Reading in Translation

NOTES FROM THE “EMPIRE OF STUPIDITY”: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ’S “THE AGE OF SKIN,” TRANSLATED FROM CROATIAN BY ELLEN ELIAS-BURSAĆ

*February 15, 2021*

By [Ena Selimović](https://readingintranslation.com/contributors)

[On a recent bike ride in East Bay, northern California, I hear a voice from the direction of a foldout chair and turn to see a maskless woman waving a clipboard. She tells her masked audience of two that she is trying to get something added to a local ballot. She repeats, “The governor, I’m trying to get the governor recalled, get it on the ballot.” On the same ride, a father runs with his bike into his son (a child of about five years) and, after falling off his bike, he shouts, “What are you doing, damn it! I told you not to stop!” The child throws his helmet down and starts to cry. When the passersby ask the man if he’s okay, he directs his embarrassment against the child beside him: “I’m fine. This is the](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[third](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[time it’s happened.” Nearby, a squirrel on a tree trunk stands so motionless that it looks taxidermied.](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)

[As I make my way home, scenes from Dubravka Ugrešić’s](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[The Age of Skin](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[(](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[Doba Kože](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)*[) come to mind. The essay collection, translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać and published in 2020 by Open Letter Books, covers—or skins!—such topics as revisionist education, embalming, plastic surgery debacles, human organ trafficking, soccer, genocides in Bosnia and Indonesia, slow television, misogyny, the concept of sensory fiction, teeth, the persecution of refugees, hot springs, the prison tourist industry, self-blame, the disappearance of retirement, and happiness. As many topics in as many pages (236 in the English translation), encased in seventeen essays. Written largely between 2014 and 2018, the collection describes an age when a certain faction of men, enjoined by a small number of women they have instrumentalized in their misogynistic and racist project, rule an empire of stupidity. She writes, “The world of murderers is a man’s world that invokes its God” (“Svijet ubojica je svijet muškaraca koji se pozivaju na svoga boga”) (38; 41). Its map is global, its languages plural. (For Ugrešić’s biographical notes, see my](https://www.openletterbooks.org/products/the-age-of-skin" \t "_blank)[review of](https://readingintranslation.com/2019/01/21/scattered-words-and-scattered-worlds-dubravka-ugresics-american-fictionary-translated-from-croatian-by-celia-hawkesworth-and-ellen-elias-bursac/)*[American Fictionary](https://readingintranslation.com/2019/01/21/scattered-words-and-scattered-worlds-dubravka-ugresics-american-fictionary-translated-from-croatian-by-celia-hawkesworth-and-ellen-elias-bursac/)*, an essay collection republished in 2018 by Open Letter Books as a new co-translation by Celia Hawkesworth and Ellen Elias-Bursać.)

The collection examines the language of skin in a comparative mode, staging the interwoven histories of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Russian, Bulgarian, English, German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian:

*English has a wealth of skin-related phrases: To have thick or thin skin, get under someone’s skin, jump out of one’s skin, escape by the skin of your teeth, save your skin, strip down to the bare skin, and sayings such as beauty’s only skin-deep, no skin off my nose, no skin in the game, skinflint, skinny-dipping… Skin is intimate, and, as far as intimacy goes, it takes precedence over metaphors of the heart. While our heart is poised to love all of humanity, we are loved only by our skin. (4)*

In Slavic languages, Ugrešić clarifies, “skin” and “leather” are denoted by a single word: koža. From that first essay, *The Age of Skin* delves into all manner of surfaces—surface knowledge, surface devotion, the prioritization of marketing over content. The essay “Why We Love Movies About Apes” examines what Ugrešić calls the “theatricalization of crime” (34). It begins with a description of Ratko Mladić—the Bosnian Serb general accused of war crimes in Bosnia where he organized the massacre of ten thousand Muslims—and his ploy to slow down the proceedings of his trial by demanding the court bring him his dentures: “It is entirely possible that thanks to the moral and emotional standards of reception held by most media consumers today, Ratko Mladić will be remembered more as a toothless buffoon than as the man who was in charge of the gruesome massacre in Srebrenica. And this is exactly what he is betting on” (32). Many of us have been successfully distracted, disarmed from looking behind the façade.

It is a sharp text, in more ways than one, and made sharper by Elias-Bursać’s translation. As in the example offered by the succinct sentence above—“The world of murderers is a man’s world that invokes its God”—she regularly finds ways to avoid increasing the number of words by the expected 20-30% as it finds new life in English. Another: “Men have Viagra—women have plastic surgeons” (“Muškarci imaju viagru, žene – plastičnog kirurga”) (135; 57). And another: “Men think and say *we*, while women generally say *I*” (“Muškarci misle i govore *mi*, žene obično govore *ja*”) (135; 57). She retains sonic overlaps—like “sops up” for “crpi”—and rhymes in the 1950s primers that serve as epigraphs to several of the essays: “Who fails to learn when wet behind the ears, / Will have trouble in their later years” (“U mladosti tko ne uči / Kasnije se mnogo muči!”) (61; 65). And then there are the long sentences, personal favorites, that retain the same winding but clear quality in translation:

*A late-autumn episode at a Zagreb post office rocked my world. I have known this post office for some thirty years: three slow-motion clerks, three windows with protective glass and a hole through which she, the clerk, and I, the recipient of her ministrations, exchange mutual, silent loathing, the dusty office plants, the philodendron, ficus, and pothos which will sooner or later be the death of them, the ladies behind the counter, a green noose tightening around their necks. (The Age of Skin 17)*

*Kasnolistopadska epizoda u jednoj zagrebačkoj pošti uzdrmala je moj pogled na svijet. Tu poštu znam već tridesetak godina: tri usporene službenice; tri šaltera sa zaštitnim staklom i rupom kroz koju ona, službenica, i ja, korisnica njezinih usluga, izmjenjujemo obostranu nečujnu mržnju; prašnjave uredske biljke, filodendroni, fikusi i puzavice koje će im, službenicama, kad-tad doći glave i zategnuti zelenu omču oko njihovih vratova. (Doba Kože 16)*

As a comparatist attuned to the imperial legacies that languages trace, I am always curious to see how translators deal with overt multilingualism. In the essay “Artists and Murderers,” for example, the word “šajser” appears in the Croatian, a term Ugrešić uses to address the murderer-turned-writer she imagines flogging at the conclusion of the essay. A witness to the Austro-Hungarian imperial history in the Balkans, the word comes from the German *Scheißer*. In her translation, Elias-Bursać offers her own sonically rewarding formulation: they are the “lousiest of lice” (110). (In the same essay, Ugrešić goes on to write: “Even Bill Clinton hasn’t been able to resist. He has announced the publication of his first novel, a partita for four hands with James Patterson. The title: *The President Is Missing*” (110-111).)

The essay collection has received high praises. My initial reaction to its mention in [*The New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/books/review/sante-ugresic-harlan-brevity.html)was that of enthusiasm to the attention granted a work of translation, especially one done so carefully and skillfully. But after reading the review, I wondered: Had I received the same copy? The answer came in the form of a familiar feeling—the dread and disappointment had returned. When a writer with any relation to the Balkans publishes a book, the review usually offers the likes of: “Eastern Europe’s ‘imaginary’ – its collective idea of its values and character – has been strafed with atrocities that range from war and genocide to simpler outrages, such as crooked politicians who refashion themselves into artists.” The words on the page, oriented around re-cementing “Eastern Europe” as an insular and distant war-ravaged wasteland, are equally as unsurprising as the words off it. The essays are described as “reach[ing] across” varied topics. (In contrast, a review of Luc Sante’s *Maybe The People Would Be The Times*is described as “a cabinet of curiosities.”) The language of “crooked” politicians coupled with war criminals waxing artistic puts my mind elsewhere—or rather, scatters it everywhere. I envy the reviewer for thinking the essays are mere “dispatches from a fitfully (or failingly) democratizing post-Soviet Europe.” Self-orientalization contributes to the problem of such language and is evident in a handful of moments in this text. I hope such moments will one day be rarer, signaling marginalized writers’ complete resistance to the internalization of imperialist rhetoric. For one, any reference to “genetic factories” and accusations of “barbarism” in a book that is so deeply anti-fascist is a reference too many.

In a speech she delivered at Portland State University in 1975, Toni Morrison stated, “There is a deadly prison: the prison that is erected when one spends one’s life fighting phantoms, concentrating on myths, and explaining over and over to the conqueror your language, your lifestyle, your history, your habits. And you don’t have to do it anymore. You can go ahead and talk straight to me.” *The Age of Skin*is straight-talk. Let it speak for itself.