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”OFFERING THE I”: AUTOBIOGRAPHICS IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S PROSE

Abstract: Women have long recorded their memories and observations as a mode of self-definition (Tomić 2018: 379), though these writings comprise a wide range of discourses and contradictory relationships to truth and identity (termed “autobiographics” by Leigh Gilmore [1994: 13]). Embracing this broad definition, the current study identifies and explores contemporary issues in women’s autobiographical prose in both the Anglosphere and Serbia. A comparative analysis of works by Rachel Cusk, Ivana Dimić, Jelena Lengold, Sheila Heti, Marija Ratković, and Margo Jefferson will seek to define points of contact as well as divergence, paying particular attention to ways in which formal choices work within a larger framework of feminist concerns. Hybridity, excess (e.g. of language, of digressions, of violence), and a preference for fictionalized accounts seem to be common across the board, as does the confounding question, “how to live?”. If women’s autobiographics serve an essential role in the constant creation of an alternative history – one always on the brink of oblivion – this study hopes to give some indication of the state of this project both in the Anglosphere and Serbia.

Keywords: women’s autobiographical prose, autobiographics, Serbian women’s writing, Anglosphere women’s writing, contemporary women’s writing.

1. Introduction: Autobiography and autobiographics

Autobiography as a genre remains a much-disputed topic: one set of theorists, led by Philip Lejeune, insists that it emerged only at the turn of the 19th century and implies a specific set of rules; meanwhile, Georg Misch claims that we can speak of autobiography across a span of some three

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thousand years and multiple genres (as long as the author is speaking about themselves in the first person); Paul de Man offers yet another perspective, namely that autobiography is not a genre but a figure of reading, and thus appears to greater or lesser degree in all texts (Zlatar Violić 2009: 36–37). Nevertheless, however it is defined, autobiography seems largely the realm of male writers. Leigh Gilmore, in her book *Autobiographics* (1994), notes the paucity of women's autobiographical texts in the development of autobiography criticism, whose model remains based on texts such as Augustine's *Confessions*, featuring "a stable and fixed perspective" that "conjoins time, space, and identity in a signifier of commanding proportions: the autobiographical *I*" (Gilmore 1994: 36). This "unified I" has thus become, in a still-dominant network of valuation, the mark of approval for autobiography.

However, there are many reasons why such a model has not been espoused by women in self-representational texts. Not only has the "representative man ... at the center of the production of autobiography" been inscribed with a "form of identity and authority" that has often been perceived as off-limits for women (Gilmore 1994: 1–2), but the entire "reciprocity of discourse," in the Bakhtinian sense, is much more complicated for women. The idea that every "inner world has its stabilized *social audience*," that "*word is a two-sided act*," and that "I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong" (Bakhtin 1986, as cited in Gilmore 1994: 4) is problematized when women

> locate themselves in complex relation to their communities of homes of origin and to the communities they join. Thus the nonreciprocity and the nonmirroring of many women as individuals by their social audiences make Bakhtin's notion of 'whose word it is and for whom it is meant' into a lifelong project rather than a simple description of communication. (Gilmore 1994: 5)

For these reasons and others, the field of autobiography studies has largely overlooked women's autobiographical writing and its contexts.

As an alternative term to autobiography, which is so closely connected with the male tradition, Gilmore offers *autobiographics*: "those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine ... those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography" (Gilmore 1994: 42). Gilmore identifies the most salient elements of such self-representational writing as

follows: "an emphasis on writing itself as constitutive of autobiographical identity, discursive contradictions in the representation of identity (rather than unity), the name as a potential site of experimentation rather than a contractual sign of identity, and the effects of the gendered connection of word and body" (42). Autobiographics is far more inclusive and open-ended, making room for a wide range of texts that embrace experiments, resistance, and contradiction.

Gilmore conceives of her book as a mapping of women's self-representational writing, which has remained largely uncharted. In the decades since *Autobiographics* was published there has certainly been more interest in this "terrain," and the present study hopes to continue in this vein by exploring contemporary trends in autobiographical women's prose from both the Anglosphere and Serbia. Here, Gilmore's autobiographics serves as a broad, inclusive framework within which to explore different strategies and themes in a diversity of texts. It is my hope that my own "mapping" will contribute to, and further encourage, a larger discussion about issues of women's self-representation in the literature of both cultural spheres, as well as highlight writers who may be marginalized – or, in the case of Serbian writers, doubly marginalized[1] – in larger conversations in world literature.

2. From "offering the I" to "annihilated perspective": Rachel Cusk and the trajectory of a truth-teller

Gilmore crucially reminds us that "autobiographical identity and agency are not identical to identity and agency in 'real life'; rather, they are its representation," which is "a construction" (Gilmore 1994: 48). She argues not for "a history of Truth" but a "history of 'truth' *telling*" (48). It is precisely the figure of the female truth-teller that proved so problematic in the reception of English writer Rachel Cusk's autobiographical books. Cusk, a contemporary English novelist, serves as an illustrative example of certain issues relating to women's memoirs, as well as the element of autobiography in fiction. More precisely, we see how the male-centered "master narrative"

[1] Sibelan Forrester has argued that women writers from Croatia and Serbia are subject to a double marginality when it comes to selection for English translation: firstly, as writers of lesser-known languages and a geographical position somewhere between larger, more dominant cultures; secondly, as women writers (Forrester 2020: 29).

and interpretive framework in autobiography scholarship (or criticism) remains dominant.

Rachel Cusk had written several novels of different genres early in her career. At some point, the memoir seemed the best form for what she wanted to say: subjects connected to family (motherhood, a family holiday, divorce), where the ideas would matter more if the reader believed the authenticity of the voice. So, she said, she was "offering the I" (Shakespeare 2018) in order to address them: *A Life's Work*, *The Last Supper*, and *Aftermath*. Also important for Cusk, at least in terms of *A Life's Work*, was to leave a record of a psycho-emotional state (childbirth and early motherhood) which she would probably never again inhabit (Cusk 2008). These works inspired a maelstrom of criticism that homed in on perceived flaws in the "real-life" writer's personality (she is "a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist" [Long 2012]) and her handling of situations (Cusk notes how one critic claimed that "she confines her daughter to the kitchen like an animal" [Cusk 2008]). Such reviews paid scant attention to the literary qualities of the texts: when Camilla Long reviews *Aftermath* in the *Sunday Times*, what she does note about the style is highly dismissive: "The strange bit is everything else. The book is crammed with mad, flowery metaphors and hifalutin creative-writing experiments" (Long 2012).

Such reviews reveal multiple issues. First, they do not treat the text as a text, a literary work, but somehow conflate the writing with the author's personality. Granted, Cusk's professed desire for an authentic voice in which the reader could feel invested does feed into this; however, the fact remains that this is a work of literary self-representation, and therefore a construction. To ignore this is to fall into the presumption that the *I* of the work and the author form a stable, unified *I*; in this sense, there is a double-stripping of Cusk's agency, both as writer and in "real life." Second, to accuse the work of being experimental or to deride it for being less than forthcoming about certain facts presumes that there is a whole truth to which the memoir must remain faithful. It likewise ignores a long tradition of experimental women's autobiographical writing. Finally, they miss one of the works' most valuable qualities, the unflinching honesty with which Cusk writes: she does not shy away from unflattering images of herself, but rather conveys her own contradictions or nonrationality without explaining them away or apologizing. For example, in *Aftermath* she tells her husband (who apparently has done at least half of the childcare for their two daughters, and possibly more) that she wants full custody: "They're my children. They

belong to me" (Cusk 2012: np). Naturally, such statements may seem hard to defend, which is precisely the point. It is raw moments like these when the truth-teller reveals herself fully, and critics found them unforgiveable. (She is also apparently broadly "hated" on online forums for British mothers.)

Cusk experienced what she calls "creative death" (Kellaway 2014) after the fiascos of her memoirs. She could neither read nor write, and fiction was "fake and embarrassing. Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous. Yet my mode of autobiography had come to an end. I could not do it without being misunderstood and making people angry" (Kellaway 2014). What followed was a rather extraordinary transformation of writing style, something hailed by critics as the reinvention of the novel, and what Cusk calls an "annihilated perspective." Her *Outline* trilogy is narrated by a British writer named Faye, who on her travels has a series of encounters that involve her silently listening to others' long monologues, which comprise the bulk of each novel. Faye herself rarely speaks, and her own narration is minimal – thus her identity seems almost completely absent, withdrawn or withheld (Shakespeare 2018).

Indeed, Cusk herself notes a certain transformation took place in her own self during her creative crisis, and that she reemerged a "consciously 'obscured'" writer: "A journalist recently told me that she had been sent to find out who I was," Cusk said. "There seems to be some problem about my identity. But no one can find it, because it's not there—I have lost all interest in having a self. Being a person has always meant getting blamed for it" (Thurman 2017). Critics often refer to her trilogy as semi-autobiographical, and certainly there are parallels (e.g. Faye is English, divorced, middle aged with two children; one novel includes Faye's experience buying and renovating an old flat in London, an event from Cusk's life that she recounts elsewhere in an essay). Cusk does not see her work as autofiction (Shakespeare 2016), but she does sense that, while her former mode of autobiography has ended, "I'm certain autobiography is increasingly the only form in all the arts. Description, character – these are dead or dying in reality as well as in art" (Guardian 2014).

The reception of Cusk's memoirs, and the ensuing shift in the form of her fiction, are telling of the state of autobiographical writing, particularly for women. The "cruelty and bullying" (Thurman 2017) to which she was subjected highlight the precarious position of women writing memoirs: that the works are not addressed in terms of literature, but rather the

identity constructed by the text becomes the object of scrutiny, mistaking representation for reality, and completely ignoring the fact that it is a *constructed* identity. On the other hand, a fictional or fictionalized form offers perhaps more freedom and a certain degree of protection from personal attacks.

3. Midlife and the crisis of the inner world: Ivana Dimić's *Arzamas* and Jelena Lengold's *Baltimor*

The freedom of the fictional form deeply infused with autobiographical detail is explored by two established Serbian writers, Ivana Dimić in *Arzamas* (2016) and Jelena Lengold in *Baltimor* (2003). The two works, both marketed as novels, share numerous overlaps in terms of formal choices and themes; their short chapters, alternating in form and narrative focus, address issues of middle age, the choice not to have children, and tensions in the mother-daughter relationship – especially in the context of the Serbian maternal prototype, which places oppressively unrealistic expectations on a woman. Just as significant to both plots is the very fact and nature of writing, which both texts connect, formally and thematically, to exploration of the subconscious, dreams, and inner life.

Arzamas details a mother-daughter relationship in the final years of the mother's life. The two women live alone together after the passing of the father several years back; the book ends in the death of mother, the "child" left alone. Like the author, the narrator is named Ivana and is a middle-aged playwright. She is unmarried and lives with her mother, who continues to perform "women's work" obsessively – cooking, cleaning, ironing, and scrubbing the hall stairs (often at midnight) – repeating stock phrases such as "I can't do everything" (Dimić 2016: 124).[2] Ivana, who has chosen a very different direction in life, is constantly criticized for not living up to the societal expectations of women to marry, bear children, and maintain a perfect household. Moreover, her efforts as caregiver are continuously frustrated by her mother's resistance, independence, and increasing dementia. Despite their altercations and misunderstandings, however, their relationship is clearly infused with love and tenderness, and the mother's death leaves Ivana devastated.

[2] All quotations from Serbian texts are my own translations.

The scenes between the two women (and doctors, guests, etc.) are written in dramatic dialogue, emphasizing the two characters and foregoing any narrative interpretation or elaboration. These chapters alternate with brief prose sections (one might call them prose poems), which bear no direct narrative connection to the overarching plot, nor to one another. In their dreamlike, anaphoric style, however, they form a kind of continuum, often describing extreme emotional states, freakish natural occurrences or near catastrophes, and obsessive rehearsals of death and the afterlife. In this sense, we might infer that they are accounts of the daughter's (or perhaps the author's) inner life during this period. Interestingly, they also directly address the question of writing and genre: "I don't belong anywhere. What I write isn't poetry, at least not in any recognizable form. Prose rejected me long ago because of my brevity, and it regards my stories with the disdain of a river looking at an insignificant stream. Dramas want to be seen – no one's terribly excited to read them" (Dimić 2016: 69). Later in the book, the question of the isolated, solitary writer's life takes on greater significance as Ivana works on a project about Emily Dickinson, whose figure proves a source of solace and solidarity.

Poet Jelena Lengold's first novel, *Baltimor*, is a dynamic meditation on middle age that delves into issues rarely addressed in such a context: marital infidelity, sex, obsession with freak accidents and death, suicidal fantasies, online sex chat rooms and voyeurism, masturbation, pornography, and, indeed, the taboo of not having children. As in Dimić's text, the narrator has the same age and occupation as the author (and also shares her central preoccupation: writing a novel), though her name is never mentioned. This combination of suggestion and withholding challenges the reflexive tendency to equate the narrator with the author, and establishes a certain productive tension that raises the stakes of the ideas discussed.

Baltimor's short chapters form a cycle of different scenes from the life of the narrator, some more frequent than others: the unsuspecting man she watches online every day at 2 p.m. via a livestream webcam in Baltimore, Maryland; domestic scenes with her husband; childhood memories; scenes that exemplify her strained relationship with her mother; reflections on death, chance, and freak accidents; and, most memorably, scenes with her therapist, which serve as an opportunity for a lengthy analysis of the narrator's past, her present emotional state, her relationship with her mother and others, her view of herself, the multiplicity of identity, and the possibility of self-acceptance. With psychoanalysis functioning as the backbone of the

narrative, the cycling between fantasy, memory, and daily life foregrounds their interconnectedness, and at times leaves ambiguous where the border is between these different spaces of being – particularly in the age of the Internet, where fantasy and reality can flip in an instant.

One of the narrator's central conflicts is the disparity between how she would like to live and the reality of her daily life. One episode in particular brings this to the fore: she recounts a period in the past when she decided, quite unprompted, to stop talking and to "finally behave exactly as I wished" (Lengold 2011: 54). She felt pure of purpose, with a clear sense of "what was important and unimportant, the people I needed to hear and those who meant nothing to me" (56). It might have been one of the happiest periods of her life if it weren't for the doctor summoned by her mother and husband to give her an injection; her silence came to an end in a hospital room. It turns out, she notes, that "we're only considered normal if we live opposite to our deepest needs" (57), and that "happiness" is what "we could from now on call the deception in which we'll continue our lives" (58). The conflict between others' expectations and one's own instincts and preferences takes on a distinctly feminist element in both *Arzamas* and *Baltimor*, as both narrators are confronted with the unconventional life choices they've made (a career in writing, not having children, and, in Dimić's case, remaining unmarried). The alternating, cyclical structure of both novels allows for movement between the quotidian and their inner thoughts, desires, and fears – all the while emphasizing the stark contrast between these worlds.

Although both texts resist the equation of narrator and author,[3] strong elements of self-representation nevertheless serve, as Rachel Cusk intended with her memoirs, to establish a certain level of veracity that encourages the reader to engage with the issues on a more intense level. At the same time, the formal liberation and experimentation permitted by the novel both insulate the texts from being read (or criticized, or dismissed) as "real life" and foreground aesthetics as equally, if not more, important.[4]

[3] Dimić has called *Arzamas*, which won the prestigious NIN prize, "a completely personal story" ("Ivana Dimić" 2017) written during seven of the nine years she spent caring for her ailing mother. And while the dramatic scenes eschew an autobiographical *I*, the prose-poetry chapters have an intensely personal quality.

[4] Here I rely on an observation made about Sheila Heti's novel, discussed below, in Miller and Bailar (2019): "Heti makes it clear that she does not attempt to depict any "real" life but rather to write literary art, which renders questions about the faithfulness of her

4. Art and artist: The autofiction of Sheila Heti and Marija Ratković

In contrast Lengold's and Dimić's accounts of midlife that strongly suggest a degree of self-representation, *Ispod majice* ('Under the Shirt') by Marija Ratković and *How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti use the author's name "as a potential site of experimentation rather than a contractual sign of identity" (Gilmore 1994: 42). The genre of autofiction emerged in the 1970s as a response to the constraints of autobiography. Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette define it as a text in which the *I* is explicitly fictionalized, thus emphasizing that "any textual *I* is a *fictive being* … and drawing focus to the process of textual production, that is, the very process of telling/writing and the narrative structure" (Zlatar Violić 2009: 40). Indeed, identity is very much at stake in these two texts, narrated by Marija Ratković and Sheila, respectively: two writers in their late 20s struggling to make sense of their place in the world.

As opposed to the withdrawn narrator of Rachel Cusk's novels, the narrators in *Ispod majice* and *How Should a Person Be* dominate the text, recording in minute detail the events in their lives and their own subjective experience. There are reflections typical of autobiography: childhood, the nature of friendships, romantic relationships, certain pivotal events in the past. Both are writers with projects they are supposed to be working on (a book, a play), but have been putting off. Ratković and Heti are well-versed in theory, and have an express interest in the destructive aspects of human behavior, and in particular "the close relation between intimacy and violence" (Miller & Bailar 2019: 152). Both texts detail excesses and taboos: explicit sexual scenes that include elements of consensual violence, drug use, fantasies of extreme violence, and suicidal fantasies and attempts. The narrators are both plagued by fear of failure and the chasm between fantasy and reality.

Ratković's novel centers around a romantic relationship, already ended, that was obsessive, all-consuming, destructive, and masochistic, but also full of tenderness and genuine love. Marija's compulsive personality is matched by her compulsive prose style. The narrative seems fated to unravel, given her propensity for obsessive description and/or analysis; indeed, the novel

representations or her readers' emotional attachment to her texts less appropriate than ones of aesthetics" (149).

moves diachronically, with little concern for connecting the dots between the scenes in each chapter. The scanty plot surfaces only occasionally and in fragmented order, while Marija's own identity is hinted at here and there but never developed in any systematic way. Such formal choices reflect Marija's own sense (or fear) of having no identity: "The only truth was that I was probably obsessed with myself alone, with some imaginary marathons of victories over myself, imaginary competitions with people I know absolutely nothing about" (Ratković 2020: 61). When she steps out of this "imaginary kingdom" she becomes aware of how "senseless" her existence is, and envies others "because they feel, they're led by desires… I envied them their humanity, which I maybe don't have" (61). Elsewhere, she worries about "losing my humanity, if I ever had it to begin with?" (85). In this sense, the use of the author's name as the narrator's turns the entire question of identity on its head, making the narrator seem utterly unidentifiable, as though this were merely a moniker – hence the novel's epigraph: "nothing was like this" (7).

If names and identifying factors such as job and age (which we only find out indirectly and well into the text) are irrelevant, the body is very much foregrounded: as a site of pleasure in sex, as something inexplicably mortal, as vulnerable to disease and subject to all manner of indignity and invasion, and, above all, a site of pain that is to be despised, given away, rejected, drugged – or perhaps loved "the way a bad, rebellious mother feels inseparable from her children as they're being taken away by a social worker" (Ratković 2020: 298). It is through the body that the novel takes not only its title, but its real shape, as Marija is faced with advanced cervical cancer that requires a radical hysterectomy and places her life in jeopardy. From her diagnosis onward – somewhere around the middle of the text – the narrative gathers momentum as we follow Marija through her own denial, depression and hope, as well as the details of her treatment. Through the body, here suffering a gendered disease, we also pass into a feminist sphere that documents an issue rarely discussed in public in Serbia (Janjić 2020). Indeed, the author herself had this same type of cancer and publicly documented her experience in a film, *One and a Half Women Per Day*.

Whereas *Ispod majice* dwells almost pathologically on various situations in the narrator's life, *How Should a Person Be?* comprises Sheila's tentative assertions and interpretations of the events and people around her in a style that blends banality, idiosyncrasy and lofty flights into philosophical questions (e.g., "My gut suggested that the man who was breaking bottles

[in the bar] was the hero. I sensed something immovable in the center of him – maybe not admirable, but strong and stable and straight" [Heti 2012: 99]). The text itself moves between prose and drama without any transitions: a chapter may suddenly turn into a dramatic dialogue, and vice versa. Most chapters are short, some very short, giving the piece a fragmented yet cyclical quality that Heti muses may be an alternative to the "journey structure [as a] fundamentally masculine form" (Miller & Bailar 2019: 172).

The novel follows Sheila, a writer, and her best friend Margaux, a painter, through periods of closeness and estrangement that arise from conversations about art and their own artistic practices. Sheila is preoccupied with a sense that something is "ugly" in her (Heti 2012: 19), and her narrative relates various episodes in which she attempts to find the beautiful in others and imitate it. She sees this search to somehow "repair" (19) herself as inimical to writing her play, a process that she conceives as a time of solitude: "*It is time to stop asking questions of other people. It is time to just go into a cocoon and spin your soul*" (9). Sheila frames these aspirations in a feminist context: the question of artistic genius is, in a sense, simpler for women, since "we don't have too many examples of what a genius looks like" (8). On the other hand, she turns the titular question of the novel, "how should a person be?" into a feminist predicament, for it appears that her wondering, and seeking the answer everywhere, is in fact a function of an insecurity or lack of confidence arising from a male-imposed paradigm that we *need* to be a certain way: "hadn't I *always* gone into the world making everyone and everything a lesson in how I should be? Somehow I had turned myself into the worst thing in the world: I was just another man who wanted to teach me something" (160).

That's not to say the question has no value. Indeed, it is one that, as we've seen, runs through virtually all of the texts discussed here. Of course, we never find an answer, but in the end it is implied that this text is her play (which, Margaux tells her, doesn't have to be a play), and that it, as a whole, forms a response to the question. Likewise, at the end of *Ispod majice* Marija appears to have produced something for her publisher, and in the final chapter, a mere half page in length, she walks into her office after a very long absence, presumably with a manuscript. In both texts, therefore, it is the completion of the work of art, following an extended personal and creative struggle, that brings a kind of resolution and redemption to the meaninglessness they perceive in themselves or others.

Insofar as the novels' narrative art culminates in an act of literary creation, the autofiction genre here emphasizes "writing itself as constitutive of autobiographical identity" (Gilmore 1994: 42), in this case of the narrators – but perhaps even the authors themselves, whether or not the events depicted actually occurred. As Miller and Bailar (2019) comment, "Heti makes it clear that she does not attempt to depict any 'real' life but rather to write literary art, which renders questions about the faithfulness of her representations or her readers' emotional attachment to her texts less appropriate than ones of aesthetics" (149). Nevertheless, both Heti's and Ratković's use of their own names and other autobiographical information in the text undeniably implies the degree to which every author uses personal experience as a source for writing (Miller & Bailar 2019: 157).[5]

5. The fault lines of autobiographical discourse: Margo Jefferson's *Negroland*

Since my focus has largely been on texts that eschew the label of autobiography, I want to close with an example of a more classically conceived memoir, as an example of the form's instantiation in contemporary American literature. Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* (2015) is a loose, dynamic account of the life of an African-American woman growing up in America's privileged Black elite. In this context, Gilmore's autobiographics take on issues not only of gender, but of race and class as well, and discourse cannot be separated from the individual body or collective history.

Jefferson is a cautious memoirist, opening with a kind of apology: "I was taught to avoid showing off" (Jefferson 2015: 3), which takes on particular weight in the cultural context of what she calls "Negroland": "a small region in North America where residents were sheltered by a certain amount of privilege and plenty" (3). For this community, whose history is intertwined with Jefferson's own, displaying one's accomplishments was almost as perilous as revealing one's weaknesses – in this sense, the stakes are clearly higher for Jefferson than for other authors discussed here. As Gilmore reminds us in her problematization of Bakhtin's discourse of reciprocity,

[5] It should be noted that Heti does not identify her own works as autofiction, at least in the sense of the current "school" popular in North America at the time, which posits the genre as a "quest narrative for an authentic self" (Miller & Bailar 2019: 157). However, autofiction as defined by Barthes and Gérard Genette, cited above, might be usefully applied to the analysis of both novels, without the need to categorize them definitively as such.

women find themselves in "complex relation to their communities of homes of origin and to the communities they join" (Gilmore 1994: 5), thus they often lack the stable audience that, according to Bakhtin, shapes and affirms the writer's discourse. Jefferson never seems on certain ground vis-à-vis her reader and the discourse she may or may not engage in, caught as she is between several different communities of discourse, and unable to predict the ideology that will inform how her words will be received.

At the same time, the reservations she expresses in her opening chapter have a universal quality:

> I'm going to change my tone now. I think it's too easy to recount unhappy memories when you write about yourself. You bask in your own innocence. You revere your grief.... Nothing is just personal. And all readers are strangers. Right now I'm overwhelmed by trying to calculate, imagine, what these readers might expect of me; reject, demand, deny; how this one will insist, as that one resists... So let me turn back, subdue my individual self, and enter history. (Jefferson 2015: 6)

The history she enters begins with the lesser-known existence of various "Negrolands" since the arrival of Black people to the continent. She traces the accomplishments of individuals, and describes the smaller and larger communities in which Black people were able to build their lives, develop their culture and even make fortunes. This transitions into her experiences growing up, constantly negotiating the pleasures and familiarities of her privileged life in Chicago's Negroland with the desires and confusions arising in a wider world dominated by white culture with all its varieties of racism.

Jefferson's memoir is highly intertextual, constantly referring to the images, films, music, and, above all, literary works that proved formative in her adolescence and beyond. Her tone remains frequently tentative, and her prose has a terse, fragmentary quality, never indulging in too much detail or lingering too long on her own "unhappy memories." She is more concerned in showing the larger dynamics of the world in which she grew up, and the process of coming to an awareness of the deep ironies of being "an Other in America," which

> teaches you to imagine what can't imagine you. That's your first education. Then comes the second. Call it your social and intellectual change. The world outside you gets reconfigured, and inside you too. Patterns deviate and fracture. Hierarchies disperse. Now you can imagine yourself as central. It feels grand. But don't stop there. Let that self extend into other narratives and truths.
>
> All of them shifting even as I write. (Jefferson 2015: 239)

By framing her experience within the larger narrative of Black history and weaving her narrative into others, Jefferson strikes a balance that reminds us how, indeed, “nothing is just personal.” Her equivocal tone aligns with her constant sense of belonging to – or moving between – multiple communities of discourse (”Actually, I’m as white as I am black,” she tells a lover [209]). In the end, her poetic style draws attention to the fact of the text, as well as the construction of self that takes place through writing and other technologies,[6] concluding with the confession, “There are days when I still want to dismantle this constructed self of mine” (240).

6. Conclusion

None of these texts – not even *Negroland* – is concerned with tracing the development of the single, consistent, “unified I” exemplified in the male-dominated genre of autobiography. If Cusk’s first memoir, *A Life’s Work*, assumed a stable *I* in the name of truth-telling (a truth-telling of the shifts in identity that occur in early motherhood), by *Aftermath* she had destabilized it: for example, in an abrupt shift, the final chapter is narrated from the first-person perspective of a nanny who came to work for the family, and Cusk is suddenly portrayed, namelessly, through this young woman’s eyes. In the end, Cusk transformed her fiction style by nearly obliterating the *I* altogether, all the while maintaining that autobiography is “the only form” for today’s art (Kellaway 2014).

The other works discussed here certainly share that commitment, albeit with various approaches to what form it will take. By emphasizing aesthetics through writer-narrators, meditations on the creative process and the role of the artist, and genre/style choices that foreground the text as a construction rather than a stand-in for the autobiographical *I*, the texts call attention to the act of writing, particularly as a space of “self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation” (Gilmore 1994: 42) – even if for the narrator alone.

[6] Here I use “technologies” in the Foucauldian sense: “technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1982).

In *Arzamas* one prose poem begins, “A letter arrived for me just before Christmas, with precise instructions on how to live” (Dimić 2016: 13). Unfortunately, the letters begin to deform, until the entire epistle resembles a rug with inscrutable hieroglyphs – so much for the easily attained future. Even Margo Jefferson, nearing 70, asks, “Have I made a viable life for myself?” (Jefferson 2015: 239). Rather than narrating “how I became what I am,” all of these texts ask instead: How should I be? What am I? And, at the same time, how should I write? What is it to write?

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Nicole Burgund

„OTVARANJE JA-PERSPEKTIVE" : AUTOBIOGRAFIKA U SAVREMENOJ ŽENSKOJ PROZI

Rezime: Postoje među teoretičarima podeljena mišljenja o tome kako se autobiografija kao žanr definiše: kao vrsta pisanja nastala početkom 19. veka sa jasnim parametrima, ili kao širok pojam koji uključuje bilo kakav tekst u prvom licu gde autor piše o sebi. Ipak, Li Gilmor, u svojoj knjizi *Autobiographics*, podseća nas da, bez obzira na to kako je definišemo, autobiografija jeste kanonski muški žanr koji podrazumeva objedinjeno, autoritativno *ja*. Takav model vrlo lako isključuje žensko autobiografsko pisanje, u kojem je diskurs često raznolik i eksperimentalan, koje bi pre postavilo pitanja u vezi sa identitetom i istinom nego da uspostavi čvrsto i dosledno *ja*. Kako bi započela mapiranje ženskog auto-reprezentativnog pisanja, Gilmor predlaže termin autobiografika (*autobiographics*) kao alternativu reči 'autobiografiji,' koji označava širok raspon strategija gde je samo pisanje u prvom planu. Kroz ovu prizmu se razmatraju savremeni tekstovi ženske autobiografske proze iz anglosfere i Srbije. Račel Kask, autorka iz Engleske, predstavlja primer rizika koji se pojavljuje kada žena piše autobiografski tekst: kritika njenog dela je bila mahom negativna i to najpre zbog percepcija njenog karaktera. Naime, osudili su tekstove kao pandane realnosti, a ne kao konstrukcije po sebi. Kask je nakon loše recepcije potpuno promenila svoj stil, vraćajući se fikciji ali sa promenjenom perspektivom. U Srbiji, ženska autobiografika više naginje ka fikcionalizaciji stvarnog (Ivana Dimić, Jelena Lengold, Marija Ratković), i često eksperimentiše u pogledu forme (multižanrovske, fragmentarne, kompulzive), naglašavajući estetski aspekt. U Kanadi, Šila Heti radi

nešto slično u svom romanu iz života (‘*novel from life*’), koji bi mogao da se smatra primerom autofikcije. Na kraju, memoari američke spisateljice Margo Džeferson pokazuje kako autobiografika funkcioniše u tekstu koji se otvoreno predstavlja kao istinita priča. Svim ovim tekstovima zajedničko je da postavljaju pitanja: Ko sam ja? Kako bi trebalo da živim? Kako pisati? Šta znači pisati?

Ključne reči: teorija autobiografije, žensko pisanje, autobiografika, Jelena Lengold, Ivana Dimić, Marija Ratković