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The Road (Trip) Home? Migration, Borders and Belonging in Contemporary Bosnian Cultural Production

Le chemin (voyage) du retour ? Migration, frontières et appartenance dans la production culturelle bosnienne contemporaine

Milica Trakilović

- 1 In recent years, post-Yugoslav (diasporic) cultural production has experienced an upswing in the emergence of (female-authored, feminist) literature and film that critically engage with the aftermath of displacement, exile and migration following the wars of the 1990s. For this article, I will focus on three recent cultural artefacts that belong to this category, specifically to Bosnian diasporic cultural production; two books – the acclaimed *Uhvati Zeca (Catch the Rabbit)* by Lana Bastašić (2018) and *Deset Šljiva za Fašiste (Ten Plums for Fascists)* by Elvira Mujčić (2020) – and one film, *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, by Ena Sendijarević (2019). While two of these are literary works, and one is a film, I contend that they can be thought together under the same discursive field as they can all be considered post-Yugoslav texts with autobiographical elements that question the politics of (European) belonging. All three feature a similar overarching narrative motif: the main character of the story, a young Bosnian woman living in Western Europe (in some ways reminiscent of the three authors), embarks on a journey back to Bosnia and in so doing, she ponders questions of (diasporic) identity, personal and cultural memory, gender, war, trauma and migration. All three texts incorporate some traditional aspects of travel writing (the road trip; finding oneself through traveling; overcoming obstacles) but subvert its masculinist trope. Moreover, instead of going into uncharted territory, this journey leads the heroine back to Bosnia; her place of origin with which she maintains an uncomfortable and unstraightforward relationship.

- 2 Though all three narratives significantly feature a focus on questions of gender, sexuality and body politics, these themes will not be the focus of my analysis. Instead, I contend that their engagement with questions of migration, mobility, war and exile also features a feminist sensibility. This feminist sensibility might best be understood through what I argue is their mimetic¹ engagement with Balkanism by way of the protagonists' (and by extension – their authors') critical embedding within its workings. From this positionality, the ghettoization of the Balkans according to a reductive East-West European framework is problematized and rejected, even when this dynamic is ironically invoked in the narratives. I will explore how in these works, Bosnia and the Balkans emerge as a narrative vehicle, linking the past and present, East and West, as well as questions of belonging and exile.
- 3 The geopolitical space of the Balkans has historically and symbolically occupied an ambiguous position in the European imaginary and sociopolitical framework. Scholarship at the intersection of postcolonialism and postsocialism has produced rich insight into the ideological divide between East and West Europe according to which the East is placed lower on the civilizational ladder and seen as lagging behind the West.² This colonial logic manifests in a specific way in the configuration of the Balkans. The Balkans have been said to represent an often Orientalized, irredeemable, barbaric anticivilization or “the Other within”³ “the dark side of an incomplete self”⁴ or a “failed Self”⁵ in a European context. Paradoxically, working in tandem with this Balkanist “frozen image”⁶ is another potent configuration according to which the Balkans stand for a shifting and ambiguous entity, forever reconfiguring the borders of Europeanness⁷ – evident in EU accession processes, for instance. The meaning of the Balkans thus oscillates between the “frozen” and “shifting” models, resulting in a discourse of the Balkans as both overdetermined and incomprehensible.
- 4 In all these configurations, the Balkans function as a sign that connotes a forever in-betweenness⁸ and inherent instability. One often-cited configuration that ties the contradictions of the frozen and shifting models is the bridge.⁹ The Balkans as bridge, frequently recuperated in cultural and political imaginaries, appears in its most well-known guise in Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge over the Drina* (*Na Drini Ćuprija*). Andrić was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1961 for this novel and it cemented his reputation as possibly the “quintessential author in Balkan imaginaries.”¹⁰ An example of the bridge metaphor can be found in the discursive framing of the “Balkan corridor” migration phenomenon that occurred in 2015-2016.¹¹ The transitional state of the Balkan corridor produced anxieties over uncontrolled migration spilling over into Europe and signified an anomalous configuration in the European landscape.¹²
- 5 These metaphors freeze the Balkans despite inner complexities. Like a bridge, they may see much traffic, but remain fundamentally stagnant; serving, at best, as a passage to the ultimate destination of (Fortress) Europe. This results in “profoundly paradoxical situations,”¹³ reducing the Balkans to a barren, inert yet overdetermined, ungraspable and incomprehensible place – an idea that is not just projected, but also internalized. The Balkans emerge in this configuration as fundamentally uninhabitable – a bridge, after all, is not a home. While thinking through the Balkans in figurative terms has aided much conceptual and critical work, there is a risk of “thinking the Balkans into a corner” through an over-reliance on certain metaphors, notably that of the bridge, that subsequently lose their status as metaphor and become exaggerated into a presumed reality.¹⁴ So potent is the symbol of the bridge in various discourses about the Balkans

(ranging from normative to critical, creative to political) that it frequently results in “rhetorical banalities”¹⁵ that fix and essentialize the metaphor of the Balkan bridge into perpetuity.

- 6 The question that emerges from considering these discursive models is how to think the Balkans beyond the static containers that have framed them. In this article, I inquire to what extent cultural production from the Balkans may yield epistemological insight into this matter by reworking and unsettling (rather than reinstating) the notion of home in their narration of the Balkans. I want to inquire how cultural production from the Balkans is mapping the “interstices”¹⁶ of experience by navigating questions of (diasporic) identity, (cultural) memory, war, trauma, migration and belonging. My three case studies are all examples of Bosnian (diasporic) cultural production from the last decade that can be understood to belong to the same post-Yugoslav discursive domain. Bringing these three narratives together creates an overarching narrative motif that may provide fresh grounds for thinking and narrating the Balkans, even if the narrative motifs are not new. Moreover, I see in these narratives a larger potential for dislodging “fixed imaginaries of Europe [...] in order to make way for new forms of solidarity and citizenship that speak as and from rather than of borderlands.”¹⁷ This, I contend, can be achieved even (and perhaps in particular) when these texts seem to repeat an already existing essentialist image of the Balkans, the difference being that this is done through situated, yet fragmentary and open-ended narrative contexts.

The Road Trip Home

- 7 In what follows, I will discuss and highlight some of the main themes that encompass the itinerant road trip aspect in the three narratives in question. I will first introduce and contextualize each work, in the order in which they were released. First among them is Lana Bastašić’s debut novel *Uhvati Zeca (Catch the Rabbit)* that came out in 2018 to international critical acclaim. The narrative focuses on two former childhood friends, Sara and Lejla, who reconcile after more than a decade of not having been in each other’s lives. While they both grew up in war-time Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sara has been living in Dublin with her partner Michael after having pursued her studies abroad, while Lejla has remained in Bosnia. What prompts their uneasy reunion after more than a decade of silence is Lejla calling Sara to tell her that Lejla’s long-lost (presumed dead) older brother Armin, who Sara was in love with as a child, has been found living in Vienna. Lejla asks Sara to come to Bosnia and drive them both to Vienna so that they can reconnect with Armin. This is the start of an uneasy road trip, told from Sara’s perspective, as both women, now in their thirties, struggle to navigate the chasm between them that is marked by memory, war, conflict, and, significantly, a certain cultural divide that is often referenced. *Catch the Rabbit* has been compared to Lewis Carroll and Elena Ferrante’s style in its dark and unflinching portrayal of a cloying, suffocating reality through a fractured friendship’s twisted journey that is doomed to fail from the start. The women never find Armin. This bleak conclusion is apparent to the reader from the start, as an omen of loss and forestalled conclusion permeates the entire narrative. However, this realization comes as a visceral gut-punch to Sara at the end of the novel, standing in an art gallery in Vienna.

- 8 The second work is the debut feature film *Take Me Somewhere Nice* by Bosnian-Dutch filmmaker Ena Sendijarević. It was released in 2019 and received critical acclaim also, winning the Best Feature Film prize at the Sarajevo Film Festival in the same year. The story follows Alma, a young woman (possibly late teens or early twenties, though this is not specifically disclosed) who lives in the Netherlands with her mother. Alma decides to visit Bosnia because her father, who left her and her mother when Alma was a child due to “nostalgia,” is on his deathbed. Alma comes across as dazed and apathetic in the film, experiencing the world as if through a screen. It is implied that reconnecting with her father might help shake her out of her dissociated state and provide a sense of belonging and purpose that she does not possess, or has lost, living as a diasporic subject in the Netherlands. She arrives by plane in the capital Sarajevo and there she meets up with her cold and distant cousin Emir and his friend Denis, with whom she starts a sexual relationship. Alma starts her journey alone to the remote village Podveležje (near Mostar, in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina) by bus, but quickly misses it. She is subsequently transported by car by a folk singer, a sleezy politician and finally Emir and Denis, who catch up with her. The three make their way to Podveležje with difficulty, as their car breaks down and they continue part of the journey on foot. However, they arrive too late; Alma’s father has passed away the day before. Instead of a reconciliation with her father, Alma gets to bury him with Emir and Denis, without ceremony. Her dazed reality continues and resolution is forestalled. The three make their way south still, to the seaside, and the story ends with Alma and Denis being assaulted in a frightening encounter with two hooligans.
- 9 The third work, the novel *Deset Šljiva za Fašiste (Ten Plums for Fascists)* was written by Elvira Mujčić and published in 2020. The main character is Lania, a woman in her thirties, from whose perspective the narrative unfolds. Lania and her family are from Srebrenica, but they have been living in Italy since the end of the war. The family is prompted to return by the sudden death of their beloved *nana*, Lania’s maternal grandmother, who wished to be buried in Srebrenica, the place she had called home and where she had lived the majority of her life. Srebrenica is also the place where she had lost two of her sons. The family scrambles to make the funeral arrangements, which involve the casket being transported from Italy to Srebrenica by an Italian funeral company. Meanwhile, Lania travels with her two younger brothers, Candido and Zeligo. During the trip, Lania reflects on questions of borders, belonging, Europeanness and the memory of war. The trio take different means of transportation (including bus and taxi) through the Balkans to finally arrive in Srebrenica. There, the family experiences a final moment of horrible dread as the casket with their grandmother in it seems to have been lost. Panicked, they wait in fear of the past repeating itself – another family member disappearing, the body not to be found, referring directly to the Srebrenica genocide. The story ends with the funeral car transporting the casket emerging on the horizon and the family erupts in happy cheers, celebrating the location of the body and the possibility of burial.

The Cultural Divide

- 10 In this section, I will analyze how the themes of a cultural divide are narrated in the three works, in dialogue with the theoretical framework I laid out above. In all three works, the characters grapple with some type of cultural divide between the main

characters' place of residence on the one hand, the Balkans and Bosnia more specifically on the other. Frequently, this divide will be alluded or referred to as one between the West and the East, the two representing incompatible and opposing realities.

- 11 In *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, the film opens with Alma and her mother sun tanning in their small Dutch backyard. As Alma is practicing her Bosnian, a neighbor appears from the hedges, asking her if she is going somewhere (see Figures 1 and 2). Alma answers that she will be visiting her father in hospital, after which the neighbor retreats. The mother asks Alma why she had to disclose that information, to which Alma replies that he is just curious. The interaction is short, but the neighbor's presence is experienced as intrusive. This is further emphasized by the way in which the small backyard is portrayed – shot slightly from above, the effect is cramped, emphasizing the very tiny space the women have for themselves. Listening eyes and ears might be everywhere, so any privacy they may enjoy is a panoptical illusion. Aside from being intrusive, the interaction with the neighbor is experienced as insincere and meaningless, just an exchange to state his curiosity. It is “life in the West.” Having arrived in Sarajevo, Denis asks Alma what life is like in the Netherlands. “I hate the Netherlands,” she answers, “cold weather and cold people.” This portrayal of life in the Netherlands as cold, detached, crowded and overtly curated confirms Alma's alienation and sense of non-belonging. Bosnia, on the other hand, does not necessarily appear welcoming (Alma's sense of alienation persists), but certain scenes initially seem to give hopeful, though naïve, glimpses into what Bosnia might offer her she cannot find in the Netherlands; vast open spaces, empty nature scapes and at one point a night sky overflowing with stars – these seem to suggest that there is more *space* in Bosnia, likely to become something or someone else (even if this is later foreclosed).

Fig. 1. The neighbor retreating



Fig. 2. Alma and her mother in their backyard



- 12 *Catch the Rabbit* makes similar observations about living in Western Europe. Towards the end of the novel, as Sara and Lejla travel by car, Sara observes at one point that they are decidedly not in the Balkans anymore. Making a stop for coffee next to a lake in Austria, Sara remarks:

The lake was artificial, and so was the parking lot, and so was the grass, and so were the waitress's nails when she brought our coffee and kindly asked Lejla to get her feet off the chair. It seemed like someone had stretched foil across the surface of the water, as if an unexpected stone would rip the whole view like a photograph. Each grass stalk looked the same size, like a hair-removal salon had taken care of the lawn, not a gardener. And the green was so different from our green – it had the same uniform hue wherever I looked: at the trees, the hedges, the grass . . . It reminded me of that little Microsoft bucket you click on to fill up a shape with one even color. [...] Austria irritated me. I felt wrong compared to its immaculate grass – my edges were rough, my skin uneven, my thoughts colored over the lines. That's when I realized I didn't like manufactured landscapes – they made me feel like my humanity was a mistake, a deeply personal flaw.¹⁸

- 13 Similarly to the back yard in *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, the artificiality of the perfectly curated landscape is emphasized. It stirs something in Sara, a feeling of her own unruliness followed later by a rebellious impulse to desecrate the seeming perfection and to expose its underlying flaws. Even though she had desperately yearned to leave Bosnia with the road trip, feeling stifled and suffocated by the thick atmosphere, once in Austria, she experiences disappointment and a certain wistfulness for the disorder that the Balkans and Bosnia represent. Here, too, the unpredictability of the Balkans, otherwise oppressive, seems to suddenly transform into the space for possibility to become (otherwise), while the order and predictability of life in the West invokes a suffocating feeling.
- 14 Though the West and the East often appear as opposing sides of a chasm, they are at times also portrayed as a gradient of Europeanness according to a sliding scale of subtle cultural and political differences that the characters observe as they move in, or out, of

the Balkans. In *Ten Plums for Fascists*, Lania observes how during her journey she notices she is in the Balkans:

There was no border, there was no passport control, but as soon as we entered Slovenia, I became aware of it. It had to do with colors, small imperfections and cracks that had managed to escape the frenzied race towards Europeaness. The sky was somehow lower, or I just enjoyed thinking it was. The colors reminded me of dirty laundry and so a grey tone dominated, undefinable, unclear.¹⁹

- 15 Slovenia here represents the Balkan threshold, the implication being that the “small imperfections” observed will only grow more pronounced as the journey moves more towards the East, towards Bosnia. Slovenia’s “frenzied race towards Europeaness” is represented by its borderless state (being part of the Schengen zone) and its EU membership. Participation in the race, however, does not imply that the race will ever be won; a country like Slovenia is still marred by connotations of Balkanness, represented by the dulled colors and cracks appearing. Slovenia therefore grapples with straddling the intersection between West and East. These images clearly invoke the Balkan bridge model and with it a sense of civilizational inferiority through the discourse of Balkanism. However, these are not necessarily represented as inherent but rather as structural issues – the effect of divisive post-war politics – privatization, capitalist nationalism and growing sociopolitical divides instituted by unequal EU accessions.
- 16 In these kinds of ruminations, the cultural divide will often appear in East and West as monoliths, either romanticized or demonized. They frequently represent the characters’ idealizations of what they have either “gained” abroad, or what they have “lost” in exile. These assumptions are either deconstructed later (Alma’s romanticization of Bosnia for instance) or they are made to challenge a previously held cultural stereotype (Sara’s aversion to Bosnia is replaced by an aversion of the “curated West”), and so the characters are constantly navigating this divide. In other words, the stereotyped portrayal of the East-West divide is invoked to be both critically affirmed in its structural and political dimension, *and* in order to be discursively challenged and upended as the narrative progresses in an ultimate act of deconstruction. The insistent repetition of this construct shows both its structural reality and its discursive absurdity, so that its invocation is the site of its dissolution.
- 17 Another recurring motif for the cultural divide is that West in all three narratives appears under the rubric of individual and cultural prosperity. Framed in such a way, the West represents a space for opportunity, signifying economic advancement and upward social and cultural mobility. The main characters in all three narratives seem to possess something of this prosperity, and ruminate on what this affords them. In *Ten Plums for Fascists*, the question of prosperity is in one interaction represented through the possession of a Western European passport. In the Italian city of Trieste, which borders Slovenia, Lania and her brother Candido have an exchange with a man from Serbia about who possesses which passports. Lania has an Italian one, while her brother Candido has a Bosnian one, which affords him much less freedom of movement. However, Candido does have an Italian residence permit, which gives him a “cocktail of freedom.”²⁰ In contrast, the man from Serbia professes that he only possesses a Yugoslav passport. Through a convoluted legal process, he is unable to renew his passport or to acquire a Serbian one. He is therefore stuck in existential limbo, forever on the border, unable to move. Having a Western passport therefore represents

mobility, in existential and quite literal terms as well: it represents moving on, being able to build a life.

- 18 *Take Me Somewhere Nice* also references how the possession of Western passports brings economic opportunities. Alma suggests to Denis that he may be able to find work in the Netherlands, and he seems to be very interested in this possibility. Emir, Alma's cousin, demystifies their budding attraction, telling Alma that to Denis, she is nothing more than a walking passport. Towards the end of the film, as the relationship between the trio grows more volatile, Alma makes some cutting remarks towards Denis and Emir, asking: "Do you really think someone is waiting for you in the Netherlands? Do you know what they think when they see you? Here's another one that doesn't speak the language, that doesn't know the culture, another mouth to feed. Too many loser foreigners."²¹ To this, her cousin Emir replies: "What have you done for your passport? You haven't seen you father your entire life. Were you bored up there, were you curious about how we live? Well, we live wonderfully, take notice of that."²² This interaction exposes the image of the thriving Western diasporic subject, integrated and upwardly mobile, as well as the suffering Balkan subject, left behind and stuck in place. In these interactions, the passport becomes the symbol of an empty promise of belonging, possibly even ironically referencing a cosmopolitanism that Yugoslavs enjoyed under socialism that has subsequently been lost.²³
- 19 In a similar fashion, *Catch the Rabbit* features several interactions where the possession of a smartphone stands for economic, cultural and individual prosperity. Sara has a smartphone, though she finds time and time again that this modern gadget cannot help her navigate Bosnia, as network connection is often lost or disrupted, invoking the Balkanist notion that the country is backwards, behind the times, catching up to the West. Lejla, in contrast, has a much more outdated model. Lejla admonishes Sara's freedom to choose in one interaction that references having a smartphone:
- "You found it funny," she said calmly. "You think people choose everything in their lives. Because you have spent your whole life choosing everything. I have a fucking flip phone because it's the only one I could afford. I am a waitress because it was the only job I could get. And I am here now, because it seemed like the last option. So if you are uncomfortable, or bored, or angry, I sincerely apologize. But I'm not gonna be some nice little European childhood friend just because you seem to have forgotten who I really am."²⁴
- 20 Sara's ability to go abroad, pursue her studies, and eventually make a life and career is represented as economic privilege, symbolized by commodities like a smartphone. Throughout the novel, Sara constantly notes Lejla's lack of scruples about performing illegal or supposedly immoral acts (like sleeping with a man for money in an Austrian hotel). This interaction shows that Lejla's lack of morality is not some kind of inherent quality, but contingent on structural inequalities. Sara's father was the head of the police force in Banja Luka, whereas Lejla lived with her single mother (her father had passed away while she was young). Moreover, Sara's ethnicity is Serb, while Lejla's is Bosniak. Sara's freedom from economic disadvantage and social stigma has allowed her to more readily cloak herself in a veneer of Europeaness, which Lejla is able to easily unmask. Being a successful Western subject is therefore presented not as something rightfully earned, but as a marker of structural privileges that one is always potentially one step away from losing.
- 21 These examples show the recurring motif of a cultural and political chasm that runs through all three narratives. As the characters progress in their journeys, the borders

in and around the Balkans and the European West seem to be only more pronounced. What are we to make of this? I contend that the emphasis on the irreconcilability between East and West is a deconstructive gesture, the goal of which is a reversal and displacement of “the resident hierarchy.”²⁵ The supposed incommensurability and hierarchical divide between East and West in these narratives is subject to constant interrogation even, and especially, when it is presented as most readily apparent. The insistence on redrawing borders, actual and symbolic, can in these cases be seen as a political strategy that insists on articulating structural inequalities²⁶ according to which Europeaness is still connoted through a Western heading.²⁷ Narrative practices of bordering in this case prompt a continued engagement with the historical and discursive circumstances that have brought the “anti-worlds” of East and West into being. We are witnessing the characters being confronted with their own internalized projections and assumptions, but they are at the same time challenging the discourse of an Enlightenment civilizational model²⁸ according to which the East (and the Balkans specifically) is always trying to approximate the West, in a perpetual game of catching up to “Europe.”

Going Down, Down

- 22 Whereas in the previous section I studied narrative articulations of Europeaness according to the motif of a cultural divide, in this section I will focus more closely on how the three road trip narratives represent journeying into the Balkans, and Bosnia more specifically. In *Ten Plums for Fascists*, while still in Ljubljana, Lania reflects on how the journey towards Bosnia represents a steady going downwards.²⁹ Bosnia, therefore, is not only more East, but also *lower* spatially, representing the journey towards Bosnia as submersion, invoking images of suffocation or even possibly of burial. Bosnia is also experienced as being somehow suspended in time and history, like in the following passage:

From the bus, Bosnia could be seen with its forests, hills, meadows, hay stacks, carefree lambs, calm cows with remote looks in their eyes. A two-storey house here and there, carefully maintained, forgotten jewelry in the window of a burglarized store. It appeared as if everything was closed for some holiday, a sign could even be seen that said “I’ll be right back,” that kind from which you can’t tell if they have been hung on the door a minute or two decades ago. From time to time, out of nowhere, unnatural multiple-storey constructions of shopping centers would emerge, colorful signboards and empty parking lots.³⁰

- 23 The representation of Bosnia here is twofold: on the one hand, romantic almost idyllic, imagery of rural life, which makes Bosnia appear as if existing out of time, in a mythical and static past. On the other hand, imagery of Frankenstein-like constructions and poorly maintained infrastructure, signifying man-made decay and abandonment. This is repeated in *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, as Alma journeys through Bosnia. On the one hand, she finds herself frequently in rural, empty and even barren landscapes, that can at times also appear very lush. On the other hand, this is interspersed with imagery of flashy and sterile malls, vast and empty parking lots and poor customer service in various kinds of institutions. Bosnia is therefore both inviting and inert, and any references to cultural or infrastructural progress are represented as illusory. Although presented as natural and eternal, these scenes are political – they subtly invoke the

dissolution of Yugoslavia and its aftermath, including the “failed transition” to democracy and capitalism under the looming benchmark of Europeanness.

- 24 *Catch the Rabbit* has the most frequent, and the most vivid, descriptions of Bosnia and the Balkans. In one notable passage, the Balkans are described through various colors:

For me, the Balkans are a color, not a name. Names are easy to forget, you just have to stuff yourself with foreign words, foreign maps, and letters will disappear like sugar on the tongue. But colors remain, like smudges under eyelids, although I had abandoned sentimentalism in my mother’s house a long time ago. Colors can’t be washed out with kilometers. A heavy shade of green, like forgotten peppers, all dry and wrinkled, can’t feed anyone anymore. A sad brown that goes on meandering like a dead river after an apocalypse. The color of a mummy devoured by worms. Visible traces of bootprints, though it’s impossible to see them from this height, it’s only an illusion. Hundreds of boots over the beaten earth. And shrubs, pale green tumors by the river, tired shrubs, yet still wild. Each one bears a question mark above. Did someone die here? Did someone kill here?³¹

- 25 The description with colors represents a synesthetic, affective component, something felt and experienced that cannot be articulated through language. The impression is heavy, ominous; a heavy green and a sad brown that invoke images of suffocation and violence, referring to war. Death and decay are inscribed into the passage, representing a confrontation with the abject. Abjection, the phenomenon that describes a certain encounter with horror by the body’s boundaries being made porous, fragile, penetrable,³² is present in all three narratives. In *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, Alma’s journey from Sarajevo starts by bus. While the other bus passengers merrily chatter away, she sits at the front holding a barf bag, clearly nauseous. While standing in a slow-moving line for the bathroom during a bus stop, Alma walks off only to throw up on the grass. The implication of these scenes is that Alma, having just arrived, has not yet had time to properly adjust to being in the unruly Balkans, and needs to physically expel her overwhelm. There is a certain reference to *inhaling* or *ingesting* Bosnia that all three works make, invoking bodily sensations. In *Catch the Rabbit*, Sara realizes that she and Lejla had already been driving in Slovenia for some time, but that the feeling of Bosnia still permeated:

I must have been driving through Slovenia for half an hour when I realized that Bosnia had stayed far behind us a country ago. Perhaps because I could still feel her between us, as if we had driven through cinders. We’re always in Bosnia. Now we were spreading her all over Europe. Our country with its irreconcilable borders was, in fact, borderless. We had fought for nothing, killed each other over nothing. We were never inside that country – she is the one inside us like a phantom itch. Our skin bleeds from futile scratching.³³

- 26 Bosnia is therefore something that cannot be simply left behind or shed like a coat. Bosnia is visceral, it resides under the skin’s surface and therefore is always already there, sickeningly so. There is fear and trepidation in this knowledge, which brings with it a (perhaps futile) effort to contain, to not let things spill over. In *Ten Plums for Fascists*, this is referred to as “releasing the Balkans.” Lania and her brother Candido get into a heated dispute while making arrangements for their grandmother’s funeral. Candido is trying to provoke Lania, whom he admonishes because she is behaving in a way that is too polite and civilized. “Release the Balkans!” he tells her. She responds angrily, after which she reflects: “This is why I despise anger: I don’t know how to control it, I turn into an unreasonable beast that releases its claws. Besides, it was never a good thing to release the Balkans that I was carrying inside of me.”³⁴ Thus, Bosnia and

the Balkans are certain uncontrollable qualities that the heroine carries with her no matter where she goes – no amount of distance or journeying will be able to remove this property, and the road trip therefore becomes, in a sense, hopeless rather than heroic. Sara reflects on the fact that “[t]here’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.”³⁵

- 27 In these instances, we witness Bosnia/the Balkans becoming internalized; they become inherent qualities rather than geographic coordinates. With associations of violence, anger and backwardness, these depictions clearly invoke a Balkanist discourse. Yet, rather than a negative stereotype, I contend that these depictions represent a mimetic engagement with the harmful image they are invoking; by affirming the stereotype (“becoming” the Balkans), its connotations becomes both emphasized, but also unsettled and displaced from the inside, that is from a situated position. Mimesis here represents “an improper transfer of sense”³⁶ as an act of resistance. Mimesis has notably been theorized by Luce Irigaray as a willing and willful reproduction of a harmful image that may be employed by women/female figures in a patriarchal context in particular for political effect.³⁷ Mimesis involves recuperating and “twisting” a sign one is already constituted by, as a potential act of displacement. As such, I locate acts of mimesis in the three works analyzed here. “Becoming the Balkans”; “going down”; “inhaling or ingesting Bosnia” – all three are mimetic acts that both affirm a Balkanist discourse and, in doing so, unravel it. Understood as a deconstructive act, the mimetic deconstruction of Balkanism “demonstrate[s] how the antithesis is always already present in every thesis.”³⁸

The Post-Yugoslav Sphere and Feminist Cultural Production

- 28 In this section, I will reflect on how the three works can be thought together under the same discursive domain (the post-Yugoslav cultural sphere) and how some of their shared characteristics (the elements of autofiction and the road trip component) can be understood as feminist engagements with questions of borders, belonging and migration. Tijana Matijević foregrounds the term “post-Yugoslav” to denote a critical conceptual space in which authors, scholars and artists engage with and offer modes of resistance to hegemonic and national discourses, in the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Matijević furthermore states that as a “cultural and political notion, it [post-Yugoslav] relates not solely to anti-national, but also to non-national or trans/post-national cultural and political space.”³⁹ Thus, post-Yugoslav cultural production in this sense can include works that have emerged in a vast cultural network that encompasses the geopolitical space of the former Yugoslavia as well as its broader diasporic configurations. This is particularly relevant for the three works I engage with in this article, as they all are created from, and operate in, the post-Yugoslav space from within a broader (European) transnational and diasporic context.
- 29 The post-Yugoslav *space* here is not to be taken literally; it cannot be situated on a map (although allusions to maps and geographies abound in its narratives). Space here might perhaps be better understood as *sphere* or as a cultural designation without set coordinates. Rather than a location, it is thus more accurate to think about post-Yugoslav as a “sensitivity” that is attuned to and engaged with questions of “crossing

borders and migrating” which includes “spatial and temporal alternations.”⁴⁰ These questions advance what Homi Bhabha termed “unhomeliness,” referring to “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations”⁴¹ enacted by diasporic or migrating subjects. In their narratives about displacement and migration, the notion of belonging is also reconfigured into an open-ended question. The narratives that are analyzed in this article do not foreground a new model of the Balkans as a long-lost home; it would be more accurate to say that they displace the notion of home altogether. This does not “solve” the issue of belonging, though it does perform a poetics⁴² that might institute a new model of relationality across these narratives – consisting of “relations that are precarious and vulnerable, and which derive their intellectual strength precisely from this vulnerability.”⁴³ It is in this narrative network that a critical post-Yugoslav relationality emerges, that might institute a novel way of thinking of/from the Balkans. This involves a critical engagement consisting of a double move – both situated and deconstructive⁴⁴ – with the legacy of war and displacement and the subsequent quest for belonging, without harking back to a romanticized Yugonostalgia, and with an awareness of historical and contemporary structural differences.

- 30 By engaging with post-Yugoslav cultural production, I heed the call of scholars of postcolonialism and postsocialism who ask for an engagement with concepts, theories and objects of analysis from the so-called second world, in order to generate grounded epistemologies in postcolonial and feminist scholarship, rather than to export knowledge in one direction (from West to East).⁴⁵ Matijević notes that the beginning of the previous decade (2010-2011) marks the beginning of a “conceptual threshold” for a specific feminist engagement in the post-Yugoslav cultural sphere with questions of belonging, war aftermath, remembering and forgetting taking a narrative focus.⁴⁶ It is precisely at the tail end of this decade that the three works I have been analyzing emerged. The feminist aspect of their engagement is to be found in “instituting the female authorial figure as the sovereign creative, and narrating subject” yet producing “non-authoritative storytelling.”⁴⁷ This mode of narrating, called autofiction, is “[a] discourse which comprises the tension between the reality and fiction [...] to reference the ambiguity of a possible autobiographical inscription, yet without ever finally secluding it.”⁴⁸ Autofiction is present in all three narratives, as all three authors have a shared history with their protagonists: born in Bosnia but living in the (European) West and navigating questions of migration, memory and diasporic belonging. Yet, it would be reductive to call these works autobiographical, and this is in all three cases not the authors’ intent. Rather, the personal embedding here is a key feature of post-Yugoslav literature⁴⁹ that signals a political commitment to articulate resistance to normative discourses (e.g. Balkanism) from a grounded place. The critical mode of these narratives exists precisely in the tension that emerges from a certain personal inscription that nevertheless cannot (easily) be extrapolated to stand for the author herself. Although a shadowy echo lingers between author and character, it is also impossible to reconcile the two in a way that would reduce author and character to mere mirror images of each other. This autofictional element can be understood as the rejection of any claim of objectivity or neutrality in favor of a reflexive and situated⁵⁰ kind of knowledge production, a benchmark of feminist writing and theorizing.
- 31 The feminist aspect of these narratives is also found in the *vehicular* narrative element that clearly runs through all three works, as they all feature elements of a road trip to (and through) Bosnia. This aspect of the narratives contains the feminist subversion of

a masculinist trope, namely that of “itinerant masculinity”⁵¹ that has been attached to stories of journeying in the West. The experience of journeying carries with it the connotation of “becoming,” as the journey opens up a space for self-discovery and, ultimately, self-definition. The notion of mobility in journeying narratives has typically been connoted by masculinity (and vice versa), while femininity and womanhood has been connoted through associations with permanence, immobility, home and rootedness.⁵² In such configurations, the figure of the journeying (heroic) man implicitly stands in opposition to the figure of the woman who is, essentially, rooted in place. The narratives analyzed in this article subvert this masculinist trope by having at the center of the narrative a young woman whose journey of self-discovery is not predictably straightforward, nor is it particularly grand. Their journeys are frequently interrupted and halted as they switch from one technology of mobility to another, including plane, car, taxi, bus and foot. In these narratives, we encounter the dissolution of a certain myth, one that promises a neat and fulfilling resolution. Instead, in these vehicular narratives, the “heroines” navigate belonging in ways that upend the traditional structures of the travel narrative, as well as the structures of home. Their road trip leads them to a “home” that actually represents the unknown in a different sense; moreover, the notion of finding oneself, or becoming, is in all cases forestalled. Home, the last myth, is never fully retrieved. This is apparent in the fact that all three narratives also have the motif of locating a loved one or a relative. Yet in all three cases, there is no reunion. The relative must be buried (and in one case is almost lost) or is not found. The relative is a proxy for home, but the lack of reunion is similarly unsettling and inconclusive for resolving the heroine’s identity.

Conclusion

- 32 In this article, I explored the itinerant narratives that were featured in the novels *Catch the Rabbit* and *Deset Šljiva za Fašiste* (*Ten Plums for Fascists*), as well as the film *Take Me Somewhere Nice*. I chose these three works as the focus of my analysis because they bear some striking resemblances: they represent recent examples of (feminist, female-authored) post-Yugoslav cultural production in which questions of borders, belonging, migration and identity are explored through the subversion of a classically heroic road-trip narrative. All three narratives are, I argued, instances of mimetic engagement. This means that when an essentialist image of Bosnia, the Balkans and a European East-West divide is invoked, this should be understood as a political gesture, rather than a simple re-inscription of existing stereotypes. There is no romanticized invocation of a Balkan bridge metaphor here; rather, the “dead end” that Bosnia and the Balkans represents in these narratives can be understood as a deconstructive gesture that points to structural inequalities that operate in a wider geopolitical and particularly European framework. In all three narratives, a search for home and belonging is present, but this quest remains wholly or partly unresolved. Instead, we get fractured, ambiguous and languid journeys that displace the notion of home as a possibility. Yet, bleak though this conclusion may seem, it actually indicates the “impossible” coordinates of existing as a border subject. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, “[t]he mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness,” characterized by “mental and emotional states of perplexity” and “[i]nternal strife [that] results in insecurity and indecisiveness”⁵³ are parts of this existential condition and epistemological vantage

point. Perhaps this is not something to be resolved, but rather something to be articulated.

- 33 These works, read together, show that there exists a relational field in which emerging voices from the post-Yugoslav context attempt to navigate questions of belonging, migration and borders in creative, critical and non-prescriptive registers. This relational field is a constellation of narrative post-Yugoslav voices that have been exploring the conditions of exile and migration, such as Dubravka Ugrešić, Aleksandar Hemon and Bekim Sendijarević, to name a few noted examples. Other recent emerging works from the post-Yugoslav context explore similar themes, like Olivia Sudjić's *Asylum Road* (2021).⁵⁴ I chose to focus on the three selected works in this article because of their recent emergence and the stark similarities in their more elaborate itinerant aspects. For the purposes of maintaining further analytical focus, I chose to not engage with all relevant narrative aspects in these narratives. In particular, questions of gender, sexuality, sexual difference and body politics are centrally present and significant in all three cases and could be further explored in future research. What these works show is that journeying through the Balkans can provide rich grounds for articulating complex narratives of belonging. These can function as an alternative to the utopian quest for a long-lost home and challenge other foundational myths of (European) belonging.

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ABSTRACTS

In the last decade, post-Yugoslav (diasporic) cultural production has experienced an upswing in the emergence of (female-authored, feminist) literature and film that critically engage with the aftermath of displacement, exile and migration following the wars of the 1990s. For this article, I will focus on three recent cultural artefacts that belong to this category: two books – the acclaimed *Uhvati Zeca (Catch the Rabbit)* by Lana Bastašić (2018) and *Deset Šljiva za Fašiste (Ten Plums for Fascists)* by Elvira Mujčić (2020) – and one film, *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, by Ena Sendijarević (2019). I will explore how in these itinerant narratives, Bosnia and the Balkans emerge as a stylistic vehicle, linking the past and present, East and West, as well as questions of belonging and exile. Working at the intersection of postcolonial and postsocialist critique, as well as of border studies and feminist theory, I will analyze how a certain Balkanist discourse is recuperated in the three proposed works. I will argue that this is not a simple reproduction but rather a mimetic engagement with Balkanism by way of the protagonist's (and by extension – the author's) critical embedding within its workings.

Ces dix dernières années, la production culturelle (diasporique) post-yougoslave s'est considérablement développée et a vu émerger une littérature et un cinéma (féminins et écrits par des femmes) abordant de manière critique les conséquences du déplacement, de l'exil et de la

migration à la suite des guerres des années 1990. Dans cet article, je me pencherai sur trois artefacts culturels récents relevant de cette catégorie : deux livres - les très remarquables *Uhvati Zeca* [Attrapez le lapin] de Lana Bastašić (2018) et *Deset Šljiva za Fašiste* [Dix prunes pour les fascistes] d'Elvira Mujčić (2020) - et un film, *Take Me Somewhere Nice*, d'Ena Sendjarević (2019). J'examinerai la façon dont la Bosnie et les Balkans émergent dans ces récits itinérants en tant que vecteur stylistique, reliant le passé et le présent, l'Est et l'Ouest, ainsi que les questions d'appartenance et d'exil. Au croisement de la critique postcoloniale et postsocialiste, des études frontalières et de la théorie féministe, j'analyserai la manière dont les trois œuvres proposées reprennent un certain discours balkaniste. J'avancerai qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une simple reproduction, mais plutôt d'un engagement mimétique vis-à-vis du balkanisme par le biais de l'intégration critique du protagoniste (et par extension de l'auteur) dans ses rouages.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Balkan(isme), post-Yougoslavie, road trip, mimésis, Est-Ouest

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