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From (Neo-)Avant-garde to Post-Yugoslav Literature

(Tijana Matijević, *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent. A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020, 280 pages)

From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent. A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature is the most recently published study of post-Yugoslav literature. In many ways, it is 'post-Yugoslav' (as well as transnational) in itself as it is written in English, at a German university (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, as a PhD dissertation), by a researcher originally from former Yugoslavia, Tijana Matijević.

Even this book's topic is quite unique, especially when compared to other full-length works in the field of post-Yugoslav literary studies. Its originality becomes particularly visible when considering the scarcity of research in post-Yugoslav literature from a gendered perspective. Even among the existing feminist approaches to post-Yugoslav texts, Matijević's study relies on the French

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theory of *écriture féminine*, which is rarely used nowadays. However, the book's uniqueness does not end there: Matijević also brings together the Yugoslav (Neo)-avant-garde and post-Yugoslav literature, identifying the existing connections and further possibilities of exploring post-Yugoslav texts through this historical context. Finally, the book intersects post-Yugoslav literary studies with feminist literary criticism. This is quite rare as (academic) feminist literary criticism in this region has, for the last decade at least, been predominantly focused on the beginning of the 20th century and the interwar period in Yugoslavia. In relation to this aspect of literary criticism in Matijević's study, its novelty is also in its uncovering of marginalized authors and/or texts, such as Snežana Andrejević, and its general focus on authors who have not been studied academically, at least not extensively.

One of the main arguments in this study is that feminist and women's writings have a constitutive role in post-Yugoslav literature. This argument might not come as a surprise when one recognizes the sheer number of monographs, dissertations and articles in the field of post-Yugoslav literary studies that are dedicated to female authors such as Dubravka Ugrešić and Daša Drndić (for example: Beronja, 2014; Kosmos, 2015; Lukić, 2006, 2015; Postnikov, 2017; Vervaet, 2011, 2016; Williams, 2013), among others. However, most of the aforementioned studies either focus on one author (such as Lukić, 2006, 2015; Williams, 2013) or they analyse literary works through a framework which only sporadically touches upon gender issues, if at all (such as Beronja, 2014; Vervaet, 2018). So, the given argument is still not entirely new. In her consideration of post-Yugoslav literature as transnational, Jasmina Lukić already argued that feminist writing plays a central role in it.¹ Lukić also previously sketched out a brief history of the transnational, post-Yugoslav history of women's writing (Lukić, 2018); however, the novelty of Matijević's argument appears when considering it in more detail.

Namely, Matijević's main thesis is that the primary themes in the narratives of post-Yugoslav writing, i.e., the past of Yugoslavia and the war, are closely connected to the exploration of gender, sexuality and body. The two images from the title (post-Yugoslavia and a female continent) symbolize this inter-

¹ Relying on Azade Seyhan's concept of paranational communities as those communities from which transnational literature is being produced, Lukić proposes looking at feminist communities in the region of former Yugoslavia as a kind of paranational community. Feminist women's literature is a part of this network (Lukić, 2018).

connectedness. Post-Yugoslavia denotes the existence of “today’s Yugoslavia” as a “cultural and discursive reality” (Matijević, 2020, pp. 9–10). The female continent represents a utopian image and a metaphor of the figure of female authorship, referring to the “resilient status of women’s writing in post-Yugoslav space” (Matijević, 2020, pp. 9–10). In other words, Matijević aims to show how feminist post-Yugoslav texts address the Yugoslav past through writings on gender, body and sexuality. Both elements – the textual “performance of the past” and the “performance of the *sexual difference*” – are of equal importance throughout the analysis of selected texts.

Matijević first gives a definition of the post-Yugoslav literary field. As a relatively new area of study and a concept that is still disputed, a significant part of the introductory discussion is devoted to the definition of post-Yugoslav literature. In discussing this concept, at the start of the book the author demonstrates a clear critical feminist approach in the recognition of this term’s political aspects. The term ‘post-Yugoslav’, Matijević claims, is “an effective political marker of anti-nationalist, arguably even pro-integrationist, but generally anticonservative cultural products and concepts”, constituted as such in reaction to the ethnonationalist cultural politics of the post-Yugoslav states (Matijević, 2020, p. 8). Matijević defines post-Yugoslav literature in two steps: a certain body of works invites and requires reading in a post-Yugoslav context; in return, post-Yugoslav authors also help describe and define the context in which they write (Matijević, 2020, pp. 8–9). This becomes obvious when recognizing engagement with the common Yugoslav past as one of the principal preoccupations of post-Yugoslav texts.

The historical perspective in Matijević’s framework is important because, apart from literary texts requiring it, she identifies the similarities of the Yugoslav cultural and literary field to the post-Yugoslav one, as well as certain continuities between them. These continuities are created primarily by post-Yugoslav literature’s engagement with Yugoslav (Neo-)avant-gardist arts. This nicely ties in with the feminist elements in the framework, because the symbol of the female continent is directly related to (and stems from) the heritage of the Yugoslav Neo-avant-garde, utopian images in particular. This argument is made at the end of the book, through the analysis of Judita Šalgo’s novel *Put u Birobidžan* in relation to Slobodan Tišma’s contemporary novel *Bernardijeva soba*.

The authors whose works Matijević analyses are, in the order in which they appear in the book, Ildiko Lovaš, Tanja Stupar Trifunović, Tea Tulić,

Ivana Bodrožić, Snežana Andrejević, Luka Bekavac, Olja Savičević Ivančević and Slobodan Tišma. The explanation of this selection in the introductory chapter is quite scant in the sense that it is not elaborated, to put it simply, *why these works and not others*. On the other hand, the selection appears to be well thought out in many ways. As previously mentioned, it mainly focuses on authors who have not yet received significant academic attention and it does the gynocritical work of bringing to light valuable forgotten texts of female authors (Snežana Andrejević). Secondly, it allows for the analysis of the given works in order to illustrate the complexity of the field and the varieties of topics, literary techniques and narrative styles of post-Yugoslav literature, at the same time establishing “continuities among the seemingly disconnected literary texts” (Matijević, 2020, p. 33). Finally, the authors’ works belong predominantly to the period 2010–2015, which Matijević identifies as a period of “literary feminisms” of the strengthening of female voices in the post-Yugoslav literary field (Matijević, 2020, p. 10).

Even though Matijević does mainly focus on women authors, this is still a study of post-Yugoslav *feminist writing*, so it does not surprise that male authors are also among the selected. To be fully precise, Matijević decided to avoid the inevitably difficult term ‘feminist writing’, which would require complex definitions, focusing instead on the approach to texts, i.e., *feminist reading* (Matijević, 2020, p. 31). Following mostly Elisabeth Grosz, she defines feminist reading as reading that “brings out the text’s alignment with, participation in, and subversion of patriarchal norms” (Grosz, 1995, p. 16, as cited in Matijević, 2020, p. 31). This definition well describes the author’s approach in this book; on the other hand, the study still operates with the concept of feminist writing, even if it tries to avoid such labelling. In other words, all of the selected works are read as mostly (even if not always exclusively) subversive of patriarchal norms. There is an impression this is also partly why they were selected.

Chapter II (“Women’s Writing and Critical Nostalgia: On Ildiko Lovaš’ Fiction”) explores, through an analysis of Ildiko Lovaš’ three short stories, the figuration of Yugoslavia in contemporary post-Yugoslav literature, the recollection of the past, and the different ways in which narratives relate to it, of which Matijević identifies three: nostalgic remembering, critical recollection attuned to the ambivalences of lived experiences in Yugoslavia, and “the critical reproaching of both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav times” (Matijević, 2020, p. 37). The three subsections of this chapter each focus on one story by Lovaš,

where each story represents one of the given ways of remembering. Further, this analysis uncovers the relation between the narrativization of female authorship and processes of remembrance in each story, thus supporting the main thesis concerning post-Yugoslav literature as a feminist discourse. Adding another element of Lovaš' writing, namely her language (which is Hungarian), Matijević illustrates well how, speaking from this position of otherness, Lovaš destabilizes the notions of national identity and belonging. Considering that Ildiko Lovaš can be seen as a paradigmatic post-Yugoslav (feminist) author, and that critical (Yugo-)nostalgia can be thought of as a paradigmatic aspect of post-Yugoslav writings, this chapter appears to be perfectly placed as the first analytical chapter. In other words, it functions as a foundation for further analyses that 'complicate' post-Yugoslav 'writings of the past'.

Chapter III ("Post-Yugoslav *Écriture Féminine*") continues exploring how post-Yugoslav novels relate to the past, but it does so through the theory of French post-structuralist feminists, particularly through *écriture féminine*. In other words, Matijević is interested in whether reading the novels of Tanja Stupar Trifunović, Tea Tulić and Ivana Bodrožić "as reflections and modifications of *écriture féminine*" enables seeing "how and if something which is historical refracts through 'writing the body'" (Matijević, 2020, p. 65). This is quite an interesting perspective, especially considering the fact that, as Matijević herself notes, *écriture féminine* has been often accused of being ahistorical and essentializing. All the more for that, it is important to look into whether the author answers her own *question* from the beginning of the chapter, and if so, how.

In the first subsection of the chapter, the analysis is dedicated to Tanja Stupar Trifunović's novel *Satovi u majčinoj sobi*. This section illuminates why *écriture féminine* is chosen as an analytical concept that works well for the selected corpus of writing: firstly, because of the lyrical, 'flowing' and hybrid style of the given writing; secondly, but perhaps even more importantly, because "a mother's absence as her unavailability but also illness and death are recurrent loci of post-Yugoslav women's writing" (Matijević, 2020, p. 71). This is more or less the case with Tea Tulić's *Kosa posvuda*, which is also examined in the second subsection. Both analyses bring to light the inscriptions of female difference in post-Yugoslav literary texts, the mother-daughter relationship and its corporeality, and their intertwinement with the issues of female authorship. Matijević shows that these texts 'write the past' through the inscription of the sexual difference (female, feminine) in the masculinist (literary, but also memory) discourse that structurally excludes the feminine. In other words,

the given writings represent counter-discourses of the post-Yugoslav feminist perspective that are able to destabilize the patriarchal masculine legacy by connecting it to nationalism and war. These analyses would be much clearer, however, if there were conclusions to the subsections/chapter that contained elaborated and condensed answers to the main question from the beginning of the chapter.² As the given literary texts narrate the Yugoslav past and/or the war, their 'writing of the past' is obvious and implied. Still, considering that 'writing the past' is one of the primary concerns of the study, the relation that 'writing the body', which is elaborately analysed, has to the 'writing of the past' is slightly elusive, thus the reader has to disentangle it herself.

In the third subsection, which deals with Ivana Bodrožić's novel *Hotel Zagorje*, the given relation is more obvious. The analysis uncovers how the girl narrator's coming of age intertwines with the absence of her father, who disappeared in the war. Her relationship with her father, just like the mother-daughter relationship in the previous two examples, is "profoundly bodily", and the body that lived through the traumatic experiences "has been *written*" in this narrative (Matijević, 2020, pp. 111, 116). Perhaps because of the explicit preoccupation of Bodrožić's novel with the gendered experience of war, displacement and post-war transition, it is more visible here how the narrative performs 'writing of the past' through its "language of the bodily" (Matijević, 2020, p. 253).

In chapter IV, entitled "The Other Writing: Atonement and Female Authorship in Snežana Andrejević's and Luka Bekavac's Fiction", Matijević further explores the relation between 'writing of the body' and 'writing of the war' and the issues around female authorship.³ An added focus of this chapter concerns issues of responsibility, of 'writing the other' and speaking for the other who cannot speak – for the dead. These different elements come together in a very interesting analysis of Snežana Andrejević's novel *Životu je najteže* that also validates the promise of the novel's value and relevance. This analysis again disentangles the main issues of this novel, the act of writing, writing of war and trauma, and the gender (and body) of the narrator. However, this analysis goes beyond the *écriture* feminine framework, because the novel's narrativization of female authorship is tied to the issue of the responsibility of writing for

² "How and if something which is historical refracts through 'writing the body'" (Matijević, 2020, p. 65).

³ Like in all the other cases, Bekavac's thematization and narrativization of female authorship, not the gender of the author himself, is what interests Matijević.

the war's victims – those unable to speak. This layer of meaning is an important next step of the study, as it is fundamentally important for the broader issue of remembrance and memory narratives.

Životu je najteže is also used in a comparative framework with Luka Bekavac's novel *Viljevo*, which allows for the feminist elements and the aspect of female authorship in *Viljevo* to be highlighted. Bekavac's novel is also introduced because of its avant-gardist elements, which are brought in at various points in the study before the culminating chapter on Slobodan Tišma makes the argument on the Neo-avant-gardist heritage in post-Yugoslav literature.

Chapters V and VI in many ways represent the central parts of the book (also the longest), even if they are the concluding chapters. This has to do with the novels analysed here: chapter V is dedicated to *Adio, kauboju* by Olja Savičević Ivančević. This novel, as Matijević herself states, “embodies the literary conjunction interpreted and conceptualized in this analysis as a critical characteristic of post-Yugoslav feminist writing: the Yugoslav past and the dissolution of Yugoslavia and their refraction by and inside sex/gender issues” (Matijević, 2020, p. 154). The analysis itself, which is clear and coherent in this section, also seems to be the most elaborate. It unpacks the novel's sophisticated *feminist* engagement with the Yugoslav past and its remembrance through the genre of the Western. Further, it recognizes this novel's attempt, personified in the protagonist and the narrator, to break away from the past, to “master the past” (Matijević, 2020, p. 183). Matijević introduces here the aspect of utopic imaginings (developed further in the next chapter) as yet another crucial element of memory narratives, of ‘writings of the past’. What Matijević identifies as an element that is inextricable from this narrativization of the past in *Adio, kauboju* is the topic of post-socialist transition and everything it entailed: “social and economic insecurity, pauperization, deregulation and dubious privatization” (Matijević, 2020, p. 154). This relation with the past, as well as images of the future, are fundamentally marked by this historical context. Therefore, Matijević argues, post-Yugoslav women's writing in the last decade has profusely engaged not only with memory and remembrance issues from a feminist perspective, but also with economic and social transformations from both feminist and materialist perspectives.

Chapter VI is dedicated to Slobodan Tišma's novel *Bernardijeva soba* and identifies its ties with Yugoslav Neo-avant-gardist literature. These ties are located primarily in the utopian imagination and the deconstruction of cultural gender norms. Matijević recognizes them, following Miško Šuvaković,

as some of the fundamental elements of the Yugoslav Neo-avant-garde (Matijević, 2020, p. 232). The utopian imagination, further, or “optimal projections” to be more precise,⁴ has a crucial feminist quality in Tišma’s novel. This feminist dimension of utopic imagination comes out of the novel’s reliance on the image of *female utopia* and on Judita Šalgo’s novel *Put u Birobidžan*, which introduced this image in post-Yugoslav literature. This is not the full extent of the analysis, however. Matijević connects Tišma’s novel’s utopic image of the female commune with one of her study’s main questions (also present in the chapter’s title): What to do with the past? The other two key images from the novel – the car wreck and the furniture design piece called Bernardi’s room – are analysed as keys to the novel’s narration of the past. They are analysed through the concepts of alienation and commodification (generally relevant for the topic of nostalgia), but also through the psychoanalytical framework (brought in by the narrator himself). The car wreck (associated with the womb) is the mother’s domain (semiotic), whereas Bernardi’s room is a metaphor of the past – the father’s domain (symbolic). Further, the father’s narrative is an emblem of the past which is “recoverable only in nostalgic memories” (Matijević, 2020, p. 202). The mother’s narrative, which culminates with the narrator’s arrival at the female commune, “projects onto the future, to the space beyond the melancholic memories” (Matijević, 2020, p. 226). Even though this chapter again ends almost abruptly, without the conclusion that would weave all of the various and rich insights together, it is successful in what it set out to achieve. It shows very well how Tišma’s novel ‘writes the past’ through a “peculiar mixture of nostalgia and an unsentimental ‘cracking’ of a finite narrative, identity or even history” (Matijević, 2020, p. 190). Equally importantly, it does so while clearly indicating how the past and this book’s narrative’s relationship to the past is narrated through the “feminine position of writing” (Matijević, 2020, p. 223).

By introducing utopic imagination into the framework, Matijević adds yet another level in the analysis of post-Yugoslav ‘writings of the past’, and she identifies yet another perspective present in these writings: a perspective that tries to *move beyond the past*. Even though Matijević’s study does not operate

⁴ Matijević relies on Aleksandar Flaker in her distinction between the image of utopia as a stable, closed and ideally structured place, and the optimal projection, which, in contrast to firm structures, is characterized by movement and openness (Matijević, 2020, p. 235). It is precisely this optimal projection that, according to Matijević, better describes the form of utopic imagination in both Šalgo’s and Tišma’s novels.

inside the field of cultural memory studies, her perspective is aligned with the most recent shift in this field, namely the shift towards studying positive attachments to the past or ways to overcome the trauma paradigm in memory narratives (Rigney, 2018). This shift is also emerging in post-Yugoslav studies, particularly in the study of Yugonostalgia (Petrović, 2013; Popović, 2021; Velikonja, 2009), but also in the study of literature and film (Beronja & Vervaeet, 2016; Mijatović & Willems, 2021).

As can be seen from the summary, the book is structured such that it demonstrates a progression through the chapters. It starts from the paradigmatic texts of Ildiko Lovaš, which are analysed so as to illuminate the foundational post-Yugoslav writing of the past. It then goes through the rich practice of post-Yugoslav *écriture féminine*, which brings a distinctly fresh perspective on the given literary field and, in particular, on post-Yugoslav 'writing of the past', which is the field's central and defining preoccupation. The study then explores post-Yugoslav novels' engagement with the issue of the responsibility of writing for those unable to speak, thus introducing an additional layer of post-Yugoslav 'writing of the past'. The last two chapters add the perspective of moving beyond the past in narratives of remembrance. The chapter on Olja Savičević Ivančević focuses on this author's engagement with memories of the Yugoslav past from a materialist feminist perspective that is attuned to the economic dimensions of the present, from and in which memory narratives are created. Finally, the study ends with an analysis of Tišma's novel that brings together all the elements that are more narrowly examined in the previous chapters and identifies the ties between 'writing the past', *écriture féminine* and (Neo-)avant-gardist heritage.

Even if the conclusions, which could have contributed to the points from the analysis coming nicely together, are sometimes lacking, the final concluding chapter of the book in many ways makes up for this. It not only comprehensively brings together and reiterates all the main arguments of the book, but it also leaves the reader with a very convincing and innovative perspective on the post-Yugoslav field. Moreover, the concluding chapter pushes the arguments from the analysis even further, offering directions for further research on post-Yugoslav literature through the lens that the literary Neo-avant-garde provides. Alongside the approaches to post-Yugoslav literature as transnational (Lukić, 2018; Vervaeet, 2016) or as an important medium of cultural memory (Beronja, 2014; Beronja & Vervaeet, 2016; Vervaeet, 2018), Matijević points out another way into field of post-Yugoslav literary studies.

This is invaluable for the young field of post-Yugoslav (literary) studies, which is still disputed and questioned, as well as for post-Yugoslav feminist literary criticism. Finally, the contribution of Matijević's analysis is that it convincingly demonstrates the strong current of post-Yugoslav *écriture féminine* and, at the same time, of feminist and gendered engagements with the memory and the past of Yugoslavia.

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Od (neo)awangardy do literatury postjugosłowiańskiej

Publikacja stanowi recenzję książki *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent. A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature* autorstwa Tijany Matijević (2020). Pracę Matijević lokuję przede wszystkim w obszarze studiów postjugosłowiańskich, zwracając uwagę także na to, jak koresponduje ona z najnowszymi osiągnięciami z dziedzin pokrewnych, takich jak studia nad pamięcią. Pokazuję ponadto, jak autorka buduje twórcze ramy badań nad literaturą postjugosłowiańską, łącząc pojęcie *écriture feminine*, pisanie o jugosłowiańskiej przeszłości i wojnie oraz jugosłowiańskie dziedzictwo (neo)awangardowe.

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja, *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent*, literatura postjugosłowiańska, *écriture feminine*, pisarstwo feministyczne, pisarstwo wojenne, pamięć

From (neo-)avant-garde to post-Yugoslav literature

This text is a review of Tijana Matijević's book, entitled *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent. A Feminist Reading of Post-Yugoslav Literature* (2020). I situate the book primarily in the field of post-Yugoslav studies, but I also point out how it corresponds to recent developments in certain related fields, such as memory studies. I show how the author makes a creative framework for the study of post-Yugoslav literature by bringing together the concept

of *écriture féminine*, writings about Yugoslavia's past and the war, and the Yugoslav (neo-) avant-gardist heritage.

Keywords: review, *From Post-Yugoslavia to the Female Continent*, post-Yugoslav literature, *écriture féminine*, feminist writing, war writing, memory

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