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ARTICLE

Disturbed Waters and Homerivers: Representations of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Postwar Riverscapes

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Abstract

By examining various literary and visual representations of rivers, this article addresses meaning-making processes related to memory, identity, and belonging in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Focusing on representations of the border rivers – the Drina, the Sava, and the Una – this article explores how postwar social transformations, including coming to terms with war-time loss, displacement, and destabilized meanings of homeland, are understood when the narrative focus shifts from landscapes to riverscapes. Concurrently, this article also contributes to scholarly discussions on representations of posttraumatic landscapes by redirecting attention from wounded landscapes, where the impact of violent human interventions is evident, to wounded waterscapes, which elude such identification. Generally, rivers symbolize steady and uninterrupted historical progress in nation-building narratives and the formation of national identities. In the Balkans, rivers are usually appropriated by nationalistic narratives tied to territorial claims, which resurface during times of crisis. Following the Bosnian War of the 1990s, in literature, cinema and arts rivers have become sites of multiple and overlapping meanings, suggesting a possible new emotional geography of the country beyond the exclusionary ideas of homeland and belonging.

Keywords: space; memory; rivers; the Balkans; postwar; wounded landscapes

> "Given Drina's associations with death and slaughter, when I first saw the river in person during a short trip to eastern Bosnia in 2009, I was shocked by its natural beauty which seemed at odds with its historical connections. When I asked Amela to tell me what Drina meant to her and her community, without missing a beat, she told me, 'Drina is sacred… it is a shrine. In Drina is where the dead are.'" (Kurtović 2022)

> "And then I realize that even when I will understand her, feel her within my being, there will still be something that I will never understand: the river as a grave. Beauty and horror intertwined. Like when you say Bosnia and Herzegovina, or vice versa." (Šehić 2020)[1]

Introduction

In her anthropological exploration of the lived experiences of the Drina River in the aftermath of the Bosnian War of the 1990s, Larisa Kurtović describes the river bordering Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia in short) as an interplay between life and death, the sacred and the ordinary. These oppositions arise from the stark contrast between everyday life by the river, famous for its

turquoise color, and the same river as the site of wartime atrocities in the region where, thirty years after the war's end, the ongoing search for remains of loved ones challenges any possibility of the final closure. Bosnian writer Faruk Šehić, whose work will be discussed in more detail in this article, implies the same ambiguity and contrastive meanings in his contemplations of Bosnian rivers. In his emotional geography, the Una, partially dividing Bosnia and Croatia on the opposite side of the country, is a source of beauty and, most importantly, a life thread providing escape and a sense of sanity during the recent war. Building on these reflections, this article examines what meanings attributed to Bosnian rivers convey about Bosnian postwar identities and belonging, as represented in literary,[2] cinematic, and visual works. In doing so, this article also seeks to address whether water can renegotiate the meanings of the land-based homeland, and to investigate how land-attributed values such as identity, memory and belonging – with their "epistemological rooting in the closed terrestrial confines of blood and soil" (Chambers 2010), and which are intensified during the time of crisis – are represented when attributed to water rather than land. Through this process, rivers offer an alternative emotional geography of the country, especially in situations where land-based homelands are no longer perceived as homes, and traditional forms of commemoration are difficult or impossible.

I will explore these themes by focusing on three rivers forming Bosnia's watery borders with neighboring countries: the Drina in the east and the Una in the north-west, and the Sava, which flows along the northern border and receives both the Drina and the Una as tributaries. Historically, the Drina and the Sava are sites of potent semiosis due to their central geographical border position between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire[3] laden with cultural, religious and civilizational connotations. In the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav context, the two rivers have featured heavily in conflicting nationalistic mythopoetics, used to assert historical claims on territories and as the background for ethnic cleansing during the Second World War and the recent war (Bećirević 2015, 82; Carmichael 2013; Halilovich 2013, 160; also Goldstein 2005). Additionally, the Sava (the symbol of Yugoslav unity as the longest Yugoslav river) became a triple border between Croatia and Bosnia – dividing the European Union and the Schengen Area on one side, with Bosnia becoming their "immediate outside" (Jansen 2009, 818), the liminal space on the borders of Europe. Another issue affecting the Sava region, as a prominent marker of postwar nationalistic ideology was radical renaming of toponyms: each reference to Bosnia in place-names was erased as a lexical legacy of the ethnic cleansing in the area, symbolizing negation of the unifying Bosnian identity (Halilovich 2013, 165-66). At first sight, the Una River, flowing into northwestern Bosnia from Croatia, may not seem like a site of such a dramatic history. However, as it passes through the Bihać area, which, even though it was designated as one of the UN safe areas (including Srebrenica), suffered for three years under the siege (1992-1995), it reveals a history marked by intense military conflict and deep suffering, the legacy which profoundly shaped the attitudes of the region's residents toward the river.

From a geographical perspective, my inquiry begins on the Drina as the eastern Bosnian border and follows the Sava westward to the Una. Such trajectory allows for mapping a possible alternative, water-based emotional geography of the country, which is signaled by the water-based terminology in the title. The lexical choice of *disturbed waters* instead of *disturbed soil*, and *homerivers* in place of *homeland* reflects this shift and suggests a movement, albeit with overlaps and not a strictly linear one, from the trauma of the wartime loss toward exploration of alternative forms of belonging and affiliation in the postwar era. "Disturbed water" is a reference to "Disturbed Soil" (2018), Vladimir Miladinović's exhibition of large size charcoal drawings based on small size forensic photographs mapping positions of alleged war-time mass graves from the archives of the (now defunct) International Crime Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as his drawings of plants, typically found on graves, suggesting organic decomposition in the soil (Miladinović 2018).[4] In forensic sciences, the term "disturbed soil" refers to "the soil from the surface and that originating from grave pit mixes, which leads to obvious differences in color and texture with the surrounding matrix" (Steyn et al. 2000), thereby indicating the positions of possible burial sites. In Serbian artist's

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interpretation, disturbing the soil equals to "reinterpretation of archival material" (Miladinović 2021, 3:04) and the role of art in continuing discussions about war crimes across his former country. For Miladinović, forensic photographs offer hard and undisputable evidence, but say very little about the ongoing sense of loss, troubled memories, and our relationship with landscapes that still bear witnesses of crimes. Hence, the role of art is to help this process by addressing the uncanny connection with the environment, and restoring the environment's commemorative function through observation, recognition and acknowledgement.

While Miladinović refers to representations of soil, and his approach intersects with scholarly approaches to posttraumatic landscapes, including "scarred landscapes" (Dawdy 2021), the question my article seeks to specifically address is how aquatic sites of suffering, in particular watery graves, are represented. Some clues to this are offered in scholarly reflections on similar commemorative initiatives in relation to the Plate River, which during Argentina's Dirty War (1976-1983) became a grave to thousands of captives, deemed the enemies of the dictatorial regime. Estela Schindel suggests that, in comparison to land, river is "a space without place – a mass of water that never stays the same – the river challenges attempts to attach memories to it" (189). I will address this issue by using Hrvoje Polan's photography of the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge (2019) over the Drina in the town of Višegrad as an example, while bringing into discussion other visual representations of the river. I aim to demonstrate how photography may be used to inscribe the permanent presence of those who perished in the landscape and the consciousness of its viewers rather than merely commemorating them.

As the discussion progresses along the Sava and the Una, the theme of "disturbed water," most prominent in the context of the Drina, is weaved through other emerging and overarching topics, particularly belonging and homeland, whose grounding in terrestrial terms is substantially reshaped by the centrality of riverscapes in the narratives. In the title, this process is reflected by use of the term "homerivers" instead of "homelands." The term "homerivers" builds on similar concepts, such as Hariz Halilovich's "home-river" (2013, 138) and Andrew Biro's "home watershed" (2013, 166-67), which emphasize a sense of belonging and meaning-making to rivers rather than homelands as central to identity formation among both forcefully displaced individuals and those choosing to migrate. The concept of the "homeriver" is particularly prominent in relation to the Sava River, with Bekim Serjanović's novel *Your son, Huckleberry Finn* (2015) as a key example, exploring the theme of the return and the possibility of an alternative, water-based homeland in lieu of a traditional, land-based one. Faruk Šehić's literary exploration of the Una in his novel *Quiet Flows the Una* (2016) emphasizes the river's centrality in the ontological meaning-making process by introducing a new type of life writing that transcends human boundaries to include what Azra Hromadžić describes as multispecies relationships between humans and the Una as a form of riverine citizenship (2024).

Merging the two words into one signals a possibility of a transition to a new conceptual level, illustrating how shifting from land-based to water- and river-centered emotional geographies complicates our understanding of memory, identity and belonging in post-conflict environments, and also reflects a broader reimagining of place and its multifaceted symbolic significance. For humans, the concept of place is predominantly terrestrial, typically "strongly associated with landed locations" while water may evoke "a place of others, or an *other* place" (Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis 2013, 8), which Schindel alludes to with her remark about the place-ness of water. Recognizing water, in this case rivers, as place leads to transformative experience shaping individuals, communities and histories, "deterritorializ[ing] *how* we understand where we live and that we consider ongoing relations with others – whether these relations join us to other locations, other beings, or other events and spacetimes" (Chen 2013, 275). In extent, this marks a shift toward recognizing rivers and "waterworlds" in which "water and humans co-configure social worlds and values" (Hastrup and Hastrup 2015, 6), and as such a point of reference for exploration of different aspects of human lives, as active agents in storytelling, shaping human experiences (Strang 2005, Chen 2013; Hastrup and Hastrup 2015) within and beyond the community of humans. My research

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highlights how this perspective is especially poignant in postcrisis situations, when for many land-based narratives may no longer provide ontological safety and a discourse they can identify with.

The selection of primary texts was informed by the centrality of specific rivers in the narrative, with a focus on "the river-place as a scene of personal and historical happening" (Tremblay-Sher 2018). The selected materials, which include photography (Polan) and life writing (Serjanović, Šehić), with documentary film, popular music and lyrical feuilletons, reflect my intention to work with multimodal representations of rivers. Such approach also reflects my belief that a complexity of traumatic experiences, as well as the concept of living with water may be better captured through a variety of genres and voices, as expressed in a particular moment, which may be most fitting for conveying different forms of loss. In this way, by exploring a variety of reflections to different, yet interconnected rivers, emotions and meanings, by attempting to interweave them into a map of different responses to loss and belonging, I aim to create a more inclusive framework for addressing emotions and attitudes toward post-conflict environments, rather than risk the exclusion of valuable insights by limiting the choice of creative practices and genres. This approach builds on research and curatorial practices of conflict textiles as a novel form of understanding difficult legacy of conflicts and displacements with "the potential to unsettle prevalent approaches to and understanding of war and militarized violence" (Andrä, Bliesemann de Guevara, Cole, and House 2019, 343). In this article, it supports a shift from the conventional analysis of post-conflict nationalism(s) solely through societal and cultural patterns to exploring attitudes towards the radically transformed post-conflict human-natural environment and the complex, often unsettling emotions it evokes,[5] a dimension that remains underexplored in scholarship on the Balkan region. In this respect, I have drawn from ethnographic and anthropological research (Hromadžić 2024, Kurtović 2022, Halilovich 2013), contributing to it with comparative literature research by working across various genres and artistic modes.[6] In this case, a multimodal approach through photography and literature, here predominantly life-writing, offers a platform for alternative commemorative practices (in particular in the context of the Drina River) as well as transformative thinking about attitudes toward place and belonging following the war. It is this shift to human-space axis in postconflict narratives that may lead to profound understanding of long-lasting impacts of violence.

My interest in this topic is not only scholarly, but also deeply personal. I grew up with stories about my maternal family history in Bosnian towns of Bihać and Travnik, in particular my mother's profound fondness for the Una River and what she called "život na vodi." A literal translation of the phrase into English would be "life *on* water" rather than "*by* water," but I intentionally use the former to emphasize her point that all aspects of everyday life in Bosnia, especially the joyful and communal ones, are deeply connected to its rivers. However, while exploring this topic through artistic and cinematic representations, social media, my own travels and conversation with people living by some of the Bosnian border rivers, in particular the Sava and the Drina, "life on water" evolved into a more complex image. Stark undertones began to blend with vivid portrayals of joy, suggesting rivers as sites of persistent, deep-seated anxiety and unease caused by still vivid trauma of the recent war. This was encapsulated by my colleague Victoria Reid in Scotland who poignantly asked, "What would rivers say if they could talk?", which made me think how the theme of "wounded" and "scarred" landscapes may be adapted to talking about water. Answers to my colleague's questions resonated in some recent conversations with people living by the Sava River, where "the other side," though at visual and physical reach, and once frequently crossed by the residents from both sides, had become a deeply internalized reminder of wartime loss, the part of their everyday living environment they preferred not even to glance at. In an anecdote, shared by a Croatian colleague, for a deeply traumatized acquaintance with firsthand experience of the war, "on the other side" was "nothingness."[7] In the situation when many find it difficult to talk about this profound and deeply ingrained unease, I realized that it is through the medium of creative aesthetic expressions, such as cinema, photography to literature that these topics may be communicated in their subtlety and complexity – it is in these forms that our complex relationships with postwar environments, as well as ourselves, start making sense.

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"This is how the last gaze on the bridge very possibly looked like for someone whose throat was just cut:" the Drina River

The wartime atrocities committed across the Drina River valley, considered perhaps "the largest mass grave of Bosnian victims of the 1992-95 reign of murder in eastern Bosnia" (Halilovich 2013), have been represented in a few cinematic and photographic renditions. A short documentary film, *A Day on the Drina* (2011) by Ines Tanović, Dijana Muminović's photo essay *Secrets of Lake Perućac* (2014) and Velija Hasanbegović's photo essay *Perućac* (2011) follow the excavation of the temporarily dried up Perućac Lake on the Drina, carried out by volunteers and family members of the deceased during the maintenance of Bajina Bašta Dam in 2010. Jasmila Žbanić's widely acclaimed feature film *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013) tells the story of the Vilina Vlas Hotel, turned into a rape camp during the war. Included in *Killing Culture* (2019), a photo-essay mapping cultural institutions and heritage sites repurposed into sites of torture across the former Yugoslavia, Hrvoje Polan's photograph of the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge (see figure 1) shows that the site of torture and execution of an unknown number of Bosnian Muslims is as much about the river as it is about the bridge as a monument of cultural importance. Similar to other photographs in the collection, Polan's photograph is devoid of people and focuses solely on the impact of war-time atrocities on the environment. Polan's photograph complements other mentioned works, documenting the aftermath of the crimes by providing a different perspective to the narrative trope of physical and metaphorical search for the remains of the disappeared. While the first three above-mentioned works are explicit narratives of wartime crimes narrated from the perspective of survivors, which is suggestive of the lack of closure twenty years onward, Polan's photograph probes the ability of artistic expression to capture the loss differently, by allowing the deceased their presence in the environment and to tell the story through their own eyes. In order to do so, his photograph excludes the element of physical and metaphorical search as an attempt of overcoming rupture between the past and the present moment, and instead shifts the focus on the river, positioning it as an explicit subject of narration.

Figure 1. Polan, Hrvoje (2019). "The bridge on the Drina in Višegrad, heritage site." Ivančić, Viktor, Polan, Hrvoje, and Stjepanović, Nemanja. (2019). *Killing Culture.* Belgrade: ForumZDF.

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As visual documents of the excavation of Perućac Lake, Muminović's and Hasanbegović's photo essays, along with Tanović's short film, capture the emotional process of searching for and uncovering the remains of the loved ones from the bottom of the dried-up lake. For many excavation volunteers, who were the survivors of the massacres, the excavation was an intensely emotional experience, marking a long-awaited moment of contact with lost family members and friends, and offering hope of closure more than twenty years after the war's end. All three visual narratives are framed as a journey, both physical and metaphorical, toward a possibility of renewed contact with those who disappeared, poignantly recalling Sara Wagner's description of the role of memories, traumatic experiences, emotions and intimate gestures in a complex process of identification of the deceased (2008). This represents an explicit trajectory from elsewhere (in the case of Muminović and Tanović, from Sarajevo, the capital city) to the remote location in the mountainous border region with Serbia, reflecting the mental and emotional ordeal experienced by the volunteers as they descend on foot to the dried-up lake. The Perućac lakebed, often portrayed as the cracked, dried-up surface with a stream of the Drina in the background, evokes not only the imagery of a watery grave but also suggests the looming threat of the river, which, temporarily tamed and controlled by humans operating the dam, is soon to rise again and halt the excavation efforts.

In all three visual renditions, both the temporal distance from the event (the excavation taking place twenty years later), and the explicit absence of the river, or the presence of the tamed river, allow for only the partial reconstruction of the atrocities, never a complete one. In *A Day on the Drina*, for instance, the camera slowly moves across the dried-up lakebed, focusing on shallow cracks from which fragments of human bones, clothing, and toys emerge. Each micro-location where the remains are found (or suspected to be found) is meticulously marked; remains are then carefully pieced together, with these fragments being identified and attributed characteristics like gender and age, personalizing them as much as possible. The volunteers involved in the excavation are shown speculating about the possible location of the main burial pit, highlighting the incompleteness of the remains – "a forearm is still missing" (11:48) – indicating that the search may never be completed, and that it will be impossible to fully reconstruct the site of the crimes. One volunteer re-enacts the execution by pointing across the dried-up surface (08:09), a visual gesture symbolizing that much remains hidden, incomplete, and missing (08:07). Simultaneously, survivors' memories are matched with the appearance of their loved ones, as if resurrecting them at least temporarily: "an 11-year old boy, violet sweater, trainers, white wool socks, and shoes on his feet" (10:18), and what remains have been found so far. Throughout all three works, gestures, glances, suggestions, and the awareness of what will remain concealed and unfound point to an unfinished story.

On Polan's photograph, the bridge is captured by the camera being positioned just under the river surface, with the clarity of the image partially blurred by the movement of the river. The diagonal position of the bridge across the frame, with its structure represented as if emerging from the river and reaching out towards one riverbank while leaving the other outside of the frame, suggests a physical and metaphorical disconnect between the two embankments. The rigid stone arch of the bridge is partially concealed, with its pillars obscured by the river. The aquatic elements, from the river to the mist obscuring the surrounding hills, conceal the solid ground. This radically defamiliarizes the environment which is otherwise a common place in popular and collective imagination largely shaped by Ivo Andrić's Nobel Prize winning novel *The Bridge over the Drina* (*Na Drini ćuprija* 1945), often misused in nationalistic myth-making and repeatedly depicted in various popular (touristy) representations, as if fixing the place within rigid discourse of a permanent interplay and symbiosis between natural beauty and historical violence. In his comments on the photograph, Polan suggests that the choice of perspective reflects the difficulty of finding a novel approach to this cultural landmark on the UNESCO's World Heritage List: The bridge has been already "captured from all possible angles, frames, and perspectives" (Berković 2019). Another equally prominent point of consideration is the ethical representation of war crimes. Polan's decision was to go beyond "angles already taken" (Berković 2019) with a single "subjective frame, half from water, suggesting that this is how the last gaze on the bridge very possibly looked

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like for someone whose throat was just cut" (Berković 2019). In other words, lingering, at least for a moment, in the liminal space between water and air, life, and death, while gasping for the last breath, the disappeared are given the possibility of glancing at the site of execution and witness the event of killing. Although silent in their presence, they are explicit in their vision of the bridge, in their presence in the environment, and granted a visual voice to provide a commentary about the absence of humans above.

The erasure of any sort of explicit human presence, including the disconnect between the two riverbanks, is a powerful reflection on human history, which is now captured from below. In the photograph, there is no return to the site of atrocities in terms of individual or communal mourning or finding evidence as coming to terms with the past. Instead, the emphasis is on timeless presence in the landscape of those who disappeared, an attempt of what Irene Depetris Chauvin calls "'being together' after loss" (Depetris Chauvin and Wilson 2020, 145). Fragility or incompleteness are no longer important: no excavation of human remains, or the explicit presence of humans is necessary as a testimony of crimes. Instead, focusing on the environment, more specifically the river with the bridge looming over, "disrupt(s) conventional ideas of presence and absence," providing "escape from both sensationalism and monumentalization" (145), making it possible to "'touch' forgotten or excluded events, spaces and subjects and to build bridges between distant memories and geographies in the present" (145). In documentary storytelling it is the absence of water from the dried-up lakebed and the act of unravelling the past, both in physical (the excavation) and mental terms (bereavement), which allows for the representation of horror (see figure 2). In the photograph, it is the presence of the Drina River, and the explicit contact between the river and the camera that generates meanings. The river touching the camera lens is an attempt of sensory reconnection with past events as well as an indication of the river being very much disturbed by violence and deaths; in the photograph, the Drina River becomes a permanent feature of the environment marked by unspeakable loss.

Polan's visual commemoration of the Drina engages within representations of rivers as sites of atrocity – disturbed waters – in other cultural environments. For instance, comparisons with artistic

Figure 2. Muminović, Dijana (2014). "Searching for the remains in lake Perućac." *Secrets of the Lake Perućac.* https://issuu.com/dijanam/docs/to_eileen_2.

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representations of the Plate River are particularly relevant due to the Argentinian river's importance in the collective memory of crimes committed during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. Estela Schindel writes that Argentinian artist Jorge Velarde "was obsessed by the character of the river as a territory without place, reflecting on how to create places on a vast surface where all traces disappear" (2014, 195), asserting that art, rather than solid monuments, may be more appropriate for commemoration purposes because happy memories cannot be "evoke[d] (…) with a dead object" (195). Marcelo Brodsky's photograph of the Plate River ("El Río de la Plata"), strategically positioned on the inside front and back covers of the photo-essay *Good Memory* (2006), focuses solely on opaque and volatile water surfaces. The front cover variation of the photograph of the Plate River contains no textual comment that would provide anchoring, and hence direct viewers towards interpretation, allowing the water surface to linger in uninterrupted semiosis. However, the back cover version of the photograph, as a physical and symbolic conclusion of Brodsky's visual/textual journey through interlinked individual and collective memories, explicitly names the river as the final resting place: "Into the river they threw them. It became their nonexistent tomb" (Brodsky et al. 2006).[8] In Brodsky's photograph, the camera surveys the river and its environs, with the gaze lingering above the river, never touching its surface, or delving under. In this way the loss is acknowledged but the distance remains maintained between the disappeared and the observers, and the rupture between the past and the present, without the possibility of touch. In Polan's photograph of the Mehmed Paša Sokolović's Bridge over the Drina, the disappeared are offered the last glance at the human world through the camera lens before sinking under the river's surface and, in the absence of humans on the bridge, seeing what the observers will not be able to see. However, as the act of silent observation, the contemplative medium of photography allows their permanent presence in the environment, in spite of human violence and the destructive nature of the river which is "merciless with anything that is put there" (Schindel 2014, 195).

"I returned regardless of the war, but, as I said, not to the country, but to the river:" the Sava River

In popular and fictional representations of the Sava River, the perception of the river as a watery grave and a site of wartime atrocities, which was so strongly emphasized in relation to the Drina, is subtly woven into other narratives and in popular culture. In the song "Dejavu" (Maajka 2002), Bosnian rapper Edo Maajka hints at the Sava riverbed as a watery grave, a haunting image unexpectedly resurfacing in the protagonist's mind during medications-induced dreams. As the song protagonist transforms into a fish surveying the riverbed, his projection of an ideal life is shattered when facing the reality he attempted to escape. Such imagery continues to co-exist along literary and cinematic depictions of the Sava as a nostalgic yet anxious setting. This representational texture resonates with the river's constantly changing and complex social and cultural perceptions; the fragile balance between a natural crossing connecting communities, cultures, and histories and a dividing force of a border river, both in terms of a metaphorical and a political divide. Once a symbol of Yugoslav unity, "a source of pride and identity for the local population" and "an imagined natural link between the people and the local area" (Halilovich 2013, 138), the Sava now frequently embodies feelings of the physical and existential displacement and trauma of the wounded postwar environment. In Matthew Somerville's documentary *Sava* (2021), a lyrical travelogue following the river from its spring in Slovenia to its confluence with the Danube in Serbia, the river is given a female voice to comment on its contentment in the natural world, and achieving a sense of freedom in belonging to all territories it passes through. As a nostalgic protagonist, the river also evokes past times, charting complex postwar social transformations along both riverbanks, while also preserving its non-human identity,[9] deliberately detaching itself from history unfolding along its shores.

In addition to this, in contrast to the explicit connotations of the Drina River as a haunted riverscape scarred by the most extreme wartime violence, contemporary narratives present the Sava River as a site of physical and ontological entrapment, particularly from the Bosnian side. This is

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reflected in the Croatian film *The Melon Route* (*Put lubenica* 2006) directed by Branko Schmidt, where the river represents a transit point on the global migration route, but also a postwar environment, devoid of hope or relief (Šolić 2025). In Ružica Kopačević-Miličević's short prose *Sava* (2013), the river is a "bloodstream" enabling life between the two sides, yet simultaneously transforming "the other [Croatian] side" into a source of anxiety for those who cross. Crossing promises prosperity while solidifying a feeling of collective inferiority and ontological entrapment as an inextricable part of identity,

> "That night I dreamt that the Sava spilled over from its riverbed and transferred our entire village to the other side. I cried, choking on fear that we would never have anywhere to travel again, that we would be those others, and that the river would forever erase Bosnia and with it the question: why humans, water, and the other side exist?" (Kopačević-Miličević 2013).

In this way, the Sava assumes a menacing presence, its crossings burdened with a sense of guilt imposed in childhood stemming from punishment for disobeying parents, which continued to persist as an aspect of adult identity. On the other (Croatian) shore, the riverscape morphs into a fantasy world, if only temporarily, before the fantasy is shattered by harsh consequences for the lack of consent for crossing – until the next time. It is only during the night when human activity along the river ceases, that the river becomes itself by restoring its "harmony with its residents and its riverbanks" (2013) and gains strength for the complex roles in the world of humans, "for a new day on the border in between two nations" (2013).

Bekim Serjanović's autobiographical novel *Your Son, Huckleberry Finn* (*Tvoj sin, Huckleberry Finn* 2015), a response to Mark Twain's coming-of-age narrative on the Mississippi River, features prominently in the emotional geographies of the Sava. Among the many similarities between the protagonist and Huckleberry Finn are problematic yet loving relationships between the protagonists and their fathers, and the idea of coming-of-age as sailing away which in Serjanović's case refers to "sailing away, down the streams, to the darkness, where Huckleberry Finn sailed away when he was no longer the son" (335). An important part of the intertextual reference is a hypothetical and imagined expansion of Twain's novel, arising from the protagonist's disillusionment with historical events which he was the witness of: while Huckleberry Finn did not manage to grow up "enough" to see how the Indians "were almost exterminated and addicted to alcohol" (335), in Serjanović's case, the protagonist's drug addiction was concomitant to uprootedness and exile following disintegration of Yugoslavia as his homeland, and his return to the river is seen as an attempt of looking for the alternative one – a riverine homeland, or more specifically a homeriver, and possibly for an alternative self.

From Norway, the protagonist returns to his rivers rather than his country, since he feels that there is no country to which he can return. This decision is suggestive of the protagonist's determination to refuse the "naturalising" (Malkki 1992, 27) narrative and symbolic framework commonly linking national belonging with soil (or territory), which is "not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical" as well (27). This is not the case of diasporic nostalgia for an idealized past homeland that disintegrated into "mud" (Serjanović 2015, 22), the protagonist's metaphor of postwar disillusionment and despair. The protagonist's choice of the river instead of land is an attempt of reinventing the past home by reorienting it towards the water, rather than the terrestrial aspect of the former homeland, which he felt he belonged to: the network of regional waterways that he intimately knew, his homerivers. In this respect, the protagonist, already positioning himself as returning to "a threshold between water and land – a transitional zone between terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems" (Chen 2013, 282) decides to embrace the river instead as a possible site of a new belonging and existential safety in the postwar world. In the novel, this shift is expressed through the trope of sailing, in particular the protagonist's inclination to see his life as a slow sail only for the purpose of sailing. Ultimately, the desire to sail away is understood as liberation from any attempt to belong (Serjanović 2015, 123). Sailing, both in real and ontological terms (as belonging), is the act of

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resistance against bordering practices along the river which, for the protagonist, are as absurd as they are indicative of the loss of the previous homeland and imposition of national and cultural identification that he cannot identify with. It is "my rivers" that the protagonist returns to as a re-negotiated connection between the present and the past, and a way of life in the situation when any collective identification remains impossible.

In such circumstances, it was the return and a sense of belonging to the environment organized and guided by natural principles rather than human impact. As he says, "I returned regardless of the war, but as I said, not to the country, but rather to the river. Nothing else interested me anymore if it wasn't related to the Sava, the Danube, the Tisa, and some other rivers I sailed into because either the water level or the current allowed it" (Serjanović 2015, 22). In the protagonist's emotional geography, the Sava region is a distinct world of its own, both as a natural and a social environment, with the river allowing the formations of new kinships subverting land-based, exclusionary narratives. "The people of the river" ("narod rijeke"), who the protagonist encounters on the Sava's riverbanks, are outsiders, either by choice or vagabonds historically deprived of land,[10] without a prominent ethnic or national(istic) affiliation and a sense of belonging (22). The protagonist remembers their presence along other Yugoslav waterways, thus suggesting the riverine identity of the country as an alternative to the solid, their own homeriver rather than political (and now the former) homeland (29).

In the novel, the Sava's border status between the European Union and non-EU reinforces the river's traditionally perceived cultural and geopolitical position of the guardian of the orderly and advanced European civilization against the Ottoman other. The protagonist makes this observation by reflecting on restrictions of access and landscaping interventions along the Croatian/European side of the river, as well as litter, including animal and human remains, carried over by water currents to the Bosnian side (Serjanović 2015, 51). What seems to be a sanitation of the civilized side of the river, effortlessly enabled by powerful water currents, solidifies Bosnia's permanent role as a civilizational dumping ground. Additionally, the presence of human waste reinstates the river's legacy of watery grave, "which could stomach what even God could not watch, so he had to close his eyes for some time" (93). With its silent, imminent, and powerful presence, the Sava passively embraces the consequences of human-induced destruction and naturalizes it, transforming itself into a non-human agent of the conflict, and becoming an accomplice in a less obvious form, that of a feeding chain in which corpses become food for fish, which are then consumed by humans, who then spill sewage into the river and re-start the cycle (93-94). The motif of waste[11] becomes so internalized that it starts defining the relationship between humans and water, circulating through the environment, animals, and human bodies, and creating an uncanny symbiosis between humans, the aquatic environment, and nature in general.

Sailing down the river allows the protagonist to reflect on the ambiguous identity of the Sava, which is not only a refuge and a leisure location, but also, with its murky surface observed from the boat, a repository of long-forgotten history. The river is an entity of its own, concealing human actions, but also readily exposing its contents without any human intervention: the protagonist's father, for instance, along with antiquities from distant historical eras, used to collect human bones, flushed by water to the river shores. The decision to re-bury the bones in the river appears to be an ultimate political decision – by denying them proper, land-based burials with accompanying religious and cultural insignia (96), the Old Man prevents any possible national or religious identification as a continuation of the divisive and exclusionary land-based narratives of belonging and identity:

> "He [the Old Man] did not explain anything to anybody, nor was there anything to explain. Until now you have been at the bottom of the river, so continue being there, it won't make anyone happy to disturb you, it won't do any good to anyone, not even to you, to be transferred from the bottom of the river to the clay on some graveyard, with a cross or a nameless *nišan*,[12] a wreath of a humble bouquet of some shy flower" (96).

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With this simple but important and inherently political gesture, the Old Man inadvertently reinstates a harmonious symbiosis between the natural and human worlds and subverts exclusionary land-based narratives of belonging. His intervention suggests that riverine graves may also be perceived as reconciliating places of final rest rather than volatile and merciless sites of loss: the deceased should remain where they are, because in this way their remains are safe from any misuse in roots and soil-based nationalistic agendas.

"that is *my river* / in her I have recognized myself:" the Una

The representation of the river as a site of renegotiation of land-based belonging and a source of stability in a radically changed environment is a key similarity between Serjanović's novel and currently the most prominent lyrical rendition of the Una River, Faruk Šehić *Quiet Flows the Una* (2016).[13] In both cases this process is triggered by war-related displacement, either from the exile in Norway (Serjanović) or from the experience of a soldier forced to move around the region with his unit (Šehić), acutely feeling the distance from the river as a distance from himself: "the river was far away and I became a man of dry land" (Šehić 2016, 75). In *Quiet Flows the Una*, nostalgia for life before the war, including the former country, is dismissed as a limiting experience evoking pity for perishable objects or sites of memory (184), which, due to their transient nature, fail to provide necessary stability and reassurance, either materially or ontologically (184). For this reason, writing becomes the only means of meaningfully preserving one's world, allowing for permanency and stability in the face of inevitable decay. The narrative reconstruction of objects, sites, memories, and situations safeguards them against oblivion. The narrator meticulously delves into the Una, charting the river's rich eco-system as a distinct world of its own, but also relies on everyday habits and local speech, informed by intimate knowledge of the river's seasonal changes and fluctuations.[14]

Central to both novels is the narrative of belonging to the river as a story of growing up and mending links between childhood and youth with adulthood. For Serjanović, the return to the Sava, as well as the idea of sailing off first to the Black Sea – the ultimate failure of which equals to sailing "just anywhere" – suggests that a fixed belonging is after all not possible. For Šehić, however, the river provides an alternative way of life-writing from a different perspective, as a meaning-making exercise beyond stereotypes about ideal childhood interrupted by war. In the poem "The Una" (2007), published six years before the novel, Šehić refers to the river as "my river … "*in her I have recognized myself*" (2007).[15] Such self-identification with the river enables the creation of an alternative autobiographical narrative, where one's relationship with the non-human world takes priority over relationships with people (whose absence from the book is deliberate). The riverine environment becomes a natural sanctuary where the narrator "felt better among plants and wild animals," and where "nothing bad could happen to me anymore" (31). In the novel, "that riverine microcosm" (54), a counter-, world-creating discourse, an entity larger than human, is an alternative to a failed homeland saturated with human-induced noises reminiscing of "relentless, depressive beat" (8), and brutality of adult masculinity embodied in "frowning, moustachoed men who performed tasks for the existence of our great and powerful State" (23). War is understood as an extreme intensification of human noise, with the ecosystem of the river providing aural shelter and representing the only reminder of stability and permanence, indifferent to the world of humans (75). It is from the position of solitude and silence that the Una becomes the world-forming catalyst of the narration – the homeriver.

One of the alternatives to stereotypical war discourses, and at the same time the key to understanding war-time experiences, is the Una as the river of joy. To illustrate this, Šehić uses imagery of "incandescent swimmers while the summer sun sprays the air" (2007), continuing to swim during the wartime, when the leisurely swim was not only a communal activity bringing people together, but also a strategic exercise of avoiding being shot by a sniper (2022). The riverine people are not socially and politically deprived outsiders from the mainstream society, as was the case in Serjanović' novel, but members of the riverine community – the riverine citizens, to use Azra

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Hromadžić's term, with "an affective and material attachment to the Una River" (2024, 2)' a sense of belonging beyond any national affiliation, united by the feeling of emotional attachment to the river. Commenting on the impact of life under siege in the town of Bihać (1992-1995) on its residents (Bišćani) it is, as Hromadžić writes, "how the river became an anchor and a compass that guided and situated Bišćani living under siege in the larger context of life on Earth" (96). In her interpretation, riverine citizenship should be understood in the context of residents' complex lived experiences of water as a natural, historic and political environment, and love for the river which is characteristic of the Una, and reflective of the identity of Bosnia itself (136).

Diving into water symbolizes a rebirth and restoration of natural memory deeply embedded into humans yet erased from their awareness. It is seen as "return to primordial caves adorned with seaweed" (Šehić 2016, 144) and the conscious act of crossing a threshold between the terrestrial and aquatic self, in Chen's understanding of the term. Instead of solid ground, prone to change and destruction, as a source of uninterrupted joy, the river is the only possible connection between the past and the present moment, a metaphorical "aquatic," rather than a solid, man-made bridge between different times, "a magic mirror displaying all past times and spaces of our lives" (136). The new world is then formed from the new entanglements between the human and the aquatic, reflecting a symbiotic connection between the community the narrator belongs to, which now includes the narrator's hometown of Bosanska Krupa nurtured by the river, as "a freshwater mussel with a pearl inside made up of the best wishes of its dwellers" (136). The river is the anchor "that holds the town together, otherwise both the river and its people would have been swept away long time ago" (135), and the human-natural microcosm is bound by "the secret union that must not be revealed" (135).

In Šehić's opus, there are implications that even the idealized environment of the Una has not been spared from the burden of human history, and that the riverine joy is a veneer sometimes concealing a rather traumatic reality. The idea that the river carries memory and may be seen as an archive of forgotten history is subtly present in the text. For instance, reflecting on the ancient origins of his hometown, the narrator argues that the river is a silent witness of the town's history, holding its secrets in an attempt to undo the absurd and cyclical history of human violence and destruction: "the water knows, but it doesn't talk" (Šehić 2016, 136). In Walter Benjamin's terms, the river acts as a chronicler, for which "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost" (2015, 246), keeping the memory of battles which are not recorded by history, and its anonymous victims, the theme reappearing in Šehić's reflections on other rivers and rivers in general beyond Bosnia.[16]

As the tributary of the Sava and part of the wider regional watershed of "disturbed waters," the Una also feeds into the network of watery graveyards and in this way locks Bosnia within the aquatic circle of suffering starting with the Drina. This becomes evident in the narrator's reminisces of his family's traumatic experiences of the Second World War, particularly the memory of relatives who perished in the Jasenovac concentration camp on the Sava. For his grandmother, this tragedy remains a living memory, evoked by the sight of the Una's branch Unadžik, flowing past her house and merging with the Una, which then "continues on alone, without islands, towards Jasenovac" (Šehić 2016, 55). Here, the historical trauma is acknowledged in the silence and solitude of those who remain by the river, and who understand the river as part of a larger network existing in parallel with land-based narratives. "Without islands" is suggestive of the solitude of the river flowing through human lives and shaping them, "a river that wants to verify the world – our world prone to cyclical destruction" (131) yet offering the only permanence in its capacity to remember and to witness.

"Only the River Looked the Same:" Conclusion

A diversity of literary and artistic responses to rivers reflects the diversity of different postwar realities in Bosnia, as well as the complexity of attitudes towards identity and belonging in postwar

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environments. As Pamela Colombo and Estela Schindel suggest, "the sphere of artistic representation is crucial for understanding of how violent spaces are socially constructed and observing their relation to subjectivity and the imagination" (Colombo and Schindel 2014, 8). This then calls for consideration of yet another question: how to represent rivers as postwar environments and to acknowledge their formative presence in understanding postwar realities? In his reflections on the practice and impact of renaming toponyms as an enforcement of exclusionary conflicting ideologies, Srdja Pavlović observes that in the Balkans, including Bosnia, only rivers have remained "among a few relatively stable features of spaces we inhabit" (2017, 459). From an experiential perspective, the same could be said about rivers with reference to the lack of visible physical destruction, observed through the ethnographer's eyes: "With villages reduced to rubble and with no people in sight, they [the survivors] hardly recognized the area. Only the river looked the same" (Halilovich 2013, 25-26). However, has everything remained the same? Which emotions, meanings, and attitudes do rivers reflect as part of postwar environments? How were they affected in the context of often radically changed and violent environments?

In this article I explored these questions by focusing on different types of entanglements between humans and rivers, understood as sites of transformation that deeply affect our understanding of history, loss, and belonging in the postwar world. In a way these entanglements can be understood as variations of what Hannah Boast defined as "hydrofiction," a literary, and, in this article, an artistic category, exploring mutual interactions and meaning-making processes between water and society (2020). While Boast focuses on the theme of water as a contested and a highly politicized material resource central to the understanding of the Israeli/Palestinian context, my research looks at the centrality of rivers from literary and artistic perspectives on the postwar region suffering loss and displacement, and as a platform for rethinking the impact of recent events on identity and belonging in the postwar environment. Their flows, which in nationalistic discourses are often utilized for intertwining identities and territorial claims and presented as uninterrupted (both physically and ideologically), became unmarked graves and traumatic sites, destabilizing for the usual practices of commemoration. At the same time, their presence also offered hope, the possibility of belonging, finding a home, or even reimagining a homeland.

Guided by these insights, my inquiry started with photographic representations of the Drina River and Hrvoje Polan's photograph of the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge over the Drina and the way one of the most prolific conflict photographers from the region probed the limits of representation. By using the camera lens as a medium to fuse the viewers' gaze with that of the disappeared, the perspective from below the Bridge emulated the victims' last sight before disappearing into the river, in this way instilling their presence within the environment. By doing this Polan demonstrated how a simple artistic intervention of embedding the invisible existence within the landscape may challenge the usual metaphor of aquatic sites, in this case rivers, as unmarked and unstable graves, which appear ambivalent to palpable and explicit destruction and at the same time challenge historical narratives of suffering and violence. In the Drina Valley, the site of mass atrocities where "yet not a single public marker exists" (McCullough 2023) to commemorate mass executions, including those on the Bridge, Polan's photograph, but also other photo essays discussed in the article, may be said to perform a commemorative function by using the environment, including the scene of executions, with all of its historical and cultural connotations, in the process of witnessing.

The metaphor of watery graves in relation to rivers continues to reappear throughout this inquiry, along other dominant connotations, in particular a shift towards making sense of belonging in postconflict world. In Bekim Serjanović's novel, the Sava becomes the riverine homeland, or rather the homeriver for the protagonist-returnee, who feels that affiliation with any type of land-based homeland is no longer possible because of the combination of physical destruction and ontological insecurity. In Serjanović's interpretation, the Sava is not an unspoiled or an idealized natural environment. Rather, the protagonists accept the river in its complexity, acknowledging its role in destructive human interventions that transform landscapes into silent accomplices, as well as

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witnesses, of war crimes. Along with displacement, rivers have also become focal points for life-writing. This is the case with Faruk Šehić's lyrical reflections on the Una in which the riverine world replaces the world of humans, in an attempt to reimagine one's life trajectory beyond unimaginable destruction and state-imposed narratives and ideologies. The Una has a particular position in the emotional geography of the region's residents as an unspoiled, innocent environment, offering the feeling of uninterrupted belonging and ontological safety, which, in Azra Hromadžić's interpretation, forms the foundations of the Una riverine citizenship, while at the same time also claiming lives, which just makes human connection with the river stronger (2024, 101). In Šehić's novel, which is a poetic articulation of this newly found identity, subtle indications remain that, despite life-writing centered around the idyllic riverine world, whose biological and spiritual diversity surpasses that of humans, this ontological creation remains fragile due to its inevitable connectedness to the troubled riverine network of the postwar Bosnia and the region in general. In this way, literary and artistic renditions of the riverine geography of the country offer important platforms not only in acknowledging and preserving social memory and its relation to landscapes, but also in expressing present sensibilities, and seeking alternatives beyond the obvious and the confining ones.

Acknowledgments. This article is dedicated to my mother (1942-2023), who crossed and loved these rivers. I am deeply grateful to the peer reviewers for their extensive and thorough comments and suggestions, which have greatly enhanced my narrative, and provided valuable ideas and inspiration for potential future directions in my research on rivers.

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Notes

1 If not otherwise stated, all translations are mine.
2 For an overview of the theme of water in the 20th century Bosnian literature (see Džafić 2021).
3 For instance, see Healy (2020).
4 In his project *Herbarium (2004-2022)*, Bosnian-Danish artist Ismar Čirkinagić employs a similar artistic principle by exhibiting dried plant specimens found on the sites of mass graves around the town of Prijedor in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See Čirkinagić (2022).
5 Another key consideration, which, because of its complexity, will remain beyond the scope of this article, was the availability of material, particularly concerning the Drina River as a watery grave. The lack of fictional narrative representations of the Drina suggests that, even thirty years after the conflict, addressing the past through the slow process of fiction writing is still very likely a challenging endeavor.
6 In this respect I am inspired by artistic renditions of a long-lasting and often a hidden impact of the war on the environment beyond explicit representations of loss, works like Simon Norfolk's *Bleed* (2005), Sandra Vitaljić's *Infertile Grounds* (2012), Vladimir Miladinović's *Disturbed Soil* (*Uznemirena tla*, 2018), and Ismar Čirkanagić' *Herbarium* project (2004-2022), among others. Šeherzada Džafić provides a detailed and an informative overview of the topos of water in contemporary Bosnian prose, by focusing on the war and the postwar only partially (2021).
7 Because of sensitivity of the topic, I prefer to keep this source fully anonymous.
8 These two variations of the same photograph of the Plate River frame what seems to be an evolving recognition of the central and intrinsic position of riverine environments in the artist's life, first as joyful, but at the same time as menacing presence, which Brodsky becomes aware of when employing an artistic approach to rendering his personal loss and collective tragedy. The photograph may be read along Brodsky's eponymous short film (Brodsky 2011), a soundless capture of the changeable river surface, with the uninterrupted motion of water suggesting its volatile permanence and presence, and in this presence the impossibility to erase memories of those who disappeared. Brodsky himself suggests an internalized riverine presence in his autobiography by acknowledging the role that different rivers play in some of the key moments of his life: "we carry the river inside us" accompanies the photograph "The three of us in a boat," an innocent childhood memory of rowing on the Gambado River (Brodsky 2006, 82). The artist

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is then captured with his brother on the boat on the Plate River in the photograph entitled "It is forbidden to stay in this place" (95); on "Uncle Salomón" (94), the Plate River symbolizes the point of entry for his family members migrating from Europe.

9 It is not by coincidence that the voice of the river is narrated by Mira Furlan (1955-2021), one of the most prominent Yugoslav actresses, whose destiny is perceived by many as an embodiment of the Yugoslav disintegration. Exiled from Croatia at the beginning of the Yugoslav Wars following nationalistic abuse and confiscation of personal property, Furlan continued living between Croatia and the United States in the postwar years before early and unexpected death in Los Angeles in 2021.

10 Serjanović uses the term "jalijaši" which is a pejorative regional term for vagabonds and homeless people. Etymologically, "jalijaš" is a variation of *jalija*, which also has spatial connotations: "sea or river shore, desolate or an empty space on the outskirts of the city; meadow" (Jàlija, n.d.). Serjanović looks at these communities favorably: "For those who don't know, *jalija* or *jalijaši* are people who live by the river, on the land deposited by the river, essentially landless people who received land as a gift from the river. And to people land meant life. However, one year the river gives, and the next it takes back. Both the land and life" (2015, 32).

11 The motif of waste is another emerging topic in relation to representation of Bosnian rivers (and the wider area). However, because of complexity of the topic it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

12 *Nišan* is a regional term for Islamic tombstone. Serjanović here refers to Christian and Muslim grave insignia, in this way indicating multiethnic pattern of the community.

13 The novel was originally published in 2011 and the original title is *Knjiga o Uni.*

14 See for instance the chapter "Aquatic Catharsis."

15 The English translation was published two years after the poem in the original.

16 See for instance the poetic cycle on The Loire in the collection *My Rivers* (Šehić, 2023).

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