

# **Resisting Xenophobia: Transatlantic Mobility and Aleksandar Hemon’s Immigrant Autobiography *The Book of My Lives***

**Elvira Bolanca-Lowman**

ABSTRACT: The article examines the significance of xenophobic language used in the current portrayal of migration in mainstream media and its potential to determine Western – i.e. especially U.S. American and European – understandings of the migration debate. By critically observing how politically diverse media outlets essentialize the identity of migrants, the article attempts to expose the dangers inherent in the emerging xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric. The focus on Aleksandar Hemon’s personal account of displacement and the subsequent difficulties and opportunities that arise from his life in diaspora serve to humanize the migrant self. In this context, special attention will be paid to Hemon’s ability to both transgress national ideas of belonging and reconstruct a self that is at home in Sarajevo as well as in Chicago. The selected sections from Hemon’s autobiographical narration will be put into a dialogue with the abstract images of an immigrant deeply rooted in xenophobic discourses.

KEYWORDS: Bosnian American Immigrant Autobiography; Aleksandar Hemon; Xenophobia; Anti-Immigration Rhetoric; Barbarian.

## **Introduction**

In his recent publication *The Figure of the Migrant*, the philosopher Thomas Nail declares the necessity to understand that the “twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant” (1). It is the staggering numbers<sup>1</sup> of subjects-in-transit that allow him to claim that we are “all becoming migrants ourselves” (1), since we all, as he explains, “fall somewhere, at some point, on the spectrum of migration, from global tourist to undocumented labor” (235). This approach underlines his understanding that, as the scholar Nikos Papastergiadis explains in *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity*, “migration must be understood in a broad sense” (2), and any discussion of it needs to incorporate a variety of reasons that cause movement such as “environmental, economic, and political instabilit[ies]” (Nail, *Figure* 1). Despite the assumption that all migrants share “the

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<sup>1</sup> Nail cites the International Organization on Migration’s statistics, which states that one billion, i.e. approx. 14 percent of the world population are considered migrants (*The Figure of the Migrant* 239). He adds that “[f]uture forecasts vary from twenty-five million to one billion environmental migrants by 2050, moving either within their countries or across borders on a permanent or temporary basis, with two hundred million the most widely cited estimate” (239).

experience that their movement results in a certain degree of expulsion from their territorial, political, juridical, or economic status” (2), the commonality of that reality has not introduced compassion for the other, the marginalized self. In this article I will accentuate the significance of prevailing media depictions of current migration as a deeply ideological project that perpetuates negative ideas of otherness, concepts that – as we will see – have been historically present and find their roots in ancient societies. The xenophobic anti-immigration rhetoric, which has been reanimated not only in the politics of the far right, but also of the moderates, in Europe as well as in the United States, will be examined carefully along with the images of migration used, in order to uncover their political ramifications, and to underline the need for counter narratives such as immigrant autobiographies.

The autobiographical immigrant self, defined by its allegiance to multiple places, shaped by movement across cultures and languages, will be observed for its ability to humanize the self that is perceived as other, and by doing so to perpetuate cultural understanding and empathy. The latter stands at the center of the immigrant autobiography by the Bosnian American Aleksandar Hemon, *The Book of My Lives* (2013), a narrative in which the reader can observe the potential of such a text to build cultural bridges and depict the complexity of the personal struggles the migrant has to overcome throughout the integration process. The particular focus on Hemon’s text underlines the significance of recent immigrant autobiographies not only to counteract the anti-immigrant rhetoric, but also to create new cultural mirrors that will diversify the nation’s understanding of the self. In his essay “The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography” (1982), William Boelhower argues that “the question of identity involves matching the narrator’s own self-conception with the self that is recognized by others, so as to establish the continuity between the two, self and world, to give a design of the self in the world” (12). Hemon’s *The Book of My Lives* seems to have taken on exactly that function of “the immigrant actant” (Boelhower 19) by giving a voice to immigrants who have made the United States their home since the beginning of the Bosnian war in 1992. Embracing Benedict Anderson’s assumption that identity “cannot be ‘remembered,’” but instead “must be narrated” (204), the autobiographer writes himself into the nation and hence invigorates the creation of a new category of the American self, a Bosnian American self.

In the following article I will focus on the xenophobic rhetoric first by paying attention to the images that are used in European and American mainstream media to depict immigrants, and hence underline the significance of language as a strong indicator of media's perception of newcomers. Subsequently, I will scrutinize Hemon's text for its ability to directly respond to the fear mongering politics, and instead humanize the other through personal narrations of displacement and the efforts to reconstruct the shattered self through writing.

### **Xenophobic Anti-Immigration Rhetoric**

In mainstream media coverage of current migratory movements of people to Western Europe there are strong tendencies to essentialize the identity of the immigrant. *The Guardian* journalist David Shariatmadari pays special attention to what he describes as the "toxic metaphors of the migration debate" in the United Kingdom. By depicting immigrants as "swarms, floods and marauders,"<sup>2</sup> he explains, the mainstream media is insinuating that their arrival can be equated to the destruction of the native lands and their population. Shariatmadari describes the usage of this specific language as "callous [and] misleading," due to its potential to determine the reader's understanding of the political debate. By pointing out the dangers that are inherent in the language the media uses, he is right in connecting the xenophobic rhetoric to George Orwell's "Newspeak," a simplified form of language that allows viewing the world in a simplistic manner by endorsing binary thinking. Shariatmadari also links Orwell's understanding of the power inherent in the language we use to the work of linguists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (par. 4). In *Metaphors We Live By*, they claim that what they call our "conceptual system" (3), which defines how we experience the world around us, "is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (3). In order to clarify the concept, Lakoff and Johnson offer an everyday example that shows that the metaphorical concepts vary in different cultural contexts, and hence show diverging reactions to similar life situations. In their approach to showing the power of conceptual systems, they use "the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR" (cf. 4). According to them, this assumption defines the way we behave when having an argument, and also the language we use. In this specific context, our voices might get

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<sup>2</sup> The listed metaphors were used by David Cameron and his foreign secretary, Philip Hammond, among many others (Shariatmadari).

louder, our behavior often takes a more aggressive form, and the selected diction is often borrowed from the military realm: “Your claims are *indefensible*,” “His criticism was *right on target*,” “If you use that strategy, he’ll *wipe you out*” (4; emphasis in the original).

When the media uses metaphors such as “swarms, floods and marauders” in order to depict arriving immigrants, one can already predict, with Lakoff and Johnson, the difficulty of seeing them as equal human beings, and acting accordingly. The perception of ‘the other’ as a “swarm” specifically is that of an exceedingly numerous horde of people that terrifies the readers. Similarly, by portraying immigrants as floods, the media equates them with natural catastrophes that destroy people’s homes, and their lives, and possibly even kill their loved ones. Furthermore, viewing immigrants as “marauders” exposes the assumption that ‘the other’ will rob and pillage one’s lands, and, hence, has a negative impact on one’s existence.

When being interviewed by the *National Geographic* about the publication of her new book, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration From Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, the American historian Tara Zahra points out that right-wing populists, such as Donald Trump in the United States, have a long history of Western rhetoric of anti-immigrant sentiments to draw on. Zahra compares the mass immigration from Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1940 to the recent arrivals of emigrants from Syria and Iraq, and claims that “anxiety and animus toward refugees” (Interview n.pag.) nowadays is comparable to the situation at the turn of the twentieth century. Both, the Jewish East European immigrants Zahra focuses on back then, as well as Syrians today, are perceived “as a potential national security threat” (n.pag.). Zahra’s reference to the long history of xenophobia in Western thought also finds expression in Nail’s essay “Migrant Cosmopolitanism,” where he clarifies that the fear of ‘the other’ can be traced back to ancient Greece. Nail expounds that the first human cities such as “Jericho, Ur, Lagash, Eridu, Uruk, and others in Mesopotamia” (188), were surrounded by walls in order to ensure “a structural political exclusion” (188) of the other. In order to describe the politics at the time in question he refers to Aristotle and explains that:

political status is fundamentally tied to one’s inclusion in the polis. For those who do not have a polis, Aristotle reserves the term [...] barbarian. The Greek word [...] (*barbarous*) originates from the onomatopoeic sound of the babbling of the foreigner who does not speak Greek. In this way, the determination of the ‘nature’ of the barbarian migrant is

already relative to a geographical and political center: the Greek polis. Barbarism is thus a political determination. (188)

From the very beginning, in political constructs such as city-states, the outsider and the immigrant are considered inferior to the cultural center and “the periphery is [perceived as] barbarian, mobile, [...], diffuse, [...] unintelligible, and so on” (188). The walls built around the first cities are reminiscent of the strict border controls around the European Union and the United States today, whose purpose is to keep migrants outside of their borders, or to control the influx of newcomers. The ancient Greek ‘barbarian’s’ legal positioning outside the city walls is coupled with the assumption that the other is not able to linguistically integrate into the new country (188). Historically speaking, language has often been used as an instrument of exclusion. Hence, immigrant narratives such as Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* and Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*<sup>3</sup> have language acquisition as their central trope of transformation. Language, however, is only one of the aspects that Aristotle considers relevant when it comes to describing the ‘barbarian.’ Nail argues that the inaptitude to speak Greek properly is translated into one’s inability to reason. The latter is used as a justification for a migrant’s “natural inferiority” (188). Additionally, at this time “an excessive geographical mobility in relation to the polis” (188) is considered part of ‘barbarian’ life.

Inarguably, all the aspects listed here that were used for political and social exclusion and possible expulsion in ancient Greece are also part of the xenophobic rhetoric nowadays. Migrants are often struggling due to their political ostracism owing to the lack of legal rights, the degradation that results from not speaking a language at a native level, or having a foreign accent, and the subsequently assumed intellectual inferiority. In this context, Alfred Hornung mentions the German-Turkish writer Feridun Zaimoglu, who, as Hornung explains, “has become the spokesperson for the generation of Turkish people in Germany who have a Turkish passport but are denied German citizenship” (186). Hornung discloses that

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<sup>3</sup> The two immigrant autobiographies selected here play a significant role in depicting the Jewish Eastern European immigrant experience in the United States in the twentieth century, and are especially relevant cultural documents portraying immigrants’ difficulties associated with language acquisition in the host country. While accommodating different historical contexts – Antin’s text is situated at the turn of the twentieth century and Hoffman’s narrative captures the 1960s and 70s –, both underline the importance of language throughout the integration process.

[Zaimoglu's] first publication can be regarded as collective autobiographies of displaced people in search of their cultural home. This cultural home is a defiance of the German discriminatory perception of Turks who – because of their often partial competence of the German language – are called *kanak* – a composite derogatory term used for people from remote and 'backward places.' [...] [Through writing] Zaimoglu wants to elevate the language of German Turkish people to a literary status and reveals its creative potential. (186)

I argue that Aleksandar Hemon's immigrant autobiography, similarly to Zaimoglu's publication in Germany, also tries to dismantle essentializing depictions of immigrants. For instance, the text complicates the understanding that the displaced can easily be assigned to numerous legal categories available. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) it is important to distinguish between a "refugee" and a "migrant," mostly because the classification indicates varying legal positions within the new country. The UNHCR explains that the 1951 Refugee Convention is "the cornerstone of modern refugee protection" and guarantees that "persons [who are] fleeing armed conflict and persecution" and whose "situation is often so perilous and intolerable" can "cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as 'refugees' with access to assistance from States, UNHCR, and other organizations" (UNHCR). Migrants, on the other hand, the UNHCR definition goes, choose to leave in order to improve their lives. While the distinction appears understandable, one needs to question the authority that is in the position to classify the severity of political circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Zahra argues that the distinction has always been determined by the respective politics. She explains that

On the one hand, international law said you could have asylum if you were a political refugee, but not if you were an economic migrant. On the other hand, the refugees Western governments were most willing to admit were those that represented a valuable form of cheap labor. What made a person get a visa was often precisely their value as an economic migrant. (Interview n.pag.)

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout my article I am using the term "migrant" as a description of someone whose existence is defined by movement. I use it interchangeably with the term "immigrant," the latter only depicting a specific stage of movement, i.e. the arrival in the host country. I am not distinguishing between "migrants" and "refugees" in the theoretical section above because I argue that xenophobic rhetoric strips immigrants of their individuality. Xenophobic observations are abstract and detached, and uninterested in the nuances of their personal struggles and hence the various legal positionings.

Hemon himself entered the United States in 1992 as part of the International Visitors program, which was run by the U.S. Information Agency. He just happened to be in Chicago when the war in Bosnia broke out (Knight 86). In *The Book of My Lives* Hemon explains that the invitation by the American Cultural Center to visit Chicago as a journalist came as a surprise, something that shaped his life profoundly (72). While he did not enter the country as a refugee, he was able to apply for asylum after his entrance.

### **Narrating Displacement and Reconstructing the Shattered Self through Writing**

Immigrant writers like Eva Hoffman, when asked about the motivation to textually capture her personal story of emigration from anti-Semitic Poland in 1959, emphasize the impact of displacement on their identity. Hoffman explains that her immigrant autobiography *Lost in Translation* attempts to preserve the transformation that one undergoes when living in exile (Miller 280). For Hemon, the act of looking back and remembering has been something he decided to do later in his career as a writer, considering that, as he explains, “[he] write[s] fiction because [he] cannot not do it, but [he has] to be pressed into writing nonfiction” (ix). Especially for a writer in exile who looks back on a war, the process of remembering might be a difficult one. In an interview with Lania Knight, he explains that “the traumatic aspects of immigration, the sense of indelible loss” (86) was something he focused on initially; later he was more interested in “the transformative aspects [...] what happens after the loss” (86).

One important aspect of immigrant autobiographies is that they can defy the notion that “the figure of the migrant is [...] a ‘type of person’ or fixed identity” (Nail, *Figure* 235). Instead they show that it is a “mobile social position or spectrum that people move into and out under certain conditions of mobility” (235). By writing, the migrant self creates their own agency, and enables themselves to share their story with a wider audience. Hemon does so by describing his life in Sarajevo before he left, depicting the normalcy of his everyday life that allows him to construct an identity that existed before emigration. It is exactly the knowledge about Hemon’s family and his friends, his education, the music that he listened to and the books he read, that enables readers to form alliances, and to develop sympathies towards the immigrant other. Hemon teaches his audience that despite the interethnic war and strong nationalism rampaging through Bosnia, before the war Hemon and his friends

were all Yugoslavs and Pioneers and [they] all loved socialism, [their] country, and its greatest son, [their] marshal Tito, but never would [he] have gone to war and taken blows for those. [Their] other identities – say, the ethnicity of any of [them] – were wholly irrelevant. To the extent [they] were aware of ethnic identity in one another, it was related to the old-fashioned customs practiced by [their] grown-ups, fundamentally unrelated to [their] daily operations [...]. (9)

At a friend's birthday party Hemon makes the statement that his friend Almir might be a Turk due to wearing a pullover that was bought in Turkey (10). The incident reveals the difficulties and the possibilities of hurting other people by labeling them. Hemon learns that, as he puts it, "*Turk* was (and still is) a derogatory, racist word for a Bosnian Muslim" (11). By invoking the image of a child's birthday party, Hemon subsequently contextualizes the incident, explaining that by calling his friend a Turk he "*othered* Almir, it made him feel excluded from the group [Hemon] was presumably unimpeachably part of, whatever group it was" (11). The reader is informed not only of the interethnic racism that can be expressed by the usage of certain words, Hemon also informs his audience about the political consequences that xenophobia invites. He explains that

Years later, I would recall my inadvertent insult, yet again, while watching the footage of Ratko Mladić speaking to a Serb camera upon entering Srebrenica, where he was to oversee the murder of eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men – 'This is the latest victory in a five-hundred-year-long war against the Turks,' he said. (11)

Hemon exercises his power as a political agent, and exposes the atrocities during the Bosnian war, and hence, asserts his stance on the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>5</sup> By doing so, he uses his narrative as an instrument of power that gives voice not simply to his story of displacement, but also to the many Bosnians who were killed and those who survived and are still struggling against the political attempts to deny the genocide. Hemon explains that

Almir was teasing exactly because there was no lasting, essential difference between [them]. But the moment you point at a difference, you enter, regardless of your age, an already existing system of differences, a network of identities, all of them ultimately arbitrary and unrelated to your intentions, none of them a matter of your choice. The

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<sup>5</sup> The Srebrenica genocide refers to the massacre of more than 8000 Bosnian Muslims who were killed by Serb forces in July 1995. The genocide was led by the former Bosnian Serb military leader General Ratko Mladić, who is on trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.



moment you *other* someone, you *other* yourself. When I idiotically pointed at Almir's non-existent difference, I expelled myself from raja. (11)

The interrelatedness of the self and the other that Hemon acknowledges as a significant part of everyone's existence is also meditated upon when Hemon attempts to understand his uprooted self. He explains that "the situation of immigration leads to a kind of self-othering as well. Displacement results in a tenuous relationship with the past, with the self that used to exist and operate in a different place, where the qualities that constituted us were in no need of negotiation" (17). To him, immigration is "an ontological crisis because you are forced to negotiate the conditions of your selfhood under perpetually changing existential circumstances" (17). The self he describes is constantly in motion, and is strongly affected by its surrounding. In this context, Nail points out that the migrant's subjectivity can no longer be described by the old idea of a "place-bound social membership" (Figure 3). Instead the uprooted self is defined by the "politics of movement" (235), "the grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of routes" (McLeod 215). Hemon's narrative is defined by the multiplicity of layers of time and geographical spaces, of the physical and mental movement between Sarajevo and Chicago and between the past and the present. As such, the narration constitutes his active involvement in creating a highly individualized space that accommodates his position.

At times his lives in Sarajevo and Chicago exist simultaneously, and are embedded in one another so strongly that they cannot be separated. The past is permeating the present through the Bosnian words that Hemon oftentimes introduces into his narrative, and does not include any translations for, exposing the untranslatability of some aspects of his earlier life. He uses the word "raja" throughout his autobiography, which could be easily translated as "the circle of friends." It seems that to him, the familiarity and the intimacy of his childhood friends cannot be captured by the English language. The Bosnian words constantly remind the reader of the multiple levels of subjectivity that constitute his self, also reflected in the title of the book, and hence the complexity of the narrative. His autobiography exposes the mobility across cultures, in his case a transatlantic perspective, as a particular mode of existence. By incorporating several cultures within his narrative linguistically, Hemon constantly underlines the cultural diversity that his identity comprises. The Bosnian

words that he does not translate stay mobile and, as foreign words, challenge the exclusive significance of the English language for his ongoing identity formation.

### **Resisting Xenophobia: Hemon's Humanization of the Migrant Self**

Hemon convincingly depicts the hardships that come with the process of integration into a new culture socially and linguistically, and the frustrations that the immigrant self might experience by telling the story of his parents after their arrival in Canada in 1993. "Things were very complicated for them, what with the language my parents couldn't speak, the generic shock of displacement, and a cold climate that was extremely unfriendly to randomly warm human interactions" (13). Even though both parents and his sister were able to find work very quickly, the social downward movement made "defining and identifying as [...] professor[s] [...] no longer available to them, since their distinguished careers disintegrated in the process of displacement" (16). The parents, as Hemon recounts, "started cataloguing the differences between us and them – *we* being Bosnians or ex-Yugoslavs, *they* being purely Canadian"(13; emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to legitimize their own importance, the parents observed those "abstract Canadians, the exact counter projection of" (15; emphasis in original) by listing all the differences:

That list [...], theoretically endless, included items such as sour cream (our sour cream – mileram – was creamier and tastier than theirs); smiles (they smile, but don't really mean it); babies (they do not bundle up their babies in severe cold); wet hair (they go out with their hair wet, foolishly exposing themselves to the possibility of lethal brain inflammation); clothes (their clothes fall apart after you wash them a few times), et cetera. (14)

Bosnian friends of Hemon's parents engage in similar activities by adding equally critically that "*we* like to simmer our food for a long time (sarma, cabbage rolls, being a perfect example), while they just dip it in extremely hot oil and cook it in a blink" (14; emphasis in original). The significance of those differences is to point out, as Hemon explains, that "our

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<sup>7</sup> The assumption of Hemon's parents that there are "pure Canadians" invites the readers to comprehend their detachment from the Canadian cultural center. The possible lack of understanding of Canadian immigrant history and the inability to communicate within the host country puts his parents into a position that only allows observations from a distance. Cognizant of their own cultural differences, his parents imagine everyone else as essentially more Canadian than they personally feel at this initial point of time of their integration process.

simmering proclivities were reflective of our love of eating and, by extension and obviously, of our love of life. On the other hand, *they* didn't really know how to live, which pointed at the ultimate, transcendental difference – *we* had soul, and *they* were soulless" (14). The comical<sup>6</sup> dimension that the list of what his parents and their friends perceived as obvious cultural differences between what they assume to be "the pure Canadians" and themselves invokes, is relativized by Hemon. He later on describes that the social integration into Canadian society over time made it "harder to talk about *us* and *them* now that we have met and married some of them – the clarity and the significance of differences were always contingent upon the absence of contact and proportional to the mutual distance" (15; emphasis in original). Hemon recognizes the initial comparisons with Canadians as his parents' attempt "to feel at home" (15). The displacement made his parents, as he puts it, feel "inferior to Canadians," and "the constant comparison was a way to rhetorically equate [themselves] with [Canadians]. We could be equal because we could compare ourselves with them; we had a home too" (15). While describing his parents' difficulties in adjusting, Hemon simultaneously teaches his audience without such experiences not only how difficult the process of integration is. He also provides the reader with cultural competence to better understand Bosnian immigrants. Hemon's educational efforts are creating cultural bridges between the United States (i.e. in the context of his parents Canada) and Bosnia.

His own displacement Hemon describes as an involuntary path. Finding himself in Chicago because of the scholarship he received as a Bosnian journalist in the United States, his plan to return on May 1, 1992, seemed to become difficult due to the emerging war that gradually worsened. Hemon describes that he was "torn between guilt and fear for [his] parents' and friends' lives," and "worries about [his] previously unimagined and presently unimaginable future in America" (115). In order to distract himself from the troubling present, the uncertainty of his life, Hemon starts his journey through the city.

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<sup>6</sup> This list is comical, among other things, due to its significance in Bosnia. The cultural specifics catalogued constitute part of an oral tradition that is handed down from one generation to another. In particular the example exposing the dangers of leaving one's home with wet hair generally puts a smile on many Bosnians' faces because of their understanding that it is exaggerated and not exactly true. Hemon's parents are approaching the new cultural context with the tools they have brought with them. The anecdote exposes their inability to operate within the new country unless they become linguistically and culturally equipped. The initial feeling of despondency that many immigrants share causes them to other members of the host culture in order to cope with their own position as the cultural other.

A tormented flaneur, I kept walking, my Achilles tendons sore, my head in the clouds of fear and longings for Sarajevo, until I finally reconciled myself to the idea of staying. On May 1, I didn't fly home. On May 2, the roads out of the city were blocked; the last train (with my parents on it) departed: the longest siege in modern history began. In Chicago, I submitted my application for political asylum. The rest is the rest of my life. (116)

Hemon's realization of his legal rights, and language acquisition are barely mentioned in his autobiography. The first because of the openness of the American government towards refugees from Bosnia at that time, the latter because English in many ways was already his language due to the music he listened to and the books he read. The culture that he entered was already his in some ways, and in that respect his integration process varies from many other immigrant accounts. His walking through the city of Chicago can be read as his particular way of taking possession of the place.

I became acquainted with Chicago, but I didn't *know* the city. The need to know it in my body, to locate myself in the world, wasn't satisfied; I was metaphysically ailing, because I didn't yet know how to *be* in Chicago. The American city was organized fundamentally differently from Sarajevo. (A few years later I would find a Bellow quote that perfectly encapsulated my feeling of the city at the time: 'Chicago was nowhere. It had no setting. It was something released into American space.') (116)

He realized that the "personal infrastructure" (117) that made Sarajevo Hemon's home before the war, incorporating "[his] *kafana*, [his] barber, [his] butcher," needed to be transferred to the new home. Hemon's understanding that the self is strongly connected to the people, is here also applied to the city. He underlines the importance of "the streets where people recognized you, the space that identified you; the landmarks of your life (the spot where you fell playing soccer and broke your arm, the corner where you waited to meet the first of the many loves of your life, the bench where you kissed her first)" (117).

The permeability of one's identity is further emphasized when Hemon claims that "[t]he borders between interiority and exteriority were practically nonexistent," and that "your sense of who you were, your deepest identity, was determined by your position in a human network, whose physical corollary was the architecture of the city" (117). His perception of himself inextricable from Sarajevo allows the readers to understand the shattering of the identity and the pain that is a part of one's displacement from their home. The description shows how the Bosnian war not only fractured the country he lived in, but also broke his self into many pieces that now was in need of being put back together again.

For Hemon it seems that the normalcy of his life before the war allowed positive attitudes towards not only his present during the war but also his future after the war. His autobiography can be read as a manual on how to survive displacement as he describes his path of discovering the city gradually, finding employment and friends, and developing an emotional attachment to the city (Hemon 117). He states that “converting Chicago into [his] personal space became not just metaphorically essential but psychiatrically urgent as well” (123). Hemon illustrates how he succeeds at transforming Chicago, a city that to him after his arrival “was nowhere [...] [and] was something released into American space,” (117) into a familiar place. Here he quotes the writer Saul Bellow and emphasizes the fundamental structural differences between European and American cities. With time, Hemon manages to change his perception of Chicago as an urban space that, like his previous home in Sarajevo, became “populated with familiar faces, [and] with shared and shareable experiences” (117).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have looked at xenophobic rhetoric in European anglophone mainstream media outlets that is centered on the idea that the other, the migrant, the one who differs from the Western self in any way, is inferior, a ‘barbarian,’ a subhuman. Hemon’s text introduces a new immigrant, a Bosnian American whose cultural background differs from the already existing diversity of migrants’ literary voices in the American cultural narrative in order to further combat the essentializing efforts. The literary success of his immigrant autobiography has made the text more visible to the public and has encouraged the diversification not only of the American self but also of the immigrant self, and has hence further developed readers’ understanding of the individuality of migrants’ experiences. By writing his own story, Hemon becomes part of a more visible agency of diverse groups of migrants who fight the injustices maintained by politicians such as Donald Trump. Hemon’s text makes one pause and rethink bigoted ideas as well as explore alternative spaces. The text allows its readers to become friends with someone whose experience possibly differs from their own, and thus potentially triggers a visceral emotional response to the presented suffering. Hemon’s critical observations of the Bosnian past, the war, and the life of an immigrant in the United States lead to the production of new knowledge about the

immigrant experience in general, and the experience of migration from Bosnia in the 1990s in particular, that might initiate readers' transformations towards more compassionate existences.

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