

## Re-Creation of Self: Narratives of Immigrant Women from Ex-Yugoslavia living in Western Canada<sup>[\*]</sup>

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Identity is at times about  
what we are essentially not,  
but are also not free to dispense with.

(Angelica Bammer, Introduction to *Displacements*, xv)

The article briefly discusses the immigration waves of former Yugoslavs to Canada, focuses on the most recent immigration wave of the 1990s, and uses narratives to interpret transformative processes brought about by immigration. The main part of this article is based on interviews conducted with former Yugoslav immigrants living in Calgary, Alberta in the period 1996-7. As the interviews were transcribed and analyzed, it became apparent that the experiences of immigrant women revolved around a few distinctive themes. In their narratives, female immigrants rationalized their experiences of migration and assessed their situation in the Canadian context. Dilemmas over what is or should be their life in Canada, and the process of re-creation of private and public self, appear as two major paradigms in female stories. Migration narratives are interpreted from the perspective of the author, herself an immigrant who settled in Western Canada in 1993. In a way, her own immigrant story is embedded in the interpretations of these lived experiences.

Displacement has been one of the most pervasive features of this century. There is a significant dynamic of change brought about by migration; it triggers a process through which the inertia of being is replaced with the dynamics of becoming (Schwartz 1994), and the status of a settler is abandoned for that of a newcomer, an immigrant. While life's journey imposes all kinds of

transformations on everyone, migration sets a stage for accelerated changes. Finding oneself in a new social context often requires fast decisions and sometimes uncomfortable degrees of functional adaptation. By functional adaptation is meant all kinds of immediate changes that are needed in order to blend in and start life in a new environment: replacing traditional clothing with a westernized outfit in order to improve one's chances of finding a job; changing one's name so that a potential employer can pronounce it easier; enrolling one's child in a day-care that embraces religious beliefs other than one's own because it is the only day-care available in the neighborhood, etc. Displacement often means being overwhelmed by the fact that too much is happening at once. Being asked to tell one's experiences of displacement can offer an almost cathartic opportunity to articulate those experiences in telling the story to others.

The main focus of this paper will be on interpreting immigration narratives that capture and reflect identity transformations. Palmer-Sailer argues in her work on female immigrant stories in Canada that the dynamics of displacement, and the resistance it often inspires, is an important illuminator of female experiences (1996).

Immigrant narratives are a part of the larger discourse of diasporic cultures, which, although unique and complex, also share commonalities with migration experiences and the theme of marginalization. They reflect multiple associations and dis-associations with the host country, struggles to define "local" as a distinctive community in the context of displacement, and a sense of identity communicated in relationship to collective histories of displacement (Clifford 1997: 286).

Identity construction and negotiation refers to the ways in which people perceive themselves and others, talk about their migrant experiences, communicate and evaluate their situation in a new environment, express viewpoints and world-views, rationalize and make sense of their everyday lives under new circumstances. What does it mean to be an immigrant from ex-Yugoslavia? How are those identities mobilized? What historical narratives are constructed to support them? How are their daily lives informed by immigrant background? As the migration stories were collected, answers to these questions started to emerge. In the future it would be important to compare female experiences with the narratives of male immigrants and combine those two sides of the immigrant story into one.

## A SHORT CHRONICLE OF IMMIGRATION

Before the latest wave of immigration in the 1990s, immigrants from Yugoslavia settling in Canada traditionally concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Ontario and Quebec. Significant immigration waves, which started towards the end of the nineteenth century, intensified in the inter-war period, especially 1927-31, again after 1945, as well as from the 1960s onward (Lukic-Krstanovic 1992: 30-69). In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a sporadic settlement of immigrants from the former Yugoslavia in Western Canada (Rasporich 1982). Several Croatian families settled in Taber and Lethbridge in 1904, and another 40 arrived in 1920 (Palmer 1972: 219). Another 200 Slovenians settled in Western Canada after World War II (*ibid.*: 200). Yugoslav immigrants were predominantly motivated to settle in Canada due to the combination of economic and political factors, such as fleeing from the communist regime, which was installed in 1945. Until the 1960s, emigration from the former Yugoslavia consisted predominantly of unskilled workers, farmers, artisans and sailors (Markovic 1965). According to the census of 1991, living in Alberta at the time were 1,020 individuals of Croat origin, 10 Macedonians, 480 Serbians, 400 Slovenians, and 4015 who declared themselves only Yugoslav in origin (Statistics Canada, *The Nation* Cat. No.93-315).

Following the wars of 1991-95, Yugoslavia dissolved as a political unit, smaller states emerged out of it, and a new wave of immigrants began coming to Canada, especially in the period from the end of 1992 until 1997, but to a lesser extent still continuing today. This most recent wave of immigrants consisted predominantly, although not exclusively, of skilled workers and professionals who left the country of origin due to a combination of political and economic factors, which accompanied the dissolution of the country and the wars which erupted in the aftermath. In addition to these skilled workers, who are referred to in the Canadian Immigration Act as "Independent Immigrants," there have also been a significant number of refugees, who were granted refugee status after coming to Canada either directly from their native country or from Western European countries that granted them temporary refugee status.

There were significant social consequences associated with the Canadian state's construction of the two different types of immigrants. Refugees enjoyed state sponsorship for a period of up to one year, which included settlement, provision of basic household items, the possibility to automatically enroll in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and to apply for other services and programs, such as being provided with a volunteer, who would host an

immigrant family and help them adjust. Sponsored day-care was also provided by specific immigrant serving agencies, as well as programs for victims of torture and war trauma. Independent Immigrants, on the other hand, had no such state provisions and could enroll for financially sponsored ESL classes only after having lived in Canada for one year.

The way “refugees” and “independent immigrants” were constructed on a discursive level is demonstrated in the following recounted dialogue between a refugee and an independent immigrant from the former Yugoslavia. One was lucky to escape her besieged city in the middle of the war; the other one left the country on her own terms after realizing that the political and economic consequences of the wars would be devastating. The ‘independent immigrant’ was able to return later to her home, organize and transport all important household items to Canada. Those included furniture, books, and memorabilia. The independent immigrant asked the refugee:

“How did you survive the winter in a city that was besieged?”

The response was: “By burning all our furniture, books, everything that could warm us up.”

“Were you selective in burning your books?”

“Well, we tried to save the children’s books. They were the very last ones we burned.”

This dialogue shows how differently people were affected by the wars in the former Yugoslavia. “Refugees” and “Independent Immigrants,” although part of the same migration wave triggered by the same push-factor (inter-ethnic conflicts), carried with them profoundly different lived experiences.

According to data from the European Council’s Commission for Migration, Refugees and Demography from 1997, there were 860,000 displaced persons and 689,000 refugees in the territories of the former Yugoslavia. Canada was one of the most desirable countries to immigrate to. According to Helsinki’s Human Rights Committee, in 1997 more than 175,000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were waiting for the results of visa applications to enter Canada and Australia (Prosic-Dvornic 1997: 4). Immigration Canada created a special program for these immigrants.

From 1992 until 1994-5 immigration quotas for people from the former Yugoslavia were raised. In 1995, for example, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees recommended that an additional 5,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia be resettled. In response, Canada accepted 500 more refugees that year. In July 1992, special measures were implemented, relaxing the

admittance criteria for citizens from the former Yugoslavia. The individual points required to enter Canada were reduced, and the procedure was accelerated, taking in some cases as little as four months from applying for the visa to entering Canada. An estimated 100 immigration visas were issued per month. In the period 1993-1995 almost 9,000 persons from the former Yugoslavia entered Canada as government-sponsored refugees (Citizenship and Immigration Canada News Release August 9, 1995).

During this last wave, Western Canada, and Alberta in particular, received a significant number of ex-Yugoslav emigrants. Family immigration was the predominant pattern of settlement for refugees as well as independent immigrants. In the period 1993-1996, it is estimated that over 200 immigrant families originating from the ex-Yugoslavia settled in Calgary.[\[1\]](#) During that time, it was possible to observe a concentration of ex-Yugoslavs in the city's belt-line – residential apartment-building blocks encircling downtown.[\[2\]](#) From the sporadic settlement in 1993 to today's high concentrations in certain residential areas, these immigrants have created "visible" ethnic enclaves predominantly within the inner city. This is also reflected in the emergence of ethno-cultural clubs and sport clubs, as well as the installment of government-sponsored programs through immigrant serving agencies, such as the Mosaic Centre's program for families from the former Yugoslavia (part of the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society).[\[3\]](#)

Statistical data indicate that immigration from the former Yugoslavia to Alberta has intensified since 1993. Unlike 1993, when immigrants from the former Yugoslavia were not among the top ten source countries of immigration to Alberta, in 1994 Bosnia appeared in 7th position with 4% of the total immigrant population (Source: IMM 1000 1993 and 1994, Preliminary Statistics, Citizenship and Immigration Canada). In 1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina was 11th and Yugoslavia 12th among the top 30 source countries of immigrants in Calgary (Source: Social Research Unit, Community and Social Development, City of Calgary).

The 1990s immigration wave consisted predominantly of urbanites, who had left towns in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia.[\[4\]](#) They belonged to diverse immigrant categories: from refugees to independent (professional class) and sponsored (family class) immigrants. Many immigrants had had experiences in other countries and in that sense came to Canada as "skilled" migrants: adaptable and knowledgeable about the settling process, they brought with them a culture different from rural patterns of dwelling.[\[5\]](#)

The potential for culture clash, which many immigrants experience upon coming to a new country, appears to have been lower among this latest immigrant group, accelerating in turn their adaptation to life in Canada. Many spent some time (even several years) in refugee camps in other countries (Germany, Italy, Austria) before coming to Canada already equipped with basic survival skills and knowledge about immigrant sub-culture. Those “immigrant veterans” were skilled in obtaining information and asking for help or support. Some had traveled extensively before leaving their country of origin and were therefore more or less familiar with the North American way of life. Although their socio-economic status differs, and they say: “Some came with no money, and others with big money,” they can be generally described as male and female middle-class professionals and skilled workers. During the interviews, participants often emphasized that they had lived quite well “before the war” and would have probably stayed in their country of origin if it hadn’t been for the war and general fear for survival.

Before growing economically stronger, ex-Yugoslav immigrants predominantly lived in rented apartments in Calgary’s belt-line. They created what could be called “ex-Yugoslav-multi-ethnic neighborhoods” and support networks. Network connections are recognized as constituting a form of social capital that immigrants can draw upon to gain access to foreign resources (Massey: 264).

Immigrants from the former Yugoslavia started to become visible in ESL classes: in some Calgary colleges as much as 80% of those enrolled were students from ex-Yugoslavia.[\[6\]](#) Downtown elementary and high schools also hosted students from the former Yugoslavia. In some cases, jobs were created for special facilitators who helped to establish communication between teachers and parents, and addressed specific problems and issues.[\[7\]](#)

#### GENDERING AND ETHNICIZING THE MIGRATION NARRATIVES

The immigrant narratives emerged in a process of constructing and evaluating lived experiences. Attempts to normalize or standardize lived experiences by subjecting them to common-sense reasoning and judging, involves a process that Turner called typification (Turner 1987: 179). Several themes could be identified in immigrant narratives interpreted here: Culture, Identity, Ethnicity,

Citizenship, Nationalism, Patriotism, War, Family, Profession, Community, Gender, Tradition, as well as Success / Failure, Typical / Atypical, Yugoslav / Canadian, Us / Them, Continuity / Change.

Recent ex-Yugoslav immigrants living in Western Canada list ethnicity, together with gender, culture and other identifiers as major organizational principles in everyday life. People participating in the interviews often emphasized that unlike in the homeland, where one was reduced to an ethnic (Croat, Serb or Muslim) identity, here in Canada, nationality did not appear to be an important factor in everyday communication. They praised Canadian multiculturalism as a factor creating an atmosphere of openness, acceptance and tolerance. According to others, however, ethnicity was a divisive factor preventing to a degree even in Canada communication between those people who otherwise share a “geography of origin” and similar cultural context. Yet others lamented the fact that, as immigrants, they could not blend into what was perceived as mainstream Canadian culture.

What we refer to as ex-Yugoslavs is a mixture of people with diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds. Yugoslavia as a political entity ceased to exist after the wars of 1991-1995, but calling someone an ex-Yugoslav is an operational reference that provides a shared context for immigrant narratives. In this case the term refers to the people who were inhabitants of Yugoslavia up until the beginning of the war in 1991 but have since left.

In everyday life, we use ethnic references in diverse contexts. From ordering ethnic food to listening to ethnic music or attending a multiethnic festival, we attach a specific contextual meaning to ethnicity, which appears to be an important organizational principle. Reducing any group of people to a common ethnic denominator is also a politically charged issue. Some of those “ethnicities” fought against each other in the recent Yugoslav wars. During that time it was particularly important to impose “ethnicity” on individuals and render them politically “visible” as the inter-ethnic conflicts unfolded. We have discussed the consequences of enforced ethnicity imposition in detail elsewhere.[\[8\]](#) Having experienced the process first-hand, the author concluded that enforced ethnic classification in essence pushed the people affected in two directions: either towards extreme ethnic awareness and nationalism or towards the dilemmas of ethnic identity and disillusioned citizenship.[\[9\]](#)

As we explore immigrant narratives in this paper, ethnicity, together with other signifiers, is evoked as part of what Smith (1987) called lived experiences.

Many immigrant contexts were explained with reference to ethnicity as, for example, in the following quote:

After all these horrible things [wars, atrocities – E.P.], there is rivalry, there are sometimes arguments, but you can see that they [we] are from the same region, from the same culture, how much they share and understand each other. They can laugh at same jokes... Smaller groups started to emerge consisting of the people who more intensively socialize. Ethnicity appears as another reason. There are people for whom it is the main characteristic: to hate others, to be professional Serbs, Croats or Muslims. They are nationalists.

The Canadianization of the storytellers' names in this article is another example of an ethnic discourse. There is a need to hide the narrators' identities in this text by giving them "Canadian" names because South Slavic names are often associated with certain ethno-cultural groups. Even if we would have randomly assigned South Slavic names to the narrators, their ethnicities would still be "visible" to an insider. What might be perceived as a narrator's ethnic background could in turn prompt an informed reader to pre-judge the arguments and statements given.

It has been noticed by earlier researchers that experiences of immigrant women often differ from those of their male counterparts<sup>[10]</sup> for a variety of reasons including Canadian immigration policies. As was the case with the majority of other groups of immigrant women, women from the former Yugoslavia entered Canada predominantly as Dependent Immigrants, meaning that someone else in the family, most commonly the husband, was considered by the Canadian state to be a primary visa carrier. This fact created their special relationship to the host society's institutional and legislative framework. Official assessment procedures commonly failed to recognize women's professional status.<sup>[11]</sup> It was common that a woman's professional background was rated as secondary to that of her husband in terms of potential employability in Canada.<sup>[12]</sup> As is the case in other countries, women in Canada, and immigrant women in particular, face realities of higher levels of unemployment and lower average income levels compared with their male counterparts (Boyd 1987: 11-12).

Immigrant women perceive their own experiences as different, more complex and more difficult than men's. On the level of interpretation, women's experiences are seen as different because of the internalized, culture-specific traditional idiom of womanhood brought from their country of origin:

(Jill) I always say I am politically loyal only to my children. I came here because of them. If they decide to stay here and if God gives us a chance to have a normal family life, then I will stay here.

(Sandra) I work part-time and intend to continue that way. From time to time I feel guilty, especially when my child is sick; on the other hand, children who have stay-at-home mothers also get sick. You are never satisfied, I know myself, I cannot sit in the house, I adore my child but it is not for me.

(Sara) It is killing me to stay at home, every day is the same. My husband can pursue his career. I am realistic, it has to be that way. I am happy to have children and as long as they are healthy and happy everything is fine. In couple of years they will go to school and then I can start doing something with my profession.

(Cathy) My child, who is now ten, did not finish a single school year in the same school because we were constantly on the move... Because of that, I am happy to be here and intend to stay here. I want to make it up to her.

Women perceive themselves as being responsible for the functioning and survival of the family, and responsible for the children: from care-giving and disciplining to transmitting “culture” and assuring language retention. Seeing themselves as the ones who should make the necessary sacrifice during a difficult, transitional stage of life, they re-examine the traditional woman’s roles. In their narratives, phrases such as: “I have been taken care of by my husband” and “...sent to security together with the children” reflect their perceived vulnerability and need of protection in critical situations. Phrases describing their lives in the Canadian context, such as: “He was working, the children were my responsibility” and “What could I do but stay at home and take care of things?” reflect their sense of duty and the “naturalness” of their assumed roles.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF LEAVING THE COUNTRY,  
TRANSITIONS, MARGINALIZATION

In discussing the reasons for leaving the country of origin, a strong commitment to the preservation of the family and to their children’s welfare is a predominant theme. Some women made the decision to leave while in the middle of the war or while waiting for their husbands to reunite with the family that had meanwhile reached safety. Unlike the refugees, independent immigrants had a chance to plan the whole experience and were not pressured by the imminent war situation. Several quotes will exemplify the context within which the decision to leave was made.

(Dolores) I did not think much, and did not make a conscious decision to leave... today I ask myself what did I think at that time at all? I did not have any illusions about the future. Then, I accepted my husband's decision to leave, I did not object... it was as if I was living in a vacuum, I did not think.

(Mona) My husband left because of the political situation, he was against the current government. I did not want to go, but my husband made me an ultimatum: if I didn't come, he would take our son away from me. I joined him three months later.

In Canada, immigrant women had to master in a short period the necessary skills enabling a smooth transition to the new country for their family. Bearing the burden of their children's frustrations with school, new friends, and an unfamiliar environment, they often suffered psychological tensions. Such problems have been recognized as an inevitable part of immigrant life. If a woman works in Canada, a sense of guilt is often expressed as well as the need to balance family and work.

(Sally) Overall, it is up to a woman to balance children, school, work. It is not only that you come home from work, eat and then relax, your working day continues. Even while you sleep you are hounded by nightmares. It is an effort... it is difficult for you to look at your child who is going through all kinds of difficulties while adapting. The whole pressure is on the mother, not on the father.

(Maria) I suffered from severe depression. I realized that I neglected children even though I came here because of them.

(Nira) I was happy to get a job which allowed me to be at home at the time when kids go to school, come back for lunch hour, go back to work and again come back home before they return from school. So, it was as if everything was normal: mom is at home taking care of things, as if nothing strange is happening in the family.

Upon immigrating to Canada, some women voluntarily assumed more traditional roles, as compared with the arrangements in the country of origin. They were put into a situation in which they did not have an extensive support network of kin, neighbors, and friends to rely on. Unlike the situation in their native country, where both spouses were commonly employed full-time, in Canada this was not the case for variety of complex reasons. It is as if some of the women became marginalized in the process and aftermath of displacement.

(Julia) Before the war we both worked and I had a good job. We lived with my mother-in-law and she helped a lot with the kids. When we came here, it was horrible, before we were in an extended family environment and had a lot of support. We all suffered here, the children as well. My husband was nervous. We had to learn English, we were both aware of our age and the difficulties of finding jobs in our profession. The pressure was on me to go back to school. My husband expected me to provide him with security, he

did not want to... could not work, and I was supposed to be an excellent student and take care of the family. On the other hand, he suffered tremendously because it was ingrained in him that, as a male, he should be the provider and decision-maker.

(Susan) I have a university degree, and I used to have a good job. When we arrived, my English was not good enough. My husband had to go and find any kind of a job. My degree was not recognized in Canada. What could I have hoped for with my degree!? Besides, our child had difficulties in adjusting to the new school so I thought I should stay at home and provide support. Now I am a housewife, and after many years, with sadness and bitterness, I have to admit to myself that I have no self-confidence to try and get a job in my profession. It is now out of the question. But I would like to find a part-time, less challenging job, and to contribute to the family income.

Such apparent “traditionalism” has to be put into the context of migration, rationalizations about oneself and the use of “before and after” imagery.

According to Angelica Bammer, migrant identities are horizontal: they are built on cultural cross-connections, unlike settlers identities that she calls national identities, rooted in the vertical lineage of culture through time (1994: xv). In the case of ex-Yugoslav immigrants, identities are not only based on synchronic affinities but deeply rooted in a special relationship to the past expressed by the use of “before and after” symbolism constructed around a particular symbolic fixture in time: the war, which lasted in different parts of Yugoslavia from 1991 until 1995. The fact that the major push factor for this group of immigrants was interethnic war in the country of origin made an impact on the way in which identity has been communicated. Experiences of war produced ambiguous feelings and conflicting identities. The symbol of the war not only rendered visible a temporal boundary but signaled the existence of a pre- and post-war symbolic order and of the social transformations that took place in the aftermath of the war.

Victor Turner (1967) is credited with pointing out the relationship between status change and transformations of identity. Transformations lead to reconceptualizing the self while adapting to new conditions. These processes are reflected in everyday discourse and narrative patterns. As immigrant women from ex-Yugoslavia talked about their life prior to and after migration, they used phrases such as “past life” and “now and then” to make a distinction between their settler and immigrant lives:

In my past life I was a school-teacher.  
Now I never play the guitar but then I used to play every day.

When evaluating their private self and assessing their primary family roles, as well as when evaluating their public self (paid work and professional affirmation), women use “before and after” symbolism to imply transformations triggered by the war situation and subsequent migration which, for some, took a retrograde turn. If there is sadness and bitterness expressed over the loss of their professional identity, there is also a sense that there was no other option. Being an immigrant, and an immigrant woman in particular, often means having no maneuvering space when making decisions: “adapt fast and survive – there is no turning back” is echoed in those statements.

#### CHANGES IN LIFESTYLES, DILEMMAS OF IDENTITY, GROUP DYNAMICS

To paraphrase Rex, for a woman in mainstream society, family as the primary private institution is a part of the whole network of social relations which constitute “her own society.” Among ethnic minorities the situation is sometimes different: for them private and public are part of different social systems and different “cultures” (1997: 216). Within the ex-Yugoslav women’s discourse, “private” consisted of a cacophony of competing lifestyles. It became a struggle to handle multiple challenges and influences. It also meant that a decision had to be made as to how and to what extent the family could be sustained under the pressures to adapt and transform.

With the “bombardment” of alternative lifestyles (cooking, dressing, leisure time, organization of children’s activities, disciplining, housework arrangements), there was a dilemma as to what needed to be preserved, to what extent, and what could be abandoned. There was also a question of who “owns” the culture and who controls the processes of transformation. For example, women often talked about the dilemmas of language use within the family. Sometimes both parents decided that the native tongue would be spoken among family members at home, and sometimes they had opposing views and strategies as to what should be done regarding their children’s language retention.

(Gloria) I usually enforce speaking of our own language at home. I correct my son when he says something wrong, but cannot do more than that. When I am particularly nervous I try to enforce it, but I am aware that it is painful for him. I am not sure anymore whether I should persist with it.

(Mavis) We want our son to preserve our native tongue. Not only is he allowed to refer to us only in Serbo-Croat language, but everyday after school I work with him in it.

(Shauna) There is a strong pressure from the children's side to speak English at home. I think that we should speak our own language in the family... Being it one or the other, they speak English among themselves. At the same time this is the only chance for me (us) to learn English as a mature person and speak it without emotional barriers: to speak it with the children at home. So it is tempting for me to speak English with them... Only then do I hear English profoundly and understand it totally. Only then does it stop being a foreign language.

Similar dilemmas could be observed in many other segments of everyday lives. The issue of "traditional culture and values" was also discussed and evaluated in contrast with Canadian culture and values. Again women communicated dilemmas over the preservation or transformation of their own "culture." Bhachu has discussed the issue of immigrant "cultural baggage relocation" (1996: 284). An important aspect of this process is the element of choice in transforming and creating new forms out of "old stock" cultural baggage. The idea is that migrants carry their cultural baggage with them and, based on the situation in the local context, decide what to preserve and what to dismiss.

(Maya) There are changes happening in our family. For example, we accepted drinking this horrible coffee. Although we preserve our traditions, we would like to celebrate both Xmas, but we don't have money for that. We celebrate the children's birthdays... and the House Saint, day which we should celebrate through my husband's side... we still don't do that, although we should.

(Annette) We accepted some customs, for example the baby shower. It is nice, but I also think that we should continue and preserve our own traditions. We celebrate our own religious holidays, we don't often go to church, although we should. That is another issue, our people avoid church because they think it is politicized.

(Kelly) In our house in the near future we will start celebrating Christmas on December 25, as soon as our child grows up. I wanted to continue with our own tradition and celebrate Christmas on January the 7th, but I cannot deprive her of presents and a festive atmosphere.

(Judith) We never celebrated religious holidays at home, only New Year and birthdays. Recently a Canadian colleague asked me if I observed any religious restrictions on an Islamic holiday. It took me some time to understand what he was talking about. Later he apologized and said that he assumed I was a Muslim because of my name. I explained that although my name is a Muslim name, I am not a practicing Muslim.

The church is seen as politicized; one's name is seen as ethnic identifier, dilemmas over celebrating one or two Christmases... almost every one of these

statements needs an explanatory paragraph in which the context is interpreted before one can begin to understand the meaning behind the words. For example, a politicized church is an “ethnic church” in the diaspora and not a mainstream Canadian church; all three major churches from the former Yugoslavia – Islamic, Orthodox Christian and Catholic – were involved politically during the wars mainly by supporting nationalist political parties and justifying the war; if one sees churches as politicized and therefore does not want to attend service, the implication is that the person does not share the political views associated with the church.

Immigrant women communicated thoughts regarding their social life, and reflected idioms of “ghettoization” – imposed or voluntary isolation, lack of contact with “Canadians,” reliance on neighbors and friends who came from the same country, internal rivalries within the ex-Yugoslav sub-culture(s). This opened a new level of interpretation in terms of the ways in which groups are made “visible,” delineating symbolic boundaries between us and them. As Barth argued back in 1969, the greater the use of us/them in everyday discourse, the more visible is the boundary defining relations of the groups in contact (Barth 1969). Solidarity and rivalry, segregation and selective incorporation are repetitive themes.

(Justine) Well, we are... there is lots of competition between people from the ex-Yugoslavia. When they see that you are not gossiping, you look strange, then eventually they accept you. I appreciate that. I enjoy drinking coffee with them every once in a while but not more than that. If someone is in need we will help, it is our cultural tradition, neighborhood is a highly valued institution. If you don't have something in the house you can borrow and return it tomorrow. Every morning someone from our apartment building drives the children to school, and another brings them back in the afternoon. You can rely on people.

(Andrea) It is sometimes so sad to observe people. You only have one life and those people lived together and they learned to live together, they were born in a multiethnic environment in their country of origin. After all these horrible things, there is rivalry, there are sometimes arguments, but you can see that they are from the same region, from the same culture, how much they share and understand each other. They can laugh at the same jokes. Segregation is more and more visible, based on who has more money. Smaller groups started to emerge consisting of the people who more intensively socialize. Ethnicity appears as another reason. There are people for whom it is the main characteristic: to hate others, to be professional Serbs, Croats or Muslims. They are nationalists.

(Zoe) I was very disappointed. I did not have an opportunity to socialize with Canadians. It is very sad for me that we cannot find occasions to meet Canadians. They also don't want to socialize with us. Being around our people means a lot to me, they helped us a lot

when we came. There are numerous families of ex-Yugoslavs in this building and they are all connected and friendly.

(Helga) We socialize wonderfully with our neighbors although we do not share the same nationality. Some are Muslims, Croats or Serbs. They come when we celebrate our Christmas and Easter, we kiss three times, but we do not talk about the war – why did it start, who was to blame. Even among our own ethnic group there are people who have different opinions. So we leave these themes aside.

(Elizabeth) My family and friends mean a lot to me, the process of adaptation would have been slower without them. But if I wouldn't have had a chance to communicate with our people, I would have been forced to mix more with Canadians. I would have liked that as well. It is as if we are living in a parallel world, almost like in a 'ghetto.'

(Chandra) We communicate with all kinds of people from the former Yugoslavia (of different educations, professions, ethnicity, religion). I think that it is our choice to form a familiar circle. Only with our own people can I be relaxed, only when I am not pressured to speak English.

A strong sense of solidarity and support from their own group, whether defined as ethnic, religious or national "Yugoslav," emerges from these narratives. Being able to share the same language and not being pressured to speak English almost feels like "coming home." Having a circle of friends with whom one can drink coffee and speak one's native language seems very important. On the other hand, certain topics are left out: people do not talk about the war, we believe, because it is an unknown territory. Before you get to know the other person well, you want to make sure not to open the Pandora's box of hatred and hostility, suffering and extreme emotions associated with the war time.

At another level, those who wish to become more incorporated into the Canadian mainstream appear to face barriers. For them, isolation within their own group, although perceived as having advantages, at the same time creates a claustrophobic environment that potentially disables social mobility. It is as if both ends of social interaction need to be kept open: to an extent it is good to be attached to one's own group, but it is also beneficial to attempt incorporation into Canadian society.

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Immigrant women from ex-Yugoslavia communicate intensive processes of self-assessment while evaluating their social situation in Canada. The new context requires adaptation and agreed-upon levels of change. It represents a contrastive background against which blueprints of one's own sense of self emerge. Women

had to assess their situation in Canada and make decisions about how to respond to new challenges.

In the migration narratives, several common themes emerged and they are interpreted within the context of the given situation. Accordingly, “culture” is perceived as an asset and as ballast at the same time, “ethnicity” is seen as a cohesive and divisive category, and old traditions are both embraced and discarded. A struggle is visible in defining the “local” as a distinctive community in the context of displacement. How the “local” should be defined seems to be open to interpretation. From one perspective, the “local” is embedded in the ethnic neighborhood, language retention, and the celebration of holidays that are not part of the host country’s holiday inventory. From another perspective, “local” emerges as fragmented and infested with ethnic rivalries, conflicting views, friendly chats with fellow ex-Yugoslavs while avoiding certain politically charged topics, and unsuccessful attempts to blend into the Canadian mainstream.

It is hard to write a conclusion to an article that dealt with the interpretation of migrant narratives. Stories are, and should be, open to interpretations. Reaching conclusions would mean imposing judgments upon lived experiences. There were parts of migration narratives that have been left out in each author’s attempt to edit complex and sometimes contradicting (life-story) monologues and turn them into stand-alone voices. Any final generalizations would be based on fragmented testimonies.

In the end it seems appropriate to transition the author into an “I” voice. While I was doing my fieldwork and collecting what has been called in social sciences “soft data” on us – immigrants from the former Yugoslavia –, I became aware of the privilege and predicament of my insider’s space. It allowed me to understand how important it is to be familiar with the context(s) in order to even begin to interpret migrant narratives. At the same time, re-living those lived experiences while listening to the narrators’ stories disabled the critical voices within me. In turn, I might have not asked some of the questions that an outsider would have asked because I thought I understood the connotations all too well.

#### ENDNOTES

- [\*] This article was presented in somewhat different form at the Metropolis Prairie Node conference at the University of Calgary in 1998. It is based on 47 interviews conducted in

the period 1996-7 with ex-Yugoslav immigrants who lived in Calgary. The article has been modified to reflect the time that has passed since it was originally written in 1998.

- [1] Shimoni, Este 1996, unpublished report, mentions 180 immigrant families from ex-Yugoslavian Calgary. There are no official statistics available, and it is difficult to estimate the total number of recent Yugoslav immigrant families in Calgary. Our estimation is anywhere between 700 and 1000 families in the year 2003.
- [2] The author was one of those immigrants who settled in Calgary in 1993 and observed first-hand the processes described here.
- [3] The Mosaic centre was an initiative to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees from diverse countries, but in the period 1993-1995 almost exclusively focused on immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. The goal was to promote health and social development of ex-Yugoslav newcomer families.
- [4] We use the term *urbanities* loosely here, in the Wirthian sociological tradition that focuses on the urban form of life characterized among other things by relations that are impersonal, transitory, segmental and competitive.
- [5] Academic debates emphasize how controversial attempts to define rurality are. *Rural* is used loosely here. In the Balkan context in particular it implies: an autarchic household, limited geographic mobility, strong family and community ties, adherence to ceremonial and religious traditions, and male domination as the head of the household.
- [6] Unofficial information from Columbia College, Calgary 1997.
- [7] Internal reports and first-hand information from administrators of Connaught Elementary School, Calgary 1997.
- [8] Edit Petrovic (1995). "Ethnicity Deconstructed; The Breakup of the Former Yugoslavia and Personal Reflections on Nationalism, Identity and Displacement Culture," XV (2)
- [9] Edit Petrovic (2000). "Ethnonationalism and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia," in: Halpern, Kideckel eds. *Neighbors at War: Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture and History*. Penn State University Press.
- [10] For example: Palmer-Seiler, 1996, and Tastsoglou, 1997.
- [11] According to the current immigration policy of Canada, potential immigrants to Canada undergo a point-system testing that includes points given to the profession in the context of employability in Canada. It is commonly the case that the husband's occupation is seen as having better employability in Canada and it is most often husbands who are identified by Canadian immigration officials as the primary visa carriers. This fact used to have implications for prioritizing who from the family would be entitled to state-sponsored English as a second language instruction.
- [12] The Canadian Metropolis project supported research that dealt with immigrant women, their professional status and health. For example: Coping Strategies: Employment Status

and Relationship Stability of Immigrant Couples; Trends in the Occupational Attainment of Immigrants to Canada; Research Toward Equity in the Professional Life of Immigrants; Voices of Immigrant Women – The effects of cutbacks on their settlement experiences.

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