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## The Construction of Ethnic Identity of Balkan Muslim Immigrants: A Narrativization of Personal Experiences

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### Abstract

This paper explores the construction of ethnic identity in the first generation of Balkan Muslim immigrants now living in the Chicago metropolitan area, with the aim of showing the intricacy of global events (civil wars in the homeland and war on terror in the host society) and local contexts (meaning-making occurring during the interviews). In-depth interviews conducted with three men were treated as a series of narratives in order to emphasize the importance of personal meaning-making. With awareness that “Muslim” can denote various subjectivities, this paper proposes research that theorizes the constant shift of identities, the interplay between ascribed and performed ethnicity, as well as the role of societal and historical mediators that influence the agency of these identities.

### Keywords

Balkan Muslims, Immigrants, Ethnic Identity, and Narratives

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## **The Construction of Ethnic Identity of Balkan Muslim Immigrants: A Narrativization of Personal Experiences**

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### **Experiences**

This paper is a part of a larger study (my dissertation research) that was guided with a broad question of how the first generation of Balkan immigrants in Chicago view their ethnicity and race, as well as which personal and cultural elements constitute the building blocks of ethnic and racial identity construction. Identity, as time and context bound, requires an interpretive study of situated human behavior as well as the careful analysis of individual diversity within different societies. Individual identities are inseparable from their sociocultural environment, as each individual's subjectivity is shaped by the searching for meaning in that environment. The close connection between individuals and narrativization of life emerges, “since selfhood arises out of the *meanings* that people attribute to their experiences, [and] what is meaning other than placing an event in a narrative context?” (Sarbin, 2000, p. 255, emphasis original). Individuals cannot depart from cultural conventions in infinite ways, since individual action is constrained by culture inasmuch it is enhanced by it (Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999). The role of language is crucial here, for language is “inherently a form of relatedness” (Gergen, 1991, p. 157) that creates sense among individuals. Seen through this perspective, the meaning of one's identity derives from interdependence between the personal and societal. Narrative analysis seems to be a particularly effective method for the investigation of cultural identity, which encompasses ethnicity, since it allows an understanding of the co-constructed nature of cultural ingredients and personal moral world.

In this paper I first review recent writings on self, identity, and ethnicity. The selection of the sources was shaped by an ongoing debate between modernist and postmodernist views on identity, with awareness that a firm distinction between the two is neither possible nor viable. I then turn to the concept of ethnic identity as related to Balkan Muslims. The Balkans consists of distinct countries, ethnicities, languages, and religions. If

one is to pay attention to sociocultural aspects of ethnic identities in the region, one has to address the interconnectedness of the personal and the historical that include five centuries under the Ottoman Empire, half a century of “soft” or hard-line versions of communist dictatorship, and recent civil wars burdened with the ethnic, the religious, and the territorial

### **Identity, Self, and Ethnicity**

The constructs “identity” and “self” are experiencing a scholarly and popular renaissance. Once reserved for the specialized psychological vocabulary, these notions have become widely researched as the result of the general sociocultural turn in the human sciences, which aims at understanding the relationship between human activity and cultural, historical and institutional settings (Wertsch, 1995). It seems that both self and identity have been in use for such a long time that they have reached a status of self-evident notions arising from one's firsthand experience (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Some scholars use the word “self” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), others talk about “identity” (Schachter, 2005; Schwartz, 2005), and yet there are those who opt for the idea of “self-identity” (Bautista & Boone, 2005; Yihong, Ying, Yuan, & Yan, 2005). Kosmitzki (1996) claimed that “one's subjective identity or sense of self consists of attributes that make one unique as well as characteristics one may share with others” (p. 239). Echoing Erikson, Hoare (1991) saw identity as personal coherence and self-knowledge of one's authenticity. Schachter proposed a definition of identity not as a “personal task” (p. 391), but as a co-construction of the individual and sociocultural factors. The task for researchers is then widening their focus to see how diverse identities function, serving diverse goals that are of value to the individual and the society.

Despite the different terminology, literature is replete with paradoxical notions of a self and identity: identity is understood as “oneness,” “one true self,” which people with a shared history and ancestry have in common, and yet, it is an entity which is constantly re-created, as people make sense of themselves and the world around them. In a way, identity is “what we really are” and at the same time it is a “name we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1994, p. 394).

“The logic of identity is, for good or ill, finished,” exclaimed Stuart Hall (1997a, p. 43). Identity has been decentered on three different levels: sociohistorical, psychological, and linguistic. First, there is a Marxian thought that sees individuals as creators of history, but never completely on their own: When people are forced to sell their labor to those who own means of production, their actions remain constrained. Second, there is the Freudian notion of unconscious, “which speaks most clearly when it's slipping, rather than saying what it means” (p. 43). And finally, there is a linguistic identity upset by language and the work of representation it does. As a result of social conventions specific to each society and historical junctures, each language produces a different set of signifiers (actual words) and signifieds (mental representations that correspond with the word), thus creating an arbitrary way of organizing the world into concepts and categories. This opens up meaning and representation to history and change, to “constant ‘play,’ or slippage of meaning” (Hall, 1997b, p. 32). These disrupted, dislocated postmodern identities tell us that we cannot feel secure within our own self. And yet, Hall (1997c) asked,

What is the point of an identity if it isn't one thing? That is why we keep hoping that identities will come our way because the rest of the world is so

confusing: everything else is turning, but identities ought to be some stable points of reference which were like that in the past are now and ever shall be, still points in a turning world. (p. 22)

This fragmented identity, dissolved in history and culture, presents a postmodern assault on essence, unity, and agency of identity. And yet, the concept of identity has survived. Postmodernism did succeed in unmasking the false universalism of the oppressive Western culture, but in its preoccupation with identity and difference, postmodernism is ill equipped to challenge the treatment of differences as fixed characteristics (Hammond, 1999). Cultural theorist Frank Furedi (as cited in Hammond) argued,

When history becomes used for identity creation it strengthens the passive side of men and women. Identity is passive by-product of history ... It does not matter whether this past is radical or conservative. In both cases it is the past that is *active* and men and women, the grateful recipients of identities, are *passive*. (Section 5, para. 6, emphasis in original)

Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (1995) proposed the more modernist perspective of self, given that postmodernism, in its abstract preoccupation with the fractured self neglects the existence of agency. The self that Gubrium and Holstein proposed is more unified and integral, grounded in the “local, everyday practices of self-construction” (p. 556). This local culture presents an organized way of understanding and representing human actions and meanings attached to them. Local culture does not solely determine how individuals see themselves; instead, it provides shared resources and possibilities under which our self is lived out. Such self is an empirically grounded, socially constructed entity that is structured according to locally available resources such as conventions, language, organizations, and institutions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Like Holstein and Gubrium, Hall also understood the self and identity as a product of specific historical and institutional sites, but for Hall there is no way back to the modernist core of identity. Hall (1994) believed that a modernist assumption was that the gist of the self hides inside many other, imposed and artificial selves is false. Cultural identities do not transcend time and place; they always have histories, and like everything that is historical, they constantly change. However, the question remains: To what extent can “culture” explain identity? Zhao (2005) nicely summarized that “cultures only expose the tip of the iceberg of our experience – the part that is chosen to be highlighted and the part that can be highlighted in a symbolic, collective and traditional manner” (p. 9). Zhao was cautious of social constructionist and postmodern views on identity that overemphasize the influence of culture on human beings. This is, Zhao argued, a determinist view of human selfhood. Instead, we need theorizing that embraces both social constructions and human unstructured experience.

### **Ethnic Identity and Balkan Muslims**

The concept of ethnicity has been described as “muddy” (Omi & Winant, 1994) and “elusive” (Sollors, 1996). Where possible, researchers have tried to avoid defining ethnicity altogether, since the concept is often conflated and confused with race, and cannot be fully understood without considering nation and nationalism (Bringa, 1993), gender, class, citizenship, and immigration status (Anthias, 1998). More recently, the concept of nation has been introduced to the theoretical discussion (Jenkins, 1999), posing additional questions

about the dynamics of ethnicities' incorporation in the state (Hutchinson, 2000). The major differences between nations and ethnicities appear to be in their relations to the state: Ethnic identity is linked to ethnic self-definition (what one thinks and feels one is), while nationality is associated to one's belonging as ascribed by the state. Miles and Brown (2003), for instance, argue that "what distinguishes the nation state is the claim that the world's population is 'naturally' divided into distinct nations, each of which has the right to distinct and separate political organization and representation by means of the state" (p. 142). The state develops and implements strategies and institutions (legal system, armed forces, and police) to protect its territorial boundaries and the nation within them.

Members of ethnic groups usually see themselves as natural categories that have always been in existence, with the myths of struggle and survival passed on from generation to generation (Sollors, 1989). However, this isolated picture of inevitably idealized groups works "at the expense of more widely shared historical conditions and cultural features, of dynamic interaction and syncretism" (Sollors, 1989, p. xiv). Sollors thus concluded that ethnicity is also a collective fiction, an invention. Hall (1996) as well saw this call for a common historical past of ethnic groups problematic. People do not correspond to the past rather,

identities use the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we come from," so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (p. 4)

Despite the differences, writers on ethnicity agree that the sense of ethnic communality is a form of monopolistic social construction in the way that it defines membership, eligibility and access, and calls upon the metaphors of blood, kin, heritage, religion, language, sexuality, dress, and forms of cuisine (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993; Brah, 1996; Jenkins, 1997; Rattansi, 1994). Cultural and social factors are apparently embedded in the concept of ethnicity, more than biological characteristics, but the problem of boundaries remain. Where does one culture begin and another end, and how many cultures are there? (Miles & Brown, 2003). Ethnicity is always constructed relationally since people make sense of themselves and others in a process of differentiation (Anthias, 2001). Or as Hall (1997c, p. 49) claimed,

The notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told from the position of the Other.

This idea of interaction, of ethnic differences and similarities as a function of "group-ness," which incorporates "outsiders" as well as "insiders," can be translated into a cross-disciplinary approach that sees identities as relational (e.g., in sociology Brah, 1996; in anthropology Jenkins, 1997; in psychology Abrams, 1999). The idiosyncrasy of identities acquires its meaning only in relation to the social and cultural context in which identities are formed.

One of the most complex questions that is still dominant in the Balkans when people talk about their own and others' ethnicity is the issue of Muslim identity. The Muslim population in the Balkans is an Ottoman legacy, and as a group, Muslims have been constantly present on the peninsula since the fourteenth century (Kucukcan, 1999; Todorova,

1998). A significant number of the Muslims in the Balkans reside in Albania, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Bulgaria. Dennis Hupchick (2002), a historian of the region, noticed that the number of comprehensive studies in the English language that deal with the Balkans is insufficient, especially when compared with published work on East, Central, or Western Europe. The Muslim population in the Balkan countries is not an exception, although civil wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) and the subsequent NATO air strikes in 1999, spurred some interest in the United States toward Bosnian and Kosovo Muslims. To borrow Allievi's expression (in Marechal, Allievi, Dassetto, & Nielsen, 2003), Islam and Muslims became visible in public discourse through "exceptional cases" (p. 292) such as the Rushdie affair in Great Britain or headscarf controversy in France, but for the United States, the Muslim population in general was brought under the spotlight by the events of September 11, 2001. Islam and the presumed deep religiosity of the people have come to represent an essence of Muslims, regardless of their place of origin and cultural practices. Unfortunately, these simplistic images, dominated by homogeneous, stereotypical epithets of Muslims have been constructed and perpetuated by the conservative political forces and often superficial sensationalistic media stories. A number of theorists (Miles & Brown, 2003; Omi & Winant, 2005; Rizvi, 2005) have termed this Islamophobia, a new expression of racism that works within a framework of national security, terrorism threat, and patriotism.

This paper considers the narratives of three Muslim men who were born and raised under state socialism which, to a various extent, restricted religious freedom throughout the Balkan region. For instance, in socialist Yugoslavia, religion was officially unaccepted and sanctioned, but unofficially tolerated, unlike Albania, where the government's ban on all kinds of religious practices from 1967 to 1990 was strictly enforced. The case of Bosnian Muslims is specific as they were the only nation in the socialist Yugoslavia that did not have their home republic, which bore significant consequences in the outbreak of civil wars. Bosnian Muslims could not claim the "blood ties" between a nation and a territory as all other nations in Yugoslavia did (Woodward, 1995), since their status followed a complicated and confusing path from being recognized as Serbs or Croats, or "Yugoslavs of undeclared nationality," or Muslims as "ethnic minority," and finally, Muslims as a nation (Bringa, 1993; Friedman, 1996; Hamourtziadou, 2002; Sekulic, Massey, & Hodson, 1994).

Religion adds more to this complexity, since in the former Yugoslavia religious affiliation is, in a way, given by virtue of one's ethnicity; Croats are Roman Catholics, Serbs are Orthodox, and Muslims adhere to Sunni Islam. Thus, religious affiliation is a part of one's cultural identity, regardless of one's attitudes toward religion. Despite the attempts of the Yugoslav Communist Party to downplay the significance of religion, Muslim identity in the former Yugoslavia was strongly charged with religious connotations for two reasons. First, even though a Muslim, with a capital "M" signaled a nation, and Muslim with a lower case "m" denoted a religion (Hamourtziadou, 2002; Popovic, 1997), this semantical and theoretical distinction has never gained popularity, and even the secular Muslims were perceived through religion. Second, the Bosnian and Bulgarian speaking Muslims are Slavs that converted to Islam throughout the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, and have presented a contested entity in their home countries ever since (Friedman, 1996). Today, the term *Bosniak* or *Bosnjak* replaced Bosnian Muslim (but not Bosnian Serb or Croat) in order to avoid the religious connotations that were not only often inaccurate, but negative as well (Friedman; Hamourtziadou).

The interplay of ethnic homogeneity and religious diversity is also present in Albania. Although religion is present in today's "vulnerable emergent Albania" (Liolin, 1997, p. 183), it is not a dominant discourse. For centuries, the Albanian social system has been mainly

based on the idea of common ancestry which in turn developed a strong loyalty to family, kin, and the clans (Gjuraj, 2000). Furthermore, patriarchy and its code of relations, as well as the existence of customary law, serve as binding forces more than religious belonging. Such value system, Gjuraj asserted, downplays religious differences, and Albania is considered a religiously tolerant country toward all of its citizens. Up to the beginning of the communist autocracy in 1944, Albania fell victim to the constant foreign invasions; Roman and Byzantine conquest, five hundred years under the Ottoman Empire, fascist occupation in the World War II. It seems that this long history of struggle for independence and freedom directed different religious groups toward each other, leaving “no time to articulate their religious interests at each other's cost” (Gjuraj, p. 32).

Given this variety of sociocultural contexts under which identities are constructed, the question is, can we talk about common Muslim identity in the Balkans? A sociocultural context is understood here as a set of practices used by a group that are closely connected with the group's common history, values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms. In his examination of Muslim diaspora in Europe, Kastoryano (1999) stated that “the diversity of national identities among Muslims and their different relationships to their states of origin as well as to their states of residence could be an obstacle to the development of a common identification” (p. 192). Different loyalties, to the country of origin, brotherhood, ethnic, or religious group, shape different narratives that Muslims of Europe and the Balkans develop. For instance, the dominant narrative among North African Muslims in France is that of colonization. For the Turkish Muslims who have never been colonized, the sense of Muslimness may emanate from the Ottoman Empire's glory (Kastoryano). In her study of transnational identity formation in young Muslims in Europe and the United States, Schmidt (2004) found that immigration contributes to the “purification” of Islam (p. 37) in a way that Muslims migrating from different parts of the world come to understand their commonalities that transcend ethnicity and geography. For the immigrants in the United States, religious institutions play an important role in the process of ethnic formation, for they exercise leadership and serve as a gathering force in structuring immigrants' lives in the host society (Kurien, 2004).

My argument is that narratives of Muslim immigrants from the Balkans were shaped by experiences that significantly differ from the experiences of the Muslims in Western Europe or Turkey. First and foremost, it was life in socialism, marked by secularism, and post-socialist transition toward multi-party democracy and market economy. Second, civil wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995, which heightened ethnic and religious sentiments, and the NATO air strikes on Yugoslavia in 1999, affected the way all identities were shaped, for the Muslims as well as for others. Not all the participants experienced the wars first-hand, but events of such magnitude reverberated through the region, and indirectly affected the lives and narratives of immigrants who are coming from Yugoslavia's neighboring countries. And thirdly, the immigrants' racial “invisibility” in the racialized social structure of the United States, inevitably shapes the stories about identity. Hence, narratives of ethnic identity construction as lived and experienced in the Balkans were narratives of ideologies and wars.

### **Data and Method**

Data for this paper are part of my dissertation research on the construction of racial and ethnic identity of Balkan immigrants. The larger study attempted to address the following research gaps: (a) different White European immigrant groups are often lumped



together into a single category, neglecting the cultural, historical, and geographic attributes of this group. Great variations among and within the groups are masked by the static label "European immigrants." More studies that address the differences and similarities between White immigrant groups are needed; (b) studies on the Balkan Peninsula are particularly needed to correct the misconceptions about this part of the world and its rich history and culture; and (c) knowing more about the Balkan immigrants in the United States can enrich the studies of Whiteness. Although there is a consensus in the field that the White racial and ethnic identity is not a monolith, the variety within White identities is addressed almost exclusively through the experiences of White Americans. The true recognition of differences needs to include the perspectives outside the North American experiences.

While experiencing my personal journey as an emigrant woman to the United States, my intellectual curiosity and excitement grew with regard to the topic of immigrants' identity. While aware of my own positionality as a partial insider, for one can never be a full cultural insider, I struggled to articulate my researcher's voice as a "Balkan immigrant" who would, through this text, inevitably, but only partially, represent Balkan immigrants. Yet, as Stuart Hall (1997a) writes, everybody talks from somewhere: In our identity we all find roots, a position from which we see and comprehend the world. It is not a surprise then that I have chosen to study "my own" immigrant group. Such a choice is not a novelty: On the contrary, if one is to look carefully at the name of the researcher and the group he or she studies, one will often find a link between the person's ethnicity or place of origin and the immigrant group that is studied.

Maria Todorova (2004) eloquently writes, "The beauty of the Balkans is precisely in its excessive richness of manifold cultures," and yet the area and its people have been subjected to "deplorable exercise in stereotyping, marginalizing and ghettoizing" (pp. 178-179), all which stemmed from the mechanical understanding of culture. My personal investment in this research reflects these words. I wished to uncover the rich meaning-making process of my participants as they opened up their personal world to me. By listening, interpreting, and writing their stories, I also revisited my own identity and what it means to be *of* the Balkans and live and write *in* the United States. My hope is that this research complements the growing scholarship dedicated to refute the image of obscurity the Balkans are viewed by and judged upon in the Western world.

I conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the first generation of Balkan immigrants now living in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. The Balkans are understood here as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (further referred to as Bosnia), Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro (my participants and I often referred to these two countries as former Yugoslavia). In a region shattered by wars and adverse economic and political conditions, it is almost impossible to single out a defining reason for leaving one's homeland. For these reasons, the popular notions of immigrants as indicators of economic migration and refugees as political migration are problematic (Hein, 1993), as well as the distinctions between various types of immigration that have become practically meaningless (Castles, 2002). Castles argues that an immense global movement of the people made it increasingly difficult for the state policy to discern neatly between categories such as economic migration, family reunion, refugee status, and asylum seeking. Therefore, this study does not make a distinction between the various terms, but uses the more encompassing term "immigrants" instead.

Participants in the dissertation research, including the three men whose narratives are highlighted in this paper, were recruited based on the length of time they have resided in the United States. I was particularly interested in the narratives of immigrants who left their

homelands in 1990s and after, during the period of civil wars and ethnic conflicts in the region. Current immigration from the Balkans has been propelled by the political and economic conditions that differ significantly from the causes of immigration that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century or after World War II. The narrowing of the sample by this criterion allowed an exploration of the influences of the historic and social context that could significantly mark the self-perception of racial and ethnic subjects, as well as the perception of the “other” both from a racial and an immigration position. Certainly, this sample is not a representative of Balkan immigrants, neither in the Chicago area nor in the United States. This study followed a principle of obtaining depth rather than breadth of information (Glesne, 1999).

While conducting interviews for the larger study, I did not deliberately search for a specific number of participants who belong to a different ethnic group, but I wanted, nevertheless, my sample to capture the experiences of different ethnicities. When recruiting participants for the larger study, these three men were the only Muslims who fulfilled the sample requirements and agreed to be interviewed. A certain number of individuals immediately refused to participate. They either did not have any interest in this topic, or declined to be interviewed because the topic of race and ethnicity caused a sense of uneasiness. Some of the potential participants did not want to be audio-taped and were suspicious of the possible audience for this research.

My assumption is that the common characteristic of the immigrants who wanted to be interviewed is the desire to speak, to be heard, and to say that “what is known about us maybe isn't so.” In a way, their stories aimed at correcting the common knowledge about the Balkans, which is often bordered with stereotypes and prejudices. A perception of mutual similarity between the researcher and the “researched” probably existed; those who participated in the interviews and who recommended me to their friends and acquaintances share an Andersonian (Anderson, 1991) sense of horizontal comradeship that connects the group of people who belong to different ethnicities, nations, and religions, but express similar sentiments.

Upon the completion of the study, while re-reading the interview transcripts, I became aware of the confluence of ethnicity, religion, and personal experiences that led to common threads in the stories of these three men. My revisiting of the finished research product also coincided with a different kind of awareness; that of the heightened attention that the Muslims in the United States have been exposed to since September 11, 2001. I have realized that these stories have to do little with widespread ideas about, and fear of, the new “ultimate other” as irrational, violent, sexist, and unwilling to change. Therein rests my choice to select these three narratives for this paper in order to show that “what is known about us maybe isn't so.”

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

A central issue in the discussion on the validity of qualitative research is succinctly phrased as a question by Lincoln and Guba (2000).

How do we know when we have specific social inquires that are faithful enough to some human construction that we may feel safe in acting on them, or, more important, that members of the community in which the research is conducted may act on them? (p. 180)

In trying to satisfy the challenge of validity, qualitative researchers propose several criteria that were followed in this study. Lincoln and Guba (2000) write about achieving authenticity of the findings through fairness. Fairness denotes inclusion of different voices in the process of interpreting the data. Multivocality secures the inclusion of the voices, prevents their marginalization, and shows that the researcher's voice always stands in relation to the voices of his or her participants (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). In this light, Mishler (1990) suggests that the researcher make his or her analysis visible by displaying examples, or actual excerpts of the interview. By displaying narrative vignettes and comparing stories in the process of interpretation, I made my analysis visible; the possible shifts in consciousness, discrepancies, and fragmentation of identities were illustrated. By asking open-ended questions, and listening with a minimum of interruptions, I regarded Walcott's (1994) warning against becoming one's own best informant.

In order to maintain access and obtain rapport (the relationship between the researcher and participants based on trust) the researcher needs to act in culturally appropriate ways (Glesne, 1999). The fact that I was born and grew up in the Balkans gave me, in a way, a "member status" and "member-based knowledge" (Johnson, 2002), which played ambiguously in this research. On the one hand, being an insider advantaged my access and rapport establishment with certain population. On the other hand, precisely because of that insider status, many potential participants were diverted, given the traumas of civil wars. For some Bosnian and Croatian immigrants, my Serbian ethnicity might have been a serious obstacle for their participation. For those who agreed to participate, the important part in establishing the trusting relationship for conducting in-depth interviews was to rely on the system of informal connections and personal recommendations, rather than on impersonal flyers advertising research.

The common question qualitative researchers ask is who determines the meaning of peoples' stories, and are alternative interpretations possible (Walcott, 1994). In other words, we are faced with the crisis of authority and crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), since it has become apparent that the researcher is not the sole authority who tells us through his or her interpretation the way the world is. There are multiple ways of seeing and representing the same world.

One of the ways researchers scrutinize their subjectivity is to be attentive to it. Qualitative researchers recognize that subjectivity is an inevitable part of the research process from selecting the research topic to choosing methods of inquiry and interpretation (Glesne, 1999; Peshkin, 1991). Researchers' subjectivities can be monitored for more trustworthy research. A part of this monitoring is recognizing emotions, for they are indicators that the researcher's subjectivity is engaged. The researcher should pay attention to emotions such as anger, annoyance, sadness, or exasperation, since these emotions can skew, distort, and block analysis of interviews (Glesne; Peshkin). The goal is not only to recognize these emotions, but also "to avoid the trap of perceiving just what my own untamed sentiments have sought out and served up as data" (Peshkin, p. 294).

Methodological choices of data analysis and interpretations were closely related to the issues of trustworthiness. Each transcript was numbered, and each story was given a short, one-line title. This is a powerful visual tool in presenting not only the content of the story, but also the participants' way of talking. One line of thought was given one line in the transcript, which enables both the interpreter and the reader to follow the story better and to gain the sense of what the participants said, and also how they said it. Features of speech such as nonlexical expressions (uhm, hm, ah), false starts and repetitions, and pauses were preserved in order to provide additional information about the participant's language.

This approach also allows the interpreter to omit some parts of the interview, reducing the story to core narratives in order to make cross comparisons and to provide good evidence of the temporal order of the story. As Riessman (1993) stressed, narratives, particularly those about important life events, are typically long, full of smaller side stories, digressions, and evaluations, and it is naïve to expect that a story could be presented without some method of reduction. Each representation is always a transformation (Mishler, 1986a).

Analysis and interpretation of data addressed “the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them - in short how things work” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12). I drew the conclusions from the analysis using various strategies; comparing, contrasting, finding commonalities and differences, noting the patterns and themes, and looking for paradoxes and surprises. In order to provide a temporal and conceptual coherence of the participants’ stories, I made deliberate choices in which narratives best represented my goals, which were twofold: (1) to compare the stories that connected individual experiences in different periods of participants’ life, and (2) to find the similarities and differences in their understanding of the larger context in which their experiences could be placed.

## **Narratives**

This study relied on Mishler's understanding of the interview process as a “discourse between speakers” (Mishler, 1986b, p. 234), where interviewees' answers to the questions were seen as stories or narratives. Responses of my participants can be viewed as well-formed stories that are “held together thematically and structurally with a strong temporal ordering to successive events or episodes” (Mishler, 1995, p. 107). Responses also had a clear plot line with a beginning, middle, and end always conveying a particular perspective, which emerged partly as a local occurrence between the narrator and the interviewer who, in the process of interpretation, shaped its meaning (Ochs & Capps, 2001). A single interview was seen as a series of stories or narratives, which served as units of analysis and interpretation. The transcribing procedure, where one line of a thought was given one line in the transcript, attempted to follow as closely as possible not only what the participants were saying, but also how they were saying it. Following Chase's (1995, p. 23) and Bell's (1988) examples, one line in the transcript presents a “spurt of language” determined by listening to intonation and pitch of talk. Data analysis and interpretation could be described as a series of circular, reiterative, and overlapping steps. Data analysis addressed the question, “what does a researcher do with her data,” while interpretation was an answer to “What does the data mean?” A mere display of a narrative (analysis strategy) could mean little to a reader without a researcher's attempt to uncover the meaning (interpretation strategy). Thus, the delineation between analysis and interpretation was blurred. The interviews lasted between an hour and a half to three hours: They were audio-taped, transcribed, and translated to English when conducted in Serbian or Croatian. Upon my university's IRB's approval, all the participants signed the consent form letter.

Since a narrative analysis is a particularly helpful genre for representing and interpreting identities in their multiple guises and different contexts (Riessman, 2002), it was chosen for the exploration of ethnic identity of Balkan immigrants. Among many definitions of narratives, this study employs Ochs and Capps' (2001) understanding of narratives as “a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 2). From the plethora of blurred genres that have emerged in the

social sciences, personal narratives emerge as an embodiment of our understanding of the world and ourselves (Kerby, 1991). They present a fundamental means of making sense of human experiences across cultures (Ochs & Capps, 1996), as well as preserving the past and shaping the future (Liska Carger, 2005). The narrative enables us to recognize the complexity of individuals: It is “the representation of process, of the self in conversation with itself and with its world over time” (Josselson, 1995, p. 33).

It is difficult to extrapolate distinctive features that would always constitute a narrative, but we can describe elements that will be always relevant to it (Ochs & Capps, 2001). These elements (sequentiality of events, tellability, tellership, embeddedness, and moral stance) mark the richness of narratives in that each dimension can be differently realized. Narrative is a recapitulation of personal experiences that maintains the temporal order (Labov, 1981; Linde, 1993; Mishler, 1986a, 1995). Narratives form in the flow of talk or story-telling, with the narrator composing a sequence of events and mental states (Bruner, 1990; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Ordering events in a temporal sequence provides coherent units, with its characters, topics, and goals that serve as an overreaching interpretive frame (Och & Capps, 2001). Narrators are confronted, Ochs and Capps assert, with an urge to tell a stable, linear reconstruction of the past that ties events together, and the desire to convey the complexities, ambiguities, and paradoxes of the actual life events.

These elements of temporal order and sequentiality, Bruner (1990) argues, do not have a meaning independent from the narrative’s plot. Furthermore, narratives of personal experiences vary in the degree and kind of embeddedness within surrounding discourses. Narratives emerge as a social activity, as a negotiated interaction between the teller and the interpreter, a dimension that Ochs and Capps (2001) call “tellership”. Ochs and Capps further argue that in the act of storytelling, narrators try to bridge a stable reconstruction of the past, an authentic story plot that is worth telling, or that is, simply put, interesting for the listener. This is a narrative dimension of “tellability”. It refers to the performative and aesthetic aspect of a story-telling. In making their decision about what story to tell, narrators, in the context of the interview, decide which story is tellable (Georgakopolou, 2006). A captivating story could be “real” or “imaginary” without losing its power as a tellable story. In a way, narratives are expressions of “factual indifference” (Bruner, p. 50). Bruner says,

When we want to bring an account of something into the domain of negotiated meanings, we say of it, ironically, that it was a “good story.” Stories, then, are especially viable instruments for social negotiation. And their status, even when they are hawked as “true” stories, remains forever in the domain of midway between the real and the imaginary. (p. 55)

Although, to some extent, self-understanding depends on the coherence and continuity of our stories, human identity easily becomes fragmented by discontinuous and contradicting narratives. To treat narratives as social facts means to neglect the profound virtue of this method that could serve as a project of self-understanding. Individuals do not attempt to redeem the facts through narrative telling: If narratives fail to truthfully represent the self it is because the facts gain their significance within the frame of the story. Narratives may be based on facts, but they are not determined by them, as “the self cannot be discovered or understood; it can only be created or invented” (Bochner, 2001, p. 153). Here, I acknowledge Kerby’s (1991) notion that “truth becomes more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning (. . .) than of a historically correct representation” (p. 7).

This paper, however, is not concerned with whether the events that the participants tell really happened, but why they describe them the way they do, and with the meaning they draw from them.

The final dimension of a narrative is the moral stance assumed by the teller. Embedded in community and tradition, narrators express moral stances conveying what they deem as good or valuable, and how we ought to live in the world (Linde, 1993; Ochs & Capps, 2001). When telling life events, narrators put forth, defend, and revise their beliefs and values. In doing this, tellers often shape their stories in a way that their own stance appears morally superior to that of other actors in the story, materializing a “looking good principle” (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Of course, the moral stance is not always certain and stable, for “a virtuous person is thus one who queries, seeks, and in doing so, learns what is good” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 51).

### **The Ambiguity of Muslim Identity: National and Religious Belonging**

When I asked Felix, a 23-year-old factory worker from Albania, about his religious affiliation his first response was, “What do you mean by that? I am Albanian.” He then said how he has chosen to be an Orthodox. Both of his parents have mixed religious background and illustrate the common practice of religious intermarriage in Albania. Felix's father is of Muslim and Catholic heritage and his mother is of Muslim and Orthodox heritage. Felix's choice of religion was influenced by the story about his grandfather who defied communist authorities.

#### **Transcript 1: Story “You Don't like Our Politics”**

- 81 Felix: My grandfather had many problems because he was a great  
believer,  
82 it's a kind of a weird story.  
...  
93 the thing about my grandfather was that  
94 they decided to destroy all the churches,  
95 so my grandfather decided to save some icons and to conceal them in  
his home,  
96 and he went to see some big guy in the city, to tell him that before they  
destroy the churches  
97 he would buy some stuff from there.  
98 But they looked at him as an enemy,  
99 like, why are you doing this? You don't like our politics?

Beginning with the remark “It's a kind of a weird story,” Felix instructed me how I should see his narrative. Rather than making an association between religion and ethnicity, Felix made a distinction between having faith in God and having faith in communism. His religious affiliation is an expression of anti-communist sentiment, with his grandfather in the center of the story, presenting a symbol of struggle to preserve his threatened religious identity. After 1967 most of the religious sites in Albania were converted into sport centers and warehouses, and those who were caught practicing their faith were severely punished.

For example, the penal code of 1977 imposed a prison sentence of three to ten years for “religious propaganda and the production, distribution, or storage of religious literature”

(Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994, p. 86). Felix could have chosen to be a Muslim, considering his parents' mixed heritage there are elements for that choice. However, since his grandfather was an Orthodox, to preserve his legacy meant to chose his faith.

When asked about his religious practices, Felix replied with a laugh. "I don't want to lie to you, it's not that I am the best one, but as long as I believe . . ." and the thought went unfinished. For Felix, adherence to religion seems irrelevant in the way it is usually imagined; the experience of personal relationship with God, the observance of religious practices, or the importance of prayer in one's life. Orthodoxy primarily serves here as keeping the memory of struggle against communism alive.

The topic of communism prevailed in the conversations with another Albanian immigrant, Elez, who is 34-years-old and works in a local factory. This narrative is a response to a question, "When you were a kid, how did you know that you were an Albanian?" The question emerged from our previous conversation, when Elez mentioned how his schooling was marked by strong messages of Albanian national pride.

### **Transcript 2: Story "There is Nothing Wrong with being an Albanian"**

- 114 I grew up in the family that was against communists, because  
 115 my mother's uncle died in a prison,  
 116 they killed everybody who wasn't for communism.  
 117 He was for the open Europe, he wanted Albanians to live like  
 people in other countries,  
 118 and since we had only one party in the power, as you know very well,  
 119 they killed people.  
 120 My grandfather was in jail for three years because of that and he was  
 a rich man.  
 . . .  
 156 There is nothing wrong with being an Albanian,  
 157 but I'm not proud for being 50 years under communism,  
 158 people being stupid and believing in that,  
 159 some of them *didn't*, but people who did, why?  
 160 Why did they believe that communism was a good choice?  
 161 I'm not proud of that.

For Elez, who is a Muslim, growing up in Albania meant being marked first and foremost by communism. Similarly to Felix's story, Elez retells the plight of his religious family members who wanted Albanians to resemble more the other nations of (Western) Europe, where religious attitudes were perceived as freely expressed. Also, in both Elez's and Felix's stories, their own religion is conspicuously absent, and was mentioned only as akin to the generation of grandparents and relatives. These men still believe that being Albanian means that outsiders will necessarily judge the people according to ideology of their government, rather than the religion that the majority professes. However, unlike Felix, Elez's moral stance is ambiguous. He starts with the proclamation of his family's political beliefs, with an emphasis of his uncle and grandfather's sacrifice for their position. His "as you know very well" in line 118 invited me to acknowledge my insider status of someone who grew up with communism as well, and who can tacitly confirm the truthfulness of his claim.

Although the narrated events belong to the past, they clearly implicate the narrator's current identity construction. A stand toward communism clearly demarcates two communities; there were "some" who did not believe in the system, and there were others separated with the pronoun "they" (lines 116, 119 and 160). The latter group, ready to imprison and kill for the idea of communism, was constructed in clear separation from the narrator's sense of self. And yet, in marking the communist "other," the narrator inevitably reinvents the story of himself and his family. Elez offers his family's suffering as a counter-narrative to the communist majority, but the story cannot erase the collective past. As a resolution to his story, Elez uses a linguistic and interactional device of posing questions to stress the importance of his dilemma. And although "there is nothing wrong with being an Albanian," the past leaves Elez uneasy.

Living in a socialist Yugoslavia has also shaped the experiences of Aldo, a 28-year-old engineer from Bosnia. Being from Serbia myself means that Aldo and I used to live in the same country of the former Yugoslavia. For that reason, I took it for granted that our understanding on what constitutes a nation and religion was shared and needed no explanations. However, the following exchange illustrates Aldo's bewilderment with the fact that others, in the former Yugoslavia and the United States alike, perceived him as a Muslim, with an attached connotation of religiosity.

### **Transcript 3: Story "Do I have an Ethnicity or Religion?"**

- 104 Aldo: Now, I don't know, if you say Muslims,  
 105 you have to say Catholics or Orthodox, right?  
 106 Maja: No, you don't. Muslims in Yugoslavia were a nation.  
 107 Not a Muslim in terms of religion,  
 108 but a Muslim in terms of a nation,  
 109 the same as with the Serbs and Croats.  
 110 Aldo: But I am a Bosnian.  
 111 That's my conflict: even today I don't know.  
 112 I am a Bosnian in terms of ethnicity,  
 113 I'm not a Muslim.  
 114 Muslim would be a religion.  
 115 But you can't say my religion is Serbian or Croatian,  
 116 it's Orthodox or Catholic, right?  
 117 Maja: How do you then -- when somebody lives in Croatia,  
 118 and if he is a Muslim by his religion,  
 119 how do we denote him? What is he then, a Croat?  
 120 Aldo: -- Well, if he has a Croatian citizenship,  
 121 he is then a Croat. (Laughs)

The notions of nationality, religious belonging, and citizenship operate here as unstable categories; an individual can choose and be given each one. During the interview Aldo went back and forth between being a Bosnian and a Muslim, weighing in the process how others see him and how he sees himself. The complexity of nationality classification in the former Yugoslavia is only one factor contributing to the discrepancy between Aldo's self-perceived identity and identity prescribed by others.

Another factor is the civil war in Bosnia, which can be discussed on two levels. First, the war not only challenged, but destroyed, the sense of identity stability by forcing people to



declare themselves in either-or categories, which were often dictated by daily politics. Second, there was the involvement of international community in the war, when the outsiders were confused with notions such as Muslims and Bosnians. Sometimes, these two terms were used interchangeably, overlooking other ethnic groups that lived in Bosnia. This multifarious group of people (Muslims, Serbs, Croats, persons of mixed ethnic parentage, and all of those who believed in the idea of multiethnic Bosnia) were all Bosnians.

Since Aldo does not practice religion, after a lot of laughing and terminology shuffling during the interview he declared himself an agnostic, he could not understand why the element of religiosity has been added to his ethno-national identity. Before the first shootings started in his native town in eastern Bosnia, Aldo “didn't care about who was what.” Growing up with Muslims and Serbs, Aldo did not have any sense of his nationality, and even less sense of his religion. His awareness was raised abruptly, mainly when the Serbian paramilitary forces that looted the town made it clear that local Muslims would be massacred.

The categories of nation, ethnicity, and citizenship could be completely irrelevant aspects of an individual identity, but the person still cannot escape its imposed attributes. The Yugoslav state constructed Aldo as a member of a Muslim nation; during the civil war Serbs constructed Aldo as a threat to Serbdom, as a “Turk,” which is an expression of a bitter sentiment that to this day denotes the Ottomans who had been enslaving the Orthodox Christians for five hundred years, as *Balija*, the pro-fascist enemy from World War II who massacred the Serbs. The fact that Aldo felt like a Bosnian did not matter.

When and how did Aldo become aware of his ethnicity? The following part of the interview was dedicated to his childhood and ways he understood his ethnic identity.

### Transcript 3: Story “He can't even Differentiate the Names”

- 81 Maja: When you were in school, how -- what was your sense of your  
own ethnicity?
- 82 Aldo: To tell you the truth, I've never had any ideas,  
83 I didn't know --  
84 you know how it is with us, you can tell by a name who's who.
- 85 Maja: Uh huh.
- 86 Aldo: First, I've never paid attention,  
87 and when the war started, I remember  
88 we were with our friends in Belgrade,  
89 he was a retired Serbian general,  
90 and she was very educated, a language professor.  
91 And there was something on TV,  
92 and I was like, 'Senad, isn't that a Serbian name?' (Laughs)  
93 I mean... (rolls his eyes)
- 94 Maja: (smiles)
- 95 My mom, it probably crossed her mind,  
96 *well, my son, it is not.*  
97 When I think about that now,  
98 I can only imagine what had crossed her mind,  
99 they are searching for my son in the war,  
100 and he can't even differentiate the names.

Our initial exchange (lines 84-85) demonstrates the dialogic character of the narrative. First, by saying “you know how it is with us,” Aldo establishes an understanding of him (a Bosnian Muslim) and me (a Serb from the former Yugoslavia) as being the same people, although officially we ceased to be so after the disintegration of our common homeland. Second, Aldo's personal experience that people in the former Yugoslavia can detect ethnicity based on somebody's first or last name, or the combination of the two, was supported by my prompt agreement. Neither of us knows how we know what we know, or how we arrived at that knowledge, but it was there, expressed during the conversation. In this way, Aldo's individual experience became co-narrated according to the local occurrences in the interview (my non-verbal signaling that I immediately understood the meaning he wanted to convey), and wider social framework where certain situations are recognizable (we grew up in the same country and brought into this interview the memories and knowledge of a specific place and distinct history). The second such moment came in lines 92-94, with shared knowledge, expressed through his eye-rolling and my smile, that Senad, the name that accidentally appeared on the television set, could not be a Serbian name because to “us” it sounds unmistakably Muslim.

This name recognition as a means of detecting someone's ethnicity is a new realization for Aldo. While growing up in Bosnia, he lacked this knowledge. His response to my question on school years was a single sentence long, with an immediate shift to the war experiences that bear more significance to the story he wanted to tell and identity he wanted to construct. War could be seen as a turning point in Aldo's life, an event that made him become aware of how others perceived his ethnicity. Line 88 refers to a short period during the war that his family spent in Serbia as refugees in the house of his parents' friends. From the current perspective, the episode in front of the television set was accompanied with laughter, but the rest of the story was told with a different sentiment. Aldo's mother is introduced to the story as a bearer of ethnic knowledge, which had escaped Aldo through his childhood. Aldo accentuates his mother's imaginary conviction, she must have known all along the ethnic difference that emanates from somebody's first name. The sentence in line 96 is uttered slowly and deliberately, to signal the absurdity and naiveté of his initial question.

Later in the interview Aldo's parents appear again, when we came back to discuss the school years and what they meant for his ethnic identity. Aldo is describing here how, unlike him, his parents gained some knowledge on their own heritage in their youth.

### **Transcript 3: Story “I was Never Interested and I Never Asked”**

- 145 I know that in school they learned something about Islam.  
 146 They went to the mosque -  
 147 whether on their own, or because they had to, I don't know.  
 148 But it was a minimum what she knew about Islam.  
 149 Maja: So it means that you've never talked with your parents about it.  
 150 Aldo: No. I was never interested and I never asked.  
 151 My father - he's never seen a Koran.  
 152 I have that feeling.  
 153 I've never talked about that with him.  
 154 Maja: Later on, in high school,  
 155 did you then realize the differences?

- 156 Aldo: No. Differences were not visible at all.  
 157 Nobody paid attention to that.

Aldo's mother was an elementary school teacher in an ethnically mixed town on the border between Bosnia and Serbia. Unlike in Albania, churches and mosques were not destroyed, but they were not heavily visited either, at least in urban areas. Rather, they served as cultural sites, and it was a usual practice for schools to organize visits to religious sites, without actually developing religious awareness in children. Aldo's father was a company manager, which for that period, in the former Yugoslavia, automatically meant that he was a Communist party member. Since religious beliefs and practices were strongly discouraged among the party members, it is not surprising that religion did not play a significant part in Aldo's life, neither in childhood nor today.

The question is why Aldo mentioned his parents in the story of his ethnicity? Upon the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, many were quick to point out all the wrongs of the system, but the way Aldo structures his story could refer to ethnic and religious harmony that former Yugoslavs experienced. The civil war in the former Yugoslavia initiated a wide range of reasons for the war breakout, one of them being ancient ethnic hatred. In telling his identity, Aldo had multiple choices of narrative construction. He chose this one, and the previous as well, to show that nothing in his past, neither the schools he attended, nor his parents, placed importance on ethnicity and religion.

And while the war did not change the importance of ethnicity and religion for Aldo, the following narrative illustrates how he sees those whose experiences had been transformed. This narrative is a result of his comment that I should have interviewed the "sunflowers." To my puzzlement, Aldo explained the metaphor that he and his friends coined at the beginning of the war in Bosnia.

### **Transcript 3: Story "Yesterday he was in a Whorehouse, and Today is a Hard-Core Muslim"**

- 549 Aldo: Sunflowers are those -- who--  
 550 who were Yugoslavs before,  
 551 those who drank, cheated, stole, had sex before marriage,  
 552 eat pork, everything, and then  
 553 the war suddenly started,  
 554 and they are Muslims now.  
 555 Maja: How did that happen?  
 ...  
 573 Aldo: I know he's a sunflower because, I saw the events,  
 574 he was a party boy.  
 575 For example, in 1992 or 1993 when I met him,  
 576 he didn't miss a single party, a single drinking,  
 577 I could never tell he was a sunflower.  
 578 There weren't any sunflowers' signals.  
 579 And there was a Bosnian club,  
 580 Maja: Uh huh  
 581 and within a club there was a mosque,  
 582 and he went there for a couple of times,  
 583 and then he started going there constantly,

584 and he was leaning toward the religious life.  
 585 Maja: Uh huh  
 586 He disappeared, like he ceased to exist,  
 587 he totally turned to religion.  
 588 He got married soon; his wife wore that – (circles around his head  
 to describe the headscarf)  
 589 Maja: Uh huh  
 590 I mean, she's Bosnian,  
 591 and she's probably one of the sunflowers, I don't know (smiles).  
 592 In any case, she wore that devil, how do you call it?  
 593 God forbid somebody sees her (ironically).  
 594 I remember well,  
 595 my best friend, he told me how he saw them in a subway  
 596 it was after New Year's Eve, they greeted each other, 'Happy new  
 year,'  
 597 everything is cool, right?  
 598 Maja: Uh huh  
 599 and she was sitting there too,  
 600 and my friend extends his arm, 'Happy new year,  
 601 and her husband is like, 'Oh no, it doesn't go like that.' (Laughs  
 heartily)  
 602 And as I told you, he told me how he had had gone to  
 whorehouses, how he was drinking,  
 603 like, yesterday he was in a whorehouse, and today is a hard-core  
 Muslim.

Aldo crafts his story as a drama. He slowly discloses the setting and main characters. My “uh huhs” invited him to continue and confirmed his success as a skillful story teller. As the story begins, we are introduced to his friend, who, at the beginning of the war, appeared to Aldo as an ordinary young man, without suspicious “sunflower” signs. As the story progresses, the tension builds up. A series of sentences start with an “and” (lines 581-584), announcing that there are more surprising events to come. Physical disappearance from the crowd that continued to party, a religious turn, a marriage to a woman who wears a headscarf; all of these events lead to the final disclosure, introduced by “Everything is cool, right?” and my acknowledgment that as a listener I am ready too for the story's conclusion.

Obviously, Aldo was not present when the story reached its climax, but he supports the truthfulness of his friend's account by starting the concluding part with “I remember well” (line 591), and reinforcing it with “and as I told you” (line 597), which frames the information as certain. The events of this story are structured in a way that further maintain Aldo's moral stance of discerning right from wrong, and yet, he appears almost absent from the events. In his own story, Aldo is positioned as an observer, as a Bosnian Muslim who, unlike the “sunflowers,” who changed their beliefs according to the dominant ideology, stayed true to his pre-war behavior. Interestingly, when referring to their “normal” pre-war behavior, Aldo talks about the “sunflowers” as Yugoslavs (line 550). This identity shift could signal that in Aldo's view, socialist Yugoslavia provided an environment for developing a secular Muslim identity, with the rest of the narrative depicting what happened when the state collapsed.

According to Ochs and Capps (2001), narratives that depict unexpected events are usually unsettling in some ways. The central event tends to be a source of some combination of fear, frustration, irritation, disapproval, shame, and sympathy. What were Aldo's sentiments that shaped his story? While his initial account was told in a neutral, matter-of-fact way, mid-response, and the end especially, are marked with smiles, hearty laughter, irony, mockery, and gestures. This shift in perspective is a way Aldo expects his story to be heard: He underlines his sentiment and his moral conviction with "and as I told you," which leads to the exaggerated "yesterday he was in a whorehouse, and today is a hard-core Muslim." It is more likely that described changes among those who experienced religious awakening (through self-discovery or political manipulation, or something else) did not happen overnight. Aldo's overstatement in line 603 could be seen as a figure of speech employed to underline his disagreement with his friend's actions, rather than his belief that a religious turning point occurred suddenly and without a reason.

While interviewing the two men from Albania, I wanted to explore the way they perceived Kosovar Albanians who are mostly Muslims, but live in the separate state of Serbia and Montenegro. Is there a sense of solidarity, and if so, where does it come from? For Felix, it seems that regional identity is an important part of his ethnicity; however, it is not bound to religion at all, but to the idea of one nation divided between two states. Talking about Albanians in Albania, and Albanians in Kosovo, he concludes the following.

**Transcript 1: Story "It wasn't us Going into their Country"**

- 144 Felix: They are 100% Albanians.  
 145 Maja: Does it matter that they live in a different country?  
 146 Felix: They don't live in a different country.  
 147 I'm not an expert in history - -  
 148 Maja: It's all right, I'm asking for your opinion.  
 149 Felix: I don't want to say, we have that part and it's ours and we have  
 o kill for it, no.  
 150 If you see the history of the Balkans and Europe, Albania was a very  
 big country,  
 151 it was a huge country,  
 152 and Yugoslavs, the Slavic people, found us there.  
 153 It was not *us* going into their country.  
 154 So, I don't believe that Yugoslavs came into this part of the  
 Balkans before us.

Although these two ethnic groups live in two countries, Felix sees them as one nation. Interestingly, as an Albanian who chose Orthodox religion, Felix does not find similarities with Orthodox Greeks or Bulgarians, let alone the Serbs, who are seen as an enemy, but with Kosovar Albanians, who are mostly Muslims. It seems that the perceived similarity is largely political: Felix sees a part of Serbian (Yugoslav) territory as belonging to Albania, evoking the strong mythical notions of a huge land, territorial primacy, and dominance. His "us" does not mean a religious solidarity between Christian Orthodox Balkan nations, but national allegiance supported by political goals, that all Albanians should live in one nation-state.

A crucial moment in interpreting the meaning is legitimacy of the story. Ochs and Capps (2001) found that legitimacy is grounded in the authority and influence of the narrator, the extent to which individual beliefs are compatible with the beliefs of the larger

community, and its historical and legal validity. Felix's personal narrative is certainly a reflection of a collective Albanian (largely Muslim) narrative, which throughout history has often stood in direct opposite with the prevailing Serbian (Christian Orthodox) narrative (Lubonja, 2001). In this ongoing process of re-telling the history, both sides incorporate elements of invention and myth-making. Although Felix is a non-practicing Orthodox by his own choice, his narratives were included in this paper. My decision that Felix's narratives could accompany the narratives of two other Muslim men stems directly from this compatibility between the personal and collective narratives.

In discussing narrative practices, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) noted how personal narratives are always composed in relation to interpretive needs. They write, "There are audiences with stories of their own who listen to what we communicate, and these audiences may have quite different preferences for particular plots and themes" (p. 106). Line 147 indicates tension between the narrator and his audience. Regardless of how strong or weak our ethnic belonging might be, both Felix and I were aware that larger forces, convoluted history between the Serbs and Albanians, influenced what could have been said and what was actually said. His reluctant and unfinished, "I'm not an expert in history" could be read as, "You might disagree with me on this, but I would like to tell you what I think." Line 148 reflects unspoken disagreement, masked with the permission to go on. Felix thus continues with a defensive "I don't want to say..." but manages to make a point that he wanted. However, had it been told to a different audience, it is likely that this story would have been shaped differently.

Unlike Felix, Elez sees the relationship between nations and borders differently. Talking about Kosovar Albanians and their position vis-à-vis Albanians in the "motherland," he focuses on the differences rather than similarities.

### **Transcript 2: Story "This is Not the Way to Live"**

- 247 Elez: First of all, we are separated from the problems they had,  
 248 and after the war and after Kosovar Albanians came to Albania,  
 249 I had a chance to talk with some of them.  
 250 They just live like they lived 100 years ago  
 251 Maja: In what way?  
 252 Elez: The bad way.  
 253 I mean the way they treat women,  
 254 I just felt bad about that.  
 255 They have to wait for their sons or people who live in Europe, in  
 Switzerland  
 256 to come there and tell them, 'Hey, this is not the way to live.'  
 257 They - - I don't know,  
 258 they made their women wear head scarves, as if they lived in  
 Pakistan,  
 259 I don't know why.  
 . . .  
 272 We are the same blood, that's true, we speak the same language,  
 273 but being separated by the border,  
 274 and thinking differently about life and everything else,  
 275 when we had contacts with them I realized we are different in  
 many ways.

276 They got more money, they got - -  
 277 you know, if you have money, money can buy everything.

Elez evokes blood and language (again, religion is absent), and as much as they are important elements of ethnic identity, they are still not sufficient for constructing the two groups as the same. What separates the Albanians is the border that divides one nation between the two states and a different dynamic that is at play in each country. Two entities could share the same ancestry, but they have different historical experiences. Although Kosovar Albanians were among the poorest strata of the Yugoslav society, Yugoslavia in general was more economically advanced than Albania. Regardless of how little was available to Kosovar Albanians in terms of economic and social opportunities, it looked lavish from the Albanian side. And yet, money could not help in shedding the way of life that was appropriate in different times (“100 years ago”) or in different geography (Pakistan). Apparently, there is a discrepancy between social and economic experiences between the two groups. Despite seeming material wealth of Kosovar Albanians, Elez views them as socially backward people, which only underlines their difference.

### **Post-September 11 Era: Muslim Identity on Defense**

In discussing religious and ethnic identity of Muslim immigrants in the United States, it was impossible to avoid the discussion of the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath. Since all the interviews were conducted during either the intervention in Afghanistan or war in Iraq, the participants were highly aware that their ethnicity and religion have gained a different meaning. Upon his arrival to the United States in 1998, when accompanied by Americans, Aldo felt free to say that he was a Bosnian Muslim refugee. Most of the people he met reacted with sympathy. Aldo felt that he needed to be on guard only when surrounded by immigrants and refugees from the former Yugoslavia. After September 11, his perception has changed: Now he is cautious with both Americans and his former compatriots. Here is the narrative of his encounter at work with an American colleague.

#### **Transcript 3: Story "Do I Really Need to Declare Myself as a Muslim?"**

760 and I told myself,  
 761 Because, I really don't have any characteristics of a religious  
 Muslim,  
 762 so that somebody might recognize me as a Muslim.  
 763 I believe that people can't make a difference between Bosnian  
 Muslims,  
 764 and Muslims from Pakistan.  
 765 I mean, there was a woman that worked in [company]  
 766 and she was like, 'Where are you from?'  
 767 'From Bosnia.'  
 768 'And what are you?'  
 769 'Is it really relevant?'  
 770 And she's like, 'Well...'  
 771 And I didn't tell her.

Paradoxically, Aldo's narrative implies the existence of universal traits of religious Muslims ("I don't have any characteristics of a religious Muslim"), and yet he doubts that the outsiders can discern between religious and secular Muslims. What would be a characteristic of religious Muslims? Without elaboration, Aldo knows that he does not have "it," and yet, Americans cannot make that difference and would mistake a Bosnian for a Pakistani. Aldo's refusal to reveal his ethnicity is simultaneously a sign of resignation and a strategy of resistance: If he was forced to flee his home as a refugee in 1992, knowing the futility of an argument that he was not a Muslim/Turk/*Balija*/enemy, but a human being, he now feels the same futility, albeit for a different reason, to justify his belonging to a certain ethnic and religious group.

On another level, there is an unnamed element of race in Aldo's narratives. He continues on the topic of September 11.

**Transcript 3: Story "If I Don't Tell You, You Can't Think Anything of Me"**

801 There are people who are like, 'I'm proud because I'm Bosnian.'  
 802 I am not proud because I am Bosnian.  
 803 I don't want to make a wrong impression.  
 804 If somebody thinks that being a Muslim is something bad,  
 805 then I won't tell him I am a Muslim.  
 806 Not because I am afraid to do so,  
 807 but simply because, it's easier, you know.  
 808 If I don't tell you, you can't think anything of me,  
 809 nor I have something to explain to you.

Aldo knows that he has a choice of revealing or concealing his identity. He is not aware though that his Whiteness allows him to do so. Unlike the Muslims from the Middle East or Asia, who will be recognized as racial subjects and cannot escape the labeling, Balkan Muslims who "look White" can hide behind their race and dominant status it has. Aldo has encountered Muslims from other countries that assumed a sense of similarity and solidarity, when there was none felt on his side. The following episode illustrates the point:

**Transcript 3: Story "If I am a Muslim, it doesn't Mean I am your Brother"**

724 I worked from some time in [Chicago suburb]  
 725 I worked with -- He was from Pakistan.  
 726 A Muslim from Pakistan.  
 727 Maja: Uh huh.  
 728 And, I was there for a year, year and a half,  
 729 and I knew him like I knew everybody else.  
 730 I hadn't ever mentioned my religion,  
 731 he knew I was from Bosnia, but he didn't know I was a Muslim.  
 732 And one day he asked me, 'What's your ethnicity?'  
 733 I was like, 'Muslim.'  
 734 'Oh, why didn't you tell me that before? You should've told me.'  
 735 Another man! You can't recognize him. (Laughs)  
 736 He almost hugged and kissed me.  
 737 And he was like, 'Why didn't you tell me?'



738 Like all the Muslims are like brothers,  
 739 and did I ditch him! (Laughs)  
 740 I was like, 'How are we brothers?'  
 741 If I am a Muslim, it doesn't mean I am your brother.  
 742 'Don't say that, we are all together here.'  
 743 I was like, the fact that you're a Muslim doesn't change anything, if  
     you ask me,  
 744 I don't know about you.  
 745 And he realized then what was my attitude, and so...

The way it was told, Aldo's story indicates his desire to have a right to define himself in his own terms and to protect himself from being a conspicuous Muslim in the post 9/11 United States. Therefore, specific events of this story were told in the changed ideological and political background, but they maintained a consistent psychological stance of moral certainty in discerning right and wrong. It appears that those who initiated a contact with a transparent preconceived idea about what it means to be a Muslim – in the first case Aldo was an interesting foreign species, in the second a brother in religion – were rejected.

There is a sense of urgency and anxious familiarity in the approach of Aldo's Pakistani colleague. "We are all together here" (line 742), which went unrecognized and unacknowledged. Having lived in Yugoslavia in the wake of the civil wars, Aldo knows the mechanisms of enemy production, when individuality is stripped, and a person left bare with only one determinant of his or her existence; ethnicity, nationality, or religion. While sensitive to and reflective about the situations when he was constructed as a real or imagined threat to somebody else, Aldo does not recognize the double burden of a Pakistani man. The encounter is told in a lighthearted manner, as a funny episode of *faux pas*, devoid of any racial undertone. As a Muslim *and* person of color in the United States, a Pakistani Muslim seeks a friendship of a White Bosnian Muslim, but is dismissed for his attempt.

A strong distance expressed toward other racialized Muslims was present in Elez's comparison between Albanian and Kosovar Muslims.

### **Transcript 2: Story "I am a Muslim... but..."**

246 They - - I don't know,  
 247 they made their women wear headscarves, as if they lived in Pakistan,  
 248 I don't know why.  
 249 I'm a Muslim, I'm not going to change my religion, but I'm not  
     going to tell my wife  
 250 to hide her face either.  
 251 I mean, like I said I've never been to the Mosque,  
 252 and I don't think I'm good at talking about the religion stuff.

Although the story is told about Kosovar Albanians, it reveals Elez's idea of life in Pakistan. Unwittingly, in relating his attitudes with the people whose lives Elez only imagines, he constructs his own identity that reveals contradictions in how he feels as a Muslim, and what being a Muslim has become to symbolize. Story after story, the headscarf motif permeates the construction of oppositional Muslim identity, with the piece of garment essentializing the practice a modern or secular Muslim should avoid.

Similarly to Aldo, Elez is afraid that Americans might not discern between Albanian Muslims on one side, and Pakistani Muslims on the other, and he forcefully defends himself from other, “guilty” Muslims. Elez evaluates Kosovar Albanians negatively for their behavior and shapes his story to make his attitude superior. With “I am a Muslim” (line 249) Elez secures a group membership, but at the same time his actions towards his wife make him “look good.” Stressing his non-religiosity and implying his modernity by not telling his wife to wear a headscarf, Elez pleads his allegiance to the secular, Western democracy of the United States. This is particularly visible in lines 251-252, where Elez offers a resolute conclusion to his story. Setting forth the perceived physical appearance, treatment of women, and usage of different cultural practices and mixing them with stereotypes, the interviewed Muslim men want to secure their place in the “civilized” world. Balkan countries might not be seen as the best achievement of (European) civilization, but posited *vis-à-vis* Muslims from Asia or the Middle East, their status seems elevated.

This view echoes the anxieties that are part of Western European discourse, which the immigrants internalized and are resurfacing here as a “cultural baggage:” that Muslims could be in Europe, but are not of it. This is what Asad (2000) calls “the narration of an identity many still derive from “European (or Western) civilization;” a narrative that seeks to represent homogenous space and linear time” (p. 16). A new similar creation of homogenous (White) identities that is currently at work in the United States might seem as a secure place where one can be a “good” Muslim and a “good” White immigrant as well.

Elez's compatriot carries out the similar sentiment a bit further. Here he explains his sense of pride for being Albanian in the United States.

### **Transcript 1: Story “We've Showed Who we are”**

- 311 Felix: I am very proud of it,  
 312 especially now.  
 313 Maja: Uh huh. Why?  
 314 Felix: Because, like I said we've showed who we are,  
 315 we are a small country and  
 316 we really used to be friendly with the US,  
 317 but we didn't have a chance to prove ourselves.  
 318 In this last war we are proving ourselves.  
 319 Maja: Which war?  
 320 Felix: Like Iraq war,  
 321 we proved ourselves, we sent our own troops,  
 322 OK, there are 500 people, but don't forget that Albania has three  
 million.  
 323 OK, we didn't do much, but big countries like France, and  
 324 the US - as far as I know - helped them a lot in the WWII,  
 325 and nobody from these *big* countries helped,  
 326 but we did.

Despite his minority status as an Orthodox Albanian, Felix sees a worthy goal that unifies his nation around helping the United States in the war on terror. A member of the first generation of immigrants who arrived to the United States in 2000, Felix has adopted the rhetoric of the “war on terror.” The current United States administration's arbitrary division on old and new Europe accidentally placed this man with the mighty and righteous, giving

him a status of a “good Muslim.” In lines 322 and 323 Felix senses that a doubt toward his homeland’s war effort might exist. Yes, his country sent a small number of troops and true, such a small group hardly makes a difference, but the effort should be recognized and validated nevertheless.

Being a Muslim who does not look White causes a perception of being different in relation to Americans (regardless of their race). Why then such urgency to delineate one's identity from those who cannot use the shield of Whiteness and are targeted as a potential threat? Regardless of their racial invisibility, in the atmosphere of loud and widespread American nationalism that dominates the post 9/11 United States, foreign accents and names that do not sound Anglo-American make these immigrants visible. Thus, they feel threatened in two ways: as being perceived as a foreign *and* terrorist threat. In such ideological climate, immigrants understood the message; their gratefulness and loyalty are not only expected, but required as well.

### Conclusion

The ways the determinants of social life influence the construction and expression of national, ethnic, or religious identity show that individuals do not have an infinite number of choices in their behavioral repertoire. Personal experiences are determined by multiple discourses of which we are a part. This does not mean that larger social influences do not increase our ability for self-understanding, but our actions are “limited by the discourses that accompany our intervention and the complex processes of social construction that precede it” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 2). The aim of this paper was to show the intricacy of global events (life under socialism and civil wars) and local contexts (interview interactions) that have shaped identity construction of three Balkan Muslim men. Fifty years of official secularism that all Balkan countries underwent contributed to the ways these men verbalize the subjective meaning of their identities. Since the interviewing was conducted in the post 9/11 United States, their narratives also bear the mark of the specific time and place under which their experiences are unfolding. In-depth interviews were treated as series of narratives, with an aim to emphasize the importance of personal meaning-making in addressing the awoken topic of Muslims and Islam. Can we talk about common Muslim identity in the Balkans? Different national identities among Muslims and different loyalties, to the country of origin, ethnic or religious group, or shared political ideas, pose an obstacle in determining the shared Muslim identity.

Islam as a highly diverse religion creates insiders and outsiders without and within: what is appropriate and desirable behavior for some Muslims, presents a contestable position for other Muslims; for instance, secularism vs. religiosity, or modernity vs. tradition as expressed in the narratives of three interviewed men. How useful then is a term “Muslim,” asks Grillo (2004)? A “Muslim” can denote various subjectivities (country of origin, nationality, gender, to name a few), and it is theoretically wrong to treat Islam as the essence of Muslim experience. However, Grillo argues, for some Muslims religion does capture the deepest and most accurate representation of identity. “Though it is important not to essentialise 'Muslim', we must understand that essentialising is a social fact which analysis must take into account and explain. (...) Many categories are, however, always already rhetorical *and* political *and* analytical” (p. 864, emphasis original). Although problematic, the category “Muslim” cannot be rejected. What is needed is research that theorizes the constant shift of identities, an interplay between ascribed and performed ethnicity, as well as the role of societal and historical mediators that influence the agency of these identities.

The fact that these narratives were told in retrospect and away from their home countries, signals the “distortions of memory and the mediation of language” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 219), thus making the past and the home, a *story* about the past and the home. For the immigrant men, narrating the personal experiences provided a space “for creating continuity, for bridging raptures in experience” (Huttunen, 2005, p. 178), for problematizing home and identity and making sense of two geographic places.

According to the Islamic teachings, a Muslim is anyone whose father was a Muslim, or anyone who converted to Islam (Marechal et al., 2003). Religious affiliation could be given by virtue of an individual's birth in a certain community, but it is also a moral and political choice. What makes the story of three men from the Balkans so complicated is often an inseparable link between ethnic and religious. Bosnian Muslims are a telling example. Although a participant from Bosnia interviewed for this study cannot be proclaimed as representative of all Bosnian Muslims, his story is supported by statistics (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003) that show how, during the war on Bosnian territory (1992-1995), approximately 2.2 million out of four million Bosnians were forcibly displaced. The largest number of victims were Muslims.

This group was simultaneously seen as the greatest victim of the war in Bosnia and as a group that is unfairly singled out by the West for its victimhood. Where is this sense of uneasiness and ambiguity coming from? Why are the Muslims in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia, constructed the way they are? Although the post World War II Yugoslav state assigned this group a national identity, it has never escaped religious connotations regardless of whether that religiosity was expressed or not. This discrepancy between personal identity and the one given by the state was exploited to extreme proportions during the war in Bosnia, when hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslims were expelled from their homes or killed. The perpetrators of ethnic cleansing masked the occupation of the land by evoking the fear of Islamic threat in the heart of Christendom. Today, the term ethnic Bosniak replaced Bosnian Muslim to avoid the religious connotations of identities, but it will take time for the expression to become a part of individual identities. Ten years after the war, a Bosnian immigrant to the United States was still uncertain what the terms Bosnian and Muslim mean. The complexity of former Yugoslav cultural identity, which Bosnian Muslims were part of, is in a way burdened identity since, “religious civilizations managed to live next to each other divided by the painful knowledge that their common Slavic origin has been appropriated and transformed by their allegiances to 'others' they hated within themselves” (Longinovic, 2001, p. 581).

Albanian immigrants, on the other hand, see religious identification as an opposition to communist autocracy, so that religious affiliation for them functions more as a political than spiritual, let alone civilization force. Two interviewed Albanian men were born after 1967, the year in which the communist regime banned all forms of religious expression. They either claim no attachment to religion or choose denomination to honor family struggle against the oppressive state socialism. This tendency could be described as ethnic and national adherence that goes hand in hand with religious detachment. Neither of the interviewed men attends mosques, nor prays, nor are they engaged in ethnic or cultural organizations that might enhance ethnic or religious conscience and activity. Balkan Muslim immigrants are aware of who they are in terms of their religion, but are uncertain how religious denomination could determine ethnic similarities and solidarity.

When Kosovar Albanian refugees, who were expelled from the province, ended up as refugees in Albania, a native Albanian perceived them as foreign nevertheless. The two groups of people share not only the language, but “blood” as well; however, the sentiment of

"one language, one people" was absent. Apparently, the state border that divides one ethnic group in two states is a factor that bears significance not only in terms of geography, but history, economy, politics, and cultural practices as well. The state border produced a vast difference in the way people lived their lives, to the extent that language remained almost the only marker of a similarity. Islam as a potentially unifying force was lacking from all the narratives.

After the events of September 11, 2001, Muslims in the United States have been perceived as a rather homogeneous group bound by Islam, leaving Balkan Muslims caught up in a racialized and highly politicized public sphere. Such discourse largely ignores the cultural diversity within this huge group of people, and individuals cannot escape this labeling that is only reinforced by the seemingly endless "war on terror." In their desire to escape the labels of fundamentalism, fanaticism, and violence, the interviewed men distance themselves from all of those who could be placed into that category. When the visibility in a public space of a group of people becomes symbolically (through dress and attire) and politically (through the "terrorism threat") prominent, it is time to mobilize the differences and claim allegiances. In several stories the headscarf motif was central to the construction of Muslim identity, with this particular piece of garment symbolizing, according to the interviewed men, the practice a modern or secular Muslim should avoid. "Few items of clothing throughout history can have been given more meanings and political significance" than the hijab, writes Robert Young (as cited in Rizvi, 2005, p. 173). In the popular Western discourse, seemingly nothing symbolizes more strongly the "civilizational" differences between the Western and Muslim worlds. Hijab occupies the Western imagery of oppressed Muslim women, as well as exotic mystery of the East (Rizvi, 2005), and the participants in this study have adopted and expressed this discourse.

Certainly, their maleness could affect such understanding. In a way, the process of interviewing put these men in the spotlight. Examining their own location in the current popular discourse on Muslims and Islam in the United States, in which women are seen as passive victims and men as either "evil-doers" or possible rescuers of their veiled wives, daughters, and sisters, the role these men are willing to take - at least in their own representation - comes as no surprise. By denouncing "uncivilized" Muslim practices, and declaring the adoption of Western liberal democracy narrative, the men expressed the guilt of backwardness imposed upon them and mediated by their ethnicity, gender, and country of origin. Being male, being Muslim and being from the Balkans works here as an amalgam that has produced a discourse of suspicion.

Immigration to the United States presents a novel setting and "a meaning making system comes into action to enable rethinking role in that setting in the light of one's past meaningful experiences and current future goals" (Lawrence, Dodds, & Valsiner, 2004, p. 457). Although aware that the essentialist view of Muslims who live in different countries and speak different languages cannot possibly be true— after all, their stories are told to prove that – these men still felt the need to defend themselves. Unable to escape the label of being foreign due to their accent and names, these immigrants avoid racialization of those who "look like Arabs." Certainly, appeals to such common sense cause uneasiness, for there is awareness that in the current political climate White Balkan Muslims could be under scrutiny as well.

### Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted in the particular time and place and thus bears the marks of then current ideological, political, and cultural circumstances in the United States. Race, ethnicity, and immigration have always been highly contested domains in this country and both Balkan immigrants who told their stories, and the interviewer who recorded and interpreted them were affected by the personal characteristics as well as present and previous opinions and emotions on the topic.

By being from the Balkans I considered myself a partial insider, which not only eased the rapport, but also shaped the analysis and interpretation in a way that could significantly differ from the approach of, say, West European or North American researchers. Due to my insider status, a certain level of shared knowledge and tacit understanding must have been shared during the interviews, since I often encountered the comment, "You know how it is." Despite my efforts to make familiar strange, and to reply with "But I would like to hear what you think about it," my analysis and interpretation carry a stamp of the dynamic I could not even be aware of.

My Serbian ethnicity may have alienated the potential participants, who, in the light of traumatic war experience, regarded that fact as an obstacle for a meaningful conversation. Despite my efforts to interview Muslim women, only men responded to this research. It is possible that the topic was seen as overtly political, thus attracting men to share their views. The framing of this research around the topics of ethnicity, especially in the context of civil wars, might have signaled the "male domain," in which Muslim women did not wish to participate. Some of the stories and perspectives were thus forever lost. Furthermore, my status of "a person from the university" possibly made the participants more cautious in openly discussing certain topics, particularly race and ethnic relations in the United States. Regardless of being a "geographical" insider, the university affiliation, its culture and value system made me in a way an outsider. Again, some of the stories were lost.

Finally, as much as I tried to establish a true dialogue during the interviews, as the interviewer I set the research agenda, guided all conversations in a certain direction, analyzed, interpreted and wrote the text. For these reasons, the final product remains open for multiple interpretations.

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