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INTRODUCTION

As a woman from the “former Yugoslavia” who now lives in the United States, I am occasionally asked to speak about women in Yugoslavia. The request usually comes in the context of an interest in women of Eastern Europe, and has been, since the fall of the Eastern bloc, asked with an increased frequency. Whenever I am asked to speak about this topic, however, I experience unease which has little to do with the actual situation of women in Yugoslavia, and much more with the context and the assumptions within which this question is posed in American popular discourse. This unease has become so overwhelming that it has effectively blocked all my efforts to address the topic. In this essay, therefore, instead of talking about women in Yugoslavia, I explicate some of the reasons for my uneasiness with the request. This essay does not focus on specific traits and living conditions of women in Yugoslavia, but on some aspects of the context in which questions about specific characteristics of Yugoslavian women (and, more generally, East European women) are asked within American popular discourse. Out of a number of very complex political and scholarly issues that the topic raises I will here focus on three. The first concerns the implied nature of the “new” political and discursive space created out of the former first and second worlds. The second concerns the nature of cultural categories as studiable objects. The third concerns the need to partly rewrite current scholarly (and, perhaps, political) paradigms in order to effectively speak about the world today.

The fall of the Eastern bloc can, among other things, be seen as a
potential joining of what used to be two ostensibly different worlds (the first and the second) into a larger and more complex political and discursive space. This opens an interesting question: what is (going to be) the socio-cultural nature of this newly (re)created space? What is this new, "fircond," world going to be like? The answer to this question is at issue whenever I am asked about women in Yugoslavia within the context of the Eastern bloc. And it is the assumptions about this space implied in the question that cause my unease. More specifically: (1) Yugoslavia is (re)positioned as an Eastern bloc country; and (2) to Yugoslavia is ascribed the difference and inferiority reserved in American popular discourse for an "other," particularly for an other from the former "evil empire." This indicates a distinctly American definition of the discursive space of the "fircond" world, since this particular positioning of Yugoslavia is an American one: the Eastern bloc frequently saw the country as Western, while by the rest of the world it was sometimes seen as third world, because of its nonaligned politics. In the first part of this essay, I discuss these issues by situating them in the context of two paradigms: cold-war and cultural diversity.

In the second part of the essay, I look at the question about women in Yugoslavia in the context of culturally constructed categories as studyable objects. Contemporary culture scholars tend to see all cultural categories as constructed. Seeing concepts such as Yugoslavian women and the Eastern Bloc as constructed rather than natural or self-evident might mean the "end of [American] innocence" with respect to the cold-war paradigm and the desire for genuine "cross-bloc" communication; it is this loss of belief in the givenness, the clear-cutness, the descriptive accuracy of the East/West Bloc division which might make it possible to realize that negotiating the space of the "fircond" world, theoretically at least, means redefinition of both of its constitutive discourses.

In the third part of the essay, I look at the question about women in Yugoslavia in the context of the contemporary multicultural, fractured, and multifaceted — and yet interdependent — world. How do we make sense of this world? It seems that nothing can be said about it, until everything is rewritten. I propose a new kind of cultural and theoretical frame to contemplate it within, the transcultural. I suggest that the transcultural can be conceived of in three ways: (1) as a complex, and/or heterogeneous space in which all other cultural categories are immersed, and out of which they are sometimes molded; (2) as an aspect of every-
body’s culture, and, potentially, as a culture all its own: a culture of people with complex, transcultural experiences and affiliations; and (3) finally, as a mode of interaction which works well among groups and people aware and accepting of cultural difference but not prepared to let that difference permanently divide them. I conclude by briefly looking at the context in which this essay appears in the American discourse. I see this as an example of the transcultural interaction mode.

I

The Cold War Paradigm and Normal Science. When I first came to Ohio, in 1986, Yugoslavia was not overwhelmingly represented in American popular discourse. Many people I came in contact with had only a vague idea where the country was (some did not even know it was in Europe), and a few thought its capital was Prague (the capital of, then, Czechoslovakia). Some people knew of Tito, Yugoslavia’s former “communist” president, and others had heard of Dubrovnik, a tourist city on the Adriatic coast (now in Croatia). As for such well-known people who did, originally, come from Yugoslavia (for example, tennis player Monica Seles or pianist Ivo Pogorelic, as well as some basketball players, film makers and scientists), even when Ohioans had heard of them, they were not, in their minds, always connected with Yugoslavia. An occasional joke about Yugo (the only Yugoslavian car on the American market), most frequently pejorative, was more or less all one could hear on a regular basis (although not even Yugo was always associated with Yugoslavia).

Practically without exception, however, everybody I met in the United States at the time classified Yugoslavia as an East European country (that is, as belonging to the Eastern bloc) and myself as East European. This came as a complete surprise, since this was not how we, in Yugoslavia, saw ourselves. I had expected, rather naively as it turns out, that Yugoslavia would be perceived by others the way it perceived itself. Yugoslavia had not been a member of the Warsaw Pact, and it had been a member of Cominform (an international communist information bureau set up by the USSR) only from 1947 to 1948. In 1948, Yugoslavian ties with the Soviet Union were severed.1 Since that time, Yugoslavia was precariously balanced between the blocs, and was one of the founding members (with Egypt and India) of the nonaligned movement. The first nonaligned nations’ summit conference was held in Belgrade, in 1961.2 Yugoslavian
borders were open to visitors from both blocs, and Yugoslavian citizens easily traveled to both Warsaw Pact and NATO Pact countries. Furthermore, the country was full of Western popular culture and, it seemed to me, more West- than East-bloc-oriented. In fact, when I had traveled to the Soviet Union, many years previously, I had been labeled a “West-erner.”

In Bowling Green, Ohio, however, I was considered “East European.” With the label went a set of assumptions: closed borders, poverty, political and gender oppression, primitive living conditions, a need for guidance by more developed and more democratic nations. Although, as I said before, many people I met only vaguely knew where the country was located, they took these assumptions for granted. (Since all of the above assumptions were seen to uniformly apply to all “East European” countries, not only was I considered “East European,” I was also frequently asked to speak for the whole Eastern bloc.) Although people I met rather hungrily sought information about life in the Eastern bloc, however, they, at the time, rarely expected to hear anything that would contradict the image they had already formed of it. In other words, they never expected to be told that the above assumptions were incorrect, but, rather, they wanted more proof that they were correct. When I did happen to provide information which questioned dominant American views of Eastern Europe, I was, as a rule, disbeliefed.

I could list pages of examples, but the following should suffice.

One of my frequent complaints about life in Ohio is that washing machines and/or washing detergents do not do as good a job as the ones “back home.” With some extremely rare exceptions, this statement always met with vehement opposition. This opposition ranged from attempts to explain this (to my opponents, obviously wrong) belief by my inability to use the machines correctly, to direct accusations of delusions or lying. In the words of one of my friends: “I find it hard to believe that any domestic appliance in Yugoslavia can be better than an American one.”

When, on one occasion, I was trying to impress upon one of my colleagues that Yugoslavia was not a member of the Eastern Bloc, he said: “Are you sure? I heard it on NBC last night.” I said that only proved that not everything said on television was true. He gave me an indulgent smile and refused further argument.

On the other hand, my stories about things I disliked in Yugoslavia, such as the absence of satisfactorily clean public bathrooms, or lack of
tolerance in public discourse, were in Ohio met with instant belief. Nobody ever said (yet): “Oh, really? I never thought Yugoslavia would have dirty bathrooms!”

It might be useful to look at this situation in terms of what Thomas Kuhn calls “normal science.” According to Kuhn, “normal science” means research within a firmly established paradigm. He defines paradigms as “some accepted examples of actual scientific practice . . . [which] provide models from which spring particular traditions of scientific research.” These are taught to us in textbooks, and they “for a time define the legitimate problems and methods of a research field for succeeding generations of practitioners . . . The study of paradigms . . . is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community” (10–11).

According to Kuhn, normal science can be compared to jigsaw puzzle-solving. The picture is already known, we just have to put the pieces in the right place. “Perhaps the most striking feature of the normal research problems [writes Kuhn] . . . is how little they aim to produce major novelties, conceptual or phenomenal” (35). In other words, normal science does not, by definition, produce radically new knowledge. Rather, it produces the “steady extension of the scope and precision of scientific knowledge” (52). When nature violates “the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science (52),” when, in other words, a discovery does not fit the paradigm, it is treated as an anomaly. An anomaly does not automatically create a paradigm crisis. Scientists are aware that no paradigm is perfect, that all of them are approximations rather than accurate descriptions of reality. Anomaly is usually treated as a hint that the paradigm needs adjustment, not that it should be rejected. In fact, scientific communities are very resistant to paradigm change. According to Kuhn, this is good: it ensures that paradigms are not rejected easily, at the whim of a few impatient scientists.

Let us for the moment assume that, with respect to Eastern Europe, the cold-war picture of the world can be seen as the dominant American paradigm. This paradigm saw the Western bloc as the “free world” and the Eastern bloc as a dark communist world behind the Iron Curtain. It saw the Western bloc as good and the Eastern as bad, or, more precisely, it saw the Western bloc as progressive, enlightened, democratic, open to new ideas and committed to the equality of all people, and the Eastern
bloc as lacking in all these areas. It also saw the Western bloc as affluent, colorful, and full of joy, and the Eastern bloc as gray, oppressive, poor, and joyless. In Kuhnian terms, stories about Eastern Europe can be seen as normal science when they can be easily told within and when they confirm this paradigm; and as anomalies when they cannot be contained or explained within it.

During the cold war this was the paradigm used by American popular culture to present Eastern Europe (particularly the Soviet Union) to American audiences. It was present in popular films, popular books, newspapers, and magazines, as well as in television news shows. This also seems to have been the paradigm used by most people to classify and interpret information from Eastern Europe.

When communism “fell,” the Eastern bloc became in America a subject of lively popular and academic interest. Although one might have expected that, with the end of the cold war, the cold-war paradigm would be rejected and supplanted by another one, that is not what happened. The cold-war paradigm persisted well into the “new world order” and still sometimes appears to be considered a valid model for interpretation of and research about Eastern Europe. If we look at the popular media’s response to the events in Eastern Europe through a Kuhnian lens, it becomes obvious that reporting and interpreting the events were conducted very much within the cold-war paradigm. No new knowledge was produced, at least not the kind of knowledge that might question the dominant paradigm and prompt a search for another one. Like all normal science, it simply added more pieces to the already existing picture.

The news about the fall of communism was accompanied by feelings of euphoria and triumph. Although, in theory, the fall of communism could have been seen as a creation of an entirely new political and discursive space (more complex, contradictory, and larger), in practice it was seen as confirmation of the cold-war paradigm’s validity. Communism lost, and the “Free World” won. The American world and its values were not seen as being in any way threatened or even affected by these changes. If anything, they were even more firmly established. “We” had been right, “they” had been wrong. It seemed to be a common expectation that now “they” would become like “us” and that becoming “like us” is what “they” should naturally desire. Any unwillingness on the part of the former Eastern Bloc to see events in this light was pronounced reactionary or shortsighted. It was often said that Eastern Europeans were
not used to democracy since they had no democratic tradition, and that they had to learn how to use their freedom. Any warning that the transition might not go as smoothly as expected was met with impatience, sometimes even anger.

Then came the news of wars, the rise of nationalisms, economic disasters, and so forth. These were again explained within the cold-war paradigm and were blamed on the former communist regimes: the oppression of ethnic and national freedoms was seen to have produced a nationalist overreaction. (Whether or not this was true for the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia's situation was not quite that simple. The country had been decentered and federal, with multilingual education, publishing, press, television, and so forth. While this regulated and strictly controlled ethnic tolerance might not have been enough to assuage nationalist hungers, reducing the causes of the war to nationalism only is, in my opinion, overly simplistic.) Communist economies and bad financial politics were seen to have made Eastern European countries unable to compete on the global markets. (Again, while this is probably true, it is also probably true that a full explanation would require looking into who controls the global markets, taking into account that global markets are capitalist, as well as that transition from total state control to a free market economy is hard for and economically detrimental to the people in lower income brackets.) And so on.

Popular fiction followed a similar pattern. Popular characters on television incorporated Bosnia into their past. All those sexy, macho, war correspondents now came from Bosnia, or returned to Bosnia, or had had their lives changed by the war in Bosnia. For example, the American journalist with whom Murphy Brown fell in love in one of the winter 1994 episodes has come from and returns to Bosnia. One made-for-television film in the fall of 1993 featured two journalists (a man and a woman) who had reported from Bosnia — before they met in Paris and fell in love. In these cases, the characters (as well as the war) were simply inserted into the already existing formulaic place: the story followed an older formula and, for most people, the (particular) war mentioned was incidental. Whether the hero or the heroine came from Bosnia or Cambodia was of no consequence; it was the war — or, rather, a war — experience that mattered. In other words, neither popular formulas nor the cold-war picture of the world were questioned.

Because the above is its implied context, the question about women in
Yugoslavia, rather than being a simple question about another place (about which the asker knows very little or nothing, and hence is in a position of a less powerful partner in the exchange), frequently strikes me as already containing a number of assumptions which put the askee in a disadvantaged position and limit the answers in kind. These assumptions usually are — or can be translated into — cold-war assumptions. Yugoslavia is labeled an Eastern Bloc country and as such its women are expected to be oppressed, unaware, unsophisticated, unliberated.

I do not mean to say that people who asked did not want to know “how things really were” but rather that “how things are” is an enormously complicated category, whose appearance and moral inflection are to a large degree determined by the conceptual apparatus used to describe it, or even simply to inquire about it. “[O]ne of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm,” writes Thomas Kuhn, “is a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions. To a great extent these are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake” (37). In other words, the paradigm within which one inquires will affect both the kind of questions asked and the kind of answers expected and considered scholastically valid and valuable. If one violates these expectations by saying that not only are answers impossible within the paradigm, but the question itself is “wrong,” this will, to the believers in the paradigm, appear confusing and unscholarly.

Asked, then, in Bowling Green, Ohio, to speak about women in Yugoslavia, I as a rule had to either position myself as East European, or devote the whole time allotted (usually 20 minutes to an hour) to explaining why this classification should not be taken for granted; that, in other words, Yugoslavia in its own eyes had not been an Eastern Bloc country. When, occasionally, I did exactly this, I most frequently confused rather than enlightened my audience. It is hard to shift an audience’s worldview in an hour, so what I had to say appeared incoherent and anomalous. The audience felt they had not quite gotten what they had come for. At other times, I accepted the classification and focused on specific examples of difference between Yugoslavian and American beliefs and life-styles. This, as a rule, went down well because it made the audience feel that their knowledge of the subject had become more precise and better. In short, in the former case they felt they had learned very little, while in the latter they felt they had learned a lot. One could argue, of course, that the
situation was exactly the reverse. They had learned nothing in the latter case, and a lot in the former, since increasing the precision of knowledge within an already questionable paradigm is far less useful than questioning the paradigm itself.

Women in Yugoslavia and Cultural Diversity. One might wonder why educated and well-meaning people continue to use an oppressive and politically nonliberal paradigm such as the cold-war one, and I would suggest that, in fact, they do not. Although it appears to be a cold-war question, the question about women in Yugoslavia is also and simultaneously (perhaps primarily) asked within another, politically far more "correct," paradigm, that of cultural diversity.

The cold war and cultural diversity paradigms have very little in common. In fact, they are ideologically opposed to each other. To put it simply: the cultural diversity paradigm is (globally) a reaction to (mostly European) imperialisms which tended to favor homogenization over cultural difference, thus devaluing and erasing cultures which they found in their way. Within the American context, the movement for cultural diversity is a reaction to long-term racist policies which have had a similar effect: non-European (as well as some European) cultures have been devalued and made invisible. Cultural diversity can then be seen as an attempt to restore to these cultures their rightful place in the world and in America, and, by doing that, to reposition the whole imperialist, homogenizing picture of the world which assumed strict hierarchies among cultural and political systems, postulating European, industrial, Christian, science-oriented cultures as an ideal. In short, the cultural diversity paradigm favors a dehomogenized, heterogeneous picture of the world in which all cultures are equally visible and in which they all have equal rights.

The cold-war paradigm's worldview is directly opposite. This paradigm is a result of two imperialisms' (the "First" and the "Second" Blocs') collision in their attempts to control large chunks of the globe. After World War II, the two blocs got locked into a stand-still which lasted for decades. During this time they kept an eye on each other and waged a mass-mediated ideological war. More specifically, this consisted in spying on each other, in competing in everything, from sports over arms invention and production to space research, and in consistently painting the other bloc as an evil, dark other. This process led in America to an image
of the other bloc as both alien to "us" and homogeneous within itself. At the same time, "our" bloc was also perceived as homogeneous, precisely because of its striking and constantly emphasized difference from the evil, dark other in opposition to which it was being constructed. In other words, while the cultural diversity paradigm makes difference visible, the cold-war paradigm covers it over — except when it comes to the difference between the two blocs.

Although considering a group an other and considering it culturally different are not, theoretically, one and the same thing, they appear to be easily confused, or, at least, easily translated into each other. While the end of the cold war removed in America some of the negative charge from the image of the Eastern Bloc, there remained a residue of (a certain negative) difference. This was an obvious, easy way to make sense of Eastern Europe: while not evil (any more) and not "other" in any negative sense, neither was it the same as "us." At least not yet. After all, it had been communist for quite a long time; it is still in a state of transition. While Eastern Europe might now be acceptable to the American general public, communism most certainly is not; and neither is the Eastern Bloc's communist past. Although there is in America a rising awareness that the former Eastern Bloc countries are culturally very different from one another, these cultural differences are still covered over and/or come second when set in the context of Eastern Europe's communist past. In short, the Eastern Bloc is still considered different from "us" and homogeneous within itself (in a certain vaguely negative way) precisely by virtue of that past.

There is in the cultural diversity paradigm an (implied) element of atonement. The paradigm not only teaches that allowing for cultural differences is good, but also that making these differences visible and considering them valid and valuable is a correction of past injustices. The cold-war paradigm has taught us that Eastern Europe was different in precisely the way which merits this kind of treatment. In other words, Eastern Europe is not (has not been) considered different in a way in which, say, Sweden is different. It was considered different in a way taught to us by the cold-war paradigm. This, in fact, was an othering rather than an acknowledgment of real differences. Consequently, Eastern Europe can now be treated in American discourse as an oppressed and wronged culture. And it is, perhaps, precisely because we still think
of it as slightly different (in that vaguely negative sense) that we feel we need to acknowledge it, to give it prominence and visibility.

In the development of any science, the first received paradigm is usually felt to account quite successfully for most of the observations and experiments easily accessible to that science's practitioners. Further development, therefore, ordinarily calls for the construction of elaborate equipment, the development of an esoteric vocabulary and skills, and a refinement of concepts that increasingly lessens their resemblance to their usual common-sense prototypes. That professionalization leads, on the one hand, to an immense restriction of the scientist's vision and to a considerable resistance to paradigm change (Kuhn 64).

It also produces a lot of good, precise information. As it was said before, even the resistance to change is, according to Kuhn, useful. It "guarantees that scientists will not be lightly distracted and that the anomalies that lead to paradigm change will penetrate existing knowledge to the core" (65).

I believe one can easily argue that the cultural diversity paradigm is still at a stage where normal science is quite in order. It is a relatively new paradigm, only entering the stage of professionalization, with a lot of blank spaces yet to be filled. Learning more about, and restoring visibility and legitimacy to, different cultural groups whose difference has been covered over by the previous paradigm is both politically and scholastically useful. Within this paradigm, then, a perfectly justified desire to internationalize and interculturalize the curriculum and campus life has led, at Bowling Green and elsewhere, to an increased inclusion of other cultures/countries into both course syllabi and campus events. As a result (as was said at the beginning of this essay), I had been asked to speak about Yugoslavia even before the country had grabbed the world's attention by disintegrating into the chaos of war. I have been asked to comment on leisure in Yugoslavia, women in Yugoslavia, popular culture in Yugoslavia. In other words, I was given visibility and attention which I most likely would not have enjoyed under other paradigms. Why, then, the unease?

For a number of reasons, most of which have already been noted and analyzed by members of other cultural groups who have gone through similar experiences.
1. At the simplest level, it is a common dilemma: on the one hand, I wanted my difference acknowledged; on the other, however, “difference” often implied an inferiority in the eyes of the asker since to be “non-American” (more particularly, to be East European) was by many taken to automatically mean “worse than American.”

2. On a more complex level, speaking “as a Yugoslavian woman” could be seen as feeding a paradigm which my talk was supposed to question. I felt I was not contributing to my audience’s better understanding of the world, or, for that matter, to the development of scholarship. Gayatri Spivak (among others) suggests that some representatives of other cultures are token representatives. When an audience wants “to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman,” [writes Spivak], they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization.” When I spoke “as a Yugoslavian woman” (particularly when what I said met—or could be interpreted to meet—the audience’s expectations) I became a token representative of both my imagined culturally pure and purely different group and an imagined proof of the audience’s openness toward difference and toward discourses of the “other.”

3. What my encounters with the First and the Second Worlds’ ideological spaces also show is Yugoslavia’s and my own semiotically unstable place within them. The First World considered me East European, the Second World considered me a Westerner. Although my meaning changed as I entered these ideological spaces, my structural position within them was vaguely similar: I was always identified as being—belonging to—“the other.” In both cases, the cultural/discursive spaces entered were more powerful (larger and politically and militarily stronger) than my place of origin (at that time, my country, Yugoslavia), so their reading of me (and by implication of my country) carried, so to speak, far more weight than my own reading of myself (and my country’s reading of itself).

The cold war could also, then, be seen as a war for classification of Yugoslavia. If the Eastern Bloc had won, Yugoslavia might have found itself classified as Western, and then, in retaliation (who knows?) been far more firmly united, all difference and centering erased? Since, however, the West “won,” Yugoslavia finds itself in the position assigned to it by that discourse; it finds itself an Eastern European country. In other words, until recently semiotically unstable, Yugoslavia now finds itself fixed as
Eastern Bloc. One could take this to clearly indicate at least one definition of the nature of the “fircond” world: the common space, rather than being negotiated among all participants, is defined in American terms. This indicates the victor’s prerogative to impose rules, in this case of discourse: it appears that the victors’ definition of the “fircond” world space (which now consists of both, the First and the Second Worlds) will apply from now on. Yugoslavia will be fixed as an Eastern Bloc country (which is the way it had been most commonly seen by the American popular discourse, but not by other discourses on the global stage).

And I, instead of performing on a common stage – created by the opening up to each other of Western and Eastern Blocs’ discourses (perhaps the image of one large room created out of two smaller ones by removal of a wall is a better one?) – am actually appearing on a stage which is controlled by the West. Furthermore, I am expected to assume on that stage an already designated place: to be different (specific to my region and culture, as well as to the political past of that region), but to relate my (different) experiences in the conceptual, linguistic, and stylistic categories offered, understandable, and expected by American audiences. And, by implication, I am also expected to walk through the door opened for me by (and into) the Western discourse, without changing that discourse.

So, when I speak as a Yugoslavian woman within the context of the Eastern Bloc, I also help legitimate the redefinition of Yugoslavia as an Eastern Bloc country. I represent and thereby participate in the American cold-war (re)definition of the “fircond” world, and, by the same token, attest to the international legitimacy, indeed, democratic inflection, of that (re)definition. In other words, by performing normal science within the cultural diversity paradigm I am also performing normal science within the cold-war paradigm.

4. And finally: in all of the above-described situations there is a lack of viable cultural space in which I (and other people like me, people with complex and nonlinear affiliations) can move, act, speak. I find most of the categories offered as vehicles of my visibility and identity to be limiting, oppressive, and stifling. This can partly be explained by historical circumstances: Yugoslavia has been semiotically unstable on the global stage, so any one affiliation or definition of it sounds simplistic and inaccurate; furthermore, since the country does not exist any more, Yugoslavian identity might appear fictional rather than real. In other words,
both in the past and in the present, Yugoslavian identity appears to have been clearly something which is culturally constructed. But this historical explanation does not quite suffice. Today most scholars of culture believe that all cultural identities are constructed in one way or another. We are not dealing here with one constructed, “unauthentic” identity in the world of pure and authentic ones; rather, we are dealing with a world full of complex constructed identities. And it is precisely that world that the above categories do not seem to adequately address.

II

Cultural Categories as Objects of Study. There is an assumption, in the question about women in Yugoslavia, of the difference of Yugoslavian women which precedes any empirical information: it is deduced from the postulated radical difference between the two blocs which, in turn, is a result of the cold war. More specifically, it is assumed: (1) that the two blocs are/were completely ideologically different, and that the acceptance of that difference should be the starting point of any communication; (2) that contacts between the two blocs have been and have to remain external: the blocs can only (or at least primarily) relate to each other as separate entities whose separateness, whose difference, defines/colors every phenomenon within a bloc, as well as every perception of all phenomena from the other bloc; and (3) that, since the two blocs’ histories have been very different, there is no common cultural space they can draw on in their attempts to communicate.

Although, on one level, these assumptions appear to be quite obviously true, on another none of them quite holds. (1) The blocs were not as ideologically different as popularly thought: for one, their propaganda techniques against each other were quite similar; then, although there were ideological differences, many of their respective educational canons were similar (great books, great philosophers, great scientific discoveries); finally, they were both part of Euro/Western civilization and subscribed to some of the same cultural and economic goals and ideals: industrialization, urbanization, logocentrism, and so on. (2) The blocs’ boundaries (borders) were not impermeable: popular and other cultural products, people, political and financial interests, and such like, constantly seeped through, ensuring the continued presence of the other bloc on each of
their soils (for example, rock music and popular movies went East, ballet and Russian literary classics traveled West). (3) This constant seepage, together with other globalizing trends,\cite{footnote-6} has worked toward creating (or, rather, maintaining?) a common cultural space which frequently (under the cold-war paradigm) went unrecognized.

In other words, an assumption of across-the-board difference between Eastern and Western blocs may not be accurate; furthermore, this assumed difference may not always be descriptive but rather prescriptive: it postulates a difference between the blocs, and this postulate is then imposed on the actual diversity which exists inside the blocs in such a way that only certain characteristics—those which are different—are considered authentic and scholarly acceptable while others are ignored as unclear, or rather, impure. In short, this process as much produces new differences between blocs as it reflects differences which already do exist. It follows that not only is the identity which I am invited to represent a culturally constructed category (and so is the very position of difference from which I am encouraged to speak), but the label “Yugoslavian women” also implies far more difference from all other, non-Yugoslavian, women and far more internal homogeneity among Yugoslavian women than exists in reality. (Among other things, this might not be good for the project which it seeks to support—namely, openness to cultural difference and a “better,” safer, more peaceful world—since it is, in fact, yet another kind of homogenization.)

Cornel West points out that “notions of the ‘real Black community’ and ‘positive’ image are value-laden, socially loaded, and ideologically charged.”\cite{footnote-7} So is the category of women in Yugoslavia. And so are the concepts of the two blocs, American and Soviet, as good and bad, as free and behind the iron curtain. Recognizing this might be comparable to what Stuart Hall calls “the end of [Black] innocence”; the “recognition that ‘Black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category.”\cite{footnote-8} Facing the cultural constructedness of categories such as Yugoslavian women and Eastern Bloc, means not only the end of “innocence” which characterized the cold-war paradigm and the desire for cross-bloc communication, but also a realization that the opening up of the “first” world, theoretically at least, calls for a redefinition of both blocs’ discourses; that both labels—“the free world” and the “world behind the iron curtain”—need to be rethought. Only then will all the diverse
voices (such as those of different national cultures, various ethnic groups, women, different classes, etc.) during the cold war subsumed under homogenizing bloc labels, fully emerge.

III

*The Transcultural.* The following question remains: how do we talk to one another and about cultures and identities in the global village of the late twentieth century, after the end of the cold war, and within an awareness of cultural diversity (not only within and across the former blocs, but globally)? Or, in other words: what is the nature of the contemporary cultural world?

While attempting to fully answer this is well beyond the scope of this essay, I would like to tentatively propose some ways of thinking about it.

First, it might be useful to ask this: when we say that we are communicating with one another as groups (or as members of different groups), in what space is that communication occurring? Is there a larger space in which all this is happening? In other words, is there a space which in some ways transcends (by being around them, in-between them, and within them) the individual categories such as Eastern Bloc, Western Bloc, Women in Yugoslavia, and other cultural (identity) labels? If so, what is the nature of this space?

Second, we might problematize the pronoun "we," or, for that matter, the pronoun "I," as loci of clear and separate group identities. While in some extreme situations, such as wars or national and ethnic tensions, a sense that the communicating parties belong to opposing groups may indeed cover over everything else (in other words, national or ethnic identity may be foregrounded), in most cases a splintering of the communication into a number of less focused (and possibly less divisive) fragments will occur. The people involved might be wearing similar clothes, have similar tastes in music and films, or similar family situations and problems. In other words, as an I in a communication process, I am a member of numerous groups (oldest children, nonsmokers, rock fans, scholars, dissidents, liberals, women, etc.) which might intersect with the groups of the person I am communicating with. This both opens potential common space we can use in our relationship and problematizes the clarity and simplicity of our respective affiliations to national or ethnic groups that we come from (as well as, for that matter, to any one of the
mentioned groups). In other words, our affiliations are more complex, more numerous, and less stable than paradigms such as the cold-war one might suggest.

I believe that this points to a cultural space that we can, for lack of a better word, label “transcultural.” This does not mean a transcendence into some kind of a universal and eternal space, beyond history and experience, but, rather, as Mikhail Epstein puts it, “a space in, or among, cultures which is open to all of them . . . . [which] frees us from any one culture.”9

I will finish this section by proposing three ways to conceive of the transcultural. (1) it can be seen as a complex, and/or heterogeneous space in which all other cultural categories are immersed, and out of which they are sometimes molded; (2) it can be seen as an aspect of everybody’s culture, and, potentially, as a culture all its own: a culture of people with across-groups-similar values and beliefs, and/or of people with complex, transcultural experiences and affiliations; (3) and, finally, it can be seen as a mode of interaction which works well among groups and people aware and accepting of cultural difference but not prepared to let that difference permanently divide them.

Transcultural Space. One of the ways of looking at this is to suggest that the cultural mixing, which has characterized our world for centuries, has had the effect of producing an enlarged cultural space above, between, and within all individual categories which participated in its production, and that this space now also precedes all new cultural categories. On one level, this space corresponds to what Mike Featherstone and others call global culture and Marshall McLuhan calls the global village. It can be seen as outlined by, among other things, the Gulf War, the intervention in Somalia, the Salman Rushdie affair, the global expansion of Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and the Japanese car industry, as well as by global feminism, rock music, postcolonial criticism, cultural diversity, international contacts of scholars, and so forth. The transcultural in this sense also consists in transcultural occurrences on the local and micro levels, such as the combinations of cultural signs found in big cities, in individual literary, film, television and other texts, as well as in culturally complex individual subjectivities whose constitutive parts come from a variety of cultures without producing chaos or incoherence.

This results in a complex, multilayered world in which old notions of
cultural identity, cultural origin, and cultural authenticity do not apply; in which an agreement on what is true, or good, or real, on what has happened and what needs to happen must inevitably be also a matter of negotiation rather than only the discovery of facts. All "new" cultural developments occur within this space, out of this space they are molded, and it is this space that they must count with.

As a frame for culture scholarship, political action, and (last but not least) everyday life experiences and personal choices, the transcultural opens up space not only for categories such as East European women, Western feminists, African Americans, Greek Americans, men, women, and so on, but for whatever is beyond, between, and around them. Furthermore, it is possible to see that not all (if any) individual cultures today have a separate existence which precedes their appearance on the global stage, but, rather, that they sometimes appear on the stage which is already set and hence must negotiate it in order to affirm their individuality. We should then not only look at how individual cultures differ from each other, but, rather, how they are actually negotiated in the contemporary globalized, multicultural, and diverse world.

In this context, it is interesting to ask: why a "pure" identity seems like a better choice at certain times? For instance: why is it easier today to be heard on the global stage as a person of a "pure" identity than as a person of a complex/mixed one? And why many people today get more pleasure out of constructing/choosing a "pure" identity than a complex one? Why, to some scholars, "pure" identities seem more authentic? I do not mean to suggest that choosing a "pure" identity is an invalid choice, but, rather, that it is as much a construction as any other (that it is neither the natural nor the only possible choice) and that, hence, it should be studied/perceived as such. (For instance, while reemergence of various nationalisms—seen as the return of the repressed national identities—at first seemed liberating, it soon became oppressive, since they allowed only, or at least favored, pure identities. Where does this leave us in terms of affirmation of difference?)

Transcultural People. In today’s world, the transcultural is a part of everybody’s experience. Transcultural occurrences and texts are so common that the normal fin-de-millenium cultural experience is not culturally and/or nationally pure, but, rather, transcultural. Most (perhaps all) cultural spaces are transcultural in this sense: they incorporate “foreign” elements
(frequently) without perceiving them as foreign. Most of us have been forced to (more or less successfully) negotiate this space. And many of us have, in the process, become transcultural people. We know that our values and tastes do not universally apply; we seek cross-cultural experiences; we are aware of the global space around us. This is in part simply the case because we are humans who today live on Earth. Indeed, it is precisely this awareness (that we are all humans with at least some things in common) that war propagandas attempt to rewrite, or put on hold, during wars.

We can also see the transcultural as a culture of people who share a symbolic/value system even though they do not belong to the same national and/or ethnic group. For example: they make similar fashion choices, listen to similar music, belong to similar social classes, or occupy similar or analogous structural positions within their respective countries. These people share a culture even when they do not always interpret all its products the same way.

And finally, it might also be possible to argue that people with complex, multiple group affiliations who are unable to subsume these under one or two simple identity labels most properly belong in the transcultural space (and share a culture?) even when they have little in common beyond the complexity itself. In other words, what they might have in common is not a specific cultural content but rather a certain kind of awareness of the world because they were forced to (due to their complex affiliations) negotiate the reality in similar ways.

The Transcultural Mode of Interaction. A useful way to think about the transcultural (particularly in relation to what was said above) is to see it as a particular mode of interaction; in other words, not to see it as this or that (permanently fixed?) position or identity, but rather as a way we can best interact in a complex and diverse space such as the transcultural. Let me use this essay as an example.

I have been asked (as an East European woman) to write it. When I suggested to the editor of this volume that I was uncomfortable with that classification and that I would like to focus not on Yugoslavian women but rather on the context of the question, I was allowed, no, encouraged to do just that. In other words, even though the initial classification fit the cold-war paradigm, what followed was not cold-war normal science. Not only was the discursive space in which this contribution was made more
complex than any one of its constitutive parts (Eastern Bloc, Western Bloc, Second World), but the interaction mode used to negotiate it was the transcultural interaction mode. It began as an attempt at cross-bloc communication; this was then identified as not quite satisfactory; we renegotiated, taking the other's position into account; in the process, a space which accommodated both of us was not only identified but further opened up.

Perhaps this was partly possible because the transcultural space already existed around us and because we were transcultural people who could see it.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
5. For specific examples, please see Michael Real, Super Media (Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, 1989), 165–222.
6. Some scholars have proposed that, in order to understand the contemporary cultural condition, one has to accept the complexity of its global nature. Arjun Appadurai, in an essay entitled, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," suggests that "[t]he central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization." Most media studies, he goes on to say, emphasize homogenization, frequently equating it with either Americanization or "commoditization," or both. However, "[w]hat these arguments fail to consider is that at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or other way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions." Instead of using the center-periphery model as the framework for studying global disjunctures, Appadurai proposes looking at five dimensions of global cultural flow: (a) "ethnoscapes": the movement of groups and persons (tourism, immigration, refugees, exiles, guest workers, etc.); (b) "mediascapes: . . . distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . and . . . the images of the world created by these media"; (c) "technoscapes": technology that "now moves at high speeds across various
kinds of previously impervious boundaries”; (d) “finanscapes”: the movement of global capital; and (e) “ideoscapes: . . . concatenations of images . . . often directly political [which] frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it.” In Mike Featherstone, ed., Global Culture (London: SAGE Publications, 1991).

7. Cited in During, The Cultural Studies Reader, 211.

8. Ibid.