

New Voices Conference

Encounters with Post-Communist Sites: Trajectories of Inquiry (Notes of a Resident Alien)

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With the revolutionary events of 1989 in east and central Europe, the once “impenetrable” and “monochrome” cold war other exploded into hypervisibility. Post-communist sites entered the American cultural and political landscape via television, and their explosion into hyper(tele)visibility challenged established cold war ideological binaries and identities and prompted the articulation of new ones. My larger work in progress,¹ from which this paper is drawn, is primarily concerned with the ways in which post-communist sites were produced and encountered in the United States during the 1990s and with their function in the articulation of narratives of post-cold war American and “Eastern European” identities. In this project, I trace the articulations and re-articulations of the post-cold war other in television and print media, travel guides, and personal narratives of return to “Eastern Europe.”

On television, constructed identities and geographies collapse into each other. Yet, television is also a crucial site of ideological production, a site on which boundaries and lines of identity and non-identity are re-drawn. It is a crucial site for the production of a post-cold war American (national and imperial) culture/imaginary. As post-communist sites entered the American imaginary on the television screen, imperial/national inflexions are inextricable from the televisual inflexions of post-communist sites.

Post-communism entered the television screen within the specific coordinates of the news genre (i.e., crisis and catastrophe) as fascinating sites that

brought to their viewers the possibility of witnessing history happening. As this piece will show, the sites of history happening were displaced by sites of deformity and disease, and the encounter with post-communist sites was contained by narratives that attempted to make sense of their spectacular televisual eruption, of who “they” (the post-communist others) are and who “we” (post-cold war Americans) are in relation to each other, to television and, to history.

Where does my project fit within, and what could it bring to American studies?² I will address these questions by identifying three of the enabling directions of critical inquiry that intersect within my project: a new American studies that aims to explore “how empire becomes a way of life” (Kaplan 1993); an emerging post-totalitarian studies discourse that examines the nexus of miscommunication between east and west post-cold war, coupled with a critical discourse concerned with the historical sedimentation and contemporary articulations of Balkanist fantasies in the west; and, finally, a cultural—specifically televisual—studies concerned with the relationship between television and national boundaries/national identification.

Amy Kaplan introduces *Cultures of United States Imperialism* by challenging the “still resilient paradigm of American exceptionalism that links the political practice of empire with its academic study” (11). According to Kaplan, the volume aims to explore how “empire becomes a way of life” by foregrounding cultures in the study of U.S. imperialism and imperialism in the study of American cultures, and “by linking United States nation-building and empire-building” (17).³ My project seeks to participate in this arena of American studies scholarship by drawing attention to both the significance of “Second World” sites in the study of cultures of United States imperialism and to the unacknowledged re-articulations of the cold war other in the 1990s United States. I contend that these re-articulations are important to, and can tell us much about, the production of a dominant national and imperial American culture/imaginary. More specifically, they can tell us how a normative “America” and identification with it are produced and experienced. Furthermore, as re-articulations of both the post-cold war other and of normative “American” travel (along the media and other knowledge vectors) from west to east, they also participate in the production of narratives of identity for post-communist subjects.

In effect, I hope to expose and relate American studies to post-totalitarian studies, an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship focused on how “Eastern Europe and the West, especially North America” have “(re)discovered one another in the decade since the Change” (Zaborowska, Forrester, and Gapova, 3). According to Magdalena Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester, and Elena Gapova, editors of the first (forthcoming) volume of post-totalitarian studies,⁴ the work of scholars engaged in the project “complements work on ethnic and cultural identity within American multicultural studies and the transcultural work of the social sciences.” While post-totalitarian studies has “much in common with postcolonial theory, cultural, gender, and identity studies,” it can also offer a “corrective” to theories and approaches “focused exclusively on the ‘global’

binary of the First vs. the Third World” (Zaborowska, Forrester, and Gapova, 3). The editors draw our attention to, on the one hand, the dangers of the disappearance of the “Second World” (which would leave us with the old and persistent binary between the “First” and the “Third World”) and, on the other hand, to the dangers of persistent and emerging binaries between “us” (the United States/the West) and “them” (“Eastern Europe”). I read persistent and emerging post-cold war binaries by examining the regime of seeing within which post-communist sites are produced and encountered in the United States (rather than in/by an abstracted West) and the national/imperial narratives of “American identity” articulated in relation to post-cold war sites.

My analysis of persistent and emergent post-cold war binaries between “American” and “Eastern European” identities is informed by the historical perspectives and theoretical contributions of Larry Wolff, Slavoj Žižek, and Maria Todorova. While Žižek and Todorova emphasize the persistence, with drastic consequences, of Balkanist fantasies and, respectively, of Balkanist discourses in the contemporary “West,” Wolff draws attention to the persistence and power of the western idea/nomen/concept of “Eastern Europe.” Speaking of the encounter between East and West and its consequences for the former Yugoslavia, Žižek says that, “we pay in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other’s dreams are made of.” (1993a, 238; 1994, 212) He points out both the implications of the “gaze of the West” in the events in the former Yugoslavia and the denial of this involvement. According to Žižek, the events were depicted from an assumedly “impartial observer position” as a “savage spectacle, alien to our civilized system of values” (1993a, 234). The persistent fantasy that organizes the perception of former Yugoslavia is, according to Žižek, “that of ‘Balkan’ as the Other of the West.” (1993a, 238; 1994, 212) Within her historical account of the Balkanist discourse,⁵ Todorova (1997) mentions that during the cold war the Balkans seemed to disappear within the cold war fiction of “Eastern Europe”⁶ only to re-appear after 1989, with a vengeance. During the cold war, “Eastern Europe” was the Western designation of a homogeneous communist world conceived of as monolithic, backward, and underdeveloped. But what has happened to the fiction of “Eastern Europe” during the post-cold war era?

My project examines the persistent and pervasive fiction of “Eastern Europe” in the post-cold war United States. I seek to show that the post-cold war fiction of “Eastern Europe” is produced at the intersection (or through the complication) of a residual cold war discourse and a resurfaced Balkanist discourse. Furthermore, I emphasize the inextricable post-cold war televisual inflexions of this fiction. In other words, my account foregrounds the role of television in re-articulating the meanings of post-cold war “Eastern Europe” as well as in the production and staging of American national narratives.

According to John Hartley, television is a construct of specific institutions: “what it means depends on how these discourses construct it for their specific purposes” (1992, 105). The fiction of the nation, Hartley argues, is used to

invent and explain the television audience (itself a fiction) by the institutions that construct television.⁷ As my readings show, post-communist sites can also help us reflect (theoretically and historically) more specifically on how “America” is constructed on television, and on how television and television viewing are linked with “American identity” in the national symbolic/imaginary.

Lauren Berlant emphasizes the “pedagogic/civic activity” of television, alongside other forms of mass-media, in redefining citizenship and in constructing the hegemony of the normative nation.⁸ She speaks specifically of the way in which television contributes to “framing” of what can be legitimately read as national. I consider how post-communist sites appear not only in relation to a normative/legitimate “America” and, conversely, how a normative “America” is articulated in relation to them; but also how they function in relation to the “illegitimate” others against which the normative national/imperial “America” is framed/contained/projected. Specifically, my reading of the role of post-communist sites in the staging of American national identification emphasizes the relationship between those sites and American women, tracing both the anxieties that accompany the staging of national identification on and around bodies of women and the ways in which women “become American” and narratives of American femininity are produced in the encounter with post-communist sites.

Finally, I trace the regime of seeing within which post-communist sites are produced and encountered along the media vector⁹ and across discursive lines. I hope to show that, as post-communist sites circulate from news to other television genres, from television to other media, and from media to travel texts, they carry with them the conventional realist promise of the news genre, embedded televisual inflexions, and a self-congratulatory meta-narrative about television: “they” (post-communism and “Eastern Europe”) appear as a once invisible/now exposed reality that television delivers to “us” (American television viewers). This “reality” is articulated and re-articulated within a discourse of pathologies: it appears as a pathological space (a space inhabited by deformed, diseased, and traumatized bodies) and as a traumatized body available for and requiring scrutiny and analysis.

In the loop: televisual bodies and traumatic encounters

In what follows, I identify the regime of seeing within which post-communist sites are produced/encountered and narratives articulated around them. This journey is site-specific, but moves back and forth, from close site analysis to cross-site analysis, sometimes moving too slowly and sometimes too quickly following the trajectory of post-communist sites. It also moves from television to travel guides and to narratives of return. I hope to convey a sense of the scope of my project and of the trajectories of inquiry that drive and guide my analysis.

The USA Network movie *Nobody's Children* (1994), which has been flickering throughout my project, will be our starting point. This made-for-television movie presents an American woman's encounter with post-communist—

specifically Romanian—sites, on television, and it offers one important post-cold war narrative of American identity articulated in relation to a re-defined cold war other. It reveals the link between, on the one hand, television and post-communist sites, and, on the other, television viewing, accessing others, and “American identity.” As this made-for-television movie recalls the encounter with the hypervisible sites of the Romanian revolution and of Romanian orphans (while producing new images and recycling old ones), it symptomatically reveals the trajectory of post-communist sites in the media (from news coverage to the recycling of news coverage into other television genres). Finally, *Nobody’s Children* displays the symptomatic articulation of post-communist sites as both sites of history happening and as pathological sites.

The USA Network showed several reruns of *Nobody’s Children* during the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics. I will press the pause button on the movie a number of times to interrupt its narrative. Furthermore, committed as I am to the logic of distraction that characterizes television viewing, I will change channels/zap from *Nobody’s Children* to NBC’s coverage of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, about which I have written elsewhere,¹⁰ and back.

The NBC coverage of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, the first games to be held on U.S. soil during the post-cold war era, attempted to nationalize the Olympics by placing the endurance of American bodies and the power and innovation of American television center stage and to re-articulate an American identity on the post-cold war global/television map. According to NBC spokesmen, the network emphasized a “female theme” to reach a female audience. Women’s bodies become the main sites of national identification, and by placing narratives of American femininity center stage the coverage attempts to nationalize the Olympics. In NBC’s Olympic coverage, the women’s gymnastics team competition took center stage for two main reasons. First, it allowed a staging of the end of the cold war as a melodramatic spectacle happening before “our eyes” (Team USA encountering and, eventually, defeating the powerful and previously dominant Russian and Romanian teams). Second, it offered the opportunity to re-articulate narratives of American identity (and, more specifically, American femininity) in relation to a re-defined post-cold war other. The performance of the other gymnasts during the actual coverage was only marginally presented; however, gymnasts from Romania, Russia, and China became hypervisible in hooks, previews, and other narratives. It is one such narrative about the Romanian team that distracts my attention below.

Let’s turn this thing on: The opening credits of *Nobody’s Children* inform us that the movie was co-written by an American-Romanian team (Petru Popescu and Iris Friedman) and was inspired by events in the life of Carol Stevens from Detroit. The first scenes of the movie—staged revolutionary scenes of the 1989 Romanian revolution, filmed in Bucharest, in 1993—feature people whiting out pictures of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu, celebrating the end of his reign on the streets, and singing revolutionary songs. From this space of street protest, we move to a car pulling into the driveway of an American neighborhood. This

scene is captioned “Detroit, Michigan, 1989.” Carol (played by Ann-Margret) and her husband open the door for their friends, who step into the living room, laughing. The television set in the background is off. The friends look at a sonogram of Carol’s unborn baby, at its “tiny little fingers.” From this comfortable home space of Detroit, the sonogram, and the cheerful talk we move back to the scenes of Romanian street protest, which are increasingly violent: tanks drive by and soldiers start shooting at the protesters. To these scenes, there appears juxtaposed the outside of the Detroit house, and then the television screen in the living room, now containing images of the revolution.

I want to press the pause button on *Nobody’s Children* in order to focus on the juxtaposed spaces, the television set, and the television screen. Two parallel worlds are presented here: Bucharest, Romania and Detroit, Michigan. The former is an outside, exposed public space; the latter is an exposed inside space, the home of an expectant American wife and husband. The two spaces are brought together via television, which both delivers and contains the images of the revolution for the American couple and, at the same time, anchors the couple in a national *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, the television set and the television screen are signifiers of the American home. The tautological quilting that links the television set to the family and to America is a complex one, and it works on a number of different levels: identifications of television and “normal” (i.e., white, heterosexual, and expecting, middle class) family as “America,” of television viewing as an American activity, and of the television screen as a site on which/through which “America” is both produced and encounters its outside.

In *Nobody’s Children*, Romania appears inextricably linked to television, something that is encountered televisually as *history*. The television screen appears as the threshold of the American national symbolic. If Romania is the outside space of political turmoil and public protest, of history, America, from which it is differentiated, is apolitical, ahistorical, private/familial. Romania enters the national *mise-en-scène* as something that is both made available by television and as a foreboding image of some threat or danger that television poses to the (national) family more generally, and to women viewers in particular.

Let us return to the movie. We move back to the American living room. Carol is decorating a Christmas tree while the television is humming in the background with scenes of revolution. She starts cramping; in the background we hear shots and news of Ceausescu’s arrest and execution. She reaches for the chair and collapses on it. As she dials a number and tells her husband to come home, we hear commentary about orphans. From Carol’s pained face we move to the television screen where we see black and white images of overcrowded rooms with Romanian orphans—gaunt, physically handicapped, suffering Romanian orphans.

Change Channels to NBC, the Olympic Games coverage: The stories interspersed throughout the gymnastics coverage are introduced by Beth Ruyak, whose voice carries into the verbal narrative of the sketches. They focus on

mother-daughter relationships (in the case of the Chinese team) and on orphaned children (Romanian team). The stories also offer a sentimentalized viewing position, an American way of watching these children from dysfunctional families/nations.

The story about the Romanian team, the team of girls who “share one father” [their coach], commences with little gymnasts playing in the grass, singing softly and laughing loudly. Images of a different reality, of “other less fortunate children,” follow: “darker” visions of little faces with little sad eyes and contorted bodies in orphanages and children sleeping in the streets of Bucharest. Towards the end of the narrative, we are shown a close-up of one gymnast, Gina Gogean, whose face looks gaunt and strained; we are invited to look into her “sad” eyes; and we are told that her face is “the face of the nation.”

The sadness in the eyes quilts the Romanian faces; this focus, the music, and the emphasis on emotions construct a way of viewing the Romanians. We are contaminated by their trauma (i.e., we are affected by, identify with, and are saddened by them), but we are the ones fortunate enough to access these stories of misery from a distance.

Change Channels to Nobody's Children: Carol comes out of a hospital room, crying and embracing her husband, and then we see her at home, in bed, mourning quietly, watching more images of orphans. At this point, the two sites of loss, Carol and the orphans, come together in a peculiar juxtaposition as Carol's sadness signals both her loss as a mother and the sadness of the television viewer, saddened by the images of orphans. In this latter sense, Carol is the embodiment of the sentimental—read feminized—subject/viewing position of watching Romania in the Olympic coverage. The encounter with Romania happens, then, in the realm of the traumatic: Carol's personal trauma is both juxtaposed to and precipitated by her encounter with the orphans traumatized by communism, and Romania appears as a traumatized site. Furthermore, it is television, in a sense, that traumatizes its viewer: Carol's loss is not just foreshadowed by the violence on the streets of Bucharest and prefigured by the traumatized and deformed orphans; rather, it seems to be somehow precipitated by it. What is on the screen leaks, and what is in the woman's body dies. The leakage from on-screen reproduces the fantasy of an uncontainable danger that television in general holds for a viewer who, although distracted, can and will overidentify with it.¹¹ It also reproduces the fantasy of an uncontainable danger that televisual post-communist sites hold for an American viewer.

When her husband wants to turn off the TV because he can see that the images of orphaned children are upsetting her, Carol tells him, decisively, “Leave it on.” Her words are those of any fascinated television viewer, but they are also the words of a depressed viewer. In this stereotypical narrative of depression, Carol's loss has her, initially, unable to do anything but watch television (orphans) and cry. However, watching the Romanian orphans (television) enables her to “deal with her loss” and “get over it” by deciding to do something, provisionally to leave behind the comforts of her home to go to Romania to adopt an

orphan. She responds to the hypervisible images of the Romanian orphans as images to which she can attach herself, or attach to herself.

We can see that in *Nobody's Children* television and telesthesia¹² affect Carol in particular, and that Carol is an American woman who cares about what is going on and does something about what she sees. Carol's husband is detached from the set. Faced with his wife's loss, he suggests adopting a baby in Texas rather than "Russia, Bulgaria, Bolivia," all "countries we know practically nothing about." In spite of her husband's arguments and pleas, Carol will not change her mind. He wants to maintain his distance, but his televisually transfixed wife, a wife whom he questions but, nonetheless, appeases, draws him into a journey to Romania. He is also drawn by the narrative of identity that his wife offers him: "But, you just don't get it, do you? These babies are dying. They need us. We would not only be adopting a child, we would be saving a life." Thus, Carol and her husband go to Romania, which is presented in the frame of continuous crisis and moral decay, in order to "save a life." However, only Carol stays there until she gets the job done (her husband is called back home to work); and she does so by mixing compassion with determination and remarkable physical abilities.

As *Nobody's Children* appeared as a rerun during the Olympic Games, it participated on television as a site that grounded the images of the Romanian orphans within one narrative of American identity and looped the encounter with Romanian orphans back to the "original" televisual encounter (the 1989 Revolution). The movie recalls the televisual encounter with sites of history happening and sites of deformity, but the latter upstage the former; the television coverage is producing another encounter with post-communist sites, but one in which sites of history happening (the revolution in the streets) are completely replaced by sites of deformity and trauma. On television, post-communist sites loop back to stories about television, which made them accessible to "us" in the first place.

Conversely, we can see how the movie participated in articulating concrete narratives of American femininity (a woman who suffers and watches television, but does something about what she sees) in relation to television viewing more generally, and, more specifically, in the encounter with post-communist sites (an American woman/hero who is touched by what she sees and saves a life destroyed by communism). Carol's story and the NBC trauma stories about American Olympic athletes concern various failures of the body and how these are controlled/overcome. In the Olympic coverage, we are asked, through verbal commentary and camera close-ups, to notice a bandage, or awkwardly held arm, or medication (for instance, a bandage on Dominique Moceanu's foot, or on Shannon Miller's foot.) In contrast to these personal trauma stories, we have stories that are about national traumas. It is at this point in the coverage that, for instance, the Romanian team sketch appears. Such a story is very different from the trauma dramas of the American athletes: it is a story about the personal traumas provoked by a political regime. The "American-ness" of the women is

depoliticized; the misery of other (post-communist) nations is the point at which political and economic realities make their way into the coverage, or conversely, it is an indication of how these realities are contained and displaced onto other “national” sites and traumas.

These brief readings have, I hope, conveyed a more general regime of seeing within which post-communist sites appear on television. No longer produced as the “Evil Empire,” they appear as fascinating and threatening “history happening” (once underexposed but now hypervisibly available to American viewers) and as sites traumatized by communism (the helpless Romanian orphans). This assemblage of traumatized sites and pathological spaces is a way of refiguring the once invisible and threatening cold war other as a victim of communism; post-cold war America as a private, safe, depoliticized, ahistorical haven from which one can witness trauma and history happening to others; and post-cold war American identity as inextricably linked to accessing and responding (as witness and savior) to the “call” of the victimized other.

Nobody's Children and the Olympics coverage render visible a post-cold war euphoric discourse that celebrates the role of television in delivering “them” (the post-cold war victims of communism) to “us” (American television viewers). However, as my reading of *Nobody's Children* suggests, we can also see that the televisual encounter is a foreboding one and that accessing these others is, to a certain degree, threatening; Americans—figured as “feminized” viewers—are also vulnerable to the trauma of the victimized other.

In a first approximation, this threat speaks of the anxiety that accompanies both the collapsing of the firm cold war ideological boundary between “them” (the communist enemies) and “us” and the re-drawing of the new boundary around which emergent identities are articulated. The logic of identification and the position of these sites in the staging of national identification can further explain why they appear to be threatening: they are sites of the *outside/abject* against which the subject identifies with the livable America. The abject, according to Judith Butler, “designates those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life” that are the “constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (1993). Identification, an iterative, repetitive, performative process, “always takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection” (Butler 1993, 3). According to Butler, it is this repudiation “which creates the valence of ‘abjection’ and its status for the subject as a threatening specter” (4). Following Butler’s reading¹³, these post-communist sites are sites of abjection against which a normative America is produced; they are, in a sense, liminal sites of an American subject’s domain. Identification with “America” is staged/produced as an overidentification with and a consequent abstraction from a vulnerable feminine subject position.

My reading of *Nobody's Children* also touched on the anxieties that post-communist televisual sites in particular—i.e., sites that enter the national imaginary via television—seem to pose to women viewers. I suggest that we read this web of anxieties that inflect post-communist sites as related to persistent anxi-

eties about the role of television within the family (and national family) and to the articulation of American identity and the staging of identification around the “vulnerable” bodies of women and in narratives of American femininity.

Post-communist travelscapes: travel guides to “Eastern Europe”

Why would anybody in her/ his right mind want to turn off the TV and go to Eastern Europe?

The question is answered by travel guides, and the answer is, to some extent, already there in the televisual post-communist sites. A parallel question is: *How does one learn to desire and see “Eastern Europe”?* With these questions we will take some initial steps towards tracing the trajectory of post-communist sites and the regime of seeing within which they are produced and encountered from television to travel guides.

According to Frommer’s travel guides, “for travelers unfamiliar with Eastern Europe, the demise of the Iron Curtain unearthed a dazzling ancient treasure from a rotting casket” (Tanner, et al. 1995, 2). “Eastern Europe” appears as a “dazzling” object—once confined within the “rotting casket” of “Communism”—and as a site unearthed for the gaze of the West. These qualities of “Eastern Europe” appear explicitly connected to the performance of television. “Eastern Europe” appears in 1990s travel guides as a territory that had been invisible and unexplorable before 1989; both the cold war inaccessibility of “Eastern Europe” and its eruption into televisibility make it a dazzling object. Recounting the televisual encounter with “Eastern Europe” as a telesthetic memory with which the reader/potential traveler can identify, the discourse of travel guides both reveals the embedded televisual features of post-cold war “Eastern Europe” and reproduces the link between television and “Eastern Europe.”

Travel guides capitalize on the televisual eruption of “Eastern Europe” and compete with television by producing “Eastern Europe” as a desirable object/site to which a traveler should journey in order to see history for oneself. Traveling to “Eastern Europe” and the encounter with the dazzling object/unearthed site would allow one to leap from watching it televisually into experiencing “history.” More specifically, the traveler would be able to watch history as an unmediated spectacle/event.

From 1992 editions of travel guides to more recent (1999 editions), Eastern Europe appears constructed along two temporal coordinates—as “history” and as “history happening.” Along the first coordinate, it is a territory “blessedly behind the times,” a territory of “untouched lands” (Rapoport 1992, 10) that has been frozen in the past precisely because the years of communism kept it isolated from the West. It is a medieval landscape containing bits/chunks of the disintegrating regime of communism. As such, “Eastern Europe” offers the reader/tourist the opportunity of time-travel in the gray zone beyond “our” present

tense of the Western/American world, a travel into a deeper and deeper past, the opportunity of slipping into a different, more comforting world. Its constitutive feature is precisely this idyllic illusion of “the absence of Capitalism”; it is a world characterized by “a warped sense of time, the intensity of friendships, the absence of constant sensory assaults through advertisements” (Rapoport 1992, x).

According to Fodor’s travel guides, “crumbling facades, dilapidated palaces, and treacherous cobbled streets both shock and enchant the visitor used to a world where what remains of history has been spruced up for tourist eyes” (Paull 1998, 17). In “Eastern Europe” “the colors are less jarring, not designed to attract the moneyed eye, the fittings are as they always were, not adapted to the needs of a new world” (Paull 1998, 17). Once again, “Eastern Europe” appears as a territory that is “underexplored,” where “western eyes” can still be shocked by the beauty in the unspoiled landscapes, or by “history” undressed for a traveler’s gaze. “Eastern Europe” has somehow preserved its innocence from the gaze, although it has now been made accessible and hypervisible by the televisual; it is outside capitalism/America/the nation. Traveling there means going beyond the televisual to “live encounter” beyond “capitalism,” to a land frozen in time. It is produced within the affective register of cold war nostalgia.

This “world” is, however, also constituted as an ongoing struggle between the forces of the past (i.e., communism) and those of the future (i.e., capitalism). The travel texts invite the reader/traveler to plug into a zone where past and future meet in the constant time of history happening. According to “The New Eastern Europe,” the introductory essay to the 1992 edition of Fodor’s:

Eastern Europe offers wonderful museums and fantastic cultural attractions, but the real treat is a front-row seat in the stirring drama to forge democracy out of totalitarianism, prosperity out of poverty. Everywhere one turns, the abstract notion of struggling for fundamental human rights and self-determination comes alive. (Echikson 1992, 1)

It is a spectacle/site where what are, allegedly, merely abstract notions for a Western/American traveler come alive as an ongoing embodied conceptual drama.

In the 1992 to 1999 editions of travel guides, “Eastern Europe’s” main attractions are the dramatic changes and the constant upheavals to which the traveler could presumably bear witness. While “Eastern Europe” as history is the land beyond capitalism and television, “Eastern Europe” as history happening is the realm of East confronting West, the realm of the disintegration of communism, initially encountered televisually, but which could be encountered unmediated by the traveler. In the discourse of travel guides, the desire for “Eastern Europe” appears connected, first, to its shift from invisibility to televisibility and, second, to the way in which “America” is articulated in relation to “Eastern

Europe.” In a sense, “Eastern Europe” appears as the ground zero, the flip side of “normal America.” As the reader/traveler is interpellated as a television viewer with a desire for history, “America” appears as an abstracted and normative “place” that is devoid of history/upheaval, a depoliticized realm from which one can just watch history happening to others. We have seen that on televisual sites this “America” is a relatively safe haven from which one can see “history happening” to others. The abstracted space of America appears in travel guides as the place attained at the end of the narrative of East confronting West—i.e., post-history. Trapped in a present tense of viewing, inhabiting a present tense America, confined to “watching history,” an American might want to go out and play. Traveling to “Eastern Europe” affords the opportunity to see the presumably always already ended confrontation as happening now.

By the way, where is Eastern Europe?¹⁴ : Naming, sectioning and re-mem-bering “Eastern Europe”

Let us pay attention to the way in which “Eastern Europe” is named, identified and re-mapped in travel guides. In other words, let us focus on how the fiction of “Eastern Europe” is produced in the discourse of travel guides and attempt to identify its inflexions. The discourse of travel guides, I argue in my larger project, is a symptom of the power and flexibility of the fiction of “Eastern Europe,” a fiction that is produced and re-produced in spite of or, better yet, precisely through inconsistencies and acknowledged resistance.

In addition to presenting “history happening” as the confrontation between East and West and the disintegration of communism, travel guides draw on the narrative of progression from East (meaning nationalism, communism, abnormality, trauma and poverty) to West (democracy, capitalism, normal life) to compartmentalize and re-member “Eastern Europe,” and to position readers/potential travelers in relation to what they see. From 1992 to 1999, travel guides struggled with the name “Eastern Europe” and with criteria for mapping and re-mapping the territory that falls under that name/rubric.

The 1992 edition of Fodor’s, the first to invite its readers to the “New Eastern Europe,” presents the journey to “Eastern Europe” as one of “genuine discovery” to “a region that for centuries lay halfway between the Occident and the Orient, sharing in the fascinations of both while preserving its own deeply ingrained character. This region we have called Eastern Europe, and it includes Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, an area that stretched from the Old Europe down into the Balkans” (Billy 1992, v). This region, which lies “beyond our everyday lives,” becomes, the editorial voice tells us, difficult to speak of as one region. Nevertheless “we” name this region “Eastern Europe” (Billy 1992, v).

“Distorted by four long decades of communism,” the region is divided between “the more advanced Westernized territories of the North,” where “democracy, markets and assimilation into Western Europe are the overriding con-

cerns,” and the more “backward Balkanized countries of the south” (Echikson 1992, 2). In this south, “Nationalism and bullets threaten to tear apart the more backward Balkanized countries . . . , most tragically in Yugoslavia” (Echikson 1992, 2). Still, according to Echikson, there is “one essential denominator that transcends these deep cultural differences: a sense of fragility, of vulnerability” (1992, 2). He tells us that “As an American, I never worry about the existential fate of my country,” a luxury not available to Eastern European countries, which are “small and vulnerable” (2). Some of these democracies have “a better chance for success” than others, but all are fragile, undergoing change. The 1992 edition of Fodor’s defines “Eastern Europe” as a transitional site between the Occident and the Orient, and divides it (North and South) according to the narrative of progression from East to West. “Eastern Europe” is peculiar for being “just beyond our everyday life,” for “being distorted by four decades of Communism,” and for its “vulnerability” and “fragility.”

These general features of “Eastern Europe” are literally reproduced throughout the decade in the Fodor’s guides. However, the territory of “Eastern Europe” is also re-mapped. Thus, the 1993 edition features only three countries: Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, we are told that these countries “prefer not to think of themselves as part of ‘Eastern Europe’ [because] in their collective conscious, they are positioned right in the heart of Europe” (Echikson 1993). Nonetheless, this author/edition of Fodor’s names this territory “Eastern Europe.” Echikson differentiates between the Balkans, which he identifies as “Romania, Bulgaria, and what is left of Yugoslavia,” and the three featured countries (xxii). According to him, the political “evolution” of the Balkans is questionable: they are a place of violent upheavals where “ethnic feuds are producing spasms of violence” (xxiii). In contrast to the Balkans, in the three countries featured in Fodor’s, “everyday life is becoming normal.” They represent a “test case: Their success or failure will influence the rest of the ex-Communist world. If the most capable of adapting to Western ways fail, so surely will the rest” (Echikson 1993, xiii).

Quite surprisingly, the 1994 edition of Fodor’s includes six countries under the rubric of “Eastern Europe”: Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria. While it is clear that what had been Czechoslovakia is now Slovakia and the Czech Republic, how and why did Romania and Bulgaria—identified as part of “Eastern Europe” in 1992 and not included in “Eastern Europe” in 1993—become part of Fodor’s “Eastern Europe” in 1994? We are not given the answer to this question, but we are given criteria to distinguish among the “Eastern Europeans.” Thus while throughout “Eastern Europe” the “energy of reconstruction is visible,” some countries (Bulgaria and Romania) “lag behind” (Echikson 1994, xxiv). All these countries, we are told, are still worth seeing, but for different reasons. Thus, in Bulgaria, Romania and other “Balkanized countries” (referred to as “slow starters”) one can see/watch “nationalism, ethnic conflict” and also lands unspoiled by capitalism. On the other four sites (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and The Czech Republic), referred to as

“the nimble Central Europeans,” one can witness that “everyday life is becoming normal” (Echikson 1994, xxiv). Nonetheless, we are told that they are all “Eastern Europe,” and the “scars” of the Communist regimes, the “drab remnants of socialist reality,” and “nationalist excesses and venomous intolerance” can still be seen throughout the region (Echikson 1994, xxxiv).

Although an awareness of the cold war inflexions of the name “Eastern Europe” becomes visible in travel guides throughout the decade, the name persists. For example, the 1997 *Eastern Europe on a Shoestring* uses the name “Eastern Europe” even though its Introduction acknowledges that “the very name of the region is troublesome” (Dydynski et al. 1997, 15) and points out that the “term ‘Eastern Europe’ only gained currency during the more than four decades of Soviet domination of much of central and Balkan Europe after W.W.II. It was then a convenient epithet for ‘us’ to call ‘them’” (Dydynski et al. 1997, 15). Frommer’s travel guides also struggle with the issue of naming and defining “Eastern Europe” where “things change from day to day with no apparent logic” (Tanner et al. 1995, 3). There is, however, a logic to their naming the region “Eastern Europe”: “You can debate the question endlessly, but the term Eastern Europe distinguishes those countries whose main objective today is to recover from 45 years of Soviet Puppetdom and economic catastrophe” (Tanner et al. 1995, 3). It is the objective—to recover—that defines or distinguishes who is to be called or named “Eastern Europe.” Conversely, “Eastern Europe” is a site of recovery from the devastation of the Communist regime and a site of the devastating symptoms of this regime. Travelers can witness this recovery, and they are invited to judge for themselves what the countries have in common and the progress they have made.

Accompanied by a recognition that specific countries subsumed under the rubric do not accept this categorization and by an increasing self-consciousness of the cold war inflexions of the name of “Eastern Europe,” the discourse of travel guides performs and justifies this naming and reproduces this fiction. “Eastern European identity” appears as an identity conferred by the normative “us” to “them” although “they” might not want to think of themselves as “Eastern European.” This naming of “Eastern Europe” is a powerful discursive act that constitutes the object and stabilizes the signifiers¹⁵ “Eastern,” “underdeveloped,” “unhealthy,” “distorted,” “backwards,” “scarred by communism,” “recovering,” etc. By contrast, “America” means “Western,” “healthy,” “normal,” “capitalist.” The tautological naming of “Eastern Europe” also needs to be considered in terms of its function in reproducing a cold war ideology: “We” continue to call “them” Eastern Europe because that is what “they” have been called by “us.” Additionally, this naming is supposedly justified by a certain historical reality: communism created/deformed a region of shared pathologies that we can identify by the name of “Eastern Europe.” The naming of “Eastern Europe” produces a symbolic consistency in these post-cold war discourses, and it helps re-draw the lines between “them” (post-communists) and “us” (Americans).

As we have seen, “Eastern Europe” is held together in the discourse of travel guides as a transitional space/place between the West and the East and between capitalism and communism, as a distorted and pathological space, and as a traumatized and vulnerable body. We have also seen that travel guides divide “Eastern Europe” into areas where “life is becoming normal” (i.e., more like Western Europe and, especially, the United States) on the one hand and areas of upheaval or backwardness, abnormality and disease, on the other. Moreover, the travel guides re-member it along the narrative of evolution/healing from East (Orient/communism) to West (Occident/capitalism). Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic vibrate like a healthy “normal” body evolving towards capitalism. Theirs is a story of survival and success. The latter—Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria—are bodies in seizure, symptomatic sites of communist residues and disease (nationalism, ethnic conflict, etc.). Against both types of sites, “America” is projected as the norm from which they differ and to which some aspire and some will never be able to reach.

In the discourse of travel guides we see “the new Eastern Europe” articulated in contrast to the once invisible, impenetrable cold war “Eastern Europe.” However, the coordinates of this new “Eastern Europe” are drawn from the “Eastern Europe” of the cold war imaginary (once invisible) as well as from television. The “New Eastern Europe” is a real territory that, once invisible, is now visible and accessible; it is a territory that is in disintegration and transition, bearing the marks of the former communist regimes. In other words, its hypervisibility is linked to the disintegration of the Old Eastern Europe. The fiction of the cold war “Eastern Europe” is thus reproduced, and the fiction of a “new Eastern Europe” is infused with cold war, televisual, and Balkanist inflexions.

As I have previously mentioned, both Zizek (1993a, 1993b, 1994), and Todorova (1997) are concerned with the persistence of a Balkanist discourse and Balkanist fantasies in western representations of post-communist societies. The fantasy of the Balkans, which, according to Zizek, organizes the perception of the once cold war other as “a place where nothing is forgotten and nothing is ever learned, where the old traumas are replayed again and again . . .” (1994, 212), appears crucial to re-mapping of the “new Eastern Europe” and is explicitly connected to the Balkans in travel guides. However, from television to travel guides these post-communist sites appear as *traumatized by communism*.

In travel guides, as we have seen, the Balkans fall in and out of the mapped and re-mapped “territory of Eastern Europe.” At times, “Balkan” is a traumatic kernel inside the region and a symptom located on the more “balkanized” (backward, less able, shifting from communist to not-so-communist dictatorship) countries; at others, it is a symptom of the dangers that affect the entire region. In the discourse of travel guides, history happening means the progression from “East” to “West,” and balkanization is a symptom of communism and of the failures of some countries to progress towards the west/capitalism/democracy.

The Balkans reemerge within “Eastern Europe” as an ideologically loaded signifier for the more backward, communist-scarred countries. However, the disease, fragmentation, and nationalism they manifest are symptoms of the end of communism traceable everywhere in “Eastern Europe.”

The “Eastern Europe” of travel guides contains features that Maria Todorova identifies as typical of Balkanist, as distinct from Orientalist, discourses. For instance, according to Todorova, a central characteristic of representations of the Balkans, which “have always evoked the image of a bridge or a crossroads” (Todorova 1997, 15), is their “transitory status” between East and West. While Orientalism, according to Todorova, “is a discourse about an imputed opposition, balkanism is about an imputed ambiguity” (1997, 17). We have seen that transitory status and ambiguity are reproduced in the discourse of travel guides as constitutive features and attractions of “Eastern Europe.” Travel guides symptomatically draw on an easily available Balkanist discourse to counter a crisis in the narrative of progression from East to West.

There was, as travel guides suggest, something fascinating about the “Eastern Europe” that appeared on television, something that is referred to as “history happening.” Travel guides capitalize on a performativity of these post-communist sites. Competing with the televisual discourse, travel guides recall the fascinated encounter with “Eastern Europe” on television in 1989 and invite the readers/travelers to “see for themselves,” to be part of history happening. However, once “there,” travelers would see what they had already seen televisually, namely “history in the making.” History would not affect them, and they would have nothing to do with it. They would be able to access it completely without being involved in it. For the travelers that these travel guides imagine, “experiencing history in the making” means “watching history in the making” from a removed place, with an authoritative gaze from which to evaluate, judge, and assess whether or not “Eastern Europe” is coming towards or approximating “America”—whether, that is, “it is on the right track to democracy.”

While travel guides articulate “Eastern Europe” as a desirable site for a direct, live encounter with history in the making, the discourse of travel guides also situates their readers/potential travelers within a certain way of seeing “Eastern Europe.” As the political commentary in the travel guides attempts to define cultural, social, and political change in these countries within the narrative of progression from East to West, travel guides educate their readers in how to be American in relation to what they see. The “Eastern Europe” of travel guides is produced within a discourse of pathologies. An assemblage of sites of “history in the making,” backwardness and distortion, “Eastern Europe” appears as a scrutinized and analyzed hypervisible body, one that requires scrutiny and analysis, a body with both salvageable and contaminated parts.

On raving voices and televisual bodies: the Eastern European/American returnee

How does a post-communist subject encounter post-communist sites, and how does one speak of the past and see oneself as a post-communist or post-totalitarian or (post-cold war) Eastern European subject? Having come to the United States from Romania in 1991, my work indirectly speaks of this experience. I also have written elsewhere about the ways in which I respond to the interpellation of being “Eastern European,” and of the difficulties that entering a discourse on “Eastern Europe” in the U.S. entails.¹⁶ Here I will speak, in very broad terms, of how post-cold war returnees encounter “Eastern Europe” and how their narratives of return enter this discourse on “Eastern Europe.”

A substantial part of my work is concerned with the hybrid genre of the narrative of return, a genre that records the particular displacement and the logics of identification of the returnee as “Eastern European” and “American” in the encounter with “Eastern Europe” on television in the United States and in the journey of travel/return. Here I can only identify some generic features, briefly touch on three narratives, and offer a (very condensed) reading of Petru Popescu’s¹⁷ *The Return* (1997) as an illustrative example.

Lost In Translation, Eva Hoffman’s (1989) narrative of immigration, begins with the departure of young Eva from Poland in 1959. The scene emphasizes the immense loss that she felt, although her home had been full of danger and scarred by anti-Semitism. By the end of *Lost In Translation* Eva has translated herself, as Salman Rushdie would say, into the present tense. She has written herself away from a subject position produced along the nostalgic attachment to Poland, and away from a Poland she could not return to. It is 1989, and she speaks to us in the present tense about a commitment to live in the present; she says, “I am here now.”

Two years later, *Exit Into History* (Hoffman 1991) records the undoing of that decision. She breaks her commitment to live in the present; she “exits into history.” Her narrative of return to “Eastern Europe,” begins with the confident arrival of the immigrant/traveler thirty-one years later in Poland. This Eva is an adult traveler with an American passport and a contract for a book documenting her return and the realities of “Eastern Europe.”

Unlike Eva Hoffman, Petru Popescu (1997) had never written a narrative of immigration before he wrote *The Return*. Once a successful dissident writer in communist Romania, Popescu came to the United States as a visiting academic some seventeen years before writing his narrative of return and decided, shortly thereafter, to defect. During this interval, he had never mentioned his past in his writings. He had also tried to keep Romania silent within himself. In the Introduction, Popescu says that this silence “was like a long tunnel between two gateways: one, my escape into freedom, the other, my re-entry into the space of my roots, which I had sworn never to go back to” (Popescu 1997, 1).

Unlike Hoffman's relationship to Poland, Popescu's relationship to Romania was not nostalgic. He tells us that, up to a certain point, he had lived without his past, "like an amnesiac, thanks to many absorbing activities: working, pursuing my ambitions, becoming an American" (11). He had completely, the narrator/returnee tells us, pushed "that private hell aside" while "working at the business of becoming an American" (11). But the past returns, and this intrusion makes it impossible for him to live fully in the present. The intrusion of the past disturbs "the essence of my new persona: an author of books and writer-director of movies, in America. A husband and father, in America. A successful, rounded, fulfilled citizen, in America" (Popescu 1997, 11).

Although Hoffman and Popescu's relationships to their past are radically different, we can see that, just as Hoffman's *Exit Into History*, in a sense, breaks the promise to live in the present with which *Lost In Translation* concludes, *The Return* also breaks a vow and a breach of silence. Popescu allows his past to return to him, and he returns to Romania. The returnee emerges through the breaking of silence as a subject of discourse. He speaks of how his silence about the past started to break, of his past in communist Romania, and his return to Romania with his American wife, Iris. He attempts to connect the narrative of the Romanian Communist subject Popescu to the narrative of the American Popescu and to the televisual Romanian revolution.

With the televised events of national revolutionary movements in 1989, "Eastern Europe," the cold war unrepresentable site, became accessible not only through memory for immigrants from communist countries, no longer something that they could claim but not return to, no longer simply personal history. It erupted into the lives of exiles and immigrants and into their present tense of being in America as a televisually accessible assemblage of sites where history was happening. Narratives of return attest that the televisual encounter with sites in revolution, replayed as a significant moment, unsettled immigrants' relationships with both their past and their present. In the encounter with televisual "Eastern Europe," immigrant viewers were not just unsettled as cold war immigrants; televisual "Eastern Europe" also unsettled their relationship to their past.

Narratives of return are symptomatic sites of this unsettling and sites of strategic productions of post-cold war historical subjects. The return appears in these texts as a journey of choice, but nonetheless a journey that takes place under the sign of an emergency—the urgency of re-positioning oneself towards both the past and the present. If the newly opened borders made the actual journey of return feasible, the televisual hypervisibility and accompanying interest in what was happening to the cold war other opened a discursive space and provided immigrants with (somewhat) attentive listeners. Thus the unsettling of which I spoke was met with an investment with authority: the returnees were authorized, contracted, to document both their return and the political realities of "Eastern Europe." The narratives of returning immigrants participate in the accessing of knowledge and the production of meaning about "Eastern Europe" and post-communism.

Like Andrei Codrescu's *The Hole in the Flag* (1991) and Hoffman's *Exit Into History*, Popescu's *The Return* responds to the demand for knowledge about what is really going on in "Eastern Europe." However, it foregrounds Popescu's experience under communism and his encounter with post-communist sites in the United States, thus performatively dramatizing the difficulty of coming to a voice and addressing an American audience.

The first words of *The Return* are "Listen to me. Listen to me" (Popescu 1997, 1). While readers come to understand the significance of this appeal to "listen" more fully after they learn of Popescu's silence about his past and his vow never to return to the country of his birth, they are made aware from his very first words of the emergence(y) of a voice and of the silence against which this voice, the voice of the returnee, emerges. *The Return* speaks to us from a discursive space created by the hypervisible presence of "Eastern European" revolutions in the United States media. As it performatively reflects on the difficulties of coming to a voice and finding a listener, the narrator's discourse can help us reflect on the discursive constraints faced more generally by those who attempt(ed) to speak of their "Eastern European" experience.

My reading of travel guides to "Eastern Europe" emphasizes the promise that they make to their viewers/readers that their encounter with "Eastern Europe" will be one in which they can witness history in the making. Television reveals to its viewers sites of history happening and sites of victimization, and travel guides promise the encounter with "Eastern Europe" to be unmediated but presented as watching from a distance. In a sense, in his Introduction to *The Return*, Popescu stages himself as a site of history happening (a historical subject emerging in discourse by breaking his own silence). In this way, the introduction to his narrative reproduces the same positioning and regime of seeing found on television and in travel guides: we are the "witnesses"/evaluators of this post-communist site (the post-communist subject), which reveals itself for our viewing. However, *The Return* puts a slightly different spin on things. As we have seen from the very first words of the text, the narrator appeals to and attempts to implicate his readers in a testimonial act. He tells us that he needs a *listener* in order to tell his story; that he needs *the patience* of this listener; and that he fears he will not be understood. This witnessing of "history happening" would actually be an act in which a reader would be implicated as a *listener* to a testimony.

In my larger project, I show that the narratives of return both revise and reproduce the symptomatic relationships between cold war and post-cold war "Eastern European" and "American" identities in the articulation of the returnee and in the journey of travel/return. I follow the doubling and troubling of immigrant memory by televisual "Eastern Europe"; the articulation of "Eastern Europe" travelscapes at the intersection of memory, televisual, and travel encounter; and the articulation of the returnee as an immigrant viewer and an immigrant traveler, as an Eastern European/American subject. I have suggested how *The Return* participates and attempts to intervene in the discourse on

“Eastern Europe.” In order to more specifically convey how Popescu’s *The Return* symptomatically reproduces the regime of seeing and narratives of “Eastern European” and “American” identities, I will zoom in on the way in which the narrator speaks of his past, reflects on his own voice, and sees himself in the journey of return.

As mentioned above, *The Return* begins with a recollection of how “Romania” started to intrude into the life of the American immigrant Popescu and to undo his vow of silence about his past. It continues with Popescu’s remembering his past in communist Romania, his narrative of totalitarian subjection and escape (Part I and II). It then shifts to a narrative of Return to Romania (Part III and IV), and it concludes with the return to the United States and a Hollywood contract for a different book. In the Introduction and first two parts, the narrator both dramatizes the disjunction between Popescu the Romanian subject and Popescu the American and attempts to connect these identities and parts of his life. *The Return* is a testimony of both the survival of a traumatized communist subject and of an American subject who is torn out of a state of amnesia and bliss by the return of his unassimilated and dissociated Romanian past.

The narrative of the Romanian Popescu is a testimony of life under communism—how Popescu lived and survived the loss of his brother, the disintegration of his family, the censorship of his books, what he calls his captivity in Romania under Communism. The Romanian Popescu is identified by a number of pathologies, symptoms of loss, and inflicted pain. While he presents his personal losses and traumas as the formative moments in his articulation as a Romanian subject, he is also representing *The Romanian* subject, and he attempts to present moments in the history/predicament of a nation under communism. For instance, he speaks of his interrogation by Romanian authorities as being “like so many others” he “had heard of” (55). His interrogation and the obvious signs of surveillance (steamed letters and interrupted phone calls) made it clear to the young Popescu that even his most personal and intimate messages were read by the system. He “assumed that many people I knew were informers, yet I couldn’t break contact with them” (58). The narrator shares the Romanian Popescu’s fear of scrutiny: there was no way of clearly knowing who was an informer, but it was widely assumed that anyone could potentially be one. He tells us that “Communism” gave him and other Romanians both an inflated sense of importance and an acute paranoia. Sharing the symptoms of his fellow Romanians, young Popescu learned how to appeal to his Romanian audience and became a successful writer. He wrote books that challenged the system while simultaneously “unintentionally” helping “Ceausescu’s nationalism” (Popescu 1997, 92). The Romanian subject Popescu appears in the narrative as a captive on a prison planet, a survivor who shares the symptoms of others and learns how to turn against others in order to survive, and, at the same time, a naïve writer whose skills turn against him.

Thus, if in the process of testifying about his past the returnee is witnessing his own past, this witnessing is also an act of self-analysis and confession. In

fact, the narrator's discourse shifts into an account of the pathologies of The Romanian subject Popescu, a site on which his personal narrative and the narrative of Romania as a nation under communism encounter each other in a symptomatic logic.

Equating "America" with "sanity," "survival," and "normality," the narrator juxtaposes the American Popescu to the traumatized and scrutinized Romanian Popescu. In his testimony of life under communism, the narrator tells us that "to remain sane, uninfected, I lived in that land but dreamed of America." (2) In addition, in recounting the intrusion of his Romanian past into his American life, the narrator speaks of the "normal" American Popescu, an amnesiac subject dissociated from the past, a survivor of history, who remains sane by shutting the past out. The emerging Popescu—the post-cold war American/Eastern European subject—is articulated through the loss of his state of amnesia and the "normality" that being an American had afforded him. Thus, the new subject is also a scarred subject.

In addition to scrutinizing his Romanian self, the narrator critically examines his own emerging voice. He comments on the inadequacy of his emerging voice to his own ears and for his American listener/witness, and he performatively presents the struggle to make this voice intelligible/meaningful: "I'm trying to slow down. To stop raving and sputtering, and to hit a certain key, whose sounds will fill the words I'm using with truth and simplicity. But that key is not easy to hit, . . ." (Popescu 1997, 2). The emerging voice is, in a sense, the wounded voice of the Romanian Popescu, the voice that intrudes into the realm of "normalcy" of the American Popescu. However, the voice is, unfortunately?, quieted as the narrator labels it and controls it for his audience.

Commenting further on both his Romanian past and his voice, the narrator says:

I sound like I'm complaining. But I'm not. Unfortunately, I can't tell my story like a normal individual: this is how I first experienced love, or work, or the loss of illusions, this is how I formed my goals and beliefs. If I experienced, say, love, it wasn't love, it was love under Communism. Communism weighed on all my experiences, distorting and deforming them. (Popescu 1997, 6)

The narrator returnee re-connects to his past through a symptomatic identification with the *deformed* Romanian subject Popescu. Because his life as a Romanian had been deformed by communism, he cannot tell his story of that life like a *normal* individual. He identifies in his raving and sputtering voice and in his incapacity to speak of his experience symptoms of a deformed Romanian identity. In other words, the emerging returnee is both a site of history happening and a site of deformity/abjection.

The narrator's discourse should make us reflect on both the raving of the voice and on the disabling effects of the discursive articulation within which/by which it is produced and constrained, the post-cold war discourse on "Eastern Europe" that I have traced thus far. Popescu's narrator struggles with recovering something usable from his past, but this past is figured within a discourse of pathologies. As it allows him to speak of and make sense of his traumatic experience, this discourse is, to a certain extent, enabling. Yet, the only way that he manages to speak of his past and of his present voice is from the perspective of their deviation from a normative American experience. Speaking to his audience from a discursive space opened by the interest in the hypervisible post-communist sites, he occupies the only position that this discourse allows for someone who identifies as "Eastern European": that of a victim deformed by communism. Thus, *The Return* dramatizes the effects of a generalized and powerful discourse on "Eastern Europe," a discourse that constrains the writing of a usable past and the representation of contemporary "post-communist" experience for both those represented as deformed by communism and for the "non-implicated" who access these experiences in the United States.

Let us turn to our text and to the returnee. We will leave him in flight, on his way from the United States to Romania. This textual moment provides another illustration of the relationship between his "American" and "Romanian" identities. It also returns us, by way of a brief but poignant illustration of how the narrator sees himself, to the regime of seeing within which post-communist sites are produced/encountered and to how identification with these hypervisible sites is experienced.¹⁸

In September of 1991, on a flight to "Eastern Europe," Popescu is aware, "just after looking at them," that his fellow first-class passengers are not "headed for Prague or Bucharest." They, he says, "didn't have that vibe. They would deplane in Munich, last stop before Eastern Europe, my terra *Orientalis incognita*" (Popescu 1997, 195). During the flight he feels something that he is constantly trying to put his finger on. What was he afraid of? He felt "almost nothing." It wasn't fear of what he "would find" (195). The Romanian son is returning with an American passport, which sits "in an elegant little folder of leather, in an inside pocket positioned right over my heart" (195). The leather wallet is "loaded with passport, addresses and traveler's checks," hanging there (right over his heart) "like a holstered pistol" (195). Folded inside the passport is his letter of accreditation from the *L.A. Times*, and in his suitcase are copies of his latest book, *Amazon Beaming*. This is, he tells us, a lot of "artillery" (195). He is not afraid of his ghosts, of his past, for his present documents ensure and protect his present status; his accomplishments are proof of his new successful identity as an American. "Digging deeper," however, he finds "some fear," which he identifies as fear for his marriage. He is taking this trip with his wife, and he fears that the encounter with Romania "would show [her] my roots, naked, now completely revealed by the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, by the Revolu-

tion and the confused painful times that followed. I'd show her, naked, a certain version of me" (196). What his wife would see—"Eastern Europe" and Romania—is a different version of him.

The returnee is both American traveler and "Eastern European" immigrant. Popescu has available an identification with an imperial American masculinity: he is an American writer who is traveling first-class to a "Second World" country in order to assess the post-communist situation, i.e., whether or not things are moving in the "right" direction. At the same time, he is an "Eastern European" immigrant (once a cold war defector) returning to see his roots. His relationship to these roots has been altered in the encounter with post-communist televisual sites; no longer personal traumatic history and unseen roots, "Eastern Europe" exploded into televisibility as history happening and as a "territory" traumatized, deformed, and scarred by communism. The Romania he expects to see is articulated at the intersection of memory and televisual encounter. Furthermore, his encounter with Romania in the journey of travel/return will take place under the intimate yet scrutinizing gaze of his American wife. Identifying with the hypervisible post-communist sites, he imagines this encounter as an act of self-exposure, and he fears the consequences.

Notes

1. I was very pleased to accept Frieda Knobloch's invitation to present a part of my work in progress for the American Studies forum at the University of Wyoming. This article, and the presentation it stems from, seeks to capture key trajectories of inquiry from the book manuscript, *Encounters with post-communism: Abjected Sites and Trajectories of Desire*, on which I am currently working.

2. Frequently when I discuss my research/interests/work, friends and critics respond by labeling, defining, placing or containing it within the categories of "Eastern European" or "Slavic" studies. I am then questioned about the political and economic status of Eastern Europe "nowadays." Identified as "Eastern European," I am expected to be an informed truth-sayer and authoritative source of knowledge about "the region." To the despair and eventual boredom of my interlocutors, I, less rather than more gracefully, find myself having to address these problematic assumptions that collapse my "identity" onto my work (a common experience for many "minority" colleagues) and the fiction of "Eastern Europe" onto a territory. I find myself trying to explain what I am not rather than what I am doing.

3. Kaplan (1993) discusses in her introduction "three salient absences which contribute to this ongoing pattern of denial across several disciplines: the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism." (11).

4. See my contribution, "How I found Eastern Europe: Televisual Geography, Travel Sites, and Museum Installations," to this volume. My piece examines the cross-discursive articulation of the fiction of "Eastern Europe" post-cold war around the circulating media trope of the Romanian orphans. As that piece, written before this one, attempts to do some foundational work for post-totalitarian studies, they complement each other conceptually. There is also an overlap in terms of two of the sites discussed in this article and in the forthcoming piece.

5. Todorova engages the question of how the "geographical appellation," Balkans, came to be transformed into "one of the most pejorative designations in history, international relations, political science, and nowadays general intellectual discourse" (1997, 7). This question introduces Todorova's discussion of the historical solidification and permutations of *Balkanism* or the *Balkanist discourse*. A number of scholars consider Balkanism to be a subspecies of Orientalism. For a reading of the image of the "Balkans" and an argument for a study of Balkan imagology as an Orientalist subtheme, see John B. Allcock (1991). Todorova, however, means to recover the reality of a region or territory of the Balkans, which she contends has been improperly identified. This is one way in which her intervention is distinguished from that of Edward Said (1979), who is concerned with the construction of an intangible Orient. The Balkans, she says, have a geo-

graphic concreteness that she is concerned with recovering. Finally, Todorova argues that while there is overlap and complementarity between the rhetorics of Balkanism and Orientalism, there are substantial differences between them.

6. Todorova says that “In the geographical and political classifications after World War II, a portion of the Balkans had secured an unobtrusive place as part of a common Eastern Europe perceived as a homogeneous appendix to the USSR by the West; another portion had been willingly included into Western Europe, something inconceivable but for the prevailing anticommunist paranoia” (1997, 140). Thus, she does not refer to Eastern Europe as a fiction, as I do in my work.

7. Hartley identifies three institutions of significance that *construct television discursively*: “the television industry (network, stations, producers, etc.); political/legal institutions (usually formalized as regulatory bodies, and intermittently as government-sponsored inquiries and reports); and critical institutions (academic, journalistic and—surprisingly rarely—self-constituted audience organizations or pressure groups).” (1992, 105)

8. Berlant’s work on national identification, which I consider to be part of (American) cultural studies, has also informed my project throughout. Although television is not her primary focus, I have found her work on television and identification enabling, along with her work on citizenship and trauma. In “Theory of Infantile Citizenship” (1993, 30-32; 35-37), she speaks specifically of the way in which television participates in a “framing” of what can be legitimately read as national.

9. In tracing the trajectory of post-communist sites from television to print media and from west to east, I am attempting a “vectoral” analysis, which builds on and is a response to McKenzie Wark’s (1994) call for more historically specified accounts of the spectral dynamics between East and West along the media vector than those offered by Slavoj Žižek (1993b). Žižek asks, “Why was the West so fascinated with the disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe?” (1993b, 200). According to Žižek, the West sought in “Eastern Europe” its lost origins, the reinvention of democracy. The real object of fascination is the gaze, “namely the supposedly naïve gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy” (Žižek 1993b, 200). According to McKenzie Wark (1994), a critique and account of the spectral dynamics between East and West should be undertaken by considering this a historically constituted form of relation, “a relation between flickering images cast by the firepower of the [media] vector” (55). For Wark’s (1994) rereading of Žižek, see *Virtual Geography* 55-62.

10. See my article, “Nationalizing the Olympics Around and Away from ‘Vulnerable’ Bodies of Women,” for an extensive reading of the 1996 Olympics coverage as a global/national televisual event and an analysis of the relationship between American girls and “others.” (Borcila 2000)

11. According to NBC spokesmen, it was such a viewer that they had in mind in the production of their coverage. It is precisely such a vulnerable and impressionable—read feminine—viewer, that print media critics of the coverage detach themselves from. See, for instance, David Remnick’s (1996) “Inside Out Olympics” for an illustration of both. My article on NBC’s Olympics coverage (Borcila 2000) also includes a discussion of both NBC spokesmen’s position and print media critics’ reaction.

12. According to McKenzie Wark (1994), *telesthesia* is “perception at a distance.” We live and acquire a “geography of experience” from the “terrain created by the television, the telephone, the telecommunications networks crisscrossing the globe.” This virtual geography produces the experience of telesthesia, which “doubles, troubles and generally permeates our experience of the space we experience firsthand.” (Wark 1994, vii)

13. Although Judith Butler (1993) is not concerned with issues of national identity and identification her conceptualization of abjection, identification and performativity are crucial to my reading of identification with both “America” and “Eastern Europe.”

14. I have been asked this question by frustrated colleagues (during conference presentations) and students while discussing the shifting borders of the idea/concept/fiction of “Eastern Europe.”

15. Slavoj Žižek’s theory of ideology (1989) informs my reading of the ideological articulation of “America” and “Eastern Europe.” In *The Sublime Object*, Žižek means “to contribute to the theory of ideology via a new reading of some well-known classical motifs (commodity fetishism, and so on) and of some crucial Lacanian concepts which, on a first approach, have nothing to offer to a theory of ideology . . .” (1989, 7). Specifically, Žižek enters the discourse on ideology via Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theorization of the identity of a given ideological field and opens it towards Lacan’s understanding of meaning as a radically contingent and retroactive process. *Quilting*, the stabilization and totalization of signifiers in a given ideological field, appears in the work of Žižek as the fundamental ideological operation. Žižek recovers the Lacanian concept of *the quilting point* (*le point de capiton*) for this theory of ideology. The quilting point, emptied of any meaning, unifies the field and “constitutes its identity.” According to Žižek, what Lacan adds to Laclau and Mouffe’s work is that the “unity of a given ‘experience of meaning,’ itself the horizon of an ideological field of meaning, is supported by some ‘pure,’ meaningless

'signifier' without the signified" (Zizek 1989, 97). Zizek emphasizes the performative character of naming and argues that the crucial step in ideological analysis should be to detect "this self-referential, tautological, performative operation" (1989, 99).

16. This discussion is central to my article, "How I found Eastern Europe: Televisual Geography, Travel Sites, and Museum Installations," forthcoming in Zaborowska, Forrester, and Gapova (2004).

17. Since Petru Popescu and his wife Iris wrote the USA Network film *Nobody's Children* (the site I discussed in the first section of this article), they—together with the director, producer, actors, etc.—participated in "authoring" this film. While it is difficult to ascertain Popescu's contribution—i.e., his role in "authoring" the film—this fact complicates the reading of both sites in my larger project (my book manuscript). I read *Nobody's Children* (1994) not only as a separate site but also as a site that doubles *The Return* (Popescu 1997). In this latter reading, *Nobody's Children* is a sort of narrative of return—a fantasy through which Popescu identifies with both the televisual Romanian orphans and the American woman who sees the orphans on television. Additionally, as he had only "witnessed" the Romanian revolution on television in the U.S., writing the revolutionary scenes for the movie allowed him to produce a version of the Romanian revolution for an American audience (and himself). Finally, in both texts television and the encounter with televisual "Eastern Europe" are center stage. Reading them alongside and against each other also offers the opportunity to reflect further on the gendering of post-communist sites and on the televisual identification with both "America" and "Eastern Europe."

18. This condensed reading implicitly addresses a question that my larger project pursues at length: "What does it mean to be held by the gaze to an unpleasurable identification?" This question preoccupies Kaja Silverman's (1996) analysis of identification and the politics of visual representation. She focuses on the experience of bodily disintegration that accompanies the experience of a "deidealizing identification." See Silverman (1996, 23-37).

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