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STORMING THE EU FORTRESS

COMMUNITIES OF DISAGREEMENT IN DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

Nataša Kovačević

Spark in Athens. Fire in Paris. Insurrection is coming!

—*Andreas Kalyvas*

Critical responses to “post-Yugoslav” writer Dubravka Ugrešić have tended to envision her work as a single voice reflecting the national preoccupations of loss and factional identity after the wars in her homeland.¹ Recently, however, scholars have begun to situate the artistic and intellectual work of Ugrešić in a much broader context that speaks to concerns shared by many countries now faced with articulating a “place” within the new European Union. Ugrešić’s post-communist literary production increasingly moves away from a sense of lonely horror and melancholic attachment to her disappearing country and instead places the Yugoslav tragedy in a global postcommunist and newly relevant EU context. Even early texts that map the route of her 1990s exile already offer a perspicacious analysis of the emerging New World Order in which the “Balkan” wars are but one instance of the fashionably derogatory ethnicization of alterity in the market of cultural difference,² where cultural chauvinism dangerously overlaps with multiculturalism. Nonetheless, this increasing focus on analyzing transnational politics—especially identities fostered by neo-liberal capitalism and the aftermaths of postcommunist transitions— informs more forcefully and confidently Ugrešić’s recent essays collected in *Nobody’s Home* (2008) and the novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2007), which largely dissects and compiles the fragments of Yugoslav identity among its refugees.

Ugrešić’s career as an internationally established writer has, paradoxically, flourished beyond her incipient Yugoslav context due to her

unrelenting excursions into topics suppressed by all nationalist governments in the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia: patriotic violence and kitsch, loss of a common country, misogyny, and revisionist historiography. Her outspoken newspaper essays criticizing the right-wing Tuđman government in the midst of patriotic euphoria earned her social ostracism in her native Zagreb, and eventually she lost her university teaching position and left Croatia for Holland under death threats.³ Famous for her experimentation with patchwork fiction and feminist themes in the 1980s, Ugrešić continued to combine a number of prose genres—essay, short story, vignette, patchwork novel—in the last two decades. Her unexpected generic juxtapositions seem particularly well suited for capturing the sense of existential loss and displacement occasioned by postcommunist wars and transitions to capitalism.

Ugrešić's intellectual engagements have always called for us to approach her literary production next to her essays and autobiographical reflections, which often provide clues to the conceptual frames and political thematics at work in her writing. Early collections of essays, *Have a Nice Day* (1995) and *The Culture of Lies* (1998), explore the forbidden mourning for Yugoslavia, a country assumed doomed to extinction both by local nationalist warmongers and Western media and military interventionists. Ugrešić caustically dissects the stereotypes of communist oppression employed in the breakdown of Yugoslavia, demonstrating that the newly independent homelands have ever more retreated into solipsistic intolerance and enforcement of intellectual conformism. In a characteristic fashion, Ugrešić chronicles the "banalities" of everyday life—vignettes ranging from reflections on soap opera to cultural kitsch to political brainwashing—to expose the ubiquitous practices and discourses that characterize post-Yugoslav transitions. But more importantly, she contextualizes the Yugoslav tragedy in the global context of Western-dominated media propaganda, mass production of kitsch globally, and the streamlining of intellectual ideas for the consumer market. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (2002), in turn, is a patchwork novel that, stringing reflections on the diary form, photography, curiosity collections, and artistic performance, explores the avenues of personal memory and European historiography available after twentieth-century upheavals.⁴ Thus, the problem of Yugoslav refugees' reconstitution of their imaginary homeland abroad is related to the erasure of Jewish histories

across European capitals as well as to the questions of postmodern historiography in the context of intellectual consumer markets.

To return to the more recent texts that will be the focus of this essay, Ugrešić has increasingly moved away from, though by no means abandoned, the focus on meticulously articulating the trauma of loss of the phenomenological and intellectual space once known as Yugoslavia. Her novel *The Ministry of Pain*, in the words of Stephenie Young, both depicts and itself performs the function of literature “as an arbiter between trauma and recovery” (90).⁵ This novel follows the exilic trajectory of a Slavic literature professor who, like Ugrešić, leaves her Zagreb teaching position for a temporary one in Amsterdam, and decides to dedicate her class, populated by Yugoslav refugees of various nationalities, to the reconstitution of languages, memories, and practices of everyday life of the shared country that is disappearing fast. This project proves to be traumatic for many students, which exposes its conceptual limits; however, beyond these limits of a common transnational project of a broken people is the imagined solidarity with various “others” of alien backgrounds similarly haunting European metropolises. This transcending of the trauma of one’s immediate national background in favor of a broader contemporary perspective of an “other” in the European Union profoundly characterizes the variegated essays in *Nobody’s Home*, which constitute timely, and in their acerbity rather unique, reflections on the failures of EU multiculturalism and rampant class inequalities.

The articulation of transnational connections and possible solidarities is particularly important to Ugrešić in the context of European Union’s official mixture of liberal multiculturalism with the insistence on preserving European nations’ specific cultural identities. For Ugrešić, the allegedly progressive EU multiculturalism does more to segregate than connect, more to downplay other significant sources of disenfranchisement than to empower politically. Indeed, the EU, according to many analysts,⁶ suffers from a democratic deficit, both because actual voting citizens feel distant from EU circuits of power and because the most vulnerable populations, typically postcolonial and recently postcommunist citizens and immigrants, remain excluded from many of its economic and political privileges. Warning that the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism is aided by intellectual conformism that has replaced democratic debate across Europe, Perry Anderson

has recently observed that even the EU's only elected body, European Parliament, functions more as a "ceremonial apparatus" of government, as it has no permanent home, no power of taxation, no ability to initiate legislation, and no say over executive appointments (23).

Ugrešić specifically dissects the dominant discourses of this ceremonial democracy that aim to silence the protesting immigrant demos: if these protests turn violent, their demands cannot be admitted into the legitimate political sphere because their expression is seen as altogether "other" to the Eurocentric narrative of individual rights and democratic participation.⁷ In the last decade, however, these groups have become increasingly vocal and aware of their shared predicaments with disenfranchised citizens across the EU: it is significant, for instance, that French 2005 *banlieue* riots were often invoked during 2008 and ongoing Greek protests,⁸ and that the Spanish *indignados* waved Greek, Tunisian, and Egyptian flags during 2011 protests. Not only are such forceful insurrections taking Europe by storm, but many are also featuring, for the first time in recent history, united fronts of citizens and immigrants.⁹

Ugrešić's texts on the new Europe explore this problem of political representation for those who cannot be heard because they are a priori dismissed as anarchic or immature. As kaleidoscopic reflections on both spoken and written expressions of anger, helplessness, and displacement, *The Ministry of Pain* and *Nobody's Home* call for the ethics of recognizing the clamor of violent protest as political discourse rather than an illegitimate path toward empowerment. These texts cognitively map a community of protest against a neoliberal Europe, which undermines a facile multiculturalism in favor of connecting disparate immigrants whose voices are received in EU government circuits as so much jarring noise.

THE NEW EUROPEAN PUBLIC: ON MULTITUDE AND ANGER MANAGEMENT

Growing economic woes across Europe have brought to the forefront the problem of EU democratic participation, especially in the forms of mass protests against neoliberal reforms, EU treaties, austerity measures, and apartheid policies in immigrant neighborhoods. EU as well

as local national authorities' responses to popular protests in the last decade evince an anxiety that the demos might participate in the first place by resorting to occupation of the streets to voice its dissatisfaction and demands. In such situations, official political statements and news coverage often feature spectacular images of burning cars and Molotov cocktails, using the pretext of violence to discredit and mute the protests while defending the right to peaceful, "civilized" assertion of dissent.

For instance, the mass peaceful marches against the Iraq War painted the image of Europe that is committed to democratic participation, nonviolent resistance and cooperation both abroad and at home. In depictions of such protests, however, civilization often codes as whiteness, as European rules of genteel and mature political debate, and/or as middle-class status.¹⁰ It is in this context that the violent "riots" that happen in neighborhoods populated by non-European residents appear as isolated events that concern merely the municipalities or countries in which they occur: such protests are not "of Europe," as violence itself has become disassociated from the European tradition. Fatima El-Tayeb argues, for instance, that when the 2005 French *banlieue* riots broke out, they weren't welcomed as expressions of democratic spirit but rather observed anxiously as if to ask if this catastrophe can happen in any European country. The diversity of the protesters and complexity of motives were generally reduced to markers of aggressive young masculinity and Muslim faith clashing with European values (661).

The problem of violence is treated with similar discomfort in philosophical reflections on contemporary forms of protest that situate themselves on the left of the political spectrum. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri thus privilege the concept of "multitude," a composite, diverse assemblage that nonviolently storms the neoliberal Empire by claiming the streets and deserting quotidian duties. The multitude acts in common, taking advantage of connectivity and networking that underlies any regular labor activity and investing it in the cause of creativity, fairness and equality. It is not an immature "people in training" but rather self-organized, "maddeningly elusive, since it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of the political body" (2004, 192). Significantly, migrants are seen as a crucial group composing the multitude: though they "often travel empty-handed

in conditions of extreme poverty,” they “are full of knowledges, languages, skills, and creative capacities” (133). Designating the contemporary metropolis, a hybrid, excessive product not of “general will but common aleatoriness,” as a proper battleground for multitude, Negri in particular looks to the migrant as a figure of hope, “what is to come,” “giving meaning to solidarity.” However, since the primary mode of the multitude—including migrants—is “love of humanity” and solidarity, violence, incoherence, and anarchy are denounced as inappropriate modes of being-in-common, degrading the multitude to crowd mentality: “The crowd or the mob or the rabble can have social effects—often horribly destructive effects—but cannot act of their own accord” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 50, 100).

In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri further develop the concept of love as ontologically constitutive in that it produces the common: “Love is the power of the poor to exit a life of misery and solitude, and engage the project to make the multitude” (2009, 189). “Good” love is distinguished from various types of “bad love,” such as love of the same (one’s own race or nation). While they acknowledge that love can be ambivalent and turn into its opposite, they still consider the social tendency toward love and building the common as immanently present. This suggests that, if there is violence and anarchy, they originate from the always-already present love that has been corrupted. However, assuming that multicultural love is a primary mode of being of this ideal political assemblage inevitably results in denouncing the actions of multitudes that, for instance, burn down European metropolises.

The loaded terms “rabble” and “mob” used in *Multitude* (Hardt and Negri 2004) suggest that enlisting in the multitude may be a matter of political maturity, which draws a problematically clear line between ability to self-organize and susceptibility to external manipulation. *Commonwealth* revises the earlier negative position on the “the crowd, the mob, and the masses,” implying that there is a “possibility of recuperating these social formations when their indignation and revolt are directed and organized” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 243). Thus, while Hardt and Negri defend the much-maligned spontaneity and naiveté of the French *banlieue* riots, they insist that the multitude must be “trained in love,” “organize antagonisms against the hierarchies and divisions of the metropolis, funnel the hatred and rage

against its violence" (260). This revision, nonetheless, is still haunted by the fear of disorganized antagonism and preserves the tendency toward a prescriptive "training in love." Unwittingly, it echoes classist and racist preferences for liberal, civilized, and well-organized protests discussed above. Complicating this vein of thinking, Etienne Balibar observes that antiglobalization militants somewhat idealistically believe that migrants may constitute a mass base of organized resistance to Empire, as if "the ultimate point in insecurity and oppression of uprooted migrants can automatically be translated into an avant-garde movement" (43).

Coming from a leftist perspective that appears less uncomfortable with the phenomenon of revolutionary violence, Slavoj Žižek argues that contemporary discourses denouncing various types of "subjective violence" enacted by "social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds" distract our attention from the invisible and anonymous, but powerful and systemic violence of global capitalism (10–14). Thus, the fascination with *banlieue* protests, for instance, merely fetishizes the effects of the larger dynamics of social and economic violence that, as a result, remain safely in the shadows. However, like Hardt and Negri, Žižek denounces the types of violent protest associated with French *banlieues* or the Danish cartoon controversy as ultimately ineffective because it is inarticulate. Sociologists and philosophers who ascribe any meaning to it are patronizing wishful-thinkers as this is a "zero-level protest" that "demands nothing," a "meaningless outburst" that lacks a utopian project, and "an implicit admission of impotence" akin to terrorist suicide attacks (Žižek, 75–76, 81).

That Žižek contrasts these "meaningless," almost instinctive "outbursts" of violence to nostalgia-tinged May 1968 protests, which were allegedly articulate and carried utopian promise, seems symptomatic of a similar civilizational coding at work in the idealization of anti-Iraq War protests. Reading Ugrešić, then, can help us examine this notion of inarticulateness in the context of EU protests: specifically, what it means that violence strips them of *any* ability to signify. Also, we must ask how and why economic desperation and disenfranchisement incite social trauma rather than love, without expecting the "rabble" to grow up, in any teleological manner, into the trained multitude of "civilized" cooperation. But this does not mean, on the other

hand, that violence is the only possible mode of political expression available to an immigrant or other disenfranchised minority. Indeed, Ugrešić suggests that Europe's main democratic challenge is to allow for its "disposable" groups to articulate their antagonism, even if it leads to a radical restructuring of the EU.

"EUROSPEAK" AND INAUDIBLE NOISES OF PROTEST

Currently based in Amsterdam, Ugrešić meticulously analyzes the mechanisms of power in the burgeoning European Union, primarily assumptions and ideals at work in the prevailing discourses advocating unification and its self-portrayals as a multicultural, democratic beacon. Never one to reject the utopia of communism only to wholeheartedly profess belief in the utopia of the European Union, Ugrešić carries out a politically astute and timely "attack" on "Fortress Europe," complicating what she sees as an all-too-easy reconciliation with economic exploitation and forgiveness for historical wrongs within Europe. Recounting a visit to a New York City nail salon where Vietnamese employees courteously service American customers, Ugrešić reflects on a similarly surprising lack of antagonism in the wake of the Vietnam War disaster: wondering if the salon is a "place of symbolic global reconciliation," Ugrešić ironically suggests the Vietnamese might be calling on "all of us to show some compassion for their partner in the historical chain of trauma between the colonizer and colonized, the exploiter and exploited, the power-monger and his victim" (2008, 135). The sense of reconciliation pervades, also, postcommunist Eastern Europe, which Ugrešić portrays as "occupied" by the EU and global capitalism. Indeed, the EU comes across as empire-soft, a consensual empire that is difficult to unmask as empire precisely because its "occupation is sensual, exciting, and pleasurable; if it hadn't been, someone would have objected already" (99). This apathetic resignation and growing consensus around the EU as an unquestionable good is precisely the problem Ugrešić attempts to highlight.

In *The Ministry of Pain*, Amsterdam emblemizes the subtlety of this pleasurable neocolonial exploitation: in the city, which the novel's narrator Tanja Lucić describes as steeped in the aesthetics of kitsch,

“live Barbies—young women from Moldavia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Belarus,” and “Eastern European Kens who had come to this Disneyland to entertain the grown-up male children here,” are indifferently consumed as “alien flesh” (Ugrešić 2007, 79). Throughout much of the book, Lucić reflects on “infantile urban exhibitionism” that prompts the Dutch to display a variety of toylike objects from their windows, as in a gesture of fingerprinting, or signaling, their belonging in the city (29). The entertainment industry of prostitution, much like Amsterdam’s residents’ kitschy personal items, are, in their “cuteness,” beyond good and evil—flattened into the fetish of the commodity, they occlude their political meaning, the trajectory of sexual trafficking from the crumbling postcommunist states. Estranging the city through a nightmarish Benjaminian lens—offering disturbing images of a surreal, grown-up playground—the narrator retrieves this silenced political context, which she mourns as a “generalized human loss: Like a Balkan keener I wailed my agony over one and all, only my agony was mute” (233).

The Ministry of Pain is preoccupied with this traumatic muteness, the loss of language with which to describe not only the agony of Yugoslav wars, but also the general untranslatability of the experience of communism in Western European exile. It is impossible for the narrator to ascribe rational meaning to or even communicate, in the context of International War Crimes Tribunal hearings, the “deaf, dumb, and blind pain” of Yugoslav war crimes (Ugrešić 2007, 143). The only way to express the pain in its “speechlessness,” and uselessness, is to scream it. This sense that language is failing marks the very inability to speak of the experience of communist Yugoslavia, which has disappeared as a referent, shattering the symbolic order that sustained it. Yugoslav refugees in Amsterdam speak an extinct language, “half swallowing their words . . . and uttering semi-sounds,” like “linguistic invalids” (4). While Lucić’s student Igor praises Holland as “a country without pain,” a “big blotter” that “sucks up everything—memories, pain, *all that crap*” (207), this unbearable lightness of forgetting is stubbornly counteracted by the narrative that revives the Yugoslav dinosaur by collecting memories, as haphazard and half-baked as the language to which they belong.

In *Nobody’s Home*, Ugrešić similarly assumes the position of a postcommunist migrant subaltern, whose pain over the breakup of

Yugoslavia is silenced in the dominant historical reductivism accompanying the transitions to neoliberal capitalism. She points out how Yugoslav intellectuals, to be accepted by the international community and justify the country's breakdown, had to "cultivate *false memory syndrome*" and transform themselves into "victims of communism" (Ugrešić 2008, 165.) But something is indeed lost in this process: Ugrešić wonders how she can disabuse a Dutch bartender who, brain-washed by the "media and widely-held beliefs," calls Yugoslavia "Tito's dictatorship" (204–5). She doesn't know how can she explain that in the post-Yugoslav "democritatorship" she has to fight for the rights she "had enjoyed freely in the communist dictatorship? The right to gender equality. The right to reproductive choice. . . . The right not to declare my nationality. The right not to hate my neighbor" (206).

Prevailing European stereotypes of communism, therefore, are also to blame for this silencing. Ugrešić portrays the EU as invested in preserving its solipsistic myth of political and economic superiority over both its eastern fringes and former colonies through insistence on multicultural unity and consensus building, preemptively managing the crisis of identity that is increasingly "occupied" by multitudes of immigrants. In light of official emphases on the need for consensus and getting along—and anxieties about its absence, as in popular oppositions to the EU Constitutional Treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, and recent austerity measures—Ugrešić's critique appears heretical, unnecessarily prickly and uncooperative. However, I will read this disagreement via Jacques Rancière's positive valorization of the concept, as precisely the moment when politics happens. For Rancière, the focus on consensus, while appearing as a pillar of democracy, subscribes to the logic of policing and the foreclosure of egalitarian change: "Police is first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying[;] . . . it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise" (29). Politics, conversely, occurs with disagreement, "an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined. . . . It makes visible what had no business to be seen and makes heard a discourse where once was only place for noise" (30). Ugrešić's texts thus argumentatively and aesthetically mark the possibility of

politics in the EU, against the management of crisis taking shape as the “consensus police.” In particular, she articulates into the political sphere “the part of those who have no part,” as Rancière might say—those who are often managed through a discourse of cultural differences into visible, acknowledged ethnic “parts,” based on an a priori determined identity. This type of representation displaces their much broader disenfranchisement in the context of EU economic and political privileges and discourages other forms of subjectivization. For Rancière, any political subjectivization entails a radical “disidentification, removal from the naturalness of place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part” (36). In fact, Žižek echoes Rancière’s concept of dissensus when he acknowledges that the *banlieue* protest in France, though inarticulate, was such a fundamental attempt to achieve visibility to the system in which these French residents have no part. The violence was thus not only necessary to draw attention to their overlooked plight, but also to reject the exclusionary frame of recognition and pose the zero-degree question of potential dialogue: “Do you hear me?” (Žižek, 79).

Ugrešić furthers a critique of the EU cultural identity politics as its primary mechanism of policing, of maintaining this exclusionary frame of recognition: Europe “treats culture as her principal ideological glue, to rearticulate and reglue herself” (2008, 154). This focus on culture as ideology turns European integration into a positive strategy of protection as well as containment of supposed cultural differences. However, because this stated respect for difference in fact parades as a “mask for chauvinism,” it effects only a false reconciliation and democratic participation of all (253). European unification thus comes across as a rather lackluster, uninspired process, where Europe both proclaims fatigue at the end of old utopias as it announces a thoroughly commodified, dull, mass market utopia of multiculturalism, where “the feeling of joy seems to be lacking” (253).

The politics of recognizing diverse cultural identities is no less problematic than the insistence on a unified European identity. Ugrešić likens the European market of cultural differences to the Eurovision song contest, notorious for its transparent politicization, spectacular kitsch, and affirmation of cultural stereotypes (2008, 139). As with the

prostitution industry in *The Ministry of Pain*, cultural difference is here flattened into a mere spectacle: “The cultural bureaucracy of the EU is perpetuating . . . *me Tarzan, you Jane* . . . formula for acknowledging various cultural identities. . . . As long as someone who is Moroccan lays something *Moroccan* on the counter, whatever that means, and we lay something *European* out, whatever that means, all is right with the world” (2008, 145). To achieve visibility in the host nation, one can also employ culture as a utilitarian currency to profit off of one’s merits, one’s safely packaged difference: “Culture can serve as *an identity help-kit*, as a shadowy point of self-respect and mutual regard, or as a blank surface onto which meaning can be inscribed and read” (153).

While the sticky concept of cultural difference belies Europe’s inability to live with difference as an ethnically or racially unmarked category, *Nobody’s Home* and *The Ministry of Pain* trace the contours of a truly postnational, global capitalist dynamic that the EU, with its outmoded language of national and cultural identities traditionally conceived, both occludes rhetorically and fails to account for politically. Metropolitan migrants who have no clear national identity thus have to wait for a European “melting pot, which would erase state borders, and national and ethnic divisions,” and hand “people a European passport . . . making them European citizens” (Ugrešić 2008, 156). More significantly, “a language which would include the overlapping interests of numerous groups, trans-local solidarities, cross-border mobilizations and post-national identities does not exist yet” (2008, 149).

I suggest that Ugrešić’s aesthetics moves toward developing and performing such a language, specifically in order to articulate, in common, the globally relevant demands of subaltern cosmopolitans who “have no part.” To coin this innovative, poetic discourse of Rancière’s disagreement, Ugrešić repeatedly grapples with identifying new structures of power and class formations that seem elusive and therefore absent, or at least benign when compared with old centralized forms of governance. She wonders who the exploiters are today: “Today they are invisible, so perhaps this is why people seem to think there aren’t any. Do they exist? Are there classes? To which class does he belong? Who are his enemies? And what is with his allies?” (2008, 292). This quandary remains disorienting and vague, without being forced into

a clear resolution. Nonetheless Ugrešić's narratives create connections among the disenfranchised migrants by highlighting their common alienation and poverty rather than cultural difference.

Tanja Lucić identifies with the silenced, muted immigrants on Amsterdam trains to such a radical extent that she confuses her own image with that of another passenger lost to the external world while listening to his "silent music." It is "as if I'd been watching myself in the glass, as if I'd seen myself but couldn't hear myself" (Ugrešić 2007, 31). Her identity already unmoored and her former language disabled, she enters a new collective configuration in this transitory space par excellence, where Amsterdam residents temporarily come together in the here and now, forced to confront one another. The passage combines the images of a "dark-skinned young man poring over a textbook of Dutch for foreigners . . . [who] turns toward the window, mumbles a few words to himself," "a young Chinese couple chewing gum in synchronized motion, their faces gray and mouselike," and "a tired Moroccan Madonna with a boy in her lap" (31). It is significant that, unmoored and silent like Lucić, they all keep to themselves, not having a language in common; however, it is the external narrative perspective that desires affiliations among people of such seemingly incongruent backgrounds and concerns (taking care of family, or learning Dutch). They are not merely united by attributes that signal their alienated participation in global capital (tired, gray, mouselike) but also by the glaring absence of a common language to express their pain, to scream it, as it were.

Both texts under discussion persistently wander away from the Disneyworld Amsterdam for tourists to depressing spaces of immigrant consumerism, such as flea markets and rundown supermarkets. Lucić is drawn to them by "vague magnetism": "the strong scents of spices from beyond the seas" and "seedy vendors of cheap clothing" (2007, 193). In *Nobody's Home*, Ugrešić is similarly drawn to shop for cheap consumer items at a Dutch bazaar, noting the immigrant shoppers' common superfluous status vis-à-vis the state: "They are all of them 'trash,' stripped of any awareness of their position. Clever politicians and the even cleverer clergy have slipped them a toy to play with: the right to religious, national, ethnic identity" (2008, 227). While this statement problematically suggests general ideological turpitude, the scathing depiction of object disenfranchisement can also be read

as a performative echo of right-wing sentiments that immigrant minorities are merely excessive “waste,” a “drain” on affluent European societies. In a situation in which superfluous migrants consume superfluous trash items, the sociality of being in common exhausts itself in a corporate context that creates the only public space. Suggesting that corporations organize even forms of communal life in Holland, Ugrešić notes that the Dutch supermarket Albert Heijn is often the only store in Amsterdam’s urban ghettos, “its single public space” that people frequent, having no other choice (119). Ugrešić’s depiction significantly dampens Negri’s hope that contemporary immigrants can inhabit the city with dignity and claim its inhospitable streets in unpredictably creative as well as peaceful ways, creating a vanguard solidarity movement.

Nonetheless, Ugrešić’s emphasis on this common activity driven by poverty also becomes a discursive space for Rancière’s dynamic subjectivization, rather than a static marker of one’s “group” identity (e.g., assorted immigrant ethnics), precisely because she creates innovative connections among a burgeoning underclass at the heart of European utopia. As an exile, then immigrant herself, Ugrešić is drawn to this portion of Dutch society more than to any other, performatively identifying with them and aligning her sympathies with the underpaid and socially underprivileged. Developing a transnational perspective, Ugrešić also places the rampant class stratification of post-communist transitions in a contemporary European context, where neoliberal reforms continue to increase income and employment gaps between European and non-European residents. Thus, *The Ministry of Pain* offers a scathing critique of the privileged “transition mutants” of postcommunist societies, “progressive and aggressively young, the well-paid commissars of *European integration and enlargement*, the harbingers of the new world order” (2007, 235). These *engagé* yuppies specialize in alleviating the blows of privatization and democratization, while “living off the misfortunes of the people they help” (234). Educated in what the narrative derides as “Eurospeak,” they will obliterate complex histories and antagonisms of their countries by disseminating everywhere the fashionable terminology of globalization: “*management, negotiation technology, income, profit, investment, expenses, hidden communication and the like*” (236). They will even adjust their personalities to fit the requirements of an upwardly mobile corporate

laborer: “*hardworking, communicative, loyal, discreet . . . and skillful in coping with stressful situations*” (236).

In other words, they’ll benefit from renewed social differentiation that has spawned an enormous postcommunist underclass, “a nameless mass of slaves down below” (Ugrešić 2007, 237). These are the economically superfluous multitudes that rummage through trash for food, sell their kidneys, and turn to prostitution in their societies’ transition to capitalism. Ugrešić italicizes the words of corporate Eurospeak to signal that this is the hegemonic language that needs to be contested, and whose ubiquity and seemingly universal validity leaves the impoverished nameless and silent. It *is* the policing structure of European democracy: configurations of accepted expressions recognizable as language rather than noise. The EU, the empire of capital, crucially relies on a neoliberal version of orientalism that, as Ezequiel Adamovsky argues in his discussion of Euro-orientalist attitudes to Eastern Europe, “constitutes[s] a form of class ideology. . . . [It is] a fundamental part of liberal-bourgeois ideology” (19). This discourse of civilizational differentiation between entrepreneurial elites and “wild” lumpenproletariat applies especially to postcolonial and other non-European minorities and newly arrived postcommunist Europeans. It is used within these “problem” communities as well, to separate, for instance, hard-working and law-abiding non-Europeans from terrorists and fanatics; or in the case of Eastern Europe, to distinguish between semi-orientals with a lazy, corrupt, communist mentality and true Europeans who have embraced individualism and honest work.¹¹

To make significant egalitarian demands in this context, the underclass who have no part must, as Rancière says, make “heard a discourse where once was only place for noise” (30). In *The Ministry of Pain*, Ugrešić posits a collective first-person political subject typically assumed to be making noise, as she antagonistically rehashes European anxieties about uncouth, violent non-European minorities who produce (animal) sounds rather than (human) language:

We are barbarians. We have no writing; we leave our signatures on the wind: we utter sounds, we signal with our calls, our shouts, our screams, our spit. That is how we mark our territory. Our fingers drum on everything they touch. . . . We bawl at weddings and wail at funerals, our women’s convulsive voices battering the concrete facades like tempests.

We break glasses and go bang: firecrackers are our favorite toy. Sound is our alphabet, the noise we produce being the only proof that we exist, our bang the only trace we leave behind. We are like dogs: we bark. (2007, 228)

This formation of subjects unified through their exclusion from a discourse rather than through an a priori party, group identity, or ethnicity assumes the tone of threat through self-annunciation, making visible the contingency of existing political configurations. For Rancière, these articulations of dissension are at once “arguments and world openers, the opening up of common (which does not mean consensual) worlds where the subject who argues is counted as an arguer” (58). At the end of the novel, the protagonist has disidentified again from this group to occupy a new subject space and point to the parallel exclusion of post-Yugoslav subjectivities that overflow visible ethnic categories recognized by the EU: “Then I open my mouth and let out the words. . . . I flicker my tongue like a fairy tale dragon, and it forks into Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Slovenian, Macedonian. . . . I shatter the glass with my voice like Oskar Matzerath. I secrete the words from my mouth like ink from a cuttlefish” (Ugrešić 2007, 255).

The rhetorical construction of a collective first-person Yugoslav identity through the country’s linguistic diversity brings forth less a multicultural people, understood as a collection of ethnic groups, and more a multitude of singularities in common where self is not separate from other, where a tongue can simultaneously speak a number of (now officially separated) languages. The intimations of a desperate need to be noticed and accounted for in public discourse, in both passages quoted above, intensify into in-human auditory and tactile violence, where “civilized” language is deterritorialized by the animalistic and the monstrous. This noise can be dismissed as inarticulate or destructive just as Oskar’s screaming is seen as childish and unnatural in the Nazi Germany of Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, or as Malik Solanka’s unconscious tirades are treated as lunatic ravings in the complacently imperialist New York of Rushdie’s *Fury*. In contrast, Ugrešić not only implies that noise must be heard as discourse, but that interlocutors must show respect and empathy for the singularity of enunciation that is alien to traditional forms of political discourse. In the first passage, therefore, Ugrešić introduces a number of communicative

gestures that would typically be labeled “too” emotional, meaningless, or disturbing—shouts, bangs, spit.

The larger connection that Ugrešić’s narrative makes here is that the violence of the physical and rhetorical breakdown of Yugoslavia into ethnic groups parallels the violence of EU multicultural discourses that categorize immigrants into separate ethnic/racial categories. Against this ethnic labeling, or stigmatization as “‘the beneficiaries of political asylum,’ ‘refugees’ . . . ‘the fallout of Balkanization,’ or ‘savages,’” Ugrešić also insists on using the collective first-person pronoun to highlight post-Yugoslavs’ shared loss and predicament, as well as shared responsibility for processing memories of the lost country: “The country we came from was our common trauma” (2007, 52). Yugoslav refugees gain agency, and significantly, a new language that counteracts their silencing both at home and in Holland, when they substitute the neutral first-person pronoun for official ethnic labels. Once Yugoslavia disappears, its inhabitants become Yugos, “or, more often, simply ‘our people.’ The possessive pronoun also came in handy when referring to the *language they spoke together* . . . to avoid its former, now politically incorrect name of Serbo-Croatian, they called it simply ‘our language’” (13; emphasis mine).

The persistent use of “we” and “our” throughout the narrative obviates discourses of national identity that are becoming solidified, at the same time, in post-Yugoslav space. It also echoes the “we” that connects subaltern immigrant groups in the EU into an assertive, possibly dangerous, collective that seeks to gain visibility in public discourse: “We are barbarians. . . . Our young men are wild and sullen, full of anger[;] . . . [they] hurl stones at car windows; they steal whatever they can lay their hands on” (2007, 227).

To return to Žižek’s reflections on the meaningless, inarticulate violence of various EU protests, the problem, as his book *Violence* argues throughout, is not so much violence *per se*—its seeming “irrationality” can also be seen as a Badouian “event” that comes as if from nowhere to exact social justice—but that it isn’t emancipatory in a true sense because it has no program for the “day after” of political restructuring. A similar argument takes place in Hardt and Negri’s *Commonwealth*. In its long-term impotence, therefore, shouts, bangs, and stones hurled at car windows do not signify enough. However, Walter Benjamin’s reading of political protest in his “Critique of Violence,”

especially his differentiation between localized and general strikes, helps to complicate such arguments. For Benjamin, a localized strike, as merely “an external modification of labor conditions” (291), remains in the domain of lawmaking, thus allowing for a perpetuation of state violence (what Žižek might call invisible, systemic violence). Conversely, a general strike is “anarchistic” and interrupts lawmaking as is (292). While the state focuses on the *effects* of a general strike to denounce it as violent—or, while Žižek and Hardt and Negri focus on the “day after” protests to denounce them as impotent and lacking vision—for Benjamin, a general strike seen as a “pure means” is non-violent in the sense that, just by virtue of happening, it interrupts the systemic violence of the state (292). The question, therefore, is not what is the purpose of all the lost lives, burnt cars, and destruction of living space in EU protests, but rather, how does the noise of protest signify in and of itself a “pure means,” or an event? How does it change relationships in a social space by traumatizing as well as addressing others who may not hear the protesters’ demands otherwise?

In an essay titled “Sobs,” Ugrešić reflects on such forms of address when witnessing other people’s pain in everyday situations in which the one who witnesses and the object of the gaze are separated by an uncomfortably visible state of heightened emotional disturbance. Faced with a violent lovers’ fight or a sobbing madwoman in Amsterdam, the narrator feels a strange, obsessive sympathy that leads to reflections on the subaltern positions of people whose misfortunes are muted by the contemporary media culture. For the narrator, tele-technological mediation abstracts the organic embodiment of pain: misfortune reaches us “through our television screens, filtered . . . for mass consumption” and “leaves us indifferent” (2008, 56). Like Oskar Matzerath, the sobbing madwoman is “an accountant for world pain. Maybe every night she registers in an invisible ledger all the pain that has happened in the world, and in the morning she publishes aloud all that she had written down” (57).

Hence, when she encounters pain directly, persecuted by sobs and shouts in the streets of Amsterdam, the narrator finds it ethically impossible to ignore the drama: she must respond, at least by pausing to reflect on it. Yet, the possibility of an unambiguously charitable political act, rather than media-induced indifference, is suspended in the tension between the narrator’s privilege to explore such a reflective

gesture and the spontaneous, ineluctable materiality of the woman's sobs or the lovers' rage. The tension over knowing how, precisely, to act in an ethically demanding situation is heightened through the narrator's double position as both a subaltern who desires to be heard as she flicks her dragon tongue, and a privileged metropolitan who writes widely disseminated texts, abstracts misfortune, and witnesses mediated pain. She both empathizes and identifies with those seen as merely making noise and highlights her distance from them in terms of uneven social privilege and the asymmetry of political situatedness.

The ambivalence of this double exposure characterizes a similar encounter between Lucić, a university professor, and three young boys who attempt to rob her with a pocketknife. The boys' description is uncannily similar to that of the collective "we" of immigrant men as well as post-Yugoslav refugees mentioned earlier in the novel, connecting them to the unheard noises of protest: "All three had the dark, sullen look of grown men" and then one of the boys aimed "his black pupils at my face, he let out a long, piercing cry full of hate . . . as unexpected and powerful as an electric shock. It came from some unknown depths, some unknown darkness" (Ugrešić 2007, 241). While Lucić becomes the immediate target of this accusing cry, she uses attributes throughout this passage that de-individualize hate and separate it from the specific situation, signaling a larger social context beyond this violent event, in which blame is not easily ascribed. Lucić thus reacts to the incident as "both moving and dreadful," acknowledging both fear for her life and empathy with the attackers (241). Ugrešić's texts suggest that the tensions present in such encounters would obligate one to walk—and act—on the thin line between refusing one's privilege of representing subaltern expressions in tired colonial epithets that reproduce existing hierarchies (e.g., calling *banlieue* immigrant protesters "scum" or blaming Greek "profligacy" on their "Balkan mentality) *and* denouncing destruction and murder as actions that cause more pain to others.

The main question emerging from this discussion, then, is how to create a viable community of protest and resistance around differentially subaltern positions within the EU. This crucial question hovers above Hardt and Negri's concept of multitude, and the spontaneous ascription to its assemblages of primary, or at the very least, prescriptive bonding through multicultural love rather than tension, enmity,

or withdrawal of solidarity. *Nobody's Home* and *The Ministry of Pain* forward a transnational perspective that connects the seemingly isolated position of postcommunist subalterns to those of other marginalized EU minorities. Although in this way the texts' narrators disidentify from their "natural" groups, and move toward a cosmopolitan multitude gathered around a shared economic strife, Ugrešić does not resolve existing asymmetries of power and disparate interests in any transcendental, utopian vision of peaceful coexistence. An alternative Europe, nonetheless, may start with a politics of disagreement, through a critique of all those European intellectuals who will gradually stop writing about "themes of exile, passports, and visas," discouraged by the "enthusiasm for unification and the code of political correctness" (2008, 158). Ugrešić particularly faults Eastern European intellectuals for having become "passionate supporters of post-postmodernism . . . the ideology of cynicism, games . . . the carnivalizing of ideology and politics." Thinking ideology as entertainment parallels Ugrešić's reflections on depoliticizing immigration in Amsterdam through the aesthetics of kitsch, which results in an infantile, ahistorical utopia. Here too, if "we proclaim that everything is a game, we cease to be responsible. We become children" (173).

From that perspective, the austerity protests that have been shaking many European countries would be necessary for a renewal of political commitment, for growing possibilities for diverse European protesting publics. Instead of reproducing dominant power discourses that dismiss the significance of protests, portraying them as immature or destructive, we could take the cue from Greek bank employees, whose joint statement denounced violence yet gave strong support to the *raison d'être* of the austerity protests. Namely, after three bank employees died in a fire started by the protesting crowds in May 2010, the bank employees went on strike. Rather than distancing themselves from the protesters or echoing the government line, their union accused disastrous government policies of pushing people to the brink of committing such desperate acts of violence (see "Greek Bank Staff Strike"). In other words, rather than simply recuperating what Žižek calls "subjective violence," they portrayed it as reactive, and argued that emphasizing it in public discourse throws a veil on the much more systematic, yet invisibly deadly dynamics of neoliberal violence perpetrated by the Greek government.

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Notes

1. I use the term “post-Yugoslav” because it is Ugrešić’s preferred, if intentionally humorous, label in the EU literary market of enforced ethnic self-definitions. She suggests this term as an (im)possible identity marker in her interview “Yugoslavia, An ‘Almost Forbidden Term’” (Kovačević).

2. Since the “Balkan” wars of the 1990s, much has been written about the derogatory discourse of Balkanism, which plunges the region into stereotypes of savagery, disorganization, underdevelopment, and bloodthirstiness. See, for instance, Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Vesna Goldsworthy’s *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998), Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić’s *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (2002), and Andrew Hammond’s *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other* (2004).

3. For further information, see my interview with Ugrešić (Kovačević). Also, in “Homeless at Home: Narrations of Post-Yugoslav Identities” Stef Jansen discusses the notorious “Witches of Rio” episode. In 1992 the Croatian magazine *Globus* published an attack on Ugrešić and a number of other Croatian women writers for attending a conference in Rio de Janeiro instead of helping the national cause. The article declared that the authors had “serious problems with their own ethnical [*sic*], ethical, human, intellectual and political identity” (Jansen, 87). However, Western critics have also castigated Ugrešić for not being “properly” engaged with political upheavals “at home.” According to Martha Kuhlman, in 1993 a Danish critic vigorously criticized Ugrešić’s 1988 book *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, “misreading the work as an offensive satire of the war. The critic accused her of engaging in a crass form of literary escapism when she actually had other pressing concerns like the ‘bloody war’ raging at home” (679). The novel explores East–West relations during the last days of the Cold War through satirical portrayals of international literary luminaries, including those from Yugoslavia. While the charge of political escapism is temporally displaced, it is nonetheless significant in terms of flattening Eastern European writers into representatives of their respective national traumas. Kuhlman adds that Ugrešić is often expected by Western interviewers to act as the spokesperson for her country, although, as Ugrešić says, “the Yugoslav writer has traditionally not been called upon to be the voice of the people and never really wanted that role” (qtd. in Kuhlman, 679).

4. In “Imagining the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*” Monica Popescu argues that the photographs

that frame this fragmented narrative and map the memories of the novel's women protagonists help Ugrešić avoid the trappings of a neatly unified, teleological cultural narrative. Rather, the emphasis is on articulating the experience of deracination, displacement, migration, and war in the Eastern European context. Jacob Emery reads the "scattered presentation" in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* as mimicking "the subjective position of the exile, who, Ugrešić claims, exists in a random and disjointed medium of non-significant objects until he deceives himself into a sense of the patterns predestination" (296). Using the example of Roland the walrus whose stomach contents open up one of the novel's chapters, Emery illustrates how "the miscellanea of a Western post-industrial society as eviscerated from the digestive tract of an exoticized body" become "a metaphor of narrative strategy by a political exile" (292–93). For further readings of this novel, see Simeon.

5. Josipa Korljan's "Izricanje Neizrecivog—Upisivanje Traume u Roman *Ministarstvo Boli* Dubravke Ugrešić" also approaches *The Ministry of Pain* as a narrative that processes trauma through articulating what is deemed unsayable.

6. See, for instance, Etienne Balibar's *We The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2003), William Urrichio's edited collection *We Europeans? Media, Representations, Identities* (2009), and Monica Sassatelli's *Becoming Europeans: Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies* (2009).

7. At best, EU focus on social equality has created a paradoxical situation in which the most disadvantaged are seen as objects of state assistance and solidarity but not as agents with their own political voice or ability to shape EU's social landscape. In *Contested Citizenship*, Ruud Koopmans et al. note that the authorities often "see migrants as incapable of ameliorating their own position and thus in need of benevolent assistance," which is "reinforced by a sense of post-colonial guilt." In public discourse, therefore, migrants "appear as a group deserving help, respect, tolerance, and solidarity, but not the kind of people that anyone would want to employ or would want one's child to be in school with" (15).

8. Kornetis draws explicit parallels in "No More Heroes? Rejection and Reverberation of the Past in the 2008 Events in Greece." Also see Pourgouris.

9. For Andreas Kalyvas, the 2008 Greek protests represent a "real rupture" because of "a new subject appearing into the public realm, the rebellious immigrant, politicized and public, claiming a political life" (356).

10. See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida's joint declaration "After the War: The Rebirth of Europe," published in Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and France's *La Liberation* in May 2003. The article signatories argue that a united Europe should balance out U.S. hegemonic grip on global power, and optimistically look to the future of Europe in which its best legacies will flourish: commitment to democracy, separation of church and state, social equality, and distrust of force and technology, among other achievements. The article admits to the united effort behind Europe's self-destruction in the two world wars and the crimes of European colonialism, but suggests that Europe has learned from, and therefore overcome, its violent past: it congratulates Europe on

“civilized,” peaceful mass protests against the Iraq War, which resounded around the world.

11. My book *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (2008) analyzes Cold War orientalist discourses which help forge such agonistic divisions in postcommunist societies. Also see Michal Buchovsky's analysis of this discourse at work in Poland. He argues that “internal societal orientalization” presents impoverished workers and peasants as roadblocks to development, as the lumpenproletariat of postcommunism who are easy prey for backwards nationalist ideologies (466–67). Their concerns about unemployment are ascribed to their laziness or habitual thievery under communism; while they are seen as mere objects of transitions, the educated, progressive, urban middle classes are its true subjects. Similarly, Dorothee Bohle and Bela Greskovits argue that in the current crisis the stigmatized poor are turned into scapegoats by Eastern European middle classes who blame them for the recession. This is replicated on the supranational level, where the EU and the World Bank, who once praised transitioning Central European countries for continued welfare provisions that helped forestall social instability, now blame them as major “causes of macroeconomic instability and recession” (12).

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