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## **“To me, you are not a Serb”: Ethnicity, ambiguity, and anxiety in post-war Sarajevo**

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### **Abstract**

The siege of Sarajevo has altered the experience of ethnicity, reconfiguring ethnic categories into moral boundaries. From 1992 to 1995, the city was held under siege by the Army of Republika Srpska, and many Sarajevan Serbs still grapple today with the feeling that others view them as aggressors. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork with Serb women of the pre-war generations, I describe how they intentionally make small alterations in gesture and body language in order to perform ethnic ambiguity, and avoid being read by others as Serb. While anthropological accounts have tended to use performativity to emphasize the constructed and situational nature of ethnicity, here I focus on the anxiety that drives Serb women’s performances in order to capture the inherent and inescapable feeling of ethnicity in a post-war space. I also discuss the difficulty of capturing this anxiety through empirical methods, navigating the discrepancy between Serb women’s narrative accounts of ethnic stigmatization compared to the apparently unproblematic flow of everyday social life. Through this discrepancy, I demonstrate how the embodied and ever-accumulating feeling of ethnic anxiety can conjure threats where there may be none, and how it can charge even the most (seemingly) mundane encounters.

### **Keywords:**

Ethnicity, ambiguity, anxiety, Sarajevo, Serbs, postwar, ethnography, performance, emotion, Bosnia-Herzegovina

A Serb woman in Sarajevo told me the following story. In 1996, soon after the siege of Sarajevo had ended, she went for a walk with an old friend. Before the war, he would have referred to himself as a Muslim but, by 1996, he identified as a Bosniak, a category officially introduced in 1993 that describes Bosnian Muslims in ethnic rather than religious terms, on a par with the ethnic terms Serb (the majority of whom are Serbian Orthodox) and Croat (the majority of whom are Catholic). As they walked along the river promenade that had until only a few months earlier been the frontline of the siege, they talked about what their lives would look like now that the war was over, and what it would mean for an ethnically delineated population to live together after so much violence. She told him she felt nervous about being a Serb in the post-war city. He turned to her and said, "Oh, but to me, you are not a Serb. To me, you are . . . Bosnian Orthodox!"

Perhaps her friend was only trying to tell her that he did not associate her with the Serb ethno-nationalists who had besieged Sarajevo for nearly four years; after all, she had spent the entire war in the besieged city. But in his revocation of her ethnicity, she interpreted a more nefarious message from Bosniaks to Serbs, telling them they were no longer welcome in the city as Serbs, that their very ethnicity had become tainted by the war. And when she told me this story more than 20 years later, her indignation felt fresh:

Why should I now be Bosnian Orthodox? The Muslims are all Bosniaks now. They're building a nation for themselves, but they want to tear mine down? [. . .] I didn't want to be Bosnian Orthodox; I didn't want a new name. I just wanted to keep being a Serb like I was before the war, and I wanted that to not be a problem.<sup>1</sup>

The war in Sarajevo has changed what ethnicity means. Before the war, ethnicity was one identity marker among numerous others, and there was meaningful space for citizens to hold multiple, hybrid, or ambiguous ethnic identities. But the logic of war and of the post-war state has polarized people into discrete ethnic groups and solidified the boundaries between them. The intended kindness of the statement, "To me, you are not a Serb", reflects that ethnic categories have become weighted with the moral categories engendered by war, as Serb has come to signal aggressor, and Bosniak, victim.

In this article, I offer a close look at the everyday practices and negotiations of ethnicity in a post-war space, drawing from one year of ethnographic fieldwork (2017 to 2018) with Sarajevo Serb women between the ages of 40 and 82: members of the pre-war generations who remember what it felt like "to be a Serb like [one] was before the war", and who feel the difference now. The contemporary anthropological view of ethnicity emphasizes its social construction; it is widely agreed that ethnic categories do not exist as primordial entities in the world, but are accomplished from moment to moment through discursive and performative interactions (Barth, 1969; Brubaker et al., 2006; De Fina, 2007; Mahtani, 2002). In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, anthropologists' constructivist interpretations of ethnicity have been invaluable for problematizing the constrictive ethnic schema of the post-war state, which divides citizens into the impossibly neat "ethnic boxes" of Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, and "Others" (Hromadžić, 2015: 70). Choosing to emphasize instances of ethnic hybridity, fluidity, and ambiguity, anthropologists have shed light on how people exist across, between, and in spite of, ethnic labels. This literature has provided important documentation that although the war may

have resulted in an ethnic partition of the Bosnian state, it did not manage to completely divide and compartmentalize Bosnian people.

Yet there is a notable discrepancy between constructivist readings of ethnicity in Bosnia (and elsewhere, see Retsikas, 2007 on Indonesia), and the feeling, relayed by many of my participants, that their ethnicity is not something that they do, but rather a constant and essential aspect of who they are. In refusing the ambiguous label of “Bosnian Orthodox”, the woman quoted earlier explained:

If someone is a hairstylist, an engineer, a mechanic—they’ve put in some effort to become that. But being Serb? I can’t change anything about that. I’m not proud of it, but I’m not ashamed either. Except, sometimes I do get ashamed. During the war, I became a little ashamed.

The shame that she describes is one that many Serbs in Sarajevo feel. For this woman, ethnicity is not simply innate, it is inescapable: she cannot slip out of it even though she might sometimes like to, in order to escape the stigma. Her words attest to the way that ethnicity often feels inherent or natural to us, even though it is not. As Brubaker et al. (2004) point out, this is why essentialist perspectives cannot be dismissed so easily; they contain important information about how people actually experience and interpret the social world.

By examining how it feels to be Serb in Sarajevo, this article sheds light on how violence alters the social experience of ethnicity, reconfiguring ethnic categories into moral boundaries. To this end, I bring several strands of scholarship into dialogue, bridging work on performance, the body, and affect/emotion. I show that the feeling of being Serb in Sarajevo is often marked by a cumulative sense of anxiety, rooted both in the violent experiences of Serbs within the siege, and in the violence committed by Serb forces. For Serb women of the pre-war generations, this anxiety manifests in the body in practices of concealment, as they purposefully perform ethnic ambiguity by altering pre-war gestures and bodily habits that have become politicized in since the war. The anxiety that drives these concealments is subtle, and yet it pervades social life for many, conjuring threats even in the most mundane encounters.

### **In praise of ambiguity?**

Ethnicity has been the primary lens through which scholars across the disciplines have made sense of the war in Bosnia and the unravelling of Yugoslavia. Narrowly ethnic explanations should be considered oversimplifications, however, as they obscure the various economic and global political factors that coalesced to bring the breakup of Yugoslavia (Jovic, 2001; Woodward, 1995). They also obscure the significant labors of ethno-nationalist elites in politicizing ethnic groups and manufacturing ethnic antagonism out of popular discontent (Gagnon, 2004; Toal and Maksić, 2014).

Since the end of the war in 1995, ethnic divisions have become institutionalized in the constitution and administrative structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The country is divided into two ethnically defined entities: The (Bosniak-Croat) Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska. The “ethno-nationalist infrastructure” of the state is apparent at every level: in the ethnicized educational

curricula that teach students conflicting versions of history; in the incompatible national calendars where one side celebrates as a victory what the other side mourns as a defeat. This infrastructure extends to the government census, which requires citizens to declare themselves ethno-nationally (as Bosniak, Croat, or Serb, henceforth B-C-S), or else be grouped with the undifferentiated remainder under the controversial category of Others [*Ostali*]. Conspicuously absent on the census are the options to declare nationally as Bosnian-Herzegovinian without specifying ethnic affiliation; to declare “mixed” or multiple ethnic affiliations; or to be counted as a specific national or ethnic minority (e.g. Jewish, Romani, Albanian, etc.). Being listed as an Other has practical consequences, making it more difficult to access state-backed credit (including mortgages and student loans), or to obtain a government job (Markowitz, 2007: 59). To make themselves legible to the state, then, citizens who may hold a more hybrid or ambiguous “off-census identity” in their private lives nevertheless find themselves compelled to declare according to the identitarian logic of the state (Markowitz, 2007: 58).

Responding to highly ethnicized portrayals of Bosnia in journalism and in the academy, as well as to the institutionalization of the B-C-S schema by the state, critical anthropological research has provided a much-needed corrective. Using ethnography to highlight the various ways that Bosnians relate to themselves and one another in ways that are not reducible to ethnicity, anthropologists have focused special attention on urban–rural distinctions (Maček, 2009; Rolland, 2004; Stefansson, 2007), neighborly relations or *komšiluk* (Bringa, 1995; Sorabji, 2008), gender relations (Helms, 2010), and local, nonethnic classificatory principles such as “decent people” or *pošteni ljudi* (Kolind, 2008; see also Neofotistos, 2004). And, consistent with contemporary ethnic studies scholarship, which depicts ethnicity as an “interactional achievement” or a “situational accomplishment” (De Fina, 2007: 374; Henriksen, 2016: 492), anthropologists working in Bosnia have emphasized that ethnicity is not an essential or inherent property; it is a fluid and, above all, relational construct that is activated through social interaction (Bringa, 1995; Čapo Žmegač, 2007; Kolind, 2008; c.f. Flere and Klanjšek, 2016).

Yet the understandable desire of anthropologists in Bosnia to document and advocate for ethnic fluidity, hybridity, and ambiguity has at times resulted in an over-correction, or a cumulative portrayal of Bosnian post-war identification as more ethnically fluid than it really is (Hayden, 2007; Maček, 2011). One factor that has swayed anthropological preference towards ambiguity or hybridity is that these forms tend to be interpreted positively, either as a kind of anti-nationalist social and political critique (Hromadžić, 2013; Kolind, 2008) or as a form of resistance by those rendered invisible or undesirable by the B-C-S schema (Markowitz, 2007).

Given the rapid ethnicization of social and political life after the collapse of Yugoslav socialism, carving out space between and across ethnic labels is indeed a form of resistance for those whose identities do not fit into the categories on offer. The issue with this conversation, however, is that singular ethnic identification becomes easily collapsed with negative political attributes such as ethno-nationalism. For example, Jansen (2016) recently noted that anthropologists have been so focused on documenting fluidity and hybridity that they have neglected to explore the appeal of ethno-nationalism. I agree with Jansen’s appraisal of the literature; ethnographic methodology has much to offer towards understanding

how people explain, enact, and embody ethno-nationalist frameworks in the course of their everyday lives (see Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Kuligovski, 2011). But I would add that there is an important middle ground to be explored between ethnic hybridity and ethno-nationalism, as people who maintain singular ethnic identities do not necessarily hold ethno-nationalist political views (Guiliano, 2011; Skey, 2011). Indeed, the transformation of ethnic groups into homogeneous political groups was the major goal of ethno-nationalist elites in the former Yugoslavia (Gagnon, 2004).

The Serb woman's indignation at being told, "To me, you are not a Serb", contains a deep anxiety that reflects numerous historical contestations over belonging in Yugoslavia. During the Second World War, when Bosnia was part of the fascist Independent State of Croatia, Ante Pavelić's government took a threefold approach to the "problem" of the Serb (Christian Orthodox) minority: deportation, murder, and forcible conversion to Catholicism. The message for Serbs was that they could remain in the state only if they ceased to be Serbs, that is, if they "converted" into Croats. In 1942, the government developed a novel conversion strategy, and created a "Croatian Orthodox" church (Greble, 2011). While the Serb woman's friend may have been attempting to console her, his formulation of "Bosnian Orthodox" recalled a more violent history of erasure.

Yet her indignant response—Why should I now be Bosnian Orthodox? The Muslims are all Bosniaks now. They're building a nation for themselves, but they want to tear mine down?—itself gestured to another history of contested belonging. For clarity, her use of the term "nation" here is customary; Bosnians rarely use the word "ethnicity" in the sense intended in English, and more often use variants of the word nation (*narod*, *nacija*). After the Partisan victory over fascism in the Second World War and the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia, it was Bosnian Muslims who struggled to be recognized as a distinct and equal nation. The dominant view among Serb and Croat politicians was that Bosnian Muslims were not a nation in their own right, but were really Serbs or Croats who had betrayed their nations by converting to Islam during Ottoman rule. Therefore, to be a Bosnian Muslim was considered merely a religious designation, not a national one. In the first socialist Yugoslav census in 1948, Bosnian Muslims had the option to declare as a recognized national group (e.g. Serbs, Croats), or to declare as Muslims of "undeclared" nationality—the implication being that "undeclared" Muslims had not yet decided whether they were actually Serbs or Croats. When a category recognizing "Muslims in a national sense" was introduced on the 1971 census, nearly 40% of the population of Bosnia declared this way.

Folded within this checkered history, the anxiety of Sarajevo Serbs proves to be double-edged. While practices of concealment may help quell the worry of social stigmatization, they only exacerbate another, perhaps deeper, anxiety: that of being erased from the city altogether, of having one's ethnicity/nation revoked. This anxiety is why the phenomenon of post-war ambiguity should not be so easily celebrated for transgressing ethnic boundaries. Approached from the perspective of Sarajevo Serbs, it reveals a complex and asymmetrical politics of belonging. Given the vital place of ethnicity/nation in many Bosnians' sense of who they are, the anthropological apprehension towards singular ethnicities leads to irreconcilable contradictions. Baker (2015) explains that, when she attempted to make

ethnic frameworks “invisible” (305) in her research design by avoiding addressing Bosnians in ethnic terms, this strategy only created gaps in her participants’ narratives since they sometimes identified themselves in ethnic terms.

Alongside the program of analyzing local-level ethno-nationalism proposed by Jansen (2016), anthropologists need to carve out enough space to “reclaim” ethnicity from the nationalists, for example by exploring, as Helms (2013: 133) suggests, how people may find meaning within ethnic accommodations in ways that are not violent or oppressive. Approaching ethnicity primarily through the deprecated form of ethno-nationalism ultimately leads to the same problem as “getting swept away with praising the virtues of the ethnically fluid” (Baker, 2015: 306). In both instances, our work may only serve to vilify ethnicity as such, rather than to disentangle ethnicity from its political collusion with violence and ultra-nationalism. By avoiding ethnicity in favor of documenting instances of hybridity, fluidity, and ambiguity—and by attending to ethnicity only when it takes a violent or oppressive form—anthropologists are effectively ceding ethnicity to the nationalists.

#### **“I can tell that they are thinking it”**

My fieldwork with Sarajevan Serb women revealed a sense of anxiety surrounding issues of ethnicity and belonging. From the beginning, my efforts at recruitment were hampered by the local reality that many Sarajevan Serbs choose not to identify publicly as Serb, opting for a more ambiguous “Sarajevan” or “Bosnian” identification in their professional or social lives. And, while this identification is certainly not exclusive to Serbs—many Sarajevans of various ethnonational backgrounds would also identify first and foremost as “Sarajevan” (Jansen, 2015)—I heard a joke that aptly captured the sense of concealment with which some Serbs asserted this identification. The joke concerned the census category of Others [*Ostali*], generally thought to be comprised of anti-nationalist or hybrid-identifying people who have rejected the B-C-S schema. Turning this idea on its head, the joke went that the *Ostali* were really “Serbs in hiding”.

During the initial stages of recruitment, I would often hear from contacts that they had a neighbor or colleague with a Serb name, but that they felt uncomfortable asking this person whether they indeed identified as Serb. Others would report back that their Serb acquaintances were “too scared” to participate in an interview. Or, to the opposite effect: “You should talk to my friend Vesna. She is very open and she does not hide [her ethnicity]. She is not like those diluted Serbs”. Eventually, I began to meet more Serb women, and to conduct qualitative interviews, asking them about their everyday experiences of the city. I was sometimes startled by their responses, which highlighted ethnic stigmatization and hostility. If we met at their homes, participants would speak openly about such matters. But often, when we met in public places, participants embodied their anxiety in various ways: a cautionary glance behind one’s back, leaning in closely to speak, or whispering.

I knew that the siege and the early post-war period had been difficult for Sarajevan Serbs. Before the war, Serbs constituted approximately 30% of the population, with Bosnian Muslims at 50% and Croats at 6%. The war altered this demography as the majority of Serbs fled the city at the start of the siege or in

its early months, and Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) refugees from other parts of Bosnia came in. According to the first post-war census, conducted in 2013, Serbs comprise less than 4% of the population of Sarajevo, with Bosniaks at 80% and Croats at just under 5%.

For Serbs, this demographic asymmetry is compounded by a moral asymmetry, as Serbs are collectively cast as aggressors in the dominant narrative of the siege, regardless of their actual war-time experiences. This narrative is inverted to a mirror image in Republika Srpska, where the innocence and victimhood of Serbs in the war (and throughout history) is strongly emphasized, while the crimes committed against Bosniaks and Croats are minimized or denied.

Although every person who found themselves in besieged Sarajevo was victimized by the Army of Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske*, or VRS), this violence was committed “in the name of” all Serbs. It is not surprising then, that there were numerous reports of violence, police intimidation, and employment discrimination against Serbs during the war and in the early post-war years due to their ethnic association with the aggressor (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2008; Vuković, 1993). And on a social level, the siege caused a deterioration in relationships, as other Sarajevans came to feel that Serbs were in various ways complicit in the war (Maček, 2009; Sorabji, 2006). Because of these factors, Serb, Bosniak, and Croat cannot be considered parallel or “symmetrical categories” in the social landscape of post-war Sarajevo (Brubaker et al., 2006: 211); they carry different moral, social, and political weights.

I knew about this past, but I was surprised to uncover that a sense of stigmatization continued to be felt so strongly in the present. As a contrast class, I had my own unfolding experience of the city. Although my inventive grammar and anglicized pronunciation betrayed my early emigration from Yugoslavia, my quintessentially Serbian name, my Ekavian accent (typically associated with Serbs from Serbia),<sup>3</sup> and, regrettably, my Cyrillic tattoo effectively marked me as a Serb. And yet, I did not feel stigmatized in my day-to-day life. Because of this discrepancy between my participants’ narratives and my own experience of the city, I initially doubted some of my participants’ claims. I dismissed them as overreacting or reading too much into encounters that were not actually hostile.

Consider the following example. One participant in her 40s who lives with her parents in the suburbs, told me that when she meets new (Bosniak) people in central Sarajevo and tells them her (Serb) name, they often challenge her belonging by asking her whether she lives in Eastern New Sarajevo, the Serb-dominated district located on the outskirts of the city, in Republika Srpska territory. Surprised by this, I asked her, “Really? People actually ask you that? This has happened to you more than once?” And she responded, a bit reluctantly, “Well, sometimes they ask, but sometimes I can tell that they are thinking it”.

Narratives like this one accumulated. Again and again, the hostility or stigmatization that participants alleged would de-materialize when I pressed for details. No one told them, “You do not belong here”, but they nevertheless read this message in the quick tightening of a mouth, in a gaze averted or held too long, in the raising of an eyebrow. I eventually came to realize that while the woman quoted above may indeed be mistaken about the inner monologues of her acquaintances,

it would be a disservice to dismiss her overall feeling of exclusion as being simply imaginary. The point is, she was not alone in the conviction, “I can tell that they are thinking it”.

### **Anxious encounters**

To clarify, the sense of anxiety I am describing does not invade each and every social encounter, nor, of course, does it apply to every Serb person in Sarajevo. Several Serb women I met were so unfettered by this anxiety that they were surprised to hear it was a pattern among some of my research participants. And I found that, although some participants’ narratives gave the impression of constant and open hostility in all domains of social life, when I would spend time with the same women out in the city (e.g. running errands, visiting a pharmacy, grocery shopping), I would see that their encounters were not overtly ethnicized or problematic—at least not in a way that was recognizable to me.

To understand why Sarajevan Serbs may be reading hostility in benign interactions (or why they may be sensitive to subtle hostility in seemingly benign interactions), we must attend to the affective dimension of post-war social life. Anthropologists have increasingly tuned into affective registers in order to capture the bodily intensities and emotional ambiances of the field that too easily elude empirical observation (Davies, 2010). Tracing the atmospheric effects of violence, Das (2007) writes that violence is not only a physical event, but encompasses the disruption of social relationships, trust, and community affiliations. She argues that one subtle form of violation involves losing the assurance of context, or ceasing to “trust that context is in place” (9). Violence introduces a skepticism into the everyday, such that social life is not assured but is transposed into a key of anticipation, anxiety, or even fear.

In an anthropological reading of anxiety among Gorkhas (Nepali-Indians) in Darjeeling, Middleton (2013) reframes anxiety from an individual psychophysiological state to a collective embodiment that is “at once historical, social, and political” (609). He argues that, for groups whose belonging is contested or denied, the experience of anxiety cannot be explained by the singular encounters in which it unfolds. Mundane events or language can act as triggers that produce an anxious response, but the response is not about those triggers. Rather, it carries the affective weight of a longer history of exclusion and precarious belonging. Similarly, Schoenberger and Beban (2018) describe how their own experiences of fear and surveillance while doing fieldwork on land acquisitions in Cambodia allowed them to better grasp the affective experience of their research participants who were caught in conflicts over land. Initially, their participants’ stated sources of fear “seemed banal . . . and not particularly threatening” (1340): a phone call late at night. But as the researchers began to feel threatened and harassed themselves, they were able to grasp the cumulative ambiance of fear that surrounded the land conflict, shaping social relationships and disciplining bodies and behavior. By itself, a late-night phone call may not be particularly threatening, but when woven into a context of accumulating affective intensity, the phone call “took on a new resonance” (1340).

The anxiety that marked seemingly mundane social encounters for Sarajevan Serbs cannot be explained if it is reduced to those encounters. It signals a complex

and cumulative anxiety about belonging that is rooted in the 1992 to 1995 siege of Sarajevo and the role of the Serb side in the war. Caught between the feeling that they were victims of the siege “just like everybody else”, as one participant put it, and the feeling that others increasingly viewed them as aggressors, many participants shared stories with me about ethnically targeted violence or hostility during the war and in the early post-war years.

### **Serb women inside the siege**

Enduring the siege as a Serb meant that, in addition to the threat posed by the besieging army, one often had to navigate an increasingly hostile context within the siege. The most consistent threat participants recalled concerned Bosniak gang leaders and paramilitary groups who rose to power during the siege (Andreas, 2008), terrorizing civilians across ethnic lines, but often targeting Serbs in particular. Several participants saw Serb friends or relatives “disappear” during the siege, presumably killed by a paramilitary gang, but never found.

The fear of violence during the siege led to practices of concealment that bear a family resemblance to practices that continue today. Several participants discussed refraining from wearing black mourning clothes when a loved one died in a shelling, as they were worried this Orthodox custom would visibly mark them and make them targets for revenge. One woman, a retired banker in her 70s, explained that during the siege, she would limit herself to one black article of clothing, thus keeping the custom in a way that was inconspicuous. Another took a cue from the Greek Orthodox tradition, which she believed allowed dark purple instead of black, so she adopted this custom temporarily.<sup>4</sup>

The social transformation of Serbs from “neighbors” to “aggressors” inside the siege recalls Bergholz’s (2016) account of “sudden nationhood” during the Second World War. He describes sudden nationhood as a triggered shift towards an ethnicized and antagonistic way of interpreting the world, such that neighbors lose their individuality and become conflated with The Serbs or The Muslims, us or them.

The Serb women I interviewed explicitly rejected the association of Serbs with aggressors. But I noticed with some surprise that they never leveraged their gender to contest it. Given that post-war women’s activist organizations in Bosnia have mobilized around gendered terms (mothers, widows) in order to claim moral authority and effect political change (Helms, 2013), I had expected to hear a similar discourse from the women that I interviewed, a discourse positioning women as peacemakers, or as innocent victims of male ethno-nationalist violence (for a critique see Kouvo and Levine, 2008; Žarkov, 2007; cf. Hunt, 2011). However, participants generally felt that being Serb women did not soften their position in the eyes of others. They recalled war-time accusations by neighbors that they were colluding with the snipers, that they were spies, or that they had shipped off their sons to fight for the VRS, even while they themselves stayed in Sarajevo. They felt unjustly scorned as aggressors, but they viewed this as an ethnicized rather than a gendered ascription (see Golubović, forthcoming). In rejecting the label of aggressor, they repeatedly emphasized that they had stayed in the city throughout the siege, thus repositioning themselves as survivors and implicitly diverting blame to the many Serbs, men and women, who had left quietly on the eve of the war.

However, even though participants did not conceive of gender as something that “conjugated” their ethnicity (Clammer, 2015) or effectively altered their moral positioning, there may well be gendered differences in how Sarajevo Serbs actually experience or express their feelings of ethnic anxiety.<sup>5</sup> For Serb women, the ascription of aggressor may ultimately be more abstracted than it is for men, who can be accused of literally pulling a trigger. As Sorabji (2006) discusses through her concept of the “wartime pedigree”, what makes it difficult for some Sarajevo Bosniaks to behave warmly towards stranger Serbs is the impossibility of simply looking at a person and knowing what they did during the war, or who they may have killed. While Serb women’s assertions that they stayed in the besieged city can be read as a way of claiming this “pedigree”, the gendered implications of Sorabji’s findings suggest that hostility towards Sarajevo Serb men may indeed be more prevalent, or more explicit, than it is for Serb women, although more research is needed.

In the post-war period, the sudden nationhood (Bergholz, 2016) that sparked during the war continues to spark within social encounters that may, on the surface, seem to be innocuous or unremarkable, compelling Serb women to code these interactions as ethnicized, and to interpret them as hostile. This is not to say that Serb women are necessarily imagining their own stigmatization, but that mundane social encounters can quickly become charged with the affective intensity of a more violent past. It is not that a raised eyebrow directly evokes a raised voice, but rather that memories of past events become part of how we inhabit the world after violence.

### **The feeling of ethnicity**

Feelings of ethnic anxiety are not unique to Sarajevo Serbs but are common across various contexts of post-war co-existence. Palmberger (2016) describes a Bosniak woman who feels certain that when she goes to the Croat side of Mostar, people on the street can “tell” she is a Bosniak, even though nothing about her appearance would give this away. The drive to conceal one’s identity is also not unique: in World War Two, Nazi-occupied Sarajevo, Jews disguised themselves as Muslim women to escape deportation, or, across the border in Serbia, took on Serb names and presented themselves as Serb refugees (Greble, 2011).

But the anxiety of Sarajevo Serbs is unique in that it comes from a blend of persecution and perpetration, suffering and shame. It comes from memories of violence committed against Serbs inside the siege, and from a complicated shame for the violence committed against fellow Sarajevans by Serb forces. This quality contributes to an important distinction between the concealment practices of Sarajevo Serbs, and what Bryant (2016) terms “constructive ambiguity”, or the labor of managing difference in order to achieve or maintain everyday sociality in post-conflict spaces. Ethnographers in Bosnia have observed this strategy in various forms, noting how Bosnians skillfully make use of silence or ambiguous language to set aside tensions, avoid confrontations, and get on with daily life (Eastmond and Selimovic, 2012; Jansen, 2013; Stefansson, 2010). While the concealment practices of Sarajevo Serb women closely resemble the phenomenon of constructive ambiguity, they shed light on how the terrain of ambiguity is necessarily navigated differently by stigmatized or morally compromised groups.

Although the cultivation of constructive ambiguity requires the engagement of all parties, the stakes are not symmetrical. For Sarajevan Serbs, an ethnic minority grappling with the stigma of being associated with the war-time aggressor, ambiguity is a performative strategy that reflects a deep anxiety about belonging in the post-war city.

A constructivist view of ethnicity is able to capture the ways that Serb women slip into ethnically ambiguous performances. It is able to capture the “agentive maneuvering” of stigmatized minorities as they actively negotiate the presentation of their identities (Becker, 2015: 3; Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012). But I have argued so far that a strong constructivist view of ethnicity is not able to capture the inherent and inescapable feeling of ethnicity, especially in post-war settings where ethnic and moral categories can become fastened, and where the residual affective intensity of war can charge quotidian encounters. To grasp the feeling of ethnicity for Serb women in Sarajevo, I turn now towards ethnicity as an embodied phenomenon.

Scholars have recently called for a closer engagement between ethnic studies and scholarship on the body. Clammer (2015) points out that while ethnicity is widely understood as a type of performance, and while the notion of performance necessarily implicates the body, ethnic studies have not paid enough attention to how ethnicity is actually enacted through or ascribed to the body—despite the widespread appreciation of gender, for example, as an embodied performance (see also Dion et al., 2011).

To this critique, I would add that for stigmatized groups in post-war settings, what the body conceals may tell us more than what it performs. In Sarajevo, the very performance of Serb ethnicity is often achieved through concealment. In Goffman’s (1959) terms, Sarajevan Serb women perform an ambiguous “frontstage” ethnicity that differs from their “backstage” Serb identities. But in the same motion that they conceal this “backstage” identity, they affirm its authenticity: they affirm it through having to conceal it in the first place.

While performance has more often been deployed by anthropologists to illustrate the situational, interactional, and contingent nature of ethnicity, Goffman’s work contains an important insight: the notion that ethnicity is a type of performance is not mutually exclusive with the subjective feeling that one’s ethnicity is an essential and unchanging aspect of who they are. One woman, a retired teacher in her 60s, put it this way: “The way you’re born is just an accident. I didn’t choose to be Serb and I can’t change that”. Even while Serb women perform their ethnicity differently in different contexts, actively intervening in what identities (Serb, aggressor) can be ascribed to them in the moment by others, these performative moments do not compromise their subjective conviction that they intrinsically are Serb (see Lemon, 2000).

But if the successful performance of a front-stage identity is at the same time a concealment of a more “authentic”, even immutable, backstage identity, then the view of ethnicity as an ephemeral social accomplishment does not tell us enough about how ethnicity is actually experienced, nor about the politics of belonging that compel a person to conceal their identity in the first place. To understand this, we need to understand how violence reconfigures ethnicity into a moral boundary,

and to consider the compelling role of emotions such as anxiety in these embodied concealments/performances.

I turn now to the bodily alterations by which Sarajevo Serb women of the pre-war generations conceal their ethnicities, and also affirm them through this concealment. In the subtle movements through which they alter pre-war gestures and greetings that they once enacted without a second thought, we can witness how the social experience of ethnicity has shifted for Serb women who knew life before the war. We can see how a residual but ever-accumulating anxiety conjures threats where there may be none, or makes people perceptive to hostilities that may be latent.

### **Embodying anxiety: Gestures and greetings**

Ethnic differences (or more precisely, ethno-religious differences) between Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats in Sarajevo are, for the most part, invisible, with the major exception of religious clothing worn by some practicing Muslims. Ethnic difference is also more or less inaudible in Sarajevo, since Bosnians of all ethno-national backgrounds generally speak in the regional Ijekavian accent. The more frequent audible distinction heard in Sarajevo is between the accents of long-term urban residents and rural newcomers, reflecting the influx of rural refugees into Sarajevo during and after the war (see Maček, 2009; Stefansson, 2007).

Nevertheless, ethnicity is expressed by and ascribed to bodies through other cues. When I met with participants in public places, they would greet me with two kisses, one on each cheek, whereas some of the same women would greet me with three kisses when I met them at their homes. The three-kiss greeting is associated with Serbs, and several participants told me that they purposefully kiss twice in public because they were sure that “people count kisses” in order to decipher who among them is a Serb. One woman in her 70s explained, “It wasn’t written down anywhere; it wasn’t the law. But, after the war, people were very aware of it. They made sure to only give two kisses”. She recalled that when she greeted a friend with three kisses shortly after the war, he leaned in for a fourth, saying, “Let’s add one more, just so it’s not quite three [*da ne bude baš tri*]”.<sup>6</sup>

Yet what would actually happen if onlookers counted to three was always left unclear. Consider the following exchange (reconstructed from field notes) between me and a manicurist in her late 60s:

Her: I always kiss twice now, I have just gotten used to it. But also, people count kisses now. They don’t want to be kissing three times.

Me: What if a friend were to give you three kisses when they came in here [the nail salon]?

Her: Actually, that has happened. My friend who is Muslim came in and for some reason she gave me three kisses, and I could see all the ladies [customers in the salon]

give me a look. They must have thought that she was my relative visiting from Republika Srpska, Bojana or Dragana or something! *[Note that she is not listing actual relatives, only offering “Bojana” and “Dragana” as typical Serbian names. Note, also, that in her scenario, this relative is visiting from Republika Srpska and is therefore unfamiliar with the local context. In other words, she is suggesting that a*

*Sarajevan Serb would not kiss three times*]. So, I decided to have some fun with it. A few minutes later, I said “Hey, Aida” [so that the customers would know her friend was Muslim based on her name], and asked her some question, and I got to watch their

faces as they tried to figure it all out.

Me: Why did she kiss you three times, then?

Her: Oh, I think she is always trying to show how much she doesn’t care about all those things, about who is what. I mean, I don’t care, I would kiss her two times or three times or one hundred times if I’ve missed her so much! But it did make it a bit awkward for me.

Me: What kind of look did the customers give you?

Her: Just a look.

Me: Would they say anything?

Her: No, nobody would say anything, but they just sort of look at you.

Me: So, what were they saying by the look?

Her: People count so that they know. They don’t have to say anything.

When I asked participants how many kisses their greetings involved before the war, they told me that they did not really know, since nobody counted before the war. A retired professor in her 70s said, “Maybe I would kiss two times or maybe three times. I don’t remember ever counting so I can’t say what I did”. Another woman, also in her 70s, also retired, said: “I always kissed twice or just once actually. I don’t know, I just like it better. It’s quicker. How long do you really want to spend kissing people hello?”

Another small bodily habit that suddenly took on new significance also concerned the number three.<sup>7</sup> In the lead-up to the war, using the thumb, index- and middle-fingers to signify the number three (as opposed to the index-, middle-, and ring-fingers) became a symbol associated with Serb ethno-nationalism, as it was used as a form of salute at rallies (Maksić, 2017). For the women I interviewed who happened to gesture three this way naturally, without intending any ethnonationalist messages, this new significance put them in an uncomfortable position. One woman who was in her 40s when the war ended told me that, after the war, she spent time at home practicing the “other” gesture for three, quickly and repeatedly assembling her hand until it felt automatic, the way a guitar student might practice a new chord. “I didn’t want to order three *kifle* [pastries] at the bakery and have everyone look at me”.

As the war changed the meaning of ethnicity in Sarajevo, sharpening boundaries and cultivating antagonism between ethnic groups, everyday practices that had benignly signaled ethnic difference began to take on a new weight. Gestures that had previously been enacted without a second thought became avenues by which ethnicity, and along with it hierarchies of morality and belonging, were inscribed onto bodies.

But even while these women felt they could not openly kiss three times in public, they did not seem to want to. Their anxiety about being erased from the city, about having their ethnicity revoked, would not be resolved by performing a heightened Serb ethnicity, such as insisting on kissing three times. Because what they missed was not the social permission to kiss three times, but the pre-war sociality of not counting kisses at all.

This was what the woman quoted in the introduction meant when she said, “I just wanted to keep being a Serb like I was before the war, and I wanted that to not be a problem”. Being a Serb like one was before the war meant being a Serb without the additional weight of being seen as an aggressor. It meant never worrying about which fingers to raise to make three. It meant kissing three times, or twice, or once, or however many times one felt like because the kisses signified a friendly greeting and not a political claim.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the social experience of ethnicity in the aftermath of violence, demonstrating how, through small bodily acts and alterations, Sarajevan Serb women intentionally perform ethnic ambiguity, unmarking themselves in order to blend in. Through the anxiety that drives these subtle concealments, we can read how the categories of victim and aggressor have become fastened to ethnic labels, making these women anxious that they will be read by others not merely as Serbs, but as aggressors, as nationalists, as enemies.

Whereas anthropologists have tended to use performativity to argue for the situational and fleeting nature of ethnicity, here I am concerned with the subjective, immutable, and inescapable feeling of ethnicity. In dwelling on this feeling, I am attempting to reclaim ethnicity from the nationalists, to foreground ethnicity as a subjective and social experience that can be pried apart from the violence of ethno-nationalism, even if only momentarily.

But, for all the small gestures that Serb women make in order to conceal their ethnicity, they do eventually arrive at an impasse: names cannot be altered so freely. Going through social life with a Serb name was for many of my participants a recurring source of anxiety. Giving their names effectively ethnicized quotidian encounters, compelling them to look for subtle clues in the responses of their interlocutors, and leading, sometimes, to the conclusion, “I can tell that they are thinking it”.

I was at the post office and the clerk asked me for my father’s name to fill out some form, and I answered Miloš, and I could just feel all the eyes in the room look at me. Nobody said anything, but I was still very uncomfortable.

Like many of the other examples presented in this article, interpreting this quick encounter depends on tacit knowledge and intuition, feeling the eyes in the room. It depends on reading small, non-verbal cues that carry intense affective weight. Because “nobody said anything”, I cannot know for sure whether the raising of an eyebrow or the quick tightening of a mouth are harmless or hostile motions. From my perspective, there is a notable discrepancy between the sense of anxiety that compels some Serb women to present ambiguously, and what I would describe as the relatively unproblematic encounters that seem to make up social life in Sarajevo.

But while this discrepancy initially led me to dismiss my participants’ claims of hostility as unfounded or over-sensitive, attending to this anxiety ultimately tells us more about how violence has altered the meaning of ethnic categories, and the

possibilities for inhabiting them. Following this feeling allows us to draw a line of continuity between the physical violence of the war and the residual anxiety that seeps into the present, manifesting in the body through gestures that are so small they might seem inconsequential. Pulling away after two kisses, drawing the thumb and pinky together to make three.

This research opens the door to important questions about how Serb ethnicity is felt by the post-war generation in Sarajevo. The concealment practices of the women in this study involve consciously altering pre-war bodily habits that became politicized since the war. It is possible that these habits did not extend to the next generation, given that they grew up in a social context where “people count kisses” (or at least their parents think they do). If the next generation was socialized to kiss twice, or to employ the more “neutral” gesture for three, then it is possible that the “clues” that mark ethnicity may look very different than they do for the pre-war generations, and may not be located in the body at all.

There is also the question of to what extent the post-war generation would feel burdened by a sense of anxiety. Research suggests that post-war generations tend to distance themselves from war, constructing narratives and identities without the “rupture” that characterizes pre-war generations (Palmerberger, 2016). This is especially the case when the war is a source of stigma and shame that the next generation wishes to avoid (Klvanová, 2019). Yet, the very ability of post-war generations to create this distance is revealing of an intimate knowledge about the past, a knowledge gained both through the stories (and silences) of older generations, and through the post-war generation’s own experiences of everyday life in the war’s aftermath (Schwenkel, 2011).

Serb women of the pre-war generations felt the decline in social relations compared to the years before the war. The next generation did not experience this deterioration, but they also never experienced what it felt like “to be a Serb like [one] was before the war”, without the ubiquitous “ethno-nationalist infrastructures” of the post-war state. The ability to draw comparisons with the past may make pre-war generations more sensitive to hostilities that lie below the surface of social life; it may also make them more prone to conjure ethnic hostilities out of unfriendly social encounters (see Bergholz, 2016).

The conviction, “*I can tell that they are thinking it*”; the reading of negative thoughts in the silent looks of the ladies at the nail salon; the imagining of how fellow customers at a bakery might respond to the “wrong” gesture for three pastries—these anxieties may not accurately reflect how everyday life actually unfolds in Sarajevo. But they do point to what Das (2007) describes as a lack of trust in context that comes after the experience of violence, a lack of trust in the “boundaries between the ordinary and the eventful” (7). They signal a worry among Sarajevan Serbs that the contours of ordinary life might suddenly bend, that everyday encounters such as visiting a bakery or greeting a friend might suddenly and unexpectedly give way to feelings of exclusion or shame. As the women in this study take measures to prevent or defer this possibility, we see how the residual anxiety of conflict shapes social interactions and bodies, and how it colors even the most (seemingly) uneventful encounters.

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## **Notes**

1. All interviews were conducted in the local language; all translations are mine.
2. I borrow this phrasing from the anonymous reviewer who pointed out the tension between Serb women's desire to feel unburdened by their ethnicity, and the broader ethno-nationalist infrastructures of the Bosnian state.
3. Ekavian is often associated with Serbs from Serbia, but it is a regional accent that is also spoken in parts of Croatia and Bosnia. The most common accent in Sarajevo is Ijekavian, and the difference between the two is found in the e or ije vowel sound. For example, the word "white" is pronounced *belo* in Ekavian and *bijelo* in Ijekavian.
4. Thank you to Heather Coleman and her Greek network for their insight on dark purple.
5. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention to this distinction.
6. I cannot be sure whether people do indeed "count kisses" in Sarajevo, but I can confirm that some people in Belgrade do. When, during my year of fieldwork in Sarajevo, I would go visit family and friends in Belgrade, I sometimes inadvertently pulled out of greetings after only two kisses, having grown accustomed to this in Sarajevo. On more than one occasion, the person I was greeting (always a generation or two older than me) would pull me back in for a third kiss, saying something to the effect of, "Here we kiss three times", or "I see you've spent too long in Sarajevo!"
7. The number three is associated with the (Serbian) Orthodox religion, in which people typically cross themselves with three fingers symbolizing the Orthodox interpretation of the Holy Trinity.

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