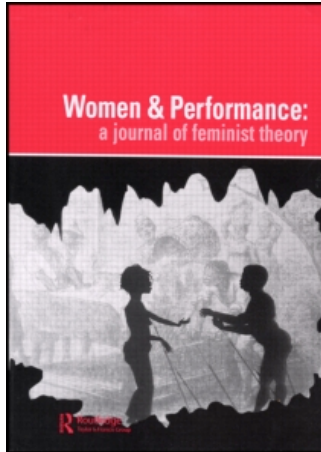


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YUGOSLAVIA, AN 'ALMOST FORBIDDEN WORD'

Cultural policy in times of nationalism—interview with Dubravka Ugresic

Natasa Kovacevic

In the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia many intellectuals, including writers, artists, and scholars, supported nationalist right-wing regimes and promoted narratives of national exceptionalism to justify relevant political decisions and cultural policies. The intellectuals who opposed these regimes were frequently silenced (censored and/or assassinated) and many of them eventually left the country. The following interview features the renowned writer Dubravka Ugresic, who analyzes Croatia's cultural and political climate at the outset of the war and explains how her opposition to the wartime Croatian regime led to her public ostracism and subsequent decision to emigrate to the Netherlands. Emphasizing the role that nationalist intellectuals played in altering former Yugoslav cultural policies, Ugresic discusses the politics of language, literature, and literary canon in the new states that emerged from Yugoslavia's violent dismemberment. Ugresic also reflects on how the new politics of ethnic identity affects international book markets in terms of publishing decisions, distribution of literature, and classification of writers according to national affiliation. In this process, Ugresic notes, Yugoslavia itself has become an "almost forbidden word," and its nurturing of multiethnic and supranational literature and culture has been supplanted by narrowly nationalist cultural policies.

Perhaps more than anything else, the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia were inaugurated by the battle over words: words as language, words as literature, words as educational tools, words as proper names of nations, streets, and institutions. Not surprisingly, intellectuals—most prominently writers, literature and critical theory scholars, and philosophers—often played decisive roles in these battles. The deadliest nationalisms in former Yugoslavia, Serbian and Croatian, were ushered in not so much by 'oppressed' people yearning for independence, as, more ominously, by intellectuals clamoring for a pure national language and a pure cultural space. In this unprecedented period of Plato's

'philosopher-kings', Yugoslav writers and scholars assumed high political positions—sometimes even presidency—in their respective national camps. The remarkable confluence between the battle over words and the battle over territory (or, pure national space) became evident in the tendency among nationalist intellectuals to transform into soldiers, and among soldiers to morph into writers and artists.

What is frequently assumed to be the first nationalist impetus for the 1990s wars took place in the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. Its notorious 1986 Memorandum, underwritten by such prominent intellectuals as novelist Dobrica Cosic and, former member of the edgy Marxist 'Praxis school', philosopher Mihailo Markovic, painted a grim future for Serbs in the Yugoslav federation. The Memorandum particularly focused on the 'genocide' of Serbs by Albanians in Serbia's Kosovo province, and, more generally, portrayed Serbs as victims of Yugoslavia's pro-Croat and pro-Albanian policies. This influential document provided ample ideological justification of Slobodan Milosevic's¹ right-wing government in subsequent years. As the war in Croatia began in 1991, Franjo Tudjman's² government rehabilitated Croatia's nationalist writers and linguists, such as Vladimir Gotovac, Vlatko Pavletic, and Marko Veselica, who took part in the 1970s movement 'The Croatian Spring'. This movement started out with arguments for a separate Croatian language and the publication in 1967 of a *Declaration on the Name and Position of the Croatian Literary Language*. However, it soon made wide-ranging political demands for Yugoslavia's decentralization, which, it argued, would improve Croatia's economic and political situation. Although the movement was suppressed at the time, and many of its members (who included Tudjman) landed in Yugoslav prisons, it returned with a vengeance—literally.

Renewing demands for a pure, distinctive Croatian language, the Tudjman government enacted linguistic codes by introducing vocabulary lists and grammar rules (frequently resurrecting centuries-old Croatian expressions). Franjo Tudjman himself was an enthusiastic inventor of new terms, which frequently, nonetheless, sounded stilted and bizarre. Croatian parliamentarians proposed, but never passed, the Law on the Defense of the Croatian Language that would levy fines and prison terms for those committing linguistic transgressions and using words of foreign origin. In a parallel gesture, Serbia's nationalist euphoria found many linguistic manifestations—from insisting on using the Cyrillic as opposed to Latin (i.e. Croat) alphabet in official institutions, schools, and newspapers, through resurrecting Serbian medieval words (which frequently sounded like Old Church Slavonic rather than Serbian), to snubbing foreign-sounding words and giving babies medieval Serbian names. This resulted in an odd situation in which Belgrade street names were only posted in the Cyrillic alphabet, until someone noticed that this might be counterproductive in light of a recent influx of Western tourists. Finally, in an attempt to foster the myth of linguistic separateness from both Croats and Serbs,

Bosnian Muslims introduced an increasing number of Arabic words and Koranic expressions into their language during the war.

The battle over language—or rather *for* a separate Serbian, Croatian, or Bosnian language—announced other changes in cultural policies, which frequently took shape more in a consensual, spontaneous, and multidirectional manner than through coercive, officially enforced means. In the late 1980s and all through the 1990s (and, unfortunately, at present), the reading public became increasingly interested in the formerly controversial nationalist writers, who had been either openly banned or imprisoned by the regime or were simply relegated to the background in bookstores, writers' associations, and media. While in other former communist countries anti-communist dissident writers gained a veritable second life in the post-1991 period, in former Yugoslavia nationalist writers took the spotlight, enticing their people with fictionalized revisionist histories (or with real revisionist histories, as in historian Tadjman's case) and tales of national grandeur and victimization. Croatia saw a rise in popularity of the aforementioned members of The Croatian Spring, whereas Serbia's readers were engrossed in novels by Danko Popovic, the aforementioned Dobrica Cosic, and Vuk Draskovic. The rising popularity of patriotic intellectuals was matched by a more official revision of the literary canon, which involved both purging old communist-inspired literature from school curricula and placing greater emphasis on relevant national literatures. Thus, while Croatian schools hardly teach any non-Croatian Yugoslav writers, Serbian schools still teach some Croatian and Slovenian writers but demonstrate a clear preference for Serbian writers.

Why should we emphasize what former Yugoslavs read during the war, or what art shows and films they saw, rather than how they dealt with the military, with the sieges of Sarajevo and Vukovar, with slaughter? The latter, indeed, would be impossible without the former: a symbolic dismemberment of Yugoslavia into 'national entities' both preceded and was concurrent with the territorial dismemberment. Those who changed its cultural 'symbolic order', to borrow Lacan's concept, presided over its military and government policies as well. In Serbia, Dobrica Cosic, the Memorandum author, was the first president of Milosevic's rump Yugoslavia; the aforementioned Vuk Draskovic, a political orator with a knack for medieval Serbian words, was an influential leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement and Serbian foreign minister. In Bosnia, Radovan Karadzic, the pre-eminent Bosnian Serb war criminal in hiding, was a psychiatrist who writes (and *still* manages to publish) children's poetry; Nikola Koljevic, a prominent Shakespeare scholar and professor at the University of Sarajevo, was vice-president of the Bosnian Serb Republic before committing suicide in 1997. In Croatia, the aforementioned writer Vlatko Pavletic acted as president of the Croatian State Parliament; writer Nedjeljko Fabrio and literary theorist Ante Stamac, wartime presidents of the Croatian Writers' Association, offered unmitigated support and admiration to President Tadjman.

These patriotic intellectuals have not disappeared now that the war is over and Yugoslavia has been appropriately partitioned. Granted, some of their popularity has waned, some of the more radical ones have been branded as fascists, some are still popular today, and some have acquired the status of national heroes. On the other hand, people who have disappeared altogether, or who still exist but operate under death threats, are anti-patriotic intellectuals. Even among them, few remember Yugoslavia or would even dare to describe themselves as Yugoslav. One of the intellectuals who dare to remember is writer Dubravka Ugresic. She left Croatia in the early 1990s because her prose was insufficiently patriotic, and currently resides in Amsterdam. In a 1997 postscript to her essay 'Goodnight, Croatian writers, wherever you may be', Ugresic comments on her name being included on both official government and unofficial neo-fascist group lists of 'intellectuals for the firing squad', and hints that even writers' associations participated in a similar type of witch-hunt: 'the Society of Croatian writers has accepted some fifty new members into its ranks. Croatia now has 536 officially registered writers. Statistically speaking, in proportion to its population, Croatia is a real paradise for writers. In the meantime, only four *enemy* writers have left the society, an event accompanied by rapturous applause at the society's annual meeting.'³

In the interview⁴ that follows, Dubravka Ugresic discusses the critical role that intellectuals, especially writers, played in Yugoslavia's violent breakup and in the altering of its political and cultural policies. The collapse of the Yugoslav option was ideologically justified as both necessary for the self-determination of its various ethnic groups and inevitable in the context of Eastern European transitions to capitalism. Ironically, the politics of ethnic identity, although meticulously forged by the patriot-intellectuals, is now accepted as a given, domestically as well as internationally: in the name of political correctness, we must use the new terms 'Serbian', 'Croatian', or 'Bosnian' instead of the amorphous term 'Yugoslav', which now conjures a communist 'prison of nations' in the popular imagination in former Yugoslavia. Ugresic reflects on how this new identity politics affects cultural policies surrounding publishing decisions, distribution of literature, and classification of writers according to national affiliation, in former Yugoslav republics as well as abroad. In this process, as she notes in the interview, Yugoslavia itself has become an 'almost forbidden word', its immense cultural achievements buried or relegated to history.

NK: Can you describe the situation in which writers in Croatia, including yourself, found themselves in the early 1990s? Why weren't you able to—or did not want to—work and write in the 'new' Croatia?

DU: From the current perspective, this past 'episode'—which has nonetheless fundamentally changed my life, and whose impact I can still feel today—seems surreal. But I had exactly the same feeling back then, 15 years ago: that is, when I was living this episode in the present. It seems that there is an optimistic gene or code at work in the human brain—as well as in our entire

culture. A small wiper in our brain fogs up our memories, pushes us toward denial, toward refusing to acknowledge the obvious, especially at times of collective hysteria.

But let's move on to the facts.

In the 1990s Yugoslavia began to rip at the seams. Many Yugoslav citizens paused, in disbelief, listening to the noise of this breakup, the media hype, and their warmongering, stirring up of unrest. An immense force of human stupidity rose to the surface, just as rats crawl out onto the surface after a building collapses. No sane person could believe that these rat-like characters would soon become our 'leaders', 'fathers of the nation', our 'heroes', our 'saviors', the most courageous 'sons of our peoples', our legally elected representatives. At first I, too, stood by and watched everything in disbelief, but then I began to write about it, unaware of the impact of what I was doing. This was a simple impulse, a gesture of protest against human stupidity. The publication of my first essay, titled 'Clean Croatian air',⁵ in a German newspaper, was sufficient for an attack on me to appear in a Croatian newspaper the very next day. The author of this article, a fellow writer, accused me of being insufficiently patriotic or 'indifferent' to patriotism, of advocating 'Yugoslavism', of an unpardonable anti-war stance, of ridiculing Croatian national symbols and Croatia's 'thousand-year longing for national independence'. On the third day (these temporal coordinates should be taken literally), my colleagues at the Faculty of Art at Zagreb University, where I had been employed for 20 years, withdrew their support. Practically overnight I became an 'enemy of the people', 'traitor', 'suspicious character', a person of 'suspicious background'—in one word, ostracized. The speed at which I was being excommunicated was surreal. My neighbors, acquaintances, best friends, as well as colleagues stopped talking to me. A terrifying silence encircled me. Nobody would come to my office at the Faculty of Art; my colleagues would turn their heads away when I passed through the Faculty hallways. Newspapers began publishing attacks on me almost daily. These articles contained a number of ugly insults, while the rhetoric of my alleged political aberration consisted of thinly disguised sexist comments.

NK: Speaking of the sexism underlying this particular nationalist politics, how did it play out in official attacks on your integrity as a writer? Has it affected your decision to leave the country?

DU: At the time, the Croatian PEN [International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists] Center offered to host the International PEN Congress in Dubrovnik.

However, it seems that this offer did not exactly meet with enthusiasm at a preliminary meeting of the International PEN in Rio de Janeiro, so the irate President of the Croatian PEN faxed a letter to his Croatian office complaining that foreign writers were interrogating him about censorship, the freedom of

speech, and other nonsense, and all this in relation to 'some women'. The very same day Croatian newspapers published an article about the 'witches of Rio', five women who were allegedly obstructing Croatia's intention to host the International PEN Congress. The following day articles came out qualifying the five women as 'traitors', as 'old hags conspiring against Croatia', and, predictably, as 'witches'. These witches were journalist Vesna Kesic, journalist and writer Slavenka Drakulic, journalist Jelena Lovric, my colleague at the Faculty of Art at Zagreb University Professor Rada Ivekovic, and myself. All this occurred despite the fact that not one of us had any connection to the PEN Center or to the organization of the Congress.

This incident took place during the war, in 1992, and set the stage for a full-blown witch-hunt. Our names, cast as a giant threat to Croatia, reverberated everywhere; institutions were founded for the promotion of a positive image of Croatia around the world (the image that we, the five women, allegedly defamed). During that time—while we, the five witches, represented the gravest danger to the new Croatian state—skillful Croatians quietly stole, purchased state-owned hotels, factories, roads, and real estate for next to nothing, smuggled weapons, killed innocent people, terrorized Serbs, moved into other people's houses, publicly bragged about their love of Croatia, entrenched themselves in Franjo Tudjman's political pyramid, infiltrated themselves in media, schools, courts, and presses. In this climate a single public word of absolute support for Croatia was sufficient to make one a hero or director of a television channel, while a single public word of criticism could turn one into an enemy of the state.

With the exception of the *Feral Tribune*⁶ weekly, nobody, interestingly, stood up for me or for my colleagues. Against us, however, a collective campaign was waged by journalists, fellow academics, fellow writers, media, politicians, and so-called ordinary citizens. My phone rang constantly (the newspapers published my phone number three times), and people I didn't know took this opportunity to make insulting, threatening comments. I received anonymous threatening letters in the mail. In the spring of 1993 I resigned from my job and left Croatia.

NK: How do you interpret former Yugoslavia's 'collective hysterias', as you call them, in light of your experience?

DU: My experience is traumatic and bitter, but as a result I think I understand what leads to collective lynching, mobbing, witch-hunt, and burning people at the stake. I now completely understand why it was possible to murder six million Jews in Europe over a relatively short period; McCarthy's black lists, Stalinist purges, and other events that I earlier found incomprehensible now make more sense to me.

There is an anecdote about Stalin phoning Boris Pasternak and asking him if Osip Mandelstam was a good poet. Pasternak's response allegedly went something like this: 'Well, you know, we don't socialize much, he subscribes to

one poetic style and I to another.' Mandelstam's fate is well known: he was soon arrested and then disappeared somewhere in the Siberian gulags. Or course, the anecdote's truthfulness is less important than its message. And this message is that any collective constellations similar to Stalinism always require participation by the majority, meaning that figures like Hitler and Stalin—or in our case minor figures like Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic—would never become successful in their monstrous endeavors without support from the majority of ordinary people.

In this situation, of course, as in any classic case of lynching, everyone does as much as he/she can: some build the stake, some bring the rope, some run to bring the matches, some watch peeking from behind the curtains, some pause briefly and then resume walking, some watch with interest, and some watch in disgust. And there is usually only one person shouting, 'What are you people doing? Have you lost your minds!?' In the general pandemonium and rush to burn the victim this voice is, nonetheless, lost.

What makes people collude with these events with so much enthusiasm? Fear of punishment or terror? No. People, in most cases, want to participate even when nobody pushes them. I think that they are guided by a fear of being excluded from a community, group, or collective. This fear of excommunication is one of the strongest human fears, at least in my opinion. If this is true, then it is impossible to once and for all eradicate fascism, totalitarianism, violence, and collective terrorizing of the Other (the Other who does not want to belong to a community, group, political or religious ideology), because similar situations can crop up at any moment.

NK: How did, then, officially and unofficially, a Yugoslav writer virtually overnight become a Croatian writer? What official policies, declarations, and the like applied to writers, literature, or literary language?

DU: Writers became Croatian in the same way that the former citizens—who until then were Yugoslavs—became Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, etc. Interestingly, the Yugoslav ideological framework was much more generous and inclusive than the current ideological framework (by this I mean the new states that hatched out of former Yugoslavia). If you pick up any Yugoslav literary anthology, for instance an anthology of Yugoslav poetry, you will be amazed at how consistently the principle of national, that is, ethnic equality was respected. Serbian poetry was printed in Serbian, using the Cyrillic alphabet, Croatian poetry in Croatian, using the Latin alphabet, Macedonian poetry in Macedonian, using the Cyrillic alphabet, Slovenian poetry in Slovenian. There was no translation, because it was assumed the readers would understand the different linguistic varieties.

We should also not forget that in schools everyone learned to write in both Cyrillic and Latin scripts. School textbooks in history, language, and literature were composed according to the same principle. All the myths about the alleged

'Serbification' of Slovenian or Croatian cultural space in former Yugoslavia—propagated by nationalist intellectuals—simply do not hold when measured up against the books, textbooks, newspapers, television programs, and a mountain of other material evidence from that time period. Each Yugoslav republic had its own literary society, newspapers, academies, institutions, and encyclopedias. The Croatian language has been officially known as 'Croatian' for as long as I can remember, although there was also a Croato-Serbian variant in Croatia and a Serbo-Croatian variant in Serbia. Incidentally, I was surrounded by the Slovenian and Macedonian languages as well, so I personally never had any problems understanding them or communicating in them. The only language within the Yugoslav federation that was somewhat neglected was Albanian. Few people studied Albanian, but all Albanians spoke Croato-Serbian.

As far as writers were concerned, the breakup of Yugoslavia unfolded relatively easily because the category of a 'Yugoslav writer' never really existed. It was used only abroad, or as a mode of self-definition. I, for instance, declared myself a Yugoslav, so I thought of myself as a Croatian writer as much as a Yugoslav writer, which seemed only natural; people were interested in my work in Croatia equally as in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Slovenia. One of my novels was translated into Albanian and published in Pristina.

NK: How did other writers react to the new situation in the wake of Yugoslavia's breakup? How did they adapt to it—or refuse to adapt? Finally, in what ways did this affect the literary scene in Croatia (as well as in other former republics)?
 DU: The majority of writers chose to adapt, just like the majority of citizens did. In the years since the breakup, the majority of writers and intellectuals, therefore, have been busy enhancing their public image and influence. The transformations through which any Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, or Bosnian literary as well as human figure went in the relatively short period of fifteen years are far more complex than the ones described by Czeslaw Milosz in his classic work *The captive mind*.

I would dare to characterize the former Yugoslav writers—today Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, or Bosniac writers—as perfect *morphs*, or *polymorphs*. First they publicly renounced communism, if they happened to be communist, and strove to portray themselves as victims of communism (although they had no proof, it was easy because nobody asked them for proof, nor could they ask them because overnight everyone suddenly became a 'victim of communism'). Next, they had to declare their anti-Yugoslav stance, which was also easy, since it fit nicely into the general anti-Yugoslav hysteria. We should also mention that Milosevic significantly helped strengthen this anti-Yugoslav climate by, among other things, stealing the name 'Yugoslavia' and pasting it onto Serbia and Montenegro.

Our writers then became fierce nationalists, which was also easy because nationalism was not only a collective euphoria but also a professionally profitable position (that is, the patriot-writer would immediately become an ambassador,

member of parliament, editor in chief, director of a literary institution, university dean, and the like). And when, pressured by the international community, local politicians exchanged their nationalist rhetoric for a pro-European rhetoric, our writers, in keeping with the trend, changed their rhetoric too and publicly repositioned themselves as fervent proponents of democracy in a broad sense, supporters of human rights, and moderate patriots. In literary practice, only now, 15 years later, do younger writers—mostly debutantes—express their anti-war stance and a critical attitude toward the realities of post-communist transitions.

NK: You earlier described the witch-hunt to which you and your colleagues were subjected in the early 1990s. Were you and the other women intellectuals who refused to adapt to Croatia's nationalist regime dubbed 'feminists' (a label that almost inevitably carries a negative connotation across former Yugoslavia)?

DU: Of course. After all, the label 'witch' that was applied both to my colleagues and to me speaks for itself. I hope that some day we will see a new generation of women who will be able to put the puzzle together and provide the whole story with historical continuity. I say this because today there are young women writers on all the national literary scenes, but each one is 'flying solo' and right now I don't see any effort on anyone's part to create connections. It is as if all the possibilities were exhausted by the fact that she (or he) has her own newspaper column and publishes books successfully. However, the situation I've described springs from the new commercial trend in these literary productions. Everyone uses the ethnic label—Croatian writer, Serbian writer, Serbian woman writer—without questioning it, because this makes it easier to break into a larger book market, primarily the European market. Some sort of market pragmatism, which is therefore ideological pragmatism, has come to dominate literary production. Once again we are recycling the old binary formula: literature vs. politics. Politics is 'dirty' whereas literature is 'pure'. These new writers, thus, have a 'pure' profession, writing literature.

NK: What about nationalist writers, who, during the 1990s wars, dealt in 'dirty' political literature?

DU: Literary critics tend to muddle up the truth (for their own sake, naturally) by placing both nationalist writers (who were in the majority) and anti-nationalist writers (who were very few, if any) in this context of the 'nineties', that is, in the remote past when writers busied themselves with 'politics' instead of writing 'real' literature. This tendency is a continuation of the old nationalist argument (primarily Tadjman's) that Ustashas and partisans,⁷ fascists and communists should be reconciled because they were all equal. Unfortunately, this argument is accepted as relevant because of general apathy and a catastrophic lack of critical thinking in all the former Yugoslav milieus. Many international intellectuals have contributed more critical insight into the war and nationalism in former Yugoslavia than the very participants in these events: former Yugoslavs.

NK: Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the new ethnic labels you've mentioned have accompanied former Yugoslav authors abroad as well, in the spirit of

preserving so-called diversity and multiculturalism. Which labels, if any, have been applied to your books? What do you think about this type of cultural politics?

DU: Although I was born in former Yugoslavia, and although I am no longer recognized as a writer in Croatia (granted, my books are published, but they are systematically ignored or receive bad reviews), and although I have written numerous times about the problem of literary labeling and the question of identity, abroad I am persistently labeled as a—Croatian writer.

The question is, why does this happen?

There are several reasons.

The first one is rather innocuous: publishers, journalists, literary critics, and readers think they will offend me if they don't mention my newly acquired Croatian identity. They feel that they have to be politically correct, although they don't solicit my opinion on this. They frequently exaggerate in this tendency, trying to spell my name with all the diacritics, but they regularly do it incorrectly. At the root, therefore, lies the euphoria of political correctness.

The second reason cuts more deeply, and its name is *denial*. Everyone belongs somewhere, and people simply cannot accept multiple identities. For instance, nobody fell for the label 'post-Yugoslav' which I suggested several times in jest.

The third reason has to do with the market: the market mostly thrives on stereotypes, ethnic included. There is no greater treat for the market than a stereotype. If you add another identity to the ethnic identity—for instance, a Jewish lesbian writer, a Moroccan gay writer—the book has a better chance of being noticed on the market.

The fourth, most important and most rigid reason, is an ossified approach to literature which is practiced everywhere, in schools, universities, academies, literary juries, foundations that deal in, promote, and provide recognition to literary works; in one word, *everywhere*. According to this approach, literature is understood within national categories (a legacy that has survived since the nineteenth century). Not even the language in which you write is sufficient to transfer you from the *blutt und boden* category to some higher classification. Many Moroccan writers in France write in French, but they remain categorized as Moroccan writers who live in France and write in French. Many Turkish writers in Germany write in German, but they cannot shake off the label 'Turkish'. There are Moroccan writers in the Netherlands who were born in this country, who went to Dutch schools, and speak no other language but Dutch, but the label 'Moroccan-Dutch' keeps trailing behind them.

Until the mentality changes, until a new way of thinking about literature is institutionalized, nothing will change. The writers themselves are not too keen on changing this system because it is better to be a Chinese-American writer than just a writer. *Just a writer* simply doesn't fly anymore, unfortunately. I know this situation intimately because I am in the limbo of so-called transnational literature;

meaning, nowhere. I barely exist in Croatia, and in the Netherlands I am identified as a Croatian writer. Despite all my insistence, the publishers refuse to identify me as, at least, a *Croatian-Dutch* writer on international editions of my books. I am, therefore, a paradox of this situation, because—as a freelance writer who writes in Croatian and lives in Amsterdam—I live this paradox.

NK: Are you published more often as a 'Croatian' or as a 'woman' writer, or are these two labels somehow combined, for instance, as in a 'contemporary Eastern European woman writer'? Also, you have been rather critical of this type of labeling, but can it be useful in any way—is there anything politically redeemable about it?

DU: I am against all types of categorization for a very simple reason: categorization affects the reading of a text itself, it is a form of anticipatory interpretation. If you read a novel by an American or British writer, you will treat it as literature. If, as a foreigner, you read novels by Miroslav Krleža⁸ or Ivo Andrić,⁹ you will approach them less as literature and more as some sort of tourist-historical guide. After all, I encountered many foreigners who were anxious to let me know that they were reading Krleža or Andrić. Why, I asked. To better understand what is happening in your country. However, do Croats, Serbs and Bosnians currently read Krleža and Andrić as literature? Most Croats hate Krleža because he told them the truth about themselves to their faces, and as for Andrić, they only recognize his poetry and claim that the rest belongs to Bosnians. Bosnians find Andrić's treatment of Muslims discriminatory, whereas Serbs read him as a Croat who wrote about Bosnia.

So once you realize all that, and many other things, how can you agree to be labeled a Croatian woman writer!

NK: Does the very fact that you write in Croatian determine the category in which your book will be published? Are there certain unwritten rules that determine this or does it have to do with official editorial policies, rules that guide the manner in which a particular book will be published and promoted?

DU: I am a freelance writer. I do not hide behind an ethnic, national, or religious identity (the category on which many contemporary writers increasingly rely). In Croatia I am barely recognized as a Croatian writer, and in the Netherlands I am not recognized as a Dutch writer. One might say I am a complete outsider. To be honest, I sometimes wonder how I managed to survive.

As far as book sales go, on the Internet my novels will frequently be grouped with books by other writers from former Yugoslavia, or else with international historians, sociologists, and journalists who have written or still write about the Balkans. Therefore, we are all marketed as an extended 'Balkan package'.

NK: When it comes to publishing and marketing books, do editorial policies in the Netherlands differ from those in other European countries or in the

United States? What about Croatia and other former Yugoslav republics—especially now, in the post-war period?

DU: The Dutch translate a lot of books, that's a fact. But as far as translations go, Croatia and Serbia do not really lag behind. I would say that editorial policies across Europe are more or less the same. There are several bestsellers per year and these attain global circulation. Most of these bestsellers come from the United States or the United Kingdom. The enormous power wielded jointly by the English language and the British–American book market also acts as an important mediator: it determines literary trends, literary values, and imposes the principles of literary evaluation. And thus we again find ourselves in a field of cultural and political supremacy, although it would probably be very difficult to explain to an American writer that his/her starting position is a million times better than that of a Macedonian writer.

NK: Earlier we discussed the cultural politics of ethnic labeling as one of the most significant phenomena accompanying the breakup of Yugoslavia. It seems to me that, as a result, Yugoslavia itself has become an indecent concept, an 'outdated' memory in its former republics as well as abroad?

DU: I do not know to what extent the interpretation of the Yugoslav conflict changed. Yugoslavia has always been interpreted as a communist national project, which is wrong, because Yugoslavia was engendered as an anti-fascist project. Its foundations were laid during World War II, in 1943, when the outcome of the war was still uncertain. Yugoslavia's estrangement from the politics of the Soviet Union bloc followed very soon, in 1948. The war and breakup of Yugoslavia which began in 1991 have also been read in the context of the collapse of all communist regimes, primarily the multi-ethnic Soviet Union, which, in my opinion, is also wrong.

Domestic war profiteers, nationalists, fascists, and criminals in both Serbia and Croatia welcomed this general context, this reading of the Yugoslav breakup as a historical necessity, because they benefited from it. Their dirty operations gained a strong ideological framework and thus they could claim, 'we are fighting against this or that repressive politics, we are fighting for democracy, self-rule, independence'. In practice, they fought to wrest money from the majority and hand it to the minority, and that was all. The European Union and the United States, which were built on more or less the same principles as former Yugoslavia, supported a breakup on foreign soil which they never would have tolerated on their own territory. The Hague Tribunal is a small gesture toward rectifying this mistake. However, the fact remains that the war in Yugoslavia consisted of brutal plunder, which was disguised within a politically legalized and ideologically acceptable package. Nobody even talks about the victims of this brutal plunder any more.

NK: To what extent do publishing policies reflect this type of domestic and global politics—by this I mean primarily European Union and United States attitudes toward former Yugoslavia (and Eastern Europeans in general)?

DU: As far as former Yugoslav writers are concerned, their books are actually translated in great numbers—although they frequently complain of being neglected. Of course, they never stop to wonder if the Dutch, Belgians, Danish, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, and others are being translated in equal measure. I believe that a simple statistical survey would demonstrate that ‘our’ writers have definitely received preferential treatment. Former Yugoslav writers are subject to the same type of calculation as everyone else. When it comes to former Eastern European countries, everyone is interested in daily life in the context of post-communist transitions. Writers who deal with this topic will attract greatest interest among foreign publishers. At that level of reception, Victor Pelevin, for instance, has emerged as a representative of the ‘Pepsi generation’. But even in a country like the Netherlands, something so scandalous as the murder of film director Theo Van Gogh had to happen in order for journalists to flock there and ask Dutch writers what they thought about it.

Therefore, as far as the book market goes, former Yugoslav authors are not in the least neglected. However, in academia—that is, at the level of the university—the situation is really difficult. The few international Slavic scholars who specialize in Yugoslav literature find their field in a state of disarray, both in terms of the language, which was officially divided into Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian, and in terms of literature, which was divided accordingly.

NK: I recently read your latest novel *The Ministry of Pain*. Among other things, the novel focuses on ‘Yugonostalgia’ and its popular treatment as an outdated, generally indecent phenomenon, especially when compared with such ‘contemporary’ trends as the ‘European integration’, ‘post-communist transition’, and ‘globalization.’ Toward the end of the novel you describe an entirely new class of Euro-yuppies and intellectuals who have emerged from post-communist countries and who will help destroy all the legacies of communist societies: ‘They will be the champions of democracy in these transitional times, and since everything is and has always been in a state of flux the words *mobility* and *fluidity* will be like chewing gum in their mouths. They will be progressive and aggressively young, the well-paid commissars of *European integration and enlargement*, the harbingers of the new world order, the creators of *unique postnational political units*, of *new national and postnational constellations*, advocates of *globalization as opposed to localization* and vice versa, advocates, zealous advocates of whatever happens to be in need of advocating.’¹⁰

Of course, the problem is that this miniature privileged class forgets ‘that the very flexibility, mobility and fluidity that catapulted them to the surface leave

a nameless mass of slaves down below. All through the gray backwaters people will be eking out precarious living by manufacturing the goods the West European magnates call for.¹¹ I consider this to be a quite accurate—and certainly poignant—analysis of what happens during the transition, which favors precisely this privileged group of people as evidence that Eastern Europe is now ‘modern’ and ‘global’. Like a Potemkine village, they hide from view that mass of people who barely subsist and are practically on their way to join the labor force of former Third World countries.

My question is, what is to be done in this situation? Are those of us who live abroad and teach at Western European and North American universities members of this privileged class, regardless of whether we sing praises to the European integration or not? Are there any alternatives available to Eastern European intellectuals and academics?

DU: There is no alternative until people realize what was lost and take seriously the task of analyzing past and present constellations from a political, economic, sociological, and cultural perspective.

The fact is that there was an enormous and interesting culture in Eastern Europe, that this culture was united by a single, more or less identical ideological landscape, the landscape of communism. The fact is that the best part of that culture was born out of protest against communism, out of critical thinking and subversion that manifested itself in numerous guises, in different genres (as underground culture or as so-called official culture with a double bottom). Part of that cultural landscape is inscribed in our minds. We remember fantastic Polish, Czech, and Hungarian films, excellent theater and BITEF;¹² we were familiar with the samizdat¹³ culture, house exhibitions, theater performances; we read critical thinkers, public intellectuals, and dissidents; we read excellent books whose subversiveness was inspired by the experimental subversiveness of Eastern European avant-garde movements.

All that, unfortunately, disappeared, and it disappeared because it was subsumed under the implacable stigma of ‘communist’ culture. Few people today have heard of Mikhail Bulgakov, although all excellent books have been published, all excellent films viewed, and all artists, including the likes of Ilya Kabakov, reproduced in lavish hardcover monographs. Global culture primarily means the global market. The global market, like any other market, operates according to simple rules: the stronger one wins. If you add to this that knee-jerk reflex, the fear of exclusion, you will notice that even the market feeds on it. If everyone in my school wears Nike, I will wear them too because I don’t want to be excluded, right? If I am a rebel, the market will find a way to satisfy my need to rebel, and I will wear my anti-Nike shoes. As a result, at least as far as culture is concerned, a new consumer is born, one who reads Michel Houellebecq for instance and considers him the most subversive writer in the world (while overlooking the fact that Houellebecq is awash with money precisely because of this subversiveness and sells his books at all the

airports around the world). Interestingly, we live at the time of information revolution, but also at the time of new kinds of ignorance, new barbarisms.

Finally, a brief footnote. Last year I taught at the Free University of Berlin, in the Department of Comparative Literature. Some of my students were fluent in several languages; however, the number of books they had read was astonishingly low. At one point I realized that my lectures were turning into lists of footnotes in my desire to help students understand me. I would mention the word 'samizdat', for instance. Understandably, they didn't know what samizdat was. I tried to explain that during communism there was a legal way to circulate manuscripts in Eastern bloc countries, but only in five typewritten copies. Then I realized I would not be able to explain what indigo paper was, or what copies were—because I simply would not be able to explain what a typewriter was. Because typewriters are, for the moment, in a limbo of oblivion: they are not museum items just yet, but they can no longer be purchased in shops.

The entire Eastern European culture that emerged during communism languishes in a similar type of limbo. Yugoslavia is an even more complicated case. 'Yugoslavia' was, and still is, an almost forbidden word. In Croatia, for instance, many libraries have been purged of 'communist', 'Serbian', 'Cyrillic', and other 'inappropriate' books. School curricula make sure that children study some notorious criminal, or a contemporary politician and hero, but they fail to mention the name of Ivan Goran Kovacic¹⁴. The famous onomatopoeia 'I cvrči cvrči cvrčak na čvoru crne smrče' was penned by Vladimir Nazor¹⁵. Croatian language teachers use this line to impress foreign students taking Croatian language courses. The monument to Vladimir Nazor in Zagreb was torn down about ten years ago in a bout of anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist hysteria, and all because the old poet joined Tito's¹⁶ partisans in 1941 and wrote a poem about Tito. This is just one example of schizophrenia experienced by those who produce it and by those who consume it. But this could also serve as an example of the schizophrenia of an entire transitioning, post-communist culture.

NOTES

1. Slobodan Milosevic (1941–2006) was president of Serbia and rump Yugoslavia from 1989 to 2000. As leader of the right-wing Serbian Socialist Party, he was a major political actor in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and most recently Kosovo. After his government was ousted from power in 2000, Milosevic was extradited to the Hague War Crimes Tribunal, where he died awaiting the conclusion of the trial.
2. Franjo Tudjman (1922–1999) was the first president of independent Croatia, from 1990 to 1999, and a major political actor in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. He was a founder and leader of the right-wing Croatian Democratic Union party (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, or HDZ).
3. Ugresic 1998, 95.

4. The interview was conducted in Croato-Serbian and translated into English by the author of this article.
5. The title of Ugresic's article pokes fun at the nationalist campaign of selling cans with 'clean Croatian air' on the main square in Zagreb in 1991.
6. *Feral Tribune* is a political newspaper weekly in Croatia, which started out by publishing political satire and became famous in the 1990s for exposing the corruption, xenophobia, nationalism, and war crimes of Croatia's government and military eschelons. As a result, it was a frequent target of censorship and other types of obstruction by the Tudjman regime.
7. Ustashas were a Croatian nationalist organization that aligned itself with the Axis powers and Nazi politics in World War II. They were eventually defeated by communist Yugoslav partisans who fought against the Axis powers and drew their support from various Yugoslav republics rather than following a nationalist politics. Because communists assumed power in post-war Yugoslavia, local nationalist and monarchic factions that participated in World War II were suppressed and/or expelled. The breakup of Yugoslavia witnessed a resurgence of symbols and increase in popularity of these nationalist factions, most notably Ustashas in Croatia and Chetniks in Serbia. In a gesture parallel to Tudjman's 'reconciliation' of Ustashas and partisans which Ugresic discusses, the Serbian parliament passed a law in 2005 giving equal veterans' rights to former Chetniks and partisans alike.
8. Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981), a novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer, and playwright, is widely considered to be a central figure in modern Croatian literature.
9. Ivo Andrić (1892–1975), a novelist and short-story writer, was the only Yugoslav author to win the Nobel Prize, in 1961. The collapse of Yugoslavia saw the figurative nationalist 'dismemberment' of Ivo Andrić: it was difficult to decide which side could claim him, as he was ethnically Croatian, yet wrote in a Serbian language variant, but primarily about Bosnia. Bosnian critics have frequently accused him of Orientalizing Bosnian Muslims in his work.
10. Ugresic 2006, 235.
11. *Ibid.*, 237.
12. BITEF is Belgrade's International Theater Festival, whose focus on classic and particularly experimental and avant-garde theater made it one of the most vibrant cultural institutions in former Yugoslavia, and, currently, Serbia.
13. Samizdat was a clandestine system of copying and distribution of government-suppressed literature or other media in Soviet bloc countries.
14. Ivan Goran Kovačić (1913–1943) was a Croatian poet who joined the Yugoslav partisans in 1942 and was killed in the war a year later. He is famous for writing the anti-war poem 'The Pit' ('Jama') which condemned fascist atrocities.
15. Vladimir Nazor (1876–1949) was a Croatian poet and essayist who, towards the end of his life, in 1942, joined the Yugoslav partisans and subsequently published a diary and book of poetry that commemorated this experience.

16. Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) was the leader of the Yugoslav partisans in World War II and, after the communist takeover, president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until his death in 1980.

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