

4 ‘From Nowhere to Nowhere’ – Mapping Trajectories of Belonging within the Post-Yugoslav Field

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Introduction

I remember being around 11 years old, attending primary school in the Netherlands. The subject is geography. We are studying the composition of Europe, learning about the different countries and memorizing their position on the map, as well as their names and capitals. The teacher has printed out black-and-white handouts of the map of Europe, which he is about to pass out to each of us, but before he does so, he says he needs to explain something. When he turns the copy that he is holding in his hands towards us, I see that all the countries on the map are clearly delineated with their national borders, and their names are printed on the sheet – except for the space of the former Yugoslavia, which has been left completely blank. The teacher is addressing the class, but looking at me, as he explains how, due to the tumultuous situation in that part of Europe, he had simply not known which countries to put on the map in the former Yugoslav space, since the whole thing is “up in the air” at the moment. He shrugs, laughs a bit nervously, looks at me apologetically, and suggests that we, therefore, skip learning about this part of Europe altogether. I am disappointed – I had only started attending this primary school the year before and was the only one in our class who was from ‘elsewhere.’ I had been looking forward to this class in the hopes that when situating this ‘elsewhere’ on the map, I would be able to demystify what I felt was my alien presence among my peers. But I nod in understanding, giving my permission to proceed as the teacher suggested. This was 1998, at which time the war was waging in Kosovo. Yugoslavia had started breaking up in 1991; by 1998, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro (then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Macedonia had all emerged and been recognized as independent successor states.¹

Another moment from around the same time surfaces. I am watching something on the TV in our living room – I cannot recall the exact context of what was being reported on but remember seeing moving figures, and the narrator’s voice talking about “refugees.” The entire memory is much more blurred than the previous one, but the only thing that stands out sharply is that, following this televised segment, I turn to my parents and ask whether we, too, are refugees – and they confirm that indeed we are. At this point, we had been living in the Netherlands for around three years, two of which had been spent in three different asylum seekers’ centres. I had

been attending a Dutch primary school for about a year and had been receiving private lessons to bring me up to speed with the Dutch language and with the Dutch school curriculum. Three years before that, in 1995, we had fled Bosnia and Herzegovina a couple of months before the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed in November, bringing an official end to the three-and-a-half-years of war. In a sense, ours was a 'typical' trajectory of displacement, marked by war, (forced) migration, followed by some kind of settlement. I remember the moment when I asked the question as the dawning of the realization that we had been refugees, whatever that meant, during this entire time. I felt ashamed for asking such a silly question and for not knowing – but, until then, I really had not fully grasped it. I suppose that I had associated the word with a state of permanent displacement, drifting in and (mostly) out of existence, with being 'nowhere.' This did not correspond to my experience, because despite having been uprooted, I had always felt like I was 'somewhere,' the focus of my own cartography. I knew very well where I had come from, where I had been and where I was now. What felt like a forced identification with that word, 'refugee,' was a disorienting experience, akin to the blank space on the map, existing in the indeterminate 'nowhere.' The two moments, though distinct, blend together in my memory into one layered experience of erasure, one continued loop.

These moments are two personal snapshots from my childhood. For a long time, I perceived them as nothing more than errant, disconnected and vaguely unpleasant memories that would best be forgotten. The clarity of retrospect allows me to understand them nowadays as formative encounters in which my sense of the world was rearranged. Furthermore, these moments represent the beginning of another kind of trajectory, an inquisitive one, which continues to be propelled by questions of nationhood, Europeaness, belonging and (cultural) memory. In a sense, I feel like I have been working my way back to them, finally arriving at that which has spurred my interest in these topics, though I realize that this, too, is of course the construction of a rather neat 'origin story.' Nevertheless, this insight is precious as it reinstates a personal cartography and continuity in the place of what often feels like a disjointed life trajectory, the pieces of which I am always assembling. Personal though it is, this memory work does not only exist in the individual dimension. In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn states:

[...] if the memories are one individual's, their associations extend far beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, the historical. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal' memory.
(2002, 5)

Memories are thus imbued with cultural meaning. To write of the self through memory work is to account for historical, political and collective developments in a grounded and affective dimension. In this chapter, I use the two memories that I outlined earlier to trace some of the symbolic borders that constitute the European 'myth,' which manifests itself in binary configurations such as refugee-citizen and East-West.

Contemplating what he calls the ‘myth’ of Europe, Stuart Hall starts by asking some crucial questions:

Where does Europe begin and end? Has it always existed and if not, when did it start? What is the ‘new’ Europe’s relation to its past? Which parts of Europe belong to ‘the idea of Europe’ and which do not?

(2002/2003, 57)

These ruminations make me recall the experience of my awkward geography lesson in primary school, the blotting out of an entire geopolitical area for the sake of convenience and continuity. Far from being a one-off occurrence, this motif has continued to travel. Just last year, it reappeared in the European Commission’s project ‘Unity in Diversity’ which consists of a poster of the map of Europe specifically designed for children. The poster has a clear didactic function, as it features a smattering of figures and objects all over the map that characterize a particular country’s history, tradition and/or culture (think of the Eiffel Tower standing in France, the Big Ben in the UK and so on). With hilarious predictability, the area of (roughly) the former Yugoslavia stands out by being depicted as green and bare, only populated by a figure of a brown bear and a Dalmatian dog. The question of Europe is always discursive terrain.

Hall’s questions show that there is no clear definition of Europe, and yet, there is the *idea* that posits Europe as a centrality, embodying supposedly universal ideas such as “liberty, fraternity, equality” (2002/2003, 59) to the fullest. However, contrary to the way in which Europe has popularly presented itself, as insular and independent, its existence has actually always been predicated on changing conceptions of difference against which it could imagine itself (2002/2003, 60). Europe is configured according to a constantly evolving discursive repertoire of constituent others that shape the idea of Europe as well as its cultural imaginary (El-Tayeb 2011; Hall 2002/2003; Said 1978; Wekker 2016). Moreover, a dominant understanding of Europe is always already shaped according to a Western “heading” (Derrida 1992, 25), invoking a hierarchy between ‘Europe proper’ and the ‘lesser’ Europes (like the East/the Balkans), that are always already lagging behind.² In this chapter, I trace how the spatio-symbolic space of the former Yugoslavia and the figure of the refugee trouble this myth by virtue of representing its constituent outside, as they speak to the state of being “in, but not of Europe” (Hall 2002, 57).

My aim in this chapter is to perform an intervention in this myth by writing from the position of two marginal entities that constitute it. Furthermore, by foregrounding personal experience, I aim to further the kind of postcolonial and postsocialist feminist dialogue put forward by Tlostanova et al. (2016, 215) in which one’s own positioning is meant to decentre the dominant Western knowledge paradigm, which is based on an imperial logic. Additionally, I explore the critical potential of marginality by considering how existing at and within the borders of multiple spaces, histories and communities might prompt an articulation and narration that challenges hegemonic discourses of nationhood and belonging.

First, I make a case for thinking with/through the border as a way to embrace multiplicity, contradiction and alternative modes of belonging, highlighting the

affordances of post-Yugoslav critical discourses for this endeavour. From there, I unpack further the significance of narration and translation and the notion of ‘unhoming,’ specifically in relation to experiences of displacement and marginality in the post-Yugoslav case. I finish by tracing the two memories in a larger framework of post-Yugoslav art, literature and cultural critique in which symbolic non-belonging and erasure are reiterated, in sometimes stunning resemblance to my childhood memories. These ‘repetitions,’ I argue, represent critical engagements with and even rejections of the essentialist discourse that they invoke.

Thinking with Borders and Figurations

I situate the argument I am making in this chapter in the context of border scholarship. I understand the border as a figuration, in line with feminist scholarship (see for instance: Anzaldúa 1987; Braidotti 2011; Haraway 1988). A figuration is a metaphorical entity with which to think through existing phenomena in a critical, non-prescriptive way; a figuration is something with which to open up a topic to (new) scrutiny, a guide with which to ask questions that may not have been asked yet, or a way to think differently about a phenomenon. There is an element of ‘undoing’ in the figuration of the border, since it represents a continually shifting entity, so that the very act of writing about the border desolidifies the thing that is under scrutiny. Here, border figurations, represented by the figure of the refugee and the spatio-symbolic region of former Yugoslavia, are analytical entry points into interrogating the meaning and myth of Europe.

Theorizing the impossibility of defining the border, Étienne Balibar nevertheless posits three main characteristics of the functioning of borders: they are overdetermined (they never merely indicate a separation between states, but are inflected by historical and political developments); they are polysemic (meaning that they do not exist for everyone in the same way and are thus experienced differently depending on one’s positioning); and they are heterogenous and ubiquitous (i.e. not only situated at official border controls but also frequently dispersed throughout society; 2002, 78–79). For Balibar, borders are thus not static entities that are controlled and enacted by states alone; rather, as discourses and processes, they are ephemeral phenomena and exist at the same time “everywhere and nowhere” (p. 78). This expansive understanding of borders corresponds to developments in border studies which call for a “multiperspectival” study of borders that takes into account not only borders’ heterogenous nature but also the recognition that they are “sites of cultural encounters rather than simply mechanisms of division” (Rumford 2012, 889). This is an important insight, as it moves away from a rather narrow understanding of borders as dividing and exclusionary, to an understanding of bordering practices in their “world-configuring” (Balibar 2002, 79) dimension. That is to say, borders create divisions but they also “knit the world together” (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 731). The border can therefore also be thought of as a generative rather than reductive phenomenon.

This insight is particularly significant for understanding the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as this geopolitical region nowadays comprises eight independent

countries. The drawing of borders in this case has been literal and symbolic, but also temporal. The new nation-states largely function according to the logic of capitalism and privatization within ethno-nationalist frameworks, seeking to establish a break with the socialist past. Splitting, expelling, sectioning and instituting difference are some of the tools employed by separatist sociopolitical practices; for instance, by introducing and imposing linguistic divisions between nation-states that had previously shared a language³ (Longinović 2013). In light of these divisions, I find it useful to mobilize the term ‘post-Yugoslavism,’ which points to a complex debate in the literary, academic and cultural field across the borders of the fractured region of the former Yugoslavia. As argued by Tijana Matijević, “‘Post-Yugoslavia’ is the name (or one of the possible names) of the ‘today’s Yugoslavia’ that doesn’t exist as an administrative territory, but it ‘happens,’ it is present as a cultural and discursive reality” (2020, 7). The post-Yugoslav phenomenon, which I will expand on more below, represents not a naïve Yugo-nostalgic harking back to a supposed harmonious past, but rather an engagement with and across the instituted borders and sociopolitical differences that were established through the dissolution of Yugoslavia. As such, one could understand the post-Yugoslav condition as “the past in its presence, topicality, uncertainty, openness. It is the past beyond its difference from the present and the future” (Buden et al. 2013, 8 cited in Matijević 2020, 26). The post-Yugoslav discussion in its critical dimension represents an engagement with the ‘unified’ socialist past as well as the fractured transition to ‘democracy’ and the neoliberal present. Hence, it represents doing border work and border experiences in their generative, non-foreclosing dimension – ‘knitting the world together.’

Homi Bhabha writes of “the boundary” as “the place from which something begins its presencing” (1994, 7). In this framework, it becomes possible to consider border experiences as ‘worlding’ encounters that cut through hegemonic discourses and cartographies. The two memories I introduced at the beginning of this chapter represent such border experiences – moments in which a fragmentary sense of being and belonging was established. In this situation, the figure of the refugee and the spatio-symbolic space of the former Yugoslavia are border figurations that puncture a unitary idea of Europe and European belonging. In what follows, I will explore the critical potential of both figurations by foregrounding displacement and peripherality as epistemo-ontological phenomena that might complicate static accounts of Europe and potentially institute a more expansive understanding of belonging. To do this, I draw on the significance of memory work and life writing as narration vehicles that situate individual and individualized experiences in the realm of collectivity.

On Unhoming, Translation and Narration

In the context of this chapter, thinking through the condition of being uprooted, unhomed or a mobile subject is not a philosophical abstraction, but an attempt to ground worldbuilding in the condition of displacement and peripherality as “[...] an imperative, an injunction against the reproduction of hegemonic discourses”

(Merolla and Ponzanesi 2005, 5). This kind of work is rooted in both embodiment and experience, exemplified in such important auto-historical accounts as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera – The New Mestiza* (1987). The conceptual affordances of migrancy and bordering have been amply explored in postcolonial scholarship; notably, in *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi Bhabha has conceptualized the condition of migrancy (in a Western context) as a liminal, interstitial 'third space' phenomenon that necessitates (cultural) translation and thus carries the potential of cultural change.

Bhabha speaks of the "spirit of the 'right to narrate'" belonging to the mobile/immigrant/migrating subject; this outlook "demands that we revise our sense of symbolic citizenship, our myths of belonging" and also insists on "the importance of historical and cultural re-visioning" (Bhabha 1994, xx). Existing at and within the borders of multiple spaces, communities and histories (which does not equal being nowhere) demands articulation, which creates an imperative to interrogate discourses that cannot hold such 'excess.' Gloria Anzaldúa's thoughts on being a border subject resonate here; she describes border existences as a juggling act, an effort to hold the disparate modes of one's belonging (cultural, racial, gendered, etc.) together. This effort will always result in some feeling of alienation and, while this is not "comfortable," it is nevertheless "home" (1987, preface). Anzaldúa imagines the border resident as someone who feels at home in the space of multiple and fragmented belonging. Feeling at home, paradoxically, consists precisely of being what Bhabha called "unhomed" (1994, 13), not fixed in a single location, inhabiting multiple contexts simultaneously. Being unhomed should not be confused with homelessness, as the former "is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (1994, 13). These conditions cannot be contained by canonical narratives, and thus require another vernacular, as well as the proliferation of different narratives, displacing the singularity of 'home' and other collectivities – the nation, Europe. In these accounts, a poetics of home (Buikema 2005) is developed, which subjects the question of belonging to constant interrogation.

It is my assertion that, in its critical mode, post-Yugoslav cultural production can perform precisely such fragmentary, 'borderline' accounts of home and belonging. These narratives regularly negotiate a complex politics of home and belonging to a place and time that no longer exist through the critical mode of what José Esteban Muñoz has termed disidentification, "a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (1999, 11). Disidentification represents a third option between naïve identification with and complete disavowal of a harmful image; it involves an unravelling of a static construct one is bound by through an intimate process of engagement and interrogation. Tlostanova et al. (2016) identify border thinking and disidentification as particularly fruitful political methods for postsocialist and postcolonial feminist scholars who are working in transnational contexts. I identify these strategies in the ways in which critical post-Yugoslav discourses advocate for "anti-national, but also to non-national or trans/post-national cultural and political space [as] the antagonistic counterpart to post-Yugoslav nationalisms" (Matijević 2016, 102). In simpler terms, this means that while "a poetics of home" may be employed, this is achieved through the dismantling of the traditional (ideological)

foundations of what home is, or what it was thought to be. Unhoming can also be understood as a critical imperative for the current political moment in Europe, with its pronounced xenophobia, racisms, territorial politics and nationalism. As an alternative way of conceptualizing Europe, Aparna et al. propose the condition of 'being lost' as an existential vantage point from which the European 'myth' might be assessed critically (2017, 463). 'Being lost' here is another way of understanding the condition of unhoming. Instead of homelessness, this condition consists of being a border(ed) subject whose multiple belongings insist on being articulated, not just as a narrative, but as a politics. The authors go on to say that:

Such a politics is built on the rhythms and temporalities that emerge from being and inhabiting, rather than speaking merely of, borders (Aparna et al. 2017), therefore being able to see Europe in its entirety, outside-in, and from a critical vantage point, and subsequently doing Other Europes because of the same.

(2017, 449)

As the post-Yugoslav condition is marked by mobility, displacement, exile and migration, the critical potential of being lost might be recuperated through these trajectories. In fact, it is already invoked in detail in noted examples of post-Yugoslav literary discourse, for instance in the oeuvre of feminist writer Dubravka Ugrešić, whose work on exile, migration and belonging has been understood to employ the method of 'flaneurism,' an exploratory, wandering mode that does not follow a determined trajectory or have a final destination in mind (Veličković 2010, 57). Such trajectories seem to lend themselves organically to the narrative format; as the Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon declares: "Movement through space, literally and figuratively, generates stories – migration equals narration squared" (2019, 129). This is evident in the field of migrant and postcolonial literature; examining the work of Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Angelika Bammer notes how the former's writing is able to re-conceptualize the customary notion of displacement so that "the migrant subject appears not doubly absent (neither here nor there), but multiply present (both from elsewhere and now here)" (2005, 153). This is an important insight, because it demands a shift in perspective. What if the absence I experienced at the time of the geography lesson on Europe, with the blotted-out former Yugoslav space, becomes reconfigured as multiple-though-fragmented presence? What if my feeling of being 'nowhere' as a result of my unwilling identification with the 'void' in the word 'refugee' can be understood as belonging to and inhabiting multiple 'somewheres' at the same time instead? In light of these questions, border experiences can be integral vantage points from which to examine taken-for-granted meanings about home, belonging and history. These narratives centre and unearth personal trajectories that can challenge the dominant cultural canon. They operate according to a politics of translation in which what is translated is not just language; translation also occurs when a subject writes themselves into language and claims a position of enunciation. This is particularly resonant for those who find themselves at the borders or in the interstices

of discourses of belonging, those “translated beings” who become “‘supplements’ in a double sense: additional (secondary) and supplanting (alternative)” (Karpinski 2013, 12). Translating the self in writing as a border(ed) subject therefore can be seen as performing a dual gesture: inscribing a marginalized positionality into language and undoing normative discourses of belonging by centralizing the peripheral experience.

Some critical considerations must be kept in mind about the notion of translation, however. Translation as a concept is perhaps often thought of as a democratizing tool, a bridge for cross-cultural understanding and exchange. Not always so, however – as mentioned before, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, the politics of translation has been employed to create divisions and to obscure linguistic and cultural similarities between countries that used to be “linguistic twins” (Longinović 2013, 153). This type of translation performs a hegemonic function, serving national interests and separatist politics. Yet the kinds of translations performed by critical voices in the post-Yugoslav field should not be considered as superfluous (hence hegemonic), but rather as anti-essentialist attempts to account for something like a shared post-Yugoslav condition while keeping in mind particular contexts and discrepancies. It is an effort to work with and across borders and differences, instead of an attempt to go beyond them (which might feed into a romanticized Yugo-nostalgia), or even an attempt to force differences (evident in the workings of separatist politics). Furthermore, and keeping these challenges in mind, another question must be posed: if translation is employed, whom is it for? When experiences of marginality become ‘digestible’ (for a Western audience for instance), they can uphold dominant discourses by being absorbed in their narratives: the melancholic migrant; the successful assimilation; the exotic Other – these kinds of narratives reinforce, in other words, a Western heading. Insisting on and practising the right to opacity (Glissant 1997) can counter the easy absorption of ‘neat’ translations. A concrete possibility for doing this lies in abandoning the presumed linearity of autobiographical narratives that practice coherence through a clear structure that is marked by a beginning, middle and end (in other words, an origin story). Introducing fragmentation into autobiographical narrative confuses the expected ‘order of things’ and produces a tension between the transparency and unknowability of the author/Other. Furthermore, the narratives I am interested in are never purely about one individual’s life trajectory (are they ever?). I am inspired by Annette Kuhn’s remark on the notion of ‘revisionist autobiography’ as a practice that

is not purely, nor arguably at all, about the lives and times of particular individuals: rather, it is about the relationship between the personal and the individual on the one hand and the social or the historical on the other – or, to put it another way, between experience and history.

(2002, 151)

In the case of post-Yugoslav discourses, the term ‘autofiction’ is particularly resonant, as it signifies a mode of politics-through-storytelling in which the

autobiographical self is never fully displayed in the narrative (at the very least, not in a linear narrative structure), though they are assumed to be interstitially present. Matijević states that “the possibility offered by ‘practicing autofiction’ signals the need for a public space of speech and communication, and a (narrative, narratological) ‘platform for resistance’” (2020, 29). This modality of narrating might in some cases also be understood as “life writing,” as identified in the oeuvre of Dubravka Ugrešić, characterized by “the autobiographical fragment, which mixes autobiography, personal essay, cultural criticism, travel writing, autoethnography, epistolarity, and diary” (Veličković 2010, 42). These are some of the characteristics of this narration technique, which comprises both the personal and political dimensions. I expand it further in the section that follows by tracing some narratives of belonging in post-Yugoslav cultural production. In them, I locate echoes of my own autofictional account that is woven through this chapter.

Other Mappings

I return to the two memories that I outlined at the start of this chapter. The first memory touches upon the make-up of Europe and the ambiguity, peripheral nature and even absence of the former Yugoslavia in this geographic and imaginary space. Similarly, the second memory pertains to the positioning of the figure of the refugee in a European national context, as a non-citizen and a non-subject.⁴ Both illuminate the borders of the politics of belonging in Europe. As emblematic as they are, they have also seemed to me at times insubstantial, two fragments that speak of fragmented experience – significant, yes, but only to me. I have reconsidered this belief not only because these memories have continued to resonate but also because I continue to recognize their imprint, echoing in other accounts of post-Yugoslav displacement and memory. In what follows, I trace some of these accounts in selected examples of post-Yugoslav literature, art and cultural critique/scholarship.

In Vesna Goldsworthy’s memoir *Chernobyl Strawberries*, the author makes a notable reference to the absence of Yugoslavia on the European map: “Yugoslavia no longer exists, not even as a name, but in a kind of Rorschach test I still see the land of the South Slavs on every map of Europe” (2005, 2). In this observation, I recall again the absence of the former Yugoslavia from the European map in the geography lesson I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. To this day, this remains a visceral imprint in my mind’s eye – the black-and-white A4 paper and the mapped spaces, busy with the names of countries and capitals, and the empty area towards the bottom right, the punctum of the image. While writing this chapter, I am compelled to redraw that map (see Figure 4.1.) in an attempt to further excavate that image from the vestiges of individualized memory and place it into the assemblage of language and narration – in this case, the post-Yugoslav collectivity.

In doing so, I recall that I had written about the absence of Yugoslavia on the European map already in 2016 when analysing Slobodan Stošić’s artwork “*Taking Over the Sea*” *Proposal for Land Art Project* (2012). The work was a visual



Figure 4.1 The author's attempt to redraw the map from memory.

rendering of the European map with the space of the former Yugoslavia flooded by the Adriatic Sea. It bears a striking resemblance to the map from my remembered geography lesson; in both instances, the empty space was a charged object threatening to spill over into its surroundings. I continue to see the empty-yet-overdetermined image of the former Yugoslavia in other mappings, encountering it in critical renderings of post-Yugoslav cultural production. The late Slovenian cultural critic Aleš Debeljak described himself as being “a child of the Yugoslav Atlantis” (2016), invoking the image of a submerged land, sunken yet alive in the complex “polyphony” of post-Yugoslav literary voices.

I have expanded my search for the Yugoslav Atlantis. I encountered an arresting example of this motif in Bosnian artist Lana Čmajčanin's work 551.35 – *Geometry of Time* (see Figure 4.2.), which consists of an overlaying of 35 geographic maps over the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, showcasing the “shifts, deviations and instability caused by colonial, imperial, conquering, migrational, martial, as well as ‘peace-keeping’ redesigns” (Čmajčanin 2014). The effect is an image of Europe in which the space of the former Yugoslavia is darker due to the effect of stacking different geographic depictions of the region on top of each other. The eye is drawn to the dark stain, yet it seems too busy to be comprehensible, the over-saturation creating a disorienting and rather fragmentary impression. This, too, is the Yugoslav Atlantis, but rather than being submerged, here we have the region represented by a stockpile of historical maps – suggesting an upward (stacking) rather than downward (sinking) movement. The image is in that sense inverted, yet the effect is the same – we are faced with a mystifying excess-in-absence.



Figure 4.2 Lana Čmajčanin. Project Blank Maps: 551.35 – Geometry of time © Pera Museum. Installation View – Pera Museum, Istanbul.

Whether represented as an empty vessel or as a container spilling over, these examples show that the image of the former Yugoslavia is an uneasy one in the European context, simultaneously frozen and too abundant with meaning, recalling Dubravka Ugrešić's assessment that "Eastern Europe is an empty mental space" (2007, 239) in the optic of the West. Yugoslavia in these examples embodies that erasure, but also stands in for a larger Balkanist discourse, an errant configuration, "the Other within" Europe (Todorova 2009). The incomprehensibility of the Balkan region is a result of its supposed inherent contradictions; being, as Raluca Voinea explains

a place of permanent change (making the attempt to capture its features an impossible task) and at the same time as a place where history is suspended and the relationships between people have an essential character (in the sense of both archaic and universal).

(2007, 109)

The notion of the Balkans representing an inferior cultural and civilizational entity in the European context, perpetually caught in conflict and lagging behind the West, is not new (see Todorova 2009; Wolff 1994), and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and its 'failed' transitions to democracy and capitalism are a potent cog in this discursive machinery. The supposed incomprehensibility of the ceaselessly warring and backward Balkans results in its being rendered as empty/overdetermined in all the mappings that I have discussed so far. However, though they all instrumentalize a Balkanist discourse, I contend that they perform it according to the principle of post-Yugoslav disidentification.

In these artistic, literary and political renditions, the imagery of the former Yugoslavia represents a critical engagement with the discourse that posits the Balkans to be one of Europe's internal Others. By performing the stereotype "from the inside" (see Trakilović 2016), the operations of nationalism and "Western knowledge paradigms" (Tlostanova et al. 2016) become exposed and, momentarily, decentred. The supposed incompatibility of Yugoslavia/the Balkans with a European framework becomes the source for the instituting of a specific kind of critique – one that unravels the discourse of the Balkanized Other. This politics of disidentification is rooted in the experience of disintegration and fragmentation of Yugoslavia, but there is no attempt to institute a romanticized form of Yugo-nostalgia here. As pointed out by Karpinski (2013, 46), depicting and narrating the post-Yugoslav condition performs a double gesture: a deconstructive one, that undoes normative categorizations, and a situated one, that speaks of the "utterly shattered world" (Ugrešić 1998, 51) that is inhabited by the post-Yugoslav subject. I recognize this gesture, not just in my own experience, but as a recurring motif in post-Yugoslav cultural production and in the examples I discuss in this chapter. More specifically, I have noticed how it is invoked anew in a recent wave of literature from the Balkans that continues to grapple with the aftermath of war, displacement and migration.

Particularly evocative are such works as Bekim Sejranović's *Nigdje, Niotkuda (From Nowhere to Nowhere)* (2020), which already in its title, but also in the novel as a whole, details the fragmented refugee and migration existence of the autobiographical narrator in the aftermath of Yugoslavia. Travelling between Norway and Bosnia in the years after the war, the narrator recalls scenes from his past through the prism of an exiled existence, meandering "from nowhere to nowhere." The novel follows these fragmentary recollections, yet they do not necessarily 'go' anywhere. There is no resolution here, no final arrival, merely a fractured trajectory that remains suspended, incomplete. Yet it is this kind of errant dwelling that rings 'true' to me and represents the kind of 'unhoming' that feels strangely familiar because of the sense of discontinuity that it invokes. I find echoes of this experience in other post-Yugoslav narratives, notably Lana Bastašić's *Uhvati Zeca (Catch the Rabbit)* (2021) which follows the fraught reunion of two former best friends, Sara and Lejla, as Sara travels back to post-war Bosnia and the two embark on a road trip that will ultimately lead them to Vienna, in search of Lejla's brother Armin, whom they will never find. The book unfolds over the span of their journey as they recall the shifting parameters of their friendship over time – and of nationhood and belonging in the former Yugoslavia by implicit extension as well. Bosnia in particular is frequently described as suffused with darkness. It is quite evident that this darkness is not merely literal, and that it may refer to many things at once. For one, it can be indicative of Bosnia's sociopolitical deadlock since the collapse of socialism, but it can also denote the country's thick smog of air pollution, regularly rising to such high levels in the capital Sarajevo that it is "in a category of its own" (Krupalija 2020), exceeding existing categorization standards. The darkness also likely encompasses the suffocation under "predatory international capital and local nationalist intentions" that excavate "natural and human resources of the country"

(Arsenijević 2021, 4). These are dense associations that have a clogging, cloying effect; meaning is stacked, overdetermined. In *Catch the Rabbit*, making one's way through Bosnia is a disorienting experience, the road ahead obscured with thick air – too much damage and history on the one hand, and not enough for a neatly packaged narrative or a satisfying resolution. Sara even remarks that

[A] road-trip story makes sense only when the travellers, albeit wrongly, believe in reaching the finish line, the journey's end that will solve all problems and end all misery. There's no finish line in Bosnia; all roads seem to be equally languid and pointless; they lead you in circles even when it looks like you're making progress.

(Bastašić 2021, 87)

Such a depiction of Bosnia recalls the empty/overdetermined image of Yugoslavia that I have been tracing so far. Bosnia here is murky and desolate, ungraspable and inert. Yet this 'pathologization' of Bosnia (and by extension, the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans more broadly) must be seen as a critical gesture that is not essentializing inasmuch as it is disturbing this essentialized image in the first place – both in the distancing gesture performed by Europe *towards* the Balkans in an attempt to purify its self-image, and in the excavation and stagnation performed by capitalist and nationalist frameworks that govern in the region.

Thus, when an essentialist, Balkanist narrative is invoked in *Catch the Rabbit* and the other works I have noted here, it is not to merely repeat an existing narrative of European non-belonging, but rather to perform an intervention by way of repetition. The essentialist rendering of Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav experience in some of the 'other mappings' I have been sketching here should not be understood as a *final destination* but rather as *departure points* for a continued engagement with the question of how nationhood and belonging is constituted in a European context. These narratives can precisely be considered as ones that put forward the notion of being lost as a potentially generative one, one that resists easy categorizations. Furthermore, by foregrounding a state of perpetual fragmentation, these works recall the post-Yugoslav migrant experience that is demystified but nevertheless remains unsettling – not to be caught and easily consumed.

In the context of these mappings, the two memories that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter cease to be purely personal, individualized experiences, and their essentialist character becomes transfigured into non-exhaustive but critical entry points into the interrogation of the meaning (and the myth) of Europe today. I am drawn to the question of Europe because I know its contradictions: its promise of unity, diversity and mobility and its historical myopia, border logic, internal divisions and hierarchies, silences and exclusions. I live in these constitutive contradictions; they shape my understanding of belonging. They also prompt a continued interrogation of the shifting parameters of Europe, which I have done here by tracing the figurations of the former Yugoslavia and the migrant-refugee existence in post-Yugoslav cultural production. By placing the two memories in a larger narrative configuration together with other, congruent, experiences of displacement and

exile, I hope to establish a dialogic exchange that contributes to the post-Yugoslav field. In doing so, the initial lack I had experienced is transformed into excess, an abundance that cannot be encompassed by customary containers of meaning and might prompt further narration – other mappings.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with two autobiographical vignettes that both, at first glance, seem to be about absence and emptiness: the memory of the geography lesson during which the former Yugoslavia was erased from the map of Europe, and the reluctant identification with the word ‘refugee,’ which I initially experienced as being ‘nowhere.’ Writing about these memories is spurred by what Vedrana Veličković calls “a need for survival of personal memory under the weight of a difficult collective history and hegemonic ways of belonging” – embodied by the capitalist and ethno-nationalist status quo in the region of the former Yugoslavia – as well as “the need to re-imagine the Balkans differently against their dominant histories in the West” (2010, 186). The foregrounding of these memories performs the function of thinking with border figurations through the register of autofiction in the post-Yugoslav field, which performs a critical gesture of translation, with a focus on fragmentation and disrupted trajectories. From these memories, two border figurations are conceptualized: the spatio-symbolic space of former Yugoslavia and the figure of the refugee, which challenge hegemonic discourses of European belonging. Being abject figurations, they represent a political imperative for Europe to:

[...] recognize in the Balkan situation not a monstrosity grafted to its breast, a pathological “aftereffect” of under-development or of communism, but rather an image and effect of its own history [in order to] undertake to confront it and resolve it and thus to put itself into question and transform itself.
(Balibar 2004, 6)

I have foregrounded the importance of memory work and life writing as narrative strategies that situate individual(ized) experiences in the realm of collectivity. In doing so, I was able to place my two memories in the context of the post-Yugoslav cultural field that critically engages with the question of migration, belonging and exile in a European context. These ‘other mappings’ consist of examples from art and literature in which the spatio-symbolic image of the former Yugoslavia or a fractured diasporic/refugee experience is repeatedly invoked. These repetitions seem to call upon essentialist discourses, but I argue that they perform a different function. Namely, theirs is a close engagement with discourses of Balkanism and the fragmentary state of post-Yugoslav (exilic) existence, whereby what becomes scrutinized is not the ‘pathology’ of Yugoslavia or the non-belonging of the refugee, but rather the discourses that produce them as peripheral subjects. These interventions are only possible because they operate in a mode of disidentification. Moreover, by insisting on overdetermination and/or fragmentation as narrative vehicles, these representations contain in them a fundamental estrangement

that interrupts easy consumption or absorption into a Western/hegemonic canon. Such interventions are all the more pertinent in light of the continued discursive appropriation of the categories of East/West and refugee/citizen in the exclusionary politics that seek to (re)draw the borders of Europeanness.

Author's Note

Parts of this chapter are based on unpublished sections of the author's PhD dissertation (Trakilović 2020), which involved a discursive interrogation of the European 'myth.'

Notes

- 1 The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was formed as a federation consisting of six republics after World War II. Political and economic challenges became more pronounced after the death of President Josip Broz Tito in 1980. Starting in the early 1990s, the dissolution of Yugoslavia occurred in a series of wars in the region, mobilized by ethno-nationalist discourses. In multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war (1992–1995) was particularly severe; it included the siege of Sarajevo (the longest siege of a capital city in modern history) and the genocide of 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica (the largest genocide on European soil since World War II). Today, the region of the former Yugoslavia consists of the following countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo (partially recognized), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. Slovenia and Croatia are part of the EU (since 2004 and 2012, respectively), Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are candidate countries, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates. The reverberations of the wars are still present politically, economically and culturally in the region.
- 2 Postcolonial/postsocialist scholarship has amply assessed and problematized the long-standing colonial idea of Western European (civilizational, economic, political) progress and the subsequently assumed temporal lag and 'backwardness' of Eastern Europe (see Chari and Verdery 2009; Imre 2014; Todorova [1997] 2009; Wolff 1994).
- 3 This can take on absurdist proportions; for instance, film subtitles may appear in several different languages simultaneously stacked on top of each other, yet with no (or only very minute) differences between them.
- 4 While I understand it as a border figuration in the context of Europe, it must be noted that the figure of the refugee is not a stable category. This is particularly pertinent in the context of Russia's aggression and war on Ukraine, which mobilized specific discourses of belonging in Europe along racial, ethnic and religious lines. There has been a trend in Western media and politics to discursively posit 'White' Ukrainians fleeing the war as European. This seeming benevolence is performed at the expense of *other* Others – refugees and exiles (Black, POC, Roma) who are racialized as non-European/non-White and thus as not as eligible for the politics of aid and compassion – in other words, whose lives are not grievable (Butler 2009). Because it is contingent on the further pathologization of these other Others, the 'warm' reception of Ukrainian refugees in the West is indicative of "Eastern Europeans precarious grip on whiteness" (Nachescu 2022) and prompts the "need to problematize how refugees' deservingness of protection is rendered contingent on their 'Europeanness,' or their 'Whiteness,' classifications which are fleeting and ever-shifting. This means that the refugee who is racialized as 'one of us' today risks becoming 'the Other' tomorrow" (Lindberg et al. 2022). Far from cementing the parameters of who counts as a 'proper refugee' and as 'properly European,' these responses to the war in Ukraine are emblematic of how the figure of the refugee is discursively *mutable*, though it always serves to define the borders of Europeanness.

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