Passing through: negotiating identity, sexuality and movement in Ahmed Imamovic's Go West

Milica Trakilović

Published online: 10 Aug 2016.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Passing through: negotiating identity, sexuality and movement in Ahmed Imamovic's Go West

Milica Trakilović

Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Bosnian director Ahmed Imamović's 2005 film *Go West*, situated at the breakout of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, follows an ethnically mixed gay couple as they attempt to escape war and gain entry to Europe. While hiding out in a small village in eastern Bosnia, Milan has his partner Kenan dress as a woman so that they can 'pass' as a married heterosexual couple. The notion of 'passing' and 'passing through' are some of the key themes in the film and will be the focal point of my analysis. My claim is that *Go West's* emphasis on a 'good' and 'bad' Europe lacks an intersectional understanding of power relations and directly influences the scope of (im)possible identities and sexualities that are presented in the film. Moreover, looking at how identity and sexuality are constructed and mediated in the film through the lens of 'nesting orientalisms' and 'Balkanism,' my aim is to bring to light an ideological duality that is created between the idea of a peaceful, liberated Europe and another Europe that always lags behind the West.

Introduction

Go West: this imperative indicates the need to move, but not merely in any direction: if one is Going West, one is also presumably Leaving East, West, or South. Going West in the context of this article represents a yearning for a better life, peace, and freedom. If placed in the context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Going West can be understood as an endeavor by the former republics of Yugoslavia to create new, distinct national identities by distancing themselves from a socialist past and adopting a 'look toward Europe,' manifesting most concretely in gaining entry to the European Union.[1]

This desire to move from East to West is emphasized in the film entitled *Go West*, which came out in 2005 and was directed by Ahmed Imamović, a Bosnian director and screenwriter. At the time of its cinematic debut, the film caused a large media uproar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and was even deemed blasphemous for its portrayal of an ethnically mixed homosexual couple in war-time Bosnia. Curiously, the outrage died down fairly quickly after the film was released (Moss 2012, 364). I was initially interested in seeing whether the different 'passings' in the film (geographical, gendered, national, and

CONTACT Milica Trakilović ✉ M.Trakilovic@uu.nl

ideological) would also allow space for, and hint at more fluid configurations of gender, sexuality, and national belonging. However, while *Go West* might be deemed transgressive and even bold for its focus on a same-sex, ethnically mixed couple in war-time Bosnia and Herzegovina, in my analysis I want to point out that the film's portrayal of gender and sexuality remains quite limited in its scope. Moreover, I argue that the film's stark division between a 'good' and 'bad' Europe reproduces some long-held beliefs about a progressive Europe (i.e. the West) and a backward, Orientalized Europe, that always lags behind. It is my claim that the abundant emphasis on the irreconcilable division between East and West also results in a constricting and normative portrayal of gender and sexuality in the context of the former Yugoslavia.

My critical intervention in this paper consists of making this particular narrative 'unstuck.' By pointing out the exclusions and stereotypical representations incorporated in the film's narrative, I want to argue that *Go West's* is a 'single story,' which, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words 'creates stereotypes … and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete' (Adichie 2009). The danger of this particular story is that it is presented as finite (as the imperative in the title suggests), complete, and absolute, when no story ever is. It might obscure other possible stories that do not follow the same trajectories. Following Gayatri Spivak, what I am interested in is seeing to what extent the film's participation in already dominant normative narratives forecloses the possibility of movement, or alternative configurations to emerge. I am therefore less interested in whether a representation is 'good' or 'bad,' but am rather 'looking for the mark of vulnerability which makes a great text not an authority generating a perfect narrative, but our own companion, as it were, so we can share our own vulnerabilities with those texts and move' (Spivak 1990, 27). In pointing out where this particular narrative has failed, my intention is not to dismiss it as a failed project on its own. Rather, I want to see to what extent even a narrative such as this one, created with the aim to counter certain normative ideologies (presumably homophobia and xenophobia) does not manage to do so without reproducing other harmful ideological constructs (misogyny and the idea of irreconcilable differences between East and West Europe).

In my analysis of a postsocialist narrative that I am choosing to approach through a postcolonial lens, I am adopting David Chioni Moore's argument, which says that many (if not all) cultural situations nowadays bear the so-called postcolonial stamp, meaning that they all stand in some relation to postcoloniality (Moore 2001, 112). Applying a postcolonial lens in studying a postsocialist narrative, such as the one found in the film *Go West*, might therefore be helpful in locating and addressing specific questions of power inequality, representational practices, and the politics of belonging. Adopting this approach means that it is less important 'what a film is thematically about and more about how it engages with history, subjectivity, epistemology, and the political ramifications of all of these' (Ponzanesi and Waller 2011, 16).

Synopsis

The narrative opens in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital, where Kenan, a young cellist and a Muslim confronts his lover Milan in a dark alley as they argue over the best choice of action to take now as war has broken out. Milan thinks it is imperative that they flee the country, as they are not only a same-sex couple, but also an ethnically mixed one. However, Kenan is worried

that he will be exposed as a Muslim, and throughout the film he frequently alludes to the fact that he is circumcised as being the thing that will give him away.[2] As the situation in Bosnia worsens, the two leave for Milan's hometown village in eastern Bosnia where they will wait until their travel documents are ready. In an act of desperation, Milan disguises Kenan as a woman and presents him to his father, friends and acquaintances as 'Milena,' his future bride. If the first section of the film was overwhelmingly bleak, it takes on a decidedly more bizarre tone almost until the very end, as the horrors of war are interspersed with eclectic and over-the-top scenes of village life in rural Bosnia. One particularly humorous segment of the film, evocative of the style of Emir Kusturica (Moss 2012, 361) is Milan and Milena's wedding, orchestrated by Milan's jubilant father Ljubo, who cannot contain his joy over his only son having finally settled down and decides to throw the 'happy' couple a surprise wedding.

As Milan is called up to join the army and is frequently away, a desperate Kenan befriends the social outcast and local witch Ranka, who, upon discovering Kenan's true identity initiates and rather forces a sexual relationship to develop between the two of them. Realizing that Kenan will never love her as he does Milan, Ranka is shown performing a dark ritual at the local cemetery. The following day, Kenan and Milan's father receive the news that Milan has died in battle. Ranka, initially hopeful, realizes that even with Milan gone, Kenan will never love her. She 'outs' Kenan in front of Milan's father, who, perhaps quite unexpectedly, does not turn on Kenan, but in his rage and grief kills Ranka for trying to disrespect his late son. He arranges for Kenan to escape Bosnia, tells him to 'go west,' after which he kills himself. In the closing scene, Kenan is shown giving an interview to a French journalist about his journey from East to West. He has lost his lover, his parents, his home, and all his possessions, but he still has his music, which he demonstrates by playing an invisible cello, which the journalist professes being unable to hear (Figures 1–3).

Figure 1. Mario Drmač as Kenan in *Go West*.

Figure 2. Milan's home village in *Go West*.

Figure 3. Milan and Kenan in Sarajevo in *Go West*.

Key intersecting configurations

The film starts with a documentary-like fragment in which Kenan's voiceover is heard. Throughout the film, Kenan will narrate periodically. In the opening scene of *Go West*, he tells the audience that the warring peoples of the former Yugoslavia may hate each other based on their different ethnicities and national ideologies, but they are all 'united' in their common hate for homosexuals:

> But this [mutual hatred among Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Bosnian Muslims] will stop one day. They will lay down the guns and forget about the massacres. But they will continue to hate homosexuals as before. On the Balkans it's easier to bear if someone in the family is a murderer rather than a faggot.

A loaded statement, the quote is crucial for my analysis because it combines several key factors that converge in the film and that I want to address in this article, namely: sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. I believe that it is imperative that these themes are not explored separately but in an intersectional manner. Intersectionality, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 139, 140), involves an analysis that is sensitive to the simultaneous imbrication of different axes of power in a given situation, based on overlapping social/political categories. Crenshaw has been vocal about the importance of intersectional thinking in feminist politics, as a lack thereof signifies a reproduction of a different type of normative discourse towards a group not taken into account by the oppositional voice.[3] An intersectional approach allows me to argue that constraints placed upon one identity category within *Go West's* narrative directly influence the scope of other (im)possible configurations. In other words, my claim is that *Go West's* lack of intersectional thinking means that for certain configurations to be given a 'human face' (homosexuality), others have to be caricatured (women/femaleness) – to the detriment of all.

To accompany this analysis, I will be looking at how movement is configured in the film's narrative – not just 'literal' movement that happens when one travels from one geographical location to the other (from East to West for instance), but also movement in a more metaphorical/symbolic sense. Therefore, transitions between different identity markers will be considered movement as well, as Kenan in the film 'moves' or transitions between different categories: male and female, Muslim and Serb, homosexual and heterosexual.

Transitory moments

Kenan's transformation into Milena does not only come with burdensome changes in his appearance (Kenan is often shown rushing to put his wig on or padding his bra whenever somebody is interrupting his time with Milan); as Milena he is quite literally relegated to the private sphere. He spends most of his time indoors, avoiding everyone except for Milan as much as possible, and experiencing a prominent loss of autonomy. Denise Riley talks about the dominant construct of separate spheres drawn along gender lines (Riley 1988, 51), where women are relegated to the private sphere, while men are appointed to the cultural and political field. In the post-Yugoslav region, this framework largely gained prominence after the breakup of Yugoslavia as the rise in ethnonationalist ideologies in the new nation states carried with them the notion of 're-birthing' the nation, largely relegating women from the public to the private sphere.[4] The character of Milena embodies this loss of autonomy.

The only female character in *Go West* who possesses some kind of agency is Ranka, who, likely because of her 'rebellious' nature and her status as the village witch, lives in almost complete isolation and is shown to be either feared or ridiculed by the locals. She is presented as an ominous, overtly sexual, and potentially dangerous character who lives at the margins of society. Towards the film's end, she is shown performing a pagan ritual in the village cemetery, plotting Milan's demise. This framing of Ranka's character corresponds to the iconography of Lilith, the ultimate corruptible and corrupting female force, overtly sexual, and morally unscrupulous. As the 'absolute protagonist of evil' (Martínez-Oña and

Muñoz-Muñoz 2015, 613), Ranka is represented through visual and narrative devices that associate her character with corruptible sensations and forces: sexuality, lust, greed, and death, which she is made to pay with by her own dying. Both Ranka and Milena's personas become so overburdened with meaning that it forestalls their development as fleshed-out, three-dimensional characters. In other words, the female character in *Go West*, in being 'still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (Mulvey 1975, 112), is sacrificed for the sake of the narrative. This representational choice should be taken seriously because, as Anneke Smelik writes, 'cinema is a cultural practice where myths about women and femininity, and men and masculinity, in short, myths about sexual differences are produced, reproduced and represented' (1998, 7).

The absence of fleshed-out female characters is part of a conscious esthetic choice by the filmmakers. *Go West's* producer, Samir Smajić, has said of the film that it is a classic love story, with one twist: 'We like to joke that it's a film about Romeo and Romeo – without the Juliet' (as quoted in Hawton 2005). This placating statement speaks of the desire to present a film with a very controversial subject matter – male homosexuality – in the most conventional, inoffensive way possible. Some agree that the creators were successful in their objective: one journalist even goes as far as saying that the film 'shows a very tender and human side of gay love, and there are no explicit scenes to upset those who are squeamish about the physical nature of homosexuality' (Brabant 2007). These sentiments urge the question of which audience was envisioned in making *Go West*, and it becomes readily apparent that a queer reception was not the most integral to the making of the film. As Kevin Moss observed, after having interviewed Imamović (who confessed not having done any research about LGBT culture in Sarajevo), the filmmakers interests were centered on 'conveying, particularly for a Western audience, the Bosnian experience during the war' (2012, 364). The relationship between Kenan and Milan is one characterized by distance (they share one moment of physical intimacy as Milan kisses Kenan in the beginning of the film, fleetingly, in a dark, shadowy alley) and isolation (Kenan and Milan's relationship is not contextualized into any kind of LGBT community in Sarajevo) (363). They appear as aberrations in the film's narrative, as bodies out of place. Tarik Filipović, who plays Milan, confirmed this uncomfortable, sterile portrayal of the two lovers by describing the film after its release as a 'film about homosexuals without faggotry' (Moss 2012, 363). The gay characters in *Go West* bear no semblance to actual queer/LGBT people in Bosnia, they 'are more simulacra and metaphor than real' (Moss 2012, 366). This also becomes clear in the development of Ranka and Kenan's relationship: while Kenan develops a tentative friendship with Ranka, which eventually becomes sexual in nature, this connection is clearly one born out of desperation and isolation and does not further hint at a more nuanced or queer orientation. It is not a great surprise therefore that *actual* LGBT and queer persons from the former Yugoslavia had a negative response to the film, feeling mis- or unrepresented (Moss 2012, 366).

Further, Kenan's transition from a Muslim man to a Serb woman, in a Serb environment, does not give him much respite from his worries. His initial fear of being exposed as a Muslim, because he is circumcised, is replaced by a frantic fear of being exposed as a woman who is, in fact, a man, and a gay one at that. Ironically, his paranoia over 'having his pants pulled down and checked,' persists even after his camouflage. Finally, the move from a cultured, even cosmopolitan Sarajevo at the beginning of the film to Milan's home village where most of the narrative takes place is almost like a step back in time, with a

strong emphasis on, and exaggerated customs surrounding marriage, family, and social life. Curiously, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is known for boasting amazing greenery and lush landscapes, particularly its rural areas, Milan's home village rather looks like what can best be described as a mountainous desert. It is not likely that anything fresh or new will grow from this dry land, the film seems to suggest. In any attempt at transition in the film, movement is completely forestalled.

Irreconcilable differences between East and West

How do these different 'passings' figure into the 'East vs. West' configuration in the film's narrative that I want to problematize? Throughout the film, different characters explicitly refer to the promise of a better life somewhere in the West, presumably Western Europe. Milan even explicitly states: 'Kenan, we will ruin our lives here. We have to go West.' At one point in the film, Milan explains to Kenan that they would be best off in the Netherlands, as the seasons there change four times per day, but the mood never does. After Milan's death, before he boards the train, Kenan is told, in short succession, by two characters to 'go West.' The satirical and farcical tone of the film in this final part reverts back to its somber and bleak, documentary-like tone.

Many scenes and situations I have illustrated so far, often played up for humorous effect in the film, are likely meant to be read as scathing social commentary on the homophobic and xenophobic attitudes present in Bosnian society.[5] Nevertheless, due to the aforementioned absence of an intersectional framework, other depictions in the film easily correspond to stereotypical and dominant representations of the former Yugoslav states and their peoples as inherently socially, politically, and culturally backwards with respect to the 'true' Europe. In her noted work *Imagining the Balkans* ([1997] 2009), Bulgarian scholar Maria Todorova speaks of the 'Balkanization' of this region in Europe ([1997] 2009, 3), constructed as the image against which the 'proper' Europe can differentiate itself. Although Todorova steadfastly avoids comparisons to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), emphasizing that this is 'not merely a subspecies of orientalism' (Todorova [1997] 2009, 8), *Imagining the Balkans* is often understood as an adaptation of *Orientalism* onto the Balkan region, resulting in so-called 'Balkanism.' However, Todorova stresses that there are crucial differences between the two concepts, and that Balkanism cannot merely be understood as 'orientalism in the Balkans':

> As in the case of the Orient, the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and the 'West' has been constructed. With the reemergence of East and orientalism as independent semantic values, the Balkans are left in Europe's thrall, anticivilization, alter ego, the dark side within. (Todorova [1997] 2009, 189)

The most notable characteristic of Balkanism is that it constructs the Balkans as an ambiguous presence: neither wholly inside nor completely outside of Europe, the Balkans cannot be understood as the binary opposite of the West, as is the case with orientalism. If according to orientalism, the Orient is everything the Occident is not and vice versa, Balkanism is best understood as the West's rejected or failed Self (Trakilović 2015, 210) In other words, the distance between Self-Other is much more uncomfortably close in a Balkanist discourse. It seems to suggests that if the Balkans are barbaric and uncivilized, the 'proper' West is not that far behind. Perhaps this uncomfortable proximity explains the incessant desire in *Go West* to create some kind of clear duality by continually reproducing a discourse which

is built upon irreconcilable differences between East and West. The stark, dry landscape, the petty village people with their crude traditions, these all seem to suggest that this is a region where movement halts: there is no transformation, no progression. Against this bleak image, the vision of the West appears as a utopian place, where things evolve and people are evolved. Virtually all characters in *Go West* allude to this hopeless situation in the Balkans in some way or another. Most notably, this repetitive lamenting of the situation appears quite late in the film, during a scene in which Milan's father is addressing Kenan (who is still in his disguise as Milena). Talking about the terrible mess that the former Yugoslavia has found itself in during the war, he says:

> My child, you can buy everything here with money except happiness. There is no happiness here. Maybe there would be, if we drove away all the Muslims. And that handful of Croats and in the end us Serbs too. They should exile us all into hell. Then they should populate Bosnia with normal people that will be able to enjoy its beauty.

What is apparent in this speech is a ranking of the former Yugoslavia's peoples according to their respective 'redeeming qualities' thereby reproducing the discourse of 'nesting orientalisms.' This concept, credited to Milica Bakić-Hayden, is a phenomenon which 'is evident in the former Yugoslavia and its successor states where the designation of "other" has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse' (Bakić-Hayden 1995, 922). In other words – in an attempt to ward off orientalizing tendencies directed at themselves, certain nations and cultures in the Eastern Europe will resort to Orientalizing their neighbors by reproducing in discourse a sliding scale of inferiority according to which those who are considered to be more 'eastern' are therefore understood as being less developed culturally and politically (Bakić-Hayden 1995, 918). The above film quote demonstrates nesting orientalism at work, by employing the characteristic 'tendency of each region to view the cultures and religions to its South and East as more conservative and primitive' (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 4) In other words, this phenomenon manifests in certain cultures of the Balkans essentially Orientalizing their neighbors in order to establish their own distinct identities.

While the above quote starts out as a case of nesting orientalisms (by ranking some of the ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia from 'worst' to 'less bad'), it takes something of an unexpected turn by the end. It has been pointed out that nesting orientalisms manifest in specific regions in Europe, in this case the Balkans, through the construction of an identity built on the orientalization of another nation or ethnic group that is 'lower,' both geographically and economically. Therefore, what *starts off* as a case of nesting orientalisms in Milan's father's speech, as he lists those who should be eliminated from Yugoslav soil (presumably for being too primitive or too backwards – first the Muslims, then the Croats), finally *transforms* into a Balkanist discourse as he claims that even his own ethnic group should be eradicated. In other words, Ljubo, reproduces a discourse of the Balkans as irredeemable and barbaric, as he claims that even the Serbs (his own people) should be eliminated from Yugoslav soil. I have previously noted that Balkanism refers to an adaptation of Orientalism, where the Self-Other duality is replaced with a good Self and failed Self (Trakilović 2015, 210). In *Go West*, the former Yugoslavia and its peoples are seen as a lost cause, an obsolete life form even that does not stand a chance of betterment. The only sensible solution, the film seems to suggest, would be to 'start over' and repopulate the region with so-called 'normal' people.

It might seem that this statement made by Milan's father contradicts Kenan's statement from the beginning of the film, in which he proclaimed that one day the peoples of the

former Yugoslavia would lay down their weapons and stop hating each other. However, let us not forget that Kenan also emphatically stated that the people of ex-Yugoslavia would never stop hating homosexuals. In *Go West's* narrative, freedom for sexual minorities is something that will never be a reality in the Balkans, because of the innately barbaric nature of its peoples. Therefore, I place Kenan's argument is also in line with Milan's father's musings on the best course of action to take regarding the warring republics of the former Yugoslavia. Motivated by rage and grief, both characters are actually reproducing a stereotyped, Balkanist discourse about the bloodthirsty and irredeemable nature of the peoples of former Yugoslavia. In *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova notes that there is a trend of representing and reporting on the Balkans in general only in times of war and conflict; 'the rest of the time they are scornfully ignored' ([1997] 2009, 184). *Go West*, even while engaging with a very controversial subject matter with the aim of opening up a dialog around it, seems to participate in this trend. By reproducing a clichéd, Balkanist discourse, whether ironically or unironically, the film also reproduces a very closed narrative. By showcasing the tragic story of two homosexual lovers in war-time Bosnia, the narrative concludes that people like them do not have a future on the territory of the former Yugoslavia and need to – there it is again – 'go west.' By stating, time and time again, that sexual minorities do not stand a chance at survival in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, *Go West* eradicates the lives and stories of those LGBT people who *have* and who continue to survive. Maria Todorova argues that there is a 'frozen vision' of this region in Europe that permeates Western consciousness, making it 'more than a stereotype':

> It appears as the higher reality, the reflection of the phenomenal world, its essence and true nature, the 'noumenon' to the 'phenomenon,' to use the Kantian distinction. None of the politicians, journalists, or writers who have specialized in passing strictures on the Balkans have ever made a claim for a philosophical basis of their argument, yet this is what they have achieved. *The frozen image of the Balkans, set in its general parameters around World War I, has been reproduced almost without variation over the next decades and operates as a discourse.* (Todorova [1997] 2009, 187 emphasis mine)

My grievance with *Go West* is not that it reproduces a negative narrative, but rather a very static one that seamlessly fits into a Balkanist vision of the ex-Yugoslav region. Moreover, as Todorova ([1997] 2009) points out, reproducing such a 'frozen vision' of the Balkan region is harmful because it is not merely esthetic, but an active reproduction of a harmful and often unchallenged discourse – and I understand discourse here in a Foucauldian fashion as a power-laden enterprise; an apparatus that determines what can and what cannot be said regarding a particular topic in any given situation, thereby informing the narrative(s) of truth about and in the world (Foucault 1980, 194–196). The fact that the public outrage about the film's supposed 'controversial' content died down upon the film's release is indicative of Imamović's desire *not* to stir the pot and produce a story in which homosexuality is a narrative device (i.e. not real) and simultaneously constructed as something that can only exist outside of the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Returning to the notion of movement I had introduced previously, it is apparent that the film's narrative seems to suggest that movement is possible elsewhere, as the region of the former Yugoslavia will always remain at a standstill in some sense, and will therefore always lag behind another, supposedly more advanced Europe which, as I have argued, is invoked through a simultaneously present discourse of Balkanism (portraying the Balkans as backwards in contrast to the 'real' Europe) and nesting orientalisms (Orientalizing one's neighbors according to

a sliding scale of inferiority). *Going West* in this context does not only represent a yearning for a better life, removed from war, conflict, as I claimed at the beginning of my paper, but also an inevitability for *any* kind of life, and it is through an emphasis on this one-directional movement that the unchallenged and unbalanced division between Europe's East and West is maintained and enforced.

Conclusion

Go West certainly made waves when it first appeared in Bosnian cinemas in 2005. The film had gained a status of notoriety even months before its release, as its subject matter (homosexual love) did not sit well with a very large number of the Bosnian population. The fact that two prominent media figures played a same-sex couple in a film about war-time Bosnia and Herzegovina sparked religious and nationalistic outcry (Soares 2005). The impression may be conveyed that the film was bold in the choice of its subject matter (portraying a relationship between two gay men), and that it addressed a matter that is rarely spoken about publicly (homosexuality). While this is certainly the case, ultimately, its execution fails to step outside of some very normative frameworks, which leads me to conclude that movement is severely restricted – in virtually any sense – in *Go West's* narrative. Ironically, although it contains some deeply satirical elements, *Go West* nevertheless presents an unsubverted image of the former Yugoslavia as incompatible with the very possibility of homosexuality, which is a notion that the detractors of the film would happily stand behind. In *Imagined Bodies, Imagined Communities*, Krista Scott argues that 'if we accept Benedict Anderson's proposal that the nation is an "imagined community"', and that '[c]ommunities are to be distinguished … by the style in which they are imagined,' then it stands to reason that how we imagine our community fundamentally influences how we experience it' (1999). Imagining differently, therefore, becomes a crucial act of resistance to oppressive ideologies. It is precisely the option of alternative configurations that the film seems to rule out, as it reproduces some deeply rooted and even clichéd ideas about Europe's East vs. its West and emphasizes this divide. Such simplified rhetoric in my opinion serves to enforce borders rather than question them – not just literal ones, and not merely between East and West, but also around other configurations (gender, sexuality, and nationality/ethnicity). If Europe's East and in particular the Balkans are assumed to be forever backward and forever behind the West, then it is implied that sexual liberation and gender equality are also to be found elsewhere. The foreclosing that takes place in *Go West* is absolute, allowing only one-directional (westward) movement. In its attempt to be critically satirical of certain practices and beliefs, the film ultimately erects invisible but absolute borders, or rather 'formidable reducers of complexity,' to quote Étienne Balibar (2002, 76), between the West and its Wild East.

Notes

1. It is widely written and believed that the disintegration of Yugoslavia occurred as a result of inter-ethnic hatreds that spanned centuries before they would result in an explosive confrontation in 1992. However, as Natasja Vojvodić argues in 'Gender Analysis in Ethnic Conflict: Causes & Consequences in the Case of Yugoslavia,' the actual origins of Yugoslavia's breakup are to be found in the failure of socialist modernization processes which were marked by the death of Josip Broz Tito, former president of the socialist republic, in 1980. Moreover,

as Vojvodić shows (2012, 3), the territory of Yugoslavia had historically been an intersection of many different nationhoods, and after its fall all of the resultant nation states struggled to acquire national identities that would be clearly enough distinct from their shared Yugoslav history. Today, from the seven countries that make up former Yugoslavian republics, only Slovenia and Croatia are members of the European Union. Croatia's membership was granted very recently, on July 1st 2013, whereas Slovenia joined in 2004.

2. Of course, Kenan's anxiety is doubled by the fact that he can be exposed as a Muslim in Serb territory *and* as a homosexual. In his analysis of Go West, Kevin Moss points to a trend in films from the former Yugoslavia of the early 2000s that have a 'gay' thematic: all of them use the figure of the homosexual/lesbian as a metaphor for pointing to certain tensions that the filmmakers *actually* wish to address: issues of national belonging and ethnicity (Moss 2012, 352).

3. For instance, she has spoken about feminism's frequent reluctance to take into account questions of race and racial inequality, which ultimately leads to internal division and opposition within the movement: 'When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism, and when anti-racism does not incorporate opposition to patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose' (Crenshaw 1992, 405).

4. The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s brought to the rise largely nationalistic political parties in the separate states. These conservative parties were motivated by religious and patriarchal ideologies that, among other things, propagated ideas of women's place being 'at home.' This ideological shift was reflected in a dramatic drop in female representatives in government functions, from 24% in 1986 to merely 3% in 1990. Some feminists understood this shift as directly motivated by the desire to 'to regenerate nations through motherhood' (Bamburać, Jusić, and Isanović 2006, 48).

5. The educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina largely enforces negative views on homosexuality. Some school textbooks contain explicitly homophobic text, from which follows that intolerant attitudes towards difference and otherness in general are also being promoted (Schrag 2010, 58). The explicitly heteronormative and patriarchal attitude is enforced very early on, as in common statements such as 'Mom makes lunch and dad goes to work' (as quoted in Schrag 2010, 58). Moreover, the formal educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina still largely enforces divisions among the students based on their ethnic belonging, whether among student bodies or in the class curricula (Stovel 2000, 7). A survey conducted in 2005 on attitudes towards LGBTIQ persons showed that as much as 82.5% of 1550 interviewees had a negative opinion on homosexuals (Djurković 2005 as quoted in Schrag 2010, 20). This attitude is largely enforced by political leaders, who often draw upon religious laws to condemn homosexuality and present it as a disease. This rhetoric operates according to an ethnonationalist logic, which means that the new Bosnian state is being created on the basis of certain inclusions and exclusions. Since the political and cultural sphere operates according to (strong) patriarchal norms, homosexuality becomes the radical Other that gets associated with another sphere (in this case, the West, and most notably Western Europe), and is shown to have no place in the Bosnian context (Schrag 2010, 21).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Milica Trakilović, PhD student, is a cum laude graduate of the Research Master Programme Gender and Ethnicity at Utrecht University, where she is currently teaching in the Department of Media and Culture Studies/Graduate Gender Program. She is currently a research assistant at the European University Institute, in the project Bodies Across Borders: Oral and Visual Memory in Europe and Beyond (BABE). Her research interests focus on visual culture, feminist art practice, postcolonial configurations, and postsocialist transitions.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2009. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED Talk. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?

Bakić-Hayden, Milica. 1995. "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia." *Slavic Review* 54 (4): 917–931.

Bakić-Hayden, Milica, and Robert Hayden. 1992. "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics." *Slavic Review* 51 (1): 1–15.

Balibar, Étienne. 2002. "What is a Border?" In *Politics and the Other Scene*, 75–86. London: Verso.

Bamburać, Nirman Moranjak, Tarik Jusić, and Adla Isanović, eds. 2006. *Stereotyping: Representation of Women in Print Media in South East Europe*. Sarajevo: Mediacentar.

Brabant, Malcolm. 2007. "Go West – A Story about Romeo and Romeo." *Qantara*, September 7. https://en.qantara.de/content/controversy-over-bosnian-film-go-west-a-story-about-romeo-and-romeo.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139–167.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1992. "Whose Story is it, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill." In *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, edited by Toni Morrison, 402–440. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.

Hawton, Nick. 2005. "Gay War Film Stirs Bosnian Anger." *BBC News*, March 21. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4368077.stm.

Imamović, Ahmed, dir. 2005. *Go West*, Film. Sarajevo: Comprex.

Martínez-Oña, M. M., and A. M. Muñoz-Muñoz. 2015. "An Iconographic Analysis of the Myth of Lilith in Advertising." *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* 70: 611–626.

Moore, David Chioni. 2001. "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique." In *PMLA*. Vol. 116, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies, 211–228.

Moss, Kevin. 2012. "Queering Ethnicity in the First Gay Films from Ex-Yugoslavia." *Feminist Media Studies* 12 (3): 352–370.

Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (3): 6–18.

Ponzanesi, Sandra, and Margueritte Waller. 2011. "Introduction." In *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller, 1–16. Abingdon: Routledge.

Riley, Denise. 1988. "The Social', 'Woman', and Sociological Feminism." In *Am I that Name?: Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, 44–66. London: Macmillan Press.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.

Scott, Krista. 1999. "Imagined Bodies, Imagined Communities. Feminism, Nationalism, and Body Metaphors." *The Feminist eZine*.

Schrag, Sarah. 2010. "We can No Longer Declare Ourselves a Multicultural City Until we Start Reacting to Things Like this: Contextualizing the Violence at the 2008 Queer Sarajevo Festival." Paper 844. *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/844.

Smelik, Anneke, M. 1998. *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Soares, Andre. 2005. "'Go West': Gay Film Spark Religious-Nationalistic Outrage." *Alt Film Guide*, 30 March. http://www.altfg.com/film/bosnian-gay-movie-go-west-sparks-outrage/.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1990. "The Post-modern Condition: The End of Politics? Interview with Geoffrey Hawthorn, Ron Aronson, and John Dunn." In *The Post-Colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, edited by Sarah Harasym, 17–34. London: Routledge.

Stovel, Laura. 2000. *Confronting Ethnic Chauvinism in a Post-War Environment: NGOs and Peace Education in Bosnia*. CCR Working Papers No. 7. Bradford: Centre for Conflict Resolution, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford.

Todorova, Maria. (1997) 2009. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Trakilović, Milica. 2015. ""The Other Within": Challenging Borders from the European Periphery." In *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe. Contexts, Practices and Politics*, edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani, 209–228. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Vojvodić, Natasja. 2012. *Gender Analysis in Ethnic Conflict: Causes & Consequences in the Case of Yugoslavia*. London: School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, University College London.