

Chapter 11

Poetics, Politics and Gender

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[I]f you wish to uphold basic human justice you must do so for everyone, not selectively for the people that your side, your culture, your nation designates as okay. (Said 1994, 69)

I am no one. And everyone. In Croatia I shall be a Serb, in Serbia, I shall be a Croat, in Bulgaria a Turk, in Turkey, a Greek, in Greece a Macedonian, in Macedonia a Bulgarian... Being an ethnic “bastard” or “schizophrenic” is my natural choice, I even consider it a sign of mental and moral health. And I know that I am not alone. (Ugrešić 1988, 269-70)

Excessive social situations, like the political crisis and war in the former Yugoslavia, produce important test cases for the study of the gendered aspects of citizenship rights. In this chapter, such a case will be studied from an intersectional point of view, taking into consideration issues of citizenship, gender, nationality, and moral responsibility as they are reflected in the works and personal experiences of contemporary woman writer Dubravka Ugrešić.¹

Dubravka Ugrešić was one of the earliest and most highly articulated critics of the new nationalist and repressive political practices that were part of the creation of the new nation-states in the region of the former Yugoslavia. Having lived in Croatia, she draws upon this context within her critiques of nationalism, and soon became a target of attacks herself. After an orchestrated media lynching in 1992, she left Croatia and moved to the Netherlands where she has continued her writing. The analysis that follows takes into account both sides of her case, including her own personal experiences and her critical writings.

Dubravka Ugrešić’s works reflect upon the political crisis and wars in the former Yugoslavia, and point out the hegemonic character of nationalist ideology. In her work, she demonstrates how structural violence operates on different levels, from the most immediate, and clearly visible forms, to those that are more subtle and hidden, yet still highly destructive. As a response to the structural violence of the state, she calls upon intellectuals to perform their moral obligation and reject the “culture of lies” produced by the nationalist regimes. In terms of citizenship rights, her call translates into a claim for equal participation, that is, for the contested right to active participation in the public sphere for those individuals who are socially ostracized on

ideological grounds within the new states that were created by the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia.

The following analysis intends to show that the violent nature of the public reactions to her criticism in Croatia, were not only generated by the arguments and examples she was using in her articles, but also by a high level of gender prejudice, which was supported, and partly induced by the new nationalist state ideology. Because of the nature of some of the criticism lodged against her, her case is also indicative of the gendered relationship between citizens and the state.

Being the Other: Women and the State

In understanding the current relevance of the Balkan conflicts of the early 1990s, I am very much in agreement with Étienne Balibar, as he argues, “in reality, Yugoslavia’s situation is not atypical but rather constitutes a *local projection* of forms of confrontation and conflicts characteristic of all Europe”, and that in that sense, “the fate of European identity as a whole is being played out in Yugoslavia and more generally in the Balkans” (2004, 5-6). Rejecting exclusionary views that locate the conflicts in the Balkans outside its imaginary European borders, Balibar emphasizes the centrality of the problem of nationalism behind the events in the former Yugoslavia.

Balibar sees nationalism as:

...the organic ideology that corresponds to the national institution and this institution rests upon the formulation of a *rule of exclusion, of visible or invisible ‘borders’*, materialized in laws and practices. Exclusion – or at least unequal (‘preferential’) access to particular goods and rights depending on whether one is a national or a foreigner, or belongs to the community or not – is thus the very essence of the nation-form. (Balibar 2004, 22)

In his view, nationalism is necessarily an exclusionary, hegemonic ideology, a secondary identity that tends to “win over” all other identities and “arrive at a point where national belonging intersects with and integrates all other forms of belonging” (2004, 23). Moreover, nationalist ideology is articulated by “a *structural violence*, both institutional and spontaneous,” which makes the question of the differentiation between “good” and “bad” nationalism pointless.

The difficulty does not reside in the good or bad, advanced or backward character of nationalism, but in the combined economy of identities and structural violence, in the subtle differences between the forms of violence combined with beliefs, ideals, and institutional norms, and in the ways those norms crystallize on the mass scale. (2004, 24-5)

Agreeing with Balibar on these points, I also want to note here that in his analysis of the complex relationships between nationalism and citizenship, he does not take into account gender, which is an important dimension of this intersection. In speaking about “sexual citizenship”, Terrell Carver defines gender as the “ways in which sex

and sexuality become political”, which include both the processes of obscuring gender issues as much as openly dealing with them (Carver 1998, 19). When we speak about the influence of nationalist ideology in the Balkans, it is important to keep in mind that these practices were deeply gendered. One of the most visible outcomes of the crisis was an obvious, induced tendency towards the re-patriarchalization of the new nation-states that emerged out of the former Yugoslavia. This re-patriarchalization was partly related to the rise of the war-culture, but it was also deeply embedded in the dominating narratives of the new nationalist ideologies, which promoted highly traditionalist images of national identity. In that sense, narratives related to the building of the new states tended to be deeply patriarchal, and therefore, gender-blind. This was visible in many areas of public life, where national identity as a *secondary identity* (Balibar 2004, 25-30) managed to impose itself as the dominating one, suppressing all the other identities as less important and marginal, as was the case in both Serbia and Croatia during the 1990s.

The (re)construction of new nation-states coincided with the (re)construction of new cultural identities, which were, strangely enough, seen to be both the ultimate source and the ultimate confirmation of national identities. Being exclusive and strongly ideologically driven, these processes were also marked by the same patterns of structural violence that permeated other spheres of social life. Promoting narratives of unity, “[n]ationalist ideologies and movements reject the constitutive ‘otherness’ at the source of all culture; more often than not, they seek to ‘purge’ the culture of its impure or foreign elements and thus render it whole again” (Benhabib 2002, 8).

In the case of Dubravka Ugrešić, this “work” of nationalist ideology in the sphere of culture is exemplified as a case of “otherness” that needs to be purged. It clearly demonstrates the ways in which structural violence operates, and how, at certain moments, it becomes a “normalized” element of public life. It is exactly these processes of the social “normalization” of structural violence that Dubravka Ugrešić attempts to unmask in her writings. In that respect, the present study attempts to employ a double perspective. It discusses the case of Dubravka Ugrešić as the ostracized Other, while also drawing upon her own critical analyses of the situations in the former Yugoslavia that allowed the practices of ostracism to once again not only be possible, but also socially acceptable.

The core of the problem, in Dubravka Ugrešić’s view, is state promoted violent behavior; therefore, the relationship between the citizens and the state proves to be of particular importance within her work. As soon as Dubravka Ugrešić started experiencing ostracism, she took a rebellious position, claimed her agency, and her citizenship right to think differently. This is clearly visible in many of her public statements. The following excerpt, from one of the interviews that she gave before she decided to leave Croatia in voluntary exile, is a characteristic example of this:

In one way, my media executors are right. I am, in a way, a ‘traitor of the state’. As we know from history, writers and states have never been, and never should have been, in

love. Totalitarian states and post-totalitarian states, particularly the small ones, loudly and hysterically repeat their claim to be loved. For some unknown reason, they ask to be loved especially by writers. They go so far as to put their state face under the face of the homeland, which, as we all know, does not ask for love for it already has it in some way. Hence, as long as this state will be as it is now, as long as it asks me to love it without any reserve, I will be its 'dissident'. When it becomes, if it becomes, decent and civilized, when it starts respecting all my civil and human rights, only then can it evoke my respect. (Ugrešić 1993, 15, authors' translation)

When accused of being a "traitor of the homeland" (an accusation which implies an immediate, total condemnation without any rational analysis of the assumed guilt), Ugrešić responded by turning the table, and unmasking the manipulative gesture of a state that equated itself to a *nation*, and equated nationalism to patriotism within public life. This is then taken by the state as sufficient grounds for it to demand uncritical love from its citizens, which in fact is nothing else but a (state-controlled) form of obedience. Such an attitude excludes any critical debate of state policy, and of the state promoted concept of the *nation*. In practice, it becomes a very useful basis for the promotion of new "strategies of representation" where "*the people is constituted as one*" (Benhabib 2002, 9).²

In the case of Dubravka Ugrešić, the general accusations of "treason," and the emotional "blackmail" behind it, are reinforced by the fact that the traitor was a woman. The various texts published in 1992 and 1993, which were part of an intense media campaign lodged against Ugrešić by the Croatian media, provide many examples that confirm this view. The attacks on Ugrešić began when she started to publish critical essays on the situation in Croatia and the region of the former Yugoslavia. In these essays, she was openly critical towards the new nationalisms in the region. In 1991 and 1992, these texts were primarily published in the foreign press, which, in Croatia, served to further reinforce the accusations.³ The attacks significantly increased after the public scandal that involved five Croatian female intellectuals, who were together exposed to a media lynching because of their critical comments on the situation in the country. Labeled the "Croatian witches" these women included: feminist philosopher, Rada Iveković; feminist journalist, Vesna Kesić; feminist journalist and writer, Slavenka Drakulić; journalist, Jelena Lovrić; and Dubravka Ugrešić.

The best evidence of the gendered character of these assaults can be found in an article published in December 1992, with the indicative title "Croatian Feminists Are Raping Croatia." The article, in a significantly depersonalized way was signed by the, "Investigating Team" (Investigacioni 1992). Within an extremely gendered framework, the article denounced the five women as "national traitors." As much as it was offensive on the surface, the title within itself carried an additional web of interrelated, implicit allegations. It accused them of nothing less than "rape," a crime that was very present and spoken of in the ongoing wars that were occurring at the time. Through these accusations, the women, recognized as metaphorical "rapists,"

were equated with the enemy soldiers, that is, they were masculinized and represented as an actual threat to the homeland. This masculinization had a very definite purpose, it justified in advance any form of assault on the women, for an enemy soldier has to be “neutralized” in whatever means necessary. On the other hand, being labeled as feminists, the five women were presented as traitors not only of their homeland, but also of their femininity—in the given context, when taking into account the public attitude towards feminism, it also meant they were not “real women.” Thus, feminism is included in the article as both an accusation, and a proof of guilt.

The article did not analyze any of the critical statements the accused women had made, it presupposed that the allegations were well founded, assumed their guilt, and “exposed” them to the public.⁴ The article listed personal information about them, including the year of their birth, the nationalities of their parents, the addresses of their homes and work, whether or not they were married, who they were married to, and if they had any children. The article was obviously framed as a call for a general assault on the “culprits,” and it very consciously manipulated the data and the way the women were presented.

Again, the gender dimension proves to be highly important here. It is obvious that the article relies on the simple fact that the publication of very personal information is somehow more “acceptable” in the case of women, who are supposedly located in the sphere of domesticity. By pointing out the nationality of their parents, the article intended to prove that the named women were “nationally unsuitable.” This again marked them as suspected traitors, and disqualified their criticisms as irrelevant. The article also claimed that these women were socially privileged, which was again aimed at taking away the weight of their criticisms, and gain widespread support for an attack on them by the journal’s readers, most of whom were impoverished by the deep social crisis and war. The data given about where the five attacked women lived did not list their exact addresses, but gave information about the size of their apartments and the parts of the city that they lived in. At a time when many people had lost their homes in the war, this was supposed to further evoke the negative emotions of the readers. Similarly, information about their places of employment was given at a moment when many people were without jobs and the proper means for living. Furthermore, it should be remembered that, according to the basic logic of patriarchal culture, women could hardly earn respect through their own knowledge and professional merits. So the very fact that all of the women were working, and were working in prestigious positions, was supposed to prove the high level of benevolence granted by the same state that they attacked in their writings. Added to this were comments on their marital status, and the identity of their husbands. It was clearly indicated that some of them were not married, and that some of them did not have children or “suitable” husbands. Again, the patriarchal system of values is brought to mind (and through this, is also legitimized), particularly the notion that a woman’s identity is determined through the men that she is related to. Unmarried women and women without children are considered to be an anomaly, while women who have “unsuitable” parents or husbands (and we speak here both of national and

ideological “unsuitability”) should be seen as “unsuitable” themselves; because it is their fathers and husbands who, according to the logic of patriarchal culture, give them their primary identity.

Of course, I do not want to claim here that the media attacks on the “Croatian witches,” as well as the media campaign against Ugrešić that lasted for almost two years, can be fully explained through these gendered arguments. The most important element of the whole affair was the low level of social tolerance towards any kind of dissonant, critical voices, which was influenced by the ongoing war in Croatia. Nevertheless, the gender dimension ultimately framed their cases in a very specific way.

Poetics and Politics: The Writer and the State

Before we go on with a more detailed analysis of the works of Dubravka Ugrešić, it will be useful to address an important literary question, that of the autonomy of literature. This question underlies both the analysis of Ugrešić’s work, as well as the debate over the role of literature in the Balkan wars.

Introduced by the Russian formalists, and strongly promoted by other formalist approaches to literary studies, the idea of the autonomy of literature was embraced rather early on in the socialist Yugoslavia as a tool to protect the sphere of literature from ideological intrusions. On the other hand, the recent cultural history of the region of the former Yugoslavia, and particularly the case of Ugrešić, are good illustrations of how the concept of literary autonomy was itself both contextualized and “contextualizable.” From a contemporary perspective, it can be seen as a significant indicator of the relationship between poetics and politics, as well as of the relations between writers and the state in a specific moment in time.

In all the books that Ugrešić wrote, both before the beginning of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia and after it actually broke out, one poetical assumption proves to be of particular importance, her deep belief that literature should not be functionally related to any tangible reality as its primary referent, nor should it aim to “reflect” it in any immediate way. This authorial stance also meant, quite consequently, that Ugrešić rejected a traditionalist concept of literature and writing. According to this tradition, literature was given a certain recognizable social function, and a writer was supposed to be promoter of state or national ideology.

Ugrešić’s poetical views, as they were framed early in her career, must be contextualized within the wider framework of the dominating literary and critical practice in Yugoslavia during the 1970s and 1980s, which was unique in comparison with other socialist countries of the time. A rather high level of freedom in the domain of culture was considered an important aspect of the so-called “softness” of the former Yugoslav socialist system. Hence, Ugrešić’s acceptance of the idea of the autonomy of literature was both in accordance with the mainstream tendencies in literary studies (knowledge which was accessible to literary scholars in Yugoslavia), and the

orientation of a particularly younger generation of Yugoslav writers and critics. It is worth noting here that when it comes to the cultural life of former Yugoslavia, formalist approaches were introduced rather early, during the late 1950s and 1960s, through stylistic criticism, Russian formalism, and New Criticism. In the late 1960s and 1970s, French structuralism also gained numerous followers in Yugoslavia, which added to the variety of interpretative models that were based upon the assumption that a literary text has to be seen as an entity in and of itself, autonomous from its immediate social context.

The openness of the Yugoslav literary scene to the formalist approach must also be socially contextualized. To a certain extent, this openness was related to the strong tendency of the state authorities to prove their democratic qualities after Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union, and its turn towards "socialism with a human face." This confirmed Yugoslavia's difference from other communist regimes. For various reasons, the sphere of culture, and in particular the sphere of literature, was considered appropriate for such a purpose. Understanding that literature can have a significant representational role in a society, the state authorities did not oppose its liberation even though some other highly sensitive social domains remained under the very strict control of the centers of power.⁵

The state also had a certain interest in making intellectuals, in particular writers, its allies, with the hope of receiving a confirmation of the legitimacy of its political project. A rise in the level of freedom in the sphere of culture was seen as a significant element in the building of this alliance, an important symbolic "currency," as Stephen Greenblatt put it in his description of the relationship between art and the state.⁶ A result of the "exchange" between writers and the state was the authority's consent to open the sphere of culture to ideas that were considered incompatible with the communist ideology of other countries. It also allowed for a rather high level of freedom for artists. Of course, the sphere of culture was never fully liberated from the control of the official ideology, and the level of this control depended on the specificities of the given moment, as well as on the sensitivity of the given topic. Still, at least from the 1960s onwards, the state was more inclined to leave a certain space free in the domain of literature, which also meant that formalist approaches in literary studies were welcomed in academia, as well as in critical practice.

The acceptance of formalist approaches, with their insistence on literary autonomy, was one of the elements of literary life that contributed to the significant liberation of the space of culture from the immediate control of the ideological apparatus. Belonging to the fictional reality of literary texts, literary characters were protected by a shared assumption that literature (the arts) is autonomous: therefore, they were given the possibility to speak more freely about actual social problems, and even to oppose the state ideology to a certain extent. While in the 1960s, the state apparatus was still not able to accept and tolerate "the black wave" in film with its strong element of social criticism, in the 1970s and 1980s social criticism became one of the more or less tacitly recognized criteria for the evaluation of literature (and of film) at that time.⁷ An interesting situation was therefore created, literary criticism strongly

promoted the idea of the autonomy of literature, while literary practice proved that the literature of the time was silently given a very special role as a privileged public space where it became possible to articulate various political standpoints (an option that was otherwise excluded from the official political arena).

While many writers (and artists) extensively used this possibility to “politicize” their writings in an obvious way, among the generation of writers who entered the literary scene during the 1970s, and later in the 1980s, there were also authors who wanted to use their freedom of speech differently. Dubravka Ugrešić was one of them.⁸ From the beginning, her writing was founded upon the acceptance of the idea that literature had to be autonomous. This was an idea she initially adapted from the Russian formalists and avant-garde artists whose work was the object of her scholarly studies: later on, she was also influenced by post-structuralist theories on the text and postmodernist poetics. In other words, from the beginning her works were founded on the assumption that immediate reality should not be considered as a primary referent in literary texts, but as one possible world of equal standing with the other possible worlds of literary texts. It is a poetical model in which the privileged status of immediate reality, traditionally assumed unquestionable, becomes contested. For Ugrešić, as for many other post-modern writers, the world is understood as a text, and a text is understood as a world in itself (McHale 1987; Ronen 1994). This also means that the primary relationships between various texts/worlds are not mimetic ones rather ones of mutual correspondence and citation.

With these poetic assumptions in mind, it is not difficult to understand why an author such as Dubravka Ugrešić, whose work was based on such premises, could not accept the claims of any collectivist ideology. In the times of socialism, she was one of the most well known representatives of post-modern literature in Yugoslavia. In the Yugoslav cultural scene of that time, such a poetical position also connoted a clear distance from not only the state ideology of socialism, but also from the unofficial but clearly present ideology of new (old) nationalisms in the domains of literature and culture.

In Yugoslavia, the propagation of nationalist ideas in literature was enabled by the same policy that liberalized the sphere of culture and opened a space for the inclusion of other political ideas and alternative cultural concepts. Their undeniable presence and influence was already clearly visible during the 1980s, before various forms of nationalism had become legitimized in the domain of public political discourses.⁹ This went along with the re-enforcement of the deeply traditionalist, patriarchal attitude towards society as a whole, which occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s and also influenced the domain of literature. According to these traditionalist views, literature should primarily be seen as an expression of “national being”, therefore a writer should perform the role of a so called “national bard”, in order to keep national traditions throughout his writings, help educate his people, and show them the proper ways of the future. This was a concept of literature that was inherited from the 19th century formation of the European nation-states. As the developments in 1990s have clearly shown, this concept of literature was never really abandoned

in Yugoslavia, although it was less influential during the times of the liberalization of the political system. Thus, after a period of relative freedom in the 1970s and 1980s, literature was once again given an ideological task, this time to promote the “interests of the nation.” Before the dismemberment of the common country, it was not an official task issued by the state; rather it was a visible manifestation of an already present rise of nationalist ideology. Once new states had been created in the region of the former Yugoslavia, an induced feeling of pride for doing something for one’s “homeland” and the “nation” became an element of the symbolic “exchange” between writers and the new states. In both cases, the writers were positioning themselves as national bards in the traditional sense of the term.

However, the role of a national bard is highly gendered, and as a rule, it is performed primarily, if not exclusively, by men. The concept itself was a product of an overtly patriarchal tradition, which enclosed women in the sphere of domesticity and excluded them from the public domain. Generally speaking, within such a system of values a woman can symbolically represent the “nation” (like the image of the “motherland,” for example), but she cannot *speak* in its name, because she is *a priori* seen as the Other, a deviation from the norm.

That is why Dubravka Ugrešić’s critical position against nationalism was especially seen as troublesome. She was a *female* voice that was articulating political and moral opinions that were different from the ones that were being promoted by the majority, this added to her subversive potential. A *woman* who is expressing radical social criticism as a *writer* subverts the traditional role of a “national bard,” that is, the logic of the traditionalist patriarchal society, and stands in a place that is reserved for men. As the case of the five Croatian “witches” clearly demonstrated, the critical statements by women who act as socially responsible intellectuals are much more likely to produce a higher level of negative reactions than similar statements issued by men under the same circumstances. In other words, the criticism of the new nationalist regimes in the region of the former Yugoslavia, which Dubravka Ugrešić articulated so strongly, was received with additional hostility because it was voiced by a woman; that is, by someone who is deprived of subjectivity by the very logic of nationalist ideology.

Antipolitics as a Politics of Writing: The Role of the Intellectual

The essays of Dubravka Ugrešić that provoked a strong media campaign against her in 1992 and 1993, as well as her other texts that dealt with the situation in the region and with her own experiences, were later collected in a book entitled, *The Culture of Lies*, significantly subtitled, “Antipolitical Essays.” This expression was drawn from the work of Hungarian writer, György Konrad, and a quotation from his book *The Antipolitics of a Novelist* is given as an explanatory motto at the beginning of *The Culture of Lies*.¹⁰ Using Konrad’s terms, it can be said that in this book Ugrešić defends “her language and her philosophy” from the totalizing forces of nationalism.

As indicated by the title, Ugrešić's book deals with the creation of a particular type of social situation, termed the "culture of lies." Under the circumstances of this social situation, people accept being manipulated by the dominating ideology, and/or overlook the structural violence that this ideology brings upon society. The book uncompromisingly points to some characteristic cases and situations that demonstrate how widely the new "culture of lies" was accepted, and how deeply it penetrated all the strata of social life. Ugrešić speaks of the various forms of discriminatory practices of the new regional states, and points to the responsibility that their citizens had by uncritically accepting them. She reflects on the various strategies of mimicking that people used in order to make themselves socially invisible. In her view, the "silent majority" gave the most significant contribution to the social "normalization" of exclusionary practices as well as the violence related to those practices.

On the other hand, it is clear that Ugrešić does not find everybody to be equally responsible for the promotion of structural violence and the creation of the "culture of lies." In her book, she is particularly interested in the role of intellectuals, in particular, writers as those who are supposed to be "anti-political" (in Konrád's sense of the term). By calling upon intellectuals, especially writers, to act as morally responsible critical agents in the given social situation, Ugrešić is also in accordance with the views of Edward Said. The task of an intellectual, Said claims, is to keep a critical distance in all circumstances, and to be able to deal with eventual problems even in those projects whose aims he may himself support. In particular, an intellectual has to be critical towards his own tradition and his own society:

The fundamental problem is therefore how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, peoples. This can never be done simply by asserting one's preference for what is already one's own: tub-thumping about the glories of 'our' culture or the triumphs of 'our' history is not worthy of the intellectual's energy, especially not today when so many societies are comprised of different races and backgrounds as to resist any reductive formulas... No one can speak up all the time on all the issues. However, I believe, there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one's own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in deliberate programs of discrimination, repression, and collective cruelty. (Said 1994, 69-72)

The dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia, and the political crisis and wars related to it, produced highly complex and socially sensitive situations, in which injustices of various forms easily occurred. It was also a time in which there was a definite call for the active involvement of the region's intellectuals. While there is no doubt that many writers and other public figures did take a public stand in the events, what Dubravka Ugrešić emphasized in her book was that too many of them failed to recognize the need for a critical distance against the authorized powers within their own societies. Given that the dismemberment of the common country was related to the creation of new ones, it also, in turn was related to the promotion of new na-

tional ideologies and strategies of identification. In such a situation, too many public figures of the time thought that “tub-thumping about the glories of “our” culture or the triumphs of “our” history was precisely their task. Of course, there were also individuals who acted like critical intellectuals (in Said’s sense of the term); however, particularly in the first years of the conflict, they were much fewer in number.

The Culture of Lies confronts the various strategies that produce Otherness, and create both new lines of social divisions as well as social homogenization within society. Being a skilled fiction writer, in this text Dubravka Ugrešić uses a specific narrative strategy, which intentionally produces the strong effect of defamiliarization. This gives her essays a distinct literary quality. She narrates from a marginal and highly personalized position, which in this case proves to be a point of clear vision: “My texts do not speak of the war itself, rather they are concerned with life on its edge, a life in which little is left for the majority of people” (Ugrešić 1998, 78-9).

Speaking from the margin, Ugrešić recalls the side of the war that usually remains less visible. As a rule, situations that are charged with high social tensions - like wars, deep political crises, or radical changes - tend to be interpreted along the main lines of events, too often translated into rather general statements that primarily concern public events and political decisions. Ugrešić wants to go beyond that; she is interested in the ways in which declared policies affect the real lives of people in whose name all the changes are being made, who, at the same time, are not seen as genuine agents of the events in question. In that sense, Dubravka Ugrešić’s position is close to that of a micro-historian who opposes the institutionally legitimized interpretation of history.

The Culture of Lies unmasks strategies used by the new nationalistic oligarchies in the Balkans, to create and impose a particular interpretation of the current events. According to this interpretation, the new nationalist oligarchies were to be seen as a positive, indispensable outcome of historical processes, which ended up being their almost teleologically inevitable result. In constructing such images, they used mechanisms that were very much alike to those that were used during the times of the one-party system of power, based upon a similar systemic dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion. Previously, “sameness” was considered one’s affiliation to the state ideology of communism; however in the new nationalist ideologies it is based upon one’s ethnic origin, which is translated as the basic constituent of one’s national identity. However, in both cases, significant energy was invested in marking out the bodies of the Others who were seen as socially unacceptable. Similar to the way that the communist regimes re-wrote history in order to promote their ideological project, the new nationalist regimes in the Balkans reconstructed the past in accordance with their own projects. When it came to the most immediate past, all the positive experiences from actual life in those times tended to be obscured, and any serious debate about alternative ways to introduce changes and re-frame the space of the previously common country were excluded.¹¹ Thus, Ugrešić speaks about the “terror by forgetting,” which is present in most of the new countries:

It seems that it is not only fear, that aroused national (and nationalist) emotions, hatred of the enemy, vulnerability, the establishment of an autocratic system, media propaganda, and war that have reinforced the culture of lies. One of the strategies with which the culture of lies is established is terror by forgetting (they force you to forget what you remember!) and terror by remembering (they force you to remember what you do not remember). (Ugrešić 1998, 78-9)

Stereotyping was one of the main strategies that was used in the production of new past/present/future images. Since every stereotype is based on the acceptance of a certain level of homogenization, it strongly reduces the space for critical thinking.¹² Ugrešić reveals the practice of stereotyping used by institutions of power to create an illusion of order in times of social turbulences. However, this was a false order that enhanced differences and fixed hierarchies. Thus, the processes of stereotyping in this case have to be analyzed in close relation with the processes of the Othering, which are, as we have already seen, highly gendered.

The Culture of Lies demonstrated how stereotyping, which deprived people from authentic emotions and the experience of their actual meaning, was strategically utilized by the new ideology of nationalism, and thus became a dangerous weapon in the ongoing power-struggle. Stereotyping produced a simplified image of the world in which the loss of individuals' rights and the possibility for them to make their own choices were disregarded in the name of a new, collective identity. Again, the nationalist ideology seemed to have learned well from the logic of hard-core communism. Since an individual is considered less important in the face of the collectivity, actual human hardships, and even sufferings tend to be obscured by stereotyped images in the media and public discourses. The same logic was used to differentiate between "our" and "their" people in death, as well as in life. The sufferings of "ours" were represented as sacred sacrifices for the homeland; the sufferings of the Others were minimized or negated by the very fact that they were recognized as "enemies."

It seems that the large amount of human misery that was produced by the wars in the Balkans also supported an intense production of a new, "national" kitsch, which was given an important role within the field of culture.¹³ Explaining the concept of kitsch, Ugrešić draws upon the work of Nabokov, and his interpretation of the Russian word *poshlost'*. She emphasizes that it could be "because of its wealth of meanings, that Nabokov prefers it to its English equivalents such as *cheap, inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry*, and the like" (Ugrešić 1998, 49). While some of the simple forms of the word *poshlost'* can bring about just a smile, others uses of it can be very disturbing, particularly when they are not obvious, and pretend to belong to the highest reaches of art and thought. The dominating forms of kitsch and stereotypes she pointed to were either taken from the repertoire of the 19th century nationalist legacies, or produced during the early 1990s. In both cases, they strongly relied upon the "eternal values" and "unquestionable ideals" of national myths. In this way, they fixed their meanings in a realm out of the reach of rational criticism, actual history, or any of the concrete parameters of critical evaluation. *The Culture*

of *Lies* demystifies these processes, making them visible, and unmasks the strategies behind them; in my view, this is one of the main reasons why the essays from this book were recognized as a threat by the new nationalists.¹⁴

Gender, Identity, and Citizenship

The case of Dubravka Ugrešić and her “anti-political essays” demonstrates yet another important point, the impact of both gender and citizenship on the perception of people’s identities within other spheres of life. If the reception of Ugrešić’s essays in Croatia were strongly framed by the low level of social tolerance produced by the social crisis and the war in the early 1990s, their readings abroad would assumingly be devoid from the personalized, emotional involvements of her Croatian critics. Nevertheless, the same kind of personalized national sensitivity, intersected with gender prejudices, proved to be present in cases where Ugrešić extended her sharp wit beyond the borders of her own country and the borders of what was assumed to be her, “local competence.” An indicative example is her collection of essays *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan Wars to the American Dream*, written during the early 1990s, at the very beginning of the war in Croatia. In a highly witty and amusing, but very insightful way, Ugrešić contrasts the typical American way of life, and the specificities of its everyday culture, with some of the specific features of daily life in the early transitional years of Eastern Europe and the horrors of the Balkan wars, which were, at that time, still in their early phases (see Lukić 2002). *Have a Nice Day* is written from the position of an exile, whose homeland is descending to war and whose present retreat (America) literally looks to her like a New World, in which she is in the position of a distant observer.

It is insightful to see that Ugrešić’s extremely witty but also sharp critical comments on the American way of life were primarily seen as problematic by her male critics – strangely enough, not because these comments were wrong, but because of the identity of the person who made them. It was if, being a stranger, an exile, Ugrešić was not qualified to be critical of the American way of life. Thus, Paul Golberg, in a paternalistic way, reproached her by saying that she was watching too much television, instead of making friends (Goldberg 1995). Robert Kaplan, on the other hand, acknowledged that Ugrešić’s observations were well founded, but reproved the reasons that he felt were behind her criticisms of American culture:

Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan Wars to the American Dream is a cynical and ironic description of the USA, written from a perspective of a foreigner whose society the United States did not manage to protect. (Kaplan 1995)

His assertions about her text, do not in any way exist within Ugrešić’s text, hence this comment speaks more of Kaplan’s own deeply patriarchal and colonial position, reflected here in his obvious assumption that the USA is some kind of global

“father” or “policeman”, who is expected to solve all the problems that others have to struggle with.¹⁵

Of course, not all the male critics of *Have a Nice Day* reacted in the same way. For this analysis, it is particularly interesting to consider the statement of another male writer and critic, Josef Brodsky, who quoted on the American edition of the book, “It takes a stranger to see how dark the world is. Dubravka Ugrešić is that stranger.” (Ugrešić 1995) Brodski values here exactly what Kaplan does not recognize as a quality, the detachment of the narrator produced by her exile. In the narrative text, this detachment produces the effect of defamiliarization, which makes us see what would have otherwise remained unnoticed. This, according to the Russian formalists, is exactly the specific quality of literature.

It should not be forgotten here that Brodski is himself an exile, which obviously makes him more sensitive towards the strong feeling of otherness that permeate throughout Ugrešić’s writing. Similar to Brodski, female critics of the book have found the feeling of detachment to be a productive literary element. “She defines herself as exile, without a center, without a home. Yet, she is still the citizen of the human race, we are all exiles in some way,” writes Janet St. John (1995). Pamela Daubenspeck claims that Ugrešić’s “wry observations on Western culture... reveal as much about this particular exile’s internal life as they do about American society’s shallow obsessions” (1995). However, how can these differences and similarities be interpreted without essentializing them? In my view, they clearly point to the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the formation of identity. They also offer a strong ground upon which to further investigate the gendered aspects of identity construction, which follows the lines indicated by feminist theory and assumes that women, because they themselves are socially marginalized, tend to be more open to various manifestations of otherness.

Instead of a Conclusion: A Few Remarks on Cultural Citizenship

A number of questions referring to gender and the ethnic aspects of citizenship can be raised in relation to the case of Dubravka Ugrešić. To complicate the picture further, I would like to add some elements from a contemporary perspective. After having been a voluntary exile for years, Dubravka Ugrešić is now a Dutch citizen. Would Kaplan and Goldberg have read her book *Have a Nice Day* differently if they perceived it as being written by a Dutch instead of a Croatian writer? Moreover, what exactly does a new passport mean for the perception of a writer who comes from a peripheral country, and still writes in her native Croatian language, but whose works have been translated into numerous languages, including English, and have been awarded a number of international literary prizes? Beginning with the replacement of the old country, former Yugoslavia, with the new one, Croatia, Dubravka Ugrešić describes this very particular situation as follows:

With my Croatian passport, I abandoned my newly acquired homeland; and set off into the world. Out there, with the gaiety of the Eurovision Song Contest, I was immediately identified as a Croatian writer. I became the literary representative of a milieu which did not want me any more, and which I did not want any more either. But still, the label “Croatian writer” remained with me, like a permanent tattoo.

At this moment I possess a passport with a red cover again, Dutch. I continue to wear the label of a literary representative of a country to which I am not connected to, even by a passport. Will my new passport make me a Dutch writer? I doubt it...

And why am I so sensitive to labels? Because in practice it turns out that identifying baggage weighs down a literary text...Because I come from the periphery. (Ugrešić 2003, 468)

It is obvious that writers like Dubravka Ugrešić challenge the concept of national literature as they “trespass” both the actual and symbolic borders in their lives. Can a simple change of framework solve anything? Would labeling her as a “European writer” put an end to the problem, or would it just perpetuate it on another level, which again asks the simple question of who “qualifies” as a European writer today? To these last questions, Dubravka Ugrešić answers in her typical way. She claims that her “hero” among her fellow writers, and the most European occurrence in European literature is one Joydeep Roy Bhattacharaya, an Indian who lives in New York, and writes about Central Europe. Bhattacharaya refuses to follow the pattern set to him by the usual practices that propose that he embrace India as his primary subject (Ugrešić 2003, 468).

Dubravka Ugrešić is speaking here for many other contemporary writers who live and write across different kinds of borders - of states, languages, and cultures - and who experienced similar problems. In discussing citizenship and identity, Isin and Wood have stated that, “Cultural citizenship is not only about the rights to produce and consume symbolic goods and services but also an intervention in this identity work. It is not only about redistributive justice concerning cultural capital but also about the recognition and valorization of the plurality of meanings and representations.” (Isin and Wood 1999, 192) If cultural citizenship is to secure these rights, it cannot be tied to the concept of the nation-state. However difficult it may be to detach certain forms of culture from the concepts of the nation and national identity, it is equally important to keep in mind how reductive and context dependent these notions are. In light of what has been discussed here, it seems that a conception of cultural citizenship that takes into account one’s right to produce, as well as exchange and consume cultural goods, in an unobtrusive way - beyond and across various kinds of borders - can become one of those areas of our common experience where the actual level of social liberty can be measured.

Notes

- ¹ Dubravka Ugrešić is a freelance writer living in Amsterdam. She is the author of the novels *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, and *The Ministry of Pain*; a collection of short stories titled *In the Jaws of Life* and several collections of essays including, *Have a Nice Day*, *The Culture of Lies*, and *Thank You for Not Reading*. Ugrešić's books are translated into all major European languages and have been awarded several literary prizes, including The Charles Veillon European Essay Prize, The Dutch Versetprijs, the Austrian State Prize for European Literature, and the Heinrich Mann Prize. Dubravka Ugrešić also occasionally teaches in American universities.
- ² Similar strategies of emotional blackmailing were used by the socialist states to support more formalized systems of control over their citizens.
- ³ The same logic operated equally as strong in Serbia at the time. For example, Ivan Djurić, a noted historian and a strong political opponent of Slobodan Milošević, was also strongly attacked in Serbia for his criticism of the Serbian regime, and particularly for his statements given abroad, which were generally taken to be an unacceptable "crime" by a very wide audience.
- ⁴ The scandal broke out when criticism, concerning the media situation and freedom of the press in Tudjman's Croatia, started to be voiced in international circles. One occasion, out of many, where this criticism was raised was at the 58 Congress of PEN centers in Rio de Janeiro, in December 1992. Reporting from the congress, the president of Croatian Pen Center at the time, pointed his finger at women intellectuals who were critical against the regime of Franjo Tudjman, and blamed them for putting the world congress of PEN centers, which was to be held in Dubrovnik in 1993, in jeopardy. As the organization of the congress in Dubrovnik was taken as a matter of the utmost importance for the confirmation of the new Croatian state, and a confirmation of the importance of national culture in the international scene, the five women mentioned in this report then became the victims of a series of very strong media assaults.
- ⁵ Here, I mean that, in the first place, the political system itself and the one-party system of government remained an untouchable issue, which actually meant that all the power was concentrated in the hands of the privileged political elite. This, in the end, proved to be one of the strongest barriers to the more comprehensive processes of transition to a market economy, which at that time had already started in some areas of social life.
- ⁶ "[T]he work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or a class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange. It is important to emphasize that the process involves not simply appropriation but exchange, since the existence of art always implies a return, a return normally measured in pleasure and interest. I should add that the society's dominant currencies, money and prestige, are invariably involved, but I am here using the term 'currency' metaphorically to designate systemic adjustments, symbolizations and lines of credit necessary to enable an exchange to take place." (Greenblatt 1989, p. 12)
- ⁷ And while in the case of some important authors like Borislav Pekić or Bora Ćosić, this kind of critical political engagement was included in their texts as an "added value," there were also cases when direct social criticism was used as a tool to get literary attention, which would not have been deserved otherwise. It is important to note here that the ac-

quired space for critical thinking was characterized by a rather simple division between those who were “in power” and those who were in the “opposition,” with an assumption that all the “opposition” was generally democratic and progressive. This attitude turned out to be a delusion with the beginning of the political crisis and the war in the region of the former Yugoslavia, when a rather large, heterogeneous, group of critics of the communist regime became more stratified. While some of them continued to argue for actual social changes and democracy, many previous “oppositionists” became promoters of the new nationalist regimes. The case of Gojko Đogo is highly indicative here. See, Gojković, 2000 for more about this case.

- 8 Some other names to be mentioned here are Pavao Pavličić and Goran Tribuson, her generational colleagues from Zagreb, as well as David Albahari, a fiction writer from Belgrade, now living in Canada, whose poetical standings concerning the role of writing seems to be closest to those of Dubravke Ugrešić.
- 9 Renewed interest in the historical novel, as a genre that supports an intensified discussion on national issues, can be found in most of South Slavic literature, and it is clear today that those narratives can be seen both as indicators, and as generators of an intense growth of nationalist feelings, later to be used so efficiently by local nationalist political elites. (See Lukić, 2004)
- 10 “Anti-politics is being surprised. A person finds things unusual, grotesque, and more: meaningless. He realizes that he is a victim, and he does not want to be. He does not like his life and death to depend on other people. He does not entrust his life to politicians, he demands that they give him back his language and his philosophy. A Novelist does not need a minister of foreign affairs: if he is not prevented from expressing himself, he is capable of doing so. He does not need an army either; he has been occupied for as long as he can remember. The legitimization of anti-politics is not more or less than the legitimization of writing. That is not the discourse of a politician, not a political scientist, not a technician, but the opposite: of a cynical and dilettante utopian. He does not act in the name of any mass or collective. He does not need to have behind him any party, state, nation, class, corporation, academic council. Everything he does, he does of his own accord, alone, in the milieu, which he himself has chosen. He does not need to account to anyone; his is a personal undertaking, self-defense.” Quoted from Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, from the motto of the book.
- 11 The creation of the new nation-states in the region of the former Yugoslavia could have happened without war and destruction on such a large scale. However, to find alternative ways out of the political crisis also meant to get involved in more intense negotiations, which would have jeopardized the privileged position that new nationalist oligarchies took for themselves at the beginning of the crisis. In other words, prolonged and more transparent strategies of negotiation would probably have undermined the position of authority that nationalist oligarchies managed to obtain by playing upon, as well as contributing to the heated social tensions between the former Yugoslav nations.
- 12 Michael Pickering explains this in the following way: “For those who use a particular stereotype, this may create an element of order by seeming to lock a category irrevocably in its place, in an apparently settled hierarchy of relations. The feeling of security or superiority resulting from this may help to explain why such imprecise referencing of other people or other cultures spreads rapidly and is taken up uncritically on a widespread basis. The imprecise representations involved in this process of social dissemination create the illusion of precision, of order, of the ways things should be. This is convenient

for existing relations of power because it lends to them a sense of certainty, regularity, and continuity...Stereotyping imparts a sense of fixedness to the homogenized images of disseminates. It attempts to establish an attributed characteristic as natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates.” (Pickering 2001, 4-5)

- ¹³ In Serbia, media close to Slobodan Milošević strategically promoted certain forms of populism. This phenomenon was analyzed in detail in Čolović 2002 and Gordy 1996.
- ¹⁴ Some of these essays were widely discussed in Croatian papers, while the media campaign against Dubravka Ugrešić was going on in 1992, however the actual articles written by Ugrešić that were discussed in the campaign were not translated and therefore not accessible to the Croatian public until the first edition of the book, in 1995. In one of her interviews, answering to a strong article against her writings published by her university colleague Prof. Viktor Žmegač, Dubravka Ugrešić raises the same issue: “Finally, we have to ask a question which is much more interesting than writing opened personal letters and closed truths. Namely, how come a country which is attacked by a much stronger enemy, with a third of its territory occupied, in a country which every day counts its dead and where hundreds and hundreds of destroyed homes are all around, which moans under the burden of exiles, which suffers endlessly – as the respected Germanist also states – how come, then, that in such a country the whole cultural, media and political public in such a unison way, so unanimously, so collectively, so devotedly, got together to react to some articles of some writer. My sins, namely, do not go beyond twenty written pages.” (Nedjeljna Dalmacija, June 16, 1993).
- ¹⁵ It is also indicative to look at Kaplan’s book on the Balkans (1993), which is founded upon revolting stereotypes of the Balkans. Kaplan represents the Balkans as a place where savage tribes live, waiting for nothing else, but a possibility to start killing each other. If Kaplan sees the Balkans in such a way, then it seems logical that, while reading Ugrešić’s book, he cannot take seriously any criticism of America which comes from a person (shall we say, a woman) who is coming from such an “inferior” place, unless a personal reaction, a narrator’s undeclared but understood disappointment in an expected paternal protection, is not inscribed in it.

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