Book Reviews

WOMEN WITH IMMIGRITUDE

Heike Paul
Mapping Migration: Women's Writing and the American Immigrant Experience from the 1950s to the 1990s
Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 1999, 251 pp., ISBN 3-8253-0900-2

A monograph on the hot issue of migration must inevitably relate to the larger debates surrounding the contested but influential field of postcolonial theory. On the one hand, migration is often seen as paradigmatic of postcoloniality; and postcolonial theory is saturated with discourses of mobility. On the other hand, however, the notion of migration has been summoned to serve as a (black feminist) alternative to postcolonial theory, as in Carole Boyce Davies's work on black women's 'migratory subjectivity'. As Heike Paul states, not every immigrant writer is necessarily postcolonial. Every study of migration is therefore bound to position itself in relation to, on the one hand, a postcolonial theory that tends to erase specificity, and, on the other hand, several other, more specific theoretical positions (such as American studies). Paul's study is an excellent example of a self-reflexive, responsible and sensitive negotiating of such theoretical positions.

The leading concern throughout Heike Paul's book is the wish to articulate a gendered critique of (postmodern, nationalist) discourses of mobility. Touching on a topic dealt with extensively by postcolonial theorists, she judges it productive neither to embrace postcolonial theory as a master discourse, nor to dismiss the insights produced from that theoretical perspective. Sharply aware, however, of the tendency to universalism in postcolonial theory, Paul proposes to read (im)migrant literature within the frame of American studies. As, from the perspective of American studies, the USA are defined as an immigrant country, immigrant writing is usually seen as a project of the articulation of a *national* identity, and thus as an exceptional literature. Paul, however, wishes to argue that these texts should instead be read within a *transnational* context. This manner of framing her readings within American studies provides her with a strong polemic focus. It allows her to summon up concepts and models developed within transnational bodies of thought such as postcolonial theory, so that she can read her texts within new transnational contexts (the black Atlantic, the borderlands) without succumbing to an unspecified universalism.

In addition, she bases her readings on the postcolonial insight into the interrelatedness of national and transnational events. The strength of this reading strategy shows itself in, for example, her inclusion of texts by Japanese-American writers. In a convincing chapter, which is dedicated to Monica Sone's and Yoshiko Uchida's autobiographical texts on the internment of their Japanese-American families during the Second World War, Paul reads these texts within the framework

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of American studies as a correction of a romantic notion of the USA as an immigration country: they show that migration and internment are two sides of the same coin. This analysis depends on the willingness to read immigrant writing as a field of ethnic and gendered diverse positions that are relating to, commenting on and complicating each other. And it is this gendered, ethnic diversity that Paul theorizes as an intervention in a nationalist discourse of migration.

Her choice of texts certainly is diverse. She presents careful readings of work by women writers from the 1950s to the 1990s; writers with a Caribbean background (Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid); Chicana writers (Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros); Jewish writers (Vivian Gornick); writers from India (Bharati Mukherjee); Japanese-American (Sone and Uchida) and Korean-American authors (Mary Paik Lee); and even a German-language novel on the coming of age of a girl from a Jewish-Polish family in a black neighbourhood in Atlanta (Jeannette Lander).

Through her careful readings, Paul is able to show that it is possible to speak of a women's 'immigritude'. For example, she shows that Chicana writers do not tend to dream of a patriarchal pastoral past, as their male colleagues may do; that they don't oppose art to life, but relate art to the community; that women writers (such as Gornick) are more reluctant to assign and to take fixed positions than their male counterparts; that the use of fantasy in women's writing should not be read as a knee-fall for a western audience interested in exoticism, but rather as a social strategy to broaden the notion of American literature, and thus to move into a larger space where all cultures interact. But, even if one finds many characteristic, common concerns, this women's 'immigritude' cannot be subsumed in one aesthetic programme. Paul points out that women migrant writers may offer a narrative excess of mobility (Mukherjee), but also an exploration of the limits of mobility (Kincaid); they may criticize essentialism, or embrace it (Anzaldúa). This variety of texts and positions, then, enters into a complex interaction with the dominant, masculinist discourses of migration – but also with each other.

To understand this network of literary interactions, one needs a plural theoretical approach. Paul's readings draw at least from American, postcolonial, feminist and cultural studies (singling out Ian Chambers, Stuart Hall and Werner Sollors as her main examples). Instead of discussing the merits of each of these theoretical practices as an independent master discourse, she prefers to concentrate on some urgent theoretical challenges in any or each of these fields. I have already referred to the much criticized tendency to universalism in postcolonial theory, an issue Paul responds to by emphasizing the imperative to respect the gendered, ethnic and historical diversity of these texts. In addition, Paul's study insists on the need to theorize the material, political and economic dimensions of migration along with the discursive and cultural dimensions. And this is perhaps the harder task.

Repeating the well-known critiques of Haraway, Butler and Braidotti, Paul asks: how to steer free from a form of theorizing that understands migration as metaphor? How to relate the fictional and theoretical explorations of migration to the social and political contexts of migration, to the lived experience and the agency of the migrant? Paul's answer to this challenge is convincing, though not entirely satisfying, if one keeps in mind that it is her purpose to present a form of 'theory in the flesh'. She interweaves her literary analysis with historical accounts of migration, while she keeps reminding us of the need for an interdisciplinary approach. However, what she offers most often is a juxtaposition of literary and sociological accounts. Her conscientious work shows how hard it is to develop a genuinely interdisciplinary approach, an approach that would interweave a

literary and a sociological approach, for example by scrutinizing and comparing crucial concepts in both domains, or by a thoughtful transplanting of concepts from one disciplinary context to the other. Paul comes closest to such an approach when, for example, she traces the history of a concept (such as borderlands), and thus contextualizes it. But Paul's focus on the US *discourse* of migration within American studies restricts her pursuit of interdisciplinarity.

The strong points of this solid work are many. One of them, however, is at the same time its weakness. For, while it is undeniably very satisfying to read extensive acknowledgements of the debates of the last decade, and an overview of the main bones of contention, Paul's scrupulous summing up and answering to all these objections is sometimes just a bit too dutiful. Such a respectful wariness to a host of critical positions is, on the one hand, a sign of scholarly integrity, on the other hand, it suggests the wish to take on the burden of a whole field. This anxious effort to cover the totality of the field is visible in the conclusion, where suddenly the argument is extended to film analysis and novels by white and male authors. But it is simply not possible to cover this totality, nor should it make sense to try to do so. Surely, not everyone in the field is driven by the same analytical desire, or speaking from the same position. A consciously, less anxious, specifically *situated* position might have led to a lighter, more experimental and perhaps even more innovative analysis.

But this is just an afterthought on the kind of studies we need *after* the sound, meticulous work presented by scholars such as Heike Paul. Paul's study shows us the state of the art in the feminist theorizing of migration and postcoloniality. This is where we are. And now, how to proceed from here? How to overcome the tired oppositions between the literary / the social, between materiality / metaphor? Let us thank Paul for her thorough exploration of this theoretical borderland, an exploration that urges us to move on, in other directions, and with other, perhaps also more circumscribed gestures.

Isabel Hoving
University of Antwerp

WITCHES FLY HIGH: THE SWEEPING BROOM OF DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

Dubravka Ugrešić
The Culture of Lies, trans Celia Hawkesworth
London: Phoenix House, 1998

Dubravka Ugrešić
The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, trans Celia Hawkesworth
London: Phoenix House, 1998

> Today, from the perspective of my nomadic-exile, I can only be grateful to my former cultural milieu. I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone. (*The Culture of Lies*, p. 273)

The first book by Dubravka Ugrešić to appear in English translation was her postmodern, metafictional novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (Ugrešić, 1991), a novel on writers and writing. The story is located in Zagreb and centred around

an international meeting of writers. In an extremely witty and intriguing way, Dubravka Ugrešić used this imaginary meeting (modelled on an existing tradition of international writers' conferences held regularly in Zagreb) to weave quite a complex story in which many genres are skilfully merged. Written at a time when the Berlin Wall was still standing, the novel cleverly combines elements of the cultural history of the region with an amusing play on various types of narration, so, in the end, a novel on writers turns out to be a novel on writing.

Fording the Stream of Consciousness was, significantly, published by the feminist publisher Virago Press, and it was almost immediately followed by another title by the same author, *In the Jaws of Life* (Ugrešić, 1992).[1] This second book foregrounds more strongly Ugrešić's interest in women's issues. This is particularly obvious in the first part of the book, in the short novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*, in which Dubravka Ugrešić skilfully uses patterns and stereotypes of romantic novels to create her own story about that eternal plot, the search for love. The heroine of the story, a typist from Zagreb and reader of romantic novels, simply wants to find a boyfriend. She tries some of the usual ways to solve the problem; she discusses it with her friends, she tries dating different kinds of men, she gets disappointed and depressed. To get away from the problem, she goes on a diet (taken from a women's magazine), tries reading (starting with *Madam Bovary*), or goes to the theatre (of course, to watch *Hamlet*, but only lasts out till the moment Ophelia is dead), and, finally, she tries by learning foreign languages. And then, quite unexpectedly, her prince charming appears, to take her . . . for coffee.

This short but effective novel is full of witty authorial comments on the way in which the heroine's destiny is framed; narration is followed by various pieces of advice on household maintenance, and in many places there are innovative devices for the readers which invite them to interfere with the narration. Significantly, those devices imitate the instructions in sewing patterns, which can be found in many women's magazines ('✂ – – – – – *Cut* the text along the line as desired', says one, while the other goes as follows: '/ / / / / / / / / *Pleat*: Make large thematic stitches on either side of the author's seam'). And the novel does not have a 'proper' happy ending, but closes with a discussion by the author-narrator with her potential readers – in this case, her mother, neighbours and relatives, all of them women – about the ways in which the story of Steffie Speck and her prince charming can be continued. The scene is hilarious, but in the end the narrator has to conclude rather seriously that none of the women she has gathered there can invent anything different from the well-known patterns. 'So, none of you can think of anything? Other then clichés, I mean, nothing from life? From your own lives? Haven't you lived?', she cries in amazement. But this cry for the authenticity of women's lives is ignored. Forgetting the realities of their own lives, the women she is addressing happily turn to fairy-tales for grown-ups and pour over an old album of Hollywood heart-throbs, inventing their own, personal romances instead of a plot for Steffie Speck's fictional life. Leaving them enchanted by their own stories, the author-narrator ponders on how 'everything was a cliché, including life itself', and that 'the kitsch microbes are the most vigorous organisms of the emotions'.

When it was first published in Croatian, the short novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* made Dubravka Ugrešić quite popular in her home country. Its unusual topic, its freshness of style and its exquisite wit made it an immediate success.[2] The novel was also among the first to show that new topics, broadly recognized as women's issues, were soon to become more prevalent in the literature of the former Yugoslavia. Subsequent titles, *Život je bajka* ('Life is a Fairy Tale') and *Forsiranje romana reke* ('Fording the Stream of Consciousness'), confirmed and reinforced the author's success.

Hence it might have been expected that her first two books in English would

simply mark out another step in her already successful career, helping a much wider audience to discover and recognize a talented and highly promising woman author from a small Slavic literature. And such recognition really happened, but in a frame which inevitably affected the reading of these two Ugrešić books. Her early novels, which were originally written with the author's deep conviction that it is only literature that counts, acquired in the following years a new, symbolic and even prophetic meaning. From a distance of almost 10 years now, it seems as if some elements of the plot in her early novels were destined to become 'realized metaphors' of her own life in the future. By the time these English titles were published, life in her own country had already become saturated with 'kitsch microbes', following quite bloody, but nevertheless rather cheap clichés from the repertoire of power struggles. The small Balkan country, once known for its special position in-between the East and the West, entered the transition in its own way, with the war. Its citizens – and many of them quite involuntarily – were overnight turned into representatives of their nations; it was nationalists who took the stand. The Serbians were the first to conclude that their nation was endangered, and that they had to protect it at any cost; they trusted in arms, and in their macabre president, still in power on the road to the destruction of his own people. The others followed, having such a perfect excuse. The result is well known. While the two parts of Europe, the so-called East and the so-called West, in the early 1990s faced each other with new hopes (and fears), and with a new will to understand, citizens of the former Yugoslavia found themselves in the midst of a cruel war, maintaining again their special, in-between position, but this time in such a terrifyingly ironic way.

> Thousands of people lost their lives, homes, identity, children, thousands of people became émigrés, refugees and homeless in their own country. The war raged on all the fronts, permeated all the pores of life, spilled out on the screens of televisions which were permanently on, out of newspaper reports and photographs. In the fragmented country both real and psychological wars were waged simultaneously. Mortar shells, psychological and real, wiped out people, houses, cities, children, bridges, memory. In the name of the present, a war waged for the past; in the name of the future, a war against the present. In the name of a new future, the war devoured the future. Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of new ones, used every possible strategic method to impose a collective amnesia. The self-proclaimed masters of life and death set up the coordinates of right and wrong, black and white, true and false. (*The Culture of Lies*, p. 6)

This new reality was imposing itself on everybody, it could not be escaped. And the writer who once believed that it was only literature that counted, had to face it. In her own, humorous way, Dubravka Ugrešić speaks of this recognition in her first book of essays on the war in the former Yugoslavia, *Have a Nice Day, From the Balkan War to the American Dream* (Ugrešić, 1994):

> . . . all my life I had been doing everything in my power to retain my right to my one single privilege of being a writer. I refused to be a member of any parties, organizations, commissions and juries, I avoided being left or right, upper or lower. I was a damned outsider. I refused membership in mountaineering, feminist or diving clubs. I believed that a writer should have no homeland or nation or nationality, a writer must serve neither an Institution nor a Nation, neither God nor the Devil, a writer must have only one identity, his books, I thought, and only one homeland: Literature (where did I get that idea?). (*Have a Nice Day*, p. 138)

But it soon turned out to be impossible. At home, she was reproached for being indifferent to the sufferings of her compatriots. And abroad, an imposed set of labels was there to be applied both to her work and to her:

> As soon as I crossed the border, the customs officers of culture began roughly sticking identity labels on me: *communism, Eastern Europe, censorship, repression, Iron Curtain, nationalism* (Serb or Croat?) – the very labels from which I had succeeded in protecting my writing in my own country. . . .
>
> – The American market is saturated with East European writers – an editor in one publishing house told me.
>
> – Oh? – I said.
>
> – I personally don't intend to publish a single one – he said.
>
> – But what has that got to do with my books – I said, stressing the word books.
>
> – You are an East European writer – he replied, stressing every word. (*Have a Nice Day*, pp. 38–41)

So Dubravka Ugrešić decided to face both, the new reality in her home country and the old set of preconceived ideas which continued to frame the perception of East Europe in the West, and so the book *Have a Nice Day* came to be written. The book is a collection of short texts originally written on a regular basis for Dutch newspapers during 1991 and 1992. All the texts were written in the form of short essays which could serve as entries for a fictional 'dictionary' of everyday life, in which various things like manuals, jogging, Coca-Cola or cappuccino were the topics. But everyday life had different meanings for the citizens of Amsterdam and for the citizens of Croatia or Bosnia, so it was impossible for Dubravka Ugrešić to think about it without speaking about the war, identity, missing people. West and East meet in these short essays, a world of peace, self-assured in its comfortable security, meets there with the troubled region in which war became possible in Europe once again.

Have a Nice Day is a book which attempts to mark out the points of identification and the points of misunderstandings between worlds which have to live together, but mistrust each other, East and West. It is a book against the war raging at that time in Croatia. Ugrešić wants to make its senseless horror visible. She speaks of people being killed by the bombs thrown at them by the Federal Army, which was supposed to protect them. She speaks of the bombardment of Dubrovnik as a crime equal to the bombardment of Venice – to the amazement of a western journalist who, understandably, cannot imagine the city of Venice being bombarded (*Have a Nice Day*, p. 20). But the book is written without hatred, without a simplified taking of stands; rather it takes that in-between stance, which refuses to choose once and for all between 'us' and 'them', simply because we are either both, or neither. This was a stance which many of us from the former Yugoslavia felt to be quite a comfortable position, but which turned to be the position on the margins, made literal both by the local nationalists and the outside observers who wanted a complex story to be made clear and simple. *Have a Nice Day* is a book written with a sharp eye and warmth, full of tragi-comedy, which the clear view from the margins can produce.

It was from those margins that everything became visible. Not only the big moves of the big players, which offered the frame of easy choices, but the sufferings and injustices on the small scale, upon which new realities were built. And it is on these sufferings and injustices that Dubravka Ugrešić concentrates. And her sharp eye cannot overlook the fact that the new realities created with so many big words, and so much unnecessary human suffering, are also saturated with cheap

manifestations of *poshlost*, which turn out to be the other side of the monumental project of national rebirth. 'In his book about Gogol, Vladimir Nabokov uses the term *poshlost*. *Poshlost* is a Russian word which, because of its wealth of meanings, Nabokov prefers to English equivalents such as cheap, inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry and the like', says Ugrešić, explaining her choice of the term. She recognizes *poshlost* everywhere around her in the newly born countries, as well as recognizing it in the old one. 'In the schizophrenic heads of citizens of the former Yugoslavia not only are two realities refracted, past and present, but two types of kitsch: the old type, already long since dead, and the new which grows out of the old, on the assumption that the recipient has long since consigned the first model to oblivion' ('Kitsch', *Have a Nice Day*, pp. 170–1).

I believe that Ugrešić's ability to recognize *poshlost*, to name it and make it visible, was one of the main reasons why she became a 'public enemy' and, between 1992 and 1993, one of the most ferociously attacked of the so-called 'Croatian witches'. It would have been a great threat to the new nationalists in power, simply because it would have been very difficult to encourage people to make sacrifices not in the usual name of 'higher goals' and 'eternal national dreams', but in the name of a notion simply framed as *poshlost*. The attack on the 'Croatian witches', five women writers and journalists who dared to speak against the mainstream, was orchestrated late in 1992, continuing into 1993, particularly for Dubravka Ugrešić. She was attacked for her non-patriotic texts, texts published abroad, which very few people managed to read at the time in Croatia, but to which so many felt obliged to react. It was a public lynching of the Other, a woman who dares to think differently. Thus a gendered point of view, so clearly visible in *The Jaws of Life*, proved its importance in the life of the novel's author, this time not in such an amusing form. Hence in 1993 she decided to leave the country, going into voluntary exile, making the decision that some of her characters in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* had had to face before her.

In these two latest books by Dubravka Ugrešić, transgressions across the borders between possible worlds of literature and the world of immediate reality are visible once again. What was once considered to be a part of a literary game (Dubravka Ugrešić was known as a writer who liked to keep the author's presence visible in her fiction) became over the last decade a manifestation of a completely different process; it is now the immediate reality that keeps interfering with her literature. In her latest novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Dubravka Ugrešić speaks of exile.

But it is not her personal story that Dubravka Ugrešić wants to narrate there, although the novel is written in the first person, and it might seem as if the author speaks about herself. At the very beginning the reader of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is confronted with a stern assertion by the author: 'The question as to whether this novel is autobiographical might at some hypothetical moment be of concern to the police, but not to the reader' (*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p. 1).

This somewhat abrupt and quite determined statement is a clear manifestation of the author's will to protect herself and her novel from oversimplified patterns of biographical interpretations. If anyone wants to see anything personal in this book, then it can only be seen as a reflection of the personal experiences of many refugees and exiles. It is not actual names that are important here, but that particular point of view of the Other, the displaced person, whose life has been shattered into pieces, and for whom a fragment becomes the only acceptable form of expression, because it corresponds with his or her perception of the world.

That is why *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* also adopts a fragmented structure. The novel starts with an unusual explanation of that method:

> In the Berlin zoo, beside the pool containing the live walrus, there is an unusual display. In a glass case are all the things found in the stomach of Roland the walrus, who died on 21 August 1961. Or to be precise:
>
> *a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in a form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, a woman's bracelet (probably silver), a hair grip, a wooden pencil. . . .*
>
> The visitor stands in front of the unusual display, more enchanted than horrified, as before archaeological exhibits. The visitor knows that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland's whimsical appetite) but still cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquainted some subtler, secret connections. . . .
>
> The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way. If the reader feels that there are no meaningful or firm connections between them, let him be patient: the connections will establish themselves of their own accord. (*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p. 1)

In other words, the loose structure of the novel is just a narrative device which signals to the reader how the text should be perceived. In this case, fragmented narration corresponds to the way in which displaced people perceive their realities, as a series of discontinuities. But Ugrešić's narration does not seek to mime their perception, nor does she want to retell their lives. Instead, she constructs situations which correspond to actual events, in detail, emotion, or gesture; doing so, she reveals to her readers a fragmented form in which the actual world presents itself to displaced people.

If we read it in such a way, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* can be seen as an extremely fine piece of metafiction.

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside literary fictional texts. (Waugh, 1996: 2)

And in this case it is the fictionality of the actual world that Dubravka Ugrešić wants to underline.

That is why the assertion at the beginning of the novel about the inadequacy of the question of whether the text is autobiographical or not can also be related to the meaning given to a small photograph reproduced on the first page of the book. It is a photograph of three women in old-fashioned bathing suits, standing up to their waists in water, and laughing into the camera. Below the picture there is an inscription: 'Photograph of unknown swimmers. Taken on the Pakrac river (Northern Croatia), at the beginning of the century. Photographer unknown.' As the reader finds out later in the book, this is the photograph which the narrator carries around with her, 'like a little fetish object', whose real meaning is not known. This small picture has some secret power over the narrator, it draws her to it, and she keeps on trying to delve into its hidden story. It is like a 'hidden passage' through which she can slip into 'a different space, a different time'. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* attempts in a way to be such a photograph. Or rather, an album of such photographs. There might be a reality behind them, but

it is not important whose faces are there, or if they can be recognized at all. The photographs themselves tell their own stories to each and every reader.

This small photograph of three women, whose original meaning is lost for ever, conveys another important message to the reader. It points to the way in which terms like 'remembrance' and 'forgetting', or 'past' and 'future' are conceptualized in the world of displaced people. It is a kind of obvious proof of the unreliability of remembrance and the impossibility of keeping the past alive. An impossibility which is most clearly understood by all those who were forced to renounce all material proof of their previous lives. ' "Refugees are divided into two categories: those who have photographs, and those who have none", said a Bosnian, a refugee' (*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p. 7). But the question is if the photographs really make any difference, and if they can keep their meaning without the rest of the frame – without the world in which they were taken.

This unreliability of photographs, as visible tokens of our need to keep the past alive and to preserve some material proof that it really existed, is quite touchingly elaborated in the part of the novel called 'Family Museum'. Left alone in her Zagreb flat, with the known world changing violently outside her walls, and herself changing slowly with time, the narrator's mother decides to arrange a family photograph album, as if she wants to 'put in order' her own life.

But arranging an album does not only imply rediscovering the past, it also implies recreating it. As with any other form of memory – and any form of history as well – such an effort is not based on preservation alone, but also on selection and exclusion. In that sense, the episode with the family album has a significant metatextual meaning, indicating also that *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* should be read as a metafictional novel. Here is one detail which clearly points in that direction:

> I never liked the whole business of taking photographs. I found tourists, armed with cameras, objectionable, I found looking through other people's albums or watching their slides a torment.
>
> During a trip abroad I bought a cheap automatic camera, and once the object was already there I shot several films. After some time I looked through the photographs and established that the scenes I had photographs of were all I remembered of that journey. I tried to remember something else, but my memories stayed tenaciously fixed on the content of the photographs.
>
> I wonder what I would have remembered and how much if I had not taken any pictures. (*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, p. 26)

The issue here is not so much to speak about the way the narrator herself has framed her memory, but how memory itself is being framed, and in particular collective memory. In the novel it is refugees and exiles who perceive and recognize this artificiality of memory most explicitly. And at the same time, they perceive in the most immediate way the artificiality and constructedness of so-called 'reality', which for many of them turned out to be not only unstable, but sometimes an event fantastic in itself.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender speaks of the experience of being displaced. The mother in 'Family Museum' was displaced in some way all her life. She left the country in which she was born, Bulgaria, to go and get married somewhere in an unknown territory, Croatia, in the former Yugoslavia. Settling there, she felt 'at home' for several years, realizing that her own past had faded away, gradually obliterated by the new frame, which she considered to be a 'stable referent'. But when the country began to fall apart, she felt lost again, turning back

to her memories to find some safe ground for herself. But memory proves also to be selective and unstable. Thus the mother feels that 'in the end life is reduced to a heap of random, unconnected details', in which she cannot find a firm point to hold onto.

This may well be a feeling that many people share regardless of where they live. But living in a stable environment helps suppress it, while people who have to face radical changes in their lives have to face the illusion of stability more clearly. It becomes obvious for them how realities are constructed. Many citizens of the former Yugoslavia had to experience that disillusionment in a highly dramatic way. The new realities which were constructed in front of their very eyes often asked of them to change not only their present and future lives, but also their own past and their identities.

This is the point at which these two recent books by Dubravka Ugrešić turn out to be related. They both speak about this process of construction of realities, but in two different genres. While *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is written as a novel, that is as a piece of fiction on fictionality of reality, *The Culture of Lies* is a volume of essays which deals in a much more immediate way with the new realities in the region of former Yugoslavia. Ugrešić names these texts as 'antipolitical essays', which in this case refers to her refusal to be manipulated by any politics. It is also an attempt to 'take back from politicians' one's language and one's philosophy, as György Konrád puts it in his essay 'Antipolitics of a Novelist', from which Ugrešić quotes at the beginning of her book.

Dubravka Ugrešić was among the first to claim her right to defend 'her language and her philosophy' from the totalizing forces of nationalism which started to reconfigure the spaces of the Balkans in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *The Culture of Lies* uses material taken from real life in the former Yugoslavia to demonstrate the constructedness and artificiality of new realities created there at the cost of so many people. Of course, by demonstrating these new principles of construction, she also points to the old ones. Surprisingly or not, it emerges that, despite ideological differences between two kinds of realities (new and old ones), which are supposed to be fundamental, many of these principles are very much the same, with the same effect: annihilation of individuality in the name of 'higher goals'.

The book also reveals some of the most powerful and efficient mechanisms which serve to make invisible the work and effects of totalizing forces. Ugrešić speaks of both the social and individual strategies of mimicking which people used to make themselves invisible and socially unresponsible. In this way a 'culture of lies' is created, in which significant parts of the society participate in some way, at least publicly. Ugrešić points to their responsibility, yet she does not find everybody equally responsible. There were those who created new politics of destruction, those who promoted it, and those who executed it. And of course, those who had to suffer its consequences.

Dubravka Ugrešić is well aware of the fact that with the disintegration of the common country the world has changed violently for too many former Yugoslavs:

> Such an abrupt transformation of values, occurring in many spheres of everyday, cultural, political, and ideological life has generated confusion in the heads of many citizens: bad has suddenly became good, left has suddenly become right. In this re-evaluation of the blotting out of one's personal life, one's identity, a kind of amnesia, an unconscious or conscious lie have become a protective reaction which enables one quickly to adopt the new identity. (*The Culture of Lies*, p. 79)

That is why it is writers and intellectuals that she addresses here in the first place, as the ones who are supposed to recognize such lies, and to be antipolitical in Konrád's sense of the word. But it was writers and intellectuals who were too often among those who were ready to overlook the fact that new lies were being produced with the construction of new realities; and too many of them ready to contribute to those lies. And it is something that Ugrešić's book clearly reveals. It shows that to contribute to the culture of lies does not mean only to be one of those who obviously promote it; it also means an acceptance of the lies that others have uttered, or a willingness to overlook them. A culture of lies is equally produced, or at least reinforced, by an acceptance to live uncritically in such a culture, and by contributing to it on a small scale. And it usually means to accept *poshlost* as a part of everyday life.

Revealing all this, Ugrešić's 'antipolitical essays' go much further than their immediate topic might suggest. Speaking about the region of the former Yugoslavia as a recent, still clearly visible example, they reveal many of the secret mechanisms that any culture of lies relies upon. Thus this book clearly shows how easily such a culture becomes possible, and it does not only concern the Balkans region. That is why we need these essays so much, and why they have to be read so carefully.

NOTES

1. *In the Jaws of Life* comprises two originally separate titles. One is the short novel *Štefica Cvek u raljama života* (Zagreb, 1981), here published as the first section of the book under the title *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life*. The other is a collection of short stories, *Život je bajka*, here *Life is a Fairy Tale* (originally published Zagreb, 1983). The book also includes a long story, *Ljubavna priča* (*A Love Story*), from Ugrešić's first book *(Poza za prozu*, Zagreb, 1978); the tale is again centred on issues of writing.
2. In 1984, a film based on the book, titled *U raljama života* ('In the Jaws of Life'), was produced by Croatian film director Rajko Grlić and scripted by Ugrešić and Grlić.

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Jasmina Lukić
Central European University, Budapest

HER PLACE IS THE SUBPLOT

Luc Dardenne and Jean-Pierre Dardenne
La Promesse
Liege: Les Films du Fleuve, 1996

In an early scene in *La Promesse*, men and women emerge from the vehicles on a car-transporter. Who would ride in unlicensed cars? The answer is not stated but implicit – people who aren't registered. The camera singles one of them out, a black woman with a baby in her arms. She brings her one plastic bag to a waiting van and catches sight of something, which turns out to be a wasps' nest. Then she and others from the car-transporter travel in the van through an urban landscape. Two white Belgians act as their guides: Igor, a teenage boy, and his father, Roger, who is in the driver's seat.

These sequences with Assita, a woman from Francophone Africa, foreshadow her experience in the film. Her new environment, an ageing industrial city, will not be completely foreign to her. Unnamed in the film itself – probably because it stands for many similar urban landscapes in Europe – it is Seraing in French-speaking Belgium, on the outskirts of Liege. There she will be reunited with her husband Hamidu, who, like her, is an illegal African immigrant. But for both of them, the city will turn out to be the site of abuse, a wasps' nest in the metaphorical sense: a place where you can get badly stung. Roger will try to control her, Igor to guide her to safety.

The precision of such symbols should not blind us to the film's dependence on commonplaces. People from non-European countries are often associated with nature. And women, in Europe and outside it, are often considered closer to nature than men – to nature in its particular forms (edible substances, children, birth and death) and to the spirit of nature (god(s), religion). Assita, who uses animals for ritual purposes, does not deviate from this norm. She is not as fully developed a character as Igor or Roger; indeed, she functions primarily as a vehicle for the boy's moral transformation. Her story is not the main plot but a subplot, and that subordinate position in the film both reflects and reinforces the hierarchy in society.

The main plot of *La Promesse* concerns a father's attempt to initiate his son into a life of crime and a child's resistance to that model of adulthood. Though Igor might earn a living as a car mechanic if he were to complete his apprenticeship, Roger prevents that by making his son an accomplice to his various illegal enterprises. Not only does Roger help people enter Belgium without visas, he provides them with false documents, heating fuel and rooms in a run-down building with substandard plumbing. In return, he demands money and construction work, which must be done on the sly and under unsafe conditions. It takes a while before Igor rejects his father, and that act is delayed not just by filial love and loyalty, but by their complicity in a crime: when Hamidu falls from a scaffold, Roger prevents Igor from trying to save the man's life and forces his son to bury him in concrete, perhaps alive.

What can change an adolescent who lies, cheats and steals without batting an eye into a young man with a sense of responsibility? The film offers no single turning point but many reasons, producing a rich and complex main plot. The 15-year-old Igor seems to find Assita attractive, both as an erotic woman and a surrogate for his absent mother. (This is not the first time he has crossed the colour line: riding a go-kart with a darker-skinned youth is one of the few times when he smiles.) Yet when Igor gives Assita money to pay off her husband's gambling debts, his father beats him unmercifully. After promising the injured Hamidu to

take care of Assita and their child – *La Promesse* of the title – Igor commits himself increasingly to her. To get her money, he relinquishes a ring which was a present from his father, exchanging one bond for another. But although Igor becomes Assita's protector, defeating his father's plan to sell her into prostitution, he deceives her for a long time by letting her believe that her husband is still alive. Telling her the truth would mean becoming an informer, and Igor is contemptuous of a 'snitch', like the character Nabil, who lives and works with illegal immigrants yet spies on them for Roger. Through this plot, the filmmakers suggest that we are not just born into groups, but we reinforce or distance ourselves from them by our daily actions. Communities are constructed – in fact they are always under construction – and *La Promesse* demonstrates that that is equally true of ostensibly natural units like the family.

As Igor begins to accompany Assita around the city, he perceives exclusion: cars do not pick her up on the highway when she is trying desperately to take her baby to a hospital. He perceives solidarity: she is helped by Rosalie, an African she doesn't know, with money, reference to a seer and a passport. And he perceives invisibility: a white passer-by thinks Assita is Rosalie because she is wearing the latter's turban; a policewoman taking Hamidu's description assumes that his hair is black and frizzy, and Assita must clarify that it is grey. Like many feminist geographers, the filmmakers consider how the urban space is used and experienced by different parts of a population, depending on age, race, gender, class, language and country of origin. Igor can feel and be protective of Assita because in the social hierarchy a black woman is even lower than a white teenage boy. She cannot place Cologne in Germany or say where Carrara is in Italy; for her Europe is very foreign. But, unlike Igor, her disorientation is geographical and not moral, for she knows where her loyalties lie.

There is movement in Assita's character in this film from anger against whites to acceptance of Igor as different from his father. When her baby becomes ill, she blames Igor for giving him a disease; later, however, she lets Igor hold her child. When her ritual statuette is broken by hooligans on motorcycles, she doesn't let Igor touch it; yet later she allows him to repair it. Even his confession of complicity in her husband's murder does not lead her to reject him. They walk off at the end of the film together. Now she no longer wants to go to Italy to find her husband's relative.

But where exactly are they heading? They cannot extricate Hamidu's body from concrete without incurring Roger's opposition. And it is questionable whether the police will help them out. When Assita last visited a police station, a policewoman was rather uninterested in Hamidu's fate because as an illegal immigrant in Belgium, he didn't exist for them. What Igor knows, but Assita probably doesn't, is that the local politicians and police are corrupt and in cahoots with his father. When the public had to be shown that illegal immigrants were being dealt with, Roger was asked to let a few get captured in a raid, and he and Igor obliged by bringing some Romanian men to a police trap.

La Promesse came out the same year that Belgians demonstrated en masse over the mishandling of the Dutroux case, but faith in the country's justice system had been shaky even before that. The fact that no one was convicted of a series of supermarket murders in the mid-1980s aroused suspicion, and there were charges of a cover-up in the 1991 murder of the Liege politician André Cools. Most European viewers probably don't have to be told that, at the end of the film, Igor and Assita face a very uncertain future. A minor could be returned to his father's custody; an illegal immigrant is at great risk of being returned to her country of origin. This is no happy ending.

The Dardenne brothers have been making documentaries together since 1975

and have only recently turned to fiction films. In *La Promesse*, which won a prize as the best film 'd'art et d'essais' at Cannes in 1996, I admire their ability to make abstractions like exploitation and illegal immigration into engrossing narratives. The film carefully avoids the stereotype which conflates blackness and sexuality. Assita helps Igor become a man, but not by initiating him into eroticism. Yet I am frustrated by the fact that this character functions primarily as a foil for Igor in the narrative. By not revealing more of her background and motivations, the film distances her from the viewer and makes her more foreign.

Karen Rosenberg
Montclair, NJ, USA

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