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**Locating Albanian Otherness Via the Black Female Body: An  
Ethnographic Inquiry of (Non)Belonging**

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**Locating Albanian Otherness Via the Black Female Body: An  
Ethnographic Inquiry of (Non)Belonging**

**by**

**Chelsi Amelia West, B.A.**

**Report**

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## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my grandmothers: to the late Pearlie Mae West, who would have loved to hear about my stories and see Albania for herself, and to Lillie Mae Bacon, who tells her neighbors that I study in Greece.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Abstract**

### **Locating Albanian Otherness Via the Black Female Body: An Ethnographic Inquiry of (Non)Belonging**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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This report is an ethnographic exploration of othering and belonging in Albania . In the past twenty years there has been a significant amount of scholarship addressing the construction of difference and collective identity in the Balkans. Much of that research has focused on processes of Orientalism, historical analyses ethnic conflict, and nationalism. The work presented here has been shaped by these discussions but is also an attempt to further deconstruct identity and nationalism vis-à-vis the ethnographic examination of belonging. Specifically, this paper addresses my positionality in the field and the ways that this positionality allows for a particular inquiry of belonging. In this report I address how my identification as a Black American female shapes my day-to-day interactions with Albanian informants, and how these encounters can be used to probe representations of what I term “Albanianess”. In doing so, I reveal the ways in which the ethnographic encounter allows for an interrogation of meaning, public intimacy, difference, and local attachments to identity.

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**Locating Albanian Otherness via the Black Female Body: An Ethnographic Inquiry  
of (Non)Belonging**

## In Public

His words echoed, echoe, echo, ech, ec, e...

Not.Many.Black.People.There.

I walked out of the airport

Not.Any.Black.People.Here.

"Zezakja!" A child screamed

Kids say the darndest things

"Zezakja!" A peanut vendor yelled

Oh are you talking to me?

The guidebook provided no warning

No clue

No preparation

No guide

They stared

I stared

I smiled

They stared and started to touch

One lady grabbed my hair

I stared

Shock, disbelief, bewilderment

Did she really just grab my hair and call it a sheep?

"People just aren't used to seeing someone like you"

My Albanian friend tried to comfort me

"It will take some time"

They call me *zezakja*

"Oh that just means dark person," she said

Why do they call me that?

"Because you are"

A white couple from Austin spent their summer touring the Balkans

The wife had a lot of fun in Croatia

The husband really wanted to go to Albania

But they never made it there

"I've been to Albania," I said

In fact I had just been there and Bosnia a few months back

"Why were *you* in Albania?" another guy quickly asked

"Why were *they* in the Balkans?" I muttered to myself

"Zezakja!" The young child exclaimed

Kids say the darndest things

“Zezakja” The middle-aged woman whispered to her sister  
My name is Chelsi if you want to know

I used to try and hide behind my sunglasses  
If I couldn’t see them then they couldn’t see me  
“Zezakja!” I heard  
I forgot to put sunglasses on my ears  
I started walking with my headphones  
That way I couldn’t see  
That way I couldn’t hear  
I wasn’t there  
I wasn’t there  
I wasn’t there  
But I was  
There

I was invited to give a talk to high school teachers in the Austin area  
About the European Union and the Balkans  
I spent days organizing a presentation  
Provided the historical background, facts, figures  
Discussed language, policy, religion, and gender  
I concluded with time for questions  
A woman in the front raised her hand  
“So how did *you* end up in Albania?”

A man followed me home last night  
“Please girl come with me”  
I raced and he chased me  
As I scaled my apartment stairs he vanished  
Inside I slumped to my cold, desolate floor  
The touch stung my skin  
My tears watered the ground  
I could not move  
“Albania is very safe”  
Chimed the previous Fulbright student at our orientation  
“I felt perfectly safe walking around alone  
Any time of the day or night”  
The white man felt safe walking any time of day or night

“Zezakja!” the kid shouted  
“Zezakja!” she repeated with a smile  
I looked up *zezakja* in the dictionary  
Ebony, black, negro, nigger, darkie were the words I found

## **Introduction**

As a freshman in college I took my first anthropology class, Introduction to Anthropology, and in it, read ethnographies about individuals going “into the field”. Through a truncated list of examples, my professor tried to present us with a background of the discipline, explaining basic definitions of terms like culture, emic vs. etic perspectives, and kinship charts. As per the course requirements I designed and carried out a short-term ethnographic project of a local private high school in Jackson, MS. I did not know at the time that I would later pursue a doctorate in anthropology, but I did know that I wanted to some day go into the field and conduct a larger ethnographic study. It was not until my second year of college that I began to more thoroughly study the complexities surrounding anthropology and the development of various schools of thought within the discipline. In particular I began reading more of Clifford Geertz’s writings about fieldwork and what it meant for anthropologists to “be there” – to be in the field. In 2006, after my second year of college, I was invited by a professor to participate in an ethnoarchaeological project in the northern mountains of Albania, in the Shala Valley. This trip was my first time to ever leave the United States, and though I was assigned to be a member of the archaeological survey team, my professor had informed me that I would get my first taste of ethnography, as I was going to have the opportunity to work with both the archaeology and ethnography teams.

I was very excited about the possibility of going to the field, to conduct fieldwork like the anthropologists that I had read about. I was not sure, though, of exactly what to expect because I was traveling to Albania, a country that I could have never pointed out

on a map before my professor had extended the invitation to join his team for the summer. I did not know much about Albania's history other than the brief mentioning of the country during my 10<sup>th</sup> grade world history course, in which my teacher used to refer to the Balkans as the "powder keg" of Europe. I also quickly realized that I was planning to travel to a place that many Mississippians had never heard of; even today my grandmother tells her neighbors that I study in Greece because she thinks that no one knows where Albania is or that it is even a country. Despite the fact that I had little knowledge about Albania (other than what I had obtained from my sole travel guide) I accepted my professor's invitation and set off for the field.

Since that summer in 2006, I have traveled to Albania at least once a year every year, including a ten-month stint during 2008 and 2009 as a Fulbright scholar. I have had the opportunity to participate in various projects, mostly those pertaining to socio-cultural anthropology, as that first summer I discovered that archaeology was not my strongest suit. I continue to return, however, to my first experience in Albania because it set the stage for me to explore surprises and unexpected encounters in ethnographic research. I am presently working through moments from the past five years, moments that have challenged the ways I think about anthropology, fieldwork, positionality, and the relationship between the anthropologist and her informants. What follows is an exploration of these encounters and moments, the ways in which they have shaped my understandings of fieldwork, and the ways that I conceptualize identity, with a particular emphasis on the ways that belonging can be analyzed vis-à-vis the ethnographic encounter.

## **Chapter One**

I arrived in Albania for the first time in the summer of 2006 and my surroundings were dusty. The air outside was hot and I was exhausted from the plane ride. I stood outside of the Mother Teresa Airport scanning various groups of people seated at an outdoor café. As I looked around I realized that many of them were looking back at me. “Now as we have discussed, Albania was isolated for almost fifty years during communism and though the country has become a democracy now, many people still may not have met an African- American person before.” The words of my professor echoed in my mind as I watched people watching me. Weeks before when he had informed me of the possibility of encountering Albanians who had never met a Black person before, I had begun to conjure several images in my mind that had been formative in my understandings of race, particular images about Black people being out of place.

Coming from Jackson, MS, when people usually referenced a place where there were no Black people, it pertained to the notion of the “wrong side of town.” In the eleventh grade my high school soccer team, a majority Black team, took a short twenty-minute drive to Rankin County for two soccer games against Brandon High School, a majority white school. It was the first time that our girls’ team had made it to the playoffs in several years but our hopes were quickly squashed by the tough defeat we suffered, a loss of 6-0. I remember the frustration as the girls’ team left the field, but then those feelings turning into anticipation because our boys had yet to play their game and we could only hope that they would beat Brandon as badly as we had lost. As the boys took the field tensions were high and only rose as the game continued. Many of the

players from both teams were colliding and shoving one another as they ferociously chased after the ball. Soon the referee began giving out red cards but unmistakably, only to our school's team. The first half ended with the score still tied at zero but four of our players had been ejected from the game, therefore there were only seven boys from our school against eleven players of the other team. Immediately after the start of the second half, one of our players was knocked over by a player from the Brandon team, and it was at this point that the fighting began. Players rushed to the field as arms and legs flew in the air. People from the stands had come to the field, players were hitting the ground and the referees were trying to pull everyone apart. Then at some point we just left. To this day I cannot remember if the referees ejected us all or if we got up and left on our own, but I remember the anger on our coach's face as she yelled for everyone to quickly grab their bags. I remember looking into some of the faces of the Brandon fans as they yelled at us, informing us that we had to leave their stadium. As we got on the bus people were yelling and throwing stuff into their seats. Even our bus driver seemed upset as we pulled away from the field and began to make our way back to Jackson. Just as we arrived at the last light before merging onto the highway, a jeep with four white students pulled up next to our school bus and someone shouted, "Get outta here you niggers!" "Niggers!" they yelled as they threw some type of sign with their hands while their car sped away. We jumped up, wanting to yell, to do something, but Coach Cook just told everyone to sit down, to just sit down and wait until we got home back to Jackson. We had to get back to Jackson, I guess to the right side of town. When I first landed in Albania, I was not necessarily thinking that I would get immediately accosted or that



people would yell at me for being “on the wrong side of town,” but I had no reference for thinking about what it meant to be the only Black person in a village or even more, to be the first Black person that people would meet.

When my professor told me that I would be introduced to Albanians who had never met a Black person before I kept thinking to myself, “what does that even mean?” After spending a month in Theth, a small village in the northern mountains of the country, during that first summer, I did gain a better sense of what it meant – it meant that there would be a lot of touching, a lot of staring and a lot of questions. As we conducted survey work in the field, people would follow me around, sometimes asking questions and sometimes just following to see where I was going. Locals in the village frequently asked me where I was from, wanted to know if they could touch my hair. Many times people did not ask, they would just rub my skin and stare in amazement when they realized that the color was permanent. I did not speak Albanian at the time, but it was apparent that people were confused by my presence, as locals would frequently look at me with wide eyes and whisper (or pretend to whisper) to one another about my body. As I recount my experiences I am reminded of James Baldwin’s chapter “Stranger in the Village” from *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), in which he discusses time spent in a small village north of Milan that, according to local knowledge, had never been visited by a Black person. Baldwin (1955) writes:

Some thought my hair was the color of tar, that it had the texture of wire, or the texture of cotton. It was jocularly suggested that I might let it all grow long and make myself a winter coat. If I sat in the sun for more than five minutes some daring creature was certain to come along and gingerly put his fingers on my hair, as though he were afraid

of an electric shock, or put his hand on my hand, astonished that the color did not rub off. In all of this, in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder. (162)

Baldwin discusses at length the initial inability to respond to the touching and hypervisibility of his body in the village. Eventually, he concludes that the responses that he generates stem less from malice or hate, and more from wonder and curiosity, albeit extreme curiosity at times. Like Baldwin, I too interpreted the touching, pointing or questions in a similar manner. This is not to say that I was never bothered at any point during my first stay there because I did experience moments of frustration. But those frustrations coupled with the locals' curiosity kept getting in my way of what I had initially thought would be a relatively smooth ethnographic experience. Though I had read about anthropologists who had traveled to locations and met groups that previously "had no contact with the outside world," those texts had more often than not been composed by white men, and had also failed to critically engage with expectations in the field as they pertain to race and gender dynamics. "Classic" ethnographies such as Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People* (1961) or Napoleon Chagnon's *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* (1968) present the practice of ethnography as a well-ordered or straightforward project. The ruptures that are addressed in these texts dealt more specifically with incidents that occurred amongst informants in the field, and focused less on the tensions and difficulties associated with the ethnographer's positionality<sup>1</sup>. Though I was also

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<sup>1</sup> When I make use of the ethnographic positionality here, I am choosing to focus on the tensions associated with the ethnographer's identity, and thinking closely about how embodiment and hypervisibility configures interactions with informants.

familiar with anthropologists that explicitly made efforts to be more reflexive in their work (for example Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect*), I was not exposed to ethnographies that spoke to gendered and racial positionality, and in particular, the ways that challenges associated with embodiment, subjectivity, and the ethnographer-informant relationship shaped experiences in the field.

Feminist researchers have played an important role in the discussion of fieldwork dilemmas and positionality in ethnographic research (Stacey 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Visweswaran 1994). Kamala Visweswaran has noted that a significant component of feminist ethnography has focused on (re)defining the practice of ethnography rather than outlining what is “feminist” about it (1997). In this paper I hope to highlight the ways that my ethnographic experiences have been “interrupted” but in such ways that have challenged the very notion of what it means to “do” ethnographic research. In doing so I aspire to situate my work in conversation with various scholars, particularly feminist anthropologists, who have been at the forefront of these inquiries, specifically those dealing with fieldwork dilemmas, post-socialist fieldwork, and the construction of ethnography.

Hermine G. De Soto and Nora Dudwick have edited a volume entitled *Fieldwork Dilemmas: Anthropologists in Postsocialist States* (2000), and in their text, examine unexpected predicaments of fieldwork, specifically focusing on fieldwork in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc. Their book includes discussions of post-war fieldwork and the ways in which nationalistic narratives structure the data collection process, gender norms, and the negotiation of personal relationships. I am particularly

interested in the discussion of gender and the negotiation of relationships in the field, for I feel that these conversations highlight positionality, and the ways that the ethnographer's identity shapes methodological inquiries. In her chapter on boundary crossings and perceptions of Western women, De Soto reflects on her fieldwork experiences in Eastern Germany, and the ways in which she negotiated both her female identity and her half-German/half-American identity, or "halfie" identity as she terms it (75). De Soto reveals the processes by which categories are created and assigned and how fieldworkers negotiate these categories; she ultimately concludes that fieldwork identities "shift" in the field, and that feminist ethnography should emerge from a particular feminist insight that recognizes these shifting identities.

De Soto's argument about shifting identities helps me to articulate the ways that I see my blackness, female identity, and Westernness intersecting in my ethnographic research. While I do feel that my blackness often dominates my fieldwork experiences (in terms of creating a greater hypervisibility and awareness of otherness), my contribution to the conversation of positionality must include a discussion of intersectionality and how all three of these identities shift in the field, and shape daily interaction with informants. My fieldwork interactions are fraught with complexity, especially when I attempt to determine why locals might be reacting to me in a particular way. If I were to focus solely on race or phenotypic aspects, then I would fail to grasp a holistic analysis of my positionality. Writing about challenges for feminists in the field, Diane Wolf (1996) argues that positionality is not fixed and urges researchers to problematize the insider/outsider dichotomy. Wolf sees this binary as simplistic and

suggests that a more productive ethnographic model would question what it means for social scientists to come from the space (and place) of the other (13-14).

Wolf also reminds Western anthropologists to remember the power dynamics that may be associated with positions in the field. Power differentials are present in my work, as I am a Western woman conducting research in a location where the East vs. West dichotomy has particular registers of inclusion and exclusion (to be addressed later in the paper). Though many of my informants frequently question the authenticity of my Westernness (as I am often perceived as *really* African rather than African-American), I must acknowledge my Westernness and how it shapes both the way that I view Albania (and the Balkans as a whole) and the way that I am viewed by those whom I encounter.

As I previously noted, though my identity shifts in the field, my Blackness produces a greater hypervisibility than my gender and Westernness (Puwar 2004). Black feminist anthropologists have long studied the frictions associated with the relationship between the ethnographer and her informants (Hurstun 1990, Harrison 1991, Jacobs-Huey 2001, Brown 2005). Irma McLaurin and Paulla Ebron have both written extensively on the role of the researcher in the field and offer autoethnography as a methodological tool for analyzing positionality. Both scholars have chapters on this subject in the edited volume *Black Feminist Anthropology* (2001). Ebron in particular elucidates various ways to appreciate cultural tensions and frictions in the field. It is her belief that an autoethnographic approach, “must track back and forth between a personal sense of the way things were, the *memory* of events, on the one hand, and on the other, the institutional markers, texts, and features of public culture that provide guideposts and

social referents of that experience” (212). Via such autoethnographic practices, Ebron analyzes the performative aspects of everyday behavior, in an effort to understand how difference is situated in particular local contexts. Her gender, she argues, provides an access point for interrogating the performative nature of difference (227). Both Ebron and McClaurin’s discussions of autoethnography offer insight into the ways in which Black female anthropologists can position themselves autobiographically and communally, particularly in settings that involve studies of Black women.

What I am trying to implement in my own research is not necessarily an endeavor in autoethnography but rather, an attempt to broaden the ways that anthropologists approach ethnography and reflexively engage with ethnographic inquiry. In his article “The Ethnographic Self As Resource?” Peter Collins complicates ethnographic research concepts by linking them with sensual experiences and sense-making. The self, he argues, is constructed as a result of interactions with others, thereby producing what he terms a “dialogic anthropology” (241). This dialogic anthropology is one in which the other is allowed to talk back (241). An ethnography routed in dialogue, he argues, “must be central to the ethnographic and (sociocultural) anthropological enterprise” (242). Collins’ notion of the self is one that is storied, one that is constructed from narrative and memory, and one that is continually in conversation with others. Recalling my first experiences in Albania, I feel that I stuck out a great deal. I am not the first person to travel to Southeastern Europe or the Balkans and not visibly “fit in” with locals. Scholars and travelers, in particular in the past twenty years, have “stuck out.” But I have had a particular experience blending in (or failing to do so). Being Black has been understood

in many different ways and has created a public display of other in different ways than features, such as height or hair color, would. I am intrigued with the ideas that locals have associated with being Black and the ways some people have been informed of what it means to be Black. For one, more often than not I come across people who expect my skin color to rub off. This happens frequently in smaller villages but also in larger cities. I am also often asked questions related to crime; a friend of mine once asked me if I was going to rob her or try and take any of her belongings. My Blackness has become a public invitation for questioning, touching, and approaching, in a way that marks me in particular space but also influences my interactions with everyday individuals.

In their text *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, Burawoy et. al. take up the subject of everyday life and the ways that social scientists theorize ethnographically. Specifically Burawoy in the book's introduction questions the ways in which ethnography can be restructured, specifically highlighting how ethnography can be enriched from what are perceived as flaws in fieldwork processes. Participant observation, he argues, "is not only a paradigmatic technique for studying others; it also points to a distinctive way of understanding ourselves" (1991:7). While my project is not as closely aligned with urban metropolises, I would like to situate my ethnographic inquiry similar to Burawoy, in a manner that would capture the lives of those in the field, but also allow space for the voice of the ethnographer.

In her groundbreaking piece "Situated Knowledges" Donna Haraway (1988) advocates for a new approach to ethnographic research, in particular an approach shaped by the feminist partiality. She argues that anthropologists need to reclaim an emphasis on

vision. “Feminist objectivity,” she writes, “means quite simply *situated knowledges*...we need to learn in our bodies, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name” (581-582). The inability to name, to react, has loomed over my experiences in Albania and has forced me to reposition myself and think about my work in multidimensional ways. Haraway, like Wolf, warns about the danger of romanticizing and “appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions” (584). I do not see my ethnographic endeavors as an appropriation of informants’ visions but I view them rather as a means to critically and reflexively explore of belonging, difference, and meaning-making. “The knowing self,” Haraway writes, “is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (586). I feel that my visibly marked body, in this Albanian space, uniquely frames all of my interactions with Albanians, and as I strive to study identity and belonging, I feel the way in which my multilayered identity is constructed provides a window into the way that my informants negotiate their own.



## **Chapter Two**

### **“Jemi Mbrapa”**

When I am introduced to Albanians for the first time, many want to know my impressions of Albania and whether or not I like the country. These types of questions are typical, whether I am having a discussion with someone for five minutes or five hours. During these conversations I have often heard the expression “jemi mbrapa”, which when translated means “we are backwards” or “we are behind”. I am struck by how frequently I hear this phrase, and also, how quickly people begin to express this to me upon meeting. What prompts the mentioning of “jemi mbrapa”? Is it because I am an outsider? How does my role as the guest influence these types of conversations? I desire to further explore naming practices and the ways that groups both name and have been named. These naming processes, I believe, are strongly tied to the ways that belonging is constructed and negotiated.

There are times in Albania when I am immediately and straightforwardly named that have shaped my inquiry into naming and the construction of meaning. During the summer of 2007 I was flying alone to Albania for a project season, aboard a very small flight from Munich to Tirana, when a woman an Albanian woman came on the plane and began gasping and pointing at me. She loudly exclaimed, “Uahh, a nigger!” But it was not a voice that expressed anger or even fear; in fact, in a peculiar manner, she seemed excited. Then, she approached me, pinched my cheeks as though she were my great-aunt at a family reunion, and looked to her husband to ensure that he had seen me. “Nigger, nigger!” she repeated. Then she smiled and went to her seat.

I have tried on numerous occasions to name my feelings or response after this encounter. I remained in my seat, partially scanning the crowd to see if anyone else had just witnessed that which I did. The woman's response to me, to my body, was that of shock coupled with an eagerness to touch or pat me. Her first word when she saw me was "nigger" – she made a relatively quick association with my body and this word. Considering moments such as this one, I want to probe meaning and what Blackness communicates in Albania; furthermore, I argue the ways in which I am named, as Black, as outsider, as different, provide an entryway for a particular discussion of identity and meaning. An analysis of the relationship between meaning, embodiment, and naming encounters, can reveal a great deal about historical othering in Albania, and the ways that identity and belonging have been locally constructed.

One aspect of naming that interests me is how groups have been named by outsiders, and the ways those travelogues and narratives contribute to stereotyping. Edith Durham's travel narrative *High Albania* (1909) is one such example of how an outsider's view has shaped larger perceptions of Albania and Albanians. Durham, who has been considered traveler, explorer, and anthropologist, produced several texts in the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writing about Albanians in the southern Montenegro and in the high northern mountains of Albania (the same villages that I visited during my first trip in 2006), Durham writes:

For all their habits, laws and customs, the people, as a rule, have but one explanation: "It is in the Canon of Lek," – the law that is said to have been laid down by the chieftain Lek Dukaghin. Lek is fabled to have legislated minutely on all subjects. For example, a man told me that Lek had ordered that men should walk the length of one gun-barrel apart, lest in turning the barrel should accidentally strike the next man, for a blow even by chance must be avenged. And this law was to keep peace. Similarly women must walk the

length of one distaff apart – they always spin on the march. Of Lek himself little is known. His fame among the tribes that still bear his name far exceeds that of Skenderbeg, and the fog of mythology is thick round him. He has left no mark on European history – is a purely local celebrity, - but must have been of insistent individuality to have so influenced the people that “Lek said so” obtains far more obedience than the Ten Commandments. The teachings of Islam and of Christianity, the Sheriat and Church law, all have to yield to the Canon of Lek.” (25)

In this excerpt Durham pays close attention to detail, as she notes the ways that men and women walk in their everyday settings, and the ways that the customary law structures everyday practice and religion. She is also careful to include historical information about Albanian figures and the ways that folklore has been constructed in northern Albania, in an effort to link the past with the present. Her matter-of-fact writing and naming practices, however, are very much aligned with other travel narratives of the time. On occasion Durham writes as an investigative reporter, revealing the mysteries of an exotic and isolated location, and how their customs compare with those of Britain. Works such as Durham’s have shaped dominant narratives of Albanians, and continue to do so in present day; notions of isolation, the role of the Kanun (Durham uses “Canon”), and honor are referenced but not interrogated. They are also presented as timeless and facile. Though at times Durham appears sincere in her desire to learn about and record Albanian customs and practices, she oftentimes simplifies Albania in her writing. Durham also refers to Balkan region as a separate entity from “Europe,” thereby emphasizing sociocultural (and perhaps even geographical) divides between Western and Eastern Europe. Though Durham befriended many Albanians throughout her years in the region, and though she later became an advocate of Albanians during the Balkan Wars and World War I (and was later named “Queen of the Mountain People”), Durham’s writings

are nevertheless infused with notions of progress vs. primitiveness and contribute to perceptions of the Balkans as undeveloped<sup>2</sup>.

In her book *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova (2009) outlines the ways in which the production of images in the Balkans has shaped negative discourse in the region. Responding to Edward Said's concept of orientalism, Todorova argues that what has developed in the Balkans is a different phenomenon of "balkanism". Orientalism, she maintains, "deals with a difference between (imputed) types [while] balkanism treats the differences with one type" (19)<sup>3</sup>. Todorova historicizes the term "Balkan", arguing that it was an incorrect regional naming beginning with the first usage. She contends that while "Balkan" was being developed and used as a geographic signifier, the term was simultaneously becoming infused with social and cultural meaning (21). Additionally, she says that the term "balkanization" retains negative connotation because it means to break up into small, mutually hostile political units" (33). Todorova's analysis of how

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<sup>2</sup> Writing about Durham and her travels, John Hodgson writes, "her descriptions combine a measure of frivolity and romantic fantasy with genuine accuracy of observation" (1991:12). I agree with Hodgson about Durham's desire to genuinely capture the everyday life of Albanians, but I believe that her romantic fantasy and Western gaze influences her work more than he credits. Durham's text, and others like it (e.g. Rebecca West's *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*) need to be carefully examined, for they do provide examples of ethnographic inquiry and include pertinent historical information for scholars of the Balkan region. In order for these texts to be productive, however, we must contextualize and problematize them, and at Todorova's suggestion, recognize the ways that they have contributed to the negative cultural and social meanings.

<sup>3</sup> In a more regionally focused study, Milicia Bakic-Hayden and Robert Hayden (1993) have researched the ways that the gaze of foreigners has contributed to an orientalist framework of Yugoslavia. Their study specifically charts the ways that the gaze influenced practices othering, which underlined division between northern and southern Yugoslavs. Their focus on political rhetoric shows the ways in which the orientalist concept became naturalized in Yugoslavia, specifically in ways that those in the north and west parts attempted to self-identify as European or non-Balkan.

the Balkans have been viewed through the Western gaze is particularly useful in thinking about how the region has been marked with terms such as “undeveloped,” “barbaric,” or “backwards”. Additionally her review of Balkan travel narratives (such as Durham’s) highlights the perception and self-perception, and how they are shaped by outside perspectives (39). Her analysis is extremely beneficial in thinking about the particular ways that the Balkans has been typed and the ways that names have labeled the region.

In an attempt to think ethnographically about naming, belonging, and difference, I recount moments when belonging and specifically non-belonging have surfaced in my fieldwork experiences. Similarly to the encounter from the airplane, there have been times in the street when a car will drive by with people yelling from the window, “Hey nigger” as the car speeds off; or kids will run by me and say, “What’s up my nigga,” and take off running. Usually the people with me (most times Albanians, but sometimes Americans or other foreigners) quickly turn around and ask, “You know they don’t mean anything right?” Or sometimes they feel the need to console me by saying, “Well they didn’t mean anything.” This notion of meaning, however, is complex; to put it simply, what does “mean” really mean? Furthermore, when people state that me being called a nigger on the street does not *mean* anything, to whom are they referring, because that has a significant amount of meaning for me. When I think about situations in which locals have addressed me with some variation of the word nigger, and people have tried to comfort me by stating that those individuals don’t *mean* anything, I imagine that what people want to communicate is the lack of malice or hate involved when Albanians use

that term with me. Among other things, one of my reactions to being called a nigger in Albania is how and why people associate that word with me.

On an everyday basis in Albania, I hear the word *zezak* (or the feminine version *zezakja*) more so than a variation of nigger. In particular members of the Roma community refer to me as *zezakja* and will comment at times that I am “just like them.” I have met Roma individuals in the street that have initially called me “zezakja” but then grabbed my hair, (presumably perplexed by its texture or curl pattern) in order to determine if I was actually like them. This makes me question the requirements for belonging to the group of *zezak/zezakja*. Does my skin color alone make me a member? How do I critically consider both the responses from Albanians as well as those from the Roma community? How does the meaning of *zezak/zezakja* shift from Albanian to Roma groups? What is the relationship between touch and difference, touch and intimacy? What is it about me, my body, or my hair, that elicits touching?

My hair has been on display ever since my first trip to Albania. In addition to some people in the Shala Valley being unfamiliar with braids and extensions<sup>4</sup>, many Albanians throughout the country have grabbed my hair and said that they did so because they wanted to know what it felt like. During my year as a Fulbright student I began having my hair straightened at a salon called “New Look Xhina” which was owned by a stylist named Xhina in her early 30s. A friend arranged my first appointment over the phone, and explained that I was a Black American (I am not sure if she had called me

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<sup>4</sup> When I first traveled to the Shala Valley in 2006, my hair was braided with weave, but midway through the project, I took the braids down and the family thought I was ill and losing my hair. One of the project directors had to explain that in fact, I was just changing hair styles, and that all of my natural hair was on my head.

*zezakja* or not) but when I entered the salon, many faces were shocked to the point of disbelief, as though no one there thought that I would actually get my hair styled. Gjergji, however, the young man who ended up washing and styling my hair, was visibly excited to be my hairdresser. While straightening and combing my hair, he told me that he had always been fascinated with Black people (he used both *zezak* and African). He had always wanted to have a coffee with a Black person. He told me that once before he had known a Black pastor in Tirana, but had never gotten the opportunity to have a drink with him. The entire time Gjergji was styling my hair, the eyes of the salon were fixated on us. I felt that my body and my hair invited some type of curiosity; one or two customers came over to Gjergji's station to get a closer look. Gjergji did such a good job on my hair that I returned about two weeks later, and within a month or two, I became a regular at Xhina's. Eventually customers and employees at the salon began asking more questions about my hair, especially when they discovered how well it could hold curls. Gjergji also discovered that he had a talent for braiding hair (by practicing on my scalp), and soon, other women in the salon were requesting braids.

Being at the salon situated me in a distinct position of the other that allowed me to think about space and the production of identity in certain spaces. Being marked as different and having people awe at my hair forced me to think about how people in Albania interpret what it means to be different. Reflecting on the public display of other, I would like to question how insiders and outsiders are marked in Albania. What are the markers of Albanianess? What role has isolation played in determining belonging in Albania? My professor used that term "isolated" when he first warned me about the

reactions that I would receive in Albania. But how can isolation be deconstructed in order to better understand belonging?

Anthropologist Bozidar Jezernik argues that the Balkan Peninsula is geographically a part of Europe but does not necessarily belong in (or to) Europe. In his book *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers* (2004), Jezernik examines written material from travelers, historians, geographers, social scientists dating from the mid-sixteenth to the late twentieth century in an effort to reveal the ways that the Balkans have been perceived and stereotyped by the West. He critically assesses passages from these narratives, tracing the routes of such terms as “barbaric”, “civilized”, and “savagery” that have marked the Balkans. According to Jezernik, Western European travelers in the Balkans often conflated difference with backwardness, by perceiving any difference in the customs and manners of the local people from their own as a lack of civilized behavior (176). His work also points to the ways in which the Balkans, once termed backwards and non-European, attempted to modernize and Europeanize, but ultimately failed to do so. Using Jezernik’s text, I argue that the way that Albanians read and name me offers insight into the ways that what it means to be Albanian are constructed. As Albanians (as well as the Balkan region at large) have been imagined as other, as different, as Eastern, this construction can be telling as to how Albanians have imagined the Westerner (Bakic-Hayden 1995), the Black person, as well as the larger construction of what it means to *not* be Albanian. It is here that I again reiterate the question of isolation and the role that it has played in shaping these ideas of sameness and difference.



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I have been afforded a particular access to locals because I am frequently treated not as an Albanian woman but as an “honorary male” (Ebron 2001). I share my experiences in these honorary male, and oftentimes, intimate spaces, because I feel that they have put me in a position that allows me to question and be questioned in a distinct fashion. In certain settings, and more so in rural areas, women and men are usually separated, whether it be at coffee shops, in restaurants, or also in the home. I am not trying to imply a timeless culture of patriarchy in Albania nor an inescapable gender division, but rather, trying to highlight that women and men are often spatially divided. In many cases, however, I am not received as a woman or rather I am not treated in the same ways that other Albanian women around me are treated. I am often welcomed into all-male spaces, and when people invite me into their homes, I frequently sit with the men for lengthy periods of time if there are men present. This practice has occurred more often in smaller villages (for example during my time in the Shala Valley) and I am discussing it here not only to acknowledge the realms that I have been afforded access to, but also speculate the notion of boundaries and question which bodies belong in which spaces (places).

When I travel throughout Albania, I usually ride the *furgon*, which is a cross between a small bus and a minivan. Because of its small size, the furgon, provides a more physically and metaphorically intimate space. This intimacy has afforded me the opportunity to converse with people in a private setting (though the furgon itself is a public mode of transportation). There are coach buses that I do use from time to time, but

they usually require more time for travel and can be restricted to fixed time schedules. Furgons, the more informal method of travel, leave when they are full, which more often than not does not require much time, although I have waited two or even three hours for a furgon to reach capacity on a slow day.

I once took a furgon from Tirana to Peshkopi, a city in the northwest part of the country, and when I returned, there were three other women traveling back to Tirana. The drive took about four hours, which included two stops, one coffee break and then a longer break for breakfast. At the first stop I was the only female that got off the furgon to use the bathroom but it did not occur to me until the second stop to take note of the fact that none of the other women left the furgon, at any point during the trip. When I made it to Tirana and asked my friend about it, she matter-of-factly stated, “They did not get off because their husbands told them not to get off until they reached their final destination.” I began to wonder if I had broken some kind of rule, if whether it was inappropriate for me to leave the furgon and have coffee or breakfast with the men. This occurrence has shaped my thinking in a larger sense about cultural boundaries in Albania. I do not intend to construct these boundaries as rigid, as customs that have existed timelessly without challenge or question. Instead I am aiming to think about the ways that these occurrences have positioned me as an ethnographic subject in the field, in the sense that I begin to question how my identity (whether as Black, American or a woman) allows me to move in certain spaces. I am posing the question of how social boundaries can be theorized in order to examine belonging, the tensions within belonging, and how belonging can be contested (Lovell 1998, Ong 1999, Siu 2005, Nash 2008). Here I am

reminded of Haraway's words about critical positioning and the situating of the self as I now present the ways in which my position has shaped my fieldwork experiences. "Identity, including self-identity," Haraway says, "does not produce science; critical positioning does, that is objectivity" (586). This critical positioning allows me to carefully consider the ways that bodies are marked and the hypervisibility attached to certain bodies; an ethnographic exploration of embodiment and visibility, I argue, speaks to the ways that belonging is constructed and negotiated daily.

In my research I hope to study the ways that the discourses of naming, categorization, and the formations of boundaries construct day-to-day interactions. I anticipate that daily negotiations of belonging will be not be as clear cut or well defined, as anthropologist Vasiliki Neofotistos has shown with her research in Macedonia. In a more recent article, Neofotistos (2004) surveys ethnic Macedonian and Albanian communities in Macedonia, in the capital city of Skopje. She argues that "labeling Macedonian society as 'ethnically divided' and social tensions as 'ethnic' defies the negotiation of tension as part of everyday life and demonstrates a profound failure to grasp the social dynamics and intricate dialectics of local life" (48). Her study is one that focuses on the day-to-day interactions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, highlighting the ways that both groups maneuver within the stereotypes and us vs. them dichotomies, and how social interaction occurs across perceived boundaries. "The rigidity of stereotypes and the porousness of ethnic boundaries" she writes, "should be seen in a relation of dialectical interaction with one another: one provides the context in which the other is made possible" (63). By deconstructing the terms Šiptar (used by

Macedonians to describe Albanians) and Shka (used by Albanians to describe Macedonians), Neofotistos is able to reveal the ways such stereotypes are used to refer collectively to the two different groups, but then also how these terms become fragmented when analyzing everyday, individual practice.

One way that conversations about belonging have manifested in my work is through the discourse of origin. Many of my encounters have dealt with the subject of home and where I come from. Questions surrounding origin, I believe, structure daily interchanges and exchanges, as individuals negotiate who belongs, who does not, and where the other comes from. During the summer of 2007 I participated in my second ethnoarchaeological project in northern Albania. There were four American students that participated as team members, three white students and myself. One morning we were invited into an Albanian family's home to have coffee. As was typical, the man of the house wanted to know the details of our project and wanted to know about all of the team members. Edi, one of our Albanian team leaders, began introductions, informing the gentleman that we were all archaeologists and anthropology students from the U.K. and the U.S. At one point the man of the house pointed at me and asked something in Albanian to which Edi looked at me and said, "He wants to know where you are from." Confused, I responded, "Me?" "Yes," Edi said, "He asked me where *that* girl was from." I wondered why was Edi asking me this question since he knew very well where I was from and had just introduced the entire group. Speaking a bit louder I said, "You mean Mississippi? I'm from Mississippi, it's one of the smaller states." Edi translated this for the man and after a few moments of discussion, Edi turned back to me and said, "He

wants to know where you are *really* from.” In my mind I began to reflect on a slight technicality, that actually I was born in Columbus, Ohio and that when I was two months old my family relocated to Mississippi. For this reason I could not say I was born and raised there. Did this man want that entire history? Edi then commented, “He said he wants to know your origin, where you come from.” My origin, I thought to myself. Why did he want to know *my* origin? What did he mean by origin? Though I had an inclination of what he meant by that question, before I could even develop my own answer, Jim, one of the other American students said, “She’s from West Africa.” Edi then told this to the man of the house, who nodded in affirmation as if to suggest he had finally received some clarification.

This encounter was one of the first times in Albania that I was questioned about my origin. In the fall of the following year I began my Fulbright term in Albania and had a similar conversation with a friend of mine named Vini. I met Vini while walking through Skanderbeg Square one afternoon in Tirana. He and his friend Gerti observed me walking and were apparently convinced that I looked lost because Gerti asked, “Where are you going?” I stopped, smiled slightly and explained that I was just walking, with no particular destination in mind. He gave me a suspicious look but then began to tell me that he knew some English and asked if I wanted to have a coffee. By this point I was not alarmed at how quickly they invited me to have a coffee because very often during my daily experiences, Albanians invited me for coffees within the first five minutes of meeting me.

During my first few weeks in Tirana the three of us would meet up and have

coffee, if only for about thirty minutes. One day I mentioned the need to purchase a jacket and Vini announced that he knew exactly where to take me. While en route to the store he asked me, “Chelsi, where are you from?” I was somewhat taken aback and confused because upon meeting one another for the first time I had announced that I was from Mississippi. In fact I remembered distinctly trying to explain that I was from a state called Mississippi and not the Mississippi River. “I’m from America, I told you this,” I said. “Remember, Mississippi?” “No, no, where are you *really* from?” he asked. “Where is your origin?” Where was I really from? “Origin?” I asked. “Yes,” he said, “Where is your father from, his father, where is home?” “My father is from America, and so was his father,” I replied. “Why are you asking me these things?” Vini looked at me and responded, “Well I saw on TV last night Barack Obama and he said that he has origin in Kenya and so I wanted to know where you have your origin. He looks like you but he is *really* from Kenya. They said he is an *African* American. I want to know where you come from.” I took a pause before answering Vini, and eventually informed him, that yes, many generations ago my ancestors were brought to the United States but unfortunately, due to the nature of slavery, my family did not know exactly where my ancestors had come from. Vini gave a short laugh and said, “What? Who does not know their origin?”

Over the past few years I can recount similar moments in which Albanians have questioned my origin, and also moments when I have been informed that I incorrectly identify as an American. Other times locals have gotten upset with me and have attempted to correct me by stating that I am an immigrant, and not a *real* American. As I

have now become more familiar with Albanians and as my language skills have improved, I have begun to think about this term origin, specifically how Albanians think about origin and what it means to be Albanian. What does it mean to be a *real* Albanian? Focusing on the ways that I have been questioned has enabled me to uniquely form an ethnographic inquiry into the ways that Albanians conceptualize origins. As someone who is immediately marked as non-Albanian, and then further interrogated as to what or who I *really* am, I am interested in the discourse surrounding the relationship between belonging, territory, and place. As my body is read in light of a particular nation, I would like to probe which bodies get to embody the Albanian nation or “Albanianess.” Furthermore, I would like to address notions of dislocation and relocation, in an attempt to investigate meaning surrounding categories, naming practices, belonging, and difference. As Albanians have tried to figure out “where I come from,” I am now trying to use that same question to understand how Albanians articulate who they are and where they come from, as well as the meanings behind origin and heritage.

A conversation that I often have with interlocutors is the way that Albania is religiously distinct from its neighboring Balkan countries, and that to really be Albanian does not imply a specific religious affiliation as it does in other Balkan countries. Many Albanians, echoing the words of famous Albanian poet Vaso Pashka, adamantly affirm, “the religion of Albania is Albanianism.” As such, as many individuals have told me that Albania has never had any problem with religion or religious wars between Albanians because their Albanian identity supersedes that of religious identity or affiliation. Though Pashka’s line, which comes from the poem “O Moj Shqipni” (My Albania), was

written in 1890, the assertions of Albanianism before religion, particularly in the Albanian republic, also have root in the Albanian communist period under Enver Hoxha, who officially declared Albania to be an atheist state during his dictatorship.

Mary Neuburger speaks to the complexities of otherness, difference, and religion in her book, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (2004). Neuburger delineates how categories of meaning have been created, in particular focusing on the Muslim and non-Muslim relationship in Bulgaria from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Building on Said's concept of orientalism, she details how Bulgarians were allowed to assert their Europeanness vis-à-vis the construction of the Muslim as other (22). Her historical analysis allows readers to understand the mapping of Bulgarian identity through its relationship to a Muslim minority, and also, how religious boundaries have been construed and maintained to emphasize that national identity. Included in Neuburger's text is a focus on agency and the ways that Muslim groups have retained their religious identities as a response to Bulgarian nationalism. This analysis of agency and the negotiation of names and meaning draws attention to the subtleties and tensions of identity-making, without generalizing identity or rendering it a simplistic process.

Neuburger's discussion of relationship between religion and the production of a national identity is in dialogue with Tone Bringa's research on religious identities in Bosnia. In her book *Doing Muslim the Bosnian Way* (1995), she examines the ambiguity of the term "Muslim" and how this term has shaped the meaning of a collective ethnic and national Bosnian identity. As I prepare to conduct research about the attachments to



Albanian identity, I would like to use these works by Neuburger and Bringa to highlight not only the connections between religious and national identities, but also, the ways that individuals and groups negotiate these identities (as well as others) on a day-to-day basis. An examination of nationalistic discourse and the politics of religious affiliation(s), allows me to study how Albanianess has been constructed within the framework of three major religious groups (Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic), and thereby capture what it means to “do religion the Albanian way.” An interrogation of religion will also shed light on tensions of belonging, and the ways that regional religious practices across Albania have shaped (and continually shape) local understandings of Albanianess.

Historian Isa Blumi urges Balkan scholars not to simplify identity to religious affiliation, and to contextualize identity beyond religious identification. In his article “The Commodification of Otherness and the Ethnic Unit in the Balkans: How to Think About Albanians” he criticizes the “ghettoization” of Balkans’ cultural, historical, and political realities (1998:528). Blumi maintains that avoiding overly simplified illustrations of dense subjects will improve scholarship on the Balkans. His work helps me to frame a complex inquiry of belonging, one that will critically investigate everyday attachments to identity. Blumi ultimately makes a push for the incorporation and theorizing of more historical moments in Balkan scholarship. Additionally he advocates for research on identity that does not treat groups as monolithic. Specifically he iterates that Albanians are not a monolithic group. He states that “professionals in the academic field should adopt an approach that exposes the variability of identity...they must redraw the typological boundaries set specifically in the literature on ethnicity and nationalism

that have often established uncomfortably narrow conceptualizations of identity formation” (568). His thoughts on Albanian identity, and the ways in which categories and stereotypes have *not* been analyzed, frames my study of what it means to be Albanian.

My first trip to Albania involved a four-week stay in the high mountains of the country. With the exception of flying in and out of Tirana, I spent all of my time in the northern region. It was not until my tenure as a Fulbright student that I was able to spend more time in the South, at which point I became aware of the regional differences between the Ghegs of the North and the Tosks of the South. Blumi (1998) traces the uses of the terms Gheg and Tosk to the Ottoman era. He argues that the Ottomans utilized these names in order to articulate regional differences and maintain control (in a sense of dividing and conquering). These naming practices, coupled with geography, as well as the linguistic differences in the north and south, “solidified cultural barriers among Albanians” (545). Blumi maintains that the Ghegs “have been able to successfully maintain a cultural identity that is distinct from the more Ottomanized Tosks of the South” (546). His analysis of the division between Ghegs and Tosks centers on power, mobility, and circulation. He argues that institutional biases stemming from the Gheg and Tosk division continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and have been further maintained by educational and religious institutions (555-556). Blumi writes, “Although it is often reduced by scholars, Albania’s sectarian diversity must also be seen as an important factor in both the perpetuation and the reflection of differences between Albanians” (554). In my research I want to probe the tensions linked to language, religion, and

ethnicity, in an effort to question the multiple regional attachments to “Albanianess” (and elucidate how this “Albanianess is contested in different geographic spaces [places])). I desire to locate ways that my positionality open windows for inquiry of othering and alterity, and in doing so, seek to find the ways that Albanians denote inclusion and exclusion.

## Conclusion

*“In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly what doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge. This, it must immediately be said, is not a matter of methods. From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, ‘thick description’”*

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

When I first entered the field in Albania, I did not anticipate conducting fieldwork surround difference and othering. Initially wanted to develop a project that would examine transnational identity via an ethnographic study in both Albania and Kosovë<sup>5</sup>. A thorough reflection of my ethnographic encounters, however, has revealed that these encounters are imbued with meaning and local constructions of difference, and provide me with a unique opportunity to think about identity and belonging in Albania. Whereas I initially viewed these encounters of getting in the way of ethnography, I now consider how they shape my approach to anthropology and the very way that I “do ethnography.” Perhaps in some way I am challenging the way that anthropologists “do” ethnography, in terms of the role that the ethnographer (and her body) plays in ethnographic research. Surprises within fieldwork, responses to my hypervisible body, and unexpected responses to my position as a Black American woman, have largely shaped my continued interest in identity. With this paper I am questioning how identity and belonging can be located

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<sup>5</sup> The Albanian spelling of Kosovë (vs. the often spelled Kosovo) is used in this paper.

through difference; furthermore I am also making the case that coming from the position of the other can provide insight into an examination of othering and how processes of othering occur. What I initially perceived as my body “getting in the way” of my ethnographic endeavors, has now reconfigured my approach to identity and allowed for the space to inquire about positionality within the field. The encounters that have resulted from my positionality frame a particular ethnographic terrain to the study of Albanianess. Research about naming, othering, and embodiment will prove very useful in highlighting the nuances of Albanian identity, as well as the social boundaries that have shaped the construction of belonging.

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## **VITA**

Chelsi Amelia West was born in Jackson, MS. After graduating from William B. Murrah High School, she studied anthropology at Millsaps College in Jackson, MS. After her second year of college, she participated in an ethnoarchaeological project in Northern Albania, and it was at this point she began to focus on Albania as a scholarly project. In 2008 she received a J. William Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research on global hip-hop performance and identity in Albania. In 2009, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin.

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This report was typed by the author.