

**How the Silence Sounded: Writing Trauma in Albanian and Post-Yugoslav Literatures**

by

Genta Nishku

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Tatjana Aleksić, Chair  
Assistant Professor Hakem Al-Rustom  
Professor Peggy McCracken  
Associate Professor Christi A. Merrill

Genta Nishku

[gnishku@umich.edu](mailto:gnishku@umich.edu)

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-0829-8687](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0829-8687)

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## **Dedication**

*For my father, Agron Nishku (1948-2021)*

*For my mother, Vera Nishku*

*And for my sister, Xheni Nishku*

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### **Note on Translation and Terminology**

Translations from the Albanian and Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian/Montenegrin are my own, unless otherwise stated. I have used Peter Agnone's translation of David Albahari's *Bait*, Ani Gjika's translation of Luljeta Lleshanaku's *Negative Space*, Ellen Elias-Bursac's translation of Daša Drndić's *Trieste*, and Celia Hawkesworth's translations of Drndić's *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*.

In conveying English translations of titles, names, and quotes from Albanian and B/C/S/M, I have chosen to use a slash to separate the languages. I borrow this method from the poet Irena Klepfisz, who uses it to incorporate Yiddish into her writing, arguing: "I consciously reject the traditional parenthesis that includes the Yiddish word's English translation because it abruptly stops the flow of the sentence and subordinates the English to the Yiddish. Instead, I use a slash (/) between the italicized Yiddish word(s) and their English meaning (Y/E with no space); to me, this comes closer to representing visually the *tsveyshprakhikayt*/bilingualism I am trying to evoke by enabling both Yiddish and English to run into each other and to have equal weight and meaning in the sentence" (405n2). To foster such a sense of multilingualism, I have used the original Albanian or B/C/S/M spelling of certain terms and names.

When writing about Albania and Yugoslavia's socialist period, I use both the term "state socialism," and the more colloquial term "communism," to reflect how this period is referred to by the people living in Albania and the Yugoslav successor states.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation argues that trauma has become the primary lens for framing, reading, and understanding the literatures of Albania and the Yugoslav successor states after the collapse of state socialism. Focusing on writers from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, and Croatia, I show that a diverse set of actors, operating at both the local and transnational level, produce and reproduce the hegemonic narrative that these countries' past was uniquely violent and traumatic. By untangling the different ways writers were asked to testify to personal, collective and historical trauma, and the ways they refused to do so, I historicize this process and show that it depended on the mutually constitutive relationship of postsocialist national and collective memory construction in Albania and the former Yugoslavia, and on the introduction of each country's contemporary literature to the international literary market.

At the end of the Cold War, a network of local and Western writers, translators, editors, publishers, and academics, together with memory institutions, politicians, and supranational entities like the European Union, perpetuated the idea that Albania and the Yugoslav successor states were nations fully traumatized by socialism and war. For local political and cultural elites, the narrative of trauma and victimhood—what I call traumatic exceptionalism—helped to disavow the socialist past, strengthen their power, and appeal to the West. For Western Europe and North America, the traumatic framework was effective in discrediting socialism and exerting political influence on these states during their transitional period. As a result, Albanian and post-

Yugoslav writers faced intense pressures to testify to their trauma and perform a passive, apolitical victimhood.

My dissertation theorizes the subversive strategies that writers used to resist the traumatic framework and the generalization, ethnonationalism, and historical revisionism it promotes. I examine the multiple manifestations of refusals to testify in Ali Podrimja (1942-2012), Daša Drndić (1946-2018), David Albahari (1948-2023), and Luljeta Lleshanaku (1968 -). Their writing deals with systematic, large-scale violence, including the Second World War and the Holocaust, the repression of the Albanian population in Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav wars, and the authoritarianism of the Albanian dictatorship. The central method of resistance that I explore, which shapes the entire dissertation, is the use of silence as a strategy of subversion against the imperative to testify. My sustained engagement with silence illuminates other, related forms of resistance: the rejection of conventional narrative structures, the refusal to provide reconciliatory conclusions that redeem suffering, and a distinct move away from stories that function on a binary of victim and perpetrator.

I attend to the subversive silences and other forms of narrative disruption employed by these authors, and show that they do not adhere to the norms of victimhood that the traumatic framework designates for them. By resisting the externally imposed imperative to testify, these writers subvert the instrumentalization of trauma in service of homogenizing ethnonational narratives of history; challenge the memory standards imposed by world literature and the European Union; and through a lack of narrative reconciliation, prevent the overidentification of the reader with the victim, instead proposing a relation of implicated subjecthood. By making a claim for silence's subversive possibilities, I model a method of reading postsocialist writers, and narratives of violence, that does not rely on the traumatic framework.

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Setting the scene**

#### ***1.1.1 One***

The walk from Jug Bogdanova to Trg Republike / Republic Square, the main square in Belgrade, was a short ten minutes. Walking as a group lengthened the time it took to reach the square, and so, for who knows how long, our procession interrupted the regular flow of the busy streets and alleyways we cross, and our appearance—each member of our group dressed entirely in black—made our togetherness even more conspicuous. It was only when we reached the square that sections of people broke from the group. A small part of our group stepped forward: in even distances from one another stood ten different women, each holding black banners containing one letter, which came together to spell “Srebrenica.” It was July 10, 2018, twenty-three years since the genocide. Another section of our group ascended the steps at the foot of the statue of the prince on horseback that gave this square part of its importance. They held signs in their hands, silver papers with a number written in black: “8372...”. The elongated ellipsis connected us to the past, to the dead who still needed to be found, made present through their very omission, made visible by those four dots. When the rest of us, who had remained in the middle, holding with one hand a black banner, nearly as long as the length of the square, and with the other, a list of some of the people murdered that July, began to read from the list of the dead, we also began the impossible task of verbalizing that number and its ellipsis. The incomprehensible scale of the massacre became palpable: each of us read from a different list, yet altogether, we hardly had enough time to cover a fraction of the entirety of the victims’



names. The repetitive act of reading made the names burn in my mouth, transforming them from the abstractness of a stranger, a victim, into the discomfort within my own throat, my own chest, my own hands, into the responsibility I felt to read, to honor those people who could not hear me. A chorus of names arose from our reading, the distinctness of each person's name punctuating the air before us, before getting lost, becoming one with the noise. Then the silence came. We stopped reading, nothing more was said. A woman, alone, stepped in front of all of us, facing the public gathered to watch us, some hostile, some ambivalent, and started to throw white rose petals on the ground. Supported by our silence, she covered the entire square in petals, gently turning it into the graveyard where we had come, together, to remember the dead.

### ***1.1.2 Two***

Staying true to its name, the Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit Boulevard / Martyrs of the Nation Boulevard in Tirana, was decorated for independence and liberation day celebrations with enlarged photographs of those designated as national martyrs and heroes, killed while fighting for the nation during its fascist occupation. For days, newspapers and social media networks had been debating the choice of the figures whose likeness now hung over the boulevard, some of whom had been killed not while fighting the enemy, but by their compatriots, in conflicts inspired by ideological differences, and the mutual pursuit of power. To me, all the photographs hanging in the boulevard looked the same: expressionless, featureless faces, unnaturally smooth complexions, and blank, dark eyes. Their visual sameness, and the long decades since their deaths, only served to solidify their status as symbols of sacrifice, struggle and patriotism. To the system using them now, their individuality and the details of their lives mattered little, my father told me over the phone, and reminded me of all those who would never be commemorated, like his uncle, who had been killed during the war by the fascists occupying his town. In an

exhibition at the National Museum of History, organized at the same time as these photographs hanging in the street, my aunt searched for this uncle, hoping to catch a glimpse of him in the pictures chosen to illustrate war-time resistance. Equipped only with a vague memory of having seen him in a family album, she was unable to find him anywhere in the exhibition room, could not distinguish him from the others, turned anonymous by the passage of time. This was not an isolated case, and during the months I spent in Tirana as part of the research for this dissertation, I saw clearly how victims—of the Second World War, and of the communist dictatorship—were instrumentalized for political gain. At events proclaiming to be “giving voice” to former political prisoners, these survivors were asked to give a testimony of their suffering, then routinely silenced, as the institutes organizing the gatherings took over to offer us in attendance a didactic summary. The past had been bad, but if we remembered appropriately, we could join the European future. It made me miss the protest in the square, where memory had felt so visceral, and the resistant possibilities of silence had been embraced.

## **1.2 Situating the Silence**

I share these stories as a way to illustrate the major themes and concepts that I will explore in this dissertation and as a way to situate my own position as a scholar and writer who grew up in Tirana, Albania, during the period immediately following the collapse of state socialism. Occurring in two different locations—the first in Belgrade, Serbia, the second in Tirana, Albania—these stories are representative of the networks navigated by the writers at the core of this study, from the capital cities of the former Yugoslavia and Albania. In the first story, I tried to capture the feeling of participating in a commemorative action organized by Žene u crnom (ŽuC) / Women in Black of Belgrade, on the occasion of the twenty-third anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, on the 10th of July, 2018. At once a commemoration and a protest, this

action brought the memory of the genocide in Bosnia to the center of the Serbian capital, where the police were ordered to separate us from a hostile group of counter protestors and a largely apathetic public. I had met with some of the main organizers of ŽuC earlier that summer, while spending time in Belgrade for an immersive language course. They had immediately welcomed me to their office, located in a converted apartment within an old building near the Sava river, where each room was filled with pamphlets, books, and other reading materials published by ŽuC and their collaborators, and the walls were covered with posters, photographs of their various protests and meetings, and news coverage about the group. Each time I entered their office, I was greeted by members working at computers and phones, emailing and calling others to inform them about meetings and actions, and was able to join the group discussions about planning for these actions, as well as gatherings for conversations about books and culture, and of course, more casual conversations over meals.

In a meeting held in preparation for the July 10<sup>th</sup> commemorative protest for Srebrenica, the group had a long discussion about every detail of the day, starting with logistics like which member would buy the flower petals and what color they should be, and which member would hold which banner. When the topic of the names was brought up, the conversation became intense. Many questions were brought up: Would they break their tradition of silence? Was it respectful, ethical, to read these names? What about all the names who would remain unread, absent? Which women would read? The group took these questions seriously, discussed them for a very long time, and in the end, it was decided to carry on with the plan of reading the names. When I had first researched ŽuC, during my first and second year in graduate school, I had become immediately fascinated by their use of silence as a method of protest, a powerful act which reclaims a quality traditionally associated with women's passivity to demonstrate against

the patriarchal, ethnonationalist and xenophobic ideologies that were responsible for the violent break-up of Yugoslavia. Attending the group's meetings in Belgrade showed me a side of their organizing that I could not fully grasp from simply reading: the often difficult, always collaborative, work of organizing their campaigns meant that their silence was not an easily achievable gesture, but a product of dynamic discussions and active listening.

Though I had already attended one of their smaller protests, and thus experienced the public's reaction to a group protesting in silence, I did not know what it would feel like to be silent together during the larger event ŽuC was planning that July, nor did I know how the reading of the names would alter the experience, our relation to one another, and our relation to the public. On that day, when we read from different lists, the names of the victims were at once distinct and indistinguishable from one another. For me, each name felt entirely unique and singular in the moment that I verbalized it. To those listening, I imagine, the individual's singularity would have gotten lost in the cacophony of voices, all the other names coming together, then pulling apart, following the rise and fall of our voices. Even so, the reading of the names would have been recognizable as a part of the lexicon of protest and remembrance, especially in contrast to what followed—our group's long, collective silence.

In this first story, the use of victim's names was a choice made by an anti-establishment, anti-war and feminist group with the intention of commemorating the lives lost to genocidal violence perpetrated by actors who continue to deny any wrongdoing and who are supported by a government that actively denies, distorts and rewrites history. This is not to say that by virtue of their oppositional stance, the actions of activist groups like ŽuC exist without the potential for appropriating the other's trauma. On the contrary, activist movements, like the work of artists

and writers, are as prone to instrumentalizing victims' traumatic experiences as are official state institutions, museums and NGOs dealing with memory.

In the second story above, I recounted an instance where the appropriation of victims' suffering was blatant: organized in November 2019 by the Tirana municipality, with approval from the Prime Minister of Albania, the display of photographs had a stated purpose to commemorate the anniversary of Albania's liberation from German and Italian occupiers. The large-scale photographs that were hung on the boulevard were a recently added aspect of the commemorative efforts that the city undertakes for this occasion, which usually involves decorating the main street with the Albanian flag. These photos depicted the people who had died during the struggle for national liberation, representing the "heroes," and "martyrs" of the nation. At the time, the public debates sparked from this display in the boulevard concentrated on the ideological innocence or guilt of these figures, whose hero status was questioned depending on their proximity to communist ideology. Applying an anachronistic lens to actions carried out before the establishment of a violent, repressive socialist system in Albania, the critics were especially troubled that these communist figures would be so prominently visible during a visit from representatives of the Platform of European Memory and Conscience. For Albania, the desire to be a part of the European cultural and political community necessitates an adherence to a certain narrative of memory and history, where little space is made for the figure of the communist martyr or anti-fascist partisan—in other words, for the victim who falls outside the narrative of European Union memory politics. In the case of the boulevard commemoration that November, the government in power used these figures to advance its own political aims: associate their party with the now mythical sacrifice of these heroes during the Second World War, thus placing their deaths in service of nation building eighty years later. But this framing

clashed with the memory institutions that have been established in Albania over the last two decades, which maintain that the socialist past was *entirely* violent and traumatic, and the so-called martyrs of the Second World War had been little more than the pawns of communists.

This dissertation is animated by a few overarching questions: How can one write about atrocity, large-scale violence, and traumatic experiences, without appropriating the suffering of others? How are these traumatic events remembered, and what subversive possibilities, gestures and actions do writers, activists and communities employ to resist the imposition of prescriptive, revisionist versions of the past? In answering these questions, this study focuses on the role and responsibility of the writer, situating this figure in a historical, sociopolitical context where the pressures to represent contemporary and historical trauma were especially significant. Now inhabiting a temporality of “post”—as post-Yugoslav, post-socialist, post-dictatorial, post-colonial, post-traumatic, post-memorial—the writers at the center of this dissertation had to contend with demands to represent, on local and international stages, the new iterations of their national and ethnic identities. In the constructions of new national identities and historical narratives that make up this temporality of the “post,” trauma and victimhood have been a crucial organizing metaphor. This metaphor has been prevalent over thirty years since the collapse of state socialism, as Albania and the Yugoslav successor states continue to frame themselves *and* to be framed through the lens of trauma.

These political dynamics manifest themselves in the sphere of world literature, a space where writers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania, continue to be regarded as outsiders to the North American literary market. Undertaken by a network of translators, editors and academics in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of Albanian and post-Yugoslav literatures to world literature

occurred simultaneously with the end of the Cold War, the rise of trauma theory as a distinct disciplinary field in American academia, the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague, and the beginning of these states' efforts to join the European Union and its memory community. I argue that this resulted in the inevitable framing of writers from Albania and the former Yugoslavia through the narrative of trauma, suffering, passivity and a manufactured apolitical quality that conveyed approachability. This dissertation shows that, far from being passive agents in these different forms of rewriting, Albanian, Kosovar, Serbian and Croatian writers were actively involved—as writers, editors, and translators in their own countries, and as cultural representatives in Western Europe, the United States and Canada—in ethical questions about the writing of suffering, trauma and violence. Drawing inspiration from the resistant silences utilized by Žene u Crnom, this dissertation explores the various forms of literary silences found in four authors' writing: Ali Podrimja in Kosovo, David Albahari in Serbia, Luljeta Lleshanaku in Albania, and Daša Drndić in Croatia. They make up the constellation of writers whose work will guide us in the paradoxical, subversive, at times inadequate, manifestations of silence.

### **1.3 Theorizing Silence and Resistance to Testimonies of Trauma**

This dissertation argues that trauma has become the primary lens for framing, reading, and understanding the literatures of Albania and the Yugoslav successor states after the collapse of state socialism. Focusing on writers from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, and Croatia, I show that the traumatic framework operates at both the local and transnational level, involving a diverse set of actors who produce and reproduce a hegemonic narrative that these countries' past was uniquely violent and traumatic. By untangling the different ways that these writers were asked to testify, and the ways they refused and resisted the testimony, I historicize the process of

establishing trauma as the primary framework of promoting and circulating Albanian and post-Yugoslav literatures at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I show that this process depended on the mutually constitutive relationship of postsocialist national and collective memory construction in Albania and the Yugoslav successor states, and the introduction of each country's national literatures to the international literary market. At the end of the Cold War, writers, translators, editors, academics, publishers—in the region and abroad—together with local and transnational memory institutions, politicians, and supranational entities like the European Union, perpetuated the idea that Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia were nations fully traumatized by socialism and war. For local political and cultural elites, the narrative of trauma and victimhood—what I have called traumatic exceptionalism—helped to disavow the socialist past, strengthen their own power and appeal to the West. For Western Europe and North America, the traumatic framework was an effective method for discrediting socialism and exerting political influence on Albania and the Yugoslav successor states during their periods of transition. I show that the verbalization of suffering and trauma in the form of testimony was crucial to the goals of these local and international entities and to the establishment of the traumatic framework. As a result, Albanian and post-Yugoslav writers faced intense pressures to testify to their trauma according to a prescriptive passive, apolitical victimhood.

My dissertation theorizes the subversive strategies that writers used to resist the traumatic framework and the generalization, ethnonationalism, and historical revisionism that it promotes. To do this, I examine the multiple manifestations of refusals to testify in the writing of Ali Podrimja (1942-2012), Daša Drndić (1946-2018), David Albahari (1948-2023), and Luljeta Lleshanaku (1968 -). The central method of resistance that I explore, which also shapes the entire dissertation, is these writers' use of silence as a strategy of subversion against the



imperative to testify. Throughout this dissertation, I model a method for reading Podrimja, Drndić, Albahari and Lleshanaku—as well as Albanian, post-Yugoslav, and postsocialist writers more generally—beyond the simplified generalization produced by the traumatic framework. The fiction and poetry that I analyze in this study deal with systematic and large-scale violence, including the Second World War and the Holocaust, the repression of the Albanian population in Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav wars, and the authoritarianism of the Albanian dictatorship.

My sustained engagement with silence leads me to other, related forms of resistance in these four writers: the rejection of conventional narrative structures, the refusal to provide reconciliatory conclusions that redeem suffering, and a distinct move away from stories that operate on a binary of victim and perpetrator, and toward the implicated subject. By attending not only to the subversive silences but also to other forms of narrative disruption employed by these authors, I show that despite writing about violent events, they do not adhere to the norms of victimhood that the traumatic framework designates for them. By resisting the externally imposed imperative to testify, they subvert the instrumentalization of trauma in service of homogenizing ethnonational narratives of history (Podrimja and Albahari); challenge the memory standards imposed by world literature and the European Union (Lleshanaku and Drndić); and through a lack of redemption or reconciliation, prevent the overidentification of the reader with the victim, instead proposing a relation of implicated subjecthood.

In Western Europe and North America, the socialist pasts of Albania and the former Yugoslavia were seen through the same generalized idea of trauma. Despite Albania's Stalinist dictatorship and the more liberal form of socialism in Yugoslavia, both were framed as traumatic in similar, equal ways. As will be discussed in more detail below, this generalization was achieved thanks to the persistence of Cold War dichotomies that cast socialism as the ultimate

evil, and Western capitalism as the means to freedom and prosperity. The beginning of the transitional period in Albania and the former Yugoslavia, characterized by war, conflict and mass migration, reinforced this dichotomy. For Western onlookers and participants, the wars and genocide committed in the Yugoslav territory and the political unrest in Albania could be seen as a continuation of the violence and repression of a generalized idea of socialism. Thus subsumed into the frame of trauma, the vastly different transitional periods in the Yugoslav successor states and in Albania could be treated together as a cautionary tale that could justify the long-term political influence of the United States and European Union in Balkan region.<sup>1</sup> For the Western literary market and literary scholarship, there was no pressing concern to differentiate the varying experience of socialism and transitional periods in these countries. In the 1990s, to successfully market writers from Albania, or Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, or Kosovo, and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, it was enough for editors and publishers to offer a vague picture of a traumatized writer who wrote about painful topics.

I maintain that this traumatic framing worked in concert with the balkanist discourse that, as Maria Todorova's work has shown, emerged in the Ottoman period and became established by the time of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, defining the states in the Balkan peninsula as Europe's "other within" which could absorb Western European "externalized political, ideological, and cultural frustrations" (188). Developed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the traumatic framework that this dissertation examines, and that the poetics of silence seek to challenge, employed a similar stereotyping logic as balkanism. In this case, the Balkan region was not imagined primarily through its backwardness, though that idea also persisted, but through its suffering and trauma. These qualities served to induct the Balkans into the newly

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<sup>1</sup> A pertinent example of this Western influence, and its failures, can be found in the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).

conceived process of “transitional justice,” which Lea David has argued has been the “main ideological force behind the human rights memorialization agenda” over the last thirty years, claiming that criminal prosecutions, reparations, truth commissions, and official commemorations would allow post-conflict societies to achieve reconciliation (3). At the same time, as I show in this dissertation, the traumatic framework could effectively introduce the Balkans to a Western reading public whose investment in certain aspects of human rights ideology made them eager to “feel good ... by identifying with the suffering of others” (Meister 166-7). Though I do not focus on this discursive switch from balkanism to the traumatic framework, I articulate it here in order to underscore that the generalizing mechanics had existed for a long time in the Western imagination about the Balkans, and to indicate an opportunity for further research.

In other words, I have not structured this study as an investigation of the *Balkans*, a term which in academic scholarship continues to refer largely to the former Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup> Rather, as a reaction to generalization and the exclusions this term can create, I concentrate on the specificities of mnemonic and literary developments in Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, and the transnational networks of memory institutions and literary communities that have connected these countries with the United States and the European Union. This has helped to illuminate the

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<sup>2</sup> In particular, Albania and Kosovo have been historically excluded from Western academic studies of the Balkans, even as the term continues to be used as an analytical and political category that claims to represent the entire peninsula. Even recent edited volumes like *Decoloniality in Eastern Europe: A Lexicon of Reorientation* (2023), edited by Ana Vilenica, or *Europeanisation and Memory Politics in the Western Balkans* (2021), edited by Ana Milošević and Tamara Trošt, which make the claim that they are troubling understandings of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, continue to reinforce, through their exclusion, the idea that Albania and Kosovo are an “other” in the context of the Balkans. Reasons for this exclusion have to do with a lack of linguistic, cultural and religious competence, a lack of an effort to create cross-cultural collaborations, and also an implicit nesting orientalism, where Albanians are configured as one of the most marginal in terms of proximity to Europe. See “Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), pp. 917-931.

differences and similarities in the development of postsocialist memory, and its relation to national literature, in each of these contexts. In Chapter 1, for instance, I show how the demand imposed on Kosovar Albanian writers to testify to trauma was made both by the local Kosovar literary establishment and also by the one in Albania. For the Albanian state, the suffering of Kosovar Albanians—under Yugoslavia, but especially during the Kosovo War of 1998-1999—was appropriated into the all-consuming, generalized narrative of Albanian suffering. This situation demonstrates that the generalizing tendencies of the traumatic framework operate *within* the countries explored in this dissertation as much as produced through Western influence, an observation that might have been lost under the broader analytical categorization of “the Balkans.”

However, a generalized image of the traumatic Albanian and Yugoslav pasts was indeed required for the rewriting of national history and the rewriting of national literature after the collapse of the countries’ socialist systems. To perform a victimhood that disavowed the socialist past, writers had to testify to their suffering. As a method for distancing these countries from their recent past, the testimony was a crucial tool of postsocialist nation building and foreign policy. Albanian and post-Yugoslav writers who entered the national literary canon and who were chosen as national representatives in the international literary market were expected to serve their nations by attesting to their collective suffering through a conventional testimony, where they expressed an appropriate level of emotion, little anger and no desire for revenge. These qualities would be understood as a reflection of their status as ideal, good victims, whose suffering, innocence, and passivity, inspired compassion and pity from others (Van Dijk 5-6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Van Dijk historicizes how the association with a humanized image of Christ attributes to victims the qualities of suffering, innocence, forgiveness, passivity, apoliticalness, lack of agency and desire for retaliation. Any deviation from these would render the victim no longer deserving of the sympathy of

In each chapter, I show that what was specifically required from the testimony was determined by a combination of the Cold War paradigm, which governed the introduction of these literatures to the West, and the specific goals that each country needed to accomplish through their rewriting of official historical narratives. For instance, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I discuss how efforts made by Serbia and Albania, respectively, to join the European community have led to an adoption of a Europeanized method of “dealing with the past” that requires both the implementation of Holocaust remembrance practices, and the remembrance of socialism according to these same methods. In both contexts, testimony plays a crucial role, but the subject of the victim’s condemnation differs. In the case of Serbia, the cause of past trauma is attributed to outsiders—Croats, Kosovar Albanians, Bosniaks—and to Yugoslav communists, but in Albania, the perpetrator is the *Albanian* communist party member. This explains the different forms of testimony present in the literary works I analyze in each chapter. In Chapter 2, I show how David Abahari constructs a narrative in his novel *Bait* where the transmission of a complete testimony about a survivor’s experience in the Holocaust is denied, as the author uses silence to subvert Serbian historical revisionism and self-victimization. While Abahari’s novel resists testimony in order to reclaim the past, in Chapter 3, I examine how Luljeta Lleshanaku’s poetry appropriates testimony to uphold the idea of the Albanian past as exceptionally traumatic—a narrative that, in claiming Albanian totalitarianism was the most repressive of all, also equates it with the Holocaust.

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others, making them targets for heavy criticism and censorship (Van Dijk 17). Interestingly, the idea of a passive victim is a relatively new concept, since as Van Dijk relates, victims and their families in Europe up to the late medieval times “had a right to seek revenge for murder and other serious crimes” (6). See Jan van Dijk, “Free the Victim: A Critique of the Western Conception of Victimhood.” *International Review of Victimology* 16(1), 2009.

Throughout this dissertation, I employ the term “testimony” in two ways. First, I use it to refer to the accounts of violence and suffering experienced by victims of the Holocaust, Yugoslav wars, Serbian repression of the Kosovar Albanian population, and the Albanian dictatorship—which are represented in the texts I analyze. Second, I use “testimony” to convey the set of cultural and political expectations placed on Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku, Drndić, and other writers of their generation, that demanded a performance of victimhood. Through this expansion of the definition of the term “testimony,” I arrive at the crux of this dissertation’s intervention and ask: what does it mean to refuse to testify? What does it mean to answer silencing *with* silence? By engaging seriously with these questions, I aim to reclaim silence from the local and transnational forces, mentioned above, which dismiss it as meaningless because of their vested interest in appropriating testimonies of trauma. To do this, I show the ways in which the writers in this study navigate the interstices between speech and silence, embrace the inherently paradoxical task of writing with silence and its multiple, mutable iterations, and subvert the expectations of the necessity to verbalize their individual and collective trauma. Silence’s interpretative openness and multiplicity of meaning is essential to this subversion, as it stands in contrast to the rigid, totalizing homogeneity of ideologies of national language and literature. Similarly, the other methods of resistance to testimony mentioned above—the absence of reconciliation, and the insistence on implication—unsettle the rigid conventions of the testimonial genre, working together with the poetics of silence to create alternative ways for attesting to violence and atrocity.

Because of its multiplicity, silence demands a practice of close reading that addresses the generalizing effect caused by the hegemony of trauma. As Pwyll ap Stifin has observed, silence emerges out of the assemblages of “particular, contingent meetings of elements” that come

together for a specific period of time to produce silence (186). Given this assembled nature, each silence is unique and dependent on the specific configuration of elements that gather to make it happen. The interpretative possibilities created by a poetics of silence are as multiple as the assemblages that constitute it. As a result, I have employed close reading as one of my main methodologies for tracing silence's varied manifestations in the work of Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku, and Drndić. In combination with historicization and comparative analysis, I use close reading to notice and listen to the silences in these writers' texts and demonstrate their subversion of the traumatic narrative—even when they do not manifest exactly *as* silence in a traditional sense, transforming into other methods of narrative disruption. Through close reading, I reveal the richness of the world of silence and resistance to testimony, starting in Chapter 1 with the faceless, mouthless and truncated body of a torso searching for its name. Found in Ali Podrimja's 1971 collection *Torzo*, published in Prishtina, Kosovo when Kosovo was the most economically and politically disadvantaged part of the Yugoslav Federation, this figure has often been read as a symbol for the silencing of Albanian history and culture in Yugoslavia. Through my analysis, I challenge readings which stop at the fact of trauma, and show how Podrimja uses the muteness and disarticulation of the torso to critique the sacrificial act made for any national body.

Likewise, in Chapter 2, I do not interpret the reluctant testimony of a Holocaust victim in Albahari's *Bait* as proof of the unspeakability of trauma, but argue that it serves as the author's deliberate refusal to participate in the Serbian state's instrumentalization of victimhood. To make this argument, I pay close attention to everything that this survivor's silence brings into relief: body language, physical gestures, extralinguistic sounds, the noise of machinery, and the noises made by physical movement. In the wake of silence, these sounds become important tools of

communication. And because they exist *in* the silence, they are also constitutive of it, meaning that silence is never really empty of sound. This is exactly what comes to the fore in the section of *Bait* from which I have borrowed the first part of this dissertation's title. During a scene where the novel's narrator and his mother are sitting down to record her testimony, the narrator asks an insensitive question that displays a lack of understanding about the realities of war. His mother, hurt by the question, stops speaking, and her silence is heard by the narrator decades later, when he listens to the tapes the two of them had recorded. Albahari summarizes the soundscape of this silence by writing: "The spindles were squeaking, the drive belts were groaning, that's how the silence in which we both awaited her answer sounded" (*Bait* 17).<sup>4</sup> Here, silence is something affective and pedagogical, which connects the victim who has *chosen* silence with her interlocutor who has to learn how to listen to silence's sounds. This example underscores this dissertation's treatment of silence as an action: silence *sounded* like squeaking and groaning, it was a material and noisy component of the testimony the novel's narrator attempted to record of his mother's story. Her silence, which I argue is the character's deliberate choice, and Albahari's rhetorical one, takes up space in the tape's magnetic reel, filling it with the distinct sounds made by the recorder, sounds that are always there, but which are often drowned out by louder noise.

What can be gleaned from the varied meanings of silence I have given above is that the concept eludes one overarching definition. Therefore, I believe it is more generative to ask what silence *does*, rather than what silence is. The example of the narrator's mother and her deliberate silence in Albahari's *Bait*, reveals that silence enables a way of hearing what is always present but rendered impossible to hear. In the novel, the survivor's silence allowed the noises of the tape recorder to emerge, and led to the narrator's understanding of the pain he had caused his

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<sup>4</sup> "Osovine su škripale, prenosne gumice stenjale, tako je zvučala tišina u kojoj smo oboje očekali njen odgovor" (Albahari, *Mamac* 25).



mother. Applying this conceptualization to a broader context outside the text, we can see how silence challenges the logocentrism of contemporary social justice movements which, as feminist theorists Aimee Carillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra argue, frame “coming to voice” as the goal of all victims, and a prerequisite to their healing and gaining of rights (10-6). These assumptions not only lead to the undervaluing and under-theorizing of silence in political movements, but also place the “burden of social change ... upon those least empowered to intervene in the conditions of their oppression,” who are required to speak to their repression if any change is to occur (Rowe and Malhotra 1). In this dissertation, I show that such undermining of silence is especially successful when trauma becomes the hegemonic frame through which to understand individuals, communities, and nations cast as victims.<sup>5</sup> In responding to these interconnected forms of silencing with silences’ multiplicity of meaning, the writers with whom I engage subvert the imperative to “come to voice” by testifying to individual and collective trauma. The attempt at subversion is not always effective: as I show in Chapter 3, Lleshanaku’s stated intention to portray the violence of Albania’s dictatorial past in less overt ways—which implies a concern about the exploitation of suffering—falls short because the methods through which she incorporates the testimonies of survivors of prison and labor camps endorse the traumatic framework. This differs from Drndić’s use of testimony, explored in Chapter 4, which I show forces a recognition of readers’ implication in the violence captured in her novels.

I argue that, ultimately, what the different forms of silence and narrative disruption accomplish, as a poetics and rhetorical strategy employed by Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku, and Drndić, is the prevention of an overidentification between the victim with the listener—who can be the victim’s descendant, the secondary witness, the uninvolved bystander, or the

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<sup>5</sup> My approach to silence has been informed by the work of the feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran, who theorizes women’s silences as a method of resisting inscription in the nation.

implicated subject. In his critique of human rights discourse, Robert Meister has written that calls to remember past evil and to “never again” repeat violence, create a world of “onlookers by challenging them to refuse to be mere bystanders” of human rights abuses (212). The creation of these *individual* relationships between what Meister calls the “beneficiaries of past injustice” and what Rothberg calls the “implicated subjects,” configure systemic violence into a series of crimes committed by individuals, removing collective responsibility from the equation of ensuring justice for victims (Meister 28). These potential bystanders project a relationship between themselves and victims where they imagine themselves as past witnesses who would have done something to prevent, or at least witness, the violence. Silence, as I show in this dissertation, challenges this relation of vicarious witnessing and its redemptive satisfaction by not providing a story that moves linearly from the testimony of trauma to the achievement of reconciliation.

In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot described the making of history as a social process that involves people in their different capacities: agents who inhabit particular structural positions, actors who interact with a specific context, and subjects who have a voice and an awareness of that vocality (23). This third role is important because as subjects of history, people “define the very terms under which some situations can be described,” in ways that are more precise than their generalized definition as actors (23-4). By treating people as “purposeful subjects,” Trouillot writes, an accurate historical narrative must approach a group of actors as “purposeful subjects aware of their own voices” (24). Following this line of thinking, I would like to ask: what would it mean to approach a group of actors, like the writers in this study, as purposeful subjects aware of their own silences and the power that these silences can exercise?

## 1.4 Methodology

This dissertation is oriented toward the writer. As such, it is concerned with writing and rewriting, processes which I understand as intrinsically tied to the political and the social. This understanding has been informed by the methodological approach I have taken to complete this project—namely, a combination of historicization and close reading through which I contextualize the fiction and poetry of Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku and Drndić, before turning the reader’s attention to the intricacies of their texts. Taking an expansive, transnational view of the past, I base my historical analysis on two important phenomena: the post-WWII development of an official version of history and collective memory, shaped by the socialist parties of Yugoslavia and Albania, and their instrumentalization of victimhood and suffering; and the collapse of these socialist systems at the beginning of the 1990s, a period of violent wars and conflicts, which were accompanied by historical revisionism, the disavowal of communism and even anti-fascism, and the appropriation of the violence and trauma caused by the dictatorship and the wars. As political strategies, historical revisionism and the appropriation of trauma have become foundational to nation-building in the Yugoslav successor states and in Albania in the new millennium. I place these two phenomena into conversation with the process of introducing Albanian and post-Yugoslav writers to world literature, and argue that the inclusion of these writers to the global literary market after the fall of state socialism was accomplished by framing them as victims who were traumatized by their countries’ socialist systems.

This was especially the case for post-Yugoslav authors, who were already represented in the realm of world literature via writers like Ivo Andrić and Danilo Kiš, and whose post-socialist reframing became shaped by the themes of suffering and violence caused by war. While post-

Yugoslav writers underwent a process of being *reframed* as victims in the international literary market—from an earlier framing as dissidents—Albanian writers were marketed through a victim narrative from the outset. Compounded by the isolationist narrative that became synonymous with Albanian communism, post-socialist Albanian literature came to English translation entirely through the lens of suffering, violence and trauma. Since the process of introducing and reframing Albanian and post-Yugoslav literatures occurred in the 1990s and at turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were molded by the then-nascent field of trauma theory and the resurgent interest in the Holocaust in the United States, both of which would shape the conceptualization of victimhood and testimony in American academic and public spheres.

During this same period, the development of what Ljiljana Radonić has called the “memory standards” of the European Union, placed pressure on countries wishing to join the union to adhere to a manufactured shared European memory (2021, 74).<sup>6</sup> Radonić and scholars like Jelena Subotić and Aleida Assmann have observed that these unofficial “memory standards” are crucial for earning EU membership. A key point of these standards is ensuring that the Holocaust is as central to collective memory in postsocialist countries as it has been to Western Europe. This is accomplished by pressure to adopt the same mnemonic practices as Western Europe, including adopting commemorative days for Holocaust victims, establishing Holocaust memorial museums, inserting a generalized account of the Holocaust in educational institutions and materials, and participating in transnational networks like the Platform of European Memory

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<sup>6</sup> Over the past decade and a half, the political scientist Liljana Radonić has been writing about the Europeanization of memory in the former Yugoslavia. Her work has been influential in underscoring how “European standards” function in the area of memory. See: Liljana Radonić, “Conflicting Memories in ‘Unified Europe’ - Standards of Remembrance in the Center and at the Periphery,” *Der Donauraum Jg.*, 2010; “Standards of evasion: Croatia and the ‘Europeanization of memory’” in *Eurozine*, 2012; and “The Europeanization of Memory at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum.” In *Nationalism and the Politicization of History in the Former Yugoslavia, Modernity. Memory and Identity in South-East Europe*. Eds. G. Ognjenovic and J. Jozelic. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

and Conscience or the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity—where the these memory standards are determined and disseminated. As Subotić argues in *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, and as will be discussed in-depth below and in the following chapters, as postsocialist states in Eastern Europe and the Balkans adopt these standards, they increase the centrality of the Holocaust in their official historical narratives, they displace local memories of WWII, and reinforce the comparison, and even the narrative of equivalence, between Nazism and communism (29-40).

As in the historical revisionism occurring at home, these European memory politics, and the framing and reframing of Balkan writers for world literature, depended on rewriting. I use the term “rewriting” as it has been conceptualized by the translation theorist André Lefevere, who extended translation theory’s analytical concern from literary translators and translation into the larger network of actors who import and circulate literature across political and cultural borders. According to Lefevere, these actors include the “middle men and women” who interpret literature and rewrite it for the general public, or the “non-professional” readers of literature. Editors, publishers, academics, critics, as well as translators, are the rewriters who produce a specific interpretation of each foreign writer entering the Western literary market. Their efforts translate foreign literature not only linguistically, but also culturally, by providing an easily understandable framework through which readers can approach authors from different countries. The purported expertise of these rewriters confers them greater credibility and facilitates the circulation of their interpretative conclusions, which can take the form of “translation, historiography, anthologization, criticism, and editing” (Lefevere 9). Far from being impartial or neutral, this process of rewriting is motivated by the ideological beliefs of the rewriters. As a fundamentally ideological process, the rewriting of literature for foreign markets, like the

rewriting of history, supports the status quo and confirms the governing beliefs of the “host” society.<sup>7</sup>

This dissertation traces the different threads of historical and literary rewritings that simultaneously shaped and were shaped by literature on the traumatic past in the former Yugoslavia and Albania, in order to make a claim for the significance of silence as a poetics and strategy for resisting the instrumentalization of suffering at local and global levels. Following Lefevere, I trace the process of rewriting post-Yugoslav and Albanian literatures for the Western European and North American context, showing that the “dominant ideological and poetological current” that governs this particular rewriting functions according to a still-present Cold War paradigm, a dominant regime of human rights, and an ongoing Europeanization of memory where trauma has unprecedented purchase (Lefevere 8). I do this in tandem with an analysis of the rewriting of history at a national level in Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, and Croatia. Motivated both by local political elites’ efforts to secure their power by positioning themselves in diametric opposition with the socialist systems that preceded them, and by each country’s aspirations for accession to the European Union and inclusion in a shared European memory, this historical rewriting disavows the recent past. Reframed as *traumatic* first and foremost, the socialist past is dismissed as a historical mistake, an entirely violent, repressive time that victimized all who lived through the period. The category of “victims of communism” is applied liberally and indiscriminately, referring at times to those condemned to prison, internment, hard labor, or

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<sup>7</sup>About this point, Lefevere writes: “Whether they produced translations, literary histories or their more compact spin-offs, reference works, anthologies, criticism, or editions, rewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time. ... [T]his may be most obvious in totalitarian societies, but different “interpretative communities” that exist in more open societies will influence the production of rewritings in similar ways.” (8)

death, while at other times, to the rehabilitated figures of fascists and fascist collaborators, who are welcomed into the fabric of society as advocates of anti-communism and national liberation.

I maintain that the constant rewriting of history at the national level is connected closely with the introduction and framing of Albanian and post-Yugoslav literatures in the local and global literary market at the end of the Cold War. These two processes inform and affect one another: as Albanian, Kosovar, Croatian, Bosnian, and Serbian writers gain international success, they are promoted through the framework of apolitical, passive victimhood, which itself is shaped by the anti-communist rhetoric of the Cold War, as well as the influence of balkanism. More specifically, I examine the influence that the EU exerts in these countries through its effort to establish a dominant, pan-European historical narrative that, by endorsing an equivalence between the Holocaust and communism, delegitimizes the anti-fascist legacies of this region, and bolsters the claim that Western Europe has adequately addressed its Nazi, fascist and colonial past.

The aforementioned rehabilitation of fascist figures is one of the most egregious consequences of the historical rewriting that propels the rewriting and reframing of Albanian and post-Yugoslav literature on the global market. I highlight it here in order to underscore the urgency and stakes of this dissertation's overarching argument: that the instrumentalization of the memory, violence, and trauma of the Yugoslav and Albanian socialist systems and of the wars and conflict of the 1990s—by Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, *and* by supra- and international actors like the European Union and the United States—divides the past into homogenous categories of perpetrators and victims, where the latter are compelled to provide testimony in service of the nation and its dominant narratives, as well as fit into the framework of trauma and victimhood developed by the global literary market. I argue that these writers' refusal

to testify, their employment of deliberate speechlessness and a poetics of silence resist historical and literary rewriting. At the same time, they reclaim the uses of opaqueness, untranslatability and multiplicity in national and international contexts that demand transparency and easily digestible, linear narratives of victimhood and redemption.

The next two sections give a summary of my research findings in regards to the rewriting of literature and the rewriting of history, and provide a guide through which to read the rest of the dissertation.

## 1.5 Rewriting Literatures

The network responsible for the introduction, framing and rewriting of post-Yugoslav and Albanian literature in the West is large and diverse. It includes publishers like New Directions, Northwestern University Press and Dalkey Archive Press, among many others; academic institutions and their programs, like the University of Iowa's International Writers' Program, which hosted Albahari and Lleshanaku and facilitated their instruction to the American public, or the Center for Soviet and East European Studies in the Performing Arts at Southern Illinois University, where Drndić received an Master's Degree for work analyzing and translating Yugoslav playwrights;<sup>8</sup> literary journals affiliated with universities, like the *North*

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<sup>8</sup> The US Department of State viewed Yugoslavia as a very important ally in the communist bloc, especially after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948. According to Carla Konta, after Stalin's death in 1953, the US Department of State and US Information Agency (USIA) devised a long term policy toward Yugoslavia that aimed at "exerting a cultural, but most of all, political influence," accomplished through a network of cultural exchange programs, including American Libraries Abroad, cultural centers, and the Voice of America broadcast. The Cultural Exchange Program brought over 50 exchange programs to Yugoslavia, thirteen of which were state-sponsored, like the Fulbright Program, while the rest were funded by private foundations like the Ford Foundation (Konta 3, 136). USIA managed these programs through six posts established in major Yugoslav cities. On the history of the Fulbright program in Yugoslavia, see: Carla Konta, *US Public Diplomacy In Socialist Yugoslavia, 1950–70: Soft Culture, Cold Partners American Foreign Policy in Yugoslavia*. Manchester University Press, 2020. A critical study of the Fulbright program in Albania is yet to be written.



*Dakota Quarterly*, *Seneca Review*, *Grand Street*, *Iowa Review*, etc.; US State Department initiatives like the Peace Corps and the Fulbright Visiting Scholar program; and of course, countless individual translators, editors, reviewers and scholars who played a role in the circulation of these literary texts. The great amount of institutional and individual actors involved in this process means that I am unable to adequately engage with every publisher, academic program, editor or translator in the space of this Introduction, or even in this dissertation. In order to illustrate the inner workings of the rewriting process, I have chosen a few compelling examples that pertain to the four writers included in this study, and that speak to the overall framing of their national literatures.

By highlighting both well-known institutions like the University of Iowa and its International Writers' Program, as well as smaller ones, such as the *North Dakota Quarterly*, I show the wide reach of the ideology that rewrote post-Yugoslav and Albanian literatures according to Cold War binaries and the framework of trauma. This rewriting initially began with translations, editing, paratextual materials, and criticism, as well as meetings where these works were discussed. These more ephemeral events were limited to smaller groups—such as the cultural exchanges between Albanian and American writers initiated by the Intelligence Agency

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Daša Drndić, who was chosen as a Fulbright Program scholar in 1970, was part of the first wave of Yugoslav students in the US. Through Fulbright, she enrolled in a Master's of Arts program in the Theater Department at Southern Illinois University, where she wrote a thesis titled *Five Plays in English of Contemporary Yugoslav Dramatists: Velimir Lukić and Aleksandar Obrenović*. In addition to providing an overview of Yugoslav drama, Drndić translated five plays from these two playwrights. The Theater Department at Southern Illinois University has an interesting history of cultural diplomacy. In the Center's inaugural bulletin published in the spring of 1969, Director Herbert Marshall links the establishment of the center with the US President's intention to "end the 'cold war'" and instead, develop mutual understanding between Americans and Eastern Europeans. Echoing the sentiment of Senator Fulbright and his cultural exchange program, Marshall writes that "it is not sufficient to study the economies of those countries," but that a thorough study of their modes of "living and thinking," is required.

and Knopf in the mid-1990s—or to publications in literary journals with smaller circulations.<sup>9</sup> It was not until the framework of trauma was endorsed and further developed by academic institutions and publishing houses that it became established as an absolute truism, applied to all writers hailing from the “traumatized” nations of Albania and the former Yugoslavia. Perhaps more than any of the institutions mentioned above, it was the International Writers’ Program (IWP) at the University of Iowa that shaped this rewriting process. The IWP had been conceptualized and established in 1967 by Paul Engle, the long-time director of the famous Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and Hualing Nieh Engle, with the aim of inviting foreign writers—mostly from socialist nations—to Iowa City to write and participate in various events, and in turn, experience the freedom of thought and expression that they lacked in their home countries. As Eric Bennett’s research shows, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop played a major role in supporting the cultural Cold War, while at the same time, being influenced by its ideology. As director, Engle successfully fundraised from the State Department, the United States Information Agency and other state agencies by promoting the Workshop, and later the IWP, as valuable tools in fighting communism, because of the soft power of cultural diplomacy that writers could provide. The idea advocated by Engle was that it would be there, in the heart of America and away from dangerous communist ideas, that foreign writers would be immersed in a lively literary and cultural community designed to give them an impression of America as the land of freedom and democracy (Bennett 112). Then, once back in their countries, these writers could spread the word

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<sup>9</sup> In 1995, United States Information Agency (USIA) funded a cultural exchange visit organized by Knopf between Albanian and American writers, editors and teachers, where each group visited the other’s country. Knopf editor Tracy Cabanis invited writers Ron Padgett, Edmund Keeley, Christopher Merrill (now the director of the IWP), Brad Leithouser, and Alan Ravage. Padgett, Keeley and Merrill wrote books with their impressions, and most of these books’ contents serve to create an idea of Albania as an exotic, quaint, isolated land, where there has been great suffering and where everything is behind the times, but where people are kind and poetic. This trip was important in creating connections that would lead to other visits, translations and criticism on Albanian literature.

about the positive experiences they had at Iowa, forming a network of unofficial ambassadors for the US.

Identifying and recruiting foreign writers, and funding their stays, became Engle's major concern in the 1950s and 60s. We can observe the fruits of Engle's fundraising, diplomacy and planning for the IWP in the collection of writing that he edited along with Hualing Nieh Engle and Rowena Torrevillas, the program coordinator, for the occasion of the program's 20<sup>th</sup> year anniversary.<sup>10</sup> Titled *The World Comes to Iowa: Iowa International Anthology* and published in 1987, the book presents readers with a large number of reflective essays and poems dedicated to the program, Iowa and the Engles. Of the writers featured, about thirty come from Eastern and Central Europe, with five Yugoslav writers represented: Grozdana Olujić, Dubravka Ugrešić, Bogomil Gjuzel, Branko Dimitrijević, and Tomislav Longinović. Their contributions to the anthology are prefaced by an Introduction written by Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle, where they retell the story of the IWP's founding and its mission. Almost immediately, the Introduction describes the writers who came to the IWP as sufferers of great injustice, who had witnessed the full spectrum of human brutality. The Engles make the claim that, unlike writers who attend "resort-like" literary residencies across the US, the writers who come to the IWP treated their time in the program, and the freedom they could experience in the United States, with great reverence. The implication is, it seems, that these foreign writers had been so traumatized and repressed by the socialist systems in which they lived that the IWP would have been their first, and maybe only, chance to participate in a free exchange of ideas (xxv).

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<sup>10</sup> As Yi-hung Liu underscores with respect to this anthology: "Engle's fervent belief in freedom had not wavered—not even slightly faltered twenty years after the establishment of the IWP." *The World Comes to Iowa* served to extoll freedom "as inherent to the IWP and the United States" (615).

With gravity, Engle notes that the foreign writers who visited Iowa brought with them baggage filled with “the world’s horrors, fears, beauties, savagery, even triumphs, all at a level of intensity seldom known in the United States” (Engle xxv). Further describing these writers as “wounded” and with “scars invisible except in their eyes,” Engle conjures an image of “world literature” where writers of this “world” live under constant, intense repression (Engle xxv). This image is supported by the almost complete absence of any concrete information about these writers or the historical and sociopolitical contexts of their countries. The only information offered to readers revolves around the violent realities of *all* of these writers’ lives, which serves to frame writers from very diverse historical and sociopolitical backgrounds through one generalized frame: that of trauma, suffering, violence and repression.

Two anecdotes about Eastern European writers, told through Engle’s voice and perspective, illustrate the workings of such framing. While many of Engle’s examples give specific writers’ names, these two stories feature anonymous writers who are meant to represent the entirety of Eastern Europe. In the first case, a “proud” but “foolish” comment by an Eastern European writer, who states that there is “no office of censorship” in his country, prompts an impassioned argument among the writers gathered in their weekly seminar, where they “discuss the literary situation back home, often with discretion” (Engle xxiii). This “foolish” statement is addressed by another Eastern European writer who clarifies that one does not need an office for censorship when the censor—the socialist ideological apparatus—lives within one’s mind. This corrective, delivered by another writer from the same un-free Eastern Europe, represents a symbolic lesson about integrating into the US literary sphere, where the disavowal of socialism

is as necessary first step.<sup>11</sup> In the second anecdote, Engle tells of another writer who spent six years in prison, routinely tortured by the “secret police who handled his case” (Engle xxiv). The 1987 anthology does not even give geographical coordinates to this writer’s background, introducing him simply as “a novelist [who] came from a country where he had spent six years in prison, two years in solitary confinement, in a cell under a river where water ran slowly down the walls and dripped from the ceiling” (Engle xxiv). It is in a 1988 version of this essay, found in a collection of IWP testimonials published by the University of Iowa, a slight change appears in the text, and we read that the novelist was an Eastern European. This is the only identifying feature that we learn from the essay, as the rest of the anecdote delves into the details of the gruesome torture this writer endured, the years in solitary confinement, the electric currents through the genitals, the face beatings, and the impossible dilemma of being forced to revive another prisoner who had fainted from the brutality of the torture. During this last event, the writer comes face to face with a “bitter moral dilemma,” because, in Engle’s words:

If he revived the prisoner, the poor victim would simply be tortured again. If he did not revive him, he himself would be tortured again. What would you have done in that dirty room where the walls were stained with human screams?

Thus the situation of writers in this twentieth century.

In too many countries the writer is an endangered species, often punished with prison, internal exile, or harsh labor for writing views, or even in styles, resented by the ruling party. [...] In Iowa City poets were and are free to speak, write, or sing about any subject or any person. (Engle xxiv-xxv).

A telling rhetorical gesture occurs in the first paragraph cited above. The reader learns of the seemingly impossible choice faced by this anonymous novelist, before being asked to imagine themselves in his place: would they choose self-preservation or would they help a fellow

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<sup>11</sup> Unable to come to terms with the ideas presented by the other writers, the writer in Engle’s story gets ostracized and is so distressed that “a few days later” suffers a heart attack that nearly kills him (Engle xxiv).

prisoner suffering from torture? By turning the question onto the reader, Engle does not seek to generate a practice of solidarity, however limited that may be, but to emphasize even more the contrast between these foreign, Second World, socialist countries and the United States. Whereas the foreign writers—these “endangered species”—are under constant threat, left to languish in dirty prison cells, at the IWP, in Iowa, and by extension, in the United States, writers have total freedom.

This framing reduces non-American and non-Western European writers simply to powerless victims of their conditions, whose one act of resistance or defiance against their governments appears to be their travel to Iowa. Classified under a generalized “victim” category, writers from three or four dozen different countries start to resemble one another, regardless of the specificities of their historical and sociopolitical context. According to this framing, writers from countries as diverse as Yugoslavia and Egypt, or India and Poland, the Philippines and Ireland, experience the same forms of censorship and repression, and ultimately, all of their lives are seen as diametrically opposite to those of writers in the United States. And since writers attend the IWP as unofficial representatives of their countries, the latter become associated with the same framework. It is an ingenious strategy: while cementing the view of the post-colonial Third World and socialist Eastern Europe as entirely devoid of freedom, this framing reinforces American exceptionalism and helps to elide countless histories of repression, imprisonment and censorship of writers in the US, often carried out by the same governmental entities that funded the activities of the IWP. The fact that much of Engle’s reporting on the success of the IWP focuses on Eastern European writers shows the influence of the Cold War paradigm. This concept, developed by Bhakti Shringarpure, captures the set of principles of publishing and evaluating literature that was established in the United States during the Cold War to harness the

soft power of literature for advancing foreign policy, where socialism is presented as the ultimate culprit for the suffering and repression of writers (135).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, when socialist systems collapsed throughout Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the framing of Balkan authors had to be rewritten once more. In the case of the Yugoslav disintegration, the framing shifted to reflect the wars, and in order to enter into world literature, writers from the Yugoslav successor states were required to testify to the brutality of war, in addition to the oppressiveness of Tito's rule. To a public which was not well informed about the historical and social context of the region, nor about its literature, this new framing that focused primarily on the tragedy of war could be sold as a continuation of the general traumatic and violent way of life in Yugoslavia, and the entire Balkans. We see this dynamic at play in a special issue of the *North Dakota Quarterly (NDQ)*, published in the winter of 1993 and guest edited by political scientist Stephen C. Markovich, who was a faculty member at the University of North Dakota, and the writer and scholar Richard Burns. According to Markovich's introduction, the direction of this special issue had to be rethought when war broke out in Yugoslavia. Imbuing his editorial role with grave importance, Markovich states that anthologies like the one *NDQ* had compiled could preserve the memory of an "embroidery that once unified the proud and passionate South Slav peoples into a fragile and short-lived nation" (3). By describing literature as an "enlightened" form of the memory of this unity, a memory which is seemingly best preserved in American institutions, the editor highlights literature's ethnographic value, but says little about the writing's aesthetics. Instead, Yugoslav literature is presented as a straightforward reflection of a monolithic, homogenized "south Slavic" culture whose defining characteristics are suffering and war.

Markovich makes such framing explicit when he writes that:

Once again the South Slav peoples were in the throes of a bitter Balkan war. For the South Slavs—the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins, and Macedonians—the present hostilities are all too familiar in their collective histories. They are a tragic reminder of the periodic conflicts and spasmodic eruptions that have convulsed these peoples through the centuries. They bring back the atrocities of World War II when the various nationalities sometimes fought the Axis invaders but as often fought each other in a three-sided civil war involving Serbian Cetnici, Croatian Ustase, and Yugoslav Partizani [sp]. They go back to World War I and the Balkan Wars when ethnic hatreds and jealousies inflamed the entire Balkans in an internecine conflagration. And they raise memories of South Slav suffering and resentment under foreign rule, centuries of suffering and generations of resentment under Turkish, Hungarian, Austrian, and Italian power. Thus, wars, bloodshed, suffering, and pain are not new for the South Slav peoples. Their tragedy has been a long and enduring one. (1)

Conflating distinct historical events, Markovich draws an apparently self-evident and clear connecting line between the Yugoslav break-up and wars of the 1990s, the two World Wars, the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, and the different experiences of occupation and colonialism that spanned several centuries. All of these events amount to the “long and enduring” tragedy that is the history of the Balkans. The social, economic and political causes of wars both recent and historical, the impact of foreign occupation and colonial rule, are all elided in favor of ascribing an innate bellicosity and old tropes of “ancient ethnic hatred” to people in the former Yugoslavia. War and suffering, the introduction argues, are endemic to this region. This argument reflects the rhetorical framing that editors, translators, critics and academics applied to writers from the Yugoslav successor states during the 1990s, and which would continue to shape the circulation of post-Yugoslav authors over the following decades. While the references made to the Yugoslav wars in this introduction in the *NDQ* might have served to raise awareness about the then-ongoing atrocities, they are also used to bolster the understanding of Yugoslav history and culture as inherently violent and eternally plagued by suffering, pain and trauma. I argue that what has resulted from such framing has been the demand for literature that reflects these same



themes, meeting readers' expectations of the appearance of writing from the traumatized countries of the former Yugoslavia, Albania, and the broader region of the Balkans.

If the reframing of post-Yugoslav writers depended on a rhetoric of perpetual war and its associated trauma and victimhood, the reframing of Albanian literature after the collapse of its socialist system depended on an overemphasis of its past political repression and isolation, which could only be overcome by embracing the West and its progressiveness. This is what we observe in the IWP's framing of the Albanian writers who joined the program in the period immediately after the political system's change. In 1992, the first two writers from Albania came to Iowa—they were Fatos Lubonja, an intellectual and former political prisoner, and Uk Buçpapaj, a professor of English language and literature, translator and poet. The choice of these two writers underscores the attitude of American academia and publishing toward Albanian literature: what represents an “authentic” and approachable Albanian voice is one that is either geared toward Western culture, like Buçpapaj and his training in English literature, or one that is preoccupied with the violence and trauma of communism, as in the case of Lubonja.

The University of Iowa's digital archives contain an interview between Uk Buçpapaj and Clark Blaise, the IWP's director at the time that he was a guest of the program, which has been framed as an introductory explanation of Albanian literature for the American intellectual and literary community.<sup>12</sup> In the discussion with Blaise, Buçpapaj is asked several questions about Albania's repression of art and writing, and no questions regarding craft or aesthetics. Blaise emphasizes that the audiences would know nothing about Albania, a country that according to him is extremely “linguistically, economically, and geographically isolated.” In his summation of

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<sup>12</sup> Uk Bucpapa and Inaki Zabaleta interview, Iowa City, Iowa, 1992: Iowa Digital Library, Virtual Writing University Archive. Accessed [here](#).

Albanian literature, Buçpapaj corroborates Blaise’s ideas about the extreme isolation of Albanian people, describes their great suffering during socialism (what he calls the “communist invasion”) and the resilient, creative soul of Albanians—people who, he repeats, are *Europeans* who long to join the European family. This narrative of isolationism and suffering becomes central to the image constructed about Albania during the early 1990s, a narrative that I argue is so powerful that it persists unchallenged today, and has shaped the way Albanian intellectuals and writers present themselves in foreign settings. It is certainly true that freedom of movement and travel was restricted heavily during state socialism, but to call Albania completely isolated from the rest of the world is inaccurate. A literary translator and writer like Buçpapaj would have known this, of course, given that he was a contributor to the weekly literary periodical *Drita* during the late 1980s, the pages of which were filled with reports on contemporary world literature and cultural developments, and with foreign literature from around the world printed in Albanian translation.<sup>13</sup> Blaise’s comment on Albania’s isolationism, thus, does not refer to isolation from the world as much as isolation from the West and the United States. This meant that in their introduction to the West and world literature, Albanian writers had to adhere to the roles of cultural ambassadors *and* victims of communism who were willing and able to testify to the trauma this regime had caused them.

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<sup>13</sup> In an effort to promote Albanian culture and literature in the US, Buçpapaj encouraged the translation of Albanian literature into English by taking up the task himself, while also collaborating with Henry Israeli, at the time an MFA student at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. See interview with the translator Henry Israeli by Miriam N. Kotzin at *Per Contra*, [here](#). This demonstrates the role that literary translation played in Engle’s vision of the IWP—translation was the key to making the most of the “cultural exchange” at Iowa, and disseminating the work of the invited foreign writers. This was the case even when, as for Israeli, the translator was neither a speaker of the source language, nor an expert on the literature of the country from which he was translating. About the approach to translating literature from the third world, Spivak has commented, “If we were thinking of translating Marianne Moore or Emily Dickinson, the standard for the translator could not be “anyone who can conduct a conversation in the language of the original (in this case English)” (404).

In 1991, Northwestern University Press (NUP) launched the series “Writings from an Unbound Europe,” edited by Andrew Wachtel and described as “the most comprehensive series of literature in translation from the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe.”<sup>14</sup> The qualifier “unbound” in the title of the series signals the lack of freedom these formerly communist countries had recently experienced, but from which they were finally freed. Wachtel introduces *In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories*, written by Dubravka Ugrešić during the 1980s in Yugoslavia, and published in English translation by NUP in 1993, with a summary of how the West has seen Eastern and Central European literatures during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He writes of the dichotomous view that had formed, certainly informed by the Cold War paradigm, wherein literatures from socialist countries in Europe were considered as fitting only two groups: the unimaginative, restricted socialist realism literature, and its opposite, the dissident literature that was deeply political and protested the always-gloomy conditions imagined by the Western public to be a distinctive aspect of life under socialism—which Wachtel notes became as formulaic as the former (Forward viii).<sup>15</sup> From there, the introduction to Ugrešić’s book offers a thoughtful and nuanced account of the author’s trajectory as a writer, as well as the cultural forces that have shaped her writing and its reception.

In comparison, the introduction to NUP’s *Lightning from the Depths: An Anthology of Albanian Poetry*, edited and translated by Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck,<sup>16</sup> treats the

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<sup>14</sup> See the offerings of *Writings from an Unbound Europe*, here:

<https://nupress.northwestern.edu/content/writings-unbound-europe>

<sup>15</sup> This is something which Ugrešić herself playfully critiques in many of her essays, and in an essay titled “Long Live Socialist Realism!” found in *Thank You for Not Reading*, she concludes that Western literary output follows similar directives from the state, even if the outcomes look dissimilar (25-29).

<sup>16</sup> Elsie, who was a well-known translator and Albanologist, is described by Northwestern Press University’s website as “the West’s leading specialist on Albanian literature” whose interest in Albania began with the visits he made starting in 1978, as a student in the Linguistics Institute of the University of Bonn. Janice Mathie-Heck’s qualifications include “extensive work in teaching and counseling Albanian

literary works within the book not as literature, but as a means of learning about a mysterious, exotic and isolated culture that is charmingly behind the times. The anthology, published in 2006, seeks to provide a chronological overview of poetry written in Albanian, starting with epic oral poetry, and following with the same literary movements that had been the foundations of the Albanian literary canon.<sup>17</sup> Overall, the introduction written by Elsie is full of balkanist tropes and recounts the suffering of the Albanian nation and people in order to explain why its national literary tradition lags behind those of other European nations. The assumption that the introduction makes, is that history and culture are not only experienced in the same way by all members of a nation, but also that they are both natural categories, not socially constructed and manipulated, and that they are the biggest factors for the choices a writer makes regarding the topic or style of their writing. Elsie concludes the introduction by noting the large number of poetry volumes published in Albania, despite the meager literary output when compared to the rest of Europe. In this case, Elsie attributes the phenomenon to the poetic souls of Albanians, using an argument of biological determinism to suggest that there is something in the genetic or cultural make-up of Albanians that made them inclined to produce poetry at rates “quite unimaginable in the rational West” (xxx).

Like many commentators, inside and outside Albania, Elsie also uses the language of pain and trauma to explain the trajectory of Albanian literary tradition. He writes of Albania as the “tender plant” growing in the “rocky soil” has been “torn out of the earth” because of the country’s brutal history (Elsie xxv). Albanian literature was the ultimate victim of a history that seems to be made only of misfortune: starting with the Ottoman Empire’s forcing the early

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refugees as well as translating, editing, and critiquing works of Albanian literature” (See the [Northwestern website](#)).

<sup>17</sup> The Northwestern series includes another book of translated Albanian literature, also edited by Elsie: *Balkan Beauty, Balkan Blood: Modern Albanian Short Stories*, published in 2008.

literature of Christian Albania to disappear, continuing with the literature of Muslim Albania “withering” as Albania sought independence, while the sparks of hope that the modern literature of the 1930s represented were brutally crushed by the communist regime, and finally, the whole body of literature produced from that time until 1991 became “outdated, untenable, and unwanted” almost overnight when “the dictatorship collapsed” (Elsie xxv). The history of Albanian literature, therefore, is a history of repression and perpetual pain, with little space for agency, subversion, resistance, joy or beauty.

Ultimately, if in the realm of world literature, the work of Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku, and Drndić are understood to represent, respectively, the Kosovar, Serbian, Albanian and Croatian nation, this is not any nation, but the suffering, traumatized national body. Similar to the victim, literature from nations that are “healing” from traumatic pasts, must testify to past trauma without seeking revenge, expressing anger or dogma. It is only in this way, I argue, that the traumatized, postsocialist nation can enter world literature.

## **1.6 Rewriting History**

The collapse of state socialism in Albania and Yugoslavia, and the emergence of new post-socialist states during the 1990s, relied on historical revisionism that gave greater legitimacy to the actions of political elites. Each chapter of my dissertation explores the intricate ways in which historical rewriting functioned in Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia. In all these cases, the official historical narrative and collective memory sought a complete break with the recent past. For the ethnonationalist political elites of Serbia and Croatia, this required the fabrication of a narrative of suffering that cast one’s group as the ultimate victim, extending beyond the Yugoslav period to encompass a memory of the Second World War where the fascist ideology and genocidal acts of the Serbian Četnici and the Croatian Ustaše were downplayed,

silenced, or even openly embraced and rehabilitated as heroes fighting against Yugoslav suppression and struggling for national liberation. The situation differed in Kosovo, since unlike Croatia and Serbia, it never received autonomy within the Yugoslav Federation, existing as an autonomous province of Serbia, who enacted a long term, systematic economic and political repression of the majority Albanian population, culminating with Milošević's ethnic cleansing campaign at the end of the 1990s. After the war, Kosovo increased its efforts to align itself with Albanian history and culture. The postsocialist historiography and memory politics that were promoted as "official" in Albania also enacted a complete break with the socialist past, though the extent to which Hoxha's regime was denounced fluctuated according to which political party was in power. The rehabilitation of fascist collaborators occurred in Albania for similar reasons as in Serbia and Croatia. Mussolini's associates in King Zog's war-time government were often framed as valiant anti-communists, who collaborated with Italian fascists as a way to defeat the threat of communist partisans, and who even participated in the project of "saving the Jews"—the salvation narrative that has, in recent years, become an important mnemonic signpost in Albanian national identity. As this overview suggests, the Second World War plays a crucial role in post-socialist memory construction in Albania and the Yugoslav successor states. This now distant history comes to the contemporary moment through a number of mediations, revised and rewritten to fit the agendas of political and cultural elites interested in securing and maintaining their power.

### ***1.6.1 Appropriating the Holocaust***

The appropriation of Holocaust memory in Albania and the former Yugoslavia has occurred, on the one hand, because of the de-territorialization and globalization of the Holocaust and on the other hand, from the standardization of European memory that requires certain

“memory standards” for ascension to the European Union. These memory standards are linked to the “Holocaust community of memory,” which has turned the Holocaust into the paradigmatic genocide to be used as the universal model for understanding and memorializing all other events of large scale violence (Assmann 112). Itself a transnational event that took place in almost all European nations and through transnational networks and collaborations—as Daša Drndić’s novels illuminate so well—the Holocaust did not immediately find a place in transnational memory. Rather, it was remembered in individualized, private and localized ways for the first few decades after WWII (Assmann 97). In fact, in the immediate post-war years in Europe, the Holocaust was seen as one of the brutal occurrences of WWII, not its central, defining event.<sup>18</sup> It was only in the 1990s, that a combination of the effort of Holocaust survivors for material retribution of stolen goods, concerns over preserving these survivors’ memories over the long term, increased mass media representations of the Holocaust, the establishment of academic fields like memory studies and trauma studies, as well as the influence of governmental initiatives, led the Holocaust to gain the status of a “supranational memory community,” as Aleida Assmann calls it.<sup>19</sup> The result of the globalization of the Holocaust was three-pronged: it

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<sup>18</sup> Jelena Subotić identifies three phases in the development of Holocaust memory: the first was the immediate post-WWII period which understood the Holocaust not as a unique event, but as part of the broader history of WWII, something seen in the Nuremberg trials’ focus on all victims. During this time, in Western Europe, the US and the Soviet Union, what was remembered is their armies’ triumph over fascism. The second phase in the 1960s brought greater awareness to the Holocaust as “a uniquely catastrophic historical event” located within WWII but different “in its meaning and significance for the predominantly Jewish victims” (Subotić 19). Significant memory events at the time helped in shifting the previous narrative, including the Eichmann trial in 1961 and the Auschwitz Trials in 1964, and Subotić adds, influence from the 1978 American show *Holocaust*, which made the emerging narrative around the Holocaust available to wide audiences. In the late 1980s, the *Historikerstreit*, or historians’ quarrel, a spirited period of debates in West Germany, on the place of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany in German historiography, brought further public attention. During the third phase, starting after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the narrative around Holocaust memory was adopted by human rights ideology.

<sup>19</sup> Assmann credits the standardization of this supranational memory community to the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (or TIF), now known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which was established in 1999 in Washington, D.C.,

created a homogenized memory of the Holocaust in countries that were involved in the event, making Jewish suffering into something abstract and not historically situated; it cemented and universalized categories like “victim,” “perpetrator” and “bystander;” and it imposed these categories, as well as Holocaust memory, in contexts where there was a lack of historical connection or where Holocaust memory was not as prevalent (Assmann 106, 112).

The initial hope invested in these transnational and globalizing efforts—and codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations in 1948—was that once the Holocaust turned into a universal norm and icon, its memory would “guarantee human rights and offer moral foundation for future humanity” (Assmann 106). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, human rights ideology would be heavily invoked, and further developed, in judicial settings through the international court tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and the permanent International Criminal Court at the Hague (Subotić 20). Since then, the rise of trauma, and remembrance of this trauma, as dominant narratives of contemporary life in many societies

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with participation by Sweden, Germany and Israel. At the start of a new millennium, TIF sought to create the structure that would carry Holocaust memory through to the 2000s, and transform it into a long-term cultural memory with reach across and beyond Europe. They achieved this by promoting standard education and a coordinated political agenda with “top-down regulations for Holocaust school education, museums and commemoration days” (Assman 103, 112). The latter was done in close collaboration with the European Union and its legislative branch, the European Parliament. In 2005, the European Parliament declared January 27—the liberation of Auschwitz—the day of Holocaust Remembrance in Europe, the first of several declarations aiming to create a shared, standard and transnational method for remembering the Holocaust. The same year, the United Nations made January 27 International Holocaust Remembrance Day. On the history of this declaration by the European Parliament, see [here](#). Several members of the [Council of Europe](#) had designated January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2002, and created a set of educational materials to be used in schools. Three years later, in 2008, the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism called for the “establishment of 23rd August, the day of signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as a day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, in the same way Europe remembers the victims of the Holocaust on January 27th.” In [September 2019](#), the European Parliament issued a resolution on “the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe,” where an equivalence was made between crimes of Nazism and Stalinist crimes. For sources on the development of a Holocaust memory community in the context of the United States, see Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*.



has given even greater importance to the infrastructures of human rights ideology. As the sociologist Lea David has argued, remembrance of traumatic, violent events, and human rights violations, occurs via a standardized set of norms, which she places under the category of “moral remembrance.” Moral remembrance has evolved to encompass several aspects: the principles of “facing” or “dealing” with the past, adopted from the German process of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*; the imperative to remember; and the necessity of taking a victim-centered approach to memory work. Because moral remembrance and its norms have undergone isomorphism—a process through which norms are standardized and homogenized at the institutional level and on a global scale—they are seen as completely natural, and not socially constructed (David 5-6).

In this dissertation, I address the isomorphism of the “duty to remember” and the uncritical adoption of the German model of dealing with the past, as employed in the Yugoslav successor states and Albania with regards to the Second World War, the Yugoslav disintegration, and violence and repression under state socialism. I contextualize contemporary, post-socialist memory politics in the former Yugoslavia and Albania to show how the Holocaust entered the mnemonic landscape of countries that, for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remembered WWII primarily as the struggle of communist partisans against fascist occupation. This allows me to better demonstrate the stakes of the resistant silences employed by Podrimja, Albahari, Lleshanaku, and Drndić, in the face of historical rewriting and in the face of the rewriting and reframing of Balkan literatures on the world stage. This part of my analysis is informed by scholars of post-Yugoslav memory politics who have illuminated the dynamics of historical revisionism in the region. Using a comparative lens to build on this work, I show how Albanian memory politics operate through similar appropriative mechanisms, which are complicated by

the still-shifting mnemonic landscape in Albania and its claim of an exceptional traumatic experience of communism.

I want to highlight an important similarity of socialist historiography in Albania and Yugoslavia. As mentioned, in both countries, the Holocaust had not been a foundational aspect of national identity. Rather, the Second World War was remembered for the communist partisans' heroic struggle against fascism, which became a key narrative for Tito's and Hoxha's parties, dominating collective memory in Yugoslavia and Albania for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This dynamic changed after the collapse of state socialism. The political scientist Jelena Subotić demonstrates that when Holocaust memory, in the globalized iteration developed in Western Europe, arrived in Serbia and Croatia, it was met with resentment because it came head to head with post-1989 nationalist memory and identity building. Subotić argues that the directive to incorporate Holocaust remembrance into official memory "threatened" and destabilized the new post-socialist narratives and identities by unsettling nationalist myths, long-standing official historical narratives, and exposing these countries' active participation in the Holocaust (11). At the root of this resentment is a deep ontological insecurity that is caused by the displacement of the perceived value or morality of victimhood: from the nation as victim, to the specific victimhood of a marginalized and minority group, in this case, Jewish communities (Subotić 25). This is why, after the collapse of state socialism, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Croatia, began to use the Holocaust, its images and associated language, as proxy to talk about and remember communism. Through the appropriation of Holocaust memory in context-specific manners, these states ensure that the nation and its majority ethnic groups are once again the ones portrayed as the true victims of the past, the victims who had suffered the most (Subotić 25).

### ***1.6.2 Europeanization of Memory***

For post-socialist states in the Balkans, the appropriation of Holocaust memory also serves to appeal to the European Union by adhering to the memory standards that the EU has set through a number of policies and declarations. While the German model of “dealing with the past” was a part of the early European Union community building and objectives, it was not until the Cold War ended that the memory of communism became a concern for EU policy-makers. New candidates for EU membership were now formerly socialist countries for whom the experience of state socialism and in some cases, totalitarianism, was a more central memory than that of the Holocaust. A series of top-down directives were devised to teach these post-socialist states how to remember. Scholars of memory in the Balkans refer to this process as the “Europeanization of memory,” defined as the process through which “shared values, remembrance practices, policies, discourses, narratives, beliefs and norms associated with the past” are constructed, disseminated and institutionalized, first as EU policy, and then “incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, practices and public policies of member states and acceding countries” (Milošević and Trošt 13). Overall, the EU memory standards and framework of memory seek to foster a shared European identity and set of “European values,” through which the EU legitimizes its own existence.<sup>20</sup> Of these memory standards, the most important has to do with participation in the Holocaust memory community. Balkan states hoping to join the EU must meet certain criteria of official commemoration of the Holocaust. Among the criteria is the requirement to adopt European days of remembrance, like August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the day of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, which the 2008 Prague Declaration on European

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<sup>20</sup> Underscoring the importance of memory to the foundation of the European Union, de Cesari and Kaya note that the union itself is a “product of memory work” (4). See: *European Memory in Populism: Representations of Self and Other*, ed. Chiara De Cesari and Ayhan Kaya. Routledge, 2020.

Conscience and Communism made the official European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism; and January 27<sup>th</sup>, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz, which in 2005 was declared the day of Holocaust Remembrance in Europe by the European Parliament. The standards also require the establishment of memory museums in sites of violence, modeled after the memory museums in Western and Central Europe, as well as the ratification of standardized educational practices and materials on the past. Through this standardization process, as Assmann has argued, local memory with its specificities is elided in favor of a “unified and locally disconnected memory” that serves as a negative foundation myth for Europe and the EU, and “[raises] the moral profile of a nation in an international context” even if it simultaneously allows for “the nation to evade awkward themes concerning its own past” (103-5).

The evasion of “awkward themes” that Assmann mentions is a reference to the nationalist historical revisionism that the Europeanization of memory encourages in the Balkans. By placing less importance on local memories and micro histories in favor of the supranational historical narratives about the Holocaust, the Yugoslav successor states and Albania are able to frame the Holocaust as purely the responsibility of Nazi Germany, effectively erasing the histories of collaboration and local acts of genocide on their soil. At the same time, because European memory standards continually equate Nazism with communism—evident in the act of making August 23<sup>rd</sup> the day for commemorating victims of Nazi and communist crimes—the histories of anti-fascist resistance during WWII are delegitimized because they become associated solely with the various forms of repression and violence of the Yugoslav and Albanian socialist systems. This equivalence has been strengthened by the European Parliament, who as recently as September 2019 released a resolution on “the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe,” stressing the importance of addressing historical revisionism and the

emergence of new fascist, racist and xenophobic groups. Throughout the document, “the totalitarian communist regimes and the Nazi regime” are mentioned in tandem and are implicitly equated. As Radonić argues, such declarations describe socialist systems “using symbols familiar from Holocaust memory (railway tracks, carriages),” and regardless of historical and social context, a demand is made for communist crimes to be persecuted through similar means and to the same extent as those of the Holocaust (*Eurozine*).<sup>21</sup> In their attempt to enter the European community and join the EU, Albania and the former Yugoslavia adopt these top-down directives on what and how to remember, endorsing a homogeneous remembrance of their socialist pasts which focuses only on their trauma and violence.

This process is compounded by the fact that postsocialist memory in Albania, Kosovo, Croatia, and Serbia, conjures an imaginary golden age before the establishment of socialism, where the nation is remembered as having been composed only of members of the dominant ethnic identity. Such nationalist memory building leaves out minorities, like Jewish people or Roma and Sinti communities who also lived in the country, and obscures the memory of communists, partisans and anti-fascists (Subotić 24). In the case of the Yugoslav successor states, this imagined golden era is invoked to rehabilitate WWII criminals and fascists like Ante Pavelić and Draža Mihailović, who are reframed as having fought for Croatian and Serbian independence, respectively, from communist control—struggles which were taken up by their supporters during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. In Albania, a similar process imagines the pre-socialist period as an enlightened era where figures who had openly collaborated with

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, in November 2019, members of the Italian senate introduced an appeal for a Nuremberg of Communism. The appeal was supported by the Platform of European Memory and Conscience and its member organizations, including two Albanian ones, MEMO and IDMC. See <https://appeal.nurembergforcommunism.org/>.

fascists and Nazis are rehabilitated as patriotic anti-communists.<sup>22</sup> We see this happening with high-ranking figures like King Zog or his Prime Minister, Mustafa Merlika-Kruja, both of whom worked closely with Mussolini. The discourse on war-time history of Jewish people in Albania is used to aid this rehabilitation, a narrative that as I have discussed, contends that partisans *and* non-communist Nazi collaborators helped Jews during the Holocaust.

### ***1.6.3 A Tale of Two Totalitarianisms***

As we have seen, the elusive mnemonic community of European memory, which the Yugoslav successor states and Albania seek to enter, centers a globalized version of Holocaust memory and equates it with the violence of communism. I do not have space here to provide a complete history of the discursive equivalence made between Nazism and communism. The comparison can be traced to influential works like Hannah Arendt's 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and its comparative treatment of Hitler and Stalin. At the end of the 1980s, on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, German historians once again took up the debate around this comparison. In what became called the *Historikerstreit*, or the "historians' dispute," right-wing and left-wing German historians argued whether Nazism or Stalinism had been the more severe form of totalitarianism and genocide (Ghodsee 118). After the Cold War ended, the comparison and the debates it provokes gained greater traction within the European Union. In

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Solina Boçi writes that historians in post-war Albania attempted to argue against the lumping together of nationalist groups who had organized against the occupation with those who had been active fascist collaborators. Yet, under Hoxha's strict control of historiography, the charge of fascist collaborationism applied liberally to all political opponents, despite accuracy, differences and nuances. Indeed, historical accuracy would bolster the contentious idea that a civil war had been fought alongside WWII and give moral leverage to groups attacked by the communists (Boçi 193). After 1991, Albanian historians once again worked to provide a more multidimensional picture of WWII, extending historical research to overlooked themes of social issues like education, or the plight of minority groups, and writing on the not so clear-cut positions of BK and Legaliteti—research areas that remain underdeveloped (Kera 381-7).

fact, in 2008, this equivalence became institutionalized through the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism.<sup>23</sup> With the Czech president Václav Havel as one of its signatories, and also signed by representatives from the Czech Republic, Germany, the USA, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Russia, and others, the Prague Declaration sought to reconcile different threads of European history by “[recognizing] Communism and Nazism as a common legacy and [bringing] about an honest and thorough debate on all the totalitarian crimes of the past century” (Havel, V. et al).

Although not initiated by the EU, the Prague Declaration ushered in significant developments in the union’s memory politics. Soon after the declaration was signed, the EU took a series of steps to support it: making August 23 the official European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism; establishing the Platform of European Memory and Conscience<sup>24</sup>; and securing implementation of the 2009 resolution on “European conscience and

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<sup>23</sup> The Declaration can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>24</sup> In recent years, the Platform of European Memory and Conscience has been responsible for exporting its anti-communist ideology to new EU members and aspiring ones, as we have seen in the case of Albania. Since its establishment in 2011, the Platform has amassed 68 members—mostly nongovernmental and research institutions—from 23 countries (see list [here](#)). Fifteen EU member nations are represented in its membership, as well as eight non-EU countries: Albania, Georgia, Iceland, Moldova, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. In terms of Balkan representation, there are four Albanian organizations active members, five from Romania, and one from Bulgaria, while no Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, or Macedonian institutions have joined thus far. Interestingly, the two organizations from the United States that have joined the Platform are the Joint Baltic American National Committee and the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, the latter of which is led by the conservative Lee Edwards, one of the original signatories of the Prague Declaration and a “distinguished fellow in conservative thought at The Heritage Foundation,” according to his official biography. The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation is an overtly anti-communist organization, which was established at the urging of Republican senators and representatives in the early 1990s, whose anti-communist advocacy led to the Friendship Act of 1993. Signed into law by Bill Clinton in December of 1993, the act sought to improve relations between the US, Russia and other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, by revising policies of the Cold War era, while also establishing a monument to honor the “100,000,000 victims of communism,” who perished in “an unprecedented imperial communist holocaust” (S. 1672, accessed [here](#)). In June 2022, the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation opened a museum in Washington, D.C., where they had also erected a controversial monument to the victims of communism in 2007. The strong ideological and partisan nature of this organization gives a

totalitarianism,” which led to the later resolution on the “Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe,” adopted in 2019.<sup>25</sup> Tracing the genealogy of these resolutions, David Barile argues that history and memory have become entangled in EU integration discussions since the Cold War, leading to a unified European framework of history “whose approach to the facts of 20<sup>th</sup> century European history deliberately stressed certain historical developments while neglecting others” (992). While Nazism and communism have become equivalents—an equivalence wherein “communism” turns into a synonym for Stalinism, and diverse types of socialist systems and experiences are placed under one homogenous umbrella—the post-war fascist regimes of Spain, Portugal and Greece, and their contemporary mnemonic landscapes receive little attention by the European Parliament’s memory resolutions. Similarly, while the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the treaty of non-aggression signed by the Nazi and Soviets on 23 August 1939, rightly receives considerable attention and explains the European Parliament choice to make August 23<sup>rd</sup> the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, other acts, like the 1938 Munich Agreement between Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy, are largely ignored, despite this agreement’s role in facilitating the rise of Nazi Germany by permitting the annexation of the Sudetenland (Barile 991).

Newly minted Eastern and Central European members of the EU, who sought to distance themselves from their socialist past, embraced the narrative that the Prague Declaration was promoting. Paired with the ubiquitous instrumentalization of victimhood and past trauma to paint

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sense of the Platform’s organizing structure and goals, as well as showing how the category of “victim” has been instrumentalized. In these spaces, “victims of communism” becomes a hollow signifier, and in its attempt to include such a wide-ranging set of experiences, temporalities and societies, becomes synonymous with a generalized fear of communism, which is expressed through this performative, but empty, empathizing with its victims.

<sup>25</sup> See the full text of the European Parliament’s 2009 resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism [here](#). The text of the 2019 resolution on the Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe can be found [here](#).



these countries entirely as victims of Soviet communism, the narrative of “two totalitarianisms” and “double genocide” cemented an equivalence between Nazism and communism, while also relativizing the Holocaust and relinquishing responsibility for the systematic murder of Jewish communities in the region (Ghodsee 117). As Ghodsee argues, the economic weakening of the European Union, the 2008 global financial crisis, and crisis in Greece and Spain, as well as the fear of anti-austerity movements and a re-emerging left, made the “two totalitarianisms” narrative a crucial necessity for discrediting the left in the new millennium (117).<sup>26</sup> Ghodsee concludes by observing that across the European Union, political leaders’ fear of any challenge to unrestricted capitalism makes “even the extremes of fascism” seem no worse than socialism, since the narrative of two totalitarianisms frames communism and socialism as systems that “inevitably [lead] to class murder,” where “class murder is the moral equivalent of the Holocaust. If fascism and socialism are “morally equivalent,” she writes, then the “political and economic elite do no wrong by choosing the pole that accords with their own financial interests” (135). The sentiment underlying the narrative of two totalitarianisms, which is exported from the EU to its candidate states in the former Yugoslavia and in Albania, is thus a decidedly anti-socialist one.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to EU projects and resolutions, this equivalence is also promoted by private foundations like the German center-right Konrad Adenauer Foundation, whose offices around the world, seek to advance “liberal democracy and a social market economy,” as well as “transatlantic relations and European unification.” In formerly socialist countries, this foundation plays an important role in ensuring the successful integration of European memory standards and the German *vergangenheitsbewältigung* through financial support for memory-related conferences, exhibitions, educational materials, books, films, etc. The role of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Albania is explored in the chapter on Luljeta Lleshanaku.

<sup>27</sup> The proliferation of memory projects, centers, and institutions in European universities needs to be studied with an eye for such ideological influences. Recent years have seen the establishment of centers like the Genealogies of Memory project, out of the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (which also organizes a number of [related projects](#)), the Council for European Studies’ Transnational Memory and Identity in Europe, the Cultural Memory Studies Initiative at Ghent University in the Netherlands, the Utrecht Forum for Memory Studies, the Danish Network for Cultural Memory Studies, the Memory Group at Warwick University, the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform, the Research

## 1.7 Chapter Outline

The four chapters of this dissertation engage with the work of four writers, the historical and sociopolitical contexts that influenced their writing, and the conditions that necessitated their varied uses of silence. In the first two chapters, I explore silence as a poetics that emerged in reaction to two very different sets of nationalist demands to serve the construction of ethnonational identity and historical narrative. My first chapter, “*Torzo* and the Disarticulation of Silence: Ali Podrimja’s Literary Experiments,” takes a close look at the dynamics of Kosovar Albanian literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By using the concept of “minor literature,” I show that Kosovar Albanian writers faced pressures to conform to a particular aesthetics and ideology coming from both Yugoslavia and Albania, without the opportunity to be integrated in either national literature. This chapter analyzes the divisions that became apparent in the Kosovar Albanian literary community after the Yugoslav student protests of 1968, when greater liberalization made cultural exchange with Albania possible, but also increased the demand for literature that testified to suffering and endorsed socialist realism in order to advance Kosovo’s goals of political autonomy and identity building. To demonstrate the impact of these sociopolitical changes, I concentrate on the work of Ali Podrimja, a prolific poet, editor, and activist whose oeuvre spanned over five decades. I argue that Podrimja’s 1971 poetry collection *Torzo*, an important example of his other experimental, postmodern writing, resisted these demands through a poetics of silence, realized via the figure of the “torzo.” I interpret the torzo as the sacrificial victim who, taking the shape of a nameless, mute torso haunts the reader and

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Platform Transformations and Eastern Europe at the University of Vienna, Memory Lab, and Mnemonics: Network for Memory Studies, among many other initiatives. These centers have produced a great amount of innovative and collaborative work, but there is yet to be a thorough study of how their funding streams impact the research that is prioritized and published.

subverts expectations of the victim as passive. Unlike criticism that interprets the *torzo* as a metaphor for the transhistorical suffering of the Albanian people, I show the ways in which this figure functions like Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs," which by resisting incorporation into the structure of the organism—in this case, the nation—reveals the futility of sacrifice and the impossible project of redemption.

The close reading analysis I undertake in this chapter addresses the rewriting of Podrimja as a purely nationalist poet, a categorization that was supported by Kosovar and Albanian writers, critics and editors, and which was based on his writing on Kosovar Albanian repression in Yugoslavia and its escalation during the Kosovo War in 1998-1999. I maintain that in the immediate aftermath of the war, there was little space for experimental aesthetics and works like *Torzo* were silenced or subsumed into the broader framework of trauma that came to dominate Albanian literature, in Kosovo and in Albania, at the start of the new millennium. Podrimja's shifting between avantgarde and nationalist aesthetics in his writing offers insights into the strategy of using silence and incomprehensibility as a way to subvert dominant ideology, but also shows the ease with which silence's lacunae can be appropriated into the nation's totalizing narratives.

If Podrimja's task had been to testify to Kosovar Albanian suffering in Yugoslavia, in my second chapter I examine the representational demands made on Serbian writers during, and after, the Yugoslav disintegration. Chapter 2, "'How the Silence Sounded:' Postmemory and the Refusal to Testify in David Albahari," situates David Albahari's 1996 novel *Mamac /Bait* in a historical moment when Serbian history, collective memory, and literature were undergoing a fundamental rewriting. The disavowing of the shared Yugoslav past in favor of rehabilitated WWII fascist figures and a mythologized "golden age" of ethnic and religious homogeneity that

preceded Yugoslavia, supported Serbia's genocidal acts during the decade when Albahari wrote *Bait*, and other diaspora novels from his new Canadian home. I read *Bait* alongside Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and show that the novel is concerned with issues of the second generation and its "working through" an inherited traumatic past, since it centers a narrator who attempts to write the story of his mother's survival during the Holocaust. I make the proposition that this novel complicates Hirsch's idea of intergenerational memory transmission by using silence as a deliberate method for refusing to give a testimony of trauma. In *Bait*, this refusal occurs through the silences of the narrator's mother, who does not comply with the narrator's request to remember and testify. I argue that mother's reluctance to speak is not the result of a pathological reaction to trauma, nor Albahari's postmodern commentary on the inadequacy of language to capture experience, but a choice made to resist incorporation into Serbia's revisionist historical narratives. I stress the stakes of *Bait*'s silence by historicizing the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory and Jewish suffering in Serbia. An appropriation of trauma that carried interrelated goals of conferring the same victim status to the Serbian nation, appealing to the larger European community, and justifying the genocidal acts committed in the 1990s, this process did not go unnoticed by the Serbian Jewish community. I argue that Albahari, as an active participant in this community, crafted a narrative driven by silence in order to prevent such appropriation of historical trauma.

My next two chapters delve deeper into the connection between literary rewriting and historical rewriting by examining the politics of memory in two countries at different stages of EU accession: Albania, which only reached the negotiation stage of the ascension process in 2022, over a decade since its formal application, and Croatia, which became an EU member in 2013. In Chapter 3, "Rewriting the Traumatized Nation: Luljeta Lleshanaku Between Albania

and World Literature,” I trace the introduction of Albanian writers to world literature after the collapse of state socialism in 1992. I build on Bhakti Shringarpure’s concept of the Cold War paradigm, defined as the principles for publishing and evaluating literature developed in accordance with US foreign policy during the Cold War, which continue to guide the American publishing industry vis-à-vis the inclusion, framing and promotion of literature from socialist and post-socialist countries. I argue that not only did the Cold War paradigm manufacture a preference for apolitical aesthetics, but it also established the testimonial genre—with its overemphasis of passivity, suffering and traumatic memories—as the primary method of framing postsocialist literature in general, and Albanian literature in particular. I illustrate this dynamic by focusing this chapter on the poet Luljeta Lleshanaku, whose literary trajectory from a writer censored by the Albanian socialist system, to an early representative of Albanian literature in the world stage through English language translations and participation in the International Writers’ Program, and to more recent international success, has cemented her as the “voice” of the generation who suffered under Hoxha’s dictatorship. I demonstrate that because Lleshanaku’s career was so intimately connected to the United States, and because she was rewritten as an apolitical, imagist poet who could easily be approached by the English-speaking public, the Cold War paradigm that introduced her to American audiences was imported to Albania and disseminated as undisputed fact after her international success. I extend the analytical propositions made by the concept of “Europeanization of memory,” as explicated by Ljiljana Radonić and Jelena Subotić, among other scholars, to the context of postsocialist Albania in order to track the development of contemporary memory politics and official historical narratives that remember only the trauma of the past, and which instrumentalize Holocaust memory to accomplish such reframing and to appeal to Europe. By bringing together these two different

threads—Luljeta Lleshanaku’s introduction to world literature, and the development of Albania’s post-socialist memory—this chapter reveals the crucial role that testimony plays in the interconnected process of rewriting literature and history. I argue that it is Lleshanaku’s incorporation of others’ testimony within poems that deal with the memory of state socialism, in *Pothuajse Dje / Almost Yesterday* (2012) and *Homo Antarcticus* (2015), that reproduces European memory standards by reifying testimony as a necessary aspect of dealing with the past. Moreover, I argue that because of Lleshanaku’s status as one of the most important writers of Albania’s dictatorship, these testimonies are read as proof of Albania’s exceptionally traumatic past. What prevents Lleshanaku’s poems from becoming completely appropriated into this narrative of exceptional trauma, I maintain, is their deliberate lack of redemption.

In the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation, “Theaters of War: The Implicated Narratives of Daša Drndić,” I analyze three novels by Daša Drndić in which the Holocaust is a key thematic concern: *Sonnenschein / Trieste* (2007), *Belladonna* (2012) and *E.E.G.* (2016). I read these novels through the lens of Michael Rothberg’s concepts of implication and the implicated subject, showing that Drndić’s method of systematically researching the Second World War, allows her to challenge the idea that Europe has adequately dealt with the past. This chapter argues that by making the implicated subject the main subject of these novels, Drndić rejects both European Union directives on how to remember *and* Croatia’s own historical revisionism. I contextualize Drndić’s intervention into Croatian memory politics by providing an overview of how they developed and how they have supported the rewriting of local history. In Drndić, the violent legacies of the European past return regardless of the layered silencing imposed on them by governments, intuitions, archives, and intellectuals. The past in these novels, this chapter argues, returns not as a story of passive, powerless victims violated by evil

perpetrators, but as a record of collective implication in European fascism, which did not end with the conclusion of the war. For this reason, Drndić does not view Croatia's membership in the EU, or her protagonist's inclusion into the international literary community and market, as the ultimate solution for dealing with the violent legacies of the past. I argue that by staging several iterations of intergenerational "facing the past," but not making readers privy to these meetings and thus surrounding them in silence, Drndić's novels underscore the impossibility of reconciliation in a contemporary European sociopolitical climate where historical rewriting remains so prevalent and where the discovery of implication is inevitable.

## Chapter 1

### Torzo and the Disarticulation of Silence: Ali Podrimja's Literary Experiments

#### 1.1 Introduction

In 1968, young people across SFR Yugoslavia rose up in protest. In Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana and Prishtina, students, artists, writers and activists demonstrated against poverty, economic precarity, unemployment and lack of opportunity. More than twenty years after the Second World War, the egalitarian society promised by the Yugoslav Socialist Party was yet to materialize. On the contrary, the student demonstrators argued that the party had strayed far from its Marxist ideals, and was now filled with the red bourgeoisie, who “were reaping the benefits of the system while keeping silent about the suffering of other social groups” (Hetemi 4). By practicing a Marxist “merciless criticism of everything that existed,” including the party in power, the student demonstrators wanted to achieve a “so-called socialism with a human face, without social stratifications and fractional nationalisms” (Aleksić 126). Contrary to what their critics, as well as many post-Yugoslav scholars later argued, neither the student protests, nor the literary and arts movements that emerged at the same time, sought the dismantling of the Yugoslav political system. Instead, their demands were grounded in socialist and Marxist ideas and aimed to secure “better implementation of communism at all levels” (Hetemi 75).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> While the 1968 student protesters advocated for a “better communism,” nationalist groups throughout the federation also organized to demand decentralization and greater autonomy. The largest of these movements, the so-called Croatian Spring of 1970–1972, displayed the nationalist, xenophobic and



In Kosovo, Yugoslavia's poorest and least developed region, the student protests of 1968 were of a different nature than those in Belgrade. As one of two Autonomous Provinces administered by the Republic of Serbia, Kosovo had experienced decades of economic stagnation, lack of political representation, deep inequalities, and violent repression. Conditions had been especially brutal under Aleksandar Ranković, Tito's second in command until 1966, whose anti-Albanian policies turned Kosovo into a police state that routinely persecuted, tortured and imprisoned Kosovar Albanians. And while census figures reported the population of Albanians in Yugoslavia at 1.7 million in 1981, much greater than the population of Macedonians and Montenegrins in Yugoslavia, Albanians never received recognition as "constituent peoples" of the federation, justifying their continued disenfranchisement, lack of autonomy and repression (Hetemi 54). Thus, when students in Prishtina and other parts of Kosovo demonstrated in 1968, they expressed not only their dissatisfaction with the red bourgeoisie and their own marginal position in Yugoslav society, but also a well-articulated platform that demanded republic status for Kosovo, so that it would have the same political autonomy as the federation's six constituent republics. As part of their struggle for the improvement of Albanians' lives in Yugoslavia, these students also called for the establishment of the first Albanian-language university in Prishtina and for the recognition of Albanian as an official language in Kosovo.

In his multidisciplinary study of three generations of Kosovar Albanian student protests in 1968, 1981, and 1997, Atdhe Hetemi argues that these students' demands for republic status and for self-determination of Albanians in Kosovo, as well as other Albanian-majority areas in Montenegro and Macedonia, were explicitly shaped by the interests of Kosovar Albanian

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historical revisionist ideologies that would contribute to the federation's disintegration. See Sabrina Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*, Indiana University Press: 2006, and *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration Of Yugoslavia From The Death Of Tito To The Fall Of Milošević.*, Routledge: 2002.

political and intellectual elites. In 1968, finding themselves stuck between Yugoslav discrimination and the Albania Republic's nationalist propaganda, these elites crafted a set of demands that would soon also become the priority of university professors and shape the sphere of politics in Kosovo for decades to come (Hetemi 89). Through careful planning and organizing, these groups popularized the demand for Kosovo's republic status to youth and students, who would bear the brunt of Serbian and Yugoslav responses, including many instances of imprisonment and torture, culminating with the fatal shooting of student protester Murat Mehmeti in November of 1968 (Hetemi 89, 95). And while Yugoslavia framed the Kosovar Albanian student protests and their demand for republic status as a provocation created by the Republic of Albania, Hetemi's archival research shows that Albania was not supportive of Kosovo's republic claim: Enver Hoxha asserted that the only way to solve the "general problem of Yugoslavia" was to replace Tito and his followers with a "Marxist-Leninist leadership," and *not* by conferring republic status to Kosovo (AMFA 360/1968 qtd in Hetemi 90-95).<sup>29</sup>

I bring up these contradictions in the political strategies of Albania and Kosovo, which go against the prevailing notion of a unified pan-Albanian effort to achieve self-determination for Kosovo, with the intention of demonstrating Albania's contingent political support vis-à-vis Kosovo, which as this chapter shows, translates into contingent cultural support that depended on aesthetic and political alignment. On the whole, these dynamics between Albania and Kosovo, and the marginalization of Kosovo under Yugoslavia, underscore Kosovar Albanians' position in

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<sup>29</sup> Hoxha's position against Kosovo's republic status contradicted his support of the so-called illegal groups in Kosovo, whose main political goals were the unification of Kosovo with Albania. For a history and analysis of these illegal groups see: Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, "The Bequest of Ilegalja: Contested Memories and Moralities in Contemporary Kosovo." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2013: 953–970; Elife Krasniqi, "Same Goal, Different Paths, Different Class: Women's Feminist Political Engagements in Kosovo from the Mid-1970s until the Mid-1990s." *Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s. Comparative Southeast European Studies* 2021; 69(2–3): 313–334.

between two powers that used them for achieving their own political aspirations. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which one particular group of actors—Kosovar Albanian writers in general, and Ali Podrimja in particular—contended with this positionality in their literary production. I show that literature was a space for negotiating conflicting aspects of their identity, political and aesthetic commitments, which did not adhere completely to expectations originating in either the Albanian or Yugoslav spheres. I argue that through a postmodernist style that utilized silences, untranslatability and opaqueness, Podrimja demonstrated a conscious subversion of the framework of trauma and its requisite victim testimony, at a time when the narrative of trauma was taking hold as a primary characteristic of Albanian identity and self-definition.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1968 student protests, the question of Kosovar Albanian ethnonational identity was an especially pressing one. During the Ninth Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, held in April of 1969, Tito granted Kosovo a set of reforms that stopped short of conferring republic status. Kosovo was now allowed to use national symbols that referenced their Albanian ethnicity, and importantly, to establish the University of Prishtina and begin Albanian-language instruction in 1969. Further constitutional amendments made in 1968 and 1971, and the new Yugoslav Constitution of 1974, granted Kosovo's leadership greater control over the province, allowing them to function "without almost any interference from the [Socialist Republic of Serbia] or the SFRY federal government" (Hetemi 100). As a result, the Albanian language was declared an official language in Kosovo, leading to greater representation of Albanians in Kosovo's local government and administration. The new, official status of the Albanian language, combined with the establishment of the University of Prishtina, helped to bring a flourishing of Albanian literature and culture in Kosovo, and

deepened the cultural, literary, and academic connections with Albania. These connections, however, were influenced by the ideological dogma of socialist Albania, then at the height of its Cultural Revolution, a process that ended religious freedom and banned all forms of “western influences” from literature and the arts. The one-sided cultural exchange between the People’s Republic of Albania and Kosovo—which established a literary and administrative standard of the Albanian language<sup>30</sup> and shaped the curriculum of the University of Prishtina<sup>31</sup>—was thus shaped by the Albanian dictatorship’s ideological apparatus and its strict adherence to socialist realism.

Always depended on the diplomatic relations between Albania and Yugoslavia, this connection between Kosovo and Albania served as a tool for Albanian Party of Labor to propagate ideas of ethnic belonging among the Kosovar population, to more thoroughly monitor the Kosovar Albanian intelligentsia, and to disseminate their propaganda in support of Enver

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<sup>30</sup> The Albanian language adopted as an official language of Kosovar administration, academia and literary publishing was not reflective of the Gheg dialect spoken in Kosovo. Instead it was the new standard of Unified Literary Albanian, newly crafted by the Albanian Communist Party. Over a period of just sixteen years, this standardization process minimized features of Gheg from literary and administrative language through the publications of new dictionaries and orthography rule books. The previous liberal use of both dialects in literature and official documents, both in Albania and Kosovo, was ended because displaying regional linguistic difference was deemed an “unlawful expression of bourgeois chauvinism and localism” (Kamusella 225). After 1969, and in order to strengthen their connection to Albanian identity, Kosovar writers adapted to the diglossia of writing in a standard that was far removed from their local dialect. This phenomenon explains the differences in language found in books published in Kosovo before and after the ratification of ULA as the standard, something which I encountered frequently when reading Ali Podrimja’s poetry, published throughout a period of over fifty years.

<sup>31</sup> Writing about the assistance given by Albania to Kosovar academics who developed the University of Prishtina’s initial curriculum, Hetemi gives a sense of the scale of this one-sided exchange: “During the period between 1969 and 1971 alone, 42,266 books of Albanian literature and other translated material, including 3031 textbooks on 46 subjects, were delivered to different schools in Kosovo. Textbooks were also sent to the faculties of economics, natural sciences, law, history, languages, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, medicine. As far as other teaching tools are concerned, during the period between 1969 and 1971, 108,970 pieces were sent, mainly maps, geographical and historical tables, newspapers, journals, etc., including 60,000 gramophone records with Albanian songs (CCA, 511/1972/48)” (162n6).

Hoxha. To these ends, academics, writers, artists, athletes and folk musicians from Albania visited Kosovo with the task of teaching their Kosovar counterparts about their professions, and publishing houses in each country came to an agreement in regards to publishing and circulating works from Albania to Kosovo and vice versa. The unequal volume of books entering each country's literary market placed Kosovo at a disadvantage, especially since, as the literary historian Sabit Syla points out, even when diplomatic relations between Albania and Yugoslavia became strained again at the end of the 1970s, Albania continued to send books and visitors to Kosovo, while limiting the number of Kosovar Albanian publications and writers that entered Albania (*Kosova e lire*).<sup>32</sup> It was through such strategic, one-sided exporting of academic, cultural and literary expertise, that during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the People's Republic of Albania promoted a false image of Albania as a utopian socialist society, headed by a totalitarian political party that was the ultimate authority on Albanian identity, culture, and history, and which could, when needed, instrumentalize the suffering and sacrifice of its people, or of Kosovar Albanians, to maintain that authority.

This paternal relationship between Albania and Kosovo was not welcomed by all: three years after the 1968 student protests, and shortly after the University of Prishtina began holding classes in Albanian, a group of Kosovar Albanian writers published an open letter critiquing socialist realism, and in turn, the influence of Albania. Titled "Vox Clamantis in Deserto," this letter was published in the prominent Kosovar Albanian periodical *Rilindja* in October 1971.<sup>33</sup>

The drafter of the letter was Anton Pashku, a writer of postmodern novels, short stories and

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed accounting of the number of cultural and academic visits from Albania to Kosovo and vice versa, and numbers of books exchanged between Tirana and Prishtina, see Sabit Syla, "Shkëmbimet arsimore, kulturore e shkencore mes Shqipërisë dhe Kosovës, 1970-1980," *Radio Kosova e Lirë* and Sabit Syla, Jakup Krasniqi and Nuri Bexheti (eds), *Kosova në arkivat e shtetit shqiptar 1950-1969*, Instituti i Historisë--Prishtinë, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> The title of the letter is a biblical reference, translated as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

plays, while the signatories included the writers and academics Ali Podrimja, Hysni Hoxha, Samedin Momxhiu, Gani Bobi, Rexhep Ismajli, Eqrem Basha, and Mensur Raifi. Having been involved with the literary and academic sphere in Kosovo for decades, these writers used the letter to point to what they saw as the two biggest weaknesses of Kosovo’s literary scene: the absence of serious literary criticism and the negative influence of socialist realism. This critique provoked an impassioned reaction from literary, cultural and intellectual circles in Kosovo, also gaining the attention of authorities in Albania.<sup>34</sup> The reputation of the signatories suffered as they became labeled as anti-communist and anti-Albanian writers who had been corrupted by Western and Yugoslav influences.

This chapter uses the debates that emerged after the publication of “Vox” as a starting point for exploring how the ideological divisions between Yugoslavia and Albania manifested in Kosovar Albanian literature and in particular, how these divisions employed or resisted the framework of trauma. To build my arguments, I use the concept of minor literature to situate Kosovar Albanian literature between Yugoslavia and Albania, and demonstrate how the demands placed on Kosovar writers to serve the interests of the Kosovar nation—and of Albanians as a unified, homogeneous ethnic entity—were predicated on a rhetoric of historical, collective suffering. While this strategy was useful in building support for Kosovo’s independence and highlighting human rights’ abuses against Albanians, it also stifled creative freedoms, as the signatories of “Vox” contended. To better understand their claims, I look closely to the work of one of the signatories of the letter, Ali Podrimja (1942-2012), a prolific poet and editor, whose publications over fifty years and thirty-five books, reflected the many sociopolitical changes in

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<sup>34</sup> I have not been able to access archival sources regarding the reactions that this letter provoked in Albania, but have read second hand accounts that suggest the letter prompted a campaign in Albania against the work of the signatories, and in particular, Anton Pashku, as its author.

Kosovo. I claim that it was through a poetics of silence that Ali Podrimja attempted to subvert both the socialist realist aesthetics required by the Kosovar literary establishment, and the instrumentalization of trauma in service of nation-building.

I do this by analyzing Podrimja's poetry collection *Torzo*, published in 1971, the same year as "Vox." The close engagement with this text allows me to unpack the intricacies of a response that aimed to resist the top-down directives placed on literary production during this crucial moment in the cultural and political landscapes of Kosovo, Yugoslavia, and Albania. Twenty years before the Yugoslav federation would begin to disintegrate in a series of wars, and the Albanian socialist system would break down in protests and civil unrest, Podrimja reconstructed a devastated world after the act of destruction had already occurred off-stage, unseen and unheard by readers. I show that, rather than framing this devastation as a product of simple story of victims and perpetrators, *Torzo* demonstrates the futility of the sacrificial impulse that offers up bodies for the construction of a communal edifice that, rather than protecting all members of the community, allows those at the margins to languish in a precarious state. In Podrimja's work, such precarity manifests in the figure of the torzo—a play on the word "torso"—a half-person who, more than the lack of limbs, head and ability to speak, laments the loss of its name. Unnamed, the torzo travels through this world in ruins, where the ungrievable loss of the name renders it completely forgotten to history. In this chapter, I read the torzo as a disarticulated body that has "ceased to be an organism," becoming the body without organs imagined by Deleuze and Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus* 159). In this form, the torzo challenges dominant constructions of a world that demands representation of pain and trauma according to a predetermined set of rules. Rather than an obedient victim, who testifies in the right way and gives us moral satisfaction for listening to the tale of trauma, Podrimja's torzo haunts the poems

with no intention of reaching a redemptive conclusion, serving as a reminder of the incomprehensibility of disarticulation and importantly, preventing readers from entering into an appropriative relationship of vicarious, secondary witnessing.

Because of this resistance to convention, and despite positive reviews at the time of its publication, Podrimja's *Torzo* suffered a form of silencing in comparison to his other work. This collection's transformative potential has been occluded by the greater importance placed on Podrimja's earlier and later work, whose more overt concern with the nation and its suffering earned it wider circulation and became synonymous with the entirety of Podrimja's oeuvre. This preference for writing that explicitly centered suffering and trauma was not unique to Podrimja's case. Rather, it was an important aspect of fashioning a post-socialist Albanian identity in both Albania and Kosovo. In this process, disparate histories of violence in Kosovo and Albania were brought together to solidify a dominant narrative that utilized past injustice and injury to claim a place within the political and cultural community of Europe. Literature that testified to these painful histories was instrumental to this process, therefore the dominant socialist realist aesthetic and its orientation toward a glorious future was replaced with an aesthetic of testimony which commodified the trauma of the past.

Given his status as an influential poet, editor and widely translated author, Ali Podrimja became one of the "voices" that best testified to the tragedies experienced by Kosovo's Albanian population. Podrimja was aware of his influence, and during the 1990s, he was active in the movement for Kosovo's independence, participating in hunger strikes in Prishtina, speaking engagements throughout Western Europe, and certainly, writing extensively about the topic in his essays and poetry. The Yugoslav disintegration and the wars and genocidal campaigns carried out during the Bosnian and Kosovar wars, led Podrimja to employ a style more akin to



poetry of witness and testimony. It was this body of work that earned him a place in the canon of Kosovar national literature, and in broader Albanian culture, especially following his death in 2012. The memorialization of the writer through gestures like placing a bust in his likeness in his hometown of Gjakova, whose municipality also named a square after him, has fully established Podrimja as a national poet of Kosovo, while at the same time disregarding more experimental work like *Torzo*. As a way to bring more attention to his experimental writing and to historicize trauma's discursive dominance in the former Yugoslavia and Albania, I use the sections that follow to engage with the texture of Podrimja's complex, paradoxical, uses of silence.

## **1.2 Making a Minor Literature: Kosovar Writing Between Yugoslavia and Albania**

In the well-known definition given by Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is “not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language,” and this literature is affected by a “strong co-efficient of deterritorialization” (*Kafka* 16-17). I believe that for Albanian language literature in Kosovo (and other parts of Yugoslavia), the categorization as minor literature holds even if the writing was largely done in Albanian. Disconnected from the core of Albanian culture, the capital of Tirana, and written in a dialect of Albanian that differed significantly from the language standardized and used in Albania; and also marginalized from the cultural cores of Yugoslavia in Belgrade and Zagreb, Kosovar Albanian literature struggled to gain solid footing within the national literatures of Albania and of Yugoslavia. To extend Deleuze and Guattari's argument further, because Kosovar Albanian literature existed in a “narrow space” between two major literatures, all individual matters, beliefs and desires expressed by writers were immediately equated with the political aspirations of the entire nation (*Kafka* 16). It is not surprising, because of this enmeshment of the personal with the collective and the political, that in the specific context of 1970s Kosovo, writers' affinity toward the

avantgarde or experimental would have been interpreted as an affront to the ethnic and cultural unity between Kosovo and Albania.

As Deleuze and Guattari explain, such an interplay between the individual and collective in minor literatures means that:

...what the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political—even if others do not agree with him. The political field has contaminated all statement, especially literature which finds itself positively charged with the role and the function of collective, and even revolutionary utterance; because the collective or national consciousness is ‘often inactive in external life and always in the process of disintegration,’ it is literature which produces an active solidarity—in spite of skepticism—and, if the writer lives on the margin, is set apart from his fragile community, this situation makes him all the more able to express another, potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (*Kafka* 17)

Following from this statement, I claim that the political, “collective, and even revolutionary” charge of literature in Kosovo during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a time when, as we discussed above, Albanian students had to rise in protest to earn the basic right of academic instructions in their native language—meant that Kosovar Albanian writers were automatically interpreted as representatives of the collective and national consciousness, a consciousness which existed at the margins of both Yugoslav and “proper” Albanian culture. And while Deleuze and Guattari invite us to imagine the radical possibilities that minor literatures have for creating the “means for another consciousness and another sensibility” that can counteract the dream of becoming established as a major language with a corresponding canon of national literature, such a possibility becomes harder to conceptualize in the context of Kosovo, especially after the beginning of Milošević’s campaign of dispossession, persecution and violence against Albanians

in Kosovo in the late 1980s.<sup>35</sup> At a time when Kosovar Albanian literature faced an existential crisis and risk of being completely silenced, adjusting to a new space within the canon of Albanian national literature might have seemed like an obvious choice. Yet, ideological, linguistic and cultural differences meant that, other than a superficial engagement, the literary sphere in Albania excluded Kosovar Albanian writers, even after Kosovo's independence opened pathways for greater literary exchange between the two. Ali Podrimja was an outspoken critic of such exclusion: in a number of essays written in the 1990s, he remarked on the tenuous relationship between Albanian and Kosovar Albanian writers, where the former viewed the latter as inferior. For instance, Podrimja recalls an event organized in Tirana, in 1995, to confer that year's "Ismail Kadare" literary prize to Ernesto Sabato. During this gathering, the organizers announced that the first translation of Sabato into Albanian was forthcoming. Podrimja writes that translations of Sabato had already been published in 1981 and 1987 in Prishtina. To him, the fact that these were not considered *Albanian* translations, demonstrated that Albania only accepted what was "created and translated within its political borders" (Podrimja 260).<sup>36</sup>

This issue of exclusion persists to this day, as Kosovar Albanian writing remains inaccessible and seldom circulated in Albania. When Kosovar Albanian literature crosses the

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<sup>35</sup> In 1989, Milošević abolished Kosovo's hard-earned autonomy, banished Albanians from all governmental institutions, and expelled Albanian professors and students from the University of Prishtina, effectively ending instruction of Albanian language, history and literature by 1991, and also segregating Albanian students from their Serbian peers (Hetemi 7). In response, a parallel system of education was developed by Albanians in Kosovo, which operated out of people's homes. See Besa Shahini, "Lessons in Resistance, Kosovo's Parallel Education System in the 1990s, *Pristina Insight*, <https://prishtinainsight.com/lessons-resistance-kosovos-parallel-education-system-1990s-mag/>. A project to map these Home Schools can be accessed here: <https://www.shtepiteshkolla.org/en>. For information on Kosovo's parallel state, see: Besnik Pula (2004) The emergence of the Kosovo "parallel state," 1988–1992. *Nationalities Papers*, 32:4, p. 797-826.

<sup>36</sup> Ramadan Musliu comments that the difficulty of integrating into the political borders of Albanian national literature made literary circles especially important in Kosovo, with circles in Prishtina and the diaspora (especially in Italy) actively interacting with another (qtd in Shala 40). For a history of the literary circles in Prishtina, see Kujtim Shala, *Prishtina Letrare: Petit Paris*, Buzuku: 2014.

political and cultural border with Albania, it does so largely as an extension of the political, nationalist agendas of the Albanian government or the country's cultural elites. In fact, this infrequent inclusion occurs whenever there is a need to support the narrative of the perpetual victimhood of Albanians, which inevitably creates a demand for Kosovar Albanian literature that centers on collective trauma. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such demand was articulated by Ismail Kadare, who was (and remains) the writer most representative of Albanian literature at home and internationally. Kadare's literary and essayistic work played a significant role in redefining Albanian literature in the post-socialist space: driven by Eurocentric, and often Islamophobic views, Kadare sought the return of Albania, and Albanian literature, to its European and Christian origins, from which they had been forcefully separated.<sup>37</sup> By emphasizing Kosovar Albanian suffering, Albanian political and cultural elites could better advocate for Albania's "return" to Europe. Such emphasis could solidify the claim of pain and trauma as an essential quality of being Albanian, and gave writers from Albania the ability to harness an image of overwhelming victimhood whenever necessary, subsuming the repression

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<sup>37</sup> In Albanian public discourse, an emphasis was placed on Albania's Christian origins, in an effort to distance this "European" Albania from its recent and distant past—first, as a victim of Ottoman occupation and conversion to Islam, and later, as a victim of Soviet socialism and secularism. Ismail Kadare famously argued this position in his essay *Identiteti Evropian i Shqiptareve / The European Identity of Albanians*, written in response to the Kosovar academic Rexhep Qosja, who accused Kadare of islamophobia. In her analysis of Kadare's "construction of Albania as a European space" Julia Musha summarizes this debate: "In an essay titled "National Identity and Religious Self-Understanding" Qosja argued that Albania, a country located at the crossroads of civilizations, could be a mediator between East and West. In his reply, *The Albanians' European Identity*, Kadare wanted nothing to do with crossroads, mediations, or dual identities, insisting instead on the simply European place of Albania. Qosja's reply to Kadare's reply, *The Dismissed Reality*, provides further clues to Qosja's understanding of "Europe." Both of them, as well as a number of other commentators on the debate are taken to task for erroneously framing the question of Albania's relationship to Europe in terms of culture rather than politics by Enis Sulstarova (19, 4). See Julia Musha, *The Other Europe: Locating Albania in Contemporary European Discourse* (PhD. Thesis).

and genocide of Kosovar Albanians in the former Yugoslavia into the larger narrative of Albanians as victims, without the need for serious historical or ethical discernment.

To be sure, Kadare was not the only one promoting such views, which were common talking points of politicians in the immediate period after the fall of Albania's socialist system, but he did play an important role in involving writers and literature in this polemic. We can see this clearly in an introduction he wrote for the war-time novel *Nata e Kosovës / The Night of Kosovo*, written by Rexhep Hoti and published in 1999. In the introduction, Kadare admonishes Kosovar writers who, according to him, did not come to the rescue of Kosovo during the war, when the need for writing that testified to what was happening on the ground became palpable. Lamenting the paucity of Kosovar Albanian literature that could bear witness to the tragedy unfolding in Kosovo at the end of the 1990s, Kadare states that the inability to provide "historical explanations" and "testimonies of daily life ... of Serbian repression ... of the crimes of the last ten years" was caused by Kosovar Albanian writers' preference for Yugoslav and Western modernism (ix). Without substantiating any of his claims, Kadare argues that the success of Serbian propaganda against Kosovar Albanians resulted from the weakness of the latter's literary tradition, which had "no connection at all with Kosovo" and was devoid of any Kosovar essence or spirit (ix). In this way, Kadare reinforces the categorization of Kosovar Albanian literature as a minor literature where individual expression must always correspond to a collective consciousness. Those writers who eschewed writing about Kosovar Albanian suffering in favor of avantgarde writing left Kosovo almost entirely "without the defense of its culture," because:

By writing hermetic literature, incomprehensible to anyone, therefore a dilettante literature, where behind the claim to modernism lay a lack of professionalism and knowledge, these writers excluded the vast majority of Albanian writing from the life of Kosovo. ... Hiding behind hermetic obscurity, they *refused to give testimony* on the drama

of their people, on the crimes and massacres that were being carried out in Kosovo in a cyclical manner. ... In 1989, Kosovo was covered in blood and they did not testify to anything. In 1991, the same was repeated and they were silent, once again. In 1998, the dark clouds covered the Kosovar sky again, and still they did not speak. When their absence started to be felt, they were nervous and said that to represent the daily tragedy or the massacre of 1981 and others like it, was to demand homework from literature. Poor them, they forget that great works of world literature have concerned themselves with the denunciation of crimes, from Homer to Dante, from Shakespeare to our times. (Kadare, "Introduction" xi, emphasis mine)<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that Kadare interprets any writing that does not directly and overtly address the national question as a deliberate, shameful refusal to testify about the suffering of one's nation.<sup>39</sup> By invoking the idea of a unified, homogeneous "people" that these writers supposedly betrayed, Kadare infuses greater pathos and sentimentality to these statements, making the decision of some Kosovar Albanian writers to embrace modernism and postmodernism appear even more unacceptable. Dismissing the choices made by a diverse group of writers, Kadare concludes that they have failed in the task of adhering to the narrow, specific way of being an Albanian writer, which for him prioritizes giving "testimony on the drama of their people" above all else.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

<sup>39</sup> Ali Podrimja addressed Kadare's criticism in an essay titled "Kadare: Pakëz Letërsi Kosove (!)" / "Kadare: A Bit of Literature from Kosovo (!)." He cited earlier instances where Kadare had reprimanded Kosovar Albanian writers for displaying too much nationalism in their writing, contradicting the conclusions he made in the aforementioned introduction, and, I would argue, showing the influence of political context in Albanian writers' attitude toward Kosovar Albanian literature. To the claims that Kosovar Albanian writers did not represent Kosovo and its plight during the war sufficiently enough, Podrimja provides a two part response: first, the responsibility for advocating for Kosovo did not fall entirely on writers in the country, who were trying to survive the brutality of war, but also implicated writers in Albania and in the diaspora. If identity-based affinities made one responsible for serving as literary ambassadors to one's ethnic affiliation, then as Podrimja argues, Albanian writers everywhere should concern themselves with the plight of Kosovo, rather than depend solely on Kosovar writers. Second, literary writing was not necessarily incompatible with national issues, while the ideological thinking advocated for by Kadare was outdated and stagnant (Podrimja, *Ëndrra* 34-40).

<sup>40</sup> Kadare's reprimanding tone is similar to the charges made by the Kosovar Albanian writer and editor Esad Mekuli to the signatories of the "Vox" letter, which I discuss below. In fact, Kadare explicitly names Mekuli as one exception to the writers he critiques in this foreword. Though Kadare makes disparaging comments with regards to Yugoslav, or more Western literary influences, and their affinity for experimentation and "avant-garde nonsense," he nonetheless supports his own argument on the Western

The demand that writers represent Kosovo and a specific way of being Albanian was not new, nor something initiated by Kadare's criticism. While it was not always characterized by an overt emphasis on the traumatic, the imperative to represent the collective shaped much of the post-WWII literary production in Kosovo, and the increased influence of Albania added pressure to present a unified ethnic identity and adherence to socialist realism. This was the situation that the controversial open letter, "Vox Clamantis in Deserto," sought to address upon its publication in 1971. The letter—which, as mentioned, was written by Anton Pashku and signed by Ali Podrimja, among others—begins by asserting that at the very moment when Kosovar writers were at last discovering "protest as the only *modus vivendi* of their art," and therefore, connecting with literary movements outside their political and cultural borders, the purportedly benevolent guidance of more established writers, who closely espoused Party ideology, put an end to any effort to revolutionize, or even simply revitalize, Kosovar literature (*Rilindja* 10). Unlike the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, who supported freedom of thought and expression, the political elites in Kosovo pursued a paternalistic attitude toward literature and the arts, where ideological conformity and a socialist realist aesthetic was paramount.

From the outset, "Vox" implies an oppositional relationship between the literary establishment in Kosovo and other parts of Yugoslavia, suggesting significant differences in terms of freedom of expression available to writers. Through a liberal use of allusions, "Vox" relies on the audience's contextual knowledge to make its critique. For instance, the letter makes

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literary tradition, invoking Homer, Dante and Shakespeare as examples of writers serving the nation in its time of need. Interestingly, in other contexts, Kadare's reliance on his status as a dissident writer in Hoxha's Albania might have made him more likely to support Kosovar Albanian writers' choice to write against the grain, his arguments in this essay align him with the same thinking espoused by the literary establishment in Albania and in Kosovo, offering little solidarity to his peers across the border.

a reference to the Croatian literary theorist Stanko Lasić's 1970 book *Sukob u književnoj ljevici 1928-1952 / Conflicts on the Literary Left 1928-1952*, but does not elaborate on the book's contents. In fact, Lasić's book examines different literary and ideological debates that shaped interwar and post-war Yugoslav literary and intellectual spheres, offering important background on the arguments later laid out by "Vox." As Ivana Perica explains, these debates divided Yugoslav writers into two groups: those who believed literature should serve the communist revolutionary struggle, and those who saw literature's role as advancing social democratic evolutionary politics (250). This division between literature advocating for revolution, and literature supporting milder forms of social reform, was ameliorated by the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža's public arguments in favor of balance between politics and artistic freedom (Brozović 144). This view was gradually normalized, and after the Yugoslav-Soviet split of 1948, it became institutionalized via a policy of "controlled liberalism" in literature, as Domagoj Brozović calls it (144).

Why were these early and mid-century polemics between Yugoslav writers, who largely published in Croatia and Serbia, invoked in an open letter written decades later and addressed to Albanian-speaking writers and critics in Kosovo? To me, this rhetorical move seems to be done with the intention of aligning "Vox Clamantis in Deserto" with a Yugoslav tradition of critique, where political debates were also carried out through the field of literature, something that would have been impossible for Kosovar Albanian writers to find in the dogmatic literature of socialist Albania. The letter's critique is reminiscent of Krleža's argument for a more nuanced approach to literature, one which takes into consideration both literature's potential for social engagement and its use for individual, artistic expression that was not tied to ideology (Vladimir Bubrin



434).<sup>41</sup> The major point of contention of “Vox,” therefore, is the deliberate stagnation of Kosovar literature and literary criticism by political and cultural elites who favored an ideology that celebrated cliché narratives of heroism, and who prevented Kosovar writers from benefiting from the aforementioned literary liberalism. In a key section of the letter, we read:

In Kosovo, now we somehow have some “poets” and “critics” who have become—would you believe it?—fathers of Albanian literature and generous preachers of culture to the masses. They do not wish to see the masses elevated to the level of *belles arts*. Because those “benevolent” toward the masses are afraid of the masses’ advancement. Wanting to “protect” the masses even from the smallest improvement in the field of art, these “benefactors” of the masses search for literary works that possess a perverse “straightforwardness,” they seek a “sincerity” that surpasses even the naivete of Voltaire’s *Candide*. Their “request” is to be, by any means, “healthy,” by any means “positive.” In short: they ask for the writer to become a pedagogue who suffers from a castration complex. An annoying moralizer. A street sloganer. A conference-goer. A *bejte* peddler.<sup>42</sup> (*Rilindja* 10)

As we can see, the letter takes issue with the paternalistic attitude of writers who appointed themselves “fathers of Albanian literature,” who promote a sanitized, “healthy” version of literature as the only way to have a successful career. This practice has not only damaged Kosovar literature by preventing writers from experimenting with content and form, but has also stunted the political advancement of the reading public. With literature functioning primarily at the level of ideology, writers and literary critics became akin to pedagogues who prefer to moralize instead of engaging in a mutual exchange of ideas with colleagues or the public. In the division of the revolutionary and the reformist, mentioned earlier, these writers and critics’ would find themselves aligned with neither, as their insistence on “healthy” and “positive”

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the debates of the Croatian literary left, see: Domagoj Brozović, “Sukob na književnoj ljevici u novohistorističkom ključu.” *Umjetnost riječi* (2015), 1-2; Ivana Perica “‘Social literature swindlers’: the r/evolutionary controversy in interwar Yugoslav literature.” *Neohelicon* (2018) 45:249–280.

<sup>42</sup> “Bejte” refers to a type of poetry, written in couplets and performed by Albanian bards during the Ottoman period, and often satirical and treating quotidian themes.

writing was a reproduction of the dogma of socialist realism. Underlying these arguments is a concern and care for Kosovar Albanian literature, its readers and its writers, at a pivotal moment when hard-earned political freedoms and educational gains should have propelled literature forward instead of leading to a stagnation.

What I observe in this letter is its channeling of the spirit of the 1968 student protests, as it applies a similar strategy of “merciless criticism of everything” to literary and academic circles in Kosovo. Unlike in Belgrade, however, the protests in Prishtina had also been concerned with self-determination and therefore, a letter like “Vox,” which exalted the value of symposiums held in Belgrade or books published in Croatia, while rejecting the “fatherly” instructions coming from Tirana, would be interpreted as working against Albanian interests.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, the socialist realist ideology critiqued here did not simply come only from Albania, but had also been present in Kosovo (like elsewhere in Yugoslavia) since the end of the Second World War—its proponents being writers who were also high-ranking officials in the Yugoslav League of Socialists, like Esad Mekuli, Sinan Hasani, Rexhai Surroi and Hivzi Sylejmani (Çitaku 178). Therefore, we can imagine that the letter’s critique is directed both at the local, Kosovar literary establishment, and the literary and cultural influences flooding from Albania in the 1970s. Unsurprisingly, “Vox” quickly became framed as a manifesto of Western avantgarde and decadent modernism, which betrayed the Albanian cause and its centuries-long legacy of pain and suffering. In the months following the letter’s appearance, Esad Mekuli, one of the most prominent Albanian poets, translators and editors in Kosovo, published a series of scathing responses in the literary journal he edited, the quarterly *Jeta e Re / New Life*. In the final volume

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<sup>43</sup> It should be said that paternal references used in the letter are appropriate also because the entire debate featured only the opinions, perspectives and writing of men. The absence of women from almost all these literary and academic discussions presents us with a significant instance of silencing and exclusion.

of the 1971 edition of the journal, Mekuli included a direct attack on Anton Pashku and the letter's signatories, in the form of a poem by the same title as the letter.

His response is filled with indignation of an especially personal nature: in a footnote below the poem, Mekuli writes about the disappointment he experienced when these writers had the audacity to author, sign and publish this letter and thus, reject the “fatherly” care he had once given them.<sup>44</sup> According to him, the guidance he gave *Rilindja* during its “first steps” was crucial for creating an environment where writers could “grow up” intellectually and creatively. For Mekuli, the views expressed in “Vox” were not simple aesthetic disagreements between writers, but an “attack” on the *family*, carried out by “unscrupulous writer-journalists,” who, like misbehaving children, needed to be reprimanded (Mekuli 916).<sup>45</sup> Through such framing, Mekuli unironically reproduces the criticism that “Vox” made against the moralizing and paternal authority doled out by the literary establishment, framing Kosovar Albanian literary history exclusively through familial metaphors. Moreover, this framing reinforces the idea of Kosovar

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<sup>44</sup> As the founder and editor-in-chief of *Jeta e Re*, one of the editors of *Rilindja*, and a translator of Albanian and Serbo-Croatian, Mekuli had played a key role in the mentoring, promotion and circulation of the post-WWII generation of Albanian writers in Kosovo, including both Pashku and Podrimja. It had been Mekuli, in fact, who had published Podrimja's earliest poems in *Jeta e Re* in the mid-1950s, and who later had translated his poetry into Serbo-Croatian for publication in Serbia and Vojvodina.

<sup>45</sup> Mekuli's note reads: “Pasi fletorja “*Rilindja*”—ku shkrova, thuajse, rreshtat e parë shqip dhe e shoqërova, sa e si dijta, në ditët e hapave të para të saja—u bë, tani sa kohë, vend sulmesh të pamerituara t'atyre që me poterë, mundohen të devalvojnë gjith atë që kemi krijuar me shumë mund gjer më tani: edhe vatrën (“*Jetën e re*”), ku shumica u rritën, edhe kujdesin, vërte atëror, të piqen si letrarë jo vetëm ata për të cilët e kemi fjalën, por, thuase, të gjithë shkrimtarët që sot i kemi—e shkrova, me dhimbje jo të vogël, këtë vjershë si reagim personal në shkrimin (sulmin) me të njejtën titull të një grupi të paskrupull letrarogazetarësh, botuar në “*Rilindje*” më 2 tetor të këtij viti” (916).

“After the periodical *Rilindja*—where I wrote the first Albanian verse, and which I followed, with whatever knowledge I had, in the days of its first steps—became a place for undeserved attacks from those who, with much uproar, try to devalue all that we have created with much effort until now, even the hearth (*Jeta e Re*), where most of them grew up, and our care, truly paternal, so they could mature as writers, and not only them, but nearly all the writers we have today—I wrote, with great pain, this poem as a personal reaction to the writing (the attack) by the same title, of a group of unscrupulous writer-journalists, published in *Rilindja* on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October of this year.”

Albanian literature as a minor literature where the personal and the collective are one and the same. The charge of having betrayed and abandoned the literary and national “family,” would have weighed heavily on the signatories of “Vox,” as it would have undoubtedly implied a betrayal of the most important political struggle of the period—Kosovo’s struggle for autonomy. Such an accusation would have been enough to discredit these writers and silence all aspects of their critique, and to differing degrees, they suffered personally and professionally after the letter’s publication.<sup>46</sup>

Mekuli’s mission to discredit “Vox” began as a pathos-filled poem published at the end of 1971 and a letter from the editor he wrote at the beginning of the next year. In the poem, he tries to replicate the emotional sensation of the letter’s “assault” on the family by conjuring a sinister world plagued by violence and spilled blood. In an apparent mocking of the avantgarde aesthetics that his modernist peers preferred, Mekuli opens his poem with a repeated image of darkness:

It was night Night Night  
Darkness Darkness Darkness  
And—war was waged  
With so many martyrs  
The sun, the sprouts

“The sun?!” (screams the chorus of the lost)  
We are in the dark  
In the desert of  
Chains and walls  
We  
Who scream  
(not in vain!) (916)

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<sup>46</sup> The letter’s author, Anton Pashku being let go from his position as cultural editor of the *Rilindja* periodical and given a less influential role in its publishing department. A few years later, Ali Podrimja’s career followed the same trajectory.

The metaphor of war employed by the poem is an obvious and hyperbolic reference to the disagreements between groups of writers in Kosovo. It positions some—who are “screaming” and lost in the desert—on the side of night and darkness, while their counterparts are the righteous defenders of the sun and its light. Ungrateful to the point of being incredulous that the “sun” might even exist, “the lost” group remains in a darkness of their own making, squandering all possibilities for illumination and enlightenment. At the end of the poem, Mekuli addresses the signatories of “Vox,” asking them “for whom?” and “for what?” they are fighting: “And we fought the war (for whom?)/And we spilled blood (for what?)” (917). This line of questioning, in conjunction with the footnote’s emphasis of his role in promoting Albanian-language writing in Kosovo, makes an argument for an identity-based ideological allegiance, which disallows strong disagreement within the group and requires homogeneity in thinking.<sup>47</sup>

If this poem and its footnote were not enough, Mekuli sealed the fate of “Vox” once and for all in a letter from the editor that he published in *Jeta e Re* in the beginning of 1972. In his capacity as editor-in-chief, he officially distances himself from those writers who try to overtake literature with notions of a decadent, demoralizing “new wave” and “avantgarde,” and reinforces his personal and professional commitment to the socialist cause and to socialist realism (4). In his capacity as editor, Mekuli writes, he would ensure that the journal would remain steadfast in addressing “anti-ideology in culture and literature” which was simply “anti-socialist ideology” in disguise (*Jeta e Re* V. I 1972, 3-6). The avantgarde and modernism are once again singled out as dangerous literary movements whose rejection of ideology worked against the interests of Kosovo and the struggle for self-management. What I find striking about Mekuli’s letter, is the

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<sup>47</sup> Assigning Mekuli to the group of Kosovar Albanian writers who produced strictly ideological writing, the literary scholar Nysret Krasniqi argues that Mekuli’s reaction to “Vox” came from a fear that new developments in literature and greater creative freedom would lead to the “destruction of the belief in equality between people, defined according to revolutionary ideals” (Krasniqi 75).

reference he makes to the traditions of the “long-suffering” Albanian people, which he notes as yet another aspect of Kosovar culture that the signatories of “Vox” chose to reject (Mekuli *Jeta e Re* V. I 1972, 3-6). With this pronouncement, Mekuli reinforces the framing of Albanian people and literature through the lens of historical suffering, the same frame that would later be used by writers from Albania to forge seemingly self-evident connections between Kosovo and Albania, and the same lens that would become the primary way for world literature to frame writers from Kosovo. Seen under this light, it is not difficult to understand the seriousness of the accusation that the signatories of “Vox” preferred the modernism of Belgrade or the West over the traditions of Albanian literature and culture. Through these aesthetic and ideological preferences, these writers betrayed not only the family-nation, but also the long, traumatic histories of suffering endured by the Albanian people.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time that these debates were taking place, Ali Podrimja published *Torzo*, an experimental poetry collection capturing historical dispossession and traumatic history. In the following section, I analyze the ways in which this book attempted to achieve an alternative form of writing about trauma, one which could subvert the demands we have been discussing.

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<sup>48</sup> In an interview from 1995, Anton Pashku responds to these accusations by describing the social and political conditions that, according to him, necessitated the writing of this letter. While the 1970s had started as a dynamic and promising decade in terms of literary production, the dominant position of didactic socialist realism in arts and culture curbed hopes for a more experimental writing movement. Pashku argues that this development was, in fact, welcomed by the Yugoslav authorities, who found it a useful tool of control over Kosovar intellectuals and writers. Though the overwhelming belief was that Albanian influences were damaging for the Yugoslav state, Pashku states that “there has always been a certain cooperation between the two states on ... the infusion of Kosovars with socialist realist doctrine,” something which the signatories of “Vox” wanted to resist (Pashku 11). Podrimja also contested the accusation that the signatories of “Vox” were anti-Albanian, writing that their interest as a group was to advocate for literary value, and to reject “works that were apologetic for the system, which was horrible on both sides of the wall” (*Vepra* VIII 38). More recently, the author and critic Mehmet Kraja has argued that: “The leadership of Kosovo at the time ... did not prevent the publication of this pamphlet, nor its distribution, under the belief that it served them to have such a powerful voice against Albanian integration. Yet, at its essence, this pamphlet had a different goal: to save Albanian literature in Kosovo from already spent literary authority, and to advance its methodology and freedom of choice” (175).

### 1.3 “Silence has Forgotten Names”: *Torzo* and the Disarticulation of the Organism

In a review of *Torzo* written upon its publication in 1971, the literary scholar Ali Aliu writes that the book is a socially-oriented work that utilizes national symbols to honor historical suffering. In contrast to Mekuli and Kadare’s criticism of experimental writing, Aliu does not see the collection’s “concise figurative expressions” and lack of narrative as a hinderance to its social message (28). But Aliu still assesses Podrimja’s writing in terms of its commitment to the nation, assigning it significance only because it concerns the disparate histories of subjugation that this critic views as one long, unbreakable historical continuum of violence against Albanians. He employs the same language of testimony we saw above, claiming that Podrimja’s use of symbolism serves as a “testimony” for the “strange and frightening things that have happened (and are happening)” (Aliu 26). Aliu redeems the experimental or avantgarde aspects of the work, like the laconic nature of the verse and its resistance to narrativization, through a critical framing that interprets them as speaking directly to Albanians’ “sacrifices” and “resistance throughout the years” (Aliu 26).

At the time, such an assessment of Podrimja would have helped to mitigate the negative reactions to “Vox” and maintain his status as an important national poet. A similar logic is used by contemporary scholars and critics of Albanian-language literature, who contend that during the previous century, Albanian writers in Yugoslavia and Albania adopted a hermetic style in order to escape censorship or punishment in either country. The literary scholar Merita Bajraktari-Januzi calls this a poetics of “low comprehensibility,” and the critic Basri Çapriqi terms it a strategy of “non-communication” used as “subversion against open communication”

(Bajraktari-Januzi 11; Çapriqi qtd in Gjerqeku 89-90).<sup>49</sup> Their arguments function on the assumption that writers employ the poetics of “non-communication” or “low comprehensibility,” as a method for resisting state repression and attesting to collective suffering and trauma the state has caused. My analysis of Ali Podrimja in general, and *Torzo* in particular, challenges this framing by asking what it means to use a poetics of silence, or “non-communication” and “low comprehensibility,” not as a way to craft a testimony to trauma which can evade the censors, but as a way to resist the very imperative to testify.

Turning our attention to *Torzo*, we can begin to see how the assemblage of silences within the text take the shape of a movement: a weaving in and out of history and its myths, undertaken by the spectral figures of the torzo and the half-person, which coalesce into one another and leave the reader unsure of the differences between them. The history they inhabit ends, then begins again, a cycle that continues to repeat itself without arriving at a conclusion. As the bounds of time expand and contract, the myths that held this world together unravel, and what remains is a lone person, wandering the abyss of silence and the negative space of history, with a map that refers to symbols without referents, and an identity that has now been rendered nameless. I interpret the loss of this name as the event that ushers in the traumatic disintegration of the self, turning the person into a “torzo”—a torso that speaks without a mouth, a truncated

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<sup>49</sup> While writers in Albania did not face the same type of ethnic-based discrimination that their peers in Kosovo did, Albania’s totalitarian system offered even less opportunity for literary experimentation and subversive poetics. For this reason, Bajraktari-Januzi’s study of hermeticism in Albanian literature is centered primarily around Kosovar Albanian poetry, since “the reflective dimension of Albanian literature [was] especially developed [there], given the more favorable literary landscape” (Visoka 25-6). It was this “more favorable literary landscape” that allowed hermeticism to thrive in Kosovar Albanian literature, even if its use arose out of a necessity to subvert both Yugoslav censorship and the ideological demands made by the Kosovar literary establishment, as we have gleaned through the debates prompted by the publication of “Vox Clamantis in Deserto.”



human body without limbs or a face, whose existence haunts the poem, and whose mouthless speech must sound like silence.

In the collection's titular poem "Torzo," this figure introduces itself to readers through Podrimja's riddle-like tercet:

everywhere i pass and nowhere i am  
if you meet me sometime  
please do not leave me nameless (93)<sup>50</sup>

By placing the onus of naming on the "you" who may be able to locate the torzo somewhere in this abyss of nothingness where a solid subjectivity seems impossible to achieve, as the torzo is "nowhere" despite its moving through the "everywhere" of this place, the poem creates a relation of implication, and not one of mere witnessing, with its readers. Implicated by the address that requires them to act in the plea to "please do not leave me nameless," readers face the torzo's existential dread and the suffering that gives rise to its plea without being offered the opportunity for catharsis or the comfort that a typical redemptive narrative of victimhood and martyrdom may provide for them (Meister 219). Instead, readers must attempt to satisfy the torzo's impossible request of bestowing it a name, a task whose magnitude is almost disguised by the playfulness of the poem's rhythm.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "TORZO

gjithkund kaloj e kurrkund s'jam

nëse më takoni ndonjëherë  
ju lutemi mos më lini pa emër" (Podrimja 50).

<sup>51</sup> Almost as if responding to the torzo's plea, Daša Drndić's novels are obsessed with names and naming, a practice they carry out "fanatically... unnecessarily, obsessively," because the name is "the last cobweb thread that separates them from general, universal chaos, from the cauldron of turbid, stale mash" (Drndić, *E.E.G.* 19). In Podrimja's *Torzo*, this "universal chaos" and "cauldron of turbid, stale mash" takes the shape of the oft-invoked "white field" in which the person has left nameless and alone, or the simultaneous "everywhere" and "nowhere" in which the torzo finds itself in the poem cited above.

To understand what caused this state of chaos and loss, we can turn to the collection's opening poems, where Podrimja explores how the process of rendering an entire collective into a nameless, anonymous mass, is essential for securing and maintaining power. In his poem "Rozafati," we learn that it is an act of sacrifice which underlies this entire infrastructure.

Podrimja writes:

each of us gave it something  
some their name  
some their bones

from the blood  
from the fire  
how often time exploded

around our sun  
we widened our eyes  
in the mountains, the drums didn't cease

because each of us gave it something

we paved the enemy's path  
with corpses  
up to our hearts

and it never hurt  
our gods  
it could never reach them

because each of us gave it something  
some their name  
some their bones (58)

Because of the poem's title, which refers to the legend of Rozafa, the Albanian version of the immurement legend common throughout the Balkans, it is not surprising to encounter images of the sacrificial motif in these stanzas, where members of an unnamed group give up their lives for the protection of a besieged community. In the legend that Podrimja references, three brothers are constructing a structure of communal importance—a tower that would look over the city,

protecting it from threat of foreign invasion. Their daily labor, however, amounts to nothing as the structure is mysteriously destroyed each night. Soon, it is revealed that the only solution to put an end to this destruction is to sacrifice a woman by immuring her within the tower walls. Giving up her life for the benefit of the community, the wife of the youngest brother is immured in the walls of the Rozafa castle, in the northern city of Shkodër, and the castle can at last be erected. As Tatjana Aleksić argues, such sacrificial death of the victim who is either a woman, or a feminized victim who is a social outsider, legitimizes the community and secures its edifices, because this death “supposedly protects the physical existence of the edifice—national, religious, or similar monolithic community; family; or even broadly defined ‘institutions of patriarchal authority’” (3). The murder committed through this sacrifice is thus justified by the “call to duty to a higher ideal, to a greater common good,” which also rationalizes any additional violence carried out in service of the communal project, including violence enacted against those deemed a threat to this project, its edifices and the hegemonic ideologies that structure and maintain it (Aleksić 3-5).

As readers, our interpretation of the specific communal project Podrimja references in “Rozafati,” will shape how we understand the poem’s sacrificial metaphor. In one interpretation, we can think of the poem as a critique of the repressed, marginalized position of the Albanian minority in Yugoslavia, which was excluded from the Yugoslav communal project of multiculturalism and “brotherhood and unity,” in order to benefit the “greater common good” of the country and its long-term stability. As I suggested above, this is the interpretation that scholars like Ali Aliu have promoted, reading the sacrificial motif as a symbol of the plight of Albanians—an interpretation that takes as a given that the poem is aligned with the Kosovar national cause. But Kosovar Albanians were also part of a communal project within Kosovo, and

thus in an alternative reading, “Rozafati” can be interpreted as a critique of the demands for heterogeneity that *this* national project also required of its members. The reaction to the publication of “Vox,” provides us with a concrete example of the metaphorical “sacrificing” of those who do not wish to follow the community’s dominant ideology. In either reading, however, the poem’s use of the sacrificial metaphor reveals the critical, personal loss that each member of this community has suffered in order to support the erection of the communal edifice. Bereft either of their name, and therefore of an identity that distinguishes them from others, or made to sacrifice their very lives, whatever is left of these sacrificed people exists at the mercy of a time that can “explode” violently once saturated by “blood” or “fire.”

My argument is that Podrimja’s “Rozafati” demonstrates that whatever temporary safety and resistance may be achieved by the sacrifice of the individual for the benefit of the greater good is made possible only through violence of a magnitude so great that roads become paved by “corpses / up to our hearts” (Podrimja 58). This macabre metaphor conjures an image that lets us visualize the massive scale of life lost to construct and defend the communal project. And while this project and the edifice that houses its symbolic seat remain an intangible, imagined political community—the ambiguous “it” in the declarative statement “each of us gave it something”—the loss of names and their corresponding lives is made material through the image of the sacrificial victims’ dead bodies overtaking the pathway that the “enemy” seeks to conquer. The materiality of this loss, I maintain, reveals the poem’s condemnation of sacrifice: rather than honoring the violent sacrificial deaths for the benefit of the communal project, Podrimja utilizes the sacrificial motif in order to deconstruct it by revealing its utter futility.

This futility is underscored in poems that follow “Rozafati,” and we see how those who gave up their names and lives for the construction of the “greater good” will inevitably always

find themselves traversing a “white field” where the human has been forgotten, destined to an oblivion that becomes fully sedimented by the passage of time. “[W]here does the person remain / the one we birthed / the one we killed,” Podrimja asks at the end of *Torzo*, likening the never-ending loss of “the person” to the likewise never-ending repetition of violence and subjugation that started with the sacrifice (105). The poet answers his question in the next poem, titled “Searching for the person” where he writes that, when this search is taken up by the “archeologists of modern times” who “suddenly appeared one day,” they will have to “dig inside the center for years / to find the lost smile of the world” (06). The ambiguity of these verses and the perplexing logic of “digging” in order to unearth something that would lead closer to the lost “person,” thwarts the expectations of a clear, linear arc that starts with a sacrifice and concludes with unification, redemption, or catharsis. In other words, readers do not receive closure. Instead, *Torzo* offers a struggle that is unresolvable because of the power imbalance inherent in this process of anonymization, or the “abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually” (Foucault 781).

Nonetheless, I do not see Podrimja’s torzo figure, even with its missing name, limbs, head and mouth, as a figure devoid of agency. Its request to not be left nameless were one to encounter it “sometime” demonstrates an understanding of its subjugated position and indicates potential cracks in the foundations of this communal project and its myths of unity and redemption. I want to propose a reading of this torzo as an iteration of Deleuze and Guattari’s body without organs (BwO): the disarticulated body that has ceased to exist as a hierarchically stratified organism. The organism, they write, is a “process which holds together the otherwise disjointed, scattered collection of organs/machines,” and “imposes upon [the body without organs] forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations,” that serve to extract

its labor and established its unified form (Smith 103; Deleuze and Guattari *Plateaus*, 159). This forceful transformation of the *body* into the *organism* turns the body into a subject. Revolted by this subjectification, the body without organs frees itself from the “natural” configurations of the organism and its regulatory force, an action that Deleuze and Guattari call a “strategy of disarticulation” (30, 150). What is important to point out here is that disarticulation’s force does not manifest in something like a revolution, but takes the shape of slow and steady resistance.

Deleuze and Guattari write:

You don’t do it with a sledgehammer, you use a very fine file. [...] Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor. (*Plateaus* 159-160)

This “very fine file” that resists the power of the organism enacts a quiet and persistent struggle against stratification, undoing and dismantling its strata slightly more each day.<sup>52</sup> Rather than the organism’s immediate and complete destruction, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the need for making “connections that presuppose an entire assemblage” and which create new links between organs and bodies, thus dismantling the organ’s designated function.<sup>53</sup> They ask: “Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly” (Deleuze and Guattari 151)? In other words, why not become the body without organs? By extending this

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<sup>52</sup> We will see more examples of this “very fine file” in the second chapter, where the refusal to testify will nonetheless be accompanied by different types of compromises as the narrator’s mother in David Albahari’s *Bait* will resist requests to testify about her experience in the Holocaust and the tremendous losses she suffered. Yet, week after week, she will still come to the table, where her son’s tape recorder will capture the pair’s exchanges and the sounds of her silence.

<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, they argue that the opposite strategy, understood as a process of wild destratification, would throw the strata “into demented or suicidal collapse,” and in so doing, catalyze more severe forms of fascism (Deleuze and Guattari 165).

line of thinking to the body politic and the national body, which depend on similar forms of stratification, we can better understand the intervention Podrimja makes in *Torzo*.

Another question that we can ask, therefore, is why not testify through silence? To approach this question, we must first understand the causes of the suffering that necessitates the testimony. In Podrimja's work, to what can we attribute the torzo's lost name, its inability to act, and its deep sense of nonbelonging? This question leads us to one of the most important poems in *Torzo*, fittingly titled "Poem of Silence." The poem begins by once again lamenting the condition of namelessness:

1. (forgotten names)

they have gone they have come  
they have come they have gone  
people with torches in their hands  
silence has forgotten names (Podrimja 70)

It is silence which emerges as the culprit in the systematic forgetting, and subsequent loss, of names and identities, and which has thrust these "people with torches in their hands" into a condition of perpetual searching for the impossible restoration of their identity. However, in its brevity, its lack of explanation and its sparse language, the above stanza displays certain qualities of silence, even when its content decries it. In employing silence to critique the mechanics of silencing and forgetting, Podrimja attempts to reconfigure a subjectivity where the ability to speak and to name is not recovered blindly, reproducing the stratification, exclusion and repression that originally caused this traumatic existence. If the world has been lost, and the names that were part of this world have been "forgotten," he seems to ask, is this not an opportunity to start anew? In answering this question, the poem does not gesture toward a reconstruction of what was lost, therefore maintaining the integrity of this system where abuse of power is the norm. Rather, it seeks to create something where the rules, classifications, and

sedimented strata of the old world are no longer sensible. The poem's paradoxical use of silence, therefore, needs to be understood as part of the process of reconstructing the world not in the image of the old, with its sedimented hierarchies, but reimagined into something "populated by multiplicities" that are constantly in flux (Deleuze and Guattari 150).

In employing a poetics of silence that has disarticulation at its core, Podrimja utilizes the "very fine file" referenced earlier. Therefore, the reimagined world in the poem contains both the "transgressive potential of silence" and the "oppressiveness of silences invested in normativities" (Levitt 680). The contradictory concepts of, on the one hand, silence as a deliberate choice, filled with multiplicities of meaning that resists a homogenous, hegemonic traumatic framework, and on the other hand, silencing as a key tool of oppression and erasure, coexist in the poem as a testament to the paradox of silence. After all, the question of "why not testify through silence," that I asked above, might appear inconsequential given the magnitude of the violence and power of silencing. We must remember that "coming to voice" is not a neutral act, either, because voice can easily become appropriated. I argue that this contingent, contradictory relationship of silence and silencing means that, as readers, we must constantly interrogate and adapt the interpretive frameworks we use to evaluate literature that deals with victimhood and trauma—pointing to an ethos of constant transformation and critique that is critical in resisting the sedimentation of hegemonic norms.

Podrimja's writing follows this paradox, and we see the disarticulated, silent torzo journey deep within the strata that buttress silence's power. There, it finds the person languishing without a name, forgotten in a "white field" where "silence isn't only the past / isn't only the future" but an all-encompassing presence (Podrimja 75). Podrimja writes:

6. how could we forget the person in the white field



silence has a name has its own color  
 those wandering through its veins without a torch  
 lose their way up to their names  
 it has slaughterers wells  
 has hospitals insanities bells  
 silence has ages loves  
 pains uncover its sleeping eye  
 birds mid-flight peck at its big head  
 days years centuries chirp in its ear  
 in its belly there never cease to be  
     cubs  
     swine  
     wolves  
 for a long time the flute has languished at the mouth of a sphinx  
 silence has stairs of its own  
 kings generals without names have descended them  
 heralds have ascended them  
 with feet of iron  
 with feet of wood  
 save us god from its hereditary sickness  
 from the deafness it will one day die  
 silence isn't only the past  
 isn't only the future  
 in this white field how could we forget the person (Podrimja 75)

While silence retains its name, its “veins” are crowded by the nameless figures who attempt to reclaim their identity by searching for what has been lost. A difficult task, this searching brings them close to everything held within silence: the slaughterers, wells, hospitals, insanities, bells, ages, and loves, which together make a haphazard list that faintly resembles the archival records of a municipality. On the page, this listing is divided not by punctuation marks, but by the rhythm and the spaces that separate each word from the next. Podrimja relies on the invisibility of the pause—yet another form of silence—to establish silence’s presence in the poem, while simultaneously using the presumption of silence’s materiality to deconstruct its omnipotence. And because it is material, like the torzo and the nameless people, silence also suffers from

*physical* pain: indeterminable aches “uncover its sleeping eye,” birds “mid-flight peck at its big head,” and the unrelenting procession of “days years centuries” resound in its ear like an unruly assemblage of undecipherable sounds (Podrimja 75). Indeed, something is amiss in this world of silence and silencing: the stratified veins leading up to the lost names are at risk of collapsing, like the crumbling feet of iron and wood, not strong enough to uphold the weight of this structure.<sup>54</sup>

If the poet’s task is to construct a new world from the rubble of what was once there, like the brothers who must rebuild the fallen edifice every day, the torzo makes this labor even more difficult, as this figure refuses to be assimilated into any structure or communal project responsible for its sacrifice. Because it haunts Podrimja’s poems like a specter, the torzo cannot be incorporated into the community like the victim who is buried within the walls of the city’s tower, nor can it be entirely annihilated when this assimilation fails. This marks an important difference between the torzo and the body without organs: while the BwO gestures toward hope, given its resistance to normativity and its openness to new possibilities, the torzo is weighted down by impossibility. When the torzo tries to act, it is met with a procession of unrealizable actions that add up to a frustrating existence, even while its half form subverts the organizational power of the organism. We observe this phenomenon in the poem “Unfinished Game,” where Podrimja lists a series of actions initiated by the torzo. Each couplet unravels the action’s sense of completion, quickly reverting to an unrealized state:

i kill they kill me  
no one is buried

the rifles invisible  
and my head on a spike

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<sup>54</sup> Here Podrimja adapts an image from the second chapter of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, where the Prophet Daniel relates and interprets the dream of king Nebuchadnezzar II.

i wander    they wander  
i jump      they fall

no one wins

the mad lion passes  
i don't frighten

the person comes from afar  
i go to the edge of the world

i kill they kill me  
no one loses

only            i am multiplied  
they are multiplied  
the planet empty and the heads full of graves (Podrimja 81-82)

The only repercussion to these violent acts of killing is the torzo's multiplication and the multiplication of the "they" who kill, again and again, without leaving any evidence of the crimes committed, because not even the accumulation of loss is permanent in this world where "no one is buried." The struggle between the conflicting forces within the poem is likewise left without resolution: no one loses, nor does anyone emerge victorious, and all attempts to escape this existence where nothing ever happens definitively are unsuccessful, as every action is soon negated. The "mad lion" that might have provoked some reaction is met with indifference, the torzo's wandering is mimicked by the "they" who fall when it jumps, and the arrival of the person—the one complete organism within the poem—does not trigger an encounter or connection, but the torzo's fleeing to the "edge of the world." Thus, the only action that is able to resist the "unfinished game" by becoming complete, is the repeated multiplication of the torzo and the "they" who wander this world. Through the reproduction of these two entities, the process of multiplication achieves a proliferation of emptiness: the missing heads of the torzo are

filled with graves that, we can imagine, are likewise missing from the ground where “no one is buried” (Podrimja 81).

An unusual dynamic is created: while the *torzo* troubles the idea of victimhood and what can be accomplished through sacrifice, and in turn, disarticulates the organism, its inability to act means that it cannot create new, transgressive assemblages, and is thus unable to catalyze truly radical change. This does not mean that *Torzo* is devoid of resistant potential. The transgressiveness of Podrimja’s writing lies in the fact that, although historical trauma and loss are themes at the core of these poems, the poet does not glorify suffering, sacrifice and martyrdom. Importantly, the unassimilable nature of the *torzo*, its resistance to becoming part of the structure of the communal project responsible for its state of loss, do not produce any sense of redemption that might justify its sacrifice or pain, and in doing so, exculpate the perpetrators of this violence. The *torzo*’s unsatisfactory testimony prevents readers from identifying with its suffering and appropriating it into their own. Instead, they face the question of how to act now that they have been implicated into the *torzo*’s desperate searching for its name.

If the marginalized earn a place within the nation’s organizational hierarchy by becoming recognized within a rights-based framework, and if this recognition comes by adopting the genre of testimony and the language of human rights, which reject the possibility of keeping silent, then I argue that the disarticulation provoked by the choice to not testify to this suffering in an acceptable manner—in this case, by providing closure and redemption—challenges the organizational structure of the national body. The *torzo*’s resistance cannot prevent its sacrificial death, yet its subversion of the imperative to testify to this trauma can resist the *torzo*’s inscription into the narratives that glorify the communal project. Unmoored from time and place, cursed and rejected by history, and having lost its name and body to the impossible project of

unity, the torzo wanders this bleak world alone, without direction, purpose, or hope of salvation. This is the torzo's resistance: it rejects the offer of being immortalized through the legend of immurement, which would make it a martyr for the national cause, and instead chooses to perpetually haunt the poems and their readers in "protest against the presumption that the mere passage of time expiates past crimes" (Meister 219).

#### **1.4 Kosovo's Son: Ali Podrimja as National Poet**

*Torzo* is not completely unique in Podrimja's oeuvre. Other books, like *Folja / The Verb* (1973) and *Credo* (1976), also use experimentation and opaqueness to touch on themes of personal and collective loss. I chose to focus on *Torzo*, however, because of what I saw as the collection's sustained subversion of the demand for a normative account of victimhood and trauma, accomplished through the disturbing figure of the torzo. I found this an especially compelling aspect of *Torzo* precisely because of how prominent testimony is in Podrimja's earlier writing and his writing during the Kosovo War, where he utilizes testimony as a key method of calling attention to human rights abuses occurring in Kosovo. The phrase "Kosovo's son," that I have used for this subheading, comes from one of Podrimja's best known poems in Kosovo and Albania. Titled, "Epika," this poem is part of long cycle "Hija e tokës," or "The earth's shadow," which was originally published in 1961, and deals with Kosovar history from a perspective of loss, dispossession and trauma. Podrimja writes:

I, your son, Kosovo, know your silenced desires, know your dreams, your winds,  
dormant for centuries,  
  
know your sufferings, joys, deaths,  
know your births of white, your ignited borders; the wave that will hit on sleepless nights  
  
and explode like a volcano,  
better than anyone else I know you, Kosovo,

I, your son. (*Vepra III* 10)

Like this stanza, the rest of the poem has an elegiac tone that addresses the lost nation and seeks recognition of the suffering experienced. The repeated invocation of “centuries” produces a sense of historical continuity about Albanian victimhood, extending from the Ottoman occupation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, and therefore applying a retroactive concept of national identity to the territory of Kosovo and Albania. In the poem, the intimate knowledge that the speaker has of Kosovo’s “sufferings, joys, deaths” is attributed to a familial, blood connection, thus creating an equivalence between personal and collective and national traumas.

Given this commitment to Kosovar identity and history, it is not surprising that Podrimja took an active role in advocating for Kosovo during the war. He participated in the hunger strikes calling for freedom of speech for Kosovo’s Albanian population in 1993; attended numerous meetings and conferences with intellectuals, writers, and the Albanian diaspora in Western Europe (especially in Germany) to call attention to the ongoing violence in Kosovo, and in Bosnia; and wrote extensively for the press in Albania and Kosovo. These activities seem to have shifted his poetic and essayistic concerns more firmly toward a poetics and narrative of witnessing, where he adopted a more overtly testimonial aesthetic. For instance, in “Scream in the desert,” a poem written from the 1993 hunger strike, he uses silence in a more traditional way, beseeching readers to, “Please be silent / Here there is dying” (Podrimja *Vepra VI* 102). Other poems in the series, and poems written over the years of the war, which directly address those ignoring the Kosovar tragedy, treat silence as the response of implicated subjects who choose to not speak in the case of atrocity. Though a more thorough study than what I have space for here is required to better understand Podrimja’s poetic transformation at this time, it does seem that the intensity of the war and Podrimja’s engagement as an activist, infused his work

with an urgency that was translated, on the page, into calls to action and calls to witness.<sup>55</sup> I maintain that because of his adoption of the testimonial genre, and because at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Podrimja was a key figure in canon of Kosovar national literature, the possibilities of his writing for subverting the framework of trauma were significantly lessened, as the entirety of Podrimja's poetic oeuvre became framed as a response to Serbian hegemony.

Podrimja's establishment as a national poet of Kosovo and a poet who testified to trauma was aided by his wide anthologizing and translation. Starting in the late 1960s, Podrimja's writing appeared in Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian and Hungarian translation—the languages of the former Yugoslavia—and in subsequent decades, he was translated into a dozen different languages, appearing either as a single author or as part of anthologies.<sup>56</sup> While this level of translation and anthologizing facilitated his work's circulation and made him a frequent

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<sup>55</sup> For example, after attending the international symposium "European Divisions," held in 1993 in Schwabenberg, Podrimja writes how he was shocked by images from the Bosnian war, which appeared on the TV screen, but which were met with cold indifference by those around him. He comments that: "Europe slept a pleasant sleep, almost like in a fairy tale! In the Marriot hotel, night extended far and wide, while in the cold Frankfurt nights, I dragged with me the pain I felt for humanity, and I could hardly orient myself in this unknown space. ... For different reasons, I do not mention Kosovo. But take a look at Bosnia! ... Is it not shameful that collectively we take part in the elimination of cultures, of people?" (19-22). The "unknown" European space is difficult for the poet to navigate because of the weight of the suffering to which he is a witness, even when he is away from Kosovo and the disintegrating Yugoslavia, becomes even heavier when experienced in a Europe that has gone to sleep. The question about *collective* shame, which Podrimja poses at the end is a question that points to implication and responsibility, rather than direct, criminal culpability.

<sup>56</sup> Podrimja's poetry was first translated into Serbo-Croatian by Esad Mekuli, who published the volume *Doživi* in 1968, a translation of Podrimja's first poetry collection. The book was published by the Kruševac-based publishing house, Bagdala, in Serbia. In the following two decades, translations of Podrimja's work were published in: Skopje, Macedonia; Belgrade and Niš, Serbia; Ljubljana and Koper, Slovenia; Novi Sad, Vojvodina; Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Zagreb and Split, Croatia. The last of Podrimja's translated books were published in the late 1980s. The Sarajevo publishing house Vesilin Masleša published *Živjeti*, translated by Hasan Mekuli and Shkëlzen Maliqi, in 1987, and a year later, the Novi Sad publishing house Forum, published a Hungarian-language translation titled *Nyngtalan Ko*, translated by Acs Karoly and Feher Ferenc. The full range of translations of Podrimja's work includes German (translated by Hans-Joachim Lanksch), Italian, Turkish, Polish, French, Romanian, Greek, English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, and Swedish. As the majority of these translations were published in Europe, Podrimja remains an obscure figure in the North American market of literature in translation.

participant of European literary festivals, academic conferences and book fairs, it also meant that when his work reached audiences outside of Kosovo, it did so in a decontextualized, abridged and edited format. Important for our discussion is the fact that publications of Podrimja's selected work in translation and in various anthologies presented excerpts from experimental work like *Torzo* alongside his poetry of witness and his nationalist poetry. This created a situation where Podrimja's more experimental and avantgarde writing was also interpreted through the lens of Kosovar Albanian suffering. The deliberate silences and ellipses in these poems—even the torzo's disarticulated form—were thus attributed to the same longing for national identity and history which shaped Podrimja's later poetry. Over time, the conclusions about Podrimja, derived from this interpretation-through-association initially produced through anthologizing and translation came to be used for discussing his oeuvre overall, resulting in a general neglect of his experimental aesthetics and poetics of silence (Krasniqi 460-471).<sup>57</sup>

The extent of this translation and anthologizing, which at times matched the rate to which Podrimja published his original work, meant that this generalized way of interpreting Podrimja was also adopted by critics, scholars and general audiences within Kosovo and Albania. Especially for Kosovo, the nationalist dimension of Podrimja's work took on another level of significance. Here, I would like to note an example of what happened with one of Podrimja's most well-known verses. The verse—"Kosova është gjaku im që nuk falet," or "Kosovo is my unforgivable blood"—also comes from the poem "Epika" / "The Epic" which I cited from above. After its publication in the early 1960s, "The Epic" gained great popularity in Kosovo, and this verse in particular was republished countless times and in different contexts, was used as a

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<sup>57</sup> An example of this phenomenon is found in a 2012 interview in *World Literature Today*, which highlights only the nationalist qualities of his work. See Adam J. Goldwyn, Rineta Hoxha, Ali Podrimja, "Finally, Ali Podrimja Spoke": A Conversation." *World Literature Today*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (May/June 2012), pp. 28-32.



rallying cry during protests, essentially becoming a “slogan” that captured the historical suffering of Kosovo (Krasniqi 454). Indeed, this slogan-verse became synonymous with Podrimja himself, equating his poetry with a Kosovar Albanian patriotism that is intimately tied to feelings of injury and suffering.

In an essay from 1997, Podrimja writes about the pressures of holding this status. He recounts the experience of finding this verse inscribed on the gravestone of Enver Hadri, an advocate of human rights who was assassinated by the Yugoslav secret police in 1990, while he was living in Brussels.<sup>58</sup> The version of Podrimja’s verse that is found on Hadri’s gravestone contains a change in pronoun, so that it reads “Kosova është gjaku ynë që nuk falet,” or “Kosovo is our unforgivable blood.” Podrimja points to this change in his essay, writing that the plural pronoun removes his “personal protest” from the poem, associating it entirely with the collective (*Vepra IX* 149).<sup>59</sup> This change from the singular to the plural pronoun is an apt illustration of how the circulation of Podrimja’s work functions through a method that compresses his long writing career, so that it all comes to be read through the lens of the nation, nationalism, and the suffering and trauma around which official narratives of history and memory are shaped.

It is also a change that encapsulates the political charge of Kosovar Albanian literature, which in the 1990s and 2000s, still displayed characteristics of a minor literature between Albania and the former Yugoslavia, where the personal and collective were interchangeable. Especially after the breakup of Yugoslavia, Albanian writers in Kosovo sought a more solid position within Albanian literature, whose limits remain confined to the country’s geopolitical

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<sup>58</sup> See: Arben Qirezi, “[Yugoslav Spy Chief Convicted of Kosovo Dissident’s Murder](#).”

<sup>59</sup> In 1994, Alma Sahitaj directed a documentary on Enver Hadri’s murder, also titled *Kosova Është Gjaku Ynë që nuk Falet / Kosovo is Our Unforgivable Blood*, reproducing the plural iteration of Podrimja’s verse. See: Behare Rexhepi and Reshat Sahitaj, *Idealistët: Enver Hadri Ambasadori i Parë Kosovar*, Unioni i Shkrimtarëve dhe Kritikëve, 2018.

borders to this day. Podrimja explored this issue extensively in his essayistic work in the late 1990s to the early 2000s, expressing a deep frustration about Albanian literary circles' exclusion of writers from Kosovo, an exclusion that he sees as motivated by differences in language. In the essay "Kartuçi i kuq" / "The Red Flag," Podrimja argues that Albanian critics and academics excluded Kosovar Albanian writers from *legitimate* Albanian literature on the basis of linguistic weakness, characterizing the Kosovar dialect as defective and not truly "Albanian" (275).<sup>60</sup> In this way, even after Kosovo was no longer part of Yugoslavia, and "Albanian literature" could thus more easily encompass works published in Kosovo, as well as Albania, the attitude of the literary establishment in Albania reflected Kosovar literature's status as a minor literature. Returning to the basic definition of minor literature, as "the literature a minority makes in a major language," we can see that in the case of Kosovar writers, this "major language" is the same as the language of the minority (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 16-17). Affinities of language and identity were not sufficient to make Kosovar writing part of the body of Albanian national literature, as a discourse of nesting orientalism framed Kosovo as less sophisticated, less civilized and less European than Albania.

The instrumentalization of Kosovar suffering proved to be one way for Kosovar writers to become provisionally accepted by literary circles in Albania. We can see this in the publishing activity of the Tirana-based literary and cultural periodical *Drita / The Light* throughout the 1990s. During this period, *Drita* dedicated a great deal of space to the events taking place in

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<sup>60</sup> For example, during the Struga Poetry Evenings, held annually in Macedonia, only poets from Albania were allowed to present during a reading of national poetry. In this case, Podrimja frames his critique around the question of national integration, and thus does not imagine alternative forms of being in community. He writes: "Do we need to accept something that does not work in favor of our national cause? On both sides of the Wall, the holy duty of writers is to raise their voices against divisions and fragmentation, and to lead politicians with their national vision. If we continue to appear as *Albanian-ish* in such international meetings, then I am not sure how much we can contribute to national integration" ("Kartuçi i kuq" / "The Red Flag," 272).

Yugoslavia and the social responsibility held by writers, intellectuals and artists to respond to what was happening. It published numerous reports and essays about the situation in Kosovo, and significantly, it also published poetry and short fiction by Kosovar Albanian authors. For many Kosovar Albanian writers, this would have been the first time their writing was presented to an audience of readers in Albania, as the censorship apparatus had prevented the publication and distribution of most writers in official venues. The formal introduction of Kosovar Albanian writing in Albania, thus, occurred in time of conflict and war, and inevitably shaped the perception of this literature as one where national and historical trauma was a primary concern. It was in this way that Podrimja's work reached a larger section of the reading public in Albania, though he already had links with writers and intellectuals in Albania, having visited the country on several occasions in the previous decades. A summer issue of *Drita* included a selection of Podrimja's poems from *Zari / The Dice*, and the editors prefaced the poems by writing that: "now the word weighs even more heavily ... the conversation is had face to face, and the wisdom is purely Albanian" (*Drita* July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1990, 8-9). This statement serves to locate the pain and suffering in Podrimja's poetry within a seemingly borderless Albanian sphere where the "weight" of trauma made his writing more significant, and where the violence directed at Kosovar Albanians were subsumed into the generalized history of Albanian trauma.

This pattern of circulating Podrimja through the frame of suffering continued throughout the 1990s and helped to cement his status as a national poet of Kosovo, even if he remained outside the canon of Albania's national literature. In 2013, a year after Podrimja's untimely death, a literary prize was created in his honor in Kosovo, thus connecting the writer even more intimately with the nation. From the beginning, the prize bearing Podrimja's name was used as a diplomatic tool: the first win was awarded to Ismail Kadare, whose speech during the ceremony

centered the historical “Europeanness” of Albanians and advocated for their rightful place within Europe.<sup>61</sup> Through this tacit equating of Ismail Kadare and Ali Podrimja as official representatives of their homelands, we can see how Podrimja was made into a symbol of the Kosovar nation. As recently as 2022, the Albanian Ministry of Culture and its National Center of Literature and Reading (Qendra Kombëtare e Librit dhe Leximit) announced that 2022 would be the “year of Ali Podrimja.” To celebrate eighty years since the birth of the poet, these two institutions planned a series of events around Podrimja and his work. Once again, the framing of this announcement centered on Podrimja’s status as a national poet of Kosovo, his engagement with the struggle for Kosovar independence, and the significance of his work for the construction of Albanian identity, while discussions of his oeuvre remained superficial. During conferences and events, the organizers stressed that Podrimja’s poetry could “unite the one culture that is separated by a border,” and continue the relationships established during the war in 1999 (Gazeta Si).<sup>62</sup> By making the connection between the traumatic past and the present a key frame of these events, the organizers continue to equate Podrimja with the traumatic.

The overemphasis placed on Podrimja’s writing about suffering causes the forgetting of his experimental work and places him into the role of the testifying victim who can be used for the political aims of the nation. From this perspective, the torzo’s resistance to assimilation, its disarticulated form and its wandering into the depths of silence and historical erasure, feels

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<sup>61</sup> See: “[Ismail Kadare merr çminin “Ali Podrimja.”](#)”

<sup>62</sup> The Albanian Minister of Culture and the Director of the National Center of Literature and Reading stated that the events would “unite the one culture that is separated by a border, through a conversation about shared values, and the poetry of Ali Podrimja” (see: [Gazeta Si](#)). During an evening of poetry and conversation held in the southern Albanian city of Saranda, in September 2022, the Kosovar ambassador to Albania expressed gratitude not only for the occasion, but also the support that the city of Saranda had given Kosovar refugees in 1999. See here: <https://qkl.gov.al/aktivitete/mbremje-poetike-ne-sarande-ne-kuader-te-vitit-ali-podrimja/>.

distant. Aware of this, Podrimja's work in the last decade of his life reflects a weariness about the future of Kosovo, as the hope for more radical change and a more equitable society is slowly lost. A poem written in 2000 from his home in Prishtina, describes current conditions through the personified image of a free and independent Kosovo. Tethered to a "rope of anxiety," this personified Kosovo, "seeks the highest branch" while "trembling" between words and remains "stuck" between "two civilizations" (236). Ultimately: "A rope neither holds nor releases it / In international conferences / It is told as a fairy tale" (Podrimja, "Litari i ankthit" 236). Returning us to the sense of impossibility and unrealized potential that we encountered in *Torzo*, this stanza points us to the limits of freedom, which remains as elusive and half-realized as the torzo's search for its name. The reference to international conferences further clarify what is required in this new era: a repetitive telling of the experience of violence that requires subjects willing to testify, again and again, to a globalized world.

The representation of Kosovo on a global stage is one of the key concerns of Podrimja's work at the tail end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other themes he pursued during this period were the lasting effects of Serbian hegemony in Kosovo, and the construction of a new Kosovar state and government. These three topics figure simultaneously and in interconnected ways in Podrimja's writing, as he critiques the lack of European concern for the genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo, and its subsequent appeasement of Serbian politicians. On an aesthetic level, this means that Podrimja's later writing is characterized by responses to current events and as a result, there is a sense of urgency to capture and preserve the present moment that closely aligns this work with testimony. It is not difficult to understand why Podrimja and other writers of his generation would turn to this style of writing during the war and its aftermath. Moreover, responding to the imperative to testify in the affirmative does not

automatically mean succumbing to instrumentalizing forces, even if avoiding them altogether is challenging. In the case of Podrimja's later writing, the issue is not that he wrote about the struggles of Kosovar Albanians at a time when such writing was particularly useful to nation-building, but that in turning fully to testimony, Podrimja often relied on the Kosovar and Albanian nationalist narratives of victimhood which drew a direct, unbroken line between disparate events in Albanian history in order to support the claim that trauma was a perpetual quality of being Albanian.

Podrimja speaks to this in an interview he gave in 1999, conducted by the literary critic Bashkim Kuçuku, where he explains that when writing, his goal is to "create the impossible" by imbuing his poetry with such rich symbolic texture that it could create a sense of cohesion among Albanian diasporas spread around Europe. He sees this act not as a manifestation of nationalism or patriotism—in fact, he denies being particularly interested in either feeling—but as an effort to save images and stories that are at risk of being erased. By collecting these ethnic symbols and stories, Podrimja seeks to create a "poetic geography" where the varied expression of Albanian ethnic identity could come together despite physical and temporal distances. The interview contains a telling statement by Podrimja: "Literature, too, is a struggle to protect or conquer what has been lost. It may even be more terrible than what happens out there in the battlefield" (Works IX, 110). From this assertion, we can come to the conclusion that Podrimja no longer refused the imposed task to represent and memorialize the nation in his writing.

Determined to create a poetic geography encompassing Kosovo and Albania, and extending this geography to the Albanian communities in Greece and Italy, Podrimja's later work wove a common thread of tragedy and suffering across these communities' disparate historical contexts. Because he conceived of literature as a *battlefield*, writing became the

indisputable site for the preservation of Albanian cultural and ethnic identity. This identity, however, was anchored in the myth of a singular, homogeneous, and lost Albanian identity that did not truly exist. In the essay “Tkurrrja e Atdheut,” or “The Shrinking of the Fatherland,” published in 1996 in an essay collection with the same title, Podrimja describes visiting villages in Sicily and Greece where there had long existed an Albanian minority. Reflecting on these visits a decade later, he makes the hyperbolic claim that Albanian villagers in either place displayed the same type of customs and material culture, down to the very way they smiled and groomed themselves—a manifestation of what we are led to assume is an inherent and immutable Albanian identity (Works VIII, 141-2).

But according to Podrimja, this identity has long been under the threat of complete eradication, as he writes:

And one day, while looking at the *Map of the Fatherland* from the period of the Illyrian Peninsula, I noticed that its shrinking had been terrible and continuous. Often we had been forced to leave our land and descend to the heart of the Earth. And each tribe or region brought with itself something characteristic from their abandoned homes, and with great zealously, cultivated it generation after generation, in that piece of land called *Homeland*. And so, within a square foot of land, the annoyance of the robbers of the Illyrian-Albanian lands, where our national consciousness began, appeared our abundant ethnic costumes, which demonstrate our deep spiritual wealth and more. (Works VIII, 141-2)

This passage reveals Podrimja’s conviction that an Albanian national, ethnic consciousness has existed since antiquity, when the Illyrians inhabited a portion of the northeast Balkans, including today’s Kosovo and Albania. The loss of Illyrian power and land to the Roman Republic in the second century BCE is presented as the first of a series of calamities that the Albanian people experienced, and which necessitated the zealous preservation of their culture. The logic underlying this statement would require us to consider that the ancient people living in the area identified as *Albanian*, several centuries before the concept of an Albanian identity had been

formed. This type of ahistorical argument is certainly not an uncommon one, as claims to an unbroken connection to antiquity are part of almost all nationalist narratives, and have played a crucial role in nation-building in Albania and Kosovo. In the case at hand, Podrimja's claim about the ancientness of the Albanian people is intrinsically connected with their suffering. It is not simply that Albanians have been living in the Balkan peninsula since time immemorial, but that from the beginning, their existence had been characterized by forced dispossession and the struggle to survive. By making suffering a defining trait of what it means to be Albanian, Podrimja linked temporally disconnected events with one another and with the contemporary dispossession of Albanians in Kosovo, starting with the Roman capture of Illyrian territories in the second century BCE; continuing with the multiple waves of migrations of Albanians to southern Italy and northern Greece starting in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, as a result of the Ottoman conquest; and onto more recent events, like the Congress of Berlin in 1878, where major European powers "reorganized" the Balkan borders. Though these historical developments might share a common theme, namely that of subjugation by more powerful entities, each is the product of distinct geopolitical conditions and cannot be seen as part of a linear continuation of the persecution of Albanians as an ethnic group. Moreover, by treating them as if existing in a continuum, Podrimja erases the centuries in between and the non-Albanian populations that lived in these same territories. This argument, with its dubious historical accuracy, should be understood in the context of the time, when virulent Serbian nationalism directly attacked Albanians' right to Kosovo and a sovereign Kosovar nation, using genocidal violence to remove them from the territory.

Employing this type of rhetorical strategy did not leave Podrimja much space for the subversive uses of a poetics of silence. In order to draw attention to the violence and trauma



experienced by Kosovar Albanians at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he saw it necessary to place this suffering into a historical continuum, even if that continuity had never existed. By doing so, he took up similar methods of invoking Albanians' historical suffering that writers like Mekuli and Kadare used, even if he had once challenged them. Because of the resonance that references to historical trauma had with his Albanian audiences, but also foreign readers who viewed the region primarily through the lens of suffering, Podrimja could not bypass the framework of trauma during the last period of his career. Even his critiques of the nation building in Kosovo, which chiefly focused on the lack of a solid connection to Albania and on the prevalence of a deceptive, self-serving patriotism among the political and cultural elites in the country, relied on arguments based on trauma and victimhood. For instance, in an essay from 1995, titled "Mos kemi tepër atdhe?" / "Perhaps We Have too Much Homeland?", Podrimja criticizes the lack of unity between Albanian and Kosovar politicians. Podrimja writes:

The forgetting of our illustrious men has now begun: when the national question was in danger, enmities and differences were forgiven. More important than those were the bloody, hungry, persecuted and cursed people. In our movement, there are many wise exceptions and initiatives, but I wish that the majority of our party membership did not leave the impression that they have taken up these positions only for political tourism that reeks of personal gain. In addition, the parties cannot become clinics for curing complexes and egos. Egocentrism brings alienation, divisions, and a misuse of the pan-national movement.

It is miserable that the bloody, trampled, poisoned Kosovo still has not joined the Albanian parties across the wall! What else needs to happen to Kosovo so that our own people understand that what has occurred is assimilation, colonialism, and the shrinking of the homeland? (Words VIII, 76)

We see that, on the one hand, Podrimja invokes the "bloody, hungry, persecuted and cursed" people of Kosovo twice in the span of a few sentences, appealing to the emotions of his readers by reminding them of the suffering Kosovo had experienced in the very recent past, and in turn, seeking a change in the political situation in Albania and Kosovo. Politicians in both countries,

Podrimja seems to be saying, should remember the violent scenes that had unfolded in Kosovo not too long ago, and pursue policies that best benefit people, rather than their own interests. In this formulation, Kosovar Albanian trauma is presented as the catalyst for political change. On the other hand, the essay's repetitive allusion to these violent events underscores how little effect they had precisely at effecting significant, lasting change in the relations between these two countries. Podrimja's question of "what else needs to happen" contains an understanding that no measure of suffering, and therefore, no measure of writing about that trauma, will address the "shrinking of the homeland" that for him, has been a constant throughout history. The sense of betrayal present in this essay reminds us of why in *Torzo*, Podrimja had rejected the idea that trauma and violence could be redeemed through the sanctity of martyrdom. As we have discussed, conditions in Kosovo nearly three decades after *Torzo*'s publication had led the poet to a different aesthetic, one where he no longer evaded the imperative to testify.

## Chapter 2

### “How the Silence Sounded:” Postmemory and the Refusal to Testify in David Albahari

#### 2.1 Introduction

“[...] I had left, in fact, because I could no longer endure the pressure of the truth,” admits the unnamed narrator of David Albahari’s *Bait* (71). Written shortly after Albahari emigrated to Canada,<sup>63</sup> *Bait* is a semi-autobiographical novel of a son grappling to understand his mother, her experience of surviving the Holocaust in Yugoslavia, the repetition of large-scale violence and genocide in the same region only a few decades later, and his positionality as a writer in the diaspora after his exile to Canada. The novel’s central conflict—the narrator’s struggle to write the story of his mother’s life, a life which his mother refuses to tell according to the testimonial genre—reveals a resistance to narration and testimony that throws into relief the labor of working through a traumatic past at an individual, personal and social level. I read this conflict as Albahari’s subversion of Serbian historical revisionism, but also of Serbia’s adoption of top-down imperatives prescribed by the European Union, including the adoption of the German model of reckoning with the past following WWII.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> No stranger to the North American literary world, Albahari had been a participant in the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program in 1986. A decade after Iowa, he was invited by Myrna Kostash, a Canadian writer with a strong interest in the Balkans, to the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity as a visiting fellow and spent part of 1994 there. Albahari then served as the Markin–Flanagan Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary for the academic year 1994-1995, an opportunity he received through Kostash and the scholar George Melnyk. This institutional support helped him move to Canada more permanently 1995. I discuss this move more in depth at the beginning of Chapter 3.

<sup>64</sup> For comparative studies on the adaption of the German model of facing the past, see the edited volume *Replicating Atonement: Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities*. Ed. Mischa Gabowitsch. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2017.

For the entirety of the novel, *Bait*'s narrator struggles with the postmemory of the Holocaust, and the more immediate past he has left behind in Yugoslavia, which had started to disintegrate in a series of brutal wars. In the novel's narrative, his admission of having left Yugoslavia because he could "no longer endure the pressure of the truth" comes right after his mother's reflections about the Yugoslav Jewish community who had remained in the country after WWII and their community practices of remembrance. Then, the narrative shifts temporally and spatially to an exchange between the narrator and his Canadian friend, fellow writer, and alter-ego, Donald. The narrator recalls the lies that were propagated by politicians "when the new war began," and that despite their intensity, it had been the "pressure of truth" underlying the lies that had disturbed him the most (*Bait* 71). I interpret the emphasis that the narrator places on the "new war," as a way to connect the two events by holding their memories in a multidirectional relation to one another, asserting their commonalities instead of insisting on the uniqueness of either one, or the importance of a certain group's suffering over that of another. This multidirectionality is also reflected in the narrative's weaving in and out of different temporalities and locations: mother's life during the Second World War, the narrator's life in post-war Yugoslavia, and his current exile in Canada, are distinct experiences that connect to one another through themes of violence, militarism and war.

The intricacies of the "new war" are conveyed to readers through the trip that the narrator takes to Banja Luka, the *de facto* capital of the Serb-governed entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the spring of 1994, one year before the massacre of Srebrenica, the narrator, working as an interpreter for an international humanitarian organization, travels from Belgrade to Banja Luka with a group of representatives from the organization. With his index finger tracing this trip on a map of Europe opened in front of them, the narrator tells Donald of

the experience that precipitated his decision to leave Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s. On this work trip in the “chaos of war,” he witnesses the devastation on the ground, the burnt towns and destroyed buildings, the landscape of ash, and the banality of evil in the “slovenly” soldiers at checkpoints along the way, who “asked for cigarettes, chewed blades of grass, and spat” as if war was the most natural of conditions (*Bait* 71-2). He also witnesses his companions’ unabashed opportunism and willful ignorance, as they photograph everything they see without asking for permission, lowering their cameras only long enough to change the film or put in new batteries.

When the group stops in Derventa for car repairs, the narrator looks around and observes that the landscape resembles Hiroshima, connecting the destruction of the Bosnian war to that of the Second World War, a comparison that is one of the driving forces of the entire novel.<sup>65</sup> Besides this comparison, the narrative provides readers with little other description to convey the scale of destruction that the representatives of the humanitarian organization so eagerly photographed for use in their reports. If, as we will see in this chapter, the narrator’s mother uses silence as a way to refuse the appropriation of her suffering by her son and by the nation, I read Albahari’s minimally descriptive language of the situation in Bosnia as the author’s effort to write about tragedy without exploiting, nor minimizing, its magnitude. Because of this, Albahari turns to memory: for the narrator of *Bait*, the stop at Derventa triggers his recollection of a memory passed down by his mother, who described the town as a somewhat idyllic and

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<sup>65</sup> A report by Uroš Komlenović for *Vreme*, from a bus trip taken in May of 1994 along the corridor in Bosanska Posavina (established in 1992 in the so-called Operation Corridor 92) gives a hint of what the atmosphere on the narrator’s trip may have been. He writes: “The macadam road around Derventa is the worst part of the journey through the corridor. This road, now only occasionally used, was cut through right after the corridor was established and before it got widened. The stretch, lined with completely destroyed houses on both sides, is 20 km long” (Komlenović, “Journey”).

harmonious location, inhabited “in her time” by members from all fourteen nationalities that made up Yugoslavia (*Bait 71*). Although he never felt the need to verify the assertion, the narrator understood its meaning: the Yugoslav promise of harmonious multiculturalism, encapsulated by the motto of “brotherhood and unity,” had once been the nation’s most powerful narrative. In his present moment, having just traversed “destroyed and precarious roads,” in the middle of a war waged by ultra-nationalist politicians, the narrator witnesses, in real time, the collapse of that narrative, and recalls his mother’s memory of a different past (*Bait 71*).

Albahari juxtaposes these two temporalities when the narrator asks the mechanic working on their vehicle about the current inhabitants of the town. His answer is curt and flat: “No one, he said, only our people” (*Bait 72*). Not aware of the narrator’s Jewish background and reading him as a Serb, and thus, an Orthodox Christian like himself, the mechanic forges an alliance predicated on the shared ethnic belonging of “our people,” and in the context of the war, a shared hatred for those not in the same group, Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), and other undesirables like Kosovar Albanians, who are erased discursively by the “no one” in the mechanic’s statement. The mechanic’s initial dismissal of the memory of the narrator’s mother is followed by his spirited insistence that the narrator, in his role as interpreter, inform the representatives of the humanitarian organization that, near where they were standing, the “church with the highest bell tower in the Balkans” would be built once the war ended (*Bait 72*). A similar promise is made to the group when they finally arrive in Banja Luka, and a set of soldiers, it is implied, ushers them to an empty square to show them where another large church would stand after the war. In this case, they are told that the church would be rebuilt in the same location as an older church that now no longer existed, because “the Ustaše had destroyed [it] in the previous war, forcing the Jews to remove the bricks and building material” (*Bait 73*). Through the insertion of this detail,

Albahari makes another connection between the “new war” and the “previous war.” In this case, the comparison made by the soldiers intends to justify the destruction of mosques by presenting the act as one of restitution, directed at previous injustice against Serbs. Not only that, but the act would also seemingly bring justice to the Jews who had been forced to participate in the destruction of the church in Banja Luka, creating an affinity between Serbs and Jews based on mutual trauma and suffering. This equivalence was being advanced by Serbian nationalists at the time of the Yugoslav wars and in its aftermath, helping to ascribe a victimhood narrative to the Serbian nation, and thus justify the state-sponsored violence committed during the “new” war, as well as occluding the crimes committed in the “previous” war by Serbians who collaborated with the Nazis. By inserting this revisionist narrative in *Bait*, I believe, Albahari exposes the equivalence’s constructed nature, demonstrating its use as an ethnonationalist talking point at the height of the Bosnian war.

In *Bait*, the trip to Banja Luka, and the interactions with the soldiers and the car mechanic are significant because they lead to the narrator’s resignation from his position as an interpreter and to his emigration far from Yugoslavia. Frustrated with the different versions of the past he is given, the narrator proclaims that he “was a translator and not an interpreter of history,”<sup>66</sup> disavowing the role he might have felt was assigned to him as the son of Holocaust survivors, or a member of the second generation, who observed the repetition of violence in Yugoslavia (*Bait* 73). Of course, what is ironic about the narrator’s assertion that he was not “an interpreter of history” is the fact that *Bait* revolves around his struggle with the memory of two wars, and his serious attempt to “interpret” his mother’s experiences in the Holocaust to help him make any sense of the break-up of Yugoslavia, but also to help establish him as a writer in the diaspora

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<sup>66</sup> “Bilo sam prevodilac a ne tumač istorije ...” (Albahari, *Mamac*, 88)

through writing a novel out of his mother's life. And so, the stop at Derventa recalls an additional memory for the narrator: in that town once stood the dance hall where his mother had met her first husband, a Jewish man active in the resistance efforts, who perished in a Serbian concentration camp. These two seemingly disparate memories reveal the multidirectional connections that *Bait* makes between the Yugoslav wars and the Holocaust. The dance hall where the young couple first met, like the town as a multiethnic entity, and are both long gone, disappeared by the relentless violence of history.

In opening this chapter with a close reading of the narrator's trip to Banja Luka, his face to face encounter with the Bosnian war and the rewriting of history that accompanies it, as well as the encounter with his mother's memories, my intention is to foreground the ways in which David Albahari's *Bait* deals with the complicated politics and layers of traumatic memory—both of the Yugoslav wars and of the Holocaust. Although it is a novel written in the middle of the Yugoslav disintegration, after the author's own emigration to Canada, *Bait* does not have the Yugoslav wars at the center of its narrative.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the description of the trip to Banja Luka is one of the few instances where Albahari writes of the Yugoslav wars directly, even if it certainly permeates the mood of the entire narrative. For most of the novel, the wars are transmitted to the reader through references made by the narrator, small glimpses at the television watched by him and his mother, the newspapers on the stand, and the fact of the narrator's exile to Canada. It is

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<sup>67</sup> The novel was published in Serbia in 1996 as *Mamac*, a word play on "mama." It is considered part of Albahari's Canadian trilogy, together with *Snežni čovek / Snow Man* (1995) and *Mrak / Dark* (1997). *Bait* appeared in English translation in 2001, translated by Peter Angone and published by Northwestern University Press, as part of the *Writings from an Unbound Europe* series. Unlike Albahari's short story collection *Words are Something Else*, which contains a foreword and afterword, as it introduced Albahari to the English-speaking public when it was published by the same series in 1996, *Bait* contains no introduction or afterword, giving little paratextual information for readers to evaluate the novel. The book's cover features a black-and-white graphic of a cassette tape inside its player, a star of David drawn inside one reel and a map of the world in the other, gesturing to the contents of the tapes and the novel.



the memory of the Holocaust that takes up most of the novel, as the narrator attempts to record and write the story of his mother's life and is met with her frequent silences and refusals to give testimony. I read Albahari's construction of *Bait* as a novel borne out of the Yugoslav wars but told through the narrator's struggle to come to terms with his mother's experience in the Holocaust, and her resistance to speaking about her memories, as his way of juxtaposing the two wars. This juxtaposition is done not as an attempt to give the Yugoslav wars greater gravity and universality through the invocation of the Holocaust, but to demand the reader's involvement in the process of working through trauma and the re-envisioning of postmemory beyond familial transmission.

This chapter reads mother's silence in *Bait*, a silence which I show takes the form of a refusal to testify, as a method of resisting the appropriation of trauma, pain and suffering. My use of the word "appropriation" in this statement refers both to the Serbian state's establishment of an official national historical narrative during the 1990s, which instrumentalized Holocaust memory, and the narrator's attempt to narrativize his mother's suffering and his postmemory of the Holocaust. The former process, already observed in the soldiers who framed the destruction of mosques and construction of new churches in their place as retribution for past injustice, utilizes a rhetoric of victimhood and appropriation of Jewish suffering to support its political claims. This same suffering and trauma is also at risk of becoming appropriated by the generation of postmemory, the descendants of Holocaust survivors. I argue that it is this fear, and not the existence of levels of pain and trauma that defy language, which prevents the narrator from writing his mother's story for so long. I examine mother's refusal alongside Albahari's personal rejection of the prescribed responsibilities of a writer to serve the nation, and argue that *Bait*, as an anti-war, anti-nationalist novel, performs its resistance through a historical

withholding carried out by the novel's deliberate silences. This is achieved by Albahari's construction of a text that mimics mother's silences: in the novel, her testimony is interrupted by the narrator's own reflections and memories, recreating the narrator's listening experience of tapes that are filled with the interruption of silence.

The final rhetorical silence in *Bait* is the novel's inconclusive end, which does not provide readers with a resolution regarding the narrator's writing project, thus replicating the incompleteness of mother's testimony. My analysis shows that, rather than a linear narrative that reaches a resolution, Albahari crafts a nonlinear narrative that reflects both the circular repetition of violence, and the circular repetition of remembering. From the temporal and spatial distance created by the narrator's self-exile in Canada, the act of listening to the tapes triggers an embodied response from the narrator: as he listens to his mother's voice, he begins to mimic her gestures, giving new materiality and meanings to the memories she passed down to him, however scant. At the same time, the narrator places these memories in new, affiliative connections by transmitting them on to others, mainly his friend Donald, expanding the memories' reach beyond the familial circle, and the ethnic or national sphere. These connections are an integral aspect of working through the past, because they help the narrator avoid exploiting his mother's memories or compulsively seeking to relive the trauma of a past he did not even experience.

Therefore, even if the narrator has a tense relationship with his mother's memories, and even as he begins to repeat her gestures, he does not engage in the acting out that, in its obsessive repetition of the traumatic event, appropriates the other's pain.<sup>68</sup> In this way, *Bait* lays before us

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<sup>68</sup> This is different from what happens with the protagonist of Albahari's novel *Götz and Meyer* (1998, trans. 2004), whose obsession with his family's experience in the Holocaust leads to uncomfortable reenactment of the gassing of Jews inside the van that circled Belgrade in Nazi-occupied Serbia.

the problem of the second generation, who must navigate the “uneasy balance between identification and distance, between acting out and working through” (Vervaeet 105). The intervention made by Albahari in *Bait* rests on the fact that the narrator’s encounter with the past is mediated by the tapes he had recorded of his mother in Belgrade, and because of this, any postmemorial work the narrator carries out must contend with mother’s long silences. As the narrator’s listening to the tapes reveals, mother’s silence is not something empty and meaningless: not only is the silence full of extralinguistic sounds, but it also opens up a number of interpretative possibilities. Mother’s refusal to perform according to the testimonial genre teaches the narrator to relinquish the need for mastery over the pain of the other, and creates an unconventional narrative that prevents Albahari’s novel from easily becoming appropriated. The novel’s silences, in fact, complicate the notion of intergenerational transmission of memory by posing the question of what happens when that transmission is deliberately denied by the holder of the memories. The following sections explore these negotiations of silence and memory in *Bait*.

## **2.2 Postmemory and the Challenge of the Second Generation in Serbia**

At the end of his visit to Banja Luka, the narrator of *Bait* concludes that history in Yugoslavia no longer exists. Instead, there dominates a “posthistorical time” which “was supposed to repeat some other time, as if life were a textbook from which they would tear out individual pages and replace them with new ones, which were really the old ones” (*Bait* 73). In the novel, this post-historical thinking leads to plans of eliminating anyone who was not part of the “correct” ethnic and religious group, to town burnings, and the destruction of buildings. The Bosnian Serb separatists that the narrator encounters during this short trip justified their violence through a manipulation of the past as if it were a textbook whose pages could easily be moved,

torn or erased, in order to produce the version of history most useful to them. The official account of history created in Serbia during the Yugoslav disintegration framed the wars as the righting of historical wrongs, returning present-day Serbia to the glorious, Christian past that would have always been its reality were it not for the Serbophobia endemic to the region, if not the whole continent, and the decades of the Soviet-imported and imposed communism that was responsible for their most recent loss of power and territory.

In such a post-historical present, veracity was of small importance, and therefore the suffering of the Jews in WWII is equated to that of the Serbs, even if Belgrade was the first city declared “free of Jews” during WWII. The rewritten past is superimposed over the present to ensure a future where erasure by replacement functions alongside genocidal acts to remove certain groups from a shared history. Different from the “brilliant tomorrow” that the Yugoslav socialist project had promised its subjects, during the war, the future became secondary to the past (*Bait* 86). As the narrator observes, this shift happened quickly, and at the start of the wars:

Suddenly everyone knew what the real meaning of the past had been, but no one noticed that the future was no longer being talked about, nor even the present, that it was not a question of a psychoanalytic reliving of some event in order to establish its true sense, but that the past, life in the past, was being offered in exchange for life in the present, that a life already lived through was being designated as the only genuine life; that is, life was being asked to be a constant marking of time, a continual reenactment of the past, which becomes merely an end in itself.” (*Bait* 86)

The torn textbook pages that the narrator alluded to earlier, were now being used as a guide for the “continual reenactment of the past” in the present. This reenactment was not a “psychoanalytic reliving” of traumatic memories in order to reach catharsis or begin to work through the trauma. In other words, what I believe the narrator was witnessing was not the postmemorial generation’s mimicry of their familial trauma, nor an effort to work through the past. Instead, what he describes is the construction and adoption of an imagined, fabricated past

as substitution for the present, allowing the architects of the Yugoslav wars to cement their power by staking a claim to the present and future through such a manipulation of the past. We can understand, then, why the narrator admonishes Donald for having the confidence to assert that “[n]othing is so reliable as history” (*Bait* 12). The narrator’s experience had proven precisely how unreliable history was, as it had been instrumentalized and rewritten in front of his eyes (*Bait* 12).

But the past, it seems, follows the narrator even after he leaves his disintegrating country and emigrates to Canada. In a last minute decision while preparing suitcases for his move out of Yugoslavia, the narrator placed the tape recordings he had made of his mother inside his suit jacket sleeves. Then, he secured them with elastic bands to protect the tapes and the “voice transformed into an electromagnetic record” captured inside of them as he embarked on his transatlantic journey (*Bait* 4). Listening to that voice, his mother’s voice, from his Canadian home brings an encounter with the postmemorial legacy of the Holocaust that the narrator had inherited from his family. In fact, as the story of the son of Holocaust survivors who is dealing with the traumatic and violent memories of his family, *Bait* can be read as a paradigmatic postmemorial novel. For Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term in her book, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, postmemory is what enables memory transmission in the face of historical trauma and violence. She writes that, when a rupture in the continuous transmission of memory takes place because of catastrophic events that sever cultural, social and familial lines of memory transmission, postmemory works to “reactivate and re-embodiment more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 33).

In Hirsch's study, the second generation, or the generation of postmemory, is comprised of the descendants of those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand. For this group of people, the traumatic memories transferred to them by their parents—whose own remembrance is shaped by the social and historical context in which they are embedded—are so significant as to risk displacing the memories of their own lives. The affective weight of postmemory can lead to overidentification with the traumatic memories that are passed down the generations, and if not careful, the second generation can appropriate their family's pain and suffering into their own. When this happens, the second generation comes to relate to their family's memories via transposition: the burdensome memories are received in their own bodies "as symptoms that plague even as they fail to lead to understanding" (Hirsch 85). Thus, while postmemorial work relies heavily on remembrance of the traumatic event, it also requires the second generation to engage with their inherited memories in ways that are imaginative and creative, even when these memories "defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (Hirsch 5). Narrativization is presented as the key to "working through" the past,<sup>69</sup> and therefore escaping the curse of repetition and embodied transposition.

Put simply, the body is placed in opposition to the word. Although Hirsch recognizes that "silence, absence, and emptiness are ... always present, and often central to the work of postmemory," her analysis is often in alignment with trauma studies' privileging of the verbal

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<sup>69</sup> Sigmund Freud first used the term "working through" in his 1914 paper "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)." Working through refers to the process of overcoming resistance to the unconscious items unveiled during analysis, as well as the repetition of the past, in order to reach the goal of remembering. The concept has been adopted by scholars of trauma and memory, including Holocaust memory. Scholars like Dominick LaCapra and Saul Friedländer have expounded the concept's uses in relation to the past, and working through figures in Hirsch's conceptualization of postmemory and affiliative memory. Despite its usefulness, LaCapra argues that the concept has remained within the confines of the "therapeutic framework" of its Freudian origin and thus has been deprived of wider application.

(247). Cultural studies written on the topic of trauma caused by large scale violence, like war and genocide, understand silence as the passive response of the stunned victim, while speech is understood as its diametrical opposite—a sign of a healing victim who is ready to reenter society. This dichotomy is illustrated through Elaine Scarry’s influential assertion that physical pain is untranslatable into language because it does not “simply resist language but actively destroys it,” and that verbalization of this pain through different forms of creation is what enables people to move past their trauma (4). Thus, if victims and survivors overcome trauma by *speaking* about it, it follows that their descendants, as the generation of postmemory, work through the trauma of the inherited postmemory by turning their familial testimonies into new narratives, transformed by time and their own experiences. This is not so simple: according to Hirsch, in narrativizing their familial memories, writers and artists of the postmemory generation face the challenge of utilizing an “aesthetic based on a form of identification and projection that can include the transmission of the bodily memory of trauma without leading to the self-wounding and retraumatization that is rememory” (Hirsch 86). In the meta-narrative of *Bait*, we can observe the tensions created by such a challenge, as the narrator is unable to write the story of his mother’s life until the very end of the novel. Overwhelmed by his writer’s block, he wonders whether it is “possible to tell a story at all” (*Bait* 53). With Hirsch’s arguments in mind, I view the narrator’s hesitation not only as Albahari’s postmodernist reflections on the inadequacy of language to translate traumatic and painful experience onto the page, but also as the son’s attempt to “work through” the memories he inherited from his parents without succumbing to the self-victimization that goes hand in hand with appropriating and over-identifying with this trauma.

To accomplish this, Albahari introduces the character of Donald as a counterpart to the narrator. Donald is a character found in different iterations in Albahari’s Canadian novels, like

*Globetrotter* and *Snow Man*. As an archetype, he serves as a guide for the novels' protagonists to better understand Canadian society and culture. In the case of *Bait*, Donald is a local writer who instructs the narrator about North American attitudes toward life and history, which Albahari, through the narrator, frames as innately different from the Yugoslav way of being. As we will see, Donald also instructs the narrator about how to craft a novel that would be well received by the North American public. Donald's perspective on history and on writing pushes the narrator to rethink his relation to history and the past. Not only that but, through conversing at length with Donald about the tapes, his mother's story, and his intention to write a novel about her, the narrator forges a connection of affiliative postmemory with Donald. In Hirsch's definition, affiliative postmemory is "an extension of the loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution" and results from a "contemporaneity and generational connection" with descendants of survivors (36). For her, the affiliative transmission of postmemory is an essential part of re-envisioning the past and preventing the appropriating the other's trauma. Because affiliative postmemory extends beyond the familial circle, it reimagines memory transmission outside the frame of the nation and its homogeneity. In my assessment, for the narrator of *Bait*, the creation of affiliation beyond the familial, and especially beyond the national, is a crucial step for building a transversal politics and transnational network of solidarity that can oppose deadly, exclusionary nationalism.<sup>70</sup>

If Albahari's narrator in *Bait* begins to create affiliative connections and grapple with ethical concerns about the representation of the other's pain, it is because of his mother's reluctance to speak when he attempts to record her life story. Because of this, mother's silence

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<sup>70</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis developed the concept of transversal politics as an alternative to "the assimilationist 'universalistic' politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand" (94)." See: Nira Yuval-Davis. "What is 'transversal politics'?" *soundings*, iss.12, 1999.



cannot be read as the passive speechlessness of the traumatized victim, but as a deliberate “historical withholding” of a story that cannot be shared—not only because it may be too painful, but importantly, because of his mother’s awareness of how easily testimonials of historical traumas can become exploited (Spivak qtd in Hirsch 195). Silence, as the central rhetorical device that Albahari uses to propel the narrative forward, sets *Bait* apart from many of the literary and artistic pieces that are part of Hirsch’s analysis on postmemory, even if the novel represents a clear example of postmemorial reckoning. Mother’s resolve to keep her traumatic experiences to herself, to refuse speech and thus to resist her inclusion in the genre of Holocaust testimony and the state’s official historical narrative, is a subversion of the typical schema of intergenerational memory transmission. If, as Hirsch suggests, postmemorial work requires narrativization in order to ensure the integration of intergenerational memories into a historically different present, then the mother’s fragmentary testimony presents an ethical challenge not only to the narrator-son, but to narration itself. What kind of memory transmission is achieved through the uses of deliberate, subversive silence? How is the work of postmemory complicated by silence, particularly the work of creating affiliative postmemory? And how does this kind of historical withholding challenge our reading of traumatic histories and victimhood narratives?

To answer these questions, it is important to devote closer attention to the political and historical context whence *Bait* originates, and to consider how that context influenced Albahari’s literary development. The following two sections provide an overview of the historical context and politics of memory in Yugoslavia after WWII, and an exploration of Albahari’s literary and political commitments in this context.

### 2.3 Heroes and Victims: Serbian Holocaust Memory Before and After Yugoslavia

After the Second World War and the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it became necessary to craft a unifying historical narrative that minimized the ethnic-based persecution and violence that had occurred throughout the Yugoslav territory during the war. Antisemitism, however, had been present in Serbia and Yugoslavia well before the Second World War, evident in hateful rhetoric and discrimination against Jews. During the war, concentration camps operated in every Yugoslav Republic; the Ustaša in Croatia and the Chetniks in Serbia, carried out genocidal acts against Jews, Roma, Muslims, political dissidents, and against Serbs and Croats, respectively. In Serbia, immediately following the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April of 1941, a special police department for Jewish affairs was established to implement anti-Jewish and anti-Romani laws. The first Serbian concentration camp was erected in the Belgrade neighborhood of Banjica in July of 1941, followed by two more camps in the same city: one located at Topovske šupe, and the Semlin camp at Staro Sajmište, in the Jewish neighborhood of Zemun. Other concentration camps were also established in the cities of Niš and Šabac. Deportations of Jews from northern Serbia to Belgrade started in the fall of 1941, and by the end of the year, almost all Jewish men in Serbia had been killed. The women, children and elderly who survived were transported to Semlin. The following spring, the mobile gas van that Albahari makes the protagonist of his novel *Götz and Meyer* (1998), arrived in Semlin from Poland and was put to use to systematically kill those who remained in the camp. As the records show, by May 10, 1942, all Jews at Semlin were killed, and by the end of August, the Nazi administration in Belgrade proudly proclaimed that the question of Jews and the Romani in Serbia has been “solved” and the territory was officially *judenfrei* (Subotić 53). The relentless and brutal genocide of Jews and Roma in the territory of

Serbia resulted in the almost complete eradication of these populations from the region at the beginning of WWII. Before the deportations of Jews to Auschwitz and Treblinka began in 1942, Serbia had killed 82 percent of Jews who had lived in its territory (Subotić 54).

Official Yugoslav historiography after WWII worked hard to occlude the brutality of the Holocaust in its territory and the targeting and genocide of Yugoslav Jews, by employing a strategy of diversion around ethnic-based crimes committed during the war. Similarly to how it was done in Albania, the Second World War in Yugoslavia was framed as a struggle of communism against fascism, where the partisans had triumphed despite all odds, and the Holocaust was treated as only one event in the larger scope of the war. The specificity of the Holocaust as a genocide against Jews and Romani communities was minimized in order to discourage feelings of allegiance to any particular ethnic identity, and the many collaborationist acts were deliberately forgotten for a similar reason. As part of the Yugoslav project of multiculturalism, and to promote the tenets of “brotherhood and unity,” the state did not acknowledge the ethnicities of those who suffered the most during the war and in the Holocaust. As Vervaet and others have argued, this created a collective, official memory that subsumed victims of the war into one category: that of “victims of fascism” (xii).

State institutions like the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Perpetrated by the Occupiers and their Collaborators played a critical role in solidifying the historical narrative around WWII. The archival research conducted by the historian Jovan Byford demonstrates how the War Crimes Commission solicited, edited and disseminated stories of survivor and witness testimonials that fit a certain predetermined mold, where “facts” and “truths” were highlighted over emotions and memories of suffering. In fact, the directions given to the people collecting testimonies specifically emphasized the need to coax stories from

interviewees that spoke about the heroism and resistance in the camps. The stories, referred to by the War Crimes Commission as “historical material,” that were permitted in the official record were carefully vetted to meet ideological agendas. Ultimately, as Byford convincingly argues, testimonies of survivors were about the communist heroes fallen in the struggle against Nazism and fascism, not about the struggles of the Jewish, Romani or other victims (27-9).<sup>71</sup>

As happened in Albania and elsewhere in the Balkans, such lionizing of the heroic struggle and resistance of communist heroes served to “affirm new socialist values by universalizing victims and universalizing memory” (Subotić 56). Through these edited and curated testimonies, the state could advance a narrative of heroic resistance and selfless martyrdom, obscuring the complexities of each individual’s suffering, as well as the implication of local collaborationists in war crimes. The civilian victim who could not be framed as a revolutionary fighter, but who perished in the concentration camps, was not memorialized under any official mnemonic venue, ritual or event. As a whole, Yugoslav memory politics after WWII had little room for *victims*—much less Jewish or Romani victims. Collective memory revolved around the heroes and martyrs of the socialist, Yugoslav revolution. As we saw at the start of the chapter, the victim would gain greater significance in the period leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars.

In Yugoslavia, a strategy of forgetting was thus employed, where the “days of war, the horrors of Semlin” were replaced with new and positive memories, built upon “swampy, sandy,

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<sup>71</sup> Byford stresses not only the fact that survivors’ interviews were collected using directions given by official state directives, he also highlights the fact that once collected, these testimonies were heavily edited prior to publications and dissemination to the public (33). This editing ensured compliance with the ideological line of the state and dominant politics of memory. A body of war-time testimonials from those who had survived the Yugoslav concentration and extermination camps was thus produced where “moments of heroism” were at the center. This “historical material” found its way to cultural production in the decades after the war, seen in the large number of partisan films made after the war where tales of valiant partisan fighters predominated.

and empty space” (Ignjatović and Pintar qtd in Subotić 58). This was the new, bright socialist future that the narrator of *Bait* had been promised in Yugoslavia, where he had lived:

... in a time and a society for which history was a textbook, an anthology composed of dead letters and retouched photographs, and the present only an unavoidable step before the entrance to a better tomorrow. It’s easy to be prudent today, but I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t been infected with a belief in a brilliant tomorrow. I recognized, like many, the backdrop in front of which the system was playing its performance, but that hadn’t affected my feelings of hope, and as used to be said at the time, of optimism about life. (*Bait* 81)

The narrator recognizes the constructed nature of the nation’s past, an official history woven into the seamless linearity and didacticism of a history textbook. The past was out of reach and static—a collection of “dead letters” and photographs manipulated to fit within the narrative of triumph and sacrifice carried out by the communist anti-fascist resistance. Like the past, the present was also dedicated to the nation, and its purpose was to be forward-looking and strive for a utopian, socialist future. This ideology became embedded in Yugoslav daily life to the extent that the narrator felt it as an embodied presence—an infectious belief in a brilliant tomorrow that seized even those who recognized the provenance and end goal of such ideology. If the Yugoslav disintegration had created a temporality where the present had turned into nothing more than “a continual reenactment of the past,” life in Yugoslavia had been directed toward this “better tomorrow” and promise of a utopian socialist future (*Bait* 86, 81). In either case, the present moment was of less importance, making it difficult to accomplish the postmemorial work that would allow for an understanding of history as something more than a lesson in a textbook full of reductive dichotomies, which repeated tales of valiant heroes and the passive victims they saved from evil perpetrators.

The overemphasis of heroism and resistance during WWII came at the expense of memorializing those who had perished during the war, as this remembrance would clash with the

Yugoslav myth of multicultural understanding and unity. Still, Holocaust remembrance was not prohibited by the state, even if it received little official recognition. The Jewish community remaining in the country after WWII established private memorials and commemorations of their victims, and compiled the Yizkor books that his mother mentions to *Bait's* narrator. These activities and memorials, organized by small community groups, or by the Jewish Federation of Yugoslavia, in the immediate years after the war and in the decades that followed, served to distinguish the experience of Jews from that of other Yugoslavs and to help save their memories of their persecution from falling to oblivion (Subotić 59). These unofficial practices also proved that, outside of institutionalized memory politics, Yugoslav memory was a dynamic, unfixed entity that evolved with time and was continuously being negotiated on individual, familial and community levels.

#### **2.4 “The Burden of Being a Writer in the East European way”: Albahari’s Refusals**

Cultural production played an important role in recording and transmitting memories that stood outside the official Yugoslav national narrative. Literature, as Stijn Vervaeet argues, provided the space for subverting the official narrative of history, for it allowed memories of various traumatic events to coexist multidirectionally, rather than in competition with one another. In their fictional narratives, many Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav authors treated the Holocaust in tandem with the persecution of non-Jewish groups by Ustaša and Četnik forces, creating a form of “internal multidirectionality” that tried to resist participation in a hierarchy of victimhood (Vervaeet xiii).<sup>72</sup> As a Jewish Serbian writer born shortly after WWII, David

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<sup>72</sup> See Stijn Vervaeet’s monograph, *Holocaust, War, and Transnational Memory: Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature* (Routledge 2018), for a thorough study of the Holocaust in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav literature.

Albahari's work reflects these negotiations of memory. His literary career began with stories that focused on the domestic sphere and which used a postmodern approach to question grand narratives and address the political without the heavy-handedness of socialist realism. Much of Albahari's writing is indicative of the outsider status that Jewish identity conferred to him in Yugoslavia, and later in Serbia, and is a part of a long tradition of Jewish writing within Yugoslav literature that includes writers like Danilo Kiš, Aleksander Tišma, Judita Šalgo, Filip David, among others.<sup>73</sup>

Albahari was also deeply involved in the Jewish community outside of his writing. From 1992 to 1994, he served as president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, which as mentioned above, played an important role in the remembrance of the Yugoslav Jewish experience during the Holocaust. He was also a founding member of the Society for Serbian-Jewish Friendship, though he left the organization when it turned overly nationalist during the Yugoslav wars (Gordiejew 274-6, Perica 47-50). When the Yugoslav wars began, Albahari served as an official spokesperson for the Jewish community of Serbia, commenting in local media and international publications about the community's decision to steer clear of political involvement, or "picking sides," because of growing antisemitism and an awareness of how their statements could be abused by the Serbian state (Gruber).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In addition, Albahari participated in the literary world in Yugoslavia through his editing and translating work. He edited numerous books and was on the editorial board of the literary journal *Književna reč /The Literary Word*. As a translator, he translated into Serbian works from Bellow, Singer, Pynchon, Atwood, Naipaul, Nabokov, Shepard, etc. In a reading organized by the University of Iowa in October of 1986, when Albahari was on fellowship with the International Writing Program, Albahari discusses the Caribbean writers he has translated, as well as the publishing houses and institutes in Yugoslavia that were dedicated to the study and translation of Third World writers from the Non-Aligned Movement. His American interlocutor appears very surprised of this connection. The reading is found [here](#) and Albahari starts speaking around the 1 hour, 17 minute mark.

<sup>74</sup> Even before these formal roles, Albahari was outspoken on issues relevant to the Jewish community in Yugoslavia. In his anthropological survey *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry*, Paul Benjamin Gordiejew highlights

According to Albahari, his role as president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia during the war, and his position as an interpreter working with refugees, left him little time for writing. In many interviews, he explains his decision to permanently emigrate to Canada in 1995 as necessary to his literary production (Melnik, *Alberta Views*, Mraović-O'Hare *Interview* 178). This move has been considered by many critics and scholars to herald a second phase in his writing: if his earlier work concentrated on the playfulness of language and its inability to fully capture human experience, this second phase was more directly concerned with political, social and historical questions prompted by the Yugoslav wars. It is true that Albahari's preoccupation with language's inability to fully capture or translate experience shaped most of his earlier work, especially given the postmodernist influence of writers like Beckett and Bernhard. But Dragana Obradović challenges the prevailing thought that Albahari's work underwent a fundamental change after his move to Canada, arguing that the features and motifs that define Albahari's style, like "uncertainty, linguistic meaninglessness ... death and silence" continue to be prominent throughout his career (104).

What changed, instead, is *where* the critique of language was directed. If prior to the war, Albahari probed the insufficiency of language in situations of daily life and in the domestic sphere, his later work examined the same issue but in relation to war and conflict (Obradović 104). Building on this assessment, I argue that what can be observed in Albahari's writing following his move to Canada, is a more *obvious* effort toward the postmemorial work of re-

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an instance of Albahari speaking in support of Israel during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. While Yugoslavia severed all relations with Israel, and while civil society in Belgrade protested the occupation, Albahari published an interview in the Belgrade weekly NIN, expressing his support of Israel's actions, and thus stood in opposition of Yugoslavia's official position on the matter (359-62). Gordiejew views Albahari's entrance into the public sphere as proof that the Jewish community in Yugoslavia did not have uniform beliefs. This event requires further analysis, and it certainly raises questions about the limits of solidarity.



envisioning the past and its trauma, but this does not mean that he had not been engaged with postmemory in earlier work. On the contrary, his writing has always been invested in working through the past and traumatic (post)memory, a process whose political stakes centered on challenging the dichotomous understanding of the past as it had been handed down from Yugoslav state institutions. In the context of the Yugoslav wars and his Canadian exile, Albahari's novels juxtaposed the new "posthistorical time" where the Yugoslav successor states were constructing their official historical narratives, with the legacy of the Holocaust and the Second World War in Serbia, which, as we saw above, had been manipulated by Yugoslav historiography.

I maintain that the implication that Albahari was not a deliberately political writer, but one whose foray into writing of political significance was almost an accident, a consequence of a seemingly unsuspected series of wars, has been useful for his introduction into the Western literary market as an approachable Serbian author. Yet, Albahari did not welcome the label of a national writer. Speaking to Tomislav Longinović in a 1998 panel titled "Between Languages: Post-Yugoslav Writers in Diaspora," Albahari expresses relief at having established a distance between himself and contemporary Serbian literature. He says:

Suddenly, I have been liberated from the role I had created for myself there, a role I was later forced to play. Also, I have been freed from the "obligation" to write in ways which were expected of me. The burden of being *a writer in the East European way* has also been lifted off my back; this means that I no longer have to be engaged in political events, constantly striving to "serve my people." (Longinović interview 1998, emphasis mine.)

In this statement, Albahari rejects the obligations required of writers by their nations, which certainly become more demanding in times of crisis and ontological insecurity. Conducted in 1998, at the height of the war in Kosovo, this interview reveals Albahari's disapproval of the war and the strengthening of hyper-nationalist rhetoric propagated by Serbia and its political and

cultural elites. In the aftermath of the breakdown of Yugoslav multiculturalism, Albahari refuses to become a pawn to a nation carrying out ethnic cleansing and genocide on behalf of “their” people—a homogeneous group devoid of any difference. Like the activists of *Žene u Crnom* / Women in Black of Belgrade, who protested the wars in the middle of Belgrade’s main square with the slogan “ne u naše ime” / “not in our name,” Albahari resists categorization as a *Serbian* writer and the representational politics inherent in such a category.<sup>75</sup>

This can be seen more clearly later in this interview. When Longinović poses a direct question regarding how Albahari identifies as a writer, and whether he sees himself as a Serbian, Jewish or post-Yugoslav author, Albahari answers that: “Being just a writer, without any adjective, ought to be the natural aim of every writer.” The writer, he cautions, should not let identity and the “factors that determine [one’s] roots and tradition” dominate their writing. His insistent rejection of the obligations placed upon writers to serve *their* people also reflects his upbringing in a multicultural, socialist Yugoslavia where the values of brotherhood and unity were upheld, at least on the surface, over any individual, ethnic or religious identity. Obradović calls this a paradox in Albahari’s “logic of resistance” (103). It was at the start of the wars and Yugoslavia’s disintegration, she observes, that Albahari began to embrace the multiculturalism of the Yugoslav project, having long professed a dislike and suspicion of all forms of state ideology and the “stifling literary milieu that bred writing ‘obsessed with morals, lessons, instructions’” (Albahari qtd in Obradović 103).

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<sup>75</sup> A similar point was made by a number of anti-nationalist writers in Serbia and throughout the former Yugoslavia, including writers like Drndić and Ugrešić, who knew well what serving one’s own people entailed at the time. Throughout her life, Ugrešić demanded the label of Yugoslav writer, rather than a Croatian one, having dedicated much of her writing to the issue of writers and intellectuals who became tools of the state, and thus complicit or even responsible for war crimes. If the xenophobic SANU Memorandum had been an overt instance of writers and academics mobilizing in support of Serbian nationalism, anti-nationalist writers were also concerned with less obvious demands for writers to conform to nationalist ideology, for instance, how one’s books were labeled inside bookstores.

Through his rejection of state ideology and imposed identities and obligations placed on literature, Albahari reinforces the narrative of Yugoslav multiculturalism, even when the myths of that rhetoric had been critiqued by other artists and writers of his generation, with the Black Wave movement being one pertinent example,<sup>76</sup> and even if this purported multiculturalism had served to subsume the specificity of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. Moreover, his statements that he could find freedom from obligations to the state only once outside of Eastern Europe, function under the assumption that writers in the West enjoy freedom to write without the demands made by state ideology and the demands of a literary market that commodifies identity, suffering and pain. In fact, this statement from Albahari nearly parrots the rhetoric of the cultural Cold War and its binary separation of on one side, free writers in the democratic West, and on the other side, repressed writers in the socialist East. Albahari's own interpellation as a diaspora writer of the former Yugoslavia is a good example of the faulty logic of his statement, since this title requires either conforming to particular demands of the literary market, and thus participating in institutions that uphold these demands, or otherwise, fading into obscurity. To be a writer in the "Eastern European way" does not simply mean to feel the pressure imposed on you by your own nation—as my dissertation argues, it also means to be faced with the demands of a world literature that has designated trauma as the primary quality of writings from the former Yugoslavia and Albania, specifically, and all postsocialist nations, more generally.

This issue comes to light in a conversation included between the author Semezdin Mehmedinović and his translator Ammiel Alcalay, found at the end of *Sarajevo Blues*, a book of

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<sup>76</sup> The Yugoslav Black Wave was a radical film movement in the 1960s and 1970s that critiqued nationalisms and the failed ideals of Yugoslav multiculturalism and gender equality. Filmmakers part of this movement include Dušan Makavejev, Želimir Žilnik and Aleksandar Petrović.

poems published in Bosnia in 1995 and in English translation in 1998. The two discuss the difficulties of promoting literature from the Balkans in the West. Alcalay admits that as a translator, he had “a very hard time finding space for Bosnian culture until the war broke out” and that after the war began, he felt he needed to “introduce readers to the present situation through dramatic and timely journalistic texts about the war” (107-8). No longer promoted in the realm of world literature as a representative of “the cold war dissident,” Mehmedinović, like Albahari and other writers publishing during the Yugoslav wars, became interpreters of the horrors of the Yugoslav war in the West, which now had an interest in consuming narratives from the region. This type of reductive framing of literature from Bosnia or Serbia, produced and reproduced by a network of translators, editors, critics and scholars, has resulted in a lack of serious analysis of the aesthetic characteristics, experimentations and innovations made in these literatures. Read as the testimonies of powerless victims, these works are depoliticized, made to appeal to the pity and sentimentality of a liberal subject that simply “feels bad, but in a good way, because he suffers *as though* he were someone else” (Meister 223).<sup>77</sup> In such a configuration, Albahari’s poetics of silence and his deliberately silent survivor offer an important alternative for approaching the writing of traumatic histories.

Considering the extent to which the various forces we have been discussing thus far—the second generation’s potential for appropriating their family’s trauma, and the state’s silencing or exploitative use of the same trauma to further political agendas—it is no wonder that the

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Meister writes in *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*: “What Freud describes as symptoms of depression correspond, in my view, to the obsessive self-reproach of beneficiaries who try to *imagine* the suffering of others by (now consciously) projecting their own body image into the (now fully historicized) picture of victimary identity. In the politics of historical memory, the original loss is now ongoing and irreparable, but only because, in the beneficiary’s mind, it has become his own loss. He reminds himself to feel bad, but in a good way, because he suffers *as though* he were someone else. Freud’s theory of melancholia models the somaticization of ethics that I have criticized throughout this book as a barrier to justice” (222-3).

narrator's mother in *Bait* is so reluctant to speak of her experience during the Holocaust. The fact that the narrator's request to record her life story came at such a precarious time would have made her testimony even more susceptible to manipulation, given that mother and son were recording in the period right before the Yugoslav disintegration began, when more fringe ultranationalist, xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric became mainstream. With this development, came an instrumentalization of Jewish suffering that reversed the mnemonics that had previously surrounded the Holocaust. While Yugoslavia subsumed Jewish victims of the Holocaust into the category of "victims of fascism," the Yugoslav successor states—Serbia and Croatia in particular—placed renewed attention on the Holocaust, with the intention of associating themselves with Jewish victimhood. Victimhood, in fact, became one of the major national narratives established during the 1990s, replacing the narratives of socialist sacrifice, triumph and unity that had kept Yugoslavia together, and justifying Serbian and Croatian aggression as the righteous response of the Federation's longest suffering members.

In Serbia, this victimhood narrative supported a revisionist and appropriative comparative logic that equated Serbs to Jews. In media, politics and academia, the case was made that the historic persecution of Serbs was on the same scale, or even worse, than the persecution of Jews. This comparison and equivalence is encapsulated by nationalist writer and politician Vuk Drašković's now infamous statement, made in his 1985 open letter to the writers of Israel, that: "Serbs are the thirteenth, lost and most ill-fated tribe of Israel" (Drašković qtd in Subotić 65). Tracing the parallels of their mutual oppression to the more distant past, Drašković made dubious claims that, "the archeological traces of the ancient Serb and Jewish kingdoms [were] found in the two holy lands of Kosovo and Israel-Palestine" (Perica 47). This, he argued, made Kosovo the "Serbian Jerusalem," from which the Serbs had been expelled, in the same way that

the Jews had been during the biblical Exodus, to experience “five centuries of Serb stateless life under Muslim Ottoman Turkish” occupation, which he also equated to “the Babylonian Captivity” of the Jews (Perica 47). Moreover, Drašković’s speech appropriated and decontextualized the loss of Jewish life during the Holocaust, claiming that the two groups suffered in the same way at the hands of Croats and of Bosnian Muslims who collaborated with the Nazis.

The role that these ideas played during the Yugoslav wars cannot be overstated. They imbued Serbia’s acts of aggression during the 1990s with an air of legitimacy, as they were seen as the restoration of order after centuries of oppression, traced back to the Ottoman occupation. The rewriting of Serbian history as a history of perpetual victimhood, and not just any victimhood, but one that rivaled Jewish persecution, allowed the Serbian state to silence Serbia’s crimes during the Holocaust, its enthusiastic compliance with Nazism and the annihilation of 82 percent of all Serbian Jews as early as 1942. Instead, the Serbian state nationalized the Holocaust with the sole purpose of reframing its victims as Serb and Christian (Subotić 70-72). As Drašković’s letter shows, these discursive changes were already happening by the 1980s. This means that when the narrator sat down with his mother to record her life story in *Bait*, the Jewish community in Serbia, and all other Yugoslav republics, would have found itself in the middle of a highly politicized environment that was instrumentalizing Jewish suffering.

Marko Živković writes that, when faced with the dilemma of how to “center the abuses of history and instrumentalization of Jewish suffering coming from the Croatian side, while at the same time avoiding the corresponding instrumentalization by the Serbian side,” the Jewish community in Serbia largely chose to avoid any major involvement with these political

developments (77).<sup>78</sup> Interviewed at a Holocaust remembrance event in Subotica, a city located in the province of Vojvodina, during the Bosnian war in July 1994, Albahari explained this decision to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Speaking from his position as the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, he expressed the Jewish community's fear of retribution were they to make public their criticism of the Serbian regime, citing rising antisemitism and the Serbian's press manipulation of their statements, as well as the Serbian Jewish community's feelings of isolation from the outside world, who wanted little to do with them as they had become associated with Serbian aggression. Despite this association, Albahari stated that Jews had become targets for Serbian xenophobia, which attributed any negative view of Serbia to an "international conspiracy of freemasons and Jews" (Albahari qtd in Gruber 4).

Albahari's comments reveal that outside of their appropriation of Jewish suffering, political and intellectual elites in Serbia did not care about Jews in their country, and quickly turned to the trope of "Jewish conspiracy" when needed. His observations are supported by Živković's argument that, although the appropriation and identification with the Jews was only *one* undercurrent of the Serbian grand narrative of victimhood, this comparison was "re-awakened" during the war in Kosovo and the NATO intervention in Serbia in 1999, which prompted declarations that dubbed Serbs the "new Jews of Europe" (79). Still, it did not take long for the NATO bombing to be framed as a Jewish conspiracy of "the new world order" against Serbs (Živković 81). Živković's analysis of the paranoid environment at the time reveals an overwhelming amount of support for these antisemitic conspiracy theories from members of the public and from nationalist political and cultural elites. These theories continued to coexist alongside the appropriation of Jewish victimhood and Serbia's attempt to establish a connection

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<sup>78</sup> This was not a homogenous view, however, and as Marko Živković points out, some members of the Serbian Jewish community advocated for showing support to Serbs in the media (77).

with Israel, with the ultimate goal of supporting Serbia's territorial claim over Kosovo through the promotion of the idea that "to be a victim of a genocide is to be entitled to a state" (Živković 82).<sup>79</sup>

Albahari's war-time interview in Subotica, where the small local Jewish community had gathered to see the erection of a monument commemorating the 4,000 Jews deported and killed there in 1944, captures the complex position of the Jewish community during the breakup of Yugoslavia. In this chapter's following sections, I focus more intensely on Albahari's *Bait*, with the purpose of examining the silences of mother and narrator, keeping in mind the complex and rapidly changing politics of memory and narratives of trauma and victimhood that underlie the novel.

## **2.5 How the Silence Sounded: Mother's Historical (With)holding and Resistance to Testimony**

In this section, I make the argument that Albahari's rejection of ideological compliance with nationalism manifests in his writing as a poetics of silence. Speaking to AVIVA Berlin in 2011, Albahari laments that unlike artists, who can create narrative without the need of words, writers can only "play with silence" and have to relent to language. Even those who, like him, believe that "there is no narration, no story," have to make this belief known through language

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<sup>79</sup> To be sure, Jewish suffering was appropriated not only by Serbia, but *all* Yugoslav republics at the time, as well as neighboring Albania in its post-socialist memory politics. Some of these dynamics are explored in other chapters of this dissertation. For more scholarship around this phenomenon see: Vjekoslav Perica, "Serbian Jerusalem: Religious Nationalism, Globalization and the Invention of a Holy Land in Europe's Periphery, 1985-2017." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 6 , Article 3, 2017; Marko Živković, *Serbian Dreambook: National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević*, Indiana University Press, 2011; Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*, Cornell University Press, 2019; Stijn Vervaet, *Holocaust, War and Transnational Memory: Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature*. Routledge, 2018.



and thus “betray silence” (Hohle). Invited to write an entry on “silence” for the 2010 book, *The Novelist’s Lexicon*, Albahari makes explicit his preoccupation with the rhetorical uses of silence:

Silence is what writers dream to achieve when they begin writing. They know that words are not sufficient without silence, and they also know that silence speaks better than any single word. “Those who know,” said Lao Tzu, “do not speak. Those who speak do not know.” There is a similar saying in the Talmud: “Teach your tongue to say, ‘I don’t know.’ ” In other words, learn not to speak. Teach yourself silence. [...] After all, if our world is really defined by our language, how beautiful and vast must be the world defined by our silence? (Albahari, 99-100)

In this statement, silence figures as an act that is chosen consciously and that displays the agency of the one who decides not to speak. In choosing silence, one must “teach” their tongue to not utter its words, underscoring the embodied effort underlying the experience of being silent.

Through this framing, Albahari recognizes not only the inherent value of silence to broaden one’s worldview, but also the labor required in achieving silence: a perspective shift is required to first recognize silence, and second, to teach oneself to communicate through it. What I also find important in this statement, is that Albahari does not frame silence and language as a dichotomy, instead, they are described as constitutive of one another, since they give each other meaning, which would remain “not sufficient” without the presence of its counterpart. Defining the world by silence, after all, would not be as compelling if one had not already experienced its definition through language.

I am particularly interested in Albahari’s cognizance of silence’s potential for resisting the demands for literary testimonies that can enrich national narratives of the traumatic past, which both influence and are shaped by a global market that favors narratives of victimhood. This is why I chose to concentrate on a novel like *Bait*, which though published in 1996, and thus in the middle of the Yugoslav wars, unsettles the reader’s expectations of a war-time narrative. In *Bait*, Albahari keeps the Yugoslav wars at arm’s length, as the novel deals with more distant,

historical violence, which is told through mother's reluctant and laconic testimony of the Holocaust and the meta-narrative about the narrator's inability to write. Albahari thus resists the push to write a novel testifying to the Yugoslav wars, making few overt references to them, and in turn, providing little "historical material" to those interested in instrumentalizing the writing to support their own political agendas. Over the course of the novel, Albahari uses Mother's refusal to testify, which I interpret as a deliberate manifestation of silence, as a method for her to resist incorporation into the Serbian state's official historical narratives. In a parallel way, *Bait*'s refusal to describe the narrator's own experiences at the start of the Yugoslav disintegration, serves to resist participation in the self-victimization and appropriation of Jewish suffering that Serbian politicians were performing at the time.

How, exactly, does Albahari achieve these two forms of refusal and resistance in *Bait*? We can approach the question by following Dragana Obradović's argument that Albahari's use of different forms of displacement—spatial, temporal, or linguistic—creates a sense of upheaval without naming the historical rupture that has occurred (Obradović 105). In *Bait*, we can observe this technique in the novel's distancing of the mother from her testimony by bringing her voice in the narrative only through the mediation of the tape player. This displacement, as well as the narrator's separation from his country, conveys the trauma of the Yugoslav wars without needing to explain or describe it through the conventional linguistic or narrative methods that, to a postmodernist writer like Albahari, would have remained inadequate. More specifically, the temporal and spatial displacements in *Bait*, create a narrative structure that I see as working on two parallel temporal levels of internal multidirectional memory. In the present, the narrator who is in exile in Canada, because of the wars that devastated his country, listens to the recordings of his mother's experience in the Holocaust. The recordings unlock the narrator's memories of a

recent past: the time he had lived in Belgrade with his mother and, following his father's death, had begun to record his mother's life story. The two temporalities coexist on the page, and the narrative switches seamlessly, if abruptly, from the past to the present, revealing how, for the narrator, the past continues to be experienced and reinterpreted in the present.

The novel opens with a question asked by the narrator's mother, so that, before anything else—before even knowing of the tape player that mediates her speech, or of her writer son who will attempt to narrativize her story—we read her words, perhaps even imagine hearing her voice. In that first sentence, the mother asks: “Where should I begin?” *Bait* refuses to completely answer mother's inquiry, and in repeating this same question, allows the story of mother and son “to unfold and unravel, to avoid allusions that master meaning, to not make a something out of ‘all sorts of things’” (Gosta 576).<sup>80</sup> Indeed, I see this question as an acknowledgement of the conventions of narrative, with its expectations of heroism and martyrdom, and teleological and linear progression through a beginning, middle and end. The predictable “beginning-middle-end plot” of these conventional narratives, the historian and trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra argues, seeks “resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack” (704). This conflation is a dangerous one, for it assumes the existence of a unified totality or community that has been lost through the fault of an undesirable Other, when the unified community, in fact, had never existed. The nostalgia toward the absence of this idealized whole precludes any attempt at working through the past, instead leading to “endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia” (LaCapra 698). We have already seen the effects

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<sup>80</sup> Tamara Gosta refers to an instance of the narrator's refrains regarding his inability to write, where he laments that he could not describe the experience of his parents' final days, saying: “If I knew how to write, if I knew how to use literary allusions, I could attribute *all sorts of things* to that nakedness, thread it into the tradition or ascribe to it a universal meaning” (*Bait* 19-20, emphasis mine). This reflection leads to the memory of first meeting Donald in a bookstore, giving more legitimacy to Donald's skill as a writer. In contrast to Donald, the narrator again repeats with conviction: “I'm not a writer” (*Bait* 20).

of one such search in *Bait*, in the violent destruction and revisionism of history the narrator encounters during his trip to Banja Luka.

Unconventional narratives, on the other hand, provide an important alternative for writing stories of trauma that are less likely to repeat and appropriate that trauma, because these narratives are not interested in providing closure or a resolution, especially not ones that return a supposed and erstwhile utopia. Instead of closure, LaCapra continues, alternative or unconventional forms of narrativizing function according to an “unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces [...] that may enable more desirable configurations that cannot be equated with salvation or redemption” (704-5). This point is crucial in helping our understanding of what Albahari accomplishes in *Bait*, and also what Podrimja, Lleshanaku and Drndić attempt in their work. The lack of narrative resolution that mother’s silent, unfinished testimony enacts, and which is further supported by the novel’s lack of a conclusion that redeems the narrator’s struggle, challenges the two types of temporal constructions critiqued by Albahari in *Bait*: the utopian socialist future and the utopian nationalist past, both of which are driven by the search for redemption.

Silence, with its multiplicity and openness to interpretation, is a key factor in achieving an unconventional narrative within *Bait*. The long, silent breaks in the mother’s testimony, and the extralinguistic sounds that emerge from the tape recorder’s machinery in the quietude of her speech create a rhythmical repetition that give the novel its structure by creating an internal pause, something the novel’s format lacks, having been written in one long, uninterrupted paragraph without any breaks. The repetition of mother’s silence, like the repetition of the narrator’s lament that he is unable to write—“If only I knew how to write,” he says again and again—create a refrain that adds rhythm to the narrative, and connect both mother and son to

speechlessness, even if they are of different kinds.<sup>81</sup> Hers has been cast aside for a decade: the tapes had been forgotten inside “dusty red boxes” that the narrator had placed behind a copy of the *Dictionary of Serbo-Croatian Language*, that most obvious signifier of national identity (*Bait* 4). All these years later, in the narrator’s present, these recordings confront him with his mother’s testimony, filled with caesura that pose a challenge to the process of working through the past because they continue to deny him full access to her memories, and in turn, challenge his intention of writing a novel based on his mother’s story.

When the tapes resurface, the narrator is adapting to life in exile. From his new Canadian home he listens to the tapes and encounters, once again, the long, silent pauses that had troubled him when they first began recording. A disbeliever in the absolute power of words—which her son claims can “make up for everything”—his mother was convinced that knowing how to keep silent was integral for finding any solace in language (*Bait* 6). Thus, she speaks in short sentences that lead to abundant silences, and within the first eleven pages of *Bait*, she has uttered only three sentences. As readers, we never encounter mother’s voice without this mediation of the tape recorder and player, or without the mediation of the narrator’s memories when he remembers their life together. Thus removed from the speaker, separated from its materiality, mother’s voice can become more easily appropriated and manipulated to fit the state’s narratives of victimhood and trauma or the son’s postmemorial overidentification with her pain. Filling her testimony with silence, mother attempts to subvert this appropriative drive, making it more difficult to excerpt sound bites of misery from her story. And yet, what the narrator’s tapes had captured in the long pauses his mother took was not an emptiness, but a silence filled with movement, sounds and noises, most prominent of which being the squeaking sound of the

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<sup>81</sup> This technique of repeating certain phrases is one that Albahari employs in many of his novels, calling them his “leitmotif sentences” (Mraović-O’Hare 186).

recorder, whose inner machinery continued the work of recording unaware that mother's refusal made audible even the minute noises emitting from its spindles and drive belts. Altogether these sounds and noises give considerable shape to this soundscape's negative space, showing that the silence caused by mother's refusal to testify provided a wealth of potential meaning.<sup>82</sup>

“Then, there, I thought that if we continued that way, my supply of tapes wouldn't suffice” the narrator says to himself as he begins to listen to the tapes (*Bait* 6). The process of listening to the tapes again, from such a distance in space and time, triggers the memories of impatience and frustration he felt while recording his mother's testimony. These feelings stemmed from an encounter with the repercussions of the mother's silence: its presence would fill the whole supply of tapes with nothingness, if she continued “that way” and punctuated her speech with such long silences. If she continued that way, Albahari seems to say, the narrator would have no material for his story. But the sentence does not end there: a semicolon separates its first clause from the second, creating a parallelism between the time and place of the “then, there” where the narrator and his mother were learning how to understand and perform the roles conferred to them by the tape recorder, and the “now, here” in which the narrator addresses the reader. In the present, in his Canadian home, he reflects and wonders: “now, here, I'm not sure whether at that time I had written anything on the sheet of paper that lay before me” (*Bait* 6). If his mother's silence had been a verbal one, employed at the moment when the testimony should have been given, the narrator's silence materialized in an inability to put down words on paper, a struggle he continues to face in the present, as he wonders how exactly he can write a coherent, non-appropriative narrative inspired by his mother's story.

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<sup>82</sup> I explore the concept of negative space in the third chapter of the dissertation, in relation to the poetry of Luljeta Lleshanaku. I view negative space as the visual counterpart of silence: that which is always present but disregarded.

In the “then, there” time-space where mother and son faced each other and wait for her to continue her story, communicating through silence and gesture, the tape recorder groans with its own noises, or else the tapes convey the recorded sounds of the mother’s nearly tacit moving around the house and entering the kitchen, which the son, in his present day location in Canada, hears as:

[...] two consecutive raps, resembling a gulping sound, the first one short, brusque, like a reflection of my conviction, the second one somewhat prolonged, distorted, when, not hiding my desperation, I slowly stopped the machine. (*Bait 9*)

The silent mother and the son eager to hear her speak meet in the space created by the silence which allows all the other sounds that are always present, but obscured by noise, to become perceivable. The first short and brusque sound comes after his mother leaves for the kitchen, after the narrator has carefully “set everything up again, stretched out the cords, secured the microphone on the tripod” (*Bait 9*). Eager to begin recording his mother’s testimony again, the narrator is met with her silence and her rejection of the recording process, which materializes in the “two consecutive raps” that are captured on the tapes. The sounds that emerge out of her silence are representative of the narrator’s frustrated response to mother’s resistance. I read this sentence as a dialogic exchange between the two of them, one where the primary mode of exchange is silence. Like in a verbal dialogue, there is a progression to these silent responses: the first quick, brusque rap evolves into a second prolonged, distorted one that reflects the narrator’s growing desperation at his mother’s silence.

Following these two is a third rap, which comes after his mother had at last agreed to speak and the narrator had set up the recording equipment again. But, in the present, this sound is not heard by the narrator: he reasons that the rap must have been “lost below the squeaking of ungreased spindles,” which perhaps could not keep up with the machine’s starts and stops, and

thus had responded with its own frustrated groans (*Bait* 10). This lost noise points to the narrator's inability to hear the fullness of sound inside of the silence he shared with his mother, something that he will start to tackle as the novel progresses and he continues to engage with his mother's lack of speech and the memories, likewise affected by silence, that the narrator has inherited from his family. Grappling with his initial frustration with his mother's reluctance to tell him about her Holocaust experiences, the narrator slowly undergoes a process of learning to really *hear* how her silence sounded.

He begins to realize that the squeaking and groaning made by the tape recorder is not simply "distorted, barely audible, useless" but a significant aspect of communication (*Bait* 11). The next time he encounters these extralinguistic sounds in the recordings occurs after the narrator hears himself telling his mother that she "became a Serb again" after she fled from Zagreb to Belgrade to escape the Ustaše concentration camps—a comment that might reflect the narrator's critique of growing ethnonationalism in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. The disbelief at having uttered such a hurtful thing to his mother is compounded by the absence of extralinguistic sounds: "no whining of rusty spindles was able to cancel" the pain his words caused (*Bait* 16). His mother responds with a brief catalog of the actions she had to take to survive the war, including the fact that she "never stopped being a Serb, nor did [she] renounce the Jewish faith," but used the identity conferred to her through the arbitrariness of birth to gain refugee status as a Serb fleeing the Independent State of Croatia. Listening to the tape, the narrator hears not only her words, but also her embodied presence, which emerges in the negative space created by her silences, and which "he inscribes with her gestures and movements in the process of recording" (Aleksić 156). And so he hears her blowing her nose with a handkerchief, and hears her clearing her throat, a sound which causes the microphone's control lamp to flicker, revealing the



materiality of the silence between them. Then, mother takes a long pause after the narrator, who realizes the impact of his question, asks if she would like to stop recording. We hear him recall through an echoic memory, how:

The spindles were squeaking, the drive belts were groaning, that's how the silence in which we both awaited her answer sounded. Then for the first time I thought about giving up. I looked at her face and repeated to myself: You're causing her pain. Perhaps I should have spoken that sentence. (*Bait* 17).

A pedagogical relationship thus develops where the silence in which they “both awaited her answer” triggers the narrator’s reflection about the emotional distress underlying his mother’s lack of speech. Although he is still far from understanding the agency his mother displayed in her choice to keep silent, the gesture of acknowledging the pain he is causing her begins to complicate the narrator’s thinking around words and literature, and in particular, the ethics of writing about postmemory. The piece of paper he keeps in front of him in hopes of writing down notes from his mother’s testimony remains blank. It only contains the title “Mother: Life” and the paper’s negative space (*Bait* 5). But that space, like mother’s silence, and like his own past speechlessness, found in the regretful thought that he should have “spoken that sentence,” is not empty, but takes up significant space, both in the tape’s magnetic strip and on the page’s blankness. In the brief excerpt I cite above, Albahari encapsulates the essence of what silence does for the narrator of *Bait*: teaching him how to listen and recognize the assemblage of sounds that give meaning to his mother’s choice to not testify, at least not in the prescribed way he expected.

Though *Bait* does slowly unfold the story of mother’s life—either through mother’s eventual recounting, or through the narrator’s memories of life before the tapes—it takes the duration of the novel for readers to hear what the two characters choose to reveal of her life. Albahari breaks up mother’s testimony not only with silence, but also with the narrator’s

memory of the minutiae of their recording sessions, his memories of life in Yugoslavia, and his long digressions on the nature of writing. These interruptions in the mother's testimony function like the repetition of the narrator's lament that, if only he knew how to write, he could write mother's story, and like the repetitive groans and squeaks of the tape player's inner machinery. Taken together, these breaks in the continuity of the main narrative recreate the narrator's experience of waiting for his mother's silence to end and for her to continue her story.

When mother starts to tell her story, she unceremoniously admits that she had wished to be dead "only once" (*Bait* 6). It is only when she speaks again, several pages later, that she gives an indication of the reason for her suicidal thoughts. Recalling an early memory from the Second World War, mother recounts that, "When the Germans entered Zagreb ... they trampled through the flowers and the chocolate" (*Bait* 11). This is a memory that the narrator knows well, since it is a piece of "family history and mythology" often heard at dinners that his parents had with their friends, where the group discussed life before the war. In its repetitiveness, the statement might have become something akin to background noise, or the old proverbs that mother liked to repeat to her family. But because the tapes allow the narrator to hear his mother speaking after a long passage of time, he must amend his memory to specify *which* war his parents had been discussing, since in his present moment, "a new war is going on; that is, the old one is ending, unrealized goals are being achieved, as though someone has excerpted the past from a film archive and goaded the actors into continuing the opening scene" (*Bait* 11). By amending his thinking, the narrator connects the memories of the two wars in a productive way, intimating at the "multidirectional logic" that will lead his attempts to understand both historical traumas and work through them (Rothberg *Multidirectional* 37). I observe a similarity between his metaphor of old scenes from a film archive that are repeated in the present by the same set of actors, and

the metaphor he uses when commenting on the development of a “posthistorical time” where his contemporaries live as if following the temporally disjointed pages of a textbook (*Bait* 73). In both cases, the revisionism of history is expressed as an experience of anachronism, mediated through academic and cultural production. The narrator pinpoints how the repetition of the past—a literal acting out of bygone scenes—stunts an individual’s and society’s ability to work through the trauma of the past.

What happens to the process of understanding and working through traumatic postmemory when memory transmission is as laden with silence as what we see in *Bait*? Mother’s act of refusal poses a problem for memory and its inter- and transgenerational transfer, and, I contend, challenges Hirsch’s assertion of postmemory’s power to redress historical ruptures. In fact, “what mother refuses to speak about *is* history” and its violence, and her silence attempts a “dethroning of history” despite an unavoidable immersion in it and in language (Aleksić 164, emphasis mine). While mother cannot fully escape or resist history, she can carry out a “historical withholding” through the speech act of silence. Hirsch borrows the concept of “historical withholding” from Spivak’s analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Sethe’s refusal to pass on certain stories of the violence and trauma of slavery to her daughter. In this relation between mother and daughter, Spivak notes a “certain historical withholding” takes place, chosen by the mother because some experiences cannot be translated into words. “And yet, it is passed on,” Spivak concludes, “with the mark of untranslatability on it, in the bound book, *Beloved*, that we hold in our hands” (195). The material proof of the printed and bound book attests to the possibility of postmemorial transmission even with the presence of an overwhelming silence about certain aspects of the familial past. In *Bait*, mother’s refusal to testify causes a silence that can stand up to the demands for the verbalization of trauma in ways

that benefit both the writer seeking material for his books and the nation-building project's appropriation of victimhood. Moreover, mother's silence ensures that the memory transmitted to the narrator holds the mark of untranslatability within it, and through this mark, she gives an incomplete testimony that makes an ethical demand for the listener to neither appropriate her pain, nor dismiss it because of what the testimony does not say.

In Albahari's novel, there comes a moment when the tension created by mother's reluctant testimony becomes too hard to bear. The narrator reveals his frustration by admitting to her that he had thought they would talk about "other things," and in turn, his mother reacts by gently striking the table with the palm of her hand (*Bait* 80). This is a gesture of disappointment, whose sound is preserved in the tape recording for the narrator to hear years later, and which recalls the raps on the table made by him when they began their recording sessions. The interaction creates a distance between them that is reflected in a complete lack of communication: they do not speak for several days, until mother finally appears at the narrator's bedroom door, standing for a moment in silence, and then soundlessly making her way to the table they used for their recording sessions. Knowing what her gestures meant without needing verbal confirmation, the narrator responds by taking the tape recorder from under the dresser and setting up the cables and microphone for their recording.

"Look at these hands," mother says as soon as the narrator presses the record button, for once "as if she could hardly wait to begin speaking" (*Bait* 87). The invitation to "look at these hands" is repeated twice on the same page. The first instance captures mother's uncharacteristic eagerness to speak, which Albahari's narrative follows with a description of mother's silent sitting down at their table, before once again asking the narrator, and the reader, to "look at these hands." After the pause created by the text's brief digression, we hear his mother tell the

narrator: “I can’t believe . . . that I once held all of you in them. I can’t believe that I held anything in them at all” (*Bait* 87-8). Spoken in the imperative, hers is nonetheless not a command, but a humble appeal, the shocked supplication of someone asking for recognition of her losses. Out of this disbelief come mother’s recollections of some of her most painful memories. “They took him away twice,” she says of her first husband, who figures in the novel only in fragments—a Jew in the resistance, “perhaps even a communist” as the narrator puts it, who was first taken to a labor camp in Zagreb, and then to a concentration camp in Belgrade, from which he did not return (*Bait* 89, 14). Albahari preserves and transmits information about this man through mother’s disjointed memories and the short letters he had sent her from the camp, which the narrator reads later in the novel. Both times he was taken away, mother tells us, her first husband had extended his hand to her instead of offering an embrace, and therefore, I read mother’s invitation to “look at these hands” as an embodied gesture of mourning that bridges time and space to create a continuity between her first husband’s final loving and desperate attempts to hold her, her attempt to make sense of traumatic losses, and her bestowing of this gesture and memory to her son.

Mother’s losses—her first husband, their two sons, the narrator’s father, a life free of structural violence and trauma—are the negative space that gives shape to her present, and materialize into the nothingness she holds in her hands, as she asks the narrator to look at her palms, now irreversibly aged, her swollen wrists, her twisted fingers and her skin, hard and coarse like sandpaper (*Bait* 88). This attention to hands, to their gestures, and to all the care and love in their potential for holding another in them, is juxtaposed with the aforementioned act of historical *withholding* that mother’s silence enacts. The two acts do not exist in opposition: while mother withholds complete access to her traumatic memories from her writer-son, Albahari’s

novel nonetheless provides openings into these memories that are not appropriative. Analyzing postmemorial works through a feminist lens, Hirsch notes how it is “the act of *holding*—caring, protective, and nurturing—made palpable in the use of hands as primary figures” that makes possible the transmission of memory outside of prescribed gender and familial roles, thus expanding the “circle of memory in multiple, inviting, and open ended ways” (99). Through their openness, these lines of transmission can resist overidentification with the other’s suffering, and thus resist appropriation of their memory, instead respecting “the irretrievability of the past, the irreducibility of the other, the untranslatability of the story of trauma” (Hirsch 99).

And so, if Mother refuses to transmit certain parts of her experience to her son through verbal communication, her embodied gestures are tacitly passed down to the narrator, for whom embodiment becomes a crucial way to articulate his postmemorial position. This happens in small, intimate moments, like for instance, when the mother, at the time of the recordings, takes a handkerchief and wipes her nose. The narrator carries out the same gesture from his temporally and spatially different vantage point: “She took out a handkerchief and wiped her nose. I, too, take out a handkerchief and wipe my nose” (*Bait* 89). Or when his mother describes life in the war as a daily repetition of going to bed and then getting up again, the narrator asserts that: “I, too, get up” (*Bait* 17).<sup>83</sup> The structure of these sentences displays the same parallelism we saw earlier—the “then, there” is contrasted with the “now, here” to reveal the transposition of the mother’s painful memories onto the son’s identification with that suffering, and to point to his embodied displays of solidarity with her pain.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> And in an acknowledgement of silence’s dialogic function in the novel, the narrator also remembers how “When she kept silent, I, too, kept silent; when she spoke, I listened” (*Bait* 36).

<sup>84</sup> This physical mimicry can, at times, involve the positioning of the entire body and its experience of being in the world. In her description of fleeing from Zagreb for Belgrade, mother uses the physical differences between the inhabitants of the two cities to comment on the political reality in each. In

This dynamic is most evident when the mother speaks of losing her sons in a train accident that happened immediately after the end of WWII. As we saw above, she conveys her pain and grief through bodily description, in this case saying: “I walked the streets of Belgrade like a sleepwalker” (*Bait* 23). Grief and shock form an emptiness inside and around her, making her walk “a little bent forward,” as if she were physically pushing that emptiness in front of her (*Bait* 26). Hearing these “transactions between language and body in the work of mourning” coming from the tape, the narrator reflects that he, too, experiences the effects of war-time displacement as a physical reaction (Das 38). We hear him think to himself:

Perhaps, being so far away, I see that in a mistaken light, perhaps I’m adapting memories to new demands, but I remember the certainty, I remember the assurance with which I walked down the street. Here, I walk hunched over and fix my eyes on the ground, always at the spot my left or right foot is supposed to get to. (*Bait* 22)

As in his mother’s description, the narrator’s bodily discomfort is also associated with an unwelcoming, threatening environment. While his mother felt as if she sleepwalked through Belgrade, the narrator traverses *his* new city with a similarly defeated walk: his back hunched over and eyes on the ground, the memory of the civil wars and disintegration of Yugoslavia too fresh in his mind. The “new demands” made of him are those of a different culture whose way of life he cannot seem to fully understand, and a foreign language that he still sees as “someone else’s language” (*Bait* 22). But they are also the demands made of his position as a member of the postmemorial generation, as he is now tasked with adapting the Holocaust memories

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Zagreb, people were “walking upright, they were speaking in raised voices, their backs were taut, their shoulders square” (*Bait* 14). But in Belgrade, people “mostly walked with bowed heads, alone or in pairs, and whispered” (*Bait* 14). Without saying so explicitly, the mother gives her assessment of the political conditions in each location: If fear of persecution and of the war made people in Belgrade bow their heads, minimize the physical and verbal space taken up by their bodies, in Croatia it seemed to make little difference in the daily lives of those who were neither Jews, nor Serbs, like her and her family.

transmitted from his parents to form an understanding of the trauma he experienced and witnessed in Yugoslavia.

At this point, we must ask: What prevents the narrator's repetition of his mother's gestures from turning into the obsessive, repetitive acting out of traumatic postmemory? It is useful to return to the moment when mother and son started recording together, which coincides with the narrator's first embodied mimicry of his mother's gestures. When she begins speaking, mother sits "unnaturally rigidly, her back pressing the back of the chair, as if she wanted to escape from the microphone" (*Bait* 11). The distance she keeps from the microphone troubles the narrator because he is worried that her "resistance and the distance she sat away," would not allow her words to be "transformed into a magnetic record" (*Bait* 11). What we soon learn, of course, is that this is precisely mother's intention. In response, the narrator contorts his body in an uncomfortable position that would make him feel a discomfort similar to his mother's, as he bends over the tape recorder and fixates his eyes on its control lamp. If we consider the narrator's struggle to write as a struggle to narrativize postmemory without appropriating it, then we can begin to understand the instructive role that Albahari intends for mother's silence to play in the narrators' working through the past. By keeping a distance from the tape recorder, mother carries out an act of historical withholding, not only because the stories she could tell are too traumatic to be passed on, but importantly, because it enables a strategic subversion of the commodification of survivors' testimonies, their transformation into the "historical material" that was discussed earlier. As a result, the "magnetic record" of the tape carries the mark of untranslatability and challenges the narrator's mining for this historical material in his mother's story.



This creates a pathway for the narrator's attempt to work through the traumatic past he has inherited *and* the one he has experienced. It is an attempt plagued with insecurity and pain, and often does come close to a melancholic overidentification with his mother's experiences. However, as we will see in the final section of this chapter, the narrator resists the appropriative drive by developing affiliative connections that re-envision postmemory.

## 2.6 Working Through, Affiliative Memory and the Dream of Freedom

Albahari embeds within the narrator's attempt to write about his mother a "search for forms of identification that are nonappropriative" (Hirsch 99). The task renders him incapable of writing and leads to many debates with Donald, whose beliefs around writing are very different from those of the narrator. For the narrator, the key difference between the two of them, other than their birthplace, lies in his friend's ability to write and his own perpetual struggle with words. He says:

Someone who knows how to write, like Donald, would sit right down and write the story, traversing to boot the shortest possible path from the beginning to the end. Nothing in that story would suggest that anything other than the story exists and not as is the case with me, with my story, if I would only write it, in which there is everything but a story, and which continually falls apart under the shocks caused by the intrusions of parallel realities. (*Bait* 45)

The narrator attributes Donald's ability to write to his capacity to structure a story "from the beginning to the end" so that it is easily recognizable as a narrative, a conventional one that can fit into larger social frameworks and literary traditions. Unlike Donald, who can clearly demarcate the borders between his story and everything outside of it, the narrator's writing breaks down with the "intrusions of parallel realities" and cannot follow any linear chronology, because it is overwhelmed by history. The parallel realities that intrude his narrative include the postmemory transmitted from his parents, as much as his lived experience of the Yugoslav

disintegration, and the difficulty of his life in exile. I argue that because these memories exist multidirectionally, the story the narrator writes of his mother cannot exclude his own experiences, and his engagement with postmemory from the vantage point of the present, what Albahari describes as the “shocks caused by the intrusions of parallel realities,” is precisely what prevents the memories of his own life from becoming displaced by an all-consuming attachment to his mother’s past experiences (*Bait* 45). Therefore, to heed Donald’s advice that “[his] mother is [his] story and everything else is preaching to the wind,” would deny the entanglements of Holocaust memory with the violence of the Yugoslav wars (*Bait* 41). It would also transform the narrator’s narrative into something linear and conventional, taking mother’s question of “Where do I begin?” and answering it with a simple chronological account of her life, thus claiming mastery over the meaning of her words and her silences.

Nevertheless, the narrator still dreams of writing a story that would take the shortest, most direct path from beginning to end, and therefore release him from the grip of the past. He tells Donald that if he knew how to write, he would sit and complete his book. But his inability to write leaves him no other choice: “I have to speak,” he tells Donald, and shows him, on a map of Europe, the trajectory his mother took in order to survive the Holocaust (*Bait* 34). Using the language of gestures, resembling his mother’s invitation to look at her hands, the narrator traces his finger on the map and gives his friend a summary of his mother’s life in Yugoslavia—from Zagreb to Belgrade, from Kruševac to Peja. In this way, he articulates the story that he does not know how to write, and condenses to two pages what the novel takes much longer to reveal. He is aware that this action implicates Donald within a larger framework of historical, cultural and familial memory. In fact, he hopes that his friend will take these memories and order them into a coherent narrative, completing the narrator’s task. “If I succeeded in that,” he remarks with his

index finger like a sign post over Yugoslavia, “if I got him to record my history as if it were his own, then I would free myself of all ballasts, then I would be free” (*Bait* 85). The narrator’s desire for Donald to write his mother’s story explains why Albahari makes him undergo such belabored efforts to ensure Donald understand his perspective on the past and thus “free” the narrator from the past that keeps him tethered to Yugoslavia, to his mother’s memories, and perhaps, even free the narrator from obligations toward “his people,” recalling Albahari’s own wishes to escape the confines of being an “Eastern European” writer.

It is this effort to transmit his mother’s memories to Donald that turns the narrator into an active “agent of transmission” who creates space for remembrance beyond the familial (Hirsch 99). Through this, Donald becomes implicated in the postmemorial attempt to work through the traumatic past, and the pair’s intense discussions of writing come to be understood as not merely philosophical, but a site for the negotiation and transmission of memory. According to Hirsch, such affiliative postmemorial work can become a “reparative ethical and political act of solidarity and, perhaps, agency on behalf of the trauma of the other” (99). But despite well-intentioned efforts, the risk still exists of the “inevitable appropriations that inflect an empathic aesthetic” (Hirsch 99). The affiliative connections that Albahari creates between the narrator and Donald do not mean the latter is incapable of appropriating mother’s story. In fact, Albahari’s characterization of Donald as pragmatic and future-oriented, seems to address this concern. Moreover, there is also a possibility that Donald exists only in the narrator’s imagination, serving as an “alter ego, autoerotic projection, real/imaginary friend” (Aleksić 171). In the case that Donald is a product of the narrator’s subconscious projection of a self that is assimilated into Canadian culture, the pair’s dialogic exchanges and the narrator’s attempts to transmit his mother’s memories and his own experiences to Donald gives us an intimate look at the innermost

mechanics of working through the past, and reveals more clearly the inner turmoil the narrator undergoes in exile, underscoring his desire for social connection.

Regardless of his real or imaginary status, I believe that Donald provides an important counterpoint to the narrator. Unlike him, Donald is steadfast in his belief around the necessity of cutting ties with the past; he is not interested in acting out inherited traumas or taking on a victim identity, but strives to move forward through the linear progression of time and history. In his approach to the past, Donald seems to advocate for the “resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal” that distinguishes mourning from melancholia, and separates working through from acting out (LaCapra 713). Because of this, Donald maintains that mother’s story ought to be written in a “straight-line chronological narrative,” instead of a postmodern narration where fragmentation and the experimental dominate (*Bait* 30). This is also the linear chronological narrative that the narrator desires in his frustrated state—but this will always elude him, each attempt at making his writing conform to convention falling apart against his will. As I have been arguing, this does not mean that the narrator is wallowing in melancholy. His troubles with writing his mother’s story and postmemory reflect the search for the “nonfetishistic narrative that resist ideology,” which LaCapra contends would still involve a certain amount of acting out of trauma, its “irredeemable losses” and “its own implication in repetitive processes it cannot entirely transcend” (*Representing the Holocaust* 199). The narrator cannot simply sever ties with his past, especially if the expected goal at the end of working through is assimilation in a capitalist North American society that depends on the labor of its immigrant communities, but neither does he have to experience the past as an existence of endless trauma.

Donald, however, does not readily accept the narrator’s extended need for mourning and is furious at his preoccupation with the past. During one of their arguments, he proclaims that all

Europeans “constantly imagine that life consists of collecting, like someone who arranges postage stamps in an album” (*Bait* 38). The narrator reciprocates the stereotyping, and enumerates the differences which make the European way of life superior: “the arrogance of Americans, for example, and the maturity of Europeans, the reality of our history, for example, and the pathetic way they exist in the uninterrupted fragmentariness” (*Bait* 41). Here, their differences of opinion are attributed to cultural norms that regard each culture’s relationship with memory and the past as innate, rather than constructed. This binarism reveals the novel’s limitations, as the characters’ oppositional relationship reinforces the idea of North America as a young, memory-less continent when compared to Europe, which elides the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and the histories of indigenous communities on the continent.

Thus, Albahari’s narrator misses the opportunity to make a multidirectional connection between the histories of large-scale violence in both continents, proving that he still has much to do in terms of working through the past. It is useful to consider LaCapra’s proposition that “working through” must entail an unsettling of the binary oppositions that color much of our understanding of the past, especially when it comes to the Holocaust. To be successful and effect change, the process of working through the past should not simply reverse dichotomous categories like perpetrator and victim, as we see in contemporary memory politics in Serbia and other Yugoslav successor states, or even the binaries that we see in Donald and the narrator’s relationship. Instead, working through the past must be embedded in a deep analysis of these categories and their “empirical role” and an “effort to counteract their functioning in its historical specificity” (LaCapra 210-1). At the heart of this work is the act of relinquishing the need to master the past, for as Saul Friedländer writes, resisting “the temptation of closure,” even when

rendering “as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow,” leaves the past open to multiple meanings and interpretations, and importantly, to the voice of the individual (261-2).

In *Bait*, it is mother’s refusal to testify and its silence that most clearly challenges this drive to mastery, leaving the past open to interpretations that do not reify dichotomies. That is why she believes so strongly that, regardless of the measure of tragedy in one’s life, trauma cannot be addressed simply by “naming the guilty party” (*Bait* 69). Through the magnetic tapes, we hear mother telling the narrator how the Jewish community who remained in Yugoslavia after WWII did not seek restitution for their suffering, nor did they focus their remembrance efforts on those guilty for the unimaginable violence and loss they experienced. Instead, they: “recorded all the places and all the names of those who had been in those places in their books and albums, and if the moment were ever repeated in which the guilty were to be sought, they would merely take out their lists and show the places, nothing more would be needed” (*Bait* 70). By making a reference to Yizkor books, the necrologies compiled by Jewish communities in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, Albahari offers readers an example of smaller and specific location-based commemorative efforts that differed from the grander, official forms of memorialization that were developed later by state institutions.<sup>85</sup> At the time of their recording, the narrator had not fully understood his mother’s words about the practice of compiling these books. It was not until the Yugoslav wars gave him a different perspective on the Holocaust, that he started to comprehend what she had been trying to say about guilt. What Albahari suggests is that far from advocating a form of denialism, his mother was warning the narrator about the potential misuses of survivors’ narratives.

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<sup>85</sup> See more information at the Yiddish Book Center:  
<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books>.

Conveying this knowledge to Donald, the narrator concludes that the repetition of violence in Yugoslavia happened precisely “because of guilt” and because those who were tasked to determine others’ guilt, did not care that their actions created “new guilty ones” (*Bait* 70).<sup>86</sup> He explains this to Donald:

[...] when such people turned to the Jews with the demand that they, as witnesses, name the guilty ones, the Jewish community merely produced the lists of names and places and refused to speak. From these lists it was seen very clearly, I told him, that all those who had participated in the previous war—in the vision of those who were demanding the naming of the guilty, the war that was going on now ought to be taking place, as if it were possible to return to the past—*all of them*, I told him, with the exception only of the partisans, had killed Jews in that war, and that, therefore, the Jewish community did not believe in the naming of the guilty but rather in the naming of the victims. (*Bait* 70, emphasis mine)

The dichotomy of “innocent” and “guilty,” victim and perpetrator, holds little value when the lists that preserved the memory of the dead showed how there did not exist *one* singular individual or group to blame and scapegoat. The lists reveal how “all of them” were implicated in the horror of that war and of the Holocaust, and made the very category of “the guilty” untenable. Shifting the attention from the names of the guilty to the names of the victims and their absences creates a politics that is geared toward solidarity and questions the instrumentalization of victims’ trauma and memory. Silence around the naming of “the guilty,” then, is used as an admonition about the repetition of violence in the quest of creating mutually exclusive categories of perpetrators and victims, and homogenous states where only right types of victims are granted citizenship. This is what the trip to Banja Luka proved to the narrator: in that microcosm of the Yugoslav wars, the concepts of guilt and victimhood were manipulated to frame the Bosnian Serb destruction of Muslim life, towns and mosques as a noble act that would

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<sup>86</sup> Albahari writes: “Because of guilt, I told him. Because there are those, I told him, who claim it’s more important to know who is guilty for something that happened in the recent or distant past; even if new guilty ones are created besides; even if every possibility that one live with only the memory of guilt is destroyed besides” (*Bait* 70).

redress Croatian Ustaše guilt for crimes against Orthodox Serbs during the Second World War, by rebuilding their churches fifty years later, during the new war.

Earlier in the novel, Albahari's narrator had acknowledged his *own* implication in these new wars by recalling his military service in "the Banja Luka barracks" during the 1970s, where for ten months he had "carried around a submachine gun without a firing pin, an unusable heap of iron" (*Bait* 30). The perspective given to him by the war makes the narrator reconsider the experience he had once easily dismissed, and he expresses feelings of remorse at not having been more politically engaged, or at least aware enough to recognize the early cracks in his nation's foundation, which would later grow into a "chasm ... into which an entire country has fallen" (*Bait* 31). The barracks that had now turned into battlefields—the self-fulfilling prophecy of a militarized society—and that he likely visits on his trip with the international organization in the mid-90s, further complicate the question of guilt. Albahari ensures that for the narrator, as for the novel, there exist no easy answers, no prescriptive, moralizing distinction between good and evil, guilty and innocent. Therefore, the narrator must attend to the laborious effort of working through the past if he ever wants to free himself of the ballasts holding him down, or at least, make the weight somewhat easier to bear.

And yet the concept of "working through the past" has in itself been appropriated by many states and their institutions, chief among them the European Union, with the intent of promoting precisely the facile binarism and understanding of the past against which the narrative of *Bait* is constructed. As I discussed in the Introduction, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the German "working through" and "coming to terms" with the past has been instrumentalized by the EU in drafting its policies and "standards of European memory." The concept has earned a critical place in the landscape of European memory politics, and is offered as the key to



overcoming the darkness of the Second World War and moving forward into a shared European future. For the post-socialist states of the Balkans who wish to join the EU, adoption of these European memory standards is mandatory and requires the formation of an official memory politics that elides the local specificity of the Holocaust in favor of the prescriptive and universalizing version of the past offered by the EU. For Serbia, subscribing to these memory standards serves a double purpose: not only is this an opportunity to appear more “European,” but it also helps strengthen historical revisionism by perpetuating the myth of Serbia as a “victim nation” (Subotić 68). This self-appointed victim status allows Serbia to continue minimizing or outright denying ethnic and race motivated war crimes committed during WWII and during the Yugoslav dissolution, all while claiming to be engaging in working through the past through participation in the European memory community.

Crucially, this process enables the Serbian state to rehabilitate, and even celebrate, Četnik, Nazi and fascist figures, while delegitimizing communist anti-fascist efforts, framing communists as yet another group guilty for the oppression of a free, independent Serbia. The same dynamic can be observed throughout the former Yugoslavia and Albania. In these countries, the Holocaust and its imagery have been “appropriated to represent the crimes of communism,” resulting in the removal of anti-fascist resistance from the memory of the Holocaust, ultimately allowing for the “revival and ideological normalization of fascist ideological movements in the present” (Subotić 11). Official narratives of history and memory in Serbia, therefore, would have little use for the entangled (post)memories that the narrator and his mother navigate in *Bait*. Little “historical material” could be mined from a story characterized by a silence that does not make a passive victim of its speaker, and where historical responsibility and working through the past is not understood as simply an act of “naming the guilty ones” in

order to enact new violence. I see this deliberate uselessness to national narratives and resistance to the conventional testimonial genre as what allows *Bait*, and *Albahari*, to achieve freedom from serving “his people.”

At the end of the novel, *Albahari* includes a visceral description of Donald crumbling and kneading the map of Europe that the narrator had been using to illustrate the stories of his and his mother’s lives, and therefore, the histories of the Holocaust and the Yugoslav disintegration. What had once been his country crumbled in front of his eyes as if it were nothing more than a “damp tablecloth,” a symbolic disintegration meant to evoke the real one (*Bait* 93). Insisting that for a writer there must be no conditional mood, Donald ushers the narrator away from what might have been, from “world of paper” and into the “real world” (*Bait* 94). Unraveling the crumbled map, he smooths this world of paper with his hands, and like the narrator had done before, repeats the gesture of dragging his index finger over the geographical features of the land, and the man-made borders depicted within it. “That’s your story,” he tells the narrator, “those fine cracks in which there are no longer color and printer’s lead” (*Bait* 94). Like a story told through silence, the faded lines created by the physical act of crumbling the map represent the days the narrator and his mother spent recording her reluctant testimony in their Belgrade apartment, while a war was beginning outside their door, and while they tried to make sense of that older war.

Donald’s act of crumbling the map forces the narrator to finally overcome his writer’s block. He writes the story in English and with the help of a dictionary, in the movement between the two languages where he finds himself in his self-exile (Caruth 23). The story-within-a-story conceives of a poet who despite his decision to write prose, cannot “free himself from concision” found in verse—from the pull of silence (*Bait* 96). Like the narrator, this poet’s life is “falling

apart” as war is waged around him, and he mourns his mother’s death, whose life story he feels “despite all prosaic concision ... becoming real in him, drawing him into himself and forcing him to play a role determined long ago” (*Bait* 96). We do not become privy to the narrator’s complete process of working through the traumatic past, what he has been given as postmemory, and what he has experienced himself, as Albahari leaves us with an ambiguous and unfinished end. But in the story the narrator finally writes, instead of relenting to a predetermined role, the poet and his lover abandon the slow-rising river they have been admiring, “trudging through the mud” into an uncertain future (*Bait* 97). The road ahead, the escape from drowning in the past, and the hope for affiliative connections is not an easy one. Like his characters, Albahari’s narrator has trudged through the mud, toward a future that does not deny the past, nor is bound to it.

Albahari ends *Bait* with a scene filled with silence, which has descended “on the soiled dishes” in the narrator’s apartment, where he waits for Donald’s arrival, the same way that “invisible motes of dust adhere to the cardboard boxes with the tape recordings” (*Bait* 116). When he arrives, Donald hands the narrator his manuscript, which he has filled with underlined, crossed-out words and question marks. The narrator steps aside to let him in, but Donald remains unmoving in front of the narrator, who can no longer recall where he had been standing a moment before. This sudden amnesia about the past makes the narrator all the more aware of the present. As they stand there, in the liminal space of the doorway, the only color that breaks the darkness is a flash of blue from somewhere indeterminable. Turning to the conditional tense one last time, despite all of Donald’s advice to avoid it, the narrator imagines how he would describe the scene if only he knew how to write, so that he could note their motionlessness, and recognize in it “the announcement of a change, the moment when the heart decides to leap into ruin” (*Bait*

117). Albahari brings this change suddenly: all color disappears, and the narrator is left to face a pure darkness, the absence of any light, the negative space that had always surrounded him, but that like silence, he has to learn to perceive and to appreciate. And like silence, he learns that this darkness has a material presence, it will not let him close the door, and he will need to use his shoulder, foot and whole body to challenge this force. When he finally overcomes it and the door's lock clicks, the backward movement of his body touches something else, something the novel never reveals.

### Chapter 3

## Rewriting the Traumatized Nation: Luljeta Lleshanaku Between Albania and World Literature

### 3.1 Introduction

In David Albahari's *Bait*, the narrator's struggle to write is a familiar one, caused by feelings of inadequacy, ethical questions regarding the representation of another's pain, and the pressure to represent one's community or nation—concerns we also saw underlying the work of Ali Podrimja. In the case of *Bait*, the narrator's inability to write, together with his mother's deliberate refusals to speak, subvert the imperative to testify to atrocity according to a script endorsed by the official, revisionist historical narratives of the Serbian national project. Such a rejection reveals Albahari's discomfort with the representative roles assigned to writers by their own nations and by the institutions that make up world literature. The tense friendship between the narrator and Donald, in particular, reveals another layer of exile and displacement in the novel, which speaks to Albahari's own introduction to the North American literary market. This introduction started with his participation in the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa in 1986, which created the needed connections for Albahari to become part of a network of writers, academics, critics, editors, and translators in the United States. The work of editors and translators, in particular, ensured that his novels and short stories were translated into English, slowly making him a known name outside of Serbia and Yugoslavia.

It was the assistance of one of these writers who facilitated Albahari's emigration to Canada, meaning that his introduction to world literature occurred simultaneously with his move

to Canada and his induction into the category of diasporic writers. In 1994, Myrna Kostash, who had met Albahari while researching her book, *Bloodlines: A Journey into Eastern Europe*, helped him obtain a visiting fellowship at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Melnik *Alberta Views*). That same year, Kostash and George Melnyk, Professor of Communications at the University of Calgary, assisted Albahari in obtaining a Markin–Flanagan Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary for the academic year 1994-1995, during which time Albahari and his family officially moved to Canada. In 1996, only a year after this move, Albahari's *Bait* appeared in Serbia and his first book in English translation, a selection of short stories titled *Words are Something Else*, was published in the United States by Northwestern University Press, as part of its series *Writings from an Unbound Europe*. *Words are Something Else* was translated by one of the preeminent English-language translators of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Ellen Elias-Bursać; edited by the academic and former IWP fellow, Tomislav Longinović; and introduced through a foreword written by Charles Simić, the well-known Serbian-American poet, *Paris Review* editor and Pulitzer prize winner. Albahari's first book to enter the North American market, thus, was well supported by what Lefevere has called the professionals who "rewrite works of literature until they are deemed acceptable to the poetics and the ideology of a certain time and place" (14).

To make Albahari's work "acceptable" to an American public in 1996, the blurb that Northwestern University Press provides on the back cover of the book frames him as an author whose writing developed outside of national Serbian literature, and who, unlike "many of his fellow Serbians, for whom literature is primarily a political statement ... carefully chiseled stories explore the full range of human experience." In this way, Albahari's writing is introduced through the vague, apolitical and universal theme of "human experience," qualities which

purportedly divorce this writer from a problematic, politicized canon of Serbia's national literature. While this blurb may be referring to the literature published during the wars in Yugoslavia, including writing that promoted xenophobic and ultranationalist rhetoric, I also observe an implicit claim that what was political about contemporary Serbian literature—similarly to Croatian, Bosnian, Kosovar, or Albanian literature—was its development under a socialist system. Only a few years after the end of the Cold War, the circulation of post-Yugoslav writers in English translation required a depoliticization that worked on two levels: anti-communist Cold War rhetoric paired with narratives of war-time trauma that constructed an idea of the writer as a perpetually suffering figure.

For the purpose of translation and inclusion into world literature, the ideal post-Yugoslav writer was one who could easily be framed in terms of ideological purity and apoliticism, or even better, one whose writing was simultaneously apolitical and anti-communist. The concurrent introduction of Albanian writers to world literature proved to be especially fruitful to accomplish this end. If in the 1990s, Western readers might have been familiar with Yugoslav writers, given the international success of writers like the Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić, Danilo Kiš, and younger writers like David Albahari and Dubravka Ugrešić, Albanian literature had not fully entered the international literary market in the same way. Ismail Kadare was the one notable exception, though the initial translation of his novels into English was done from the French, rather than the Albanian. The collapse of state socialism in Albania, and the country's wider opening to the world provided more opportunities for Western scholars, editors, critics and translators to rewrite Albanian literature in ways that were marketable and profitable. Their framing used a similar narrative of trauma and apolitical victimhood as was used for post-Yugoslav writers. While Albanian writers did not experience the wars and genocide that the former Yugoslavia did at the

end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albania's more brutal form of state socialism under Hoxha's Stalinist system could be used to successfully establish trauma as a defining characteristic of this nation, its history and its literature. My research has shown me that the American literary market framed *all* Albanian writers on the basis of their suffering and their lack of freedom, regardless of whether or not these writers experienced the more severe forms of censorship, imprisonment, torture or hard labor. Because this framing was in line with Albanian postsocialist historical rewriting that emphasized the exceptionally traumatic and violent nature of Albanian socialism, it was welcomed and encouraged by many Albanian editors, translators and literary institutions.

In this chapter, I examine the mutually constitutive processes of constructing Albanian memory politics after socialism and framing Albanian literature for the West by following the career trajectory of one writer who came to prominence, both in Albania and in the US, during the crucial period of the 1990s: the poet Luljeta Lleshanaku. One of the few internationally acclaimed Albanian writers today, Lleshanaku's success abroad is tied with her work's preoccupation with the violence of the Albanian communist regime. This is compounded by the fact that Lleshanaku has played a role in shaping the collective memory of the Albanian past through her work with memory institutions, namely as a researcher of politically motivated socialist-era crimes, and an interviewer and editor for a series that collects testimonies of victims. Lleshanaku's circulation in the West and Albania, as well as her direct involvement with memory politics in the country serve as a point of departure for my analysis of *Negative Space* (2018). I argue that in the process of becoming the main representative for the traumatized Albanian nation in world literature, Lleshanaku's work has adapted to the critical consensus that has framed it as an approachable and apolitical account of the violence of socialism. I show that by appropriating the testimonies of survivors of prisons, labor and internment camps, for use in



her lyrical poetry, Lleshanaku contributes to the deliberate confusion around the past in Albania, which is driven by the country's aspiration for membership in the European Union. Nonetheless, because there is a lack of complete resolution in these poems, they challenge expectations of the redemptive power of testimony, calling into question imperatives to remember and testify.

I begin this chapter by discussing David Albahari's introduction to the North American reading public because of its resemblance to Luljeta Lleshanaku's introduction to the same market, which supports my proposition about writers from different formerly socialist contexts becoming subsumed into a generalized narrative of trauma. In both cases, it was the apolitical nature of their writing that received the most attention, contributing to the idea of the former Yugoslavia and Albania as places which are not only filled with suffering, but whose suffering can be redeemed through legible, approachable forms of testimony. Given their affiliation with American and Canadian literary programs and universities in the 1990s, Albahari and Lleshanaku could actively participate in the process of introducing post-Yugoslav and Albanian literatures to the US and Canada, serving as representatives for their countries' contemporary literatures. Thus, they differ from Ali Podrimja, whose introduction to North American readers is yet to come and whose reframing process was anchored within the Albanian-speaking sphere, and Daša Drndić, whose translation and promotion arrived belatedly and could not obscure the political and ethical stakes of her writing.

In *Bait*, Albahari attributed the tension between the narrator and Donald to their different cultural backgrounds, with the narrator not integrating into Canadian life because he remained immersed in the past that was found in the tapes of his mother's reluctant testimony. The argument I developed in the previous chapter considers the narrator's writer's block as a reaction to his mother's deliberate silence, but we can also think of such inability to write as the narrator's

resistance to the pressures exerted by Donald—whom Albahari uses as a symbol for the North American literary world—to conform to a particular set of narrative and thematic requirements dictated by literary institutions in the West. These requirements are not limited to the writers’ literary output, but also concern their own presentation as “good” victims, deserving of wider circulation and readership. And even though I have been focusing on the moment when these writers are introduced to world literature, the same framing continues to be prevalent even after many years have passed. For instance, sixteen years after Albahari’s emigration to Canada, George Melnyk declares him “Alberta’s best kept literary secret,” alluding to his outsider status and inability to fully integrate himself in Canada’s literary sphere. The article, published in *Alberta Views* in 2010, begins with a physical description of Albahari, who is referred to in diminutive terms, before Melnyk turns his attention to the simplicity of the writer’s surroundings. We are told that Albahari is “slender” with “dark, gently graying hair” and “sinewy fingers.” He writes from the basement of his Alberta home, a small space with little light, since the only window in the room looks out to a concrete wall and security bars, a view which Melnyk deems prison-like. In this small, dark room, Albahari writes in “a language few would recognize” and is surrounded by Serbian books, books on “Jewish topics,” as well as books by Canadian writers—the former outnumbering these latter books, signaling to Albahari’s enduring otherness.<sup>87</sup> While the physical description of Albahari serves to make him appear approachable and not threatening despite being foreign, the description of his surroundings place

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<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, I have found similar comments about the alien nature of the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language in archival materials from New Directions Publishing. In correspondence dating from the 1960s to the mid-1990s, between the publisher, its editors, and writers from Yugoslavia, the American interlocutors’ lack of knowledge of the language is presented as a barrier for further collaboration. The off-hand comment made by Melnyk in this 2010 article demonstrates the continued reluctance of North American editors and critics to seek alternative ways to supplement their lack of linguistic knowledge.

him within the familiar framework of austerity and lack of freedom that make him recognizable as a writer from Serbia to the broader readership of *Alberta Views* magazine.

Luljeta Lleshanaku's first American translator, Henry Israeli, uses a similar strategy to introduce the poet to English-language readers, concentrating on her meek and pained appearance and her oppressive surroundings in order to emphasize the writer's approachability despite the darkness of her place of origin. In the Afterword he wrote for the book *Fresco: Selected Poetry of Luljeta Lleshanaku*—published by New Directions in 2002, and translated by Israeli, Shpresa Qatipi and a number of Albanian translators<sup>88</sup>—Israeli instrumentalizes recent histories of violence and trauma in Albania to support a Cold War narrative of the dark, repressive socialist East that must learn from the democratic and freedom-loving values of the West. In this Afterword, Israeli tells of his first meeting with Lleshanaku, a story which unfolds entirely along this Cold War binary, starting with descriptions of Lleshanaku's appearance that highlight her physical weakness, which supposedly reveals the spiritual wounds she has suffered *and* also her resilience against her former, oppressive government. According to Israeli, Lleshanaku dons the same expression that “unites” all Balkan people: that of “history’s raw, crushing impression,” a weary and overworked expression that reminds Israeli of “a survivor, someone who has overcome great adversity” (69-70). Israeli’s invocation of “history” connects Lleshanaku’s experience of repression to something older than Albania’s dictatorship, gesturing to the common tropes of the Balkans as the “powder keg” of Europe, and to survival narratives that would have been familiar to an American public because of their proliferation in relation to the Holocaust (Todorova 45; Greenspan 281n38).

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<sup>88</sup> The copyright page of *Fresco* lists an unusually long list of translators: “Henry Israeli, Joanna Goodman, Ukzenel Buçpapa, Noci Deda, Alban Kupi, Albana Lleshanaku, Lluka Qafoku, Shpresa Qatipi, Qazim Sheme, Daniel Weissbort, and the author.” Most promotional materials only give credit to Henry Israeli, even though he does not have any knowledge of Albanian.

The repressive imagery continues when Israeli describes the locations that Lleshanaku frequents and inhabits: if Albahari's office was a dark prison, Lleshanaku works in a "cavernous space" where the only light is some sunlight that "seeps like fog through a dusty window" (70). The city outside that window, Israeli continues, could almost pass for a quaint Italian town were it not for the "Stalinist-era buildings" bearing images of "workers uprising against their oppressors," or the exotic presence of a man carrying a still-live lamb across the street, surely heading to its slaughter (69). These visible cues of poverty, socialism and Stalinism might have stopped a reader from engaging with an Albanian poet were it not for the fact that their danger is neutralized since they are, in Israeli's estimation, remnants of a different time. As remnants, they lend the location an air of appealing mystery and intrigue, and in Israeli's writing, a layer of sadness, helplessness and despair, despite the energetic and youthful energy of the city. This is exactly how Israeli approaches his translation and interpretation of Lleshanaku's poetry, which he reads as a self-explanatory expression of the sociopolitical situation in Albania after the fall of communism.<sup>89</sup> Finally, in a rhetorical tool that seems to set Lleshanaku apart from the bleakness of her country, we learn at the end of the Afterword that, unlike the chaos of the outside world, Lleshanaku's apartment is neat and calm, something that is meant to note her uniqueness in this society, as well as give her greater credibility as a victim and survivor. In Lleshanaku's home, attended to by her mother and interacting with her children, Israeli gets comfortable enough to

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<sup>89</sup> We see this in Israeli's writing on the effect that Lleshanaku's poems had on him, where he contrasts the sadness of her verse to the energy felt in Tirana: "The lines of her verse that fell so softly, naturally onto the page carried an immense sadness. At the same time, I was drawn to the intense yearning in her images, not a longing for an idealistic past, but for a future that could never be, as it would forever be burdened by a troublesome history. I felt myself moving through her haunting landscapes, helpless, trapped. The melancholy of these finely etched world seemed diametrically opposed to the new wave of optimism in downtown Tirana, yet I couldn't help feeling that the reality of Lleshanaku's poems lurked just under the city's surface. Lleshanaku is an engaging woman with an overworked, weary, look. One sees in her, as in many Balkan people, history's raw, crushing impression. Her gaze—hungry, determined, unrelenting—is that of a survivor, someone who has overcome great adversity" (Afterword 69-70).

almost forget where he is. Then, with gravity, he reminds himself: “this is not just anywhere; this is Albania, a country where nearly every family has to some degree, at one time or another, fallen victim to oppression” (71). This statement is so broad and vague that it could be used to describe any nation in the world, once again revealing how the framework of trauma erases historical and sociopolitical specificity by placing the population of a whole country under the homogeneous, depoliticized category of “the victim.” In engaging with this early promotional material about Lleshanaku’s work, my intention has been to show how inconsequential the contents and style of the literary works being translated and circulated become when placed under the framework of trauma. What matters more is the cultivation of an abstracted image of the writer that can project a traumatic aura about them and their country.

In this chapter, I address the abstraction that turned Lleshanaku into the “voice” of an oppressed generation. In the sections that follow, I attend to particularities of literary and memory politics in the Albanian and American contexts where Lleshanaku’s writing was developed, published and circulated. I then provide a close reading analysis of key poems found in *Negative Space*, the 2018 English translation of selected poems from two of Lleshanaku’s collections, *Pothuajse dje / Almost Yesterday* (2012) and *Homo Antarcticus* (2015).

### **3.2 The Traumatized, Apolitical Victim: Framing Lleshanaku**

Since her first publications in the Tirana-based periodical *Drita* in the early 1990s, Luljeta Lleshanaku has had a successful writing career, both in Albania and internationally. The decade of the 1990s was an especially productive one for the writer, as she published four collections of poetry: *Sytë e somnambulës / The Eyes of the Somnambulist* (1993), *Këmbanat e së dielës / Sunday’s Bells* (1994), *Gjysëm kubizëm / Half-Cubism* (1996), *Antipastorale / Antipastoral* (1999). In the new millennium, she published a book of short stories, *Arti i joshjes /*

*The Art of Seduction*, and two poetry collections, *Pothuajse dje / Almost Yesterday* (2012) and *Homo Antarcticus* (2015). This prolific publishing activity occurred after the collapse of state socialism in Albania, which lifted the censorship that had been imposed on her as the member of two politically persecuted families, and allowed Lleshanaku to enroll in a literature program, become employed as an editor and journalist for different magazines and newspapers, including *Zëri i Rinisë*, *Drita* and *Rilindja*, and participate in literary festivals and workshops across Europe and the United States. At this time, she was also part of the lively, modern and experimental poetry scene in Tirana, made up of writers who saw themselves in opposition to the establishment writers who had dominated Albanian literature over the previous five decades. Gatherings at the University of Tirana's Faculty of Philology, the "E për-7-shme" café, and a literary magazine by the same name, created venues where younger writers could publish, experiment and have exciting discussions in the years immediately after the system change.

Almost from the beginning, Lleshanaku's writing career was connected with Western Europe and the United States. In 1999, on the heels of the active publishing period mentioned above, she traveled to the US to attend the Iowa International Writing Program (IWP) at the University of Iowa and to pursue a master's degree at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. When Lleshanaku arrived in Iowa, a number of her poems had already been translated by Henry Israeli, who had published them in journals like *Grand Street*, *Iowa Review*, *Seneca Review* and *Fence*. In subsequent years, Israeli would publish two books of Lleshanaku's work in translation, both with New Directions: the aforementioned *Fresco: Selected Poems* (2002) and *Child of Nature* (2010). These would be followed by the 2018 publication of *Negative Space*, also with New Directions, which contained translations of selected poems from Lleshanaku's later work, rendered into English by the Albanian poet and translator Ani Gjika.

Israeli's arrival to Albanian language translation occurred under the auspices of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he had been an MFA student when the first Albanian writers traveled to the University of Iowa to join the IWP in 1992. Building on its cultural diplomacy efforts and its mission to introduce writers from socialist countries to American values and freedom, the IWP solicited Albanian writers immediately after the country's isolationist policies ended. The first two Albanian writers to come to the IWP were Uk Buçpapaj, an Albanian poet, translator and professor in the Department of English Language at the University of Tirana, and Fatos Lubonja, a formerly imprisoned intellectual, cultural critic, writer and editor of the magazine *Përpyekja / The Struggle*.<sup>90</sup> The choice of these two writers underscores the attitude of American academia and publishing toward Albanian literature: what represented an "authentic" and accessible Albanian voice was one that was either geared toward Western culture, like Buçpapaj and his training in English literature, or one that was preoccupied with the violence and trauma of communism, whose brutality they had experienced directly, as in the case of Lubonja.<sup>91</sup>

It was Buçpapaj's visit to the IWP in 1992 and his friendship with Henry Israeli that introduced the latter to Albanian literature. Together, they collaborated on various translations of Albanian writers, which eventually led Israeli to discover Lleshanaku's work and to translate and promote her poetry to an American public even while having no knowledge of Albanian and

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<sup>90</sup> After Buçpapaj and Lubonja's visit to the IWP in 1992, the poet and writer Lindita Arapi would participate in 1996, to be followed by poets Luljeta Lleshanaku in 1999, Gentian Çoçoli in 2006, and Albana Shala in 2010. One Kosovar Albanian writer, Edi Shukriu, attended the IWP in 2005. Since 2010, no Albanian writers have attended the IWP.

<sup>91</sup> In addition to Lubonja's experience of political persecution and imprisonment, subsequent participants further emphasized the repressive nature of Albanian state socialism, in one instance, the writer Lindita Arapi, who visited the IWP in 1996, gave a presentation on another persecuted writer, Visar Zhiti. See: [https://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Avwu\\_2190](https://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Avwu_2190).

little knowledge about the country until his visit in 1996 (*Per Contra*).<sup>92</sup> According to Israeli, his interest in Lleshanaku's work stemmed from the fact that her writing seemed to be "at the forefront of a new movement of post-communist Albanian poetry" (*Per Contra*). By this "new movement," Israeli refers to Lleshanaku's focus on detail and imagery, which he saw as different from the politically-oriented works of other poets in 1990s Albania, whose anti-communist writing nonetheless followed a socialist realist style. Unlike them, Israeli stated, Lleshanaku's writing "felt nearly apolitical" (Israeli *Per Contra*). Given the IWP's adherence to a Cold War paradigm that had established a preference for apolitical aesthetics, Lleshanaku made an ideal candidate to attend the IWP. At the end of the 1990s, her fellowship there would propel her into the American literary market and help to cement an image of Albanian writers as traumatized victims who express neither their anger, nor their inconsolable grief, but perform according to the accepted conventions of testimony.

Among the testimony's conventions, especially in terms of its literary application, is the claim to universality, which allows for easier linguistic and cultural translation, and allows readers to identify with the suffering on the page. This message has been a constant one in the framing of Lleshanaku for Western audiences over the last three decades. For instance, an interview of Lleshanaku conducted by the IWP program coordinator Rowena Torrevillas in 1999, informs the listener that her poetry is highly imagistic and thus contains a universal appeal

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<sup>92</sup> Israeli recounts these meetings: "In 1992 I was an MFA student at the University of Iowa. ... Uk Buçpapa [sic], an eccentric Albanian poet and translator who was also part of the IWP at the time, had the habit of soliciting just about anyone he could to help him translate both traditional epic and lyric Albanian poetry as well as the work of contemporary Albanian poets. After much prodding I agreed to help him in translating three of them and I had the good fortune to show them to Donald Revell, who happened to be a visiting teacher in the MFA program at the time. He took all of them for publication in the *Denver Quarterly*." (*Per Contra*)



that renders it “easily translatable, unlike political imagery.”<sup>93</sup> From the outset, translatability, and therefore marketability, is positioned in opposition to the political—images that are “easily translatable” are ones that have universal appeal, rather than ones invested in the political specificities of the writer’s context. Lleshanaku’s poetry is assigned the desirable qualities of universality and apoliticism, meaning that her writing is approved for the American literary market. The fact that this approval and framing came from an influential institution like the IWP, meant that the “universal” and “apolitical” qualities of her writing remained the primary way through which to market the writer.

Moreover, Lleshanaku’s personal background as a member of a persecuted family added a greater air of authenticity and credibility to memories of socialist-era suffering that are found in her work. The details of her personal life, therefore, feature heavily in the poet’s promotion and circulation in the US and elsewhere. In the biography that New Direction Publishing uses to publicize Lleshanaku, she is described as:

Luljeta Lleshanaku was born in Elbasan, Albania. She grew up under house arrest during Enver Hoxha’s Stalinist regime. Lleshanaku has worked as a lecturer, literary magazine editor, journalist, and screenwriter, and is currently the research director at Tirana’s Institute of Studies of Communist Genocide. She is the author of eight poetry collections published in Albania. Her books have received many national and international awards and have been translated into several languages. New Directions also publishes her collections *Child of Nature* and *Fresco: Selected Poems*.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See “Luljeta Lleshanaku [sp] interview, 1999,” Iowa Digital Library collections, accessed at: [https://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Avwu\\_2283](https://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/islandora/object/ui%3Avwu_2283).

<sup>94</sup> See the New Directions website [here](#). I want to highlight that the copy contains two errors: first, house arrest did not exist as a form of punishment employed by the Party of Labor in Albania. To define her youth as a childhood under “house arrest” would be to mislead readers of the book, even if the term may draw them in easier than the more correct terminology, which is more akin to a forced internal exile. The second error is a mistranslation of Lleshanaku’s workplace— *Instituti i Studimeve për Krimet dhe Pasojat e Komunizmit*— which New Directions translates as the Institute of Studies of Communist Genocide. In the Albanian, the institute’s name does not include the word “genocide”— even if different Albanian politicians, public figures or media may employ the term when discussing Hoxha’s regime. The full name of the institute in English translation would be the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and

This biography begins by first pointing to Lleshanaku's history of persecution, therefore introducing her to the American public as a victim of the communist regime first, and as a writer, second. Because of the influence and status of New Directions as a publisher, the language of this biography has been reproduced verbatim by many other organizations that have circulated Lleshanaku's work, reviewed her books, or invited her to give talks and readings. This reproduction solidifies Lleshanaku's reputation in the West, and ensures her profile centers around the identity of a victim of communist repression who overcame adversity, achieved national and international success, and who now has taken on the task of remembering the collective trauma of her generation. I see this framing of Lleshanaku as the paradigmatic, ideal victim of communism, who also investigates it through her professional role as a researcher, working symbiotically with the promotion of her writing, by publishers, translators, editors, and academics,<sup>95</sup> as universal and without any overt political sentiment. Because her circulation in the United States is closely tied to cultural diplomacy following the Cold War, this reductive framing comes to be understood as applicable to Albania as a whole, as she is seen as a cultural ambassador. But it is a very particular version of Albania that makes it to world literature: namely, the *traumatized* nation that has disavowed socialism and remembers its past as purely bad, painful, and full of suffering.

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Consequences in Albania (this is the English name used on the institute's own [website](#)). It is hard to know why New Directions has not used this straightforward translation for the name of Lleshanaku's workplace—if this is simply a careless translation, or if the use of the term “genocide” was done deliberately to ascribe greater brutality to Albania's dictatorship.

<sup>95</sup> See the 2014 article by Bavjola Shatro, titled “Between American Contemporary Literature and Albanian Culture: Poetry of Luljeta Lleshanaku and Cathy Song; a Comparative Approach,” in *Mapping the World of Anglo-American Studies at the Turn of the Century*. Shatro repeats the commentary on the apolitical nature of Lleshanaku's work without questioning or analyzing it, supporting and reproducing this view.

In reviewing Lleshanaku's early work—which was being translated and circulated through the connections created by her participation in the IWP—I do observe a significant use of imagery by the poet. These images, however, are not divorced from the political dimension, but in fact create an impression of the past, the poet's personal one and that of her community, that does not align with a purely traumatic framing. For instance, in the lyrical poems selected and translated for the 2002 volume *Fresco*, which included poems from three of Lleshanaku's books, there is a strong presence of the intimate, domestic sphere. Lleshanaku populates this sphere mostly with women: unknown, symbolic female figures, or else the poet's mother, navigate their lives within the confines of the home, which I read as commentary on the limited social sphere of women. In "The Woman and the Scissors," Lleshanaku writes:

I remember the scissors  
that cut thick strips of newspaper  
to seal the cracks on stove pipes  
and the scissors that trimmed my soft nails  
delicate as pleurae

and later on  
my sister's small scissors that cut  
the silk thread of her embroidery, blue loops  
wound tightly round two fingers of her right hand  
while I watched a man shoveling snow  
and heard rocks struck  
and saw an acacia tree  
branches covered in ice  
swaying majestically, conspicuously,  
like a nine-year-old on a swing,  
with green bangs  
and white stockings.

And then came my escape from the anxiety of scissors  
an all-consuming appetite for books  
the betrayal of my parents' simple dream:  
a tailor's large scissors

tracing white chalk lines. (*Fresco*, trans Israeli and Qatipi, 7)

The memories captured by this poem extend our imagination beyond the traumatic. In it, scissors are tools that can either bring about comfort, through their assistance in cutting newspaper for insulation, their closeness to the body when trimming nails or cutting thread for embroidery, but also tools of suppression. Placed in another's hands, like the tailor who can cut a shape that will ensure the poet matches the homogenous appearance of everyone else, the scissors pose a threat of ideological conformity. The "all-consuming appetite for books" is presented as a method of evading such conformity. Lleshanaku's poem does not enact a definitive disavowal of this tool, creating a mnemonic landscape that includes both welcome memories of intimate and familial moments *and* this danger of identity loss. Thus, the past is configured as an assemblage of complex feelings and experiences, where there is room for agentic expression of individuality despite "the anxiety of scissors." The other poems in *Fresco* revolve around similar quotidian images and moments, which Lleshanaku weaves together to form an impression of a past that is textured and full of contradictions where pleasure and pain cohabit.

If Lleshanaku's poems contain this nuance, then, why was her work promoted according to the reductive interpretations we have been discussing? Why do such diverse sets of institutions—from universities to publishing houses, from literary journals to individual critics and translators—circulate the same narratives about Lleshanaku? Because the introduction of Albanian writers to the American literary sphere was predicated on Albania being constructed as a nation traumatized by communism, I have found it productive to interpret Albanian writers' inclusion to world literature through what the literary scholar Bhakti Shringarpure has called the Cold War paradigm. Shringarpure shows that after being developed in accordance with US foreign interests during the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War paradigm became one of the most

important standards for evaluating and promoting literature, deciding which books are translated, published and distributed, and shaping literary tastes through awards, talks, conferences, book clubs and book reviews. Her research points to the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) as a key architect of the Cold War paradigm. CCF was a CIA operated global network of magazines that operated from 1950 to 1967, when its affiliation was discovered. Over this seventeen-year period, the CCF developed and set the standard for what constituted “good” literature: the domestic and foreign writers that thrived were those that expressed anti-communist views and were not critical of American interventions abroad. Through a sophisticated politics of visibility that promoted these approved writers via the countless small magazines that the CCF established and funded around the world, it cultivated a specific understanding of what this anti-communist “dissidence” meant. While works that were critical of the United States were relegated to the margins, those whose dissent had to do with communist parties and philosophies were lionized. Importantly, these anti-communist works could not be obvious critiques: what was valued and preferred, instead, was an apolitical aesthetic that created a false separation between politics and literature (Shringarpure 151-2, 165-6). On the practical level, this was achieved by appropriating modernism and reframing its “detachment, abstract style, and aesthetic experimentation” as being in direct opposition to “more vociferous, openly critical, and politically radical works” (Shringarpure 151-4).

While the introduction of Albanian literature to the West occurred after the official end of the Cold War, the dynamics of its promotion, framing and reception followed the Cold War paradigm described here. Indeed, we have seen how Lleshanaku’s initial institutional support in the US, including her first English translator, used very similar language and framing to discuss the poet’s work, praising its apolitical quality over the more politically charged writing of her

peers. After the collapse of state socialism, the identities of Albanian and other writers from formerly socialist nations were reframed: no longer the dissidents of communism, they were now recategorized as its victims. Despite this change from dissident to victim, the expectations placed on their writing remained the same; to be successful in the US, works from “victims of communism” needed to display the same apolitical aesthetic and its false dichotomy between literature and politics. And because their writing was now even more akin to a testimony, its apolitical aesthetic also supported the notion that the only victims deserving of attention and empathy were ones who did not act out.

In Lleshanaku’s case, the monetary and institutional support that enabled her stay in the US was closely tied to organizations that had links with the CCF and US Department of State. Her visit to the IWP was sponsored by an ArtsLink Fellowship, an organization that calls itself the “first large-scale program of exchange in the US for artists and arts managers from the former Soviet countries.”<sup>96</sup> The IWP, as was discussed in this dissertation’s Introduction, was deeply influenced by the politics of the Cold War and its cultural diplomacy apparatus. The IWP’s founder, Paul Engle branded the program as an opportunity for writers from repressive, socialist countries to experience American freedom and intellectual life, and readily accepted funding from the US State Department and various foundations historically invested in supporting anti-communist ideology. As Eric Bennett has shown in his investigation of creative

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<sup>96</sup> ArtsLink coordinates exchanges, in the form of residency programs, between the US and thirty-seven countries in “Eastern and Central Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus.” Their goal is to “create opportunities for artists and communities across the US to share artistic practices with artists and arts managers from abroad and engage in dialogue that advances understanding across cultures.” More information can be found on the ArtsLink Program History [page](#). Similar coded language of “understanding across cultures” can be found in ArtsLink own funder, the Trust for Mutual Understanding, which was established in 1984 by “an anonymous American philanthropist as a private, grantmaking organization dedicated to promoting improved communication, closer cooperation, and greater respect between the people of the United States, the Soviet Union, and other countries in Eastern and Central Europe” (Trust for Mutual Understanding: <http://www.tmuny.org/>)

writing programs' connections to the cultural Cold War, these funding sources included the Fairfield Foundation, a front through which the CIA funneled money to cultural organizations to fulfill its political goals (112). Even after Engle's tenure as IWP director ended, the IWP continued to advance the same Cold War binaries and accept funding from governmental agencies, primarily the US Department of State.<sup>97</sup> The funding and institutional support that made it possible for Lleshanaku to visit the US and attend the IWP, and in turn, connected the poet with the American literary scene, was a direct product of US foreign policy and cultural diplomacy.

At this point, I would like to turn our attention away from the United States and ask two questions. First, if the apolitical and the traumatic are the two qualities used to market, promote and circulate Lleshanaku in the US, how does she reach readers in Albania? Second, what narrative frames are used to discuss her work there, and how do they relate to the dynamics of world literature discussed thus far? Answering these questions will enable us to better note the interconnections present within a globalized world literature, as the asymmetrical amount of power held by the North American literary establishment affects how Albanian writers, publishers, and readers, engage with literature in their country. I want to provide a concrete example of how the Cold War paradigm is reproduced in the contemporary Albanian literary sphere, and how this reproduction is facilitated by processes of translation and rewriting. In the fall of 2019, I attended Tirana's annual book fair, organized by the Society of Albanian

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<sup>97</sup> See funding information at the IWP website: <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/about-iwp>. In addition to the institutions mentioned, it should also be mentioned that Lleshanaku's American publisher, New Directions, was driven by similar desires of promoting an apolitical modernist aesthetic. The press' founder, James Laughlin was open about his preference for "depoliticized and aestheticized modernism" which he believed to be the "natural product of free individualist artists exercising free inquiry and free expression in a free society" (Barnhisel 179, 187). The implication here is that political writing is a reflection of totalitarianism

Publishers, with support from the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The book fair gathers publishers from Albania and neighboring countries with Albanian-speakers and readers, who use the space to advertise their new publications through readings and discussions. As the biggest literary event of the year, this book fair can be seen as a microcosm of the Albanian publishing industry. This is why, after perusing the book stands present that year, I was surprised to find only one of Luljeta Lleshanaku's books available for purchase: the collection *Pothuajse Dje / Almost Yesterday*, which had earned Lleshanaku the Society of Albanian Publishers' "Author of the Year" award in 2012.<sup>98</sup> Being out of print, her older publications were nowhere to be found, and the more recent *Homo Antarcticus* was likewise missing.

But Lleshanaku's work was not completely absent from this space: her publications with the Instituti i Studimit të Krimeve dhe Pasojave të Komunizmit (ISKK) / Institute for the Study of Crimes and Consequences of Communism were available to attendees. I will discuss these books in the next section, but here I would like to focus on the only other publication that included Luljeta Lleshanaku: the 2019 issue of the literary magazine *Illz*, published by the Poetry Club of Tirana, which featured Lleshanaku on the cover. Inside the magazine, the editors had reprinted nine of Lleshanaku's poems, along with a series of commentaries interpreting and evaluating Lleshanaku's work, all from American or Western European sources. This body of commentary was made up of paratextual blurbs or snippets from reviews published in the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Poetry Nation Review*, written by authors and critics like Peter Constantine, Allen Grossman, Robert Creeley, and Eliot Weinberger, among others. The editors also reprinted longer reviews, including ones by George Szirtes at the *Poetry Review*, John

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<sup>98</sup> The society gives out awards in several categories each year, including for the best translated book or the best scholarly work and since 2019, has added an award for the best published book in the genre of "Literature of Memory," demonstrating the growing significance of memory as a cultural symbol.



Bradley at *Rain Taxi*, and Alan Dent at *Mistress Quickly's Bed*. In order to share these blurbs and reviews with an Albanian audience, the editors of *Illz* translated them into Albanian. Because their intended audience was a Western one, unfamiliar with the Albanian context, other than its overarching framing as a backwards, repressed country, these critical pieces were shaped by the Cold War paradigm and balkanist rhetoric. Nonetheless, their Western provenance gives them legitimacy: it is the foreign, translated commentary, more than any critical writing on Lleshanaku written in Albania, that is meant to signal the importance of her writing, because it is a sign of the writer's entrance into world literature. In this issue of *Illz*, Lleshanaku's endorsement by foreign critics is taken as such self-evident proof of success—not only of her particular body of work, but also of the Albanian culture and nation—that no criticism from Albanian sources is included.

The excerpts chosen by this magazine provide a condensed view of Lleshanaku's reception since she first debuted in the Western literary market, and repeat the usual information used to market her to American audiences: in these pages, we read of Lleshanaku as a lyrical and imagist poet, a victim of a communist regime, and a writer who is not political. An included quote by Eliot Weinberger, taken from a blurb he had written for Lleshanaku's *Fresco* describes the poet (in its original English) as:

A child who paid for the political sins of her grandparents<sup>99</sup> in Hoxha's Albania; a young poet who seems to have been writing for a hundred years in a language that's only been written for a hundred years; an erotic lyricist in the ruins of a state; Luljeta Lleshanaku is the real thing, and as unexpected as an oasis behind a mountain on the moon. (*Fresco*)

As we can see, Weinberger hints at Lleshanaku's familial history of persecution before he offers any insight into the particularities of her writing, its style and quality. In fact, readers obtain information about the type of writing they hold in their hands only in the third sentence, which

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<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, the translation in *Illz* reads "parents" instead of "grandparents."

states that Lleshanaku is an “erotic lyricist.” Otherwise, the quote is designed to give clues in regard to the culture and context from which Lleshanaku originates. “Political sins” is a reference to Albania’s communist period, “a language that’s only been written for a hundred years” uses the adverb “only” as an allusion to Albania’s backwardness, while the “oasis behind a mountain on the moon” advances ideas of Lleshanaku’s uniqueness and of Albania’s isolationism—a comment that I believe is used not only as a reference to the country’s socialist period, but as an almost defining cultural trait. The review implies that, if Albania is as distant from America as a “mountain on the moon,” Lleshanaku is the much-needed respite for the Western reader who seeks an adventure into unknown territory. Not only that, but Lleshanaku will provide a “real” experience of this unknown because she is an authentic victim and survivor whose personal experience and image is valued more than her skill as a poet.<sup>100</sup>

Nowhere are these dynamics clearer than in Peter Constantine’s introduction to Lleshanaku’s *Fresco*, which *Illz* has translated into Albanian and published in this issue. This text is important because, since the book’s publication in 2002, the language of this Introduction has circulated widely in promotional materials about Lleshanaku’s work or events. Moreover, because this Introduction provides a brief survey of the history and state of Albanian poetry—

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<sup>100</sup> Another blurb translated and reprinted in *Illz* comes from the poet and critic Allen Grossman. He reassures the American reader that Lleshanaku is not an alienating writer even if she comes from a strange country like Albania. The American reader does not need to fear, because as Grossman writes, “there is nothing alien about [her] poetic distinction,” except that it comes from a “violent and corrupt public world which penetrates privacy and betrays every intimacy.” Once again, we see a critic reinforcing Cold War binaries, juxtaposing the supposed freedom of the democratic West with the repression and violence of the socialist (and post-socialist) East. For the American reader, this is sufficient information to be able to understand the essence of Lleshanaku’s work before even reading the book, as Eastern Europe and the Balkans had long been framed by images of violence, suffering, corruption, lack of freedom and democracy—a construction that these pieces of criticism contribute to through an overemphasis on the traumatic aspects of Lleshanaku’s work. Relevant here is Maria Todorova’s well-known analysis in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), of the term “balkanization” and its usage in the west, which illuminates the role that the uncivilized Balkan Other plays in Western European self-fashioning.

however unreliable—it also served to familiarize American audiences with this literary tradition.<sup>101</sup> Following a pattern that we have now seen numerous times, Constantine praises Lleshanaku’s poetry for its lack of direct political or social commentary, claiming that this earns her a seat amongst the great writers of world literature, who write about *universal* themes that can appeal to any reader, at any time. He is also careful to paint a bleak picture of Albania during Lleshanaku’s childhood to inform the reader that this writer suffered greatly because of communism—as an individual denied certain freedoms, and as a writer who could not access material from Western literature.<sup>102</sup> The Introduction comes full circle in its concluding section, when Constantine reasserts the uniqueness of Lleshanaku’s writing, which unlike that of her contemporaries, was not corrupted by the ideological and political themes that were prominent in Albanian literature during the system change of the 90s—a nearly identical comment to that

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<sup>101</sup> Constantine’s introduction starts by remarking on the abundance of poetry publishing in Albania. He concludes that Albanian writers turned to poetry out of convenience, as it was easier to follow the rules of socialist realism in the concise form offered by verse (xi). As a result, poetry publications were so numerous that, “[i]n a country where reading was one of the pleasures still allowed, even miners and factory workers lined up to buy poetry books, and the small Balkan nation was the unlikely nation of poetry bestsellers” (xi). Again, the emphasis in these paratextual writings about Lleshanaku is to create a compelling story for the American audience, who trusts Constantine as an expert in the subject matter, even if no references are provided to support claims that are dramatic and exaggerated portrayals of suffering and injustice (no pleasure was allowed except for reading) or quaint and romantic (*even* miners and factory workers read poetry).

<sup>102</sup> Constantine writes that after Albania ended its relations with China, there was an almost complete ban in foreign literature and translation, as its self-imposed isolation from the world increased. It is true that after the 1978 split with China, Albania entered a period of greater restrictions and an economic downturn, but the claim that this also resulted in a ban of translated literature is not accurate. Simply looking at the literary newspaper *Drita*, published by the Albanian League of Writers and Artists, disproves the statement. Issues published from July to December of 1988, for instance, include translations of writers like Italo Calvino, Bertolt Brecht, Alberto Moravia, Oktay Rifat, Leo Tolstoy, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, among others. (Accessed through NYPL Collections: *Drita*, JFP 02-10 v. 28, no. 9-26 (Feb. 28-June 26, 1988), v. 28, no. 27-52 (July 3-Dec. 25, 1988)). In addition, in his examinations of the translation techniques used by Albanian translators during socialism, the linguist Ardian Vehbiu has argued that translation provided a space for greater experimentation with language, greater potential for subversion and even the ability to evade the censors (See: Ardian Vehbiu, *Fraktalet e shqipës: Rrëgjimi i gjeometrive të standardit, Gjuha e thyer, gjuha që thyen*).

made by Henry Israeli in the Afterword to this same book, as we discussed earlier. On the contrary, Constantine maintains, Lleshanaku's poetry stood out because of its "absence of direct social and political commentary," which allowed her work to avoid "simplistic reactions to a terrible past and an unstable present and future" (Introduction xvi). Because they are not concerned with social and political commentary, Constantine concludes, Lleshanaku's work can enter the "contemporary classics of world literature" and "transcend time and culture" (Introduction xvi). Here, as in the rest of the criticism I have been citing, the Albanian context in Lleshanaku's poems is simultaneously presented as important—because of her history of familial repression—and as able to be transcended by her writing, because her poetry is apolitical, and therefore, not bound by time and place, but geared toward the universal, Western reader.

I have quoted from these critics at length to demonstrate that Lleshanaku's status as an ideal writer for bringing Albania to the United States in the period after the Cold War was solidified through a concerted effort that framed her as a poet testifying to the horrors of socialism while simultaneously treating universal themes without politics, anger, dogma and the didacticism of ideology. But what do we make of the presence of such critical framing in an Albanian magazine like *Illz*? The Albanian audiences who read these blurbs and reviews, translated from the English into Albanian in this issue of the magazine, but also in other venues that promote her work in Albania, are met with a peculiar uncanniness about the sociopolitical context in which they live. The Albania that they read about in these texts—which were originally written for a very different audience, and thus contained a quality of cultural translation in their presentation of Albania to American audiences—has undergone a second act of translation in order to now be published in Albanian. When this form of layered translation is reproduced uncritically, as I argue *Illz* does, it reifies the biases ingrained in the initial act of

rewriting Albania and Albanian writers for world literature. In other words, by offering no critical assessment through which to read these American reviews of Lleshanaku, and by translating and publishing them as proof of Albania's relevance to world literature, *Illz* reinforces the Cold War paradigm at work in these reviewers' framing. This is not an isolated phenomenon: Western criticism and writing about Albanian literature circulates widely in media, academic and cultural spaces in the country. In the process of reproducing this paradigm, Albanian writers, editors, critics, and those working in memory institutions, reproduce and internalize a rhetoric of a passive, perpetual victimhood, and a memorialization of the past as exclusively negative. This is directly connected to the postsocialist mnemonic landscape in Albania, which has sought to separate the contemporary moment and its European Union aspirations, from the socialist past.

In the two following sections, I examine these memory politics, their motives, and the methods used to construct a narrative that claims the Albanian communist regime was not only the most repressive of all other socialist systems in the region, but its brutality was on par with the Holocaust.

### **3.3 Traumatic Exceptionalism: Albania's Memory Politics and the Trauma of the Past**

During at the 2019 Tirana book fair, the aspect of Lleshanaku's work that was most prominent was not her poetry, nor the books she translates from English to Albanian, but the books she has published with her employer, the Instituti i Studimit të Krimeve dhe Pasojave të Komunizmit (ISKK) / Institute for the Study of Crimes and Consequences of Communism, where she is the Director of the Research Department. ISKK's publications include memoirs by formerly persecuted people, archival investigations of prisons and internment camps, encyclopedic volumes of the life stories of those persecuted by the communist regime, and more. The series *Zërat e Kujtesës / Voices of Memory*, which features testimonials from people who

had been sent to prisons, labor and internment camps, is one of the most important publications that ISKK produces. As the Director of the Research Department, Lleshanaku is the main interviewer and editor for the *Voices of Memory* project, in addition to overseeing the other publications mentioned.

ISKK was established by the Albanian government in 2010, after a prolonged pause on any governmental activity concerning former political prisoners. Today, ISKK describes itself as an “independent and public institution,” funded primarily by state funds. Its stated mission is to “study and evaluate crimes committed under state socialism, conduct relevant archival research in the state records, and create an archive of oral histories and testimonials of survivors of the dictatorship.”<sup>103</sup> The institution is part of a network of government agencies, nonprofit organizations and museums involved with memory work in post-socialist Albania. Among these entities are the non-profit Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture (IDMC), the public institution Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents (Autoriteti), and a number of memory museums, including the Museum of Secret Surveillance (also known as the House of Leaves), Bunkart1 and 2, and the Site of Witness and Memory in Shkodër. These relatively newer institutions join older groups like the National Association of Albanian Political Prisoners and the Union of the Persecuted and Political Prisoners, which had been the first to advocate for the rights of the formerly persecuted and imprisoned since the system change, while also calling for a reevaluation of the historical narratives prevalent during the socialist period and insisting on the erections of memorials and museums where their histories could be remembered.

The official historical record that had been established by the Party of Labor of Albania (PLA) after WWII followed a pattern that resembled that of many other socialist countries.

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<sup>103</sup> See ISKK’s website: <http://www.iskk.gov.al/rreth-iskk/>.

History was closely controlled by the party leaders, who used the Second World War and the partisan anti-fascist resistance to construct a grand narrative of the heroic struggle and sacrifice that communist partisans made for the nation. As political scientist Elvin Gjevori argues, this control of history had a double purpose: it strengthened the population's adherence to communist ideology, and also ensured that communism was entangled with nationalism, conferring greater legitimacy and mass appeal to this system (35). To achieve this, official narratives of the past were tightly controlled, censored, and manipulated by the PLA, with figures that had once been heralded as heroes—like Hoxha's second in command, Mehmet Shehu—falling out of favor and eliminated, both physically and from the historical record.<sup>104</sup> This constant historical rewriting and revisionism served to “discredit political opponents; mythologize the partisan movement and create a cult of personality for communist leaders,” and in turn, help secure their absolute power (Boçi 191).

The new political elites that emerged in the wake of the collapse of state socialism, who often came from the very nomenclature of the previous regime, revised these historical narratives in ways that bolstered their own power. This time, the task was not only to adapt the narratives about Albania's history as a nation, but also to establish an official historical account of the PLA. Albania's polarized two party system, comprised of the center-right Democratic Party (DP) and the center-left Socialist Party (SP), has meant that since the collapse of communism, what has counted as “official” history in Albania has shifted and changed depending on the interests of which party is in power. When the Democratic Party came to power in 1992, the memory and legacy of communism became crucial for evaluating political choices and giving legitimacy to

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<sup>104</sup> Mehmet Shehu died of suicide in 1981, though the cause of death remains contested. His son, Bashkim Shehu, is a novelist who now lives in Spain. In 1997, he published a novel about his father's death, titled *Vjeshtra e ankthit / The Autumn of Anxiety*.

reforms made under the name of democratization, like military reform and NATO membership (Gjevori 35). For leaders of DP, it was necessary to craft a narrative of the past that memorialized only the regime's politically motivated violence and persecution, torture, internments and murders; other forms of repression, like censorship, lack of private ownership, extreme poverty and malnutrition in rural areas, and a politicized judiciary, received less attention (Gjevori 107). Overall, DP modeled itself as the direct opposite of the past system, in a simplified binary of good and evil which ultimately reproduced the same manipulation of the past that their predecessors had used (Iacono and Këlliçi 56-7).<sup>105</sup>

This manipulation of history was supported by a public debate and media landscape that, in the early 1990s, described the recent past through images of prisons, internment camps and murder, thus making violence and suffering emblematic of Hoxha's regime. In his thorough discourse analysis of three newspapers published in the mid-1990s, which functioned as official organs of either DP or SP, Gjevori concludes that these papers promoted:

[A sense] that the communist regime was not only violent and repressive, but that it was *the most repressive of all*. The uniqueness of Albanian communism was unrelentingly connected with its oppression and violence. ... Simply put, the Hoxha regime was described as a hellish structure in which the dictator was the master of a vast concentration camp where life was never safe and rights did not exist. (107, emphasis mine)

As this quote suggests, the construction of postsocialist narratives of memory and history considered the socialist past only through negative terms. From the beginning, the new narrative of history aligned Hoxha's regime with the Holocaust through terminology that evoked its most persistent imagery, like concentration camps, in order to accomplish the political goals of new political elites that sought to distance themselves from the PLA and to bolster Albanian traumatic

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<sup>105</sup> This was done even if key leaders of DP, like one of its founders and former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, had been involved with the communist party through Ramiz Alia's efforts to revive the party with new intellectuals (Progni 61).



exceptionalism. By positing that Albania's experience under communism as "the most repressive of all," politicians and media, but also writers and intellectuals, strengthened the idea that suffering and trauma was a key aspect of Albania's national identity. The usefulness of this narrative of Albanian traumatic exceptionalism for nation building explains why the Socialist Party (SP)—the so-called descendant of the PLA— which has been in power since 2013, advances similar memory politics.

The influence of the PLA's version of history, however, is still present in Albania. Old narratives about Albania's national history continue to resurface and resonate with people. They are spread through the media, upheld by the still living devotees of Hoxha, and used whenever convenient by government officials and institutions. Denialism, misinformation or complete ignorance about the severity of crimes committed by the PLA, including internment camps, hard labor camps, prisons, tortures and executions, is also prevalent. Lack of funding for historical research, school curricula with inadequate coverage of the communist period, which repeat the same WWII narratives that the PLA upheld, means that these historical inaccuracies are difficult to dispel and remove from mainstream, nationalist ideas about Albanian history. This situation is compounded by the fact that none of the demands made by formerly persecuted people have been met or made a priority of either political party, the Democratic or Socialist Party. Over thirty years since the collapse of state socialism in Albania, and despite the lip service paid to formerly persecuted people, very little concrete, material change has been made to meet the demands of groups like the Committee of Former Political Prisoners and Persecuted People (established in 1993) and the Institute for the Integration of Formerly Persecuted People (established in 1997). The key demand of lustration, for instance, was never seriously undertaken and lustration laws have been arbitrarily modified and employed depending on who was running

for office (Austin and Ellison 383-4).<sup>106</sup> The demand for compensation of hard labor and time spent in prison was also never fulfilled, even if laws drafted in the early 1990s promised a fair compensation for formerly persecuted or imprisoned people and their families.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, demands concerning the remembrance and commemoration of their persecution and struggle remain unfulfilled. The infamous Spaç labor camp and the Tepelena internment camp have been left to decay, with very little commemorative attention paid to them. The demand for opening of the files held by the Secret Service is addressed in an unsatisfactory, piecemeal fashion, motivated more by the desire for television ratings or book sales, than justice for the persecuted.<sup>108</sup> Such stagnation continued even after all of these demands became articulated in an

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<sup>106</sup> They are, Law No. 8001: On Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Committed in Albania during Communist Rule for Political, Ideological or Religious Motives and Law No. 8043: On the Verification of the Moral Character of Officials and Other Persons Connected with the Defense of the Democratic State. An example of the arbitrariness and inefficiency of these laws occurred when the current party in power appointed former high level officials from Hoxha's regime to positions in today's government, like the current speaker of parliament, Gramoz Ruçi, who was once the PLA's Minister of the Interior and head of the Directorate of State Security (known as Sigurimi).

<sup>107</sup> In 1991, Law No. 7514 passed, "On the innocence, amnesty and rehabilitation of those formerly sentenced and persecuted for political reasons," and in 1993, Law No. 7748, "On the status of people formerly convicted and persecuted for political reasons by the Communist system." The absurdly slow-moving process of "rehabilitation" began to compensate people in 1994, only after a strike organized by the Association for Formerly Persecuted People. This compensation came as pensions—where one year of prison was equated to two years of work—paid out in the form of bonds, which are almost immediately devalued and made worth close to nothing, their value reduced to 3-4% (IDMC 12-4). In 1998, soon after these bonds began to be distributed, the financial compensation for formerly persecuted people came to a complete halt, and despite protests, did not resume until 2006, and was plagued by the same inefficiency as before, and which continues to this day. It is no surprise that a 2016 audit concluded that the lack of accountability on the part of authorities and continued dismissal of protests of formerly persecuted people, and the serious negligence in drafting and implementing laws, resulted in "serious consequences for [the] rehabilitation" of the formerly persecuted and political prisoners (IDMC 24). For a detailed account of the process of rehabilitation of formerly persecuted people in Albania, see the 2019 study by IDMC, *(Non)Rehabilitation of Former Politically Persecuted: In the Process of Transitional Justice (1991-2018)*.

<sup>108</sup> The media landscape in Albania is filled with television shows and newspapers that use declassified materials for views and profit. Here it is important to consider the argument made by historian Elidor Mëhilli, who writes that it is dangerous to view these files as a pathway to an ultimate truth about Albanian state socialism, as these archives themselves were a curated and selected record of what those in power wanted to preserve. See Elidor Mëhilli, "Documents as Weapons: The Uses of a Dictatorship's Archives," *Contemporary European History*, Volume 28, Issue 1, 2019: pp. 82-95.

official capacity in 2006, when the parliament passed a resolution called “On punishment of the crimes committed by the Communist regime in Albania.” Among other points, the resolution called for: “a review of school textbooks, the declaration of a national day for commemoration of the victims of Communism, the opening of museums, including transforming into museums the terrible political prisons, and the raising of memorials to honor the Albanians killed for their opposition to the totalitarian regime,” as well as urging all parties to distance themselves from these crimes (IDMC report 17). Seventeen years later, little progress has been made on these goals.

This atmosphere of confusion over Albania’s relation to its socialist past is clearly displayed at the National Museum of History. Although it is not marketed as a “memory museum” in the same way as the other museums I mentioned above, in which “memory” refers only to remembrance of the trauma of communism, by virtue of being a national museum, this institution is heavily concerned with presenting a certain historical narrative of Albania. The museum’s three floors present a chronological overview of the most important historical developments in the territory of Albania, from antiquity to modern times. On the third floor, two separate exhibition halls are reserved for the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Albania. One hall holds an exhibit about the history of the anti-fascist war, whose propagandistic narrative arc appeared to me, when I visited in 2019, virtually unchanged from what visitors would find prior to 1989. The exhibit lionizes the communist partisans not only for their struggle during the war, but also for the role they played in establishing the socialist system after the war ended. Their personal objects, like typewriters and clothing items, are displayed to enrich the visitor’s experience, to help visualize this historical period and humanize the participants in this struggle.

These same figures, who this exhibit praised as “heroes of the people,” are admonished in the adjacent exhibit called “Communist Terror,” which provides information on the politically-motivated executions, labor and internment camps, prisoner rebellions in these camps, and finally, the student protests of 1990-1991 which helped to put an end to the socialist system. I found this same exhibition material, sometimes reproduced word for word and using the same photographs or illustrations, in BunkArt1 and the Museum of Secret Surveillance—the most well-known memory museums in the country. These two narratives, one about the brave communists who fought the Italian fascist occupation, and the other about the terror caused by the communist system, are offered simultaneously in the National History Museum; no effort is made to reconcile the conflicting version of events that each one presents. The fact that Albania still does not have one overarching, consolidated version of the history of the socialist period is proof that these two differing narratives continue to be useful to the state in different ways. To maintain their power, the Albanian government and state institutions rely both on the narrative about the heroic sacrifice made by partisan communists during the WWII struggle against fascist occupiers, and on the narrative about the exceptionalism of the brutality and trauma of the socialist system. The first narrative is useful for preserving the notion that Albanian history unfolded in a series of heroic struggles against occupiers, in addition to being crucial for appealing to voters for whom the antifascist movement remains an important memory. On the other hand, the second narrative is helpful for constructing a national identity predicated on suffering and trauma.

In the next section, I examine one crucial reason why the narrative of trauma has become especially important in Albania in the last two decades: the process of accession to the European Union.

### **3.4 Holocaust Memory, Communism, and the Europeanization of Memory**

Albania's desire for a place within the European community and the European Union represents one of the most important motivations for adopting this narrative of a purely traumatic past. As was discussed in the previous chapter, regarding Serbian historical revisionism and collective memory construction in the postsocialist period, membership in the EU is conferred through adoption of the union's directives on memory and history—especially the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century started, Albania has actively attempted to integrate European memory frameworks into its narrativization of the past. In 2004, the Albanian Parliament declared it would observe the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, demonstrating a new interest in participating in the European memory community. That same year, the National Museum of History unveiled an updated WWII pavilion. Other than the long-established narrative about partisan anti-fascist resistance in the country, which I mentioned above, this pavilion also contained a new section about the Holocaust in Albania.

During my visit to the museum, I observed how photographs, maps, a video installation and archival documents attempted to capture the war-time experiences of Jewish people in Albania. The majority of the exhibit, however, was dedicated to depicting the acts of ordinary Albanians who helped to shelter Jewish people during WWII, as well as the Albanian officials that assisted these actions. This history has received considerable political and media attention in recent years, coinciding with an increase in the appropriation of Holocaust imagery and memory to talk about the violence and trauma of Albanian communism. As historian David Perez has observed, the new exhibit in the National Museum of History, as well as the discussions around Holocaust history that occurred when it opened, served to evoke national pride and strengthen

nationalist sentiment in Albania (33). Participants in these discussions eschewed historical and political analysis that would account for the less severe forms of persecution experienced by Jews in Albania, preferring to employ purely cultural explanation—like Albanian tradition and customs of hospitality—as evidence of an inherent, “genetically programmed” propensity of Albanians for aiding others (Perez 40). These qualities, cast as proof of Albania’s commitment to religious tolerance and anti-discrimination, were then used by politicians in their dealings with the European Union.

The establishment of institutions like the Institute for the Study of Crimes and Consequences of Communism (ISKK) and the Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture (IDMC), in the decade immediately after this incorporation of the Holocaust into Albania’s official memory, connected Albania’s participation in the shared memory of the Holocaust in Europe with Albania’s goal of distancing itself from its socialist past. In the new millennium, this process was spearheaded by the new memory institutions which, though an adoption of a German model of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or “dealing with the past,” equated the brutality of the Albanian dictatorial system with the Holocaust. Such an equivalence was in line with the well-established logic of “two totalitarianisms” that has been shaped by European and American anti-communist rhetoric since the Cold War. Starting from such rhetoric, and adapting it for a local context, memory institutions in Albania promote the view that communism and Nazism were similar ideologies, caused comparable amounts of violence, and therefore, should be memorialized through similar methods—as made clear by the 2006 parliamentary resolution.

These memory institutions declare that it is precisely because remembrance of the communist past in Albania has not followed the German model of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that the country cannot progress enough to join the rest of Europe. This position is an

unsurprising result of the Europeanization of memory in Albania, where partnerships and funding streams of the aforementioned memory institutions reveal the widespread influence of European organizations. Chief among these funders are the German Embassy and German foundations, like the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Foundation, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Foundation. By offering their expertise in this process of “dealing with the past,” these German foundations serve as “pedagogical conduits” which claim moral superiority and approach Albania, and other postsocialist countries, in an asymmetrical power dynamic meant to instruct them on how “deal” with their violent past (von Bieberstein 256). This involvement carries clear political implications. KAS, the German foundation which has been the most involved in Albanian memory politics since the fall of state socialism, describes itself as a “political foundation,” which operates as a branch of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany. This foundation is explicitly interested in promoting the party’s conservative, anti-communist agenda. As the principal partner and founder of IDMC, and to a lesser extent of ISKK and Autoriteti, KAS guides and supports activities like the annual “Memory Days,” conferences, exhibits and educational activities with high school students, and more.<sup>109</sup> In all these events, the programming reflects the anti-communist motivations of the foundation, and the frequent invocation of the Holocaust serves to support this rhetoric with the weight of what the event symbolizes.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> See more on KAS’ website, [here](#). We can see KAS’s political leanings clearly in this [video](#) they released to celebrate ten years of work in Albania, where members of Albania’s Democratic Party, including Sali Berisha, have been invited to speak.

<sup>110</sup> At the 2020 Memory Days event, for instance, IDMC and KAS announced they would reward the high school students participating in the “Ask your Grandparents” competition with trips to visit concentration camps in Germany, where they could learn how another country “dealt with the past.”

Another important European memory partner is the Platform of European Memory and Conscience, which provides a direct link to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. Established by twenty institutions from EU member states in 2011, the Platform has since then expanded to include sixty-two public and private organizations from EU and non-EU countries, as well as Canada and the US. Five Albanian organizations are part of the Platform: IDMC, ISKK, the Institute for the Integration of Persecuted People in Albania, MEMO Center and since 2020, Autoriteti. Collaboration with the Platform is a crucial step for participating in a European community of “shared memory,” thus the inclusion of these five Albanian organizations is significant for the country’s aspirations for EU membership. When, in November of 2019, the Platform chose Albania as the site of their annual membership meeting, it signaled important movement toward Albania’s successful implementation of European memory standards. As part of its visit, the Platform brought its traveling exhibition “Totalitarianism in Europe,” which was displayed at the Site of Witness and Memory in Shkodër and outside of the National History Museum in Tirana.<sup>111</sup> For this occasion, the exhibit, which depicts “victims of Nazism, Fascism and Communism” alongside perpetrators, was updated with new panels on Albanian history, where the truncated, decontextualized history of Hoxha’s regime was presented side-by-side with panels that summarized Nazi and Fascist crimes in Europe.<sup>112</sup> Once again, a facile equivalence was made between these different systems, effectively delegitimizing

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<sup>111</sup> The unveiling of this Platform-sponsored exhibit in Tirana coincided with the annual “Memory Days” organized by IDMC in February of 2020, whose theme was “Violence and Stalinist Repression.” IDMC had invited many guests, almost all of whom were representing countries in Central Europe (Poland, Germany, Hungary, Austria). What could have been the chance to provide insightful comparative perspectives on the case of socialist systems and how they relate to the case of Albania, instead became a confusing conversation about different contexts and superficial understanding of the Albanian case. The keynote speech “Violence as Fatality. Stalinist Terror and its Victims” was given by Jörg Baberowski, a German historian who has been the subject of much controversy in Germany because of his right-wing views and claims that Stalin was “more vicious” than Hitler (see [here](#)).

<sup>112</sup> See [the announcement](#) on their website. See the exhibit panels [here](#).



the anti-fascist resistance carried out by the Albanian communist partisans against Italian and German occupiers during WWII, and appropriating the suffering of victims of both systems, in order to ensure the success of this erasure.

These Albanian institutions and their European partners dismiss memories about Albania's communist period that are passed down in the private sphere, labeling all of them as corrupt, false, biased, and filled with nostalgia about the past regime. Instead, it is memory that is mediated by institutional intervention—in museums, exhibits, multimedia publications, and other programming—that is a reliable and impartial source of information about the past, and thus an important tool for overcoming the trauma of the past, obtaining justice for the victims, and achieving a democratic society. The air of legitimacy and expertise conferred to Albanian memory institutions by their governmental affiliations or proximity to European partners means that they can more effectively disseminate the narrative about the exceptionalism of the Albanian dictatorship's violence and its equivalence with the violence of the Holocaust. As the comparison is repeated and enters the public sphere, the antisemitic and racial dimension of Jewish, Romani and Sinti persecution and extermination during the Holocaust is elided. Instead of a comparison based on historical specificity and productive, multidirectional analysis, it is the abstracted imagery of a globalized Holocaust memory that is used to establish a totalizing understanding of the severity of Albania's dictatorship.

In my review of institutional publications, media appearances, and event programming, it becomes clear that this comparison and its conclusion of equivalence stops short at just one thing: the crematoria used in extermination camps. For instance, in an 2018 interview, the long-time director of the IDMC, Jonila Godole, makes a strong case for the comparison between the Holocaust and Albanian communism, going as far as equating Auschwitz with the internment

camp of Tepelena.<sup>113</sup> She states that the similarities between the camps were so great, that the only aspect that set them apart was the presence of the crematorium at Auschwitz. The argument I want to make here is that, despite the fact that the comparison acknowledges this crucial difference, the continuous invocation of the Holocaust and the crematoria serves to nonetheless create an associative connection between Nazi extermination methods and the torture and violence used in Albanian communist prisons, internment and labor camps.

We see this particular type of appropriation and erasure in ISKK's short documentary-style video about the internment camp in the city of Tepelena. Released in 2019, with the stated intention of raising awareness of the camp and its atrocious conditions, the video synthesizes the research and testimonial gathering conducted by ISKK, research that was led by Luljeta Lleshanaku, who then wrote the script for the video. In this so-called "virtual museum," some of these testimonials are combined with visual representations of life in the camp, reconstructions of its barracks, and shots of the rubble and ruins that remain today.<sup>114</sup> Disembodied, disconnected from their bodies and identities, these voices reach the viewer and listener as abstractions. In the video's first shot, an old oil lamp is seen burning amidst pieces of broken walls and sparse, dried grass growing in the abandoned ruins of the former camp. As the camera moves to show the state of the dilapidated walls, the disembodied voices of the survivors of the camp, which are superimposed over these images, are heard speaking about their experiences. This opening scene, chosen by the production team of the virtual museum, and Lleshanaku as screenwriter, sets up an immediate comparison between the Albanian dictatorship and the Holocaust. One after another, the three voices note the unspeakable terror experienced in the

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<sup>113</sup> See: *Ora News*, "Godole: Krahasimi i kampit të Tepelenës me atë të Aushvicit, jo i ekzagjeruar,"/ "Godode: The Comparison of the Tepelena camp with Auschwitz is not an exaggeration," [here](#).

<sup>114</sup> See the video for the "virtual museum" with English subtitles, [here](#). Luljeta Lleshanaku created the script for the video, and more information about the project can be found on the ISKK website, [here](#).

Tepelena camp, with one voice likening the camp to Mauthausen, saying that Tepelena was a similar extermination camp, while another making a telling comment that, “the only thing missing were the ovens.” These pronouncements, disconnected from the storytelling and thought processes that led to them making these comparisons, are presented to viewers before any other piece of information about the Tepelena camp. Though the survivors testify that the camps lacked crematoria, the fact that these statements are cut from their longer recollections to be spliced together and inserted in the video’s opening scenes—whose somber music and dark visuals convey the start of something serious—makes an implicit but strong claim for the validity of the equivalence between these different camps and their vastly different contexts.

In Albanian memory politics, the use of testimony taken from victims and survivors of prisons, labor and internment camps is crucial for supporting the appropriation of the Holocaust to remember communism. This is made clear by this “virtual museum,” which depends on the edited testimonies to achieve its stated goal of educating the public about the Tepelena camp, but also its implicit aim of associating this internment camp with Nazi concentration camps. Such mediated use of testimony is not limited to public-facing products created by institutions like ISKK, and has permeated the Albanian literary and cultural world, where the testimonial genre, and the related genres of the memoir and personal narrative, have become necessary for attesting to the hardship experienced during Hoxha’s dictatorship, particularly for those who suffered in prisons, labor and internment camps. In the next section, I offer a close reading of poems from the collection *Negative Space*, where Lleshanaku writes of the dictatorial past. Because of Lleshanaku’s integration of a number of testimonies taken from victims of the dictatorship’s violence, these more recent poems differ from Lleshanaku’s earlier work, where intimate, quotidian memories helped to create an image of a complex past. In an attempt to provide

readers with what she calls an “autobiography of a generation,” Lleshanaku appropriated the suffering of others into her own, and because the international literary market had already designated her as a trusted source of authentic Albanian experience, these poems were easily integrated into the Cold War paradigm and the larger, totalizing framework of trauma.

### 3.5 Conflated Voices of Memory and the Appropriation of Testimony

In an interview with the writer and critic Elsa Demo, Lleshanaku describes the difficulties she experienced while writing the poems in *Pothuajse Dje / Almost Yesterday* (2012) and *Homo Antarcticus* (2015)—selections from which make up the translation *Negative Space* (2018)—because of the responsibility she felt toward the trauma experienced by her family, her generation, and of the people whose testimonials she collects for ISKK’s *Voices of Memory* project. To address this tension, she chose to evade direct portrayals of pain and trauma, instead employing a poetics of the negative space. She explains this choice:

Choosing negative space is like choosing a window through which to see everything else. Negative space is the emptiness, nothingness, between objects. But sometimes this emptiness turns into the central thing, it turns into an object in itself, making everything that is around it unimportant. And if we interpret all this history through negative space and the lens of emptiness, then I will have been able to surpass the limits of a simply autobiographical poem.<sup>115</sup>

Lleshanaku suggests that as a method for writing, a poetics of negative space can upend the importance of the center, shifting our focus to the margins and, crucially, to the interstices between margin and center, all that exists in the “nothingness between objects.” To want to write a history out of nothingness is similar to the act of giving a testimony that is deliberately filled with silence. In either case, our attention as readers and listeners is not directed toward the

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<sup>115</sup> See Lleshanaku’s interview with Elsa Demo, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zz0fq2uWTq0>.

articulation of trauma but to the texture of what surrounds it. This perspective shift reveals the overlap between the spatial and social categories of the margin and the center, prompting a rethinking about these categories as mutually exclusive binaries, as well as a rethinking of speech and silence as opposites. Becoming aware of how these binaries are constitutive of one another, I believe, can help us reconsider what political and apolitical writing entails, and thus provide clarity for two questions important for this chapter and the entire dissertation project. First, we can ask: does a poem need to look either like a call to arms, or a testimony of suffering, in order to be considered political? And second, must the victim verbalize their trauma via the testimony in order to receive recognition, healing and redemption?

To attempt answers to these questions, we can turn to the poem “Negative Space,” which was originally published in the collection *Pothuajse Dje / Almost Yesterday*, and which lends Lleshanaku’s latest translated collection its title. The poem faces the reader with a world filled with emptiness and ephemerality. The images that make up the poem are built around what is not there or what is on the verge of disappearing: there are images of crosses removed from graves—a reference to the cultural revolution of 1967, of a town covered in “mounds of dirt the rains would smooth down / sooner or later,” and of the activity of Sunday mass being replaced with the smoking of pipes, whose “smoke rose / into the air, against gravity’s pull” (NS 20-1). The poem pays careful attention to the disappearing of these objects and customs, creating tightly wound scenes, whose brief length allows for a deeper concentration with the moment described before they are gone, dissolving into the negative space. And while each moment is well-contained within the image that describes it, the poem as a whole is expansive. It takes readers from small town neighborhoods, to the classroom, the living room and bedroom, to the factory and the hospital room, and then briefly, even to the prison. Slowly, these locations and images

build the frame, or the window, through which we see and read everything else by creating a tense feeling that indicates repression's permeation into every sphere of life.

In this quotidian, ubiquitous negative space, we find the image of a blackboard where meaningful language is broken down in “leftover diphthongs from yesterday or the day before,” inside the first-grade classroom where children are indoctrinated to follow state approved speech (NS 22). Lleshanaku writes that under the careful eye of the dictator's portrait, a cast-iron stove puffs ephemeral “smoke from its temples” to provide “enough heat for everyone” and the teacher commands the children to:

“Read!”—I was told. Who said that?  
Angel Gabriel, or my first-grade teacher  
who had dark roots underneath her bleached curls? (NS 22)

In the Albanian, the imperative to “read!” comes in an indirect, dative construction (“m’u tha”), which means the reader is in the dark about the provenance of the order until the poet gives us the image of the teacher. The seemingly insignificant detail of the teacher's “dark roots underneath ... bleached curls” signals to a deception, but also provides a glimpse into the daily, mundane life of the time, a detail which makes the figure of the teacher seem almost pitiful. The power that this figure exerts on the students in this classroom, however, cancels any pity we might feel. Calling the teacher “Angel Gabriel,” Lleshanaku references the 96<sup>th</sup> surah of the Qur’an (Al-‘Alaq, translated as “The clot”),<sup>116</sup> comparing the teacher's proclamation to “read!” with the order given to Muhammad by the angel. If this surah is about the origins of humanity, a story that begins with a command to read and thus emphasizes the importance of the word, then the poem's replacement of the angel with the teacher who orders the students to read can be

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<sup>116</sup> Lleshanaku also uses this reference at the end of the poem, when the poem's speaker dwells on her ability to see the end of things, explaining that “It wasn't a mystical gift, but like a blood clot / in the darkness of a vein ...” (28).

interpreted as a critique of a society that had replaced religious worship with ideological indoctrination. Indeed, immediately after this order to read, the teacher commands the student to “Continue where your classmate left off!” (NS 21). This is not an invitation to build shared language inside a community, but an authoritative demand to conform to language and discourse approved by the state. As an all-powerful figure, the teacher decides how, when and by whom this language will be spoken.

While the teacher’s orders may connect the students in the same struggle, it also alienates them from language and from each other. Lleshanaku writes that:

A long sentence tied us to one another  
without connotation as if inside an idiom.  
Someone would get to read the noun, another the verb,  
a third one a pronoun. . .  
I always got the exclamation mark at the end—  
a mere grimace, a small curse. (NS 21)

We can sense how the authoritative environment of this classroom creates an uneasy relationship with language. Tied together inside one long, tedious sentence, the students find no way to truly relate to one another because the meaning of what they are saying gets lost, like an idiom found without context, or the “leftover diphthongs from yesterday or the day before” that have remained on the blackboard (NS 22). Each student follows the order to read a part of the sentence assigned to them arbitrarily, but the sounds they make linger in the air without reaching the others in the room. An imposed language of fragments arises, with noun, verb and pronoun saying little to one another, as each word gets suspended in the negative space of the brief silence between each speaker’s turn. When it is her turn, the poem’s speaker gets the exclamation mark: an unutterable symbol, but without which the sentence would not have the same significance, nor would the following sentence be anticipated with as much suspense. And thus, though language

arrives to the speaker in irregular rhythms that make it appear as if, “split in syllables, spasmodic / like code in times of war,” it also teaches her how to make sense and create something from what initially appears meaningless (NS 21).

Still, receiving the exclamation mark to read also means to be out of luck. While the other students are protected by whatever noun, verb or pronoun they get to read, the speaker can utter nothing. She cannot appease the teacher who demands sound and thus, she becomes marked by negative space, which begins to outline her entirely, sketching her “onomatopoeic profile / of body and shadow in an accidental encounter” (NS 22). I interpret these two verses as the moment when the poem’s speaker recognizes her embeddedness in the system, which prompts her dreams of escape. At night, this speaker looks to the constellations outside the window and imagines possibilities for a language that is not so “erosive” and disciplinary (NS 22). The window opens up to the night sky, whose expansiveness contains limitless space, without borders and compartments, without differentiation between the negative space and the “everything else.” Ultimately unable to fully escape the confining spaces that make up her daily life, the speaker adapts to her conditions, and begins to understand how she is positionally afforded by the negative space, which creates the profile of her body, affects the way she interacts with the world.

While “Negative Space” is mostly told through the perspective of a lyrical subject that speaks in the first person singular, Lleshanaku’s “Water and Carbon” takes a more multivocal approach. Originally published in the 2015 collection *Homo Antarcticus*, this poem tells the histories of both the individual and the collective that is made to conform to a prescribed standard of being, thinking and speaking. In the poem, those who deviate from the standard are relegated to the margin, marked by the indelible, invisible label of the outcast, the enemy of the state, and isolated by the material borders that are created by the barbed wire surrounding labor



and internment camps, as well as the more intangible social ostracization that results from being marked as deviant. Lleshanaku replicates these spatial separations by breaking up the poem into twelve sections that convey a distinct sense of the systematic ways in which the body is degraded and destroyed.

“Water and Carbon” begins with another classroom scene: “Revelation came to you on a September day, / not on top of a dry mountain, but in the chemistry lab” (NS 109). The revelation mentioned refers to a teacher who categorizes the human body as a simple product of the chemical reaction of water and carbon (NS 109). From this critique of ideological indoctrination and the devaluing of human complexity, Lleshanaku moves to a more concrete depiction of how the body is measured, weighed, disciplined and outfitted to conform to a certain standard. The poem guides us through every step of this assembly-line:

Water and carbon. Measurable.  
When you're born they measure your weight, your height, and heartbeat;  
they encase and stamp you with a belly button like a leaden seal  
you have no authority to open! (You have no authority over yourself.)  
They measure your temperature, in the shade of course,  
your sugar levels, albumen, iron, reflexes on your knees,  
your tongue, twice, before and after a meal,  
(what does this have to do with speaking?!) (NS 110)

Here, the body is measured in all possible ways: from a thorough review of the outward physical traits of height, weight, or the circumference of the head, to an assessment of more inner qualities like the nutrients in the bloodstream and the regular beating of the heart. Altogether, the measurements will ensure a good fit for the identical hats and suits that everyone will wear in order to become the same as the other bodies in this group. This, in turn, will maintain conformity and obedience, turning the subject of the stanza, the unnamed “you” that we encountered at the start of the poem, into the “healthy, the impeccable lamb of the herd / for a

sacrifice in the name of your country” (*NS* 111). Lleshanaku’s mention of sacrifice makes clear what is at stake in this process of taking careful measurements: individuality is surrendered for the community’s greater good. If Lleshanaku’s indeterminable “you” recalls Ali Podrimja’s *torzo*, I maintain that the comparison remains at a superficial level, because while the extended metaphor of the *torzo*’s sacrifice was used to demonstrate the act’s futility, in “Water and Carbon,” the sacrifice enables an overidentification of the reader with the victim.

This overidentification is facilitated by the poem’s oscillating between lyrical subjects, which switch from the “you” who attends the chemistry lesson, to the “they” who are responsible for ensuring the body’s obedience, and later on, to the “you” and “I” who languish in the prisons and labor camps. Such confusion about the lyrical speaker might be a deliberate choice made by Lleshanaku, perhaps to comment on the anonymization created by totalitarian ideology. Her strategy is not successful in reaching that end goal because it associates all of the poem’s lyrical subjects or speakers with one another, including the subject that testifies in the first person singular about their time in the prison or labor camp. We read:

I was seventeen one morning in my prison cell  
when after a night of delirium, running a 107-degree fever  
caused by bronchopneumonia,  
I woke up drenched in my own urine.  
I was neither a child nor a man any more. (*NS* 112)

The poem’s sudden shift to this first person testimony of illness and humiliation in the prison cell creates an equivalence with the experiences detailed through the “you” who was indoctrinated in the chemistry classroom and the “you” who was measured and standardized. This equivalence between these different forms of violence fosters the idea of the general “victim of communism,” a category which encompasses all individuals who lived during Albania’s socialism system, indiscriminate of time, location, and severity of violence experienced. By incorporating this first

person testimony into this multivocal poem in an effort to write what she called the “autobiography of a generation,” Lleshanaku effectively turns the trauma of this one individual political prisoner into a synonym for the Albanian socialist past as a whole. The pains experienced by this figure—the delirium, fever, bronchopneumonia, incontinence, and the loss of a sense of self—become one and the same as the pain of the collective. In a reversal of the typical proclamations about needing to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, the poem creates a dynamic where the victims’ voices speak for the rest of society, giving any member of the group the right to claim the same experiences of torture, violence and deprivation that these victims endured.

This phenomenon is not isolated to this poem. Rather, as we saw in this chapter’s previous sections, Lleshanaku’s oeuvre, through its promotion and circulation as the ultimate source of information about Albania’s dictatorship, performs a similar associative equivalence where her writing on the system’s political violence is interpreted as representative of the experiences of all Albanians during all five decades of state socialism. I am concentrating my close reading on “Water and Carbon,” precisely because this poem’s explicit interest in offering a definitive representation of the Albanian socialist past has earned it considerable attention in international discussions of Lleshanaku’s writing. First published in English translation in *Tupelo Quarterly* in 2016,<sup>117</sup> the poem was then included in the collection *Negative Space* in 2018, and highlighted by the international Griffin Poetry Prize and featured on its website in 2019.<sup>118</sup> As recently as 2022, the poem’s Polish translation, completed by Dorota Horodyska, was used to

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<sup>117</sup> See *Tupelo Quarterly*’s website: <https://www.tupeloquarterly.com/translation/water-and-carbon-by-luljeta-lleshanaku-translated-by-ani-gjika/>.

<sup>118</sup> The Griffin Poetry Prize website features an excerpt from “Water and Carbon” and a video of Lleshanaku reading the poem: <https://griffinpoetryprize.com/poem/from-water-and-carbon/>.

nominate Lleshanaku for the Polish European Poet of Freedom award, a title she won for writing that “serves as a reservoir of memory.”<sup>119</sup>

The promotional material published by the European Poet of Freedom award describes Lleshanaku as a poet whose writing about memory combines the “hum of history” and the “voices of her ancestors,” voices whose reverberations she “humbly accepts that she cannot escape” (European Poet of Freedom Jury). Such an assessment of Lleshanaku’s poetry obscures the rhetorical choices made by the poet. The voices she includes in poems like “Water and Carbon” are not the mystical sounds reaching from the beyond, nor abstractions or metaphors produced by the poet’s imagination. In fact, they are excerpts of the testimonies found in *Zërat e Kujtesës / Voices of Memory*, which Lleshanaku collected for the ISKK’s project mentioned earlier in the chapter. Like the “virtual museum” focused on the internment camp at Tepelena, this project of ISKK seeks to raise awareness of the plight of former political prisoners, who are asked to relate to readers their family histories, reasons for their persecution, and memories of the brutal treatment they suffered in the camps or prisons. Lleshanaku has spent several years as the principal interviewer and research lead on this project, becoming intimately connected to these stories. When I met with her in Tirana during the autumn of 2019, she shared parts of her experience with the testimony gathering and interviewing for this project, describing a labor-intensive process that also emotionally affected both her and her interviewees. It is unsurprising, knowing the extent of Lleshanaku’s involvement in this project, that her poems borrow stories and images from the conversations she has had with victims and survivors of the totalitarian system’s most intense violence.

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<sup>119</sup> See the European Poet of Freedom website here: <https://europejskipoetawolnosc.pl/winners/2022-luljeta-lleshanaku/?lang=en>.

This is not an inconsequential decision. By appropriating the so-called voices of memory for use in her poetry, Lleshanaku creates a lyrical subject where the victim of torture, imprisonment and internment adopts the same voice as those citizens experiencing less extreme forms of totalitarian repression. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest a hierarchy of suffering, but to stress that when it comes to the use of the testimony of other's trauma, more precision is required in order to prevent what Meister has called the "moral identification of bystanders with victims" through an act of witnessing that occurs long after the violence described (213). This becomes possible, he argues, because human rights discourse abstracts victimhood, making our "common humanity" stand for the true victim of large-scale atrocity. Some of this humanity can be saved, however, through a process of vicarious witnessing, where today's "potential bystanders" imagine themselves reacting in an ethical way to their witnessing of past violence (Meister 213-5). Through the double identification with victims *and* with witnesses who do not look away, Meister's potential bystander—a figure that Michael Rothberg might call an implicated subject—redeems itself in the eyes of human rights ideology. Lleshanaku's conflated lyrical subjects functions in a similar way, as the bystanders or witnesses who watch violence in the prison or camp, but do not act to stop it, are redeemed through an association with the victims—the "I" and "we" who bear the brunt of this violence.

We observe this dynamic clearly in the fifth section of "Water and Carbon," where two disembodied voices converse with one another, one telling the other of the various forms of beatings in the prison, labor or internment camp. Lleshanaku conveys the testimony in this way:

*"They stripped us naked  
and beat us under cold tap water  
with Soviet boots. We fainted. But..."*

*"But?"*

*“But the next day all four of us were alive, on roll-call.  
And the officers made a bet for a case of beer on the boy from Tropoja  
having left him outside in the snow all night long naked as the day he was born. But...”*

*“But?”*

*“But one of them lost his bet.”*

*“...?”*

*“When they beat the old man like a child slapping him in the face,  
I did nothing to help him...”*

*“...?”*

*“Then I knew that even death didn’t give a damn about us. It  
approached us like a dog,  
sniffed us then left us alone...”*

*“...”*

*“We were simply femur bones, without marrow.” (NS 114-5)*

Unlike the stanza we discussed above, here we receive the testimony with little mediation from Lleshanaku. In examining similar instances where authors relinquish their authorial voice in order to bring testimony into the text, Susan Gubar has argued that this gesture transforms the poet from a creative writer into a scribe. As scribe, the writer experiences a “humbling imaginative exile analogous (but only like a pale shadow or a faint echo) to the graver losses described by their speakers” (Gubar 151). Instead of fictionalizing or aestheticizing these losses, the writer-as-scribe merely documents them by re-recording what they have heard or read (Gubar 151). Given the sociopolitical context and literary markets in which Lleshanaku’s writing is embedded, it is difficult to read her inclusion of testimony through this logic, since the circulation of testimonies about the violence of the Albanian dictatorship through this literary format helps to solidify the totalizing narrative of trauma. The disembodied voice who speaks in

the first person plural “we” inducts us all into the category of the victim, even as the response of the interlocutor devolves into the silence of the ellipsis. The rhetorical power of silence, in this case, is not sufficient for subverting what Gary Weissman has called a “wishful blurring of otherwise obvious and meaningful distinctions between the victims and ourselves” (Weissman 20). The ellipsis, which is one aspect of Lleshanaku’s rewriting of these testimonies, conceals the second part of the poet’s intervention: her editing and splicing together of different interview material from the *Voices of Memory* series into one continuous narrative. The disparate voices of memory are combined precisely through the silence-as-ellipsis that moves the conversation forward without having to verbalize anything. Through Lleshanaku’s editing and mediation, the rhetorical use of silence serves to bring attention to the testimony. The narrative she conveyed is one of a generalized representation of the trauma, where each memory appears almost interchangeable with another.

To better understand this particular rhetorical choice, we can take a look at the introduction that Lleshanaku wrote for the first volume of the *Voices of Memory* series. She immediately aligns the project with a Holocaust memory community by citing Elie Wiesel and his statement that survivors have “more to say about what has happened than all historians put together” (8). The introduction, thus, places official historiography in opposition with survivor testimony, conferring to the latter a more authentic, trustworthy status than the former, especially since the testimonies of the survivors featured in this series are compared with testimonies of Holocaust survivors like Wiesel. In addition to praising the testimonies’ value in establishing a truthful account of the violence of communism, Lleshanaku highlights the survivors’ moral code and ability to turn the other cheek. From this, we can see that Lleshanaku considers testimonies not only as important knowledge about the past, but also as moral lessons about how to honor,

pay “homage” to, and contribute to the “mission” of remembering the victims of communism (Lleshanaku, *Introduction* 10). This introduction confers an air of martyrdom and saint-like qualities to those interviewed, which perpetuates an understanding of the passive victim being the only one worthy of salvation.

My reading of Lleshanaku is critical of the way she has adapted these testimonies in her work because of the potential for her text to become incorporated into the larger traumatic framework of Albanian national identity and its promotion abroad. Lleshanaku herself acknowledges this much in a panel titled “National Literatures in a Time of Rising Nationalisms” and organized by the IWP for the program’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017.<sup>120</sup> During this panel, Lleshanaku says that in contemporary Albanian publishing there is a push to commercialize literature, sensationalize certain aspects of Albanian history or society to make the writing marketable, especially to a Western audience. Despite a very globalized world literature and the romantic ideal of writers as “citizens of the world,” Lleshanaku concludes that the international literary market demands that writers take up narrowly defined national representative roles. She makes an interesting remark, saying that: “When I am introduced to American audiences, they don’t want an American from me ... they want the Albanian from me.” The version of “the Albanian” that American audiences want, as should now be clear to us, is that of a consummate victim. Since Lleshanaku is clearly aware of this dynamic, having participated in the American literary world since her first visit to the IWP in the late 1990s, we cannot but read her work with an eye toward the ways she reproduces, or resists, this representative role.

I would like to conclude this chapter by making the point that what prevents Lleshanaku’s poetry from becoming purely appropriative of the testimonies and suffering of

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<sup>120</sup> “IWP 50th Anniversary Panel: National Literatures in a Time of Rising Nationalisms.” Accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZckqdZVOFU>.



others, is its lack of resolution. The poem we have been discussing, “Water and Carbon,” criticized the search for redemption and reconciliation by showing how easily violence is reproduced, how quickly the victim can become the perpetrator. Within the poem, images of martyr-like suicides, references to the last supper and the crucifixion of Jesus, to Palm Sunday and Good Friday are used to underscore oppression’s cyclical nature—like water, it is “recyclable” and has a “short memory” (NS 119-120). As long as the structures that create and maintain exploitation are never unsettled, the only change we will see is the periodic replacement of who is in power and who they are violating to secure that power. This is what Paulo Freire reminds us of in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As he argues, the solution to the conditions afflicting the so-called “marginal” members of society is not to simply integrate them into “the structure of oppression,” but instead, to “transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (Freire 74). In Lleshanaku’s poetry we may not find radical lessons about structural transformation, but we do encounter a concrete critique of the mechanism of inclusion into structures of oppression.

The final section of “Water and Carbon” is dedicated to one person who seems to have been offered salvation and a way out of the hell of prison. “You are free,” he is told, after forty-five years of imprisonment, a declaration that sounds almost absurd and unimaginable after a long poem where the human body had been deconstructed and pained to the point that suffering itself becomes another limb. Where else to go but the place that had eluded him for so long, the place he had never seen before: the sea. At the ticket counter, the man asks for a train ticket to the seaside, as the sky, oblivious to the significance that this day holds, “opened its mouth ear to ear / laughing brazenly / exposing a group of clouds on lonely mountain peaks” (NS 121). The image of a mouth returns us to the body and to speech, and as the ticket seller, repeating the

gesture of the laughing sky, opens her mouth wide enough to expose her wisdom teeth, we are transported from ephemeral, wispy clouds, to the material and physical body.

For this man, and for the poem, the trip to the sea is meant to signify redemption, but the redemption is an incomplete one. Not knowing the correct train station where to disembark, he gets out too early and has to walk the rest of the way, with “[t]he breeze from the poplars softly hitting him on the neck” (NS 121). And when he arrives, his difference from others is immediately and painfully apparent: he is not dressed for the season, but is fully clothed from head to toe. Lleshanaku writes that he clashes with the people in “speckled bathing suits / and the joyous children with sunburnt shoulders” (NS 122). Despite his freedom, the poem seems to be saying, this man is still an outcast who cannot blend in with the others at the beach, whose casual enjoyment of the seaside is in contrast with his discomfort at being there. In what is a crucial inversion of the principles of negative space, the man no longer appears as empty space but becomes an inescapable and concrete presence among those living in the mainstream of society, who are as indifferent to his suffering as the grinning sky had been, even if they live under the same repressive regime as him.<sup>121</sup> Unlike them, this man comes to the beach:

alone fully clothed, head to toe  
like a black piano, closed in the corner of a hall around which the world  
revolves undisturbed

longingly touching a myriad grains of sand only one of which  
will end up in the belly of a shellfish  
where pain, with time, will transform it into a pearl. (Lleshanaku NS 122)

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<sup>121</sup> The story of the man who is freed and decides to go to the sea had been told to her by one of the people she had interviewed. Lleshanaku told me this section came to her while she was abroad in the US, completing a writing residency. Alone, in the small dorm-room, furnished with simple bunk beds, and a small window that barely let in any light, she wrote the stanzas as the words poured out of her and when she finished, she “collapsed in sobs.”

An outsider even in his freedom, this man who has just left prison cannot easily reintegrate into society. Pain, trauma, anger and hurt separate him from everyone else—a common outcome for formerly imprisoned people, for whom care and rehabilitation after liberation is most often minimal. But at the beach, there is a sudden inversion in our understanding of negative space, because it is negative space, embodied in this man, that becomes that central thing around which the world revolves, becomes the *subject* of the image, rather than simply its framing. The inversion, coming during the very final stanzas of the poem, should have heralded a victory, or at least a small comfort at having earned a place outside of the margins. Instead, even as the negative space becomes the central subject, it is unimportant, invisible, in the corner, closed, and thus purposeless and soundless. Ultimately it affects nothing and no one: the world is still “undisturbed” by negative space. Its position might have been changed slightly, the marginal might have been included in the narrative of the nation, its official history and memory, a few rights may have been granted, but there is no fundamental change in the subordination of the negative space.

We encounter a similar ending in Lleshanaku’s poem “Negative Space.” Midnight snoring or the “meaningless sounds that stain the side of the wall / that belongs to no one” provokes questions that bring the reader and speaker together in conversation, and we find the poem asking:

So where are we? What dimension?  
Who foots the bill at a time like this  
without lambs or sinners,  
when even angels record nothing? (*NS 27*)

The sound of snoring communicates only a few things: it is nighttime and people are asleep, except for the one who is awake to listen to the sound, a witness to their slumber. In the absence of everything except these sounds, the poem asks us about where we are: what space holds us

now, and which dimension would claim us “at a time like this”? Space, then, is connected to time, but it is difficult to find a temporal location in historical time because the act of recording is no longer being carried out by angels, who in Abrahamic traditions are tasked with recording each person’s good and bad deeds. The angels cannot record anything because this is a time “without lambs or sinners:” there is no one to do good, and no one to do evil. Such a system without binaries cannot work, since the dichotomy between victims and villains is necessary for the construction of national identity and history, one where the struggling people suffer at the hands of evil outsiders until they are rescued by valiant heroes who then head the nation. Collective and cultural memory of past atrocities revolve around this dichotomy, reproducing it with each new commemorative event or museum exhibit, thus reinforcing the idea that the past can only be remembered through the trauma of its victims. In the poem’s unspecified place, in this dimension without a name—except the name of nothingness, emptiness, and the negative space—there is neither the ideal victim nor the evil perpetrator. And because they are not there, there is nothing of note, nothing to write down.

And yet, when considered in the context of Lleshanaku’s career, which has been intrinsically tied to the international literary market and therefore has been influenced by the Cold War paradigm and its traumatic framework, the ending of “Negative Space” displays the same apolitical aesthetics advanced by these paradigms and frameworks. The impossibility of writing noted by the poem cannot be interpreted as a deliberate, resistant silence because it is not caused by a recognition and rejection of the prerequisite display of suffering. Instead, it results from the lyrical subject’s resignation to the didactic syntax they had been fated to speak. We can see this more clearly in the poetic scene that concludes “Negative Space.” Lleshanaku writes:

There’s nothing sillier  
than watching a film in reverse

where after the climax, the protagonists  
are replaced by circumstances,  
and circumstances replaced by minor characters,  
their tongues plastered behind a single, fatal smirk.  
Life and my short lunar calendar slipped away.  
like carbon paper sending off as much light as necessary,  
skipping the details, the contrast and sharp colors.  
Lunar time is short. Until the actual end,  
there are years enough, the negative spaces.  
What to do with them when the verb  
has already been uttered, a conclusive sentence  
with Latin syntax, or more than that:  
didactic. (NS 28).

The experiment of “watching a film in reverse” and imagining what it would be like to encounter the protagonists, minor characters and their circumstances with the full knowledge of where the story leads could almost be an allegory for the reading of literature through the traumatic framework. In the case of literature, readers’ reliance on the rewriting carried out by editors who shape the paratextual and critical information available about a specific book, gives them a conclusive interpretative frame for understanding the writing and its author before even seeing the work in question. As we have discussed, Lleshanaku’s arrival to the North American literary market was guided by editorial intervention that positioned her as the most authentic voice of Albanian communist-era trauma. In the excerpt cited above, though there is a recognition that there is “nothing sillier” than engaging with a piece of art starting “in reverse,” this practice is hardly challenged. What Lleshanaku does, instead, is to develop a metaphor that connects the act of watching a film out of order with the question of how to live a life when one’s fate has already been determined by dominant ideologies. This life, reproduced through carbon paper and thus devoid of the details, contrasts and the sharpness of colors, has lost its specific, unique texture. The lyrical subject does not revolt against this imposed erasure: left without the aspects that made her existence unique, she merely wonders what to do with the time that remains. In this

question, I see a detachment between the lyrical subject and the material conditions of her life, leading to Lleshanaku's final and unsatisfactory observation that the "conclusive sentence / with Latin syntax" whose verb has already been uttered is the didactic decree governing this life.

In her encounter with this syntax, Lleshanaku does bring attention to its limits and absurdity, but does not examine how her own writing reproduces a similar result by adhering to externally predetermined norms. We see this dynamic unfolding in "Water and Carbon," where after a description of violence in Albania's labor camps—discussed earlier in this chapter—Lleshanaku makes a comparison between the communist labor camps and the Nazi extermination camps. She writes: "Without a witness we wouldn't even have crematoriums / and only white fumes would leak out of history's nostrils" (Lleshanaku 113). In these two verses, there is an indirect parallel between the writer and the witness. In either case, Lleshanaku implies, the absence of the witness or the writer would have meant the complete erasure of history, because "even [the] crematoriums" would not have made it to the record without the witnesses' watchful eye or the writer's narrativization. By placing the writers' role in this close relation to witnessing, Lleshanaku minimizes the rhetorical choices she makes as a poet: like a person witnessing atrocity because of the chance of being at the wrong place at the wrong time, the writer arrives to the page through circumstances out of her control. In other words, Lleshanaku obscures the social and political influences that drive the comparison underlying the verses above, which invoke the Nazi crematorium in order to position the Albanian labor camp in a self-evident continuation of the same fascist violence of the Second World War.

Indeed, while Lleshanaku's body of work is deeply concerned with memory, the development of postsocialist memory politics in Albania, including the desire to participate in the collective memory of Europe and the Western world more broadly, remains outside the scope

of her critical and poetic eye. As a writer who has benefitted from the interest that the world literary market had for stories coming from traumatized postsocialist nations, Lleshanaku has yet to substantially address how this sociopolitical context aided her international success and impacted her work. In an interview conducted for an Albanian television program in October of 2021, the poet is asked about the circumstances that led to her becoming translated to English and participating in various American literary programs.<sup>122</sup> She is evasive with her answer, saying that her career path was simply a product of chance. This hesitancy to discuss the networks of rewriters—translators, editors, critics and scholars—who played a role in building interest for Albanian literature in the United States, starting with those at the International Writers’ Program at Iowa, renders both the traumatic framework and the Cold War paradigm irrelevant to Lleshanaku’s literary career. But without the social and political context that these two historical developments provide, it is impossible to understand the position of contemporary Albanian literature in the international literary market. Lleshanaku’s promotion of this ahistorical view aims to place her outside of politics and as a result, make her poetry appear as if disconnected from ideology. Thus she reproduces the initial rewriting of her work as having an apolitical aesthetic that set her apart from her contemporaries, which American editors, translators and critics put forth at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Over two decades since that initial introduction, Lleshanaku appears to have tired of the representative role that was designated for her. During a public conversation that took place in April of 2021, part of a literary festival organized by the Albanian bookseller Bukinist, Lleshanaku shared that though she had been working on a few new poems, she did not have a

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<sup>122</sup> See “‘Fol me mua’ nga Rovena Dilo - E ftuar Luljeta Lleshanaku:” <https://youtu.be/DOMPtoQYpC0>.

new collection on her hands, and was taking her time to arrive to a new book.<sup>123</sup> This is a statement she has made on a few different occasions, attributing the delay of this new book to her desire to not repeat herself—a wish that might come from participating in publishing networks that demanded the same narratives from her. During this particular event, Lleshanaku is asked to describe her ideal reader. An ideal reader of her writing, she answers, would be someone who chances upon her work without any preconceived notions and engages with it on its own terms. Given our discussion in this chapter, it is hard to imagine this reader exists. Because Lleshanaku’s career trajectory has been so intrinsically linked with the traumatic exceptionalism of Albanian memory politics after state socialism, as well as the binaries of the cultural Cold War, the imperative to testify, and a European mnemonic landscape that reflects and shapes these other factors, readers who encounter her will inevitably expect a certain level of adherence to the framework of trauma. While this framework has been ascribed to postsocialist Albanian literature in general, it has been especially significant in Lleshanaku’s case. To obscure or deny this fact contributes to the sort of historical rewriting that suggests trauma and suffering is the most prominent and inherent quality of the Albanian nation—a form of self-victimization that forces one to repeat oneself, as Lleshanaku also notes.

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<sup>123</sup> See a recording of this conversation here, “Sukseset e poezisë së Luljeta Lleshanakut:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kis3sDQKWk0>.



## Chapter 4

### Theaters of War: The Implicated Narratives of Daša Drndić

#### 4.1 Introduction

Andreas Ban would like to not remember. He would like to leave all the ghosts in the past, to be haunted by nothing and no one, particularly the history of a continent whose legacy is one of war and destruction. But his efforts are futile: in the novels where Daša Drndić makes him a protagonist, the narrative unfolds a seemingly endless series of violent events, perpetuated by a cast of characters that are as unrepentant as they are accepted, even welcomed, by a contemporary moment and society that, as Drndić demonstrates, encourages the advance of fascism through the active forgetting and rewriting of history. For Andreas Ban, his attempt to *not* remember differs from forgetting. His efforts target the memories that have penetrated each cell of his body like the air he inhales, which like a miasma, has transformed into an embodied experience of daily anxiety and terror. We understand his suffering because Drndić's narratives bring us into the depths of this character's historical research and the rageful despondency that results from his searching. In this state, Andreas Ban traverses the European continent searching for the past, discovering its violent legacies in the archives of different states and institutions, in public memorials and street signs, and underneath the layers of secrecy and silence that shape the European community, including his own Croatian home. First in the novel *Belladonna*, and then in *E.E.G.*, this searching makes him feel that he has “sunk into the morgue of time,” becoming a “cadaver wrapped in senselessness, in idiocies, in the grotesquely devised absurdity of soldiering with an aura of the dramatic” (Drndić *Belladonna* 36).

It is not surprising that Andreas Ban dreams of not remembering, even if this desire will ultimately remain unattainable. Just as in previous chapters—where we encountered the torzo’s search for its name, the narrator’s writing, and the victim’s reintegration in society—Andreas Ban’s wishes remained unfulfilled. Drndić foregrounds Andreas Ban’s desire in the opening section of *Belladonna*, through a wishful thinking that reasons: “He could do that too. Stop speaking. Stop remembering” (2). Disgusted by the militarized remembrance through which “men in bars feed their masculinity,” and consequently, the deadly nationalism that devolves into more war, Andreas Ban seeks an alternative to such remembering (Drndić *Belladonna* 36).<sup>124</sup> He recognizes the futility of the task he is drawn to again and again, until he has sunk so deep within the interconnected and parallel threads that make up the past that he finds himself surrounded by the “rubbish heap of time” (*Trieste* 58, *E.E.G* 8). And so, despite the promises he makes himself that “he will not research the obscenities of the Second World War,” Andreas Ban continues to excavate Europe’s hidden histories—the ones found in “his” Croatia, and the ones he discovers in his travels (*E.E.G* 260). Through Andreas Ban and his research of the past, Daša Drndić explores her fascination with the names and stories of ordinary people left behind and silenced by official accounts of history, those people whose “individual destinies sink” and “small lives merge into one great false mass event that keeps repeating its statistical story” (*Belladonna* 250-1). In the course of *Belladonna* (2012) and *E.E.G.* (2016), two novels that follow the fragmentary and discontinuous journey of Andreas Ban’s reckoning with the legacies of the Second World War in Europe, Drndić expands the work she had started in earlier novels like *Canzone di guerra* (1998), *Totenwände: Zidovi smrti* (2000), *Doppelgänger* (2002), *April u Berlinu / April in Berlin*

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<sup>124</sup> Here Drndić’s text remains in the conditional: Andreas Ban “could now recollect his military days in detail,” she writes, before continuing with a paragraph-long list of the memories that Ban could remember if he so chose. As readers, we become privy to this militarized memory only in the conditional— that grammatical tense which in Albahari’s *Bait*, Donald was so determined to renounce.

(2009), and especially, *Sonnenschein / Trieste* (2007).<sup>125</sup> In this chapter, I focus on three of these novels: *Trieste*, *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, works that are linked thematically and intertextually, and where Andreas Ban is a key figure.

Early in *Belladonna*, Drndić inserts an intertextual reference to her earlier novel, writing about Andreas Ban reading *Trieste*. In that novel, he finds the name of a relative, who in *Trieste* had appeared as a Jewish boy that Haya Tedeschi, the novel's main character, knew as a young girl in Italian-occupied Albania, where her father had secured employment through his connections with the National Fascist Party of Italy (Partito Nazionale Fascista, or PNF). Not long after, Drndić stages a chance encounter between Andreas Ban and Haya Tedeschi in *Belladonna*: they meet at an art exhibit on the work of Zoran Mušič, organized in the northern Italian town of Gorizia, near the border of Slovenia and Italy. This meeting highlights the extent of entanglement between these two characters' lives, and in turn, the connections between seemingly disparate historical periods and places. Like Haya Tedeschi, Zoran Mušič, a Slovene artist and anti-fascist, had lived in Trieste in 1943. The two might have passed each other in the street: Haya heading to watch a film in the cinema with her lover, S.S. officer Kurt Franz, while Zoran, soon to be deported to the Dachau concentration camp, walked by her. And so, after his meeting with Haya, Andreas Ban reflects, "for the *n*th time" that "we are all traveling along parallel tracks, tracks that touch for only an instant through the crazed sparks that scatter from the wheels of an eternally rushing train" (*Belladonna* 45). This "eternally rushing train," this acceleration toward a present interested only in progress, which depends on an ideologically manipulated past, disturbs and disgusts Andreas Ban. Yet, despite the proclamations of his refusal to remember, he is obsessed with the past, an obsession that helps him make sense of a

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<sup>125</sup> Drndić first published *Sonnenschein* in Croatia in 2007. In 2012, the English-language translation was published under the title *Trieste*. For easier reading, I will refer to the novel by its English title.

Croatian present where the rewriting of history is happening before his eyes. This obsession also connects Andreas Ban with Haya Tedeschi, whose research of the Holocaust in *Trieste* becomes an all-consuming activity in her old age, as she finally begins to deal with the horror of events she so easily ignored in her youth.

As I argue in this chapter, Haya Tedeschi and Andreas Ban's mutual fixation with the past and historical research reflects Drndić's concern with the concepts of implication and the implicated subject—concepts explicated by Michael Rothberg in conversation with a long lineage of thinkers and activists, including the Combahee River Collective's idea of multiple and interrelated forms of oppression, and Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt's ideas around collective responsibility. Tracing Drndić's preoccupation with implication in *Trieste*, *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, I demonstrate its profound influence in her oeuvre, arguing that it is the implicated subject who becomes the protagonist of these novels, rather than the more common protagonists of historical fiction—the passive bystander, the suffering victim, or the evil perpetrator. While the previous chapters discussed literary texts that critique the repetition of violence across generations, Drndić's work makes explicit that such repetition is *enabled* by the implicated subjects whose actions and inactions facilitate this continuation of violence, suffering and repression. Because of its intertemporal nature and its move away from the binary of victim and perpetrator, I consider implication as a better analytical tool for capturing the relationship between past atrocities and present injustice that Drndić so meticulously dissects in her novels.

These novels reflect a sociopolitical context that—in the years immediately before and after Croatia succeeded in its bid to enter the European Union in 2013—was intensely focused on reframing and rewriting history and establishing a cohesive collective memory based on that rewriting. As scholars like Ljiljana Radonić and Jelena Subotić have argued, Croatia's historical

revisionism has been aided by the implementation of the EU's "standards of memory," which delegitimize the country's socialist past and anti-fascist struggle during WWII. This chapter argues that Drndić's work challenges the complex layers of historical silencing and revisionism occurring in Croatia *and* in Europe by laying bare their implication in the legacies of the Holocaust and Second World War, legacies whose magnitude has yet to be fully measured and addressed. Using what Vlad Beronja has called an "archival poetics," Drndić embeds within her fictional narratives a wealth of historical research, testimonies from Holocaust survivors, and long lists of names of those who were killed. These names, stories and voices interrupt the narrative and make linearity impossible. This strategy of interruption, which functions alongside one of digression and bracketing, reveals the *inevitability* of implication. By using the term "inevitability," I aim to capture the ways in which implication functions in Drndić: like the negative space that gives the world its shape, or the silence that is always constitutive of language, implication becomes the ontological condition of *Trieste*, *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.* Despite all attempts of an implicated society to deny the past and create instead a "new life blurred by memories in which albums from the past lay stored in a cranny of reality," in Drndić, this hidden archive—"as always happens"—will one day be found, opened and read by someone (*E.E.G.* 107). What actions are taken after the silenced and hidden fact of implication becomes known, then, is the ethical question posed by Drndić's novels.

My engagement with these novels challenges Stijn Vervae't's assertion that Drndić appropriates victims' stories in order to enable the "reader's *identification* with the victims rather than [...] a relation of empathy which would involve critical distance and an awareness of the *difference* between the reader/writer/historian on the one hand, and the victim on the other" (Vervae't 132). I maintain that, if Drndić wants her readers to identify with a set of characters, it

is with *implicated subjects*, not victims. This is why her novels are filled with characters who testify to their implication, providing an important supplement to victims' testimonies. Andreas Ban in *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, the Tedeschi family, Elvira Weiner, the Lebensborn and the descendants of Nazis in *Trieste*, and Rudolf Sass in *Belladonna*, create a map of implication that Drndić uses to lead her readers on a tour of Europe's silencing of its war crimes and responsibility to victims.

But the characters I have named above make up only a fraction of the implicated subjects that populate Drndić's novels. Hers is an endless list that includes nearly everyone who enters the narrative: the passive, ordinary people content with the scraps their governments give them; the cowardly, apolitical academics and employees of bureaucratic institutions who uphold Croatian nationalism; the members of the Croatian diaspora who perpetuate the rewriting of history and help the state's rehabilitation of the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska or NHD), actors that contribute to the re-emergence and strengthening of fascism; the people who enjoy their afternoons in Parisian cafés in buildings seized from Jews; Italian tourists who eagerly buy properties in Croatian towns for cheap after the Yugoslav wars; and the international writing residencies and literary programs which exploit suffering, commodify literature, and infantilize readers. Through such an expansive demonstration of implication and implicated subjecthood, Drndić's novels focus on the countless, inevitable ways that one is connected to legacies of violence, and in the process, knowingly position the reader among this web of implication. While most criticism on Drndić has categorized her novels as being dedicated to victimhood, this chapter's close and extensive engagement with her work reveals implication as the primary organizing principle.

In the previous paragraph, I listed a number of implicated subjects who represent a contemporary set of characters. Drndić's intertemporal narratives juxtapose these characters with subjects who were implicated in WWII while the war was ongoing. A vast group of people united by an insistence on their innocence and a denial of their implication, these groups have most often been defined as "bystanders" in academic scholarship and popular culture. Drndić also employs this term throughout these novels, but the designation of "bystander" does not capture the extent of these figures' connection to historical violence. As Rothberg argues, our vocabulary for discussing historical violence suffers from underdevelopment, and the idealized idea of an innocent "bystander" is thus used to describe people who, in reality, are implicated in this violence. Rothberg proposes the category of the "implicated subject" to capture the multiple, complex ways in which a subject who is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but "rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator" exists in the world (1). Though Drndić's novels often reference and criticize the bystander, their true concern is with the implicated subject. We observe this in *Trieste*, when, in the midst of revealing how the Tedeschi family became involved with fascist ideology during the Second World War, Drndić inserts a reflection that, despite invoking bystanders, captures the essence of the implicated subject of contemporary Europe. Drndić writes:

Life is stronger than war. For most people, for the obedient and the silent, for those on the sidelines, for the bystanders, life becomes a small, packed suitcase that is never opened, an overnight bag slipped under the bed, baggage going nowhere, in which everything is neatly folded—days, tears, deaths, little pleasures, spreading the stench of mold. For those on the sidelines there is no telling what they are thinking, whose side they are on, because they do nothing but stand and watch what is going on around them as if they don't see a thing, as if nothing is happening, as if there is nothing going on. They live according to the dictates of everyone's laws, and when the wars end this serves them well. There are many bystanders. They are the majority.

Blind observers are “ordinary” people who play for low stakes. They play it safe. They live their lives unimpeded. In war and skirting war, these blind observers look away with indifference and actively refuse to feel compassion; their self-deception is a hard shield, a shell in which, larvae-like, they wallow cheerfully.

They are everywhere: in the neutral governments of neutral countries, among us. Bystanders. That is who we are.

For sixty years now these blind observers have been pounding their chests and shouting, *We are innocent because we didn't know!*” and with the onset of new wars and new troubles, new observers crop up, armies of young and powerful bystanders are born, blindfolded, feeding on their innocence, on their indestructible compatibility, these yes-men, these enablers of evil. Little stories are forever surfacing. (*Trieste* 83)

In Drndić’s original text, the word “bystander” has not been translated into BCS, but used in its English form, changed only to match the language’s grammatical rules. “Bystanderi, *to smo mi*” she writes, and then describes the Tedeschi family as: “civilna je obitelj, *bystanderska* i šutliva, a kad ne šuti, učlanjuje se u fašizam” (*Sonnenschein* 96, 98).<sup>126</sup> In Ellen Elias-Bursać’s English-language translation, this sentence is rendered as: “The Tedeschi family are a civilian family, bystanders who keep their mouths shut, but when they do speak, they sign up to fascism”

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<sup>126</sup> In various [interviews](#) and [blog posts](#), Drndić reveals her inspiration for the Tedeschi family in *Trieste*. In 2015, as one of the five recipients of the literary prize Premio Gregor von Rezzori, Drndić was in a [conversation](#) with Antonio Scurati, Susanna Nirenstein and Edmund White. When asked about the inspiration for *Trieste*, Drndić described that during her research of Holocaust testimony, she had found an account of a woman from Gorizia, who during the Second World War had lived in Trieste, and then different Albanian cities, and whose Jewish family had survived the war by blending in and joining Mussolini’s Fascist Party. This “pathetic pamphlet, full of pathos” as she calls it, was Drndić’s initial motivation for exploring the Holocaust through the question of the bystanders. Interestingly, despite speaking in Croatian and Italian, all the participants of this event employ the English term “bystander.” Because of *Trieste*’s wide distribution following its translation to English, the family that had served as inspiration for the novel [recognized](#) themselves in the work. Members of the family confronted Drndić at promotional events and wrote numerous articles about the issue. Their contention appears to have been not with the issue of implication, but with the fictional relationship that Haya Tedeschi has with S.S. officer and Treblinka camp commander Kurt Franz. As a result of the family’s involvement, a note was added to all subsequent printing of *Trieste* in English, clarifying that the book is a work of fiction, and specifically addressing the inspiration for Haya Tedeschi’s character.



(*Trieste* 86).<sup>127</sup> The original text's inclusion of an English-language term—particularly one as loaded with historical, political and cultural connotations as “bystander”—is not captured in *Trieste*'s English translation, as the word does not need to be translated in this version of the novel.

Two important points are raised by this question of translation: first, the issue of the circulation of Western human rights discourse and terminology and its influence on the former Yugoslavia; and second, the inadequacy of the term “bystander” to capture the complexity of Drndić's work. The first point is something that has been discussed throughout this dissertation, since it pertains to the dissemination of European “memory standards” that adhere to the limiting view of history dictated by EU policy, where the memory of the Holocaust is universalized and standardized. According to these standards, the main figures who were involved in the Holocaust were the perpetrators of violence, the victims who suffered this violence, and the bystanders who, because of self-preservation or shock, stood passively while this violence took place, doing nothing to resist it. The importing of such terminology and understandings of the past is difficult to avoid in the post-socialist landscape of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, as the countries' efforts to join the European Union inevitably lead to the adoption of language that aligns their own “reckoning with the past” with that of the European community.

Therefore, and in relation to the second point, we can note how Drndić's “bystander” may, in fact, be an implicated subject. Analyzing Drndić's novels as “(anti)historical” narratives, Jasna Lukić uses the term “mitläufer,” which she translated into BCS as “suputnik,” to pinpoint

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<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, the Tedeschi family's politics are framed through an oppositional relationship between silence and speech. In this case, their silence is not a resistant one, but is clearly in support of fascism, so that “when they do speak,” they only make their allegiance more official.

the major concerns of the writer's work.<sup>128</sup> She writes that Drndić's process of "'historicizing' the personal sphere" is:

... especially evident in her attitude towards the fellow-travelers of history, those whom *Sonneschein* calls *bystanders* in the novel and to whom she is extremely critical. It can even be said that one of the crucial parts of *Sonneschein* is shaped around her fascination with this "fellow-traveler" position, the unwillingness of a large number of people to recognize the consequences of inaction and take political responsibility for what they were (not) ready to do. (28)<sup>129</sup>

In Lukić's analysis we observe another instance where the circulation of English and German terminology, borne out of specific sociopolitical and historical contexts of the United States and Germany, is translated and used by scholars in the former Yugoslavia (in this case found in *Treća*, a magazine published by the Centar za ženske studije / Center for Women Studies in Zagreb). The German term *mitläufer* refers to those Nazis who, in the German denazification process were regarded as "followers" of Nazi ideology. These *mitläufer*—a word which roughly translates to "travel with" or "fellow-traveler"—were rarely, if ever, convicted by the Nuremberg Courts or other trials.<sup>130</sup> But the *mitläufer* can hardly be understood as a passive bystander, as these people remained employed in organizations responsible for war crimes, or were otherwise connected and implicated in the war, and thus continued to participate in the public life of the Third Reich—as the Tedeschi family does in Drndić's *Trieste*.<sup>131</sup> I see the *mitläufer* as coming

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<sup>128</sup> My thanks to Tatjana Aleksić for pointing out that "suputnik" was a translation of "mitläufer."

<sup>129</sup> "To je posebice jasno vidljivo u njezinu odnosu prema suputničima povijesti, onima koje u romanu *Sonneschein* zove *bystanders* i prema kojima je izrazito kritična. Čak se može reći da se *Sonneschein* jednim svojim bitnim dijelom oblikuje oko njezine fascinacije tom "suputničkom" pozicijom, nespremnosti velikog broja ljudi da prepoznaju posljedice nečinjenja i preuzmu političku odgovornost za ono što (nisu) bili spremni učiniti" (Lukić 28).

<sup>130</sup> The *mitläufer* were listed fourth in terms of criminal responsibility for the Holocaust, after "major offenders," "offenders (activists, militarists, and profiteers)" and "lesser offenders (probationers). The fifth and final category included "Persons exonerated. (Those included in the above categories who can prove themselves not guilty before a tribunal)." (See: Control Council Directive No. 38 of October 1946).

<sup>131</sup> On the question of responsibility and participation in a totalitarian society's public life, Arendt writes: "For the simple truth of the matter is that only those who withdrew from public life altogether, who refused political responsibility of any sort, could avoid becoming implicated in crimes, that is, could avoid legal and moral responsibility" (34).

closer to capturing the crux of Drndić's literary intervention, but this concept still cannot account for her novels' concern with the intertemporal impact of historical violence.

To obtain more analytical specificity, we must turn to the concept of implication. In working with this concept, I do not seek to reproduce the dynamic of uncritical application of terminology developed in the North American or Western European academy to interpreting post-Yugoslav or Albanian memory politics and cultural production. Rather, I argue that it is Drndić's work, with its complex configurations of memory, history and calls for collective responsibility, which leads us to implication. What I observe in the long excerpt from *Trieste* quoted above, is Drndić's expression of the relationship between the past and the present as one of implication: collective responsibility for the violent past is precisely what is denied by these "blind observers" who "for sixty years now" have proclaimed their innocence. Yet, as Drndić's novels reveal, these groups of "bystanders" were never passive, and even if they had been, passivity in the face of fascism is in itself a grave failing. The word "now" keeps the passage of decades tethered to the present, a present in which "new wars," "new troubles," "new observers crop up" and new "bystanders are born," ready to repeat the same story, one whose narrative thread has never been fully closed. The figure of the bystander cannot capture this temporal dimension of implication, because the bystander is tied closely to one particular time and space. On the other hand, the implicated subject as an analytical category does not function according to rigid temporal borders, and therefore does not divorce the present, with all its unjust conditions, from legacies of the violence that occurred in the past.

Likewise, in her critique of the compliance and complicity of the bystanders who "live according to the dictates of everyone's laws," Drndić does not separate the experience of war from what comes after. That these actions, in fact, "[serve] them well" when the war ends

suggests that their privileged existence will be inherited by their descendants, who despite not directly participating in the war, will benefit from their families' implication and participation in the fascist and Nazi regimes. By making the implicated subject the protagonist of novels so concerned with historical and present violence and injustice, Drndić pushes her readers to critically assess their own implication in the layered structures of oppression and violence that make up their lives. In the above passage, "That is who we are," serves as a direct address to readers and implicates *them* in the violent histories examined in the novel. I see this statement functioning as a form of "implicated nonidentification" that distances the subjects included in this "we" from those impacted by the violence of war, and seeks a non-appropriative relationship with the survivor testimonials that Drndić adapts and includes in *Trieste*, and later in *Belladonna* and *E.E.G* (Rothberg 150, 207n12).

In what follows, I analyze Daša Drndić's *Trieste*, *Belladonna*, and *E.E.G.*, through the lens of Michael Rothberg's concept of implication, and show that despite these novels' strong preoccupation with victims, perpetrators and bystanders, it is the implicated subject who becomes their primary concern. Through her research practice, which allows for the mixing of historical facts and fictional narratives, Drndić creates a world where, sooner or later, each character will discover their implication in the violence of the past. The archives of implication, either institutional and governed by bureaucracy, or unofficial, hidden and languishing in attics, prompt her characters' engagement with implication, revealing how the past they are connected to makes them implicated subjects in the present. Once this knowledge is gained, their actions or inactions will determine the extent to which fascist ideology and violence will continue to be a force that shapes the European present and future. Written after the Yugoslav wars, during Croatia's EU ascension proceedings and in the years that followed its official membership in the

union, Drndić's novels subvert the "memory standards" that the EU requires its members to adopt. I argue that, while the Holocaust is certainly the major historical event explored in these three novels, thus fulfilling one of the key tenets of European memory, Drndić does not reject the legacy of anti-fascism, but fully claims anti-fascist resistance as the only viable politics for the former Yugoslavia, for other countries in the Balkans, and for the European continent.

#### **4.2 European Memories: Andreas Ban and Antonio Tedeschi/Hans Traube in Wannsee**

Before delving into the analysis of implication in *Trieste*, *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, I would like to ground the discussion through a close reading of a moment in *E.E.G.*, Drndić's final novel published prior to her death, and the second book that follows Andreas Ban's story. In the middle of this novel, we find Andreas Ban at a writers' residency in at Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin that, since 1963, has welcomed international writers "from east and West" to "[lay] the blueprint of the literary scene we're familiar with today" (Literarische Colloquium Berlin, "Fifty years in the midst of literature"). The neighborhood is filled with grand, beautiful villas, one of which houses writers participating in this program. On January 20, 1942, in another villa in Wannsee, the highest-ranking Nazi party officials met to consolidate their plans for the Final Solution, in what became known as the Wannsee Conference. Ban's present-day presence at this location recalls parallel tracks that barely ever touch, on which lives of repression and violence unfold parallel to lives of implication—an asynchronous parallelism through which Drndić connects the Second World War to the present.

In *E.E.G.*, the section on Andreas Ban's stay at Wannsee is brief, spanning the length of only two pages. Drndić writes about Andreas Ban's time spent in the company of Stephan, a young writer from Leipzig and Nora Iuga, a poet from Bucharest. He weaves in and out of history and fiction, the present and the past, strolling through the garden at "this particular villa

on Wannsee” and speaking with Stephan and Nora, whose identities begin to mix with one another, with Andreas Ban, and in many ways, with Drndić herself (*E.E.G.* 194).<sup>132</sup> If Nora Iuga is introduced as a Romanian poet in one paragraph, by the end of it, it is Stephen who has been transformed into a writer from Bucharest. Drndić places the merging of their identities in italics: “*‘I was in Bucharest, I was,’ Stephan insisted, Nora said, ‘I was in Bucharest in one of my former lives, but as a woman, I was a woman in Bucharest, said Stephan,’ Nora said*” (*E.E.G.* 193-4). Drndić employs a method of accumulated speech, where the repetition of the verb “to say” creates uncertainty about the speaker of a story, as in this instance, while in other cases, it brings confusion about the provenance of testimonies. In telling the story of another, the speaker, who in the above sentence is Nora, merges with Stephan, grammatically and metaphysically. It is this repetition, experienced through the succession of one “said” after another, which confuses the narrative, making the reader pause to reread in order to distinguish which character is speaking and which parts of the speech belong to them. Because Drndić makes her authorial choices visible through a repetitive “said... said” sentence construction, as seen above here, the merging of speakers in her novels differs from Luljeta Lleshanaku’s conflation of testifying subjects in her poetry, where there was an occlusion of the poet’s intervention. Employing this technique throughout *Trieste*, *Belladonna*, and *E.E.G.*, Drndić questions ideas about ownership over a story and the forced coherence of narrative into a plotline that unfolds that story in a linear manner.

For Andreas Ban, hearing the confusing, layered and merged speech of Nora and Stephan leads to reflection about his own identity. He wonders:

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<sup>132</sup> Together with Nora Iuga, Alek Popov and Ostap Slyvynsky, Drndić was a writer in residence at the Literary Colloquium Berlin in 2007 (see [here](#)).

Then I thought for the first time, perhaps Nora Iuga is not Nora Iuga either, perhaps I am not Andreas Ban, perhaps I am a woman from my previous or future or existing life, or perhaps I am a man whom I have not yet met. Perhaps various people squat inside me, I thought then, and I decided to research it. (*E.E.G.* 194).

I interpret the presence of “various people” who squat inside of Andreas Ban as a manifestation of Rothberg’s definition of implication as a form of being “folded into” each other’s histories, which serves to connect a multidirectional set of memories and temporalities (Rothberg 1). As the identities of Andreas Ban, Nora Iuga and Stephan weave in and out of each other, it becomes more difficult to determine the borders between them, and in turn, between the temporal, narrative and historical borders of different European countries. The same way that Stephan experiences his implication in Nora Iuga’s story, and thus in the legacies embedded in a life spent in Bucharest in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, so the legacies of Nazism are tied to legacies of violence in Romania, and other countries in the Balkans. If for the Literary Colloquium Berlin,<sup>133</sup> the organizer of these literary conferences in Wannsee, these meetings were originally framed around the idea of cross-cultural encounters of writers from opposing sides of the Cold War divide, an idea that continues to guide the organization today, in Drndić’s hands, this space of literary and intellectual exchange becomes an important site for investigating implication, especially as it pertains to writers and cultural institutions.<sup>134</sup>

Yet, in this case, the process of investigating connected histories of violence does not follow the pattern that Drndić has established in her work. In fact, in a gesture uncharacteristic of her writing, Drndić does not delve into the history of the villa at Wannsee in this section, even if

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<sup>133</sup> See: “A house amid literature,” accessed at: <https://lcb.de/a-house-amid-literature/>.

<sup>134</sup> In both *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, Andrea Ban’s trips to countries like the Netherlands and Italy are prompted by invitations to literary activities, and lead to Ban’s investigations of the transnational networks of implication that exist in Europe with regards to the legacies of the Holocaust. Writing, the institutions that form around it, and implicated histories, are always connected in Drndić novels.

*E.E.G.*, like the rest of her novels, has been relentless in its excavation of the legacies of historical violence in Europe, both hidden and well-known, as in the case of the Wannsee Conference.<sup>135</sup> In this section, Andreas Ban is almost divorced from history, accomplishing the promise of not-remembering that he had made himself in *Belladonna* while at a different writer's residency in the Netherlands. Even his declaration that after experiencing the embeddedness of countless others within himself, he had "decided to research" the condition, seems to be postponed for a walk in the "horticulturally astoundingly varied" park surrounding "this particular villa on Wannsee" (*E.E.G.* 194). It is on this stroll, however, that the inevitability of implication finds Andreas Ban once more, materialized in the handsome man photographing the garden, a man who was "well built, tall and gray-haired, around sixty years old" (*E.E.G.* 194).

Drndić introduces the man as, "Hans Traube, or rather Antoninje Tedeschi" (*E.E.G.* 194).<sup>136</sup> This double identity as Hans Traube, the son of Haya Tedeschi and S.S. officer Kurt Franz, who was kidnapped as a baby as part of the Lebensborn project and raised by Austrian Nazis who named him Antonio Tedeschi, makes Hans/Antonio one of the most compelling examples of the implicated subjects in Drndić's work. His encounter with Andreas Ban in *E.E.G.* serves to connect the disparate narrative threads found in these three novels, as the implicated subject that emerged out of *Trieste*, and who haunted the pages of *Belladonna*, now makes his way to *E.E.G.* At Wannsee, he introduces himself to Andreas Ban:

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<sup>135</sup> Drndić's novel *April u Berlinu / April in Berlin* investigates German history and memory politics in depth, also providing a critique of the Wannsee museum, which according to the novel, offers an inadequate picture of what happened at the Wannsee conference. For an analysis of this novel, see: Vlad Beronja, "Shards of Broken Glass: Daša Drndić's Archival Poetics," *FLUMINENSIA*, v. 32 (2020), n.1; Stijn Vervaeet, "Intersecting Memories in Post-Yugoslav Fiction: The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s through the Lens of the Holocaust," *Post-Yugoslav Constellations : Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature and Culture*, ed. Stijn Vervaeet and Vlad Beronja, De Gruyter, Inc., 2016; Sabina Giergiel, "The Saving Narratives of Daša Drndić," *Studia Judaica* 21 (2018), nr 1 (41).

<sup>136</sup> This is the only instance where Antonio Tedeschi's first name is spelled as "Antoninje."



*My name is Hans, said the beautiful man in his admirably tailored suit. My name is Hans Traube and I come from Salzburg.*

*You can't be called Hans Traube, I said, Hans Traube is an imagined character, Hans Traube from Salzburg was invented by a writer, consequently Hans Traube can't be here, Hans Traube can live exclusively between the covers of a book.* Then "Hans Traube" said, *I'll tell you my life story, and I said, Don't. I already know your life story.*

*You don't know everything, he said. (Drndić E.E.G. 194)*

Andreas Ban refuses to listen to the story of Hans Traube, an act which may amount to a refusal of history, were it not for the fact that Ban "already" knows Hans' life story, having read it in "the book *Trieste*," as he had informed readers in *Belladonna* (53). Andreas Ban asserts his status as a "real" character, in contrast to Hans Traube, who is "an imagined character ... invented by a writer" and thus capable of living only "between the covers of a book" (*E.E.G.* 194). And yet, Hans' smile prior to disappearing from the garden and from the narrative, a smile that showcases his "beautiful teeth, his regular teeth, not porcelain" adds an air of irony to their meeting and underscores the self-reflexivity of Drndić's text. Placing the name of Hans Traube between quotation marks, Drndić creates an intertextual reference to her previous novels, where the story of Hans Traube was first revealed. In doing so, Drndić extends the network of implication beyond the confines of "the covers of a book." Moreover, by transferring the task of research to the reader, who must now investigate the provenance of this "Hans Traube" and his deeply implicated life, Drndić employs what Beronja calls a "democratic pedagogy" to guide readers toward a practice of historical excavation and taking collective responsibility about the violence of the past (25).

The lack of information about the past of Wannsee in *E.E.G.*, then, must be understood in conjunction with the positionality of Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi, and of Andreas Ban, in a network of complex implication, in which there exist: "distinct but intertwined histories that position subjects in relation to both victimization and perpetration simultaneously," without

assigning them to a fixed position within either category (Rothberg 123). Drndić, thus, does not need to expand on the history of Wannsee in this section of *E.E.G.*, because the presence of Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi serves as a tacit reminder of the implication that involves the whole continent of Europe. Hans/Antonio, in his double-named identity, represents the parallel lives and parallel histories—those of victims and of perpetrators—that appear to unfold independent of one another, not touching until the inevitable fact of implication reveals their connections. His appearance at Wannsee disrupts the German (and Western European) notion that the past has been dealt with appropriately: sixty years after the end of the Second World War, sixty years since those “innocent” bystanders started shouting *we didn't know!*, Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi returns to haunt the heart of Europe with an undeniable reminder of its implication in the legacies of the Holocaust. Memory and the past, it seems, always find a way to interrupt the liberal narratives of historical progress. Because of this, Andreas Ban's attempts to not remember will always be destined to fail.

#### **4.3 “We Ran into Fascism”: Trieste and the Question of Implication**

Earlier, I discussed implication as a recognition of how one is “folded into” histories and events that might first appear distant and unrelated. In her novels, Drndić adapts the “folded into” nature of implication to the page's visual construction. For instance, in *Belladonna*, she juxtaposes the relatively recent testimony of Thomas Harlan, the son of German Nazi film director Veit Harlan who directed the antisemitic film *Jud Süß*, with a WWII-era announcement made by the NDH's Directorate for Film to declare that only nationalist films would be permitted. While the NDH announcement celebrates deadly nationalism, Thomas Harlan's confession of the special treatment he received from the Gestapo and Goebbels as a child is followed by a direct acknowledgement that his past—specifically, his father's actions and

position in the Third Reich—implicates him in the Holocaust. We learn that driven by a profound sense of responsibility, Thomas Harlan committed himself to researching Nazi archives and helping persecute war criminals, because, as we read him say:

*Responsibility for what my father did must pass to my children and my children's children, and to their children, and so on. That past, which is also my past, circulates like shrapnel through my body, causes ineradicable, unbearable pain, and ravages it. That murky brown and black German past follows me through life. (Belladonna 65)*

Harlan expresses his recognition of his position as an implicated subject through metaphors of embodiment and inheritance, which align with Rothberg's analysis of implication and its intergenerational transmission through legacies of violence. The recognition that he has inherited implication and responsibility for his father's crimes, and that this responsibility will be passed onto future generations, shapes Thomas Harlan's response to a past that "circulates like shrapnel through [his] body." Rather than rejecting this past and its painful legacy, Harlan acknowledges this inheritance and takes responsibility for it by actively working to bring his father's associates to justice.<sup>137</sup> While Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides analytical tools for understanding the relationship between the second generation and the violent, traumatic experiences and memories of their families, the concepts of implication and the implicated subject offer analytical pathways for the study of collective responsibility. Like Hirsch's postmemory generation, Rothberg's implicated subjects navigate shifting temporalities, where the borders between past and present are tenuous, even if official narratives of history attempt to

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<sup>137</sup> Drndić likely adapts the metaphor of shrapnel from Harlan's speeches in the documentary about his life and work, *Wandersplitter / Moving Shrapnel* (2007). Thomas Harlan's films include *Wundkanal* (1984), *Remembrance* (1991) and *Verrat an Deutschland* (1955). He also produced the documentary *Notre Nazi* (1984), where he interrogates the S.S. officer Alfred Filbert. For more on this documentary and Harlan's work, see: Brad Prager (2021), "Trial by documentary: the Harlans, between *Jud Süß* (1940) and *Notre Nazi* (1984)." *Holocaust Studies*, 27:2, 235-256.

delineate clear breaks between them. In fact, implication points to the intersection of historical and contemporary structures that uphold violence and oppression.

In Drndić, I observe such intersections not only in her thematic concerns or, as just discussed, in her use of juxtaposition, but also in the construction of her sentences. At the sentence level, Drndić folds separate voices and testimonies from different time periods into one another, or inserts brackets and tangents, which often bring the Yugoslav wars into the fold of more distant histories.<sup>138</sup> For instance, the aforementioned comparison between Thomas Harlan's implicated subjecthood and Croatian fascist propaganda, is followed by a critique of the NDH-produced film *Stráža na Drini / Guard on the River Drina*, which glorifies the Ustaša fight against Yugoslav partisans in Bosnia. Drndić quotes from the film's narrative extensively, but interrupts its flow with Andreas Ban's contemporary assessment of the film:

... this Black Legion “demonstrates the greatest heroism, and the Croatian Liberation Forces (HOS) hurry to the aid of their brothers under attack in Bosnia”—as in 1992 — ‘and capture hordes of bandits who call themselves Partisans, rampaging without restraint. (*Belladonna* 70)

The phrase “as in 1992” creates a comparative relationship between the NDH and the Ustaša, and the Croatian War of Independence and Croatian aggression in Bosnia fifty years after both *Jud Süß* and *Guard on the River Drina* were first screened in Croatia. The comparison highlights the repetition of violence in the same region of Bosnia, perpetuated by those who “[rampage] without restraint,” and also hints at the implicated subjects who allowed this violence to repeat. I

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<sup>138</sup> Although the narrative of these novels revolves largely around the Holocaust and the contemporary moment, Drndić writes about the Yugoslav wars directly and extensively when she describes Andreas Ban's need to leave Belgrade for Zagreb, when Andreas Ban visits friends in Sarajevo long after the siege, and several other moments in *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*. The Yugoslav wars and dissolution of the federation are mostly approached indirectly, however, and alluded to through a focus on present-day nationalism in Croatia, and the violence of the Holocaust. Like Albahari, Drndić makes the choice to express the worst atrocities of the Yugoslav wars through less overt ways, challenging the exploitative tendencies of the literary market.

interpret this insertion, through the use of em dashes, of a more recent past in this sentence about the Second World War as a gesture that highlights implication precisely through the disruption that the insertion causes in the linear narrativization of history. As Rothberg writes, the implicated subject “emerges from the ongoing, uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present” (Rothberg 9). It is the uneven and destabilizing intrusion of the past that Drndić’s characters continually experience throughout her novels, and which, as we will see, prompts some of them to testify—not as victims—but as implicated subjects.

What, exactly, does implication mean in this context? In Rothberg’s argument, which I adopt in this chapter, implication is what accounts for histories and individuals that fall outside the limiting categorization of traumatic histories as a dichotomy of victims and perpetrators. Unlike “the victim” and “the perpetrator,” the implicated subject is not a fixed category, but a dynamic position that changes according to context, temporal and spatial location. One may be a victim in one context, and an implicated subject in another space or time period. Rothberg names this dynamic “complex implication,” a term used to explain the “coexistence of different relations to past and present injustices” (8). As neither victim nor perpetrator, the implicated subject eludes a Western legal system that is limited, in scope and vocabulary, by the “individualist and legal assumptions of liberal culture” and in turn, implication is “entangled in injustices that fall outside the purview of the law” and cannot be judged by a court or tribunal (Rothberg 8). While courts seek to indict specific individuals for specific crimes, and are thus beholden to time-bound events, implication accounts for the complex, dynamic and diachronic legacies<sup>139</sup> of violence that evade temporal and spatial borders.

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<sup>139</sup> Rothberg insists on a plural use of the word “legacy”: “Treating people as property, chattel slavery produced morally tainted legacies of wealth for some at the same time that it stripped other classes of people of property, privilege, and right” (64). In thinking through the legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave

As the story of a Catholicized Jewish family who survived the war by becoming members of the Italian National Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*, or PNF), Drndić's novel *Trieste* is a compelling exploration of implication and its entanglements.<sup>140</sup> For Drndić, there is no doubt that by seeking and obtaining membership in the PNF, the Tedeschi family was implicated in the Holocaust and the Nazi project of Aryan racial purity and supremacy. *Trieste* slowly and methodically reveals the ways in which this family became “enablers of evil” who lived “according to the dictates of everyone’s laws” even before Haya’s overt transgression through

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trade, he writes, it is necessary to think of their contemporary manifestations in structural racism and racial inequality, which confer privileges to some and oppression to others, regardless of one’s direct lineage. Thus, one of the overarching question posed in his study is: what does it mean to inherit and be implicated in legacies of violence, genocide and dehumanization, across vast temporal distances, when you are not a direct descendent of those who perpetrated this violence?

<sup>140</sup> Historians of the Second World War in Italy have pointed out the historical revisions at play in the study and overall societal attitude around the Holocaust in Italy, where fascism is understood as having been less severe in its persecution and violation of Jewish rights when compared to Nazism. As Susan C. Knittel observes in *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*, recent decades have seen a wave of critique against the myth of the “good Italian” who bore no responsibility for WWII crimes. Scholarship on Italian racist policies and actions during the war, the discrimination and persecution of the Jewish Italian community, the forced Italianization of Croats and Slovenes, and Italy’s colonial aspirations and invasion of Ethiopia and Albania, has served to combat this myth and its misrepresentation of the historical record. Mussolini’s Fascist government may have not carried out an eugenic campaign like Nazi Germany, but its campaigns of “agricultural, human, and cultural bonifica (reclamation and improvement), especially in border regions” had lasting effects on the non-Aryan population of the country (Knittel 15).

The Italian historian Michele Safratti has played a key role in researching the gradual loss of rights that the Jewish population of Italy experienced after Mussolini founded the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento in 1919, the establishment of the National Fascist Party in 1921 and the March on Rome the following year. The stripping of political power and basic rights that the Jewish community experienced in the 1920s and 1930s underwent several phases, which are carefully explicated by Safratti, and occurred at the same time as an increase in virulent antisemitism in the press and in politics. On 6 October 1938, the “Dichiarazione Sulla Razza” (Declaration on Race) introduced the “first detailed definition of what it meant ‘to belong to the Jewish race’” (Safratti 129). This declaration built on a long list of antisemitic measures, including the identification and conduction of a census of Jews, the aryanization of different sectors of society, the expulsion of all Jewish students from public schools, and all foreign Jews from Italy (Safratti 121-5). According to the October decree, the Jewish population would be divided into different categories, and these antisemitic laws would be applied to differing degrees to “Italian Jews possessing military, national, or Fascist merits” (Safratti 125). Such a distinction was short-lived, as the definitive legislation announced in November 1938 proclaimed no more differences within the Jewish community.

her affair with a S.S. officer (*Trieste* 83).<sup>141</sup> For this family, life during the Second World War continues nearly unimpeded, aided by the connections that the parents make within the PNF and their willingness to ignore what is happening around them. For example, they clap along with all the other supporters of the PNF each December when the government announces the “twenty-three most reproductively active mothers in Italy,” and their neighbor is awarded for the eighteen sons she has birthed (*Trieste* 45). “Life is beautiful,” Drndić’s narrative declares with wry irony, since up to that point, readers have been faced with a relentless barrage of information about the First World War, the subsequent rise of fascism in Italy and the escalation of discrimination against Jews during the 1930s (*Trieste* 45). If not “beautiful,” the gendered reproduction of life is undoubtedly essential to nation-building, and this early scene will be tied with the history of the Lebensborn later in the novel.

When Drndić repeats the statement about life being beautiful a few pages later, the narrative finds the Tedeschi family in southern Albania, happily swimming and enjoying the pleasant climate. Thanks to an old army friend, Haya’s father Florian has been able to secure a job with the Bank of Naples, and then, by pleading with a fascist bank official, has received a transfer to Italian-occupied Albania. There he “makes headway at his job. He is proud. He buys a

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<sup>141</sup> Michele Sarfatti writes that there were a variety of reasons why Jews became part of the Fascist movement. At its inception, people may have joined because they were “motivated by the nationalism and the profound patriotism that many had matured during the months and years spent in the trenches of the First World War,” a feeling that also developed out of the Italian unification and nation-building project during the Risorgimento, when the Jewish community played an important role (Sarfatti Quest XV). Sarfatti determines that “the Jews who joined the PNF ... might be nationalists, members of the 1920-1922 Fascist squads, reactionaries, men of order, ‘Mussolinians,’ landowners adverse to Bolshevism, young men who believed in the new doctrine’s anti-bourgeois revolution, later (in the Thirties) young men who had been educated in fascistized schools, people who had joined for self-serving reasons or to follow the tide” (Quest XV). Even in the 1930s, membership of Jews in the PNF continued to grow, although at a much smaller rate than that of the general population, until the racial laws enacted by the PNF in 1938 excluded all Jews from the Fascist Party (Sarfatti 116-7). See: Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, and the special issue of the journal *QUEST. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, edited by Sarfatti and titled *Italy’s Fascist Jews: Insights on an Unusual Scenario* (Issue n. 11, October 2017, doi: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/3

new suit, Italian, a new trench coat, black” (*Trieste* 57). “Oh, yes, life is beautiful,” Drndić writes again, because for the Tedeschi family, these implicated subjects, life “flows by” on the Albanian beaches where they eat fresh seafood and where Haya meets her first love (*Trieste* 58). In describing the relative ease of these years, Drndić offers a critique of the family’s complete lack of self-reflection and accountability about the ways they had been implicated in events for which they were not directly responsible and which were beyond their individual agency, but from which they undoubtedly benefited.

On the contrary, the Tedeschi family expresses a strong identification with the Italian nation. In this family’s mythology and memories, it is the partisans, and not the fascists, who become associated with a negative feeling, alongside German soldiers who pose a threat to the Italian nation. Haya, for instance, remembers “how the whole family fear thieves and Tito’s partisan bandits, bandits most of all” (*Trieste* 88). This memory coexists with contradictory ones like Florian’s job loss, the disappearance of Haya’s Jewish teachers and classmates, and the “several nights on straw mattresses” that they had to spend hiding “in the foyer of the Dajti Hotel, while around their heads stomp polished Italian boots” (*Trieste* 60). Returning from Albania to Italy after Italy’s capitulation in 1944, “in chorus with Ada and Florian,” Haya tells their relatives in Gorizia: “*Those were terrible times for us Italians there*” (*Trieste* 60). In this statement, I see the family’s desire to inscribe themselves within the Italian nation. The use of phrasing like “us Italians” to frame their war-time experiences makes the Tedeschi family’s attitude toward memory stand diametrically opposite to the silence of the narrator’s mother in David Albahari’s *Bait*. While the narrator’s mother refused inclusion in the construction of national history, the Tedeschi family willingly did so, making them anything but passive bystanders. But while the Tedeschi family seeks inclusion in the category of “us Italians,” they



do not want to take any responsibility for the crimes that the fascists committed in their name, even though by participating in the public life of Mussolini's totalitarian society, they had entered its body politic. As Arendt wrote in 1964, such participation in the public life of the fascist regime would make one "implicated in one way or another in the deeds of the regime as a whole" regardless of official "party membership or membership in the elite formations of the regime" (33).

Unlike her family, after the war Haya does experience some guilt over this implication. Her frenzied research of the S.S. officers who operated the concentration camp at San Sabba in Trieste, and their prior involvement in the Aktion T4 euthanasia program, as well as her research in the International Center of Nazi Persecution at Bad Arolsen, are actions that bring her face to face with the perpetrators of the Holocaust, both its key architects and its "ordinary" soldiers. This search represents her attempt to reckon with her past and demonstrates how "memory can serve as a resource" in the "struggle against the conditions that produce implication" (Rothberg 11). Because Haya's preoccupation remains chiefly with the *perpetrators* of the Holocaust, her historical understanding is limited and she cannot understand her positionality as an implicated subject. Nonetheless, it is significant that, for Haya, the past "elbows into her wait like a blow, like a surfacing diver, breaking, transparent and wet, through an elusive wall (of memories), and Valona shimmers before her eyes, completely changed" (*Trieste* 58). Describing the past through such terms, Drndić suggests a physical force that Haya cannot stop, as the past has inevitably caught up with her. What has changed? What has caused these distant decades to now haunt the hidden, dusty "meanders" and "warehouses" of Haya's consciousness, to appear all around her and fill with "rubbish" the emptiness in which she passes her final years, waiting for her son, kidnapped by the Nazis, to return to her?

Once again, Drndić points us toward implication. In her old age, now that she has the time to wait, Haya also has “the time to wonder *How could I not have known? How could I not have seen?*” (*Trieste* 58). A temporality of waiting has started to govern Haya’s time, and she begins to experience the past as something that is not entirely closed off, but that can be revived again in the present. This past becomes tangible for her as she starts to collect, in a red bucket by her feet, the letters, documents, newspaper clippings, photographs and more, which make up the vast and seemingly disconnected string of events and lives that, in one way or another, she had been folded into. “My memories are my present,” Haya declares after a long period of researching, reading and collecting these materials, whose contents enter her consciousness and disturb what she had once known as her past (*Trieste* 252).<sup>142</sup> Thinking of her life “in retrospect,” she struggles to remember the faint outlines of Jewish life she saw in Albania, but can clearly remember her parents expressing their fear of the “Greeks and the Albanians, the partisan bandits,” and the distinct feeling that they, the Italians, were “losing the war” (*Trieste* 58).

Many years later, Haya attempts a meek confrontation with her mother about the fact of their implication, but it is already too late: Ada does not hear her. Confined to the psychiatric ward of Gorizia hospital at the end of her life, Ada instead relates a series of breathless and disconnected confessions about her life to her daughter. Drndić links Ada’s testimony with that of Umberto Saba, the Jewish Italian poet whom she meets at the ward, and whose poetry Drndić also incorporates into the novel. As proof of her continued, willful ignorance, Ada never realizes that Umberto Saba’s life and her own had been connected long before their physical encounter. To her, everything Umberto Saba recounts feels like discovering an entirely new world, even if, like Ada, Umberto Saba had spent his life in Trieste. Unlike her family, however, he had refused

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<sup>142</sup> Later in the novel, Haya’s descent to this temporality of waiting will trigger an episode of complete silence, a chosen speechlessness in which she only “listens to ghosts. And waits” (*Trieste* 254).

conversion to Catholicism once antisemitic laws and persecution began. In Ada's long testimony, spoken to Haya in the ward, and rendered in italics in the text, we again observe Drndić's technique of layered speech, as a relay of the word "saying" weaves together the lives of Ada and Umberto Saba in a similar way to Andreas Ban and the writers at Wannsee in *E.E.G.*. In the course of relating her story to Haya, Ada's layered speech turns her testimony into the story of both Ada and Umberto Saba. Ada's first-person singular speech mixes with Umberto Saba's third person singular (he says) and the narrative's third person singular (she says) and these two lives lived parallel to one another collide and mix together in the space of the text.

It is during this merged speech that Haya tries to alert Ada about the responsibility they carried for their implication in fascism. Drndić writes:

*And Umberto ran away, you know, just like we did, he ran away from fascism, so he tells me,*

*We ran into fascism,* Haya interrupts, but Ada doesn't hear.

*and he hid in attics. I hid everywhere, Umberto says, in attics in Paris, in Florence, in Rome, says Umberto, says Ada, and she also says, The next time you come, bring some ampoules of morphine for Umberto and little bottles of rum for me, and when I die, bury me at Valdirosa, over there, in Slovenian soil. (Trieste 137)*

The act of retelling Umberto Saba's life story necessitates a layering of language, which Drndić conveys through constructions such as: "says Umberto, says Ada, and she also says." In her attempt to reveal the similarities between their family's experience during the war and that of Umberto Saba, Ada forges a misplaced solidarity between them based on shared memories of life in Trieste, knowledge of its streets and neighborhoods, and the war-time displacement away from that city. It is Haya who reminds her that their stories differ on a crucial point: if Saba ran away from fascism, their family ran *into* it, supporting Mussolini's fascist ideology through their

membership in the PNF, participation in public demonstrations, and her father's professional involvement with the Bank of Naples.

By interrupting the torrent of her mother's speech, Haya attempts to address the family's implication in the crimes of the Second World War, but the attempt remains unsuccessful. It is important to note that the family had been aware of this implication and understood their membership in the PNF made them liable for punishment, or at least, made them morally and metaphysically guilty, to use Karl Jaspers' terminology (68). Because of this knowledge, the Tedeschi family burns their Fascist Party membership booklets as soon as the war is over. This is a symbolic act meant only to assuage their own guilt, however, as "no-one asks them for anything" and accountability for their action cannot not be delivered by any court or tribunal (*Trieste* 133). I discern layers of irony and critique within this statement, since by re-integrating into life in Italy and Slovenia, the Tedeschi family finds itself part of an entire society implicated in the crimes of the war. No one would ask them anything because they were also implicated and bore responsibility for what happened. I argue that this act of "asking," which suggests legal or criminal liability—hence the preemptive burning of their legal documents—could not serve the pursuit of justice, given the fact that the "realm of implication," as Rothberg calls it, is not able to be judged through courts and legal systems.

As we discussed earlier, implicated subjects do not hold the types of criminal guilt that can be tried in a tribunal. Yet they do bear personal and collective responsibility for the legacies of violence in which they are implicated and the active roles they play, through their "actions and inactions," in producing and reproducing the positions of victims and perpetrators, thus securing their own privilege (Rothberg 1-2). In the next section, I examine instances in which Drndić's characters face their implication outside of the judicial system.

#### 4.4 Implicated Characters and the Impossibility of Reconciliation

*Trieste* does not offer a reconciliatory and redemptive encounter between Haya and Ada, as the latter fails to hear her daughter's timid disagreement. Instead, Drndić follows Ada's speech, layered with Umberto Saba's testimony, with the "names of about 9,000 Jews who were deported from Italy, or killed in Italy or in the countries Italy occupied between 1943 and 1945" (*Trieste* 142).<sup>143</sup> The list communicates the gravity of the Tedeschi family's implication in the war, challenging their dismissal of their actions as the self-preservation of any *mitläufer* who "simply 'followed along,' allegedly unaware of the policies of extermination conducted during the war," an attitude that explains the unwillingness and inability of Haya's mother to engage with her daughter's questioning (Aleksić 236n74). Therefore, the novel's uncomfortable divulging of Haya's relationship with Kurt Franz, one of the most brutal commanders of Treblinka and San Saba, should be seen as a continuation of the family's implication in the Holocaust. Starting in January 1944, Haya and the "dashing German second lieutenant, S.S.-Untersturmführer" delight in each other's company, stroll the streets of the city, wine and dine with other S.S. officers, all while Trieste and the surrounding areas are being liquidated (*Trieste* 118). Living a parallel life to the Jews of the Nazi-occupied Adriatisches Küstenland and to the anti-fascist resistance groups who were active in the area, Haya remains willfully blind to Franz's position in the Reich.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, she spends 1944 going to the cinema with him, then

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<sup>143</sup> Sabina Giergiel argues that Drndić's act of enumerating the names of those murdered by the Nazis "de-automates [their] reception as well as serving as an ethical gesture" that becomes a "prosthetic for experience and memory" which "disquiets and discommodates the reader [...] more strongly than an aesthetically shaped tale of the crime" (114). See Sabina Giergiel, "The Saving Narratives of Daša Drndić." *Studia Judaica* 21 (2018), nr 1 (41).

<sup>144</sup> Haya's willful ignorance is so deep that she never even comes across the partisan-printed underground press, preferring to read "official press" and magazines about movie stars, and therefore: "so as far as Haya is concerned that sort of press, anti-fascist, focused on national liberation, in Slovenian, Croatian and Italian, does not exist" (Drndić, *Trieste* 106-107).

going to confess and receiving absolution at church, while her sister sends letters detailing her fear of the partisans and her belief that German soldiers were “courteous” and “even good looking ... just as Haya told her” (*Trieste* 122).

Drndić places Haya’s awakening decades later, when, prompted by an angry letter from her former student Roberto Piazza, who demands an answer as to why their teacher never spoke about the atrocities that took place in Gorizia and Trieste, she begins to dig through the endless archives of the past. Haya collects everything she finds in her red basket, which turns into a personal archive of the Holocaust and her implication in its violence. This is how Drndić writes of Haya’s agonized descent inside history:

Haya deciphers her past. She builds a file of her past. From a newspaper she cuts out an incomplete list of S.S. men, incomplete because there are more than a hundred of them with some sort of rank and terrible power from 1943 to 1945, when they are dispatched to the Adriatisches Küstenland; more than a hundred of them saunter around the unrealized dreamland of the fictitious Adriatisches Küstenland, yet the list published in the papers gives barely fifty names. Where are the ordinary soldiers? Where are the German police officers? Where are the Ukrainians? Where are the Cossacks? Where are the women and the members of their families who spend their summers and winters on the shore and in the mountains, from 1943 to 1945? Where are the Italians in the service of the Reich? Where are the civilians, the silent observers, the invisible participants in the war? And *Here, too, am I*, Haya says. *This list should be endless. This list is endless*, she says. (*Trieste* 198-9)

Haya’s questioning of what gets entered into the historical record displays her awareness of implication, however underdeveloped it may be. The barrage of questions she poses is aimed at the absences she finds in these newspapers, which publish “barely fifty names” and exculpate through their omission all others responsible and implicated in war crimes. This line of questioning extends from the “ordinary soldiers,” to the families still able to vacation at the height of the war. These “civilians ... silent observers ... invisible participants in the war” are the implicated subjects whose lack of action aided the S.S. officers in their perpetuation of

genocidal violence. Because it is endless, the list of implicated subjects will always remain incomplete. We can observe how Haya identifies her own position within this archive and network of implication: “Here, too, am I,” she asserts, recognizing her implicated role, one that is unaccounted for by mainstream historical narratives which only make space for victims and perpetrators. Yet her declaration does not go very far, since upon finding in these lists the “names of people she met, at whose table she ate, with whom she shook hands (*not often, thank God, she adds*),” Haya becomes so overcome by searching, researching and arranging these documents, that she gives in to the lure of melancholia instead of engaging with a productive working through the past (*Trieste* 198).<sup>145</sup> In addition, I read the bracketed comment that her dinners with S.S. officers occurred “not often, thank God,” as Haya’s resistance to taking responsibility for her implication in the war and her attempt to minimize and rationalize her proximity to Nazism.<sup>146</sup>

Drndić stages an encounter between Haya and another implicated subject during an interlude between the two parts of the novel—the first part about Haya’s childhood and youth

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<sup>145</sup> In the full quote, we can observe Haya’s melancholic reaction at the loss of any pretense of her own war-time innocence. Drndić writes: “In the newspaper cutting Haya finds names of people she met, at whose table she ate, with whom she shook hands (*not often, thank God, she adds*), and she searches, and researches, and arranges, and stops sleeping, staring instead into the yawning jaws of the Hydra, waiting for the poisonous fumes to spew forth, and Hercules is nowhere to be found. *Oh, this eternal repetition, she says, can it be cut short?*” (*Trieste* 198).

<sup>146</sup> In a similar vein, Drndić’s *Belladonna* unfolds the story of the implicated subject Rudolf Sass, whose father dined with Ustaša during the Zasavica massacre, while in *E.E.G.*, Andreas Ban narrowly escapes cooking dinner for his lover’s father after discovering his Nazi medals in the “small storeroom for rejected objects” of his home in the forests south of Munich (*E.E.G.* 106). The domestic sphere and intimate setting of sharing a meal allows Drndić to illustrate the pervasiveness of implication, as well as its ability to be incorporated into the body and transmitted to future generations, revealing how easily entire communities can become involved in the atrocities carried out in their name, even if they are not directly committing a crime that can be persecuted by the law. Imagery of food also becomes relevant in the story that Elvira Weiner relates regarding the Swiss volunteers bringing soup to those aboard trains heading to their deaths.

during the war, and the second about her obsessive research. This encounter brings us the important testimony of a woman named Elvira Weiner. Unlike the majority of other testimonies of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators that Drndić includes in *Trieste*, Elvira Weiner's story is the confession of an implicated subject.<sup>147</sup> Because of this, her story is not presented as a statement given in front of a court of law, but as a story told to Haya during a stroll along Bahnhofstrasse, in Zurich's downtown, during a break from the mathematics conference the two women are attending in 1969. On their walk, Elvira tells Haya about her youth in Switzerland, beginning:

*... at home there was a lot of talk about trains, about coal coming from Germany through Switzerland, through the St Gotthard tunnel to Italy, and this was discussed in our family. There was a lot of talk, though more of it was a whisper, it was like an open secret—everybody knew [...] (Trieste 124).*

Drndić allows the paradoxical coexistence of “a lot of talk” and “a whisper” to frame this “open secret” that “everybody knew.” Elvira goes on to describe with vivid and overwhelming detail how in 1944, her mother learned that trains “with people on them” started to pass through Switzerland. Working with the Swiss Red Cross, Elvira, her mother and a group of volunteers, brought coffee and soup to these people on the trains (*Trieste* 126). Creating a distribution chain, the group waited until the train carriages arrived, and then passed small containers of soup to one another until these “disappeared” inside the train.

In this story, Weiner and her family become implicated subjects by virtue of the privileges and protections that their Swiss citizenship offers them. Rather than being “neutral,”

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<sup>147</sup> I have found that Drndić has adapted Elvira Weiner's testimony from an interview with an anonymous Swiss woman, conducted by the BBC/Frontline for a BBC/PBS documentary on the role of Swiss banks in the Holocaust, titled *Nazi Gold*. The interview can be found [here](#) and was prompted by the desire of this woman to report what she saw as a teenager in Switzerland, a country which continues to maintain claims to war-time neutrality, despite the evidence. In *Trieste*, Drndić includes the entire interview, inserting into it information about partisan resistance and attempts to derail these transports, gained from other witnesses the documentary makers interviewed, as seen [here](#).



Switzerland was deeply implicated in the Holocaust, as Drndić makes evident in this section, inserting in Elvira's confession the fact that Switzerland allowed the transports to pass through its territory. Inconvenienced by the desperate screams emitting from the trains, Swiss citizens then complained enough for the path of these transports to be adjusted, to ensure restful nights for these "neutral" citizens who would later claim to have been innocent bystanders who knew nothing (*Trieste* 127-8). So many years later, Elvira is troubled by these war-time acts, and by her community's lack of resistance to what "everybody knew" was happening. Drndić prefaces her testimony with a statement that displays Elvira's (and in turn, Haya's) search for catharsis: "Conversations about the past are like little confessions, like unburdenings, after which the soul returns to the present on angel wings, fluttery and luminous," the novel's narrator observes (*Trieste* 124). The intensity of Elvira's speech, conveyed through breathless prose that nearly lacks all breaks offered by period marks, reads as an unburdening and a confessional act. However, the promised "return to the present on angel wings" does not occur at the end of Elvira's story, just as it did not come at the end of Ada's speech.

Elvira finishes by admitting to Haya that it had been only after the death of her mother, who had spent the years after the war advising her to forget, that she began to research what was happening with these transports that passed through Switzerland. As in Haya's case, Elvira's belated research uncovers the never-ending networks of implication and thus, the need for collective responsibility. "[T]here are no coincidences," Elvira finally concludes, connecting the memories of her youth with the larger historical events that she was folded into (*Trieste* 130). And yet, also like Haya, her search is left incomplete and she never gains a full understanding of how the transports came to pass in her town: the Swiss Red Cross archives mention nothing about them, neither do the Swiss railway archives contain any information about the transports,

even if her memories clearly place her there in that cold night at the rails, and even if she does find certain hints about these transports in “little document[s]” (*Trieste* 130).

I interpret Elvira Weiner as a counterpart to Haya Tedeschi: she is her almost-doppelgänger who grew up in Switzerland, and whose small, pitiful gesture of assistance to the people in the trains is contrasted with Haya’s complete ignorance during the same time-period. And while Elvira’s political analysis goes slightly further than Haya’s or the other members of the Tedeschi family, she is also unable to take responsibility for her implication. Her thoughts become unclear and contradictory, at times stressing that they “knew nothing,” while also admitting that:

*We knew these people were going to Germany, we knew there were Jews inside, we knew about the concentration camps, and we had helped them, so why were they hollering now at night? That is what we were thinking, That is what we were thinking, says Elvira Weiner. We gave them blankets and coffee and soup, why are they protesting? That is not polite, we thought, they are making a racket and we can’t sleep. That is how our citizens wrote, you know, this was wartime, says Elvira Weiner, and we all had our worries and that troubles me today, says Elvira Weiner, because if we hadn’t left the people like that, if the Government had gone back on its word, if we had said, We are not letting these people go on to Germany, then I guess the other transports wouldn’t have followed — and they did come, there were many transports [...] I don’t know, says Elvira Weiner. We knew nothing, we knew only that there were Jews and Gypsies going to Germany and beyond — we didn’t know where beyond — and that they had to go through Switzerland [...] That’s what my mother told me, but at the meeting somebody also asked, Why do they have to go through Switzerland? (Trieste 128)*

Despite her earnest confession and haphazard attempt at working through the past, Elvira remains implicated in the legacies of the Holocaust, as her mode of thinking remains in the conditional mood, stuck in a helpless imagining of what could have been possible had they made any attempt to stop the crimes that were unfolding in front of their eyes, and in which they were participants. I can note that, unlike Haya’s historical research, which remains focused on the perpetrators of the Holocaust, Elvira’s research reveals that the possibility of resistance had existed even in the midst of war. She relates to Haya how “partisans tried to sabotage the freight

trains and stop them before they entered Switzerland,” and were at times even successful in liberating people (*Trieste* 130).

But because her thinking remains in a conditional “what if,” Elvira does not fully acknowledge, let alone take responsibility for her own failure to act, and more importantly, for the failure of her community to do anything to stop the trains passing through Switzerland. In capturing the Swiss community’s reaction—meager donations of food, disdain for the purported lack of gratitude of those in the trains, and a vehement denial that they knew anything—Drndić demonstrates their unaddressed implication in the Holocaust and challenges claims of their non-involvement during the war, and in doing so, challenges the myth on which these claims rest, that of the passive bystander. Ultimately, Drndić thus does not allow any catharsis to come from Elvira’s confession to Haya. Elvira, as the implicated subject testifying to her involvement in the Holocaust, does not receive absolution through the act of speaking. Haya, as the listener to this story, does not leave the interaction having become a secondary witness who is morally redeemed. I argue that this is a deliberate choice made by Drndić to show that there can be no reconciliation with the past if responsibility continues to be evaded by those implicated in its violence. By denying readers the redemptive power of the testimony, and carrying out this rejection in the very heart of Europe—in this case, Switzerland, and in the encounter between Andreas Ban and Antonio Tedeschi/Hans Traube, in Germany—Drndić rejects the premise that European memory standards hold the keys to solving the problem of how to deal with the past in Croatia and other countries of the region.

Therefore, instead of assisting Haya’s redemption, Elvira Weiner’s testimony heralds Haya’s slow and anguished process of coming to a realization about her own implication. Their encounter ends with Haya seconding Elvira’s fear of train stations—a fear that gives her

“nightmares, frightening dreams” (*Trieste* 130). Haya’s nightmares revolve around Kurt Franz and their days together, spent parallel to the transports to concentration and extermination camps leaving from or passing Trieste. To substantiate this fear, Haya digs in her red basket for a photograph that Kurt Franz gave her. On the page, Drndić provides for readers a photograph of a group of men, likely S.S. soldiers, standing in front of the Treblinka train station.<sup>148</sup> The photograph—which is surrounded by the negative space of the page, heightening its disturbing visual impact—ushers in the story of Antonio Tedeschi’s birth and his subsequent kidnapping shortly after, as well as Ada’s testimony and the long list of the names of the Jews killed in Italy and Italian-occupied territories, the truncated biographies of some of their murderers, and archival material from the survivors testifying in court.

It is only after these stories, names and voices, that Drndić shifts the focus of *Trieste* to the implicated subject once again. At last, Antonio Tedeschi/Hans Traube takes over the narrative to tell us his story. His process of reckoning with his implication also begins in Western Europe—in Salzburg, Austria. He begins by addressing readers in the first person, and Drndić maintains this grammatical voice for the entirety of Antonio Tedeschi/Hans Traube’s story. We read:

My name is Hans Traube.

I was born in Salzburg on 1 October, 1944.

All my documents say my name is Hans Traube, and they say I was born in Salzburg on 1 October, 1944. When someone says “Hans”, I look up. That’s what I’ve always been called: Hans. Ever since I can remember people have called me Hans. [...] *Oh, Hans, Hans*, my mother said to me on her deathbed *once you were called Antonio*.

Ever since then, since the moment my mother Martha Traube moaned *Oh Hans, Hans*, and that was on 20 April, 1998, I have been searching, looking for this Antonio who has been lost, but who isn’t lost, who was in hiding for half a century, yet he wasn’t — all the while this Antonio has been crouching inside me watching, breathing with me

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<sup>148</sup> On the use of photographs in Drndić work see Sabina Giergiel, “Additional Testimony: Photographs in the Prose of Daša Drndić,” in *FLUMINENSIA*, v. 32 (2020), n. 1, p. 39-52.

yet listening to me breathe, dreaming with me while stealing my dreams, and I knew nothing about it until my mother Martha Traube, as she was dying, said, *Oh Hans, you were born Antonio. (Trieste 293).*

In bringing Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi into the fold of the novel through a direct, first person introduction, Drndić aligns this character with the survivors of the concentration camp of San Sabba in Trieste or survivors of the Treblinka camp in Poland. Like the speech cited above, these survivor testimonies also begin with an assertion of each individual's name:

*My name is Majda Rupena ... I am Albina Škabar from near Trieste. My name is Dara Virag ... Branka Maričić from Rijeka ... My name is Carlo Schiffer. I am testifying on behalf of my friend. ... I am from Rijeka. My name is Dara Virag ... ” (Trieste 194-7).*

[...]

*By the way, my name is Oscar Strawczynski. ... My name is Richard Glazar. I killed myself in Prague in 1997. ... My name is Jacob Eisner. ... My name is Spiegel. I died, too. (Trieste 255-8).*

Hans Traube's initial assertion of his name, despite the confusion of identity that follows, associates him with these survivors. As a Lebensborn, he is indeed a victim and survivor of the Nazi racial project. At the same time, through this style of introduction, Drndić ensures that Hans Traube's speech resembles a witness statement given in a courtroom, like the ones cited above. This will prove crucial, later, when Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi's vocal rejection of all legal institutions will enable Drndić to solidify her critique of the idea of reconciliation.

That critique depends on implication. It is no coincidence that the imagery in Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi's introduction, which suggests an Antonio "crouching inside" a Hans, recalls Andreas Ban's questioning, earlier in this chapter, of whether his identity was a composite of several others squatting inside of him. This repeated metaphor signals the relational nature of subjectivity and implication, a relation which Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi is eager

to explore. In order to learn the story behind the name “Antonio Tedeschi,” Hans Traube undertakes arduous research that takes him to the sites, archives and people involved in the Lebensborn plan, or the “big Third Reich *secret* ... the population project designed to boost and spread the *Übermensch* species” (*Trieste* 299). Through Hans/Antonio’s process of searching for the truth of his birth and identity, Drndić teaches readers about the history of the Lebensborn project and takes them on a tour of the houses erected with the goal of caring for “‘racially and biologically quintessential’ pregnant women, who would give birth to racially and biologically quintessential sons of the homeland,” in Germany, Norway, Austria, Belgium, France and the Netherlands (*Trieste* 301, 321). This geographical overview mixes with the testimonies of the many Lebensborn children born or brought there after being kidnapped from occupied territories. Instead of the war, their testimonies focus on their experiences after it. Stripped of their real names and identities, these Lebensborn children were dubbed “filthy German children” and “German bastards” who could be verbally, physically and sexually abused with impunity, framed as a disturbing form of a collective reckoning with the past (*Trieste* 312). Providing a detailed account of the brutal suffering of these Lebensborn children, Drndić shows that violence did not end with the official conclusion of the war.

Soon turning obsessive, Hans/Antonio’s research into the plight of the Lebensborn leads him to the depths of the realm of implication. Having gathered what Drndić describes as endless “‘case histories’ of Nazi descendants, the descendants of the first, second and third generation of Nazis, big and little, known and anonymous,” Hans/Antonio finds that silence, secrecy and denial reign over the descendants of Nazis (*Trieste* 341). Because of this, Hans becomes convinced of the futility of any court system that purports to address the magnitude of such injustice and violence. “The truth is absolutely simple,” he asserts, “Our fathers were criminals

and murderers, so screw those platitudes about the banality of evil” (*Trieste* 341). His speech continues with a complete rejection of the tribunals erected at the end of the Second World War.

I quote it here at length:

There are no justifications, there is no valid relativization, there is no excuse. here is *no mercy* for the pathological debris of humanity, those tainted minds shouldn't have even been brought to trial, what miserable justice, what defence of which dignity, whose dignity, which pathetic Nurembergs, Stuttgarts, Dusseldorfs, Frankfurts, Munichs, Hagues, money wasted, time wasted, only dark, farcical performances after which not a single diseased mind has learned nor will learn a thing, all of them should have been executed after a summary trial the way the Russians and East Germans did in '46, '47 and '48, their germ should have been sent to seed so the new ones don't come along who keep coming and coming, they, too, should be swiftly done away with before they die in comfortable prisons playing chess or, worst of all, free, as heroes to whom monstrous monuments are raised, whose names bedeck city squares and airports, that scum ought to be *eliminated* so that the story wouldn't continue, elegantly and brazenly, inserting itself into reality and so that the malevolent Phoenix would once and for all stop hovering over our heads. That eternal and infinite *Herumgeschmuse* of the children of the murderers and criminals is becoming pathetic. Their “They were little Nazis” holds no water. There are no little Nazis. (*Trieste* 342-3)<sup>149</sup>

Rather than liberal ideals of reform and reconciliation, Hans/Antonio advocates for the abolition of the court system, those “pathetic Nurembergs, Stuttgarts, Dusseldorfs, Frankfurts, Munichs, Hagues” that offer only “farcical performances” and no semblance of justice, as too many WWII

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<sup>149</sup> Hans Traube's speech in *Trieste* contains comments adapted from an interview with Niklas Frank, the son of the Nazi Reich Minister Hans Frank. Niklas Frank wrote scathing critiques of his Nazi parents, and [in a 2005 interview](#) with *Spiegel*, is quoted as saying: “Die Wahrheit ist doch ganz einfach: Vater Speer war ein Verbrecher. Das ewige Herumgeschmuse der Kinder finde ich lächerlich. Wenn sie die Verbrechen des Vaters nicht anerkennen, verkleinern und relativieren sie insgesamt die Verbrechen der Deutschen während des sogenannten Dritten Reiches.” (The truth is quite simple: Father Speer was a criminal. I find the constant *Herumgeschmuse* of the children ridiculous. If they don't acknowledge the crimes of their father, they downplay and relativize the crimes of the Germans during the so-called Third Reich.) We can see that Drndić used parts of this interview to craft Hans/Antonio's culminating speech in *Trieste*, leaving his use of the word *Herumgeschmuse* untranslated in her text, a word that conveys a sense of the “cuddling” of the children of Nazis, these implicated subjects that Hans/Antonio detests. Near the novel's concluding pages, Drndić writes in Hans/Antonio's voice: “Niklas Frank is unrelenting. Niklas Frank is not giving up, so I won't either. ... Niklas Frank continues to howl in a cosmos of deaf and dead silence. A small consolation which I keep, which I hold onto, so that it won't drop like overripe fruit onto muddy earth and rot” (*Trieste* 349).

criminals emerged out of the war unscathed, tried *in absentia*, or even honored with monuments memorializing them. For him, nothing short of their executions would have ensured that their “germ” would not have “been sent to seed.” This unsparing statement encapsulates Hans/Antonio’s recognition of implication, and his understanding of its transmission from one generation to the next. Disturbed by the lack of accountability and denialism espoused by children of Nazis, such as Gudrun Himmler, Irmgard Bormann, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and many others who minimize their fathers’ acts, Hans/Antonio cannot see any solution outside of their performing a “verbal *Exerzier* and *exercitationes* of self-denazification, a *mea culpa* in the name of the second generation and the third” (*Trieste* 343). Through Hans/Antonio’s speech, Drndić rejects the uses of courts and tribunals for dealing with the past, building a case for taking personal and collective responsibility for one’s implication outside institutional and judicial contexts.<sup>150</sup> To do this, I argue, Drndić turns the testimonial genre onto its head: while Hans/Antonio’s introduction in the narrative followed the conventions of a typical witness statement, like the ones seen in the Nuremberg trials, by the end of *Trieste*, these conventions are done away with completely. Full of anger, Antonio/Hans’s condemnation of implicated subjects who take no responsibility for their implication defies the expectations that a victim’s testimony should be docile, express only an appropriate amount of emotion and certainly, not such open desire for vengeance.

This is not the only way that Drndić upsets the rules of testimony in *Trieste*: overall, the novel offers its readers no sense of resolution. We know that Hans Traube goes to Gorizia to search for Antonio Tedeschi and for his mother Haya Tedeschi. Drndić precedes Hans’

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<sup>150</sup> These legacies extend outside the German and Austrian space, as Hans/Antonio’s speech also addresses the descendants of the “Fascists, Ustašas, homeguard fighters, Četniks” and the descendants of the “former satellite Nazi-Fascist fabrications,” and even contemporary issues, as Hans/Antonio takes on Israel, America and the Catholic Church (*Trieste* 343).



introduction with a brief section, told from his perspective, of the train ride from Austria to Gorizia, an inverted trajectory of the forced transportations that had been the focus of much of the novel, and in which his biological father played a critical role. Yet, even after gaining insight into the identity crisis he experiences, as well as his research on the Lebensborn and Nazi descendants, we never become privy to Hans' encounter with his mother. This long-awaited resolution never arrives—instead, mirroring Hans/Antonio's rejection of court-mandated justice and reconciliation efforts, Drndić refuses to offer readers a proper ending. Thus, the final pages of *Trieste* turn to an unrealized future tense, a condition of possibility of what might occur once Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi leaves the safety of his hotel room in Gorizia, walks to the building where his mother is spending her days surrounded by the debris of a history that both of them have come to know intimately, and speaks with her for the first time. Like other Lebensborn, Hans/Antonio *may* “write the role of [his] mother in the universal history of infamy,” but as readers, we will never witness their meeting. Hans/Antonio, too, will ultimately remain enveloped in a similar ambiguity. His final attempt to work through the past will make him question who was it that: “strolled around the San Sabba rice mill, who snapped pictures of San Sabba, my mother or I, who searched through the files of the officials of the Adriatisches Küstenland, she or I, who studied the details from the life of S.S.-Untersturmführer Kurt Franz ... who was it that visited Treblinka” (*Trieste* 351). Their presents and pasts will be mixed together, as the inevitable encounter of parallel lives in Drndić will make one difficult to distinguish from another, just as the novel's layered speeches and testimonies make their provenance or authorship hard to distinguish.

I see the open-endedness and indeterminable chronology of these final pages as Drndić's subversion of the rigid temporal borders promoted by policies of liberal human rights and official

narratives of history, where the present and future are distinct from a past that is considered “over,” and therefore they are unaccountable to the legacies of historical violence. Indeed, it was when “the Past jumped out” at him, asserting its presence by hanging from his neck “like a carcass, like some rotten corpse” that dug its “claws” into his artery, that Hans Traube began to face the legacies of the Holocaust (*Trieste* 336). Once again, the corporeal imagery and metaphors used by Drndić emphasize implication as something that is inherited and embodied. This past with a capital “P” cannot be relegated to an archive, picked over and hidden from view, because its presence is felt clearly on the body, as a chronic, perpetual pain. For the implicated subject, the past can never be over, neither can it be fully suppressed and silenced. As Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi laments, this putrid past “swings on me as I walk, it lies on me while I sleep, it looks me in the eyes and leers, *See, I’m still with you*” (*Trieste* 336).<sup>151</sup>

What this section has shown is that if Drndić’s novels function as “Holocaust counter memorials,” they also serve as counter memorials of implication (Beronja 21). This is critical because the implicated subject serves no purpose to a nation’s official narratives of history precisely because this subject-position does not fall into either side of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, and is thus never commemorated in official memorialization. Likewise, in the European continent’s “shared memory,” it is advantageous to exclude implication from remembrance. To remember implication would bring up uncomfortable questions about Europe’s unaddressed responsibility toward crimes of the Second World War, and also toward legacies of

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<sup>151</sup> Because of this relationship with the past, because of the “sacks brimming with the sins of our ancestors,” Hans/Antonio declares that: “History has no need to return, History is in our marrow, and here, in our bones, it drills rheumatically and no medicine can cure that. History is in our blood and in our blood it flows quietly and destructively, while on the outside there’s nothing, on the outside all is calm and ordinary, until one day, History, our History, the History in our blood, in our bones, goes mad and starts eroding the miserable, crumbling ramparts of our immunity, which we have been cautiously raising for decades” (Drndić *Trieste* 335).

colonialism and imperialism. It is for this reason that in *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, Drndić juxtaposes Andreas Ban’s critique of Croatia’s denialism, apolitical apathy and xenophobia after the Yugoslav wars with the erasure of implication from the European mnemonic landscape after the Holocaust. I focus on this juxtaposition in the sections that follow.

#### 4.5 “It is 1942, or Rather 2015”: Andres Ban and the Superimposition of Memory

In *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, Daša Drndić’s protagonist, the psychologist and writer Andreas Ban, experiences the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> through a peripatetic life he did not choose: his forced displacement from Serbia to Croatia on the heels of the Yugoslav disintegration, his brief and unsuccessful period of emigration to Canada, and the travels to Western European cities that he takes after his return to Croatia, reveal to him the continent’s unaddressed implication in the legacies of violence of the Second World War.<sup>152</sup> Becoming obsessed with the Holocaust drives Andreas Ban to “uncover” histories of implication that lie in plain sight of the apathetic citizens of Croatia, France, Switzerland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and everywhere his journeys and research take him. In *E.E.G.*, Drndić makes an especially significant connection between the history of the Holocaust in Western and Southeastern Europe through Andreas Ban’s visit to Paris in 2013 for a writer’s residency, the same year that Croatia joined the European Union.

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<sup>152</sup> Although in interviews, Drndić often rejected the premise that Andreas Ban was an extension of herself, the character’s life follows a similar trajectory as the author’s—including a childhood in Croatia, adulthood in Belgrade, a Fulbright experience in the United States, war-time displacement from Serbia to Croatia, writing residencies in different European countries, an academic career in Croatia, international writing success later in life, and a series of illnesses that would deteriorate Drndić’s health, similarly to Andreas Ban. Like the other authors included in this study, the autobiographical element is influential in Drndić’s novels. True to form, Drndić addresses the question of autobiography in *E.E.G.*, stating, through Andreas Ban, that: “Autobiographical books don’t exist, autobiographies don’t exist, there are multigraphies, biographical mixes, biographical cocktails, the whole mélange of a life through which we dig, which we clear out, from which we select fragments, remnants, little pieces that we stuff into our pockets, little mouthfuls that we swallow as though they were our own” (8).

A most critical and observant *flaneur*, Andreas Ban spends his days walking the Parisian streets, which inevitably lead him to encounters with memory and history. The histories that Andreas Ban investigates are silenced stories hidden in forgotten archives, in dusty attics, inaccessible institutions, and in suppressed familial memories. Andreas Ban's act of walking becomes a tool for historical excavation, because as he walks, Andreas Ban sees the past superimposed onto every part of the city's urban design and architecture. It is through a method of superimposition of the past onto the present that Drndić brings readers to the heart of Möbel-Aktion, the large-scale Nazi looting of Jewish homes, primarily in France, the Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>153</sup> Andreas Ban arrives to the inconspicuous building at 85–87 rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin and what he sees is not the building as it appears in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but as the erstwhile furniture store Lévitán, which had been turned into a work camp by the Nazis, in collaboration with the Vichy government. Lévitán had been one of the three satellite camps to the Drancy internment camp, the others being the work camps at Austerlitz and Bassano. Located in the center of Paris, these three camps were filled with Jewish detainees who were forced to sort and repair the massive loads of looted objects from the homes of French Jews.<sup>154</sup>

As the historian Sarah Gensburger argues, this manner of indiscriminate looting and distributing of massive amounts of mundane, ordinary and nearly worthless objects,

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<sup>153</sup> The operation was part of the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, or ERR), which was headed by Alfred Rosenberg and led to the looting of priceless artwork owned by French Jews, including the infamous sequestration of artwork from the Louvre and Jeu de Paume, intended to fulfill Hitler and Hermann Goering's dreams of adorning German museums with these masterpieces.

<sup>154</sup> While the inventories of these looting operations were destroyed at the end of the war, the S.S. produced over one hundred photographs that documented these camps, which demonstrate the massive, systematic scale of the looting. Reproduced in Gensburger's book *Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album*, these photographs make the scale almost palpable, as photo after photo shows the countless stacks of ordinary objects, signs of a lost domestic mundanity: hundreds of mattresses, linens, clocks, pots and pans, pieces of cutlery and even stacks of lightbulbs were stolen from Jewish apartments and homes, and made available to those favored by the Nazi regime, and later the general population.

demonstrates that the aim of Möbel-Aktion was not simply economic, but aimed at the total destruction of “all trace of the existence of the Jews” in France through the anonymization of looted materials (Gensburger 199).<sup>155</sup> Thus anonymized, these objects would make their way to Germany—or through similar operations, to Belgrade, Dubrovnik and Zagreb—where civilians would “shop” for furniture, forks and spoons. The ordinariness of these objects and their broad distribution means that some of them may still be in use today, serving as material proof of the pervasive, large-scale complicity and implication that involves a great number of people—those who shopped for the objects, those who passed the work camps, and those who many decades later, knowingly or not, own one of these objects. The large scale of this specific instance of implication is important to Drndić, who describes how in Zagreb, and especially in Paris, the operations of E.E.R. ensured a macabre reality wherein Jews and others displaced and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, left the storehouses of the work camps to walk “in their coats, in their suits, with their hats on their heads, with their leather bags over their shoulders, in their shoes ... only now fused with other people’s bodies in which, like a requiem, there resounded their prayers—or their curse” (*E.E.G.* 283). The excerpt reveals how the process of systemic annihilation preserves the mundane objects of victims so that through a substitution of ownership, even the memory of those who used these materials originally is erased.

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<sup>155</sup> As in the case of the Lebensborn, the victims of these Parisian camps do not fit as easily in the typology of Holocaust memory: the camps were not concentration or extermination camps, those interned there were not considered “typical” victims due to their relatively privileged position, and a majority survived the war (Dreyfus 232). To this point, Gensburger’s research highlights how, for survivors of Austerlitz, Lévitán, and Bassano, a culture of silence developed after they learned of the atrocities committed in camps like Auschwitz, which they deemed incomparable to their own experiences. Gensburger argues that this silence was not a product of “unspeakable” trauma, but of a lack of appropriate social framing for their experiences within discussions and memorializations of the Holocaust (Gensburger 200-1).

Yet, despite the massive effort to ensure complete extermination of Jewish life and history, the existence of these everyday objects, spread as they are throughout the European continent, carries with it the charge of implication—what Drndić describes as a resounding prayer or curse. The sound emitted by these objects is a silent one, unheard by those who once rummaged through the shops of Möbel-Aktion, clothing themselves with the coats and suits of the murdered, the same people who later called themselves bystanders or *mitläufer* because they did not commit the kind of violent acts persecuted by criminal law and tribunals. The reverberation of the silent prayers and curses emitted from these objects crosses the arbitrary border between past and present, as the legacies of past violence contained within them impact their relationship with the careful observer and researcher of history. These legacies are not confined to one period of time. In fact, regardless of the passage of time, when these objects change hands, they still create new implicated subjects of their new “owners,” even as their temporal distance from WWII becomes greater.

This is what Andreas Ban realizes upon reflecting on the provenance of “his” glasses and other objects, purchased from flea markets in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and New York, including:

... joys and sorrows bought for a song, toasts and commemorative speeches which here, in my half-empty room, like soft bells speak of every forced relocation of existence and being, of every violent interruption of abiding, and they send out a clear but ominous crystal sound. The objects with which I am surrounded, with which I surround myself, when the air stops the breath, when not even silence quivers, transformed into fluids they begin to penetrate the armor of my skin and sneak in among my organs, already poisoned by imprints of the past. (*E.E.G.* 281)

The seemingly innocuous activity of collecting objects at flea markets in these major cities is, in fact, another way in which Andreas Ban finds himself implicated in the Holocaust. If the memory of the Parisian work camps has now been relegated to the “grey zone of memory,” as the French historian Jean-Marc Dreyfus argues, because neither the camps, nor the detainees, fit

neatly into established frameworks of victimhood, then the memory *and* continued fact of implication that can be traced to these lootings is likewise outside established mnemonic frames (232). To convey this implication, Drndić relies on imagery that is strongly focused on the body: the objects of unknown provenance that transform themselves into a liquid form are then able to sink into the surface of Andreas Ban’s skin and even deeper, into his organs. When this happens “not even silence quivers,” and yet—like the silence full of sounds heard in the recording tapes in Albahari’s *Bait*—even in that state of speechlessness, these objects still resound softly and speak of all the displacement, violence and death they have experienced and witnessed. It may be the “clear but ominous crystal sound” that these objects emit which, reaching across space and time, produces the “whimpering” that Haya Tedeschi hears as she sits and waits, the red basket full of history at her feet.<sup>156</sup> Unlike Haya, however, Andreas Ban demonstrates a critical eye toward his own practice of collecting these objects and the stories of people and past violence that they carry. He admits that the assortment of glasses he owns does not belong to him or his life, but instead makes up a “small collection of other people’s days” (*E.E.G.* 281).

When Andreas Ban reaches the former Lévitán building at 85–87 rue du Faubourg Saint-Martin in 2013, he is aware of all of this history. If he were not, the “memorial plaque at eye level for the average pedestrian” which is affixed to the building, would trigger his impulse to research the past. Reading the plaque, which informs of the building’s use as a satellite camp to Drancy, and the forced labor carried out by Jews there, Andreas Ban observes how, once “again, as several times in the course of my roaming round Europe, History had grabbed me by the throat and clouded my already problematic vision” (*E.E.G.* 278). And while the statement may reflect a sense of defeat or exhaustion, I read it as an expression of gratitude to the plaque’s

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<sup>156</sup> Haya asks the emptiness around her: “*Is that the chair whimpering or is it me?*” (*Trieste* 288).

precipitation of his connection with the past, since Drndić makes a connection with the lack of similar commemorative signs in Croatia. This comparison between French and Croatian remembrance practices may seem to place greater value on the former, but I want to point out that during Andreas Ban's history walk through Paris, Drndić conveys a striking and complete absence of passersby in the city's streets. The plaque commemorating the Lévitan camp may be "at eye level for the average pedestrian," but the narrative is devoid of their presence. There is no one around Andreas Ban, no one to look at the plaque and remember the people interned at Lévitan and the other work camps, or the people whose belongings turned into anonymous cargo. The novel thus assigns little mnemonic value to the plaque and the building that houses it, something which is emphasized by the first sign that Andreas Ban sees when he approaches the building: a mosaic that reads "Aux Classes Laborieuses" and declares to passersby that "it is here, that it is ready to devote itself to the working class" (E.E.G. 277). Placed at the top of the building, this mosaic made for the eponymous clothing store dedicates the entire structure to the working class, even if the same building was once a forced labor camp. I argue that by highlighting this ironic juxtaposition, Drndić makes the mosaic and the plaque represent not the multidirectional memory of two different historical moments and events, but the mnemonic confusion that covers up the inadequacy, hypocrisy and silencing that state-sponsored memorialization in Western Europe can enact. Andreas Ban may encounter and appreciate many commemorative plaques in Paris, but the city's deserted streets, empty of the public who is supposedly being addressed by these commemorative signs, allow the memory of past violence and injustice to fall into oblivion, and with it, the fact of society's ongoing implication in the legacies of that violence is likewise forgotten, covered by the veneer of the building's recent renovations.



But if in *E.E.G.*, the Parisian streets suffer from an absence of the public, the streets of Zagreb, to which Drndić turns her attention next, are filled with people enjoying restaurants and cafés outside buildings once inhabited by members of the city’s Jewish community. To reflect this inversion in the dynamics of the streets, Drndić switches the narrative to a subjective mood that allows Andreas Ban to guide the reader through an imaginary walk of Zagreb in two temporalities: the present of European integration and carefreeness, and the distant past and terror of the Holocaust, which is superimposed onto the present. Such an exploration of Zagreb is prompted by Andreas Ban’s research on the activities of the E.R.R. outside of France, after learning that it had extended its “tentacles” to Serbia and Croatia through operation *Arbeitsgruppe Sudot*. While the records of the plunder accomplished by Möbel-Aktion were destroyed, Andreas Ban notes that evidence of the looting of Croatian Jews is preserved in several archives that can now be found in the Russian State Military Archive and in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “In other words,” Drndić writes, “it is all known” (*E.E.G.* 285). “It is known,” she repeats, and ushers another interruption to the narrative: twenty pages of these records, consisting mostly of confiscations of personal libraries, since “fortunately for the looted ... the Balkan booty” did not amount to much of value (*E.E.G.* 284). By deferring the progression of the Zagreb narrative through the inclusion of these records, Drndić creates another counter-memorial of the Holocaust, one which opens greater possibilities for commemoration and engagement with readers than the unheard address that the Parisian plaques offered the city’s inhabitants.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> In *Belladonna*, Drndić uses a similar list format to provide an inventory of the personal objects that Andreas Ban was forced to send from Serbia to Croatia, when the Yugoslav disintegration displaced him and his son. The list of a hundred and eighty-two boxes, packages, and larger crates, which contained the entirety of Andreas Ban’s life, comprised mostly of books, clothes, plates, glasses and ornaments, almost mirrors the list of books looted from the Jewish community of Zagreb in *E.E.G.*. Surely an intertextual

In Croatia, Andreas Ban invites readers to join him in a journey of superimposed memory. “Let us imagine a randomly chosen address in the center of Zagreb,” he begins, and directs us to “today’s 16 Teslina, where the Vuković and Runjić bookshop is now,” but where once, when the location was known as 16 Nikolić, Josef Konforti, born in Travnik in 1916, had a popular radio and book shop, before being sent to his death at Jasenovac (*E.E.G.* 306). The juxtaposition between contemporary streets, with their new names, and the city’s streets before and during the Second World War, highlights the loss of Jewish life and culture that occurred under the Ustaša and Nazis. At 63 Ulica Vlačka, Andreas Ban conjures the figure of Avram Levi, “son of David Levi, born in Sarajevo in 1911,” whom we are to imagine standing inside his small clothing and shoes shop, “wondering whether he will sell anything to anyone that day” (*E.E.G.* 307). At the same time, we are also to engage our sense of smell, imagining the scent of pizza, freshly baked at the Kariola pizza café. The café now occupies the same building where, as Drndić writes, “customers drink beer and peck at their smartphones and vacantly throw warm triangles into their mouths,” while the image of Avram Levi during an ordinary day in his shop is projected above them in this tour through Andreas Ban’s imagination (*E.E.G.* 307). In the novel, the two moments coexist on the page, in the same paragraph, separated by nothing more than a

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commentary on the repetition of the mechanics of erasure, displacement and uprootedness felt by victims of the Holocaust and the Yugoslav wars, this parallel listing nonetheless points us toward questions about the limits of comparison between the two events. In both cases, the rows listing the objects, as personal as they are ordinary, index war-time losses. Unlike the Zagreb Jews, however, Andreas Ban’s “personal effects for export—removal,” are not completely lost (*Belladonna* 306). Drndić writes that his boxes arrive “preserved, pointlessly whole and displaced” to his sister’s Croatian address, a country where Andreas Ban must now rebuild his and his son’s life, despite the hostile, ultranationalist administrators, educators and ordinary people that surround them (*Belladonna* 306). The pointless *wholeness* of the boxes he sends across the new borders that now divide what was once his country distinguish Andreas Ban’s situation from that of the Jews of Zagreb, whose lists of stolen books signaled the community’s annihilation. The juxtaposition of these two lists extends the logic of implicated nonidentification that Drndić had established in *Trieste* by gesturing toward comparison without equating the two experiences, or relativizing one to the benefit of the other.

punctuation point. But this Croatian present is short lived: it does not survive the conclusion of this paragraph where Avram Levi is superimposed onto the customers enjoying beer and pizza. Instead, the narrative turns to the past, relating the fact that, “Avram Levi was killed by the Ustasha in Jasenovac in 1942,” and in so doing, putting an abrupt stop to our imaginative speculations (*E.E.G.* 307).

In his analysis of Drndić’s novel *Leica Format*, Aleksandar Mijatović writes that in this novel: “disappearing is not the part of the present that slowly replaces what fades out. Instead, the present shows itself as the last instant of the vanishing. The present appears as a time that remains before everything evaporates” (59). What we observe in *E.E.G.*, as well as in *Belladonna* and *Trieste*, is the present *and* the past appearing in the “last instant of the vanishing,” as the narrative alternates between the two, switching tenses in quick succession. If as Mijatović contends, for Drndić “what disappears endures,” we can begin to think of this disappearing as the work of the negative space, which envelops the novels’ present tense with the existence of a past that never fully fades away from the frame. This is what we see in the tormented waiting that Haya Tedeschi experiences in *Trieste*, when she hears strange sounds in her room and repeatedly asks “deep emptiness” around her: “*Is that the chair whimpering or is it me?*” (*Trieste* 1, 288). Rather than providing an answer, the emptiness, or negative space, surrounding Haya expands, and “spreads its putrid cloak in all directions to draw her in ... to swallow her, blanket her, swamp her, envelop her, ready her for the rubbish heap where the emptiness, her emptiness, is piling the corpses, already stiffened, of the past” (*Trieste* 1). This statement shows that for Drndić, the emptiness is not vacant or inert, but something material and able to act on its own, making its presence known by expanding and enveloping Haya. Such emptiness is incorporated into the negative space of Haya’s room, and the novel more generally,

so that when its “putrid cloak” is spread over everything and everyone, the violent legacies of the past settle over the present, however short-lived this present may be in the space of Drndić’s text.

I am proposing this view of the past as the negative space that shapes the implicated present in order to better understand the stakes of Drndić’s technique of superimposed memory. In *E.E.G.*, a neon sign advertising the optical center now located across the street from Avram Levi’s clothing store flickers in the darkness that falls on Ulica Vlačka. At the same time, and in the same paragraph, Avram Levi’s son, Leon Altarac, “born in Sarajevo in 1909,” locks the doors of his knitwear workshop and heads home for the night. The two realities exist simultaneously in the narrative, which tells us that, “[it] is 1942, or rather 2015,” without this being a mistake of confusion about the date (*E.E.G.* 308). Through this superimposition of memory, Drndić is able to capture implication’s intertemporal nature. Recent and distant histories, part of the “irrevocable pasts” that Rothberg argues intrude upon the “unredeemed present,” place subjects from disparate time periods within a complex web of victimization, perpetration and implication (9). In the scene described above, the passive, apathetic gestures of the present-day inhabitants of Zagreb position them as implicated subjects in relation to the Jewish community who had once lived in the same city, even as their positionality vis-à-vis the more recent genocides in the former Yugoslavia remains unknown. My argument here is that, by conveying the memory of implication at the same time as victimization and perpetration, Drndić enacts a disarticulation of the hierarchies upheld by historiography, official memory standards, and mainstream modes of memorialization. The past is not over, and neither is the effect of the violence that occurred long ago. In Drndić’s novel, the “blue, sharp eye” of the optical center in present-day Croatia can thus intertemporally follow “Leon Altarac’s supple step: as far as the killing field of Jasenovac,” where he was murdered (*E.E.G.* 308).

Thinking about the importance of place-based memory, Andreas Ban had observed that, “without memory, the present becomes sick, mutilated, a torso with extracted organs” (*E.E.G.* 306). Instead of doing away with this “sick, mutilated” torso that was produced by the collapse of space and removal of memory from the present, Drndić recovers and reconstructs this present with fragments and traces of the silenced past (*E.E.G.* 306). Through this, she attempts to disarticulate the “body” of history, using multiplicity and superimposition, as her tools against the reproduction of a stratified organization of history. Moreover, because they focus on the implicated subject, Drndić’s disarticulated historical narratives are able to create new, unexpected connections, cross back and forth between fiction and nonfiction, past and present, treating them not as opposites, but complementary parts of a continuous, multilinear system where “everything happens at once” (Deleuze and Guattari 297).

These strategies, I argue, represent the author’s reaction to the overly organized, ideological and official history and collective memory established in Yugoslavia after WWII, and a few decades later, in Croatia after the Yugoslav disintegration. Based on narratives of heroes, perpetrators, victims and martyrs, these histories made no space for ambiguity and nuance, and their political, state-building agendas did not account for the implicated subject. In the chapter’s concluding section, I discuss the novels’ Croatian context more specifically, connecting this to pertinent developments of European memory.

#### **4.6 Forgetting Implication: Croatian Memory Between De-Yugoslavization and Europeanization**

The establishment of an official historical narrative in Croatia after the disintegration of Yugoslavia resembled the manipulation and rewriting of history in Serbia. As in the Serbian case, the supranational Yugoslav identity and historiography had dominated in Croatia while the

Federation's power was intact, meaning that the memory of the Holocaust had been minimized, and its Jewish, Romani, Sinti, Serbian or Croatian victims were entered into the generalized category of "victims of fascism." This required the silencing of the war crimes committed under the fascist Ustaša and the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH). Jelena Subotić writes that, as early as the 1929, resentful of a perceived marginal status in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Croatian nationalist elites formed the Ustaša, a "political movement organized around fascist, racist, extreme nationalist, and increasingly terrorist ideas" that sought to expand Croatia's territorial claims and establish a "Greater Croatia" that incorporated a majority of Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (97). These expansionist goals were closely tied with an ideology that sought "racial purity and the elimination of non-Croats, primarily Serbs, Jews, and the Roma" through genocide, and explained the Ustaša's close collaboration with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy (Subotić 99).

These goals were actively pursued after the establishment of the Ustaša-controlled NDH government on April 6, 1941, less than two weeks after the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia. Its leader, Ante Pavelić, returned to Croatia to guide the rapidly growing Ustaša membership and militia. As the first order of business, the NDH put forth a number of antisemitic laws, and in "a departure from German laws" included Serbs in the list of undesirable racial categories (Subotić 101).<sup>158</sup> These laws led to arrests and lootings of the Jewish population, as well as dismissal of all Jews from their employment, and through decree, the introduction of mandatory Jewish insignia, months before the same policy was employed in Germany. Similar discriminatory policies were introduced targeting Serbian and Romani communities. The NDH quickly

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<sup>158</sup> The Ustaša genocidal violence against Serbs distinguished it from the Reich, which "reprimanded" the NDH for the deportation and extermination of Serbs, an action that "often backfired, as it recruited more Serbs to partisan resistance," and which led to an internal civil war between Croatian and Serb militias (Subotić 103).

established twenty-six concentration and extermination camps for systematic killings of Jews, Serbs, Roma, and political opponents like communists. They included camps in Danica, Stara Gradiska, Kerestinec, Jadovno, Dakovo, Loborgrad, Slana, Sisak—the only camp that held unaccompanied children in the whole of Europe—and Jasenovac, which was the largest camp and whose history and memorialization became a major point of contention and political appropriation during and after the Yugoslav wars. Over the course of the war, twenty thousand Jews were murdered in Croatia or killed after deportation to extermination camps, and twelve thousand Jews were killed in NDH-controlled Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>159</sup> As in the Serbian case, the genocide of the Jews was carried out in a quick pace, and by 1942, only seven thousand Jews were left in Croatia. By the end of the war, eighty percent of Croatian Jews were killed, with only three thousand Croatian Jews surviving the war (Subotić 106-7).

After the war and the establishment of the Yugoslav federation, official historiography about the Second World War, framed the crimes committed by the NDH as solely part of Nazi ideology, thus silencing both the genocide of Jews and Romani communities, and the NDH-specific genocide of the Serbian community in Croatia. The Yugoslav mnemonic landscape was devoid of memorials that captured the unpleasant reality of past collaboration with the Nazis and the home-grown fascist ideology of the Ustaša in Croatia and Četniks in Serbia. To support the narrative of the Second World War as the “supra-national partisan struggle” and the peace-time ideal of Yugoslav multiculturalism, the state and various institutions erected thousands of small and large memorials throughout the Federation that commemorated *only* “communist heroism,

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<sup>159</sup> Determining the total number of victims of the Holocaust in Croatia has been a contentious point for historians in Croatia and Serbia, with the former minimizing the numbers and the latter inflating them. According to Subotić, “scholarly consensus puts the number of dead between eighty-three thousand and a hundred thirty-five thousand,” of whom “8,000–20,000 were Jews, 45,000–52,000 Serbs, and 8,000–15,000 Roma” (105n32).

antifascist partisan struggle, and civilian victims” and in turn, contributed to a deliberate obfuscation of the past (Radonić 33, Subotić 112-3). Despite the fact that six thousand WWII memorials were erected from the post-war period to 1990, with 2,700 of them found in Croatia, almost no memorials were dedicated to the Holocaust and its Jewish victims. The only exceptions were the memorials erected with the initiative and funds of Jewish community members, and the few, inadequate ones funded by the state. Even the sites of former concentration and extermination camps in Croatia were ignored and left to languish in oblivion, despite community interest in erecting commemorative memorials. The biggest of the camps, Jasenovac, did not receive a commemorative monument and memorial museum for decades after the war ended. Since the camp’s operations were almost completely led by the Ustaša, its memory posed a significant threat for the Yugoslav narrative of multiculturalism. As Ljiljana Radonić argues, when the monumental sculpture known as *Kameni cvijet* / Stone flower and designed by Bogdan Bogdanović was finally erected at Jasenovac in 1966, the “abstract flower symbol that opens toward the sky stood for hope and the future,” but without naming victims who perished at the camp, or those who were responsible for their deaths (38).

What this brief historical overview highlights is how significant Drndić’s fiction is as a counter-monument to Holocaust victims, perpetrators and implicated subjects in Croatia, whose existence and suffering were first swept under the rug, and later were instrumentalized by the Croatian state after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Croatia sought to distance itself as much as possible from the legacy and memory of Yugoslavia, while at the same time distort and deny its role in the 1991-1995 Croatian War of Independence (known also as the Domovinski rat / Homeland War). Street names, names of schools and public buildings, and all monuments commemorating partisans and communist leaders were removed



and replaced with those of “precommunist or anticommunist Croatian heroes,” including members of the Ustaša (Subotić 119).<sup>160</sup> By the year 2000, around 3,000 monuments had been destroyed, including those few monuments commemorating Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In *E.E.G.*, Andreas Ban laments this destruction, remembering the now missing memorials through the traces they have left behind: “instead of those former plaques, on the walls there are only marks, the outline of their erstwhile frames, dried mortar, flaking, and the holes of the screws by which they were once attached to the buildings” (Drndić 278). The faint outlines of the plaques and the screws that once kept them in place silently testify to a period in time that Andreas Ban remembers well, but which is now disavowed by the postsocialist Croatian state.

Concurrent with this process of de-Yugoslavization, a process of rewriting collective memory was also underway. In the new Croatia, the Ustaša and criminals of the more recent Yugoslav wars were recast as valiant heroes of the nation, fighting on behalf of the Croatian people and against the Yugoslav, or more specifically Serbian, communist threat. As a succinct example of this process, both Radonić and Subotić point to the rephrasing of the common statement that once dedicated various memorials and statues to those “Fallen for the People’s Liberation Struggle,” referencing the anti-fascist partisan struggle during WWII, to now reading,

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<sup>160</sup> This is what Andreas Ban observes in the opening section of *E.E.G.*, in regards to his hometown, the Istrian city of Rovinj. Drndić writes:

... it is important to mention that this steep, stone street is also called *via del Monte*, just as for decades all the streets in this town have had two names, which used to grate on the ears of some people in power at the beginning of the 1990s, so there was almost a premiere here of the chiseling away of street names, but that was left after all for the appalling Vukovar performance twenty years later. In those days Istria shouted, *Tudjman go home!* and thus saved the streets and identity cards and Italian schools and Italian kindergartens and Marshal Tito Square. Those up there, intoxicated with stinking Croatdom, persevered in carrying out “small” corrections, so they changed the name of the heroine Roža Petrović (whose eyes were gouged out by Italian Fascists, but nevertheless, blind as she was, she carried on knitting socks for the Partisans, including a pair for our father) to Ruža Petrović, so that now the little street that bears her name is somehow additionally crippled, blinded even though that little alley is indeed short and blind. (*E.E.G.*, 16-7)

“Fallen for Croatia,” a reference that accounts only for the Ustaša fight for an independent Croatia (Radonić 44, Subotić 120).<sup>161</sup> Such reframed memories served the overarching goal of rehabilitating and normalizing Ustaša figures, and in turn, legitimizing the government of the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, or HDZ), which came to power after Yugoslavia’s dissolution, by connecting it with the legacy of the NDH.

How, exactly, was this legacy reframed? Certainly, the fascist ideology and genocidal acts of the Ustaša could not be openly embraced if Croatia wanted to successfully join the European community. Instead, it was their commitment to anticommunism and Catholicism that became touted as the link between these two systems. Franjo Tuđman, Croatia’s first president following its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, played a major role in this historical revisionism. Himself a “historian” of WWII, Tuđman “made politics of the past an important part of his agenda,” as evidenced by his antisemitic book, *Wastelands of Historical Reality* (1989), where he put forth the idea that crimes committed by both the Ustaša and the partisans were of equal magnitude, and where he minimized the number of people killed at Jasenovac (Radonić 42). However problematic, such equalizing between communist and fascist crimes in Croatia would easily be incorporated into a similar mnemonic strategy of the European Union, and serve Croatia when the country sought inclusion in the union.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Jelena Subotić notes that the destruction of these Yugoslav monuments was not carried out with the same intensity all over Croatia, and singles out the example of the Kapor memorial complex on the island of Rab which commemorated the concentration camp there, maintained by the Antifascist Association of Rab (122). Subotić explains this peculiarity through the fact that the Rab camp had been operated by Fascist Italy, and thus its memorialization was not contested, since blame for the violence there can be deflected to a foreign power. Nonetheless, this example is an important reminder that local ways of remembering exist outside of official narratives of history.

<sup>162</sup> What happened with the Jasenovac Memorial Site after the Croatian War of Independence illustrates these dynamics well. While during the war, the site was occupied by Serbian forces, who looted museum exhibits and even displayed some of them in Belgrade as a testament to the “genocidal tendencies of the Croatian people,” after the war, the repair and reopening of the site became a priority for the Croatian

After receiving EU member candidate status in 2004, Croatia became eager to display a newfound commitment to Holocaust remembrance to the European community, and took steps to align its official memory policies with those of the EU. In 2005, it joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and a year later, the new museum exhibit at the Jasenovac Memorial Site was inaugurated, designed to “meet the standards of the Council of Europe and the EU” (Subotić 135).<sup>163</sup> As scholars of Croatian memory politics have argued, such mnemonic compliance was temporary and superficial, intended to support transitional justice processes and the process of European Union accession. Importantly, Tyler McConnell’s research reveals that since joining the EU in 2013, Croatia has undergone a “mnemonic backsliding” that persists “despite the presence and continual development of European norms of memorialisation throughout Croatia’s accession process and further” (51). This process produces a revisionist, nationalist and exclusionary narrative of history through which right-wing political elites “[undermine] the memory of the Homeland War” and erase “all things Yugoslav from the Croatian retelling of its past,” including the Yugoslav partisans’ anti-fascist resistance, which is

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state (Van der Laarse 81). This work served the nation’s historical revisionist goals, and its strategy for EU accession. As Subotić argues, the “commitment to Jasenovac became much less clearly about remembering the Holocaust or the genocide against the Serbs, and even less about criminalizing the NDH,” but instead, was a “commitment to use the genocide of WWII to mnemonically interpret the more recent war of the 1990s as a genocide against Croats” (131). Again, the appropriation of the suffering of others served to support a narrative of victimhood, and similarly to Serbia and Albania, Croatian politicians dubbed its citizens the “new Jews,” who had been victimized by the Serbs, or “the new fascists,” as Croatian prime minister Ivo Sanader stated during a 2005 visit to Yad Vashem (Subotić 131).<sup>163</sup> The exhibit focused exclusively on the victims of the execution camps, but information on their ethnicity was missing, as was information on the perpetrators of this violence. In fact, the NDH was framed as simply a Nazi puppet state, instead of an independently functioning fascist state. Without any historically significant material displayed, and without any traces of the camps remaining, since they were destroyed at the end of the war by the Ustaša, the Jasenovac Memorial Site suffered from what Ana Kršinić Lozica calls the “mark of emptiness” (305). Such emptiness—which resonates with Drndić’s descriptions of Haya Tedeschi’s agonized wait in the empty, whimpering negative space of her room, where she hopes to see her son, that product of European fascism—is borne out of the particular social, political and historical context of Croatia, but is also in alignment with EU remembrance policies and practices.

demonized as a threat to the NDH and the Ustaša regime's fight for Croatia's independence (51-64). Croatia's "rejection of Europe's power over memory," its "ongoing backsliding" and its rehabilitation of criminals from the conflicts of both the Second World War and Homeland War has yet to be addressed by the European Parliament or other EU institutions (McConnell 67-8). Indeed, the complete rejection of Yugoslavia and communism fits well within the EU and European Parliament's narrative of "two totalitarianisms," which as has been discussed, equates Nazi and communist ideologies, systems and crimes.

This is the social and political context that Andreas Ban contends with as the polyphonic narratives of *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.* unfold. In the new Croatia, a country which had proudly made its rightful return to Europe, Andreas Ban navigates a present in which the past has been molded to fit the agendas of Croatian and European political elites, to then become embraced by the larger society. For instance, early in *Belladonna*, Andreas Ban encounters a blatant example of an unrepentant implicated subject, whose actions not only deny familial involvement in the NDH, but also rehabilitate these family members to appear as heroic supporters of the nation. It is 2010, and Andreas Ban reads an advertisement for books written by Carmen Vrljičak, a university lecturer, journalist and writer from Argentina, originally from the Imotski region in Croatia. Reading the materials promoting this visit leaves Andreas Ban perplexed: nowhere does he find a mention of her family's involvement with "the government of the Leader Ante Pavelić, in which her parents participated zealously," taking up leadership roles (*Belladonna* 75-6). Drndić relates to readers the full breadth of Andreas Ban's research into this family, a process that reveals layers of its direct participation, complicity and implication in the NDH and Ustaša ideology during WWII, and its contemporary role in the upholding of that same ideology through their work in academia and publishing.

Drndić's admonishment of the Vrljičak family, accomplished through Andreas Ban's extensive research on each member of this family, is a continuation of her critique of implication. In this case, implication crosses geographical borders and involves members of the diaspora, whose location in the West should have led to their facing and coming to terms with their past. After all, the West has positioned itself as an authority on how to properly deal with difficult histories. Their failure to even recognize their implication and privilege makes it easy for readers to know where to place the Vrljičak family. In the taxonomy of implication, perpetration and victimhood, the family falls neatly in the category of implicated subjects unconcerned with the violent legacies inherited from their predecessors. A distinctly post-Yugoslav challenge to our understanding of implication is created, however, when Drndić's *Belladonna* introduces the story of Rudolf Sass. The son of an Ustaša father, who had tried to divorce himself from the legacies of the Holocaust by fleeing and assimilating to Switzerland, Rudolf Sass is nonetheless haunted by his past.

At age sixty, Rudolf Sass has "made a fine job of his life," has an orderly marriage, a daughter and granddaughter, and a successful medical career in Switzerland. Despite all this, he is afflicted by *pruritus ani*—an uncomfortable and unrelenting itching of the anus, and he leaves his Swiss home to try and find his affliction's cause through the psychological help of Andreas Ban and his colleague, Adam Kaplan. The two dig through Rudolf Sass' repressed memories to reveal the source of this anomaly tormenting his body: the memory of his violent Ustaša father. Specifically, Andreas Ban and Adam Kaplan learn that Rudolf Sass' youth unfolded parallel to the tragedy of the Kladovo transport. This was the attempt of a group of Jews from Vienna to escape to Jerusalem in 1939, whose efforts were thwarted by the freezing over of the Danube, forcing the group to overwinter in the Yugoslav town of Kladovo. A year later, they moved to

the town of Šabac, on the river Sava, where they would meet their end in the camps at Zasavica and Sajmište (Offer and Weiner xiii-xxii).<sup>164</sup> Drndić carefully conveys all aspects of this “little wartime story which is not included in encyclopedias or in world history,” but which “just glimmers from time to time at its edges” (*Belladonna* 185). To address its omission, the author inserts a number of witness testimonies, archival material, and the names of the 1,107 Jews killed at the concentration camp in Šabac.

Because Drndić reports these facts through the clinical case of Rudolf Sass, the history of the Kladovo transport reaches us through the framework of implication, rather than simply being relayed as a story of victims and perpetrators. Moreover, she again makes use of a strategy of layered speech to create parallel chronologies that emphasize the Sass family’s involvement and implication. By July of 1941, Rudolf Sass’ Jewish friends have completely disappeared, and a month later, his father entertains captains, corporals, sergeants and officers of the Ustaša army, who switch from their uniforms into “civilian suits” to attend evening mass as good, devout Catholics, while during the day they plan the extermination of the Jews and Roma in the town. The fact that Rudolf Sass does not go to church with them does not stop the disturbing procession of history: in August, “the killings begin,” the bodies of the dead are hanged from telegraph poles, or piled high onto carts, and soon, on “August 12 and August 13, 1941, all those interned in the camp near Šabac are taken to Zasavica and shot” (*Belladonna* 193).<sup>165</sup> Rudolf

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<sup>164</sup> For more on the history of the Kladovo transport, see: Dalia Ofer and Hannah Weiner, *Dead-End Journey: The Tragic Story of the Kladovo-Sabac Group*, New York: University Press, 1996. See also the dissertation thesis, *The River Danube as a Holocaust Landscape: Journey of the Kladovo Transport* by Vesna Lukić, and [her film](#) *Two Emperors and a Queen*, which re-traces the journey of the group.

<sup>165</sup> Pausing the event’s chronological torment, Drndić inserts the italicized eyewitness account of Milorad Jelešić. A local farmer who was forced by German soldiers to throw those killed at Zasavica into a mass grave after ensuring they had been robbed of anything valuable, Jelešić later testified at the Nuremberg trials. In *Belladonna*, his testimony is mediated through Rudolf Sass, who conveys his memories of the massacre’s aftermath to Adam Kaplan. These memories amount to vague recollections about the dark and

Sass sees the dead bodies hanging in the town square, the carts full of bodies heading to unmarked mass graves. A seemingly powerless bystander, he only “looks” and “looks again” (*Belladonna* 192). But Rudolf Sass is not a *mitläufer*: he does not completely ignore the world around him, and the act of looking makes him into a witness who feels responsibility and who understands, even if not fully, the role his family plays in this violence. However, his one attempt at resistance, his plan to deliver “partly collected and partly stolen money” to his Jewish friends Kari and Enzi, who are seeking to escape from Šabac, is entirely unsuccessful (*Belladonna* 183). Unable to help his friends, or stand up to his father, Rudolf Sass plans his own escape, and a year after the end of the war, he leaves Šabac for Switzerland. There, he makes a new life for himself, and as Drndić writes, “life works, it goes on” without the burden of the past (*Belladonna* 213).

But for Rudolf Sass, like for Haya Tedeschi and Andreas Ban, forgetting and escaping the past is impossible. In Rudolf Sass’ case, the past resurfaces, against his will, as the physical manifestation of discomfort, swelling and chronic itching that afflicts him even as he appears to have created a successful *European* life for himself. His bodily pain keeps him tethered to the past he tried to disavow, allowing him no catharsis, reconciliation or forgiveness, because it is through his physical, intergenerational connection to his father’s legacy that he is implicated in the murders of the Kladovo-Šabac group. Drndić writes:

Rudolf Sass will never discover whether or how much his father, on the other side of the River Drina, served the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia, because he never asked anyone or researched anything, because he never had time, is that it? Life pulled its strings which Rudolf Sass obediently accepted, in the end, by anesthetizing his

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ominous night that preceded the killings, and what he “heard” from friends at school, because Rudolf Sass does not find the truth about what happened at Zasavica until forty-five long years after the massacre, when he listens to Milorad Jelešić. This testimony, which in the novel is inflected with a repetitive “said Jelešić,” and “Jelešić said,” serves as Rudolf Sass’ attempt to distance himself from the tragedy through the implicit assertion of the fact that he *did not know* what had occurred right under his nose. Milorad Jelešić’s testimony can be accessed online, [here](#).

Swiss patients, himself becoming numb, quiet, reconciled to his polished inner being in which he stored his family filth. (*Belladonna* 217)

I read this excerpt as Drndić's way of pointing to Rudolf Sass' unwillingness to truly interrogate his father's role in the NDH and work through the traumatic past in any productive manner. Even as he projects an image of a quiet, assimilated life in Switzerland, and even as he buries the memories of his youth, Rudolf Sass cannot shake off his implication in the Zasavica massacre. No matter the distance between him and Šabac, he "bears the stamp of his family" (*Belladonna* 217). His one feeble attempt at confronting his father, whose shadow threatens his "good, stable Swiss mountain-lakeside life," is a complete failure (*Belladonna* 217). Returning home too late, Rudolf Sass finds that his father is already dead. As in *Trieste*, which did not reveal the details of the meeting between Haya Tedeschi and Hans Traube/Antonio Tedeschi, Drndić does not give us the satisfaction of knowing what would have happened during this confrontation between parent and child in *Belladonna*. This, I argue, reflects Drndić's belief that there can be no redemption or peace for Rudolf Sass, who believed that a "good" and "stable" life in Switzerland would have separated him from his past and the violent legacies in which he was implicated.

Similarly, the "polished" standards of memory promoted by the European Union, and adopted by the Yugoslav successor states and Albania fail to adequately deal with the magnitude of violence and the legacies of the Holocaust that still impact the present. At their core, the superficiality of "reconciliatory" efforts made by Croatia and other Yugoslav successor states in their pursuit of EU membership resembles Rudolf Sass' powerless and belated attempt to "confront" his father, a trial which would need to happen *in absentia*. Distrustful of the idea of reconciliation, Drndić's narrative does not offer any satisfactory conclusion to Rudolf Sass' story. Much like the process of Europeanization, which, while professing an aim to "rebuild social trust, repair a fractured justice system, and build a democratic system of governance," can



be easily reversed, and thus serves only a “superficial and performative” role that does not transform social conditions, Rudolf Sass’ stable European life cannot free him from the past and his implication in the violence that occurred in Šabac and Zasavica (McConnell 63, 68). In fact, Drndić’s repudiation of Rudolf Sass’ European dream through the humiliating torment caused by his *pruritus ani* and the weight of his father’s legacy subverts the top-down directives imposed by the European Union accession process, since his European way of remembering amounts to a pathetic practice of self-anesthetizing, denying and concealing the past. Read as a personification of Croatia’s accession to the European Union, Rudolf Sass’ futile and unsuccessful escape to Switzerland illustrates how inclusion in the European community has failed to address Croatia’s historical revisionism. When read together, as I have done in this chapter, Drndić’s *Trieste*, *Belladonna* and *E.E.G.*, show not only the utter failure of the entire European continent to deal with the past, but the extent to which history has been deliberately silenced and manipulated.

For Drndić, the only possible form of reconciliation is an ironic one. Attending to his father at the end of his life, Andreas Ban visits him in the old people’s home where he is living. A partisan and intellectual, Andreas Ban’s father is placed in the home by his second wife, a right-wing religious fanatic who cannot measure up to his late mother. At that home, Andreas Ban’s father lies in a bed that is adjacent to “a former Ustasha whose surname is Boban” (*Belladonna* 224). Now ninety-seven, this Boban has returned to die in “the bosom” of his beloved homeland, and spends his days stealing insignificant objects from other rooms. Humbled by time, old age and the failing of the body, Drndić writes that, “the Partisan and the Ustasha reach a ‘reconciliation.’ In an old people’s home. In silence. In infirmity” (*Belladonna* 224). Certainly not a reconciliation that would serve any institution of human rights or memory organization, theirs is not an attempt at “rebuilding” broken relations, but an assertion of

reconciliation's impossibility, recalling Haya Tedeschi's meek confrontation of her mother in another institution. Andreas Ban attempts to carry out his own form of confrontation with his father: having just learned of his maternal uncle's role as a Ustaša official during the war, he asks his father for the truth, only to be met with a dismissive attitude. "Many people collaborated," his father tells him, adding that he no longer remembered the details his son was demanding of him, and only wished to be left alone (*Belladonna* 221). With that, Andreas Ban once again understands that he must deal with the past, with history, and with implication, on his own. The author will not provide a reconciliatory ending.

## Conclusion

In the end, Andreas Ban can be read as a symbol for the four writers we have explored in these pages. Because of his deep investment in the question of accountability for past violence, both in regards to Croatia, the country where he had been born, and Europe, the supranational community he tried to join, Andreas Ban's struggles remind me of the literary trajectories of Ali Podrimja, David Albahari, Luljeta Lleshanaku, and Daša Drndić. As writers critical of the manipulation of history and memory in socialist Albania and Yugoslavia, and in their respective postsocialist states in Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, and Croatia, these writers looked to the possibilities and connections afforded by transnational networks of world literature. Similarly to Andreas Ban, their forays into European and North American literary communities were marked by the narrative framework of trauma. Podrimja's invitations to speak at symposia and events in Germany were always connected to themes of war and nationalism, drawing little attention to other aspects of his work; in Canada, Albahari was praised for not resorting to nationalist tropes, but their invocation nonetheless continued to associate the writer with nationalist violence; Lleshanaku's initial framing as an imagist, apolitical poet was replaced with her role as the voice of a traumatized generation, proving effective for marketing the poet in the United States and throughout Europe; and in the case of Drndić's openly political novels, the belatedness of her international attention reveals how challenging it is to circulate narratives that do not conform to normative ideas of victimhood. Abroad, as at home, they could not escape the power of the traumatic framework, which constructed the past as a record of pain and suffering.

Andreas Ban's tour of Europe, during which he attends different writers' residencies speaks to this reductive framing by illuminating what underlies the drive to discount and erase uncomfortable aspects of the past. In fact, through Andreas Ban's visits to Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and France, Drndić performs a reversal of the pedagogical role that the European Union takes toward its candidate states or new member states from the Balkans and Eastern Europe. On each trip, Andreas Ban cannot focus on writing.<sup>166</sup> Instead, he gives in to his obsessive research of the past, which leads him to all the forgotten edges and corners of history, ones that lay in plain sight, even as the European countries he visits try to conceal them, with the enthusiastic blessing of the European Union and its institutions. The time that Andreas Ban spends at his writing residencies reveals the inconsistencies between Europe's espoused values of equality and justice, and the forgetfulness that dominates its cultural and social sphere. He learns an important lesson: the commodification of writing and narratives of victimhood happens alongside the distortion and erasure of historical legacies of violence.

In Tuscany, for instance, Andreas Ban stays in an old villa owned by aristocratic benefactors who fund residencies for writers. In exchange for this generous hospitality, complete with servants and leisurely dinners, these barons and baronesses expect the attending writers to adhere to the norms of their world of illusions, which Drndić describes as being "steeped in the tassels of an extinguished past" (*E.E.G.* 326). To Andreas Ban, these remnants of the Italian aristocracy are only capable of contrived, tedious conversation, where literature is simply another commodity up for consumption, and where violent histories are just another beautiful decoration

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<sup>166</sup> These residencies reflect ones that Drndić personally attended, including the Dutch Foundation for Literature in 2010; the Literary Colloquium Berlin in 2007; the Gregor von Rezzori and Beatrice Monti della Corte Retreat for Writers and Botanists in Tuscany, in 2015; and the Tirana in Between residency, organized by the local organization Poeteka, in collaboration with TRADUKI, in 2015.

that can be displayed on their walls. In the villa, paintings and photos preserve the memory of Italy's colonial past in Ethiopia and Albania, but this past is reframed as yet another form of charity by people who willingly believe the tale of their ancestors as "saviors" of Ethiopian art during the Italian occupation of Abyssinia.<sup>167</sup> The delusion and hypocrisy of these wealthy implicated subjects disturbs Andreas Ban, but he is also cognizant of how easily the writers who benefit from their patronage become servile and eager to assimilate into this world and "stand on the capitalist feet of mass-produced correctness" (Drndić *E.E.G.* 327).

In the midst of Europe, immersed in a global literary community, Andreas Ban experiences the same issues he faced in Croatia, where he had felt an authoritative demand for conformity and the adherence to a dominant narrative about the past. Drndić encapsulates this demand in an encounter that Andreas Ban has in his hometown of Rovinj: on a hike, he comes across a woman of "the middle-class milieu, who despite the whirlpools of socialism, published her doctorate, found an academic post and a respected social position," who admonishes him for writing "*a book like that about the town which gave [him] everything*" (*E.E.G.* 29). Uninterested in paying homage to any place, least of all the town that gave him years of unemployment and alienation, Andreas Ban is likewise not interested in becoming a representative or cultural ambassador for Croatia on the global stage of world literature, and so he cannot find peace at the writers' residencies he attends, their promised European enlightenment notwithstanding.

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<sup>167</sup> Drndić writes: "During the Second World War, Nazis lived in some of the villas belonging to the Italian aristocracy. (They weren't Nazis, but soldiers of the Wehrmacht, said some former and current owners of those villas, with a dose of irritation in their voices.) ... Relative calm reigned and undesecrated nature bloomed; members of partisan "bands" attacked SS personnel in little Renaissance towns, they didn't touch the aristocracy, this was told to me in a steady voice by former landowners, that is, the descendants of former barons and dukes, entirely cynically, without comment. Some of the owners of Tuscan and other Italian villas 'found themselves' involved in the humane task of saving Ethiopian cultural treasures during Mussolini's campaign in Abyssinia, but those times were long since past, so there was no point in wasting words on them" (*E.E.G.* 334-5).

Drndić's message is clear: the imperative to represent and to testify will remain an ever-present one. As I have shown in this dissertation, similar concerns impacted the writing of Podrimja, Lleshanaku and Albahari. While the four authors found different ways to resist yielding to these external demands, I have argued for the significance of silence as an important method of subversion. Silence's resistance is not boisterous, the change it affects is not immediately apparent, it requires careful attention, a sustained practice of close reading and listening. For us as readers, learning to notice the multiple form of silences and other methods of narrative disruption that these writers employ in their writing about totalitarian violence, war, genocide, and displacement—all the disparate histories that have become subsumed into the generalized "trauma" of Albania and the former Yugoslavia—is only the first step to recognizing the varied manifestations of victimhood. Survivors of brutality do not always desire to verbalize their trauma, their speechlessness cannot be assumed to be a pathology, and silence is more meaningful than what this definition implies. The recognition of silence's multiplicity of meaning, especially as it pertains to the violent narratives discussed in this dissertation, transforms our understanding of victimhood and traumatic experiences, escaping the reductive, apolitical framing so long designated for them. In particular, implication opens new interpretative and analytical frames through which to engage with narrative and history.

And yet, as individuals embedded in historical and sociopolitical processes, these four writers do not exist outside of the production of this dominant narrative framework of trauma. After all, as Mona Baker observes, "there is no way that the story can be told from a privileged position of absolute neutrality. The narrator cannot stand outside the narrative" (126). This means that they are not immune to reproducing the harmful effects of the traumatic narrative, despite their resistance to it. Here I am not referring to postsocialist historical revisionism and the

Cold War paradigm's commodification of trauma, whose purpose is the delegitimizing of socialism, but to the reproduction of hierarchies of victimhood that place greater value to the suffering of one's own national or ethnic community and, in the process, erase both the suffering and resistance of other groups. The contemporary effort of Albania and the former Yugoslavia to disavow the past and enter the European community is based not only on the rejection of the legacy of socialism, but also on an effort to conceal, downplay, or outright erase any aspects of their culture and history deemed to be non-European. As the ultimate outsiders to Europe, the Romani communities that have long lived in the territory of Albania and Yugoslav successor states are not included in these countries' ambitions for a European future. In the texts analyzed in this study, I notice a similar exclusion. If their writing attests to the violence of the past, we can ask, whose trauma receives representation? In the works of Podrimja, Albahari and Lleshanaku, there is an almost complete absence of the Romani community in Kosovo, Serbia and Albania. Even Drndić's expansive novels, whose exploration of 20<sup>th</sup> century European history is thorough and relentless, do not account for the plight of Romani communities during the Holocaust, other than a few, vague mentions here and there. This absence is a telling example of how the silencing of Romani histories is upheld even by those committed to addressing injustice in other areas. The limits of solidarity conceal what has always been there, in the capacious negative space that surrounds us and that we choose not to see. Romani writers in Albania, Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states have produced fiction and poetry outside of the confines of the national literature canon. In post-WWII Yugoslavia, especially, Romani writers actively participated in the literary sphere of the country and were connected to transnational movements for European Roma emancipation and cultural advancement. This multilingual body of work offers opportunities for further research, where the concept of the

traumatic framework and the resistant poetics of silence that I have developed in this dissertation can be productive methods for exploration.

Lastly, as the story I shared at the beginning of this dissertation shows, silence and speaking are constitutive of one another. Reading the names of the victims of genocide with *Žene u crnom* / *Women in Black* was powerful because the group has long foregrounded silence as a method of resistance: our collective breaking of that silence was a deliberate act that did not dismiss the significance of withholding one's speech. As my generation, those born after 1989, write new works that speak to contemporary life in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, and the rest of the countries grouped under "the Balkans"—a life characterized not just by economic precarity, migration, neoliberal exploitation, and increasing authoritarianism, but also by pleasure, joy, creativity, and comradeship—it will be important to notice how their writing resists the allure of the traumatic framework and its devaluing of silence, and whether the transnational literary and activist networks they form can be built on something other than suffering.



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