his life, adopting Slovenian as his primary language. He died in Ljubljana on 31 December 2020.

ISMENE

If I thought you were funny, I would laugh!

ANTIGONE

Then you be funny!

ISMENE

Oh, I'm being funny all the time. That's why everyone runs away from me!

*Antigone laughs forcibly. (Jovanović 1997, 8)*<sup>7</sup>

Antigone is completely out of place. Her forced laughter seems to indicate that she does not know what she is doing, that she is uncertain even about what kind of genre she is supposed to perform in. I take her position here to be precisely one of an artist who feels the duty to engage, somehow, with a world out of joint, but expects at the same time that anything she can do would be either wrong or meaningless, even ludicrous.

The focus on the role of the artist in times of war is an important theme in the other two plays in Jovanović's trilogy as well, in *The Riddle of Courage* and especially in *Who Sings Sisyphus*. The main character of the trilogy's last play, Sisyphus, is an opera singer, known simply by the initials O.S., who moved to Switzerland at some point after the wars started and now enjoys a successful career there. However, he repeatedly gets mysterious phone calls from the old country (it is not specified which one), from a reporter interested in his past, specifically in his role as a radio host who stoked the flames of nationalism. These phone calls gradually take the form of a call of conscience, as it turns out that the singer is actually in some sort of hell where he is sentenced to endlessly sing, in the modern genre of rock opera, about Sisyphus's love

7 All translations from Jovanović's *Balkan Trilogy* are my own. Occasionally, I took the liberty of slightly editing punctuation for clarity.

for his “rolling stone.” Jovanović’s play seems to take issue with the old saying, known well among the Southern Slavic nations, that “s/he who sings means no evil.”<sup>8</sup> The singer – and by extension, any poet or artist, or a radio host – can certainly mean to do and indeed commit evil. Art does not make one inculpable, and art itself is not completely innocent of guilt or blame. While it is especially in *Who Sings Sisyphus* that these questions take the central role, we can sense some of them already in the initial appearance of the heroine of *Antigone*, in her pathetic performance of silly walks and in her forced laughter. Her theatrics – and by extension, all theater, all art – seems ill at place in the besieged city.

## Shitty Metaphysics

An important character in Jovanović’s *Antigone* is the Hag, a woman with a very specific position among the city residents. She turns out to be the very Sphinx once defeated by Oedipus. Her practical role is that of a fortune teller, a role she performs in line with her metaphysical conviction that (a) only what was first inside *can* later come out and (b) what is inside *must* come out. Accordingly, her method of telling the fortune is to examine people’s excrement. The Hag’s methodology is explained in a scene with a young Phoenician woman, a refugee who remains mute throughout most of the play.

ISMENE to the Phoenician

Do you want to know who this lady is? (*The Phoenician turns her head towards her but doesn’t speak.*)  
She’s our WC Frau! The keeper of the toilet.

8 *Who Sings Sisyphus* is an obvious reference to one of the most popular (war) films in Yugoslavia, *Who’s Singing Over There* (*Ko to tamo peva*, d. Slobodan Šijan, 1980). The motif of the singer being incapable of evil, however, puts Jovanović’s play in dialogue with another successful film, one that used the proverb as the title, *One Song a Day Takes the Mischief Away* (*Tko pjeva, zlo ne misli*, d. Krešo Goli, 1970).



JOCASTA

The lady collects the admittance fee at the entrance to the public bathroom.

ISMENE

She's seen so much shit in her life, she really knows shit.

ANTIGONE

For a fistful of change, she will also tell you your fortune.

ISMENE

She's practicing on the toilet. You go to the toilet to poop, you don't draw water, you come out. She goes in, looks at the shit, comes out, tells you your fortune. Hide your shit from her!

ANTIGONE

She doesn't even look at shit anymore. She prefers to look you in the mouth.

JOCASTA

Ass, mouth, it doesn't matter. Just show her a hole and you've got a diagnosis.

HAG *comes in, stops by the Phoenician*

You're pregnant! (Jovanović 1997, 14)

What is inside must come out: we could call this the meta-physics of shit – if I may be allowed to borrow this term, taken in all earnestness by many scholars. The women do not take the Hag very seriously, but from the first scene onward it is clear that Creon is under her influence, that he is “her student.” In the final scene, after Eteocles and Polyneices have already killed each other, the Hag completely takes over and overtly gives instructions to Creon. The final line quoted above – “you're pregnant,” delivered, I imagine, without any pathos – further characterizes the Phoenician refugee

as the impersonation of the victim of war, and perhaps rape. It is also a nod to Euripides's play *The Phoenician Women*, which features a chorus of women who were trapped in Thebes because of the war. In Jovanović's version, the Phoenician sings, too, but she is only one, not a chorus, and she is mostly silent. Her pregnancy has a metaphysical implication as well; in the world according to the Hag, where what is inside must come out, the pregnancy signals a different kind of externalization, perhaps even a promise of something new, something beyond the banality of the "metaphysics of shit." We will come back to this when we analyze the ending of the play.

The Hag is clearly the main antagonist in Jovanović's play, not Creon, who is simply dancing to her tunes. She is the Sphinx, but it seems that no one in the play knows the answer to her riddle ("How can Polyneices win the city without Eteocles losing it?" performed in a form of a quiz-show. See: Jovanović 1997, 18). Her enigmatic appearance, her special relationship with history, destiny and power, and her charisma all serve to make her a personification of war itself. Moreover, she seems to embody the idea that war is inevitable, that it was somehow already "inside" the brothers and simply had to "come out." This is the most sensitive question of the play, especially since a common theme in Western journalistic reports about the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s was the idea of an eternal and irrational ethnic conflict within premodern Balkans societies. Is Jovanović subscribing to this simplistic, exoticizing, condescending narrative? Moreover, is Jovanović suggesting that war is simply an integral part of the human condition and that there is perhaps no good reason to seek specific perpetrators of specific crimes, to discuss how inflammatory propaganda was manufactured, who contributed the ideological grounding for warmongering, who made great profit in time of war and suffering, to analyze historical causes of war, and so on? Of course, we cannot expect a playwright to perform the task of a prosecutor in a court of justice, of a journalist, or of a historian. Still, by focusing

on senseless violence and hatred, exemplified especially in Eteocles and Polyneices who keep on fighting even after their death, it seems that the text of Jovanović's *Antigone*, at times, walks dangerously close to falling into the trap of essentializing the condition of war. The reason I think the play ultimately avoids it is that it is really the character of the Hag who personifies the reductionist theory of an "inner" necessity of war that was destined to "come out," along the lines of what we could call bad or expressionist Hegelianism. The Hag, being cast as the riddle-posing monster and a warmonger, certainly does not represent the "truth" of the play. The list of characters in Jovanović's play does not include Tiresias, the blind prophet who delivered the verdict of gods in the ancient plays in the Theban cycle. Instead of the messenger of gods' will, instead of someone who can suggest answers, Jovanović's play gives us the Sphinx, a monster who only poses riddles.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Hag is not emblematic of the play as such, neither is Antigone. In the final dialogue with Creon, Jovanović has Antigone say the famous lines from Sophocles's text, namely that she lives not to hate but to love (Jovanović 1997, 37; Sophocles 2013, v. 523). However, these words are drained of any significance and not just because the antagonism between her and Creon, so crucial for Sophocles, is of little importance in the play. It is the dualism of love and hate that is consistently rendered meaningless throughout the play. Jovanović's Polyneices embodies the vacuousness of this dualism; it is revealed that, as a schoolboy, he was a great "lover," that he wrote a poem about how to love everyone, even his enemies, and especially declares his love for both Antigone and for his brother (Jovanović 1997, 21, 25, 36). It seems that what was inside Polyneices in his childhood was an abundance of love. But what came out of Polyneices was pure, unfiltered hatred. In Jovanović's version, Antigone and Polyneices are sibling

9 The fact that Jovanović's play does not have the character of Tiresias evaded me in my first reading, and I am grateful to Djordje Popović who pointed this out during a conference on "War and Theater" in Ljubljana in September 2024.

lovers – as are Ismene and Eteocles, too. Polyneices's hatred becomes pure in a very special scene, in which Antigone talks to her already dead brother. Her side of the dialogue is romantic, as she expresses her naïve love for her brother and how she imagines them as some sort of Romeo and Juliette.

ANTIGONE *speaking nostalgically, a little theatrically*  
When I was little, I wished I was dead, not really,  
of course, just seemingly and just temporarily – just  
so that everyone would believe I was dead and they  
would come to the grave and they would cry and they  
would say that they loved me and that it was a pity that  
I was gone so young. And I imagined that suddenly you  
would come running out of nowhere, wearing a white  
tuxedo and holding a big bouquet of white roses in your  
hand, and you would exclaim: “Antigone, my sister,  
I loved you so much that I wanted to marry you! [...] And  
now, little sister, when we have permission to marry  
– you go and die unexpectedly in the flower of child-  
hood!” (*After a time.*) Then I would have risen from  
my coffin, and would have spun merrily in my black  
burial dress and varnished paper-soled shoes, and would  
have said: “Oh, Polyneices, I have only just dozed off!”  
(Jovanović 1997, 34)

To this, the dead Polyneices responds:

POLYNEICES  
[...] But I have one thing to say to you before I shut  
up for good. Deep down, I despise your disinfected,  
colorless regard of a perfumed coward. I despise your  
impersonal peacemaking weaving of some ill-conceived  
plan to resolve the dispute between us in a “peaceful  
manner”! (*Gets super angry.*) There is no peaceful way!  
No! I want it, he wants it, I don't give it, he doesn't give  
it! Bullet to the head! Where do you see any peace?  
We're two people who are mutually exclusive.

(*Passionately.*) Who are destined to kill each other, and so we are destined to disappear from the face of the earth! [...]

*The Phoenician starts singing. She sings a gentle song of the sun, the beauty, the love, while Polyneices is suffocating in his swan song of hatred.*

It was worth living just to let ourselves loose! We hated with our deeds, not with our verses. And I am not sorry to have died of hatred! (*Speaking blissfully, as in orgasm.*) Sister, the cause that I died for, I'd die for anew, a hundred times! (Jovanović 1997, 35)

The final line of this crescendo of hatred strikes the Slovenian reader to the heart. It is a paraphrase of a well-known, beautiful poem, written by the partisan poet Karel Destovnik Kajuh during World War II, dedicated *To the Mother of the Fallen Partisan*. In the final couplet of the poem, describing the gentle boy who grew up to be a man and died fighting for freedom, Kajuh lets the dead young man speak directly to his mother: "Mother, my life I adored, and knew it for true, but the cause that I died for, I'd die for anew!" (Kajuh 2021, 200). In Jovanović's paraphrase, this heart breaking line becomes utterly grotesque; Polyneices has no noble cause to fight his brother, the fight is not even about Thebes for him, it is an indulgence in pure, unrestrained hatred. The Phoenician's song of love and beauty in the background only emphasizes the hatred in the foreground. But singing songs about love and beauty does not absolve one from evil. The naiveté of Antigone's attempts to stop the war cannot be denied. Creon's pragmatism wins, even though this victory is itself meaningless.

In the ancient, Sophoclean version of *Antigone*, there is a curious passage from the heroine's final speech, just before she is led away to be buried alive. She declares that she would not have risked her life to bury her husband's dead

body if she had been wed, or the body of her child had she been a mother. She only risked her life for her brother, because – as she explains – she could always remarry and have more children, but a brother, with her parents already gone, was irreplaceable (Sophocles 2013, v. 904-14). This passage has always been a challenge for interpreters, since the reasons she gives for her deed are not fully convincing, and they are an obvious digression from her insistence that she is burying her brother simply because it is the pious thing to do. Many commentators have suggested that the excessive devotion to Polyneices was perhaps due to her romantic, incestuous feelings for him – even though Sophocles’s text does not mention them, at least not explicitly. After all, the two were born of incest. In Jovanović’s version, incest is not only explicit, it is omnipresent. In Meta Hočevár’s staging, the two couples of lovers-siblings even had sex – after the brothers were already dead. (One wonders about the third pair of siblings, Jocasta and Creon, who never really communicate in the play; Creon is always close to the Hag, and Jocasta is preoccupied with her sons.) Their relationships are quite explicit, even vulgar. And there is incest even in the relationship between the brothers. In their duel, which is performed as a live reportage, Eteocles rapes Polyneices.

ETEOCLES

In this very moment, Eteocles notices the white flesh on the naked buttocks of his enemy and his masculine muscle begins to pulsate!

*The Phoenician begins to let out terrified screams.*

POLYNEICES

They are rolling on the floor in terrible convulsions!

ETEOCLES

He’s going to ram him! He shoved his candle-straight limb into his brother’s colon!

*The Phoenician's screams, full of pain, cut like knives.*  
(Jovanović 1997, 32)

The Phoenician, who is an innocent bystander caught up in the war, was perhaps herself a victim of rape, as is hinted at already in the Hag's casual remark (namely that the Phoenician is pregnant, see above). Or perhaps she is carrying Polyneices's baby, a metaphor of his capacity to love (she recites his childhood poem in the final scene). If there is anyone in the play who has even the slightest chance of outliving the Hag's spell, anyone who carries the possibility of a different future, anyone who can solve the riddle of war and break through the destiny of the brothers to endlessly repeat the cycle of incest and violence – it is the Phoenician. She is the only one who poses any threat to the Hag, as slight as it is. This seems to me to be the meaning of the final scene, where Hag/Sphinx is in full control, in a matter-of-fact way, and saves her final lines to prophesize the destiny of three women.

HAG

*Stares at Ismene, stares at Antigone, then runs out. After a while and all we can see is the eternal massacre, she flies back in, stands in front of Ismene and Antigone and says*

*You are pregnant! And you are pregnant!*

*Then she sees the Phoenician.*

*And you, girl, stop faking it!*

*The Hag takes Phoenician by the hand and drags her out.*  
(Jovanović 1997, 39)

The Hag declares that Antigone and Ismene – who had sex with their brothers – are pregnant, apparently condemning Thebes to continue the cycle of incest and war. The Phoenician,

who can, perhaps, be read as the distant chance of hope, however, is not pregnant, or else the Hag will make sure that she doesn't carry to term. The play's production was in 1993, when the war in Bosnia was still escalating, and the final scene reflects this dark time that dared not to hope.

## War and Representation

Let us take a closer look now at the dramatist's strategy in the scene of the duel – the idea of listening to or watching a live report. Reporting about an action, especially one that takes place off stage, is nothing new in the history of drama; it is in fact one of the most basic dramatic tools, used massively in ancient times. In *Seven against Thebes*, Aeschylus manages to stage war simply by having Eteocles and a Messenger report on the commanders of the opposing armies, thus describing a series of seven duels to take place at the seven gates of Thebes. Finally, Eteocles himself deciding to hurry to the seventh gate, where Polyneices is attacking, produces a magnificent dramatic effect not just because the war becomes personal and fratricidal at that moment, but also because the reporter becomes directly involved in the events he was reporting on. By extension, this is the moment when the play breaches the form of representation and, in a sense, becomes the thing itself. In Jovanović's play, the text spoken by the brothers during the duel refers to their own actions on the stage. It thus has the quality of stage direction rather than dialogue. This produces a curious effect where the duel takes the shape of a representation of the duel. This is a theme, as indicated above, that is in common to all plays in Jovanović's trilogy and is a clear reference to how war itself changed fundamentally in the early 1990s with live televised footage. Of course, propaganda and misinformation, as well as the framing of who is the victim of ethnic hatred and who the perpetrator, retroactively interpreting the *effects* of the attack as their *cause* – these are all age-old tactics. Nevertheless, providing a live feed of events, without any time



to reflect on what was happening and how to react, was not just a new tool in the box in the 1990s, but rather it transformed, to an extent, war itself. It also underscored a somewhat surprising discrepancy between the barbarism of war on the one hand and the high-tech way of waging it. While the West was indulging itself in the postmodern fantasy of the world at the end of history, a world beyond the model of the nation-state, the Balkans, in the heart of Europe, was still very much historical.

If *Antigone* is a response to the initial shock of the war itself and especially to its visceral and unrelenting nature, *The Riddle of Courage* from 1994, the second piece of *The Balkan Trilogy*, takes a step away from this position and focuses on the question of survival. The play has two sets of characters; a theatrical troupe is working on the production of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, and they work together with a group of survivors, refugees from the Yugoslav wars. The first part of the play begins with the theater director, known simply as Director, and the main actor Irena discussing the production while having their breakfast in bed. Very soon, however, darker tones prevail, as it turns out that Irena has a problem with how to approach the role of Anna Fierling, the woman who lost her children to war, even while she was trying to profit from it. Irena wants to play the role without acting, without thinking about the artistry – and simply “be” the part. She discusses this with her therapist Olga, and it is clear that Irena cannot take a deliberate distance from her role.

OLGA

This woman – Anna Fierling, *Mother Courage* – is a strange phenomenon. She is always pushing away, repressing her emotions. She shows none of the symptoms that are typical of people who have lost their loved ones...

IRENA

Like, say...

OLGA

Nervousness, depression, fears, “special thoughts,” panic feelings, nightmares, insomnia, tremors, loss of appetite, weight loss, reduced work efficiency, fatigue...

IRENA

How do I play this? I can’t play this!

OLGA

...indigestion, chest pain, skin rashes, fainting, sweating, vomiting...

IRENA

This thing has already hit me in the guts!  
(Jovanović 1997, 48)

Unlike Anna Fierling, Irena cannot push away her feelings. But what exactly is this “thing” she mentions in her final line in the scene, gnawing at her from the inside? Is it the role of Anna Fierling? Or is it the war itself? Is she bothered by the *representation* of the loss – or by the *loss itself*? It seems to me that Irena’s problem is precisely in that she is incapable of distinguishing one from the other. An accomplished actor, she knows how to manipulate the audience, how to deliver a performance people will enjoy; she even calls herself “the queen of the stage” (Jovanović 1997, 44). But in this case, she does not *want* to be the queen of the stage, and it turns out that she *cannot* be the queen of the stage. The “thing” prevents it: for her, the traumatic loss itself is indistinguishable from its performance. She says this more or less explicitly in a conversation with her confidante in the theater cafeteria.

IRENA

Before she died, my mother was stuck in a hospital bed for a long time. I knew that she would not return home. [...] The moment I buried her, everyone started giving me the kiddie-glove treatment, like I was sick. [...]

Whoever visited me spoke in whispers, as if the departed mother were only sleeping and speaking loudly could wake her up. The word “dead” was never mentioned. [...] It’s not like I wasn’t hurt and crushed. But not in the sense that such theatrics were needed. What else was there for me but to accept this game! Inadvertently, I started playing the grieving daughter. [...] I enjoyed it, I admit it! (Jovanović 1997, 52)

Irena’s personal, intimate problems with the evasive distinction between the representation of trauma and trauma itself have a correspondence in the wider world of play. Marija, whose character has many similarities to Brecht’s Anna Fierling, and her son Dino, who was rendered handicapped by the war, are not particularly impressed by the fact that the theater group decided to put them onstage. Marija quickly begins to turn things to her advantage and starts a business. She organizes other women refugees in a knitting collective; she collects donations of wool from humanitarian organizations and then sells, at great profit, woolen handicrafts to buyers, mostly Americans. She pays the women 10% of the profits, and they are very happy to work for her. Upon learning about this, Irena is shocked; she accuses Marija of exploiting the women and says that she would be ashamed to do such a thing. But Marija has an answer for her:

MARIJA

If you are not ashamed to exploit my misery for your shitty theater, then you don’t have to be ashamed about this either! (Jovanović 1997, 63)

It is hard to disagree with Marija on this point. With all her feelings of insurmountable distance from Marija, with all her humanitarian guilt trip about how she cannot play the role of Marija, Irena is ultimately not so different from her after all. In fact, in the earlier scene, when she was describing how she accepted and enjoyed the game of “playing the grieving

daughter,” Irena even describes how she used this emotional veneer to manipulate a young man into sleeping with her.

But events take a dark turn still when Marija starts yet another business, roasting barbecue lamb. One of the customers, known only as Sergeant, apparently knows Marija back from war-torn Bosnia, and, intoxicated as he is, attempts to take his vengeance on Dino and kill him. Instead, the Cook arrives on the scene just in time to prevent this and shoots the Sergeant with a rifle. This horrible event ends the first part of the play. The deadly encounter affected the theater like an exploding bomb. It is not just that Irena does not know how to distance herself from the war, but the war itself seems to know no distance. The production is canceled, and the troupe begins its healing process. What seemed to be taking place in a distant place, in a distant land, to other people, and what the troupe was merely attempting to perform on stage, suddenly turns out to be taking place much closer to home.

The interplay of distance from and proximity to the traumatic experience of war, or loss in general, in Jovanović’s *The Riddle of Courage* brings us back to the audible gasp produced by raising the curtain over the Ceaușescus’ state box back when Jovanović’s *Antigone* was performed in Bucharest in 1995. I argued above that Irena’s problem, which she expresses as the “thing” and which becomes the problem of the theater troupe in general, is that she cannot distinguish between the representation of trauma and trauma itself, between loss and its performance. But what if that is the problem of social trauma as such? What if the nature of traumatic experience, at least on the social plane, is such that it can never be observed or talked about in its immediacy, but that the thing itself becomes inseparable from how it is represented or how it is talked about? This, I argue, is the wager of theater: that theatrical representation is not merely an indirect *reference* to the fissure that it represents (such as war trauma), but that – by representing it – it has the power to conjure it in its immediacy, to produce it in its actuality, to elicit an audible

gasp. In other words, that *re*-presentation is in fact presentation. Now, in response to this, one can always assert that such thoughts are nothing but fantasy. But at the same time, one cannot deny that theater, at least in very specific circumstances, indeed has the capacity to produce something real, to unearth something dead in the very act of burying it with the veil of theatrical performance. Perhaps it is for this very reason that, when we think about historical events, we cannot but think about them in theatrical terms – whether it is a naval or land battle, a coronation or other such investiture, or even a revolution as described by Marx at the beginning of his *Eighteenth Brumaire* (Marx 1972). Clearly, if we are allowed to pursue this fantasy, it implies a strange reversal of time, such that the representation of an event – which in the accepted understanding of time can only happen after the fact – intervenes with that event itself, becomes part of it, and even seems to engender it.

We could claim that the highest aim of theater has always been to not only represent, but by representing to produce anew, and perhaps even transform. But what exactly is that which is represented or produced in such instances? Is it some mystic unity of the thing and its representation? A Dionysian oneness beyond all individuation (Nietzsche 1999, 45)? I think not. As I indicated above, what theater can do at best is only produce an internal split, a separation within its own domain, a split between two stages, between what it evidently represents in full view of everyone in attendance on the one hand and that untouchable, unrepresentable, radically obscure scene that takes place in unconscious thought. If theater may be said to have any restorative, healing, or cathartic power, it can only come as an after-effect of its real power to reveal the “wound,” the fissure that sustains the social tissue.

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### 3 The War of the End of the World, at the End of the World

BRANISLAV JAKOVLJEVIĆ

Bucharest, November 1989. The gray and seedy cityscape of the capital of Romania, still scarred by the recent uprising that ended the rule of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, is dotted with weeping willows, their branches tied to the ones above them, so that they no longer appear droopy and melancholy. These arboreal facelifts are the work of Mirča Dinesku, a poet and dramaturg at the National Theater by day and an intuitive conceptual artist by night.<sup>1</sup> Equipped with pieces of string and scissors, he sneaks out of his apartment in search of weeping willows and then proceeds to “fix” them.

It appears as if this imaginary conceptual art project from Vojislav Despotov’s novel *The Autumn of Every Tree* (*Jesen svakog drveta*, 1997) attempts to reverse what contemporary Russian philosopher Valery Podoroga called “the tree of the dead” (Podoroga 2013, 99). In his book *The Time After*:

1 I am using the Serbian transliteration of personal names, as they appear in the novels I discuss in this chapter.

*Auschwitz and Gulag: Thinking the Absolute Evil*, Podoroga suggests that within the rich mythological repository of the tree symbolism – the tree of good and evil, tree of knowledge, tree of life, the world tree – the Gulag lays a special claim to the tree of death. Starting from Varlam Shalamov’s meditations on larch as the symbol of Kolyma labor camps, Podoroga suggests that, in its verticality, this tree brings together “the nature and anti-nature of the Gulag.” The nature above is the sphere of “immortality, eternal movement and transformation, deep sleep and awakening, perishing and resurrection;” the labor camps below belong to “the world of pointless and completely devalued work, the labor of gulagian slaves” (Podoroga 2013, 103). Podoroga takes seriously the lessons offered by Shalamov and other chronicles and historians of the Gulag, who observed that this penal world was not limited to Siberia but expanded across the vast Soviet state – and, we can add, beyond its boundaries. Techniques and procedures patented and tested in Gulag reached the far corners of the empire, to the states such as Romania, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and others.

In *The Autumn of Every Tree*, Dinescu presents his project at the Congress of New Hope, which a mysterious foundation Europlan holds in Warsaw from 26–29 December 1989. Gżegoż Latuśiński, the congress organizer, sends invitations to a number of nonconformist artists and scientists from across an increasingly “former” Eastern Europe. For example, a certain Halupka Halupka from Prague stages guerilla performances at the doorsteps of unsuspecting citizens, the way mail carriers deliver telegrams: there are buddhagrams and pornograms, havelograms and beergrams, miraclegrams and sausagegrams. One Elin Pelin from Sofia advances a theory that a whole new quasi-human species spawned up from organic materials sloshing in the sewage, so that there is a “second Sofia” underneath the aboveground Bulgarian capital (Despotov 2004, 397). Among the presenters is the novel’s protagonist, curiously named Vasijov de Votops from Novi Sad, who, obsessed with



August Strindberg's photographs of clouds, decides to make a "cloud machine," a project he elaborates upon in an extensive manuscript. He conceives of clouds not only as random formations of evaporated water but as projections of earthly structures in time and space. They allow one to imagine the unimaginable future: a new New York, new London, and new Jerusalem. Dazzled by the spotlight after years spent in deep margins, he and other eccentrics from across Eastern Europe finally get a chance to present their unconventional ideas to the continental audience.

The only presenter who did not languish in obscurity during the Cold War years is the Soviet poet Venedikt Zverev. Votop's mirror world above and Pelin's pseudo world below the Earth's surface pale in comparison with the bombshell that Zverev drops in his keynote address. The star of the conference stuns the audience with his shocking revelation that, in the "vast expanses of Siberia, somewhere between Vladivostok and Kursk, which equals the surface area of the whole of Europe, there is an artificial realm, an artificial continent – an *other* Europe under an entirely non-secretive name of *New Europe*" (Despotov 2004, 493). Zverev goes on to detail the Soviet government's gargantuan project of making an exact copy of Europe: "the entire continent, including Paris, Rome, and Berlin. They built copies of all cities and rivers; in modified Siberian lakes, there were Sicily, Island, Corsica, Majorca, Great Britain, and even that tiny Danish island with Hamlet's tower." The copy of the continent is made in 1:1 proportion to the original, and its details are astonishing: "in the Danish sector, there are thoroughbred cows, in the German, there are excellent wursts and beer, and everything is exactly the *same* as in the original Europe," including Eastern Europe, recreated faithfully as it is, "miserable and poor" (Despotov 2004, 494). The Russian poet reveals that building the New Europe was the true reason for establishing labor colonies across Siberia.

Most mind-boggling of all, the New Europe surpasses the very culture that concocted it in the first place: for

example, while “all of Soviet Union has terrible, awful roads that make cars lose their parts,” “the copy of Europe made for mysterious reasons has roads of the same quality as those in Europe number one!” (Despotov 2004, 496). Still, regardless of that unimaginable investment in money, energy, planning, and human lives, the copycat continent remains shrouded in mystery. There are satellite images of this vast structure taken from space, but there are no witness accounts coming from the ground. Not many former inmates survived hard labor, even fewer stayed in Siberia after they completed their long prison sentences, and practically none of them knew what the true purpose of their toil was. According to Zverev, the upside of depopulation is that the Soviet copy of Europe surpassed the original: since the New Europe remains uninhabited, there is no danger that vandals and careless residents would damage and spoil the meticulously built structures. The poet points out that “hundreds of billions of dollars were invested in making a copy of our dear continent in Siberia. Is this copy made for military or ideological reasons?” (Despotov 2004, 495). The poet has no answer, nor does his stunned audience.

Despotov’s parodic image of Siberia resonates with the tragic vision of Podoroga, who argues that “The Gulag is an invisible, pure space; it is an absence of the *socium*, and even more paradoxically, it is present in legal forms of sociability by the way of its absence and exclusion. It is possible to imagine it as a secret, phantom double of the Stalinist *socium*” (Podoroga 2013, 109). The correspondence between Despotov’s literary imagination and Podoroga’s philosophical reflection on Gulag is notable, with the difference that the former presents this “empty space” as the double of the European and not of the Stalinist *socium*. If the erasure Podoroga talks about comes as a result of a society that is deeply at war with itself, what does that mean for Despotov’s hypothesis about the New Europe?

## Rhyme with no Reason

Starting in the early 1970s in his hometown of Zrenjanin, that is to say, in the geographic and conceptual proximity of Novi Sad's new art practice, during that and the following decade Despotov made his mark as one of the leading new voices working at the intersection of concrete poetry, performance and conceptual art, and theoretical investigations of new art practices. In addition to that, he distinguished himself as one of the premier translators of new poetry from English, German, and Slovene, and as an editor of literary journals.<sup>2</sup> Then, in the late 1980s, he unexpectedly turned to the literary form furthest removed from conceptual art and concrete poetry – the novel.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1990s, Despotov published in quick succession three novels that were different from all of his other longer prose works and can be said to represent a summation of his literary and artistic efforts: *Jesen svakog drveta* (*The Autumn of Every Tree*, 1997), *Evropa broj dva* (*Europe Number Two*, 1998), and *Drvodelja iz Nabisala* (*The Woodworker from Nabisal*, 1999).<sup>4</sup>

2 In 1976, his collection *Dnjižepa bibil zazra uhut*, subtitled “elementary poems, linguistic and visual substance of experience,” was published by the Študentski kulturni center (ŠKUC) in Ljubljana.

3 In his first novel *Mrtvo mišljenje* (*Dead Reckoning*, 1989), Despotov experimented with textual forms and literary devices that were characteristic for his poetry. Formally and thematically, his two short novels, *Petrogradska prašina* (*Petrograd's Dust*, 1990) and *Andraci, jepuri i ostala čudovišta Petrograda i srednjeg Banata* (*Andraks, Jepurs, and Other Monsters of Petrovgrad and the Middle Banat*, 1998), are marked by their autobiographical tone and by the collaging of prose and visual elements (mostly found images).

4 It was Bálint Szombathy who offered the most salient take on Despotov's transition from conceptualist poetry to novel: “In Despotov's workshop, the intensified states of visual literary devices did not inform to a significant degree his grapho-visual poetry of the seventies, but instead – and paradoxically – they were decisive for the imaginary of his novels (*The Autumn of Every Tree*, *Europe Number Two*, *The Woodworker from Nabisal*) from the 90s: in a unique way, this trilogy summarized the quintessence of the conceptual approach to art and the questions pertaining to the fate of the avant-garde.” (Szombathy 2005, 123)

War is at the center of each of these novels: the first one depicts the end of the Cold War, the second one unfolds against the backdrop of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, and the final one portrays, without naming them explicitly, the events surrounding Despotov and other Serbian citizens during the NATO aerial bombardment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup> This overwhelming omnipresence of the wars should not be too surprising if we take into consideration that Despotov worked on this trilogy during the short interlude between the wars Serbia was involved in during the 1990s: the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, which ended in the early 1995 with the Dayton Peace Accords, and the armed conflict in Kosovo that started in 1998 and ended with the aerial attack on Serbia and Montenegro in the spring of 1999. Further, in each of the novels, Despotov explores the phenomena of temporal and spatial boundaries (the end of an epoch, the borders of Europe) and the question of going beyond them. The first novel portrays the general upheaval and the movement of individuals and masses that accompanies the end of large-scale conflicts, up to and including the Cold War; the second one follows the protagonist on his journey into exile; and the final one concludes with an attempt of a small group of people to leave their devastated country. Also, each of the novels is marked by more or less explicit self-referentiality. The name of the protagonist of *The Autumn of Every Tree*, who starts his journey from the author's hometown, Novi Sad, vaguely resembles the name of the author (Vasijov – Vojislav, and Despotov – de Votops). The main character of *Europe Number Two* leaves behind “the wars of our Balkan statelets” (Despotov 2004, 575). The name of the city in which the last

5 At the beginning of this terrible decade, Despotov had a relatively light approach to the approaching menace. In the late 1980s, he started publishing *Hey Joe: magazin za američku književnost* (*Hey Joe: A Magazine for American Literature*). We find the following editorial disclaimer in the issue that came out in June 1991, as skirmishes between Yugoslav People's Army and local national(ist) armed forces were beginning in Croatia and Slovenia: “We apologize to all readers of *Hey Joe* for the delay: it's the printer, not the war.” (Despotov 1991, 18–19)

novel is set, “Novi Abisal” (the author explains that Abisal comes from the Greek word *abyssos*), echoes Novi Sad, where Despotov lived and worked in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Last but not least, it should be noted that Despotov wrote these novels in the last three years of his short life (he died in 2000 at the age of 50), so they exude a sense of rush: the author’s effort to finish his work, but also the impression that fictional time is racing to catch up with historical time. *The Autumn of Every Tree*, published in 1997, depicts the events from the final months of 1989, *Europe Number Two*, which came out in 1998, is set in 1992, and, while not explicitly dated, *The Woodworker from Nabisal* is referencing, in the fictional form, the historical present of Despotov’s writing.

Other than war, the most prominent aspect of Despotov’s novels is the thematic thread of replication and doubling that runs through all three of them. In the conclusion of his report in *The Autumn of Every Tree*, Zverev exclaims: “In this twentieth century, at its end, everything is only a replacement, a metaphor, a surrogate.” He concludes, saying, “all, all is imitation, a fake, modern art which makes us replace even ourselves without noticing it” (Despotov 2004, 496). The protagonist of the final novel, the titular “woodworker” Sebehlebski is the sculptor who, with the help of his “art machine” makes exact, life-size, copies of deceased people using only photographs or realistic drawings as his models. As aerial bombardment and an epidemic of suicides gradually decimates the population, the president, also a sculptor by profession, calls for the “memorialization of life in general” (Despotov 2004, 691). In that way, the living society is gradually replaced by its own lifeless replica. If this seems to establish a straight line from the first to the last novel

6 “Nabisal” is the contraction of “Novi Abisal.” While working on his final novel, Despotov was also translating Ralph Hartmann’s book “*Die ehrlichen Makler*”: *Die deutsche Aussenpolitik und der Bürgerkrieg in Jugoslawien* (“*The Honest Brokers*”: *German Foreign Policy and the Civil War in Yugoslavia*). Originally published in 1998, it came out in Despotov’s translation into Serbian already the following year.

in Despotov's trilogy, the second novel brings a major aberration to this idea of exact replication.

Upon hearing Zverev's shocking disclosure, Vasijov decides to "visit Siberia transformed into Europe" already the next spring (Despotov 2004, 497). *The Autumn of Every Tree* finishes before he makes that journey, and Despotov picks up that thread in his next novel. However, *Europe Number Two* is not a sequel to *The Autumn of Every Tree*. In fact, it takes the story about the replica of Europe built in the wastelands of Siberia in a decidedly different direction. At the conclusion of the first novel, the Cold War is over, and de Votops returns to Novi Sad. The protagonist of *Europe Number Two*, an installation and performance artist by the name of Viktim, decides to leave his hometown to avoid being sent into the fight "on the other side of the Danube" (Despotov 2004, 534). While everyone else was "escaping to the West," he decides to run in the opposite direction: eastward, towards Moscow, and further, beyond the Urals. While he is aware of the "Warsaw congress," what prompts Viktim to embark on his journey by train and on foot is not "Zverev's heartbreaking report" but the investigative work of the historian Viktor Kamišev (Despotov 2004, 535, 540, 544). This version of the story of building a copy of Europe in Siberia goes further back into the past. Kamišev sets the starting date of this gargantuan project in 1710, at the very beginning of the Siberian penal colonies. In fact, this effort to build a copy of Europe in the newly conquered expanses of the East is one of the very few lines of continuity between the Tsarist and Soviet empires. Over a period of 150 years, some "twenty million exiles of all kinds and colors" toiled, "having no idea about the purpose of their labor" (Despotov 2004, 540). It seems that everything, from the sale of Alaska to the sacrifice of living standards in the USSR, was aimed at completing this enormous construction project. The results were pitiful.

Having crossed the river Hula, Viktim paddles across a broad shallow lake. He passes by an artificial island, which turns out to be the "simulated England" and reaches

a flat expanse. A large windmill indicates that he has landed in the second Holland. This “Europe” is nothing like Zverev’s idealized continent. When he approaches the windmill, Viktim discovers that it is just a two-dimensional mockup, not a working replica (Despotov 2004, 564). The highways look good and solid. They have the right color and appearance. However, upon closer inspection, it turns out that they are not made of asphalt and concrete but of dried mud compressed with steamrollers.

Like Zverev’s “New Europe,” Kamišev’s “Europe Number Two,” is a continent-sized copy of the actual Europe. However, like everything else in the Soviet Union, it is manufactured poorly. “New Berlin” consists of wooden barracks left from the camps; there is a Berlin Wall bisecting this settlement, but it is made of styrofoam. The only thing on which the two reports about the secret continent in Siberia agree is that it is unpopulated. Almost, as Viktim is about to find out.

### **“... u njihovu Bidzu, materinu...”<sup>7</sup>**

Wars are animating the narratives in each novel in Despotov’s trilogy; and also, wars were happening while he was working on his novels. It seems that this simultaneous occurrence of war in fictional space of the novel and in everyday reality makes the boundaries between them permeable. The striking personalities of the members of Novi Sad’s neo-avant-garde movement, Despotov’s friends, are on a march through *The Autumn of Every Tree*. One chapter is named “The Rose of Wandering,” after a multi-year and thousands-of-miles-long performance/poetry project by Miroslav Mandić, one of the most extraordinary representatives of the generation of Novi Sad’s conceptual artists from the 1970s. Vasić’s track across Europe echoes, to some degree, Mandić’s “walks for

7 It is almost impossible to render in English this turn of phrase from the concluding pages of Judita Šalgo’s novel *The Road to Birobidzhan*. John K. Cox makes a valiant effort: “... Bidza, or whatever the fuck...” (Šalgo 2022, 273).

poetry,” with which he crisscrossed the continent. Bálint Szombathy, the founding member of the Subotica conceptual art group Bosch + Bosch, helps him with a forged passport in Budapest (Despotov 2004, 420). The Warsaw congress turns out to be a magnet for the Novi Sad conceptualists: Mandić is there, for sure, and so is Bálint. And not only them, but Slavko Matković, the co-founder of Bosch + Bosch, performs his scream poetry, and their friends Boro Radaković and Matjaž Hanžek, from Zagreb and Ljubljana respectively, are also in the lineup of performers.<sup>8</sup> It’s like old times in Novi Sad’s Tribina Mladih.

In the early 1970s, Tribina Mladih (Youth Platform), together with Ljubljana’s ŠKUC, Belgrade’s SKC (both are abbreviations of Student Cultural Center in Slovene and Serbian, respectively), and Zagreb’s Studentski centar (Student Center, SC), were the hubs of the new art practice in Yugoslavia. Like all of them, this state-subsidized youth cultural center served as a production and presentation space for conceptual art, performance, new poetry, and experimental film, as well as for symposia, conferences, and public lectures. One of Tribina Mladih’s peculiarities in relation to other similar institutions in Yugoslavia was the propensity of conceptual artists gathered there to take their performances, actions, and installations out into public spaces, from nearby city streets and squares, to the quayside along the Danube. Another was its close collaboration, and frequent overlap, with editorial boards of youth publications, which like the abovementioned cultural centers, offered an alternative to the mainstream media in Yugoslavia. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Novi Sad’s conceptual artists and poets found an outlet on the culture pages of the student magazine *Index*, and a few of them served on the editorial boards of the journals *Polja* (in Serbian) and *Uj Symposion* (in Hungarian). The existence of this

8 In 1970, Matković made a series of photographs of clouds. Like other performances and art projects that appear in Despotov’s novels, Votops’s obsession with clouds has its source in the conceptual art made in Vojvodina in the 1970s.



alternative public sphere was conducive to the emergence of self-published poets' and artists' books and zines. Despotov was an active member of this scene: he staged artistic actions and performances in and around Tribina Mladih, published in *Polja* and *Uj Symposion*, and initiated two zines, *Neuroart* (1971, three issues) and *Pesmos* (1972). The final specificity of the Novi Sad neo-avant-garde art scene was the severity with which it was crushed by officialdom. Already in the early 1970s, issues of *Index* and *Uj Symposion* were banned, the editorial office of *Polja* temporarily shut down, the artists attacked in mainstream media, and two of them, Miroslav Mandić and Slavko Bogdanović, criminally charged and sentenced, respectively, to nine- and eight-month-long prison stints. During the campaign against the Novi Sad neo-avant-garde, the local politicians who profited from these persecutions remained mostly in the shadows. The public offensive was spearheaded by poets and writers, the representatives of "that current of national modernism which, nurturing romanticist cults and myths, always blindly worshiped the terms such as *tradition* and *identity*" (Milenković 2011, 44). It was the literature of this national "pathetism," as the historian of Vojvodina neo-avant-garde Nebojša Milenković calls it, that eventually triumphed not only in Novi Sad but throughout Yugoslavia.

In the subsequent decade, the period of recovery and reassessment of the neo-avant-garde artistic production from the early 1970s was unusually short and incomplete, as it came during the political and economic crisis in the 1980s, which was followed by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. It was not that the wars brought another bout of suppression; worse yet, they generated indifference towards alternative art and its history among the general public, while also narrowing, due to the dire economic and social conditions, the available space and support for this kind of art and its protagonists. It would be wrong to argue that Despotov's trilogy was an attempt to recover the semi-forgotten artistic practices of the author's youth; the novel, to which he turned relatively late in his career, did for Despotov what poetry could not, namely provide space

for avant-garde experimentation in a way similar to what Tribina Mladih, *Polja*, and *Uj Symposion* did. His trilogy is positioned as an extension and continuation of the Novi Sad neo-avant-garde understood, as Silvia Dražić suggests, “not as a homogenous group of poets and artists, or a unified collective poetic platform that brings them together and determines them at the same time. Rather, it is a diffuse poetical and poetic space of textual explorations that goes from visual and concrete poetry to analytical works of conceptualist poetry” (Dražić 2018, 25). If Despotov uses the literary space of the novel conceptually as a gathering space of neo-avant-garde artists, that is because the actual social space for their congregation and action was no longer available.

There are fewer Novi Sad neo-avant-gardists in *Europe Number Two*, and that makes their appearances even more significant. In an early chapter of the book, the narrator notes that Kamišev’s exposé about the forbidden zones in Siberia surprised him even more than his discovery of Birobidzhan, the actual Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Siberian Far East near the border with China conceived during Stalinist times, about which he learned from the novel by his “early deceased friend Judita Manhajm” (Despotov 2004, 542). Here, Despotov is using the maiden name of Judita Šalgo, one of the most striking figures of the Novi Sad neo-avant-garde movement from the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> An experimental poet and conceptual artist herself, to whom in another context Despotov referred to as a “champion of poetic forms” (Despotov 2005, 32) and the “queen of [poetic] devices” (Despotov 2005, 139), Šalgo was the artistic director of Tribina Mladih during its heyday in the early 1970s. Having published three acclaimed books of poetry between 1962 and 1986, in 1987 she turned

9 Šalgo was born in 1941 to a Jewish family in Novi Sad. At the outset of the round-ups of the Jews in 1944, her mother left her in the custody of a young Hungarian widow Marika Šalgo, who raised her as her own daughter. Judita found out about the fate of her parents later in life, but decided to keep her adoptive mother’s last name. Also, she made a conscious decision to write in Serbian, rather than in Hungarian, the language in which she was brought up.

to the novel with *Trag kočnja* (*Skidmark*), and did not live to see the publication of her second novel, *The Road to Birobidzhan*, which came out posthumously a decade later. Her turn from experimental poetry and conceptual art to novel was pioneering, and in that she was followed by other artists from Novi Sad's neo-avant-garde scene, such as Slobodan Tišma, Vladimir Kopić, and Despotov himself. If Šalgo takes the historical fact of the Soviets' failed attempt to make a Jewish republic in Siberia and turns it into a metaphor, Despotov follows the same procedure, but in the opposite direction: from metaphor to history. A barrage of questions and notes about Birobidzhan from the section "Fragments from the Working Diary about Birobidzhan," which was included in the published version of Šalgo's unfinished novel, is applicable to *Europe Number Two*:

Female continent, or island?

Birobidzhan is the unknown, the compressed pith of the human personality (sub-consciousness?)... The embodiment, the territorialization, the nucleus of neurosis.

Birobidzhan is the land without killing? The dream of a man (woman) who, in fear, for no reason (?) killed the old Arab.

Birobidzhan is the lunatic asylum.

Birobidzhan is the FINAL SOLUTION  
(Hitler's secret plan for his attack on the USSR).  
Birobidzhan is the ideal city (utopia).

Already covered:

B. as a homeland in reserve.

B. as a swampy nursery for Jewish  
seed (New Zion?)

Birobidzhan – the last preserve (on earth) of active magical thinking and life.

The Jews maintained (and the Russians with them) a distant homeland of magic. See shamanism! (Šalgo 2022, 97)

Indeed, it is from a Siberian shaman that Zverev reports to have first heard about the New Europe, and it is a clan of poet shamans that Viktim encounters at the very boundary of Europe Number Two. Like Birobidzhan, Despotov's simulacrum of Europe is a sprawling and infinitely malleable literary space that can contain multiple meanings. Birobidzhan and Europe Number Two seem to intersect in 1992, the year of war, disaster, and isolation:

[...] at the moment this story begins, the center of the global funnel, of earthly oblivion, is Birobidzhan. At the Belgrade airport, all flights have been canceled. One night on the monitor in the concourse a destination popped up that never existed within the memory of any system: Birobidzhan. Through the electronic blinking of this solitary world, a metallic voice from the public address system told travelers to go to gate B-2. (Šalgo 2022, 23)

This could very well be the time and place where Viktim's eastward journey began.

## **Tautologizing with a Hammer**

Unlike Zverev's New Europe, Europe Number Two is not completely deserted. It is populated, sparsely, by an unusual group of exiles. The first people Viktim encounters once he crosses to the Siberian Europe are a couple of artists, Fanfara Gerič and Tetka Fiona, who are on their way to "Berlin." Knocking around side paths in an old truck (so as not to get stuck on a "highway" made of mud), they explain to their stunned visitor that the "false Europe" is an "empty continent": "there are no banks, money, there are no post offices with pale, staring clerks, there are no office windows, no political parties, no police. Most interesting of all, there is no official art" (Despotov 2004, 569); this is to say, in the same way in which from the North Pole all paths go southward, everything

in Europe Number Two is art. Having been emptied of its previous inhabitants, the labor camp's inmates and native peoples, the simulacrum of Europe has been gradually invaded by artists, who have migrated to the vacant cities and villages and settled there. From the Gulag Archipelago, Siberia became the "ideal archipelago of the arts, a continent made for a new beginning" (Despotov 2004, 571). Fanfara explains that she works on a performance project *The Last Farewell to Reichstag* that takes place at "Berlin's" "wall," and that their artistic collective, Cabaret Voltaire, is working on a series of artistic projects that "compromise and destroy all fatal ideological phantasms" (Despotov 2004, 576). Once in "Berlin," Viktim walks among deserted camp barracks turned into topoi of the European avant-garde by the means of simple inscriptions made on weathered wooden boards: Stray Dog, Bauhaus, Tristan, Aerial Ballet, Gadji Beri Bimba, the Factory of the Eccentric Actor, the Blue Blouse. He meets the artists Aproksimatif, Katarina Poslednja, and Euromajakovski,<sup>10</sup> and is introduced to the ancient Andzi-Kredla himself, the contemporary of Russian Futurists who survived Stalin's purges, the thaw, the stagnation, and Perestroika, and who is the elder and the unofficial leader of the Cabaret Voltaire collective.

In his report, Zverev presents the pseudo-continent as a terrain, a series of geographic and topographic landmarks. But, which Europe did the New Europe replicate? That from 1917, from 1937, or from 1987? What the concept of the New Europe fails to account for is the fact that a continent is not just a territory, but a dynamic process. That much Tetka Fiona seems to suggest in his initial conversation with Viktim: in Europe Number Two, "all forces are directed towards transformation. Today I'm a florist, tomorrow a surveyor. Gay – tailor. Clerk – dragon. Always. Always" (Despotov 2004, 569). It is for this reason that performance is the privileged

10 Aproksimatif is a reference to Tristan Tzara's *L'homme approximatif* (1931). Katarina Poslednja translates as Catherine the Last, and Euromajakovski as Euro-Mayakovski.

art on this artificial continent. The copy of Europe, however dingy, is an “Art State,” a giant participatory art project. Andzi-Kredla informs Viktim that “in Our Europe, all performances and film projections take place without the presence of an audience. Modern art anticipated its audience, included it in the work as its inherent part, but it is not necessary” (Despotov 2004, 587). Europe Number Two is not just an “Art State,” it is a “Performance Archipelago”: bands of artists roam across its expanses, making performances, and challenging one another to performance duels (Despotov 2004, 610). Andzi-Kredla explains that performance animates this art continent:

The entire history of the world flows into the form of artistic expression called performance. Humanity concluded one of its epochs – and I was one of its important parts – and now it vomits itself out through the nuclear artistic form that contains all genres and subgenres, poetry, painting, gesture, ballet, politics. The real significance of performance is contained in the fact that it recapitulates history and art itself. Performance is a living being, self-sustaining, coming from mortal history. (Despotov 2004, 587)

Another artist, Lajko Feliks,<sup>11</sup> recaps Andzi-Kredla’s theory: “We carried over to the New Europe the seeds of modern art, especially its extract called performance, because they are the seeds of the end of the world” (Despotov 2004, 591). This Europe is “number two” not because it follows, replicates, and repeats Europe Number One, but because it stands over against it. It is not a *second Europe*, in the sense in which socialist states were proclaimed as the Second World in geopolitical stratification during the Cold War, but an *other Europe*. As such,

11 Félix Lajkó, a musician born in Vojvodina and living in Hungary, is known for his fusion of traditional and contemporary music from that part of Europe.

it is, essentially and uncompromisingly, opposed to the old, first, and traditional Europe.

*Europe Number Two* concludes with Viktim's performance *The Hammer of Tautology*. This piece shares its name with Despotov's most ambitious theoretical work, which was published in three installments in the Sarajevo-based journal *Dalje* in the late 1980s (a double issue for 1986–87, a triple issue for 1987–88, and the double issue that came out in 1990, on the eve of the Yugoslav wars). Subtitled "A Survey of New Kinds of Technical Intelligence in the Poetry of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia," this long essay offers a panoramic view of new poetic practices from the 1950s until the 1980s, ranging from concrete to visual poetry, and from letterism to conceptual art. In his preface to this detailed and engaging inventory of poetic techniques, the author offers a brief rationale for the significance of the "new kinds" of poetry in Yugoslavia. His central thesis is that, throughout their existence, radical artistic practices have been engaged in "a civil war of language (as dynamic intelligence) against language (as the most conservative social force)" (Despotov 2005, 6). This is, of course, a direct reference to the attack of the Novi Sad conceptualists on traditionalist poetry, which, as we have seen, went on a counter-attack and retaliated savagely. Viktim, the protagonist of *Europe Number Two*, is the victim of this civil war. The takeaways from that battle fed directly into the central theoretical premise of Despotov's novel. Andzi-Kredla's account of the cult of the avant-garde in his artist collective recapitulates this confrontation, albeit on a much larger scale: "The art was directly confronted by all Lenins, Stalins, Taylors, and Ford factories: there was an invisible war of art against Everything. We lost. That's why we came to this strange land [...], and we have a full right to say that it was meant for us" (Despotov 2004, 612). It is the relentless utilitarianism of all of these, as Fanfara has it, "ideological phantasms" that makes them so fatal. All Viktim has to do to find the affirmation of Andzi-Kredla's thesis is to look back at the place where he came from.

The “tautology” in the title of Viktim’s performance, which is to say of Despotov’s essay, does not stand for a specific procedure favored by conceptual art, in the sense that Benjamin Buchloh advocated in his influential 1990 article “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions.” Buchloh’s central argument is that, within the general program of abolishing the perceptual object in favor of a “linguistic definition alone,” conceptual artists embraced an “aesthetic of administration” as a way of preserving the object through the deployment of procedures that he described as tautological (Buchloh 1990, 119). Conversely, for Novi Sad conceptualists, tautology offered a way out of the permanence of the art object *and* of the aesthetic administration of officialdom. For example, in their performance *Public Art Class* (1970), the members of the conceptual art group KÔD Mirko Radojičić and Miroslav Mandić performed a number of tautological actions: the first removed from the grass in a public park a square measuring 1x1 meter and covered the dirt with green pigment, and the second placed letters forming the word “TRAVA” (grass) on the green space (Šuvaković 1995, 13); Bogdanka Poznanović placed in the Danube pieces of cellophane inscribed with the names of Yugoslavian rivers (Radojičić 1978, 46). From these strategies of taking artworks out of the confines of galleries and museums into everyday life, tautology expanded to refer to all art, and everything that an artist does. Šalgo recognized this tautological relation of art to life in Mandić’s transformation of mundane activities into radical art practice:

The purpose of these endeavors, *projects*, is replacing the irreversible natural processes with the unnatural, and taking aging, suffering, and death into the domain of art and proclaiming them as art. In that way, Mandić’s art becomes the artistic project of living: his poverty – poor art, his hunger – starvation art, so that the money he receives from his friends or shares with them becomes



artistic money, the dust from the carpets he dusted in private homes [to support himself] becomes artistic dust, and blood he donates in the Center for Blood Transfusion becomes artistic blood. (Šalgo 1995, 47)

If Europe Number Two is a continent-sized tautology, that is because its peoples are artists for whom every undertaking amounts to *projects* of the kind Šalgo is talking about. Viktim insists on staging his performance site-specifically, in “Belgrade.” The entire artist collaborative Cabaret Voltaire, with Andzi-Kredla in tow, sets off from “Berlin” southward, first to “Trieste” and then east, across the “Balkans” to “Belgrade.” The performance *The Hammer of Tautology* involves the creation of the Kalemegdan fortress using only the means at hand: a small hammer and the participants’ bodies. It was precisely the tautological nature of Europe Number Two that made it possible for Viktim to make a “Kalemegdan fortress” in the “Kalemegdan fortress”: the first one was an imperfect replica of the historical structure, and the second one even poorer, made with a dull hammer and a stream of piss standing for the Sava River. The consecutive replicas appear in descending order of superiority only if observed from the position of the “first” world and its values. When Viktim protests that if Andzi-Kredla’s collective did not find “caviar, canned beef, and vodka” in the abandoned structures that became the Siberian Artist State, the “art of performance would have to make a compromise with life,” the old avant-gardist lashes back:

Your question is reminiscent of the question posed by a swimming coach – how would we swim if there were no water in the pool? – and it is dangerous because it epitomizes that old-fashioned thinking, which, starting from a most pragmatic and trivial trifle, wants to construct the system of how the world works. Start from art [...], from symbols and from the liberation of language from the brain, and not from food. As if I didn’t know that

someone needs to raise cows in order to slaughter them and package them in cans? We are not tending cows, Viktim – we have the key that opens the can, the key as such! (Despotov 2004, 612)

In a talk he gave at a symposium on literary Yugoslavism, which took place in Novi Sad in the fall of 1986 (exactly at the time he was working on his “Survey of New Kinds of Technical Intelligence [...]”), Despotov offered a clue of what he meant by the “civil war” of poetry against all. He suggested that in the 1970s, Yugoslavian neo-avant-garde poets “created distinctive concretist and concrete republics, explorations in intentional strategies of new ways of communication, crisscrossed by personal correspondence, inclusive editorial boards (so-called, Yugoslavian), thematic issues, exhibitions and frequent in-person contacts, and, above all, devices that, renouncing the classical idea of talent, stormed the calm of bourgeois poetics.” The generation of artists who came from all parts of Yugoslavia, “Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Kranj, Zrenjanin, Subotica, Rijeka, and the village of Lučani near Čačak,” constituted an invisible republic strewn throughout Yugoslavia (Despotov 2003, 378–79)

From their constitutional frameworks to their political organization, from their industrial capacities to their nationalist aspirations, the six federal republics of Yugoslavia were striving to become replicas of one another. Some political analysts argued that the Yugoslav People’s Army constituted a seventh republic distributed across Yugoslavia. In his poetic analysis, Despotov asserts that the new art practice constituted a similarly deterritorialized republic: unlike the seventh one, the eighth republic was poorly funded and came under attack from the moment of its inception. It was seen by the ethnic republics, which cultivated their own traditionalist and, at the core, bourgeois literatures, as a conveniently weak opponent, an “enemy for amusement.” But not entirely. They saw it for what it was, as a “unified Yugoslav sub-specialism, as an integral affinity within the physical

space of a constitutional federation” (Despotov 2003, 378). They took it seriously because they knew very well that it exposed their deep commonalities and shared interests erected on those most pragmatic and petty needs. The six ethnic republics of Yugoslavia, which grew ever more intolerant towards one another, all along had one and only one common enemy: the concrete and concretist republic with no territory, no industry, and no army. Cowards, they charged ruthlessly once they found a defenseless opponent. Once they destroyed their “amusing” enemy, the six sister republics turned against one another. It is the hammer of tautology that smashed Yugoslavia. In his trilogy, Despotov shows that, paradoxically, the wars tearing the country and people’s lives apart in the 1990s were only a consequence of a much deeper, fundamental, and no less brutal war that had been going on for decades. It is important to remember that this was a war of one kind of poetics against another, and of one kind of poet against another. What appeared as a war of literary cliques was, in fact, a deep, fundamental conflict over the purpose of art and the way in which it informs all other values and attitudes in a society. In the case of Yugoslavia, it prefigured armed conflicts, it remained at their core while they were happening, and it will continue, on small, local turfs, as long as there exists any possibility for the survival and reemergence of that second, other, world.

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# Repeating Trauma





## 4 Perpetrators, Psychiatry, and Forgetting: Reckoning with Responsibility in Serbia

ANA ANTIĆ

As Serbian military psychiatrist Željko Špirić argued in 2008, “in the majority of (victorious) states, veterans enjoyed public support and sympathy, served as an important source of national pride, and were glorified.” On the other hand, in Serbia, veterans from the 1990s became an unwelcome reminder of the national defeat (which was never officially proclaimed as such) and an “obstacle in the process of forced repression of the [collective] memory of war losses” (Špirić 2008, 12–15). It was only in 2007 that the Serbian Ministry for work, employment and social policy approved the first research project aimed at systematically evaluating the mental health status and needs of war veterans from the 1990s, in order to (finally) design a long-term healthcare plan for this population. As we will see in this chapter, another reason for this state-orchestrated project of willful forgetting was that Serbian soldiers were also perpetrators of extreme violence against non-Serb civilians within other socialist Yugoslav Republics – primarily in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo – and any official recognition of their existence and needs would

necessitate a difficult political reflection. The political neglect of this group has also meant that the exact number of war veterans was never properly ascertained in Serbia, though it is likely very sizeable: researchers studying this problem have estimated that anywhere between 400,000 and 800,000 men fought as soldiers during the war (Beara et al. 2004, 47–49).

This chapter explores how contemporary Serbian literature has engaged with this problem of invisibility, war trauma, and political responsibility by focusing on Saša Ilić's award-winning novel *Dog and Double Bass* (*Pas i kontrabas*, 2019) and, to a lesser extent, Mirjana Drljević's *No one is Forgotten and We Remember Nothing* (*Niko nije zaboravljen i ničega se ne sećamo*, 2022). It argues that the theme of (political and personal) forgetting becomes central to both of these novels and that, in their examination of the relationship between returning Serbian soldiers' traumatic memories and political responsibility, they draw in creative and important ways on psychiatric tropes, spaces, and practices. Somewhat unexpectedly, both Ilić and Drljević put psychiatry and psychiatrists at the center of their novels' difficult questions and painful reckonings with the past, and the chapter aims to understand why psychiatry has assumed such an important role in this literary and historical context.

Saša Ilić's writing about the Yugoslav wars and Serbian veterans' war trauma revolves centrally around the themes of psychiatry and forgetting. *Pas i kontrabas* follows a troubled jazz musician and a former conscript from Belgrade, who loses his ability to play music and ends up committed to the Kovin psychiatric hospital (an actual mental health facility in Serbia), where a specialized, internationally led treatment program for war veterans focuses on neurological research in order to effect the permanent erasure of their war-related traumatic memories. In this universe, forgetting – the core political ideological goal of mainstream post-war Serbia – becomes the main strategy of a (seemingly apolitical) psychiatric intervention, which purports

to introduce cutting-edge scientific therapies in Serbian hospitals. It is even more ironic that the interventions described in the novel do not originate in Serbian psychiatry, but are part of an influential global research project hosted at a leading European university. The novel taps into sharp and often bitter divisions within psychiatry itself. The international research strand implemented at the Kovin psychiatric hospital and spearheaded by ambitious Dr. Larisa Sibinović represents the dominant clinical paradigm in psychiatry, which tends to prioritize biomedical, neurological, and quantitative research at the expense of nuanced social and political analysis. On the opposite side, the author positions progressive social psychiatry, inspired by Basaglian anti-psychiatric tendencies, which sees war trauma and mental illness as inseparable elements of the complex sociopolitical matrix, and proposes social and political engagement as therapy and healing. In this constellation, mainstream medical psychiatry thus reinforces conservative politics simply by relying on the clinical model, as its marginalization of social and political factors and concerns plays into the hands of those who benefit from eschewing discussions of political responsibility. As we will see, in the case of the Kovin hospital and its treatment of war veterans, Dr. Sibinović's approach directly undermines attempts at moral reflection and political reckoning, and reinforces the politics of silence regarding Serbia's role in the war.

The only character who mounts genuine moral resistance to Sibinović and the politics she (unwittingly) represents is Dr. Marko Julius, a fellow psychiatrist from the opposite camp, but kept at the Kovin hospital as a patient. This clearly demonstrates how thoroughly marginalized his alternative understanding of psychiatry is in the current climate. Julius is a social psychiatrist and is very receptive to the anti-psychiatric critique of mental health institutions and their reliance on violence and coercion. The novel adds another historical layer to this juxtaposition: the Kovin psychiatric hospital did not in fact house any therapeutic programs for war veterans in the aftermath of the 1990s but it was briefly converted into

a treatment center for Yugoslav partisans (anti-fascist resistance soldiers) diagnosed with war trauma (*kozarska histerija*) in 1945 (Klajn 1955). At this time, the program was run by psychoanalysts and progressive psychiatrists Hugo Klajn and Stjepan Betlheim, colleagues of Dr. Dezider Julius, the social psychiatrist who had himself been the head of the Kovin hospital in the interwar years. In the aftermath of WWII, Julius the historical figure was one of the most prominent Yugoslav practitioners (and himself a former partisan), and he also took part in discussions about the treatment and reintegration of psychologically wounded partisan soldiers. In the novel, Marko Julius is Dezider's (fictional) son, someone who was born on the grounds of the Kovin hospital, but also arguably a representative of a very different model of a socially and politically engaged school of psychiatry. Ilić thus set up the Kovin hospital as the main site for two different forms of psychiatric interventions and two different approaches to the issue of soldiers' trauma: Sibinović's neuroimaging and Marko (and Dezider) Julius's understanding of trauma as a window into the very nature of the Yugoslav/Serbian society.

The core theme of the novel rests on Sibinović's program of "memory reconsolidation," rooted in neurological research on rats. This method of therapeutic intervention aims to find "that part of the [brain] puzzle which hides memorized trauma, lift it from its place, spin it, and return it in a completely changed form" (Ilić 2019, 50). Relying on psychopharmaceuticals, the program interferes with the biochemical reactions and syntheses that underlie the process of remembering in order to erase that element of one's memory that stores the traumatic event. This is the reverse of Pavlov's experiments: Sibinović and her mentor at the University of Leiden want to break the link between the stimulus and memory of the traumatic event – the link that she once described as a mental wall forcing people to live in constricted and debilitating psychological chambers. In this way, the Kovin hospital becomes a site for reenacting

the most important psychiatric conflict of the twentieth century: the rivalry between the behaviorist and psychodynamic models of the mind and broader moral philosophies. Julius regularly challenges Sibinović's perspective, and her reduction of experiences of traumatization and related suffering to a chain of neurological reactions and transmissions, which seem to be identical in humans and rats. This approach is completely decontextualizing: Sibinović retorts that "this is not about a political analysis but about an advancement of therapy," and, even more importantly for the Serbian society, it leaves no space for personal responsibility (Ilić 2019, 50–51).

As Sibinović refers to her doctoral thesis on a boy who survived the school siege in Beslan, North Ossetia, Julius comments on the glaring absence in her research of any exploration or questioning of the behavior of the Russian forces, which stormed the school and were consequently responsible for the murder of hundreds of hostages, including 186 children. But Sibinović and her ilk genuinely do not see any connection between the sociopolitical circumstances, moral concerns, and experiences of traumatic suffering: she insists that "a traumatized person has nothing to do with the mechanism of production of the [traumatic] event, but she as a scientist is exclusively interested in the mechanism of trauma remembering and its healing" (Ilić 2019, 51). The global reach of her research paradigm is reinforced by this thorough decontextualization: the same protocols and approaches can be applied to Afghanistan or Northern Ossetia in the same way as they have been in the Balkans. Nor does the traumatized patient's role in these violent conflicts hold any particular significance in the therapeutic process: victims find themselves on the same plane as perpetrators and complicit bystanders, their moral differences erased by their shared neurological constitutions and processes of creating memories.

In the context of the Kovin group of war veterans, this refusal to acknowledge the relationship between trauma and responsibility constitutes a strong political statement despite Sibinović's protestations against the relevance of politics for

her work. The psychiatric aim of permanent erasure of trauma from active personal memory dovetails neatly with the overall political argument of the Serbian leadership and its right-wing nationalist opposition: that Serbia never participated in the 1990s war and could possibly bear no responsibility for the destruction and civilian victims of those conflicts. The most difficult aspect of acknowledging Serbian soldiers' post-war trauma was that their psychological wounds were inextricably linked to their complicity and participation in war crimes, which the Serbian political and military authorities had ordered them to commit. In other words, Serbian veterans' traumatic memory of the war puts in sharp relief the absence of a coherent collective memory of the 1990s in Serbia, and points out the unfeasibility of the leadership's (and large sections of the public's) preferred memorial narratives. Any acknowledgment of their suffering would also mean acknowledging their role as perpetrators of extreme violence, the ultimate responsibility for which lay in the Serbian state. In that sense, Sibinović's solution appears to be ideal from the point of view of the most conservative political forces, with which, we must believe, she does not harbor any conscious alliances: the trauma is reconstructed for the last time in therapy and then it disappears for good, so that veterans are healed and reintegrated in Serbia's post-war society without any further moral or political reflection and reconsideration of Serbia's complicity.

In *Pas i kontrabas*, the language of antipsychiatry gets conflated with social and politically engaged psychiatry, and the narrator, a deeply troubled war veteran, finds an unexpected ally in the figure of Marko Julius, the "good psychiatrist" who represents progressive and reformist tendencies, and whose thoughtful and socially aware approach to the issue of war trauma is juxtaposed with Dr. Sibinović's reductive and mechanistic model. Unsurprisingly, Julius' perception of trauma is informed by literary language and political analysis, and he insists that trauma and stress are too complex to be compared with physical illnesses and injuries precisely

because they are always produced by social activities. However, the narrator explains, “this idea is too dangerous because it means that the patient would need to be shown the real picture of a society that produced that trauma in him” (Ilić 2019, 26). In other words, psychological (and war) trauma could not be treated without an honest assessment of and education about the character of the relevant social and political structures and processes that were responsible for traumatic experiences. In the context of Serbian society in the 1990s, such an engagement would indeed be deeply destabilizing and dangerous, as it would involve a difficult reckoning with Serbia’s moral and political responsibility.

And the novel brings its characters face to face with the highest leadership of wartime Serbia, Slobodan Milošević and his wife Mira Marković, probing their own political accountability for both the war violence and internal political oppression. Julius relates that, during the war, he was urgently summoned to the Miloševićs’ residence in his capacity as an established Belgrade psychiatrist. There he learnt that Marković suffered from an acute, debilitating, and inexplicable allergic reaction. Julius concluded it was psychosomatic, explaining that this was a case of “psychological underestimation” comparable to a “denial of sin”: “It is possible that you overestimated yourself when you did, heard, or saw something, which you thought could not hurt you. It is even more dramatic if you understood everything, but still can’t admit it to yourself” (Ilić 2019, 39). Here Julius was clearly referencing the extreme violence of the Yugoslav breakup, which the couple was planning to ignore by holding a celebration for Marković’s political party’s anniversary. In Julius’s interpretation, the preparations for the anniversary party, which Marković excitedly talked about, acted as a “trigger” for the psychosomatic outbreak of the allergy. The passage about the Milošević–Marković couple thus introduced early on two themes that proved central to the novel, namely the notion that the couple had committed acts that could cause such a powerful psychological reaction, and their unwillingness

to recognize their own culpability. Marković thus suffered a form of hysteria produced by her and her husband's unethical decisions, which led to unspeakable violence. This also meant that there was no conscious recognition of responsibility nor admission of guilt – only denial. Marković experienced a somatic reaction to her own complicity precisely because she refused to acknowledge the events in which she played such an important role. As Julius concluded, the anniversary banquet, which did happen soon after his visit to the couple, was a proper *dance macabre* on the bones of thousands of boys and men killed in the Srebrenica genocide just days before. The imaginary successes of Marković's party were thus being celebrated as the victims' bodies were being exhumed and reburied in secondary and tertiary grave sites upon the Serbian military's orders.

Ilić's description of the couple's brazen political denial is thus applicable to the society as a whole: the wars of Yugoslav succession and war crimes committed by Serbian troops have assumed a most awkward place in Serbian public discourse and remain impossible to remember and commemorate in any coherent or self-reflective manner. Post-war Serbia was a troubled society that never declared either victory or defeat, never even recognized its own participation in military strikes on its neighboring states' territories, and never articulated its political (and ethical) attitude towards its soldiers' wartime behavior. As Serbian journalist Ljiljana Mitrinović argued, "it has not yet been said [in Serbia] whether this war was a war of aggression or a defensive war; who the heroes and criminals are; whether it has been worth it. We live in a country in which we are increasingly forced to listen to the truth from others because we don't want to speak about it ourselves." (Mitrinović 2003)

In this situation, the position of Serbian veterans became particularly complicated: sent to fight but then almost completely erased from political discussions and the public sphere, they struggled to receive any support from the state. Moreover, for many disillusioned veterans, the glaring



absence of symbolic acknowledgment was even more harmful, as the entire political leadership that had entangled the country in a series of wars now renounced their responsibility for both the conflicts and those who fought in them: “contrary to the general opinion how veterans were only interested in material rewards, most of the veterans’ narratives revolved around the loss of dignity and the lack of any symbolic recognition” (Jović 2008). Serbian veterans were a sizable group whose needs and health difficulties were virtually invisible to the rest of Serbian society for most of the post-war decade. This did not mean that such needs and difficulties did not exist: in fact, it appeared that the very experience of invisibility confounded veterans’ attempts at recovery and reintegration (we will revisit the topic of invisibility at the end of the chapter). As several psychiatrists and psychologists testified from their own clinical experience, the extreme political and military events of the 1990s left an indelible mark on various sections of the Serbian populace, and soldiers and veterans were among the most affected in terms of psychological health and recovery. At Belgrade’s Institute of Mental Health, psychologist Vladimir Jović and his colleagues were, by the mid-1990s, seeing dozens of traumatized veterans every week (and that excluded any active military officers, who reported to a separate military hospital) (Jović 2008, 384). According to Špirić, even though the intensity of relevant “war stressors” has diminished radically in the years since 1995 (or 1999), “the number of patients treated for PTSD did not decrease significantly” (Špirić 2008, 13). Moreover, PTSD often went hand in hand with additional chronic psychiatric and somatic disorders.

In the general atmosphere of silence and denial, it was these psychiatric discussions that served as a powerful and uncomfortable testimony to the sheer magnitude of Serbia and Serbian citizens’ involvement in the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Kosovo, and a reminder of the heavy psychological burden such participation imposed on Serbian society. Again, psychiatric debates became an unexpected forum for discussing highly controversial political issues and concerns that could

not be addressed elsewhere. According to Špirić's analysis of over 200 questionnaires filled in by war veterans in Serbia, the military conflicts in former Yugoslavia cast a long and troubling shadow, and still dramatically shaped the lives of its participants. For instance, Špirić assessed that over 40% of the veterans "probably" suffered from undiagnosed PTSD, which limited their post-war adaptation and severely impaired their efforts to rebuild their social networks. Importantly, on average nearly 60% of the interviewed veterans still thought about the war frequently (a decade after its end), and that number rose significantly, to 70%, for the subgroup with PTSD symptoms (who were experiencing intrusive memories and flashbacks). Moreover, nearly 30% of PTSD veterans now regretted their participation in the war, and a significant number developed a fairly negative assessment of their war activities (Špirić 2008, 349–53). Finally, the veterans' overall physical health, the quality of their social and family relations, as well as their ability to provide for themselves and their families deteriorated dramatically, while systematic state policies to address these problems were sorely lacking. Nearly 30% of the veterans described their own physical health as bad, while a shocking 78% believed that their material situation was bad or exceptionally bad. They were also much more likely to underperform at work, to have their pay docked or get fired, and were promoted much more rarely than before the war. In fact, unable to find solid ground in a society undergoing major structural transformations after the change of regime in 2000, they often labeled themselves "losers of the transition" (Špirić 2008, 354–60).

In a similar vein, Ilić's novel explores psychiatric spaces and therapy sites to open up the topic of veterans' war wounds and experiences, inextricably related to their complicity in violent crimes. In the course of Sibinović's group therapy, former soldiers tell about their most difficult, piercing and disorienting wartime experiences, their "original traumatic events." In one of the early monologues, we meet inmate Topisirević, a violent, amoral, and deeply troubled man who,

it turns out, was a war volunteer and one of the main participants in the massacre of over 200 Bosnian Muslim civilians from Prijedor on the Korićani Cliffs (mountain Vlašić). As we learn, Topisirević's unit took part in the executions in August 1992, and then returned about a month later for the purposes of "restoring the terrain" (*asanacija terena*), i.e. to take the bodies from the rocks, remove the white bands that all Prijedor Muslims were required to wear around their arms, and bury them elsewhere (Ilić 2019, 113). Topisirević's motivation for participation in this execution and "restoration" (and in the war in general) was purely monetary: he was being paid per body for the restoration operation, and the execution itself was planned for mercenary reasons – the civilians were being taken from one of the concentration camps in the vicinity of Prijedor to be exchanged for Serbian prisoners of war, but this particular group's journey was derailed, they were robbed of all their valuables and then killed. Topisirević's narration of how the atrocity was agreed upon and carried out remains matter-of-fact and emotionally unengaged, but it was the restoration that turned into a nightmare: as Topisirević was trying to remove decomposing bodies from the pit on an awfully hot and rainy day, he lost consciousness and was attacked by a pack of dogs, but in his delirium he saw the dead jumping on him, assaulting and biting him, trying to drag him back into the pit. Brought to his knees after his monologue and shaking uncontrollably, Topisirević "said that he wanted, if at all possible, to erase that day from his memory. And not only that day, but also those before it, since they [Topisirević and his unit] arrived at the bloody Korićani Cliffs up until he was taken out of the pit with corpses" (Ilić 2019, 115). And it was particularly this kind of erasure that the Kovic therapeutic program was gearing up to offer. In the case of Topisirević's "restoration of the terrain" as well as Julius' patient who took part in the executions in Srebrenica in 1995, this erasure of the personal memory of trauma also means forgetting the crimes perpetrated by the Serbian military and police.

In other examples in the novel, as in the actual psychiatric publications about Serbian war veterans, we learn about a variety of traumatic events that were thoroughly erased from Serbia's official political discourse and popular memory narratives. All these experiences not only seemed to irretrievably scar the soldiers involved but also deeply implicated the Serbian state in the wars its leaders denied any responsibility for. For instance, one of the narrator's fellow psychiatric inmates, young man Gyuri, tells a story of his best friend's violent death in a trench in Kosovo, during the NATO strikes in the spring of 1999. Gyuri and Tibi grew up together and were then recruited and sent to fight the Albanian-led armed resistance group, while the Serbian military and police also mass-murdered and expelled Albanian civilians. Completely unprepared for this war, Gyuri obviously found its aims incomprehensible, but even more importantly, he was absolutely terrified of the constant fire he needed to live through every day (which he described as hell on earth). Once he found himself exposed outside the trench, Tibi ventured out to save him but was fatally shot himself, his final words surprisingly life affirming: "Friends are worth living for." (Ilić 2019, 154). Gyuri was torn by guilt and grief, but his narration indicated that it was the Serbian state's subsequent political manipulation of Tibi's senseless death for propagandistic purposes that was even more difficult to overcome. Though Tibi's family received little support and respect from the military authorities, his case soon attracted political attention and was retold in line with the state's violent nationalistic expectations: as an exemplary "heroic death" of a young man who willingly and joyfully sacrificed himself for his homeland. It was this final and cynical political abuse of his memory that stayed with Gyuri as the original traumatic event: "[Tibi] gave his life for the fatherland, they said, but Gyuri wanted to tell them that, on that 28th of April 1999, in the Morina creek, he, Gyuri, was Tibi's only fatherland." (Ilić 2019, 155). In a self-serving move of political propaganda, the state wove a narrative of a soldier's demise that erased the importance of friendship, life,

and love in order to prioritize an imagined dedication to a brutal and death-loving political and state project.

In a similar vein, the narrator's own traumatic event – his near-death experience when he was a young recruit on a military ship, which was revealed on the final pages of the book – paints a dark picture of the military and political leadership (Ilić 2019, 288–94). The perpetrator of this particular experience was his commander – a cruel and sadistic man, who cared as little for the lives of his soldiers as he did for those whom he considered enemies. His regular verbally and physically abusive practices on the ship endangered everyone, but it was his vengefulness towards the “enemy” civilian population and his desire for senseless destruction that would harm future generations that were the most damning. In both Gyuri's and the narrator's cases, the forgetting of these memory puzzles would certainly redeem the Serbian state itself, enabling its leadership (and citizens) to avoid facing its political legacy perpetually.

Ironically, as mentioned above, it is not some conservative ethnocentric tendencies in Serbian psychiatry that support this orchestrated forgetting of political responsibility – the disavowal of responsibility is the work of cutting-edge global psychiatric research. In a well-known anti-psychiatric trope, psychiatry thus naturally reinforces the dominant state politics and protects the interest of the most powerful political organizations. It also replicates state violence: even though this is not the punitive psychiatry of the former Eastern bloc, its practices are consistently coercive and physically invasive, while patients' consent is not a concept anybody but Julius ever seriously raises. Patients are restrained and manhandled during individual therapeutic sessions, punished with violence and isolation for any infractions they commit, and the Kovin hospital regularly administers ECT treatments without any concern for its patients' right to resist and refuse (Ilić 2019, 132). The narrator's experience of ECT (without consent) is linked to Julius's mother's similar treatment in the 1930s – both were extremely painful and degrading, and the brutal

and crass hospital orderlies (another important anti-psychiatric reference) acted in thoroughly dehumanizing ways (Ilić 2019, 123). Even more importantly, the novel draws a direct line connecting the brutal psychiatric practices of the 1930s and the modern scientific psychiatry of the early twenty-first century. Finally, Dr. Sibinović and her research project administer unspecified new psychiatric medications to the narrator and other veterans – these drugs promise to “reconsolidate” traumatic memories and achieve permanent forgetting, but they appear to be untested and lack medical approval. Their safety is “guaranteed” by Sibinović herself, but, again, the veterans are never informed about their exact nature (nor their side effects), and their consent for participation in this dubious psychopharmaceutical experiment is not obtained. This coercive medication thus acts as a culmination of modern Western psychiatry’s violent practices – all in the service of scientific research and, indirectly, the state.

In fact, the issue of consent is only raised once, in the context of the army: well into his stay at the Kovin hospital, the narrator is approached by a mid-level military apparatchik Brdar to sign a consent form for the experimental treatment, and to thereby relieve the military of its responsibility for possible bad outcomes. Here again, the notion of consent and patients’ rights only serves to deny responsibility, the very theme of the novel: as the narrator retorts, “the army never took responsibility for a single death in wartime, on any side, nor after the war, not for family murders, executions of soldiers guards, or explosions in military factories, so why would it now admit responsibility for the Kovin therapies...” (Ilić 2019, 213). This conversation also reveals how the relationship between Sibinović’s treatment of memory erasure and the Serbian military’s interests is not accidental or situational: as Brdar makes it clear, this entire “European-level” treatment for soldiers in fact constitutes a part of “the renewal of our body and soul,” so that the same organization can regroup and regain its former (prewar) strength. Whether Sibinović and the University of Leiden were aware

of this broader political project and their role in it or not, their research lends itself to such political uses so easily that it must indicate a fundamental problem with their branch of psychiatry. Importantly, the very ideological possibility of such a political project – with the military at the center of it – rests on the refusal to admit responsibility for the institution's own wrongdoing in the past. The psychiatric project of forgetting thus enables the existence and continuation of the same political paradigm that produced the extreme violence of the wars of Yugoslav succession.

Therefore, Ilić's novel explores the significance of war trauma and forgetting in post-1990s Serbia by centering psychiatry, its practices and discourses, and its complex political orientations. In many ways, psychiatry is an obvious theme of interest in this context: as the discipline that deals with the diagnosis and treatment of psychological trauma and PTSD, psychiatry has been vital to the development of war memory narratives and it has played an important role in shaping societal attitudes to traumatic and violent events. The novel thus centers on the politics of psychiatry and its deep connections to social and political concerns. In line with the arguments of the anti-psychiatric movement, it emphasizes that psychiatry could not possibly be apolitical or neutral, and that its values and interpretations are inevitably linked to specific political projects and goals: socially progressive, revolutionary, and critical of the existing power inequalities (as in the case of Julius), or conservative, oppressive, and protective of existing hierarchies (as in Sibinović's brand of psychiatric care). In 1990s Yugoslavia and Serbia, psychiatric discussions about war trauma in both civilians and soldiers became a site of involved political debates and conflicts, as the issue of psychological trauma is inextricably connected to political narratives of the war as well as collective memory (Antić 2022). In the case of Sibinović's research, it was its political usability that perhaps remains the most striking: while her own pronouncements are always focused on improving the well-being of individual patients – "in the end, she was

interested in the happiness of a cured man, who managed to overcome his trauma and offer different responses to the life that surrounds him” (Ilić 2019, 51) – the overall societal and political effects of her insistence on psychopharmacologically induced forgetting as therapy are fully in line with the Serbian state’s efforts to eschew political responsibility.

Ilić has not been the only one to touch upon the relationship between psychiatry/neurology, forgetting, and war trauma. Mirjana Drljević’s debut novel explores Serbia’s continued conflicts around war memory narratives, problematizing in particular the issue of Serbian soldiers’ return, reintegration, and responsibility. While a number of elements from Ilić’s novel resurface in Drljević’s work, they are organized in a different way. It is the neuropsychiatrist Saša who is also a deeply troubled (but untreated) war veteran, a Belgrade boy recruited and sent to the frontlines in the early 1990s when he turned nineteen. Almost thirty years later, Saša exacts his revenge on the family of the man he considers responsible for his mobilization – his neighbor Gvozden, a military officer, head of the military recruitment service in the 1990s and father of his best childhood friend, who could have taken his name off the recruitment list but refused. Saša’s trauma relates to what he experienced during the war – although this is never spoken about – but also to the extreme suffering of his father, who could not endure his son’s absence and the uncertainty of his fate, and killed himself before Saša’s return. Saša’s father, as we learn from one of the novel’s characters, suffered from dementia – an illness defined by memory loss and particularly appropriate to the overall condition of Serbian society in the 1990s. In relation to that, Drljević seems to indicate that Saša is most intensely traumatized by the erasure of his wartime sacrifice from the public memory. As Gvozden explains, “[our] sons are warriors of non-existent wars about whose outcomes one does not speak. Those who came back became invisible” (Drljević 2022, 147–48). This appears to be a good summary of the situation, but Gvozden, as a man of the regime and one who holds



the ultimate responsibility for Saša's traumatic experiences also offers a justification for such memory politics: "It has been best for them, best for everyone, to forget. They are civilians with an accidental war episode in their biographies" (Drljević 2022, 148). Compared to the heroic warriors of the Second World War, Saša and his comrades in arms had no claim to fame from Gvozden's perspective – given what was perpetrated and ultimately achieved in these wars, the Serbian state had a clear interest in forgetting them.

But for Saša, this willed amnesia was unbearable, partly because it meant that nobody would take responsibility (in 2019, when Saša's revenge takes place, we find Gvozden silently crying all the time, but it becomes clear that the reason is not his grief, regret, or repentance, but pure rage). Moreover, it made it impossible for Saša to make sense of his wartime-experience and his father's death: even though life-defining and psychologically foundational, these events were also politically non-existent and unmentionable (Saša did not want to be an "unknown soldier;" he wanted to be a hero, and he wanted his wartime biography to be his "real CV") (Drljević 2022, 261). At the Cemetery of the Liberators of Belgrade, where soldiers of the Second World War were buried, an old survivor tells Saša off for coming there: "I told you there was no place for you here ... Find yourself another cemetery. This is ours" (Drljević 2022, 248). This emphasizes the stark difference in how veterans from different wars were treated – and how they perceived themselves. World War II soldiers remained heroes, celebrated for their sacrifices, achievements, and victories, and they at least had a chance to turn their trauma into meaningful lives. As Gvozden also says, "We were important. We were visible. We held our chin high" (Drljević 2022, 147). The title of the novel is taken and adjusted from Olga Bergholz's famous epitaph, which now adorns the statue of the eternal flame at the Cemetery: "Nobody is forgotten and nothing is forgotten" – such a contrast to the memory politics of the 1990s. As a psychiatrist studying the intricacies of memory, Saša concludes that the only way to rewrite

the narrative is to shock his city and neighborhood with another traumatic event.

In the end, it remains to be seen whether this connection between psychiatry, trauma, and (willful) memory loss will be explored further as Serbian literature continues to grapple with the fate of war veterans and issues of political responsibility and forgetting. After all, given the sustained politics of erasure of both Serbian soldiers and their victims from the official memory of the Serbian state, psychiatric archives remain among the very few repositories of intimate knowledge about the war's unspeakable horrors and their psychological consequences. Even though these veterans might have been officially forgotten, their memories, suffering, frustrations, and at times guilt were nevertheless often shared in the privacy of consulting rooms and psychologists' offices. It is psychiatrists like Marko Julius from *Pas i kontribas* who can help Serbian society comprehend the relationship between trauma, healing, and social and political responsibility. One good example of this has been a psychologist from Belgrade, Vladimir Jović, who was the first to raise the issue of the collective memory of and ethical responsibility for war crimes and human rights abuses in the context of his own experiences with treating PTSD (Jović 2008). Jović noted the similarity between the situation of Serbian soldiers and that of Vietnam veterans in the US, especially with regard to the Serbian leadership's "confusion about the wars' political aims" and the Serbian society's negative attitudes towards war participants. Through this comparison, Jović introduced the issue of war crimes and veterans as perpetrators, whose psychological problems were in large part caused by their own violent or destructive acts (Jović 2008, 384).

Jović's research raised the issue of the Serbian state's complicity in civilian suffering almost naturally: when he analyzed his cases, there was no way of eschewing a discussion of the Serbian military (and paramilitary) formations' crimes against civilians and international humanitarian laws. Moreover, he explicitly referred to the Serbian military

groups' most heinous crimes outside Serbia, within Bosnia and Croatia, such as the shelling and destruction of the Croatian town of Vukovar and executions of its civilian population, the shelling of the historic city of Dubrovnik, the mass murder of civilians in the Eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica, etc. In his analysis, Jović critiqued the absence of any "societal self-reflection at a national level" in Serbia, any reassessment of Serbia's status following a series of mass crimes, military defeats, and humiliations, or "any steps whatsoever towards reconciliation with the other nations against which we waged wars" (Jović 2008, 376–77). Instead of taking a hard look at itself, the Serbian society continued to deny its own role in the post-Yugoslav carnage by ignoring the needs and the very existence of its veterans. Jović even compared the Serbian public to bystanders in the Holocaust, who knew about but remained indifferent to the fate of concentration camp inmates, even though they did not personally commit any crimes.

Jović's research was comparable to Julius's approaches in that it indicated that a thorough sociopolitical understanding and analysis were necessary for treatment: Jović spoke about the PTSD diagnosis of the entire society, not only the surviving soldiers – those who identified with the Serbian "national interests" and criminal leadership still inhabited a grey zone and remained dependent on a political ideology which would enable them to "distance themselves from any considerations of war crimes" and their moral responsibility for them. For such people, the chances of psychological recovery were rather low without any admission of responsibility. But the problem was even larger than this group of people, and here he relied on psychoanalytic interpretive frameworks to explain the political effects of the war. A majority of Serbian citizens, whether or not they supported Milošević's belligerent regime, found it impossible to integrate the destructive experiences of the war (poverty, extreme fear and helplessness, humiliation) into their memory and meaningful sense of self, so they utilized the strategy of "externalization," "denial," and "projection." In other words,

a strong delineating line needed to be maintained between those who participated in the war formally, and those who did not: “the group that contained any references to the war had to be held at a long enough psychological distance” so that any negative war-related memories or feelings could be symbolically “deposited” in such figures and expunged from the national space. Veterans, as “contaminated” by the war, were either expelled from the public discourse (invisible, as Drljević would suggest) or vilified. The psychiatric focus on individuals and their personal treatment and healing was thus misleading: it would be impossible for such psychiatrists (like Sibinović) to address (and overcome) society’s efforts at externalizing the veterans’ experiences, precisely because this strategy hid the most difficult truth – in a society of morally complicit bystanders, everyone was traumatized (Jović 2008, 377–78).

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## 5 Bosnian War, Genocide, and the “Holocaust Script”: The Burden of Analogy

BLAŽ KAVŠEK

Three Pulitzer Prizes have been awarded for the coverage of the Bosnian War (1992–95) and the Bosnian genocide.<sup>1</sup> In 1993, the prize was shared by John F. Burns (*New York Times*) and Roy Gutman (*Newsday*), and in 1996, it went to David Rhode (*The Christian Science Monitor*). The war in Bosnia – if we take the number of journalists awarded this prize in the International Reporting category as an improvised gauge – was similarly as emblematic of the decade in which it took place as was the Vietnam War of the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

In the articles considered by the prize committees, these journalists sought to highlight the gravity of the situation in Bosnia and supplant the narrative of a bottom-up conflict,

1 We could add Samantha Power to this list; she won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize in the General Nonfiction category for her monograph “*A Problem from Hell*”: *America in the Age of Genocide* (2002), in which she examined a much broader history of American foreign policy and media responses to reports of genocide, but devoted a substantial part of it to the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo (1998–1999).

2 It should be noted that this chapter focuses almost exclusively on the American perception of the Holocaust and the Yugoslav wars.

fueled and directed by arcane ancient hatreds, with one of clear top-down genocidal intent on the part of Serbian leadership.<sup>3</sup> To succeed, they relied heavily on evocations of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> Together with their critics, who pointed to the allegedly inappropriate instrumentalization of this sensitive history, they have thus become an important part of a long tradition of debates about the representation of Nazi crimes, which became increasingly intense and complex in the 1990s. An analysis of their texts could suggest how the enthronement of the Holocaust as the focal point of the twentieth century influenced the various levels of processing of a new major European traumatic event.

I classify the prize-winning articles by these journalists as literary journalism and therefore consider them not only as a subgenre of it (specifically literary war journalism) but in many ways as literature itself.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, they can be analyzed in the context of a broader history of the intertwining of war and art. My classification may be controversial, as to my knowledge none of them have ever declared themselves to be literary journalists, but it is hard to overlook the fact that their articles are characterized both by a “tenacious attachment to the facts generated by reporting and research” and by a prominent use of many

- 3 Two quotes are particularly (in)famous, one by the Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger (“This war is not rational. There is no rationality in ethnic conflicts. It’s the guts, it’s the hatred.”) and one by the Secretary of State Warren Christopher (“The hatred between all three groups [...] is almost unbelievable. It’s almost terrifying, and it’s centuries old. That really is a problem from hell.”).
- 4 In addition to the articles listed by the prize committees, I also take into account the books in which these authors either subsequently collected these articles and added photographs, prefaces, epilogues, or commentaries, or otherwise adapted their original content. Examples include *A Witness to Genocide* (1993) by Gutman and *Endgame* (1997) by Rhode. Because of his pivotal role in the reporting from Bosnia and the subsequent trial of war criminals, I am also examining the works of Ed Vulliamy: *Seasons in Hell* (1994) and *The War is Dead, Long Live the War* (2012).
- 5 The term “literary war journalism” is used, for example, by J. Keith Saliba and Ted Geltner in their examination of John Sack’s Gulf War articles. See: Saliba and Geltner 2012.



of the tools of the novelist, a combination that finds its way again and again into the definitions of this form of journalism (Boynton 2020, xx).

## War, Literature, and the Unpredictable “Rhythms” of Memory

War and literature are intimately connected and many would argue that the first truly “literary war” was World War I. Military historian Richard Holmes, hinting at the problem we are approaching in this text, once even complained about it being “far too literary” (Holmes 2005, 12). This is not only because of its unprecedented magnitude and the corresponding size of the canon of literature produced by those who lived through it, but also because literature played a decisive role in determining how we understand, remember, and mythologize this conflict today.

It is not difficult to locate the most recognizable topoi of the First World War in its poetry. Many of the best-known poems, such as Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1920), conjure up the claustrophobic imagery of muddy trenches, poison gas, and no-man’s-land.<sup>6</sup> The legacy of the Trench Poets, together with other similar literary attempts at processing the experience of war, such as Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), has profoundly influenced countless memoirs, films, television series, and even historical studies, all of which echo the distinctive narrative characterized by its conception of the Great War as an absolute cultural caesura, the annihilation of the pre-war idyllic world,

6 The poem beautifully links the end and the beginning of the 20th century and the two outer boundaries of my analysis. In 1992, Slovenian philosopher Renata Salecl wrote an article entitled “Pro patria mori”, in which, although she did not directly refer to either Owen or Horace (she was, in fact, quoting Ernst Kantorowicz) she wrote about the West’s attitude to the war in Bosnia. World War I and Yugoslav wars are also conveniently linked by the town of Sarajevo, where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated on 28 June 1914 and where the infamous siege by the Army of Republika Srpska was conducted between 1992 and 1996. See: Salecl 1992.

or appropriately poetic, as the destruction of the so-called “Edwardian summer.” This vast literary corpus consistently bears witness as to how the “initial patriotic enthusiasm [gave] way to disillusionment and despair amidst the chaos and degradation of trench warfare” (Trott 2017, 1–3). The British infantrymen are often portrayed as “lions” sent to their deaths by clueless and callous commanders, “donkeys.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the most sophisticated and influential articulations of this narrative can be found in Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). Fussell, World War II veteran turned scholar, analyzed the impact of World War I on the development of literary conventions in the twentieth century and, in particular, the development of an ironic mode of expression in culture at large, which he believed to stem from the unbridgeable gulf between the prewar naiveté, promises and hopes of human progress, and the disenchanting futility of war. The tone of this intriguing book seems to me to be neatly summed up by the thought that “the Great War [...] was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ invoking a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (Fussell 1975, 21). After that, it seems, as in the case of most modern wars, that history has spiraled out of control.<sup>8</sup>

This (primarily literary) culture that Fussell was addressing and that mostly originated in the UK has curiously influenced me to such an extent that it has largely overridden my domestic (in my case, Slovenian) schooling and even my family’s (great-grandfather’s) framings of World

7 Campaign group Led by Donkeys was founded in 2018 to criticize Brexit and the Conservative government, testifying to the tenacity of this narrative in British culture.

8 This kind of persistence of chaotic history was also evident in the case of the Yugoslav wars, which broke out at a time when, as Gregor Moder points out in his chapter, “the West was indulging itself in the postmodern fantasy of the world at the end of history.” See: Moder’s chapter “War and Representation: On *The Balkan Trilogy* by Dušan Jovanović.”

War I. In some cases, of course, these domestic and foreign sources of the image of the Great War that I carry with me are completely complementary, but I would not be surprised if this complementarity is, in some cases, the result of the very hegemony of the narrative outlined above.

Only some more recent studies have confronted me with the complexity, uncertainty, and gradualness of the formation of this all-encompassing narrative, which for a long time seemed to me to have no history. As British historian Vincent Trott's study *Publishers, Readers and the Great War* (2017) lucidly demonstrates, it was not until the late 1920s that this canon of "disillusionment literature" started to come to the fore (in the UK). Trott quotes a 1930 text by the writer A.C. Ward, summarizing the "Bloodless War between Contents and Not-Contents," referring to the "war books controversy of 1929 and 1930, a fierce public debate, sparked by the publishing boom, which concerned not only the value of recent war books, but also the value of the First World War itself." Representatives of the Contents approach to war literature "ascribed meaning and value to the war," emphasizing victory and noble sacrifice, while representatives of the Non-Contents approach "critiqued the war and were sympathetic to the myths of relentless horror and futility" (Trott 2017, 51–52). There was no firm national consensus on the issue of how the war should be remembered and soon everybody was completely overwhelmed by its cruel successor, World War II, which seems to have cut into the slowly normalizing course of history again and brought with it new dilemmas and problems, not least literary ones. According to one of the main critics of this kind of mythologizing of the war, British historian Brian Bond, it was only in the 1960s that this disillusionment narrative of World War I really consolidated into "conventional wisdom," and despite the efforts of some historians who have called for a more complex treatment of the period, it continues to dominate to this day (Stewart 2003, 348).

I find the process through which coalesced today's ubiquitous imagery of the traumatic core of World War II, namely the Holocaust, similarly unintuitive. American historian Peter Novick wrote in his study *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) that the "rhythm" with which the Holocaust engulfed Western culture seemed to him unusual (Novick 1999, 1–2). The process, of course, resembles that of World War I only to a certain extent, since it must not, and has never in any meaningful sense, included ideas about some noble side of the Holocaust. But it is certainly similar in the sense that something, now taken for granted – that is, not only the ubiquitousness of this history in the cultural sphere but of the specific images that have been chosen to represent it – to a large extent developed into recognizable contours rather late.

## The "Holocaust Era"

American political scientist Norman Finkelstein has pointed out that, between the end of World War II and the late 1960s, the Holocaust did not occupy a very prominent place in the United States. American universities offered only one course on the subject and "[w]hen Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, she could draw on only two scholarly studies in the English language – Gerald Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* and Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*" (Finkelstein 2003, 5). Even British historian David Cesarani, who was generally unenthusiastic about the suggestion that "an inquiry into and discussion of the persecution and mass murder of the Jews [...] were either neglected or repressed between 1945 and 1960," and who certainly would not have agreed with Finkelstein about the moment when this trend reversed, which Finkelstein set in the year 1967 and justified this by analyzing the political forces that emerged after the Six-Day War, had to at least admit that the early post-war period is by no means comparable to the explosion in the 1990s

in terms of the scale of interest and research on the Holocaust. He even went on to call this period the “Holocaust era” (Cesarani 2006, 79).<sup>9</sup>

The extraordinary increase in awareness about and interest in the Holocaust in the final decade(s) of the 20th century has been commented on by many scholars. British historian Rebecca Jinks has called the Holocaust “a cornerstone of contemporary Western culture,” writing that the 1990s and 2000s saw “an explosion of Holocaust remembrance, literature and film” (Jinks 2013, 17). Almost two decades earlier, in his 1997 essay “From Explosion to Erosion,” American historian Anson Rabinbach noted that a decade of very public and institutionally anchored Holocaust remembrance culminated in the film *Schindler’s List* and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 (Rabinbach 1997, 227). Another American historian Judith M. Hughes pointed to the fall of the Berlin Wall, which allegedly forced countries in both the West and the East to confront their history anew, to the events that ignited and shaped the German *Historikerstreit* – the Bitburg controversy, the publication of David Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996), and Ernst Nolte’s revisionist texts – and the trial of Maurice Papon in France (1998) as key moments that sparked an unprecedented interest in the Holocaust and defined its understanding (Hughes 2022, 66–70).<sup>10</sup>

The film industry became a particularly important element in the process of shaping the Holocaust imagery in the 1990s. In her article *The Problem With TV’s New Holocaust Obsession*, TV critic Judy Berman wrote that, like

9 To illustrate the extent of Holocaust memorialization in the first decades after World War II, Cesarani mostly relied on studies by Annette Wieviorka, Robert S. C. Gordon, and Pieter Lagrou.

10 The point about a delayed burst of attention to the Holocaust in the 1990s is further confirmed by the lack of a reaction as strong as that in the case of the Papon trial (1998) to the Eichmann trial, the Ulm Einsatzkommando trial, and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials of the 1950s and the 1960s, all of which were at first glance more important.

most members of the generations who spent their formative years in front of the television in the 1990s, her “most indelible impressions of the genocide come from pop culture” and that when she envisions a concentration camp, her brain invariably produces “a collage of movie stills.” Berman goes on to recall Susan Sontag – who wrote already in 1977 (*On Photography*) about culture’s saturation with Holocaust imagery – suggesting that, after the 1990s, a completely different dimension of saturation has developed, naming it “Holocaust-fiction supersaturation” (Berman 2024).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Annette Insdorf, who started working on her book about Holocaust cinema in 1979, “when there were merely a few dozen titles to warrant attention,” contrasts the late 1970s with the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a corpus of films about the Nazi era and the Holocaust has not only consolidated into a distinct genre but also became a key part of an unexpected universal “cultural embracing of the Shoah” (Insdorf 2003, 245).

Factors that are said to have contributed to the explosion of awareness of this history in the 1990s are simply too numerous to summarize here in a meaningful way. Apart from the seemingly more trivial ones, such as the anniversaries of the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz in 1985 and 1990, the ones I briefly summarized above and those related to, for example, analyses of globalization or emergence of new media landscapes, one of the catalysts of this explosion is surely the necessity of confronting the reports of genocide that were pouring in from journalists and other observers dealing with the Yugoslav wars.<sup>12</sup> In what is to follow, I will attempt to review briefly how this general saturation of culture with Holocaust-derived imagery has affected journalists’ abilities and motivations to confront the genocide in Bosnia.

11 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have pointed out that already the mini-series *Holocaust* (1978) marked a particularly important turning point in the “Americanization” of the Holocaust (Levy and Sznaider 2002, 96).

12 We could, of course, reverse the causality and say that the Bosnian (and Rwandan in 1994) genocides received wide international publicity precisely because they happened at a time when interest in the Holocaust was already at the forefront of the cultural mainstream.

Roughly speaking, Burns, Gutman, and Rhode's evocations of the Holocaust fall into two categories. The first one includes simple direct references that do not require any interpretative effort. The only examples that are included here are those that are most readily apparent. The references in the second category are more interesting, as they are characterized by a more indirect use of the Holocaust imagery and constitute a crucial part of the so-called "Holocaust script, [...] a particular representation of the perpetrators, victims, genocidal dynamic, and outcome," which brings the acts of violence it describes closer to the event that gave us the term genocide (Jinks 2013, 27).

## Direct References<sup>13</sup>

The first type of references are discernible even at the level of monograph titles, chapter headings, and individual article titles. Gutman's report of 21 July 1992 from Banja Luka is entitled "*Like Auschwitz*": *Serbs Pack Muslims into Freight Cars* and a couple of his other articles refer directly to the history of Nazi death camps (*Todeslagers*): *Death Camp Horrors* of 18 October 1992 and *Death Camp Lists* of 8 November 1992. Ed Vulliamy, admittedly much later, interrupted the narrative flow of his book *The War is Dead, Long Live the War* (2012) with two "Intermissions" and one "Endpiece," all entitled "Echoes of the Reich." The "Intermissions" are subtitled "Auschwitz–Birkenau" and "Terezín and the Wrong Side of the Sky."<sup>14</sup>

Equally straightforward are the statements that contextualize the war in Bosnia as the first European crisis, which, according to various sets of parameters, succeeded World War II and Nazi crimes. They are usually formulated in the form

13 For better legibility, I write the titles of the articles by Burns, Gutman and Rhode (in this subsection) in italics.

14 Terezín is a Czech town where Germans established a prison complex and a Jewish ghetto, which served as a transit station for deportations to other camps during World War II.

of statements, such as “[human-rights abuses] unseen in Europe since the Nazi Third Reich” (Gutman’s *Prisoners of Serbia’s War* of 19 July 1992), “largest war crime in Europe since World War II” (Rhode’s *Eyewitnesses Confirm Massacres in Bosnia* of 4 October 1995), “Europe’s worst massacre of civilians since World War II” (Rhode’s *Graves Found That Confirm Bosnia Massacre* of 15 November 1995) or “Europe’s most brutal conflict since 1945” (Burns’s *A Killer’s Tale* of 26 November 1992). There are also direct links between World War II and the Yugoslav wars at the level of infamous names and terms. Gutman, for example, writes of a “Serb-led blitzkrieg” (“*Like Auschwitz*” of 21 July 1995), “Kristallnacht for the Bosnian Muslims” (*Unholy War* of 2 September 1992), or – quoting Simon Wiesenthal’s interview for *Newsday* – labels the Minister of Information of the Republika Srpska, Velibor Ostojić, the “‘Goebbels’ of the Bosnian Serbs” (Gutman’s *Three Who Planned Rape and Murder* of 19 April 1993).

Elsewhere, in the mainstream media, in the speeches of politicians, the analogies have been even more explicit – Samantha Power singles out the American illustrator Jim Borgman, who (for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*) painted Croatian and Muslim skeletons entering a large room in a Serbian concentration camp with a single shower head – and one could easily speak of a general commitment to Holocaust comparisons, which apparently threw off even some of the main reporters from the field. Power reports on Ed Vulliamy’s frustration at the tendency of the programs that asked to interview him in the days after the publication of his article on the Serbian camps to make explicit linkages to the Holocaust. At one point, he reportedly angrily ended the call when a radio station played recordings of Hitler’s Nuremberg speeches as an introduction to his interview (Power 2002, 277).

The following (indirect) references are especially interesting from the point of view of this very frustration. If we assume that, beyond the kind of direct references to the Holocaust that I summarize above, journalists did



not persistently and consciously draw connections between the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, we could be dealing with a semi-conscious analogy that is not (only) the result of a pragmatic aim to draw attention to the ongoing genocide, but of the symbolic composition of the Western world itself in the 1990s, which began to see itself as the inheritor and the “privileged witness” to the Holocaust (Sznajder 2004, 180).

## Indirect References

In analyzing this category of references, it is important to bear in mind the relatively small size of the sample used here and the consequent great weight of the individual references. David Rhode was awarded for 5 articles between 17 August and 15 November 1995, John F. Burns for 10 articles between 4 February and 30 December 1996, and Roy Gutman for some of the 34 reports he gave between 21 November and 22 June in 1993.<sup>15</sup> All were relatively short.

The first image that stands out in the articles and is visibly emphasized in the descriptions of the war and genocide in Bosnia is an image of incineration.<sup>16</sup> John F. Burns, in his article *A Killer's Tale* of 26 November 1992, summarizes an interview with Borislav Herak, a Bosnian Serb soldier who was put on trial in Sarajevo in March 1993. Herak recounted a “chronicle of six months of the savage violence that has characterized the Bosnian war.” One of the article’s subheadings is “Bodies in Furnace.” Burns highlights several moments in which incineration is foregrounded. Herak’s description

15 I could not find exact information about which articles were highlighted by the committee.

16 Although included in a rather bizarre answer to an interview question by the Israeli scholar Ben-Naftali, I find powerful Jacques Derrida’s illustration, which was probably not meant as such, of the Holocaust’s pervasiveness in Western culture: “[O]ne cannot burn anything at all, not even a love letter, without thinking about the great Holocaust of this era.” (Derrida 1998)

of two mass murders of Muslims in the Sarajevo area involves “dump trucks [...] used to transport the bodies to scrubland beside a railway yard at Rajlovac, near Sarajevo, where the bodies were piled in an open pit, doused with gasoline and set afire.” In another report, Herak appears as an eye-witness to the murder of 30 inhabitants of Donja Bioča, who were later “incinerated in a furnace at a steel plant at Ilijaš, a town north of Vogošća.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Roy Gutman, in his *Witness’s Tale of Death and Torture* of 2 August 1992, summarizes a two-hour interview with Alija Lujinović, in which the 53-year-old recounts the massacre of prisoners from the Brčko camp and of the residents from the surrounding settlements, telling Gutman that soldiers “had prisoners drive them to an animal feed plant” and that he “had every reason to believe the bodies were being cremated for animal feed, for that day the air in Brčko would stink so badly you couldn’t open the window.”

In addition to the apparent reference to cremation, Lujinović’s impression also contains the image of contaminated air as an ominous indicator of the massacre of civilians, which is a true *locus classicus* of Holocaust representations, and can be found in countless novels, memoirs, films, and series. The recent Cannes prize-winning film *The Zone of Interest* (2023, d. Jonathan Glazer) uses this trope with remarkable frequency. The film focuses on the seemingly idyllic family life in the residence of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of the Auschwitz complex, but all the while more or less subtly reminding the viewer of the absurd proximity of the extermination camp, located behind the flower-covered garden fence. Apart from the sound design, which includes the occasional human scream and cry, what stands out most is the persistent infiltration of smoke from the crematoria into the serene foreground. The same scene, which usually assumes a viewer who is and a character who is not (at first) aware of what the smoke means, can be found,

for example, in the first episode of the successful series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–19), the hugely influential film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (d. Mark Herman, 2008), and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Burns's report on the inhabitants of Donja Bioča who were burned in a steel factory, and Gutman's report of those murdered in the Brčko area who were reportedly turned into animal feed, both also combine the image of incineration with the element of industrial efficiency, which only reinforces the allusion to the Holocaust. The introduction of human beings in the context of the industrial management of inanimate objects or animals was integral both to the Nazis' humiliation of their victims and to the images people chose to bear witness to that humiliation.

References to industrial efficiency are made both in individual phrases – for example, Gutman's classification of Omarska as a “death factory” in his *Author's Note to A Witness to Genocide* or Rhode's characterization of the July massacre in *Graves Found that Confirm [the] Bosnia Massacre* of 15 November 1995 as being conducted with “brutal efficiency” – and in prominent reports of the use of cattle and freight wagons to transport victims.<sup>19</sup> Gutman begins his *Author's Note in A Witness to Genocide* with a transcript of a telephone call from a Muslim political leader on 9 July 1992:

Please try to come here. There is a lot of killing. They are shipping Muslim people through Banja Luka in cattle cars. Last night there were 25 train wagons for cattle crowded with women, old people and children.

18 For an assessment of the impact of *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, see Gray 2015.

19 The word “cattle” shares an etymological background with the word “chatel.” In this way, two of mankind's most notorious projects of annihilating fellow human beings – the system of Atlantic slave trade, characterized by chattel slavery, and the Holocaust, whose memory is inextricably linked to the image of cattle car transportation – are perversely linked.

They were so frightened. You could see their hands through the openings. We were not allowed to come close. Can you imagine that? It's like Jews being sent to Auschwitz. In the name of humanity, please come. (Gutman 1993, vii)

Gutman goes on to mention that he was the first journalist on the scene to confirm the information about “the deportations in boxcars” based on conversations with members of the Bosnian Serb Red Cross. A report dated 3 July 1992 from Palić entitled *Ethnic Cleansing* states that the Yugoslav government (FRY) “chartered an 18-car train last week in an attempt to deport the entire population of a Muslim village to Hungary.” In the same month (19 July), *Prisoners of Serbia's War* reports witnesses from Banja Luka and Zagreb describing “executions, mass deportations in closed freight trains, forced marches and a regime of starvation and abandonment to the elements.” The degradation of human beings to the level of animals implied by their being herded into cattle cars is further underlined in Gutman's book's photographic intermezzo. In one of the pictures, a long line of prisoners can be seen sitting on the floor, and a caption below the picture explains that “[m]ost survivors of Omarska were taken to the army-run POW camp, where they were held on the floor of open cattle sheds from August until December” (Gutman 1993, 117).

If conventional representations of the dehumanization suffered by the victims of the Holocaust include the embeddedness of their murder in an inhumane system of the industrial management of animals and things, their humanity is usually depicted and emphasized by reminding us of their lives before the corruption of society that led to the camps. Emphasis is placed on the objects and memories that represent their inclusion in a society that has discarded them, an identity that has been taken from them, and a peace that has been interrupted. The focus is usually on the victims' professional roles or their most personal

items. A prominent example that has become a crucial part of the tradition of Holocaust remembrance is the victim's shoes.<sup>20</sup>

David Rhode in *Evidence Indicates Bosnia Massacre* of 17 August 1995 reports on evidence of genocide in the protected zones of Srebrenica and Žepa and highlights the “[d]iplomas, photos, and other personal effects of Srebrenica Muslims [being] scattered near the areas of disturbed earth.” In *Graves Found That Confirm [the] Bosnia Massacre* of 15 November 1995, he reports on “the freshly turned earth of the feed,” covered with “haphazard dots,” which upon closer inspection became “empty shoes, shattered eyeglasses, and decaying clothing.” He later explains in more detail about finding (in the nearby woods) “three canes and a crutch,” and (scattered across the top of the graves) “[t]hirty to forty shoes, a pair of pants, a shirt, a blue civilian beret, socks, and shattered eyeglasses still in their case.”

It is difficult to overstate the importance of shoes as a symbol of Holocaust remembrance. From the famous places in the most influential testimonies (Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*),<sup>21</sup> to the most shocking early documentary images of the remains from the camps

20 In the chapter “Echoes of the Reich: Terezín and the Wrong Side of the Sky,” Ed Vulliamy places particular emphasis on Primo Levi's famous statement about the importance of shoes in the Lager (“Death begins with the shoes.”), which he (Vulliamy) quotes in response to the fact that the lady interviewed by him chose shoes as a major motif for her favorite painting, which she painted as part of her way of processing of the camp experiences. See: Vulliamy 2013.

21 Elie Wiesel (as recorded in *Night*) thanks God “for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe,” because an SS officer overlooked his new (mud-covered) shoes during an inspection (Wiesel 2006, 38). Levi's references to shoes (in *Survival in Auschwitz*), unlike in Wiesel's text, are extremely frequent and testify to his lucid focus on the materiality of the Lager. I find Levi particularly fascinating precisely because of his conception of the (camp) world as ultimately reducible to a struggle between men and “primal substance” (*Urstoff*), accompanied by his capacity for powerful moral indignation that is in many ways radically different from Wiesel's. When Levi recalls how he heard in the barracks a thanksgiving similar to Wiesel's, he writes: “If I was God, I would spit at [his] prayer.” (Levi 2000, 52)

(mainly Majdanek, Flossenbürg, and Auschwitz) and the key parts of the commemorative infrastructure, shoes remain one of the most significant images still capable of triggering an emotional response in someone already thoroughly immersed in the commemorative culture that has developed over the last few decades. To focus on the most recent developments, two years ago (in 2022), the Conservation Laboratories of the Auschwitz Museum launched a major project to repair the shoes of child victims of the Holocaust, fearing the loss of a key exhibit in the museum's permanent collection. This year, the international public was again alerted to the potential loss of this important piece of history when one of the survivors of the Stutthof camp, Manfred Goldberg, drew attention to the deterioration of shoes recently discovered in the woods adjacent to the camp, only a handful of which have been restored and placed on display at the Stutthof Museum. In this context, conservator Rafal Pioro, Head of Conservation at the Auschwitz–Birkenau Museum, Michael Newman, Chief Executive of the UK Jewish Refugee Association, and Steven Luckert, Curator of the Permanent Exhibition at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, all, with the same passion and in the same manner, underlined the incredible effectiveness of shoes in embodying and conveying moral lessons from the history of the Holocaust.<sup>22</sup>

## **Representational Prescriptions and Chomsky's Critique**

If we make a serious effort to simplify the heated debates about the representation of the Holocaust that took place in the 1990s, we can propose that two dichotomous schemes definitively crystallized during this period. They can be imagined in the form of continua or scales, reminiscent of the Likert

22 See: Boyle 2012, Connolly 2024 and the post on the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum website ("The Museum has launched a two-year project for the conservation of children's shoes belonging to victims of Auschwitz," 18 April 2023, <https://www.auschwitz.org>).

scales, on which all representations of the Holocaust can be, and sooner or later were, placed.

The first scale has on the one side a Hollywood-style, simplistic depiction of the Holocaust, which is the subject of most critics of the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust, and on the other a supposedly complex, in-depth analysis, which prides itself on intellectual rigor. As Rebecca Jinks has pointed out, for a while the dichotomy was almost entirely reducible to “a battle between enthusiastic advocates of Spielberg’s popular *Schindler’s List* (1993), and those who preferred the complexity and philosophy of Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985)” (Jinks 2013, 20). The second scale has, on the one side, a conceptualization of the Holocaust as a mystical, aberrant, extra-historical, and unique event, which is by definition impossible to represent, and, on the other side, a conceptualization of the Holocaust that acknowledges its “normality,” and instrumentality, and allows for its historical and comparative analysis.<sup>23</sup>

The positioning of the analyzed articles on these continuums is not particularly interesting in itself. Burns, Gutman, and Rhode’s reports portray the Holocaust solely in its most emotionally effective dimensions, as a literary amplifier providing a moral framework, which places them on the side of the scale that includes those representations that critics have accused of simplifying the Holocaust. On the other hand, their approach generally resists mystification. They allow themselves to compare the Holocaust with the Bosnian genocide and at first glance allow it to take its place as an event that can be understood and placed within the maelstrom of history in a legitimate and meaningful sense. However, if one combines an analysis of their articles with an analysis of their critics’ attitudes to the Holocaust, one arrives at a couple of more general conclusions on the imposition and

23 The idea of the Holocaust’s uniqueness is, in a certain simplistic sense, still dominant in the mainstream, while the academic world has, for the most part, almost completely renounced it.

function of the Holocaust in the world's perception at the end of the 20th century.<sup>24</sup>

The best-known and most established critic of the media's coverage of the Bosnian war is Noam Chomsky. His decades-long critical enterprise against the hypocrisy and moral cowardice of the Western establishment needs no introduction. What is less obvious and particularly interesting is how virtually all the controversies in which he has found himself during his long career can be aligned with his genocide-related opinions. From Chomsky's role (along with Edward S. Herman) in the early commenting on reports about the Khmer Rouge killings, to his criticism of the allegedly tendentious and sensationalist reporting in the case of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, his criticism of imperialism regularly led him to challenge reports of alleged genocides, or, to be fair, as in the case of East Timor, challenging the refusal to report about the killings.

At this stage, my interest is not in the legitimacy of his criticisms *per se*, but rather in an element of them that is arguably markedly superfluous. It is reasonable to posit that the criticisms could have been, if one agrees with these views, as insightful or incisive without this element – that is, Chomsky's appeal to the uniqueness of the Holocaust. His support for the American political writer Diana Johnston, whose book *Fool's Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions*, was rejected by Swedish publishers in 2003, was essentially based on a defense of free speech; his criticism of the ITN's campaign against *Living Marxism*, which led to its closure, was again based on a defense of press freedom and perhaps also an indictment of British libel laws; while many of his more general comments, in which he argued in one way or another that the killings in Bosnia had been reported carelessly, were or could simply be based on a critique of American political opportunism. None of these arguments,

24 As noted in the beginning of the chapter, this chapter mostly addresses the American perception.



which make up his critique of the Western interpretation of the war in Bosnia, necessarily called for a claim of uniqueness of the Holocaust.

In response to Chomsky's many comments on genocides, particularly the Rwandan one in 1994, political scientist Adam Jones has analyzed Chomsky's entire oeuvre in an effort to, despite his fragmentary treatment of the topic, summarize how he defines and understands genocide. As Jones notes, "Chomsky's approach to the discourse of genocide" is best described as "conflicted" and, in general, a framing can be discerned that favors a "totalized or near-totalized understanding of the concept" (Jones 2020, 101).

Although Chomsky avoids one of the most common and problematic aspects of the assertion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, where the event is somehow beyond the reach of any attempt to represent it, he goes beyond mere observations on the historical exceptionalism of the Holocaust by repeatedly suggesting that calling other annihilation projects genocide is in and of itself a form of Holocaust denial, as well as an insult to its victims. Such observations can be found, for example, in the foreword to Edward S. Herman and David Peterson's controversial book *The Politics of Genocide* (2010), where he writes that "the end of the Cold War," because the term genocide has been inappropriately attributed to various crimes unworthy of the label, "opened the way to an era of virtual Holocaust denial" (Chomsky 2010, 7). The same attitude can be observed both in the case of Kosovo – in relation to which he wrote in *A News Generation Draws the Line* that genocide claims were "a bitter insult to the memory of Hitler's victims" (Chomsky 2016, 95) – and, of course, the case of Bosnia – whereby, in an interview with British journalist Jonathan Freedland, he similarly declared that the way the term genocide is used to describe what happened in Srebrenica was "a kind of Holocaust denial" and that it "demeans the victims of the Holocaust" (Chomsky 2013). In all these cases, Chomsky invoked what Michael Rothberg has called the "logic of competitive memory," the zero-sum

game concept of competing commemorative practices in public space, which the scholarly community dealing with genocide has, for the most part, rejected as unproductive (Rothberg 2011, 523).

Despite notable differences both in terms of political outlook and in terms of representational prescriptions – which I have discussed using improvised scales and which, in the context of this comparison, turn out to be completely meaningless – in the end Chomsky finds himself in the same camp as Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists. They are all playing the same game that need not be played, which is based on the implicit acknowledgement that genocide is unthinkable without the aid of the Holocaust and that any recognition of genocide requires the similarity criterion to be met.

From this point of view, the idea of the violent re-emergence of history in the Western world, which naively nurtured fantasies of its (i.e. history's) end, also comes into play. Chomsky, as well as Burns, Gutman, and Rhode, responded to one of the most unintelligible historical developments of the 1990s, the intrusion of history, which resisted its implementation in the reassuring story of the triumph of Western civilization, with the use of an interpretative template, which has the benefit of appearing to be the most resolved, the most washed clean of the chaos of historical complexity. The cultural explosion and persistence of the Holocaust is therefore perhaps best understood as a manifestation of the fact that it is not only an unsettling and cautionary presence that endures because it frightens and keeps us in check, or because it serves as a powerful tool for legitimizing political decisions, but also because it functions as a soothing agent that, paradoxically, alleviates anxiety about the unpredictability and uninterpretability of the world.

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## 6 From Victim to Survivor: Realizing the Value of Survival in Artistic Practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina

DAMIR ARSENIJEVIĆ AND SAŠA ASENTIĆ

Bosnia and Herzegovina lives the terror of peace.

When we look back, we see that the result of the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is hundreds of thousands of dead, clandestine mass graves, the ongoing legacy of concentration camps and wartime rapes, an impoverished country, and the theft of socially owned property by a new class of ethno-capitalists. The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed almost 30 years ago, may have ended the overt war-time violence in this country. In its place, it ushered in the slow violence of an antisocial peace.

The terror of such an antisocial peace is seen in a continuation of the production of people and social relations as waste, managing people as waste, constantly wasting lives, and wasting environments in the rampant trade for profit. If this seems insufferable, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are given a false choice on a daily basis: either accept the provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement or risk another war.

What is this if not the Peace Agreement as dead labor? Such dead labor is both that which thrives on our internal

privatized conflict of guilt, shame, and mistrust as survivors, and that which taps into the dead and extracts value from them (Arsenijević 2019). This is the Peace Agreement that “vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (Marx 1996). This Peace Agreement produces the antisocial, which started with the privatization of socially owned property and the destruction of the political subject of Yugoslavian socialism – the *radni narod* (working people). The neoliberal transitional logic of the Peace Agreement privatized the political by introducing and reifying ethnicities that now compete against one another. This is privatization as an expropriation of sociality as such, which installs capitalist antisociality as the organization of aggressiveness into an economic system.<sup>1</sup>

Have we survived the war only to be put back into circulation of capital and be pitted against one another in this trauma market?

## **Rat ne počinje u istom trenutku ili istom danu, niti istom mjestu za sve – Čardak**

Amidst the anti-war protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991 and 1992, war becomes the Master Signifier that demands a subject be stitched to it. The start of the war represents the *point de capiton*, the moment of the subject’s attachment to the Master Signifier, a fantasy retroactively created. War demands acquiescence – it necessitates tacit acceptance as the Master Signifier begins to dominate everything, with little reprieve from its grip. This marks the moment of interpellation into war, a moment of a forced choice: live or die, when an individual responds to the violent eruption of violence by trying to survive and, in doing so, disavows the possibility of the “anti-war.” In doing so, a person becomes a mute bearer of guilt, retreating into the private and accepting the destruction of the social bond previously created by socialist Yugoslavia.

1 I draw here on cogent insights of Samo Tomšič (Tomšič 2023).

There are also those who overidentify with the Master Signifier – executioners, e.g., kings who really think they are kings. They materialize the fantasy of fascist continuity, forcing people into survival as the privatization of politics. Some reject the forced choice as false: they respond to the injunction to accept war or die with a firm “no, thank you” and instead focus on saving the lives of others.

Saša Asentić’s individual performance within the exhibition “Retrospective” from 2019 performed at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin is based on the experience of the residents of the Čardak settlement in Derventa during the spring of 1992 and explores how people behave towards one another when the existing social order collapses, shedding light on what the “state of exception” reveals about society itself.

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Saša writes: I once sat with a neighbor in Derventa and asked him to tell me what happened to him in April 1992. Those of us who were lucky enough to escape, avoiding bullets, shrapnel, and torture, only knew parts of the stories, but I had never heard them from those who weren’t so fortunate to escape and who survived it all. I didn’t know how to connect with him. I gathered the courage to ask and to listen – if he was willing to share with me. I told him I was an artist preparing a performance, mustering the courage to speak publicly for the first time about my life in the years leading up to my 15th birthday, and especially about that day when, instead of celebrating, we fled our home, leaving a Czech cake on the table, realizing the war had begun. War doesn’t start at the same moment, on the same day, or in the same place for everyone – for me, it began in the kitchen while looking at the cake. In our house, it had three other beginnings: one for my sister, my mother, and my father. There were eight more beginnings for our first neighbors who left with us, many more beginnings further down the street, and one for my neighbor at the top of the hill, and

countless others throughout Čardak and the whole of Derventa. War doesn't end on the same day or at the same moment for survivors; in many ways, it continues for a long time. I told my neighbor that I wanted to speak about the days when the war was beginning for us, and the years that followed when my mother could never make Czech cake again because it was too painful a reminder.

I didn't want to be just another neighbor who only knew him through local news reports about commemorations and sporadic updates on the fight for justice by the camp survivor association. Nor did I want to see him through the lens that the neighborhood, steeped in an ableism rooted in patriarchy and capitalism, had imposed – considering resilience, functionality, productivity, and independence as the best for him individually, and for the rest of the neighborhood, and this being the best support the neighborhood could offer. I wanted us to get to know each other, for him to know that I wanted to hear him.

I remember watching my neighbor's large, rough fingers gently grasp the handle of his cup and his soft gaze as it passed over the still surface of his black coffee, falling through the table to somewhere far away, while bringing the edge of the cup to his lips, and taking a sip of coffee beneath his thick, unmoving mustache. I felt fear rising in me as my gaze sought for where my neighbor was, my neighbor, whose fingers, lips, head, back, chest, stomach, and genitals had endured the horrors he had just told me about surviving in the HOS torture camp. But he wasn't there in front of me. I wondered what it was like to be what you are not. I felt as if the person in front of me were at the same time a missing person. I thought about how you become who you are. The fear I felt came from what we're warned about as children, namely to be careful that no one steals us, that we don't disappear, and from what I later learned as a teenager, that people become missing persons. My neighbor held the coffee in his mouth for a moment, swallowed it, and told me that it was important for the stories from our neighborhood to be heard because they are rarely



talked about. They occasionally make it to the news, but they aren't told, so let them live through art.

In 1987, I was preparing for a dance performance, my first one at 10 years old, with other kids from my classroom. We were preparing for a school performance for the day of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the country where I was born and grew up. Every 29 November, we celebrated our country and its socialist revolution with performances on the big stage of the House of Yugoslav People's Army in Derventa, my small hometown in northern Bosnia.

That day, with our performance, we celebrated our country, our society, and our way of being together. Less than five years later, it would all disappear.

I decided to leave Novi Sad, Serbia, and move to Germany. Shortly after my arrival, I attended a theater performance. There was a scene with a scream that sounded like a scream of human flesh. This scream triggered a memory of a story I knew but did not hear firsthand in April 1992. I was fortunate, along with my family, to escape a torture camp under very lucky circumstances. The torture camp was established in April 1992 in Derventa, my hometown, by the HOS, the Croatian army, in the basement of the House of Yugoslav People's Army, the basement beneath the big stage where the school performance took place in 1987.

What I am about to share is a story about that scream that is still on hold and waiting to be heard.

I know about it because my neighbor, who survived the torture camp, shared his testimony with me. I also know about it from seeing how Radojica Garić, one of the neighbors, recounted it for the camera for the local TV station. I would like to ask you to try to remember his name, as we often tend to forget names that are unfamiliar to our language or culture. His name is Radojica Garić, and his testimony goes like this:

I was taken to the basement of the House of Yugoslav People's Army and brought into a room where other Serbian civilians lay beaten and unconscious on the floor.

Then they took me to another room. The floor there was covered with broken glass and stones. They forced me to take off my shirt and lie down on the floor. Two soldiers from the Croatian army uniforms stood on my back, while two others on each side kicked me. Then they ordered me to crawl under their weight, my body pressing against the glass and stones. Afterward, they commanded me to stand up. When I did, I was cut and bleeding. They took me back to the common room, where the beating continued. They were beating Blagoje Đuraš the most. Blagoje Đuraš would fall to the floor, and they ordered me to lift him up, which I did at one point. Then a woman in a Croatian army uniform, named Azra Bašić, approached Blagoje's body. She stabbed him in the neck and then slit his throat. Blagoje made a sound – a scream – still breathing and fighting for his life, making gurgling noises. Azra Bašić then came to me, grabbed me by the hair, and forced my head down to his neck, making me drink the blood from his wound as he struggled to breathe.

We started today as ordinary people, strangers to each other. But the time we've spent together has created a shared memory. This memory will be different for each of us. I ask myself, with this memory, what do we carry with us? How are we with each other, or how would we be with each other, in situations where the social order as we know it is challenged, broken, and different from what we are used to?

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This is how Asentić ends this part of his performance. We see that witnessing evacuates and emigrates into art. Asentić frames this witnessing within the coordinates of the destruction of the social to focus on the violent tearing apart

of the social bond that existed within Yugoslav socialism. It is precisely this social bond that is almost always overlooked in analyses at the expense of the fascination with the spectacular material destruction.

## **“Neka im svima na savjesti stoji riječ OMARSKA”**

Concentration camps are factories for the production of the antisocial. Commemorations, as they are mainly staged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are mere dissemination events of the camp's product. This is how the logic of the camp is operative in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. The camp's product is a petrified, silenced, and ethnicized victim, whose story of surviving – and dying that such a survival entailed – cannot be acknowledged within this new anti-social.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, a survivor is also a missing person from our society.

If Asentić intervenes in artistic practice by bringing forward the witnessing of people produced as missing in perpetuity, Emir Hodžić directly intervenes in the commemoration in the city of Prijedor and in Omarska. Hodžić is remembered as a lone figure, a witness in his solitude, standing in the main square in Prijedor, a white ribbon tied to his arm, a reference to how Muslims were forced to mark their houses and apartments in Prijedor in 1992.

In 2012, on the 20th anniversary of the Omarska camp, the mayor of Prijedor even banned survivors' associations from commemorating 266 murdered women and children in that city. Emir Hodžić went and bought white plastic bags and decided to defy the ban. I interviewed Emir in 2015, and this is how he recalled it:

I wanted to do something with my body, even though it was officially forbidden to commemorate. I had such

2 For a more elaborate discussion, see Arsenijević 2013.

rage inside me, but I didn't want to let that rage turn into something negative. I wanted it to drive me to action. I took the bag and went to the main square. I remember approaching, seeing people walking around, living their lives. But what did Prijedor do to me? It made me a victim – no, not just a victim, it made me a second-class citizen, someone who had to fear for their life, constantly in danger, every second. It's a form of torture – knowing that at any moment, someone could come to get you, and that it's entirely normal. It happens every day, every minute, and no one comes to help. No one will help. (Emir Hodžić 2015)

This initiated a chain of visits to other concentration camps where Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats were interned and this took off as the international Dan Bijelih Traka.

Omarska is a mining complex around 20 kilometers from Prijedor. During the spring and summer of 1992, around 6000 inmates, mostly men but also 37 women, were tortured, raped, or executed there. Now, Mittal Still owns the mining complex, where hidden mass graves potentially exist. In 2005, the company, now known as ArcelorMittal, pledged to fund and build a memorial for the survivors of the concentration camp but later reneged on this commitment.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the guard at the entrance of the mine banned Emir Hodžić from visiting the site where his family members were tortured. In Emir's words: "The man said, 'I'm going to call the police.' And that's when I broke...there was this rage and sadness inside me...I just grabbed onto that fence and stared inside, starting to feel anger. For the first time, I felt what it meant to deal with deniers. Before that, it was all abstract. But now, for the first time, I understood what it felt like when someone looks you in the face and says, 'No! You can't'" (Emir Hodžić 2015).

Ultimately, in August 2012, Republika Srpska's authorities and the Mittal Group gave permission for a

3 See: Refik Hodžić 2012.

commemoration to take place within the mining complex. Former concentration camp inmates asked Emir: how about a performance for Omarska? One of the inmates talked about the routine in the camp, things that happened every day, and the decision was made to recreate one of the routines – a transport from the kitchen. This was a reference to how camp inmates were made to run towards the hangar. They had almost no time in the kitchen to slurp some beans and if they lingered to try to eat a bit longer, whatever time was deemed even the slightest second too long by the torturers, they would be singled out and tortured.

On 6 August 2012, the decision was made for Emir to play the role of a concentration camp guard. This is how Emir describes the preparation:

When we arrived for the commemoration, we moved around secretly because no one knew what we were going to do. I approached people – it turned out most of them were former camp inmates. We told them we were going to stage a performance here and asked if they wanted to be a part of it. I quickly explained: “I’m going to torture you; your role is to experience what happened here. I will do to you what was done in this place.”

The people who were former detainees immediately, without hesitation, said, “Yes, yes, I’m in.” Some younger people were like, “Who are you? What? I don’t get it. Wait.” They didn’t understand anything. But the former prisoners, as soon as I asked for volunteers, instantly said, “Yes, let’s go.” (Emir Hodžić 2015)

Emir not only issued orders to sit, get up, and kneel, but this enactment of torture featured repeated beatings, stealing of watches, the removal of shoes.

The apex of the enactment was to be the moment when an order would be given to run toward the kitchen

and the bellowed command STOP! would signal the end of the roleplay. Emir says:

When I first shouted, “Stop!” no one stopped. I screamed, “STOOP!” but still, no one stopped. They just kept running into the kitchen. They kept running into the kitchen. I remember yelling two, three times, “Stop!” I followed after them. I think five or six of them had already rushed into the kitchen, as if they were going to eat, going for the beans. Those people were going for the beans. (Emir Hodžić 2015)

What saved Emir from breaking down, in his words, is that the former inmates started leaving the kitchen, one after another, then approached, hugged him, and told him, “Hvala, hvala za ovo.”<sup>4</sup>

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I think of this performance as having the structure of a dream.<sup>5</sup> As Freud writes, “[n]ow dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (Freud 1955, 13).

It is not the fright of the enactment of the torture but waking from it into another fright – fright of the terror of peace is that of which this trauma consists. It is not just the confrontation with death but the confrontation with survival, contingent and incomprehensible.

As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth claims: “Repetition in other words is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally, and enigmatically,

4 “Thank you, thank you for this.”

5 I am repeating Freud’s move here but in reverse: from (child’s) play to traumatic neurosis.

the very attempt to claim one's own survival. If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own." (Caruth 1996, 64)

## Partisan Method: Mourning as Claiming the Commons<sup>6</sup>

### KOMEMORACIJA

tvoje rebro je  
oba puta zaraslo  
jednom je puklo od stražareve čelične kugle drugi put  
od ljubavnog stiska

mojih nogu

ljubim ti zaraslu sljepočnicu – živo meso ispod zarasle  
kože ližem brazdu kojom je  
niz tvoja leđa klizila krv,

ližem tvoju krv

jedna lomljena noga je ostala kraća  
ova noga koju noćas snažno stišćem svojim

putenim butinama

ova vrela glava  
u mojim rukama obrtala se nekad u ritmu stražareve

neumorne pesnice

6 An earlier version of this argument was developed in Arsenijević 2018.

kako je dobro što si živ!  
kako je ukusno tvoje živo meso!  
na travi ni na betonu noćas nema nikog

ležali ste na betonskom igralištu škole

noćas ovdje nema nikog samo ti i ja  
nema cvijeća  
nema sjećanja

u mikrofoni  
okrugao kao čelična kugla koja lomi rebra

samo ja koja ljubim zaraslu kožu  
na zaraslom lomu  
i ti čije sjeme

ovu pustu zemlju oplodava

Adisa Bašić<sup>7</sup>

## COMMEMORATION

your rib healed  
both times  
one time it cracked from the guard's iron ball the other  
time from the loving

squeeze of my legs

I kiss your healed temple—the living flesh underneath  
the healed skin

7 Bašić 2014, 23–24.



I lick the hollow on your back  
down which ran your blood,

I lick your blood

one leg broken stayed shorter  
this leg, which I squeeze so hard tonight with

my lustful thighs

this burning head  
in my hands spun once in the rhythm of the guard's

tireless fist

how good it is that you're living!  
how tasty is your living flesh!

on the grass and on concrete there is no one tonight.

all of you lay on concrete in the school playground.

there is no one here tonight only you and me.  
no flowers  
no recollections

for the microphone  
round as the iron ball that breaks the ribs

only me kissing the healed skin  
on the healed bone  
and you whose seed

makes this wasteland fecund

(translation Damir Arsenijević)

We are beyond an oppositional discourse, where action is either confined to disbelief and shock at the intensity of violence or framed as a reactionary defense against it. This partisan method retains no distance, boldly asserting even the right to the living flesh that endured the torment of both concentration camps and commemorations. By making such a claim, a new public is created – one that mobilizes both private and public spheres to insist on the social.

What good is the body of a lover who survived if it is immediately put into the circulation of the bloodied capital? The partisan method seeks to create conditions for realizing the value of survival through the pleasure of the sexual act. The sameness found in commemoration is juxtaposed against the difference found in the sexual act. In the poem, the production and realization of value are united through the sexual act, where making the wasteland fertile is not oppositional but central to the new body economy we collectively need to produce. The partisan method intervenes in this temporality by merging the poem's speaker and the lover-survivor into an ensemble: they become timely together, existing and coinciding in the same moment.

What it takes to translate the victim into a survivor is the staging of an encounter between the survivor and his personal name, which is opposite to what official commemorations do in that they reduce the survivor to the anonymity of an ethnic identity. The partisan method disrupts complicity in "torture through commemoration" and asserts mourning as part of the commons, belonging – at the same time – to everyone and no one.

This new economy of the flesh, introduced by the partisan method, challenges the normative regime of commemoration by making the claim to the right to the survivor's body and removing it from the grasp of bloodied capital, which claims the "right" to control the production, realization, and circulation of value. Such reclaiming is an intervention into the antisocial – what is at stake is the very sociality that must be reimagined and

practiced collectively to halt the continued extraction of value from victimhood and the commodification of the victim under dominant commemorative regimes.

How do we then consolidate and produce a new type of commemoration, through which we interrupt the law of the mass grave that rules over the dead and the living in Bosnia and Herzegovina today?

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# Healing Trauma





# 7 The Exiled Body in the Theater

ZALA DOBOVŠEK

During the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the institutional Slovenian theater production, especially in Ljubljana, was slow to respond to the events and less active in reflecting on the war than the rest of the European cultural space. Such lack of response was mainly attributed to the ungrateful position of Slovenia, which is still said to be too politically and geographically involved to “soberly” analyze and critically evaluate what was happening. The indeterminacy of the war’s escalation spoke volumes about the common consciousness and escapism of Slovenian theater creators, who, if anything, instead of politically direct performances, preferred texts that merely thematized any war, focusing even more on magical performance forms that “sing odes to imagination and creativity” (Uytterhoeven quoted in Milohnič 2009, 118). If, for this reason, the “real” war remained represented merely through the mass media, its actual, physical reality soon manifested itself in the arrival of exiles in our country.

Only individual activism could establish an engaged gesture concerning the war situation: between 1992 and 1997,

actress Draga Potočnjak founded the Theater of Exiles with young refugees from Bosnia. Among this activity was the group *Nepopravljivi optimisti* (Incorrigible Optimists). The number of members changed due to constant departures to other countries, but eventually, it settled at ten. The Theater of Exiles was considered a specific theatrical phenomenon in our country, which unfortunately arose as a side effect of the war. Its theatrical productions were otherwise only the end, visible form of the creative process through which young exiles processed their personal hardships. The *Incorrigible Optimists* created three shows, performed them thirty times, and toured Italy and Austria.

## **Therapeutic and Political**

This theater was a therapeutic refuge for expelled minors, which saw its priority role in overcoming fear through theatrical procedures. The methodology of the therapeutic process addressed three factors: the inner world of the practitioner, the problem situation (life experiences), and the activity that is part of drama therapy. Security and trust are fundamental conditions for cooperation. The project's second – public – role was certainly to acquaint audiences with the presence of exiles, especially with their stories, which portrayed a realistic image of the war. The exiles represented a vulnerable, marginalized group that otherwise could not have a voice in the public sphere, so they manifested their existence and traumatic stories through theater principles, combining improvisation, drama, and personal experiences.

The series of theatrical productions was certainly a theatrical phenomenon. Young refugees, who had mostly never been on stage before, “acted” in theatrically unusual “formed” performances, which were effective both with their shocking content (and its background) as well as with their naked and charged theatrical form. These performances were always more than just

theatrical events. They were “performances of performances.” (Lukan 1999, 61)

The psychological state of refugees is a complex structure that is ultimately important for understanding their performance in the theater, where they not only step out of the private sphere into the public sphere but do so through sensitive steps and intimate content. In this case, they take on multiple identities: first their own, then artistic and social, and finally political.

In the phenomenon of cooperation with refugees in the Theater of Exiles, we can recognize a psychological pattern of support. If we come into contact with acutely traumatized people who are hurt, in shock, and sad, an intense need arises in the person to jump in, become active, help, and comfort: “Such behavior is considered ‘transculturally’ conditioned, inherited. Apparently, this is an evolutionary, biologically built-in program. It is an internally motivated spontaneous need to offer help, both in laymen and professionals. This spontaneous need is important in working with people” (Petzold 2004, 4).

Initially, the refugees are happy to have survived and be safe. Soon, however, they close in on themselves and begin thinking about the uncertainty of their future. The happiness is only apparent and short-lived because the refugee soon faces a new reality. War and its consequences destroy not only the physical, emotional, and social world of children and adolescents but also their moral world. Namely, children and adolescents who have experienced the traumatic experience of war often experience dilemmas related to the evaluation of good and evil, trust and betrayal, and protection and aggression (Rafman 2004, 467–71). This was also expressed in multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the inhabitants lived in good relations – up to the point of the armed conflicts.

After the signing of the Dayton Agreement in December 1995, many refugees returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina; in 1997, there were still around 4,600 Bosnian refugees

in Slovenia. Many left Slovenia soon after their arrival and sought refuge mainly in Western European countries (Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) and the United States and Canada. In any case, an exile is always subjected to persistent stereotyping in the new culture into which one integrates. Although the typological conception may be accurate in a certain respect, we should not believe that if we observe an individual marked by such a general characteristic, we have accurately covered the entire group.

Despite the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many refugees in Slovenia decided not to return to their pre-war homes. One of the basic requirements for returning home is peace and the fact that they have somewhere to return. The homes of many had been destroyed or inhabited by other people. The refugees' decision whether or not to return was also influenced by the extremely difficult economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its poverty and unemployment. Dilemmas arose regarding how they would repair their homes, whether they would get a job, what would happen to health and social insurance, and the like. The results of numerous studies show that many refugees do not want to return to where they lived before the war because they return to worse conditions and to an environment where there is resistance to refugees, saying that they left their homeland in the most difficult moments.

The act of the young refugees, the decision not only to participate in the theater (that is, to expose themselves publicly) but also to face their fears and hardships, can be understood as an important decision and affirmation since, in principle, in their constant state of fear and uncertainty, they avoid open communication about their memories and the emotions that accompany them. They do not want to talk about their fears with each other, let alone with others. If the parents do not process and name the traumas, this can have fatal consequences for subsequent generations as well. War can leave catastrophic consequences for families

directly or indirectly involved in it. Family members may be aware of the problem but still cannot or do not want to talk about it because the pain is too great. As a result, children or even grandchildren will feel the effects of these unresolved issues over time. They will feel things they did not experience firsthand: sadness, numbness, rage, and anger will often settle in them for an unknown reason. Some of the participants of the Theater of Exiles came to Slovenia alone and were completely cut off from their families; others came together with family members, but this did not mean that their psychological condition was better. For many adults who “have themselves been affected by a traumatic event, sensitivity and responsiveness to the child’s needs may decrease due to their own emotional distress” (Mikuš-Kos and Slodnjak 2000, 16).

## **Artistic Effects on the Public Space**

Projects of this type, as expected, trigger polarized reactions from the audience and the general public, as skepticism about the ethics of such activity constantly arises. With today’s rise of right-wing populism contrasted by excessive demands for political correctness, we can only imagine what reactions and effects the Theater of Exiles would cause in the current Slovenian cultural context. The young people involved in the Theater of Exiles were marked by the traumatic experience of the war from which they fled. This negative experience also conditioned their decision to participate in theatrical creation and the subsequent way they participated.

To some extent, the Theater of Exiles can be characterized as applied theater, which refers to drama activity created and taking place “outside conventional mainstream theater institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies” (Nicholson 2005, 2). Here, the fundamental idea of participatory research comes from the premise that the researcher and the participants strive for equality regardless of their social, cultural, and economic capital. The participants are not merely passive

objects of observation without critical thinking and intellectual culture. What is important here is that these performative methodologies try to explore and connect three segments, namely, 1) individual or group action as a performance, 2) performing in front of others, the “audience,” and 3) at the same time connecting this “public” self with the private, “back-stage” context.

In the case of the Theater of Exiles, the fact that the performers are children or teenagers also plays a big role in the relationship between interpretation and perception. These are subjects who are not yet aware of the possible abuse or manipulation of certain stories, experiences, or information. At the same time, the level of awareness of their actions is also unknown or perhaps unpredictable – not from the point of view of self-therapy (they are aware of its effects), but from the point of view of the importance for and affect on the public and the wider society (as a result of the critical charge their performances can create).

There are two extremes at work when a child is present on stage, which at the same time speak of his imprudence in the choice of stories and the possible unplanned “traumatic connotations,” which may arise, but at the expense of (objective) accompanying circumstances and not so much because the child intentionally/consciously created them.

The position of the child in a play always touches the field of the documentary as well because, regardless of the child’s learned and polished stage performance, the child is always a sign/symbol for himself, which at some point has a universal effect and is constantly connected to the reality from which it truly (privately) comes out. A child on stage (in a performance for adults) appears as an authentic entry; with his presence, he questions the viewer’s perception. Despite his or her conscious concentration and control of the acting, a child is often perceived in the eyes of the audience as a spontaneous and non-elevated phenomenon within the event. That is why he always stands out, inspires wonder, and constantly opens new questions about the scope

of the documentary and the sign/symbolic/metaphorical message he brings when appearing in a theatrical event.

I tried to make our story as general as possible, as metaphorical as possible, and at least a little poetic. But, the participants increasingly entangled me in the specifics. They wanted to speak uncompromisingly from the stage about their war as directly as possible. I failed to convince them that such concreteness can appear very naive and even completely trivialize what is most valuable. Such “representation” of reality can certainly have the opposite effect, so people would rather turn away from them than come to see them. It didn’t work, it didn’t work at all! In every possible way, they asserted their beliefs that even from the stage, their truth cannot act as a lie. They were not interested in stories that would only be associated with their fate. No, they wanted to talk specifically about themselves, about their Sarajevo at war. (Potočnjak 1999, 15)

As in the theater of besieged Sarajevo, it was also a kind of “spiritual rebellion” against the terrible situation the refugees were thrown into. The genre diversity of the repertoires in besieged Sarajevo demonstrated the interest of theater creators and audiences in a diversity of content that would have existed even after the war. Clearly, the psychological state of the individual in a liminal experience such as war still maintains a multifaceted need not only for (entertainment) relief but also for self-analysis (experience) and, of course, a liminal intermediate space, which was indicated by the tendency towards absurdist themes, such as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (a utopian and endless wait for a savior who never arrives) or an adaptation of Sartre’s *The Wall* (the story of the last hours before the execution of three Spanish fighters during the Civil War). Another line of content was included in the programs intended to establish identification with the audience (theater as a transfer of pain), among them the production

of *Silk Drums*, which was inspired by the Japanese Noh theater and questioned the role of feeling and sensitivity in times of despair. It also relied on connections with distant cultures. The theme of wartime siege was also treated in the production *In the Land of the Last Things*, an adaptation of the novel by Paul Auster, which outlined the experience of living in constant crisis. The staging of *The City* was structured as a collage of writings by various authors who wrote about cities as such, with which the content raised questions about the city of Sarajevo with a strong connotation, especially about the identities and symbolic power that it assumed during the war. The key manifestation of the city is defined by its reaction to the given (war) situation. The well-known musical *Hair*<sup>1</sup> simultaneously enabled identification and comic relief (in relation to its pacifist connotations). *Bešeški, the Dream of Sarajevo*<sup>2</sup> was a lyrical comedy (about bad times and good people), a tragic love story from the end of the eighteenth century, when Sarajevo was, as always, caught between two wars, two pandemics of evil and misfortune. Identification occurred precisely through the intimate stories of ordinary people enduring the occupation of an extraordinary war.

Theater production in besieged Sarajevo was only one of the artistic currents that produced events. During this time, two cinemas opened (Apollo in 1993 and Radnik in 1994). They mainly showed films from private collections, later, also ones that foreign journalists brought. The Sarajevo Film Festival was conceived just before the end of the siege (October 1995). The Sarajevo String Quartet also worked continuously, but the line-up was constantly changing as the members had left Sarajevo or were killed. The title and concept of the visual art project – sculptures named *Faster than the Wind* (1994) – confirms that the people of Sarajevo have always maintained their characteristic (black) humor. Suspended above

1 *Kosa*, directed by Slavko Pervan, Kamerni teater 55, premiere October 1992.

2 Darko Lukić, *Bašeškija, san o Sarajevu*, directed by Gradimir Gojer, premiere April 1991.



the Miljacka River, the sculptures look like they are running. Indeed, running had become a normal, everyday activity, the ultimate dynamic of movement in wartime Sarajevo, controlled by snipers.

In contrast to their fellow Bosnians who remained in Sarajevo, the Bosnians in Slovenia experienced hardship far from their homes, in a new environment, in a different culture, among unknown people and rules. Although they were spared the direct danger of war, they suffered other – psychological – consequences. They were the targets of chauvinism, xenophobia, hate speech, ignorance, and guilt. Young people, who, on the one hand, were not yet mature enough to understand the war system and its consequences, were, on the other hand, receptive to their feelings, insights, and reflections of what was happening to them. The generational profile of the participants with whom Draga Potočnjak worked ranged from eight to twenty years old.

If we wanted to define this theater, we could say that it somehow escapes the definitions of theater forms at the “intersection of cultures,” as defined by Patrice Pavis. Thus, to categories such as intercultural theater, multicultural theater, cultural collage, syncretic theater, postcolonial theater, and theater of the “fourth world,” we should add a new one: “theater of resistance.” (Lukan 1995)

Representing war always means representing pain. The pain of loss, physical pain, the pain of despair, the pain of helplessness, the pain of defeat, the pain of not being heard, the pain of being ignored. In many cases, it is about mediating some personal pain (trauma), which can be physical, psychological – or multidimensional – since the first parameter (physical) often does not exist without the second (psychic) and vice versa. Although there are countless principles and methods of representation for transforming private pain into public pain, it is not always a matter of representing its

totality/absoluteness (which would trigger complete empathy in the audience) but rather an act of “sharing pain with others.” However, establishing an appropriate symbolic language of art – one that spans between the speaker and the observer – is required. Often, this symbolic language turns out to be the most problematic. Empathy, especially the empathy toward different people that takes place during the performance, can be understood as an attempt to assume and play new roles and identities and, in this sense, as a “threshold experience.” Or, as Erika Fischer-Lichte writes, “by transferring the emotions perceived on the actor’s body to the spectator’s body during the performance,” such perception causes an *infection* (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 192).

Elaine Scarry attributes pain to three fundamental factors influencing its process and effects. These are 1) the problematic expression of physical pain, 2) the political and perceptual complications that arise from this, and 3) the nature of both material (bodily) and verbal expression or, simply, the nature of human creation. According to Scarry, physical pain has no voice, but when it does get that voice, it begins to tell stories, and when it begins to tell stories, all three of these parts begin to interrelate and become inseparable (Scarry 1997, 87). Traumatic narratives, therefore, include a kind of “double narration.” They oscillate between a crisis of death and a crisis of life, “between a story about the unbearable nature of a certain event and a story about the unbearable nature of surviving that event” (Scarry 1987, 7). We must, therefore, understand the staging of plays about war as a therapeutic factor rather than a desire to “understand” pain.

Possible problematic aspects of the Theater of Exiles can emerge in the context of establishing the *other*. Indeed, the stage representation of the refugee experience often comes from the intention of informing the public about oppressed groups. However, this move also hides a loop in establishing the performers as *others*. When the child population enters the discourse, the value of the other diminishes since the child is not yet, at least not personally, contaminated with political

consciousness or ideological activity. From a private point of view, we can say that his childhood relieves him of political otherness. However, a cultural otherness is still established with him, which this time not only illustrates the fact that he comes from elsewhere but that he comes from an environment that represents the “dark Balkans” to the outside world, that is, a place where nations are unable to communicate with each other other than through violence. This context is – beyond their awareness – predestined for them. Even for Slovenia, as we have already written, the Balkans represent a “cultural Other,” in relation to which Europe can present itself as a cultural (“civilizational”) whole (the one without war conflicts). If nothing else, we can define the geographical interruption of the Balkans in the north by separating the war zones from the non-war zones.

Based on what happened to them, I told them that they had forever earned the right to perform in life with certainty and with their heads held high, and above all, not to allow themselves to be humiliated. I felt they needed confirmation, above all else, the feeling that they were really something. [...] They got the opportunity to talk on stage about the war and certain things that clouded their consciousness and brains to resolve their worst feelings, thus restoring their self-confidence. (Potočnjak 1999, 65)

Critic Blaž Lukan wrote about the play *Pridi vsaj k sebi, če nimaš kam* (*At least come to your senses if you have nowhere to go*), which premiered at KUD France Prešeren on April 23, 1995:

It is a time that runs parallel to the war. More precisely, it is all war. The realization that there will never be a universal truce is cruel and tragic. It will only be what it already is: ruins, ruins... The drama of refugee theater artists entitled *At least come to your senses if you have nowhere to go* also offers the possibility of a way out,

the possibility of the emergence of the new on the ruins of the old. However, this requires a sacrifice. [...] The drama by Igor Serdarević and Draga Potočnjak is a modern existentialist play of the Camus type, in which almost everything that is meant in it is also said. The various forms of torture it enacts are skillfully framed by genre (only a blunt knife remains unused). Despite many humorous, uplifting, and revealing moments, the play never sinks to the level of melodrama. (Lukan 1995)

For the local Slovenian audience, it was an attempt to understand and sympathize. For the participants, it was entertainment – not only a chance to momentarily forget reality but also a specific therapy. Most importantly, the guest performances they put on in refugee centers represented a unique experience for the creators, as they performed in front of people who had never been to a theater in their lives and yet shared the same war experiences (at that time, the poorest exiles were living in the refugee centers).

### **“You build a new world around yourself to get away from the thought that ‘you are the problem’”**

In September 2024, I had the opportunity to talk to Damir Murathodžić, a former member of the Incurable Optimists. As an epilogue to my discussion about Dragica Potočnjak, I have included some excerpts from this conversation below.

Damir Murathodžić fled to Slovenia from Srebrenica. On 14 April, 1992, his parents put him on a bus intending to send him “somewhere,” i.e., somewhere else, to safety. During the journey, he did not even know exactly where they were going, but in the end, they arrived in Ljubljana at the Šmartinska refugee center. It was also SCT’s<sup>3</sup> home for workers from former Yugoslavia. He stayed in the refugee

3 Slovenija ceste Tehnika, d.d., one of the largest construction companies in the region of former Yugoslavia until its bankruptcy in 2011.

center for about three and a half years, living in a small room with six constantly changing roommates. There was no space, no privacy, and, therefore, no time to reflect on what was happening to him. Due to the catastrophic war situation, the atmosphere in the refugee center was unbearable for him (crying mothers, frightened children, and a constant barrage of bad news from Bosnia). He soon joined various volunteer groups, including the team at KUD France Prešeren.<sup>4</sup> He also looked for various forms of work, which is how he connected with different people and expanded his social network. The people he met outside the refugee center greatly influenced his well-being, built his personality, and, above all, helped him to stop constantly thinking about the war and what was happening to the four hundred other people in the refugee center.

He says that for him at that time, KUD France Prešeren was “a magnet for events and the possibility to help.” Or, as he says, “You think about how to help others to indeed help yourself.” He participated in various organizations and decided to list all the refugees in Ljubljana refugee centers because people did not know about each other at the time due to poor communication channels. Sometimes, not even the fact that a family member or relative might be nearby. Murathodžić posted the lists on the bulletin boards of the refugee centers.

“You build a new world around yourself to get away from the thought that ‘you are the problem.’” All the time, he was accompanied by a kind of “detachment” from himself, that the war did not happen to him, so now he helps other refugees as a volunteer. In KUD France Prešeren, he performed various jobs, from serving to technical assistance, and that is how he came into contact with the theater group

4 KUD France Prešeren is a culture and arts center where individuals and groups pursue their artistic, cultural, educational, societal, humanitarian, technical, and informal interests. Its policy of an open social space promotes interaction between visitors and people who create or produce various programmes. This is all reflected in the planning and shaping of activities as well as in the atmosphere and the image of the center.

led by Draga Potočnjak. First, he worked as a technician, but Draga invited him to join the Incurable Optimists ensemble when one member (an actor) left the group. “By then, I had been helping with lighting and sound equipment for more than ten repetitions. Of course, I already knew the play’s text by heart.” He adds, “It was no problem for me to accept the offer to act. We were ‘acting non-stop anyway’.”<sup>5</sup>

He perceived the period in Slovenia as a dream. “The syndromes of war are always different; some become beasts, some superheroes, some victims. I myself became a kind of hyperactive young man.” Although he stood on stage for the first time and acted for the first time in these performances, off stage, he is extremely communicative and extroverted.

“Draga, as a mentor, worked very intensively with me. It was a very demanding process for me to understand why the role was important, both from a rational and emotional point of view.” Especially since I constantly pushed my fears and pains away and kept silent about them, as if there was no war. Even my theater group mates and I never really talked about it privately, so the shows and playing were the key valve that released our tensions and hardships. “We built a wall and didn’t talk about ‘how do you feel?’” In theater creation itself, they wanted to be so-called anti-war revolutionaries. They persisted with war themes on stage, intending that some of it would “remain” – for them and the public.

Nevertheless, there were some paradoxes: “Even though we talked about the war on stage and in the play, it paradoxically seemed to us that this war was not happening to us.” A dilemma always accompanied their situation: “Why would you ask a refugee ‘how are you doing?’ – if you know he’s in a bad and terrible condition.” From here, we can also derive the psychological question of recognizing the absence of this kind of communication. Is this the result of ignorance or fear of invasion of intimacy?

5 “Itak glumimo non stop.”

It was an extremely intense experience for him. Even though he was not a professional actor, he already recognized the various parameters of perception: the mutual energy in the group, the connection with the audience, the intense silence during the performance when he saw that people were looking at him, completely absorbed. Putting on the performances in other refugee centers was a kind of “risky thing to do because you present topics that are directly related to their war experience, and some of them were literally ‘torn out.’ They wanted to go on stage...”

He says about his acting practice that he “always felt as if it wasn’t him” or as if “someone else was speaking from him,” as if it was not a conscious act. Cooperating with Draga Potočnjak was extremely valuable and unique, not only because of her acting and teaching skills but also because she was an outstanding activist and politically engaged outside of their community. “She fought constantly outside of our theater meetings, and therefore, we established a special relationship, also a kind of admiration, which positively affected the creative process.” She once told him, “Damir, despite everything, despite all the rehearsals and conversations, I could never get close to you, and I don’t really know anything about you and your family.”

During his stay in Slovenia, he wanted to study. He went from college to college, and since he was treated as a foreign student, he would have had to pay around €3,000 in tuition fees (in today’s currency). And he answered them: “Do you think that if I had €3,000, I would be living in a refugee center?” He was later accepted at the Faculty of Social Work. Thus, he received a new status, a student index, and a monthly bus ticket. He acquired a new identity, and with it, he also had opportunities to connect with new people. He wanted to move on; he passed all the conditions for the driving test, which was a huge expense, but he never got the document because he did not have a permanent residence permit. Because of strict requirements for foreigners at Slovenian banks, he also could not open a bank account.

In 2022, the Incurrigible Optimists met again thirty years later, at Vodnikova domačija Cultural Center in Ljubljana, where they “staged” a kind of reconstruction of the performances. “It was an attempt and a nice gesture, but it was clear that any concrete reconstruction was impossible. Thirty years ago, I was in a completely different state of mind, and the environment and circumstances shaped my existence. It was very difficult or impossible for me to recall all of this.”



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## 8 The Little Prince Defies Silence: Literary and Cultural Agency for and with Children in Times of Displacement

KATJA KOBOLT

At some point during the Battle of Menina Planina on 13–14 March 1945 – when the Sixth and Eleventh Brigades of the NOV (People's Liberation Army, 1941–45) succeeded in breaking through the ring of the Nazi-German SS Galizien siege – a song is said to have been sung. The song gave the partisan fighters the courage they needed to break through the ring of the besiegers. Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz (1928–2023), a partisan teacher and cryptographer, later a journalist, long-time contributor to the editorial board of the Sarajevo children's magazine *Male novine*, and writer for children and adults, also recounts this event in her memoirs (Skrinjar-Tvrz 2019a and 2019b). Because of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–95), Skrinjar-Tvrz, born in Zagorje (Slovenia), returned to Slovenia as a refugee in the autumn of 1992 after almost forty years of living and working in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). She and her husband joined the last Jewish convoy on their journey from Sarajevo. The couple carried their basic personal necessities and documents in one bag, while in the other, Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz took books and tapes of radio and television programs for children, of which she was the author (Skrinjar-Tvrz n.d.).

However, it was not customary for refugees to include books in their basic kit (Krtalić n.d.). The establishment of the biblioteka egzil-abc book collection, published between the years 1993 and 1996 by the Kulturni vikend djece BiH (Cultural weekend for BiH children) at the cultural center Vodnikova domačija in Ljubljana, and the Bosanska riječ (The Bosnian Word) publishing house in Wuppertal, Germany and, later, in Tuzla (BiH) attest to the need for books and literature among refugees. Both the book collection and the publishing house were founded and run by writers who themselves were displaced from BiH. A quarter of all displaced people from BiH who came to Slovenia were children under sixteen (Šmid and Štrumbelj 2004, 248), and the displaced writers and artists for children continued to work *for* and *with* children.

Similarly, as these writers and artists drew on the modes of literary and artistic agency and education that they themselves enjoyed within the ramified socialist structures of aesthetic and literary education, and which they later actively co-defined with their professional activities, so too does this chapter draw on my previous research on so-called literary agency (Kobolt 2024b). With this text, I continue the outline of literary agency, which I, drawing on discourses, conceptualizations, policies, practices, and (infra)structures of literary education and their role in the establishment and development of literary polysystems<sup>1</sup> in socialist Yugoslavia, identify as part of cultural agency (Kobolt 2024b, 106). In reference to the proposals by scholars Doris Sommer (2006) and Maya Nitis (2023), who introduced the notions of cultural and literary agency, respectively, I define literary agency as “a generative and reproductive tool of literary systems, and by extension also of other cultural and social fields as well as of subjectivation” (Kobolt 2024b, 97). The chapter aims to outline the concrete literary agency of displaced writers and artists, as well as children, in the context

1 Itamar Even-Zohar’s (1990) system theory is rooted in translation studies and identifies within the (poly)system the dominance or centrality and peripherality of certain systems within which producers, receivers, and products, as well as institutions, marketplace, and repertory, operate.

of their war-related migration from BiH to Slovenia and partly to Germany. I will consider the modes, conditions, and roles of literary agency in the context of production for and with children, particularly in times of displacement and its aftermath.

I look for answers mainly by following the professional biographies of the artists involved in the research, based on interviews with them, both within the research itself and more broadly. I take into account the previous research on their work, especially within the studies of so-called migrant literature. To trace the relationship between literary and cultural agency and subjectivation, especially in the aftermath of war-related migration, I draw on the conceptual framework of narrative agency (Meretoja 2022; Kobolt 2024a). Narrative agency is a concept developed within narrative hermeneutics to explore the modes of (and relations to) different narratives and their role in subjectivation and in constituting and making sense of reality (Meretoja 2022). In my research, I also draw on the literary work of children and young people in which they describe their experiences of war and displacement. The children wrote in the context of the literary and artistic activities of writers and other artists with children in the framework of the workshops Cultural Weekend for BiH Children and elsewhere. Memories of these workshops were collected in 2022 by the Vodnikova domačija/Divja Misel Institute as part of the project *Zgodilo se je čisto blizu nas* (It Happened Very Close to Us) on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the arrival of Bosnian-Herzegovinian war refugees in Slovenia.

## **“A to je nekako baš bila ono vikend oaza” – Cultural Workshops for Refugee Children**

“It was a kind of weekend oasis,”<sup>2</sup> is how one of the child participants, Irena Krtalić, describes the Cultural Weekend for BiH Children that took place weekly from January 1993 till

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of quoted materials are by the author.

the year 1996. Krtalić, now an adult and a lawyer, believes the workshops had a therapeutic effect because the children “were not exposed to the fear of a new language, of new people, of the possibilities with which and how [they] would finance their stay here and how long it would last” (Krtalić n.d., 3). Artists, educators, and writers from BiH, all refugees themselves, led the cultural workshops.<sup>3</sup> The Cultural Weekend for BiH Children was financially supported by the Open Society Foundation so that the tutors could receive a small fee – the painter and mixed media artist Ismar Mujezinović,<sup>4</sup> who led the art workshop recalls 400 DM per month (Mujezinović 2024).<sup>5</sup>

3 Vjekoslav Andree taught the children guitar and also coordinated the workshops, Marija Andree taught keyboards, their daughter Vesna Andree Zaimović also helped them with the lessons (Andree Zaimović n.d., 14). Music was further taught by Sabrija Džafić (guitar), Đorđe Busančić (oboe and other wind instruments), Meira Ismajlović (piano), and Maja Muslimović (keyboards and the children’s choir Bonbončići [Candies]). Josip Osti led the literary workshop, Ismar Mujezinović the art workshop, Marina Andree the animated film workshop, and Anton Bartulović led the workshop of handicraft copper processing (*kujundiluk/kazandiluk*) (Andree Zaimović n.d., 14; Mujezinović 2024). Theater and photography workshops were also offered. The workshops were also held in the context of mother tongue classes in the so-called assembly centers and more than 50 organized refugee schools (Bekrić 2024; Šmid and Štrumbl 2004, 248).

4 Ismar Mujezinović (1942–) is a painter, designer, illustrator, set designer, writer and filmmaker. His work was probably best known to the general public of the “region” for the iconic posters of athletes for the Sarajevo Olympics and posters of popular Yugoslav films (such as *Sječaš li se, Dolly Bell?*, *Valter brani Sarajevo*, and others). Although Ismar Mujezinović was represented in the *Likovna enciklopedija Jugoslavije* (*Art Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia*) with his motto and a reproduction of a painting (Husedžinović 1987, 392) and has been working in Slovenia ever since the war, his work, together with the work of most of his refugee colleagues in Slovenia remains more or less overlooked.

5 The question of fees is very important, despite the humanitarian nature of this work, because the problem of finances was and remains very acute for displaced people. As a rule, refugee status prohibits paid work. The Slovenian labor market situation in the first years of the 1990s was also extremely bad, as many former socialist companies, including economic giants, went bankrupt in one way or another during the privatization process, and workers became “technological surplus.”

The (textual and visual) works by children produced in workshops were published in children's magazines and other publications. The publications were issued by dedicated educators together with children in assembly centers and primary schools for refugee children where workshops were also offered: *Runolist/Planika (Edelweiss)* in Ilirska Bistrica, *Školarac/Šolar (Schoolchild)* in Novo mesto, *Vezeni most/Izvezeni most (Embroidered bridge)* in Črnomelj, *To smo mi (That's us)* in Piran (Bekrić 2024).

Unaccompanied by her parents, Sonja Ivić (1976–) came alone to Slovenia at the age of sixteen from Sarajevo, where she was also injured. Sonja, who lost her father during the war, participated in a literary workshop at the Cultural Weekend for BiH Children. In the story “Čovjek” (“Human”), Ivić speaks about the divide between the experience of the siege, violence, and other oppressions of war and the experience of those who sought refuge. This divide continues to mark the memories and also lives of those who have, in one way or another, experienced the war, and thus, it also affects the relationship between their temporary (or permanent) new and old homes.

Why do I feel like a traitor if they would have done the same had they had a chance to be saved from madness and death on that cold November 20. And again, I wonder if I have the right to say that it is difficult for me and if I can ever compare myself to them in any way. They are together, and I am alone. They will always be able to pass with their heads held high, look everyone in the eye, and say: “We fought, and we endured. And you, where have you been?” I won't be allowed to look at them, even though I struggled, too. *Pen and paper are the means of struggle for those of us who, by force majeure, have left everything and now find ourselves lost somewhere between two worlds, two lives, not distinguishing between dreaming and being awake.* (Ivić 1995, 37–38; emphasis added by the author)

This story, along with other short stories by Sonja Ivić about her experiences of war and displacement, was published in 1995 in an edition of 200 copies under the title *Krvarim ali živim (I bleed but I live)* in the book collection biblioteka egzil-abc library. It was published between 1993 and 1996 as part of the Cultural Weekend for BiH Children and was founded and edited by the poet, translator, and editor Josip Osti (1945–2021). The small (10 by 14 cm), black-and-white, metal-stapled booklets, wrapped in thin pastel-colored covers, featured Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Slovenian authors as well as children's works. In the description of the book collection on the flaps the editor Osti urges readers: "We suggest that the readers to whom we give the books free of charge also give them to others to read and, if possible, photocopy them themselves and share them with other interested people." (Ivić 1995)<sup>6</sup>

### **"Tražim svoje ime" – Literary Agency by Writers with Migration Experience**

I am no longer sure if my name is "refugee" or if I have my own name. However, I know that's not my name, and don't call me that. Call me by my own name because I, too, had my own name, my home, and my homeland.  
(Nazdarević 1994, 40)

Similar issues highlighted by Amra Nazdarević in her story "Tražim svoje ime" ("I demand my name"), who attended the literary workshops, regarding the displacement have also plagued the so-called migrant literature and its authors within the Slovenian literary polysystem. Just as refugees are treated as a separate group of people socioculturally and in terms

6 According to the data available, the access to children's books in the languages of the former Yugoslavia in general and school libraries in Slovenia has not been systematically organized, neither in the 1990s nor today (Pirc 2016). Researchers of migration and interculturality encourage the inclusion of multi- and intercultural content as well as teaching staff with migration experience due to the positive relational effects (Vižintin 2014).



of their rights, writers with migration experience and their work are also treated differently. Žitnik Serafin, a literary scholar in migration studies, highlights the separate treatment of the work by the writers with migration experience within academic and professional discourses, which has structural consequences (eligibility for scholarships, subsidies for inclusion in publishing programs, inclusion in canonization processes, and access to residencies, prizes, and awards, etc.). Are the (former) nationality, the mother tongue, the language they use in their work, or the “literary aesthetic (especially thematic, motivic and partly stylistic) specificity” of their works really so pronounced or decisive that we can speak of the validity of the concept of “migrant literature” (Žitnik Serafin 2014, 33)?

Literary polysystems are based on national languages and thus tend to be monocultural. Despite their (cultural, political, structural, and ideological) integration into the broader Yugoslav socialist literary polysystem, the individual Yugoslav literary polysystems, and thus also the Slovenian one, tended toward monoculturalism already during the time of the common state. This is also true in the field of children’s literature (Blažić 2005). This is evidenced, among other things, by the late Yugoslav attempts at joint textbook projects and the comparative study of publishing programs in children’s literature, which were primarily oriented toward the national curricula.<sup>7</sup> Also, the professional and academic literature of the time – including the rare anthologies of Yugoslav writers for children (cf. Pirnat-Cognard 1980; Idrizović and Jenkić 1989) – considered Yugoslav children’s literature in the context of the literature of individual national or minority languages. One of the writers I discuss

7 Even though there were, especially compared to the present time, very vivid translation activities between different Yugoslav literary polysystems, distinctly cross-cultural collections of children’s literature were very rare. One such collection, *Lastavica*, was founded and edited by the Bosnian-Herzegovina children’s writer Ahmet Hromadžić at the Sarajevo-based publisher Veselin Masleša.

in this chapter, Ismet Bekrić, highlighted the fragmentation in Yugoslav children's literature in a panel discussion at Zmajeve dečje igre (Children games by [Jovan Jovanović] Zmaj) entitled "Knjiga i dete danas" ("The book and the child today") in 1989. There, Bekrić drew attention to the commercial aspects of children's literature mostly due to its integration into the educational sector and called for a greater *passability* in curricula of individual Yugoslav republics as well as for the renewal of literary systems through the integration of new, yet not-acclaimed authors (Bekrić 1990, 115). Only three years later, with the outbreak of the war in BiH, this canonized author – together with most of his other colleagues who had fled to Slovenia – found himself in the group of so-called non-elite authors (Dimkovska 2006).

Poet, comparatist, and translator Lidija Dimkovska argued already in the mid-2000s that more than 90% of writers with migration experience in Slovenia were "non-elite" and relegated to anonymity (Dimkovska 2005, 71; 2006, 141, 142). Dimkovska identifies the level of integration in the literary polysystem as the inclusion in mainstream literary journals, events, and (anthology) projects (Dimkovska 2005, 74). As obstacles to literary integration, the researcher addresses the following factors: firstly, writing in a mother tongue and insufficient translation of their works, publishing of their works in separate literary journals (or in the Slovenian case, in the only journal for Slovenian writers in foreign languages – *Paralele*, published by the Fund of the Republic of Slovenia for Amateur Cultural Activities (JSKD) since 1994); presenting at a separate literary festival – Sosed tvoje brega (Neighbor of your riverbank or before that, the festival Susret/Srečanje, 1979–) also organized by the JSKD; and the non-inclusion of the writers with migration experience into programs of established publishing houses as well as in other central (infra)structures of the Slovenian literary polysystem (Slovenian Writers' Association, literary events and professional, academic and media coverage of their work) (Dimkovska 2005, 72–74). All these factors are said to have

caused the writers with migration experience to “often find themselves somewhere in between, in the space between cultures, and in fact belonging to neither one nor the other,” as Dimkovska summarizes her colleague, literary scholar and translator Maruša Mugerli (2005, 190). Ismet Bekrić, in his native culture, a well-established and many times awarded poet and children’s author, translator, literary pedagogue, and editor, made a similar comment in the research process for this chapter: “Everything you write and say will only make sense if our status is more regulated [...]” (Bekrić 2024).

Given the slow progress in improving the status of writers with migration experience, particularly of the first-generation of immigrants, in the continuation, I will focus on how the displaced writers continued with their literary work for and with children, albeit within the context of “non-elite” and marginalized literature.

## People Are the Strongest Structure

It is estimated that, in 1993, between 70,000 and 100,000 displaced people from BiH arrived in Slovenia (Šmid and Štumbl 2004, 248). Only a small number of these individuals were accommodated in assembly centers (Markotić 2009, 13). Similarly, as most of the displaced were largely dependent on those with whom they had familial, friendship, or professional relations for their housing, for the literary activities of the displaced writers and artists some of their Slovenian colleagues but mostly the fellow refugee colleagues provided the most solid structure.

Ismet Bekrić emphasized the significance of these collegial collaborations, particularly the collaboration with Boris A. Novak, Josip Osti and Šimo Ešić (Bekrić 2024). In 1991, Ešić, a poet, editor, publisher, and promoter of children’s literature, founded the *Bosanska riječ*/Das Bosnische Wort (Bosnian Word) publishing house in Wuppertal, Germany. In addition to his work with poetry, which he began as a child within the context of the then-diversified structures of literary

education (Kobolt 2024b), Ešić also served as an editor for the publishing houses Univerzal in Tuzla and Književna zajednica Drugari in Sarajevo. His visits to Germany, where the Drugari publishing house promoted its publications to Yugoslav migrant workers and their children in Germany, resulted in a collaboration with a local Serbo-Croatian language teacher, and the publishing house Bosanska riječ was established. The Bosanska riječ publishing house has ever since presented its program in the so-called common language (*zajednički jezik*),<sup>8</sup> including the works by Ismet Bekrić (1994), Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz (2009, 2012, 2016), Josip Osti (2006), as well as the works these writers translated from Slovenian language (Boris A. Novak 2002, Ela Peroci 2002, Dane Zajc 2006 and others). After the war, the writers continued their collaboration. Thus, Ismet Bekrić and Šimo Ešić collaborate within the children's festival Vezni most (Woven Bridge [after the eponymous work for children by Nasiha Kapidžić-Hadžić]) in Tuzla (2004–), which bestows the Mali princ (Little Prince) – the only award in children's literature paying attention to the regional production of the so-called common language.

The displaced writers were also supported by their Slovenian colleagues, especially those with whom they had collaborated before the war or who had experienced migration themselves and had access to some of the (infra) structures of the Slovenian literary polysystem. Despite the above-mentioned monocultural tendency, the manifold structures of the Yugoslav socialist literary polysystem, in many ways, encouraged inter-Yugoslav and even international collaboration. In particular, children's literary magazines, selected book collections, book fairs, and awards

8 The Declaration on a Common Language (Dekleracija o zajedničkom jeziku) treats the languages spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia as a so-called polycentric literary language – a language spoken by several peoples in several countries, with distinctive varieties, which is a common phenomenon in Europe as well as in the rest of the world.

connected writers, artists, translators, editors, and publishers from different Yugoslav production contexts. Children's festivals also played an important connective role,<sup>9</sup> where actors from different Yugoslav literary polysystems met and actively co-shaped children's literature and art as well as cultural policy. The meetings of the Yugoslav Writers' Union, whose members were mainly established children's writers, were also important. Although in 1989 the Slovenian Writers' Association (DSP) broke off relations with the Yugoslav Union, where in the course of the 1980s, nationalist voices got louder and louder, individual members of the DSP actively supported their Bosnian-Herzegovinian colleagues who fled the war to Slovenia.

The poet, translator, literary theorist, pedagogue, and editor Boris A. Novak (1953–), one of Slovenia's most renowned contemporary children's authors, supported his displaced colleagues very actively. As the last editor of *Kurirček*, a literary magazine for children (1960–90, later renamed *Kekec*), Novak also included works by writers from other Yugoslav production contexts. For example, in the first *Kurirček* issue in 1989, we find the poem *Zakaj otrok želi odrasti* (*Why a child wants to grow up*) by Šimo Ešić. The poem, together with other poems by Ešić, was also published a year later in the poetry collection *Kako nasmejati mamo* (*How to make your mother smile*) by Mladinska knjiga Publishing House in Ljubljana, in the translation by children's author, translator, journalist, editor, and teacher Neža Maurer (1930–). Maurer also actively supported her Bosnian-Herzegovinian colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

9 Zmajeve dečje igre, Novi Sad (1957–), Festival Djeteta, Šibenik (1958–), *Kurirček*, Maribor and elsewhere (1963–92).

10 Their cooperation dates back to the pre-war period: the presentation of the bilingual poetry collection *Iskal sem kukavico/Tražio sam kukavicu* by Neža Maurer at the Drugari publisher, where Šimo Ešić worked, was translated by Šimo Ešić and Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz (Maurer 1989). Šimo Ešić and Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz continued their collaboration within Bosanska riječ publisher.

## “Ej, ti me možeš slušati, zar ne?” – The Roles of Literary Agency

Hey, you can listen to me, right? [...] After reading another book, my soul wanders, and I'm still here. [...] The OTHER ME, who would dream, sing, write, live. [...] But here, I remain, THIS ME who hurts. Who wakes up in a military bed in a barrack abandoned even by soldiers. [...] THIS ME, who finds it harder and harder to love. [...] That's why I'm asking you, and I know that you can do it one night when ME, the real ME, is sleeping, when the OTHER ME and THIS ME meet, hide us. [...] Hide us, please, right next to you, because only there, apparently, it doesn't hurt to dream!

Irena Krtalić, student, Ljubljana. (Krtalić 1994, 41)

Along with other children whose parents were employed by Rade Končar technological company, Irena Krtalić arrived in Slovenia unaccompanied by her parents. The children initially resided in the company's holiday accommodation in the Gorenjska region. From there, they were relocated to Ljubljana to be able to continue with their secondary schooling. Her work “PRAVA JA” (“THE REAL ME”), which she wrote in a literary workshop, alludes to the function of the narratives in relation to subjectivation and “the integration of the self over time” (Mackenzie 2008, 12). It particularly touches on functions of narrative agency or the “ability to navigate our narrative environments: use and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narratively interpret our lives and the world around us” (Meretoja 2022, 123).

Hanna Meretoja defines three central aspects of narrative agency. First, narrative agency involves *narrative awareness* as “awareness of different narrative perspectives and of the cultural repertoire of narratives that circulate in our cultural environments and provide us with models

of sense-making.” Second, it includes *narrative imagination*: “the capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present [...] and to engage with the culturally available repertoire of narratives critically and creatively in ways that expand one’s ‘sense of the possible.’” Its third aspect is *narrative dialogicality*: “the capacity to enter into relationships and be part of communities that have their own shared ‘narrative in-betweens’ that is, intersubjective mythologies and narrative sense-making systems, and to participate in their renewal, challenging, and transformation” (Meretoja 2022, 123).

Adopting the concept of the narrative agency and developing it towards what I call literary agency, I propose to examine the work by displaced writers for and with children through the polysystemic understanding of literature: to examine the work of writers with migration experience in the view of producers, receivers, products, institutions, marketplace and intertwinings with other social systems. In my examination, I consider four levels: the level of literary agency of writers, of children as readers and especially as writers, and of (general) readership, as well as other structures of the literary polysystem (including publishing/market and institutional structures in the sense of the various disciplines, associations, media, etc.). Following the tripartite breakdown of narrative agency by Hanna Meretoja regarding the different levels of literary agency, I accordingly ask about the i) *awareness*, ii) *imagination*, and iii) *dialogicality* of literary agency.

## The Awareness of Literary Agency

During their displacement, the writers could base their literary agency on an awareness of the Yugoslav socialist literary polysystem (and its narratives). The cultural policy in the Yugoslav self-management system, especially since the 1970s, also encouraged smaller, self-organized projects. With this knowledge, the displaced writers were also able to (re)establish connections and organize themselves upon their arrival

to Slovenia and Germany, respectively, and to continue their literary work.

In the aspect of awareness of the literary agency at the level of the institutional structures of the Slovenian literary system of children's literature, the already detected underrepresentation of writers with migration experience needs to be confirmed – with few notable exceptions (Re 1995, 19; Leiler 1996, 13; Šajn 1994, 8; Horvat 1997, 8; Lavrenčič Vrabec 2001). Publications by authors with migration experience are absent from the central Slovenian children's (and adult) literature magazines: Bekrić is represented in the children's magazine *Ciciban* with a single publication, while according to the data available, Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz has not been represented at all.<sup>11</sup> The researched writers are not represented in the Slovenian curricula. Thus, the writers with migration experience have turned primarily to their native and diasporic contexts.

In the context of awareness of literary agency at the level of readership, it can be concluded from interviews with the authors and distribution networks of the publishing projects included in the study that their works, as well as the works by children, were mainly read by other people who were refugees from BiH or migrated from BiH before the war.

The awareness of the literary agency of the writers with migration experience reflects partly the narratives and structures that emerged in the prewar and interwar processes of ethnicized identity politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, more broadly, in the region. These were incorporated into the Dayton Agreement, which formally concluded the war in BiH in November 1995 and became embedded in the constitutional framework of the postwar BiH, pinning the country down to ethnic division to a considerable extent. Consequently, in 1994, the Bosanska riječ publisher

<sup>11</sup> According to the online bibliographical system Cobiss ([www.cobiss.si](http://www.cobiss.si)), accessed on 20 September 2024.



released an edition of Bosniak children's literature.<sup>12</sup> Within the Yugoslav framework, Bosnian-Herzegovinian children's literature was not divided according to the authors' ethnicity. Rather, it was classified according to the language in which the writers wrote, the production context in which they worked, and, in some cases, the place where they were born. Additionally, their works' thematic-motivic, spatial, temporal, stylistic, and figurative characteristics were also considered.<sup>13</sup> The collection of Bosniak children's literature, which was financially supported by Bosnian-Herzegovinian missions, diasporic individuals, and associations, was not continued after 1994. However, ever since, the publisher's program has included works from all former Yugoslav production contexts, as well as translated world literature for children.

In the context of the awareness of children's literary agency, the themes the children wrote about reflect the thematic-motivic landscape already inherent in Yugoslav socialist children's literature. In the afore-quoted work, Irena Krtalić addresses the understanding of literary agency (from the point of view of both the writer and the reader) as a place of freedom. This is demonstrated through the merging of the imaginative THIS ME that emerges through the literary experience and the OTHER ME that awakens on the metal beds of a former barrack converted into a refugee center. This merging allows for the realization of the real ME. Typical of the Yugoslav socialist conception of literary agency, and cultural agency in general, was the understanding of it in relation to non-alienated work, as an experiential, cognitive, and relational incentive (Kobolt 2022 and Kobolt 2024b).

12 The collection included the works of Bosnian Muslim writers such as Skender Kulenović and Ahmet Hromadžić, as well as younger ones like Irfan Horozović, Alija Dubočanin, and Ismet Bekrić discussed here.

13 In the compendium *Književnost za djecu u Jugoslaviji* (*Literature for children in Yugoslavia*) by Idrizović and Jenkić (1989) some writers can be found within several language-production or republic contexts. Thus, for example, Ivo Andrić and Branko Ćopić are represented both within the literature for children of BiH as well as of Serbia and Montenegro.

A thematic-motivic and formal look at the contributions of children with refugee experience reveals further continuities with Yugoslav children's literature. In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by the war and the violent persecution from the familiar environment (family, neighborhoods, school environment, and circles of friends) in which children had grown up until the outbreak of war, there was a resurgence of patriotism. This was also encouraged by the Yugoslav socialist children's literature, as well as by literary education, largely linked to the memory politics of the People's Liberation War (NOB).<sup>14</sup> It is also noteworthy that there are thematic-motivic continuities in the transnational understanding and love, especially love for one's family and friends (Farah Tahirbegović's *Pismo roditeljima* (*A letter to my parents*); Sonja Ivić's *Posljednje pismo za mog tatu* (*The last letter to my father*) and, through anthropomorphisms, also of respect of other living beings and nature (cf. *Kamenček potepinko. Kamenčič skitnica* (*Stone tramp*) by Valerija Skrinjar-Tvrz, 1993/94). At the same time, the contributions of children with refugee experience reflected an awareness of the impact of the war on their lives. This included the loss of home, loved ones, and friends, the disrupted established routines, and the unfamiliarity with the new environment and language. It also encompassed feelings of loneliness and strangeness, the challenge of adapting to a new way of life, and the need to question one's own resilience in the face of adversity, a determination to resist hatred and hope for a better future (Tahirbegović 1993; Ivić 1995).

## The Imagination of Literary Agency

With the prewar, within the Yugoslav socialist framework, and the wartime experiences of literary work for children during the displacement and later diasporic situations, the writers with experience of migration expand the literary polysystems

<sup>14</sup> See the themes of the literary workshops: "Da sam ptica" ("If I were a bird"), "Moj rodi kraj" ("My home town"), in Bekrić and Topić 1994.

within which they work to different extents. Ismet Bekrić, for example, is one of the leading translators of Slovenian children's poetry into the so-called common language, for whose publications the translator is also extremely committed.<sup>15</sup> Bekrić also presents his translation work in the literary magazine *Latice. Beseda kot sosed. Besjeda kao susjeda* (*Petals. Word as a neighbor*), published by the Bošnjački kulturni savez Slovenije (Bosniak Cultural Association in Slovenia). In addition to reports on Slovenian and regional literary events, this magazine includes works of children's literature, both original and translated (from and into Slovenian).

To address workers on the temporary work abroad, as Yugoslav migrant workers were then called, Šimo Ešić and his colleague Ivica Vanja Rorić founded the publishing house *Bosanska riječ* in Germany already before the war. At the time, Yugoslavia organized different support structures for the migrant workers and their children, ranging from Yugoslav mother-tongue schools and cultural associations to magazine projects such as *Naš delavec: skupna revija slovenskih časnikov za delavce na začasnem delu v tujini* (*Our Worker: a joint magazine of Slovenian newspapers for temporary workers abroad*, 1978–88), which also included content for children. Thus, at the abovementioned symposium at Zmajeve dečje igre in 1989, Neža Maurer, along with her colleague Ismet Bekrić, specifically addressed the issue of literary education of children of the Yugoslav migrant workers (Maurer 1990). Today, the *Bosanska riječ* publishers also have offices in Canada and the United States, where following the end of the war and the loss of refugee status and the impossibility of successful (administrative) integration in the European environments

15 Bekrić translated eight poetry collections for children and adults by various Slovenian poets. He also regularly publishes translations in the Montenegrin children's magazine *Osmijeh* (1994–2001 and 2021–), which is published by the Association of Montenegrin Writers for Children and Young People (UCPDM). The journals are available online: <https://pis-cizadjecug.wixsite.com/website/blog>.

to which people fled initially, many people have migrated from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The literary polysystems of the countries where migrant writers come from, in this case, Bosnia and Herzegovina, are, in principle, more permeable, especially for the first generation of writers with migration experience, than the literary polysystems of their “second home.” This enables the writers to expand and enrich their native literary polysystems to a much greater extent. The contribution of writers with migration experience to the post-war Bosnian-Herzegovinian literary polysystem, characterized by precarious production conditions, cultural and educational divisions along ethnic lines, and an uncertain socio-political and economic situation, is of the utmost importance.

A look at the 1990s and the literary agency of children with refugee experience reveals, first of all, the linguistic-educational aspects. Of all the artistic polysystems, the literary system for children is most intertwined with the educational sector. Questions of promotion of literary agency are crucially connected to the questions of literacy as an important educational and socio-political issue. Reading and writing in the mother tongue and its multifunctional development are also fundamental for the development and growth of the language of the environment or the language of learning (Kutzelmann and Massler 2018). In the field of integration of students (from families) with migration experience in the contemporary Slovenian school system, the researcher Marijanca Ajša Vižintin (2014, 2018, 2021) notes a lack of inclusiveness, both in the field of migration and multiculturalism, in terms of materials and the actors themselves – children, teachers, parents – and suggests ways to overcome this by developing multicultural models of inclusion. Thus, the integration of writers with migration experience and their works, as well as themes and motifs related to migration and, finally also of the languages with which children in Slovenia grow up, are to be considered also within the promotion of multilingual literary agency and literacy.

The literary agency of children with refugee experience not only supported the development of their mother tongue and Slovenian as a language of the environment and learning but also encouraged them in their conceptions of the future. The children's contributions offer a glimpse into a better future – beyond the war that was raging then, into a time of peace that the children hoped for. Farah Tahirbegović (1973–2006) participated in the Cultural Weekend for BiH Children as a young adult, and upon her return to Sarajevo, she co-created the post-war Bosnian-Herzegovinian cultural landscape with great enthusiasm and also impact. Her collection of short stories within the biblioteka egzil-abc, entitled *Pismo roditeljima*, evokes the future:

I know that solutions will come, that someone or something (my persistence or my pain, maybe?) will open a way out, but when? [...] I must not allow myself to hate because it is the worst feeling [...] I know I have enough love to overcome it. [...] I know, but sometimes the defense mechanisms give way [...] Then I have to come back to you, run away from everything, dream, and draw life from your love. Very often, I remember J. Joplyn: "FREEDOM IS JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE.

Because after all, my dearest ones – I AM FREE!!!  
(Tahirbegović 1994, 3–6)

## The Dialogicality of Literary Agency

*A call to the world*

Friends, if you see me crying,

Don't ask why.

My tears are a call to the world.

I want, I just want, for someone to see them  
and stop the war!

Sanela Bašić, 15 years (Kozarac), 1993

(Bašić 1998, 26)

According to Hanna Meretoja's proposal on the dialogicality of narrative agency, this aspect of literary agency is primarily concerned with the relationality, or with those aspects that, through so-called "in-betweens" (Meretoja 2018, 117–25), open up literary agency to "the capacity to enter into relations and be part of communities" (Meretoja 2022, 123).

Writers with migration experience establish, expand, and modify relations with their literary agency, both at the level of the so-called host literary polysystem and at the level of their native literary polysystem. They change these relations through the abovementioned modes, as well as through criticism. During the war, and also with the experience of living and working in two literary polysystems (and earlier in the Yugoslav one), writers with migration experience also introduced into these polysystems new thematic-motivic and also formal solutions, which have already been partly analyzed by Lidija Dimkowska (2005).

Literary agency helped children refugees to experience their own "in-betweenness" with other refugee children, as well as with older children and others affected by the reality of the war in different ways.

I live as I have to when I can't as I want. Everything is the same here every day. School and home. There are no neighborhoods and customs here. They do not know how to prepare mezze or how to look forward to every holiday. They only know about themselves and their house.

Maja Jaganjac, 8th grade, Koper. (Jaganjac 1994, 64)

Everything is bothering me in my life! I can't do it my way because nothing is mine. I know nobody is happy that I am here and that I must stay here for a while.

Minela Jazavac, 4th grade, Črnomelj. (Jazavac 1994, 66)

Through literary agency, especially at the level of the implied readership, children demanded an equal

dialogue with the majority milieu, as in the above-quoted story by Amra Nazdarević “I demand my name.”

## Conclusion

Based on the interviews with authors, selected ethnographic material and publications, and publishing projects, this chapter presents the modes, aspects and roles of the literary agency during the displacement and its aftermath. The literary agency of writers with migration experience, who have worked for and with children, unpacks the experience of war, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the experience of displacement from their perspective as well as the perspective of children. At the same time, by observing their literary agency, some of the characteristics of the Slovenian as well as other literary polysystems in which these writers have worked – mainly the Slovenian, Bosnian-Herzegovinian, and former Yugoslav literary polysystems – come to the fore.

Taking into account the previous research on the work of writers with migration experience, mainly in literary migration studies, and adapting the conceptual apparatus of narrative agency from narrative hermeneutics, in the proposed concept of literary agency I include the perspective of the polysystemic understanding of literature. In doing so, I consider four different levels of literary agency: the level of writers, the level of children’s literary agency, the level of the readership, as well as other structures of the literary polysystem (publishing/market and institutional structures in the sense of the different disciplines, associations, media, etc. that operate within the literary polysystem). In relation to these different levels of literary agency, I ask questions about the so-called awareness of literary agency, its imagination and its dialogicality.

Within the awareness of literary agency of writers with migration experience as an awareness of perspectives, repertoires, and structures, I find continuities in the modes of their work. During the displacement, the writers attached

to the knowledge, methods, and professional connections they had established in the Yugoslav socialist framework. On the level of their awareness of literary agency, institutional processes are also partly present and situated in the narratives and structures that emerged in the prewar and interwar processes of ethnicized identity politics, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the wider region.

Children's literary agency reflects the thematic-motivic landscape already inherent in children's literature during Yugoslav socialism. The literary agency is identified as a realm of freedom. Children's experiences of war and displacement are also often expressed through patriotic motifs, which, however, do not fuel nationalist impulses, as they are based on the broader themes of love toward different social contexts children have been a part of (hometown, family, friends, neighborhood), which is also characteristic of some of the writers researched here.<sup>16</sup> Underlined is also the motif of global belonging and equality.

In connection with the awareness of literary agency at the level of the readership, it can be concluded that the interwar as well as postwar editions, including children's contributions, were read mainly by other displaced children and adults, as well as by Bosnian-Herzegovinian diasporic communities. However, the publishers sought to extend the readership by translation activities.

For the level of institutional structures of the Slovenian literary polysystem, the already established underrepresentation of writers with migration experience needs to be confirmed (Žitnik Serafin 2014, 33; Dimkowska 2005; 2008).

With their experience of literary agency for and with children, first in the Yugoslav socialist context, then during the displacement, and later in the postwar and diasporic

16 Ismet Bekrić's *Otac sa kišobranom*, *Ljube se tata i mama*, *Kako se mjeri ljubav* and Šimo Ešić's *Rudarov kućerak*, *Kako nasmijati mamu*, etc.



contexts, the writers with experience of migration have the potential to significantly expand the literary polysystems through the imagination of their literary agency. The aspect of the imagination of their literary agency is however mainly absorbed in their native and partly in the diasporic contexts of their production, ranging from the works in their mother tongue to translation practice, editing, and publishing, as well as literary pedagogical and promotional activities. In doing so, writers with migration experience usually follow inclusive linguistic and editorial models beyond ethnicized language politics and canonization processes.

A look at the imagination of literary agency of children is connected to the questions of multilingual literacy and is thus to be considered of educational and socio-political relevance. The same is true for the level of the readership. An important part of the imagination of literary agency of children with refugee experience is connected to imagining the future, beyond the war.

The dialogical aspect of literary agency primarily raises the relational aspects of how literary agency allows us to connect, enter into relationships, and build communities (Meretoja 2022, 123). Through literary agency, children with the experience of displacement created their own “in-betweenness” with other displaced children, as well as with other readers. Due to the (multi)linguistic, thematic-motivic, and formal characteristics of their (original, translation, pedagogical, editorial, and publishing) work, the writers with migration experience have addressed their native, diasporic, as well as host environments. However, the latter, especially in terms of their hegemonic institutional structures and readership, do not succeed in opening themselves up sufficiently to the dialogicality of the literary agency of writers with migration experience. Above all, this closes off the possibilities for children, the readership and other stakeholders in the literary polysystem for dialogue with those “in-betweens” that characterize our postmigrant reality.

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# Humanism vs. Antihumanism





## 9 Wer, Woher, Wohin: A Successful Arrival (in Words) in Marica Bodrožić's *Sterne erben, Sterne färben: Meine Ankunft in Wörtern*

ALEKSANDRA STARCEVIC

The Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) were distinct but connected ethnic and religious conflicts as well as independence battles that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ratification of autonomous successor countries. An estimated 140,000 people were killed, over 40,000 went missing, 2,000,000 were internally displaced, and 2,400,000 fled to other countries, including Germany (Watkins 2003, 10). In the late 1960s, Germany's *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) recruitment program attracted a large number of people from Yugoslavia. Many of them remained in Germany, which also served as a safe haven for countless individuals and families fleeing Yugoslavia from the ongoing wars in the 1990s. After the wars, many of the refugees who had fled to Germany eventually returned home, while others settled down permanently, among them exiled and migrant writers. The Yugoslav Wars and their aftermath left them with traumas and painful experiences they have written

about, including the loss of *Heimat*,<sup>1</sup> identity, belonging, and language.

## Trauma and Storytelling

These unimaginable losses were recounted in the narratives around the Yugoslav Wars. Through a variety of genres, migrants, exiles, and refugees from former Yugoslavia<sup>2</sup> wrote many texts to convey their experiences, stories, and traumas. One of these ex-Yugoslav authors is Marica Bodrožić, whose autobiographical book *Sterne erben, Sterne färben: Meine Ankunft in Wörtern* (2007)<sup>3</sup> offers a variety of answers for coping with the loss of *Heimat* and identity. Philosopher Richard Kearney addresses the issues of identity and belonging to explain the fundamental human need and desire for storytelling: You share your story when someone asks who you are (Kearney 2002). By providing answers to the questions “who am I, where am I, and where am I going?,” migrants are compelled

- 1 The German term *Heimat* carries a lot deeper connotations and historical “baggage” than the terms “homeland” or “home” that are used as English translations. Additionally, due to many movements, flights, and expulsions in the 20th century, recent scholarship has reexamined the concept of *Heimat* in order to better understand its critical aspects and the dynamic notion of space rather than the static notion of place. There is a shift from the traditional concepts of *Heimat*, immovable places of rootedness, and place-bound belonging to the idea that *Heimat* is not necessarily tied to one place, but that multiple *Heimaten* are possible. *Heimat* as a transient notion that is not attached to one particular place is relevant here for the chapter and study of displaced writers from the former Yugoslavia in Germany, as they demonstrate the fluidity, renegotiation, and pluralization of *Heimat* due to the loss of their former *Heimat* and their move, exile, or refuge in the new country.
- 2 In this historical context, migrants are the people, who moved to Germany years before the Yugoslav Wars, for example as *Gastarbeiter* (also their children); exiles are those, who left to avoid military draft and fighting in the war, for instance; and refugees experienced the war firsthand for a certain period of time and then managed to flee.
- 3 *Inheriting Stars, Coloring Stars: My Arrival in Words*. This book has not been translated into English, so all the translations here are my own. Some German is still deliberately used throughout as it testifies precisely to the linguistic world Bodrožić lives in. All the secondary sources have also been translated by me.

to reconstruct their identities and life narratives. For displaced writers from former Yugoslavia living in Germany like Marica Bodrožić, the idea of *Heimat* is a transitory concept that is not tied to a specific location because this writer shows how the concept of *Heimat* is fluid, renegotiable, and pluralized resulting from loss of their homeland. Marica Bodrožić writes about the break-up of Yugoslavia, the losses resulting from Yugoslavia's dissolution, and the aftermath of the wars through her perspective. She recalls moments such as leaving Yugoslavia for Germany as a child several years before the onset of the Yugoslav Wars. More specifically, the author discusses the traumas, the renegotiation and fluidity of identity and *Heimat*, and demonstrates how the effects of the *Heimat* loss impacted people regardless of how long they lived in Yugoslavia and when they left.

## Bodrožić's "Road" to Finding Her Identity and *Heimat*

After living and growing up in Dalmatia<sup>4</sup> and Herzegovina<sup>5</sup> with her grandfather and other relatives, Marica Bodrožić came to Hessen, Germany in 1983 at age nine. Along with her siblings, she joined her parents who migrated to Germany in 1968 as part of the *Gastarbeiter* program. Coming from a mixed nationality and ethnic family background and from a country that broke apart during the Yugoslav Wars, Marica Bodrožić stresses a particular stance in her book, namely one in which she does not use her nationality as a lens through which to explain her relationship to her native country: "Yugoslavia stood for itself, not for a national feeling, at least for me it was never tied to one" (Bodrožić 2007, 46). This offers the image of a transcultural "citizen of the world," according to critic Madlen Kazmierczak, who wanders freely in "Third Space" and is unaffected by the idea of nation

4 One of three regions in Croatia with a significant amount of coastline.

5 The southernmost region of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(Kazmierczak 2012, 21–33). This suggests that one may not be able to depend on their country or nationality. Thus, for Bodrožić, a nation is not so much “a solid entity” as it is reliant on historically shifting political institutions (Kazmierczak 2012, 33). Author Meike Fessmann demonstrates that those who are forced to flee their country, such as immigrants, refugees, migrants, or exiles, find it increasingly difficult to rely on their nationality as a means of identification (Fessmann 2013, 733). Bodrožić similarly makes this argument in her text: “Anyone who ventures out even just a little bit, away from their dusty little world and into a larger world, realizes how nationality cannot be possessed.” (Bodrožić 2007, 56)

Bodrožić’s situation involved not only her relocation to a new nation but also the disintegration of her old *Heimat*. Due to the unreliability of nationality, Bodrožić discovers language to be her means of belonging and that she is a person and a human notably because of her “Stimme,”<sup>6</sup> making language and “gemeinsames Sprachmensch-Sein”<sup>7</sup> crucial (Bodrožić 2007, 44–45). This is made clear by Bodrožić’s account of her meetings with people from former Yugoslavia whom she stumbles into on foreign soil. When Bodrožić narrates one of those interactions, she emphasizes the significance of communicating in a shared tongue with others who have lost their shared *Heimat* yet retain the vocabulary that unites them. Language, discourse, and communication, as well as collective memories and music, are the strongest symbols of togetherness, intimacy, and connection to her Yugoslav *Heimat* and her people for Bodrožić.

Before the language of her childhood played a very specific role during a particular time in her life, German proved to be a helpful language for Bodrožić as a traumatized former Yugoslav writer attempting to make sense of the painful

6 Her “voice.”

7 Having a common trait with a fellow language user by using language as means of communication, which in return creates a sense of belonging together through language, speaking to one another, communicating.

circumstances she had to deal with, creating her experiences, and organizing her feelings and thoughts. By moving to Germany, the new language and everything Bodrožić is experiencing with it start to become more significant, grow stronger, and finally take over: “Year after year, German grew on me, became a protective shield against the longing for the grandfather, the village, the children there who were becoming more and more like strangers with each holiday season, who commented on my new tone and the gaps in my sentences.” (Bodrožić 2007, 153) This reflects how *Sehnsucht* (longing) is paired with the loss of language in Bodrožić’s text. Her native tongue gradually fades away as German takes over as her go-to language for everyday communication. Bodrožić shares how she used reading as a coping mechanism for her new situation of living in a foreign place and speaking a foreign language. Writing ultimately serves as a supplement to reading by granting a more comprehensive claim to languages – that is, freedom.<sup>8</sup> Bodrožić’s desire to keep and preserve memories is the basis for her need to narrate: “Wanting to tell a story started with the desire to preserve something from my grandfather, to protect it” and German was the most appropriate language for achieving this, as Bodrožić creates distance by writing in German, which helps her confront the past (Bodrožić 2007, 12).

Bodrožić assesses that one’s native and second languages must be clearly separated in order to establish emotional space and deal with the past and loss. German became, as she calls it, a “Schutzschild,”<sup>9</sup> taking over a protective role and making it possible for her to engage with her childhood memories, recreate her old home, go back in time, and remember: “With this language, I then entered this first space, my space of origin, because I had the need to return to the first world, but that was only possible with German” (Amodeo, Hörner and Kiemle 2009, 182). Additionally, by writing in German, Bodrožić finds what

8 See: “Die Schichtungen der Gefühle,” 2018, [www.cicero.de/kultur/die-schichtungen-der-gef%C3%BChle/41405](http://www.cicero.de/kultur/die-schichtungen-der-gef%C3%BChle/41405).

9 “Protective shield.”

has been lost: her identity, belonging, and home, whereby what is lost is recreated through imagination and in language with the aim of keeping it alive in the mind. Finally, German serves as the language in which Bodrožić can express her emotions and that is achievable because her second language makes it possible for her to be less emotionally connected. In summary, Bodrožić concludes her autobiographical book by highlighting the particular significance of German in her life and writing. “This newly learned language [is] inevitably linked to a usually very important piece of biography,” as literature studies expert Christoph Parry notes (Parry 2013, 193–94).

Nevertheless, Bodrožić still finds great significance in multilingualism and her mother tongue. Despite using German as her primary literary language, she occasionally embeds words from her native tongue into the text. Bodrožić exhibits emotional attachments by using native words and expressions that represent a strong bond with the location and landscapes of her childhood, her grandfather who raised her, things that carry emotional attachment to her former *Heimat*, and terms that relate to feelings like mourning, pain, grief, and sorrow. Writing about the past and loss can also be accomplished through this code switching of the native and second language. Furthermore, Bodrožić’s work features a diversity of linguistic voices and components, which are all related to various life circumstances, encounters, customs, and emotions. Dagmar Winkler, literary expert and linguist, asserts that each language carves out a distinct niche and that alternating between the two languages maintains a connection between the first language and all other languages learned (Winkler 2010, 188).

Thus, this creates movement between languages that can be tied to movement between different times and places. It can be interpreted as the possibility for migrants to oscillate between their *Heimat* and their new country, between the past (what is lost) and the present, and to reconstruct the loss through language due to this movement. As Raluca Rădulescu, a professor of medieval literature, asserts, it can also be called

a “Hin und Her Reise”<sup>10</sup> both to the past and into the present. Eventually, it can also lead into the future. Therefore, speaking German helps migrants deal with their current situation of migration and exile as well as their future in the new nation. It also helps them deal with language barriers and discuss their painful past experiences. Beyond that, Rădulescu refers to this back and forth between the German and Yugoslav past as “identitätsforschende Unterfangen.”<sup>11</sup> She claims that in the end, the writer turns into a “Fragende”<sup>12</sup> and a “Suchende.”<sup>13</sup> Namely, Bodrožić switches between two personas, and via “written reinforcement of hybrid experiences,” disparate identities are acknowledged and subsequently combined into a single cultural identity (Rădulescu 2012, 2). As a result, Bodrožić defines her identity as hybrid and German is the language that aids her in locating that identity.

Furthermore, speaking German gives Bodrožić a new medium to rebuild her identity and home without having to deal with the post-Yugoslav language regulations. Bodrožić highlights the challenges associated with speaking one’s mother tongue. Not only did Yugoslavia fall apart as a nation, but Serbo-Croatian,<sup>14</sup> the common tongue of the Yugoslav

10 “Back-and-forth travel.”

11 “Identity search endeavor.”

12 “The one who is asking.”

13 “The one who is searching.”

14 Serbo-Croatian is a polycentric South Slavic language with four mutually intelligible standard varieties, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin. The linguistic standardization of Serbo-Croatian originated in the mid-19th-century in the Vienna Literary Agreement by Croatian and Serbian writers and philologists. As the Yugoslav state was established, slightly different literary Serbian and Croatian standards developed, also in terms of the alphabets (Serbian Cyrillic and Gaj’s Latin alphabet). By the 20th century, Serbo-Croatian served as the official language of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and it was called “Serbo-Croato-Slovenian.” Later it became the official language of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and was called “Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian.” With the breakup of Yugoslavia, the languages were also separated along ethnic and political lines.

people, was divided into Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin languages by decree. Bodrožić finds it challenging to express herself in the post-war era due to the politically motivated language divide, as official declarations about her native language mandate that she uses particular vocabulary as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Bodrožić was able to choose between Croatian and Serbian words while growing up thanks to her first language, which was a hybrid of Serbian and Croatian: “As a child, I really liked the Serbian word *voz* because it seemed consistently coherent to me, even announcing driving – *voziti se*. The Croatian word *vlak*, on the other hand, had a gentle aura, to me it sounded like *mrak* und *mlad*, a mixture of the words *darkness* and *young* [...]” (Bodrožić 2007, 97).

However, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the newly established nation of Croatia mandates that its citizens refrain from using any words that are part of the Serbian component of the once-common language Serbo-Croatian. Bodrožić does not see the need for this politically motivated division because she does not associate language with borders or nationalities, preferring to focus on the possibilities that language presents, such as the variety of linguistic interpretations that one word can have. Additionally, this common hybrid language of Yugoslavia satisfies a need for openness and variety rather than representing homogeneity. The amalgamation of pre-war languages and the recently established standards following Yugoslavia’s dissolution influence Bodrožić’s identification of her mother tongue in relation to time, family, or ethnicity. It is referred to as “erste Sprache,”<sup>15</sup> “erste Muttersprache,”<sup>16</sup> “die Sprache meiner Kindheit,”<sup>17</sup> “Muttersprache,”<sup>18</sup> “erste

15 “First language.”

16 “First mother tongue.”

17 “The language of my childhood.”

18 “Mother tongue.”



erlernte Sprache,”<sup>19</sup> or “das Slawische”<sup>20</sup> when she discusses it in her book (Bodrožić 2007, 11–59). She makes no mention of her mother tongue in relation to any recently established nation or ethnic group, and she does not depend on it to tell her stories.

Nevertheless, Bodrožić’s native language plays a noteworthy and significant role during different times and in different places. During her young adulthood, Bodrožić has several encounters with people from her former *Heimat* – on a bus in Rome, at a train station in Frankfurt, in the streets of Paris – where she identifies her Yugoslav people through visual (looks) or auditory cues (pronunciation) and these encounters culminate in a discussion in their mother tongue. According to Rădulescu, Bodrožić’s *Heimat* does not suffer from the political division of the nation in these other countries because the people there know and accept one another despite the artificial boundaries erected within the former Yugoslavia (Rădulescu 2012, 6). These encounters highlight how people from their former home country use their body language and first language as a means of communication whereby a connection of shared destinies and the discovery of analogous experiences are made. Furthermore, these interactions, which involve spoken and nonverbal language, show how meeting someone from former Yugoslavia can immediately elicit strong emotions. Bodrožić also illustrates how she as someone from Dalmatia and another young woman from Belgrade were “not strangers on a crowded Roman bus even for a second” during a particular chance encounter. Because “the war will never destroy our love, never be able to completely erase it,” as the young woman from Belgrade remarks to her, demonstrating that ethnicities, nationalities, and borders do not matter. The young woman did not mean “herself and me, she meant the Croats and the Serbs,” as Bodrožić

19 “First language learned.”

20 “The Slavic.”

expounds, and it was evident that this was “so normal, so natural” (Bodrožić 2007, 43).

Even three years after the wars ended, Bodrožić still vehemently disagrees with being part of any specific newly formed nation or country. Bodrožić calls the young woman “one of us,” acknowledging that she identifies all former Yugoslavs as one, despite the fact that it was already 1998 and no one had “the right to think like that” (Bodrožić 2007, 41). Specific instances of her mother tongue’s function in Bodrožić’s adult life reveal its importance during a very specific period, namely between the ages of 18 and 22, during the start of the Yugoslav Wars and the beginning of the refugee crisis in Germany. Her text elucidates that Bodrožić’s views on the Yugoslav Wars and their aftermath are shaped by her contemporary experiences, making this a crucial period during which her mother tongue gradually regains significance and meaning for her.

According to Bodrožić, the news reports about the wars are where it all starts. In addition to experiencing mental anguish from witnessing the atrocities of war, Bodrožić also considers her physical reactions to what she witnesses in her mother tongue by her own people on television. Although her first language starts to permeate her life at this point, German enables her to deal with everything she sees on television: “They showed pictures from Yugoslavia on television. The war was given a face. The face cried. Only with the protective barrier of the German language was I able to hold back my own tears in front of the screen” (Bodrožić 2007, 27). Additionally, Bodrožić believes her sadness is not as pronounced in German as it is in her native tongue. She shares how German provides her with a safe space and the necessary distance to deal with these traumatic and painful situations: “German also moved me. But more so, it distracted me more during this time. It helped me to contextualize the horror, to shift it outside of myself...” (Bodrožić 2007, 29–30). However, trying to continue living her current lifestyle in Germany proved to be more difficult. Listening to and reading various

news reports, she concludes that, along with her *Heimat*, everything she had ever known is lost:

Now a new time has come. And in it, there was no longer any past, bit by bit, day by day of fighting, front by front, it was gotten rid of. Now, there was no more Yugoslavia; [...] decades of living life [...] Forgetting your own laughter. The dimples. The births of children. The Sundays. [...] The collecting of chestnuts, nuts, and almonds. The braiding of hair. The joy of the workers when they received their well-deserved wages at the end of the month. [...] Learning the alphabet. The first kisses. The first date. The first word in a foreign language. (Bodrožić 2007, 25)

Despite not experiencing the Yugoslav Wars directly, Bodrožić still experiences traumatic stress. She highlights the ongoing erasures and destruction of her *Heimat* and the past and demonstrates how loss is a byproduct of war with a range of examples from childhood and everyday life. As she reveals at the end of the quote, there is an expectant future orientation indicated by the word “erste.”<sup>21</sup> But because of the wars, these instances symbolize parts of life and times that seem unachievable as long as the fighting continues. Bodrožić provides an illustration of ways in which wars impact the past, present, and future. To establish order and lead a normal life in Germany, she tries to make sense of what is happening as a distant sufferer who can only experience the suffering and mourn with her people through media and stories she hears from and about her family and relatives back home:

[...] when the word “war” had also become a present-day word for us eighteen-year-olds. The word was no longer just present in the German history books,

21 “First.”

now it was also a part of our homes; we began to believe in the war and in the images of the war with our own eyes. (Bodrožić 2007, 25)

People died in Bosnia. Our cousins were drafted. The word war got company, poverty, the aunt in the city had hardly any money, food became scarce. Poverty and hunger. New words that our relatives had to live with while we looked for pretty jeans in the 21st century, earnestly tried to live a normal youth, and go to the cinema to see the latest films or just to drink a cup of cappuccino (Bodrožić 2007, 34).

Here, Bodrožić characterizes a “surrounding other” (Figley and Kleber 1995) or a “secondary victim” (Bolin 1985) with secondary traumatic stress disorder. As Charles R. Figley, a professor and expert in different fields among them psychology and traumatology,<sup>22</sup> and Rolf J. Kleber, professor of psychotraumatology, explain, secondary victims experience traumas indirectly, witness the suffering of primary victims, and must cope with the changes brought about by the event and the suffering as they learn about the events.<sup>23</sup> Bodrožić does not immediately experience the traumatic situation of the Yugoslav Wars, but still feels disrupted and helpless – two characteristics defining an extreme or traumatic situation. These elements occur when the secondary victim learns about the traumas that those close to them have experienced.

22 Charles Figley's other fields of expertise are psychoneuroimmunology, mental health, social work, family therapy, and family studies. He established the Traumatology Institute at Florida State University, which was the first of its kind. The Institute was instrumental in establishing the first set of treatment guidelines, and ethical standards for both the study and treatment of the traumatized. Since 2008, he has been a distinguished MD Chair in Disaster Mental Health at Tulane University.

23 Figley and Kleber point out other publications on the phenomenon of the transmission of trauma, for example, Miller, Stiff, and Ellis wrote about “emotional contagion,” defined as an affective process in which “an individual observing another person suffering experiences emotional responses parallel to that person's actual or anticipated emotions” (1988). Dixon identified as “peripheral victims” those who were not present at the location of the disaster but who easily could have been (1991).

This knowledge leads to a confrontation with feeling helpless and having their life disrupted (Figley and Kleber 1995). The dynamics of this kind of disruption are described as follows: “[...] the situation crudely disrupts the course of daily existence. One is cut off from the previously secure environment. The existing certainties of life disappeared. The world does not make sense anymore. The images one holds of oneself, and the environment no longer adequately fit the new situation. [...] Basic assumptions have been shattered” (Figley and Kleber 1995, 78). Bodrožić believed that the wars were erasing everything she knew about her past in Yugoslavia, including her identity and sense of belonging. Bodrožić thus suffers from loss of both topographical (country) and temporal (past) aspects. This incident not only upends her normal adolescent life in Germany, but it also affects her identity and her sense of origin – the assurance and security she experienced when Yugoslavia was a single nation and the manner in which she left it, with all of the people and memories. Bodrožić seeks to find herself, her identity, and her place in the world as she struggles to cope with these losses and questions everything. She talks about the necessity of having an anchor to her *Heimat* and the effects that it has.

Bodrožić later discovers this *Verankerung* (anchoring) in the waves of refugees that arrive in Germany and the bonds she forges with them. She talks about the breakup of Yugoslavia, how it affected people with and without war and flight experiences, and how they, as a community, dealt with the losses through togetherness, interactions, and relationships. People who immigrated or fled to Germany from various parts of Yugoslavia are clinging to one another to preserve their memories, culture, origins, and identities as the wars rage, destroy, and kill in Yugoslavia. “The strange thing about the peoples<sup>24</sup> from the former Yugoslavia has always remained the same: while they argued, were at war, and murdered each other at home, they were inseparable abroad [...]”

24 The author Marica Bodrožić uses the word “Völker” here.

(Bodrožić 2007, 33). Bodrožić sees the loss of her *Heimat* as the beginning of the need or desire to preserve everything Yugoslav, just like it was for those who fled the war. There are many ways in which this occurs as refugees of different ethnicities and religions from all over Yugoslavia come to Germany, even though the causes and circumstances for this loss differ among those who experienced war and flight immediately and those who did not. Bodrožić stresses that, motivated by love and a desire to preserve, the younger generation did not place emphasis on nationality, ethnicity, or religion. By gathering, commemorating, and creating what political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson terms an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of former Yugoslavs who are grieving and suffering from loss and trauma, they resist current events in their country: “Over the winter, we all met in a bar, a kind of a bistro that turned out to be a meeting place for all ex-Yugoslavs. [...] and as always, they stuck together in a Yugoslav way” (Bodrožić 2007, 32).

This “Sammelplatz”<sup>25</sup> functions as a “Third Space,” as termed by the critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, where a group of individuals “renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha 2004, 10). Various groups from former Yugoslavia have created a “Third Space” for interaction, sharing, remembering, creating, and preserving collective memories. As such, it functions as a place of enunciation and expression as well as a “space of invention and transformational encounters, a dynamic in-between space” (Bhabha 2004, 35). Like Bhabha, bell hooks<sup>26</sup> notes this as a “space of resistance” and “a site of creativity and power,” and this is exactly what Bodrožić depicts the former Yugoslavs doing as they form this “Third Space” to cling to one another and stay connected through memory (hooks 1990, 152).

25 “Gathering place.”

26 This pen name stylized in lowercase was used by the American author, theorist, educator, and social critic Gloria Jean Watkins.

The “canon,” which professor of English and literary studies Aleida Assmann defines as the “actively circulated memory that keeps the past present” (Assmann 2008, 98) and which Jan Assmann, an Egyptologist, cultural historian, and religion scholar, claims “[o]ne has to remember in order to belong [to a group]” (Assmann 2008, 109–19), is what facilitates the active remembering “auf jugoslawische Weise.”<sup>27</sup> In the 1920s, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs explained that these memories, especially collective memories, are a social product. He argues that collectives such as armies, corporations, families, or nations have “distinctive memories that their [individual] members have constructed, often over long periods of time,” and “the individuals being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past” (Halbwachs 1992, 22). Halbwachs contends that socialization and communication are aspects of social life that are contingent upon memory (Vervaeke 2011, 2). The ex-Yugoslavs in Bodrožić’s text serve as an example of this since they embody a collective memory of the Yugoslav people. This collective memory, according to Bodrožić and her friends, is made up of their shared history, language, music, films, artists, and landscapes.

Regarding language, one of the major shifts in Bodrožić’s life at this time is that the role of German diminishes as she attempts to make sense of who she is. Since she lives in a German-speaking nation and speaks it daily, German is naturally still very prevalent. But at this point, the importance of Bodrožić’s first language begins to take over, particularly as the wars rage on and refugees continue to arrive in Germany. Her family speaks their “Muttersprache”<sup>28</sup> at home, and she and her siblings speak it “consistently for the first time” (Bodrožić 2007, 30). They also make friends with several Yugoslav refugees, and the young people spend

27 “In a Yugoslav way.”

28 “Mother tongue.”

a lot of time talking in their native language without caring about each other's ethnicity or nationality. Bodrožić expresses her need to maintain and strengthen her connection to her people through her mother tongue by using the term "Muttersprache." Furthermore, the term "Muttersprache" also denotes a deeper meaning, specifically a deeper bond among Yugoslavs. Bodrožić shows how this can be seen as Yugoslavs resisting the wars by the unbreakable bonds and relationships between them across the borders through their common language and juxtaposing this connection of all the Yugoslav people to the *Kriegsalltag* (everyday war life) in their *Heimat*. During this period, Bodrožić documents that she composed her initial poems and read them aloud in her native language, showcasing her strong emotional bond with her homeland as they acknowledge that their "Yugoslavia lost its possibility [to exist] forever" (Bodrožić 2007, 27). This insight prompts them to recall and recreate in various ways things that were lost during the Yugoslav Wars. Speaking in their native tongue, Bodrožić and her siblings spend most of their time interacting with the refugees and other "Auslandsjugoslawen"<sup>29</sup> (Bodrožić 2007, 33). As a medium of belonging, where there is no distinction between *Fremde* (stranger) und *Zugehörige* (the one who belongs) but rather a "we" ("wir Jugoslawen"),<sup>30</sup> "us" ("uns alle"),<sup>31</sup> and "our" ("unsere jugoslawischen Leute"),<sup>32</sup> the first language thus gains significance and even eclipses German in public (Bodrožić 2007, 30–34). Former Yugoslavs are united by a common hybrid language that facilitates an experience of sharing and the creation of collective memory.

29 The term Marica Bodrožić uses for those who came to Germany at some point in their life before the Yugoslav Wars and made Germany their permanent home.

30 "Us Yugoslavs."

31 "All of us."

32 "Our Yugoslav people."



This role of the common language is also reflected in the role of music as these young people – Bodrožić, her siblings, Yugoslav refugees, and “Auslandsjugoslawen” – work together to shape the collective memory in a way that enables them to modify those memories to fit their current desires, ideas, and beliefs. The music from former Yugoslavia, which reverberates throughout the book and especially during the time that Bodrožić and her siblings spend with their refugee friends and boyfriends, is the most profound shared experience. Together, they play instruments, sing, and listen to music that unites them and helps them remember things: “Singing helped us not to forget” (Bodrožić 2007, 34). Despite the fact that remembering can be uncomfortable and cause conflicting feelings at extremely sensitive moments, Bodrožić captures in her text that remembering contains all the reasons for both joy and sorrow, and they are often the same:

When we were at our saddest, we simply listened to the songs from Bjelo [sic] Dugme or any Roma band, [...] it made something come alive in our bodies, made the world notable even if it was just as long as the song lasted. These conditions, [...] it was also a despair that is akin to joy, the greatest possible feeling on Earth. (Bodrožić 2007, 33)

Bodrožić depicts the agony of witnessing wars, even at a distance, and the anxiety that comes with daily worries about loved ones. Music allows them to remember, to preserve the memories of all that has been lost, and to demonstrate their shared humanity and solidarity: “Hardly any wedding took place at which not *all* the songs were sung. Music built bridges for us [...]” (Bodrožić 2007, 33). According to Bodrožić’s book, music always played a big and important role in people’s lives everywhere, and highlights how music served a very specific purpose in her former *Heimat*:

[...] in France just like in Croatia (and Serbia), certain songs are part of biographies [...]. In a way, this is the case everywhere in the world, including in Germany, but here, it is not really part of the memory mentality, it never becomes part of public space, and that is exactly what makes the difference. (Bodrožić 2007, 79)

Speaking about the function of music, particularly in social and cultural contexts, Britta Lange, a cultural scientist, elaborates:

Sound as a physical, social, and historically-specific anthropological product as well as a physical event that is genuinely linked to the process of perception, i.e. hearing can be understood in its cultural dimension using the instruments of cultural studies: indeed, sound is like nature in the world, but it is always heard, described, problematized, and negotiated by people under the premise of culture – that is, historically-specific perception, processing according to culturally influenced patterns, the use of language to communicate about it. (Lange 2018, 115)

Since “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” in the “*lieux de mémoire*,” which the historian Pierre Nora popularized and defined as “any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community,” it is clear that music plays a very specific, moving, and expressive role (Nora 1989, 7). As Nora puts it, “a place of memory in every sense of the word goes from the most material and concrete object, possibly geographically located, to the most abstract and intellectually constructed object” (1997).<sup>33</sup> Places of mem-

ory can be immaterial and intangible, as well as concrete and tangible. They serve the dual purposes of instructing and evoking emotions. Music, as a cultural tradition that aids in the creation and maintenance of individual and collective memories when loss in many forms is experienced on both levels, due to the wars and the deprivation of *Heimat*, is one of these intangible *lieux de mémoire* for the ex-Yugoslavs in Bodrožić's book. As demonstrated by Bodrožić, music is always readily available, repeatable, and capable of crossing boundaries. Additionally, it is affordable, and as popular music culture expert and sociomusicologist Simon Frith points out that "music has become entirely mobile: it can follow us around the house, [...]; on journeys, [...]; across national and political boundaries [...]," and that music from "all sources, from a hundred years ago, from a hundred thousand miles away, is equally available" (Frith 1996, 236–37). Bodrožić explains the significance of this music from long ago and far away: "We incessantly listened to the music of one of the three Yugoslavian cult bands [...] or some Dalmatian chansons that sang about the sea, the life of a mother, or once again told a melancholic love story with an inevitable farewell." (Bodrožić 2007, 27)

Music and the people of former Yugoslavia symbolize origin and belonging in Bodrožić's text. When she experiences the first feelings of *Heimat* loss in her early years, this becomes abundantly evident. It is also a loss that she and the people of former Yugoslavia continue experiencing since she emphasizes that they can all still recall and perform every song by the band Bijelo Dugme,<sup>34</sup> for instance. It is clear again that Bodrožić identifies Yugoslavia not with nations, borders, or nationalities, but rather with the collective memory embodied in this well-known band and the ex-Yugoslavs

34 This particular band is mentioned in the book multiple times. It is regarded as Yugoslavia's most popular band and is typically linked to Yugonostalgia. Their reunion concert in 2005 took place in three capitals (Belgrade, Sarajevo, Zagreb) and attracted about 400,000 people and huge media attention in all former Yugoslav republics.

who continue to enjoy their music. Asserting significant roles to several well-known former Yugoslavs who were important in the lives of people from ex-Yugoslavia, Bodrožić underlines that the collective memory of former Yugoslavia is represented by all of these bands, musicians, filmmakers, and their works, which will “*forever*” be her “very own Yugoslavia” (Bodrožić 2007, 49). Bodrožić’s singing and dancing are for “belonging, commonality...being for it, being for the singing,” and “singing” and “people” are always a part of her “Herkunft”<sup>35</sup> (Bodrožić 2007, 45, 78).

As the author Dean Vuletic emphasizes, one of the cultural phenomena that Yugoslavs shared the most before and after Yugoslavia split and that brings them together more than anything is popular music (Vuletic 2008, 861). There is a “continued existence of a common market for popular music in former Yugoslav republics, where audiences across it consume the popular music produced in its various parts, and composers, musicians, singers, songwriters, and record companies from them co-operate in its production” (Vuletic 2008, 874). Bodrožić illustrates the significant role that music played in preserving Yugoslavia’s cultural legacy for future generations. She also demonstrates how music continued to play a vital role during and after the Yugoslav Wars, demonstrating that it was not a victim of the conflicts. When considering Yugoslavia’s musical history, it is evident that popular music festivals were created all over the nation and eventually developed into “the single most powerful public forum for the presentation, production, and definition of Yugoslav popular music,” as noted by Ljerka V. Rasmussen, a professor of music history and ethnomusicology (Rasmussen 2002, 41). These festivals helped promote the nation’s motto and slogan, “brotherhood and unity.”

Even as Yugoslavia is falling apart, Bodrožić still desires this “brotherhood and unity,” which becomes evident as she talks about her origin and belonging, rejecting to have

her identity dictated to her and refusing to fit into any side, region, established or newly formed nation. Bodrožić is not only safe from the effects of war while in Germany but also from being forced to identify with Croatia, the new country legitimized after Yugoslavia broke up, and the new nationality. As Bodrožić notes, not everyone was able to escape and highlights in particular that some people and families were forced to return “to a country to which they now belonged, whether they wanted that or not” (Bodrožić 2007, 37). Bodrožić is greatly impacted by this and is left with a unique mark as she comes to the realization that she no longer wants to be a Croatian or a Yugoslav: “I did not want anything to do with Croatia and Yugoslavia any longer. For years, I thought that being your own person had to be more worthwhile than the identity card of a country that all of a sudden [...] falls apart” (Bodrožić 2007, 37). The loss of *Heimat* inevitably leads to the loss of identity. To emphasize this point, literature and media didactics expert René Kegelman states that Bodrožić believes that nationalized attributions do not define a person as a human being, particularly considering the ease with which a state can collapse due to negotiations and power struggles (Kegelman 2012, 42). According to Rădulescu, Bodrožić rejects continuing “to allow [for her] identity to be exploited for political purposes” (Rădulescu 2012, 5), which Kegelman also affirms by emphasizing that Bodrožić repeatedly describes “how she detached herself from a national identity not only because of the actual relocation to Germany but especially in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia” (Kegelman 2012, 42). Bodrožić offers an alternative strategy to the “trained national, geographic reflex” that holds that we require a national identity: “Why don’t we say we need an orientation, and we would like to call it an identity card? That way, our children would know that orientation is not something fixed, it is not something that we have to defend, something that we want to die and kill for.” (Bodrožić 2007, 56)

Bodrožić's recommendations align with those of linguist Norman Fairclough and sociologist Stuart Hall, who favor the term identification over identity. Hall contends that "identity" is a closed process and as a result, he supports "identification," which he views as an ongoing process (Hall 2003, 196). Similarly, Bodrožić suggests fluid orientation as an alternative to set national identity and does not consider any one nation to be her home. Rather, as Bodrožić clarifies, she always refers to "the whole Earth" when using this "phrasing 'my country'" (Bodrožić 2007, 87). She views herself as a citizen of the world and her *Heimat* as anywhere in the world as a result:

My air is Mediterranean. All shores of Europe. The beauty of the lights on our Earth. (Bodrožić 2007, 48)

Once, looking at the peaks of the Alps from the airplane, it struck me that when I said "my country" I had always meant the whole Earth and had never really noticed it myself. (Bodrožić 2007, 87)

## Conclusion

In her autobiographical book *Sterne erben, Sterne färben: Meine Ankunft in Wörtern*, Bodrožić tells a story of a woman's childhood and adulthood, navigating the Yugoslav Wars and searching for her identity and *Heimat* due to the country's dissolution. The book provides a particular illustration of how people who were not directly exposed to the conflicts handled the Yugoslav Wars and their aftermath. Bodrožić discusses the function of her two languages, Serbo-Croatian and German, demonstrating how her first language continues to play a significant role in her life and development, especially during certain hard times while German helps her tell her personal (hi)stories. As Bodrožić and her siblings establish connections with Yugoslav refugees, the importance and significance of the mother tongue becomes more evident. This

ultimately aids in her self-discovery and provides the answer to the book's main question, "Habe ich eine Herkunft und gehe ich irgendwo hin?"<sup>36</sup> (Bodrožić 2007, 11). Bodrožić uniquely configures the loss of her *Heimat*, belonging, and identity, namely how this loss unfolds gradually. It is initially connected to her parents' relocation to Germany as *Gastarbeiter*. The additional loss is brought on by the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s and their aftermath, which occurred about 10 years after this relocation. Bodrožić attributes her ability to navigate indirect exposure to traumatic stress and loss to her varied linguistic experiences that in turn help her find answers to questions about identity, origins, and belonging. Throughout her life, both languages are important to Bodrožić as she attempts to adjust to the loss of her native country and lead a normal life in Germany, her new home. She is able to write about and recreate her childhood in German, which is also the primary language of her everyday life. As the Yugoslav Wars break out and a wave of refugees enter Germany, things change, and the primary language takes center stage. At this point, her first language permeates her early adulthood years, where it acts as a medium of belonging with her fellow refugees and "Auslandsjugoslawen," with whom she forms relationships and friendships. Together, they attempt to remember, share, and preserve Yugoslavia's collective memory via language and tradition, particularly music. Due to the inevitable loss of *Heimat*, Bodrožić feels the need to discover who she is and where she belongs, which she successfully satisfies. She rejects the identity prescribed by the political elites in the recently recognized countries that once formed Yugoslavia and concludes from her experiences that she does not require or desire a fixed identity or place to call home. Her *Heimat* can be any place on Earth, and she can be a citizen of the world. When she finally arrives, her *Ankunft* (in *Wörtern*)<sup>37</sup> is a successful one.

36 "Do I have an origin and am I going anywhere?"

37 Her arrival (in words).

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## 10 Post-Yugoslav Author in the House of Being

DJORDJE POPOVIĆ

*The audacity of hope results in people sacrificing their lives for some hapless utopian power-driven project. I don't do that. I prefer to write in despair.*  
– Aleksandar Hemon, “The Audacity of Despair”

In March 2015, twenty years after he published his first story in English, Aleksandar Hemon sat for yet another interview in his adopted language.<sup>1</sup> The conversation took place

<sup>1</sup> The first short story the Sarajevo-born Aleksandar Hemon wrote entirely in his adopted language, “The Sorrow Spy Ring” (1996), was not the first of his stories to be published in English. That designation belongs to an older “list” or “catalog” story, “The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders,” the main body of which Hemon wrote in Bosnian in the late 1980s and then published in his own English translation in the prestigious Chicago-based literary journal, *TriQuarterly* in 1995. The explanatory notes he appended to the story on that occasion were written in English, in a different narrative voice and with a different audience in mind from the one that listened to Hemon perform the original as a broadcast gag on Sarajevo’s youth radio (Omladinski program) or that later read “Život i djelo Alfonsa Kaudersa” in a literary magazine published in Zagreb (*Quorum*, 1989). The two parts of Hemon’s inaugural story are thus written in two different languages and some ten years apart. The line of demarcation that runs through this story is unlike the other formal devices Hemon has since used to fragment his prose.

in a Texas college town where Hemon was in residence at an arts institute that year.<sup>2</sup> As befits the genre of the literary interview, the conversation quickly turned to the question of the writer's relationship to his medium.<sup>3</sup> The interviewer posed the following question: "[T]his year marks two decades that you've been writing stories in English, and with greater mastery and nuance than many who experience it as a first language. How would you describe your interaction with the language, and has that relationship changed for you over the past twenty years?" (Hemon 2015b, 246) The context and the definite article make it clear that the question is about Hemon's interaction with a specific national language, the English language, and not about language in general as a system of communication or a privileged locus of untold theoretical trends over the last century. At first Hemon does not provide the response his cisatlantic readers have come to expect from the immigrant writer – an oft-repeated story about an accidental émigré who learns the language of his host nation by reading Nabokov and who roams the streets of "Nowhere" (Saul Bellow's description of Chicago, he tells us) as a "tormented," "low-wage, immigrant flaneur," until his

2 The interview was conducted by Timothy Boswell, managing editor at *Studies in the Novel*, and it was later published in this journal under the title "The Audacity of Despair: An Interview with Aleksandar Hemon" (Hemon 2015b, 246–66). The conversation was held in Denton, TX, on 2 March, 2015, where Hemon held the position of 2014–2015 artist-in-residence at the Institute for the Advancement of the Arts at the University of North Texas.

3 Once viewed with suspicion by writers and literati alike – an "unhappy invention" according to Mark Twain – the interview was transformed into a veritable art form on the pages of the *Paris Review* (quoted in Fay 2012). The genre-specific conventions established in 1953 – for example, the emphasis placed on writers, rather than critics, reflecting on their own work and craft, or the introductions in which authors are described as fictional characters – owe much to the explicitly apolitical and anti-critical editorial vision behind the then-émigré American quarterly. Usha Wilbers (2008) has written about this convincingly in "The Author Resurrected: The *Paris Review's* Answer to the Age of Criticism." To illustrate the frequency and the overall importance of the literary interview in Hemon's overall creative output, within a month of his conversation with Boswell, Hemon gave two other interviews, one in *American Literary Review* (2 February, 2015) and the other at The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture (5 March, 2015).

“immigrant interior [begins] to merge with the American exterior” (Hemon 2013c, 144, 148, 155).<sup>4</sup> Instead of the usual answer expertly calibrated to register a degree of familiarity along with a dose of strangeness, Hemon offers another response, a brusque defense against a charge barely perceptible in the question he was asked: “I guess I am now, and have been for a while, fully bilingual” (Hemon 2015b, 247).

By the end of his second response, Hemon’s annoyance becomes more palpable, and his language becomes more precise. “Operating in two or more languages,” Hemon explains, “is not fully appreciated in terms of literature and in terms of sheer being in the world as it is” (Hemon 2015b, 247). A condition he calls “monolingual myopia” prevents monolingual people from understanding that the world is changing in some fundamental ways and that in this new world, “speaking with an accent [or] writing in a non-native language is not an impediment, but rather a great advantage.”<sup>5</sup> It would be a mistake to conclude here that this “great advantage” manifests itself solely in matters of craft – or, as the first editor

4 “The Lives of a Flaneur” was first published by *The New Yorker* in 2011 as “Mapping Home: Learning a New City, Remembering the Old.” The original title lacks the immediate flair of the Parisian figure, but it speaks more directly to the prominence of the spatial turn in Hemon’s prose.

5 At least initially, Hemon appears to be concerned solely with what he sees as the patronizing reception of his and other works of the so-called “immigrant literature” (a label he rejects) in Anglophone markets: “Such monolingual myopia,” he explains, “often results in seeing multilingual and multicultural writers and their work as being and/or coming from the fringes.” The works of new Americans are relegated to the “periphery” of the American literary space where they can be admired without being taken seriously, their presence tolerated so that the “self-congratulating multiculturalists in this country [can] feel great about themselves, because they are open and they do not exclude.” This is a familiar critique about who gets to speak and how, which is to say, about the limits of representation in both the political and aesthetic sense. It is worth noting that the targets here are not nativist acts of exclusion, but rather the exclusionary effects of the politics of inclusion by the well-meaning literary establishment and their “liberal knee-jerkiness that annoys [Hemon] greatly” (Hemon 2015b, 247–48). In more theoretical terms, Hemon is leveling the charge of epistemic violence against those very readers, critics, and agents who essentially trivialize his work by granting him the status of an immigrant sensation.

to take up Hemon's work put it, in "a kind of hyper, acute sense of the possibilities of English that a native speaker wouldn't necessarily have."<sup>6</sup> Far more is at stake here, for Hemon seems to suggest that the world is not as it appears and that a new phenomenological perspective to which "the world as it is" will reveal itself in all its complexity is available only to a bilingual mind. In other words, for Hemon, the advantage of writing in a non-native language is as much cognitive as linguistic.

This may explain why Hemon believes that being "pathologically bilingual" is a "privileged situation," but it does not help us understand how he gets there (Hemon 2015b, 247). How do we go from the issue of second-language acquisition to psychology, epistemology, and even ontology? To what does the bilingual state of mind owe its superior perspective, and what new and more complex world is suddenly disclosed through the same? There is no indication here that the more fundamental reality is a developed reality, only that our access to it depends on some hidden capacity within (a second) language to circumvent the same social and historical relations that have clouded the monolingual view of the world in the first place. This is not the first time Hemon has attempted to draw his

6 Comments are by Reginald Gibbons, Hemon's first editor at *TriQuarterly* (quoted in Rohter 2009). Speaking about his decision to publish Hemon's first two stories, Gibbons pointed to an inherent advantage the non-native speaker had in his interaction with language: "He's had a great ear for the way language is used," and this, according to Gibbons, afforded Hemon "a place to stand which English speakers don't have." One must wonder here what it was that Hemon saw and heard from the privileged perch of a non-native speaker that so resonated with Gibbons? The answer is quite predictable. Gibbons was moved by "the unrealistic nature of life" and "a complex and absurd reality" that Hemon "attempted to get ahold of" through devices and "modes outside realism – footnotes, mindgames, telescoping of time" (quoted in Borger 2000). Fortunately, a framework was already in place to make sense of the absurd – "we liked the same writers, such as Bruno Schultz and Danilo Kiš," Gibbons explained – and the deal was sealed. Hemon thus became a professional writer under the auspices of Reginald Gibbons who still apparently "wish[es] there were more American-born writers who would venture out of the realistic box." For a different view on why "writers are applauded for their denaturalizing of language" or how "works of radical estrangement" become canonized, see Raymond Williams's essay "When Was Modernism?" (Williams 1989, 31–35).

readers' attention to the nexus between language acquisition, storytelling, and knowledge. Nor is this the first time in Western letters that an obvious observation about the significance of language to our species is treated as sacrosanct.<sup>7</sup> So what, then, is different about this case? What possible advantage will focusing on foreign tongues and their acquisition bring to the homespun reification of language? Is it really possible that some latent power remains within language(s), unknown to all linguistic idealism hitherto, and that the harnessing of this power in Hemon's peregrine prose will rid the world of whatever remaining fantasies it still has about transcendental or constitutive subjectivity and the world shaped by this subject?

In what follows, I will attempt to develop an affirmative answer to this question. I will show that Hemon thinks he has discovered just such power, not in any one national language, native or adopted, but in an "overlapping" space created in between languages. Acquisition is a formal requirement in this scheme, a necessary condition for this overlapping. Whatever is sedimented in national languages – and thus acquired along with a foreign tongue – matters little to Hemon. Overlapping functions as a sieve through which the dregs of history are sifted, converting memories into what Hemon famously calls his true fiction – a type of narration in which truth is created instead of posited as a prior and stable category.<sup>8</sup> I argue that this conversion mechanism neither frees Hemon's stories

7 "Language speaks, not humans. Humans only speak inasmuch as they fatefully (*geschicklich*) co-respond to language" (Heidegger 1996, 96; trans. modified). Similar formulations can be found throughout Heidegger's work, e.g., in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1975, 190), or, later, in Gadamer, Derrida, or Foucault, to name only the best-known examples. While linguistic idealism, or the view that human reality is somehow fundamentally determined by language, predates the linguistic turn in philosophy, it is only in the twentieth century – with the shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the hermeneutics of Dasein – that the elevation of language takes place at the expense of the human subject. The charge of "linguistic idealism" is made with some frequency: Bakhtin made it against Saussure, Habermas against Gadamer, and, on the analytic side of the philosophical divide, Anscombe discussed it with respect to Wittgenstein, her teacher.

8 For a clear articulation of what Hemon means by "true stories," see Aleksandar Hemon, "Teju Cole by Aleksandar Hemon" (2014c, 72).

from historical determination nor reveals some new truth developed through narration. I will examine the origins of this phenomenon and its political implications, but first I will briefly outline what in Hemon's own previous assertions about language is now supplanted by the advantage he sees in being bilingual.

Hemon has made different assertions about language elsewhere in his work, most notably in his 2011 short story "The Aquarium: A Child's Isolating Illness" (Hemon 2013b, 213–240), a heartbreaking story about the death of his infant daughter from a rare tumor. Beyond its difficult subject matter, "The Aquarium" is also a story about the expressive limitations of language and form, the author's overcoming of these, and a creative process that can help one understand all that once lay beyond conceivable experience. Hemon broached the last of these themes through a parallel story of his other daughter's creation of an imaginary friend, Mingus, at the time of her sister's illness. This common phenomenon would be of limited theoretical interest to Hemon if he understood it solely as a child's coping mechanism or, worse, as a replacement technique ("The Aquarium" is a work of mourning directed precisely against the internalization of loss that the latter technique implies). Instead, the story of Mingus led Hemon to "recognize in a humbling flash" that his daughter was doing "exactly" what he had done "as a writer all these years" (Hemon 2013b, 233). I will briefly list a few of these unlikely analogies before I address Hemon's larger epiphany about the nature of literature and its existential import.<sup>9</sup>

So, what are these analogies? With respect to Mingus, Hemon writes that "the creation of an imaginary character

9 A formal analysis of "The Aquarium" reveals a deft narrative structure. The analogies between his daughter's and his own activities are drawn over a middle section of the story, which contains Hemon's furious rejection of "platitudes" – be they rhetorical ("comforting clichés," "vacuous, over-worn language") or conceptual ("God" as the "supreme platitude"; [Hemon 2013b, 230–31]). The analogies are thus constructed over an expressionless pit where "words" are said to "fail" so that even structurally Hemon's story can point to the ultimate triumph of language over the ineffable (Hemon 2013b, 231).



is related [...] to the explosion of the child's newly acquired linguistic ability, which [...] rapidly creates an excess of language that [the child] may not have enough experience to match" (Hemon 2013b, 225). Similarly, as a writer, Hemon "found [himself] with an excess of words, the wealth of which far exceeded the pathetic limits of [his] biography" (Hemon 2013b, 233). Having found themselves in an analogous situation, the child resorted to "constructing imaginary narratives to try out the words she suddenly possessed" (Hemon 2013b, 225), while the writer realized that "[he] needed narrative space to extend [himself] into" (Hemon 2013b, 233). He "needed more lives," so he created "fictional characters" who then allowed him to "understand what was hard for [him] to understand." In her case, "the surge in language [...] created a distinction between exteriority and interiority," and this led to "the child's interiority [becoming] expressible and thus possible to externalize" (Hemon 2013b, 225). As a result of these creative processes, "the world doubled" for both of them. If it is still not clear that in talking about externalization and doubling, Hemon is describing – and naturalizing – a process otherwise known as alienation, he soon provides an even more obvious hint: his daughter is said to have received "an inflatable doll of a space alien, which [she] subsequently elected to embody the existentially slippery Mingus" (Hemon 2013b, 226). At least until the "alien" doll deflated and her new friend became entirely imaginary again, the new externalized self was literally and even visually (on the cover of the 2013 paperback edition of *The Book of My Lives*) depicted as an alien.

Having established these unlikely analogies, or in other words, having shown that surplus is squarely on the side of language and that it is self-generating, Hemon draws his far-reaching conclusion from an evolutionary perspective (rather than a historical one):

[T]he need to tell stories is deeply embedded in our minds, and inseparably entangled with the mechanisms that generate and absorb language. Narrative imagination – and

therefore fiction – is a basic evolutionary tool of survival. We process the world by telling stories and produce human knowledge through our engagement with imagined selves. (Hemon 2013b, 234)

Several spectacular claims about storytelling are extrapolated from his observations about language expansion, only to be subsumed back into some undifferentiated whole where the already innate faculties are further mystified by being presented as “inseparably entangled” with one another. This is supposed to indicate to the reader that we are dealing with a complex relationship that is quite literally inexplicable outside of its utility and evolutionary import. And yet, this relationship of interdependence serves as an epistemological foundation in Hemon’s schema, the means through which “we process the world” and “produce human knowledge.” The obfuscation that lies at the foundation of this knowledge is the first hint we get that the “we” – the subject who processes the world – is not mediated, that whatever knowledge Hemon thinks is produced by storytelling is not the knowledge of the subject, and that this subject is somehow outside or ahead of its own process of thought.

As with his musings about bilingual advantages, Hemon’s interest in the question of language acquisition in the above passage is still clearly epistemological. He believes to have discovered a dynamic structure of experience, a seemingly mediational process he calls the “dialectic between the real and the imaginary” – an ill-fitting term for an operation that only shows that binary oppositions are not mutually exclusive.<sup>10</sup> The role that concepts were once thought to play

10 The quote comes from an interview Hemon gave to Eleanor Wachtel, host of *Writers & Company* on CBC Radio One, on 26 October, 2013. Wachtel spoke to Hemon on stage at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto, Canada. “In Conversation with Aleksandar Hemon” was later reprinted, along with an earlier interview, in Eleanor Wachtel, *The Best of Writers and Company: Interviews with 15 of the World’s Greatest Authors* (2016, 112). Hemon glossed his “dialectic” in another interview for *Bookworm* as well: “There’s no contradiction between the real and the imaginary.” “To think that reality is something that we can simply recognize instantly” – or,

in the production of mediated knowledge – what Hegel called the “labor of the concept”<sup>11</sup> – is replaced here by various linguistic units, all apparently more nimble than the hoary

should we say, “in a humbling flash” – “is a little lazy,” he added, demonstrating that he has indeed mastered the American idiom and the place the charge of idleness holds in its hierarchy of insults (Hemon 2013a).

- 11 Hegel’s well-known phrase comes in two different forms in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In §58, Hegel writes about the importance, to the study of science, of taking upon oneself “the strenuous effort of the concept” (*die Anstrengung des Begriffs*), while in §70 he speaks of true thoughts and scientific insight being won by “the labor of the concept” (*die Arbeit des Begriffs*). A section of the paragraph in which the second of these phrases appears is worth quoting in full since it seems to presage – conceptually and rhetorically – the turn theory has since taken: “True thoughts and scientific insight can only be won by the labor of the concept. Concepts alone can produce universality in the knowing process. This universality is critically developed and completely finished cognition. It is not the common indeterminateness (*Unbestimmtheit*) and inadequacy of ordinary common sense. Nor, again, is it that extraordinary kind of universality where the powers and potencies of reason are spoiled and ruined by genius through indolence and self-conceit. It is truth which has successfully reached its own inherent native form. It is this universality which is capable of being the property of every self-conscious reason” (Hegel 1977, 41; trans. modified). In some scholarly accounts, Hegel’s two expressions are fused together and mistaken for a figure of speech wherein the “labor of the concept” is thought to refer solely and, I must note, self-referentially, to an intellectual effort required to think in conceptual terms. As Adorno points out in “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” this is *not* an accurate interpretation of what Hegel means by intellectual labor, scholarly activity, or philosophy: “The Hegelian ‘labor of the concept’ is not a loose circumlocution for the activity of the scholar. Hegel always represents the latter, as philosophy, as passive, ‘looking on,’ as well, and for good reasons. The philosopher’s labor actually aims solely at helping to express what is active in the material itself, what, as social labor, has an objective form that confronts human beings and yet remains the labor of human beings” (Adorno 1993, 22). If the phrase was never meant to designate the exertion of intellectual conceptualization, is it possible that Hegel was in fact referring to the work performed by concepts, the toil, so to say, that the concept itself goes through? Since concepts are not subjects in Hegelian nomenclature, they can possess a capacity to “labor” only if hypostatized and that, I believe, is not Hegel’s intention. Neither of the two genitives appears to work because the subject changes between the first and second formulations of the phrase one might mistakenly take to be largely synonymous. The first speaks explicitly of the effort and the methodological task ahead of a scholar who wishes to approach the content of his study immanently (§57–59). The effort here is that of thinking in terms of concepts and of following closely the logic inherent in the object. The second formulation points to a more developed or, in Hegel’s words, “absolute” subject: Hegel is talking here of Spirit’s labor, a term with prohibitive connotations unless one realizes – as Adorno did in the section quoted below – that Spirit’s labor is social labor, which contains both subjective and objective sides.

philosophical term, so that the object of experience is now mediated not through concepts or a system of concepts but through words and storytelling. This is not an entirely accidental substitution carried out by a writer who cannot but process the world through the “compulsive narrativization of experience,” another “syndrome” Hemon invents to describe the inner workings of his own mind (Hemon 2016a, 94). The turn from a conceptual to a linguistic framework effaces the subject and seriously affects what we think mediation is and what we can expect from the human experience. *While it appears more dynamic, the linguistic framework is, in fact, far less transformative.*

To explain what I mean by this, I will briefly draw on Adorno’s distinction between a Hegelian conception of experience and those advanced by existential ontology. Whatever these two conceptions appear to have in common – e.g., their rejection of empiricism and skepticism, their disavowal of abstractions, and their foregrounding of sociohistorical formations – is belied by all that separates them concerning their incompatible approaches to the questions of mediation, actualization, alienation, and more.<sup>12</sup> Disentangling these two conceptions of experience is thus a task of pressing importance, and Adorno repeatedly applies himself to it throughout his career. He thus begins “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy,” the second essay in his *Hegel: Three Studies*, by contrasting Hegel’s transformative conception of experience – a “dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object [so that] the new true object issues from [this movement]” (Hegel 1977, §86) – to the pseudo-dynamic accounts where experience is understood to be a “mode

12 That so much can be at stake in the conceptualization of experience should not surprise us. Not only can modern philosophy be distinguished by its epistemological turn, Hegel himself considered the topic of experience central to the endeavor he originally called “Science of the Experience of Consciousness,” the working title and later a subtitle of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

of being” or something “presubjectively ‘appropriated as event’” (Adorno 1993, 54).<sup>13</sup>

Adorno’s distinction is useful to our present purposes for at least two reasons. First, a Hegelian conception of experience entails an active subject so that even when one is dealing with the most undeveloped or unmediated subject – this is what Hegel would call “consciousness,” i.e., “the immediate existence of Spirit” (Hegel 1977, §36) – or with the damaged subject of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the movement that is experienced is the activity of the subject. In contrast, ontological accounts understand movement *not* to be something that the subject does willfully – this would be considered a “humanist” conceit – but a description of some abstract capacity, an ontological ground that always-already defines the ontic or empirical subject while remaining independent of it and, as importantly, independent of the object of experience. The active dimension belongs to this new subject as some fundamental quality or mechanism, not as something the subject produces through conceptualization or labor. In fact, Heidegger’s Dasein is said to betray its own ecstatic essence with every act it takes except one: its recognition that Dasein always and only has its own being to be. The point of this, if one is to be generous, is to save men from themselves and from history, and to preserve the possibility of change within banal circumlocutions about some ur-principle of indeterminacy. Or, in Adorno’s words from *Negative Dialectics*, another one of his works explicitly concerned with expounding the concept of philosophical experience against the reign of ontology, the point is to “limit reification by appealing to an *origin we cannot lose*” (Adorno 2007, 90; emphasis added).

13 The foil here is clearly Heidegger – the “appropriating event” is a reference to *Ereignis*, the “event of givenness of being” in later Heidegger – and in particular Heidegger’s 1942–1943 essay, “Hegel’s Concept of Experience.” This is the work where one learns from Heidegger that, for instance, “Hegel does not conceive of experience dialectically,” that “he [Hegel] thinks of the dialectical on the basis of the essence of experience,” or that “experience is the beingness of beings” (Heidegger 2002, 138).

The second reason Adorno's distinction remains relevant deals with the question of mediation of subject and object – the subject-object dialectic. Only one of these two conceptions of experience understands the world in terms of mediation that also extends to whatever essential or natural conditions are said to precede and enable experience. This is not a matter of making dialectics more dialectical but of releasing the object from the grip of the unmediated subject. Only an active, conceptualizing subject can allow objects to speak for themselves, and only if objects are mediated by concepts.<sup>14</sup> As Adorno puts it while quoting Hegel, “Nothing can be known ‘that is not in experience’ – including, accordingly, the Being into which existential ontology displaces the ground of what exists and is experienced” (Adorno 1993, 53). A few pages later, he expresses this in even starker idealist terms:

The farther Hegel takes idealism, even epistemologically, the closer he comes to social materialism [...]. Spirit's confidence that the world ‘in itself’ is spirit is not only a narrow illusion of its own omnipotence. It feeds on the experience that nothing whatsoever exists outside of what is produced by human beings, that nothing whatsoever is completely independent of social labor. (Adorno 1993, 68)

This would amount to little more than solipsism if Adorno was indeed thinking of the transcendental or “constitutive subjectivity” (Adorno 2007, xx).<sup>15</sup> But he is not. “The

14 Seemingly paradoxical, the statement that only the subject is capable of preventing philosophical experience from relapsing into idealism encapsulates one of Adorno's basic insights and serves as a foundation for the often-overlooked sense of hope that permeates Adorno's work – hope that we indeed can complete the unfinished work of universal freedom. This utopian figure of hope in Adorno is in contrast here to the brashness of despair in Hemon.

15 Adorno's points of reference here are Kant and Fichte: in Kant, Adorno writes, subject “constructs the objective world out of an undifferentiated material”; with Fichte, it “engenders the world itself” (Adorno 2005, 247).

subject is the agent,” Adorno declares, “not the constituent, of the object” (Adorno 2005, 254). Mediation is a process of transformation of both subject and object, neither of which exists in some pure, immediate form prior to their dynamic encounter. The subject cannot turn inwards to escape reification, just as the object will not escape instrumentalization in the common nihilistic fantasy of a world rid of humanity. The subject will find no Being, no storytelling desire, no evolutionary tools of survival – in a word, nothing without a distinct ideological function – “deeply embedded in our minds.” The object, too, hides no indeterminate materiality, no irreducible concreteness, within itself. To fetishize it as such, a phenomenon ubiquitous today only because, paradoxically, all subjective synthesis depends upon it, means to “suck the object’s own dynamics out of it,” to rob the object of “whatever would allow motion to be predicated at all” (Adorno 2007, 91). As both the agent of the object and an object of history, the subject transforms itself by infusing matter with spirit so that the world we live in can be freed from the immutable laws of its now second nature (history and historically mediated objects of experience mistaken for immediacy).

The reader is now able to see why the mediational process is altered beyond recognition with the switch from a conceptual to a linguistic framework. Knowledge can only be conceptual, not intuitive, linguistic, or revealed. Simply put, concepts are bound by the objects they are trying to grasp.<sup>16</sup> Their failure to encompass the object (subjective contradiction) is something that only an active, conceptualizing subject can realize and, more importantly, overcome. The overcoming of contradictions is the only impulse Hegel speaks about. Unlike Hemon’s account of our “deeply embedded [...]

16 Robert Hullot-Kentor offers a superb expression of the importance of this bindingness and its relevance to the emancipatory project of Adorno’s philosophy: “Adorno’s critique of systematic reason is not – as has been indicated – a dismissal of thought’s claim to bindingness, but, on the contrary, having rejected compulsion as the standard of consecutive thought, it means to gain a more demanding and compelling bindingness on the basis of what in it is radically true.” (Hullot-Kentor 2006, 15)

need to tell stories” – a need that originates in the excesses of language and the *lack* of referents in one’s experience – the compulsion to overcome contradictions in Hegel stems from an excess in the experiential content and the *inadequacy* in conceptual thought. The remainder is on the side of the object. Hemon’s subject is thus a passive object of a “deeply embedded need” that precedes experience, while Hegel’s subject creates even its “impulses” through its encounters with the empirical world. This active subject is not simply applying concepts to a world that exists independently of it; it (the subject) and its past conceptual failures are also part of the reality the subject is trying to grasp. The subject gets to know or experience the object not by realizing what the object is in itself but by realizing how the object has transformed the subject and how the subject has transformed the object (precisely the transcendental folly I will show Hemon reject below).

Words, on the other hand, relate to their referents and to each other in a more arbitrary way. Whether one is dealing with Saussure’s sign or Derrida’s *gramme*, the basic interpretive unit since the linguistic turn in the early twentieth century is built on the tension between its indissociable elements (signifier-signified, presence-absence) and is thus thought to already contain within itself the dynamic function that, under the conceptual framework, is performed by the subject. The subject is effaced within the linguistic mark and language is inscribed with agency that is denied to human consciousness. With the homeless thus expected to find their home in the house of Being, within some dynamic phenomenon safely kept outside of history and experience, a home they unknowingly had all along and that they can never lose, a new transcendental subject (language) is posited as a condition of experience and knowledge. The “ontological need” is met by the need to tell stories, and these stories, unsurprisingly, depict an internally split consciousness exactly mirroring the indeterminacy and contingency of the new transcendental subject. The so-called knowledge produced by storytelling



is no knowledge at all since all it reveals about the world that it “processes” are the methodological assumptions and commitments it brings into the encounter.

Hemon’s account of the bilingual experience cannot be predicated solely on the notion of constitutive subjectivity that structures the reality we experience without being part of that empirical world. If that were the case, the constitutive subject would still be reified (in the sense that it and its faculties could not be transformed through experience), but this condition of reification would extend to all of humanity. For all its flaws, constitutive subjectivity is still a universal category precisely because it is not affected by experience. The bilingual cognitive advantage is indefensible if it takes something akin to transcendental apperception as a condition of experience. Whatever epiphenomena are caused by language acquisition in children, in whichever way the surplus in words is allocated and appropriated, generative linguistic faculties are not in themselves enough to explain the cognitive advantage that suddenly manifests itself *only* in one group of people. In the most rudimentary terms, Hemon’s argument about the bilingual cognitive advantage hinges on his ability to demonstrate and maintain a difference between the monolingual and bilingual mind. He must first show them to be sufficiently distinct from one another before he can offer his views on which of the two is better suited to comprehend, navigate, and even survive in a changing environment.

Hemon will conclude that “people with multicultural and multilingual minds swim better in the currents of the contemporary world than monolingual people” (Hemon 2015b, 248). While obviously a figure of speech, the verdict nonetheless reveals that the advantage Hemon has in mind is of evolutionary import and that the changes he perceives in the world act with the force of natural phenomena (Hemon’s phrase also touches on what he calls the “question of domain,” or the scale on which human agency is a relevant concept: the “currents” of the contemporary world cannot be altered – certainly not without adversely affecting all

of humanity – so the best one can do is learn how to swim better [2015b, 255]). It is true that in writing about language acquisition in children, Hemon was also driven to speculate about evolutionary matters, but the similarity between his two arguments ends there. A transmutation must occur that turns an apparently universal “evolutionary tool of survival” into something that benefits only one group, a subspecies of more adept swimmers.

Since the cognitive advantage Hemon has in mind implies a strict separation between two groups of people, it cannot be adduced simply on the basis of some universal epistemological function exhibited in all storytelling or on the basis of natural facts that apply to all of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Another mechanism is called forth here, another foundational, pre-existing structure that determines our relationship to reality, and Hemon will find it in the notion of “overlapping.” If the merits of constitutive subjectivity were first discerned through analogies with language acquisition in children, the logic of “overlapping” will become a foundation for a new, fully ontological subjectivity. While both the ontological and the constitutive subject serve to structure human experience without being determined by the conditions of that experience, and while they both are also said to be intelligible in separation from the conditions to which they ostensibly relate, only the ontological subject is “supposed to be dynamic in itself, to be ‘happening’” (Adorno 2007, 90). In other words, the same difference I outlined above between the dialectical or mediated subject on the one hand and the constitutive subject on the other is now carried out by the ontological

17 At some level Hemon must also understand that he, who aspires to be more than an immigrant writer, will not be taken seriously and the universal import of his declarations about human experience will not be recognized as long as his arguments derive from his observations about language acquisition in children. The new immigrant literature is not made puerile only by the patronizing attitudes of the American literati, as Hemon is quick to point out. Depictions of the émigré experience as a second infancy are so common in immigrant narratives – as a recurring motif, structural device, even chronotope – that some critics have even considered it an anatomical trait. See, for instance: Coward 2006.

subject vis-à-vis the constitutive subject. This is why the bilingual storyteller's invariant relationship to the world appears to be dynamic and dialectical when, in fact, it is neither.

An insight that evades monolingual people becomes available to bilingual ones not through the acquisition of another language but through the overlapping of languages in the bilingual mind. By virtue of operating in multiple languages, Hemon explains, the bi- or multilingual person possesses a "particular state of mind" where two or more languages or cultures "overlap" (Hemon 2015b, 247). The operative word and Hemon's own emphasis here is on this "overlapping" phenomenon where two distinct entities, in addition to their separate existence, are positioned in such a way that they can produce a third, composite entity – an amalgamated, not mediated, hybrid existence. "Overlapping" is thus understood as a cognitive quality that allows one to not only, or even primarily, "have access simultaneously to more than one culture," but also, and more importantly, to have access to the inter-sectional, interstitial space between languages, cultures, and, ultimately, between the internally-split-selves. This self-reflective capacity is the true meaning of the "great advantage" (not "impediment") or the "privileged situation" (not "torment") of the "pathologically bilingual" condition. None of these formulations are new to Hemon (or new at all) and certainly do not appear for the first time in the "Audacity" interview. I will briefly mention two other iterations, written exactly fifteen years apart and in vastly different contexts so that the reader can get a better sense of the philosophical provenance and political implications of the logic of "overlapping."

In "Kako sam postao profesionalni pisac" ("How I became a professional writer"), a 1999 column Hemon published in the Sarajevo-based weekly *Dani* and later reprinted as an afterword to the Bosnian edition of his first collection of short stories, *Pitanje Bruna* (*The Question of Bruno*), Hemon employs the "overlapping" motif to explain how responsibilities and commitments differ between a "professional writer" (himself) and his "national" counterparts, who,

characteristically for Hemon, include both right- and left-wing “national” authors, irrespective of the positions they held or the works they produced. He concludes the article with the following declaration:

The place I occupy as a writer is not defined by national cultural systems, which insist on fixed and unbridgeable borders. I exist in between cultures, and that is not an empty space, but the space of overlapping (*prostor preklapanja*), where strange and unpredictable things happen, where distant experiences intermingle, and new, fluid identities come into existence. My responsibility is not the responsibility of a national writer but the responsibility of a public figure who participates in the democratic, non-hierarchical exchange of ideas and information. As a professional writer, I could be a bridge between different cultures, while as a national writer, I would be only a fence post [*taraba*]. (Hemon 2004a, 51; 2004b, 209; translation Djordje Popović)

One cannot be surprised that what until now we treated as a structure of experience turns out to also have an impact on how Hemon determines the rather rigid lines of demarcation within his profession. Or, to put it differently, it should be no surprise that the overlapping or “interstitial” space that “emerges as a structure of undecidability at the frontiers of cultural hybridity” – to quote from another deeply confessional migrant text – will have an impact on what constitutes “speculative fieldnotes” and who gets to compose them (Bhabha 1990, 312). What is genuinely surprising, and perhaps even unique to Hemon, is the candor, bordering on boorishness considering his audience, with which he does not even attempt to dissemble the normative implications of the distinction he draws. There is no deliberate ambiguity in his verdict: “National” writers are to be treated with contempt. Hemon is less forthcoming when it comes to the political connotations built into his pronouncements. The “overlapping” space of inspiration,

innovation, and fluidity is contrasted here not to any particular state but to the very idea of the state as a political form. The old Arendtian chestnut that subsumes both the Left and the Right under the same “totalitarian” model is repurposed here so that the difference between the “national” and the “professional” literature is recast in terms of their disposition toward the power of the state. Renunciation of “any politics that seeks to enter or make claims on the state,” in the words of Timothy Brennan, becomes the dividing line between the statist “national” authors and the stateless-cum-antistatist “professional” writers (Brennan 2006, x). Aesthetics begins with the “anarchist sublime,” to use Brennan’s famous phrase; the rest is simply propaganda.

The epigraph at the beginning of this essay – “the audacity of hope results in people sacrificing their lives for some hapless utopian power-driven project. I don’t do that. I prefer to write in despair” (Hemon 2015b, 266) – was thus more than a sophomoric provocation designed to unsettle his liberal readers.<sup>18</sup> It also contained the crux of Hemon’s aesthetics. For all the talk about transgression and border-crossing at a time when people move far less than commodities (and when they do, they move as commodities and refugees), there are certain boundaries or limits (in the Kantian sense of *Grenze*) that literature cannot break through. The new *a priori* bounds of literary form preclude the possibility of social transformation or a change in property relations – to name only some of the historical effects of capturing state power – in a way that would challenge the uninterrupted appropriation of surplus value, surplus humanity, and surplus meaning in today’s society. The moment literature crosses this *Grenze*, we are supposedly no longer in the land of literature proper, where content is autochthonous to form but in the realm

18 Hemon’s obvious political reference is to the title of Barack Obama’s 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention and the later book by the same name, *The Audacity of Hope*. It turns out that Hemon’s clever inversion is both an old idea of the so-called “despair of defiance” (Kierkegaard), as well as a widely used one (e.g., David Simon’s blog is called *The Audacity of Despair*).

of politically manipulated formulae and vulgar matter. True literature is defined in terms of its impotence and its opposition to the power of the state. Not only is this view inaccurate since good art has often historically served to embellish power, but this naïve understanding of literature and art is also duplicitous because it attributes its own political complicity and conformism to rival literary projects and the aesthetic of “naïve” realism in particular. Hemon’s anti-political interstitial space of permanent homelessness and endless possibility closely resembles the economic logic of capitalism with its ostensible separation from politics, its uprooting of people, and its false totality under the guise of the exchange principle (absolute commensurability of value that conceals social and conceptual contradictions under the guise of indeterminacy). It is remarkable that the professional writer – not *from* Nowhere, but *of* Nowhere – cannot realize that “Nowhere” is very much part of a supra-national system of exchange with the responsibilities and commitments akin to those he dismissed above. One may be tempted to forgive the oversight in 1999, but in 2015, after all the interviews, book tours, contracts, reviews, etc., after all the times he had to answer the same questions for the same audiences who still are not listening or reading his work – this shows the depth of ideological commitments and the utter inability of experience to break through the ontologically-inflected mind. If there is still any doubt that fundamental or existential ontology is the source of his “overlapping” logic, my second example of its past use should put it to rest.

Fifteen years later, almost to the day, another interview with the consummate professional appeared in the now defunct, Brooklyn-based arts and culture portal *Frontier Psychiatrist*. Asked if he considered himself a “bicultural writer,” Hemon disclosed the following:

I do, but even as I say this, it feels imprecise in that “bicultural” might be interpreted as operating in two cultures – which we might call “American” and “Bosnian”

– simultaneously but separately. I can do that, but I like to think I mainly operate in the space of overlapping between those two cultures. I was just (re)reading a book called *The Future of Nostalgia* by Svetlana Boym, much of it about Nabokov, and ran across this quote: “Bilingual consciousness is not a sum of two languages, but a different state of mind altogether; often the bilingual writers reflect on the foreignness of all language and harbor a strange belief in a ‘pure language,’ free from exilic permutation.” Something similar could be said for the bicultural state of mind, whereby you can slip in and out of the limits of a particular culture, but still practice something that is much smaller and much more transformative, much more specific to your life and being, and create hybrid spaces that never last long enough to solidify into cultural monuments. A bicultural mind allows for a kind of difficult freedom that is not available to monocultural people (although one could reasonably argue that, outside the isolated societies in remote parts of the world, only the dumbest fascist mind is purely monocultural). (Hemon 2014b)

Hemon is still “operating” in the interstitial “space of overlapping” where one can apparently “slip in and out of” logical categories freely and with impunity. For example, borders are both porous and impervious; limits both intrinsic and extrinsic to what they delimit; being is permanent in its evanescence; freedom indistinguishable from necessity; and, in the most absurd of these, his brief musings about the fleeting experience of hybridity on a short-lived blog are held in contrast to “cultural monuments.” The point is not that enough material survives the immateriality of labor and form to erect a monument or that it is disingenuous to insist on a difference between monuments built by the state to advance its own interests on one hand and, on the other, essays, blogs and an online space produced by the creative class for the advancement of the arts and all of humanity. My point, instead, is that

the nothingness of being, along with the difficulty of the liminal, “frontier” freedom it entails, has long generated the kind of devotion that those who build cultural monuments can only dream about. To take seriously Hemon’s views on what sort of freedom is “available” (and to whom it is available) runs the risk of missing that, at least in this passage, “difficult freedom” is an affect produced by the rhetorical and logical tension maintained on the level of the text. To put it somewhat figuratively, freedom is made free by its difficulty. When halfway through the passage, Hemon signals so clearly to his intellectual lineage and affinity – Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* – he discloses more than he thinks. It appears that contrary to his own argument about hybrid identities, it is another intellectual tradition – one that ontologizes alienation and sees estrangement as an “existential principle” and “ethical stance” – that informs his work (Boym 2001, 30, 292).<sup>19</sup>

Between the current trends in child psychology and the rise of nativism on the political right, Hemon’s championing of inherent bilingual and bicultural advantages appears so sensible and high-minded that one is almost willing to look past the initial confusion of “pathology” turned into a “privilege.” As Hemon is eager to remind his readers, truth and courage matter in literature and in life, and little seems more audacious or wise than “making a virtue of necessity.”<sup>20</sup>

19 Hemon has read and cited Boym before. See, for example, “Budućnost egzila” (“The Future of Exile”) in *Sarajevske Sveske* (2014a, 11–14); or “Jazuk za Jugu,” (“A Pity for Yugoslavia”) in *Dani* (2001a, 49). *The Future of Nostalgia* (Boym 2001) is a thoroughly Heideggerian study. Boym’s distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is but a version of the ontico-ontological difference, and her definition of reflective nostalgia’s temporal extension is simply the most elementary rendition of the ecstatic essence of Dasein. In other words, the internal temporal structure of Boym’s concept of nostalgia is that of Dasein.

20 This injunction takes a number of different forms in the preface Hemon wrote for a Dalkey edition of Danilo Kiš’s *Psalm 44* (Hemon 2012, vii–xiv). Yet again, Hemon does not appear to be aware that is an old literary contrivance, a device used in English literature at least since Chaucer to bring a semblance of resolution to a narrative formally torn asunder by the medieval notion of the so-called “double truth” (“To make a virtue of necessity” is spoken by Theseus, Duke of Athens, in “The Prime Mover”



Moreover, to someone trained in the field of comparative literature with its long-standing commitment to reading in original languages, the value of multilingual competence is intuitive,

speech that ends “The Knight’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* [1986]). For a discussion on the “double truth” and Chaucer’s experiments with narrative form see Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer’s Poetry* (1984). Sklute explains the import of the “double truth” in the following way: “according to the concept of the double truth, when a conclusion in philosophy is logically reached but contradicts the conclusion of theology, the truths of both conclusions may stand as long as they are kept categorically separate, the one true for philosophy, the other true for theology. [T]he idea [is] interesting because it suggests that as early as the thirteenth century people understood truth to exist in kinds and to reside in alternatives; moreover, philosophers were willing to allow contradiction to remain unresolved” (Sklute 1984, 16). In the earliest historically recorded use of this literary device, in the Book of Job, the reader can see it function as a dissimulation device that allows political problems to be met with metaphysical solutions. Job’s initial response to the calamity that befell him – a combination of natural and man-made disasters – is to simply acquiesce to his fate: “Naked I came out from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord has given and the Lord has taken. May the Lord’s name be blessed” (Job 1:21 [Alter 2018]). Eventually, in what is a subversion of the prophetic literary genre in which God judges Israel, Job demands to face his divine tormentor in a court of law. His request is met only by a highly irrelevant theophany in the final chapters of the book, where divine disclosure (the simultaneous giving and taking, appearing and withdrawing) is naturalized as a “whirlwind” and where Job’s final concession is forced out of him and therefore purposefully made to ring hollow (the greatest biblical poet is reduced to a few austere lines). While the Book of Job is usually understood as the final triumph of a fully transcendent God, it is in fact a story of the defeat of humanity *not* in the hands of God, for that means nothing, but in the hands of a certain philosophical procedure that should be quite familiar to readers today. In order to reconcile the existence of evil with a fully monotheistic concept of God, the Book of Job challenged the conventional, Deuteronomistic moral-theological axiom (divine retributive justice) as a view too formulaic, too coherent, too systematic to predicate the divine. However, what the Book of Job offers under the guise of divine mystery and power, is another formula, another coherent moral order, where suffering is suddenly justified not as retribution for past transgressions, but as a condition for future redemption. This view receives its full articulation in the New Testament where it is precisely the suffering and the sacrifice of the most innocent human that leads to the atonement of mankind. If one parses the story of Job more carefully, one shall realize that the recognizable theodicean turn is predicated on pure cruelty of separation. In order to adjudicate their wager, God and the Adversary (Hasatan) turn to what can only be described as a series of phenomenological (and ontological) reductions. The act of stripping Job to his naked inner self by forcefully removing layers of material circumstance, historical particularity and social relations does not reveal a transcendental subject since the heavenly wager is answered, in turn, by Job’s version of Pascal’s wager (see Job 27). All that’s “disclosed” is an absolute cruelty of the method.

even axiomatic.<sup>21</sup> Not only are two languages better than one as a matter of simple arithmetic, but the acquisition of another language is said to lead to a better appreciation and a deeper knowledge of the original language, which then enables a whole new approach to the second language and so on, *ad infinitum*. A new type of reflective cognition is thus produced when language takes itself as its own object of representation and thought. The bilingual author thus dramatizes his own relationship to language not to flaunt his competence among the monolingual masses but rather to demonstrate a hard-won certainty, a new epistemological foundation grounded in a language becoming aware of itself. The “infinite advantage” that in “despair of defiance” he claims over other men amounts to a privilege indeed – a privilege that those supposedly reflective by nature have in not questioning any of the suppositions they barter in.<sup>22</sup>

Once the effects of bilingualism are mistaken for knowledge, language itself becomes a proxy for method, and a whole series of methodological questions that a displaced, bilingual author would have to ponder are instead met with one, ready-made answer about a redemptive promise “always-already” present within language. For example, under what conditions does a bilingual person acquire his or her second language, and how do those conditions affect the representational capacity of the new language? In Hemon’s case, this clearly happens under duress, but this duress manifests itself only as an existential category, eventually alleviated through

21 I am paraphrasing from the Warwick Research Collective’s *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015, 26). Literary comparativism is well suited to address these issues because it is historically vested in the idealist debates over multilingualism and its critical role within transnational humanism. For a distinctly idealist view on multilingualism, see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (Apter 2013, 61).

22 In Kierkegaard’s typology of despair (sickness of spirit), “despair of defiance” is the most advanced or conscious type. Here, a despairing individual accepts despair as fundamental to his being, and this new knowledge manifests itself in the “advantage he has over other man” (Kierkegaard 1954, 205–6).

the panacea of language. More broadly, is there a political economy to languages, a relationship of dominance among them, or do they and the meaning expressed through them circulate freely in some virtual and timeless space of linguistic and literary parity? Does it matter what the second language is in Hemon's scheme? Would the interplay between two languages, between the before and after of displacement, be the same if the medium was not English? When we speak of an *a priori* content of forms – a problem certainly known to the author who “blurs the lines of genre” and “slips in and out” of cultural norms in order to free the content of his stories from formal limitations – shouldn't we extend this sense of confinement and historical determination to entire national languages and literary traditions (Hemon 2015b, 246)? Isn't this even more necessary when the expressive idiom in question is not merely a vernacular language but the triumphant global English, home to a peculiar kind of world literature, assembled in American literary markets to affirm mostly metropolitan values? Take, for example, the following passage from the “Audacity” interview where Hemon contrasts his own way of accessing the past to that of “nostalgic writers,” whose obsession with “entirely imaginary” homelands or “fantasylands” he had dismissed earlier for having latent “fascist” aspirations (Hemon 2015b, 250).<sup>23</sup> Says Hemon:

The past is an interesting thing in terms of displacement because access to it becomes a crucial issue, imaginatively speaking, intellectually speaking [...].

23 The distinction is modeled on Svetlana Boym's typology of “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Boym positions her discussion of nostalgia in terms of longing for a “home that one never had.” “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy,” she writes (Boym 2001, xiii). While this may be the case with the transcendental home or the elusive origin posited by Western metaphysics, Boym's “home that no longer exists or has never existed” – just like Hemon's “entirely imaginary” homeland – is supposed to refer to an actually existing political order that at least attempted, as I suggest below, to build an earthly home for those who did not find solace in heavenly accommodations.

One of the drives for me to acquire the English language – particularly the register of the English language that would allow me to write – was related to the drive to engage with the past from a new situation, a new position. A new language would be less useful [...] for retrieving the past, or even preserving it. Language is always personal, particularly for writers. Your words are loaded with emotional content, from the fact that you probably have learned it from your mother or your family [...]. But that also limits your choices – if your mother can always be present in your mother tongue, perhaps you might try [...] speaking a language that allows a greater freedom. So to convert and address those memories in a different language gives them a different value, gives them a different structure, gives you a different access to them. They can be converted into something else, into stories. (Hemon 2015b, 251)

Since I am still dealing with methodological presuppositions concealed within the creed of bilingualism, I will set aside the question of the conversion of memories into stories and proceed only with what is obvious in the passage above. At stake here is the question of access, specifically, access to the past. Other people may think of this as a matter of historiography, but that describes only one of two alternate ways of relating to the past. In fact, history, for Hemon, is a totalizing scheme that induces systematic oblivion by erasing individual memories in the very act of their retrieval. Fortunately, a countervailing force capable of “forestalling oblivion” is also at play. As Hemon wrote elsewhere, “The only way to remember what must be remembered is to tell the stories of lives that have been erased by the megalomaniacal callousness of history” (Hemon 2012, xiv). None of this is unusual or without theoretical or literary precedent. But in most other cases, from Homer’s Demodocus to Benjamin’s Leskov, those who have commented on the power of storytelling did not mystify its medium in an effort to save it from the ravages of history.

Hemon's foolproof solution of simply switching to another language – a language that just happens to allow for “greater freedom” from the limitations one inherits in history – appears to place an inordinate amount of trust in a formal maneuver that alone can keep restorative tendencies at bay and thus succeed where native and immanent approaches have failed. This, I would like to suggest, is a fantasy – a daring fantasy far greater than that of an imaginary homeland which, in Hemon's case, was an actually-existing socialist state that, to varying degrees of success, “housed” those who did not find solace in the abstract accommodations of language.

To be fair to Hemon, he is *not* proposing an escape from history; escaping, exempting oneself from, or even overcoming history all fit under the same undifferentiated rubric of politico-theological “transcendence” that Hemon considers an essential folly of humanity and that he mocks relentlessly as a “delusional” and “catastrophic hubris” (Hemon 2015b, 254, 266).<sup>24</sup> What we are talking about here is not escaping but the *outwitting* of history through a formal conversion that promises “freedom” and maturity, a “different value” and a “different structure,” without a hint of irony or even awareness of the extent to which this freedom-yielding conversion is itself based on the inner historical and political logic

24 “In Eastern Europe and in Bosnia,” Hemon explains, “because history has not been kind to us in any way, no one in their right mind would think that Bosnians are the chosen people – so there's this necessary acceptance of being unimportant in history. And also necessary understanding of the limits of your will – you simply cannot will your way out of history. That's just nonsense” (Hemon 2015b, 253–54). Also, it is remarkable that both Hemon (with his carefully deployed term “hubris”) and Brodsky, in his “Catastrophes in the Air” (1986), think it is appropriate to use the language of Greek tragedy to account for the transcendental folly, revolutionary eschatological, or religious humanism in modern times. One gets the sense that all men are condemned to suffer the same fate the Greek protagonists supposedly did – a conclusion that may have more to do with a tendency to think about Greek drama in the terms popularized by Nietzsche than by the actual historical record, which in the same Bosnia Hemon brings up includes many historical examples of his compatriots in fact changing the course of history. On Nietzsche's “pessimism of strength,” see *The Birth of Tragedy* (1999, 4); on his views of Anaximander, “the true pessimist” who led the “colony of the emigrants,” see *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (2023, 45–46, 49).

of the language of free exchange, value-added transactions, and structural adjustments. A simpler way to say this is that the “language that allows a greater freedom” also imposes certain socially and historically determined limits that do not disappear simply by positing the existence of some “overlapping” space of conversion.<sup>25</sup> In fact, a whole set of ideological conversions seems to precede Hemon’s bilingual conversion, anticipating the shape that surviving memories will take in the new language and its book markets. Hemon’s prose is thus as restorative as that of “nostalgic writers.” Hemon would, of course, categorically deny this analogy, and he would not be entirely wrong, for there is indeed one important difference between the two approaches. The difference is in the substance of the actual *stasis* they each reinforce.

It is important to note that in addition to attributing the meaning of his stories to the conversion process, Hemon also believes that this conversion can reconstitute what history has destroyed. This is not an insignificant difference. If, as I have intimated above, the former is a matter of mystification, the latter is an example of hypostatization of language. In both cases, we are dealing with magic, but the first magic is that of misdirection (language conceals method), whereas the second magic is that of creating or making. To rephrase this one last time, the former *creates an illusion*, whereas the latter has an *illusion of creating*.

25 These historically determined limits become obvious if one examines, in earnest, the instructional and representational models available to the displaced author. Hemon readily acknowledges the debt he owes to Nabokov and to what he calls the “Nabokovian model” (Hemon 2015b, 250) without admitting that there is a political economy to the model one emulates. This goes beyond the questions of imagination or the expectations in the publishing and cultural industries, to a more fundamental question of what is even intelligible in American English. Can a refugee from the socialist past write without ironic detachment that borders on historical revisionism; without elegizing the loss of individual experience; without expecting literature to rescue the ephemeral from the “callous” totality of history; without condemning nostalgia; without mocking the absurdity of the state building projects, the futility of human actions, the naïveté of hope? Can a post-socialist work of literature not be about language?

To test this proposition – to see how Hemon’s world is reconstituted and, more importantly, what it actually looks like upon restitution – I will place some of his assertions about the power of language side by side with those about various social and political formations. Hemon claims that within the realm of history, “transcendental projects have been abysmal failures for thousands of years.” History is replete with examples of this “catastrophic” yearning, these “foolish fantasies” of people “willing themselves beyond history” and “beyond the limits of their humanity” (Hemon 2015b, 253–54). Hemon’s own examples run the gamut from millenarian religions and American political hubris to state-building projects in the socialist East. One may find it strange that such widely divergent and even irreconcilable political projects are all said to attest to the existence of a single phenomenon – an overarching transcendental folly that people are doomed to suffer in history – but this is and has been standard analytical fare among those commenting on the socialist experiment for decades.<sup>26</sup>

Whether one claims that socialism failed because it too closely resembled its Western counterpart or because it did not separate itself enough from religious or metaphysical teleology, these arguments are based on *formal* analogies and on the equivalence thus imposed on what may be different contents in each of the formulations. In other words, not all teleologies serve the same end, nor do all binary oppositions contain the same antipodes (to use the most common example of content routinely dismissed *in toto* due to its formal quality). In Hemon’s case, this means that we best not dismiss all transcendental propositions simply because they appear to harbor the same fantasy of stepping across

26 For instance, think of Brodsky’s dismissal of the Soviet “revolutionary eschatology” in his 1973 essay, “Catastrophes in the Air,” or of the more recent assertion by Susan Buck-Morss that the end of the Cold War marked the mutual defeat of two inseparable modernizing projects that equally betrayed the open-temporality of history (Buck-Morss 2002, 62–68). I have written about the former in “Circuits of influence: Brodsky’s Platonov and the ontology of alienation” (Popović 2019, 113–129).

the “fucking line” – Hemon’s colorful definition of transcendence – without first understanding what this line is, how it has come into existence, and what it delineates. This is not to say that there is no *a priori* content to each form. Lukács makes this argument convincingly both in terms of literary forms and, later, in terms of the commodity form. However, to rest the case here would mean, philosophically, not moving past the limits Kant places on human knowledge and, politically, not allowing for the possibility of change. In Marx’s Hegelian analysis of revolution, it is precisely the asymmetry of content and form that produces change. There’s another way to say this. Formalism has become the default logic today because it absolves its adherents from having to make political judgments between, in our case, two different types of transcendence or teleology. For example, while formally, there may be no difference between a shining city on the hill and the dictatorship of the proletariat, politically and historically, there is. More importantly, the formalist conceit has also made well-meaning critics and authors politically impotent by assuming that revolutionary change entails a formal break or a rupture in the commensurability of form. In a strange historical twist, those who have outright rejected the teleological form and the possibility of transcendence find themselves in the no less religious predicament of awaiting a messianic rupture, looking for salvation in other realms, or simply resigning themselves to suffer, audaciously, the limits of their naturally determined humanity.

This bleak, fatalistic view of a world beyond redemption, a world in which various theoretical decrees about the end of metaphysics are extended into political doctrines against revolutionary zeal, a world in which “projects of willing yourself beyond history [have] failed... catastrophically” – it is this world that in Hemon’s work is contrasted to the realm of literature. I will mention some of the actual phrases Hemon uses to describe the promise and the potential of language and literature. “Literature is inherently democratic,” Hemon declares, “as it is the way for everyone and anyone who can read to enter



the difficult and vast field of everything that comes under humanity” (Hemon 2012, viii–xi).<sup>27</sup> Writing is also “an inherently democratic project [since] you have to give everyone voice” (Hemon 2015b, 256). This can lead to the “liberation of the self” in both the reader and the writer and the “sensation of erasure of borders between the self and the world.” Furthermore, the “inversion of [historical] hierarchies is inherent in literature and language” (Hemon, 256, 257, 261). This list can go on, but I trust two things are sufficiently clear: language and literature are assigned too many “inherent” qualities for someone skeptical about metaphysical naïveté; and each of these inherent qualities is a political attribute denied to historical agents. In Hemon’s own words, in literature “people are contending or battling not only the limits of language, but the limits of humanity” – precisely what he advised them to forgo in history. Literature is inherently democratic, whereas political and social formations and institutions are not – and this includes the socialist state of his youth. The ability of human beings to create collectively and through their labor is stripped from them and bestowed instead on the work of a displaced author writing in a foreign language. “Democracy,” “equality,” and even “humanity” are understood to be merely semantic categories. Since their implementation in history is by definition, a disaster, they comfortably assert themselves in the aesthetic realm.

27 Hemon appears to be fond of saying that literature is “inherently democratic.” One comes across the same expression in, e.g., a 2017 interview for the American PEN Ten series, or in his “Running Out of Reasons for Not Writing” (2015a), the interview he gave the same month as “The Audacity of Despair.”

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Resistance





# 11 Palestinian Theater in the West Bank: An Interview with Iman Aoun

MARINA JOHNSON

On Sunday, 25 August 2024, almost 11 months into the genocide in Gaza, I sat down with Iman Aoun, the Executive Director of Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah, Palestine, for an interview about the work that Ashtar Theatre has done historically and about staging theater productions in the face of the ongoing Nakba and genocide in Gaza.

I first met Iman Aoun and interacted with Ashtar Theatre in person in 2015, where I had the pleasure of watching one of their Theatre of the Oppressed tours throughout the West Bank. I have also viewed their performances during three subsequent visits to Ramallah. This August, the month that I interviewed Iman, I had been seeing her daily at the Palestine Circus School where a collaboration between the School and Ashtar Theatre was taking place. However, on the day of the interview, we met on Zoom for ease and due to scheduling constraints. What unfolded is the interview that follows, though it has been edited for clarity.

MARINA JOHNSON     It's a pleasure to sit down with you today, Iman. Since people will be reading this interview who are not necessarily familiar with the work that Ashtar Theatre does, let us start by discussing when and how Ashtar Theater was founded.

IMAN AOUN     Ashtar Theatre was founded in 1991 in Jerusalem, exactly in the middle of the First Intifada. We thought that it was time to give an alternative education to the young people coming out of the resistance that they'd been living through for six years (from 1987 until 1993). We wanted the program to be directed towards the younger ones – 14 to 18 – in order to give them possibilities, first of all, to express themselves, but also to discover their innate talents. Because up until that time, there were no theater or no drama [programs] inside the schools; there was hardly any arts education, like painting. The arts programming that existed in schools was very small-scale. It's also important to note that the school systems were under the occupation because it was the Israelis who were supervising the national education. However, the private schools were run by private organizations connected to the Jordanian curriculum. We had two different curriculums. Of course, we did not target the governmental schools because we wouldn't work with the Israeli governmental institution; we only targeted the private schools at that time. Even the UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] schools were quite skeptical at that time.<sup>1</sup> When we started, we did not enter the UNRWA schools; we targeted the private sector to start. It went really well, and we managed to cover a good number of schools in Jerusalem and in the West Bank, in Ramallah. Then we started thinking of the universities, which

1     From the UNRWA for Palestine Refugees in the Near East website (<https://www.unrwa.org>): "UNRWA human development and humanitarian services encompass primary and vocational education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance and emergency response, including in situations of armed conflict." Israel began its blockade on Gaza in 2007, making it difficult, if not impossible, for people to enter.

is a different age group but an important one, and they needed the same kind of education and training. After Jerusalem and Ramallah, we expanded to Bethlehem, and then we went straight forward into Gaza. We started in Gaza, like a year after the initiation of the project. And we had partners, Jackie Lubeck and Jan Willems from Theatre Days Productions. When we were not able to enter Gaza anymore for political reasons, our partners took over, and then they started their project there as a continuation.<sup>2</sup> Then we were completing each other's work. We continued with the first group until they graduated, and Ali Abu Yassin came back to Ashtar Theatre in Gaza, and he started to train others in the name of Ashtar. That's how things really grew and developed.

MJ     So you started in Gaza in what year?

IA     1992, one year after we started our work in the West Bank.

MJ     Wow, that was a quick expansion!

IA     Yes, and in 1995 we established our actual theater space in Ramallah.

MJ     It's a beautiful space and one that has made such a difference for both Ashtar and other theater and performance organizations that you have allowed to use the space. Ashtar does a lot of different kinds of theater productions and training. But how would you describe the initial training? Did you start with the Theatre of the Oppressed right away?

IA     No, we started with the drama theater – drama training, based on Viola Spolin's work, Keith Johnstone, Meisner, Brecht. I mean all these philosophies and all these points

2     For more information, see Theatre Day Productions' website: <https://theatreday.org>. Another additional resource is *To the Good People of Gaza: Theatre for Young People* by Jackie Lubeck and Theatre Day Productions (2022).

of view informed how we could really utilize theater as a tool to either educate or raise awareness for these students, and also the general audience. And then, of course, parallel to our work, there was always the political situation that was going from bad to worse. Checkpoints started to be implemented all over the West Bank after 1993 even after the Oslo Accords, and then there were a few years of, let's say, a "bubble prosperity," and then the Second Intifada erupted in 2000. There was always the problem of occupation. In 1997, there were about 730 checkpoints implanted in the West Bank so people were not able, really, to commute and move from one city to another. They started to be entrapped in their areas. And so we thought, okay, now that the audiences are not able to enter Jerusalem... they're not able to come from Bir Zeit and Nablus and other areas into Ramallah the way they were coming before. We thought, okay, we need another way of reaching out to our audiences. Instead of them reaching our theater, we have to take our theater to where they are. We thought about what type of theater we might be able to do in order to reach out to them while also being convenient and allowing us to perform in alternative places, because there were no theater spaces in the West Bank. Therefore, we thought of the Theatre of the Oppressed. We thought that might be the best way to be able to raise issues that are of concern for our audience, while keeping us mobile and making theater that was affordable; we needed to take the theater sets and people and go wherever we needed to go.<sup>3</sup> This strategy really helped us. It helped us to connect deeply with the community and in the West Bank and also to see what was needed. We started to hear our people's plight and what they would like to see

3 Because the Theatre of the Oppressed is meant to be accessible and taken to the people, in the streets, or wherever it is invited, it is often created to be more mobile than a play built for one specific theater location where the emphasis is on the aesthetic. To make a conventional play, some scenic and prop elements may be necessary. For Ashtar Theatre, because of the difficulty traveling from place to place because of the occupation, it is crucial that all of the play's elements fit into one vehicle with the actors and technicians.

on stage. We started to hear from them – what would they like us to present, what kind of issues would they like us to raise on the stage? And then we started to work with them immediately, as the Theatre of the Oppressed suggests. This helped a lot to spread the technique in the West Bank, mainly, but we also transferred it to Gaza where Ali Abu Yassin and other colleagues also started using the Theatre of the Oppressed. It really became a vital tool for us.

MJ My first time seeing Ashtar Theatre's work in person was in 2015 and I went with you as you were touring a show from Ramallah to Beit Jala. I was so impressed that everything fit into one car, and when you put it on stage, it was really effective. It was a Forum Theater show and everyone in the audience was engaged; it seemed like the play touched on issues that people cared about, getting them involved in talking and thinking through these issues.<sup>4</sup> It was my first time really seeing the Theatre of the Oppressed's pedagogy put into practice, and it was so powerful to see.

IA Yes, absolutely. It is very powerful, of course, because it is the game of dialoguing. No matter what you present on stage, you can have a meaningful dialogue. Don't misunderstand me – we might be presenting something really important and artistic, in terms of meaning, or in terms of issue. But no matter what we present, the most important part is when we open up a dialogue afterwards – the forum is another

4 Augusto Boal, in his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, defines Forum Theater as a performance that is an "artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actors." After the play is performed conventionally, the spect-actors are "asked if they agree with the solutions advanced by the protagonist." They will likely disagree and, as the play is performed a second time, they will be given the chance to intervene and change the play, "showing that new solutions are possible and valid" (Boal 2005, 243); "spect-actor" is a term created by Augusto Boal that combines the words "spectator" and "actor" indicating that someone watching a Forum Theatre piece should not watch passively as their thoughts are of the same importance as those on stage and they often join on stage to share their opinions.

level. It's on a level where people can start to believe or re-believe in their abilities to speak up – to publicly speak up. This is something that is not always granted in our community or in our society in general, so to be able to tell your ideas among a group of people who do not know you necessarily, and defend those ideas, is an important factor, because that gives you an unconscious strength and helps you develop your own thoughts as well. As you reassess yourself, you reassess your ability to reach out beyond yourself as well.

MJ That makes sense. I appreciate hearing about your Theatre of the Oppressed work because that is one of the first things I learned about Ashtar Theatre. However, life has definitely changed in Palestine in the past 11 months, and I'm wondering how it specifically has changed for you and other members of Ashtar Theatre during this time.

IA Well, of course, it changed for everybody, enormously. First of all, we are all traumatized. The fact is that we've been struck by this massive war, and incursions everywhere, and killing, and mass-killing – It's not even killing. It's mass killing. It's very frustrating that there are so many lies happening, and the world is denying and delusional about what is happening here ... it's like they are in a mood that they don't want to see, to hear, and to speak out ... it's very harsh. What we're trying to do is, first of all, recuperate those traumatized by this genocide. Second, we're trying to find ways to survive and third, we're trying to be of use for our people. Those are our three main levels of interventions or involvement. You have to really think all the time about the ways you can protect yourself and the people around you, but you also have to reach out. There is a duty; there's something that we need from each other. We're not like foreigners abroad. We cannot be neutral to what's happening.

MJ One of the levels that you were talking about, reaching out, reminds me of what happened on the International

Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people last year (2023). Ashtar really made a push to have people perform *The Gaza Monologues* in solidarity, but also to have people speak the words for Palestinian youth that have experienced this before. Can you speak a little bit about *The Gaza Monologues* in the first iteration, and then we can talk more about the recent solidarity stagings, because I know you've been deeply involved in working with many of these people who are still, some of them, in Gaza right now.

IA Well, *The Gaza Monologues*' historical background is the fact that I initiated it in 2009 after the first assault on Gaza, which was in 2008–2009 for 22 days. At that time, Ali Abu Yassin was our director and we were working with groups of people in Gaza with the main idea to create solidarity with Gaza. Up until that date, people were in total denial of the Palestinian cause and of the rights of the Palestinians in Gaza to really exist and even resist the occupation. This was a taboo you could not really talk about. The main aim for me was to really raise the voice of the young people and to speak to the heart of the international community, because it's not an intellectual debate. The monologues they wrote are about what they felt and how they experienced the attacks and the loss of their dear ones. I wanted their voice to be out there and I also wanted some sort of connection between them and other peers of their age because it's that age, 13 to 18, when you start to create your personal philosophy. You start to really understand the world around you and start to create empathy towards others and understand them. That was part of the main objectives of why *The Gaza Monologues* began. Following a year of training with Ashtar, we took the stories of these young people, and then we translated them into different languages. We started with English and French, but then also Italian and Spanish and other languages, and we shared them with our network around the world. There were about 52 groups who took these monologues and put them on in a performance of some kind. And then we took them and

presented these monologues to the [United Nations] General Assembly, hoping to get the politicians to really hear the people. Because, usually, the politicians hear themselves. *They* make monologues all the time. They don't even make dialogues between them and other countries – it's usually a one-sided conversation.

After that, *The Gaza Monologues* became well known and were used at universities, in certain schools, and were published in particular books. But then, in 2014, there was another assault. We asked our youth, the ones who wrote the original monologues, to write other monologues and added those new monologues to the original thirty-three.

Coming into 2023 we thought – What can we do? We have these stories that are accurate at the moment. Not much has changed, really, except now the killing is wider and stronger, but the killing is the killing. People are now dying every day in Gaza. This is why we disseminated these monologues around the world with increased urgency. And 62 countries responded – thousands of people wanted to read them. And on 29 November, around 3000 people read *The Gaza Monologues* around the world and from that minute onward, it has still been going on. Every week there is a reading somewhere, not only one reading, but maybe more than one, in different places. Also, many groups decided to print out the translations into books.

Meanwhile, the war did not end, and the genocide continued. We asked ourselves, “Okay, what's next? What can be done? How can we raise more awareness?” This led us to the thought, okay, there has to be another response, like a response from the world to Gaza. Let the world write to Gaza what they think. Because of this, we initiated *Letters to Gaza* from the world (instead of *from Gaza to the world* this time, which was the case with *The Gaza Monologues*). We started collecting these poems, verbatim stories, and writings, and we will be producing a book out of these letters. Among these pieces will also be monologues that our colleague Ali Abu Yassin has chosen. From the beginning of the war and continuing even



now, he decided to write some sort of diary. Not a daily diary. But he's writing monologues in a kind of ongoing fashion, and now he has about 30 monologues that he has written, maybe one every two weeks. Sometimes, he writes one every week. I translate them into English, and then we put them on our website, The Gaza Monologues [<https://www.gaza-monologues.com>]. We have all this material that is important, and this is documentation of what is going on, and it's giving us some sort of pavement to stand on in these hard times. With deep sorrow, we realize that people might go, but the story needs to stay.

MJ Especially in a world that is not documenting Palestinian voices or even the number of Palestinians killed accurately. To have a project that is really telling Palestinian stories by Palestinians, and then asking the world to respond, is very meaningful. I was part of several readings of *The Gaza Monologues*, but the most recent version that I worked on really touched me. A few children from Gaza evacuated to my area in California and one of the girls was hearing someone else read a Gaza Monologue, and she heard a name from 2009 and she said, "That's my cousin!" She wrote her own monologue for the performance and it was both amazing and horrifying that it was her cousin and herself talking back in time to each other. But it was, of course, meaningful to have these things written and shared with the world. Ashtar has been doing other projects recently, too. One of the projects that you did was touring the play *Oranges and Stones*, which is a two-person play with you and Edward Muallem. Can you tell us about that play and how it has been received by audiences?

IA *Oranges and Stones* was made in 2010 to bring people's awareness to the situation in Palestine. Mojisola Adebayo, the director and initiator of this play, is a Londoner from a mixed background. She's been a friend of Ashtar's for many years, and she used to work with us on other projects before *Oranges and Stones*. She studied the Theatre of the Oppressed

and she was one of the people who gave us workshops and produced Forum Theatre plays with us in 2000 and 2001. The main reason she wanted to make the play was, every time she went back from Palestine to the United Kingdom, she would talk about the occupation, but people would not really understand what she was saying. They would understand to some extent, but they didn't really understand what an occupation is. Occupation can mean a job or you can occupy space on a bench, but this is a colonizing occupation. The word doesn't resonate with everyone. That made her want to present a simplistic form of what occupation means. And because we speak Arabic as a country, people often say to us "Ah, you make plays in Arabic, and we don't understand them. Don't bring them here." She wanted the play to exist without words at all. Without words, but here we are, talking about what occupation means. In 2010, we started improvising on that theme and the play emerged, and it was called *48 Minutes for Palestine*, because it was 48 minutes exactly.<sup>5</sup> And it started with the events of the Balfour Declaration [in 1917] and went throughout history until 2010, the year we had the first production. The play was successful. It toured many festivals in the world, and then it stopped in 2015. Then, in 2017, it was the centennial of the Balfour Declaration. We decided to remount the play. Before that, I was not part of the play. It was another colleague [Riham Issac] who was in my place, but she was a younger actress, and the director, Mojisola, wanted me to be in that role because we are talking about an older woman and an old man. It's also very symbolic about Palestine and about the Jewish migrant who is coming into the house of this woman after the First World War. She accepts him. She's skeptical but she accepts him. She gives him water; she gives him oranges. She sympathizes with the loss of his family. But then he starts to take more of her space, and the conflict starts. Up until the moment when he pushes her out of her place completely,

5      Additionally, 1948 is the year that the Palestinian Nakba, or catastrophe, occurred, so 48 here has a double meaning.

she's stuck in one corner. Now, when we did the play from 2010 until 2023, the woman was stuck in a very small space. It's like she's stuck in Gaza or she's stuck in the West Bank. The play did not change – nothing changed inside the play. The only change was that, after the recent genocide started, the woman decided that she would go out to the audience with the orange and give it to an audience member as a representation of asking for active solidarity and keeping the story alive.

MJ That's really striking. I mean, one small change, but with a major effect.

IA But it says that we've been living this for 75 years and more.

MJ You just toured *Oranges and Stones*. How was it received by the audience? Did people understand the orange moment as a metaphor? It brought tears to my eyes as you're describing it; I'm imagining it was impactful.

IA Before the current situation, we had already done 160 performances, and we toured maybe 38 cities outside of Palestine; the audiences were really in favor of it. They come out struck because there's not one single moment that doesn't tell volumes. The symbolism of it is very strong and there's action, action, action from beginning to end. Everything that we do on stage has different meanings; the audience was really receptive. The last places we toured were the UK, France, Portugal, and Jordan. The audiences were very receptive, and they wanted to know more. There are always conversations after the performance. People are eager, thirsty to understand. The play is very descriptive; it tells a lot, but also, people were wanting to know even more.

MJ The fact that this play has been seen in 38 cities is amazing.

IA Yes. We were even at Georgetown University in 2018 at the lab [Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, USA] and we are now hoping to bring it to an extensive tour to the US – this is our aim for 2025.

MJ A very necessary mission.

IA We definitely need your help and the help of Friends of Ashtar.

MJ Definitely, and hopefully, people who are reading this will be able to look for more information about how they can show support. Another piece that you've recently done with Ashtar was a commissioned play by Ismail Khalidi and Naomi Wallace called *Guernica, Gaza*. I would love for you to tell us more about it. The two things I know about it are that Guernica is a town in Spain and the piece is also named after a Picasso painting.

IA Why did we want to invoke Guernica in particular? Guernica was a city where the Nazis experimented with new bombs; the city was used as a testing site, live testing ammunition. This is a similarity between Guernica and Gaza... this has been happening in Gaza, too. It is totally surreal how Gaza has been utilized every two years or so... when there was a war and an assault on Gaza, there were weapons used that shouldn't have been used there. To be clear, no weapons should be used, but especially not testing *new* weaponry. Also, yes, one of Picasso's masterpieces is called Guernica about the [Spanish] Civil War. Here in Gaza, it's not a civil war, but we wanted to extract the surrealistic images of the effect of the war and the people on the ground. This is what Naomi and Ismail were using in order to create the play, which they then called, *Guernica, Gaza: Images from the Center of the World*. We wanted Naomi and Ismail to write it in particular. We went to them with the Guernica idea to see whether they could

take it and see what might be there to discover. They stuck to the idea of the place as being the site that is used for testing. We were happy to collaborate with them because it's been ages. I mean, I have known Naomi since almost 2002 and we are close friends, and theater makers, and Naomi was also one of the Advisory Committee for the Gaza Monologues. We have always wanted to work together at some point, but we never found a way. We kept this close rapport and when she was asked, she said "Yes, I want to help." And Ismail as well. They wrote a beautiful play that Emile Saba, Ashtar Theatre's Artistic Director, directed with 5 of our lovely young theater makers who presented the play 5 times, and they will be presenting it 10 more times.

MJ Very exciting, and I can't wait to see it when it tours the West Bank in those upcoming shows.

IA Yes, hopefully. Well, they were supposed to go to the UK, to Oxford, because they were invited by Mandala Theater to participate in a festival, but unfortunately, Israel currently does not allow the West Bankers to get into Jerusalem to do the interview with the visa section, so they couldn't obtain a visa. They couldn't go to the UK, and now we're hoping that other possibilities will come and that they will create them to really travel and present this play so people outside of Palestine can see it as well.

MJ I really hope so. I think people don't, especially people in the Global North, they don't always think about what the visa process is like for people, especially for Palestinians who have to travel from within the West Bank to go to a visa office that's in Jerusalem, and really have to navigate so much just to be able to apply for a visa to try to go someplace else.

IA Yes, and Palestinians from the West Bank have to have a permit, a special permit, to enter Jerusalem, which they have not been able to obtain since the war on Gaza. I mean, no one,

almost no one, is able to obtain any permission from the West Bank into Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

MJ I've also had the pleasure recently of sitting in on training sessions that Ashtar Theater is doing in collaboration with the Palestine Circus School. It's been such a treat to get to see people, especially because I know that everything in Palestine feels very heavy right now. To see people be in a space and to breathe deeply and to process things together and do this training, which will culminate in a circus-theater production this week, has been really beautiful. It's great to see this community coming together in this way. How did this collaboration with the circus school start? And why did you feel like it was important to do it now?

IA The collaboration with the Circus School started way before. I started a theater and arts organization network with 15 other organizations that is called Palestinian Performing Arts Network. We've been working together, next to each other, in alliance with each other for many years. But with the Circus School, we have a very special rapport, because Shadi, one of the founders of the Circus School, was one of our students and our colleagues for maybe 15 years. When he started the school, he started the school inside Ashtar, and then as they grew, they went out on their own and grew beautifully. Three years ago, I wanted to create a performing arts village, a true village in the Jordan Valley, because we were working at the Jordan Valley for 10 years on and off, and it broke my heart to see that there's no cultural life there that could really grow and give possibilities for the young people and the community in general. I started to really work on this idea. I wanted Ashtar to be with other organizations and not alone. Because to really create a village, you need to have a collection of visionaries and people who can contribute to that

6 For reference, from Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah to the Old City of Jerusalem is 20 km.

dream. I spoke to the Circus School, and then we also had other partners like the Jordan Valley Solidarity Campaign, and then we had the Jericho municipality on board as well. We started to look for a place to establish this village, and it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy for many reasons. First of all, you realize that in the Jordan Valley, there's no more land. The very scarce land that exists is there for the people to use, either to plant or to build their own homes, if they are able to. All other land that exists is being confiscated – whenever you put your hand on it, [the Israeli Occupation Forces, IOF] come and destroy whatever you put there. The Israeli army destroys everything and anything that is built on Area C which is more than 60% of the West Bank.<sup>7</sup> When we talk about being autonomous, this is a big job. The West Bank is completely under occupation. There's no space that is Palestinian itself. The Palestinian Authority are impresarios of the Israeli occupation. Anyway, we went a little bit south, and we started to negotiate with the municipality of Jericho, and they wanted to give us a piece of land there, but then the war erupted, and we were not able to reach it. The war continued on and, it has been almost one year now, but years into this negotiation, and nothing is on the ground. We thought, okay...we moved the idea to somewhere else – really we brought the idea back to where we are...let's do the idea from our spaces, because part of this village is to create an Academy of Performing Arts, mainly theater and circus, and we have written the curriculum for this. We wanted to really start it as a pioneer project. The academic approach is for two years. But we thought that this summer could be the pilot project of an intensive, one-month program that we wanted to test. We chose August 2024 to be the month

7 The 1995 Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into three areas – A, B, and C – that were meant to be temporary. Area A is under the Palestinian Authority, in Area B the Palestinian Authority exercises administrative control but shares “security control” with Israel, and Area C is under Israeli administration and has arguably the worst living conditions for Palestinians, as they are surrounded by settlers, are near Israeli “firing zones,” and have less access to other basic needs like water. For more information, see the Anera (American Near East Refugee Aid) website: <https://www.anera.org>.

that we would test this pilot, and I believe that it's going really well, and hopefully we will see some good stuff on Thursday [for the final performances].

MJ It's very exciting. And I love the idea of a performing arts village, because I think that Palestinian society teaches a lot of things, but one of them is really about community and collectivity and working collaboratively. In theater, of course, we have to work collaboratively, but I just see that functioning even differently in Palestine, in a beautiful way of interconnect-edness. This news gives us so much to look forward to from Ashtar as we think about what this could mean for the future.

Ashtar Theater runs a lot of different psychosocial projects, and it might not be a term that some people are used to. Can you define what psychosocial means for the projects that Ashtar does, and maybe give an example or two? Because in my mind these are projects that give so much to the community.

IA Why we're saying psychosocial and we're not saying mental health, or we're not saying *only* psychological intervention, is, because for us, we look at the two ends together as one. When we started to talk, we talked about the trauma. Since we are all traumatized, the trauma that we are living, especially the young people, is not only affecting the psychological part of our young people's being, but it's also producing shame in them from the social context. By this I mean sometimes families, in the upbringing of our kids, have been very uptight – young boys should not be crying, should not be really expressing their feelings, because they are men and they have to be solid. Young girls are put on the side, unable to speak up because they have to be socially preserved, and so on. The social aspect, together with the psychological aspect, gives a very complex presentation of the identity, which puts the youth, mainly, into a vicious cycle inside themselves and society. They either shut up and run away from their internal feeling or they become able to express them. They would often



go into either waves, like militant or mental health problems, drug addiction, unable to face problems, etc. Or they are very violent towards society in order to prove their macho-ism and to prove their best strength. Explaining all of that, what we try to do is put up a little bit of a soft mirror in front of these young people, through theater and through exercises just to give them the way to remember that first of all, they are children, that they can have fun and play without conflictive approaches. Even if there is conflict in the game, it can be a positive conflict, you know what I mean? Using these techniques, and also using the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed and dialogue, we help the young people to express what they do and how they feel. The type of social intervention that we have been using, trying to use, since the war erupted. It's also a way to tell them that it's alright, it's alright to cry, it's alright to feel pain, it's alright to mourn. It's alright to feel that you are frustrated or you are afraid. All of these emotions impact the body, and sometimes they are not even aware of their existence, because they suppress the feelings. But what we try to do is to reveal them, talk about them, play them out, and share them. We want them to understand there is a community that can become a safe haven for us, if we want, but we have to really reach out.

MJ It's so important for people to know they're not alone, and also to know that sometimes it's a coping mechanism to press down our feelings, but we have to let them out, and we also have to deal with them at some point for our own health and sanity...being able to do that in a safe space is amazing. To wrap things up, what would a call to action be, or something that you would urge anyone reading this piece to do – an action item for them?

IA The genocide is not entertainment. What is happening at the moment is that we've been watching for 11 months a genocide live. If we continue to do this, we will lose something of ourselves, not to mention the people in Gaza. In a way,

it reminds me of how, through Hollywood movies, we have become desensitized to violence. What is happening now is redirecting the way our emotions and our psychology work towards such traumatic images. What is needed from the global community, especially those who really believe that solidarity is important, or activism is important, is that it's not enough to say that we are "supportive" of Palestinians. It's not enough to get out in the streets. There have to be actions toward the decision-makers. It has to be a complete boycott. Maybe even don't pay your taxes, maybe even don't go to work, maybe even stop what you're doing and let the world stop. We experienced that during the COVID-19 pandemic – the world stopped completely for months, and we started to see animals in the street. We started to see the ozone going back or healing a little bit, so stop what you're doing. We should all stop what we're doing in order for this war to stop.

MJ    Thank you. That's a great ending for us, and I hope that everyone who's reading is able to take that very seriously, because this cannot continue, and we need to make sure that decision-makers know that, and that we're willing to change our lives to make it stop. Thank you so much, Iman.

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If you are interested in reading more about *The Gaza Monologues*, you can find them in the anthology *Stories Under Occupation*, edited by Samer Al-Saber and Gary English. Additionally, you can find the play text for *Oranges and Stones* (under the previous title *48 Minutes for Palestine*) in the edited volume *Theatre in Pieces: Politics, Poetics and Interdisciplinary Collaboration: An Anthology of Play Texts 1966–2010*.

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# **12 The Role of Theater in the Social Adaptation of Children and Adolescents in the Context of the Russian Military Aggression Against Ukraine**

**SOFIIA ROSA-LAVRENTII**

Translated by Anna Halas

War and children. This subject is consistently fraught with pain, instability, and emotional upheaval. The breadth of experiences encapsulated within these two words makes it challenging to juxtapose them. Our instinct is to preserve, shield, conceal, and even avoid acknowledging the war altogether. Nonetheless, it persists, and children endure its consequences firsthand. The war in Ukraine, spanning from the initial incursion by Russian troops in 2014 to the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, has reached a decade as of the month of February, 2024, when I am writing these lines. A considerable number of children who were around 10 years old in 2014 have since matured and now find themselves tasked with defending their families on the frontline. An entire generation has come of age amidst these circumstances. How can discussions about war be initiated with children, especially when its tangible impact surrounds them? Adults are also encountering this challenge, each striving to determine the most appropriate approach based on their individual instincts and convictions.

In such circumstances, the question arises: Can we effectively engage children and adolescents in discussions about war through artistic mediums, specifically through theater? Considerable discourse has emerged regarding the Ukrainian theater's role and response amidst the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. What developments are unfolding within the theaters dedicated to children and adolescents amidst these circumstances? Do theaters continue their activities, and do they address the topic of war with their young audience? Furthermore, is such engagement considered necessary? In a landscape where the war seems omnipresent, saturating our surroundings and permeating every aspect of life, should theater remain a sanctuary, untouched by its influence?

Indeed, these questions hold relevance for Ukrainian theater artists who focus on engaging with young audiences. Clearly, each theater offers its unique response, shaped by diverse circumstances such as its geographical location, resources, and its own journey through the complexities of war. In this chapter, I do not aim to present a comprehensive analysis of the activities of theater groups working with children and teenagers; instead, I will draw upon select examples from the unfolding events within Ukrainian theaters.

The efforts of Ukrainian theaters amidst the war can be categorized into two primary areas. One of these areas involves establishing communication with the audience through performances and stage readings. This line of activity can be defined as the creation of a communicative space within which narratives of war are developed and disseminated. Theater engages with war as a crisis and reflects upon it accordingly. Another facet involves art therapy, where theater establishes a space and facilitates circumstances for the audience to generate and share their stories. Theatrical projects emphasizing the therapeutic mission of theater have gained particular significance following the full-scale war in 2022.

## Theater and its Reflections on War as a Crisis

One notable example of addressing the topic of war and its repercussions with teenagers was the staging of *Noah's Children* by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt at the Lviv Theatre “People and Puppets,” directed by Mykhailo Urytskyi and premiered in 2020. The production is intended for audiences aged 12 and above. The theater embarks on a dialogue with young viewers regarding the war, abstaining from romanticizing or glorifying it, and addresses the consequences of the war in general, notably the Holocaust (as depicted in Schmitt’s text, referencing World War II). Similarly, the play avoids the route of instilling fear or moralizing.

Through expressive visual imagery and minimalist yet poignant puppetry, the creators skillfully maintain a dual perspective: one that transcends the tragedies of the Second World War while also fostering a deeper understanding of the intrinsic value of each individual and the responsibility we bear for our legacies in this world. Thus, utilizing metaphors such as an ark and a garden, and employing puppets as intermediaries bridging the experiences of disparate generations, the theater initiated a challenging dialogue with young viewers regarding the complexities and challenges inherent in war, and the values we hold dear. It is deliberate that the puppets resemble elongated shadows, devoid of vibrant colors and expressive features, resembling souls from the past, as envisioned by the artist Uliana Kulchytska.

Young viewers will traverse the multifaceted narrative of characters, including the teenagers Joseph (portrayed by Nadiya Krat) and Rudy (portrayed by Volodymyr Melnikov), as they navigate the trials of war – encountering separation, fear, and the anguish of loss. However, amidst these challenges, they embark on a journey throughout the play that culminates in experiences of hope, trust, steadfast friendship, unforeseen joy, and triumphant love. These values can endure within a person indefinitely, akin to treasures that can be passed down and cultivated within the soul like

flourishing gardens. The garden-like souls, which appear to burgeon and bloom, sculpted by the actors, serve as profoundly expressive visual representations of life's resilience, perpetually seeking love amidst any circumstances. Thus, in recounting the narrative of adolescents amid wartime, the play effectively communicates the enduring values that we hold dear within ourselves and impart unto others.

Another method through which Ukrainian theater typically addresses the topic of war with children's audiences is by utilizing the genre of folk tales. The tale format, with its allegorical elements, symbols, and inherent detachment, as well as its clear and understandable division between good and evil, has proven to be highly effective for facilitating challenging discussions – not only about the war itself, but also about profound values such as betrayal and freedom, fear and dignity, and ultimately, death and love.

A notable illustration of a theater's thoughtful communication with its young audience regarding the theme of border violations is demonstrated in the play *Koza-Dereza* (*Bully Goat*) staged by the First Academic Ukrainian Theatre for Children and Youth in Lviv. The premiere took place on 5 June 2021. The play's director, Ihor Zadniprianyi, along with the theater's team, reimagines the renowned Ukrainian folk tale within the aesthetic framework of a detective TV show. The well-known story of the malevolent Goat usurping the Hare's dwelling (in this rendition, the Hare was portrayed as a Fox) and subsequently displacing him expands into a narrative of broader significance. It serves as a conduit for the theater to engage its audience in discussions about borders – both geographical and personal – and the means to establish, safeguard, and defend them.

Clear and understandable parallels emerge for the audience primarily through the terminology employed by the theater. The Goat's actions of seizing the Fox's home are not merely depicted as eviction; rather, the Goat is depicted as "occupying" it. Throughout the play, the Goat is consistently referred to as the "Occupant" and "Aggressor." While this may



elicit laughter at times, the roles are distinctly delineated, thus allowing for a contextual understanding of the parable's progression.

The performance, presented in the format of a detective reality show, featuring rap monologues delivered by the characters, alongside a rap group "chorus" providing commentary on the unfolding events (composed by Yuriy Sayenko), with vibrant elements of pop art costumes and sleek, movable set pieces (designed by Daria Zavyalova), illuminated by Svitlana Korinkova's lighting design, might be likened to a theatrical comic book. The genre is characterized by its vibrant, dynamic nature, and is readily embraced by young viewers. The comic book format creates a sense of familiarity and closeness to the audience, while the structure of a fable with a clear moral ending provides a degree of detachment. This detachment enables the theater to address complex topics more freely.

The portrayal of the Goat as the "Occupant" (played by either Natalia Alekseenko or Bohdana Bonchuk) diverges from the traditional demonic and menacing depiction found in the folk tale. Instead, the Goat is depicted as vibrant, even somewhat charismatic, yet ultimately "ordinary" and thus susceptible to defeat. In the final moments, the improvised scene of the Goat's interrogation in an interview with a lie detector exposes her as nothing more than a common fraud. The theater constructs a coherent narrative within its performance: the Goat is depicted as a fraudster whose criminal actions disrupt the harmonious forest community, violating the personal and spatial boundaries of the Fox. Now, all the forest inhabitants are confronted with the daunting challenge of restoring order and defending their personal boundaries.

The portrayal of the Fox (performed by Mariana Kichma and Anastasia Khavunka) undergoes significant variation throughout the play – from initially being depicted as pacifist-friendly, princess-like, carefree, and somewhat childish, to ultimately appearing confidently defensive yet retaining a sense of elegance in the finale. All the forest inhabitants eventually come to the Fox's aid in her time of need, although

their assistance may not be immediate. It is only through their unity and collective action that the animals manage to drive the Goat away.

Clear allusions to the events of the Maidan and the Revolution of Dignity, which occurred in Ukraine in 2014, are evident as the forest dwellers gradually realize their strength and their right to stand up and fight. Justice prevails, eliciting euphoria among the audience, accompanied by enthusiastic rapping in which both the actors and the audience actively participate. The narrative is inherently optimistic, culminating in a triumphant conclusion, and serves to instill a sense of confidence that evil will be vanquished and that, through unity, it can indeed be overcome.

This narrative possesses a distinct structure and moral lesson, aimed at instilling values in young viewers. It emphasizes the importance of respecting personal boundaries, refraining from encroaching on others' property, and, most importantly, recognizing the inherent value of the individual "I" deserving of respect. In the face of the looming war and the imminent full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these values have assumed even greater significance.

The period following 24 February 2022 marked a new shock and a significant rupture for Ukrainians. In the initial days of the large-scale Russian invasion, Ukrainian theaters ceased their regular operations for several months, being transformed into shelters and volunteer centers. All previous social and artistic structures, including theaters, underwent restructuring: some employees enlisted at the frontlines, while others joined territorial defense efforts. Those who remained established volunteer centers to provide aid and support. These centers assumed the critical role of shelters, offering essential assistance to Ukrainians fleeing the occupation, often from areas near the frontline. This support was vital for the millions of people affected by the war.

Actors, directors, and stage designers – referred to simply as volunteers – played a crucial role in assisting the first wave of refugees affected by Russian attacks. They provided

physical aid such as food and accommodation, as well as psychological support by offering acceptance, lending a listening ear, and empathizing with the pain, fear, and anxiety experienced by those affected. Nearly every Ukrainian theater experienced this phase of transformation into a shelter. Many artists described their experience during the initial months as a period of creative and psychological “numbness.” They grappled with a sense of incapacity to engage in theater during that time and harbored doubts about their ability to do so in the future. However, this phase of “numbness” gradually subsided, and they came to the realization that art, particularly theater, could aid in their acceptance of this new reality.

In the frontline cities, which continue to endure heavy and frequent shelling, the trajectory of theaters is comparable, albeit with distinctive nuances. In Kharkiv, where thousands of residents are still compelled to seek refuge in underground tunnels due to the ongoing shelling, many individuals, particularly families with children, found themselves living in these spaces during the initial days of the full-scale invasion. At a certain point, some actors felt the urge to introduce a semblance of theater into these cold spaces, suffused with fear and grief. Theater served as a respite from the dire reality, offering salvation for both them and the audience.

The story of the puppetry students from Kotlyarevskiy Kharkiv National University of Arts and the actors of Afanasiev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre, who made the decision to relocate one of their children’s performances to the subway, is undeniably poignant. It was the tale *The Speck* by Anna Schmidt (directed by Oksana Dmitrieva, artwork by Natalia Denisova, 2022). The actors reminisce about the experience as a moment of impromptu inspiration, as they entered the underground in costumes and announced to the bewildered audience in this unusual space that they were staging a play for children. Nevertheless, everyone participated in the performance, including children, teenagers, and adults alike. Oksana Dmitrieva acknowledges that it was

the most unconventional tour for their theater, performing in the Kharkiv underground stations teeming with people. She reflects:

Performances in the underground became such a special encounter with the audience for me, where we met halfway. The viewer to the actor, the actor to the viewer. And it was a mutual form of salvation. We concluded each performance with a hug, satisfying the intense need for physical contact at that time. There were many hugs if people desired or required them. The theater now serves a new purpose – it has begun to help heal. (Dmitrieva 2022)

Many Kharkiv residents confessed that the underground performances briefly transported them back to their recent, normal lives – a luxury that felt distant yet worth fighting for. It reminded them of the life they yearned to reclaim and defend. It was easier to incorporate performances for children into the underground environment than performances tailored for adult audiences, as the latter might not have been able to afford “entertainment” for an extended period. Furthermore, it was the puppet theater, with its form, mobility, and specialized approach to work, that succeeded in fostering an atmosphere of trust and genuine dialogue.

The personal initiatives of individual actors have emerged as a remarkable phenomenon. In particular, a family of artists from Kharkiv, including Daria Kushnirenko, a puppet theater artist and actress, and Pavlo Saveliev, a puppet theater actor, stands out.<sup>1</sup> Daria Kushnirenko was the first to craft the puppet characters for the imaginative folk tale performance *Ivasyk-Telesyk* (2022). She remembers that at a certain point, witnessing children during these somber war days

1 They, along with their sons, continue to reside in Kharkiv. They dedicate themselves tirelessly to volunteering efforts, often personally delivering humanitarian aid to villages on the frontline.

– children akin to mice peering silently out of the windows of their homes – she felt compelled by both a sense of necessity and her own inner fortitude to communicate with them through theater. At night, Daria Kushnirenko would sew dolls, even amid air raids, finding solace in the act. Together with her husband, Pavlo Saveliev, she designed the performance using nothing but scrap materials. It was their most mobile and flexible performance yet.

Once more, a tale of danger and rescue, of love and tenderness that can leave a lasting impact, was narrated through a folk tale. The performance encompassed both humor, as seen in the portrayal of battling geese tasked with guarding Ukrainian airspace, and tenderness, exemplified by the melodic flute tune of a mother's lullaby. In the hands of the artist, the war materialized into a puppet witch, who, following the storyline of a Ukrainian folk tale, pursued the main character, a boy named Ivasyk, with the intention of devouring him. The witch assumed an exceedingly militarized appearance, resembling a steel tank with a gaping mouth filled with sharp fangs. It was menacing and threatening, yet, as it transpired, also clumsy and slow.

Undoubtedly, the young protagonist was not equipped to overcome the adversary; however, he endeavored strenuously to evade its clutches. Ultimately, Ivasyk successfully managed to elude the witch's pursuit. The primary focal points of the play, its core message, revolve around elucidating the factors that enable an individual to retain their humanity, even amidst the most dire and harrowing circumstances. A mother's lullaby, expressed through the gentle melody of a flute, embodies the significance of seemingly simple gestures that have the power to instill love, foster resilience, affirm inner freedom, and preserve one's authentic self, thereby safeguarding against the encroachment of chaos and cruelty into the heart.

Through the stark visual contrast between the two principal puppet characters – Ivasyk, crafted from a wooden block, evoking a sense of warmth and naturalness, and

the Witch, depicted as steely, sharp, and cold – the young audience comprehends that the narrative extends beyond mere fantasy, resonating with their own lived reality. The theater seeks to convey their inherent strength, to show the profound love that adults harbor for them, and to assure the audience that even the tale's most daunting aspects are invariably supplanted by uplifting plot developments. Furthermore, it underscores the belief that children unequivocally deserve happiness. Embracing these seemingly simple yet profoundly complex notions holds importance, marking a pivotal moment in the lives of children residing amidst the turmoil of war.

It can be asserted that Ukrainian theater adeptly initiates a dialogue with children, both during and concerning the war. A distinct challenge emerged in communicating about the war with teenagers, a unique audience situated between childhood and adulthood. How does one engage with them, how does one elucidate something that even adults struggle to accept and comprehend? Playwright Nina Zakhozhenko (Lviv) attempted to give voice to this segment of our society through the play *I Am OK* (2022). By observing and documenting individual conversations and dialogues overheard at train stations, in city squares, and at volunteer centers, the author compiled the narrative of four teenagers from the city of Bucha, which serves as a representative image of Ukrainian cities subjected to Moscow's occupation.

Each character embodies a collective representation of diverse experiences and circumstances encountered by Ukrainian teenagers amidst Russian aggression. The narrative of Liza, portrayed by actress Katya Pinchuk, chronicles a lengthy journey from her hometown and subsequently from the country. Alongside her parents, she departed Bucha in the initial days of the full-scale war, a decision born out of necessity rather than choice. Liza is forcibly uprooted from her familiar world, separated from her friends, school, the familiar spaces of her city, and her home. Her departure was not a matter of choice; rather, she was rescued without her opinion being sought.

Sasha, portrayed by Yakov Ozerov, has an equally fraught narrative: it marks his second departure from home. The first time, he was evacuated from his native Donetsk during the onset of Russian incursions into eastern Ukraine in 2014, leading to the establishment of “puppet republics.” Mike, portrayed by Daniil Nikiforov, plays out a tragic tale of teenage maximalism. Fueled by anger and a desperate sense of dignity, he is driven towards direct resistance. However, the futility of his actions becomes apparent as he grapples with the stark reality of confronting an enemy armed to the teeth while wielding only a single Molotov cocktail in hand.

Finally, the story centers on the heroine, portrayed by actress Lilia Oseychuk, who endured the occupation, residing in the basement of the hospital where her mother worked, and embarking on a perilous journey from the bomb-ravaged city navigating past checkpoints. Ultimately, she and her mother succeeded in evading the occupation.

*I Am OK* premiered in the summer of 2022 at the Afanasiev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre. Despite being seldom performed within the confines of the theater itself, the production unfolded in various basement settings. Director Oksana Dmitrieva imbued the image of wooden cubes with remarkable expressiveness and multifunctionality throughout the performance. Drawing inspiration from object theater and puppetry, this motif permeated the entire narrative, serving as a tangible symbol of cherished possessions that individuals aspire to preserve indefinitely. Characters carried these cubes in their backpacks, colloquially referred to as “emergency backpacks,” advised to keep them close at hand alongside their most prized possessions. For Ukrainians, these backpacks held profound significance as emblematic representations of home, encapsulating their entire lives amidst the conflict. Additionally, the cubes metaphorically represent the building blocks of a house. Throughout the narrative, actors creatively interacted with these objects, utilizing them to symbolize various elements such as the last loaf of bread, a city undergoing reconstruction and destruction, imaginary protective barriers,

and even Molotov cocktails. Thus, the wooden cubes served as primitive yet powerful symbols, evoking a sense of normalcy and harking back to fundamental values amidst the chaos of war. This imagery, though simple in its essence, resonated profoundly with audiences, offering a poignant reflection on the experience of war.

Throughout the performance, the audience gleaned fragments of the teenagers' stories, often left to conjecture and piece together the narrative. However, no explicit explanations were necessary, as the audience intuitively grasped the resolutions of the stories. The play's essence lies not in the narratives themselves, but rather in the internal struggles and experiences these teenagers face during such a challenging phase of their lives. The director employed techniques akin to Brechtian alienation in several aspects of the production. Firstly, nearly all dialogues within the play are constructed as phone conversations, delivered by the actors with a deliberate lack of emotion. This stylistic choice emphasizes the disconnected nature of communication and underscores the characters' ongoing exchange of life events through remote correspondence. The topics discussed by the characters during these exchanges were deliberately chosen to be vastly distant from the typical experiences of ordinary teenagers. Thus, the emotionless delivery was fitting, as it accentuated the contrast between the content of the conversations and the detached manner in which they were conveyed, prompting the audience to derive its emotional response from this juxtaposition. The characters' emotional states were unveiled through the actors' monologues, with each character expressing their individual emotional anguish stemming from various sources such as the loss of home, friends, dreams, and even life itself.

Another instance of detachment in the play was evident in the original songs performed by actress Lilia Oseichuk. Interjected between dialogues, these lyrical interludes momentarily transported both the character and the actress herself away from the overarching reality of the play's narrative. The



songs serve to merge the character and the actress into a singular entity, as they embody Lilia's deeply personal reflections on the events of the war. The incorporation of detached elements, such as expressing personal emotional experiences through song, enabled the play to strike a balance between emotional resonance and rational perception. This approach provided the audience with an opportunity to immerse into the perspective of teenagers amidst war, to empathize with their struggles, and to comprehend the challenges they encounter. Importantly, the theater moved through these stages with restraint and delicacy, avoiding the risk of retraumatizing its audience.

The play holds a unique position as it is narrated to teenagers by their peers. The actors, who are students of Kotlyarevskyi Kharkiv National University of Arts, are approximately the same age as the characters portrayed in the play and have undergone similar experiences. Through their performance, they lend their authentic voice to this reality, providing a perspective that resonates deeply with their audience. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this play has been staged abroad, particularly in Poland, highlighting its relevance beyond national borders.

## **Theater as Therapy**

Indeed, contemporary theater for adult audiences in Ukraine is increasingly serving as a platform for exploring the profound impact of war experiences. Given the inherently traumatic nature of such experiences, the therapeutic dimension assumes paramount importance. Theater, in the hands of adept practitioners, emerges as a potent avenue for therapeutic expression. Notably, a parallel trend is emerging within theater aimed at children and teenagers. Currently, discernible initiatives in theater therapy are directed towards this demographic.

Among the earliest proponents of utilizing theater as a therapeutic tool during the war were artists who

collaborated in a long-term initiative known as the Art Therapy Force. The team comprises theater artists from Ukraine, including event curator Veronika Skliarova, actress and puppeteer Natalia Shapovalova, actor Yaroslav Voitenko, and choreographer and performer Iryna Avdeeva, alongside musicians and psychologists such as musician and music therapist Maryna Slot. Additionally, it involves artists from the UK, including composer and art therapist Nigel Osborne and musician Rory Osborne.

The Art Therapy Force collaborates with nine universities to organize music therapy courses. As part of their ongoing activities, the project also arranges retreats and artistic recreation camps for children and their parents from the frontline regions of Ukraine. During these camps, children participate in activities such as music, dance, theater, and applied arts, which often culminate in a collective theatrical performance by the camp participants.

One notable performance was *The Odyssey*, staged by the camp participants on the island of Veliki Brijun in Croatia. Children and teenagers, ranging from 4 to 16 years old, collaborated to create the performance by molding their own narrative inspired by Homer's renowned classic. Guided by composer Nigel Osborne and a team of artists, the participants brought their collective vision to life. Their objective was to collectively construct a narrative alongside the children, drawing inspiration from a familiar story. The theater instructors aimed to establish an environment conducive for children to reimagine the classic narrative as their own, identifying elements within it that resonated with their experiences and concerns, thus enabling them to articulate their own story.

For the group of participants on the island of Veliki Brijun, the narrative of Odysseus evolved into a tale about the anguish of parting from friends, feelings of solitude, efforts to save comrades, grappling with anger, and attempts to manage it. These themes proved to be profoundly significant for children who had been forcibly uprooted from their familiar surroundings due to the war, severed from friends, classmates,

the comforting familiarity of their schools, and the landscapes of their towns or villages.

The performance served as a platform where they could articulate their pain, fears, and experiences triggered by the circumstances of the war, alongside moments of joy and gratitude. Osborne's method involves participants writing their own lyrics, which the composer then assists in setting to music. This multi-stage artistic transformation of children's emotions enables them to detach from their own experiences during the performance and share them with the audience, thereby mitigating the risk of retraumatization.

In addition to sculpting narratives, participants also develop characters, often employing theatrical techniques like puppetry to bring them to life. In the production of *Odysseus*, for instance, they utilized shadow theater methods and constructed a sizable puppet using improvised and natural materials sourced from the island, including paper, cones, peacock feathers, and sea stones. Translating personal stories into puppetry is an exceedingly effective method for empowering participants to share their experiences with the audience. The preparatory phase for the performance holds importance, as it involves the artistic conversion of emotions into a theatrical narrative. This process is deemed more crucial than the performance itself, with its therapeutic value outweighing its aesthetic significance.

The performance of *Monster Opera*, based on Shakespeare's plays, holds particular significance within the Art Therapy Force project. It involved children whose parents are currently serving in the army, and it took place in 2023. The production of *Monster Opera* served as a platform for children to articulate their experiences, utilizing Shakespearean characters as vehicles for expression. Through the medium of theater, the aim was to facilitate a positive transformation of their traumas. The project was facilitated as art therapy, led by Nigel Osborne, in collaboration with students from the Faculty of Culture and Arts at Franko National University in Lviv and Kotlyarevskyi National University of Arts

in Kharkiv. The project was tailored to engage Ukrainian children whose parents are currently serving in the army. It culminated in a performance, marking the apex of the project, which took place at Franko National University in Lviv.

The narrative, a fusion of plots from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, intertwined with children's experiences, unfolded before the audience using giant puppets symbolizing Courage, Danger, and the Forest. The stage space was open, without the curtains or dimmed lights typical of traditional theater settings. Instead, all the action unfolded in broad daylight, immersing the audience in a mystical world inhabited by fabulous and fantastical creatures, as envisioned by the participants themselves. The enchanting atmosphere of this otherworldly realm unfurled through the tender notes of the piano and the harmonious melodies sung by the choir, painting a vivid mental picture of majestic mountains, expansive fields, and limitless skies. The towering, luminous staffs brandished by the choristers added to the portrayal of an ancient forest. It felt as though the characters of this fantastical world were brought to life through these auditory elements: the King, the Queen, animals, and birds. They manifested in a pantomimic manner, their forms accentuated by solo vocals at times. The auditory and visual stimuli immersed the audience in this fantastical world.

The King's crown made of a plastic bag or his cloak fashioned from a garbage bag did not detract from the experience – this is the essence of theatrical magic. Fittingly, the confrontation between Rage and Justice marked the climax of the performance. These allegorical creatures appeared before the audience as towering theater puppets, built by the actors under the guidance of artist Natalia Rudenko-Kraevska. The intensity of the battle was heightened by the rhythmic accompaniment and emotive sounds of the chorus. A colossal puppet, symbolizing Rage and Cruelty, collapsed with a resounding crash, defeated by the triumphant song of the choir.

The moment where the Hero-Warrior prepared to confront Rage stood out as especially poignant in the performance. The magical fairy, dancing alongside the chorus during the song, “crafted” the Warrior’s strongest armor from moments of joy, of care, shared lullabies, football goals scored together, and of books read together – all born out of love. The paradoxical thought reverberated through the space: how much love does it take to go to war and defend those you love? These small wellsprings of love possess the strength to forge the mightiest armor, shielding their parents, for this is their play, their tale. In the world they fashioned, the children held sway; within their world, Love, Goodness, and Justice prevailed.

The approach adopted by the team in this production, under the guidance of Nigel Osborne (guest music educator) and Kateryna Ostapovych (coordinator and music educator), revolved around the collaborative creation of a theatrical narrative. In this process, the initial step involved establishing a secure creative environment for the participants, allowing them to become acquainted with one another, experiment with basic musical noise instruments, develop collaborative rhythmic and physical sketches, and cultivate mutual understanding, respect, and trust. The project engaged theater, music, and art instructors, as well as psychologists (both students and faculty members from Lviv University), who collaborated with a group of children and teenagers aged 5 to 14. Following the method proposed by Nigel Osborne, the group of participants was introduced to adapted stories such as myths, legends, and classical dramas that the instructor believed would resonate with the group.

The subsequent phase involved improvisation, wherein a pivotal aspect entails the concept of “appropriation” of the narrative. This entails group participants constructing their own stories drawing from the narrative provided to them, facilitated by collaborative efforts with music and theater instructors to develop music and songs. This extensive process underscores the participants’ innate creativity.

The instructors provide support, guidance, and assistance as the participants craft their narrative to share with the world through the mediums of music, song, rhythms, and visual elements. Participants in this project were introduced to adapted narratives from Shakespearean plays and encouraged to envision their own fantastical realm. This imaginative space was conceived using a combination of sounds, plastic materials, colored pencils, improvised objects, and verbal expressions. Participants engaged in the composition of songs and music after initially sketching the characters of their fictional world on paper. Subsequently, they translated these depictions into tangible forms by fashioning theater puppets from simple materials such as bags, tape, and branches.

The children involved in this project effectively constructed a spectacular world wherein they wielded agency over unfolding events. This empowerment, even within the context of play, serves as a significant therapeutic instrument. Despite allowing elements of anger and brutality to permeate their imaginative world, reflecting the harsh realities of conflict prevalent in their own lives, the children infused their narrative with resilience and solidarity. Within their story, they bestowed strength and encouragement upon the defenders of their world, symbolizing their parents, enabling them to become victorious.

Both performances from the Art Therapy Force project evoke a similarly moving response that resonates deeply. These works encourage contemplation of the challenges and issues faced by the current generation in Ukraine, which the children involved encountered at an early age. Moreover, these projects exemplify the communicative, transformative, and therapeutic potential of theater art, showcasing its ability to profoundly impact society and shape narratives.

## Conclusion

In summary, Ukrainian theater for children and adolescents amidst the war adopts a range of approaches and strategies.

Professional theaters produce performances that utilize artistic techniques to construct narratives influenced by military contexts. A significant finding from the analysis of such productions is the portrayal of war's cruelty and inhumanity without glorification. When addressing war and its repercussions, theaters aim to be candid with young audiences while also exercising sensitivity. It is crucial for these narratives to neither instill fear nor romanticize war.

The examination of the experiences of Ukrainian theater groups that, during the initial months of the full-scale Russian invasion, transitioned into shelters and volunteer centers for individuals fleeing from bombing raids, constitutes a pivotal aspect in comprehending the trajectory of Ukrainian theater amid this war. During this period, actors, directors, and all theater personnel engaged in mundane tasks such as resettling individuals, cooking, and procuring necessary supplies. Nonetheless, during these challenges, theater artists demonstrated resilience by continuing to provide performances for young audiences. Hence, the phenomenon of underground theater or theater in precarious environments emerged. Such theatrical performances aimed to offer solace, divert the attention of children and teenagers from the grim reality, and safeguard their mental well-being.

The concept of "theater as a voice" pertains to performances aimed at amplifying the experiences of Ukrainian teenagers from the stage, allowing their narratives to resonate. *I Am OK* by Kharkiv student actors exemplified this trend with their highly expressive portrayal. The age and firsthand experiences of the student actors resonated deeply with their characters in the production, thereby significantly augmenting the play's thematic messages.

The last section is dedicated to art therapy theater projects, where participants engage in theater therapy techniques to process their experiences, articulate their narratives, and present them onstage to an audience. These practices are profoundly significant as they demonstrate tangible positive effects on the participants, even though quantifying this

impact remains challenging at present. The act of sharing and collectively experiencing stories contributes to the confidence and potential liberation of their creators. Notably, psychologists specializing in children's and adolescents' experiences play an active role at various stages of these projects, providing essential support and guidance.

While theatrical performances exude the transient nature of appearing and disappearing, they also wield the potent ability to facilitate collective, conscious engagement with lived experiences. This communal experience has the transformative capacity to shape entire generations of participants, leaving a lasting impact on their lives.



## Performances

- Noah's Children*. Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt. People and Puppets Theater, Lviv. Directed by Mykhailo Urytskyi. Premiere in 2020.
- Bully Goat*. Folk tale. First Academic Ukrainian Theatre for Children and Youth, Lviv. Directed by Ihor Zadniproanyi. Premiere in 2021.
- The Speck*. Anna Schmidt. The Afanasiev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre. Directed by Oksana Dmitrieva. Premiere in 2022.
- I Am OK*. Nina Zakhochenko. The Afanasiev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre. Directed by Oksana Dmitrieva. Premiere in 2022.
- Ivasyk-Telesyk*. Private initiative of the actors in Kharkiv. 2022.
- Monster Opera*. Based on Shakespeare's plays. The Art Therapy Force project. Directed by Nigel Osborn. Premiere in 2023.

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# Theory in Exile



# 13 Theory in Exile. An Exchange of Letters

BOJANA CVEJIĆ, JANEZ JANŠA, BOJANA KUNST

## Letter 1

**BOJANA KUNST TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND JANEZ JANŠA**

Frankfurt, Germany, 1 May 2024

Dear Bojana, dear Janez,

I will begin this first letter with another letter, an older letter from Bojana to us, which is still saved among my emails. The last time we met in person was at the Performing Arts Forum, a wonderful space initiated and run by artists, theorists, and practitioners in Reims, where we came with our students in October 2022. Bojana, you invited us to a meeting of teachers and students from different art academies across Europe to discuss the politics of art education today. Most of the teachers were those who had worked together on the common platform of our magazines from the former YU (*Maska*, *Frakcija*,

and *Walking Theory*), especially in the late nineties and until 2010, and with whom, as Bojana writes, “we can recognize a distinct common point of departure, a political and critical orientation in our teaching, which goes back to the political experience of the former East, or YU in particular.” And many of us, as you wrote in that letter, have the same professional path, teaching in international programs (of dance, performance, art), reflecting upon the transformations in the field of dance and performing arts, where teaching “becomes a significant activity, schools a possible refuge for relatively unhindered experimental and critical study (as well as a means of escaping from crises).” The crises meant here are especially economic and social; in the recent years, however, we have all seen this hope of education shattered, not only because of the growing inequalities between students, the precariousness and difficulty of imagining the future, but also because of war, populism, and nationalism, which more and more often seem like a haunting repetition of the times of the early nineties that we have always tried to combat with our work.

With this letter, I would like to start an exchange on the dimensions and characteristics of this common political and critical point of our teaching and writing. Even though we have very different intimate and life histories and reasons for moving, migrating, staying, and leaving, and different relationships with our many homes, we are also connected through our writing, teaching, and thinking, not only through the common spatial and cultural referentiality of the former YU, but also through our way of working and practicing theory. We can then perhaps be described as conspirators (because we breathe together), even though we live apart.

For myself, I would describe these common characteristics that shape our theoretical and institutional work as a continuous politicization of the always embodied and situated position of speaking, which in itself is a kind of paradox since we are more or less all currently working in a highly international, global environment. Another characteristic is a focus on the processes of artistic work and production, and

a continuous critical engagement with the structures of power dynamics in the arts, which can be found in the organization, in the discourse, and in the very ways of making and sharing. This critical stance is always combined with an almost utopian, resistant hope in collective, shared, collaborative processes of art-making that deeply intervene and disrupt the social fabric itself. I have a comforting and perhaps naive notion that these last characteristics also distinguish me a little [from the typical academic who] knows how to engage in critical discourse and reading, but rarely questions the industry itself (ownership, the economy of knowledge, the circulation of values, etc.). Maybe that is why we all end up working in art academies, who knows, but these, too, have their problems. When I look back at our common theoretical endeavors, the journals we have published or edited together, the conferences we have attended in the former YU, but also internationally, over the last decades, when I look back at our discussions and exchanges, somehow, we have always shared a strong interest in including in our thinking a broader social reality of art. At the same time, our specific poetic and aesthetic interests are very much intertwined with the making of art, with artistic practices themselves. Now I'm wondering what this has to do with a specific political period in which we were formed as intellectuals and artists, which was somehow marked by the Balkan wars and the destruction of Yugoslavia. And what does it have to do with our work in the so-called "international" environment? None of us has directly experienced the cruel reality of war like many of our colleagues and friends, but we have experienced the proximity of war in a different way. In this way, we do all belong to a post-Yugoslavian and post-war generation (and thus of a former East).

Lisa Baraitser writes in her book *Enduring Time* that we always establish our place retrospectively, and that this is the only way in which a generation appears: through the attachment to the political events of our own (past) time, of our own moment. This attachment always happens with

a delay; we situate ourselves retrospectively as a generation and respond to time past as my time. In this way certain political events happened with delay, and take on significance only retroactively. I experienced this strange time loop very strongly when I moved to Germany more than a decade ago for a university job. For the first few years, I found myself in a temporal abyss, which manifested itself in my body as a numbing anxiety, only partly the result of personal events (the loss of my mother, my loneliness, and the lack of friends). I also experienced a more destructive loss of the temporality in which I had previously lived and worked in Ljubljana. Baraitser discusses this intergenerational delay with reference to a great book by Luisa Passerini, *The Autobiography of a Generation* (1996), in which Passerini narrates the aftermath of the 1968 generation. This loss of something I could not name at the time, but which manifested itself within me almost as physical pain because I could not be there when things were happening (like the anti-right demonstrations in Ljubljana, etc.), Baraitser calls the “too-muchness of the present.” With this phrase, she describes the experience of a highly politicized time, which can be not only overwhelming but also destructive for the engaged subjectivities (in Passerini’s autobiography we meet mainly female activists). I realized that my state at the time was a symptom of mourning (intimate and political); I was mourning the loss of the too-muchness of a present, the very present that was at the same time harming me so much that I had to leave. This happens to many who leave or emigrate from highly contested local political environments; I see it very often with students who come to study from all over the world, looking for a safe environment in which to work and live along with their studies. But Baraitser says something reassuring in her book when she writes that “certain political scenes gain their political potency only after the event” and that intergenerational delay is a way of doing politics (*Enduring Time*, 98). She is borrowing from psychoanalysis, particularly Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (meaning deferred or retro-action), and



shows how certain events only take on significance retroactively: for example, Passerini's interviewees were only able to locate themselves within the political agitation of 1968 some two decades later, when Passerini began interviewing them. Through this, Baraitser begins to posit intergenerational delay as a mode of doing politics, an attachment to a political event that becomes the foundation of political self-identity. So, in the sense that when we think together about the common characteristics of our theoretical, intellectual, and political practices that somehow belong to what has been lost (ex-YU, our former home, our former communities), this is also a mode of doing politics that weaves lines between practices and their memories, communities and their afterlives. Perhaps this is what "theory in exile" can really do, not only to contribute to the circulation of knowledge in the international professional environment from a specific position, but also to care for the contexts that still live in our bodies and memories, and to engage in politics with a delay.

Hugs to you both and happy May Day!

Bojana

## Letter 2

**JANEZ JANŠA TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND BOJANA KUNST**

Berlin, Germany, 31 May 2024

Dear Bojana and Bojana,

First of all, thank you very much for your beautiful letter, Bojana. It brings back many memories of times when our collaboration was new to us and to the times in which we live.

In a way, we were in exile long before we left the countries where we grew up, searching for a connection with soulmates who shared a similar passion for creating, reflecting on, and engaging in art, research, and theory. Understanding that our professional endeavors are deeply rooted in societies that we would be able to understand and hopefully transform. In the period of strong collaboration between the three magazines, *Frakcija* (Zagreb), *Maska* (Ljubljana), and *The Walking Theory* (Belgrade), from the end of the 1990s until *Frakcija* and *The Walking Theory* were discontinued, what connected us was precisely the question of the embeddedness of society in art and vice versa. Looking at modes of production in art as the production of subjectivities and relations, and reflecting on working conditions in art as a materialist class question were urgently needed in order to reveal and fight against the precarious working and living conditions in which many cultural and freelance workers found themselves. We found ourselves in regional internationalisms (growing up in the former Yugoslavia, forming in newly established countries) that were officially highly discouraged, as each new country based its *raison d'état* on running away from socialist Yugoslavia.

In this respect, it is interesting to see the renewed interest in Yugoslavia, be it in rewriting the history of neglected art (and beyond), or in future-oriented initiatives such as Yugofuturism, which focuses on claiming the right to the future of generations that are economically deprived and exposed to ruined environmental conditions and international power relations that make their lives far from independent.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot write this letter without being deeply affected by recent events at universities near me and elsewhere in the world. Western internationalism, of which we are a part either by circulating in artistic or academic contexts or by teaching in international programs of academic

1 See the joint issue of *Maska*, *Frakcija* and *The Walking Theory* on Yugofuturism (<https://maska.si/en/journal/jugofuturizem>), as well as the follow up issue of *Maska* (<https://maska.si/en/journal/jufu-2>).

institutions, has its own dynamics and has a lot to do with the reproduction of international power relations.

For a significant number of students, studying in an internationally oriented university program is a kind of refuge, a promise of a safe place, a search for free work and expression. This requires a different infrastructure from universities compared to institutions where most students come from safe and nearby contexts. Working in a fully international environment, supported by the German system of public institutions, I am faced with the paradoxes and shortcuts of internationalism, with inequalities that place students and staff in unequal studying/working conditions.

Where do universities stand? Any public institution is a political institution. Any attempt by universities or cultural institutions to remain “neutral”, to engage in decontextualized academic production and knowledge transfer, becomes the politics of the status quo – whichever status quo is prevailing at any given moment, whatever power relations govern a given institution. The problem of universities trying to remain “neutral”, to protect the academic environment by distancing themselves from engagement with external reality, is just another name for opportunism. “Neutrality” paves the way for politics through policing.

The student protests on many Western campuses in 2024 brutally showed us that universities are not safe places. Universities (not all, of course, but too many, especially in Germany) are not places where freedom of expression is guaranteed. Instead, the policing of biographies, the policing of signatures on letters of protest or support, the policing of likes on social media ... fueled the culture of censorship.<sup>2</sup> Language has become a minefield. The policing of language is a shortcut to the policing of bodies. Hate speech leads to hate

2 “Archive of Silence – Cancellation & Silencing the Public List,” brings evidence of 158 cancellations from October 2023 until June 2024. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Vq2tm-nopUy-xY-ZjkG-T9FyMC7ZqkAQG9S3mPWAYwHw/edit?gid=1227867224#gid=1227867224>.

policing. And repression is always brutal. Brutal in its potential or in its execution. The way the police act against students involved in protests is predictable.<sup>3</sup> University managements call the police knowing that the police will use force. That's why they call them. When they call the police, they want to show their power. Physical power. Spatial power. Territorial power.

Universities are political institutions, they carry out the politics of creating, contextualizing, and disseminating knowledge. The student protests, as they took place in 2024, are a continuation of the politics of creating, contextualizing, and disseminating knowledge where the knowledge institution has been doing the policing, thus performing the job of the police.

I'd like to share with you an excerpt from Etel Adnan's "To Be in A Time Of War" (published in *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, 2005). If you haven't read this letter out loud so far, please read Etel Adnan's words out loud:

To turn the page without moving into a new life. To put on the radio.

To listen and receive much poison on one's face. To curse the hour, the

fire, the deluge, and hell. To lose patience.

To lynch misfortune.

To prevent the trajectory of inner defeat from reaching the centre.

To resist. To stand up. To raise the volume. To learn that the marches against the war are growing in number.

To admit that human

nature is multifaceted. To know that war is everywhere.

3 For example, the Berlin police besieged the Free University of Berlin on the instructions of the university management in order to break up a peaceful Palestine camp. Seventy-nine people were arrested and criminal charges laid against 80 protesters. See more on the protests at the campuses: "Clashes and arrests as pro-Palestinian protests spread across European campuses," *The Guardian*, May 8. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/08/pro-palestine-student-protests-campus-europe-arrests-police>.

To admit that some do win. To drink some water.  
To turn in circles.  
To pretend that one is not spent out. To believe it.  
To pretend. To  
discuss with one's heart. To talk to it. To quiet it down,  
if possible.  
To curse the savagery of the technologically powered  
new crusades.  
To remain in doubt. To come out of it in triumph.

I am looking forward so much to hearing from you again.

Hugs to you both,

Janez

### Letter 3

**BOJANA CVEJIĆ TO  
JANEZ JANŠA AND BOJANA KUNST**

Oslo, Norway, 19 June 2024

Dear Bojana and Janez,

Thank you for initiating this exchange with the remembrance of our “conspiring” endeavors. Ruminating on your letters charged me with newly found energy in an increasingly difficult time, in which I thought I was no longer certain of the advantage of the critical tools of our political history in this moment – anchored in the collapse of Yugoslavia and in the cultural space retrieved in retrospect, with an intergenerational delay, as Bojana put it. The peculiar conjuncture of precariousness and the colonial legacy of asymmetries, exacerbated by ecological anxiety and the rise of the right

wing that international art programs put in harsh relief, make the struggles of young people, with respect to the political promise of artistic and critical practices, more dire and complex compared to our historical situation in the 1990s and 2000s. When I invited you for the meeting to discuss art education in the vicissitudes of the present situation at PAF in 2021, I remember counting on a continued comradeship at a distance, anticipating that we might still share a similar political take on the problems we are grappling with now, working in European art academies, and that we might be complicit in the perspectives we transmit to our students.

Even though the reasons and circumstances of our departures were different, I was intrigued by the fact that dramaturgy and teaching marked to some extent our paths 'into' European art academies. This commonality entails several points your letters made me think again. Dramaturgy was the place in which one didn't have to distinguish between artistic and theoretical production. This position, as I think we insisted, meant refusal to specialize professionally as a critic, theorist, academic, or artist – in other words, to separate these functions and places, and safeguard their separation as it is expected in the art scenes in Brussels, Berlin, or Vienna. The contexts of our scenes in YU required us to *contextualize* our work, which I understood as operating out of structural deficiency, thinking about what could we do critically to improve not just our individual chances of survival but the material conditions for everyone willing to invest themselves in that context, to self-organize and self-educate. This was manifest in our magazines and conferences. Investing in artistic practices meant practicing how to look past the artistic into the social, as you both remarked. In my work within TkH, but also collaborations with BADco from Zagreb, it sometimes meant instrumentalizing art forms and experiences to learn from their social dramaturgy or utilizing these art forms to intervene politically in a diagnosed situation. On stage and in writing. Remember *Collect-If*, the project on which Janez, then known as Emil Hrvatin, and

I collaborated between Slovenia and Belgium. The rehearsal of an ad hoc collective made up of performers invited to discuss and shed the stamp of ownership of the 'great author' (dance company label) was regarded with suspicion – too critical, perhaps cynical in its diagnosis and in the procedure of overidentifying with the stamp, but was it artistic? In one word, it was cast as 'too much' or excessive beyond the boundaries of art, theory, or social intervention.

The too-muchness Bojana invoked in what she referred to as mourning for a lost present I, perhaps a little bastardly, reread as a way our dramaturgical operations in the West-European scenes were threatening and had effects that couldn't be neatly sorted and filed away. My question to you: what happens once we operate within European academic programs in the role of teachers, to the excess of a position of resistance toward protecting this gap or distance between artistic practices and critical theory? How do you think the academy channels that excess and towards which end? Especially since critical theory was welcomed into performing arts education not so long ago. In my view, it is challenging to sustain faith in the transformative critical potential of artistic processes and studying radical theories and historical precedents. These 'weapons' often seem too oblique or too slow, inefficient for the overwhelming and exasperating sense of powerlessness that young artists feel. They know too well that neither art, nor culture, nor education are public goods any longer, and even when they were recognized as such ideals in the past, they didn't manage to resolve the structural injustices perpetuating global social inequalities.

Yet, inasmuch as this is true, the reflex bound up with that promise of transformative potential still persists in me. Almost by habit, I regard the group as an invitation to take responsibility for the situation we are co-creating, whether in the art school or in a self-organized structure like PAF. While individual positions always differ, we are implicated in the situation and a more collective, rather than an individualist way of acting upon it begins by taking into account the reciprocal,

yet asymmetrical relations that we have around an issue that gathers us. For example, when students address the ways that a program discriminates against or favors them. Over the years, it's become more difficult to form alliances by collectivizing responsibility for a situation, because conflicts from the macro-world have been folding into the microphysics of power among individuals. Every failure to overcome the differential precarity that separates students of the so-called international mix through political solidarity is poignant. What's been most perplexing to me, recently, is that, despite articulating political and social inequalities, the collective approach based on sharing resources and taking risk doesn't prevail among peers out of lack of trust. Conflicts among individuals, even if only rivals in misery, prevail instead. This makes the times for studying and teaching politically difficult.

Once you are no longer operating within a context in whose problems you are historically implicated – for us it was the political history of Yugoslavia – are you roaming like a magnet, available for, and attracted to the struggles that at first don't seem to belong to you? Reading Bojana's new book, I took to her phrase of art 'braiding' with the embodied experiences of unresolved conflicts and inequities. The verb 'braiding' here opens for a variety of minoritarian and nuanced ways in which art, with its objects, people, and experiences, is interlaced with and inextricable from the lives in which that art circulates and 'lives'. In the past year or so, I've been repeatedly reading out loud María Lugones's essay "Playfulness, World-Travelling, and Loving Perception" (1987) with many groups I encounter 'teaching theory.' Lugones' argument is nicely complicated, and I won't lay it out here entirely. What has spoken to me, so dearly, is her notion of traveling worlds in a manner that reverses one's arrogant perception of difference, or looking down out of indifference. As a Latin-American feminist in the 'Anglo-white' academia of the 1980s, Lugones compares her relationship to her white feminist colleagues through an analogy of her fraught relationship with her mother. By reflecting on the contradiction between the need for love,



as an emphatic expression of being in feminist solidarity with women, and the inability to love as long as the relationship is humiliating (as it was between her and her mother and between American liberal feminists and women and feminists of color), she develops world-traveling. It is about traveling to the world of the other person you are related to, and attempting to see how that person sees themselves through their own eyes, but also to see yourself and the relationship between the two of you from the perspective of *their* world. It sounds like an ethical exercise, but I think it is a political one, and it has helped me loosen the knot of conflictual groups that aspire to solidarity.

I stop here, in the middle, somewhat inconclusively, eager for the continuation of our correspondence.

Hugs,

Bojana

## Letter 4

**BOJANA KUNST TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND JANEZ JANŠA**

Frankfurt, Germany, 29 June 2024

Dear Bojana and Janez,

In a part of your letter that still resonates with me, Bojana, you write about contextualizing as a practice of operating out of the structural deficit and then state that “by contextualizing, we improve not only our personal chances of survival but also the material conditions of everyone willing to invest themselves in this context and to self-organize and self-educate.” I think this point summarizes very well the various aspects

of what we have tried to identify as common in our theoretical, dramaturgical, and artistic practice in previous letters. Theory and practice in our collaborative exchange within the framework of the regional internationalism of the ex-YU (as Janez described it) are intertwined with continuous cultural work, sharing and developing common material conditions. This cultural work is relentless because it is not a path to success, but a continuous contestation of counter-forces, a way of living an engaged and political life, with the multiplicity of others and ourselves. In our case, this contestation is also deeply marked by the history of socialism, with its failures and its potentials.

In this way, I think that theory in exile (at least from my perspective) always has to find a way to engage with the material conditions of the environment in which it operates, but this can only succeed if the previous communities and engagements are not forgotten but are somehow made alive and active in new constellations. Because I've moved (to teach, to write, to live), I have to care even more about what I no longer have, but not in a way that nostalgically mourns the loss or fetishizes it as something that was much better. I had to do the cultural, political, and intimate work of sharing my context with others, bringing that perspective with me, turning it into a practice of thinking and doing things, and at the same time being open to recognizing and expressing solidarities between environments that I never knew existed before. I think theory in exile is really a lot about learning from others, about accepting that you can be very unsettled (and this in the time of life, at least as it was for me, when things usually settle down). Even if you are in a kind of bubble (which an international program for the study of choreography and performance – which is where I work – together with the usual academic enterprise, certainly is), I believe it is still possible to engage with the conditions of our work and in this way learn about the difficulties and joys of solidarity. Teaching, then, is a lot of giving space to contexts of shared learning, based on trust and curiosity about the worlds of others and the ways in which those worlds can be shared, even if the backgrounds are different and

the promises of the future are often incomparable. The study is also a space for social rehearsals, for sowing the seeds of how to work together not only artistically, but also politically, taking into account the context and material conditions of all those involved in the process. We are aware that in poetic experimentation we are also constantly involved in inventing forms of life (not only for ourselves but also for others).

Because of the difficult situation in Germany over the past few months, considering the position of official German politics and state institutions on the war in Gaza our studies were for the first time in real danger that they would fall apart and the principles of war and fixed fronts would enter our work and discussions. So we held a series of conversations throughout the winter in which we wanted to keep the space to understand the fears, to share the conflicting perspectives on the war, on what is happening to the language that we use to understand and to mobilize. Within these discussions, a very important moment happened, which after reading your letter, Bojana, I will call a “Maria Lugones” moment, a moment of playful world-traveling. Nargess, a student from Tehran, told us how, as a child, she had to stand up every morning at school and say out loud a phrase: “Death to America and Israel.” Then she looked at Rom, one of her classmates, a Jewish student who had just arrived from Tel Aviv, and said to him, “And here I come to study in Germany, and you are the first Israeli I have met in my life.” Rom looked at her and replied, “The same goes for me, Nargess, I’ve never met an Iranian before.” We all started laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

This clash of perspectives and places acted as a kind of magic spell, helping us not to allow the principles of war to enter the small study community here. We have to learn to live together with the plurality of each one of us, and this is not possible without poetic and imaginative work. But at the same time, this poetic work is only possible if it is also a resistance to injustice and inequality, opening up a much more complex idea of solidarity and paradoxical entanglement; and that’s why the excess of critical theory is still very helpful. Such political

complexity is not only challenging and dense but also playful, and it is opposed to the generalization and simplification that is thin, linear, and lacking a sense of humor. I think this is why the extreme right and populist movements hate critical theory, feminist theory, etc., because for them it is much more desirable to engage in a politics without complexity, without playfulness, without any trace of plurality, fixing us into blocks of enemies and friends. The problem, however, is that this same impulse is very much present on the left today, which I can see very well in the conflicts at German universities, which are sowing the division especially inside the leftist movements (fighting around the positions on anti-semitism, Gaza war, understanding of Middle East Crisis). That's why this moment, which we experienced in all its absurdity in our talks, is very important, but also sad. Because the current situation and the policing of discourse could very well result in precisely these moments of clashing among different perspectives, and persisting together will ultimately no longer be possible in the future.

Allow me to conclude with another small anecdote, which again tells us a lot about the paradoxes of theory in exile, but also about the problem of internationalization that you both, Janez and Bojana, describe. Isidora, a Chilean student in our master's program here at the Theater Institute in Giessen, recently said that it was "so funny that we read a lot of Latin American feminist writers here, but I never read them at home." This could easily be read cynically as part of the global commodification and abstraction of theory from its material conditions, as running after a fashionable discourse, as the arts field especially likes to do. But maybe we can also see it as an attempt to build a challenging and joyful sisterhood between chains of articulations and practices of thought and action that do not always appear in the space from which they come. But that does not mean that they are without space and context and without consequence. Perhaps we should not talk so much about internationalism but rather contribute more with our academic activities to the new international, anti-capitalist, and democratic alliance that

is so urgently needed at a time when we seem to be returning with dangerous speed to identitarian and national constructions. In building the material conditions for a plurality of experience, poetic and political work go hand in hand. (And that's why art practices are the first to be attacked by populist politics: because they are also practices of life). Alliances are also always made through micropolitical work, within the continuous opening of communities to the experiences and perspectives of others. Thinking about theory in exile from this perspective means that any critical theory is always in exile, connecting, traveling, meeting, and making alliances between thinking and doing, always from multiple perspectives and multiple places.

I have to stop here, because I'm already too long. Very much looking forward to your reply and sending hugs!

Bojana

## Letter 5

**JANEZ JANŠA TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND BOJANA KUNST**

Berlin, Germany, 23 July 2024

Dear Bojana and Bojana,

Allow me to remind you of your kind advice, as experienced professors in international university programs, when you heard that I had been appointed to teach in another university context similar to yours. Trying to answer my eyes full of questions, you both wisely said with a significant smile on your faces, "Just listen," as if to tell me not to rush, not to rush into constellations that require careful attention to the contexts brought by the students, the colleagues, as well

as the university institutions and their dynamics. To actively listen to the students first of all, to listen to what they bring in terms of their cultural, social, and political formation, how they talk about their work and their lives, how they see themselves in the European (German) context, how they see the place of their origin from the current position of students in a highly competitive cultural context, etc.

One of the teaching formats we offer to the students is called “Food and Politics,” where for each session a student invites a compatriot living in Berlin; together, they cook food from their place of origin and talk about the issues related to the context from which they come. The idea stemmed from the observation (and criticism) that international art programs tend to produce an international aesthetic, devoid of local specificities, not much different from discourses that reproduce already established hegemonies. One of the guests at this year’s edition was Joanna Ostrowska, a historian coming from Poland and researching queer history, who claimed in an interview that:

[...] the queer community in Poland doesn’t have a history of WWII. There is no Polish perspective when it comes to talking about queer history. When I talked about my field of research, “queer history,” people often started laughing or said it wasn’t part of history, especially Polish history. The political situation is even worse now. The [former] Polish government and the Catholic Church refer to LGBTIQ+ people as ideologists and don’t see them as people. I think that the situation we are experiencing now is a consequence of the lack of awareness of queer history.

In another session with a Turkish guest, we spontaneously ended up discussing how we (from Australia, Colombia, and the United States to South Korea, Hong Kong, Syria, Switzerland, Poland, and Slovenia) were taught about the Ottoman Empire in school. Everyone could at least vaguely

recall that chapter of their education, but the discussion turned out to be much more about our own places than about the Ottomans: the “Ottoman Empire” gave us a space to talk about ourselves, our views, our projections, and our distance from “us.” The concept that began to resonate in another session was brought by students from Colombia (with mestizo backgrounds), namely the Bolivian anarcho-feminist María Galindo’s notion of bastardism (and bastard feminism):

Bastardism is a political site, a historical site. Bastardism is the place of the illegitimate. It is the place of the in-between; in-between. Bastardism is also a colonial category, of racism, of a racism that has nothing to do with skin color, but with real racism. Racism is not a problem of skin color; it is a problem of hierarchical social categories. Bastardism, for me, is a political site for encompassing all these factors at the same time, outside of rigid identities and outside of legitimacy. That’s why bastardism could also be understood in relation to whatever you want: fields of knowledge, aesthetic fields, geographical positions.<sup>4</sup>

I wanted to give these examples as another facet of what you, Bojana K., said in your second letter: “I think theory then is really a lot about learning from others, about accepting that you can be very unsettled (and this in the time of life, at least as it was for me, when things usually settle down).” Through your words, I can identify with the concept of bastardism as an agency that resists the reproduction of hegemony and injustice as its constitutive (and not collateral) damage.

What we have been experiencing in Germany since October 2023 is a tacit, or not-so-tacit, production of silencing (cancellation in the cultural and academic sphere), institutional and political loyalty (if you apply for

4 “‘I Believe in an Anti-Systemic Feminism.’ A Conversation with María Galindo.” *Nocountrymagazine*, April 27. <https://nocountrymagazine.com/i-believe-in-an-anti-systemic-feminism-a-conversation-with-maria-galindo>.

German citizenship), and a rise in censorship and self-censorship. The climate that intoxicated public discourse and began to restrict freedom of expression provoked the student protests in the spring of 2024, which were largely ended by police intervention. In response to the actions of the police and the university administration (at the Free University of Berlin), hundreds of academics published an open letter condemning the eviction. The academics defended the students' right to peaceful 'Every piece of evidence is vital' protest, including the right to occupy university premises.<sup>5</sup> The outraged Minister of Education, Bettina Stark-Watzinger (of the Free Democratic Party, by the way), wanted her ministry to look into the possibility of cutting academic funding to those who criticized the eviction of the pro-Palestinian camp. Again, heavily criticized, and yet still in power.

For me it is a kind of *déjà vu*: not only because I experienced direct censorship under socialism, but also under transitional capitalism, when the right-wing government in Slovenia sought a legal framework that would allow a minister to cut funding retroactively.<sup>6</sup> These attempts to shut down critical discourse are based on the old-fashioned production of fear. But as a side effect, they create pockets of bastardism that can dilute the toxic narratives produced by institutional power. Those pockets of bastard atmospheres are the ultimate places of theory in exile. Those are the places of careful listening, thank you both for the excellent advice!

See you there, dear friends! Have a great summer.

Janez

5 "Statement von Lehrenden an Berliner Universitäten."  
[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfVy2D5Xy\\_DMiaMx2TsE7YediR6qifxoLDP1zljKzEl9t1LWw/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfVy2D5Xy_DMiaMx2TsE7YediR6qifxoLDP1zljKzEl9t1LWw/viewform).

6 During Janez Janša's second administration in 2012, with the minister of education, science, culture, and sports Žiga Turk.



## Letter 6

### BOJANA CVEJIĆ TO JANEZ JANŠA AND BOJANA KUNST

Korčula, Croatia, 4 August 2024

Dear Bojana and Janez,

Study as a place for social rehearsal, in which we practice listening in order to share our incommensurable worlds through poetic and imaginative exercise has a renewed political valence for me with the rise of the far right in the political context in which we teach today. You are both right to point out that we need to persist, in plurality, and protect our ‘bubbles’ from collapsing either internally, by folding in political conflicts into their own social space, or from external pressures, for example, from a decision above that has the power to thwart them, underfund or close them down. I worry about the prospect of art and education in the late-capitalist economy, as it developed in the U.S. in the aftermath of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde scenes, where the university becomes the academic, largely private propertied haven for artistic experimentation and critical theory that by large lost public traction in society. In contrast to the U.S., we still have a chance to defend education as a public and common good, even when the government, as you describe this moment in Germany, threatens to withdraw its funding. In the German case now, it is about political repression, while I witnessed a program I studied in (Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy ousted from Middlesex University in 2010) and a program I taught at the Utrecht University (M.A. in dance studies, 2011) close down under the economic premises of budget cuts and austerity. I am drawing this temporal arch in light of a political process of *longue durée*, call it authoritarian populism or ‘late’, racial, liberal-democratic ‘survival of fascism’, as Alberto Toscano referred

to it, which feels like the rising level of water in the last two decades that now threatens to drown art and education.

When I began teaching at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels in 2002, I became painfully aware of its differential dynamic as the program selected among middle-class Europeans and Asians who could afford tuition and students from Latin America and Africa, who were financially supported by the school. A year ago, the Norwegian government introduced tuition fees for non-European students, and for that matter very high fees, in a higher education that hitherto had been free for all – Norway being the last exception of tuition-free schools in Europe besides Germany. Months of protests and contestations, including the barring of the minister's access to the campuses as a *persona non grata*, didn't manage to reverse the decision, which is xenophobic and racist, as it makes studying in Oslo, where I teach, unthinkable for many students who used to come from Africa and Latin America. We learn from our students, or better still, the collective dimension of the study entails that all who study and teach learn from one another while being together as they individuate as a group, but our efforts to make (then a center-left coalition) government hear that Norway needs 'newcomers' from other geographies and histories (an inadequate word I would replace with 'people who travel') more than they need Norway met a deaf ear. Once again, the differential regime is installed in education mirroring the fascism of anti-immigration policy in Europe.

Picture the situation in which about 40 young people from four continents enter B.A. studies in contemporary dance and performance in Brussels. In our first encounter in the classroom, each one of us offers an untranslatable word in our mother tongue as a matter of introducing ourselves. And we count more than a dozen languages in the room, where in some cases, one or two colonial languages are added as a second and a third language to the list. Ranging from 17 to 20-year-olds, these young people have already earned a lot of respect from me for having chosen dance instead of a more

financially certain path, or still in the contexts they come from, a more recognized profession. The fact that we all have to speak English brings the initial force of synchronization, which shatters the temporalities these people have lived. After accepting the givenness of such a constraint, how to keep playfulness rather than the feeling of loss in relationship with the places and times left behind without the likelihood of a return? As I observe these young artists grow into dancers and performers, the rooms we inhabit strengthen a feeling of privilege, in the way that Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò discusses it. We can hardly speak on behalf of the others left out of that room even if we share a history of struggles with them.

Access to a studio in an art school is or becomes a kind of social advantage, which for many is gained through prior social advantage, and for a few it bears a new mark of distinction, welcome or troubling in relation to their past. That access means being given the space and the time to probe, invent, and tinker with ideas, fantasies, desires, needs, and skills without the pressure to be productive. In the programs I am teaching, the studio is prized as the place of experimentation 'on the floor', so to speak, and where a work, and a practice, come into existence, which always hides the promise of an imaginary construction of a possible world, possibly different from the worlds we are struggling in. Bojana refers to a form of life, in which the work or the practice is embedded, the life that is socially reproduced in the artistic, but also as that which enables it. I see this similar to a continuum between an imaginary world staged by a work and the life-world of the people addressed by that work, a possible world, however small, they attempt and rehearse. For that reason, I am often plotting with my students ways to get out of our bubble. Unlike the political oppression in Germany these days, Brussels is a city where artists collaborate with activists in their daily political practice and not as their art project, protesting is not punished, people who flee and are on the run are hosted by citizens... It is important to be in contact with those who are outside our rooms of privilege.

What does critical theory have to contribute to this process? Here comes the difficulty: as we put in a lot of time grappling with the diagnosis of a devastating present, not just with perspectives and critical tools in reading and discussion, but also with the feelings and the temperature rising in the room, it becomes harder to believe that the artistic work we would like to see before we can see it or make it is something worthwhile to pursue; that it matters, or will matter in such a world. To counter cynicism, on the one hand, we study Tania Bruguera's *arte util* with a moderated expectation that we could hijack art as an opportunity to intervene in society with direct consequences as she does it. Political contexts of art are incomparably different and learning by repetition is ludicrous. The work will be useful even without a socially disruptive effect if it holds the space for imagining and practicing other social relations than those we disagree with. On the other hand, art education doesn't have to guarantee that more excellent art should be made. It was a relief to accept that the outcome of our educational programs doesn't have to be an artistic practice, and that in intellectual honesty, some artistic practices might reach their (social) end.

I will stop here without a positive note, as I am running out of space, and I will save my more cheerful thoughts for after your letters, dear friends.

Yours,

Bojana

## Letter 7

**BOJANA KUNST TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND JANEZ JANŠA**

Frankfurt, Germany, 9 August 2024

Dear Bojana and Janez,

As I return to our correspondence for the third time and reread our letters, I find that we were dealing a lot with the current role of the academy and the study of art. We discussed how to meander within the academy and still teach with hope, we have discussed how to use our shared histories and experiences to address current difficulties. This is not surprising, given the burning social issues and conflicts that we experience on a daily basis in our professional environments. In my last letter to you, however, I want to return to what unites us in our theoretical and artistic endeavors, which has somehow shaped and sustained our intellectual and personal friendship. I would like to return to how our way of thinking and being in the world is shaped in one way or another by a particular political and social experience of the past that we share, that of socialism, which collapsed along with our former country Yugoslavia, and the period of transition that followed and, in some ways, still continues, with many disastrous consequences. I would like to argue that this common background still has a lot to offer today when we are trying to deal with the current situation.

The common past that unites us is part of the imaginary community of a former country, no less real for that. This community has a history created by its people that is worth thinking about, especially if we think about it in the context of various decolonial struggles, struggles for solidarity and the common good, for the public sphere, for gender equality, for the power of internationalism, etc. Within this history, one speaks from the place, one is situated, and is very sensitive and critical of general abstractions, because they are always a sign of those in power of the majority, which always speaks as if it were everywhere. But it is also a past of distress and disillusionment with this idea of community, which ended in disaster. A past in which the failure of socialism gave way to authoritarianism and ended in nationalism. And a past of many people migrating because of lost

opportunities and failed homelands, and a past of an ideologically driven transition to capitalism that is still going on, giving way to new forms of neoliberalism, authoritarianism and corrupt politics.

In one of your letters, Janez, you write about the renewed interest in Yugoslavia among the younger generations, which not only goes back to what has been (intentionally) forgotten, but also offers a future-oriented alternative for the economically deprived generations. You write about Yugofuturism, to which the magazine *Maska* recently devoted an entire issue. I just finished reading a book from my summer reading list by a Slovenian journalist, Mojca Pišek, in which she mercilessly dissects post-socialist political and social conditions. Reading it excited and annoyed me at the same time, because she walks a delicate line between harsh criticism and generalization. For example, she is merciless towards the generation born before 1975 (to which I belong, at least as far as my age is concerned), which, as she writes, still benefited from the achievements of the socialist legacy, but at the same time destroyed it and left only ruins for ensuing generations. The whole book is written as a mobilization and activation of the socialist legacy at a time when there is almost nothing left of it, and so the return to the past could easily be seen as naive nostalgia. But even if the idea of this legacy seems to be more imaginary for a critical younger generation on the left than it was mine, this does not prevent it from being an inspiration for a practice of working towards a more politically and socially just society, even if only this is inspiration for a minority. However, this minority is not that small, since the post-socialist condition in her book is related to other struggles and alliances in the global South, and is linked to the development of decolonial knowledge, which gives it another strength and a worldly dimension.

Our collaboration with magazines, platforms, festivals and artistic initiatives in the former YU (together with colleagues like Ana Vujanović and Sergej Goran Pristaš, whose voices I miss very much in this exchange) was an articulation

of kinships between environments destroyed by war as well as by the transition to capitalism. In this way, it helped us build alliances and open our imagination to another common future, through which it was possible to question how the social process of transition in socialist countries is unfolding, especially in the arts. We were thus engaged in resisting the colonial notions of belatedness that were so often part of the problematic temporal dynamics between East and West and the so-called “discovery” of Eastern art in the 1990s. A lot of important work has also been done by many other colleagues and institutions to challenge the idea that socialist history is an empty temporal hole, a mistake in the capitalist progress of history.

I think this relationship to the post-socialist legacy became complicated when all this activity slowly turned into a cultural industry, into a competition for local and international calls for projects, where social ties were replaced by efficient management and organization, and the articulation of political and activist alliances was replaced by professionalized curatorial proposals. This is the time when later generations grew up and found themselves searching for their place in precarious conditions, with few good options for a decent life. Among the ruins of socialism, they also witnessed the ruins of democracy, the rise of nationalism, the environmental crisis, and the return of authoritarian politics, but also unresolved hierarchies in the midst of so-called “open” environments, with very little circulation of power and solidarity practiced mostly between those who already have enough. I’m aware that various post-Yugoslav countries have different temporalities, but the transition has left a similar taste of loss everywhere.

Coincidentally or not, all three of us work in environments that are somehow a consequence of the welfare decades in the West. We work in very specific and exclusive (from the perspective of a general audience) artistic environments that have benefited from the globalized economy and the democratization of the various processes of artistic work

and that have contributed to the needs of the particular niche of the cultural industry in recent decades. At the same time, however, access to these environments has become increasingly difficult, especially for students without economic or geographical privileges, and the study of art is a privilege of the wealthy. A large part of my work in recent years has been to negotiate and manage this access, to find ways to making study accesible, to help students with economic and political difficulties, to find scholarships, to help with recommendations for visa extensions, and to write letters to embassies, and similar work is also being done in our department by students, organizing support funds, finding ways to support each other, etc. I think this work is urgent and strategic, because art in general has often become a target of cultural wars and political conflicts, with a strong desire to discipline the multiplicity of its values and its porous borders between art and life. This has nothing to do with the instrumentalization of art to heal the social wounds and excesses of neoliberalism (as has very often happened due to political desires about the social role of art and society) and it does not mean that art should do the repair work instead of politics. In this way, I like very much what you write at the end of your second letter, Bojana C., when you talk about a change in the value of artistic education and about the role of the studio.

I still believe that our common past can help us in this, that its hopeful but failed legacy paradoxically can give us the means to remain optimistic and not to despair, because there is still much work to be done. Our work has namely been to continually build support and environments for social and artistic experimentation, to understand production practice in the arts as the practice of the many, and to always transcend the conventional boundaries of art. We were working towards a more diverse understanding of cultural work, resisting the hierarchical, closed, and authority-based understanding of art. And it seems exactly this kind of work is needed now as much as it was needed then.



I really enjoyed the discussion with you, thank you very much!  
I look forward to your thoughts!

Bojana

## Letter 8

**JANEZ JANŠA TO  
BOJANA CVEJIĆ AND BOJANA KUNST**

Ljubljana, Slovenia, 30 August 2024

Dear Bojana and Bojana,

It is such a pleasure to read you on these hot summer days! One of the thoughts that runs through our correspondence is the question of placing art in a broader social context. The search for new modes of artistic endeavor and critical exploration is how social connections are made, because the search for something new is actually the search for another community, another society, another life that one wants to live in conditions worth living. Going back to the early stages of our collaborations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, first through the journal *Maska*, later with collaboration in a performance and educational context, we came together because our interests aligned. But more than that, what I see as the legacy of the journals *Maska*, *Frakcija*, and *Teorija koja hoda* is the exploration of the zones of society that are mostly covered up, as if they were completely non-existent. Interestingly, at this early stage, we arrive at the hidden, unexplored potentials of the social by clearly focusing on the recent shifts in dance, choreography, performance, and art in general. That's how we arrived, for example, at the educational platform of the Maska Institute, the seminar on contemporary performing arts that you, BK, brilliantly

curated until you moved to Germany. The seminar was a simple response to institutional ignorance of the need for reflection and critical thinking on contemporary performance art, and Maska's long-term investment in a potential new generation of contributors to the *Maska* magazine. The communities of those who attended the seminar were a collateral effect of those who shared an interest in other ways of making art, looking at art, and thinking about art.

As much as we had no choice and no time to lose in the search for discourses that would engage with contemporary art practices – so we produced them ourselves – as much as we had no time to lose in the search for better working conditions for artists and cultural workers in general – so we made an association of cultural activism with constant pressure on decision-makers. I could go on listing the activities that arose spontaneously as a result of a particular urge, but what I have found to be an underlying feature is the potential to take things into our own hands, not from someone else, not as a confrontational agency, but by understanding a society as something expandable, transformable, inclusive. To put it simply, the (artistic) practices that in the 1990s seemed to be preoccupied with formal aesthetic issues very soon turned into questions of how we would like to live/work and how we would like to live/work together. The legacy of our common professional past is certainly that of making art and making theory with a constant reflection on ways of living/working and with a continuous performance of at least an active citizen, if not an activist in the sense of direct political action. This legacy has nothing to do with funding schemes that navigate and control the production of cultural content and endeavor. I think BK says it best: “I think this relationship to the post-socialist legacy became complicated when all this activity slowly turned into a cultural industry, into a competition for local and international calls for projects, where social ties were replaced by efficient management and organization, and the articulation of political and

activist alliances was replaced by professionalized curatorial proposals.”

So where do we go from here? What, for example, will survive and continue from the associations and organizations created to facilitate independent artistic and cultural work? I sometimes ask colleagues and friends who founded and run these organizations how they see the future of these entities without them. Can an organization set up to facilitate the work of an artist or group of artists continue its life by, for example, passing it on to facilitate the work of another artist or group? It is, perhaps, easier to imagine the future of NGOs that produce cultural activities that are not exclusively related to a single artist or group (publishing, festivals, venues, etc.), but the question remains the same when put on a more general level: have we reached the exhaustion of a certain type of cultural production that reproduces precarity for most cultural workers, precarity fed by the constant promise of a postponed sustainable future? A precarity of the entire field of contemporary art and life that can easily be wiped out with a single gesture of populist politics?

The simplest manifestation of the precariousness of the whole field is found in gentrification processes, in which cultural production plays a crucial role, contributing to the increase in real estate values and related businesses. This is probably the harshest way of instrumentalizing and controlling art, which has been systematically carried out for decades in many Western cities, including Ljubljana, the formative city for BK and me: cultural activities that did not submit to the general gentrification policy were whipped away. But even those that submitted had no guarantee of survival. Capitalism extracts from art, artists, and cultural workers as mercilessly as from any other resource.

I would like to end this correspondence with a wish or an invitation to you, Bojana Kunst, but also to you, Bojana Cvejić, to reformulate the subtitle of BK's book *Artist at Work* (Zero Books 2015, originally published in Slovenian by Maska in 2012), namely the “Proximity of Art and Capitalism,” into

an exploration of the proximities of art and socialism from the perspective of cultural productions as they exist now and as we can imagine them to be.

And yes, you can count on me.

Janez

## Letter 9

**BOJANA CVEJIĆ TO  
JANEZ JANŠA AND BOJANA KUNST**

Brussels, Belgium, 24 September 2024

Dear Bojana and Janez,

Happy you rerouted our conversation where we began, in the common legacy of socialism and Yugoslavia in which our endeavors and the collective platforms we acted with and through were embedded. There is not much I can add to your sharp articulation of the specific context and historical situation in which the cultural work of many organizations created “independent” or “other scenes” in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Skopje, and Belgrade, which were so crucial for the struggles against the return of the nationalism as well as for the commons as a ground of solidarity for artistic and theoretical production, and for self-education. Marta Popivoda’s film *Cultural Worker 3 in 1* (2013) is an accurate document of the shared collective endeavors between these cities, where many voices across two generations (born before and after 1975!) can be heard.

Even if I’ve often encountered indifference in the contexts in northwestern Europe whenever I have brought up the critical and experimental legacy of Yugoslav socialism, it is thanks to that legacy, to the egalitarian promise

of education in socialism – namely that everyone is entitled to self-develop their potential through free access – and to the experiments in self-education and critical performative interventions into postsocialist society I have been part of, that I still believe in art school as the place for political education and social experimentation. It is also reassuring to know that this legacy continues in new forms, for example, the self-educational program *Critical Practice Made in YU*, curated by Ana Vujanović, Marijana Cvetković, and Biljana Tanurovska, which gathers a diverse group of researchers and writers who study and work on the more radical critical premises of Yugoslav socialism.

What I cherish most of all from our common legacy is our (if I may?) expectation of art to exercise its capacity to look past itself into society, and that this is a commendable instrumental function of art, one of its poietic possibilities. As I often speak with Nikolina and Sergej Pristaš, I would like to end this short letter by quoting and paraphrasing a work of theirs, made in collaboration with Maska. In 2006, Maska invited many artists to draft a future project for 2023. In his monologue for the performance he was asked to realize in 2023, Sergej recounts how the invitation, for BADco (*Bezimeno Autorsko Društvo* – *anonymous authors' society*), was to “practice the impossible.” So they decided to “return to historical moments of expression of collective will.” The three acts would include the day when the Partisans liberated Zagreb in 1945, the student demonstrations in Zagreb in 1968, and the spontaneous choir of half a million people who sang in 1980 at Marshal Tito’s funeral. While BADco didn’t realize these reenactments, “the promises became obligations” to interrupt one’s own speech and interrupt the myth and listen. One of the questions Sergej asks: “What is the might that comes from interruption? [...] Today, when the environment confronted us with a whole list of impossibilities... when the list of impossibilities confronted us with the clarity of an imminent end, an imminent catastrophe... with transparently explained reasons for the catastrophe... maybe we are

blinded by that transparency ... maybe that transparency takes away our power to imagine other possibilities...”

I understand Janez’s suggestion to rethink art in proximity to socialism as a challenge that often comes to my mind, the need for a more straightforward claim to, or positive identification with ideology, like socialism and antifascism are, as the grounds of trust in the poietic capacity of art and collective study against the paralyzing crisis-talk and impossibility. How can we find in the multiplicity (“being-many”) a clearer ideological edge, a line from which one can say “this I shall not let pass”?

Thank you so much for your thoughts in these letters, they rekindled for me the sense of possibility.

Hugs,

Bojana



# Notes on Contributors



ANA ANTIĆ is a professor of modern European history and medical humanities at the University of Copenhagen, and heads the interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and the Mind. She specializes in the social and cultural history of psychiatry, history of war and violence, and history of the Cold War and decolonization. She has published on 20th-century global, East European and Yugoslav history. Her most significant publications include *Therapeutic Fascism: Experiencing the Violence of the Nazi New Order* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and *Non-Aligned Psychiatry in the Cold War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

DAMIR ARSENIJEVIĆ is a full professor of Anglo-American Literatures and Critical Theory at the University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina. His research focuses on literature, psychoanalysis, and the terror of peace after genocide. He is also a psychoanalyst in training at the Lacan School of Psychoanalysis in San Francisco. His theoretical and artistic work creates settings for emancipatory politics after genocide and earned him a Leverhulme Trust Fellowship for his project “Love after Genocide.” He founded the art-theory group Jokes, War, and Genocide. He also co-founded the international platform Studije Jugoslavije, located at the intersection of art, theory, education, and politics. He is the author of *Forgotten Future* (Nomos, 2010) and editor of *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Nomos, 2015).

SAŠA ASENTIĆ is a performance maker and cultural worker whose artistic work has been widely presented at major contemporary performing arts venues and festivals in Berlin, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Vienna, Tehran, Athens, Moscow, and beyond. His practice spans contemporary dance, performance, and disability arts, emphasizing solidarity and resistance to cultural oppression and indoctrination. Central to his work are allyship and long-term collaborations, particularly with disabled artists. Asentić is the founder of Per.Art, an organization uniting disabled and non-disabled artists to challenge ableism in dance and cultural spaces since 1999. He is currently a PhD

researcher at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, focusing on “Aesthetics of Access and Politics of Memory.”

BOJANA CVEJIĆ has a PhD in Philosophy and a background in musicology. Her research interests include contemporary performance poetics, critical theory and contemporary dance. She has lectured at many institutions, including the contemporary dance school P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, Utrecht University, Oslo Academy (KHIO) and FMK in Belgrade, where she has also been active in the independent art scene and co-founded the platform TkH (Teorija koja Hoda). She is the (co)author of several books: *Toward a Transindividual Dance* (Oslo National Academy of Arts, 2022, with Ana Vujanović), *Choreographing Problems* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), *Public Sphere by Performance* (Bbooks, 2012, with Ana Vujanović) and *Drumming & Rain* (Mercatorfonds, 2013, with Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker).

ZALA DOBOVŠEK is a dramaturg, theater critic, doctor of performing arts and Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy and Performing Arts Studies at the Academy of Theater, Radio, Film and Television. She is the president of the Association of Theater Critics and Theater Studies in Slovenia and the editor of the Kritika portal. She has published theater reviews on Radio Študent, on Platform for Contemporary Performing Arts NEODVISNI and on the MMC RTVSLO portal, in *Delo*, *Dnevnik* and *Pogledi*. In 2022, she published the monograph *Gledališče in vojna* (Knjižnica MGL), in which she analyzed the artistic responses to the Yugoslav wars.

BRANISLAV JAKOVLJEVIĆ is Sara Hart Kimball Professor of the Humanities, and he teaches in the Department of Theater and Performance Studies, Stanford University. His most recent book *The Performance Apparatus: On Ideological Production of Behaviors* will be published in the spring of 2025, and in it he makes a case for an apparatus theory in performance studies. He edited and co-translated into English

Radomir Konstantinović's *The Philosophy of Parochialism* (University of Michigan Press, 2021). He is the author of *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia 1945–1991* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), which was the winner of Joe A. Callaway Prize for the Best Book on Drama or Theater for 2016–17 and the co-recipient of Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Outstanding Book Award for 2017. It was reviewed widely in the US and Europe, and was translated into Serbian (2019) and Slovene (2021).

JANEZ JANŠA is contemporary performance artist who in his performance, conceptual and interdisciplinary art works focuses on the relation between art and the social and political context surrounding it. He was the director of *Maska* (1998–2021) and editor-in-chief of *Maska*, performing arts journal (1999–2006). He is the head of the MA program Solo/Dance/Authorship and a professor at the Inter-University Centre for Dance (HZT) Berlin. In 2007 together with two other Slovenian artists he changed his previous name into the name of the conservative, threetimes prime-minister of Slovenia. He has edited seminal volumes on theory of the performing arts (*Presence, Representation, Theatricality and Theories of Contemporary Dance*) and is the author of a monograph on the Belgian artist Jan Fabre, translated into several languages.

MARINA JOHNSON is a PhD candidate in TAPS at Stanford University (M.F.A in Directing, University of Iowa). Her dissertation research concerns Palestinian performance from 2015 to the present. Johnson is the co-host of *Kunafa and Shay*, a MENA theater podcast produced by HowlRound Theatre Commons, and they are also a member of Silk Road Rising's Polycultural Institute. Johnson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Theatre/Practice*, *Arab Stages*, *Decolonizing Dramaturgy in a Global Context* (Routledge), *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities* (Routledge),

*Women's Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance, Volume I: Performers* (Bloomsbury). Prior to her PhD, she was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Beloit College for three years. Most recently, Johnson directed on the mainstage at Stanford, dramaturged with Golden Thread Productions, and directed *The Shroud Maker* with the International Voices Project in addition to several new play workshops.

BLAŽ KAVŠEK earned his PhD in literary history from University of Ljubljana. Until 2022, he was employed as a research assistant at the Department of Slovene Studies at the Faculty of Arts UL, and since 2023, he collaborates with Maska on the international project *Moj dom*. He writes and gives lectures on cultural and literary history of the 19th and 20th century with special emphasis on the history of authorship. He has published research papers in *The Art of Words* and *Slavic Review Ljubljana*, and essays, literary and theater criticism on Radio Študent, in *Literatura*, *Maska*, *Razpotja* and in several playbills. His monograph *Slovenski pisatelj 19. stoletja med napuhom in skromnostjo* (Slavistično društvo Slovenije) is forthcoming in 2024.

KATJA KOBOLT is a scholar in literary, cultural and memory studies. Since her studies in comparative literature and literary history as well as journalism at the University of Ljubljana (1996–2002), her crossdisciplinary PhD in literary studies at LMU Munich (2002–2010), and her many years as a curator and art educator, her research interests have focused on women's authorship and critical, especially feminist, interventions in processes of memorialization, historicization, and institutionalization. As a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Institute of Culture and Memory Studies at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), she is currently researching artistic labor and childhood conceptions in children's literature in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1991).

BOJANA KUNST is a full professor at the Institute of Applied Theater Sciences at the Justus-Liebig University Gießen, where she heads the international master's program Choreography and Performance. Her research interests include philosophy of art, aesthetics and the intertwining of poetic and political processes in the production of dance, visual and performance art. She is the author of numerous books and articles and (co-)editor of several monographs translated into many languages, among them *The Life of Art* (Transversal, 2023, in German), *Artist at Work* (Zero Books, 2015), *Contemporary Performing Arts* (Maska, 2006, in Slovenian), *Dangerous Connections* (Maska, 2004, in Slovenian).

GREGOR MODER is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Philosophy, University of Ljubljana. He co-founded Aufhebung – International Hegelian Association and served as its first president (2014–2020). His works include *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity* (Northwestern University Press, 2017), *Antigone. An Essay on Hegel's Political Philosophy* (FDV, 2023, in Slovenian, forthcoming in German with Turia+Kant), an edited volume on *The Object of Comedy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, with Jamila Mascot) and an edited volume on *The Ethics of Ernst Lubitsch* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024, with Ivana Novak).

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## **The Resilience of History: The Yugoslav Wars through Art**

*by* Gregor Moder, Branislav Jakovljević, Ana Antić,  
Blaž Kavšek, Damir Arsenijević and Saša Asentić,  
Zala Dobovšek, Katja Kobolt, Aleksandra Starcevic,  
Djordje Popović, Marina Johnson, Sofija Rosa-Lavrentii,  
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