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Croatian, Dalmatian, Queer: New Post-Yugoslav Film and Literature

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by

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Abstract

Croatian, Dalmatian, Queer: New Post-Yugoslav Film and Literature

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This thesis examines select post-Yugoslav film and literature from the period 2010-2020 produced in Croatia, specifically works that are set in Dalmatia or autobiographical/autofictional works by queer authors. This thesis argues that they critique and re-inhabit the sites of exclusion where Croatian national identity is produced: the heteronormative family, standard language, and the conflicting touristic/provincial space of Dalmatia. The first chapter examines the autofictional novel *My Dear You (Moja ti)* by Jasna Jasna Žmak and the documentary film *Family Meals (Nije ti život pjesma Havaja)* by Dana Budisavljević, which utilize strategies of relational self-representation that go beyond identitarian representation, even as they also belong to a growing number of “out” writers and directors. They also enact reparative critiques of the Croatian language and the nuclear family, respectively. In doing so, they queer them, sabotaging their use to the maintenance of the monolingual or heteronormative nation and making them into more livable arrangements instead of sites of exclusion. The second chapter turns to the contested space of the region, where the image exploited for Croatian tourism of a timeless, cosmopolitan Adriatic coast is displaced or deflated by a series of works that center a gritty or provincial Dalmatia firmly grounded in the postsocialist present.

This chapter also provides a reevaluation of an archetypal Dalmatian novel of this period, Olja Savičević's novel *Adios, Cowboy* (*Adio kauboju*). Relying on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Kathryn Bond Stockton, it argues that the figure of Danijel is a "queer child" whose ambiguity provokes paranoia even from the narrator about his unconfirmed sexuality, which is reflected by his narrative absence and perpetuated by his resultant unknowability. All these Dalmatian works ultimately pose a challenge to the tourism slogan "Croatia Full of Life," asking for whom and under what conditions life is livable for those who actually live in Dalmatia.

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Introduction

In scholarship on post-Yugoslav literature, authors to whom the most space is devoted in English make up a select group of prose writers living abroad since the 1990s, or those working in successor states who occupy antagonistic positions toward national categories.¹ Their bodies of work construct a language with which to critique nationalism, they remember and nostalgize Yugoslavia, and archive the ruins and debris of the 20th century.² The continuing relevance of their work speaks to the continuing relevance of the Yugoslav paradigm, but also to a particular niche on the literary market and a generational experience.³ If, as Danijela Lugarić and Dijana Jelača argue, “socialism and its legacy [continue] to influence everyday life and cultural production in hybrid ways” despite its end thirty years ago, the approaches of younger generations to themes of

¹ An inexhaustive list would include Dubravka Ugrešić, David Albahari, Aleksandar Hemon, Daša Drndić, Slavenka Drakulić, and Miljenko Jergović. Of course, the corpus of works typically addressed in scholarship does not accurately reflect the breadth of post-Yugoslav literature, in translation or otherwise, and scholarship in Serbo-Croatian is much more prone to writing on contemporary literature, although often analysis is divided by nation.

² In English, see David Williams on ruins, *Writing Postcommunism: Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins*; see Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervae (eds.) on archival and memorial strategies as well as a wonderful selection of scholars who often work in Serbo-Croatian, *Post-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature in Culture*; see Dragana Obradović for a consideration of postmodernism, *Writing the Yugoslav Wars: Literature, Postmodernism, and the Ethics of Representation*; see Stijn Vervae for the legacy of the Holocaust, *Holocaust, War and Transnational Memory*; *Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature*, see Andrew Wachtel for influence of Danilo Kiš, “The Legacy of Danilo Kiš in Post-Yugoslav Literature;” see Gordana Crnković for a pleasantly eclectic archive, *Post-Yugoslav Literature and Film: Fires, Foundations, Flourishes*.

³ The translation of post-Yugoslav writers in the 1990s correlated with Yugoslavia’s breakup and indicated a Western interest in the fetishized dissident-truth teller whose political cachet after communism was replaced by market expectations. As Nataša Kovačević notes, Dubravka Ugrešić is a superb example of a writer who subverts this role. *Narrating Post/Communism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 173-181.

transition and national belonging, insofar as they corroborate or deviate from that of older generations, remain to be studied in similar depth.⁴

Therefore, in this thesis I examine both literary and cinematic works of a younger generation that has remained in successor republics of Yugoslavia, specifically in Croatia.⁵ The works herein are “Croatian” insofar as they were produced from 2010-2020 in the current Republic of Croatia, but they should not be restricted to that framing; the decision to focus on Croatian film and literature is to provide a detailed case study within post-Yugoslav film and literature and not a deliberate exclusion.⁶ The first chapter examines queer film and literature that leverages queerness against the heteronormativity of national languages and family, negotiates strategies of self-representation and narration, and deploys unhappiness as a bulwark against normative measures of progress. The second chapter examines the potential of regional film and literature, particularly from Dalmatia, to disrupt the inaccurate projection of a unified, touristic national identity by showing the region as a dry, dead, and ugly landscape populated by grotesque tourists and down on their luck locals. Also of import to the second chapter is unspoken paranoia

⁴ “Introduction: The ‘Radiant Future’ of Spatial and Temporal Dis/Orientations,” in *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York, 2018), 5.

⁵ This could encompass both the so-called Lost Generation born in the 1970s-1980s as well as those who were born after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Age is likely a factor in the lack of scholarship, as many of these authors are less established than older generations. Translation of their works into English has been limited and accessibility of films after their life on the festival circuit is poor.

⁶ For an overview of contemporary discourses on post-Yugoslav literature summarized in English, see Tijana Matijević, “National, Post-national, Transnational: Is Post-Yugoslav Literature an Arguable or Promising Field of Study?,” in *Grenzräume–Grenzbewegungen: Ergebnisse der Arbeitstreffen des Jungen Forums Slavistische Literaturwissenschaft in Basel* (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag, 2016), 101–112. “Post-Yugoslav” here refers to the region of the former Yugoslavia without privileging one national tradition, although in terms of readership and academic attention (especially in English) Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian predominates. The term denotes a break with the past as much as it acknowledges continuity with that which was Yugoslav. “Post-Yugoslav” has also been staked as an anti- or post-nationalist position, an identification for those who do not comfortably belong to the ethnonational identities of successor states.

about homosexuality. On this point, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that subjecting paranoia about homosexuality to a close reading elucidates the negotiations that occur in a heteronormative environment that would otherwise assume ontologically stable homosexual and heterosexual subjects: “[The shifting definition of homosexuality] has been an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds, and perhaps especially over those that define themselves, not *as* homosexual, but *as against* the homosexual.”⁷ I will not be attempting to prove or disprove homosexuality, but rather reading for the instability that this paranoia reveals, particularly in relation to masculinity.

With regards to readings of queer (post)Yugoslav literature and film, scholarship is limited by the dearth of works that are self-consciously queer or “out,” a problematic category in and of itself, although more literature and film would benefit from queer reevaluations that slip through the interstices of identity, or which acquire new queer meanings from new readerships in different times. In general, an identity-centered model of queerness holds a monopoly in the former Yugoslavia and is subsequently equated with LGBTQ or sexual orientation. Most literature that explicitly, not subtextually, centers deviant sexualities and gender nonconformity has appeared in the past two decades, which does speak to the work accomplished by activism. Besides the 2004 anthology *Poqueerene priče (Queered Stories)*, the self-conscious use of “queer” has occurred mostly since a queer turn around 2010, perhaps reflecting its increasing viability as a market category. With regards to postsocialist queer film, depictions of queer

⁷ *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 185-186.

characters (always identifiably gay or lesbian) are cliched, killed off, or, as Kevin Moss notes, they are used as metaphors to pathologize the body of the nation.⁸ Sanja Laćan writes that homosexuality (Laćan's term) is utilized "as a medium for the discussion of what were perceived as more immediate socio-political concerns," like consolidations of national and cultural identity after the fall of Yugoslavia that resulted in a "muddled discursive space that conflated issues of gender, sexuality, nationhood and ethnicity."⁹ Dijana Jelača, on the other hand, argues that queer or "queer-themed" films can, in their treatment of queer bodies, "dislocate ethnocentric heteronormativity as a primary mode of group belonging."¹⁰ She reads director Dalibor Matanić's film *Fine Dead Girls* (*Fine mrtve djevojke*) against the grain of the prevailing reading that sees it as a cruel metaphorization of the lesbian body, arguing instead that the negativity and trauma of "hateful heteronormative encounters" can block overly optimistic readings of progress.¹¹

The Moving Target of Queer/*Kvir*

I would like to preface my use of the word *queer*, particularly when writing about an archive of cultural texts that are not in English, although I will soon provide an overview of how, precisely, *queer* translates culturally and linguistically. In the texts addressed in this thesis, queer denotes sexualities, genders, and bodies that do not align

⁸ Kevin Moss, "Queer as Metaphor: Representations of LGBT People in Central & East European Film," in *Beyond the Pink Curtain: Everyday Life of LGBT People in Eastern Europe*, edited by Judit Takács and Roman Kuhar (Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2006).

⁹ Laćan, "Concealing, Revealing, and Coming Out: Lesbian Visibility in Dalibor Matanić's *Fine Dead Girls* and Dana Budisavljević's *Family Meals*. 230.

¹⁰ *Dislocating Screen Memory: Narrating Trauma in Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 23.

¹¹ *Dislocating Screen Memory*, 136.

with heteronormative expectations or linear notions of modernity. Following Duygu Ula, I think that queer can be used “not as a blanket term that travels without issues but as an indeterminate oppositional and dissolving force whose definition can be multiplied in productive ways the more it travels.”¹² Doing so does not reduce queerness to the false binary between the Western queer and the local, authentic queer, or the “us vs. them liberal human rights discourse that relies on sexual identity categories,” but also allows consideration of the “ambiguities of the local and historical cultural landscape.”¹³ Both Jasna Jasna Žmak and Dana Budisavljević’s works have been classified as “lesbian,” (“*lezbijski*”) and they have publicly announced that they themselves are also lesbian. Without discounting the validity of the descriptor lesbian, in my analysis I will call these works queer for several reasons. Both Žmak’s *My Dear You* and Budisavljević’s *Family Meals* are noticeably absent of identitarian claims to “lesbian,” and I think that their elusiveness is intentional. For example, Žmak’s text avoids declarative statements about sexuality, and the fluctuating grammatical gender of the character You questions the stability of the signifier “lesbian.”¹⁴ Moreover, I want to intentionally read *My Dear You* and *Family Meals* beyond their functions in a post-Yugoslav lesbian canon, focusing on the productive critiques they offer in their defamiliarization and reshaping of

¹² “Toward a Local Queer Aesthetics: Nilbar Güreş’s Photography and Female Homoerotic Intimacy,” *GLQ* 25:4 (2019), 513-543, 516.

¹³ Cüneyt Çakırlar and Serkan Delice quoted in Ulu, 517. As Evren Savci warns, “the search for particularity in order to reject universality...results in certain subjects bearing the burden of particularity itself.” *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics Under Neoliberal Islam*, Durham: Duke University Press, 62.

¹⁴ The only gestures toward identification are words glossed in the appendix, like the entry for “*autohomofobija*” (internalized homophobia) or the word “*homo*,” which in this case means “let’s go” in čakavian, but Žmak also adds that as a suffix it relates two similar things, “for example, *homosexual*.” Jasna Jasna Žmak, *My Dear You* (Zagreb: Profil, 2015), 139. All subsequent translations of the novel are mine.

heteronormative, national structures of language and family.¹⁵ In my reading of Savičević's *Adios, Cowboy*, queer is used in relation to Danijel to read him as a character who occupies the paranoid position of the “queer child,” or the presumed homosexual who reveals the conditions of legibility in an otherwise unquestioned masculinity.

I will use *LGBTQ* when referencing identity-based activism to maintain the openness of queer. Instead of the “postidentitarian” and “strategically fluid” reclamation that American activists and scholars like Susan Stryker invested in the term “queer” in the 1980s and 1990s, it was absorbed into the mainstream under the “LGBTQ,” which often just means gays and lesbians who “conform to gender norms and [who are] poised for mainstream acceptance.”¹⁶ In this usage, queerness-as-LGBTQ is a sexual subjectivity defined by its relation to heterosexuality. The assimilative mainstreaming of these sexual subjectivities in the American context integrated predominantly white gays and lesbians into heteronormative structures of citizenship, the nation, family, and even the military.¹⁷ Jasbir Puar astutely notes that this integration results in a “pinkwashed” imperialism or “homonationalism” by which the United States “relies on and benefits from the proliferation of queerness” by leveraging a normative, Western queerness globally as a marker of modernity.¹⁸ Similarly, the proliferation of a normative queerness—what

¹⁵ Helen Palmer writes that “[i]n the process of queering, as in the process of defamiliarising, subjects, objects, things and structures are liberated from the strictures of their preconceived referents and permitted multiple potential reorientations. Queering is defamiliarising.” *Queer Defamiliarisation: Writing, Mattering, Making Strange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 3.

¹⁶ Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 213, 152. “Queer” is increasingly eclipsing “LGBTQ” since Stryker wrote this in 2008.

¹⁷ See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 179.

¹⁸ Puar argues that certain queers are granted “benevolence” because, although they threaten the reproduction of the nation, they can be rehabilitated as “nonnormative *national* subjects” at the expense of

Robert Kulpa calls “a ‘whip and carrot”—in post-Yugoslav states is intimately connected to Europeanization.¹⁹ The context of post-Yugoslav activism has shaped the production of queer literature and is worth surveying in brief here, although my chapters will intentionally move away from thinking about queerness as synonymous with LGBTQ activism and encourage the reader to consider aesthetic works as enacting their own form of change.

Yugoslavia’s breakup and subsequent nation-building processes violently excluded queerness and made “any sort of political opposition extremely difficult.”²⁰ In Croatia, one activist notes that “[t]o be Croatian has for a long time been synonymous for being Catholic, heterosexual, and patriotic.”²¹ The early 2000s, after the end of a decade of rule by Franjo Tuđman and the HDZ party, seemed to promise a new era marked by the first Pride Parade in 2002. Amid increasingly LGBTQ-specific activism in the region in the 2000s (that is, no longer tied up with feminist and antiwar activism), a “supposedly universal message of liberation” arrived primarily via Europe, in English, supplanted local archives of queerness, and advocated rights-based inclusion.²² Lest the imposition

racialized or dangerous others who cannot be integrated into the nation. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, republished 2017), xxxiii.

¹⁹ Robert Kulpa, “Western Leveraged Pedagogy of Central and Eastern Europe: Discourses of Homophobia, Tolerance, and Nationhood,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 21:4 (2014), 432. For context, see the thorough *LGBT Activism and Europeanisation in the Post-Yugoslav Space: On the Rainbow Way to Europe*, edited by Bojan Bilić (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁰ Bojan Bilić, *Trauma, Violence, and Lesbian Agency in Croatia and Serbia: Building Better Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 57.

²¹ Marija Radoman, “Conclusion: Discovering the Lesbian in Us—On Our Ongoing, Never-Ending Struggles,” in *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*, edited by Bojan Bilić and Radoman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) 189-214, 191.

²² For an overview of queerness in the post-Yugoslav region that intertwines queer theory, activism, and art, see Saša Kesić, “Teorija prikazivanja kvir identiteta u savremenoj istočnoevropskoj umetnosti i kulturi,” PhD diss (Belgrade: Univerzitet umetnosti, 2016).

of European norms in Eastern Europe be seen as wholly involuntary, Nataša Kovačević reminds us that the relationship of the European Union to its periphery is a “consensual empire” that tacitly forces cooperation with the EU out of a lack of a viable alternative.²³ This bears on both otherwise nationalist governments who adopt legislation to boost their EU membership chances as well as on minority groups who have no other option but to welcome the EU’s rights-based framework, resulting in a strange oppositional, strategic collaboration. So although post-Yugoslav queers/activist groups are not wholly passive recipients of EU norms, Piro Rexhepi points out that “questions of sexuality continue to be mobilized to mediate projects and ideals of sexual rights aligned with nationalism and recognizable EU–US models of sexuality,” and the project of liberation becomes coeval with the breadth of the EU.²⁴ This results in tensions between a loosely imperial Europe and transitional states, wherein queers threaten religious, ethnonational communities unless that “homosexual exceptional identity,” in Puar’s words, can be put to service for the nation by excluding even more abject others.

Engaging with languages beyond English, like Serbo-Croatian, provides inroads to consider normative “Western” queerness as a form that is not unidirectional but acquires shades of difference and contestation in translation. As Evren Savci points out, queer studies is consistently monolingual, and its “unspoken English norm” restricts a discipline “where language and discourse have been central to understanding the

²³ “Europe” and the “EU” become synonymous in this sense, as does “modernity.” *Uncommon Alliances Cultural Narratives of Migration in the New Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

²⁴ Piro Rexhepi in conversation with Marina Gržinić, Tjaša Kancler, “Decolonial Encounters and the Geopolitics of Racial Capitalism,” *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* no. 3 (2020), 27.

workings of normativity and power.”²⁵ Attention to work beyond English encourages one to “think about the question of difference [that is negotiated between languages] without reproducing the universalism/particularism binary” that is reinforced by queer studies’ homolingual address.²⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Suzana Tratnik, a translator of numerous queer theoretical and literary texts from English into Slovenian, who says that “encouraging interaction” between contexts that are often as similar as they are different results in a “resignify[ing]” and “reinventing” of both languages.²⁷

Although I do not address the intersections of translation and queer studies in detail in this thesis (which Evren Savci does wonderfully in *Queer in Translation*), taking a brief look at how “queer” is translated will show that Western queerness is not unproblematically copied but also hybridized and contested outside of English.²⁸ The increasing popularity, and mainstreaming, of the word “queer” is reflected by its adoption beyond English, albeit mostly by academic-activist circles. There are good reasons for this: it can function as an inclusive, gender-neutral word, especially in gendered languages, and it can also replace local words with pejorative meanings that might hinder

²⁵ Evren Savci, *Queer in Translation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5

²⁶ Savci, 13.

²⁷ For example, Tratnik had to find creative solutions to translating queer terminology. She chose to translate “Stone Butch Blues” into “Nedotakljive” (“Untouchables,” gendered as feminine plural). This preserves the meaning of “stone butches” but augments it with a word recognized and used by Slovenian lesbians, unlike the Serbian translation, which transliterates the original to “Stoun bač bluz.” Although it is just the same as the English title, its unique transliteration adds an “accent” to the original, affecting it in its own way and calling attention to the sonorous, spoken nature of language. “Translation Trouble: Translating Sexual Identity into Slovenian,” in *Contexts, Subtexts, and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*, edited by Brian James Baer (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011), 143.

²⁸ Translation and/or close attention to languages in “areas” beyond America provide some of the most productive recent challenges to and expansions of queer studies. For example, see the June 2021 special issue of *GLQ*: “Cuir/Queer Américas: Translation, Decoloniality, and the Incommensurable,” or Brian James Baer’s article with a case study on translation as a site of negotiation in post-Soviet Russia, “Beyond Either/Or Confronting the Fact of Translation in Global Sexuality Studies,” in *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, edited by Baer (London: Routledge, 2018), 38-57.

public recognition (ironically, “queer” retains less and less of this pejorative meaning). Transliteration is a popular localization, like “*kuir*” in Turkish and “*cuir*” in Spanish and French.²⁹ Most Slavic languages adopt “*kvir*/квир,” but sometimes local alternatives become palimpsests of meaning.³⁰ Although “*kvir*” is the preferred alternative to identity-centered language, in Serbo-Croatian the definition of “queer” as something strange is best translated as “*nastran*” (lit. “on the side”), but it also retains the negative associations of “perverse” or “deviant.” There is “*kvar*,” or “a malfunction,” which embodies the negativity of being “a malfunction in the machine” (“*kvar u mašini*”).³¹ We might even look to a recent neologism in the name of a queer arts festival in Bosnia, Kvirhana, which combines “*kvir*” with the word “*han*,” a word borrowed via Ottoman Turkish that means an “inn,” emphasizing the idea of a uniquely Balkan queer hospitality and meeting place.

Impossible Areas³²

By working to engage various threads from queer studies and Slavic and East European film and literature, another discipline comes into view in the background of this thesis, area studies. With its Cold War roots and tilt towards social sciences, quantitative

²⁹ Even here “*cuir*” also means “leather” in French and Spanish, creating an allusion to queer subcultures.

³⁰ In Kyrgyzstani Russian, Mohira Suyarkulova notes that there have been attempts to translate “queer” as the relatively neutral *квир* (*kvir*), but also as the more controversial *нудар* (*pidar*), which attempts to echo the reclamation of the originally pejorative “queer” in English. “Translating Queer into Kyrgyzstani Russian,” in *Sexuality and Translation into World Politics*, edited by Caroline Cottett and Manuela Levinas Picq (Bristol: E-International Publishing, 2019).

³¹ “Kvar” was taken as the name for a Belgrade queer festival, but didn’t last. See Bojan Bilić and Irene Dioli, “Queer Beograd Collective: Beyond Single-Issue Activism in Serbia and the Post-Yugoslav Space,” in *Intersectionalist and LGBT Activist Politics: Multiple Others in Croatia and Serbia*, edited by Bilić and Sanja Kajinić (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 105-125.

³² Title taken from the introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on queer and area studies. Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, “Area Impossible: Notes Toward an Introduction,” *GLQ* 22:2 (2016), 151-171.

data, and complicity in treating the rest of the non-Western world as an object of study, area studies seems ill-equipped to address topics of queerness, literature, and film. And it often is.³³ It may seem curious that I frame my work *in relation* to area studies, then. Although the discipline should have logically fallen away with the “defeat” of communism in 1989, it is alive and well and often overlaps with literature and cultural studies departments as academic units become increasingly flexible. It is unavoidable, all the way down to the undergraduate classroom, as foreign language classes are often taught and funded by area studies departments or private and public scholarships with an interest in the acquisition of foreign languages for security reasons. In “Eastern Europe as Method,” Anca Parvulescu describes the uneasy coexistence that results, as well as the “imperial position” of Russian (and Soviet) studies:

Most of us are apprehensive about a Sputnik-prompted Eastern European area studies, which often inherited its institutional frameworks from Oriental studies and which produced both scholars and CIA agents. Furthermore, many of us do not endorse the reproduction of the imperial position of Russian studies within Eastern European studies and the fact that, if one aspires to get a job “in” Eastern Europe, one should be ready to answer questions about one’s Russian proficiency.³⁴

Utilizing the most valuable skills gained from working in or even just passing through area studies, language and historical knowledge, provides scholars the tools to decenter Americentric scholarship, including queer studies, which David Eng and Jasbir Puar call “its own particular form of US area studies” that produces a neocolonial “Western gay

³³ See Anita Starosta, *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Difference* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

³⁴ *SEEJ* vol. 63 no. 4 (2019), 475.

consumer-tourist or the queer native informant.”³⁵ Eng and Puar call for the Western queer and the postcolonial queer to finally become coeval. To this I would add that it may be valuable to discover how the postsocialist queer bears on these figures.

Work on queer studies in a certain “area,” however, is often “relegated by queer studies scholars to area studies scholarship, while it is seen by regional specialists as unable to represent a proper area studies method.”³⁶ But there is still perhaps something worth gleaning from the area studies, as Anca Parvulescu points towards Gayatri Spivak and *Death of a Discipline*.³⁷ Spivak indicates that area studies can finally be put to rest by evacuating its “thick description,” linguistic training, and funding in service of a more ethical merging of area studies with comparative literature, creating a literary practice more attuned to cultural studies. Following Spivak, Parvulescu proposes an alternative to the vacuum of area studies that she calls “Eastern Europe as Method,” which uses Eastern Europe as a discrete site of analysis larger than national frameworks and as a renewed object of comparison. In some way, I hope that the work that follows on queer and regional Croatian literature and film gestures towards this collaborative work.

³⁵ “Introduction: Left of Queer,” *Social Text* Vol. 38, No. 4 (145) (December 2020), 7.

³⁶ Eng and Puar, 8.

³⁷ *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 15.

Chapter 1:
**Performing the Self in the Presence of Others: Queer Autobiography
and Autofiction in Dana Budisavljević's *Family Meals* (2012) and Jasna
Jasna Žmak's *My Dear You* (2015)**

And so, I abandoned my dictionary and set off for the wasteland for which dictionaries have no words.

—Jasna Jasna Žmak³⁸

We all learned to speak with the awareness that words are exchanged, that language is forged within a relationship of absolute reciprocity, without which no one would be mad enough to want to speak.

—Monique Wittig³⁹

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon write that “queer lives and impulses do not occupy a separate social or physical space from straight ones; instead, they are relational and conditional, moving across and transforming the conventional spaces of normative systems of sex, gender, and family.”⁴⁰ This space, however, is not occupied in equal measure—within it, those queer lives whose gender and sexuality “aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically” must negotiate their occupation of this space and visibility within a diktat of heteronormativity predicated on their inclusion.⁴¹ It is

³⁸ *My Dear You*, 139.

³⁹ Quoted in Annabelle Kim, *Unbecoming Language: Anti-Identitarian French Feminist Fictions* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 95.

⁴⁰ Moon and Sedgwick, “Queers in (Single-Family) Space,” *assemblage* No. 24 (Aug. 1994), 30.

⁴¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of “queer” bears continuing here. In an oft-quoted passage from which the above quote is taken, queerness can signify “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps...and excesses of meaning” when one's gender and sexuality do not align with heteronormativity. However, what is often left out is what follows, in which Sedgwick acknowledges that to disavow the centrality of same-sex desire from this definition ignores that “prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression” are most often the way queerness is materialized and experienced. Still, the stigmatization of same-sex desire is

with this contested yet shared space in mind that this chapter looks to the ways that space is made for queerness in contemporary Croatian film and literature by examining the documentary film *Family Meals* (*Nije ti život pjesma Havaja*, lit. “life is not a Hawaiian song,” or “life isn’t easy,” 2012) by Dana Budisavljević and the novel *My Dear You* (*Moja ti*, lit. the possessive “my you,” 2015) by Jasna Jasna Žmak. As the epigraph by Žmak hints, there are perhaps not yet words in the dictionary, that symbolic object of what can be said and what is legible, with which they can express the “wasteland” of their queerness, but they attempt to do so anyway by finding new forms through language, written and spoken. This chapter takes Monique Wittig’s claim that language is a reciprocal, which is to say social, relationship as its starting point. It is in this social exchange of language, or narration, that Žmak and Budisavljević gesture towards new modes of attachment in the shared space of straight and queer, which are not isolated but affected by each other.

Family Meals and *My Dear You* are indicative of a postsocialist “queer turn” that has taken place since around 2010, after which there is more film and literature that is not subtextually but self-consciously queer (already “out,” so to speak). Both Budisavljević and Žmak utilize strategies of self-representation—autobiographical documentary and autofiction, respectively—to claim space for their queerness and, as Moon and Sedgwick write above, “[transform] the conventional spaces of normative systems” through which they pass, as well as the straight lives therein. Self-representation has long been a

distinct from the naturalization of an ontological gay or lesbian identity based on this. *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

generative strategy for queer and feminist subcultures in the face of erasure, and Žmak and Budisavljević's works should be read within a longer genealogy of queer and lesbian experiments in film and literature, beyond the Croatian context. The act of representing themselves counters exploitative uses of queerness, especially lesbianism, as a metaphor or plot device. Moreover, the fact of their personal lesbian identification does not make their work reducible to just that identity. Instead, they leverage the structural position of queerness—that which exists outside heteronormativity and threatens its coherence—by enacting reparative critiques of the Croatian language or the nuclear family, which by design do not accommodate deviations from their heteronormative structure, and which are also pillars of Croatian national identity.

There are also stakes in utilizing autobiography and inhabiting the role of a lesbian for Žmak and Budisavljević, as the figure of the lesbian is heavily mediated by others. Kevin Moss and Mima Simić write that a “*real* lesbian is a menace, too much of a menace to be allowed to write the plot herself, to take a lesbian subject position,” and Žmak and Budisavljević challenge the fictionalization and exploitation of their subjectivities by making themselves the “real” lesbian subjects of their art, although the ontology of this subjectivity is subsequently complicated.⁴² *My Dear You*, a novel that takes the form of short stories about a narrator Jasna and her partner You, opts to distance itself from a recognizably sexed and gendered lesbian body by fragmenting the author into a fictional self who exists solely as a body in language, which is intensified by the

⁴² Kevin Moss and Mima Simić, “Post-Communist Lavender Menace: Lesbians in Mainstream East European Film,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15:3 (2011), 280. Emphasis mine.

autofictive and metafictional quality of the novel, in which the narrator cannot exist as anything beyond or in language. Budisavljević, on the other hand, leverages the power of her physical presence as a disturbing lesbian presence for her family, whom she confronts to discover why they reacted poorly to her coming out as a lesbian. By placing herself in front of, instead of behind, the camera, she exposes her “real” self. In doing so, she is no longer just making a film about a lesbian but embodying that role *and* the bad feelings that go with it.

Self-representation, which is important because it places the production of a queer or lesbian text in the hands of a queer or lesbian producer, should not be mistaken for the presentation of an authentic self. The performative element of self-representation present in Budisavljević and Žmak's works further positions their queerness as socially relational, formed around and with others instead of as essential or isolated. The act of narrating oneself in the first-person is, Judith Butler argues, a constantly renewed performative act:

I also enact the self I am trying to describe; the narrative “I” is reconstituted at every moment it is invoked in the narrative itself. That invocation is, paradoxically, a performative and non-narrative act, even as it functions as the fulcrum for narrative itself. I am, in other words, doing something with that “I”—elaborating and positioning it in relation to a real or imagined audience.⁴³

Crucially, this narration is always a state of address to an(Other) from an “I” that is never quite capable of narrating itself coherently. Because there are unknowable parts in them or parts of them that belong to others as an unavoidable result of living in social relation, “the moment when [they] narrate [they] become speculative philosophers or fiction

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 66.

writers” who can only describe or attempt to approximate that “I” in language and in relation to their interlocutors.⁴⁴ This fundamental uncertainty in narration resists the closure of a story about one’s “authentic” or even truly “real” self, which destabilizes the false empiricism of lesbian or queer subjectivity that is pathologized, mediated, and always asked to make itself legible. In this manner, Žmak and Budisavljević go beyond just static representation, because their narration in the presence of others does not create perfectly closed autobiographies but stories negotiated between Jasna and You on one hand, and Dana and her family on the other.

When Budisavljević and Žmak utilize first-person narration, it is always interrupted and fragmentary. Budisavljević’s conversations with her family are often a back-and-forth exchange in which they take turns narrating in the first-person singular “I” as well as the first-person plural “we,” constituting that shared “we” by weaving together their various subjectivities. The visuality of the documentary and the repeated ritual of the family meal also create a stage upon which their performance-conversations are repeated. For Žmak, language is always-already performative and is inextricable from its social use, further indicated by *My Dear You*’s intertexts of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, or Judith Butler. This constitutive function of language emphasizes the fictionality of the narrator Jasna, as she inverts Wittgenstein to say that “the limits of [her fictional world] are the limits of [her language],” or to admit that “Austin was right...things really can be done with words.”⁴⁵ So whenever Žmak’s narrator or

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, “Giving an Account of Oneself,” *Diacritics* Vol. 31 No. 4 (Winter 2001), 37.

⁴⁵ *My Dear You*, 148, 96.

Budisavljević, or even Budisavljević's family, begins to narrate or tell their own story in words, they construct themselves as individual actors at the same time that their subjectivity is tied to the ensemble around them, showing “the way in which [they] are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world.”⁴⁶

Local Queer Aesthetics

Budisavljević and Žmak expand the available repertoire of local queer aesthetics, which Duygu Ula defines as the articulation of a visual (and I will add literary) language of queerness grounded in local histories and cultures, not just a Westernized expectation of queerness—although I will caution against reifying the difference of regions like the Balkans by claiming they have no right to adopt and imbue aspects of Western queerness with meaning.⁴⁷ In many places, however, local repertoires of queer aesthetics have not always been clearly recognizable without a continuous tradition from which to draw, but the archaeological or archival work undertaken to find precursors illustrates what Melanie Micir calls the “biographical impulse” to leave a trace that can be found or decoded by future generations who might recognize queerness where it could not flourish.⁴⁸ Telling this history in the former Yugoslavia is beyond what this chapter could possibly cover, but what is most salient about the following provisional examples is that

⁴⁶ Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in reference to Judith Butler, “Lives in Outline: Women, Autobiography, and Recent Graphic Memoir,” in *Women Narrating Their Lives and Actions*, edited by Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Sandra Prlenda (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije), 164.

⁴⁷ Duygu Ula, “Toward a Local Queer Aesthetics: Nilbar Gures’s Photography and Female Homoerotic Intimacy,” *GLQ* 25:4 (2019), 513-543.

⁴⁸ Melanie Micir, *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

biography (and the ability to represent one's self, textually or visually) is what allows a counternarrative to prevailing heteronormativity to be constructed and space made for queerness. It is worth providing this overview of a uniquely Croatian or Yugoslav queer genealogy, which is under-researched and insufficiently synthesized in English, as well as contextualizing the general lack of autonomous representation in queer literature and film, although this is shifting amid the aforementioned postsocialist “queer turn.”

Visual self-representation can be seen in the self-portraits of painter Nasta Rojc from the early 20th century, in which Rojc experimented with crafting images of herself that subvert expectations of genteel femininity and attractiveness for the male gaze.⁴⁹ Jasna Jasna Žmak claims that Croatian drama has yet to see its “first real LGBTQ+ play,” since its stages have been devoid of nearly all queer characters except for gay, cisgender men, who are more often than not only superficial or “apparitional,” and therefore precluded from acting as agents in their own fate.⁵⁰ The representations of lesbians on film, or at least in mainstream film, is poor, as lesbians are most often fated to death or violently included into the project of the nation.⁵¹ The situation is somewhat better in literature, as Natalija Stepanović argues that “Croatian queer literature has a surprisingly long history” which has accelerated in the past decade or so, and is marked by the

⁴⁹ See Ljiljana Kolečnik, “Autoportreti Naste Rojc: stvaranje predodžbe naglašenog rodnog identiteta u hrvatskoj umjetnosti ranog modernizma,” *Rad. Inst. povijest umjetnosti* 24 (2000), 187-204. My translation.

⁵⁰ Playwright Espi Tomičić's 2020 drama *Your Love is King*, about the estranged relationship between a trans man and his dying mother, perhaps rectifies this. Žmak, “The Apparitional Gay and the Invisible Everyone Else – LGBTQ+ Identities in Contemporary Croatian Playwriting,” in *Go East!: LGBTQ+ Literature in Eastern Europe*, edited by Andrej Zavrl, Alojzija Zupan Sosič (Ljubljana: Ljubljana University Press, 2020), 167.

⁵¹ Aniko Imre writes about the “ambivalent” relationship that lesbians on film have to nationalism in “Lesbian Nationalism,” *Signs* 33:2 (Winter 2008), 255-282.

familiar tropes of “coming out, moving away, [and] traveling” to more progressive climes, like Berlin.⁵²

Suzana Tratnik argues for the continuity of a uniquely Yugoslav queer literature—even if at times discontinuous—exemplified by the rediscovery of David Pijade's epistolary novel about a romance between two nuns, *Passion (Strast*, originally published in Serbian in 1921 and republished in 2001). For readers years later, *Passion* “gave a sense of a local lesbian culture, offering the possibility of a lesbian literary history before the gay and lesbian movement of the 1980s,” which was and still is heavily influenced by American queer history, with particular attention to gay and lesbian cultures. This local queer archive of source texts is then recontextualized and reperformed by new generations, like Serbian playwright Olga Dimitrijević's radio drama rendition of Pijade's novel, which premiered in 2020. Similarly, Jelena Petrović argues that transgender⁵³ author Ljuba Prenner and the novel *Freshman: The Novel of an Unknown Slovene Student (Bruc-roman neznanega slovenskega študenta)*, published only posthumously in 2006 after the manuscript was found in Prenner's archive, offer an interwar precedent of a publicly lived queer life which offers a sense of possibility in the

⁵² “Iz ormara na police!: o odrastanju i izlasku iz ormara u hrvatskoj *queer* književnosti,” *Umjetnost riječi* LXIV 1-2 (2020), 51. The capital, Zagreb, has also served as a stand-in for a more progressive, urban environment within the country. My translation.

⁵³ A provisional English descriptor that Prenner certainly did not use. Ljuba Prenner was born in 1906 and died in 1977 and practiced as a lawyer in Ljubljana after an unsuccessful literary career (although he authored the first Slovenian crime novel). Prenner dressed primarily in men's clothing and used femininely gendered language (*ona*) in formal capacities but masculine (*on*) among friends and family. Suzana Tratnik calls Prenner a “butch lesbian” and uses femininely gendered language when talking about him. Petrović refers to Prenner in the feminine as well but uses the descriptor “transgender” to describe Prenner. See Suzana Tratnik, “Ljuba Prenner 1906–1977,” in *Pozabljena polovica: portreti žensk 19. in 20 stoletja na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: SAZU, 436–439); and “Lesbian Visibility in Slovenia,” *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 8:3 (2001, 373-380).

21st century. From the “privileged position of a man,” *Freshman* is a “romanticized” Bildungsroman of the narrator Lojze Pečolar, who bears the same initials as his author, juxtaposed with the “*auto*-character” of Rudolfina Čerče, a fictional “(auto)reflection” of Prenner's own childhood as a girl.⁵⁴

In contemporary Croatian literature, there is a growing amount of literature that centers the experiences of queer women affirmatively.⁵⁵ In addition to *My Dear You* and regional collaborations like the anthology *A Decent Life: Lesbian Short Stories from the Ex-Yu Space* (2012), republished in Macedonian with additional stories in 2015 but still without any Albanian language contributions, there is the work of Nora Verde (*Lend Me Your Smile*, 2010), Ivana Kovačić (*Parafairytales*, 2013), Viktorija Božina (*Turbofolk*, 2018), poetry by Aida Bagić (*If My Name Were Sylvia*, 2007) Saška Rojc (a poetic “heteronym” of novelist Olja Savičević, *Puzzlerojc*, 2006), and even Mima Simić's “gender flipped” graphic novel adaptation of Sherlock Holmes (*The Adventures of Gloria Scott*, 2005, with illustrations by Ivana Armanini), to name just a selection.⁵⁶ At the cusp of a new queer turn in Croatian film and literature, the descriptors or qualifiers of what it means for a work to be “queer” are in flux between universalizing and minoritizing visages of queerness, especially when it comes to works considered “lesbian.” This is in

⁵⁴ Jelena Petrović, *Women's Authorship in Interwar Yugoslavia: The Politics of Love and Struggle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). 174.

⁵⁵ Gay literature in contemporary Croatian literature is anecdotally represented by “the first gay Croatian novel,” Dražen Ilinčić's *Berlin Towel* (*Berlinski ručnik*, 2006), which is more notable for being the first more than for quality. A recent counterpoint to *Berlin Towel*, which is mostly about loitering in a Berlin sauna, is Dino Pešut's *Bruised Knees* (*Poderana koljena*, 2018), a self-professed “millennial novel.”

⁵⁶ In the region and beyond, see Dragoslava Barzut, Olga Dimitrijević, Lejla Kalamujić, Suzana Tratnik, as well as Pajtim Statovci, Petar Andonovski.

no small part due to the spread of “queer” as a catch-all term for anything pertaining to non-normative genders or sexualities, which is more and more used in academic, activist, or literary Croatian contexts instead of “gay” or “lesbian” (“*gej*” or “*lezbijski*”).

As these terms are in flux, however, it comes with a negotiation of the continuing utility and meaning of earlier terms used to label cultural texts, particularly “lesbian,” which is still more popular than “queer.” As in America and France, in the former Yugoslavia there was a strong association of lesbian subjectivity with feminism and women’s writing (*žensko pismo*, from *écriture féminine*),⁵⁷ the criticism of which Zsófia Lóránd dubbed “Yugo-gynocriticism,” further enmeshing lesbian literature with the female body.⁵⁸ The relatively recent introduction of “queer”/“*kvir*” as a viable umbrella term or alternative to “lesbian,” which is overwhelmingly associated with cisgender women, would seem to imperil an essentialist conception of lesbianness or womanhood as necessarily mapped onto the female body, and indeed already has.⁵⁹ This issue of naming or classification has become problematic, illustrating the tensions between what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms the “inversion” model of homosexuality, in which queer

⁵⁷ I am here thinking of Elaine Showalter’s definition of *écriture féminine* as “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text.” “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 249.

⁵⁸ Zsófia Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), esp. 97-127. See also Dubravka Djurić and Aleksandra Nikčević-Batričević, “Demarginalizations and Destination(s) of post-Yugoslav Literary Canons,” *Neohelicon* 46 (2019, 575-590).

⁵⁹ In 2020, the Center for Women’s Studies in Zagreb was embroiled in scandal after a new director was appointed who had made transphobic comments in the past. This divided the Center into those demanding her resignation and asking the Center to reform its poor record of including queer and trans topics and members, while others defended the director and the Center as a space for (female) women, bordering on transphobia if not outright TERFism.

sexualities and genders lie between or wholly outside binary gender (i.e., androgynous, invert, “genderfuck”), and a “separatist” model, in which the separation of binary gender is upheld, even strengthened, by the conflation of social identification and sexual desire.⁶⁰ These tensions become problematic when adopting the categories of “lesbian” and “queer” for cultural texts, as they increasingly serve as market categories labelling texts in a deterministic manner and creating a set of minoritizing expectations. Žmak herself has resisted this determinism in the reception of *My Dear You*:

My Dear You certainly isn't a straight book, but all the same it isn't just lesbian. At the same time, it's very obvious that it's lesbian, and it didn't occur to me to buff that out or hide it, but I'd rather the lesbian qualification be just a fact, and not a label, because labels are just sensationalized facts, and I think that lesbianism in truth isn't something spectacular. Love is spectacular, sure, but in a different way than a label, and, of course, [love isn't just lesbian].⁶¹

As is evident in Žmak's exegesis of her own work, she has an attachment to the specifically lesbian nature of her novel, since same-sex desire is the most visible materialization of queerness, but the label of “lesbian fiction,” particularly when it carries connotations of the aforementioned separatist model of lesbianism, is misleading in the expectations it stokes. Similarly, Budisavljević's *Family Meals* is about Dana, an out lesbian, but the viewer sees much less of her and more of her family, raising the question of the semantic work that the term “lesbian” can do, and how accurate it is. As I will

⁶⁰ Sedgwick writes that in the separatist model, it is taken as natural that “people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinate diacritic mark of social organization [sex as aligned with gender], people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire” (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 87-88).

⁶¹ “Moja ti' svakako nije 'strejt' knjiga, ali nije ni samo 'lezbijka'” (“*My Dear You* is in no way a “straight” book, but it's also not only “lesbian”) *Crol* (24 December 2015). My translation.

show in the following sections, the reach of Žmak and Budisavljević's works goes beyond just representation. They do provide a “sense of local lesbian history,” to use Suzana Tratnik’s phrase, but they also occupy the shared space of the social that implicates even the seemingly straight. Their project of queering Croatian language and the heteronormative family, it turns out, is not limited to only queer lives.

***Lezbijka with a Video Camera: Family Meals* by Dana Budisavljević**

In her criticism of Dalibor Matanić's 2002 film *Fine Dead Girls*, Mima Simić asks why the first “celluloid lesbians” in Croatian film had to die, either as an allegory for the nation or as a critique of it. However, she also predicts the possibility that a “new celluloid lesbian...might succeed in acquiring from some cultural artistic EU fund enough money for a feature-length *autobiographical* story,” which might finally grant lesbians a “happy ending” and break the cycle of the metaphorization and recycling of queer characters in service of a national story.⁶² Dana Budisavljević steps into this role of the new celluloid lesbian with her documentary film *Family Meals*, which was released in 2012 and became one of the most watched documentaries in Croatia.⁶³ Simić’s emphasis on the autobiographical qualifications of a lesbian film that would counter depictions of lesbians like Matanić's is echoed in her and Kevin Moss' previously mentioned assertion

⁶² Simić argues that even if Matanić intended to use the emponymous lesbian couple's death as a critique of nationalism, he still perpetuates the impossibility and unreality of lesbianism in doing so, as lesbians can only ever be “fine dead girls,” sexualized and then killed. “Čuvarica granica: Celuloidna lezbijka kao dvostruka metafora u re/konstrukciji postjugoslovenskih nacionalnih identiteta,” in *Na marginama: Manjine i mediji u jugoistočnoj Evropi*, edited by Edin Hodžić and Tarik Jušić (Sarajevo: Mediacentar, 2010), 223. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ Sanja Laćan, “Concealing, Revealing, Coming Out: Lesbian Visibility in Dalibor Matanić's *Fine Dead Girls* and Dana Budisavljević's *Family Meals*,” *Studies in European Cinema* 12:3, 243. My translation.

that it is the “real” lesbian who is a menace, because their real experiences and, as I will argue, their physical presence challenge the symbolic representation of lesbians as sacrifices or roadblocks to the fulfillment of a national community or family. Sanja Kajinić goes a step further to claim that, in the broader post-Yugoslav region, documentary film or performances that center “real” queer bodies produce a “regional queerness” connected by art and film festivals that needs real queers much more than it needs fictional representations of them.⁶⁴

Although originally trained as an editor, Budisavljević has directed three documentary films that all center the experiences of women or historical figures pushed to the margins of Croatian memory or society. Her directorial debut, *Straight A's (Sve 5!, 2005)*, follows the rocky reintegration of Lidija, a former sex worker, into life in her small hometown on the Croatian coast after 15 years living in Amsterdam, but Lidija's story is framed as just one example of women who were forced into sex work instead of the economic opportunity they were promised in Western Europe after the fall of socialism across Eastern Europe. Her story thus becomes intertwined with the disappointing postsocialist transition as well as the strong hold Catholic morals have in Croatia. Budisavljević's most recent film, *The Diary of Diana B. (Dnevnik Diane Budisavljević, 2019)*, is a docudrama about Diana Budisavljević, who rescued thousands of children, mostly Serbian, from camps run by the fascist Independent State of Croatia

⁶⁴ See Sanja Kajinić, *Post-Yugoslav Queer Festivals* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Many of the films at these festivals are not just from the post-Yugoslav region but all parts of the world, although the festivals about which Kajinić writes are in Slovenia and Croatia, along what she calls the “Ljubljana-Zagreb axis.”.

(NDH) during World War II, thereby bringing up the repressed history of Serbians living in Croatia and the crimes of the Ustaša, as well as Diana's erasure in socialist Yugoslavia.⁶⁵ In 2005, Budisavljević founded ZagrebDox, an international film festival with a deliberate focus on regional productions, with Nenad Puhovski.

Documentary film as a medium has a history of being used for activist causes. Borrowing “the evidential integrity of the photographic image,” documentary film has often found itself tasked with addressing social injustices by confronting the viewer, the camera serving as a witness, with what seems unquestionably real, not fictionalized.⁶⁶ Of course, documentary techniques have always been used beyond just a mimetic function, especially in avant-garde or experimental film.⁶⁷ With the advent of digital technologies, it became even more portable, spontaneous, and affordable medium, but still “a sidelined media category—*considéré comme marginaux* [considered marginal],” considered to serve educational or ethnographic purposes more often than artistic.⁶⁸ However, this has

⁶⁵ *The Diary of Diana B.* differs from previous works, as documentary interviews of camp survivors whom Diana rescued are interspersed with a scripted story that reenacts the actions of Diana Budisavljević based on her diaries, as well as with archival newsreel footage.

⁶⁶ Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, and Wang Chi, *The Act of Documenting: Documentary Film in the 21st Century* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 8.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR, 1929), Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (USA, 1943), Jonas Mekas' 1970s diary films (Lithuania/USA), or Vukica Đilas' *Home Movies* (Yugoslavia), as well as Dušan Makevejev's use of documentary footage in *Innocence Unprotected* (1941) or *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971).

⁶⁸ Winston et al, 3.

not prevented the medium's adoption by queer and feminist filmmakers as a means to center and archive their own autobiographies.⁶⁹

Writing in the context of the Chinese New Documentary movement, Chao Shi-Yan argued that the movement was productively co-opted in the late 1990s and 2000s by feminist “*lalas* [lesbians] with video cameras,” Director and activist Shitou in particular introduced not only feminist societal concerns but also queer representation into the public consciousness, not least because she was the first person to come out on Chinese state TV.⁷⁰ Films made by *lalas* with video cameras make lesbians and queer culture visible to mainstream audiences as a local phenomenon and not a Western import, although these films also carry an ethnographic aura, since they are explaining themselves to the public at large. I find Chao's category of “*lalas* with video cameras,” itself a riff on Zhang Zhen's “women with video cameras” after Dziga Vertov's “man with a movie camera,” useful in thinking about *Family Meals*. Chao's “*lalas* with video cameras” are activist filmmakers who not only are lesbian but also work to improve their standing in the larger society in which they and their films are embedded. These filmmakers' works are “premised on a *sensitivity* to their specific socio-political conditions” and grounded in a local queer aesthetics, although inevitably one shaped by

⁶⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these filmmakers are Agnes Varda, Barbara Hammer, or Chantal Akerman. See *Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, edited by Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁷⁰ This is something that both Jasna Jasna Žmak and Mima Simić have also done, illustrating the importance visibility and coming out can have. It also indicates the strategic leveraging of lesbian identity by Shitou, Žmak, and Simić in highly visible settings in which they have forced the topic of homosexuality into public.

Western queer images as well.⁷¹ Similarly, I argue that Budisavljević's *Family Meals* can be seen as the work of a “*lezbijka* [lesbian] with a video camera” that serves an activist as well as artistic function.⁷² In *Family Meals*, there is no separation between the subjects of the film and the invisible documentarian posing the questions, as Budisavljević inserts herself into the film as a participant. This shifts the role of the documentarian from an objective observer to a participant, or a character. Budisavljević's public “outness” as a lesbian lends the film the veneer of authenticity, assuring the viewer that what they are seeing is representative of a queer subject and her concerns, not the misuse of her queerness for narrative means by a director who has no personal connection to the material. Even when Budisavljević is in front of the camera, the shots are still framed by cinematographer and collaborator Ana Opalić, who was also drawn to documentary as a means of documenting “real” queer lives.⁷³

Over 50 minutes of lunches, coffees, and dinners, she holds conversations with her mother, father, and brother about why they reacted poorly to her coming out a decade prior. The topic is one that they have seemingly never broached. Budisavljević uses this traumatic scene from her own life as artistic material, but I argue that the film is more about her family as a plastic site of social relations, or habitus, than a documentary that

⁷¹All preceding quotes from Shi-Yan Chao, *Queer Representations in Chinese-language Film and the Cultural Landscape* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020) 268, emphasis in original.

⁷² As Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1995) shows, the form of the first-person lesbian documentary can also be pastiched and used for fictional means, although the creation of an archive and finding ancestors is still important even in a fictional documentary, maybe especially in a fictional documentary.

⁷³ With Noah Pintarić, Opalić directed the autobiographical documentary *Once Again (Još jednom)*, (2014) about their lives and the lives of several other friends over a period of five or more years, in which Mima Simić participated and on which Jasna Jasna Žmak worked.

centers the everyday life of Dana as an individual. In fact, there are only rare moments in which the viewer actually sees Dana alone, extricated from her family. It is more precise to call *Family Meals* what Michael Renov has named a “domestic ethnography,” in which the documentarian turns the camera on both themselves and their family “at home rather than in the village square,” often to interrogate a past event that has shaped the director, like the lukewarm reaction to Budisavljević's coming out.⁷⁴ The family, in case the “familial other,” outlines “the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor...or perpetrator of trauma,” becoming as much an imbricated subject of the documentary as the director.⁷⁵ Following Pierre Bourdieu, the family unit is the smallest level at which a habitus or “common code” of gendered roles and behavior, division of labor, and cultural tastes and preferences are naturalized and “objectively harmonized without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a norm.”⁷⁶ Budisavljević forces her parents to confront their unconscious deference to the norm of homophobia when she presses them to answer *why* they never talked about her coming out to each other or other people, provoking discussion about something that, within Dana’s habitus, is not an explicit prohibition but something that can be thrown out or reshaped.

⁷⁴ Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 229.

⁷⁵ Renov, 228.

⁷⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80.

The manner in which Budisavljević presents herself belies her discomfort as well as her unhappiness as a result of her family's silence.⁷⁷ Her parents cannot even speak the unspoken prohibition of her queerness out loud, while Dana calls herself either gay (“*gej*”) or attracted to women (“*volim žene*“), curiously avoiding the charged term “lesbian.” Although the tone of *Family Meals* is generally light, in many of the conversations Budisavljević is visibly uncomfortable, stiff and withdrawn in her posture, and occasionally upset or frustrated by her family's comments. particularly her mother's repeated mourning of the loss of Budisavljević's feminine appearance when she cut her hair short or the foreclosed possibility of grandchildren. Duygu Ula argues that visible gender nonconformity in an environment structured by clearly gendered expectations, like the family home or kitchen, “destabilizes the idea of the family home as a heterosexual and heteronormative locale,” and thus presents a challenge to its existing structure.⁷⁸

The site of the family home, and in particular the kitchen in which family meals are prepared, was symbolically never a neutral space for Budisavljević to inhabit.⁷⁹ It is in this private, domestic space that she becomes legible as a woman and mother within the frame of the nation, as Nira Yuval-Davis argues:

⁷⁷ It could be considered not just a passing state of unhappiness, but a Bourdieuan hexis, the technology of how Dana holds her body, acculturated by following the role model of her parents and becoming miserable doing so, because she cannot be straight for them nor can she keep silent. See Bourdieu, 87.

⁷⁸ Ula, 538.

⁷⁹ Ankica Čakardić argues that the political function of a woman is to “do something for her state” by serving as another “in the home, where she is additionally disciplined to accept her guaranteed place in the frame of the family.” “Država kao bratska zajednica: Težnja zajednici bez zajednice,” *Filozofska istraživanja* 99: 25 (2005), 846. My translation.

The construction of 'home' is of particular importance here, including relations between adults and between adults and children in the family, ways of cooking and eating, domestic labour...out of which a whole world view, ethical and aesthetic, can become naturalized and reproduced.⁸⁰

In the “pure fantasy” of the family in post-independence Croatia, there is, as Tanja Pavlović writes, “no room for discontent” such as Budisavljević's because her critique of her family is a critique of the national, heteronormative family.⁸¹ Dubravka Ugrešić lampoons the metaphor of the nation as family in *Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, writing, “*The nation is just a big family*, says my President and leader [Franjo Tuđman],” who in this allegory becomes the father of the nation.⁸² After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the family was inscribed with new meaning for the state as the representative unit of an ethnic Croatian nation, and women as its carrier. Pavlović identifies the most salient characteristics of this ideal family: it is, first and foremost, identifiably Croatian and not ethnically mixed, and its maintenance is rooted in the rigid maintenance of masculine and feminine gender roles.

Budisavljević is an antagonistic presence in this domestic space, her queerness and turning away from the prescribed role of a woman placing her at odds with its symbolic value. She is what Sara Ahmed names the “unhappy queer,” who is “an unhappy object for many parents” by refusing dominant, gendered “happiness scripts” that are naturalized within the family and perpetuate the national ideal of a straight,

⁸⁰ Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London, SAGE 2008), 55.

⁸¹ “Women in Croatia: Feminists, Nationalists, and Homosexuals,” in *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, edited by Sabrina Ramet (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) 135, 131.

⁸² Translated by Celia Hawkesworth, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 103.

Croatian family.⁸³ Happiness scripts are “straightening devices” that provide a blueprint for happiness or the good life, which ultimately orients subjects toward heterosexuality, the path of least resistance.⁸⁴ Budisavljević's deviation from this script is signaled by her coming out and opting out of heterosexuality, as well as her refusal of the role of a woman of use to the maintenance and reproduction of the nation, and even as a woman at all. In doing so, she troubles what Rada Iveković calls the “tale of gender roles as *fixed* and definitive within the nation.”⁸⁵ By narrating her own unhappiness, Budisavljević makes a “gesture toward another world” beyond the misery of the present.⁸⁶ The titular setting of the family meal, as a ritual that repeats, provides a space for all family members to reconsider and therapeutically process the injuries of the past which were papered over by the same silence that caused Budisavljević so much harm, showing that their attempts to model happiness, which is to say a normative heterosexuality, do not only harm her but also themselves. Her mother is finally able to acknowledge how difficult it was for her to be kicked out of her house at a young age and be *without* a family, as well as her guilt about failing as a mother by not giving Dana and her brother more stability when she left Dana's father. Her father admits that his own repressed familial upbringing discouraged outpourings of emotion and limited his outward support for Dana, and that he never legally married Dana's mother due to an aversion to marriage. Sanja Laćan argues that this narration, as a continuous act of communal

⁸³ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 95.

⁸⁴ Ahmed, 90-91.

⁸⁵ “The Fiction of Gender Constructing the Fiction of Nation: On How Fictions Are Normative, and Norms Produce Exceptions,” *Anthropological Yearbook of European Cultures* Vol. 14 (2005), 29, my emphasis.

⁸⁶ Ahmed, 95.

storytelling between her and her family members, makes Dana's queerness inextricable from them, and even "uncovers her family's queerness," or their distance from normal expectations of monogamy, marriage, and even an adherence to norms of health and ablebodiedness, in the case of her brother.⁸⁷ Budisavljević's initial expression of unhappiness has now taken the "form of political action" in which all of her family begins "saying no or pointing out injuries as an ongoing present."⁸⁸ *Family Meals* thus enacts a critique of the family in which critique is not just criticism but an agitation in search of "a livable life," which in Butler's words interrogates "the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation."⁸⁹ This gesture towards a livable life remains a gesture, as the film ambivalently ends with Dana and her mother cleaning the kitchen, wiping away the residue of its symbolic function for the nation, and vowing to "clean" their souls even though it's hard, but it stokes a spark of possibility.

Family Meals is an autobiographical film, but it is more specifically a "domestic ethnography" that I argue turns the camera onto Budisavljević's family more than actually onto herself—this perhaps provides an access point for audiences who may not feel they can sympathize with Dana the lesbian, or perhaps it models the difficulty of ever getting away from the family-cum-nation, let alone as an unhappy queer. However, in a

⁸⁷ It is revealed that Dana's brother had cancer, which Dana ignored and didn't take seriously. Laćan, 241.

⁸⁸ Ahmed, 95.

⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

carefully curated disclosure of herself, Budisavljević has used her agency as an editor, a feminist practice with its own history,⁹⁰ to place a short montage of clips nearly 40 minutes into the film. In this short series of scenes, the viewer is briefly privileged and finally trusted with a look at what Dana might really look like beyond her familial attachments and behind closed doors, as it were. I think it only right that I close my discussion of Budisavljević with these images she chose to show of herself, in just this way.

For the first time, we see Budisavljević introduce herself directly to the camera as if she were a different person than the one with whom the viewer has spent most of the film. She announces, “My name is Dana, and I’m waiting for her to come.” The aspect ratio changes, taking on a smaller, more intimate frame that mimics the appearance of a home movie or a video diary, in which it is clear that Budisavljević’s film crew, however small, is no longer in the room. We no longer see Budisavljević as an unhappy queer but happy for the first time, filming her partner and asking how long it—their relationship—will last. This short clip, which will last less than a minute, perhaps hints at the kind of film Mima Simić truly had in mind when she said that one day a celluloid lesbian would make a real autobiographical story with a happy ending.⁹¹ She is no longer seen in relation to her family, constituting herself as an unhappy queer or an adult child stuck in

⁹⁰ Dijana Jelača points out that editing and montage were “a central element of women’s film work in socialist Yugoslavia” as well as in the Soviet Union. “Towards Women’s Minor Cinema in Socialist Yugoslavia,” *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies* (Fall 2020), 5.

⁹¹ In addition to the 2014 documentary film *Once Again*, by Ana Opalić and Noah Pintarić, Simić ultimately appeared in a 2013 documentary about her own relationship, *Mima and Marta: An Activist Love Film*, by Damir and Sanja Radić.

arrested development, but constituting herself in relation to an intimate partner, occupying a different performative space than the charged family home. Instead of eating meals in the stark lighting of her parents' kitchens, she eats an orange in the dappled sunlight of a different kitchen, juice dripping down her face as she smiles. The inclusion of this clip connects Budisavljević's two formerly separate private lives, even if only briefly. Whereas with her family Budisavljević participates in communal, sometimes painful narration of her coming out in relation to her family (told in the first person plural "we", or "mi"), this short segment is a visual depiction of herself (in the first person singular, "I" or "ja") "behind closed doors" ("u četiri zida"), in a moment of romantic address that is similar to Žmak's *My Dear You*.⁹² This brief clip is brought into the public eye in a calculated reveal of another version of Budisavljević, but she does not submit to creating of herself a seamless biography.

Doing Things with Words: *My Dear You* by Jasna Jasna Žmak

Our language is binary and there doesn't exist a complete avoidance of gender within it, but it certainly offers the freedom of playing around, incorporating, and changing its primary options, like the ones we use. In language, we can always... play around with genders where it's not given, or where it isn't customary, and by accessing language in such a way in the public sphere we are offering new possibilities for naming. Once again, we still have to do that within clearly placed categories and limitations.

⁹² "U četiri zida," or "in [one's own] four walls" denotes the restriction of queerness to a private behavior conducted in one's own home, far from the public sphere. For an overview of this and subversions of this phrase by activists, see Mislava Bertoša and Sandra Antulov, "Ovo su naša četiri zida: slogani zagrebačkih povorki ponosa kao taktika prisvajanja prostora," *Društvena istraživanja* god. 21 br. 3 (2012), 771-791.

—Espi Tomičić⁹³

Indeed, as we think about worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible, the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very "offense" that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms.

—Judith Butler⁹⁴

My Dear You is the first novel by Jasna Jasna Žmak, whose training in dramaturgy elucidates why the novel often feels like a performance or dialogue written for just two characters, or why the performative function of language is so central to it. *My Dear You* often plays around with Croatian's rigidly gendered grammar, connecting it to a history of queer feminist literary activism. There is a rich tradition of "ungendered" novels that erase or trouble the stability of gender in language, like Monique Wittig's *L'Opoponax* (1964), June Arnold's *The Cook and the Carpenter* (1973), Anne Garreta's *Sphinx* (1986), or Jeannette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), as well as novels that switch pronouns with their characters, like Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Ali Smith's *How to be both* (2014), to name just a few.⁹⁵ These works attempt to speak "in ways that have never yet been legitimated," as Judith Butler writes in the above quote in order to "expand the domain of linguistic survival." However, as Espi Tomičić also notes, the Serbo-Croatian language presents a unique challenge to

⁹³ Espi Tomičić, "O tranzicijama i rodnim supostojanjima, ispremeživanjima i pretapanjima: Razgovor s Espijem Tomičićem," *Treća* vol. XXII br. 1 (2020, 16-19) 17. My translation.

⁹⁴ *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 41.

⁹⁵ For a list of "ungendered" novels published in Europe and the United States from 1868-1999, see Anna Livia, *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21.

ungendering language as well as bodies. Whereas the aforementioned texts invent new pronominal genders or avoid gender markers, Žmak is restricted by the Croatian language more than in either French or English. So, she strategically mixes up her usage of masculine and feminine gender, although her characters are marked with feminine grammatical structures in most of the novel. The result is a lack of coherence that disturbs the implicit homology of sex and grammatical gender, making linguistic gender a stylistic or aesthetic choice instead of something that signifies anything essential about either Jasna or the eponymous You.

Like Budisavljević, Žmak draws on her own life in crafting her novel. However, unlike the autobiographical nature (the “trueness” or embodiedness) of Budisavljević's *Family Meals*, Žmak's *My Dear You* is autofictional and thus muddies what Philip Lejeune terms “the autobiographical pact,” or the agreement between the reader and author that “the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical.”⁹⁶ The pathos of Budisavljević's film lies in its correspondence to reality, whereas Žmak's fiction creates a “rarified and self-contained universe of its own.”⁹⁷ That does not mean that Žmak has not written herself into *My Dear You*. The open-ended genre of autofiction, first coined by Serge Doubrovsky, transforms the author from a person to a character as it

⁹⁶ *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary, edited by Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 5.

⁹⁷ See Marjorie Worthington on the unreliability of autofiction. “Fiction in the ‘Post-Truth’ Era: The Ironic Effect of Autofiction,” *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58:5 (2017), 474.

“reinvents the identity of the *personne* of its author as that of a fictional *personnage*.”⁹⁸ *My Dear You* is narrated by a fictionalized version of Žmak, the writer Jasna, who is “woven from the words of her fiction” (52). Jasna (in the first-person, “*ja*”) is writing the story of her relationship with her first girlfriend, the only other character in the novel, who is never named except as the titular “you” (“*ti*”). Just as Budisavljević has agency in presenting her story as a corrective to detrimental or generally absent depictions of lesbians in film, Žmak has total control over how her protagonist and her romance with You is depicted and ultimately preserved in fiction, which is to say that fiction allows her to write an alternative to the grim stories of queerness that dominate the cultural landscape. An epigraph from Branko Miljković reads, “We have only words / And we managed wonderfully in that poverty,” and thus “words” or language is conceived as a place in which Jasna and You can be imagined and freed from the “real world.”⁹⁹

Autofiction—along with the often-intertwined genres of memoir, essay, and autotheory—has become increasingly fertile ground for writers whose lived experiences are rarely represented in the mainstream, promising to destabilize the hegemony of the neutral, unmarked author, the straight white man. Since the rallying cry of women's liberation that “the personal is political” and Helene Cixous' call for “[w]oman to write her self,” autobiographical writing has been utilized as a feminist and queer strategy.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Alex Hughes, “Recycling and Repetition in Recent French “Autofiction”: Marc Weitzmann's Dubrovskian Borrowings,” *The Modern Language Review* Vol. 97 No. 3 (July 2002), 571. Italics in original.

⁹⁹ *My Dear You*, 152.

¹⁰⁰ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875.

Lauren Fournier argues that the rise in autotheoretical art and literature in the 2010s is directly tied to the expanding scope of social media and the “postmodern self-awareness,” resulting in a “postconfessional” performance of the self.¹⁰¹ Amid pressures to “come out,” queer literature has increasingly been tasked and expected to make such a performance of the self, even in fiction. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon writes that autofiction is “‘fiction’ because all memory [recollected from the author's own life] is fictionalizing; ‘auto’ because it is...a literary genre, generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist – not the other way around.”¹⁰² Autofictions often embrace fragmented narratives and short, episodic forms like the vignette or the short story that make tracing a linear narrative difficult.¹⁰³ As such, Žmak's novel “problematize[s] narrative representation, even as [it invokes] it.”¹⁰⁴ Tijana Matijević localizes autofiction in post-Yugoslav literature, arguing that it attempts to claim space in a narrative tradition dominated by masculine and/or nationalist discourses, especially in the last decade.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 6.

¹⁰² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, (1992), 40.

¹⁰³ ⁶² In queer literature, especially Anglophone or Francophone, autofiction is *de rigueur*, as evidenced by works by Ocean Vuong, Michelle Tea, Garth Greenwell, Ali Smith, Edouard Louis, Didier Eribon, Douglas Martin, Eileen Myles, Alison Bechdel, or even its early adopter, Roland Barthes, to name a few. The related “genre” (also loosely defined) of autotheory encourages the production of knowledge from one's own experience, but which is frequently in conversation with theory, like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) or the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981).

¹⁰⁴ Hutcheon, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Tijana Matijević. *Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent: A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature* (London: Transcript, 2020).

And Jasna, the narrator, does write herself, literally. She is not just the protagonist but also the metafictional writer of *My Dear You*, which fulfills Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction as a text that “*self-consciously* and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”¹⁰⁶ This first-person narration, implicitly marked as lesbian by Žmak's own biography as well as by the linguistic structure of the original Croatian (both *Jasna* and *You* written in the feminine grammatical gender), is an act of claiming a queer subjectivity hitherto obscured, or, as Žmak herself writes about LGBTQ+ drama, which was only apparitional. Unlike *écriture féminine*, in which the female body is a site of embodied experience, the focus of *My Dear You*—besides the framing story of *Jasna* and *You*'s relationship—is *Jasna*'s textual relationship to language and its mediation of reality. Stories often revolve around either a single event or fight over semantics between *Jasna* and *You*, the writing of the story in real time, or its editing after the fact. In writing herself, she is immediately confronted with the rigid structure of the Croatian language, to which she has difficulty conforming. She has an antagonistic relationship with Croatian, which is to say the monolingual standard, which Yasemin Yildiz sees as the “access point for the individual” in an ideological system that supposes a homology between a mother tongue and nationality or ethnicity.¹⁰⁷ This “proper” Croatian is tied to linguistic purism which is mediated in the public sphere as well as the private sphere of individual attachments to language. After the breakup of Yugoslavia (but before that, as

¹⁰⁶ Patricia Waugh, *The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), 2. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁷ *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 42.

well) it was necessary to produce a unique standard language that was sufficiently “Croatian.” This meant free from words perceived as Serbian or overly referential to socialist Yugoslavia, which were seen as antithetical to a national Croatian identity and history.

Although Yugoslavia never appears by name in the main text of *My Dear You*, it is through absence that it makes itself known.¹⁰⁸ For Žmak, who came of age in nascent post-independence Croatia, this absence is not just textual but autobiographical, as well. For example, in the story “In Cyrillic,” You’s lack of knowledge of Cyrillic is tied directly to her and Jasna having been born a generation too late to wear the “red neck scarves and blue hats” of Tito’s Pioneers or to celebrate the liberation of concentration camps by partisans in World War II, further associating Serbian or Serbo-Croatian with Yugoslavia and its antifascist roots.¹⁰⁹ The use of Cyrillic in Croatia is controversial in its own right, not least because of competing wartime memories of Vukovar in the 1990s and contentious efforts to re-introduce Cyrillic into public spaces.¹¹⁰ To even see Cyrillic beyond the pages of vintage issues of the newspaper *NIN/HIH*, Jasna and You visit Belgrade, and the border crossings that are necessary to do so are emphasized. Their experience with Cyrillic signs is described as exotic and touristic, emphasizing the artificial cognitive dissonance between Croatian and Serbian. In *My Dear You*, Cyrillic and other deliberate usages of Serbian or Ekavian orthography, foreign languages, and

¹⁰⁸ It appears only twice, and only in the “Lexicon of Lesser Known Terms” in the definitions for the departmentstore Nama and for the date of the liberation of the Danica concentration camp in Koprivnica.

¹⁰⁹ *My Dear You*, 94.

¹¹⁰ See Ljiljana Šarić and Tatjana Radanović Felberg, “Cyrillic Does Not Kill’: Symbols, Identity, and Memory in Croatian Public Discourse,” *Družboslovne Razprave* XXXIII 85 (2017), 51-71.

regional dialect (čakavian) function as what Vlad Beronja calls “shards of speech,” which jam attempts to maintain a pure (Croatian) national identity and obscure the Yugoslav memory of linguistic and cultural plurality. The memory of multilingualism in socialist Yugoslavia that Žmak evokes challenges attempts to “construct a monolithic and ideologically suitable national identity” in the 1990s and today.¹¹¹

Žmak, like her “exilic” predecessors Daša Drndić and Dubravka Ugrešić, critiques the monolingual standard and the national identity that mutually reinforces it. Jasna's relationship to You provides a medium through which this monolingualism is contested, but Croatian is not wholly rejected. You is a scholar of Croatian (“*kroatistica*”) who prefers the rules and regularity of standard language. As a result, Jasna's anglicisms, foreign loanwords, and dialect bother her. Jasna defies these concerns by freely peppering her stories with the “shards” of other languages, alphabets, and dialects that expand Croatian and denaturalize its status as a mother tongue from which national belonging is derived. This national belonging is shown to be the obscured root even of You's prescriptivism, which Žmak shows in the story “*Bicikl*, not *bicikla*.” When Jasna refuses to use the “proper” version of the word “bicycle” (*bicikl*, instead of her preferred regional variant *bicikla*), You starts to say something “xenophobic” along the lines of the far-right Croatian Party of Rights, but instead “decides on something milder, on a variant of the center right: ‘That isn't dialect, that's a rape of language.’”¹¹² The association of violence and nationalist politics with linguistic prescriptivism, spoken in an

¹¹¹ Vlad Beronja, “Shards of Broken Glass: Daša Drndić's Archival Poetics,” *Fluminensia* 32:1 (2020), 20.

¹¹² *My Dear You*, 18.

uncharacteristic moment for You, shows the insidious nationalist politics that have historically undergirded nearly all prescriptivist efforts of Croatian linguists, in socialist Yugoslavia as well as post-independence Croatia.

The only linguistic problem Jasna cannot completely solve in Croatian is gender, and the centrality of Žmak's language games with gender inextricably ties the critique of heteronormativity and Croatian monolingualism. In the story "Neuter," You asks Jasna if in one story, she can "be a boy." Although in English the first-person singular and second-person singular are grammatically genderless, in the original Croatian it is immediately clear that Jasna and You are written in the feminine grammatical gender, with some fluctuations story to story. Therefore, the novel cannot hide the queer, or more specifically lesbian, nature of Jasna and You's relationship. Jasna goes on:

But when I sat down to write the story, I realized that I don't know how, except grammatically, to make you masculine...gender is one of the rare instances in which I like the real world better than language, because in language, at least in ours, there exist only three—masculine, feminine, and neuter—while in the world they are endless... at least I like to think so. It's true that if we were in a different language, Turkish or Finnish, for example, maybe we wouldn't have gender at all, and in some others, we could choose between five, six, or more, but in Croatian we're fated to be either boys or girls, there's not something third, there's nothing in between.

And the truth is that we, you and I, are most often just that, something third, something in between, around, beyond, and over those two or three exclusive genders, we morph depending on the occasion...

...in all of my stories or at least in just one, you and I should be a little masculine, a little feminine, and even a little neuter, since as long as I'm writing us in Croatian, we can't completely avoid gender.¹¹³

The solution for Žmak, then, is to take a fluid approach to gender in grammar, ignore its complicity in what Monique Wittig names “the enforcement of sex in language,” and play around with it.¹¹⁴ As Espi Tomičić says in the epigraph of this section, playing with language in set categories is the only way to repurpose it for queer purposes, at least for now.

The story “Love Story” similarly shows this playful approach, which characterizes Žmak's approach to Croatian in general, but instead of gender fluidity, it looks at how language discursively upholds heterosexual norms, excluding her lesbian relationship with You. Jasna searches all the dictionaries she can find for definitions of the word “love” (“*ljubav*”) and its derivatives. She becomes “completely enraged” when she finds out that the common link between the definitions of the word love, regardless of the dictionary, is the phrase “person of the opposite sex” (139). As Mislava Bertoša shows, this discursive construction of what love *is* contributes to the unquestioned “perfect pair” that is typically heterosexual.¹¹⁵ In the entirety of “Love Story,” the grammatical gender of both Jasna and You switches unpredictably between masculine to feminine from sentence to sentence, with one regularity. In each sentence, regardless of whether Jasna is marked with masculine or feminine grammatical gender, You is marked

¹¹³ *My Dear You*, 139.

¹¹⁴ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 29.

¹¹⁵ “Sociosemioški bricolage: Analiza savršna para,” *Društvena istraživanja* god. 17 br. 6 (2008), 1109-1132. My translation.

with the same grammatical gender. Due to the assumed correlation between sex and gender (*spol* and *rod*), Jasna and You are written in such a way that they always are “of the same sex” and thus never manage to satisfy a heterosexual definition of love as a feeling for “a person of the opposite sex.” They are, as a result, *not* the perfect pair, if that pair can only ever be heterosexual (139).

At least in language, Žmak disturbs the grammatical structures that uphold a binary construction of gender and heterosexual norms. The Croatian language, although still governed by the masculine, neuter, and feminine, becomes something that can accommodate the ambiguities of gender, so that Jasna and You can be not quite “something third,” but something “for which dictionaries have no word” (139). Furthermore, Žmak manages to emphasize the queer or lesbian relationship of Jasna and You by subverting “the perfect pair” and finding new ways of “speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms.”¹¹⁶

Narrating Oneself into History

Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.

—Michel de Montaigne¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 41.

¹¹⁷ “To the Reader,” *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, translated by Donald M. Frame (Knopf, New York, 2003), 2.

[T]o narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down.

—Sara Ahmed¹¹⁸

As the epigraphs that open this section suggest, space is often made for oneself through first-person narration, a way to enter into dialogue with another, as narration in language always already entails a dialogue. In closing, it is worth considering the stakes of Žmak and Budisavljević’s autobiographical impulses against the backdrop of queer archives, or to evoke Duygu Ula’s phrase once more, repertoires of local queer aesthetics. I do so by starting from a somewhat oblique angle, with Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays*, the sixteenth-century work that set the standard for Western autobiography. Montaigne warns his reader at the start of *Essays* that making himself the subject of his work may be an act of vanity, but it is also a way of leaving a trace for others to find. Montaigne goes on to claim that he “dedicated [his autobiography] to...relatives and friends, so that when they have lost [him] (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of [his] habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of [him] more complete and alive.”¹¹⁹ For Montaigne, telling the story of his life and creating an object of it (a book) ensures remembrance after death. He claims his purpose to be private (despite its publication), revealing a desire to be known not by the public but by “relatives and friends” who will remember him as “more complete and alive” by his

¹¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 107.

¹¹⁹ Montaigne, 2.

“habits and temperaments.”¹²⁰ In her essay on Montaigne, Virginia Woolf similarly claims that Montaigne did not create a flat “mirror” of himself but a “*talking of oneself*” and that he “stands out from the legions of the dead with such irrepressible vivacity.”¹²¹ Clocking in at over 1,000 pages, Montaigne’s *Essays* made sure he was remembered in detail.

But Montaigne’s essays, or “attempts,” to write himself are isolated from the public, meant to be of use to his family only after death. This lonely interrogation of self, punctuated by the question “*Que sais-je?*” (“What do I know?”), so close to the questions “What am I?” or “What do others know about me?,” whose answers may not even be known after death, is unexpectedly queer.¹²² Queer self-representation, however, is remembered by its absence, and the historical prohibition of same-sex desire rarely allows individuals to document what they know, what they are, or who knows about it. Its rare appearances in the annals of Western history are sought by others who look backwards¹²³ to prove that there have always been queer lives, which is an urgent desire for sociality and to be seen by others or see other “relatives and friends” like them. This search for genealogy is evident in the “queer archival turn” of the 21st century, which

¹²⁰ Montaigne, 2.

¹²¹ Virginia Woolf, “Montaigne,” in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1948) 84-97, 84, 86. My emphasis.

¹²² *Essays* enjoys its own queer paranoid readings, because Montaigne began writing it after the death of his exceptionally close friend Étienne de La Boétie, about whom he wrote rapturously. See Marc D. Schachter, “That Friendship Which Possesses the Soul;” Montaigne Loves La Boétie,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 41:3-4 (2002), 5-21.

¹²³ See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

attempts to salvage predecessors from hegemonic histories and informal archives.¹²⁴ The *lack* or *destruction* of a documented genealogy that would offer the historical proof of text or image, Gayatri Gopinath argues, pushes searchers to seek “the nonvisual, the tactile, the audible, the kinesthetic, and the antimonumental.”¹²⁵ In these forms, queerness is not confirmed but only gestured toward or closely read. Moreover, as Ann Cvetkovich has shown, even when there are archives of queerness, like the lesbian ones she constructs, they are saturated with trauma and full of “girls like [her] feeling bad.”¹²⁶

Here, although Žmak and Budisavljević’s works do not “look backward” (and there is not much to look backward to), they are more implicated in the search for queer genealogy than they might appear. Against the background of an incomplete lesbian or queer history, their autobiographical impulse gains an accretive quality because they can leave traces more explicit than the “unfinished lives” of Melanie Micir’s modernist women, and they do so by creating what Woolf called a “talking of oneself” in relation to Montaigne. There is much to be suspicious about in representation as an unproblematic social good that profits off marginality, but narrating oneself, even as a fragmented self, may be a way to attempt to be visible for future generations *and* contemporaneous others. In doing so from domestic or intimate spaces, Žmak and Budisavljević narrate what Cvetkovich calls “the reparative work of daily living,” which works to fill incomplete

¹²⁴ See “Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015), 211-232.

¹²⁵ Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 168.

¹²⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

queer archives by telling the history of the present moment.¹²⁷ Moreover, when one looks beyond the American history of queerness, which is arguably the least incomplete, it is perhaps irresponsible to dismiss the importance of representation, although *Family Meals* and *My Dear You* do more with their queerness than just name it. Budisavljević does this in *Family Meals* by narrating herself to and with her family as an unhappy queer, or as another girl like Cvetkovich, a lesbian who feels bad. Expressing her unhappiness, Ahmed argues, can be “affirmative” by “gestur[ing] toward another world...[that] might exist after the walls of misery are brought down.”¹²⁸ Although language games with Croatian were the focus of my reading of *My Dear You*, Žmak’s novel might be seen as the mirror image of *Family Meals*, were they to sit together in an archive beyond this chapter. The narrator and You are “happily queer” to have gone “beyond the straight lines of [heteronormative] happiness scripts,” even if only in language.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 26.

¹²⁸ Ahmed, 107.

¹²⁹ Ahmed, 115.

Chapter 2:

Decontextualizing *Dalmacija*: Aesthetics in New Dalmatian Film and Literature and the Skeleton in the Closet of Olja Savičević's *Adios, Cowboy* (2010)

The concern of this chapter is literature and film about the “bad object” of the Dalmatian coast, or the hinterlands (suburbs, working-class neighborhoods) and their inhabitants who occupy “the same darkness that is touristically called ‘sunny Dalmatia’.”¹³⁰ Croatian tourism slogans advertising “the Mediterranean as it once was” obscure the “human experience of the Adriatic coast and of the broader Mediterranean basin” as it actually is.¹³¹ In this chapter, I will survey a selection of cinematic and literary works from a new “Dalmatian wave” of the 2010s that peel away this “sunny” image, calling into question the accuracy of such a depiction of the region and whom it serves. These works include the films *Quit Staring at My Plate* (*Ne gledaj mi u pijat*, 2016) by Hana Jušić and *Mare* (2020) by Andrea Štaka, as well as the novels *Singer in the Night* (*Pjevač u noći*, 2016), and *Adios, Cowboy* (*Adio kauboju*, 2010) by Olja Savičević Ivančević, *Turbofolk* (2018) by Viktorija Božina, and the short story “Refrigerator” (“Frižider,” 2020) by Maša Kolanović. After providing an overview of common narrative and aesthetic tendencies of these works, I will turn my attention to perhaps the most popular new “Dalmatian novel,” *Adios, Cowboy*.

¹³⁰ Ranko Marinković, *Ruke* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1972), 35. My translation.

¹³¹ Stipe Grgas quoted in Nikola Petković, “Between the Rock and the Homeplace: Poetics of Bestiality,” in *The Errant Labor of the Humanities: Festschrift Presented to Stipe Grgas*, edited by Sven Cvek, Borislav Knežević, Jelena Šesnić (Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet, 2017), 102.

Adios, Cowboy is a pastiche of noir and American, spaghetti, and Red Westerns that takes place in a small town outside of Split, where the narrator, Dada, returns home to investigate the suicide of her younger brother Danijel four years earlier. Savičević's subversion of the Western genre and its gendered tropes received much attention in narratological and feminist readings, particularly through the character of Dada. In my reading, however, I argue for turning a closer eye to the character of Danijel, whose narrative absence and ambiguity makes him a site of suspicion and projection for others. It is productive to read him as a "queer child," to use Kathryn Bond Stockton's term, who never fully "grows up" into the gendered expectations of adulthood or sexuality expected of him. By doing so, he troubles a normative construction of masculinity that is unable to imagine him as anything but already queer. Danijel's absence ultimately focalizes the various ways that the reproduction of an ethnonational future is enforced by the social exclusion of outsiders like Danijel, Karlo Šain, and Marija Čarija. Moreover, when he is always already assumed to be queer, or more accurately gay, and his death and silence on the matter seals that fate, there was never a future for him to begin with. Dada, on the other hand, retains a degree of mobility and leaves town to become a guest worker in Germany. In the division of their fates, Savičević's depiction of Dalmatia, although full of intimate details, is ultimately ambivalent.

Ambivalence is a defining characteristic of new Dalmatian film and literature. These works bear witness to the detrimental effects of tourism, as well as what the coast actually *looks* and *feels* like for those who live there and may not have the secure

mobility of the tourist to leave, particularly women, displacing the “museum...destination...[or] stage set” of Dalmatia.¹³² They are usually set in “ugly” neighborhoods or suburbs against a decaying industrial landscape where precarious, seasonal, or migrant labor is an integral part of life, and conversation is often suffused with dialect.¹³³ The aesthetics and affects of these “little places” contribute to an overall “structure of feelings”¹³⁴ marked by gloom, dissatisfaction, and various “sentiments of disenchantment” borne from a lack of agency.¹³⁵ The future is characterized by uncertainty and often deferred, and so most of the protagonists in these works are in a state of arrested development, unable to “grow up.” In *Adios, Cowboy*, Danijel is one particular extreme of this, and I propose that he be read as a “queer child,” to use Kathryn Bond Stockton’s term. Danijel is an elusive character who never fully achieves the gendered expectations of adulthood or sexuality expected of him. In his inability to “grow up,” he troubles normative constructions of masculinity, but Savičević’s Dalmatia is also unable to conceive of him outside these constructions.

They are temporally marked by an extreme “presentness,” which is to say that they are firmly grounded in the Croatian, postsocialist, transitional present. Those that do

¹³²Olja Savičević, *Singer in the Night*, translated by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Istros Books, 2019), 71.

¹³³ In English translations of Olja Savičević Ivančević’s novels *Adios, Cowboy* and *Singer in the Night*, a Cockney accent replaces Dalmatian dialects, but it is worth questioning what is lost in this decision to privilege an ambiguously working-class inflection.

¹³⁴ Raymond Williams’ term is often ambiguously used, but his definition here is most useful to this chapter: “[A] structure in the sense that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren’t otherwise connected--people weren’t learning it from each other; yet it was one of feeling much more than of thought--a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, of which the best evidence was often [literature].” *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (London, New Left Books, 1979), 159.

¹³⁵ Paolo Virno quoted in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-4.

look briefly to the past look no further than their childhood in the 1980s. The “presentness” of these works is likely a result of their shared historical moment, as they were all produced from 2010-2020 in a post-EU membership, post-2008 crash Croatia, in contrast to texts in which the past is overwhelmingly seen or remembered. Tijana Matijević marks the year 2010 as the year when women began increasing their share of the post-Yugoslav literary/cinematic market, addressing more feminist concerns, and receiving more critical attention.¹³⁶ Tatjana Rosić Ilić argues that 2010 marks a sea change in the “paternity issue” of post-Yugoslav literature, when narratives about the negotiation of patriarchal communities between fathers and sons were replaced with narratives of absent fathers who become sites of identification for their sons, who hope to find answers to their current state of crisis or aimlessness.¹³⁷

In general, the works surveyed in this chapter do not engage this “paternity issue” in the same way, if at all. They avoid the reinstatement of masculine power sought by Rosić Ilić’s narrators, from which they are excluded. For example, in Hana Jušić’s *Quit Staring at My Plate*, the father’s absence is liberating for his daughter because it disrupts the hierarchy of her family. In Olja Savičević’s *Adios, Cowboy*, the narrator identifies with her late father not for his patriarchal authority but for his “alternative masculinity”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent: A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature* (Berlin: Verlag, 2020), 12-14.

¹³⁷ Rosić Ilić finds this uncertainty and loss of a paternal community in the historical “fragmentation” of Yugoslavia, arguing that narrators do not seek their mothers’ help because they consider their mothers to be secondary historical actors. Tatjana Rosić Ilić, “Metaphor of (Lost) Reign: Policies of Paternity and Post-Yugoslav Cultural Space,” *Serbian Studies* 29:1-2 (2018), 95.

¹³⁸ Matijević, *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent*, 163.

and because he didn't "fully belong to anyone."¹³⁹ Other narrators are implicated in intergenerational, matriarchal relationships. In Andrea Štaka's *Mare*, the eponymous character does not inherit her family home, which goes to her brother, but does inherit her mother's soothing "warm hands," as does her own daughter. In "Refrigerator," Maša Kolanović's adolescent narrator imagines that her body transforms into that of her grandmother and is calmed by the clutter of the old woman's "completely useless capital."¹⁴⁰ In Viktorija Božina's *Turbofolk*, the narrator Amelie actually disidentifies with her mother, but this is because she sees her mother's belief in marriage to be a misguided investment in a myth of upward mobility, which just perpetuates the same "story from the province" that her mother hopes Amelie will disrupt.¹⁴¹

The Ugly Side of Dalmatia

"...the happy north Mediterranean is mostly a loser's place, a place that should be left because the future here is brittle. That Mediterranean is marked by an unrelenting decline, debt, violence, intolerance, lawlessness, pollution, corruption....a land of unfinished jobs and unfinished houses...an object of market exchange."—Jurica Pavičić¹⁴²

¹³⁹ This is untranslated in the English version and is my translation ("ničiji posve") from the 2017 edition of *Adio, kauboju* (Zagreb: Sandorf), 28. See later note about translations for *Adios, Cowboy*.

¹⁴⁰ "We were two peas in a pod. A big woman and a small one. A woman and a womanette." Kolanović, "Refrigerator," from *Poštovani kukci i druge jezive priče* (Zagreb: Profil, 2019). My thanks to Vlad Beronja, to whom all subsequent translations of this story are credited.

¹⁴¹ "Every afternoon after a *telenovela*, she'll take the kid for a walk...He earns a salary that he spends on his wife, kid, and gambling...Every Sunday evening they return home to their apartment in their secondhand car and in disgust realize that they resemble their parents more and more." *Turbofolk*, (Zagreb: Sandorf, 2018), 40. All translations of *Turbofolk* are henceforth mine.

¹⁴² *Knjiga o jugu* (Zagreb: Profil, 2018), 6. My translation.

In the transition period, city centers and economies have been reoriented towards tourism and service, pricing out residents to peripheries¹⁴³ and taking on “the characteristics historically present in female work—precariousness, flexibility, mobility, fragmentary nature, low status, and low pay.”¹⁴⁴ This occurs simultaneously with the general repatriarchalization of post-Yugoslav societies¹⁴⁵ and intense mapping of ethno-national identity onto the historically “liquid borderland” of the Adriatic Coast.¹⁴⁶ Following Ernst Gellner’s skepticism, it could be said that Dalmatia is an artificial fount of “authentic” Croatian culture, grounded in the “healthy, pristine, vigorous life of the peasants, of the *Volk*, the *narod*.”¹⁴⁷ But this is an image with a particular, profitable purpose that does not critically reflect the differences between the (historically underdeveloped) region of Dalmatia and the rest of the country, particularly the capital of Zagreb. This myth imagines a continuous national heritage that conveniently skips the Yugoslav period--as is visible in the uncommon success Croatia has had in acquiring UNESCO recognition of various pre-industrial objects of “intangible cultural heritage”--despite the stubborn presence of its architecture and the people who live there.¹⁴⁸ This

¹⁴³ A full overview of tourism in Dalmatia is not possible here. For history of tourism in Yugoslavia, see *Yugoslavia’s Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s-1980s)*, edited by Karin Taylor and Hannes Grandits (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), esp 241-278.

¹⁴⁴ Johanna Oksala, “Affective Labor and Feminist Politics,” *Signs* vol. 41 no. 2 (Winter 2016), 281.

¹⁴⁵ See Lilijana Burcar, *Restauracija kapitalizma: repatrijarhalizacija društva*, translated by Mirta Jurilj (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku i Centar za ženske studije, 2020).

¹⁴⁶ Pamela Ballinger, “Liquid Borderlands, Inelastic Sea? Mapping the Eastern Adriatic,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, edited by Omer Bartov and Eric Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 423-437.

¹⁴⁷ Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 57.

¹⁴⁸ See *Holidays After the Fall: Seaside Architecture and Urbanism in Bulgaria and Croatia*, edited by Elke Beyer, Anke Hagemann and Michael Zinganel (Berlin: Jovis, 2013), esp 155-252.

architecture is a central motif in *Singer in the Night*, in which its lost futurity¹⁴⁹ is mourned along with the exodus of its residents, the poor to “industrial suburbs” and the rich to “green elite [suburbs]” (71). The protagonist Clementine becomes melancholy when she sees that “little stars beside the intercom indicated that tourists had penetrated even into [the] concrete oases” of Split’s concrete blocks on Dinko Šimunović Street (16). She likens the feeling of the emptying space to the unsettling calm after an apocalypse: “a town without birds, insects or people, a town of inanimate things...Or an old dance hall filled with the ghosts of dancers...Or a closed road. A factory: machines and turbines without workers (17).

Tourism is sometimes shown only glancingly, if at all, keeping the focus on the locals who *cannot* leave. For example, the film *Mare* refuses to center the privileged figure of the mobile tourist by not crossing borders that Mare (Marija Škaričić) cannot or does not want to. Mare visits a friend at work, a grocery store near the Dubrovnik airport, and several foreigners call for assistance in English. The camera stays in the storage room with Mare while her friend rings up the purchase. Mare slumps against the wall, waiting on the tourists at the same time that she is avoiding them. This illustrates the interactions that can occur in the liminal spaces of what Erica Williams calls a “touristscape,” an environment in which “the tourism industry is a central focal point” that locals and tourists occupy and move through differently.¹⁵⁰ When tourism is shown directly, it is

¹⁴⁹ See *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980*, edited by Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić (New York: MOMA, 2018), esp. 156-159.

¹⁵⁰ *Sex Tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous Entanglements* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 6.

portrayed as grotesque.¹⁵¹ This is evident in “Refrigerator,” as the narrator watches Zadar change from the place where she spent summers with her grandmother:

The entire town turned into a *cafeteria*...Now there are only *sleek* German drug stores and *hot pink* cosmetic shops on every step.... little creams and oils *scented like coconut and tropical fruit*...Now [the boardwalk is] filled with souvenir stalls selling *flashing* keychains and sailor shirts that say “Dalmatia” on them. The *smells of coconut* on people’s bodies and *fresh plastic* have overpowered the scent of the sea...Shriveled and pale, [elderly locals] crawl in the sea of *tanned, beefy* bodies. They look like ghosts amidst the *smell of popcorn, pizza, cotton candy, and ice cream scoops the color of turquoise sky*.¹⁵²

The sensory input is disorienting. The town is now a “cafeteria” marked by consumerism made material in the consumption of food. The bodies in view are corporeal and virile in comparison to the dwindling elderly residents who fade into the background like ghosts. The artificial colors and smells that overpower the natural landscape, however, reveal the illusory nature of the town. The fantasy of Dalmatia that can be bought on a souvenir is one that no longer has any origin, because the Zadar that the narrator knew as a child is gone. Like her grandmother’s apartment that finally got air conditioning, it was buried and sealed off “cold as a grave.”¹⁵³

If Zadar is described as a confection to be consumed, Olja Savičević describes Split in *Adios, Cowboy* as a hedonistic spectacle. Even retirees visiting on cruises don’t detract from the libidinal rush of scents and sex, because they are described as disembodied automatons--they walk in orderly columns and are marked by their

¹⁵¹“The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.” Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 27.

¹⁵² Kolanović, “Refrigerator,” unnumbered.

¹⁵³ Kolanović, “Refrigerator,” unnumbered.

detachable “prostheses and toupees” (57).¹⁵⁴ The landscape is fragranced not with food or artificial smells that mimic the sweetness of fruit, but with “the mild winds of hashish, the stench of bodies and perfume,” foregrounding the human body’s exhales and excretions (57).¹⁵⁵ It is described as a sinful paradise like “Sodom” and “Eldorado” where “girls in high heels” and “clean-shaven lads” cavort, “smelling of vinyl and genitalia, money and tobacco” (57). Compared to the ecstasy and activity of the center, the Old Settlement outside of town is still, barely moving: “[Dada] and Ma sitting on the balcony, sipping tepid beer out of plastic bottles or eating melon, while a fan on the railing pretends to be a breeze...Here, nothing has changed; it hasn’t budged” (28). Just as the old citizens of Zadar leave or are dying out, the hinterland around Split is a sterile landscape that won’t “ever bloom into a paradise garden” (87): “There is nothing green anywhere you look. Only dust...the spring juices have now turned to dust and my blood has turned to dust. I’m sure that in males of all species their sperm has turned to dust” (42). The Old Settlement is marked by the hangouts of elderly pensioners, where old women “[sit] on little benches and [spend] the whole afternoon saying nothing in their brilliant dialect,” a far cry from the frenzied youth of the center (96).

These settings, which Miranda Levanat-Peričić calls “antiplaces” (“*protumjesta*”) or “former places” (“*bivša mjesta*”), lag temporally and economically behind urban centers where progress happens.¹⁵⁶ For example, Savičević creates an internal geography

¹⁵⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from the 2015 version of *Adios, Cowboy*, translated by Celia Hawkesworth (New York: McSweeney’s).

¹⁵⁵ The narrator Dada, however, recognizes that even these bodies are bought and sold, if, as the text suggests, the youths “smelling of vinyl and genitalia, money and tobacco” are sex workers (AC 57).

¹⁵⁶ *Poredbeni dvogledi* (Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru, 2017), 135. My translation.

for *Adios, Cowboy* in which “grey, grey” Zagreb is “the most distant city on Earth” from the Old Settlement (64), which is on the other side of Split’s industrial zone, now a “stranded wreck” and “garbage heap” (28), and which is marked by the closing of the symbolic “Kino Balkan” and “Hotel Illyria,” thus seeming to exist after (or at the end of) history. Maša Kolanović’s demarcation of the spatial center and periphery in “urban” Croatian prose is useful here to briefly sketch out a provincial/cosmopolitan divide that can be productively extended to other works studied in this chapter. The urban neighborhood (*kvart*, or suburb, *predgrađe*) is depicted as a repressed threat on the margins of the city center, as a “dark, uncomfortable, ‘miserable place,’ a place in the shadows, often comparable to ‘the end’ of the world...a symbolic setting in between urban and rural.”¹⁵⁷ In this setting, there is an interplay of symbolic markers of class and provinciality, as an urban, cosmopolitan identity is constructed in contrast to its repressed rurality as represented by dark *kvartovi* or *predgrađe*.¹⁵⁸

Viktorija Božina’s novel *Turbofolk* avoids romanticizing its environment, instead depicting Zadar and Benkovac as a “provincial shithole” (15). The narrator Amelie defines herself against her hometown by becoming cultured, which is to say losing her

¹⁵⁷ Split, too, could be considered an urban center despite the sizable difference in population between it and Zagreb. Savičević, however, consistently places her works either outside the city (the Old Settlement of *Adios, Cowboy*) or in peripheral *kvartovi* (*Singer in the Night*). Kolanović, “Što je urbano u ‘urbanoj prozi’?: Grad koji proizvodi i grad iz kojega proizlazi suvremena hrvatska,” *Umjetnost riječi* LII 1-2 (2008), 75. My translation.

¹⁵⁸ These spaces are dismissed as a “backwards” stronghold for conservative or nationalistic politics, which Stef Jansen argues that, although often true, excludes them from a post-Yugoslav identification that is overwhelmingly based in capital cities. Stef Jansen, “Cosmopolitan Openings and Closures in Post-Yugoslav Antinationalism,” in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, edited by Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco (London: Routledge, 2016), 75-92.

accent and studying literature.¹⁵⁹ Her story appears at first to be a standard *Bildungsroman*, a search for modernity and individuality that will ultimately lead to her ascension into the intellectual community of other Croatian literary scholars. However, she ends up not quite belonging anywhere, marginalized at home and in school. She reconciles herself to some pleasures of her working-class background, namely turbofolk, but remains critical of the only model of affirmative Dalmatian identity available to her, which she associates with her childhood friends who marry young and never leave their hometown:

On the rearview mirror, a crucifix hung, because fuck it, they're all Catholics. Behind the crucifix, a little pennant with the lyrics to the national anthem...because fuck it, God and the Croats, you can't have one without the other. Behind the anthem--who else but the Hajduk football club...because not only are they Croats and Catholics, but they're Dalmatians, too. Forgetting that they're actually the part of Dalmatia that Dalmatia itself wants to get rid of. (40-41)

Even though she spurns them, these markers of provinciality are attached to Amelie when she enters the space of the university, as she is mocked when she accidentally wears her brother's Hajduk scarf and is asked if her family keeps livestock. She remains "what [she] always was--an outsider" (8). In the novel, turbofolk music ("the bottom of the barrel," 125) becomes a signifier for what Uroš Čvoro calls "the spectre of class as the disappearing discourse in the post-socialist reality" and thus of the culture of her hometown.¹⁶⁰ Because the genre is perceived as a kitschy, low-brow, Serbian or Balkan

¹⁵⁹ Natalija Stepanović notes that Amelie's studies make her "the ideal type of protagonist for intertextuality." 'Iz ormara na police': o odrastanju i izlasku iz ormara u hrvatskoj *queer* književnosti," 65. My translation.

¹⁶⁰ *Turbo-folk Music and Cultural Representations of National Identity in Former Yugoslavia* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 148.

import, its popularity among the working class becomes problematic for the maintenance of a cosmopolitan Croatian, or European, identity. Amelie reconciles this part of her and begins to enjoy turbofolk and speak her “first-learned speech with its accent” (110), remarking that there is “something hypocritical” about the public’s hatred for the genre (126), which is ultimately a rejection of the working class that listens to it.

Hana Jušić’s film *Quit Staring at My Plate* similarly avoids a romanticization of its setting by denying viewers the satisfaction of seeing a recognizable Šibenik, except to locals, and provoking a sense of disgust. Reviewing the film, Viktor Zahtilo describes it as “an anti-postcard...urban chaos and derelict socialist architecture of Šibenik’s hinterlands, devoid of color...closeups of frying meat and irritated skin daubed with the sheen of St. John’s Wort oil.”¹⁶¹ In his review, Boris Homovec claims that “not a single shot in the film is beautiful.”¹⁶² The film is much more interested in showing the perspective, and sensations, of everyday life in the city. It opens with Marijana and her father carrying out their daily routines in the morning, then leaving their shabby apartment and walking to work. Their walk to work is filmed with a shaky camera, framing the jumbled overlap of apartment balconies, cars, buses, and storefronts from the low perspective of a pedestrian. Grand vacation homes are only seen from within, as Marijana takes a job cleaning them. A view of the city from above is only shown late in the film, after Marijana meets people her age from Zagreb and realizes that there is an outside to the city in which she has spent her entire life. The sea is rarely seen, although

¹⁶¹ Viktor Zahtila, “Podhrtavanja ispod identitetskih razvalina,” *Kulturpunkt* 12/1/2016. My translation.

¹⁶² Boris Homovec, “Pogledao sam 'Ne gledaj mi u pijat' i potpuno mi je jasno zašto se o njemu toliko pričalo; film je fantastičan,” *Telegram* 11/16/2016. My translation.

Marijana meets her brother Zoran for lunch at the same bus stop by the water. Even here, the sight of the sea is crowded out by the sound of passing cars and scooters and by the unappetizing meal cooked by their mother, which Marijana throws into the water in one of the few acts of defiance available to her.

In addition to ambivalence and the frustration of Marijana and Amelie in *Quit Staring at My Plate* and *Turbofolk*, the new Dalmatian film and literature surveyed in this chapter shares similar affective moods. The editors of *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia* argue that the experience of capitalism in postsocialism has become “a restructured feeling: from an optimistic, if ambivalent “love affair” with it during Yugoslav times, it becomes recalibrated into a harsh reality whose promise of material security appears increasingly unattainable (except for a select few).”¹⁶³ This “harsh reality” is ultimately felt as discontent, hopelessness, or longing, which are all provoked by enclosure and a powerlessness to do anything about it.¹⁶⁴ There are still small moments of tenderness to be found, although they ultimately do nothing to improve characters’ social or economic status. For example, in *Quit Staring at My Plate*, the

¹⁶³ Dijana Jelača, Maša Kolanović Danijela Lugarić, “Introduction: Cultural Capitalism the (Post)Yugoslav Way,” in *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and its Other*, edited by Dijana Jelača, Maša Kolanović Danijela Lugarić (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-20. 2. If, as Brian Massumi argues, affect is “an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory,” then the range of affects provoked by the works in this chapter are able to be compared more broadly (*Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 45). In postsocialist spaces specifically, Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope has been adopted to describe a particular commonality of experience. For this concept in the former Yugoslavia, see Maša Kolanović’s contribution, “Back to the Future of (Post)Socialism: The Afterlife of Socialism in Post-Yugoslav Cultural Space,” in *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives*, 165-194; for a comparative use in China, see Leung Wing-Fai, “The Postmodern Life of My Aunt— A Chronotope of Postsocialist China,” *Annales de géographie*, vol.1-2 no. 695-696 (2014), 844-864.

¹⁶⁴Although Sianne Ngai’s ugly feelings” overly specific and static, her conclusion that they are weak because they arise in a “general state of obstructed agency” is fitting here. *Ugly Feelings*, 3-4.

sibling relationship between the withdrawn Marijana and spoiled Zoran is undergirded by his privileged status as the older son who doesn't work. She still gives him a light brush on the ear when she leaves the house as a farewell, which is a rare expressive gesture that extends the possibility of solidarity with her, although he will ultimately choose his privileged status with their parents over her. In *Mare*, Mare washes an older neighbor's hair in her yard; the scene is filmed in disorientingly rough close-ups of either Mare's hands or the woman's hair, making it impossible to see them in the same frame. The result is a scene that marks a departure from the long shot-boredom of Mare's everyday life, but the disjunct nature of its filming also indicates that this nontransactional act of care is disruptive to her legibility as a wife, mother, or worker.

In *Adios, Cowboy*, atmospheric feelings describe the sensation of being trapped in a small place or provide vague desires of what it would be like to leave. For example, Danijel could have been "an astronomer [or a] poet" had he lived anywhere but the Old Settlement, which he describes as the "same old social welfare *mournful gray brown with black tones...slimy and wet and mud, indescribable gloom*" (169, my emphasis). Depression, economic and emotional, is subsumed in the landscape itself. Miranda Levanat-Peričić also eloquently points out that the earth, in which Marija Čarija can hear the "bones of dead occupiers," becomes "dark soil soaked in time," which makes the Old Settlement an eerie place to live.¹⁶⁵ This gloom is contrasted with what Karlo Šain ambiguously calls "radiance." For Dada, it is the imagined feeling of what it would be like to experience beauty or luxury, completely lacking in the Old Settlement. It is a

¹⁶⁵ Levanat-Peričić, 151.

“discreet,” immaterial shine in “the way the willowy waiter serves a dessert,” or “lively and round like a magic lantern” (AC pg). Dada is stuck in the Old Settlement, and cannot actually grasp this radiance, rendering it only an aspiration that makes the *lack* of radiance felt more. In *Turbofolk*, the jugo wind is characterized by its ability to make residents miserable and surround them with an inescapable squall, trapping them. Its dirtiness “delivers afflictions to your bones, it’s a wind that assaults your mind and your soul with trash,” and the threatening climate in Zadar, with a “menacingly hazy sky...concocted from rain, dark clouds, negative energy, tattered leaves, dust, and sand,” contrasts the superficial joviality of the summertime (TF 17).

These powerless, or almost powerless, feelings also often reflect gendered divisions of family and economy. In *Mare* and *Quit Staring at My Plate*, the protagonists share a lack of privacy in their homes. While Mare attempts to go to the bathroom, her family members enter and exit, leaving the door open and barely noticing that she is there. Similarly, in *Quit Staring at My Plate* the bathroom is the only place where Marijana can be alone, but her family members push at the door even as she is trying to take out a bloody menstrual pad. The general mood evoked is what Aida Vidan calls “patriarchal” and “provincial doom,” as Marijana is trapped in her family’s apartment under the control of her father.¹⁶⁶ At 24, Marijana is a far cry from the “luminous” and “re-assuringly feminine” post-feminist women who Angela McRobbie claims construct

¹⁶⁶ Aida Vidan, “Framing the Body, Vocalizing the Pain: Perspectives of South Slavic Film Directors,” *Studies in European Cinema* vol. 15 nos. 2-3 (2018) 125-145, 141-142.

themselves in the public spotlight.¹⁶⁷ Instead, she is an awkward, androgynous youth who seems caught between adulthood and childhood. This is in large part a result of the familial confinement and supervision that has foreclosed her socialization as a sexualized adult, or a woman. This claustrophobic closeness proves to be preferable to the uncertainty of independence, as Marijana ultimately decides to stay with her family in a state of arrested development. Mare's attachment to her family home is less gothic than Marijana's, but she still finds herself unhappily tied to the idea of family as a normative path to happiness, which Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, or the relationship with "something you desire [that] is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."¹⁶⁸ Mare's lack of privacy is a spatial reflection of her invisibility beyond her role as a wife and mother, which was never what she wanted. She wanted to stay in Switzerland as a guest worker, but, like Marijana, the uncertainty of the future propelled her to take the safe route of "reinvestment in the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital" by investing her hope in her husband and children despite her desire to leave.¹⁶⁹

Queer, Cowboy

The enigmatic character of Danijel haunts *Adios, Cowboy*, and the facts of his death are repeated several times by Dada as if out of a police report: "Daniel, my brother, died in his eighteenth-year by jumping under a speeding Intercity Osijek-Zagreb-Split train. He threw himself onto the track from the concrete viaduct over the railway one

¹⁶⁷ *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), 60.

¹⁶⁸ *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹⁶⁹ Lauren Berlant, "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in La Promesse and Rosetta," *Public Culture* 19:2 (2007), 281.

winter morning.”¹⁷⁰ Dada takes on the “case” of Danijel when she returns to her hometown, the Old Settlement, to interrogate the “old gay” Karlo Šain and determine if Danijel said anything to him before his death.¹⁷¹ Cowboys might be the *lingua franca* of the novel, but Dada herself is more aligned with a cynical hardboiled detective and the portions of the novel she narrates with a film noir: the voice-over (her 1st person narration), flashbacks, Angelo the gigolo as her betrayer and *homme fatale*, clues (some misleading), moral and urban degradation. Noir, especially when layered on top of a Western as it is in *Adios, Cowboy*, can combine its nuanced emotional palette with the “revenge plot” of a Western: “Usually, the hero continues to struggle with this trauma (many times the violent death of a loved one), and often the action...centers around “settling a score” so the hero can (he hopes) put the past behind him and move forward.”¹⁷² The score to be settled, however, is finding some sort of concrete documentation or clear picture of Danijel that would explain his suicide in his own words.

Here, my reading of the novel diverges from, but also augments, previous scholarship. Firstly, Dada has primarily been read as a feminist narrator who subverts the role of the typically masculine cowboy. I would add that she also subverts the role of the noir detective, as shown previously. She has access to the inconspicuous mobility of a private investigator who moves between respectable and seedy environments with ease,

¹⁷⁰ Savičević, *Adios, Cowboy*, 46.

¹⁷¹ “That old gay’s back,” said my sister when she called me in Zagreb...It took me half an hour to pack a bag with everything I could cram into the idea of my life.” 166.

¹⁷² David Meuel, *The Noir Western: Darkness on the Range, 1943-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 15.

as well as the emotional depth of his *Weltschmerz* and moral ambiguity, which is typically not a characteristic of the flat personality of the cowboy. If anything, Danijel occupies this flat role in the novel. Secondly, the importance of Dada's investigation to the plot, as shown by the repetition of the circumstances of Danijel's death and her search for clues, indicates that it is more than just, as Tijana Matijević argues, "a necessary step in her own maturation and emancipation – as a woman."¹⁷³ On the contrary, Dada and Danijel are each other's doppelgangers and cannot be read in isolation. While Dada, the outsider of the Old Settlement, is developed as a character in the foreground of the novel and is able to leave town for her future as a 21st century *gastarbeiter* in Germany, Danijel, the insider, is never fully seen as he disappears into childhood memories and has *no* future whatsoever. I argue that Danijel should be recuperated from just serving as a constitutive background for Dada and closely read for what his "provocative unreadability" as a protoqueer or queer child might reveal about the immediate world of the novel, and why he was so incompatible with it.¹⁷⁴

At this point, we arrive at the skeleton in the closet of *Adios, Cowboy*. Danijel's queerness¹⁷⁵ is the mystery that opens the novel; more specifically, there is a suspicion in the Old Settlement that he had a sexual relationship with his neighbor Karlo Šain. Dada

¹⁷³ Matijević, *From Post-Yugoslavia*, 154.

¹⁷⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit study the "enigma" of Caravaggio's youths who are, much like Danijel, "not yet domesticated by sexual--perhaps even gendered--bodies" and thus presumed to be implicated in a homosexual scene with the viewer, or Caravaggio (13). In their frozen state, they permanently possess this "secret, one not of interiority but rather of indefinite extensibility, unrepresented, and unrepresentable, ontological affinities." *Caravaggio's Secret* (Cambridge: MIT Press, October Books, 1998), 82.

¹⁷⁵ I will be using the term "queer" in relation to Danijel because it encompasses his broader capacity to be a problematic figure for heteronormative alignments of sex and gender. When I use "gay" or "sexuality," it is in reference to the characters' speculations, because in the novel Danijel is conceived along a limited hetero/homosexual axis. "Gay" also references the perceived future of Danijel as a queer child, which will be expanded upon.

returns home to the Old Settlement and “take[s] Danijel’s things out of [the] closet” when she moves into his bedroom, and one might imagine that it is symbolic of her quest to see if Danijel, too, is inside.¹⁷⁶ The reader, however, only receives a “vague image of Danijel assembled from the fragments of Dada’s memories and suspicious clues.”¹⁷⁷ The singular instance in which his own voice enters the narrative is the inclusion of his emails at the end, which detail his increasing isolation and unhappiness (“things are sometimes so bad for me I cant describe its like someone gouged out my stomach” (172). Because he has already died at the start of the novel, there is no way to confirm his sexual relationship with Karlo Šain, nor am I interested in doing so. What is of interest to my reading of the novel is the selective image that the reader receives from Dada of Danijel, which is that of “an effeminate boy” who constitutes “a *gap* in the discursive fabric of the given.”¹⁷⁸

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this “effeminate boy” as a “protogay” child who haunts history and has no way to express himself in the current social order or language, and Danijel is a similarly indeterminate figure. Savičević blocks the reader from any identitarian foreclosure or confirmation of Danijel’s queerness with ambiguous descriptions, such as “a poet, or a revolutionary, a cosmologist, a red-haired child” who has no hope of “[being] like everyone else” (166). The interior world of the novel, however, does not know what to do with this ambiguity that spills over the borders of unspoken masculinity, and so Danijel is imagined to have crossed the “invisible,

¹⁷⁶ This is my translation, as “*ormar*” is translated as “cupboard” in the English. *Adio, kauboju*, 10.

¹⁷⁷ Matijević, *From Post-Yugoslavia*, 164.

¹⁷⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this “effeminate boy,” like “tomboyish girls,” as those “protogay” children who haunt history and had no way to express their queerness, but I also find the description fitting for those children who are not identifiably “gay” or “lesbian.” *Epistemology of the Closet*, 43. Emphasis in original.

carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line” between being a “man’s man” and being “interested in men.”¹⁷⁹ Danijel, having no recourse to speech to confirm or deny this, unwittingly performs posthumous “closetedness” initiated by this silence.¹⁸⁰ The paranoia surrounding his sexuality in the Old Settlement is ultimately just as, if not more, revealing of the “endlessly blackmailable male identity” that associates homosexuality with a failed performance of masculinity than a confirmation would be.¹⁸¹

As a result of this telling paranoia, I propose reading Danijel as what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls a queer child, modeled after Sedgwick’s “protogay” child. The queer child is a problematic figure who threatens reproductive futurism. Lee Edelman describes reproductive futurism as the “dominant ideology” of a heteronormative society that attempts to replicate its existing order by invoking the symbolic figure of the not-yet born “Child” whose future must be protected from outsiders or nonreproductive others (i.e., “Do it for the children”)—however, Edelman’s Child is symbolic and is *not* the queer child.¹⁸² Read in a new, Croatian context, Edelman’s reproductive futurism takes on local characteristics. As Dubravka Žarkov notes, the gendered politics of post-Yugoslav

¹⁷⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 90.

¹⁸⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lays out several juxtapositions upon which the epistemology of the closet functions, the most important of which to this chapter are closeted/out, public/private, cognition/paranoia, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

¹⁸¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 84.

¹⁸² Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* has a checkered legacy as the premier example of “antisocial” or “antirelational” queer theory. José Esteban Muñoz called *No Future* “the gay white man’s last stand,” arguing that its refusal to invest in the future is a pessimistic and privileged stance. However, Edelman’s refusal of the future is a refusal of a future *organized around the Child*. Despite criticism (or misreadings of the symbolic “Child” as real), its radical negativity is still a powerful refusal of an unlivable social order, a refusal without which a relational queer future cannot begin to be built and which need not be limited to gay white men. I think that there is potential in refashioning Edelman’s critique as a refusal of national futures, which was not emphasized in the original American context. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 30.

nationalisms are tied to the heterosexual reproduction of an ethnonational community in which there are clear divisions between men as protectors and women as carriers of the nation.¹⁸³ Its reproductive futurism depends on securing a future for itself via the national Child as well as the projection of an imagined past into the future. For example, Croatia's war in the 1990s (the "Homeland War") and particularly the towns of Knin and Vukovar are considered foundational moments of victimization that must be remembered for future generations, for future children: "Elites call on emotional symbols of children and future generations...In all speeches, it was the children, the children of victims, the children of war veterans and future generations of Croats that were prioritized."¹⁸⁴ The figure that threatens this national family and its Child is the queer or the foreigner, which is why the figure of the queer child is problematic.

This is not to say that the queer child *is* or *will be* a queer adult in any recognizable way, but that they are, in childhood or adolescence, queer in their *potential* to become that which threatens the reproductive order, and which is pathologized as "homosexual" or "gay" from a young age. They are a child who avoids the "vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up," which entails an orientation towards heterosexuality and proper development of gendered characteristics in their fulfillment of "marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness."¹⁸⁵ In fact, a character likens

¹⁸³ *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-Up of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁴ Ivor Sokolić, "Heroes at the Margins: Veterans, Elites and the Narrative of War," in *Framing the Nation and Collective Identities Political Rituals and Cultural Memory of the Twentieth-Century Traumas in Croatia*, edited by Vjerman Pavlaković and Davor Pauković (London: Routledge, 2019), 155.

¹⁸⁵ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 11, 4.

Danijel's death to Peter Pan, the paradigmatic boy who never grows up: "Peter Pan threw himself under a train, as well, did you know?" (AC 223). Accordingly, I will analyze the various ways that seeming to stand on the cusp of heterosexuality but never fully reaching it leaves an imprint "in the shape of a tendency to homosexuality" on Danijel precisely because of his peripheral presence in the novel. Remembered retroactively, these "protoqueer" tendencies shape Dada's memories of him.¹⁸⁶ For example, his tenderness towards animals foreshadows his unwillingness to enact violence with his gang ("*banda*"), thereby failing to correctly perform manliness, which is "constructed in front of and for other men," against homosexuality."¹⁸⁷ His friendship with his older neighbor Karlo Šain was seen by his peers as an affiliation that implicated him in Šain's (often derided) queerness.¹⁸⁸ These are assumptions made by characters in the novel about Danijel, illustrating that his queerness, in the context of the novel, is a matter of speculation based on social norms, or gossip, which my close reading will follow. Dada even chooses to keep Danijel's emails to Karlo Šain private so that her sister never knows "about the correspondence [between them] on the floppy disk. Neither she nor Ma—as long as [they're] alive...All they need now would be Daniel's cyber-postal fairy tale with

¹⁸⁶ Second quoted portion is Freud quoted in Kathryn Bond Stockton, 25.

¹⁸⁷ "[M]anliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of 'real men,'" the failure of which is to be "relegated to the typically female category of 'wimps, 'girlies', 'fairies, etc.'" Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated by Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 52-53. For a critique of *Masculine Domination*, which although overly brief nevertheless astutely observes the social mechanisms of masculine domination and its reproduction, see Martin Wallace, "A Disconcerting Brevity: Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*," *Postmodern Culture* 13:3 (May 2003), 8.

¹⁸⁸ Danijel is tied to the other outsiders of the novel—Karlo Šain and Marija Čarija—by a strange sense of kinship or recognition. Karlo is his friend, and Marija's obsession with him remains after death, as she was the first to find his body, and she sees his ghost at the spot where he killed himself.

his fat friend.”¹⁸⁹ The fear of a friendship between Danijel and Šain further illustrates the homophobic paranoia that can only imagine their relationship as abusive.

Danijel’s body is rarely seen in its entirety, and is instead often absent, immaterial or dismembered. This echoes the form of the nonlinear or repetitive memories that Dada has of him, and also makes his physical body difficult to “piece together” into a properly gendered or sexed body, or nationalized body for that matter, as Danijel is called a “[f]ilthy half-breed” for having a Montenegrin father (34).¹⁹⁰ It is noted by Dada how identical she and Danijel looked in childhood¹⁹¹--“I was almost a boy, just like my brother, who was ‘like a little girl’” (24) -- but Dada grows out of her androgyny during puberty, distinguishing herself from Danijel.¹⁹² His body, however, remains misaligned with a stereotypically male body and seemingly noncorporeal:

Daniel was a boy the way boys are like those carved wooden angels that are supposed to guard your house or those Gothic ones with cheery expressions. They are free from either male or female sins, the only sunny, full-blooded creatures in church frescoes or in free flight above anorexic saints, heretics, and virgins in the side aisles....A neglected angel, perhaps, but not from a porcelain cup and not a little girl—that was our Daniel. (24-25)

¹⁸⁹ These letters actually reveal nothing declarative about Danijel’s sexuality. They mostly chronicle his worsening emotional state and exile from his gang, as well as his thoughts about the Old Settlement and a better, less corrupt world. Savičević, *Adios, Cowboy*, 159.

¹⁹⁰ See Katja Kahlina for an overview on the construction of a Croatian national identity as a heterosexual identity (one that explicitly excludes the figure of the “Serb-faggot”) in “Nation, State and Queers: Ethnosexual Identities in the Interface between Social and Personal in Contemporary Croatia,” in *Sexuality, Gender and Power: Intersectional and Transnational Perspectives* edited by A. Jónasdóttir, V. Bryson and K. Jones (New York: Routledge, 2011) 30-44.

¹⁹¹ Divna Mrdeža Antonina notes this as an example of the numerous gendered transformations and subversions in the novel. “Žena kao kauboj u maskulinom žanru vesterna,” 6, unnumbered.

¹⁹² Tijana Matijević notes that an episode in which Dada cuts her hair (“an act of *de-feminization*”) and is ambivalent about her changing body illustrates Dada’s own queer identification with Danijel’s body, but her “femaleness” is ultimately asserted against her brother’s undifferentiated body. *From Post-Yugoslavia*, 165-166.

Unlike Dada, who has inherited the virility of “the insatiable one,” her brother, the innocent “angel,” lacks carnality.¹⁹³ But as he grows closer to “the adulthood against which [his innocence] must be defined,” the retention of his childhood interests and slight body is pathologized as feminine, and thus the body of a “homosexual invert.”¹⁹⁴

It is commented on several occasions that Danijel could have been a poet, in a different life. To quote Frank O’Hara: “They called me ‘queer’ and I thought they meant I was a poet, so I became a poet. What if I’d understood them?”¹⁹⁵ An interest in poetry seemingly has no place in “a town without metaphysics” (166), and Danijel is therefore coded as effeminate, which is to say that to be a poet in the Old Settlement is to be “a queer” and vice versa. Danijel is also remembered by Dada as being tender, unlike the other boys his age in the gang. Whereas “Ear and Tiny, two jerks who dressed like Puff Daddy and Eminem” brutally beat Karlo Šain and kill animals in Šain’s clinic (65), Danijel is a “genuine coquette” (100):

Whoever met my brother wanted to take him home, to have him nearby laughing or speaking, to be Daniel, to touch him on the shoulder, to pinch his cheek (which he hated). He had the gentleness and ferocity of a serious little man. Well, tenderness attracts people in different ways, it tempts some to crush it, I recall, people often wanted to thrash him; it gets on some people’s nerves. Being just a little bit different was always an excellent reason for something to be destroyed. (78)

This “gentleness” and “tenderness” contrasts greatly with his former friends, who would beat someone up, including Danijel, for no reason, “[m]ostly boredom”(207), or even the

¹⁹³ Dada discovers her first pubic hair the night that their grandmother, “the insatiable one,” known for saying “Colpo de fulmine” (“Love at first sight”), dies. When she dies, the “only thing alive” on her aged body is “the muff between her legs, shaggy, shiny fur, bright black (AC 24-25).

¹⁹⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton. 29.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Chad Bennett, *Word of Mouth: Gossip and American Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2018), 144.

cowboys that Danijel idolizes. His friendship with Karlo Šain is also seen as suspicious. Šain is an effete who is unambiguously coded as gay by the Old Settlement. He charms the older women, who read his affectations as a harmless marker of good breeding and class, saying, “He’s got manners, that man...His whole family, especially his late mother, was very refined. Crème de la crème” (75). The younger generations, however, see him as pathetic: ““Your buddy’s a faggot, you clown,’ [his sister] said, slapping Daniel’s bum when he began visiting the vet frequently” (78). For all these reasons, Dada is convinced that Danijel might have been involved with Šain, and out of uncertainty she retroactively pursues “the truth” of the matter, which his absence makes impossible to know.

In an amateur porno that Dada suspects stars Karlo Šain and Danijel, the possible body of her brother, appears ambiguously gendered and disjointed. The video is a grainy recording of a projection, mimicking the filter of Dada’s memories of Danijel. All she can see is “a thin, white body...boy or girl, it’s hard to tell...a boyish nape, with short [red] hair” (26) and eerie, dismembered parts (thighs, neck, shoulders).¹⁹⁶ In death his body is finally absent, buried underground. This body is remembered as incomplete in death as in life, since his body was found “some twenty meters from the viaduct, in a vineyard, and his left arm only two days later, in a stream under a spruce bush” (71). When Dada goes to the morgue to identify his body, she fixates on his right hand, which echoes the finger-relic of the town’s patron Saint Fjoko, further associating Danijel with a

¹⁹⁶ Although Dada discovers at the end of her investigation that the film is of Karlo Šain and an unknown boy (not Danijel), the boy in the film is called “Gingerbread,” which was Karlo Šain’s nickname for Danijel.

supernatural presence more than a corporeal one.¹⁹⁷ It is this incompleteness and absence that makes Danijel an elusive character who appears to be in a state of what Sara Ahmed calls “nonalignment,” in which he is improperly oriented towards a heterosexual future, and is therefore on a “slant.”¹⁹⁸ Dada’s memories of him are paranoidly read backwards through the consequences of his death, which left him on a “slant” and colors his childhood with the possibility of him being gay, and thus a queer child.¹⁹⁹ Tijana Matijević points out that Danijel’s being vaguely “different” ties him to the “alternative masculinity” of his father.²⁰⁰ But because Danijel has disappeared from the world of the novel, I want to emphasize again that this “difference” or “alternative masculinity” seems to only be conceivable as “reaching toward ‘gay’” in the Old Settlement where there are no alternatives.²⁰¹

Danijel is thus not just the doppelganger of Dada, but an embodiment of the constitutive outside of a wounded masculinity whose social and political power has eroded amid globalization and transition. He is rejected by his friends in the gang and the social order of the Settlement, in which men who are economically and politically emasculated assert the fiction of their power onto those weaker than them, women and marginalized characters like Danijel, Karlo, and Marija. This masculinity is pathologized as uniquely *local* in comparison to the Western European “daddy-tourists” who move

¹⁹⁷ Like St. Fjoko, Danijel will also become a sort of martyr for the town. His resemblance and the tagline “DANIEL R.I.P THAT’S WHERE COWBOYS GO” is graffiti’d on the side of an abandoned bathroom on the edge of town...(100).

¹⁹⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ* vol. 12 no. 4 (2006), 543-574.

¹⁹⁹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, 159.

²⁰⁰ Matijević, *From Post-Yugoslavia*. 164.

²⁰¹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, 25.

into the Old Settlement, fix up the old houses, and “push their children around in buggies” (32). Tatjana Rosić Ilić argues that this local or “national” masculinity is “nondiscursive” and unquestionable, and therefore does not discursively define or acknowledge its superficiality.²⁰² Danijel’s violent isolation and abjection from within this masculinity, in combination with Dada’s careful observations of its operations in the Old Settlement, makes its contours known and reveals some of the unspoken workings of its fiction.

What is to be done with Danijel’s cowboys and their fictional masculinity? Their time has passed, as is evidenced by the novel’s title, but I argue that in the context of the Old Settlement and its wounded, transitional masculinity they become an unreal, even queered figure of admiration and aspiration. Danijel worships cowboys and unironically styles himself after them, something that Dada remembers as “charming when [he was] nine, but not really after that.”²⁰³ He donned his father’s nonfunctional Colt six-gun and “walked in a diagonal, in an unpredictable tacking movement, trying to trick the murderer Liberty Valance or the greedy Pac-Man. Or to capture the cyber badge of the universe, like a cyber cowboy” (61). He possessed the two things that, according to John G. Cawelti, a cowboy cannot be without: a horse and a gun.²⁰⁴ Danijel has his Colt, and a

²⁰² “In the context of national cultures, hegemonic models of masculinity continue to be enforced that presume normative heterosexuality, answer to the call of patriotic interpellation, loyalty to the nation, and active skills...this type of normative masculinity is just a kind of mask that conceals the disintegration and mutation of traditional hegemonic models of masculinity in the context of the process of re-patriarchalization, whose primary representative is a specific type of wounded masculinity that seeks ways to rehabilitate its disrupted, heteronormative identity.” “Panika u redovima tj. Balkan, zemlja s one strane ogledala,” *Sarajevske sveske* 39/40 (2012), 49-67, my translation.

²⁰³ Savičević, 224.

²⁰⁴ Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1971), 85.

“motorized pony,” in reality a sputtering moped, to take him across the plains (122). The virility and capacity for violence associated with the gun, however, is only symbolic, as it cannot fire, further hinting at Danijel’s nonreproductive future--Antonina Mrdeža notes that it is symbolic that Karlo Šain returns the gun to Dada--or its function as a prop in a performance.²⁰⁵ Westerns could be read, per Michael Moon, as “images that can be not only glimpsed but gazed at, stored in memory, retrieved, and thereby subjected to something like the full intensity of desire,” as childhood instructional scenes of fascination with the male body or the idea of masculinity that cowboys performed on film.²⁰⁶ And Danijel’s heroes are, at first, outsiders that appeal to the Old Settlement because of their unvarnished machismo, like “Eastwood, Wayne, and Django,” or Ned Montgomery, who “isn’t the kind of guy who bakes himself on a yacht on the Hvar waterfront, he doesn’t sip cappuccinos on the Dubrovnik Stradun with bodyguards at his backside” (93). They are anticosmopolitan, the opposite of effeminate, and powerful.²⁰⁷ This model of rugged masculinity, however, is shown by Savičević in its most emasculated form, revealed to be impotent. When the real Ned Montgomery comes to the Old Settlement to film a movie, he has “thin hairy legs, knobbly knees, and drooping balls” (181).

²⁰⁵ Mrdeža Antonina, 8.

²⁰⁶ Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

²⁰⁷ In “Dehexing Postwar West Balkan Masculinities: The Case of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, 1998 to 2015,” Marko Dumančić and Krešimir Krolo stress “that it is necessary to enlarge and add nuance to the perspectives on West Balkan masculinities because not doing so confirms the idea that the Balkans are a museum of masculinity,” and it is not my intention to cast the violent and chauvinistic masculinity of Danijel’s gang as the standard model. On the contrary, I argue that Savičević is challenging such masculinities through the character of Danijel. 156.

Danijel's maturation is finally shown when, in his last letter, he disavows the false promises of fantasy cowboys and their "fancy boulevard of the stars in Hollywood celebrities and the like," as well as the "thieves murderers and criminals who've made themselves filthy bloody millions" in Croatia, and instead revalorizes the "true cowboys among us great lads and lasses" who will receive "sheriffs badges and partisan stars in constellations" (75). In the end, Danijel is disenchanted by fictional masculinities and promises of prosperity when, from his vantage point, he sees no future worth investing in, and there is not future for him anyway.

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