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The post-Yugoslav subject: Mobility, liminality, and post-war trauma in Goran Vojnović's novel *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (*Yugoslavia, My Fatherland*)

Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, Poznań, 61-255, Poland

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Abstract

The article focuses on the novel *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (*Yugoslavia, My Fatherland*) by the Slovenian author Goran Vojnović, one of the key works of post-Yugoslav literature, combining reflection on migration in the territory of the former Yugoslavia with an analysis of the crisis of identity following the violent dissolution of the political community. The study explores the individual experience of migration as a reflection of a broader generational condition, as well as a form of spatial mobility that alternately emerges as necessity and as a quest – for the father, for identity, for the recovery of memory, and for confronting post-war trauma. It argues that migration is not merely a thematic concern of the novel, but a structuring principle that shapes its narrative architecture, spatial configuration, and construction of subjectivity. The protagonist is portrayed as a hybrid, transnational, liminal figure who moves between non-places, negotiating the meaning of homeland/fatherland while grappling with his sense of responsibility for the crimes committed by his father.

Keywords

migration, Yugoslavia, post-war trauma, identity, non-places

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Corresponding author: Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković (krypien@amu.edu.pl)

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Goran Vojnović's novel *Yugoslavia, My Fatherland, 2015b* (*Jugoslavija, moja dežela, 2015a)* is one of the most important literary reckonings with the legacy of the breakup of Yugoslavia. In it, a private family story becomes a narrative about migration and the loss of identity, as well as a tool for analyzing the political and ideological space of the post-Yugoslav world. The novel's political dimension does not lie in directly commenting on historical events, but in showing how grand politics (nationalism, war, state violence) permeates the private sphere (biographies and the language of everyday life) shaping identity, memory, and family relationships. The consequences of the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are refracted through the perspective of the novel's protagonist, Vladan Borojević – the son of the Serb Nedeljko Borojević and the Slovene Duša Podlogar – and a representative of the "last generation of pioneers," those born between 1974 and 1982 (Milica Popović). The readers learn about his fate at a turning point, the end of a carefree childhood spent in the Croatian city of Pula, where his father served as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army. Just before the outbreak of armed conflict, in the summer of 1991, his father was withdrawn from Pula and sent to the front in eastern Slavonia (Croatia). This decision marked the beginning of the protagonist's migratory trajectory.

Vojnović approaches emigration and migration not merely as the physical movement of characters across the states that emerged after the breakup of Yugoslavia, but as psychological and cultural processes that reshape memory, belonging, and interpersonal relationships. In the novel, emigration assumes the contours of a fundamental condition of post-Yugoslav existence. Migration, mobility, non-belonging, identity struggles, and the emergence and crossing of borders represent central concerns of the narrative and are simultaneously inscribed in its formal structure: movement and travel function as the work's structural axis. This article seeks to analyze the individual experience of migration – as an expression of a broader generational condition – and spatial mobility, both as necessity and as a quest for identity, the recovery of memory, and the confrontation with post-war trauma.

The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to dramatic demographic shifts, including both voluntary and forced migrations[1] as well as the emergence of new political borders. In post-Yugoslav literature, migration has emerged as a central motif, operating both as a lived experience and as a metaphor for the fragmentation of community. Among the most internationally recognized writers to engage with the emigrant condition are Dubravka Ugrešić and Miljenko Jergović. For the Yugonostalgic Ugrešić, emigration entails crossing the borders of the former Yugoslavia and confronting exile abroad, whereas for Jergović it takes the form of relocation from Sarajevo to Zagreb, shaped by nostalgic recollections of the multicultural city of his childhood. Another literary and autobiographical account of post-Yugoslav migration is Ivana Simić Bodrožić's novel *Hotel Zagorje*, which portrays (through a child's perspective) the experience of displacement endured by a family forced to flee the besieged city of Vukovar. Without the father, who stayed behind to defend the city and was killed, the family drifts between hotels designated to accommodate refugees across Croatia, inhabiting spaces entirely foreign to the world in which the children had grown up.

Migration produces its own anamorphic narrative, often autobiographical in nature, which […] places emphasis either on a story of transformations in the subject's identity, or on an account of taming and appropriating places previously inhabited by Others, or on a reflection on the circumstances of its own emergence, which in turn modify the narrated content (Gosk, 2012, 7).

For Goran Vojnović, the migratory narrative primarily concerns struggles with identity and the circumstances of one's own formation. In the novel, migration first signifies movement in a disintegrating state, then movement between newly established states. Yet it also becomes a structure of everyday experience, in which political borders cut across family, linguistic, and emotional relationships. *Yugoslavia, My Fatherland* belongs to a current of literature that examines the consequences of war and social transformation through a (pseudo) autobiographical perspective. Like other writers from the region, the author avoids a clear-cut national narrative, instead focusing on the ambivalence of belonging and on hybrid identity.

The first migration of the protagonist in Vojnović's novel leads to Serbia. At that time, he is unaware that he will never return to his home in his native Pula, nor that the plans for the summer holidays that have just begun will be cancelled. Having not yet received a new official apartment, his mother and her eleven-year-old son initially stayed at the Bristol Hotel in Belgrade, where both experienced profound loneliness. This loneliness was not only a consequence of leaving

[1]Arjun Appadurai (2005, 283) thinks of the whole of Eastern Europe (especially Bosnia and Herzegovina) as the most tragic and complex examples of a domino effect triggered by waves of refugees: "Refugees from one country flow into another, causing further destabilization there and leading to social unrest, and ultimately to yet another exodus. Thus, the population pressures of one country can generate social tensions in its neighbours, opening up endless cycles of ethnic cleansing, forced migration, xenophobia, state paranoia, and further ethnic cleansing."

home, arriving in a city foreign and unfamiliar to them (the capital of a country in which war had just broken out) and being placed in an alien environment, but also of losing familial bonds. In Belgrade, the mother left her son alone in the hotel room for long hours, wandering the city streets and increasingly "migrating" into her inner world, to which the child had no access. The room became the first space of isolation, and likewise of his own internal migration:

> I had no choice but to create an imaginary world in my confused, lonely, hotel-locked head. […] My mother and I lived in parallel worlds those days in Belgrade. […] I had a fear that, for her, I had entirely ceased to exist, and was now invisible. […] I suddenly felt that I had neither a father nor a mother anymore, that I was without friends, that everyone in the hotel had forgotten about me, and that no one in the world would be interested in me anymore (Vojnović, 2015b, 70–71).

The decision to leave the hotel and move to the father's distant cousin in Novi Sad was accompanied by what Vladan described as the "greatest fear of [his] life," as well as by his mother's premonition that this migration would never truly end and that the family would never be whole again: "She was a woman not only defeated, but left to realize that she was alone in her own story. I don't know if she felt, at the time, that the 'extraordinary situation' would ever end. I believe that her sixth sense tingled in anticipation of the horrors drifting her way. Sitting among the boxes and suitcases, she was now a woman on the run, someone who would end up running for years and years" (Vojnović, 2015b, 89). From a city that symbolized Yugoslav diversity, openness, and multi-ethnicity, the protagonist is transferred into a nationalist environment: a cramped, overcrowded apartment and a circle of supporters of Slobodan Milošević's policies, who blamed Slovenes and Croats for the country's disintegration. From the perspective of the driver transporting the family and explaining to the boy where they were headed, it was a land of darkness: "the lights to our left came from Hungary, the lights to the right from Bosnia, and that Serbia and Vojvodina were straight ahead of us, where there were no lights to be seen" (Vojnović, 2015b, 49).

Eventually, the mother decided to return to her family home: to her roots, to Slovenia, and to the parents with whom she had had no contact since leaving for Pula and getting married. It is a deeply unwanted re-emigration, yet remaining in Serbia would have meant accepting Milošević's policies and loyalty to the Yugoslav People's Army. The boy, deprived of his father, allegedly dead in unexplained circumstances, and soon also losing emotional contact with his mother, was thrown into an alien environment, different socio-political realities, and a foreign language. At first, he arrived in the patriarchal, traditional Slovenian village of Vnanje Gorice. There, he met his grandmother and his grandfather Dušan, the head of the local police during the communist period and an ardent communist. Yet, after Slovenia gained independence, he became an equally fervent nationalist and never forgave his daughter for marrying a man who was not Slovenian. Subsequently, the mother and her son moved to the Ljubljana district of Fužine, a "post-Yugoslav ghetto[2]" for immigrants from the former republics, called Čefuri by the Slovenes, who (in the name of preserving authenticity) were unwilling to assimilate or acculturate. Slovenia would never become his home or homeland/fatherland, and Ljubljana would never become his city. The protagonist fully realized this lack of rootedness when his relationship with a Slovenian girlfriend fell apart. He remained in a constant state of suspension between a sense of non-belonging to either Slovenes or immigrants, perpetually existing in a liminal phase (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969[3]). His stay in Slovenia ultimately distanced him from his mother, and this resulted from his refusal to communicate with her in Slovenian:

> she revealed her doubtless long, premeditated plan to speak only Slovene to me from that moment on. While she tried to provide a substantial, multipart explanation of her decision, from psychological, sociological and who knows what other aspects, I decided for myself that I would never speak a word of Slovene to her, no matter what. […] this led to a mother and son never speaking to each other in the same language again (Vojnović, 2015b, 130–131).

Vladan understood the necessity of adapting to the new reality and the new language, yet his internal resistance to the situation found expression in his relationship with his mother. On one hand, he addressed her exclusively in his mother tongue; on the other, at his new school, he did not use that language to communicate with his fellow immigrant peers. Over time, his contacts and communication with other immigrants "in our language" (Serbo-Croatian) would increase, at least for practical reasons, though he would remain distanced from the larger Čefur community.

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[2]Andrzej Sakson (2008, 15–16) considers the deepening of national diversity, the creation of ghettos, enclaves, and colonies as typical social consequences occurring in host countries. These include "new patterns of behaviour, problems related to adaptation, stabilization, and integration of immigrants, conflicts along racial and ethnic lines, increased prejudices both between different immigrant groups and between them and the majority society, growing social inequalities (worse jobs, lower wages, lower living standards for immigrants compared to the local population), an increase in social pathologies, and so on."

[3]"The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner, 1969, 95).

Vojnović skilfully handles linguistic and nominative proximity and diversity to foreground national differences. The "Janezs" are juxtaposed with the "Jovans," "Ivans," "Suljes," and "Muljes." Janez, Ivan, and Jovan are variations of the name John in Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian, respectively, while Suljo and Muljo are the most popular Bosnian names. These names are used as colloquial substitutes to denote nationality. In mutual perceptions, stereotypes prevail, and language becomes a tool of segregation – ethnic, emotional and moral. At the same time, and without his mother's knowledge, the protagonist began learning Slovenian, setting himself the goal of attaining a level of fluency that would prevent anyone from detecting that he was not Slovenian. This decision was closely tied to his desire to distance himself from the Čefuri, for whom mastering Slovenian often proved challenging. Consequently, communication between Slovenes and the Čefuri frequently unfolded in a hybrid "Serbo-Croatian–Slovenian" vernacular. As an adult, Vladan inhabits the interstice between these two worlds: the orderly, Slovenian-European sphere and the Yugo-Balkan milieu perceived as existing at the margins of the law, navigating and embodying both cultural frameworks at once. Yet this concerned the understanding of culture described by Appadurai: culture is a carrier of difference, and as such, it possesses an adjectival character. "I find myself frequently troubled by the word culture as a noun but centrally attached to the adjectival form of the word, that is, cultural. Implying a mental substance, the noun *culture* appears to privilege the sort of sharing, agreeing, and bounding. […] I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities" (Appadurai, 1996, 25). An example of cultural difference is Vladan's conversation with a Bosnian owner of a car repair shop:

> It crossed my mind that I ought to get some discount in this asshole part of the city, especially if he thought I was one of 'his guys.' It never crossed my mind to explain […] I'd never felt like one of 'their guys,' nor did I want to. It was easier, and often cheaper, to put up with the good old-boy chatter, always conducted in 'our language,' and amuse myself by guessing what discount I would get if I were a Slovene[4] (Vojnović, 2015b, 20).

Vladan did not culturally identify with the Čefuri, yet he instrumentalized this potential affiliation when it proved advantageous. In this context, language emerges as the most salient marker of belonging. Multilingualism plays a crucial role in Vojnović's narrative: language operates simultaneously as a marker of migratory identity and as a tool for negotiating inclusion and exclusion. The protagonist embodies a "between-identity": he does not fully align himself with the former Yugoslavia, with the newly established national narratives, or with immigrants like himself. For him and his generation, migration constitutes both an unwanted necessity and an existential condition – one that produces a transnational, hybrid subjectivity. In line with Stuart Hall's thesis, migratory or diasporic identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of becoming, a matter of positioning that involves simultaneous attachments to past and future:

> inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms […]. Nevertheless, this idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changes our conception of 'cultural identity'. In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. […] It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin' (Hall, 1990, 225).

Vladan enlisted the help of a Bosnian as he set out on a journey across the post-Yugoslav space in search of his father. He decided to retrace the route of his 1991 journey: Pula (Croatia) → Serbia → Slovenia sixteen years later (in 2007), this time in the opposite direction, after accidentally learning that his father was alive and sought by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. One could argue that his search for his father, Nedeljko, hiding under the Croatian name Tomislav Zdravković, was driven by a "compulsion to repeat," a pressure or return.[5] This repetition/return of Vladan functions like the Lacanian *tyché*: a repetition of what is not associated with pleasure, leading to an encounter with trauma and the Real (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 1978).

The protagonist set out on a journey through new countries and, simultaneously, into the past, confronting previously non-existent borders and their guardians (Hendrys & Szulc 2025, 377–381), who represent different state administrations

[4]In the original, it is stated that the mechanic comes from the town of Donji Vakuf, located in central Bosnia and Herzegovina. The town functions here as an important marker of identity, as does (omitted by the translator) his name, Enes, a typically Bosnian name. Likewise, the replacement of the name Janez, used by Vladan in his "self-presentation," with the neutral term "a Slovenian" further effaces a culturally specific signifier.

[5]Freud wrote about the "compulsion to repeat" (*Wiederholungszwang*) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, linking it to the concept of the death drive. Building on Freud, Lacan spoke of *insistence* (Lacan, *Seminar III*, 1993) or of return (*jouissance*), an excess of pleasure that recurs in order to go beyond the pleasure principle in pursuit of death (Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 2007).

and national narratives. It was both a physical and a mental journey: into a past he thought had been effectively erased from memory, and into the present of the new states and their versions of recent events:

> In a village near Bijelina [BIH], relatives and friends and even a priest formally welcomed home a local hero, returning after eight years, coming straight from the International Court in the Hague, where he had been arrested for war crimes, his guilt proven by the wicked and corrupt international community, even though his aunts and uncles swore on their dead mothers' graves that he wouldn't hurt a fly, and that their beloved Milan was a known philanthropist (Vojnović, 2015b, 74).

From the son's perspective, the hiding of the killer of Croatian civilians under a Croatian first and last name was interpreted as a kind of internal migration. Tom Zdravković was a popular Serbian singer who died in 1991. By adopting his full name (Tomislav) and surname, the father, in his son's view, followed a logic suggesting that a person bearing the name of a Croatian king would not be suspected of burning a Croatian village and committing crimes against Croatians. Vojnović presents an alternative "biography" for Nedeljko Borojević, which the protagonist invented for interactions with a neighbour – a Bosniak woman – in the town of Brčko, where he had been in hiding for several years. In the novel's present, Vladan learnt this fabricated autobiography from her:

> Tomislav Zdravković told his tales so tall and so precisely because he had no trouble believing them: knit your own lie within your head so it wraps around and blankets the unbearable truth, which then protects you from the destructive ash of guilt, or whatever else eats away at you. This would explain many things about Tomislav Zdravković and also Nedelko Borojević. Even though I knew nothing of the self- preservation techniques taught in the Yugoslav Army, I was quite convinced that, in Tomislav's life, the village of Višnjići never existed (Vojnović, 2015b, 56).

The search for a father accused of war crimes, alongside the search for one's own identity, is the central motif of the novel[6] which also bears the traits of both a coming-of-age story and a detective story. Finding the father based on scant clues and conjectures about his secret fate was no mean feat. The reader gradually receives information about the father, his wartime path, and his past, following the rhythm in which the protagonist-narrator uncovered it (Đurić, 2021, 205). Mobility thus serves an epistemological function: knowledge of the past is not given in advance, but is acquired through movement. The adult Vladan's journey is performative: it re-creates the father and re-creates himself, with a crucial role played by the narratives of those he encounters along the way who knew Nedeljko during the period when Vladan was no longer in contact with him. From these fragments of stories he assembled the figure of his father, filling the void left by the "deceased" with the father's rediscovered existence. The father functions as a figure of state authority in a condition of disintegration: unreflective, loyal to an idea, and at the same time morally compromised. Vojnović demonstrates how nationalist mechanisms produce a moral alibi in which crime becomes "defence," and responsibility is recast as "loyalty to the nation." The war does not end with the signing of peace; its consequences persist in the form of silences, repression, and the shifting of responsibility. The novel exposes a mechanism by which collective responsibility is displaced into the private sphere, and the burden of guilt is taken on by the children: "I thought countless times that his crime was my crime, and am slowly accepting it" (Vojnović, 2015b, 270).

Vladan struggled with a "generational trauma," shaped not only by his father's crimes against Croats, but also by testimonies of crimes committed in Herzegovina in 1942 by"Ustaše or men disguised as Ustaše from the inflamed Herzegovinian neighbourhood"[7] (Vojnović, 2020, 107). The only survivor of the massacre of the village and the family was Vladan's grandfather, who found the bodies of his loved ones burning on a pyre laid out in the yard. This scene would be repeated in 1991 in the Slavonian village of Višnjići, except that this time the perpetrators were soldiers of the Yugoslav People's Army under the command of Nedeljko Borojević. The writer clearly takes a stand against a politics of forgetting, suggesting that without the ethical labour of memory there can be no stable political future. He does not, however, propose simple solutions; instead, he reveals the individual psychological cost and even suggests the need to cast suspicion on the narratives about the past that are currently being told. After meeting his father, the protagonist began to doubt the stories he had heard, suspecting that they may have been constructed in order to justify the father in the eyes of his son:

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[6]The novel is composed of twenty-nine chapters, and its narrative structure relies on the alternating interweaving and developing past and present narrative segments. Occasionally, this pattern is interrupted; for example, chapters two and three unfold in the present, while from chapter twenty-three to the end of the novel, only present-tense narrative segments appear, as the two quests merge into one. In this way, the text suggests that the past has reached the present, culminating in a confrontation between the narrator and his father, in which the former seeks answers while the latter is unable to provide them unequivocally (Đurić, 2021, 204).

[7]"[…] požgali ustaše oziroma v ustaše preoblečeni ljude iz zavrelega hercegovskega komšiluka"(Vojnović, 2012, 122–123). This passage has been omitted in the English translation, which significantly alters the meaning of the text.

> I didn't even want to hear his story […] His story. His damned, lying, fucking, screwed up, planted, motherfucking, stupid, manipulative, phony story. The story I bought so easily […] I was ashamed because I wanted to believe this story the whole time, which was probably at least partly made-up to defend a war criminal to me. I was ashamed because I silently wanted for this story to be true, from the first letter to the last, ashamed because I had subconsciously longed for the understanding and justification of my father from the very beginning (Vojnović, 2015b, 263).

A story of imposed migration often turns into a traumatic narrative, marked by fractures and gaps. In Vojnović's novel, trauma has a dual character. At first, it is connected with separation, loneliness, and confrontation with otherness, the result of movement along the route from Pula to Ljubljana. The journey in the opposite direction, however, produces trauma arising from what might be called "connection": with oneself, with the past, with the truth about the father and the family. It is a trauma that results from filling in a lack. The journey in search of the father also proves to be a journey back to childhood, to everything that seemed consciously and effectively "buried," closed off, forgotten – even to what Freud described as the repressed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Travelling through the countries that emerged after the disintegration of his homeland, reaching the places that had been stops along his migratory route from Pula, as well as those where he encountered traces of Nedeljko, the protagonist brought back from memory even such truths as his father's criminal activity - something he had heard from his cousin during his first stay in Novi Sad:

> 'He's not a Croat. His dad kills Croats!' Misho then pushed past the two baffled idiots, while I followed, convincing myself along the way that I didn't know what he had been talking about... Sixteen years later, Misho's answer accompanied me like irritating music, all the way from Goražde on to Novi Sad, on those bumpy Bosnian and Serbian roads. This ten-year old, a year and a half my junior, knew very well back then what he was talking about, but I decided to be ignorant" (Vojnović, 2015b, 99–100).

The room in the Belgrade hotel, Novi Sad, Vnanje Gorice, Goražde, Brčko, and even Ljubljana – all these stops on the migratory map of the novel's protagonist remain unassimilated spaces, never transformed into place (in Tuan's sense). Some of them (or perhaps only Ljubljana, where Vojnović was born) may be considered autobiographical places (auto/bio/geo/graphical).

> An autobiographical place "retains its necessary reference to a geographical location, yet it is not a fragment of real, physically existing space, nor simply a set of cultural meanings and representations associated with it. It is distinguished by two fundamental features: it has an individual character and is shaped primarily within the substance of literary works"; it is "identity-forming, familiar, and historical" (Czermińska, 2011, 186–188).

Vojnović is the child of immigrants; he did not personally follow the route described in the novel, yet he draws on the experiences of his family and generation. Ljubljana and the Fužine district provide an autobiographical backdrop, growing out of personal experience. Vojnović began constructing the literary image of an autobiographical Ljubljana with the novel *Čefurji raus*; his representation of the Slovenian capital portrays the city as a space of divisions and symbolic segregation, and Fužine as an immigrant microcosm. The city thus becomes a symbol of broader processes: the redefinition of identity after the breakup of Yugoslavia, migration, ethnic tensions, and neoliberal transformation.

Among the autobiographical places distinguished by Czermińska in the context of migration, Ljubljana represents a place that is "observed," created in the "here and now." Pula, Goražde, Brčko, and Novi Sad may be "remembered" places, preserved in family memory; perhaps they are "imagined," constructed (as in the case of the author of *Jugoslavija, moja dežela)* by the second generation of migrants; or perhaps they are "touched," fleetingly encountered in the course of a journey.[8] According to Dejan Đurić, the localities chosen by Vojnović function as synecdoches of specific social processes and atmospheres. Due to its pre-Yugoslav history and the fact that Pula served as the seat of the Yugoslav Navy, it points to the influx of people from various parts of Central Europe and the former state, which shaped its multinational character and openness. It is a place of intimacy and fulfilment, a symbol of childhood from which the narrator is brutally torn away. Belgrade, in turn, represents the capital of the former state. In contrast to the intimacy of Pula, Belgrade welcomed the mother and son with bureaucratic coldness. Novi Sad evoked provincial Serbia and its spirit of unreflective adherence to dominant political trends, manifested in sympathy for the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Vnanje Gorice represents Slovenian provincial life: traditional, patriarchal, and nationally homogeneous Slovenia. The Ljubljana district

[8] "The remembered place was once stable, given, but has been lost, most often as a result of exile or flight. […] In the creation of autobiographical imagined places - that is, those constructed in reference to a geographical area the writer did not personally know or have the opportunity to inhabit - family tradition plays a key role. Genealogy, which is important for remembered places, in the case of imagined ones becomes simply the foundation of their construction. […] A place that has been touched is also one encountered in travel, but only fleetingly, usually on a single occasion" (Czermińska 2012, 50–56).

of Fužine, located on the periphery of a communist housing estate, reflects through its marginalization the position of its inhabitants within the context of Ljubljana and Slovenia: secondary and immigrant (Đurić, 2021, 210).

The protagonist's trauma, tied to being displaced from Pula, and his loneliness in the Bristol Belgrade gave rise to a determination never to stay in a hotel again. Meanwhile, a sense of homelessness and unfamiliarity caused the places he inhabited or merely visited to remain (like a hotel room) - non-places (Agué). This also applies to Ljubljana:

> I realize that nothing except fear of other foreign cities is keeping me in Ljubljana. I've been afraid of the realization that all the cities in this world are equally foreign, and that the same people walk everywhere. […] For me, Ljubljana has always been, and remains, the town of vaguely familiar foreigners. Here, where my home is supposed to be, nobody misses me (Vojnović, 2015b, 269).

Marc Augé's concept of non-places is a bridge to grasping the specificity of the spaces depicted. Hotels, border crossings, and the cities the protagonist visited or inhabited functioned as transitional spaces where the protagonist's identity was suspended (Augé, 1995, 103) or redefined. Non-places also symbolize the condition of post-Yugoslav homelessness, the loss of a stable map of meanings. Vojnović employs these spaces to highlight the discontinuity of the migratory experience and existence in a perpetual "in-between," in the form of liminality (Turner, 1969, 94). Permanence and a sense of being at home are now only memories tied to Pula, to which the protagonist returned at the end of the story, to the grave of his father, a man hiding from the Hague Tribunal and, according to his wishes, buried under the assumed name Zdravković in a navy cemetery protected by the Hague Convention. By fleeing justice, Nedeljko Borojević also shared the fate of a refugee, even after death "hiding" among strangers. Vladan recalled his father's story about how, upon arriving in Pula, he went to the cemetery to see where he truly was, because "the names of the dead explain everything to us, […] 'Our people aren't here at all. There are Austrians, Germans, Italians, Czechs. That's history for you, Vladan. Today we are here, tomorrow it's going be someone else'" (Vojnović, 2015b, 277). By arriving in Pula, Vladan closed the circle of his journey, but the void left by the father who raised him in that city remained. Returning to the "homeland/fatherland" awakened the desire for the impossible: a return home and the continuation of a life interrupted in the summer of 1991.

Vladan's journey across the region's cities (a form of narrative cartography) constructs a distinctive map of memory: each location embodies a fragment of the fragmented Yugoslav community and preserves a shard of lost memory, allowing the narrative to continually return to the past. State borders, while formally in place, prove artificial and painful, as they cut across a shared past. Despite its divisions, the post-Yugoslav space remains communicatively cohesive. Therefore, language becomes a symbol of a lost community that has survived beyond political borders. However, the encounters and conversations conducted by the protagonist in his native language reveal the disintegration of the communal narrative.

The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia created new nation-states but also a new, post-Yugoslav cultural condition. Its central experience is mobility, both the forced migration resulting from armed conflicts and the symbolic migration connected with the reorganization of memory and identity. In Vojnović's novel, migration assumes an epistemological function. The experience of mobility is closely linked to the deconstruction of stable categories like homeland, nation, and memory (individual and collective alike). Migration leads to the formation of a hybrid identity that cannot be fully integrated into any prevailing narrative.

Yugoslavia appears as a lost though not idealized space, impossible to narrate within the new national categories, and as a space of illusory brotherhood and unity (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), a space of silences and unaccounted-for crimes of WWII that awaited exposure and revenge. The state may have disappeared, but its ideological remnants persist in the language, memory, and fears of the protagonists. These remnants of the country, the political system, the family, official narratives, and personal experiences are overlaid with truths and silences concerning the war of the 1990s. Returns to the past, often marked by nostalgia, most frequently stem from fears, anxieties, and a lack of guarantees for the future (Lowenthal, 1985, 11). The escape into the former world is perceived as an opportunity to rediscover a place of safety. The protagonist of the novel is not granted this opportunity; the mythologized idyll of childhood spent in Pula, in a complete family, cannot be recovered. The parents from that time no longer exist, nor does that Pula, nor that country. Yet the nostalgic moods widespread in the countries of the former Yugoslavia stem from unfulfilled hopes, from the immersion of the new states in constant crisis, and perhaps also from the specificity of the times - nostalgic postmodernism (Shawver, 2006). In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, longing for what once was (a former order, environment, way of life, an idealized past) is intensified by mass migrations. From Vojnović's narrative emerges a nostalgia for childhood and for a once-ordered world, yet it is a reminder of the impossibility of returning to the past.

Ethics and consent statement

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

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Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analysed in this research.

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