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DIALOGICAL MEMORIES AND NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES IN POST-YUGOSLAV LITERATURES

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate relationship between memory and identity in post-Yugoslav literature, with a specific emphasis on the dialogical nature of remembrance in contexts marked by trauma, exile, and systemic transformation. Drawing on memory studies and dialogical theories, the study examines how memory emerges as a contested and evolving discourse shaped by interpersonal, cultural, and historical tensions. The analysis focuses on three contemporary novels: *Hansen's Children* (2004) by Ognjen Spahić, *The Ministry of Pain* (2005) by Dubravka Ugrešić, and *Catch the Rabbit* (2018) by Lana Bastašić, highlighting their individual and collective negotiation of the legacies of Yugoslavia's disintegration and the postcommunist European order. By situating these texts in the European semi-periphery, the article underscores how identity formation is embedded in global structures of inequality and historical contingency. Ultimately, I argue that these literary texts embody and enact the dialogical nature of memory, highlighting silence, forgetting, displacement, and the complexities of belonging.

Keywords: post-Yugoslav literature, memory, identity, Dubravka Ugrešić, Ognjen Spahić, Lana Bastašić, dialogism.

Introduction

The history of twenty-first-century Eastern and East-Central Europe — marked by World War II, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, communist authoritarian regimes, the rise of ethnic national consciousness, diaspora, and the eastward enlargement of the European Union — has left complex, overlapping identities across personal, ethnic, national, and continental levels. The rapid transformations of postcommunist societies spurred interest in remembering as collective action, intertwining historical events with private memories often tinged with trauma. Memory — the capacity to encode, store, and retrieve experience, whether individual, collective, or cultural — shapes identity, yet memory resists linear reading. It is, as Sztompka (2004) observes, formed by silence and forgetting as much as by recollection and dialogue, continually modified by traumatogenic social changes that are rapid, widespread, and radical.

Literature fulfills a crucial role in this process of remembering, exposing the instability of identity. Neumann (2010) notes that homodiegetic narration reveals tensions between experiencing and remembering selves, highlighting the dialogue between past and present. This effect heightens when authors themselves appear as protagonists, though not always under their own names. Dix (2022: 9) argues that such narratives "blend truth and fiction in a highly self-conscious way, and [...] [have] the

capacity to moderate between individual voice and collective experience, [therefore] [...] operating as a form of testimony or witness-bearing with regard to past cultural and/or political struggles." Testimony here is less description than survival, a way to process trauma and to reassess one's position in the world as both individual and group member.

Among the changes that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, two interrelated events (cf.: Woodward 1995; Samery 1995) stand out: the collapse of Yugoslavia and the expansion of Western influence eastward. Yugoslavia's wars, forced displacements, and institutional ruptures provided fertile ground for authors such as David Albahari, Dubravka Ugrešić, Faruk Šehić, Ognjen Spahić, and Lana Bastašić to narrate their personal experiences of war and its aftermath. Whether writing from inside or outside the region, all may be considered exiles — metaphorically displaced by violence. While national literatures of the successor states retain their specificities — as it was already the case before the implosion of the former Yugoslavia (Marčetić 2019), many works written in Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian reflect the interplay of personal and collective memory against the shared trauma of war and transition, reflecting on both their national identity and Europeaness.

This negotiation of identity is central to the three novels analyzed here: Ugrešić's *The Ministry of Pain* (*Ministartstvo boli*, 2004), Bastašić's *Catch the Rabbit* (*Uhvati zeca*, 2018), and Spahić's *Hansen's Children* (*Hansenova djeca*, 2004). Despite the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the authors' Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin backgrounds, these narratives belong to what Matijević (2016; 2020) terms the post-Yugoslav space — a dynamic field where identities and memories are continuously renegotiated between resistance to nationalist discourses and participation in post-national cultural politics. Additionally, these novels appear to have been conceived for a broader European readership rather than a strictly national one. Ugrešić wrote her novel while in exile in Amsterdam, and it was translated from Croatian into fifteen European languages within five years, beginning with Western European editions. Bastašić, who received the European Union Prize for Literature in 2020, saw her novel translated into eighteen languages within just four years. Likewise, Spahić's *Hansen's Children* — recognized by the same award in 2014 for *Hell Full of Joy* — has been translated into eleven languages to date, including Arabic. Despite a slower reception in Western Europe, the novel remains, in the words of its prologue writer Nick Thorpe, "a parody of Europe."

The Ministry of Pain tells the story of Tanja Lucić, a displaced professor of Yugoslav literature who teaches at the University of Amsterdam after the breakup of Yugoslavia, and assigns her mostly exiled students to write about their homeland. Her project of Yugonostalgia forces her to confront the limits of language, exile, and the impossibility of reconstructing a coherent identity from fragmented trauma. In *Catch the Rabbit*, friends Sara and Lejla, who have been separated for twelve years, reunite for a journey to Vienna in search of Lejla's missing brother. Sara, now living in Dublin with her Irish

boyfriend, has cut ties with her past, but Lejla's call compels her to re-enter the unstable terrain of memory and unresolved trauma. Finally, in *Hansen's Children*, A Yugoslavian narrator recounts his confinement in Europe's last leprosarium, set against the backdrop of the Romanian Revolution of 1989. In the novel, twelve inmates live in isolation, deprived of medical care. Two inmates plan to escape, enticed by the driver who dropped them there years ago, but tensions in the groups escalate, and the historical context postpones their freedom until the day they are finally picked up to go West.

These novels, very different in style, map transitional moments: the fall of the communist bloc (Spahić's novel), the exile (Ugrešić's) in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the perspective of the Generation 1.5, term coined by Suleiman (2006) to refer to those who were too young during the conflict to understand the war (Bastašić's). All depict protagonists negotiating new realities that unsettle identity through forgetting, estrangement, and re-encounter. They expose contradictions of memory through recall and reassessment, individually and in dialogue with others.

Thus, this article examines identity in these autofictional works, situating them within systemic theories alongside dialogical theory (Bakhtin, Hermans) and memory studies (Assmann, Halbwachs, Ricoeur) to underscore the process of identity formation and the multiple layers in which it results, complicating the liminal state in which characters find themselves. I contend that the reading, as the analysis supports, should vindicate a simultaneous reference to the relationship between East and West in Europe, the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the implications those realities have for memory and identity on a continent of migrants and crisscrossed battles. By universalizing the local, these authors offer a framework for understanding complexity as a shared human condition rather than a Balkan particularity.

After presenting the theoretical framework, the study is divided into three parts. First, I situate the novels within debates on East-West Europe, highlighting their contribution to European memory. Next, I examine how these novels problematize this divide in the experience of exile and the double dimension of being forgotten and forgetting. The third part delves into the collective, dialogical dimensions of memory. The conclusion underscores how these narratives reveal fractured identities shaped by trauma and displacement, while presenting memory as dialogical. Ultimately, these works challenge fixed selfhood, portraying identity as an ongoing negotiation shaped by history, others, and cultural boundaries. In doing so, they contribute to a transnational memory of postcommunist Europe that embraces complexity over resolution.

The Dialogical Character of Memory in the Construction of Identity

World-systems theory, pioneered by Wallerstein (2011), conceptualizes global inequality as a structural feature of capitalism, dividing the globe into core, semi-periphery, and periphery zones. Drawing on Marxist and *longue durée* historiography, it frames development and underdevelopment as relational outcomes of one global system. Its rigidity has been nuanced by Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development, which stresses the hybrid, non-linear nature of social change. The Balkans are typically placed in the semi-periphery (Arrighi and Drangel 1986; Hazzard 2024), revealing patterns of external domination, late industrialization, and ongoing alienation (Wolff 1994; Hammond 2017) that create an "uneven distribution of 'Europeanness' within the continent and its racializing undertow" (Gasser 2022: 46). Thus, Europeanness — that is, the idea of Europe and the sense of belonging to it — is largely articulated from the core of Western Europe, defined in contrast to its semi-periphery, the "Other" of Central and Eastern Europe, which is itself produced through this very process of othering. The dynamics of European integration within the European Union exemplify this Western-driven logic, particularly in the case of the Western Balkans (Radeljić 2021: 205–207). This tendency is also evident in studies that equate Europeanness with a "European consciousness," often describing it as a "key pillar of the EU" (Piasecki and Woroniecki 2016), or that emphasize the institutional primacy in defining Europeanness even while acknowledging the participation of external actors among those labelled as "entrepreneurs of Europeanness" (Calligaro 2013).

Lucy Gasser (2022) conceives of Europeanness as a plural and contested cultural construction that must be rethought from Europe's margins. She argues that "neither the 'West' nor 'Europe' are [...] homogeneous spaces" (3) and that Europeanness is best understood as a multi-center, dynamic, relational, and decolonial process where plural understandings of culture and history, challenging Western Europe's normative centrality in identity formation. By reconfiguring narratives of belonging, Gasser envisions futures where "Europeanness" no longer serves as exclusive or hierarchical markers of value and legitimacy (168-177).

Though Wallerstein himself did not address literature, scholars have used his framework to examine how texts reflect and critique the hierarchies of the world-systems. It has informed theories of national allegory (Jameson 1986), modernism (Warwick Research Collective 2015), peripheral aesthetics (Majunder 2017), and semi-peripheral realism (Hazzard 2024), and it is revealed in the identity-related themes of novels from the semi-periphery. Christina Hazzard (2024) notes that semi-peripheral literatures often reconfigure realist genres such as the historical novel, *Bildungsroman*, or memoir. In postcolonial contexts, Dix (2023: 2) highlights autofiction as a variation that "affords writers from diverse societies

[...] the means to re-write dominant narratives about the world in which they work and thereby to broaden cultural memory [...] in the service of greater diversity and equality.”

Cultural memory, introduced by Jan Assmann (1992), elevates personal recollection to the cultural level. As Erll (2010: 5) observes, memory is "always inherently shaped by collective contexts," intersecting with media, institutions, and practices. Halbwachs (2010) had already argued that even individual memories are collective phenomena, embedded in family, education, language, and culture. These social frameworks both enable and constrain remembrance, accounting for why groups recall the same events in different ways. Building on this foundation, Aleida Assmann (1999) further distinguishes between storage memory—a vast, passive repository—and functional memory, which actively constructs meaning and identity in the present. Autofiction complicates this divide by transforming private memory into socially resonant narratives that activate stored memory into functional identity work.

The concept of functional memory highlights the importance of forgetting as an equally constitutive aspect of memory. In Assmann's taxonomy (Assmann 2016), forgetting may be passive (obsolete yet retrievable) or active (violently destroyed or intentionally suppressed). Other forms of forgetting — selective, constructive, or therapeutic — play crucial roles in the novels under analysis. Nietzsche (1980) and Bergson (1970) praised the capacity to forget as protection against overwhelming recollection. Similarly, Connerton (2008: 63) includes "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity" alongside "repressive erasure" and "prescriptive forgetting" as in truth commissions. In trauma contexts, Burrell (2022) emphasizes the importance of witnesses, postmemory, and Generation 1.5 in countering oblivion, although forgetting may also repress harmful memories that are accessible only through indirect forms, such as poetry.

Silence occupies a paradoxical position within the phenomenology of memory. As Ricoeur (2004: 414) argues, forgetting is not simple erasure but latency, "forgetting kept in reserve," where memory is displaced rather than destroyed. Silence is thus not absence but deferral, shaping the contours of recollection. Hirsch (2012) also demonstrates how postmemory operates in these silences, as descendants inherit fragmented stories that resist closure. In narratives marked by historical rupture, silence becomes a threshold where memory re-emerges in symbolic form.

Memory, which includes forgetting and silence, provides the content from which identities are formed. Identity is not static, but somewhat shaped over time into a narrative identity (Ricoeur 2004). Crafting life stories allows individuals to make sense of themselves despite contradiction. This identity is always interpretive, dialogical, and embedded in cultural and historical contexts.

This dialogical dimension resonates with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. He observed that utterances in polyphonic novels exist in dialogue with others, revealing "even the inner contradictions and stages of development of a single person" (Bakhtin 1973: 23). Self-narration exposes distinct, sometimes

conflicting, parts of the self. Drawing on Bakhtin, Hermans conceptualizes these as "I-positions" (Hermans and Kempen 1993), which encompass both the internal aspects of the self and the external, authoritative voices that stimulate growth (Konopka et al. 2018). Memory studies also acknowledge this dialogical nature. Aleida Assmann (2010) introduces "dialogic remembering," which emerges through exchange across social, generational, or cultural groups, in contrast to monologic or repressive memory shaped by dominant narratives.

Understanding memory as dialogical — formed through temporal tension and interpersonal exchange — the discussion now turns to how exile further intensifies this interplay. The condition of exile — marked by dislocation, cultural bifurcation, and loss — accentuates the fragmentation of identity and compels a reconfiguration of memory in relation to both absence and longing. The following sections, which analyze the three selected novels in the light of this theoretical framework, will address questions of estrangement and Europeanness, the role of forgetting in these narratives, and the different perspectives that shape the narrators' identities.

Exile, Memory, and the Question of Europeanness

Goran in turn tried to persuade me to leave [to Tokyo], but I held out: I was a Western European (Ugrešić 2006: 5)

I need to go home [...]. Home. We had lived together for six years, I shouldn't have said that. [...] Home was our apartment [in Dublin]. *Home* was not Bosnia. Bosnia is something else. [...] Bosnia is not home. (Bastašić 2021: 26-27)

Go West! (Spahić 2011: 155)

The protagonists of *The Ministry of Pain*, *Catch the Rabbit*, and *Hansen's Children* are all exiles. Tanja and Sara's departures are voluntary, while the lepers in *Hansen's Children* are forcibly confined to a leprosarium. Their exile highlights a duality: the space they leave and the one that defines their future. Already stigmatized by identity before exile — Tanja as a Croatian married to a Serb, which makes her "that Serbian bitch" (Ugrešić 2006: 6); Sara as a Serb whose parents did not favor relations with other ethnic groups during the war; Spahić's narrator because of his disease — they map displacements that profoundly shape identity. The quotes introducing this section reveal that, at some point, all claim Europeanness, although the contradictions of the concept (Rotger and Vidal 2024) quickly ensnare them.

Europe itself is a divided and ambivalent space. Split for decades by the Iron Curtain which deepened ontological distinctions between East and West, rooted in the Roman Empire's partition and the peripheralization brought about by the western colonial-like superiority during the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994); ambivalent because novels are set against the backdrop of a Europe aspiring to unity under the EU

while reproducing contradictions and consolidating the unevenness of the Europeanness (Gasser 2022). This vision has continued after 1989, when postcommunist enlargements have inflicted political, economic, and emotional pain on candidate countries that were “seen to have lost [...] [their] ‘Europeanness’ under Soviet influence” (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2022:39). The Western Balkans, in particular, have been marginalized, their accession delayed, and their future marked by the trope of “balkanization” (Hammond 2017).

The three novels problematize this artificial divide. In *Catch the Rabbit* and *The Ministry of Pain*, the heroines identify with the West despite their Eastern origins. In *Hansen’s Children*, the fence around the leprosarium becomes an allegory of borders that replicate exclusion. Exile thus provides not only a lens to explore identity but also a challenge to continental narratives, situating the protagonists in liminal spaces where neither East nor West is idealized.

Ugrešić is particularly incisive in her portrayal of Amsterdam as a synecdoche of Western Europe, a space of consumerism and moral detachment built on a distribution of economic roles. Tanja compares her exiled students' precarious labor — working in sadomasochist factories — with Eastern European women displayed in the Red Light District, a sight that triggers memories of wartime rape: “I thought of the fresh East European flesh setting off on the long journey west. If it didn't get bogged down in some Serbian or Bosnian backwoods, it would end up here” (Ugrešić 2006: 79). As Williams (2000: 7) notes, “the West is ephemera and the East viscera: in a Europe united by commerce, the West will provide the cash and the Eastern body will be a tradable commodity.” Amsterdam also reveals structural inequalities: exiles' residence depends on Dutch partners or bureaucratic ties. Tanja herself becomes a lecturer thanks to acquaintances, but her contract is precarious. Her students rely on marriages — “Maybe I married her for the passport” (Ugrešić 2006: 10), asylum claims — as it is Boban's case —, or “welfare and [...] heavily subsidized public housing” (Ugrešić 2006: 11). This precariousness echoes the Schengen border, replacing the Iron Curtain with a fortified Europe.

In *Catch the Rabbit*, the West is both a destination and an illusion. For Sara, Dublin symbolizes reinvention, but her trip back to Bosnia destabilizes this identity. Crossing into Austria, she reacts against the manicured landscape — “Austria irritated me. I felt wrong compared to its immaculate grass [...] my humanity was a mistake” (Bastašić 2021: 208-209) — and the synchronized singing of the birds symbolizing the “orderliness of the *world abroad*” (Bastašić 2021: 209). The artificial order of the West, once idealized, becomes equally alienating. As Trakilović (2023) observes, the repeated invocation of the East-West divide exposes both its structural weight and its absurdity, a tension Sara embodies.

Sara's distance contrasts with Lejla's rootedness, a dynamic that critics (Llop 2025) have read as Orientalization. While Sara blends in with Western tourists, Lejla is presented as a waitress in a tourist location and is labeled and narrated by others, muffling her voice. Further details reinforce this idea: the

way Sara looks Lejla down and misrepresents her, Sara's personal stability and financial capacity to afford the improvised trip, and her access to commodities such as a smartphone contrasts with Lejla's submission to gender violence inflicted by her boyfriend and men since her teens — like the colonial-like abuse on Eastern Europe, her ruse to convince Sara to do a trip for which she does not have the means, and her use of an old Motorola.

Spahić's *Hansen's Children* frames this division allegorically. The leprosarium symbolizes Europe's diseased periphery: isolated, neglected, yet constantly referenced. Europe is the backdrop of indifference, and the isolation of the lepers echoes the marginalization of the East in post-1989 Europe. Western Europe is represented outside the perimeter, but it is not the rosy world one might expect. As Eastern Europe is squeezed between Russia and Western Europe, both are at the origin of the contraction of the disease: "It was there, in Gulag 32-A, that Margareta contracted Hansen's bacillus in return for her labours" (Spahić 2011: 18) and Robert "picked up leprosy in the brothels of Amsterdam in 1982" (Spahić 2011: 22).

Moreover, the frontier represented by the fence is a field of conflict. Zoltan's memory of Germans executing lepers during World War II merges with his attempt to join a group of workers singing against Ceaușescu, only before they stoned him. The narrator concluded heartbreakingly that "[i]t was all just another confirmation that we did not belong [...]; whoever tried to cross that waste would be stopped. Yet Robert was becoming convinced that it was worth a try. (Spahić 2011: 57). The narrator defines the fence as "an imaginary border between two worlds, whose encounters always left ugly memories" (Spahić 2011: 156). Indeed, after his experience with the workers, Zoltan is killed by a pack of wild dogs that stalk lepers from the perimeter, the same who devours the lamb Robert and the narrator stole some hours earlier. In contrast, the fence is also the place where they receive donations from the Red Cross until their service is discontinued, and from where Mr. Smooth communicates his plan to set Robert and the narrator free. After many delays that somehow remind us of the agonizing European enlargement process, the day arrives that they can escape thanks to Mr. Smooth's assistance, who sees them off with a symbolic "Go West!" (Spahić 2011: 155). With Robert run over on a highway at the border with Austria and the narrator back in his country, though isolated as a lighthouse-keeper, any prospect of a better life seems to have failed.

As in the imagery corresponding to Eastern Europe, "everything foundered on *the iron curtain* that Hansen, like a devoted tradesman, had been erecting around our vile name" (Spahić 2011: 65, my emphasis). The leprosarium was led in a dictatorial, although seemingly effective, way under the narrator, who was ascribed the leader role on the grounds of the size of his male member, still untouched by the bacillus. Dissent was scarce — "Either there were no complaints, or no one had the strength to complain. Protest was limited to mutterings [...] or minor squabbles" (Spahić 2011: 14) — until another faction took

over and wielded power in a sadistic manner. However, the narrator's retaliation peaks in violence and spreads fear. Finally, life inside the hospital is not free from replicating the unjust treatment outsiders inflicted on them — as they learn about the AIDS pandemic, "Mstislav and Cion were shunned... like lepers. It was kind of understandable" (Spahić 2011: 16).

The manner in which these novels portray East–West dynamics recalls Ugrešić's *Europe, Europe* (2008: 81–99), where she notes Europeans' tendency to identify with the West while obscuring the arbitrariness of the division. Such fantasies, rooted in Western superiority and Eastern inferiority, persist in political discourse. For our narrators, their longing for Europe is a first response, as we will see in the following section, but it ultimately proves to be a contradiction. Nevertheless, the debate of the European identity underlies these narratives and interpellates the reader: aren't they actually European? Aren't their history and trauma part of Europe?

Leggewie and Lang's *Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung* (2011) provides a helpful framework for understanding how Europe shapes its own identity. Their model of seven concentric circles of memory describes how different historical experiences are remembered in Europe and how central or marginal they are within the European memory canon. For decades, the core of European historical consciousness has been anchored in the memory of the Holocaust. Around this core, six additional, increasingly contested circles of memory have formed, variously aligning with, distancing from, or showing indifference to the central events. These concentric layers encompass the memories of state crimes of communist regimes and parties, of genocides, expulsions, and ethnic cleansing, of the hot and cold wars of the 20th century, of European colonial atrocities, of migration, and of the process of European integration. The model allows them to observe the imbalance between the two dominant and relatively well-established narratives — the Holocaust and the European integration — and the less developed memory and processing of domestic and interstate conflicts along Europe's periphery, which calls for a more comprehensive understanding of Europe that offers a critical corrective to the prevailing core-center narrative.

When post-Yugoslav authors such as Ugrešić, Bastašić, and Spahić expose this identity clash in their novels, they render their narrative a counter-memory practice. They resist the marginalization of their historical experience and challenge the hierarchy of remembrance, therefore aligning with Leggewie and Lang's theory. By confronting the constructed narrative of collective European memory and inscribing personal, often silenced, histories within it, these authors actively participate in shaping both European identity and European citizenship. Their work contributes to what Rigne (2012: 624) calls an "ongoing conversation about multiple pasts and just as many futures." Aleida Assmann (2013: 197) refers to this process as *dialogische Erinnerung* or dialogical memory — a practice rooted in mutual recognition

of diverse constellations of victims and perpetrators, aimed at engaging with a shared history of violence and reckoning with a traumatic past.

Exile and Forgetting

There is no such a thing as mercy, no such thing as compassion: there is only forgetting; there is only humiliation and the pain of endless memory. (Ugrešić 2006: 215)

Names are easy to forget [...] But colors remain. Colors can't be washed out with kilometers. (Bastašić 2021: 41)

Memories [...] are dying out. (Spahić 2011: 53)

The construction of European identity in these novels is closely tied to the act of forgetting. Forgetting enables survival and adaptation in exile — "forgetting [...] is constitutive in the formation of a new identity" (Connerton 2008: 63) — but it also exposes the pain of being forgotten by others. In *The Ministry of Pain* and *Catch the Rabbit*, exile entails active distancing from one's homeland. In contrast, in *Hansen's Children*, it is imposed through confinement, stripping characters of their belongings and memory stabilizers.

In *The Ministry of Pain* and *Catch the Rabbit*, the protagonists' initial sense of self is shaped by forgetting — an act linked to their ambiguous status as residents or exiles in Western Europe. In *Hansen's Children*, this dynamic takes the form of physical and symbolic isolation: the lepers are stripped of their personal belongings, which might anchor them to a remembered past. Across all three texts, the characters not only engage in forgetting but also experience being forgotten by others, including family, the state, or society. This section first examines how the narrators' initial positions are rooted in forms of erasure and displacement.

The characters in these novels undergo a process of transformation, predominantly adopting the identity of the host society. They either assert it, as Tanja does — "I was a Western European," Ugrešić 2006: 5) — realize about it, which happens to Sara at answering Lejla's call in relation to her underused native language — "After a whole decade, I go back to [...] all the other languages I voluntarily abandoned" (Bastašić 2021: 2) — or integrate the values of the new society, as in *Hansen's Children*, where the narrator soon instills fear and rules with an iron hand and experience a progressive vanishment, due to the disease according to the storyline, or, more poetically, as the representation of the forgetting of the self. As exiles, Tanja and Sara seek an opportunity for a future outside their national boundaries, while the narrator in *Hansen's Children*, knowing of the final condition of his new destination, is determined to adapt and survive. Thus, their positions are characterized by identification with the host environment and

withdrawal from their societies of origin. Although there exists a progressive return to their previous identities, which swings between temporalities and allows for the interplay between East and West, their initial situation is the result of a process of forgetting.

The very opening scene in *The Ministry of Pain*, in which Tanja imagines herself smashing her head against an incomprehensible tram map, points to her frustration due to displacement. Perhaps she did not forget enough; it is possible that she is not yet who she aspires to be. As opposed to her fellow countrymen who communicate "in a kind of half language [...] [full of] gestures, grimaces, and intonations," with conversations that "seem long, exhausting, and devoid of content" (Ugrešić 2006: 4), she perceives her native language as alien, is surrounded by Dutch, and communicates in English. In her own eyes, she is a Westerner. Even the assignment she gives her students is a reflection of this distance she seeks: by assigning their essays in English, she not only keeps them brief but also suppresses emotional resonance; by referencing Yugoslavian products, she pretends that the most recent traumatic memories and the rise of nationalism do not exist. She devises a plan to maintain a bearable life, employing the same subterfuge of erasure that they criticize in their national authorities. Engaging in a process of "active forgetting" (Assmann 2016), she wants to erase what they praise, retrieve what they deleted, since her country is actively suppressing the past ("repressive erasure"; Connerton 2008: 60/61): "Stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our former country had pressed the delete button, I the restore button [...], operating a lost-and-found service, if you will" (Ugrešić 2006: 52).

In her experience, the retrieval, which corresponds to an attempt at "active remembering" (Assman 2016), becomes increasingly complex as her country and its people evolve. Getting lost in her own city, Zagreb, where street names have changed, makes her feel like a foreigner and forgotten at once. Later on, she shares that feeling with another passenger during her flight back to Amsterdam: "they've written us off. Me, you, and all of us who've left. [...] In a few years we may look like them to the people who stayed behind. So the thing to do is *forget, forget everything*" (Ugrešić 2006: 118-119, my emphasis). This mutual forgetting is indicative of their different positions in and outside the territory of the former Yugoslavia, their paradoxical belonging in a space they do not inhabit anymore (vid. *mutatis mutandis* "paradoxical spaces" in Rose 2013, 137-141).

Grown apart, they might only be united through justice. Forgetting can play a teleological role in collective memory, as in truth commissions where acknowledging facts leads to forgiveness (Erll 2017: 118; Ricoeur 2009: 483; Connerton 2008: 61–62), or through a guilty plea accompanied by testimony. However, at the International Criminal Tribunal, where Uroš's father was accused, "[n]one of the accused felt the slightest guilt. Of all the people who had destroyed the country [...] not one was willing to come out and state, I am guilty. I had not heard the word 'guilty' from them before, I did not hear it while sitting

in the courtroom [...] nor do I ever expect to hear it" (Ugrešić 2006: 142). With this path closed, "[o]nly one thing is real: pain" (143). Justice may be served, but collective memory falters before the impossibility of forgiveness, which remains an individual ethical act (Ricoeur 2009: 487–493).

For her part, after more than a decade in Ireland, Sara is westernized and estranged from her family, ignoring her mother's calls and even her father's funeral. Passing through Banja Luka, she hides in the garden rather than visit her mother. She feels alien in her own country: "I was lost for real, I wasn't pretending. I had forgotten everything: her and Armin, Bosnia. The darkness" (Bastašić 2021: 88). She adds, "I had the skin for Bosnia. Now I had to grow it again, let it excrete and harden over my naive European pores" (Bastašić 2021: 89). Though she speaks Bosnian, Lejla mocks her Western airs: "Sara doesn't speak our language. She's from Dublin. I can translate" (104). Sara's identity, however, is shaped not only by forgetting but also by silence.

Like Tanja and Sara adapting to host societies, the unnamed narrator in the leprosarium is stripped of ties and possessions: "When you arrived at the leprosarium, all documents, personal belongings and clothes were rudely taken off you, and in return you were given a few items of underwear, two white shirts, an army jumper and a quality robe with a large hood" (Spahić 2011: 24–25). He gradually forgets his former life, a passive forgetting marked by fading memories and growing emotional distance.

Back then I still bore the stamp of that other world, of years of a relatively peaceful life which were slowly sinking into the quicksand of oblivion, entering the swamps of the future [...] I [...] [used to feel] a pang of nostalgia that brought tears to my eyes [...] But in the last few years, memories of this kind aroused less and less emotion. [...] They are dying out. (Spahić 2011: 53)

More poignantly, the narrator undergoes bodily decomposition that mirrors his disappearance. In Kristeva's theory of abjection, the abject "disturbs identity, system, order" (1982: 4), emerging when bodily boundaries collapse and the self confronts what must be expelled to remain coherent. The leper's daily encounter with the mirror becomes mourning: absence, deformation, and forgetting replace personal continuity. His vanishing body signifies not just decay but the erosion of symbolic selfhood, situating him "on the threshold of the inhuman." The claim that "physical ugliness made it easier for that other, more deeply ingrained side of human nature to come out" (Spahić 2011: 19) highlights how abjection unleashes repressed impulses, exposing the fragility of social and ethical norms. Allegorically, it reflects communist regimes' efforts to seal off the past, sanitize history, and enforce isolation, control, and manipulation — while Western Europe simultaneously forgets them (Connerton 2008).

As Astrid Erll aptly notes, "[r]emembering and forgetting are two sides — or different processes — of the same coin, that is, memory" (Erll 2017: 7), an active component in the construction of identity.

This construction does not happen in isolation, but requires the presence and recognition of others, whose responses shape the possibilities of reconciliation and communal identification. This dialogical nature of memory is what I will address next.

The Dialogical Path to Find the Selves

Igor was right. I won't forget him. Nor will he forget me. Because I could have kept his name from the policeman, but I didn't. [...] I had sown my seed. (Ugrešić 2006: 214-215)

I had brought pieces of Lejla on me. (Bastašić 2021: 85)

[W]e were all one body that lived the disease, slept the disease, and died of it. (Spahić 2011: 17)

The heroes in these novels oscillate between their own forgetting and that of others, confronting themselves inwardly while discovering identity through interaction. Though initially defined by forgetting, their narratives reveal disorientation, insecurity, and contradiction, displaying an array of characters' positions. Self-narration thus exposes conflicting facets of the self — what Hermans and Kempen (1993), following Bakhtin, call "I-positions." Since memory is collective (Halbwachs 1925; Assmann 1992), identity emerges as a dialogic construct: memory supplies the content, dialogism the structure, and identity the evolving result.

The characters are multifaceted and resist being confined to fixed identity labels, instead being seen as archetypes of exile that move across parallel worlds. This liminality is expressed in a tribute to Carroll. Ugrešić's heroine likens her condition to *Alice in Wonderland* after falling into the rabbit hole (Ugrešić 2026: 28), then traversing episodic realms that reveal instability of meaning and fragmentation of identity. Bastašić employs similar imagery: her novel's title, Carroll epigraph — "I could tell you my adventures — beginning from this morning [...] but it is no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then" (Bastašić 2021)— and Dürer's *Young Hare* all frame identity as shifting. Even Spahić's narrator invokes the rabbit metaphor when Robert was "manoeuvring like a hunted rabbit with a fox at his heels" (Spahić 2011: 164). Though authors may take political positions, their alter egos embody hesitation and internal struggle. In these post-Yugoslav novels, vagueness is not a flaw but a dialogic tool: blurred identity sustains interpretive dialogue on exile, memory, and belonging.

In *Catch the Rabbit*, the protagonist Sara returns to Bosnia after years in exile, where she has constructed a carefully curated identity marked by cultural assimilation and emotional detachment from her Bosnian roots. The mere prospect of returning and reconnecting with her childhood friend Lejla begins to destabilize this identity. Sara's journey reveals the depth of her internal fragmentation, shaped by migration, guilt, forgetting, and selective remembrance. Lejla, who remained in Bosnia during and after

the war, serves as both a mirror and a destabilizing force. She challenges Sara's self-image, exposing her blind spots and complicity in historical amnesia.

Lejla's confrontational remarks act as triggers for Sara's introspection and narrative transformation. For instance, when Sara bleeds from her forehead after a car accident and says, "Lejla, my forehead is bleeding," Lejla replies, "I've been bleeding [menstruating] for three days and you don't see me whining about it" (Bastašić 2021: 172). This moment encapsulates Lejla's no-nonsense maturity and refusal to center Sara's pain above all else. Similarly, Lejla points out Sara's failure to recognize the presence and significance of their shared journey: "What about me? Are you driving me too? Or is this Sara's journey?" (Bastašić 2021: 171). These interactions complicate Sara's claim to narrative authority and force her to reassess her position as both subject and narrator.

Throughout the novel, Sara recalls that she "had brought [to Dublin] pieces of Lejla with me [her]" (Bastašić 2021: 85), acknowledging that her identity has always been shaped, albeit unconsciously, through her relationship with Lejla. Lejla's comments are dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense: their meaning extends beyond the moment of utterance, resonating in Sara's internal monologue and sparking a recursive process of self-examination. For example, when Lejla reveals that she did not enjoy their graduation night, which Sara had idealized, she adds, "I guess you don't know everything" (Bastašić 2021: 133), a statement that lingers in Sara's consciousness and challenges her interpretive control over their shared past.

Moreover, Lejla's withheld disclosure of being abused by their math teacher — "I didn't want you to hate him" (Bastašić 2021: 192) — introduces the theme of protective silence and deferred memory. Sara's sense of guilt intensifies as she recognizes her previous blindness to Lejla's trauma and her complicity in the broader culture of forgetting. This is paralleled in Sara's reflection on her father's nationalist rhetoric and his suspected involvement in the disappearance of Lejla's brother: "Dad said that Armin and that scum gang of his had probably poisoned our neighbor's dogs" (Bastašić 2021: 57). Although Sara was aware of the ethnic tensions and violence, she chose silence, later admitting, "I would lie to foreigners later on. I was too little, I would say, I was not even aware of what was going on. But that's not true" (Bastašić 2021: 72).

The novel intricately ties personal memory to collective trauma, extensively represented through language and cultural weaponization. Lejla's family undergoes a forced identity transformation, changing their Bosniak surname Begić to the Serbian Berić, and adopting Christian names. Lejla joins Orthodox religion classes where Cyrillic is the only script used, symbolizing cultural erasure. Sara, on the other hand, is christened at thirteen and embraces her family's Serbian identity. These parallel trajectories reflect different strategies of survival and complicity, illustrating how identity is negotiated under systemic pressure. This battle extends its tentacles to the moment of narration, shedding light on its

continuity in the present, exemplified by Sara's regret for not using a more Croatian word, *such as kolodvor* (station), when giving directions to a cab driver in Zagreb. However, on the other side of the front, language is also the tool to undo "preestablished narratives [about each ethnic group or nationality] present in the media and in many epic war narrations" (Llop 2025: 4).

By the end of the novel, Sara acknowledges the inseparability of her identity from her past and from Lejla's influence. Writing the novel becomes her act of reckoning — "You can do it [write a book about me] [...] When you grow up," Lejla had said. Sara's final transformation is encapsulated in the metaphor of bodily contamination: "My blood was full of little dark specks that spread all over my body. Now I had to get used to them, accept them as something essentially mine" (Bastašić 2021: 191–192). The novel thus frames identity as a dialogical, shaped through confrontation with suppressed memories and catalyzed by the presence of the other, who refuses to be silenced or simplified.

Lejla's role exceeds that of a secondary character; she serves as the narrative's conscience, the unrelenting voice that compels Sara to confront her ghosts. In turn, Sara's identity is constituted not only by her own memory, but through her entanglement with Lejla's — an entanglement that spans shared trauma, betrayal, and the possibility of reconciliation. Through this dynamic, *Catch the Rabbit* exemplifies how post-Yugoslav literature navigates identity as a process of dialogical negotiation within a landscape scarred by war, silence, and memory.

The disruption of communicative memory in *Catch the Rabbit* liberates the protagonist from inherited narratives, redirecting focus to their personal reckoning with absence and dislocation, but, as their journey progresses and they visit the catacombs and the AVNOJ museum in Jajce, Sara becomes aware of the impact of cultural memory and even experiences the longing for its preservation. By imagining Lejla fragmenting — "What if she, too, split apart into pieces of old rags with tiny stars and pale colors? (Bastašić 2021: 127) — She compares her friend to a museum and understands that cultural memory is preserved in lived bodies, silences, and the broken syntax — the untold — of friendship. As in *The Ministry of Pain*, memory is etched in suffering, residing in what remains unsaid.

That is what Tanja's student, Igor, conveys in his monologue during the violent encounter at his professor's apartment, staged as a metaphorically sadomasochist painful session. He exposes both her privileged situation and her carrying of collective trauma, exorcising the pain— "suddenly I convulsed and spit out an invisible bullet, the one I'd been clenching between my teeth since it all began. And from my throat came a mighty scream" (Ugrešić 2006: 212). I commented above that Tanja tries to distance herself from her country, indulging in forgetting, and that by focusing her course on Yugonostalgia, she was erasing part of history, exactly the violent part of which Igor accuses her for waging "an angry little war against the class" (Ugrešić 2006: 204) instead of ignoring or dealing with the situation — her head of department told her some student had complained about her not teaching literature — in a healthier way.

After all, wasn't violence a part of history she rejected? Like Sara in *Catch the Rabbit*, Tanja is compelled to see her darkness, the same way she had to admit she could not only forget, but be forgotten.

Tanja's classroom becomes a metaphor for a lost homeland—inhabited by students who, like her, live in exile, though they do not necessarily process that condition in the same way. Ugrešić's novel is not merely a meditation on personal memory; it is a literary performance of dialogical memory, in which the narrator enters an extended, unresolved conversation with the cultural, historical, and linguistic legacies of a country that no longer exists. This dialogism aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of narrative as inherently polyphonic: Tanja's voice is not autonomous but constantly in dialogue with her students, her former self, and the broader discourses surrounding Yugoslavia. Her narration moves fluidly between irony, mourning, and critical reflection, creating a narrative space where memory is not merely confirmed but rather questioned, negotiated, and at times rejected. This way, *The Ministry of Pain* becomes a site of dialogical identity formation—where subjectivity emerges not in solitude, but through engagement with multiple, often conflicting, voices and temporalities.

Tanja's attempt to preserve Yugoslavia's cultural memory through literature clashes with her students' desire to forget or move on. The classroom becomes a patchwork of expired memorabilia, exposing the fragility of memory once institutions collapse. Believing in "the cohesive force of an identity that does not exist any longer, in a common past" (Ugrešić 2006: 51), Tanja tries to activate functional memory. However, students often treat Yugoslavia as a distant storage memory. Reviving it risks trauma, as when Selim added Omarska (Ugrešić 2006: 50) — a wartime concentration camp — to a Yugonostalgic museum of Balašević's songs, bureks, and baklava. Still, Tanja risks "exposing the poverty of the 'baggage' [they][...] deemed so powerful" (Ugrešić 2006: 58). Student essays reflect nostalgia, conflict, and division: Igor calls Yugoslav poets "a bunch of sickos" (Ugrešić 2006: 74); Uroš claims "Yugoslavia was a terrible place. Everybody lied... now each lie is divided in five, one per country" (Ugrešić 2006: 75); Nevena doubts her "hazy and dream-like" childhood memories (Ugrešić 2006: 60). With these fractures, and after Uroš's suicide on learning his father was a war criminal, Tanja concedes: "there was no release; there was only forgetting" (Ugrešić 2006: 137).

Tanja is not loyal to her own conclusions. If forgetting is the only way to survive, why does she launch an offensive against the students during the second semester? She may feel a Yugoslav, but she is also an exile with the same problems to keep residence in the country, because, even when privileged, there is always a price to pay for forgetting. She is now closer to her fellow citizens, to the *we* she uses to talk about her people. In the exile's dialogical memory, Ugrešić does not offer a reconciled narrative of Yugoslav identity; instead, she provides a platform for its contested and dialogical reconstruction.

The heroines in *Catch the Rabbit* and *The Ministry of Pain* establish a different relationship with regards to collective identity, the image a group creates of itself and with which its members identify, a

sense of "we" that is characteristic of social and cultural formations, which are nourished mainly by shared memory and arises from a dynamic interaction between concepts of otherness (Assmann 1992: 132). Whereas Sara finally acknowledges the collective identity and different fate in the realm of ethnic conflict, as well as her positioning in it then — as part of a Serbian family — and now, experiencing discomfort and rejection, Tanja condemns ethnic nationalism but finds refuge in a non-existent identity. In the end, society is shaped through joint remembrance, but that society may no longer be Sara's, and it is preterite in Tanja's case.

The situation of the narrator in *Hansen's Children* differs in that he and his community are immersed in a process of constructing a new identity based on their condition, with some identifiable traits that reflect how it was built up in Eastern Europe. The narrator is proud of his leadership — "My tacitly approved leadership position had never been more pronounced" (Spahić 2011: 85) — and it transpires that it is a top-down process: most lepers fear him, and dissidents are repressed. The collective execution of lepers at the hands of German Nazis during the Second World War is commemorated every 14 December with a minute of silence and a joint prayer at the mass grave. The narrator is aware of the instrumentalization of the celebration — that it was carried out for the sake of collective identity — and of how this manipulative process could have gone further on other hands, with ostentation and lies:

If Zoltán had cast-off his documentarian chains for a moment and given his imagination free rein, he might have been able to spin a story about how [...] he had heard the defiant shouts of those prepared to die; he might have said that they started singing the 'Internationale' in unison in different languages [...] Since he was the sole survivor, and the post-war Communist authorities were eager to present myths and heroism, they would have embraced his far-fetched tale with open arms. A charming memorial center would have been built nearby, and the leprosarium would have been given central heating. (Spahić 2011: 35-36)

Despite this criticism, the unreliable narrator does the same, infusing other episodes with an epic tone, undermining the force of other, more factual narratives: "I guess that is how the world works, and literature too: stories are always written and remembered by people like me, not by the Roberts, Zoltáns and Mstislaws of the world." Thus, the narrator is the one selecting the episodes and crafting the epic, alternating actual historical facts — lepers were made to wear bells or yellow crosses in Medieval Europe (Spahić 2011: 25, 68), restricted their freedom of movement (Spahić 2011: 26), confined to the physical, social, and symbolic periphery (Spahić 2011: 27) — with the false story of the fictional Tuscan city Sensotregiore, the violent uprising of a leper colony in the 16th century that managed to impose their rule (Spahić 2011: 26,27).

Their collective identity is configured through stories featuring alterity — the outsider who outcast the lepers; biographies whose truth was never questioned yet not "ascertainable" (Spahić 2011: 24); and impossible tales of tigers attacking lepers in Romania (Spahić 2011: 69), all serving to bind the

community. While the narrator adapts these stories into legend, individual contributions echo Assmann's view that identity emerges dialogically, shaped by others (1992: 16). Acting as a substitute for lost institutions, the narrator turns dying patients' voices into vessels of history, transforming scattered storage memory into functional memory that re-inscribes meaning amid loss and neglect.

The individual identity, for its part, is highly symbolic in *Hansen's Children*. As the narrator receives a passport with the last picture taken before admission to the leprosy colony, he is "forced [...] to rethink everything" (Spahić 2011: 53) and receives the Romanian name Andrei Stanescu. The discovery of the plans to escape, a treason to the community that leads Cioran to take over, reveals the cracks in the collective identity, the longing for individuality and freedom, and the fall of Communism.

Conclusion

This article has explored how memory and identity intertwine in three post-Yugoslav novels, showing how *The Ministry of Pain*, *Catch the Rabbit*, and *Hansen's Children* turn memory into a dialogical practice that forges identities amid rupture. Read together, they place the former Yugoslavia in Europe's shifting semi-periphery, where the East–West divide is less a geographical reality than a discourse of inclusion/exclusion where identity is crafted. Each novel dramatizes the costs of belonging — Tanja's precarious cosmopolitanism in Amsterdam, Sara's carefully curated self unraveling on her return to Bosnia, and the leprosarium's allegory of fenced inclusion and abjection. None offer stable identities; instead, they stage identity as an ongoing negotiation that looks at the local and the supranational level at once keeping a double dialogue.

The framework of cultural memory and dialogical theory highlights how these narratives weave remembering and forgetting into polyphonic accounts of the self. Forgetting appears not only as loss, but also as survival or institutional erasure; silence, too, becomes testimony, as in Bastašić's trauma-rooted withheld speech. Formally, these texts refashion realist genres and present autofiction as counter-memory: Ugrešić's classroom debates, Sara and Lejla's fraught exchanges, and Spahić's fragmented chronicle all turn memory into scenes of confrontation and belated recognition.

In pressing the Yugoslav wars, displacements, and post-socialist transitions into Europe's memory, these novels unsettle the EU's self-image without offering closure. Their double vocation is to provincialize Western fantasies of the East while universalizing the local without erasing its particularity. Identity here is unfinished, fragile, and dialogical; memory is the very space of that negotiation. Together, these works ask readers to trade purity for complexity and resolution for the labor of holding multiple pasts and futures within a shared, if contested, horizon.

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