

## Us, Them and Reconciliation: A Critical Discussion of the Workings of Bosnian Blame and its Consequences

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### **Sažetak**

Krivnja, uz nostalgiju i osjećaj izdaje, igra centralnu ulogu u pričama preživjelih Bosanaca u egzilu. Podaci, prezentirani u članku ispod, potiču iz detaljne kvalitativne studije, obavljene u periodu između 2004. i 2005. godine, bazirane na životnim pričama dvadeset Bosanaca koji žive u Londonu. Iako studija nije uključila ispitanike koji trenutno žive u Bosni i Hercegovini, ona ipak pomaže u prepoznavanju ključnih dimenzija u pretpostavljenim preperkama i izazovima u svezi s rekonstrukcijom i socijalnim kapitalom naspram krivnje u Bosni. Teme osude, nostalgije i izdaje su ciklično povezane i proizvode tzv 'losstalgic blame' (krivica/osuda zbog gubitka). To je vid krivnje/osude što dijeli prijeratne zajednice u "nas-njih" dihotomiju. Cijepanje prijeratnih zajednica, najčešće po etno-vjerskim linijama, je u kontradikciji sa osnovnim ciljevima pomirenja čiji je cilj uspostavljanje 'prijateljskih' odnosa. Pored svega, krivnja i osudjivanje, u svojim različitim oblicima, su prisutni i zbog toga se trebaju uzeti u obzir u kreiranju projekata pomirenja i gradnje mira u poslijeratnoj BiH. Međutim, potrebno je biti posebno obazriv kad je u pitanju razbijanje teze „mi i oni“. Ovaj članak razmatra i ilustrira narativnu praksu vezanu za osjećaj krivnje i traženja odgovornosti, te njihovu važnost u obnavljanju mira i mogućnostima za razumijevanje premećenih međuljudskih odnosa.

### **Abstract**

Blame plays a central role, alongside nostalgia and accounts of betrayal, in the narratives of Bosnian survivors in exile. This finding is derived from a detailed qualitative study of the life stories of twenty Bosnians living in exile in London, conducted between 2000 and 2005. While the study didn't include participants living in Bosnia, it does help to highlight key dimensions of the anticipated challenge posed by blame in Bosnia for the reconstruction of social capital. These themes of blame, nostalgia and betrayal are cyclically related and produce what is referred to here as 'losstalgic blame'. This is a form of blame that splits the nostalgically recalled and ethnically integrated

pre-war community into an 'us-them' dichotomy. This splitting of the pre-war community, frequently along ethno-religious lines, contradicts the primary objective of reconciliation which aims to restore 'friendly' relations. Nonetheless, blame, in its different manifestations, is pervasive and therefore needs to be considered in the design of reconciliation and peace-building projects in post-conflict Bosnia. However, caution needs to be exercised regarding the means whereby omnipresent notions of 'us and them' are challenged. The following paper explores and illustrates the narrative practice of 'loisstalgic' blame, its ramifications for post-conflict peace-building and possibilities for mitigating its more divisive social effects.

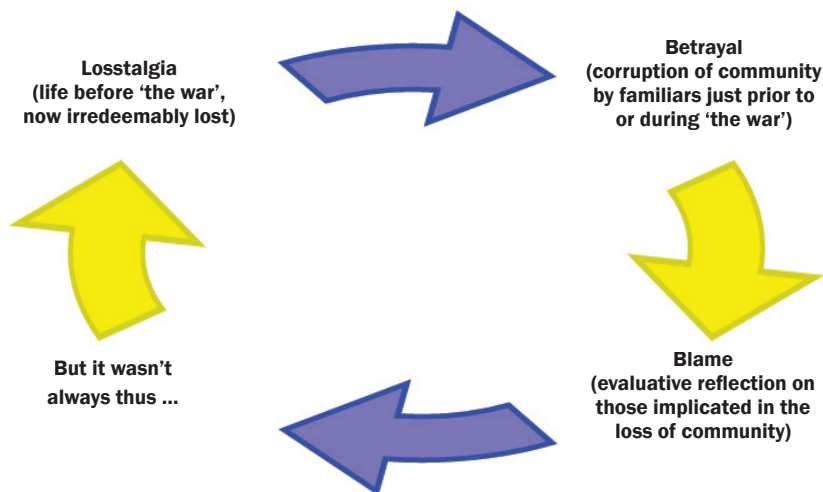
### **The Relevance of Blame in Exile**

Recent work on post-conflict reconciliation in Bosnia tends to overlook the participation and responses of Bosnians in exile, referring predominantly to refugee return if any discussion of refugees is included.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this omission in the literature, a disturbing discourse has also emerged whereby the Bosnian diaspora is either overlooked or even resented as a distant and privileged cousin to those currently weathering the transition in Bosnia.<sup>2</sup> This is ethically problematic, as such references or omissions function, however unwittingly, to further the objectives of 'ethnic cleansing' by exacting a second exclusion from the Bosnian polis of those previously forced into exile by the violent nationalism of the 1990s. It also marks a strategically counter-productive omission in that the Bosnian diaspora, as with other diasporas, constitutes an indisputable source of capital and skills, as well as a powerful political lobby in diplomatic negotiations about aid, trade and political participation in regional and international bodies.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, this omission overlooks an obligation under the Dayton Peace Agreement to facilitate refugee return, and ignores the reality that the returnees of today are the refugees of yesterday.<sup>4</sup>

The study on which this paper is based did not allow for a comparison between the responses vis à vis blame of Bosnians within and outside of Bosnia. Nonetheless, research has been done into the comparative intensity of post-conflict perceptions and narratives among other diasporas when compared with their compatriots 'at home'.<sup>5</sup> This distilled quality of responses to Bosnia's past and present among those in exile enhances rather than negates the importance of these responses. Post-conflict reconstruction projects need to accommodate the participation of those in exile for whom loss and betrayal, for example, is primary when compared with the responses of those in Bosnia for whom loss is arguably self-evident and perceptions of betrayal often deliberately understated in everyday life.<sup>6</sup> In spite of these differences, however, blame would seem to remain of relevance whether discussing accounts in exile or personal stories shared in the private sphere in post-conflict Bosnia. It is therefore essential to understand how blame is asserted, how the blameworthy are distinguished from the blameless, and the contexts used to justify blame.

## The Cycle of Blame

According to the life stories gathered from Bosnians in exile, nostalgia, betrayal and blame are inter-related and can be described in terms of a hermeneutic cycle. Firstly, the dichotomy of nostalgia and betrayal are, in most cases, a manifestation of a particularly intimate form of *blame*. These are 'intimate' in the way in which two of three blame positions effectively rupture erstwhile communities into a perceived us-versus-them. Secondly, this blame is grounded in a sense of loss articulated using a form of *nostalgia* in which loss outweighs wistful remembering. Thirdly, loss is such a dominant dimension of nostalgia because memories of pre-war Bosnia are tainted by memories of *betrayal* and a belief in the active or complicit involvement of familiars, whether as perpetrators, bystanders or beneficiaries of the atrocities between 1992 and 1995. Finally, understanding the centrality of betrayal is crucial to recognising the intimate nature of blame apparent throughout these transcripts. The articulation of blame subsequently tends to trigger further nostalgia as narrators emphasise that it was 'not always thus'. This constitutes what is referred to here as the *Cycle of Losstalgic Blame*.



**Diagram 1: The Cycle of Losstalgic Blame**

### Losstalgia

No Bosnian foresaw that their country would erupt into war. In fact, when anyone ever told me about life in Bosnia, it seemed always to be summer.<sup>7</sup>

The prevalence of losstalgia, or a nostalgia dominated by an emphasis on loss, is extraordinary in the exile accounts. Four characteristics distinguish this form of nostalgia, namely:

1. A clear sense of present and historic time<sup>8</sup>
2. The sense that the present is deficient in comparison with the past<sup>9</sup>
3. The existence of a dual present: a present in exile alongside a present in post-conflict Bosnia, which is contrasted against a singularly idealized past
4. A loss of faith in the redeemability of the past<sup>10</sup>, impossible to resuscitate

The following excerpt illustrates this irredeemability (*italics mine*):

So I would rather go back to the years when Tito ... before war. I would ... About my life in Mostar: I really feel sorry that I can't live in my town, why I couldn't have career in my town, like couldn't bring my child there. Because I love my life, I love my child to be there. But when the situation is like this. There is no war there, but thank you very much, I wouldn't go to live there. Because *something is in the air*, that's what I say still. And *it always will be, it always will be*. So many people lost their lives. I just can't. My life was before brilliant, really.<sup>11</sup>

The inaccessibility of this past, recalled most frequently for its inter-ethnic harmony, alongside a disappointment and a sense of injustice regarding the continuing sense of loss, is commonly used as a narrative context for the accounts of betrayal and blame that tend to follow. Hereafter, however, differences surface both in the emphasis placed on betrayal and the nature of blame and its consequences for the perceived community. The term 'community' has been widely contested and is used inductively here. While the participants don't refer explicitly to community, many of them refer to a mutual knowledge and sense of togetherness apparent:

[I]ived all our lives with them, mixed with them, had mixed marriages, went to school together, had dreams together ... I suppose enjoyed life together sometimes – had friendship together.<sup>12</sup>

It is this familiarity, and the former trust it assumes, which defines the use of 'community'. The effect on this perception of community and trust is arguably the most significant aspect of nostalgic blame for inter-ethnic dialogue alongside reconciliation and peace-building in post-conflict Bosnia.

### **Common in Loss, Different in Blame**

The life stories of Bosnians in exile are not, however, simply elaborate 'whodunnits'. While the accounts are ultimately consolidated by means of blame, this blame is integrated into accounts in which several other ingredients are used to contextualize and ground the blame. Almost unanimously, participants began with nostalgic memories of community from which very few exceptions were excluded. Bare life<sup>13</sup>, or existence as a mere living organism, robbed of social or political participation, was apparently rare in the context of pre-war Bosnia, reserved only for those deemed guilty of war-crimes in the Second World War or anti-Titoist treason. But outside of this narrow margin of exclusion, a Titoist community is described, of brotherhood and unity in which political as well

as social security were abundant not only nationally but also locally. Religious and national difference was nominal and irrelevant in the everyday patternings of employment, friendship, love and loss. But then the milk-and-honeyed landscape of Yugonostalgia sours.

Accounts of unanticipated change in the nature of daily encounters between individuals from different national groups punctuate the nostalgic pining. The humanity in which all but the very few were invited to share under Tito's leadership gives way to a members-only replacement in which only Serbs could qualify. All those remaining were deemed by Serb nationalists to be bare life, and so robbed of this cherished humanity and their participation in what had seemed a successful multi-ethnic community. These stories of a loss for which none were prepared reframe the nostalgia in such a way as to tip the balance between loss and fond remembering in favour of loss. And so it is that the losstalgia discussed above becomes such a central ingredient in the way in which survivors formulate their experiences.

This uninvited loss then further degenerates into narratives of calculated betrayal as narrators search for the means whereby the loss was exacted. Narrators recount the experience of recognizing members of eviction squads, camp guards or nationalist zealots alongside bystanders and apologists as former friends, boyfriends and neighbours:

When my dad and my brother were picked up and they were brought to the main street, we had Serbs, neighbours there. And they would just stand around and watch. Watch people getting beaten up and everything. They wouldn't say a word. It was just unbelievable! I mean think about it: someone comes and grabs out your neighbour because of his name, and you not going to do anything. Because ... they could've ... there was one guy within that group of soldiers who recognised a friend of his, when he recognised him, all the killing stopped, and they didn't touch anyone afterwards ... they could've stopped everything, but they didn't want to. They just didn't want to, they just didn't want to ... to have your neighbours like spend twenty, thirty, fifty years throughout the Second World War, not to even say anything you know is ... is ... just hard to imagine.<sup>14</sup>

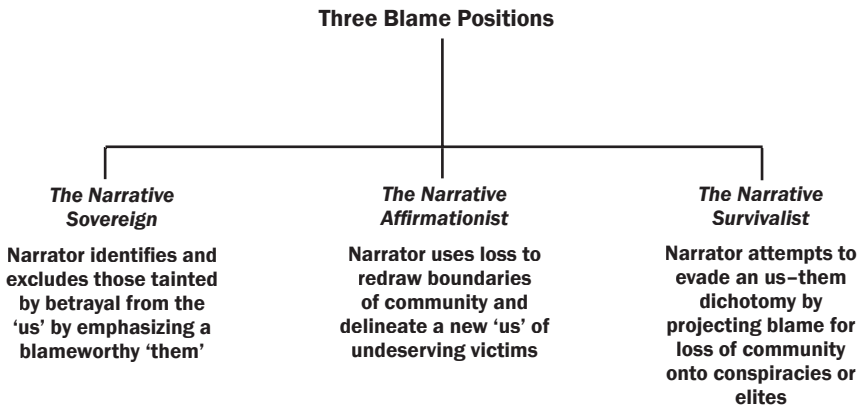
Accounts of evidence that local campaigns, and the betrayals they involved, were planned in advance further deepen the indignation underpinning narratives describing this corruption of community.

A further narrative layer then becomes apparent. A cast of characters is introduced—a delineation of who played which roles. Detailed characterizations are articulated, not only of those familiars who were involved in different crimes, but also of those familiars who sought to trivialize or deny the narrator's losses and defend contentious histories in post-conflict Bosnia:

The problem is that when you go and see Serbs ... they welcome you with open arms and they love you. This is the people who you know. And everything is fine ... They pretend as if nothing had happened, as if we can be mates. 'It's all fine. No problem. Lovely. Everything is great', like they have just sent you yesterday to buy a pack of cigarettes, and you just took a while, took ten years to come back. There is a terrible hypocrisy there.<sup>15</sup>

Accounts of betrayal and denial as post-facto betrayal are followed by blame narratives in which a storied form of blame displaces a simple naming of culprits. Here, nostalgia functions as an orientation or context, and betrayal as the narrative that links pre-war harmony with post-conflict evaluation through blame. But the exercise of blame is far from identical across the transcripts.

The narratives show that the individual tends either to edit community and exclude those she or he distrusts; to identify loss as a source of community; or to project blame externally for this loss owing to an ambivalence towards or a reluctance to abandon such a remembered community. These three positions – referred to throughout this paper as blame positions, have practical consequences for the polarization of post-conflict societies, whether in exile or in countries of origin.



**Figure 1: The Three Blame Positions**

Three blame positions help to highlight the most significant differences. The differences between participants predominantly assuming the position of the Narrative Sovereign, the Narrative Affirmationist and the Narrative Survivalist lie in the intersection between two factors. Firstly, the pre-war experience of inter-ethnic social integration is significant. And secondly, the qualitative experience of ethnic cleansing, which depended in large part on ascribed ethno-religious identity, can partially predict the preferred blame position.

In short, those emanating from largely ethnically homogenous villages prior to the war and who predominantly experienced direct forms of genocidal violence in the form of mass rape, incarceration in camps and the daily threat of extermination tend to predominate among those preferring the position of the Narrative Sovereign. The totalizing form of violence to which these individuals were subjected helps to account for the allure of this position and its unequivocal distinction between the blameless and the blameworthy. These survivors also tended to recall dramatic experiences of betrayal such as encounters with familiars as camp guards. Here emphasis is placed on a tainted 'Them':

Say an ordinary Serb knows that somebody's gone and killed all those people in Srebrenica, or somewhere else, as a human or say as a mother that has a son, if they think about it at any level they would know that it's bad. But what they can do – they can distance themselves from it at least, maybe, maybe not, I don't know. (By saying what?) They're mad, they are extreme individuals, they are mad. And I have heard that among the Serbs, but they would like to put the blame onto a few individuals. For me, everybody's a criminal: those who threw people out of their houses, those who harassed them, it doesn't have to be just literal killing. It is the whole picture. It is the supporting machinery behind the killing.<sup>16</sup>

However, those who emanated from integrated urban environments prior to the war and who were forcibly removed from their homes and workplaces tend to assume the position of the Narrative Affirmationist. These individuals were not commonly violated en masse and describe subtler forms of betrayal – such as failure to provide warnings and the prevalence of denial. Here emphasis is placed on the righteousness of a victimized 'Us':

I don't know. I don't want to be more on Muslim side because I am Muslim. But I don't see Muslim people to change worse because they was frightened. Things did a lot of ... but Serbian people ...<sup>17</sup>

Those emanating from urban environments prior to the war and who managed to escape direct violence or forced removal by virtue of mixed marriages or ethno-religious identity tend to assume the position of the Narrative Survivalist. Here, betrayal was either omitted or associated with the shifting of loyalties from a unified Yugoslavia to smaller republics. Emphasis is placed here on projecting blame onto institutions, political elites or a Western conspiracy, to name just three examples:

When forces from Zagreb and Belgrade got involved in internal matters of Bosnia, then you know people started looking at their neighbours differently. Because relations between neighbours in Bosnia used to be very good.<sup>18</sup>

But regardless of which blame position is assumed in a given narrative, all are by-products of the individual survivor's engagement in an intersubjective struggle.

### **The Intersubjective Struggle**

It is argued<sup>19</sup> that the struggle to locate oneself such that one experiences as much power and as little subjugation as possible in social exchanges with others permeates social life irrespective of context. This tension and aspiration written into the fabric of the social is often described as a struggle:

There are always two spheres of governance in our lives. On the one hand, there is the immediate sphere of family and friends, of our local community, the world of which we have a complete and intimate knowledge, where our words carry weight and our presence makes a difference. Then there is the wider world of which we know little, in which we count for nothing, where our voices are not heard and our actions have next to no effect. Every human life is a struggle to strike some balance between these two spheres, to feel that

there are things one decides, chooses, governs and controls that offset the things over which one has no power. Stories help us negotiate this balance.<sup>20</sup>

What do all of the above – nostalgia, betrayal, blame, the reconfiguration of community – have in common? They are all, fundamentally, components of the survivor's response to intersubjectivity. Through the articulation of nostalgia, betrayal and blame, each of these twenty survivors responds to the experience of being treated as a *what* rather than a *who*, of having their agency suspended and their community divided to the experience of being the object of the Other's subjective choices. But they have also transcended a simple description of nostalgia and betrayal to embark on narratives of blame.

All these accounts are, by their content as well as their form, intersubjective. They concern themselves with the fluctuating balance between self-as-object, reduced to the state described by Arendt as *Animal Laborans* – the state of mere survival – and self-as-subject and agent capable both of making choices and of influencing the choices of others within a community of agents. This latter dimension – the inclusion of the self-as-subject and agent – is introduced when the survivor embarks on articulating blame. In so doing, albeit in a narrative context, the survivor assumes authority and agency and uses such to delegate responsibility and name the exception – those worthy of exclusion from a new imagined belonging, a post-conflict community of agents.

The Narrative Sovereign goes furthest in this regard by reducing those perceived as worthy of exclusion to a *what* – a group who, simply by virtue of being Serb, are deemed incapable of participation in a community of trustworthy agents. The Narrative Affirmationist is clearly disappointed at having been robbed of the security and potential for agency offered in the prewar community, and so elects to focus on reformulating an *I* by appropriating the label of Bosnian Muslim, which had been imposed during the war when the 'tainted' claimed monopoly over agency and reduced all non-Serbs to cases in an imposed category.

The Narrative Survivalist tentatively assumes the authority as narrator to diffuse blame either by projecting it beyond the confines of the Bosnian prewar community or by distributing it equally among the three national groups, thereby refusing to declare any single group or groups as exceptions worthy of exclusion. Hence the pre-war community, albeit damaged and burdened by loss, is depicted as united in a mutual state of corruption, foolishness or victimhood at the hands of political conspirators. The Narrative Survivalist thereby refuses to reduce an Other to a state of thing-ness, while assuming an agency in a community of fellow victim-agents. This position grasps obstinately onto the possibility of a plurality in which all can exercise agency, albeit in the self-knowledge of our shared propensity to be led into betrayal and moral corruption. The Narrative Survivalist therefore emphasises the evasion of ethno-religious blame rather than the use of blame to pursue agency within a new ethno-religiously delineated community, as is the case with both the Narrative Sovereign and the Narrative Affirmationist. These three positions serve to highlight the importance of both narrative blame and concepts of agency in the formulation not only of past experience of violence and loss, but also of new identities and communities among survivors.

## Blame and Post-Conflict Bosnia

Currently, some ten years after the cessation of conflict following the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord, Bosnia faces the challenging task of economic and infrastructural reconstruction and reconciliation. In this context, it is crucial that policymakers and practitioners working as midwives of the new Bosnia acknowledge the relevance of blame. Reconciliation is defined<sup>21</sup> as the noun referring to the process of restoring 'friendly relations between'. And blame, as discussed, means to 'charge ... accuse ... reproach ... make answerable'.<sup>22</sup> Reconciliation is fundamentally restorative, while blame is punitive.

This basic tension may be one means of explaining the recent finding in a UNDP survey conducted among Bosnians within post-conflict Bosnia, which indicates that only approximately 25 per cent of those surveyed expressed a willingness to engage in open discussion of 'what happened'.<sup>23</sup> The role of different outlooks on loss, betrayal and blame respectively in contextualizing this finding deserves urgent research. Since 2002, I have undertaken several fieldtrips to Bosnia gathering needs-assessment data for another project. While not of direct relevance to blame among Bosnians in exile, this fieldwork data indicates that different manifestations of blame do exist among those living in Bosnia. However, one prevalent perspective among those who remained in Bosnia echoes the assumptions regarding betrayal and blame, apparent in the following account from the exile material:

In a way I lost my faith in people, in human beings, to be honest with you, with a reason ... they sell their country very easily, my country ... They accept new ones, new ones very very quickly. Far too quickly for my taste... because most of them ... loved their country ... But very quickly they sold, literally sold that for their own little interests. Most of them were driven by their interests. They thought 'if Bosnia became an independent country, I will probably be ... I don't know ... football referee or something like that' because it would be smaller, less competition and ... That's the way a lot of them thought in those days.<sup>24</sup>

Some assert that betrayal was perpetrated by those who supported secession and the dissolution of Former Yugoslavia, thereby placing blame on the shoulders of those who voted in favour of the independence of Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. Others assume the position of Narrative Survivalists, agreeing that blame can best be placed on 'greedy political elites'.

Among returnees, predominantly Bosnian Muslims who were forcibly repatriated or who returned with parents and grandparents who had determined not to die elsewhere, the tripartite configuration of *losstalgia*, betrayal and blame is subtly different. Here, the ethnographic evidence<sup>25</sup> suggests that loss regarded as self-evident leads to a less pronounced role for *losstalgia*. In the accounts included in this study, exile gave impetus to the *losstalgic* reflection on prewar Bosnia. Among returnees in post-conflict Bosnia this impetus is absent, and *losstalgia* is no longer necessary as a means of contextualizing accounts of betrayal and blame.

There is one further observation worth noting. A schism has begun to emerge between exile and returnee communities of Bosnians. Among Bosnians currently

living in Bosnia, a form of material envy for those perceived as having greater financial security and job opportunities in exile is pervasive. Hence, a new dichotomy is emerging between ‘us’ – those living in Bosnia and weathering the economic and political austerities characterising life there – and ‘them’ – the beneficiaries of a ‘better life in exile’. This new dichotomy does not fit neatly into a *losstalgia*-betrayal-blame framework, yet there are suggestions that in some way the loyalties of those in exile have been compromised.<sup>26</sup> Any such social divisions affecting the sense of isolation of those participating in post-conflict Bosnia warrant our attention.

The above suggests that different approaches to blame between those in exile and those in Bosnia, as well as differences among different groups in Bosnia, certainly deserve further inquiry. Such research needs to be urgently and rigorously undertaken to provide disaggregated and clear insights into findings, such as those among Bosnians recently surveyed by a UNDP team, reflecting the lack of faith in ‘open discussion and public debate on what happened’. Only 23.9 per cent of the 1,500 surveyed believed this to be ‘the best way to deal with the events of 1992–1995.’<sup>27</sup>

It is essential that research about blame among Bosnians neither perpetuates nor exacerbates the effects of collectivizing blame by using methodologies that collectivize through aggregates and descriptive statistics. This research needs to highlight qualitative differences that exist among Bosnians regarding different needs and justifications for blaming, as well as different forms of blame and the different categorizations of the blameworthy. This paper has clearly illustrated that even collectivizing blame along ethno-religious lines can be practiced in significantly different ways (the position of the Narrative Sovereign versus that of the Narrative Affirmationist). But research that helps to disaggregate the practice of blame needs to overcome the necessary constraints of this paper n both sample size and research design. For example, by using focus groups to explore the effects of exchanging and sharing blame narratives between and within demographic groups.

### **Concluding Comment**

The preceding discussion has described a series of perceptual legacies apparent in the life stories of survivors in exile relating to the violent nationalism which divided Bosnia in the period 1992–1995. Blame is contextualized using the loss of community nostalgically described. This loss is then narrated with reference to the role of familiars in the betrayal of a cherished multi-ethnic pre-war community. This *losstalgia* – nostalgia tainted with memories of betrayal – is used to justify the subsequent delineation of the pre-war community into a blameless ‘us’ and a blameworthy ‘them’.

Political violence exercised along ethno-religious lines tends to produce a corresponding tendency to collectivize blame along ethno-religious lines among its victims in exile. Our task as scholars informing policy and practice is to acknowledge the experiential rather than the imaginary grounds<sup>28</sup> on which such post-conflict identities and practices of blame are based. Regardless of how we use these findings about *losstalgic* blame, we must, however, accept that blame,

like nostalgia, fulfils an important function in the psycho-social recovery of the survivor. Blame offers a means of making sense of traumatic memory and of re-integrating such memories into a new post-conflict conception of self and community. The intersubjective pendulum needs to self-correct and to allow the self-as-object to reclaim its position as subject, and even as sovereign, in the short-term re-assertion of agency and plurality.

However, we should also remain aware of the danger of allowing a collectivizing violence to produce a collectivizing blame, which in turn creates fertile ground for subsequent cycles of exclusion and polarization. In this way, a violent nationalism threatens to produce a righteous counter-nationalism. Neither serves the interests of the generations of survivors across the ethno-religious spectrum left to participate and live in Bosnia today and tomorrow.

In the meantime, reconstruction programs in post-conflict Bosnia need to be designed so as to accommodate an incremental approach to inter-ethnic exchange and debate in order to dilute this appetite for the ethno-collectivization of loss and blame. Such programs carry an ethical responsibility to seek to multiply contesting narratives and splinter collective assumptions through increased opportunities for face-to-face inter-ethnic contact.

Without demonizing or patronizing those engaging in nostalgic blame, it is necessary to recognize the role of unacknowledged loss, public denial and blame in the gestation of Serb nationalism after the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> Blame, like loss, lends itself to cynical manipulation by ambitious political elites. Hence, to avoid the ossification of a particular form of blame – collectivizing blame – into bigotry or ethno-nationalism, a counterpoint is needed. In further research, it would be worth investigating whether the experience of being positively surprised by an encounter with one who would otherwise be relegated to the ranks of a blameworthy ‘them’ could provide such a counterpoint at the level of the individual. Multiplying social opportunities for such ‘subversive surprises’ is perhaps one means of countering the translation of blame – especially that of the Narrative Sovereign or Narrative Affirmationist – into bigotry. For it is the cracks in these collectivities that may hold the greatest promise for accommodating individual agency and disaggregating the collectivities inspired by nostalgic blame.

Certain of the life stories gathered, especially those dominated by the position of the Narrative Sovereign or Narrative Affirmationist, demonstrate how some survivors recover their own agency and individuality while withdrawing agency and individuality from those deemed threatening or traitorous. This takes place through the process of placing nostalgic blame on a tainted collective. The degree to which survivors are willing to renegotiate these parameters between the blameless and the blameworthy over time, on the basis of such face-to-face encounters, is undeniably significant when considering the struggle against entrenched ethno-religious polarization in post-conflict Bosnia. Blame, mitigated by an awareness of plurality and the possibility that individuals can practice (and have practiced) agency in defiance of violent nationalism, constitutes a more promising investment in ethno-religious tolerance and peace-building.

If left unchecked, the alternative is ominous: the inter-generational transmission of collectivizing blame to second and third generation survivors has not served the region well in the past. The former supports the prospects of an eventual return to an integrated society. The latter threatens an eventual return to a violence waged on the basis of frustrated victimhood by those who were toddlers in the early 1990s and hence have no access to nostalgic memories of inter-ethnic harmony.

## Endnotes

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<sup>11</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 4, line 234–239.

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<sup>14</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 13, line 388–411.

<sup>15</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 14, line 820–827.

<sup>16</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 14, line 929–939.

<sup>17</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 2, line 221–224.

<sup>18</sup> L. Esterhuizen, Transcript 20, line 63–67.

- <sup>19</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1998; M. Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*, University of Chicago Press, London, 1998; M. Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen, 2002.
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