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Writing Alberta: Building on a Literary Identity

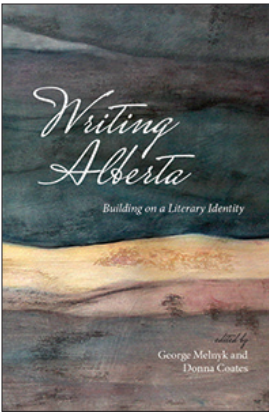
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WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity
Edited by George Melnyk and Donna Coates

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Alberta in the Alberta Novels of David Albahari

George Melnyk

David Albahari (b. 1948) is an Alberta novelist, short story writer, essayist, and translator, who now lives in Zemun, a suburb of Belgrade, Serbia, where he had lived since the 1950s before coming to Canada. In the fall of 1994 he arrived at the University of Calgary as the international writer-in-residence under the auspices of the Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writers Program.¹ He continued to live in Calgary until 2012, when he returned to Zemun. During the eighteen years that he resided in Alberta, he published three novels set in the province. The first was *Snežni Čovek* (1995), published in English as *Snow Man* (2005). The novel parallels his own life because it describes a man who flees war by becoming a writer-in-residence at a foreign university. “Whatever happened in *Snow Man*,” he explained in an interview, he himself felt except “... on a smaller, less intense level” (Melnyk, “Lost in Translation” 41).² *Snow Man* is an early representation of Albahari’s view of Alberta because it is based on first impressions by a writer who was uncertain about his future relationship to this place. Would he stay? Would he go back? Would he write in English? Would he continue to write in Serbo-Croatian?

The second novel is titled *Mamac* (1996), which was co-published in 2001 in English by Northwestern University Press and Bayeux Arts of Calgary under the title *Bait*. The work is more reflective on the status of a writer in a foreign country than *Snow Man*, expressing what should be considered a mature engagement with North American reality. It is a classic representation of how Albahari understood Alberta and Canada because

it contains an extensive discussion of the contrast between European and North American mores and sensibilities. The third work, *Svetski Putnik* (2001), was published in English translation by Yale University Press in 2014 under the title *Globetrotter*. One ought to consider *Snow Man* an early representation of Albahari's literary displacement, *Bait* a classic example because it reflects his adjustment to life in a new cultural, linguistic, and physical environment, and *Globetrotter* his late or post-classical period of understanding Alberta. Taken together the three novels were produced during the first six or seven years of his life in Calgary. After that he did not write any other novels set in the province. It is as if he had come to an end point in positioning himself in its psychic landscape, though he continued to live in Calgary for another decade.

During the eighteen years he lived and worked in Calgary, he published more than twenty books (novels, short story collections, and essays) averaging more than one book per year. This is a prodigious output, reflecting the tranquility that Alberta afforded him. My focus on his three Alberta-related novels does not constitute a proper literary discussion of his impressive body of work while in Canada, nor his international stature as a writer. It is simply a study of how a writer's displacement from one geo-cultural context to another generated literary work that was influenced by that displacement. The immigrant/exile writer sees the world of Alberta differently than does a writer formed from birth by the province and nurtured by its historical milieu. Alberta is the home of numerous immigrant groups and writers from those groups must reconcile all sorts of socio-cultural and linguistic factors in order to "explain" the meaning of the new land to themselves and their readers. Albahari comes from the Jewish minority in the former Yugoslavia. Its tragic history is part of the Holocaust that engulfed and decimated European Jewry in the Second World War. His mother was a survivor. Later he experienced the early years of the civil war that destroyed Yugoslavia, the country of his birth with which he strongly identified. In a sense, he had become psychologically stateless when he arrived in Alberta.³ That is the sensibility that haunts each of these novels.

While his novels and short story collections had been translated into numerous languages prior to his coming to Alberta, English translations began to appear only in the late 1990s and were originally published by small presses (Bayeux Arts, Calgary, and Northwestern University Press,

Chicago). This limited their audience, but later on the English translations of his novels *Götz and Meyer* (2004) and *Leeches* (2011) came out with major publishing houses, giving him a wider access to the English-speaking world, especially in North America. Stylistically, Albahari is very much a writer's writer. His narratives communicate through avant-garde structures. His novels are usually written in a single paragraph extending over a hundred pages or more. This unconventional style is disconcerting to readers of more traditional fare, but for those who are willing to enter its stream-of-narrative consciousness, Albahari's work provides a powerful and engaging experience. At first the reader may feel trapped in a singularly voiced consciousness or wrapped in an all-encompassing world that critics have termed "metafictional." Because there are no "natural" breaks in the text, the reader has to create virtual chapters and paragraphs as they see fit. The reader becomes a phantom co-creator by stopping, starting, and reflecting at any point in the text without any structural guidance from the author. He is not the first European writer to use this format. The Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard influenced Albahari in this technique. While fond of first-person narrative, he tends to identify key characters not by name, but by relationship (such as Mother, Wife, and so on). Because of these features, Albahari's writing was not easily accessible to an Alberta or Canadian audience. His style became another hurdle for local readers.

Albahari played a successful game of incognito while in Alberta, partially by writing in Serbian and then waiting for English translations to appear, and partially by remaining active in Serbia, which he visited each fall for the Belgrade Book Fair to launch his latest title or titles. His Serbian audience grew to expect an Albahari book every year. But the sporadic appearance of his works in English translation resulted in a much lower level of recognition in North America and Britain. The end result is that the scholarly response to his work is primarily in Serbian by Serbian scholars. There are also reviews in English-language periodicals and newspapers and critical studies by Northern American and British scholars of Serbian origin, who are able to read his work in Serbian. His work has also appeared in anthologies of fiction by exiled writers, a term he himself is reluctant to use.

The context of his writing about Alberta is a specific and short period in the literary history of the province. This period (1994-2001) was one of increasing recognition of diversity in Alberta writing, post-colonial

interest in works by writers from minorities, and lively debate around the concept of being an Alberta writer. Albahari did not participate actively in this emerging consciousness. Instead he was an invisible witness to it and an observer of his own voice as it struggled with an alien environment. This positioning had a certain trajectory that followed a quickly rising arc launched in 1995 with *Snow Man* that reached its apogee a year later with *Bait*, and then became a gradual glide, touching ground with *Globetrotter* five years later. The implications of this asymmetrical trajectory are what this essay explores.

Snow Man

The novel begins with this sentence—“The driver was waiting for me at the airport, just as I’d been told he’d be” (Albahari, *Snow Man* 1). The driver was me. I was using a University of Calgary vehicle when meeting him at Calgary International Airport in October 1994. In this sentence the key word is “airport” because of its signification of travel, distance, passage, departure, and arrival. Airports are places of tension when they are, or represent, unfamiliar places. Airports are places of entry, a kind of border that is crossed to enter another realm. By using the term, Albahari recalls for the reader the reactions that come from either leaving for, or arriving in, a foreign place. The narrator is not being met by a friend or family, but an anonymous figure—a driver. He writes:

The whole airport was no more than a cluster of sentences, I was on my feet thanks to words, something I would never have believed if someone else had told me. I was kept in one piece by letters, words held me; I breathed thanks to punctuation. (3)

On one level this is a poetic way by which Albahari announces that the narrator is a writer, an unidentified writer. On another level the equation of the airport with language suggests both the new language (English) that the airport represents and also that it is language and his ability as a writer that brought him to the airport in one piece. Being a writer saved him. In a letter that he wrote to the Alberta writer Myrna Kostash on 10 February 1993, he referred specifically to the issue of language in his writing and how it might affect him should he come to Canada:

And now we come to the old question: how does a writer feel when he has to go to another country, another language? Should he surround himself with his own language, and most probably sink, or should he try to mutter in his new language? There is probably no single answer to that question; there must be many of them. But most of them tell very sad stories. (Albahari / Kostash correspondence, 1993, courtesy of M. Kostash and D. Albahari)

It was Kostash who pushed for his getting the writer-in-residence position, and so he entered the no-man's land between two languages, where "clusters of sentences," as he says, are the only definition he has. He did not look forward to his new life, but he also did not think his old life was viable. As he said in an interview only a few months after arriving in Calgary, "The only homeland for a writer is language" (McGoogan B11). This is the homeland he embraced in Calgary.

An anonymous stranger (the driver) brings him to the new life at the university in an unnamed land. This lack of naming is Albahari's way of lifting us into a purely existential position with very few reference points by which to orient ourselves in the narrative, other than the perspective of the narrator, whose voice holds us with its narrative. The narrator hates his new situation and academe itself, where he is forced to play out a Kafkaesque navigation of his new life as "writer-in-residence." Surely, the term itself is loaded with connotations of alienation from the familiar, of being housed in an institutional setting with concomitant demands, and the idea that one is in a public role with an office like some official might have. What brought him to this point is part of the mystery and whatever we are told about the mysterious writer, except his immediate thoughts and reactions, unfolds with obliqueness. The narrator is apprehensive about the whole enterprise he is about to embark on, grateful for small gestures, initially rejecting the value of the new land, and feeling a need to hide his true feelings because he doesn't know the culture. All this is personalized in the appearance of an adversary, an unnamed professor of political science, who pronounces like a Machiavelli on politics and offers explanations of why the writer's homeland is disintegrating.

What immediately strikes the Alberta reader of the novel is the lack of identification of Alberta in the text. Only those who know Albahari's biography can identify Alberta in the text, where it is presented as an anonymous, imagined place without a name, though the references to foothills and mountains do help locate it. Since I was the driver who picked him up at the airport to take him to his rented home and the University of Calgary, I can vouch for the novel's Alberta locale, and having visited him often in this home, I can vouch for its description in the novel. He writes: "The living room faced eastward, the bathroom looked to the north, and the kitchen looked to the west" (Albahari, *Snow Man* 19). So it was. What is also present from early on is the way the narrator views his new home as the Other. Since the book was written for a Serbian audience, who would have a stance similar to Albahari's toward Alberta, the narrator's strategy of making the locals the alien ones makes sense to his readership. But for those of us who see the world from the viewpoint of our Alberta experience and who know Albahari's relationship to, and history with, Alberta, the narrator is the stranger, the Other.

The novel then moves into a mediation/dialogue on the narrator's former country with the professor of political science pontificating in curious metaphors, while the narrator bites his tongue in despair. The first person narrative is so dominant that the other voices in the text seem distant, almost irrelevant echoes. The advantage of our being so fully absorbed into the narrator's perspective is our identification with that narration. The disadvantage is the limitation of a singular point of view. For example, the novel's description of the university sounds more like a guide to an alien planet's civilization. The new world is so shockingly different and discombobulating that the narrator tells us: "I thought it would be best for me to shut myself in the refrigerator and come out when all this was over" (45). Especially galling to the narrator is the casualness with which the students and professors discussed the disintegration of his country. For Albahari's Serbian readers this smug Canadian casualness and ignorance must have been irksome and disappointing. The novel captures the poignant divide between one who has experiences of war and one who sees it from afar. Clearly his audience could identify with the narrator since they knew where he had gone to live. It was public knowledge.

A mantra throughout the novel is the recurring sentence: "I will grow old here." In fact, Albahari did grow old here. He was forty-six when he

arrived and sixty-four when he left, an age at which he could begin thinking about collecting a pension. While this fictional prophecy was no doubt a literary device expressing the sadness of the narrator's situation rather than a prediction of his autobiography, it is circumstance that was realized in his own life. This fear of growing old in an alien place is a common enough theme in the life of emigrants and the exiled. One feels that one belongs to the place that one left and one does not wish to die in a foreign land. In Albahari's case, he was to return to Serbia, a country that he could never fully identify with as he had with Yugoslavia. He returned to a physical universe he knew (the apartment in Zemun), but the post-Yugoslav reality was one that troubled him. He never was a Serbian nationalist.

At one point in the novel the narrator is given *A Historical Atlas of Central and Eastern Europe* by the unnamed professor of political science, with the admonition that political identities and boundaries in the region are forever changing. "During one century alone," he says, "every town became several, no language stood firm, people went to bed at night without knowing what place they would wake up in the morning" (57). The whole narrative to this point positions the reality of the body and its suffering against the abstraction of ideas. "I have never hidden the repellant quality history holds for me," the narrator confesses (65). Not only does the narrator hate academe, but he also hates history. Turning to the atlas, he asks: "What do I do with you?" He is asking what do I do with my particular history which is not a book but a living experience. The answer is on the beads of sweat that appear regularly on the narrator's brow as he tells his story. He describes history as a "dislocation" and an "evasion" (68). It is history that has driven him to this new place where he doesn't want to be.

The image of the atlas as a book is quickly transformed into an atlas as a map, another abstract face of history. It was a German language map of the Roman Empire, which is an actual map that hung in his home in Calgary for all the years he lived in it. It had been left by the previous owner. The narrator mentions other maps that he has discovered in the home and they serve as a backdrop to his emotions about his life there and here. Maps have their own language, the shorthand of cartography, which is a language the narrator finds impenetrable. And then it begins to snow, a symbol of Canada. Snow means something to the body and in the novel snow signifies that magical moments are to unfold. The following

description of the narrator's first encounter with snow in this new place is worth recounting:

Then I went back to the snowball, which was lying on a gentle snowy incline. Like a tiny frozen meteor, it lay at the bottom of a shallow crater; as it rolled, once it completed its trajectory, it picked up another layer of snowflakes; the track it left behind, piecemeal, uneven, reminded me of the path of a snail over crumbly soil." (89)

The comparison between the path of a snowball and the path of a snail captures the narrator's bridging his former world with that of his new one. I cannot imagine a Canadian writer making that sort of comparison, but a Serbian audience would understand it. He brings the snowball home and says, "I arrive like a snowball, I disappear like a snowball, and all that is left is a puddle" (91). The new land may be as firm as a snowball at this moment, but it is destined to dissolve like his former country is dissolving. Only books and maps do not dissolve. So the narrator attempts to change the maps, to draw borders that separate "the Illyrians from the Slavs, the East from the West, the Arabs from the Jews" (93), but all he feels are the rivers that people are not allowed to cross and the mountain passes that are shut, all the barriers to the movement of bodies put up by these lines on a map. He concludes mournfully:

"The only story that is alive is one that has not been given over to language ... just as the only history alive is the history that has not been given over to maps ... Words are merely ... phantom riders in the sky ... just as borders are only unreal scribbles ..." (105)

The juxtapositions of life, of language, and history are matrices that hold the narrator in a trap. Maps are a matter of phantoms and scribbles of lines on paper that have no body, no life but they can kill us.

The novel concludes with the narrator's world falling apart, of his questioning who he is in this place. He is saved by seeing a rabbit in the snow. It is the narrator's *Alice in Wonderland* moment as he pursues the rabbit. "I didn't know what I was exiting from and what I was

entering into,” he tells us, “but something kept opening behind me, just as something else kept opening before me” (117). The world is now magical rather than prosaic as the tempo of the final pages increases. He chases the rabbit to the summit of a hill—Albahari’s home was situated just below Nose Hill in Calgary—and turns to see the city, which disappears before him. The narrator enters an existential void. He is free.

It is a dramatic and fitting end to a novel about a nameless world, where what is real are snow and a rabbit, physical representations of the body that the narrator can identify with, rather than the abstractions of professors, history, and maps. There is a powerful mystical and visual quality to Albahari’s writing and imagery. His paradoxical speculations and quizzical attributions have a poetic logic. They levitate the reader, float him above reality as a way of expressing Albahari’s own existence in the homeland of language. While the narrator cannot bond with the university or his new home through ideas, he does bond with a snowball, a physical metaphor that means something to him. Perhaps it is its temporality and fragility that appeal to him. Perhaps it is simply a literary device symbolizing Canada for his Serbian readers. But my preference for understanding the power of the snowball image is its whiteness and its lightness. It can fly through the air like an angel. Albahari is one of the few writers who can turn a snowball into a mystical symbol. Its ability to change form is something that resonates for him, mirroring his own life.

The *Atlas* is the only object with a proper name in the novel and having a name it torments the narrator with its historical definiteness. It is not even an atlas of the place he is in, but the place he came from. There is no map to this new alien land, Alberta. The immigrant/exile only understands the new world through its functional identities—dean, professor, woman, neighbour, house, basement, room, and street. For him their proper names do not matter, as he himself slowly becomes nameless to himself and turns into a snow man. Snow does not appear on political maps. Nor does Albahari. In an interview in 1998 he called himself “an invisible writer” (Longinovic 33).

Bait

The form of *Bait* follows that of *Snow Man*. It has a first-person narrator and an antagonist named Donald, who is the foil to the narrator, much like the professor of political science was in *Snow Man*. But now he has a name. Even the narrator's mother has no name, and she plays a vital role in the narrative. The novel recounts the life of his mother (and his father to a lesser degree). He identifies his father as someone who "found himself behind a barbed wire fence in a German camp for captured officers," which is what did happen to Albahari's father (Albahari, *Bait* 4). The autobiographical element continues when the narrator tells us: "It was two years already I hadn't heard my own language, I wasn't able to hear it often being this far away in the West of Canada, in a city in which everyone is an immigrant ..." (5). On the previous page he had identified his nationality by referring to the *Dictionary of the Serbo-Croatian Language*. The immigrant now has a specificity that was lacking in *Snow Man* and the novel itself becomes slightly more illuminated by the reference to Calgary, not by name, but by circumstance as a city "... raised on the surrounding hillocks that had once been part of the prairie at the foot of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, and the high-rises were on a flat stretch of land bounded by a narrow river [the Bow] and its still narrower tributary [the Elbow]" (10). The rivers are narrow because the rivers of Belgrade, the Danube and the Sava, are wide indeed. The narrator's mother has provided him with tapes of her life story, which he has brought to Western Canada. Her story symbolizes Europe and his being in Calgary becomes a place of displacement from his past. The reference to language is fundamental because the narrator expresses anxiety about losing his language and without it he believes he vanishes. Albahari's commitment to writing in Serbian during his eighteen years in Calgary is a confirmation of the narrator's concern. He admitted in an interview that "I can't create in English" (Melnyk, "Lost in Translation" 40). The growing specificity of the protagonist in the novel seems to parallel his affirmation of writing in Serbian rather than in English. Grudgingly he has adopted being in a new place, but not a new language. "I don't even want to consider writing prose in English," he told an interviewer after being in Calgary for four years, "especially because I have been developing my own style in the native language" (Longinovic 32).

While *Snow Man* is a novel of confrontation with the Other, *Bait* is a novel of loss, memory, and explanation. It is mellower in tone and less stringent in its judgements. Places and identities are named so that it is much easier to orient oneself in the work because naming creates a kind of map. What was vaguely suggested in *Snow Man* becomes specific in *Bait*. The battle between the two worlds remains, but now it is more a dialogue or debate rather than an angry, emotional exchange. For example, on page 41 of *Bait*, Albahari mentions Belgrade and Banja Luka, places that carry historical connotations for his Serbian readership, while on the previous page the words “Bosnia,” “Yugoslav,” and “Muslim-Croat formations” appear. The Yugoslav civil war of 1991-99 is here. He is finally able to write about it from the distance of Canada.

The narrator goes into a bookstore to search for a book about the Canadian soul and meets a writer named Donald, with whom he starts a debate. The narrator is particularly concerned about the relationship between identity and language: “I felt the other language taking over me, adapting me to its requirements, myself becoming another person” (28). The reference to English continues the concerns first expressed in *Snow Man*. The tapes from his mother explain the person he is, including his birthplace (Peć in Kosovo) and his military service. While saddened by the history of war in Yugoslavia and how it impacted his family and himself, he finds Canada a curious culture. The narrator talks about “Canadian kindness” as being made up of “polite phrases and so many thank-yous” (32). But this commentary on niceness leads the narrator to an unnerving conclusion: “Nothing so much frightens as kindness, nothing so much leads one to suspicion as a smile” (37). The cultural divide that this sentence expresses is a gulf that has the narrator feel total isolation (“I haven’t met a single neighbour” [37]). This rather bleak social existence is then applied to the whole city where the narrator claims, “Life is invisible” (37). So in his second fictional description of his Alberta experience, two years into it, the alienation seems to have deepened. The city of Calgary is further described in a continuing tone of disinterest:

... a city on the edge of the prairie and the rim of the North, where the sun, especially in winter, moved uncertainly and low across the horizon, in the same way as I moved through the city center and the scattered suburbs. (47)

The narrator presents himself as having an uncertain and low profile, suggesting his passage through the city as being surreptitious, either out of fear or out of dis-attachment. This furtive presence seems to have been brought on by the weight of his mother's narrative that he listens to on a tape-recorder. What seems real to the narrator is the family history in Yugoslavia rather than the place he currently inhabits. The family story is the fundamental element, while where the narrator resides is unimportant and simply a place where he can reflect on that story and its tragedies. This may be the way that Alhabari actually viewed his own situation—his Serbian situation being the important one, and Alberta being simply a place where he could reflect on it. In a Canadian interview several years after *Bait* was published, he is quoted as saying:

My present situation is a blessing and a curse at the same time. It is a blessing because of the experiences offered by the new culture ... the curse is in losing touch with one's native language while surrounded by English speakers ... (Longinovic 32)

Later on in the interview he presents a more positive view of what has happened to him. He says that his "physical absence" from Serbian literature has liberated him from certain roles he had within that literature. "The burden of being a writer in the East European way has also been lifted off my back" (32). But, of course, his Serbian audience is more interested in how he deals with his voluntary exile in Canada, imagining themselves in his shoes, and he graciously plays to that interest.

When the narrator explains his mother's story to Donald, he encounters a certain blankness that frustrates him. He concludes mournfully: "I will always be a European, as he will always be a North American, and about this nothing can be changed; we will always remain as different as night and day" (Albahari, *Bait* 62). This black and white metaphor suggests that in the continuum of existence and the daily passage of time the transitions offered by morning and evening are inconsequential. It is the two opposites that matter. Then the narrator shifts the parameters toward the elusive so that the reader is left wondering. He describes Donald as "a shady creature from the North" and himself as "a shady creature from the land of no return" (62). The characters in the novel are simply shades rather

than reality, just shadows of real people. This shift gives his fictional world a certain indefiniteness. What Albahari wants the reader to experience is that in-between world where he himself is standing or trying to stand. He wants the reader to live in the space created by his writing, to be at home in a “cluster of sentences.” One critic describes the point of view of the novel as looming “over the void” (Aleksić 54).

That Albahari felt comfortable enough in 1996 to write about the civil war that was raging in Yugoslavia was an indication of how his residence in Calgary had given him both peace and purpose. The relevance and power of the novel were such that it won the Nin Prize in Serbia for best book of the year, the most prestigious award that his work had received to date. It tells his personal story, though disguised and piecemeal. The tone of the novel is highly confessional and this approach, also true of *Snow Man*, brings the narrator close to the reader. V.G. Petković, writing in *Belgrade Language and Literature Studies*, describes the persona of the narrator as “articulate, but helpless and listless” (95). There are then two features of the narrator—first, his articulateness and second, his vulnerability—that encourage the reader to reach out to him. Because of the narrator’s uncertainty and ambivalence, the interplay of history and identity becomes quite fluid and indeterminate. Expressing a viewpoint and then discounting it are typical for the narrator, whose life is losing its centre, just as his former country is disintegrating. Albahari’s depiction of Alberta (he never uses the name) is wrapped up in terms such as “Canada” and “North America” which have currency among his Serbian readers, but not “Alberta.” This is an important feature of his Alberta novels. They may be situated in the province, but they do not participate in its existence other than as a backdrop or as a symbol of a wider identity such as North America. That is why a Serbian critic like Petrović makes no mention of Alberta in her article. From her perspective the province is not a relevant player other than as the nameless “émigré environment . . . duly reflected in his fiction” (94). While the narrator in the novel recounts his mother and father’s history and his own in Yugoslavia through various selected episodes, the narrator’s history in North America deals with his futile attempt to make that previous history understandable to the figure of Donald. This obvious refusal to engage with the history and character of his new home, other than to see it as the opposite of Europe, reflects Albahari’s unalterable commitment to his European identity. In the Longinovic interview, Albahari confirmed that

it was the “theme of exile” that dominates the novels written in Calgary (33). He describes the novels as being about “isolation and existence in a linguistic and cultural in-between” (33).

The lonely voice of the exile is the voice of *Bait*. Lost in remembering, tied to events that traumatized, formed by the vagaries and horrors of history, the exile finds his new home empty, dull, and blind to his pain. For his European readership this portrayal is meaningful and relevant because of their own experiences. For his Alberta or Canadian readership, or even a wider English-language one, there is sympathy for the narrator’s plight, but also a certain disappointment about his refusal to engage with the history and identity of the city on the edge of the prairie. The narrator excuses this failure by claiming he cannot adapt “... to North American standards” (Albahari, *Bait* 79). If he tried to adapt, he would lose whatever authenticity he has. That the narrator’s story exists on a tape that he winds and rewinds, stops and starts, characterizes the past as an oral history as opposed to an official history, and the narrator’s relationship to that history is one of memorializing family events and family attitudes. It is war, the narrator tells us, that has driven him to Canada and it is war that he cannot forget. It has formed him against his will and rather than glorify the refuge he has received, he tries to ignore it by reliving the past “of my onetime country” (94). The narrator describes these memories as “... the ballast that pulled one violently toward the bottom” (101). The heaviest of this ballast is the narrator’s story of his mother’s first husband who was a victim of the German occupation during the Second World War. He was Jewish. The baggage that this history has imparted to Albahari and which he does not want to jettison results in his cultural immobility.

The weight of European twentieth-century history lies heavy on this novel and on the reader. Its overpowering presence pushes aside the desire of his new home for a real presence in his work. It makes Alberta and North America feel lightweight and irrelevant to the pain of European history. However, Albahari’s literary style is so engaging, his narrative so genuine, and his philosophical meanderings so endearing that the absence of the name Alberta in this Alberta novel does not matter. Albahari maintains his style by encouraging us to be lost in the anonymous narrator’s voice as it mulls over possibilities, dithers about this and that, and goes back and forth in a mood of indecision. The humanity of the narrator is never in doubt, even if his reality sometimes is. Because of the novel’s precision and

its confessional style, it offers a concreteness that *Snow Man* lacked. The explanation of life in Alberta (the discussions with Donald) and life in Belgrade (the pronouncements of his mother) that is at the centre of the novel is both effective and moving. After five years of silence about Alberta, Albahari produced a third work, resulting in an unplanned Alberta trilogy. *Globetrotter* represents his final coming to terms with his years in Alberta.

Globetrotter

The novel follows the same format as the previous two. Instead of a professor of political science or the writer Donald acting as foils to an anonymous narrator, we have Daniel Atijas, an anguished writer from Belgrade, who is staying at the Banff Centre. Daniel is described in the novel as a Jew and an outsider (Albahari, *Globetrotter* 45). He also happens to have the same initials as Albahari. The unnamed narrator, who is a painter from Saskatchewan, meets Daniel and they become temporary buddies supposedly because they both come from flat terrains—the narrator from the western Canadian prairie and Daniel from the flatlands of Vojvodina, a geographic feature shared by parts of Serbia and Hungary. Adopting a Canadian persona for his narrator is a reversal for Albahari, whose first two Alberta novels had narrators from Europe. While Daniel and the narrator have their different points of view, they have an innate compatibility as they delve into the mysterious nature of their respective countries. They discuss and compare politics, multiculturalism, the nature of history, much like the discussions in the previous two novels, but the Canadianization of the narrator and the sympathetic treatment of Daniel give the novel a less antagonistic tone overall. The reader can easily identify with both characters.

Since Albahari was at the Banff Centre in the summer of 1994 when he was approached to become the Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary, *Globetrotter* should be considered a homage to Banff, to that moment in his life, and to the mountains that he hiked while living in Calgary. The work is full of Banff place-names (Wolf and Bear Streets) and other easily identified locales in the town and on the campus of the Banff Centre (Lloyd Hall). It is ironic that Albahari's most self-evidently Alberta novel should not have found an Alberta or a

Canadian publisher, and had to wait for more than a decade to find an English translation and an American university publisher. However, its publishing history may very well be a reflection of his “invisible” status in Canadian letters.

On the surface, any Albertan reading it would feel instantly at home in its descriptions, its movements through the town, and its appreciation of the mountain landscape, but the discussion of European and North American politics and history which is continued from the previous two novels seems tedious to Canadian readers. This may not be the case for Yugoslav readers, for whom the civil war had come to an end in 1999 with the NATO bombing of Belgrade and Kosovar autonomy. The main focus of the story is Daniel and the narrator’s discovery of Ivan Matulić, a globe-trotting Croatian who signed the guest book at a Banff institution back in 1924. His grandson, who has emigrated to Canada and now lives in Calgary, comes out to Banff to meet with the two men. The three men begin a conversation about immigration, what happened to Yugoslavia, and what, if anything, nationalism means to Canada. This tripartite dialogue is a departure from the dualism of the first two novels. It adds to the complexity of the novel and Albahari’s adroit representation of their points of view in a seamless text. The idea that a non-ethnic Canadian, a European visitor to Banff, and an ethnic Canadian engage in a conversation about national identities indicates that Albahari had reached a certain degree of comfort with identity after having lived six years in Alberta. The novel was published in Serbian in 2001.

This troika of characters hang out together for a few days, during which the Canadian narrator, much to his chagrin, sees a growing affinity between Daniel and the grandson. Albahari has created three personae (the foreigner, the immigrant, and the native) as representatives of the Euro-Canadian part of Canadian identity and he plays them off against each other, while acknowledging their mutual foreignness to Canada since they are all non-Aboriginal. The clash of European pre-occupations and Canadian issues, already covered in the previous two novels, is repeated when Daniel mentions the philosophers Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the writers Borges and Rilke, and the artists Bosch and Dürer in reference to art and museums, after which the Canadian narrator counters with comments on Quebec separatism and western Canadian alienation (64). It is the same story of colliding worlds we have heard before. What is different

is the mix. Because this is a late period work, relative to the other two, it has become debased by external elements not present in the first two novels. Having a Canadian narrator is a debasement of the classic Albahari-in-exile stance because the explanation of Canadian history and attitudes, while being outwardly correct, lacks a visceral quality when read by an Alberta or Canadian reader. The narrator does not ring quite true as a western Canadian to a western Canadian like myself, though he probably rings true to a Serbian audience, whose knowledge of Canada is either non-existence or very limited. The narrator's historical meanderings and political commentaries on Canada lack the depth of passion that he gives Daniel and the grandson. I find the narrator to be someone who is wearing a western Canadian disguise. Albahari is trying to offer a genuine portrayal of a figure from a place where he had been resident, but which he has not fully absorbed. Claiming a Saskatchewan identity for the narrator could be his way of acknowledging that there may be something not quite right about the narrator's credentials, since Albahari had no experience of Saskatchewan. It is a way of acknowledging a certain inevitable distance from the subject.

There is a plot to the novel. Eventually the grandson tells the narrator and Daniel about his search for the history of his grandfather, the globe-trotter, by going to Croatia in the 1990s and later in Canada, when he digs through a box of his grandfather's effects in which he finds a diary. Unfortunately, the information that he gains puts his grandfather in a bad light. This revelation leads, at first, to a long discussion of historical guilt and how little history Canada has. Then it leads to a more tragic conclusion. But before this happens, there is a scene at which Daniel gives a reading along with other writers at the Banff Centre. The narrator describes the story in this way:

There was no story to it, no events, no central or marginal characters, it even seemed to have no beginning or end. It was all about passages, language itself—endlessly beautiful and endlessly powerful—and if it had sounded this good in translation I had to wonder what it sounded like in the original. (97)

The passage is Albahari's tried and true voice about his own writing. In the second half of the novel there is more of this kind of writing, along

with general pronouncements on history, creativity, art, and even communism. These discussions and commentaries provide a lengthy interlude before the novel moves toward its climax. Daniel announces that he must climb Tunnel Mountain before he returns to Europe. He is joined by the narrator and the grandson. The three manage the ascent easily enough, since it is not a difficult route.⁴ However, the descent is something else. A storm appears out of nowhere and in the wind and rain, the grandson falls to his death. It is left to the narrator to make sense of what happened as he searches through the things left behind by the grandson, much like the grandson had earlier done with his grandfather's effects. What he finds makes him want to leave the mountains for his prairie home.

It is not surprising that Albahari did not attempt another Alberta-based novel while living in Calgary because *Globetrotter* is so place-specific and western-Canadian oriented that it would be difficult to surpass it, unless he were to drop the whole European segment of his novels. Being full of place names and named characters is the complete antithesis of his first work, *Snow Man*, which had only one name. This specificity suggests a late phase work because Albahari prefers to inhabit general categories, where he can roam backwards and forward without really venturing outside his narrator's mind and emotions. This orientation toward abstraction may have contributed to his work not developing a significant English-speaking Canadian or American audience while he lived in Calgary. But as *Globetrotter* clearly shows, he had absorbed the history, the ambience, and specific locales that are part of Alberta. Yet his language and thought-structures remained Serbian and these continued to be evident in the English translations. It is not just the references to so much of recent Yugoslav history in these novels that make that case; it is the way the novels journey through his personal experience of Alberta—initially, a fierce rejection in *Snow Man*, then a mellower emphasis on differences between Europe and America in *Bait*, and, finally, an attempt to articulate a Canadian identity in his main character, the unnamed narrator, in *Globetrotter*. The journey had to end at some point, and in the case of *Globetrotter* the two remaining characters either go home or are about to. Return to one's roots, willingly or unwillingly, is an abiding theme in all three novels. For Albahari, Alberta never became the home that was Serbia, though *Globetrotter* was his attempt to display what he had learned about this alien place and what he understood to be its preoccupations and formative elements. In the end the

concreteness of the novel has to be measured against the innate sense of absence, of silences, of omissions, of spaces in-between that Albahari prefers to inhabit and to re-create. In the case of all three characters there are histories that undermine identities and attitudes that are magnetized, pulling each figure backwards to something that is haunting, yet inexpressible.

Foreignness, Exile, and Alberta Writing

Alberta writing by Euro-Canadians began with the publication of travel journals, so there has always been a component of “passing through” in Alberta literature. But David Albahari spent a long time living and writing in Alberta, without surrendering the foreignness in his writing by writing in Serbian. Because of his orientation toward his European, Serbian-language audience, his significance for Alberta letters is not easy to assess. A 2005 issue of *Serbian Studies: The Journal of the North American Serbian Studies Society* (vol. 19: no. 1) was devoted to articles on the work of Albahari by Serbian-born scholars teaching in North American universities. In these articles the theme of exile is prominent, and it may well be that this theme can explain Albahari’s reluctant relationship to Alberta.

Radmila J. Gorup, in “The Author in Exile: Writing to Forget,” states that those, like Albahari, “... who voluntarily live in an alien country ... do not suffer as much as those forced into exile, [but] they share the solitude and estrangement of exile” (4). Albahari’s stance toward Alberta, an alien country, begets a feeling of solitude and estrangement. That is why his protagonists, according to Gorup, “are in a state of extraterritoriality, being neither *here* nor *there*, but rather in-between things that cannot come together” (6). This in-between state makes one feel alone and resentful of those who are not exiles and “belong to their surroundings” (6-7). Albahari’s characters struggle with a people and a landscape that are unfamiliar and strange, and with their own sense of no longer belonging. Zoran Milutinović, writing in the same issue of *Serbian Studies*, confirms Gorup’s view by describing the narrator in *Bait* as being caught in “... a no-man’s-land between the past, present and future ...” (20). Not being able to identify with Alberta may well reflect the writer’s personal response to his situation of voluntary exile.

What the Serbian North American scholars unanimously support is the division of Albahari's work into two phases—his pre-Canada phase and his Canadian phase. Damjana Mraović calls the works discussed here his “Canadian cycle” (40). It is clear to scholars of Serbian literature that Albahari's being in Canada did have an impact on his work because of the subject matter in these works. These scholars comment on how history and identity issues seem to dominate the Canadian cycle (Ribnikar 53). The narrators in the first two Alberta novels appear as traumatized human beings struggling, often without success, to determine who they are now that they have left their formative home. The narration of the past becomes an obsession because they cannot identify with the present. Their bodies occupy this new space, but their minds and memories resist. Petković sees the preoccupation with history and identity by Albahari's protagonists as a direct result of his own “dislocation” and “the need to re-define or explain his identity” (97). To understand Albahari's novels as a product of dislocation and an internal struggle with identity goes a long way in helping grasp what the writer is expressing in his Alberta novels. Because his native country and its audience for his work remained open to him while he lived and wrote in Calgary, his dual status (he carried a Yugoslavian passport when he first arrived in Calgary, and both Serbian and Canadian passports later) encouraged the dislocation, the neither here nor there of his writing. He occupied his own country while he was in Alberta. His body was here, but his mind was there. The result is a view of Alberta that is based on reluctance, uncertainty, and loneliness. The quest for a safe haven for his literary spirit was both met and not met by Alberta. That the place provided a refuge in which he led a prolific literary existence is true, but it is also true that the place did not offer him the audience that writers need. This means that an alien country that remains alien to the expatriate writer can be a wonderful stimulus to literary creativity. That this creativity finds the alien country a negative space is not surprising. What is surprising is how that negativity was able to generate a literary reputation that continues to grow.

Serbian scholars writing in English focus on what they read as the Serb-in-exile theme of Albahari's Alberta novels. North American reviewers and critics take a slightly different approach. They view his work and his presence from the welcoming country's viewpoint. David Berlin, reviewing a book titled *Room for All of Us* by Adrienne Clarkson, which has a

chapter about Albahari, states: “Canada offers a tradition of benign neglect that allows a Calgary-based Serbian writer named David Albahari to carve out the space he needs ...” (R28). The idea here is that Alberta is a refuge, a sanctuary, where émigrés, expatriates, immigrants, and exiles can find peace. It is a place of welcome and security. Eric Volmers, of the *Calgary Herald*, quoted Albahari as saying in 2011: “I feel like a double personality because I am here in one sense and in another sense I’m not here because I am not writing in English” (C1). This duality is consistent with the legacy of other Alberta writers who did not write in English like the Icelandic poet Stephan Stephansson, the Ukrainian novelist Ilya Kiriak, or the French novelist Georges Bugnet. As immigrant writers they became a part of Alberta literature because of their writing about this place in their work. Albahari has done the same but only to a limited degree. Stephansson, Kiriak, and Bugnet were immigrants who died in Alberta. They embraced their identity as immigrants and wrote about that experience. Albahari never saw himself as an immigrant and preferred to write about the angst of voluntary exile. Considering this view, his return to Serbia in 2012 was not totally unexpected.⁵

When the *Hudson Review* published a review essay of a number of Albahari’s novels, the reviewer wrote that *Bait* was a hybrid novel, “unified by the narrator’s consciousness” (Lewis 374). My own experience of his Alberta novels suggests that they actually display a highly limited sense of hybridity, because the narrator’s antagonists, who represent the Canadian reality, are portrayed in a negative light as lacking in understanding or whose understanding is superficial. Albahari admitted as such when he said in a 2005 interview that he used “stereotypes and prejudices” in creating the conversations between his narrators and Donald (*Bait*) and Daniel (*Snow Man*) (Mraović-O’Hare 184). His purpose was to expose the misunderstanding between cultures. In the same interview, he talked about his protagonists in the Alberta novels as experiencing “cultural shock” as they struggle with loss and adjustment (178). This shock only heightened their struggle with the issue of identity. Because Albahari was born, raised, and became a writer in a multinational state called Yugoslavia, which is now no more, his struggle with identity issues and the meaning of being a Serbian writer was more profound. If Yugoslavia had not disappeared in a civil war, I suspect that he would have remained in Yugoslavia and be known today as a Yugoslavia writer. There would not have been any Alberta novels

and Albahari would have explored other realities in his work, as he has done in numerous other novels and short stories. His attempt to describe the clash of two worlds gave both worlds familiar and unfamiliar characteristics. In the end, the only space that he occupied in his Alberta novels was a personal internal space of belonging and not belonging simultaneously. This was most apparent in his engagement or rather non-engagement with the English language. Albahari continued to translate English literature into Serbian, for he was also a fluent speaker of English, and yet, he steadfastly refused to write fiction in English. This refusal became a hallmark of his Alberta novels. It also became a sign of choice of the writer using place for his own ends, and then determining which place mattered at a certain point in his life. Because Albahari chose to live for a time in an English-speaking world while writing in Serbian, he was dependent on translation to reach the world he lived in. This may be the key concept in understanding his Alberta novels. In Yugoslavia he was the founder and editor-in-chief of *Pismo*, a magazine of world literature. He also did numerous translations, especially of English-language fiction. So one can think of his Alberta novels as his “translation” of Alberta to his European home audiences. He was speaking to them with a sensibility they understood about a place they did not know. They could grasp what he was trying to say because he and they came from the same roots. This was not the case with Canadian readers who read him in translation. We had the sense that we were reading a foreign writer. This idea of translation is something that I very much associate with the nature of Alberta writing, where writers, whether anglophones or not, had to tell others what this place was all about. In an essay dealing with Albahari’s translation of his own words, I wrote:

I believe it is best to see David, the writer, as the consummate translator attuned to disparate audiences. He translates his hidden inner self into acceptable external categories (*First Person Plural* 110).

The power of language to both express and repress is captured in this quote from an interview with Albahari conducted by Mraović-O’Hare in 2005, and published in 2008:

From a technical point of view I could write in the English language, but I don't see the point of such a move, and, practically speaking, I would just limit myself." (180)

The importance of native language to Albahari is such that using a language, like English in which he is fluent, would still be limiting to his expression. In fact, in an interview in *Books in Canada*, Albahari makes the point that the Czech Canadian writer, Josef Skovrecky, did not need to write in English as he eventually did. It wasn't "necessary," he says (Longinovic 32). But Skovrecky's choice to write in English gave him a literary profile in Canada that Albahari never achieved. Albahari's emphasis on publishing in Serbian, in Serbia, became self-fulfilling and made him a foreign writer in Alberta.

This emphasis on describing and situating his Alberta novels using Serbian makes the relationship of these novels to Alberta literature problematic. During the time he spent here, he wrote numerous works. The specifically Alberta-located novels represent a minority of the total work he did here. The novels express conflict and uncertainty and their contribution to Alberta letters also seems conflicted and uncertain. Alberta as an alien land that produces emotional and mental conflict for the narrator is the basic structure in the novels, and yet Alberta remains peripheral because it was mostly a nameless Other that could have been any strange place. Albahari wanted his readers, whether in Serbian or in translation, to feel tied to language itself and its power. What is certain is that his Alberta novels contributed to his journey as a literary hero in Serbia, but they did not contribute to his profile in Canada. It would seem that the borders between national literatures are still in place and a writer, like Albahari, who wants to live in the no-man's land between them, in a map of his own imagination, has to pay a certain price.

Albahari's residency in language rather than place is a sign of the diasporic literary imagination. His diaspora is not just his years in Canada, but, more importantly, his diaspora is Serbia itself. How can that be? Because his national literary identity was Yugoslavian, a multicultural and multinational society in which he felt at home. When Yugoslavia disappeared as a nation-state, Albahari became stateless in his heart. For him, Serbian national identity was something he had to struggle to accept. Being Jewish and aware of the horrific history of Balkan nationalism in the twentieth

century, how could he not be wary and distrustful of the new/old identities. It is important to note that his diasporic imagination is not a simple Serbian-Canadian duality; it is a complex of disconnections and connections that he had to navigate in a civil war and postwar environment. Later, watching history unfold from the safety of Canada did not make the process any simpler or easier. In fact, it made his retreat into himself and away from nationality an uncertain, even indeterminate, exercise in self-understanding and identity. His Alberta novels were profound expressions of that journey into absence, an inner space where only he could reside.

NOTES

- 1 The program is currently titled The University of Calgary Distinguished Writers Program.
- 2 One must be careful in accepting Albahari's self-interpretation. The claim of less intensity is something that is difficult to assess by a third party because of the interiority of the author's mindset.
- 3 It would not be till the new millennium that the name of Yugoslavia would disappear and be replaced by the nationalities (now countries) that had made up its multinational identity—Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and even Kosovo.
- 4 While David was writing *Globetrotter*, he invited me to go with him to Banff and Tunnel Mountain so that he could accurately describe the situation he had envisaged for the fall. We did go and he confirmed the climb *in situ* as this was part of the nature of the novel with its emphasis on geographic accuracy.
- 5 Even after his return to Belgrade, he has made periodic visits to Calgary, most recently in 2016. He still has a house in the city and family to visit. Whether this experience will ever find its way into fiction is unknown.

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