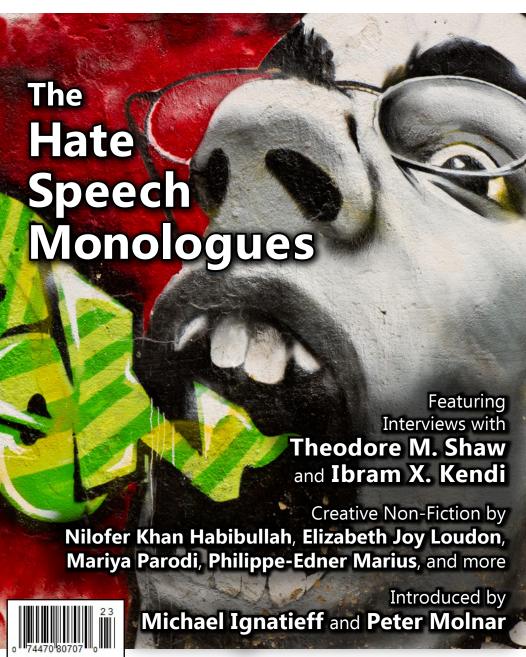
## LONDON READER

Contemporary Voices in Creative Writing



## I am Not Sorry for Being Different

By Arman Heljic

Author's Foreword: I was born into a mixed family of Bosnian and Herzegovinian, Romani and Montenegrin origins. The inspirations for this project were multifold. First, I was inspired by the courage of my friends from the Department of Gender Studies and Roma Access Program at the Central European University. I listened to their experiences and realized that the Hate Speech Monologues are important for raising awareness but also personal healing. By healing I mean the process of healing the inner wounds and traumas that hate speech has on those who survive it. I think the power of such a performance is in the transformation in my personal life after processing those traumatic experiences and sharing them with my community.

About the Author: Arman Heljic was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the past 6 years he has worked on on projects relating to LGBTQIA and LGBT Romani rights in South-East and Central Europe. These projects included work in digital story telling, performance art, documentary film-making, and photography as means to preserve and promote culture and fight against social injustice and oppression.

## I am Not Sorry for Being Different By Arman Heljic

When I was four years old, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina started. The first aircraft dropped a bomb in the field where I used to run and play. The Yugoslav People's Army was attacking my home town. This marks the start of the exodus. For the next 13 years I was a child with no home, no land, no language, and no field to call my own. At the age of five I arrived in Germany together with my parents. We were refugees there. The first word that I learned was, "foreigner", or "ausländer", "out-lander", as they say in German. I learned that word in a school where I was the only non-German child. A school where they had swastikas framed at the entrance doors. I was very scared, and I was silent. But soon I learned many other words. "Stupid," "worthless," "Muslim-pig," and many others. For the next 6 years I heard "Foreigners out!" every single day on my way to school. We escaped bullets, tanks, knives, and snipers, in order to be free, but where I had arrived, words were bullets. Words were tanks. And the words became bombs that shelled the spirit of this six year old child.

I can still remember the joy when they deported us back from Germany to Bosnia-Herzegovina. We were on a bus trip back home with my mother and my sister, and we were at the Slovenian and Austrian border and I asked my mother, "Can you tell me where we are?" And she said, "We are in Yugoslavia." Little did she know that the only Yugoslavia that she would ever have again was in her memory, but I responded to her with joy, "Mom, finally, we're not *ausländers* any more!"

\*\*\*

It's 1998. I returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina. I was 11 years old.

My happiness and joy for being back in my homeland was very short. Soon I started learning new words. "Faggot." "Peder." "Girlie-slut." "Djevojčura." "Weakling." "Slabić." I heard these words every single day for the next six years of my life. I always walked to school. I really liked walking. But sometimes it was really difficult. Sometimes they would beat me. They would beat me for being girlie. They would beat me for being a faggot. I was scared again. I was asking myself, will it ever stop? Sometimes the boys would surround me and toss me around in a circle, beating the last breath of air out of me, shouting, "Faggot! You should die!" or "Do you want to suck my cock faggot?" or "We should all fuck him."

At those moments I wished I could die. But instead I learned to develop two pairs of eyes. I had to because I needed to know from where the next bottle, stick, stone, or brick would come. I needed to learn how to survive.

I was 13 when I returned to the town I grew up in. I went for a walk in the neighbourhood where my father was born. It was my first walk there since I was four, since my mother took me out of bed in the middle of the night to escape the war. I looked for the house he had grown up in. It was burned to the ground. I was thinking about the mixture of fear, sadness, and pride that I felt, as I was standing in front of that house. To get there, I had crossed the line of the division. I had crossed the line that divided the Serbs from the Muslims. I was really proud of myself. But my thoughts were interrupted by someone shouting at me again, "Gypsy! Get out of here! You should all be burned and slaughtered!" I run again. I learned another new word, another new sentence, of hate.

\*\*\*

Today I am almost 25, and I stand before you strong. Throughout my life I learned many, many words. My body learned how to take these words, assaults, and attacks of hate. But I didn't give up. I learned new sentences of love as well as I was growing up. I learned that I will

never need your permission to be who I am. I learned that my love is stronger than your fear, than your fear of a faggot, a Muslim, or a Gypsy. I am here. I learned that I have a family who accepts me for who I am. That family is my chosen family. That family is the Roma, and my friends, who have similar, or the same struggles. We are here. We always have been here. And we always will be.

LQ