No Man's Land: The Intersection of Balkan Space and Identity

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Introduction

Individuals do not live as independent units devoid of cultural and religious ties that shape their identities. In a postmodern world, identities are shaped by shifting boundaries between cultures, religions, and other places of belonging. Rodriguez (2000) argues that "there is no guarantee that one's experiences will lead to a common core of values or beliefs that link one to other members of one's 'cultural group'" (155). Similarly, shifting identities negate a space of freedom because that space is dependent on an individual's singularity. If identity is to be seen as a dynamic and flexible construct, one in which multiple identities or acts of identification are allowed and expected, Bhabha (1994) would argue that identities are brought about from an awareness of subjectivities. Postmodern identities can be changed and manipulated as often as the subject determines it is needed. Identities are layered upon differences that overlap each other as opposed to the search for similarities and homogeneity.

But what if acts of identification are politically manipulated to alter the intellectual, cultural, and personal identity of individuals? An attempt to understand the embedded narratives of intersecting languages and ideologies would create a space in which collective identities would emerge. Countering the notion of a space for collective identity, Hannah Arendt (1951) advocates the creation of a common space in which the narrative of the individual is emphasized. A common space, for Arendt, that favors the narrative of the individual would be a space in which the inherent difficulties of attempting to reconcile a common denominator in heterogeneity are acknowledged. In other words, a tension exists in the interpretation of postmodern identities.

Whether or not a postmodern identity can be interpreted and understood as part of a collective identity based on interconnected traits, or whether the same identity can only be understood as an embodied narrative, is a theoretical argument I have difficulty reconciling. Equally complex, however, are the difficulties that arise when one tries to negotiate multiple identities. The negotiation of differences and the reconciliation of the past with the present are

complexities that are encountered when analyzing the processes of identity formation in geopolitical post-conflict spaces.

The issues surrounding the development of identity formation initially emerged from my work as an English as a Second Language instructor. I was intrigued by the idea of identity formation of immigrant youth and their ability to negotiate the differences between the dominant culture and the culture of their heritage. Having immigrant parents myself helped me to articulate the lived experiences of one who is suspended in identity — neither here nor there. By birth, I am a Canadian citizen but my Croatian heritage and cultural influences layer my identity and therefore being a Canadian is multidimensional in nature.

The notion of *hybridity*, as proposed by Homi Bhabha, has lead me into a theoretical and philosophical web of nodality by which I mean the interstitial spaces whereby processes of identity formation are interweaved. For Bhabha (1994), "it is in the emergence of the interstices . . . that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated." Yet, it must be acknowledged that antagonism and difficulties may be found in the emergence of interstices even though the experiences of nationness, community interest, and cultural value may all have shared a discriminatory or oppressive past. Bhabha further explains that the social articulation of difference is a continuous process that "seeks to authorize cultural hybridities" (2). Although the negotiation of differences creates a cultural hybridity in which a community is evolving, a postmodern perspective of hybridity is seen as a fluid experience that cannot be fixed in its identity formation.

In an attempt to further explore the tension between individual and collective identities, I have chosen to examine a third space of identity — a liminal space that may function to bridge the tension of postmodern identities. To illustrate how this liminal space is portrayed, an analysis of examples of Balkan film and literary art will be examined. A textual analysis of the film *No Man's Land* and the novel *The Bridge on the Drina* will provide rich examples of the means by which a third space of identity exists in a geopolitical zone of conflicting acts of identification. The theory of cultural hybridity as an alternative framework to understanding postmodern identity suggests that postmodern identities are multicultural and thus may offer a space for resistance, protest, tolerance, and pluralism.

Balkan Identity as a Form of Hybridity

Although the term *Balkan* has gained negative connotations in Western Europe and North America since the ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, the term *Balkan* and its derivatives will continue to be used here instead of the newly-accepted geographic *Southeast Europe*. Goldsworthy (2002) suggests that the Balkan identity and the location of culture of the peoples of the former republics of Yugoslavia are formed in the space of in-betweenness or in a third liminal space. The Balkans are more than a *clash of civilizations* (to use Samuel Huntington's metaphor) of ancient hatreds destined to be in eternal conflict. Balkan scholars metaphorically describe the geopolitical areas of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia in particular as *living between two* (Antić, 2003), a *transitory character* (Kiossev, 2002), and *being neither here nor there* (Bjelić, 2002). It can be

inferred that the reason for such ambiguous language is to express the ambivalence of determining the essence of a Balkan identity.

Some Balkan scholars would question the usage of the term *identity* arguing, as Alexander Kiossev does in his article "The Dark Intimacy" that a distinction exists between the notion of *identity* and *act of identification*. Building on the work of Lacanian theory, Kiossev (2002) differentiates between "acts of individual mirror identification and acts of spontaneous cultural identification" (168). Confusion underlies the assumption that while cultures and societies allow space for multiple acts of identification, they simultaneously want individuals to adhere to a certain identity. Michael Ignatieff (1993, 1998) has observed that acts of identification in the former republics of Yugoslavia are contingent on what one is not in relation to the other. While interviewing Serbian soldiers in their barracks during the Serbian-Bosnian conflict in 1998, Ignatieff observed that a dichotomy existed between the lived experiences of the soldiers and their participation in the ethnic conflict. Ignatieff (1998) concluded that Balkan identity was a relational term based on differences and that relational differences equal an "empty tautology." If a geographic metonym cannot presume the existence of a non-geographical entity (Kiossev, 2002), it cannot be concluded that the Balkans would directly produce a Balkan identity.

Were postmodern identities to call upon the notions of plurality, difference, and heterogeneity, a web of interconnectedness between the Balkan peoples would be expected whereby peace and harmony would reign instead of war and disunity. Due to the lack of progress in developing a politically-stable multicultural society and due to a history of imperial oppression in the Balkans, Antić (2003) suggests that the ambiguity of determining a Balkan identity is in fact the essence of a hybrid identity. Hybridity is not only an effect of the cyclical oppression of groups of people in the Balkans but also a cause of the present crisis in identity. Feelings of belonging and acts of identification shape Balkan identity. Yet, if through feelings of belonging, one is identified as a Croatian Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, or Bosnian Muslim, how can a multiplicity of subjectivities be negotiated in a pluralist context such as in Bosnia where the desire of the other republics for a collective cultural identity produced some of the greatest atrocities of the latter half of the twentieth century?

Balkan Hybridity as Art

Balkanism, the study of the effect of space on identity in the Balkans, can be studied in either an archival or textual format, substantive knowledge without examining presuppositions in the former and examining suppositions epistemologically in the latter (Bjelić, 2002). Bjelić continues to emphasize that neither textual nor archival studies should separate the notions of Balkan and Balkanism from the history of the place, and any effort to do so by changing a place in discourse-geography would be a blatant attempt to subvert identities. Antić (2003) teaches us that learning the essence of truth about the life and political orientation of a country can be undertaken effectively through an examination of the arts in a country. This subsequently creates an opportunity for history to reveal its narrative qualities. In an effort to examine the narrative truth of Balkan identity and Balkanism as a hybrid identity, the implications of the bridge in Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* and the cinematic space between the Bosnian and

Serbian trenches in Boris Tanović's *No Man's Land* as metaphorical and geopolitical symbols will be taken up.

No Man's Land is a cinematic journey of the irony and absurdity of war and its inherent origins, circumstances, and historical interpretations. It was introduced in theatres in North America with the following trailer: "No one knows who they are. No one knows which side they're on. And no one wants to get involved. Two enemies are becoming the victims in a war between the newsmakers and the peacekeepers. What started as a minor problem is about to become a major incident" (Trailer, *No Man's Land*, 2001). A middle trench — no man's land — located between the Bosnian and Serbian front lines, is a particular place where two wounded soldiers — Čiki, an armed Bosnian Muslim, and Nino, a Serb soldier — must work together to keep Čiki's compatriot, Cera, immobilized. If Cera moves, the "bouncing mine" strategically placed under his body will kill them all. The other major players in the film are the United Nations Protective Forces (UNPROFOR) and the global television networks, both of which are concerned about advancing their respective agendas — agendas that do not include the plights of the soldiers in the middle trench.

The area between the two trenches — no man's land — functions as a place of dwelling where the dwellers — Nino and Čiki — negotiate the spaces of their individual and collective identities in a hermeneutic circle of being. The irony of minor differences between the protagonists is woven throughout the film. Ignatieff (1993) uses Freud's analysis of narcissism to coin the term *the narcissism of minor difference* to explain how feelings of ethnic nationalism are exploited by exaggerating the minor linguistic and cultural differences of the Balkan peoples. Language, more than land and history, is considered the essential form of belonging and as such must be differentiated from that of the other. As the director states that "the language spoken in the film by the protagonists is in fact the same language. Today, the Serbs call it Serbian, the Bosnians call it Bosnian, and the Croats call it Croatian. The fact is that when we speak, we understand each other perfectly" (Portuges, 2002, p. 676).

Understanding each other perfectly would imply a shared collective identity, yet the protagonists are in a constant state of tension wavering between moments of anger and frustration which are muted by moments of recognition and belonging. While waiting for the German mine expert and the UNPROFOR forces to return, Nino and Čiki realize that they have a mutual acquaintance in common:

> Čiki: You're from Banja Luka.
> Nino: How do you know? Yeah, right.
> Čiki: I had a chick in Banja Luka. Sanja.
> Nino: I know a Sanja . . .
> Čiki: What's become of her?
> Nino: She's gone abroad.
> Čiki: I don't blame her.

The sense of camaraderie is fleeting as Nino reveals that their mutual acquaintance has emigrated from Bosnia. The ensuing silence is heavy with the realization that the protagonists

have been left behind in a politically contested space (Bosnia) and in a particular place of being (trench) where their survival depends on the vilification of the other.

Actively identifying with other individuals in their collective identities (Bosnian Muslim or Serbian Orthodox) to fight an ethnic conflict becomes increasingly difficult when Nino and Čiki, as individual identities, engage in moments of recognition realizing that very little differentiates one man from the other. Heidegger (1971) explains that a fundamental characteristic of dwelling is to spare and preserve. In a no man's land, the physical boundaries of the trench create a third space in which a sense of neutrality subsists. Although Čiki and Nino utter death threats and maim one another, neither man takes the life of the other even when the opportunity presents itself. The trench as a particular location engages their beings in a hermeneutic play. By sparing the life of the other man, peace is observed — a peace that erupts into war outside of the boundaries of the trench. Just as the Balkans suffered centuries of cyclical oppression from imperial forces such as the Ottoman Empire and from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Western-European influences, Čiki and Nino suffer the consequences of the subversive involvement of the UNPROFOR and the global television networks. Shortly after being taken outside of the middle trench, Čiki and Nino revert to their allegiances of collective identities and kill each other.

An elemental aspect in understanding Balkan identity is to understand the structures of domination in the Balkans. Within the small geographic area that comprised the country of Yugoslavia and all its republics, each republic and its people alternated the roles of colonial rulers and colonial subjects. Bjelić (2002) refers to these structures of domination as vertical and horizontal lines of domination. The latter refers to oppression of neighboring republics and areas through historical ethnic conflict compared to the former that refers to the subjugation of the Balkan people by first the Ottoman Empire and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Brown, 2001). A third, more recent structure of domination emerges from the globalizing effects of the American superpower. In *No Man's Land*, the Colonel of the UN High Command responds to Captain DuBois' request for assistance in dealing with the situation in the middle trench:

> You can't expect me to risk the lives of our soldiers in order to save theirs,
> can you? I hope that I don't have to remind you Captain of the precise
> purpose of our mission here in Bosnia . . . but you perfectly know that
> there's nothing that I can do without the approval of the General
> Assembly of the UN. I don't think that the General Assembly of the UN
> is going to convene itself specifically in order to deal with the problems
> of two unknown individuals trapped in no man's land . . . tell them as
> usual that neither side can agree.

The Colonel's terse response mirrors a common opinion of many Westerners: that the people in the Balkans are not only the same but not worth our help and resources. This cultural essentialism is detrimental to understanding the development of individual and collective identity formation. In place of a Balkan identity, Balkan differences melt into sameness and essentialized identities pervade. Whether orientalizing the other (Said, 1979) or politicizing the mode of representation (Bjelić, 2002), cultural essentialism negates the idea that space becomes a

place with meaning thereby creating a location in which identities are shaped and to which acts of identification are formed. This is to say that particular places create narratives to which entire communities and individuals are tied.

In Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina*, the bridge is used as both a narrative device and a metaphor of location. Interweaving over three hundred years of colonial and imperial history through his short stories, Andrić metaphorically represents the bridge as historical evidence of the Balkan character. While in *No Man's Land* the middle trench is the location of being and dwelling for the protagonists, in *The Bridge on the Drina*, the bridge provides a site or a location on each side of its banks where dwelling can take place. The bridge itself creates an in-betweenness not because it spans the river separating the Bosnian Muslim village from the Serbian Orthodox village but because it reveals a hybrid space. Unable to name the process by which Andrić develops his description of the Balkan identity, Edwards (1959) notes that the peculiar position of Bosnia as "a storm center for centuries on the border of the Eastern and Western worlds, saves them from the curse of detailed provincialism and gives them an interest that extends far beyond its narrow borders" (7). What Edwards implies is that the bridge is Balkan reality — it is a bridge between East and West, between civilizations, between "us" and "them" (Antić, 2003). As long as the bridge stands, the villagers on either side of its banks exist in a state of being that has meaning only in relation to the other.

To explain how building and dwelling interact, Heidegger used the metaphor of a bridge in his seminal article, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." A bridge, as an example of a building, is not dwelling but in the domain of dwelling which is to say that building provides a place for dwelling to occur. It could be argued, however, that dwelling could take place on the bridge itself if being exists in a state of impermanence, for dwelling is transient. On the *kapia*, a gathering area in the center of the bridge, Andrić (1977) illustrates the following scene:

> On the *kapia* by day sat the Moslems of the town, morose and disconsolate, about a dozen elderly men grouped around a younger one who read to them from the newspapers, interpreting foreign expressions and unusual names and explaining the geography . . . Hiding their emotion, they bent over the map which showed the future partition of the Balkan Peninsula. They looked at the paper and saw nothing in those curving lines, but they knew and understood everything for their geography was in their blood and they felt biologically their picture of the world. (229)

Andrić is describing an example of the ways in which a hybrid space shapes both identities and acts of identification. The Balkan identity has been shaped through centuries of imperialism and as a result identities become a form of in-dwelling. I use the term in-dwelling to try to explain how Heidegger's notion of dwelling can be internalized so that it is experienced from within rather than from without. To bear "geography in their blood" and to feel "biologically" implies a metaphorical space within a particular location representing a liminal space of being.

The location of culture for the Moslems in the example above is one of a shared collective identity inferred by their fear of yet another unnamed colonial force. Andrić himself

was a supporter of the Bosnian movement for independence and believed that the ethnic clashes in Bosnia were not as much intrinsic to the Bosnian character as they were consequential of the presence of colonial empires (Antić, 2003). Symbolically then, the location of the *kapia* offers a place on the bridge where two worlds could lead to a "clash of civilizations" or to a united front against external structures of domination.

The development of identity based on geography (the Balkans) and geopolitical poles must by nature be a space of transition. Although the bridge remains ageless, ahistorical, and permanent, the dwelling that occurs within the locations of its banks suggests a state of impermanence. The bridge is described as "the same as it had always been, with the eternal youth of a perfect conception, one of the great and good works of man, which do not know what it means to change and grow old and which, or so it seemed, do not share the fate of the transient things of this world" (Andrić, 1977, p. 214). The transient being referred to is that of dwelling — that of (wo)man dwelling in a particular place. The bridge is a reflection of the condition of the Balkan people; their entrapment in a space surrounded by colonial powers naturally creates a third liminal space in which meaning and being transform into dwelling.

The bridge intimates to the reader an understanding that indeed it is a Balkan space creating a Balkan identity, for the bridge's existence affects the psychology of the townspeople on either side of it. Consequently, the myths and stories unfolding over the three hundred years of Andrić's narratives (1977) serve to offer the reader a glimpse into the identity formation of the Balkan people: "So, on the *kapia*, between the skies, the river and the hills, generation after generation learnt not to mourn overmuch what the troubled waters had borne away. They entered there into the unconscious philosophy of the town; that life was an incomprehensible marvel, since it was incessantly wasted and spent, yet none the less [sic] it lasted and endured 'like the bridge on the Drina'" (81).

When considering the condition of the Balkan people, enduring through time is a significant element, for to endure through waves of vertical and horizontal structures of domination is to exude a collective strength. The bridge's permanence in the space of the identity of the Balkan people reflects the impermanence of their being and dwelling. The bridge representatively hints toward the beyond and as such suggests that boundaries are ephemeral. Heidegger (1971) equates boundaries with horizons and suggests that "the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*" (152). Heidegger's hermeneutic circle implies that dwelling for an individual takes place within a socially-constructed spatialization. Boundaries do not physically limit the existence of one's being and the extent of one's dwelling but exist only within the sphere of one's identity and acts of identification. Thus, ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and other affiliations are present for individuals so long as other individuals share similar affiliations expanding or delimiting the *boundary of presence*.

Bridging Identity

Cultural hybridity presupposes that identity formation reflects the postmodern tenets of being fluid, fragmented, and strategic in that individuals may negotiate multiple identities. Identity-building, as it pertains to real or imaginary geopolitical areas, nevertheless is often based on the idea of *the other*. Again applying Lacanian theory to the social construct of identity formation,

Ditchev (2002) states that acts of identification run on two parallels: "On the level of the imaginary, you identify with a specific object you want to be, whereas on the level of the symbolic, you also identify with the gaze . . . creating the field in which identification takes place" (236).

The disintegration of Yugoslavia indicates that the people within its borders yearned to be, in the existential sense, the products of the imaginary. In an anecdotal remark, Yugoslav diplomat Miroslav Krleža was reported as lamenting, "God save me from Serb heroism and Croatian culture" (Brown, 2001, p. 20). By making a figurative reference to the imaginary in the minds of the Croatians and Serbians, Krleža demonstrated that imaginary acts of identification can fuel the nation-building of a people. Space, as a requisite of nation-building, functions in the realm of the imaginary as well. As Reisenleitner (2001) explains "places may thus no longer be the clear, unique support for identity, and are certainly no longer tied to the political borderlines of nations, yet they still resonate throughout the imaginations of communities" (9). The community as place for identity formation is embedded with oral histories, personal narratives and cultural discourses in which the imaginary of the identity is shaped, revisited, and called upon. A disadvantage when analyzing the conflicts in the present and distant history of Yugoslavia is the dismissal of the effect of the imaginary on the identities and acts of identification of the people.

The second level of interpretation of identity-building put forth by Ditchev is epitomized by the realm of symbolism. The gaze "or the subject of the gaze" and "the rule this gaze imposes" (236) implies opposition. *The other* is not just in an oppositional stance but in a stance of naming the objects within its gaze. In an effort to comprehend the processes by which neighbors become enemies, Ignatieff (1998) negates the claim that the nationalist wars of the 1990s in Yugoslavia stem from tribal hatreds and past hostilities. Instead, Ignatieff purports that the various ethnic groups (e.g., Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian) are engaged in a "minor narcissism of difference" meaning that characteristics that once seemed less important to discern identities become the minor differences or divisive factors of warring ethnic factions. He states that "ethnicity is described as if it were skin, a fate that cannot be changed" and that "what is essential about ethnicity is its plasticity" (56). A fluid, or plastic, ethnicity is a symbolic identity in that the gaze of the other is ever-shifting. Fissures cracking through society slowly break apart into ethnicities and competing claims of identity.

Another Balkan scholar, Vesna Goldsworthy, takes issue with the terminology used when discussing Balkan identity. In "Invention and In(ter)vention", Goldsworthy (2002) holds that the gaze of *the other* reflects the symbolism of the Balkans to the outside world. Although in this discussion, *Balkan* has been identified to mean the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, others have not made any distinction between Yugoslavia and its neighboring countries. For Goldsworthy, the notion of Balkanization has been exported through the process of globalization and corrupted only to be used in pejorative contexts that refer to communist and Soviet-style ideas. The result is a fragmented identity "where particular Balkan identities might once have been defined against each other, they now incorporate a sense of difference from Americans, Western Europeans or Asians" (32). The gaze of *the other* not only serves to play name games but to attribute preconceived characteristics onto a people. Thus, whether living constrained by physical boundaries or living in imagined communities of borderless peoples,

the Balkan peoples are continually negotiating spaces and developing identities within those spaces.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether living constrained by physical boundaries or living in a borderless world in which movement between communities, cities, and nations is relatively unimpeded, we are continually negotiating spaces and developing identities within those spaces. Negotiating spaces, or dwelling, to use Heidegger's concept, refers to the state of being within a socially-constructed spatialization. Heidegger (1971) points out that dwelling and being are not synonymous with each other; for dwelling to occur, space must contain a place that provides a location for being to exist. In other words, space can be constructed through the use of architectural designs or interpreted through the metaphysicality of one's being and one's fundamental acts of identification with a social spatialization. Acts of identification and identities are the embodiment and embeddedness of narratives and as such are situated in particular places (Reisenleitner, 2001). Assuming that social spatialization is understood as the relationship between the built environment of the landscape and the social imaginary or collective presuppositions of its dwellers (Shields, 1997), the key to understanding the relationship between social spatialization and dwelling — the location of culture — can perhaps be found in a liminal space of being — a hybrid space.

The interpretation of Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of cultural hybridity as it pertains to the Balkan context offers a glimpse into the omnipresent forces shaping the Balkan identity. Whether identity is examined as a distinct individual identity or a fused collective identity raises several questions as to what the lived experiences of those identities would be. Hybridity, as an alternate notion of postmodern identity, provides a narrative space in which the local and global forces of domination are examined. Bjelić (2002) advocates the study of Balkanism by both Balkan and Western scholars in order to produce the opportunity to reflect on the proliferation of power relations. By taking up Balkanism in a study of a particular ancient place wrought with history and conflict, I have tried to explore the interconnectedness of hybridity theory and its relation to Heidegger's notion of dwelling. Dwelling, as a state of relating to a location, not only gives meaning to the process of identity formation but alludes to a theory of understanding pluralism in a globalized context.

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