Guido Snel

Levantinizing the Balkans: Outlines for a Literary Geography of Encounters

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Abstract: The debate on the ‘where’ of the Balkans seem to be stuck between national paradigms and a nostalgia for cosmopolitanism. This essay explores an alternative spatial mapping of the region, opening it up to the wider Eastern-Mediterranean, in particular the fuzzy and contested notion of the Levant. First, it looks into various instances of ‘the Levant’ and ‘the Levantine,’ ranging from Turkish and Greek to Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian examples – with a particular focus on the latter. Secondly, by then ‘levantinizing’ the Balkans, in an explicit analogy to Édouard Glissant’s understanding of ‘creolization’ in the Caribbean, it attempts to draw the outlines of a geography of encounters. Finally, it offers a sample of what such a geography might look like and what its literary-historical repercussions might be, bringing together the work of Semezdin Mehmedinović and Etel Adnan.

Keywords: Balkans, Levant, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, encounters

1 The Balkans: Neither National nor Cosmopolitan

In the introduction to her seminal *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Maria Todorova, before famously stating that, *hors du texte*, the Balkans are “tantamount to the Ottoman legacy,” suggests that what has variously been called the “Europeanization,” “Westernization,” or “modernization” of the Balkans – first and foremost “the triumph of the bureaucratic nation-state” – has resulted in the region “becoming European by shedding the last residue of an imperial legacy, widely considered an anomaly at the time” (13). And she continues provocatively that “by assuming and emulating the homogeneous European nation-state as the normative form of social organization,” “it may well be that what we are witnessing today [...] is the ultimate Europeanization of the Balkans” (13). Why is this provocative? Because Todorova was writing in 1997, less than two years after the signing

Corresponding author: Guido Snel, University of Amsterdam, European Studies, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands, email: g.j.a.snel@uva.nl

of the Dayton agreement which put an end to half a decade of war and violence in Bosnia and Croatia, conflicts that have often been attributed, “wrongly,” as Todorova writes, “to some Balkan essence” (13). By qualifying the Balkans as more European than Europe, she also challenges any claims by the European Union, which was preparing itself and a series of future member countries for accession, that the continent was about to leave behind the nation state – the last residue of the long 19th and the short-lived but traumatically violent 20th century.

At the same time, Todorova suggests (50), the former center of the Ottoman empire, the modern republic of Turkey, tended to neglect the Balkans as a remnant of “an undesirable imperial past” (50). The process of modernization initiated after the founding of the republic, according to Kevin Robins, first and foremost entailed “Turkey’s enthusiastic acceptance of the national model [...], its assertion of the principle of cultural homogeneity, and its consequent modern fear of complexity within” (243) – more or less what Todorova refers to when she speaks of the Europeanization of the Balkans. Both Todorova and Robins, discussing the afterlife of empire, set up an implicit opposition between national culture and a tradition of cultural diversity that pertains to language, ethnicity, and religion. The latter is explicitly linked to the legacy of imperial society, in this case that of the multinational Ottoman and Habsburg empires. While Todorova writes about imperial legacy that was “widely considered an anomaly,” Robins speaks of “a closure in the face of the principle of cosmopolitanism that existed to the south and east of Europe” (243).

The question today, therefore, is not so much: where to situate the Balkans, but rather: how to think the Balkans? For literary scholarship, this is not just a question about paradigms and paradigm shifts (how to inscribe literary works in their historical contexts? which are those contexts if they keep on shifting?), but also a methodological one: perhaps it is first and foremost in textual representations where the positionings and re-positionings of the region are being performed – which time and again begs the question: how do the realities of texts relate to lived experiences, and to future experiences still to be lived? Both Robins and Todorova maintain that the imagination plays a major part in the cultural-historical configurations of space, be they nationally inspired or not. To Todorova, the Balkans are as much an imagined (textual) reality as they are historically real (more about this contested assertion later), while Robins’s critical assessment of national culture relies heavily on Benedict Anderson’s well-known concept of imagined community. Robins, paraphrasing Anderson, makes sure to insist on the need for an imagined community to eliminate complexity as it disturbs “culture in common, a unitary culture” which is “valued as a mechanism for collective cultural bonding” (238):

At a quite fundamental level, then, we may say that the community contains the desire for purity and homogeneity of culture and identity. And it seeks to fulfill this desire through the elimination of complexity, and the expulsion or marginalization of elements that seem to compromise the “clarity” of national attachment and belonging. (239)

Cultural, linguistic, and ethnic homogeneity is a condition, Robins claims, for the members of a national community to be able to identify with their brethren. Still, as much as one may sympathize with this critical deconstruction of national culture as imaginary (in the sense that Benedict Anderson uses the term), one should also critically address the counterpart of the comparison. How real is the assumption of a cosmopolitan culture? On the one hand, critical historical studies have pointed out that there is a certain level of idealization at play (cf. for instance Elden, “Istanbul as Cosmopolitan City,” on the late Ottoman empire). On the other hand, we are dealing here with complex lived realities which do involve a high degree of mixing, of hybridity.

The case of Bosnia, which can and should be framed not just as a post-Ottoman and a post-Habsburg but also as a post-Yugoslav and a post-socialist space, presents a particular challenge. According to poet Semezdin Mehmedinović (born in 1960), “this Bosnian culture is inclusive, it includes the Bosnian Franciscan tradition, the Muslim Sufi tradition, and the Sephardic Jewish tradition; this is all part of my tradition, as well as Goethe, so that limitations can’t be imposed” (*Nine Alexandrias* 115). Yet he is also aware of the fragility of this inclusiveness when he speaks of the “kind of fragmentation that turns into the ideological farce we are witnessing now,” referring to the nationalistic violence of the 1990s (120). It is important to note that his *Sarajevo Blues* (1995) contains a number of portraits of former literary acquaintances who turned foes – among them Radovan Karadžić – each of these portraits preoccupied with the same question: what caused these writers to betray the very culturally diverse hardware that created them and which they represented? In this light, as an explanation of individual choices, Robins’s “desire for purity and homogeneity” seems too abstract. For the same reason Mehmedinović rejects the idea that Karadžić was a devil incarnated (21) for “if you follow through on this metaphor [...], then you can remove any trace of responsibility from Karadžić’s hellish acts” (21). It follows that, as one should not essentialize nationalism’s desire for cultural homogeneity, one equally should not reduce culture’s inherent diversity to some kind of non-historical, transcendental cosmopolitan spirit.

This points to a more fundamental problem of a methodological nature – how to reconstruct the historical realities as well as the contemporary manifestations of ‘cosmopolitan’ culture from the confinements of national discourse, if most of our academic discourse is deeply embedded in national thought. Todorova is fully aware of this problem, hence perhaps the emphasis she puts on spatial con-

figurations, as geographical and linguistic boundaries inevitably affect the choice and delineation of our objects of research. This is the case regardless of whether one seeks to affirm or reject national discourse. For instance, when speaking of a culture as being diverse, we are already in the defense, and implicitly acknowledge at least the existence of a homogeneous national culture as being the norm. Robins's discussion of the Euro-Turkish border is another case in point. Even when he is critical of methodological nationalism, which reifies the Europe-Orient dichotomy, this very logic is maintained. He seems aware of this himself, when offering a plea for a different sense, a different model of identity: "[W]e have to move from thinking in terms of cultural identity to consider the significance of cultural exchange [...]. [W]e have to think in terms of cultural experience, and of whether or how collectivities may be capable of learning from experience" (4). Speaking of a stifled, rigid imaginary border between Western Europe and "the geopolitical region of which it is part (the Balkans, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, Turkey)," Robins is not optimistic. "Is Europe capable of transforming its perceptions of the 'Non-Europe' which surrounds it?" (82)

2 Geographical Containers as a Heuristic Device

A complicating factor seems to be the disciplinary dispersion of this discussion of the (historical, cultural, and literary) *how* of the Balkans. Todorova's study is located on the intersection of (cultural) history and literary studies (although it mainly looks into travel accounts and offers no thorough study of literary fiction), but it has made its way into the social sciences and anthropology as well. At the same time, theories on the making of geographical space, now widely used in literary studies, stem largely from social geography. And there is of course history. Take for instance the Germanophone paradigm of 'Südosteuropäische Geschichte' (Southeast European History) and its use of Southeastern Europe as a spatial container. Here, responding to Todorova, Dietmar Müller explains that since the rise of this academic field in the first half of the 20th century, a relative degree of consensus has existed both about the region's natural borders as well as about its cultural character, displaying "Einheit in der Vielfalt" (394), unity in diversity. Müller, aware of the dangers of spatial containers, amply writes about the deep implication of the discipline in Nazi-German nationalist eastern expansion. Poststructuralist deconstruction as offered by Todorova is therefore very much necessary, he argues. But drawing on the work of Holm Sundhaussen, he still emphasizes "the necessity of the endeavor to define historical regions of Europe," even when such categories, as heuristic devices, "are open to re-examination when they fail to provide a viable definition of the region in question" (401).

According to him, the unease of historians with Todorova's work stems from, beside the already well-known critique of "essentialisation of the West, a teleological view of the Western-European nation-state [...] and a self-congratulatory image of the Ottoman empire" (402), especially from her refraining from giving her own "more viable characterization of the region" (402), apart of course from her rather unfounded assertion that historically, the Balkans are identical with the perceived Ottoman legacy. As a methodological solution he proposes that "besides postmodern arbitrariness there is no other way of constructing working concepts and definitions than by drawing borders, both in a methodological and in a concrete sense" (406).

Social sciences have again a different take on how on the one hand reality is a construct, which on the other hand is accessible only through representations of lived experiences. A landmark in our regional field is Étienne Balibar's address "At the Borders of Europe" in Thessaloniki in 1999, during the Kosovo war. Balibar proposed here to rethink the very spatial layout of the continent into a space of borders:

In this sense, border areas – zones, countries, and cities – are not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere but rather are at the center. If Europe is for us first of all the name of an *unresolved political problem*, Greece is one of its centers, not because of the mythical origins of our civilization, symbolized by the Acropolis of Athens, but because of the current problems concentrated there. (2)

Thessaloniki is highlighted here neither as a Balkan nor a Mediterranean city, but as one of those "places where the dialectic between confrontation with the foreigner (transformed into a hereditary enemy) and communication between civilizations (without which humanity cannot progress) is periodically played out" (1). The question that literary scholarship would ask is: how is it possible to turn Balibar's assertion that all of Europe is a set of borders, other than the Balkans – and its contested beginnings and endings are part of this question – into a workable epistemological set of concepts? The important point, it seems, beside the value of deconstruction, is that this new spatial conceptualization needs to be intimately connected to the historical and contemporary reality of the region, evocating its practices and styles; it has to offer a kind of framing that is historically viable but that does not solidify culture by constantly revisiting its own parameters.

Some inspiration, I contend, can be found in the origins of postcolonial theory, especially the notion of creolization and its historical connectedness to the Caribbean. Creolization is in the first place a linguistic reality, a phenomenon which produces a new language resulting from the mixing of other languages. According to Édouard Glissant, this linguistic process does not effect "uprooting, loss of sight, suspension of being" (13); "as long as a creole language is always a

combination of two or more different linguistic areas [...] it produces and results in a new kind of expression” (13). As a metaphor, it has become a concept for a specific, region-related style of encounter, exchange – the coming about of “a radically new dimension of reality” (14). The interaction between land and sea in the Caribbean is now different from that in the Mediterranean (if we extend the Balkans by incorporating its interactions with the Adriatic, the Aegean, and the Black Sea, as well as its rivers), and Glissant explicitly differentiates the former from the latter: he describes the Caribbean as “an archipelago-like reality which does not imply the intense entrenchment of a self-sufficient thinking of identity, often sectarian, but of relativity” (12). This results in the Caribbean being in a different identity paradigm, in which the rhizome replaces the root and “imagining from and by traces is more fragile but more fruitful than thinking by systems” (18). By contrast, Glissant asserts, the Mediterranean is “historically a concentrating sea” and, by implication, one that does entail a self-sufficient thinking of identity” (12). I would, however, maintain that if we want to spatially rethink the Balkans, just as in the Caribbean, “the concept of diversity [...] is an immediate real-life experience of the people [...] a firsthand basic reality” (12). The difference, of course, is the persistence of national community and thought, and the resulting dominating role for national languages.

In the remainder of this essay I would like to explore one particular cultural and linguistic fringe produced as much by imperial legacies as by the logic of national community: the notion of the Levantine and of Levantine culture, and possibly of a ‘levantinization’ of the Balkans. When Stuart Hall signals that one can “rethink the positionings and repositionings of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to at least three ‘présences’ [...], *présence Africaine*, *présence Européenne* [...] *présence Américain*” (230), then one starts to get a glimpse also of what a rethinking of the Balkans in terms of Levant and levantinization can yield. By balancing historically and culturally specific experiences and their need to be conceptualized, theorized, ‘levantinization’ can help to formulate a relational understanding of the attitudes towards the various defining presences (Habsburg, Ottoman, but also post-socialist as well as the European Union – either as a realm of the ‘already’ or the ‘not yet’).

3 Uprooted in the Balkans: Two Levantine Characters

Any such inquiry into levantinization in the Balkans preferably starts not with grand historical schemes but rather with encounters of people and their traces. In

two canonical novels that both emerged from the fuzzy, post-imperial constellation of interwar South-Eastern Europe, characters appear that are referred to as 'Levantines.' The first case is that of a certain Doctor Cologna in Ivo Andrić's *Travnička Hronika* (Chronicle of Travnik), first published in Belgrade in 1945 (translated as *Bosnian Story*, 1961). In this historical novel, set in the Napoleonic era, the small town of Travnik is under Ottoman rule, but both the French, Russian, and Austrian powers have delegated a consul to this strategically important city. Daville, the French consul, pays a visit to this Doctor Cologna, who is to serve as messenger between the Austrian and French consulate. The young diplomat, first irritated by "that peculiar language of his which might be either corrupt Italian or imperfect French" (284), becomes soon fascinated by the monologue of the old doctor, who expresses despair about not belonging anywhere:

Nobody knows what it means to be born and to live on the margin between two worlds, knowing and understanding both, yet unable to do anything to help them to explain or to draw them nearer to each other, loving and hating both, wavering and following another's lead one's whole life long, having two homes and yet none, being at home everywhere, yet always remaining a stranger; in short, living torn apart, yet as victim and torturer in one [...]. Yes, these are the agonies which torment Christians in the Levant and which you who come from the Christian West can never entirely understand, just as the Turks can understand them still less. It is the lot of the Levantines to be *poussière humaine*, human dust, drifting drearily between East and West, belonging to neither and pulverized by both. (285–286)

Doctor Cologna, who is murdered shortly afterwards under vague circumstances, but after having converted to Islam allegedly to save his skin from an angry Turkish mob, recalls the words of "the great Jelaleddin, Jelaleddin Roumi": "For I cannot define myself, I am neither a Christian nor a Jew, nor a Parsee, nor a Mussulman. I am neither of the East nor of the West, neither from the sea or from the dry land." (286) And he also states that Levantines "are the 'third world' on which has descended the whole of the curse which followed the division of the earth into two worlds" (287).

A second, equally tragic case can be found in Miroslav Krleža's *Povratak Filipa Latinovicza* (The Return of Filip Latinovicz, Zagreb 1932), the story of a modernist painter who, disillusioned with artistic fashions in Paris, returns to "Pannonia,"¹ the undefinable political and cultural borderlands south of Vienna and Budapest and north of Belgrade. Verging on committing suicide, Latinovicz becomes entangled in an amorous affair with a woman who is also courted by a certain "Sergije Kirilovitch Kyriales, a Greek from the Caucasus, a graduate of the Sorbonne in Paris, with two doctorates, in dermatology and philosophy" (161), whose

1 For an in-depth study of this imaginary literary space, cf. Snel, "The return of Pannonia."

destructive rhetoric leaves the main character Latinovicz defenseless. Kyriales' "mother was supposed to have been a Greek Jewess, from an island of Asia Minor, his father, Kiril Pavlovitch, a Russian staff lieutenant in a Guards regiment. [He] spoke all the European and Levantine languages, had roamed all the five continents." (161) And: "From such a dull, bald, unhealthy, inert family, there has suddenly surged up within the young Sergei Kyriales his Levantine Jewish blood." (162) It is, however, the body of this "mystifying Russo-Levantine" (180) which is found on the railway track on a misty morning, whereas the painter, Filip, will continue his artistic life torn between the Pannonian outback and the false lure of Paris.

In both cases, these Levantines are liminal figures in various respects: they are of uncertain age, uncertain origin, nationality, and race. They are protean characters, who can express themselves in various tongues but none of these is really a native language. Both are men of intellect yet with deeply irrational fits – and so they also seem to preserve an uncertain balance on the threshold of modernity and whatever preceded it. One needs to stress also that these are one-sided representations. Krleža's novel is a masterpiece of shifting focalizations, but we never get to follow events from the perspective of the Levantine. Andrić's Doctor Cologna gets to speak in direct speech, yet his self-image seems deeply colored by national standards of ethnic and linguistic purity, which he can never live up to. How he felt about being Levantine, therefore, reflects not so much the actual state of affairs in the beginning of the 19th century, but is a fictional representation from the mid-20th century, of the perceived historical reality of the early 19th century. The uprooted nature of these characters' biographies is therefore first of all the effect of representation. The case of Krleža's *Banquet u Blitvi* (Banquet in Blitva, 1938) led me to conclude in an earlier essay that one can speak of different forms of existential homelessness: national homelessness as distinguished from that other sense of homelessness, that of the Jews in the Danube-basin, who are made to feel outsiders within every nation (Snel, "Krleža's and Kosztolányi's Encounters" 171). Even when I stressed here that these two forms of homelessness, national and non-national, are the product of focalization, and do not reflect a reality *hors du texte*, there is the implicit threat of fixating the opposition between national and non-national, between the sedentary and the nomad, as absolute. Perhaps levantinization can help to revise this opposition by exploring a possibly more disruptive potential of homelessness, as well as an alternative sense of identity, based on encounter and relationality.

Whereas in the two examples above it is just the two fictional Levantine characters who disappear in the existential gap between fixed (mostly national) communities, there is a *longue durée* of epistemological instability initiated by the end of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, and of the various multinational concep-

tions of Yugoslavia, of a constant realigning and reshuffling of communities and allegiances, and especially of a sometimes violent rewriting of the history and cultural geography which eventually also deeply affects the status of the work and figures of Andrić and Krleža and the (contested) national traditions that they represented. This has disruptive potential that not only disturbs every finite attempt to draw the boundaries of the region (in the case of Krleža toward the Central-European presence, in the case of Andrić toward the Ottoman or Oriental presence), but that eventually also challenges any attempt to draw borders between Europe and the Mediterranean, or Europe and the Near East – perhaps even the ambition to draw cultural boundaries as such.

4 Where Is the Levant and Who and What Is a Levantine?

Referring in the two examples above to a Protean identity, Levant and Levantine as concepts in Mediterranean and European culture also seem to have a Protean presence. *The Journal of Levantine Studies*, founded in 2011, covers topics as various as the Arab Spring, the cultural history of Thessaloniki, Marrano Jewishness, the Armenian genocide, the Iraqi novel, gender and politics in Turkey, as well as many other themes, which all seem loosely connected to an even more relaxed conception of a cultural and historical space. The mission statement stresses the ambition to “read the world from the Levant and to abandon, or at least balance, the traditional reading of the Levant” (5–6). What is this traditional reading of the Levant, and why would one want to challenge that reading?

First, “Levant” designates roughly the Eastern Mediterranean – east of Italy; sometimes, more specifically, it is restricted to “Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt” (Seigneurie 7). Recent studies have either treated it in a narrow sense as “the Eastern littoral of the Mediterranean” (Seigneurie 7), whereas others as widely as “present-day Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and parts of West Africa and India” (Alcalay 21). In short, as Hochberg observes, there is a “failure to reach a consensus regarding the exact location of the Levant” (224). Then there are the semantics of “Levantine.” Most dictionaries give as a first meaning “a person who lives in or comes from the Levant.”² Several languages signal a second meaning as well, or rather a connotation. In Croatian for instance,

² Cf. entry “Levantine” in the online dictionary *Lexico*.

Klaić's dictionary of loanwords gives "lukavac, varalica (u trgovini)," that is "a shrewd person, a fraud (in commerce)" (800), a tendency that is also visible in for instance Hebrew,³ as well as Italian ("disonesto"⁴) and Greek (Babiniotis 995),⁵ whereas Turkish reveals a neat distinction between communities, restricting the meaning of Levantine to a very specific historical group.⁶ The Israeli case is very specific and will be discussed below. All this points to a pattern of othering, or at least inherent focalization, which is of course at the semantic root of 'Levant,' which in French means among others "rising sun" and which also suggests a pattern of cultural evolution from east to west (cf. Hochberg 221). The semantic field opened up by 'Levant' implies a European gaze looking from a perceived and unfixed center toward a semi-colonial subaltern, who at the same time cannot be set aside as non-European: "[...] a state of cultural impurity: a failed attempt on the side of the colonized to imitate the ways of the West, resulting in (poor) performance of Western culture." (Hochberg 221) So perhaps the hidden threat lies in the mixed nature of the category: it lays bare the unease with non-pure, mixed origins, both in a pan-European colonial and in an internal national-European context.

Next to these cases of othering, I have come across two historical examples of Levantine self-assertion. The first would be the historical (and to some extent contemporary) Levantine communities in the two major port cities in the Ottoman empire, Istanbul and Izmir/Smyrna, as reconstructed by historian Oliver Jens Schmitt in *Levantine* (2005), in which he concludes that these Levantine communities were neither a European nor Oriental people; they defined themselves culturally by Roman Catholicism, and maintained throughout the ages connections with the European states from which they originally came – or their families, mostly France and Italy. However, often these pedigrees became blurred through intermarriage, so that Levantines, in a Europe that increasingly defined itself nationally from the 18th century onwards, began to embody in their self-perception the real European identity, precisely because of their mixed origin, in some cases their social standing (semi-colonial middle and upper-class), and their multilingualism. Additionally, Schmitt offers some proof that these communities were not just an elite group. Especially in the 19th century, Schmitt comes

3 Cf. Carlino 2.

4 Cf. the entry "Levantino" in the online dictionary *Treccani*.

5 Levantine (old-fashioned): 1. the East or inhabitant of the East; (more specifically) a European settled in the coasts of Asia Minor and the Middle East (see also the word: Franco-levantine) 2. Christian of the East without national consciousness 3. (derogatory) self-seeking man from the East.

6 For instance, the Kubbealtı dictionary upholds a distinction between Levantines on the one hand and Jewish people on the other.

across traces of a lingua franca, a pigeon, with a Greek basis and a mixed vocabulary. Still, to this day, Istanbul has an association of Levantines and in 2014, 2016, and 2017, the city hosted conferences of the Levantine Heritage Foundation.⁷ The latter project seems informed at least to some degree by nostalgia, not uncommon for a city which has been reinventing its cosmopolitan past roughly since the 1990s (cf. for instance Elden, *A History of the Ottoman Bank*).

The second case is present in the work of the Israeli writer Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979) and her notion of “levantinization” – or rather, her defense of this in response to “Ben-Gurion’s promise to prevent the levantinization of Israel” (Hochberg 222). Instead, Kahanoff pointed to the “colonial oppression [...] in the cultural meetings between the Ashkenazi (European) Jews and the Mizrahi (Jews of Arab descent)” (222). She pleaded for “reconstructing a pluralistic Levant [as] a workable alternative to imperialism, neocolonialism, Christian, Moslem, or Great-Power rivalries and domination”:

The Levant has a character and history of its own. It is called “Near” or “Middle” East in relationship to Europe, not to itself. Seen from Asia, it could just as well be called the “Middle West.” Here, indeed, Europe and Asia have encroached on one another, time and time again, leaving their marks in crumbling monuments and in the shadowy memories of the Levant’s peoples. (Kahanoff 246–247)

For Monterescu, the work of Kahanoff opens up an “unavoidable hybridity, which challenges the illusion of belonging as it historicizes and deconstructs the idea of indigenusness itself” (27), and he reinterprets the notion of the Levant as follows: “At the intersection of European, Mediterranean and Middle-eastern trans-regional identities, the Levant manifests the persistence of both networks of connectivity and enslaving structures.” (36) And he notes that whereas, for instance, utilizing a category such as Mediterraneanism, although some “have even gone as far as to argue for the non-existence of the region as such” (37), one should speak in the case of Kahanoff and other writers (he discusses Jabès, Aciman, and others) of a “lived Levantine experience” (37).

If we want Levantinism to be more than a mere (albeit ongoing and persistent) challenge to Eurocentric, colonial, postcolonial, religious, and national categories, and instead to recast it as “an alternative map” (Hochberg 227), drawn along the lines of these “lived experiences,” then this begs the question as to what kind of category we are dealing with here, and how and if at all this can be transposed into a historical, cultural, and literary geography that has valid heuristic value. Let us first of all assume that we are dealing with a counter-geography:

7 Cf. *Third Levantine Heritage Foundation international conference*.

unlike in the case of creolization in the Caribbean, levantinization is always embedded in a geography predetermined by national communities and national languages. It points to alternative modes of cultural identity, but these still need to be made visible, as they are hidden under or disfigured by the rhetoric of national communities. If Levantine is that experience with always one foot elsewhere, in a different national space, or in an interstice, then levantinization urges us to step across the frontier into the next language.

Hochberg speaks of “surprise meetings,” a notion he also borrows from Kahanoff. A space is levantinized each time that such an encounter takes place. Hochberg, referring to the work of Mireille Rosello on encounters, looks, for instance, into Israeli-Moroccan encounters (Amos Oz and Tahar Ben-Jelloun), as well as several other cross-border encounters, and he gives an in-depth analysis of Ronit Matalon’s reworking of Kahanoff. For the sake of my endeavor to levantinize the Balkans as a literary space, I will follow this suggestion and look into another such accidental encounter, between the poet Semezdin Mehmedinović (1960, writing in Bosnian) and poet and visual artist Etel Adnan (Beirut 1925, writing in French and English).

5 Each Encounter Sets its Own Stage: Mehmedinović and Adnan

Poet Semezdin Mehmedinović, living in the USA since 1995, comes across Etel Adnan, who has been living on and off in semi-exile in the USA since the Beirut civil war:

On a windy American street, April 2003, I’m talking to Etel Adnan, daughter of an officer in the Ottoman Empire, about what Bosnia was like before she or I were born: it was like I’d gotten a letter with a Turkish stamp postmarked Istanbul, and in the envelope a picture of me I’d never seen.

Etel says: “Jack Hirschman once told me this story. Someone asked: What time is it? And Yogi Berra answered: You mean, what time is it now?” (*Knjiga Prozora* 37)

The poem, published in 2014 in *Knjiga Prozora* (The Window Book), connects the poet to a past he and his city had forgotten – or rather reimagine on the spot. Not that the road towards the east had been totally sealed off. Take, for instance, the poem “Zvoni telefon,” “The Phone Rings,” published in 1995 in *Sarajevo Blues*, but written before the war that began in May 1992:

The phone rings
The phone keeps ringing.

I go to look out the window
And an eyelash falls into my eye.
Everything seems sluggish and wobbly.
And no one knows what they're doing
Par for the course in this
Social-realist paradise.

Maybe everyone except the fence
On the bridge with his gold watch
Getting ready to pick up
Some perfume for his girl
Riding a Vespa all the way to Istanbul.
(*Sarajevo Blues* 7)

Here, the connection is at most anecdotal; the difference from 2003/2014 is the increased urgency. Whereas before 1992, “no one knows what they’re doing / par for the course in this / social-realist paradise,” in post-war time the glimpse of “the Ottoman Empire” has an impact: it suggests a whole (alternative, forgotten, or neglected) identity; the past is open again, begging reorientation, reinterpretation as a result of the violent erasure of more recent layers. It is also telling that when introducing Etel Adnan, Mehmedinović paraphrases part of the official biography that Adnan has been using for quite some time now: “Her mother was a Greek from Smyrna, her father, a high ranking Ottoman officer born in Damascus.” (Adnan, *Homepage*) Whereas the framing of the father leaves out his ethnicity, the addition of the mother’s origins relates Adnan’s biography to a history of loss, of what the architect Bogdan Bogdanović in the context of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s referred to as “the ritual murder of the ‘city’” (53). Smyrna in the 1920s, Beirut in the 1970s, Vukovar and Sarajevo in the 1990s, a retrospectively constructed continuity that sketches a geography of loss and homelessness, and that refuses ethnic categorization (and one is tempted to add Aleppo and Idlib in our present). Another observation is, of course, the place of encounter, “a windy American street”: the counter-space that is starting to emerge also contains coordinates of exile.

Let me take space, quite literally here, as place. The I in the poem “The phone rings” is looking through the window; no more than a couple of months later, to look through the same window in his city is too dangerous, as described in *Sarajevo Blues* (1995), because of the snipers in the hills. To find out what is going on outside, one has to resort to CNN on TV in order to watch reports on one’s own city being shelled. The people under siege invest their hope in these images, which circle around the globe. But, as Mehmedinović suggests, in vain, the fact

that the news is out there, that the images are out there, will not stir identification, because identification does not work like that:

But is this really possible when television sees right through the lack of compassion in human nature, just as long as tragedy doesn't hit home? The sense of tragedy arrived with the body bags wrapped in the American flag, and not before then, not through TV reports from Vietnam. Massacres happen to us, we empathize with our own tragedies. It's as simple as that. (83)

First, one needs to recognize victimized people as being part of the same community – only then can identification take place and the sense of tragedy “hit home.” What, in such a bleak situation, surrounded by cameras, is the effect of the written word? “A constant discomfort derives from this – writing these sentences, or any other for that matter – I am writing an ad for the war. With that, every utterance about freedom finishes.” (87) Here, in a way, the written word is not so much stripped of any influence at all, it is even worse than powerless, because words just as images still have an effect: they multiply the reality of the war, the suffering, and to no avail, with no justifiable purpose. One's words only intensify the immorality of the war. Mehmedinović displays similar caution when meeting Adnan a decade later, in 2003: he could claim a shared Ottoman past, but an all-encompassing sense of relativity of historical time and place prevents him from doing so – and the connection remains tentative.

The window here was as much a concrete thing as a metaphorical frame: the reality of the siege of Sarajevo made them coincide. Mehmedinović's view of the city under siege was limited by his window – so in a way, his window was at the same time the frame that limited his view, and in a metaphorical way, it qualified the powerlessness of his writing, of which he was very much aware. At the same time, cameras shot footage and photos, the frames of which allowed the outside world to be witness to the war, without intervening. The most prominent of these witnesses were European intellectuals, and Mehmedinović writes especially sarcastically about Bernard-Henri Lévy, *rive gauche* prominent and star philosopher. While Sarajevo under siege is undergoing a series of visits from French writers and intellectuals, Etel Adnan is spending time in Henry Lévy's hometown Paris. In *Paris, When It's Naked* (1993), Adnan situates Paris again at the heart of Europe: “When it rains in Paris, Europe brings out its umbrellas.” (1) Featuring Charles Baudelaire's buste in the Jardin du Luxembourg on the cover, she writes a post-1989, postcolonial version of *Le Spleen du Paris*: Paris as the heart of a former colonial empire, drifting heart of a shifting global network. There is no mention of the war in Bosnia, but war looms large from her Paris perspective:

There is always food in Paris, pastry, cheese, paté, but there is a limit to what one can eat innocently. And what about the larger causes for sadness, the ones that get never solved, the territories occupied, the lack of rejoicing in the world at large. [...] When the sky itself reminds us of tanks, when windows in beautiful streets get to be as black as prison-windows, when walls are messy, used by dogs, decrepit, one is really cornered and prone to notice that window frames are indeed black and cold. Is a window meant to keep you in, or open your perceptions to the outside? (23)

What is bothering Adnan is the ongoing “Arab apocalypse” (the title of a collection of her poems from 1980), in 1993 the violence in Algeria, urging her to identify a new spleen, sadness, a new, post-1989 form of melancholia:

You can go on living like a fish in the huge aquarium of Paris, and feel safe, licking with your eyes the windows of pastry shops. You can also burn, with prayers in the stomach instead of bread, if you go more to the south, and cross the Mediterranean, and stay there, if you so decide. Who among us has such guts? I, for one, don't seem to have them. So I'm chained to my melancholy, which is a sense of helplessness, of defeat, rather than a romantic sadness. (10)

Paris may be the last great capital in the world (and as such, a place full of nostalgia), but as the former capital of (European) intellectual engagement, it is now mostly the capital of powerlessness, of helplessness. We can connect this window in Paris to the one in Sarajevo, as they both look out on the same phenomenon: a reality (Europe and its surrounding areas) that renders us almost completely helpless, powerless. So, windows seem indeed meant to keep us inside, and the view it gives only infuses us with a sense of powerlessness.

Yet at the same time, these melancholic expressions of powerlessness also provide something else: an alternative spatial imaginary. “My windows are my dearest properties given that we live in cages” (26), writes Adnan. Here, my suggestion is that there is at least a possibility to mitigate the sense of powerlessness. What we see through the window is not reality as it is, but reality as we view it; in other words, what we think is reality (of which there is nothing we can change) is just the result of framing by the metaphor of the window. Once we see this, our own position changes: while we initially consider ourselves trapped inside, helpless, and experience melancholy as a result of this, thinking about the frame, and the way the window (Paris!) structures what we get to see of the rest of the world, changes our position *vis-à-vis* the world. The vista offered to us now is not the only possible way to frame the world.

When Adnan and Mehmedinović met and a direct dialogue between them ensued, a new discourse on geography emerged – marginal, to be sure, but also of a different nature – tentative, probing, aware of the danger of solidifying meaning, and yet embedding it in shared affinity of a lived, cross-Mediterranean ex-

perience. For instance Mehmedinović's *Nine Alexandrias* (2002), containing a cycle of poems describing a train journey to all the places called Alexandria in the USA, can also be read, as a result of this levantinizing discourse, as an inscription of Bosnian, post-Yugoslav exile into the Eastern Mediterranean's multinational, multilingual world, giving viable meaning to the notion of 'post-Ottoman' – next to all the other relevant presences. The last poem in the cycle opens up a vista on a different sense of home:

A Door Upright in the Wind

Alexandria's at the end of the road
I moved there this summer with the
Intention of writing poetry
This says less of my devotion and
More about this experience of home:

Down by the river I saw a door
That wasn't part of any house
Just a door held upright in the wind.
If you open it, you can walk right into the river, easily

And declare: "Homeless door!"

And behind it the
Infinite interior of home with
Giant Italian gondolas and
Goldfish in an oceanic aquarium

What door leads home? Is there such a place as home? Is there such a thing as the original Alexandria? That of Kavafys? That of Kahanoff's Mizrahi community?

6 Conclusion

Levantinization, when applied to the Balkans, like creolization, signals "a new expression" (Glissant 13), as becomes clear from the Adnan-Mehmedinović encounter. It engages with formulating alternative cultural and historical geographies but refuses to set fixed coordinates. It is, on the other hand, not just another postmodern phrase suggesting some kind of free-floating nomadic subjectivity, precisely because it does engage with local histories and the cultural particularities of the region. In this particular example, shared histories of loss and (ethnic, religious, and nationalistic) violence create common ground, literary affinity, perhaps a shared sensibility of the role of poetry in such an endangered environment.

At the same time, one has to acknowledge that accidental encounters do not suffice as a foundation for a new spatial paradigm. The question is also if one needs a full new paradigm, when what one is really looking for is a model for relationality instead of belonging – relations that are precarious and vulnerable, and which derive their intellectual strength precisely from this vulnerability. There is a specific role here for the literary scholar, *vis-à-vis* such accidental encounters. In the case of Adnan and Mehmedinović, the encounter was really accidental, taking place “on a windy American street.” But there is a reason why, after the accidental part, it began to make sense: there was mutual recognition and identification. Glissant signals at the end of his essay (written in 1992) that “the new Mediterranean going up today, where [...] a *poétique de la relation* shades or moderates the splendid and triumphant force of what I call continental thinking, the thought of systems” (20), may be turning into an archipelago, “a place of passage or errantry” (12). One is even tempted to go along with Iain Chambers and reconceptualize Europe, and by extension the Balkans, in terms of Mediterranean metaphors. In *Mediterranean Crossings*, Chambers praises this fluid space for its “metaphorical force [...] which with its waves, winds, currents, tides and storms [...] provides a more suitable frame for recognizing the unstable location of historical knowledge that the restricted location of a landlocked world and its dubious dependence on the fixity of immediate kinship, blood, and soil” (27).

But this would be one-sided, as the lived experience of Sarajevo, Beirut (Smyrna, Alexandria, and many other cities), also testifies to solidification – to the violent, rigid thought of ethnic, nationalistic, religious, and other forms of sectarianism. The literary scholar is not adrift here, depending on chance encounters. There are the set coordinates of lived experience, captured in poetry, literature, and art which testifies to conviviality, happiness, even bliss, but also of adversity, trauma, exile. Errantry, not randomness, may be the apt metaphor to describe the itinerary of the scholar. Andrić’s Doctor Cologna, after all, was convinced that under or beyond this divided world, another one was looming:

[I]n spite of the disjointedness and disorder we see, things are nevertheless all interconnected and work together. Not a single human thought, not a single spiritual effort is wasted. We are all on the right road, and we shall be surprised to find ourselves meeting. Yet we shall all meet and understand, wherever we may have got ourselves to now and how far we may have strayed. That will be a glad encounter indeed, a rare and saving surprise. (288)

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