Narcissus taking a selfie – post-socialist literary representations of "whiteness" in the Balkans

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Exposure to massive migrations due to different political and economic influences in the past twenty years appears to have had a profound effect on the societies of the West, transforming them into ever more complex cultural hybrid environments but also outlining the sharp contrasts and contradictions. These processes cannot be observed simply as cultural blending, since we also see the reverse actions at work, those constructing gaps or divisions commonly recognized as "othering". These actions still remain predominantly detectable in the treatment of the concepts of race, class, gender and culture while the global literary scene equally projects the fears of the hosts and the hopes of the newcomers, often pointing to the directions which current politics and media systems appear to deliberately avoid. Deeply within the flux of migrations, South-East Europe is, however reluctantly, very much involved in the processes constructing new alliances and divisions. Because of its geographical position, it is inevitably a space of transit. Because of its economic status, it cannot become the "target space" for non-European migrants and thus it fluctuates between solidarity with the migrants and rejection and denial. Its cultural production refrains from adopting perspective of a "host culture" and appears determined not to recognize its own dormant or active impulses of "othering". Though rarely acknowledged, the processes of "othering" can be traced as literary production goes beyond the conventional patterns. In the newly-recognized negotiations of class, race and gender, the already established subjectivities of the European fringe require to be confirmed, deconstructed or re-constructed, acknowledging the contradictory forces at work.

The post-socialist contexts of South-East Europe since the break-up of Yugoslavia appear to be moving towards emphasizing cultural homogeneity and national emblems of independence, which primarily put forward the urge to articulate a clean break with the Yugoslav heritage. It is heavily reflected in the Serbian literary scene, which the critic Tatjana Rosić (2013) declares to be (non)existent, and for the most part "transitional" as is the present society. She believes that "the neocolonial spirit of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries fatally impacted Serbian culture" (242), since what follows the vacuum left after the 1980s Yugoslav literary postmodernism is the formation of a transitional culture polarized between the desire to revive the esthetic community and the lack of faith that such a community would have a real social and critical impact in an environment unable to generate dialogue.

As a consequence, the literary scene was generated through what may be described as two major formative influences – the first one originating from the imperative of commercialization of cultural production, and the opposing one stemming from a demand to create a literary system of values independent from the market imperatives but operating within a market economy, which Tatjana Rosić perceives as rather unsustainable. The restructuring of the literary scene that followed from these demands generated two major thematic clusters which Rosić maps as "reading as fun" and "writing about reality" and describes as "tense, dramatic and at times extremely divided" (2013, 246). Rosić presents the current Serbian literary scene as dominated by a gender gap where the commercially successful portion of literary production, profiled as "reading as fun", is the domain of writers who are predominantly women, yet ideologically are on the opposite side of the spectrum from feminist writers, which is why Rosić labels them as "female writing" and observes this production as a hallmark of the postfeminist era instigated by the "media promotion of female authors" (247). In terms of topics, this production is an imported concept and follows a cliché: a love drama or thriller, with a hint of the exotic or mystical, focused on what is considered to be a "commercialized female experience" (247). It sells well, but carries a persistent undertone of shallowness and repetitive, schematic and uninventive writing. Rosić further elaborates on the liaisons between the "repression of the universalist literary-critical speech and academic social practice on the one hand and the implacable commercial demands of the market, on the other" (249).Using Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence of the patriarchate, she explains that critical-literary discourse caters to the market and media boom of "female writing," promoting it as "diversity" in an environment so saturated by it, that it remained as the only visible option in a time marked by the defeat of feminism (249).

The other part of the literary scene, involved in issues related to creating a new canon and dealing with issues related to "reality", Rosić sees as a dominion of male writers, whose production perhaps is not as commercially successful as that of "female writing", yet theirs are the works which receive most of the literary awards and are recognized as having cultural value. Most literary debates on the "new Serbian literature" being generated from this part of the literary scene, agreed that it should "thematically and ideologically focus on transition and post-war traumas that have befallen us" while the layers of difference appear to be established precisely in the ideological interpretation of the nature of "our" presence in the trauma or the war itself resulting in the "opposing presentations of wartime, postwar and transition-era 'realities' in Serbia'" (258). Although such a division is superficial and allows for exceptions to the rule, it is also symptomatic of the transitional re-patriarchalization and does carry a pretext for the reception of a literary work. This in itself is evidence that Serbian literary production has generated several filter lenses of cultural reality which often allow processes of "othering" to remain invisible.

The novels analyzed here cannot be comfortably assigned to any of the defined slots in the post-socialist literary scene in Serbia and represent rare examples of venturing beyond the introspective gaze. They challenge the compartmentalization of the literary scene on the one hand, while they also provide a broader context for cul-

tural influences and the issues pushed into the background. Above all, they open the issue of negotiation of one's subjectivity beyond the closed-off space of the Balkans, but also offer some understanding of how "othering" operates in the cultural space which stands somewhere in between.

The novel *Dangete, duša koja se smeje* (Dangete, the smiling soul, 2011) by Tijana Ašić had a rather difficult task in addressing its potential audience. This partly auto-biographical first-person, narrative about challenging life choices and their consequences shows the personal development and maturing of its protagonist, as well as an account of a failing love affair in a rather unwelcoming, though exotic environment. As the story evolves, it sheds light on matters usually not recognized or spoken about in the Balkans: what are the key elements in our perception or representation of our own identities in terms of race, class and gender in contexts outside the region? In addressing such issues, the novel resists classification and challenges both readers and critics by subverting expectations.

The second novel discussed here, *Tai* (Thai, 2013) by Goran Gocić, offers a view of contemporary "reality" exposing the process of "othering" much less subtly than *Dangete* and offering, perhaps not quite intentionally a rather unflattering self-image of its protagonist. The protagonist comes across as a man in a severe midlife crisis, struggling with social pressure to be recognized as financially and personally successful which allows for an initial discussion on patriarchal, as well as neo-liberal ideas of success. He appears deeply dissatisfied with his life in a setting he finds overbearing with absurd contradictions about what it means to be a man in the Balkans. His quest to resolve internal conflicts takes a rather unexpected turn – he takes a leisure trip to Southeast Asia and gets involved in a relationship ridden with paradoxes, with a woman in the Thai sex industry. For much of the novel the protagonist struggles to make the readers believe he has found love in its purest form and that he would in that relationship eventually discover a formula which would counter the effects of emptiness dominating his understanding of his own existence. The novel unfolds as an introspective journey through the protagonist's worldviews which present him as selfish and bigoted, mainly unable to come to terms with the social and racial stereotypes which his actions only validate or even deepen. Although the novel stands outside the mainstream discourse of contemporary Serbian literature, despite sharing some perspective with Michel Houellebecq's *Platform* (2001), in many respects it speaks out about contemporary issues. It gives insight into the alliance of the media and the hegemonic interests which generate a desirable perception of identity for individuals as well as for entire geographical areas. In terms of reception, the novel got the NIN award in 2013 (a prestigious literary award in Serbia) and found a place in the prestigious edition of the contemporary Serbian prose in English translation, allowing it to potentially reach a much wider audience.

What both novels share is the embedded perspective of the narrators, which is firmly grounded in the understanding of their Balkan identity as troubled and ambiguous. In order to establish their perspective in the process of negotiating who they are or who they need to be, both narrators make a symbolic double movement. They either willingly or reluctantly align their positions with those they assume are

dominant in western cultures, in order to establish a point of reference with respect to the discourses of race, class and gender. Only then they are considering their position in the cultural space of the Other, of Asia or Africa, and the subsequent interaction appears to reinforce their already established identification, instead of allowing them to negotiate or explore and assess the difference against what they perceive as the Other. However, the process is not irreversible; inconsistencies and contradictions create fractures and fissures in the blocks of the assumed identity which open alternative interpretations and prevent the protagonists to dominate or manipulate their own narratives.

REPRESENTATION OF "WHITENESS" AGAINST THE BALKAN UNDERSTANDING OF RACE AND GENDER

As Catherine Baker explains, the overwhelming focus on ethnicity, nation formation, forced migrations and genocide in the former Yugoslavia foregrounds an ethnopolitical and religious interpretation of issues, leading to the firmly rooted preconception that the "Yugoslav region […] apparently has nothing to do with race" (2018, 12). The region's lack of a colonial heritage and its position on the eastern edge of Europe "proper", never brought mass migrations of people whose identities would be racialized as non-white. However, in everyday life, as well as in the broader historical contexts, there is ample evidence that race as a cultural practice is very much present. Baker points out "identifications with 'Europe' as a space of modernity, civilization and […] whiteness, but also analogies drawn between 'Balkanness' and 'blackness' in imagined solidarity, as well as the race-blind anti-colonialism of Yugoslav Non-Alignment" (13). Baker further argues that it is no longer possible to maintain the position that the "Yugoslav region stands outside race" and that it is imperative to determine "where it stands, and why that has gone unspoken for so long" (13).

Baker's account of the issue of *whiteness* in Eastern Europe draws on Anikó Imre's statement that it is still perceived as morally transparent due to the lack of an colonial heritage (Baker 2018, 20), along with Charles Mills's explanation that race is not only linked to the violence of colonialization, but to "the construction of spatialised hierarchies of civilization/backwardness around people(s) and territories" (25). In addition, Baker contends that the evidence of the bonds that tie the Balkans to the global racial order despite lower rates of migration may be readily found persisting in the popular culture in the "fantasies and desires of colonial exoticism" (27).

Both novels in question correspond to the formal features of travel narratives, each being a quest for the narrators to establish "negotiation between Self and Other that is brought about by the movement in space" (Thompson 2011, 9). However, the common point of reference for both authors is the paralyzing fixation on the images they negotiate with – the rather archaic dichotomy of the Occident and the Orient and their desire to appropriate the identity of the West by consuming rigid stereotypical images of the Self and the Other, elaborating on the series of binaries in what they assume to be the core of the Other of the Third World. In the process, although from different gender perspectives and social roles, protagonists manipulate their own

reflection the most, leaving the reader struggling both with the distortion of their subjectivity and with the image of the remote space and culture as an (un)desired reference point. Their motivation to do so, which comes across as a defense mechanism, opens the possibility of interpretation. The protagonists insist on focusing on the kind of difference which functions as a tool for validating their perception of themselves; their "belonging" to the West, but in doing so, paradoxically they also reassert what Milica Bakić-Hayden has termed "'nesting colonialisms', discourses through which post-Yugoslavs distance themselves from the 'Third World' just as the EU and other Western institutions seemed to be pushing the region into it" (123).

The resulting self-indulgent images of the protagonists can be examined through Richard Dyer's focus on "the representation of white people in white Western culture" (1997, iii). Dyer explains that whiteness is a category claiming universality and invisibility, which assumes its status of maximum power by applying the category of race only on non-white peoples, therefore excluding white people from being racially seen or named, making them function as a "human norm" (1997, 1). Dyer links cultural constructions of race to the interaction "between body and spirit as revealed in Christian culture" (1997, 19), but also to the political development of Europe from the 16th century, identifying populations as those inside and outside the boundaries of centralized rule. He contends that the category of *whiteness i*mplies a symbolic boundary to be crossed, but also an internal hierarchy of privilege to be climbed, since this is a construct which operates together with categories of class and gender. Understanding the experience of whiteness is predominantly limited to the representation originating in the Western world – male dominated, capitalist and exploitative, while the role of "non-white subjects is reduced to a function of the white subject, without allowing for the recognition of similarities or the acceptance of differences except as a means for knowing the white self " (1997,13). In this context, the model images of whiteness present the key elements in the process in which the protagonists of the two novels seek to know themselves against the backdrop of the faraway spaces they temporarily inhabit.

Dyer emphasizes that the embodiment of whiteness is firmly grounded in the Christian concept of the split between mind and body (15), and that gender ideals rely on the figures of Mary and Christ. The resulting female ideal models of behavior thus promote "passivity, expectancy, receptivity […] motherhood as the supreme fulfillment of one's nature […] constituting a given purity and state of grace" (17), while the male ideal is based on the "divided nature and internal struggle between mind (God) and body (man), and of suffering as the supreme expression of both spiritual and physical striving" (17). Those ideals are considered not as identifications, but rather models to "aspire to be like and yet what one can never be" which is in turn a construct of a temporary and partial "triumph of the mind over matter". Although the protagonists' understanding of themselves is to an extent blurred by the ambiguities of the Balkans and their personal rebellion, these models are clearly present in their self-fashioning.

THE PALE GHOST OF KAREN BLIXEN

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them [quote attributed to Karen Blixen]. I came to Kenya in order to find a man who will be brave, interesting, educated, distinguished and unpredictable like the adventurer and hunter, English nobleman Dennis Finch-Hatton, and who would be much more unusual, intelligent, ambitious and successful than him. I have not found such a man in Ken (Ašić 2011, 110).

In Tijana Ašić's *Dangete, the smiling soul*, the protagonist sees her subjectivity as pieced together from a series of different identities in fragments of three, collected as places, objects, languages and people. The narrative is also a confession of her sorrows: the failing marriage, the struggle to cope with the expectations of an exotic faraway country, loneliness and the paralyzing fear forcing her into compliance and passivity on the one hand and motivating her to struggle to set herself free against the odds on the other. Although Africa features in her story as a place in which she lived for a while, her story corresponds to the mode of telling characteristic for travel writing. As is almost always the case with travel literature, her account of the people and places she encounters offers the reader an insight into her own thoughts and identity, rather than creating a window into the new culture from a point of view of a disinterested observer. The protagonist's emotional involvement makes it rather difficult to approach her story as an objective account of contemporary Africa, therefore somewhat undermining her reliability as a narrator. On the other hand, *Dangete* shares a very specific perspective, since travel writing used to be a genre where women's voices were rarely heard. Although there are records about women travelers and about written records of their travels dating as early as the 14th century, "[u]ntil well into the twentieth century travel writing was often defined as a masculine domain, a showcase for contemporary norms of masculinity, heroism and virility" (Bird 2016, 35). This assumption was challenged in the 1990s in Billie Mellman's *Women's Orient* (1995), which in addition to exposing gender bias in the genre, spoke about the often-omitted issues of complicity and negotiation of women with imperial ideology and administration (Bird, 36). Yet, as Bird points out, the expectation that the women travel writer should exhibit a sense of solidarity with other women she encounters is very much present in current criticism (36) since women travelers are perceived as "already somehow Other or *ex-centric* in their own culture, therefore occupy a privileged position of 'otherness' within the host culture and so can identify with the equally marginalized native women beyond cultural and class boundaries" (Fortunati and Ascari 2001, 5 [Bird 2016, 36]). As the novel *Dangete* confirms, such a proposition is rather naïve and reductionist, since it first assumes an experience of gender understood as a type of universal "bond of sisterhood," secondly it reduces the women in the host country to the function of a mirror "set up to reflect the experience of the European traveler" (Bird 2016, 37) and finally, it may fit only those who correspond to the specified gender profile. The protagonist Tina's position fluctuates between deliberate transgressions and conscious retreats – while the women she encounters in Kenya facilitate her transformation and in some cases act as catalysts in the process of assuming the active role, she finds herself both complicit and lacking. Although race as the topic in the novel appears to be unavoidable, the treatment of

issues pertaining to race is not consistent. On the one hand, it reflects "race-blindness" in the observations about social and personal relationships; however, in the self-fashioning of the protagonist, establishing the discourse of race does rely on promoting feminine ideals of whiteness as defined by Dyer: passivity, receptivity, motherhood as a supreme fulfillment of one's nature, given purity and the state of grace.

Tina's character is first contrasted to the character of her husband's sister, whose position in Tina's husband's household would be challenged by her arrival. Women travel writers "are arguably in a position to explore new textual constructions of femininity precisely because no fixed paradigm exists" (35). However, Tina enters into a female hierarchy of her husband's Kikuyu family where she alone, as a new bride, occupies the position of *Other* and where her background, education or racial features apparently would not contribute to the improvement of her status: "A young, inexperienced, skinny half-woman-half-scientist wishes to marry an older experienced African intellectual and businessman who already has to acknowledge a few pounds extra […] we must point out horrible mistakes she would undoubtedly make if it were not for our care for her wellbeing and for her dignity" (Ašić 2011,10). All the information in the novel comes from the narrator, therefore the interpretations also function as a characterization procedure directed at the narrator. In Tina's view, the "care" is not a genuine concern, but a means of maintaining control and the positions of power. What is more, she gradually realizes that her future position is a part of a carefully designed construct within the patriarchal hierarchy which overarches the female one. She presents herself as conditioned by the roles and symbolic references her future husband wishes to assign to her and his interest in her appears to be limited to the "model wife" he was creating for the purpose of his own social advancement. She becomes a "flat character, a paper doll with an important role in his social promotion" (17). Although she is aware of it and she is emotionally affected, at the end of the first chapter she explains her own willingness to put up with it, evoking a deeply troubling period of insecurity in the Balkans which is accurately summarized in one half sentence – he was so very different from the young men in Serbia "completely destroyed by the wars in the region, mothers in the house and the omnipresent Sloba-Sloboda [i. e. Slobodan Milošević]" (14). While at the time she believes she chose her future husband for his will for life, she later finds his achievements to be superficial and inferior and herself deluded and manipulated.

Whether or not seen as plausible, revealing her true motivation becomes the initial point of her apparent identification with the representation of *whiteness* in the ideal of a woman. It is hinted to the reader almost as an afterthought – she chose to go to Africa because she would become a mother to her husband's child by his first wife.

The role of selfless motherhood Tina preserves as an element she deeply believes to be genuine and uses it as a parameter for comparing and contrasting herself to other women while trying to determine her own social status, whether in the rather rigid social setting of Switzerland where she is a foreign Ph.D. student in linguistics and socializes with a little girl, occasionally playing the role of her would-be-mother at the time when she meets her future husband, or in Kenya's various and traditional social circles. From the pompous and snobbish ones, represented in the character

of her sister-in-law, prone to theatrically emphasizing her would-be-supreme motherly qualities, to the slums of Nairobi's second center haunted by the hungry eyes of children and their mothers' empty gazes, or the rural setting of her husband's family village, the image of motherhood she assumes is the basis of the construct of herself. It allows her to maintain what she perceives as the "purity or the state of grace" which opens the space for her individuality to develop in the environment otherwise closed off and unwelcoming to any kind of female individuality. In Switzerland she models herself as "traditional," expressing disdain towards her student colleagues who present themselves as feminists in order to secure financial support from various groups promoting "gender equality" (Ašić 2011, 36–37), but equally towards those who trade their bodies and minds in order to gain a more or less respectable place in Swiss society. Being traditional, however, she does not deny herself the right to agency. The decisions to go to Africa, as well as to leave, she claims as her own (69), yet she uses the image of motherhood as a means to justify her transgressions against loyalties she feels she owes, first to her family left behind in Belgrade and excluded from her "new life", and then to her husband, when she finally decides to leave him and Africa behind. The actual state of motherhood, when she has her own son in Kenya, paradoxically becomes her only foothold in a marriage in which her position gradually deteriorates and she is stripped of her financial independence. In letting her husband control her income and savings, her freedom of movement becomes very limited, because she gradually grows afraid of the people in the city around her and since the loyalty to her child was paramount, her agency appears to be blocked. At the same time, she seems to have fully realized that racialization is as present in Africa as it is in Europe, although in a form she might not have been familiar with, and that her decisions now have real consequences:

> I did not go to the Black continent looking for an exotic-sexual-humanitarian experience. In the first place, I wanted to get away from the world in which I suffered because I was different. I also wanted to find a new, better and more honest universe and […] an exceptional brave man in it. My expectations failed me twice, Africa and Africans are not better or healthier than Europe and Europeans and the man I chose was poorly chosen (177).

Her disappointment perhaps can be interpreted as a consequence of her own prejudice and the lack of better judgment, but on the other hand, it can also be due to her initial sense of displacement which created a need to construct a perfect "better and more honest universe" at any cost that made her reject the imperfect world she encountered. An accidental encounter with two women of mixed race who recognize the language Tina is speaking on the phone makes her realize that, like other women of European and Asian descent married to Africans, she would always remain a social outsider. Although she never sees her marriage as a "racial combination" (56) for her husband the appropriation of a white woman is a step into *whiteness,* and she is forced to accept the symbolic value of a white woman by allowing him to present her as his prized possession. On the other hand, his understanding of her purpose depends on her refraining from personalizing the experience of *whiteness*, and her Slavic roots, Balkan origin and especially Orthodox Christianity are carefully concealed, since in the system of values *whiteness* operates, those features reduce her

value. Having served her limited purpose, she suspects she would become a prisoner of her love for her children like other women she knew, "condemned to sit around the house waiting for the ever-absent husband, drink evil Kenyan brandy and stare at the blank screen" (88) until she is replaced by some other "less annoying" female. From that point on, she directs all her abilities to silence and cunning, rather than to open rebellion, in order to escape, taking her child with her.

By opening her story to usually unspoken topics, Ašić demonstrates that she is aware of the conventions of the Serbian literary scene dominated by commercial writing described by Rosić (2013) as "female". She deliberately constructs the narrative so as not to comply with the assumed generic patterns of an exotic romance. She breaks the novel's chronology, allowing the reader into the story at a point when the possibility of a romantic love affair no longer exists. The manner in which her subjectivity as a woman is structured in the novel rests on the sequencing of the events from different moments in the chronology of the narrative which all refer to this initial balance of power established in the first chapter.

Although this story is a record of an experience of living in a foreign country, rather than a typical travelogue, we may trace the pattern of storytelling according to which the travel writer often records their adventure following a preconceived idea about the place they visit. Tina's expectations of Kenya rely on the romantic account of Africa acquired through Karen Blixen's writing and on the superficial conversations with affluent women of Geneva and Paris who thought Europe to be unbearably boring, and "yearned for a life in Africa, where everything is fresh, exciting and beautiful" (115). Tina's situation or her racially blind background cannot compare to either Blixen or wealthy Western European women, thus what she actually encounters is in sharp contrast to expectations. Her reaction is a revolt against the sanitized scenery offered to tourists and equally against the "ugly reality of Africa" which she describes as the swarming anthills of people left to fend for themselves (114) in the "second downtown" of Nairobi clogged by cardboard shacks and desperate people sleeping on the ground. However, one of her greatest disappointments is not to find freedom, which she only finds by escaping Africa and returning to the Balkans and Europe. Tina's experience of class and race, her own perception of her *whiteness* against African social hierarchies, produces an experience which directly contradicts that of Blixen, who thought Kenya to be the embodiment of ultimate freedom. On the contrary, for Tina "the shackles Ken chained my little wrists and ankles with were heavier than anything I experienced until then" (108). Paradoxically, Tina's readiness to transgress or disregard boundaries, which had brought her to Africa, also forced her to experience the limitations of cultural and social stereotyping governing the realities of Africa, Western Europe (Switzerland) and the Balkans which forces her to acknowledge her own weaknesses: "Sometimes I think I finally know myself and the secret of my existence, that I bathe in life as if it were the clearest water, and sometimes my soul appears as a deep well full of poisonous sludge rising from the bottom of this world" (194). The novel ends by alluding to the myth of Sisyphus – the stone is at the top of the hill, and her story is over – her motherhood remains the only stable element of who she became. In the interchanging images of Africa and Europe, Ašić

presents an interesting parallel: her heroine is allowed to see as her own reflection only frozen images of discourses on race and gender, not leaving much room for otherness of any kind, which at the point she realizes she participates in it, makes her tragic.

THE WILLINGNESS TO TAKE UP THE "WHITE MAN'S BURDEN"

The novel *Thai* (2013) is a story about a journey told by a man in his mature years, confronted with existential crisis and haunted by the sense of loss and wasted life. The structure of the novel is rather complex; the text often backtracks and is almost suffocated by digressions about the narrator's aspirations, desires, losses, disappointments and forced affections. This makes it very difficult to reconstruct the chronology and to understand the characters' motivation. The protagonist is the loudest (if not only) voice in the novel claiming to search for the "knowledge of himself" by daring to step out of the ordinary or, as he believes, to experience life to the full extent. This attempt takes him on a journey to Thailand motivated by his instable emotional state following the death of a friend, which exposes a "void" in him that he believes is present in all "Western" people trapped in the chase for success. He naively hopes to find there a world made on principles ultimately different from those of Western European neoliberalism and capitalism, a pure world of mystic and raw forces driving life itself. In the end, he returns to his "Westerner's" life and his void remains happily nested inside him while his journey completes the full circle and brings him back to deliberations about the fragility of human life (Gocić 2013, 273).

The reader encounters the protagonist in a crowd in Bangkok arriving from the airport. After a brief exchange, when he immediately imagines a possibility of a relationship with a woman he noticed in the crowd, as a fulfillment of his quest for true love, the protagonist ventures into Nana, the sex trade district of Bangkok, in order to find the woman and to offer "to save her" as his personal sacrifice. The subsequent "relationship" develops in a manner which emphatically foregrounds dualism: the opposition between the protagonist/narrator modeled after a colonial matrix of male travelers, and "the object of his desire" he claims to fall in love with, whom he labels Lady Thai but never names nor allows her to speak. The narrator's account of his personal relationship with the woman is dominated by the contrast between his apologetic attitude to prostitution and the social hypocrisy both of the Western and of the Thai culture, and his personal urge to "rescue, protect and improve" the object of his desire, seeing her as "a damsel in distress" (26), regardless of what her wishes might be. In this situation the reader recognizes the protagonist's true motivation – more than anything, he desires an "ultimate emotional experience which would validate his (white) privilege" (Cole 2012), even if it means disguising the evils of the sex trade with sentimentality and exchanging his desire for the experience of a full life for the "white savior complex". Although the protagonist appears to be aware of the power relations and colonial worldviews projected through this affair, he never contests them; instead, he himself plays a game of immersion into the "girlfriend experience" which is known as a kind of service, an alternative client – service provider relation-

ship, enjoying, praising and exploiting the submissiveness of "his" Asian woman as if it was not an exchange requiring payment in money.

The image of the "farang" (foreigner) conditions the image of Thailand, as the construction of authority is central to travel writing (Thompson 2016). He clearly understands what facilitates his privileged outsider position: "Here the farang's power comes from his euros, his pounds, his dollars, his yen. The power provides relevance to the insignificant whims. Power is the ultimate passion." (Gocić 2013, 169). Thai was expected to be a "revelation read… a text that would provide authentic details to lead us into the atmosphere of an unknown country which very few readers might hope to see with their own eyes" (Arsenić 2014). However, the setting offered in the novel repeats the toponyms and descriptions omnipresent in the media, especially "first-hand experience" blogs and forums, aimed at affluent white men fascinated by the Thai sex trade. The author seems to be following the strategy of travel writing's structuring of authority (Thompson 2016, 4) by introducing a third character into the story as his guide. The protagonist exchanges emails with him, his voice is presented as seemingly reliable and competent, and he is the one who feeds the protagonist the data from the media. However, although this idea could have produced "interesting intertextual connections" (Arsenić 2014), very soon the reader realizes that the expert witness's voice brings no contrast to the narrator's, and it produces an adverse effect – instead of contributing to the construction of a specific chronotope, this repetition deepens the impression of the lack of authenticity.

In addition, the narrative in its structuring also consistently recreates a stereotypical Orientalist discourse, insisting on an essayist manner, emphasizing generalized binary oppositions between the East and the West, instinct and reason, mysticism and clarity, seen as "its topos, Thailand, Love and Thailand. A woman, sensuality, demystification of the protagonist […] a lesson for the self-absorbed Westerner how to resist his hubris looking up to the complaisance of the Easterner" (Bobičić 2014, 157). This certainly evokes the 19th-century colonial discourse which often defined travel writing as "a showcase for contemporary norms of masculinity, heroism and virility" but also promotes the "privileged locus of self-fashioning for men" and a presentation of the male ideal of *whiteness* absorbed in the struggle of the dichotomies of stereotypical masculinity "asserting facts rather than indulging feelings, announcing heroism rather than admitting cowardice, accumulating heterosexual conquests and eliding homosexual exploration" (Bird 2016). Instead of the "archetypal figure of masculinity impregnated with 'the exotics of adventure'", the reader encounters the protagonist who prefers a diegetic over mimetic mode, who frequently overwhelms the text with his endless banal declamations and inconclusive commentaries mostly aimed at celebrating his own broadmindedness (Arsenić 2014). What is more, he repeatedly declares himself a model "Westerner" (Gocić 2013, 19, 55, 71, 179, 185, 225) and attempts to adopt the cultural norms of Western Europe that has much less in common with the Balkans than the protagonist would like to admit, and which itself promotes a widespread stereotype about a white male sex-tourist in Thailand. In appropriating the colonial stance and the "European fantasy of full possession of the Orient", the protagonist seems to be desperate to cloak himself in a particular kind of hegemonic *whiteness:*

Compared to the Balkan excitement with machismo, with the female demands to bring them stars from the sky like a dog would run and fetch a stick, compared to the Balkan madness of emancipation in domestic life and traditionalism when it comes to breadwinning – the simple desire of the Thai women for material security, while they would take care of everything else, seems like fair play to me (181).

For the most part, this does not fit his circumstances or heritage which is why he comes across as powerless, delusional and pathetic (137–140, 230–238). Engaging the Western European discourse with a character from the Balkan cultural space assuming whiteness as a unifying factor (Dyer 1997, 19) inevitably creates an (unintended) ironic effect since it activates a series of deeply contradicting stereotypes: the Balkans is the fringe of Europe, often considered not "white enough", or not Christian enough, inadequately drenched in paganism or Byzantine and Orthodox mysticism (which was precisely the experience of the protagonist of the novel *Dangete*), a part of the "totalitarian" or "communist" Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain, retrograde, violent, patriarchal and, before all, not rich enough to be fully accepted within the boundary of the Western hegemonic representation of *whiteness.* In addition, whiteness cannot override the historical and cultural differences – the imperialist heritage of Western Europe is directly opposite of the socialist and anti-colonial background of Yugoslavia. Gender discourse in the Balkans must acknowledge the abundant patriarchal heritage and traditionalism, which especially in the post-socialist period, contributes to the widespread current regression (and repression) of women's rights rather than emancipation, and the omnipotence and benefits of the liberal market in the Balkans are restricted to the smallest elite – all these points remain unaddressed in the novel, although they could be used instead, as points of similarities with Thailand, including these ambiguities in the equation and making Thai culture more accessible and understandable for Balkan readers.

The novel ends in a rather blunt crash into reality. The protagonist labels it his "return to monologue" (Gocić 2013, 271) aimed at addressing the consequences, which is rather ironic, since the entire novel is ultimately a monologue. For the protagonist, the quest for love having failed, possible consequences remain on the surface – the alleged emotional risks he has taken in this relationship seem to have done very little to initiate any kind of transformation or personal growth, but he does express concern for his physical status. Luckily, the anxiety because he was not practicing safe sex in a relationship with a prostitute he declares resolved having received the three stamps on a piece paper confirming his "negative" status – to HIV, hepatitis B and C. Contrary to his relief at his narrow escape and "survival", his alter ego, the alleged acquaintance and the authority on Thailand, returns to Europe to discover his health irreversibly ruined by the "hedonist lifestyle" in Asia, and the protagonist's thoughts are again directed to the "limitations and fragility of human life" (275) he claims to motivate him in finding his new purpose by channeling his emotional experience through "saving, protecting and improving". The protagonist falls short of his own expectations although he appears pleased with the self-image he chose for himself. The entire enterprise, although elaborate and burdened by over-thinking, does not generate change: the protagonist's travel does not facilitate any kind of negotiation,

he remains introspective and closed off to outside influences. The world he encounters as a tourist turns out to be exactly what it can be – a ready-made version of an adult entertainment park with the attractions tailored to extract currency. The "love affair of his life" remains futile and he is forced to pick up where he left off in the life he tried to escape.

CONCLUSION

In post-Yugoslav literature, distant lands are not a common topic of interest, and the two novels presented here create a niche which would allow the Serbian literary scene to expand in time. Travel is understood as an encounter between the Self and the Other that becomes possible by movement through space, while travel writing records the negotiation between the known and the unknown or between the desired and undesired which takes place in the encounter (Thompson 2011). The protagonists of the novels *Dangete* and *Thai* touch upon the painful questions of constructing a self-image while struggling with cultural norms governing gender, class and race layered in at least three different contexts. In their desire to find a purpose, they expose some of the contradictory aspects of the Balkans as a region between the West and the global South (or the so-called "Third World," of which non-aligned Tito-era Yugoslavia was itself a part). In addition, by initiating a literary discussion on the post-socialist understanding of race as a cultural construct in the Balkans, they open the space for Serbian literature to be visible in the context of Europe undergoing change under the pressures of migration.

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Narcissus taking a selfie – post-socialist literary representations of "whiteness" in the Balkans

Whiteness. Serbian literature. Post-Yugoslav literature. Travel writing.

The novel *Dangete, duša koja se smeje* (Dangete, the smiling soul, 2011) by Tijana Ašić is partially an autobiographical story presented as an encounter with East-African cultural norm. On the other hand, the novel *Tai* (Thai, 2013) by Goran Gocić is set in Thailand and presented as a story, or rather as a project, "of a self-aware man […] who seeks to protect a woman", but also "as a lesson given to a complacent Westerner, with the intention of curing his haughty ego by succumbing to the East". Both novels correspond to the formal features of travel narratives, and their common point of reference is the paralyzing fixation on the images their protagonists are pressured to negotiate with – those of the South Eastern Europe caught between dichotomy of the Occident and the Orient.

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