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2. Between Repair and Humiliation

Religious Buildings, Memorials, and Identity Politics in Post-war Sarajevo

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Abstract

This article examines how, in a post-war setting, memorialization and the increasing presence of religious buildings support not only processes of repair and dealing with a difficult past, but also of sustaining conflict through processes of humiliation. It analyses new and repurposed memorials and religious buildings in post-war Sarajevo, a divided, contested city where identity politics has been mobilized both in wartime and in its aftermath. It also discusses how local understandings of the urban image and urban imaginary of Sarajevo have been related to religious pluralism, but also to conflict and antagonism. Furthermore, it shows how construction of new religious buildings has changed from pre-war patterns and serve to create new spatial appropriations and transformed forms of conflict. Finally, it discusses how memorials take part in identity politics formation in a cityscape dominated by nation-building, contributing not only to dealing with the past, but also to supporting continued divisions and animosities. The underlying argument is that the politics of identity not only shapes memorial acts, but is itself shaped by interventions in urban space, in connection with identity claims.
Introduction

In 1996, following a nearly four-year long siege, Sarajevo lay in ruins. From its old Ottoman/Habsburg core, tucked tightly in the upper Miljacka river valley, to the socialist-era neighborhoods further downstream, Sarajevo’s cityscape was severely damaged, leaving pockmarked houses and collapsed apartment buildings, demolished mosques and churches, burnt libraries, shelled museums, and broken trolley lines. More than five thousand civilians were killed, sixty percent of the buildings damaged, and roughly fifteen percent of all housing units destroyed (Bublin: 219). Since that time, the city has undergone as extensive process of reconstruction, and most buildings have now been repaired (Bădescu 2015, 2017; Ristić). The occasional unreconstructed ruin serves as a material reminder of the war that ravaged the city. Other reminders include an extensive ensemble of plaques and memorials randomly dotting the city. The “Sarajevo roses,” traces of red paint on asphalt, appear on the city’s streets and sidewalks to mark places where shrapnel and bullets killed people. In the centrally-located Alija Izetbegović Independence Square, named for Bosnia and Herzegovina’s first, wartime president, a post-war monument in Bosnian and Italian proclaims, “The multicultural [hu]man will build the world.” After all, with its cityscape of mosques and churches standing side by side, Sarajevo has been touted as a center of urban cosmopolitanism both before and after the war. However, on the city’s emblematic City Hall, which was reconstructed with much effort after its burning by a Serbian paramilitary attack, a plaque points directly to “Serbian criminals,” while asking the viewer to remember and warn future generations. In fact, plaques indicating the Serbian ethnicity of killers and attackers are ubiquitous all across the city.

The first example suggests acknowledgment of the ravages of war; the second, a celebration of diversity; while the third, by contrast, exposes the ethnic identity of the city’s attackers. This article interrogates the impact of Sarajevo’s distinctive memorial acts within the larger landscape of the spatial reshaping of the city. As many studies have pointed out, memorials are not merely a cultural representation of social group memory, but are intrinsically connected to political processes, including identity-building (Till; Mitchell; Forest and Johnson). In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH hereafter), identity discussions have centered on ethno-religious aspects of its three primary constituent groups: Bosniaks, who generally identify with Islam; Bosnian Serbs, who are predominately Orthodox Christians; and Bosnian Croats, most of whom identify as Roman Catholic. In the post-war period, the increase in

1 The plaque, inscribed in the local language and English, reads: “On this place in the night of 25/26 of August 1992, Serbian criminals burned the National and University library of BiH. More than two million books, magazines and documents were lost in the flames. Do not forget, remember and warn.”

2 In early 1992, the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina held a referendum for independence from Federal Yugoslavia. While Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Bosnian Croats wanted to secede from the remnants of Yugoslavia, seen as Serb-dominated after the 1991 secession of Slovenia and Croatia, the Bosnian Serbs boycotted the referendum as they did not want Bosnia to leave the Federation. As the capital of the newly proclaimed independent Bosnia, Sarajevo initially became the target of the Yugoslav National Army, followed by the Bosnian Serb paramilitary and the army of the newly-proclaimed Republika Srpska. For accounts of the war, see Burg and Shoup; Glenny; Silber and Little.
memorial building occurred at the same time that different groups were sponsoring construction of a sizeable number of religious buildings. This article discusses how interventions in urban space, in the form of memorials and new religious buildings, relate not only to practices of spiritual life and social remembrance, but are fundamental in sustaining antagonistic identity politics. Sarajevo offers an excellent case study for exploring the dynamics of identity politics, through which I examine how particular patterns in the construction of memorials and religious buildings lead to transformed modes of conflict through competition, shaming, and humiliation.

The War and Identity Politics

The war in BiH has been described by Kaldor (2007) as a prototype of the “new wars,” central to which, she argues, is identity politics. In the context of globalization, ideological and territorial disputes have been replaced by an emerging fracture between cosmopolitan politics, “inclusive, universalist, multicultural values,” and the “politics of particularist identities (7). In contrast with former wars, where identity politics in the form of nationalism was an instrument of states to mobilize armies against other states, new war identity politics is constructed through conflict itself. As Maček (2009) shows in her ethnographical study of the siege of Sarajevo, the construction of rigid identities and antagonisms occurred during the war – through fear and mobilization – not preceding it. Out of gradually increasing fears of violence, people rallied around organizations and institutions that claimed to represent their own ethnicities and increasingly embraced particularist identities and attitudes. Consequently, political mobilization around identity was the aim of war rather than the instrument of it (Kaldor: 13). Making sense of the war in Sarajevo is thus tied to identity politics and how different war narratives embrace such politics to create different visions of the city.

Identity politics have also been central to the post-war arrangement in Sarajevo. After the end of the war, perpetrators and victims from all sides shared a common state, albeit one divided among entities, where identity politics dominate internal affairs. This arrangement was put forward by the Dayton Accords (1995), which created a complex political and territorial arrangement based on the status quo created in the war, while neglecting the alternative, inclusive, universalist voices of BiH (Kaldor 2007; Bieber). The territorial framework that emerged mirrored frontlines and demographic structures resulting from years of forced population removals. Sarajevo demographics changed drastically from the 1992 census results, which showed a population distribution of fifty percent Bosnian Muslims, twenty-five percent Bosnian Serbs, seven percent Bosnian Croats, and thirteen percent self-declared Yugoslavs. The outbreak of the conflict saw a large exodus of Bosnian Serbs, and again at the end; refugees from all groups left, and other displaced people, mostly Muslims, arrived.3

The Dayton Accords divided BiH into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, run by a Bosniak (Muslim)-Bosnian Croat alliance, and Republika Srpska (RS),

3 At least 240,000 pre-war inhabitants left Sarajevo proper, departing as exiles to the West, Belgrade, or Republika Srpska, while 90,000 internally displaced persons took their place (Steffanson).
controlled by Bosnian Serbs, all under the international monitoring of the Office of the Higher Representative (OHR).

Dayton had a direct impact on Sarajevo, which was caught up between the newly created entities, their border running through the pre-war city. Most of the pre-war city today is located within the boundaries of the Federation, and has a Bosniak majority. It extends alongside the Miljacka river valley in a dense urban area, with newer, often informally built housing units perched on adjacent hills. In the southeastern periphery lies the city of Istočno Sarajevo, constituent of the Serbian entity of Republika Srpska, where the overwhelming majority are Bosnian Serbs (see Figure 1). Consequently, post-war Sarajevo is a divided city in a contested state (Anderson; Pullan and Baillie).

![Figure 1: The quarters of Sarajevo.](image)

This article discusses a number of implications arising as a result of memorial and religious building construction in this divided, contested city, where identity politics has been mobilized both in wartime and in its aftermath. First, it examines how local understandings of the urban image and urban imaginary of Sarajevo have related to religious pluralism, but also how other

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4 The usual English rendering of the official name of this entity is Republika Srpska, which in the local language means the Serbian Republic. In order to avoid confusion with Serbia proper, I will retain the name Republika Srpska, or RS, its usual abbreviation.

5 Aside from the two entities, Dayton also accounted for the creation of the autonomous Brčko District, which features an attempt to build multi-ethnic institutions (Jeffrey 2013; Parish).

6 At the 2013 census, more than eighty percent of the population of Federation Sarajevo declared a Bosniak identity, with five percent identifying with Croat nationality, less than four percent Serb, and ten percent “other” (mixed nationality, Jewish, Roma, etc.).
representations have focused on conflict and antagonism. Second, it will analyze how the construction of new religious buildings has changed the pre-war patterns and served to create new spatial appropriations and transformed forms of conflict. Third, it discusses how in the cityscape dominated by nation-building, memorials take part in identity politics formation, contributing not only to dealing with the past, but also to maintaining divisions and animosities. The underlying argument throughout is that the politics of identity not only shapes memorial acts, but is itself shaped by interventions in urban space, in connection with identity claims.

Jerusalem of Europe? Sarajevo’s Urban Image and Urban Imaginaries

Sarajevo’s celebrated cityscape of juxtaposed minarets and church bell towers was frequently invoked at the end of the twentieth century as a materialization of the city’s cosmopolitanism. In the city center one may see a honey-colored Orthodox church, a neo-gothic Catholic cathedral, a Moorish-looking synagogue, and several towering minarets, all standing within a radius of a few hundred meters. The sight invokes an image of a kind of European Jerusalem, a place where monotheistic religions meet, a quintessential embodiment of urban cosmopolitanism (Figure 2). The urban image of a cosmopolitan city abounds today in Sarajevo’s tourist brochures and in the rhetoric of some political leaders. The monument to multiculturalism adorns one of Sarajevo’s central squares, which, among other things, features a huge chessboard located just outside the city’s Orthodox cathedral, where crowds watch men engaging in life-sized chess matches (Figure 3), conveying a sense of public space vibrancy, conviviality, and (mostly male) sociability.

While the dominant image of pre-war Sarajevo is that of a cosmopolitan city bridging religions and identities, traditionally thriving through its pluralism, there are other narratives...
concentrating on antagonisms, rivalries, and conflict. Balkanist' media representations in the West during the war, as well as enduring local nationalist narratives, present the city as a place of perennial conflict, with segregated lives and spaces for each rigidly-defined group. The two imaginaries, however, relate to actual practices of the past: historians of Bosnia showed evidence to support both, some pointing out to irruptions of conflict within largely peaceful coexistence (Donia; Greble; Simmons).

The cosmopolitanism brand endured after the war, but demographic realities changed. Federation Sarajevo is now an overwhelmingly Bosniak city, while neighboring East Sarajevo is a Serbian town. Moreover, the self-understanding of residents as urban cosmopolites has changed. Among pre-war Sarajevans, the experience of the siege changed the perceptions of many regarding cosmopolitan life. As the war progressed, categories became rigid and divisions increased as other ethnic groups came to be regarded with fear and suspicion (Maćek). Newer Sarajevans, mostly Muslim, fled other parts of BiH during and after the war as a result of forced removal (“ethnic cleansing”), or the fear thereof, seeking refuge in the new capital city of an independent Bosnia, with powerful Bosniak institutions to protect them and a Bosniak majority to minimize the risks of future danger. They were seeking a new beginning on cooler ground, less so cosmopolitanism (Jansen).

Todorova discusses “Balkanism” as discourse applied by the European West to the Balkans, depicting the region as an incomplete Europe, mired in primitive battles and barbarism. Like Said's Orientalism, she observes, “balkanism” elucidates the self-image of the West more than the actual realities of Southeast Europe.
The emergence of a separate East Sarajevo, while important for the development of a new local urban imaginary in RS, hardly figures in Federation Sarajevo, where it is written off as a non-urban place, invisible in the larger picture of Sarajevo’s urbanity. Before the war, what is now East Sarajevo was the sparsely inhabited suburb of Lukavica, where the only notable buildings were military barracks. Its rural character changed through the extensive construction taking place, of residences and institutions alike, but it amassed an urban aspect similar to other small towns in BiH, rather than Sarajevo or Banja Luka.

While the initial Jerusalem imagery referred to the city’s traditional religious diversity, Sarajevo’s post-Dayton dynamics of a divided city in a contested state echo aspects of contemporary Jerusalem (Pullan et al. 2013) times of conflict (Pullan and Baillie 2013; Baillie 2013a), sustained by memory practices centered on competitive victimhood. In BiH, three hegemonic ethno-national narratives emerged as a competition based on “who-committed-the-most-genocides” and “who suffered-the-most-genocides” (Moll 2013). The Bosniak hegemonic narrative represents the 1992–1995 war as an aggression by Serb-dominated rump Yugoslavia and the new independent Croatia, with Bosnian Serbs and Croats as collaborators and Bosniaks as sole victims. Their narrative is built on the fact that in terms of civilian casualties, the number of persons displaced, and the extent of heritage destruction, the Bosnian Muslims suffered the most, with the Srebrenica genocide as its prime example. By contrast, the Bosnian Serb interpretation is that Bosnia witnessed a civil war which was for them a war of homeland defense against the secession of Bosnia from Yugoslavia (Moll 2013: 917). While the RS government admitted, in November 2004, that “enormous crimes in the area of Srebrenica” had occurred, the general narrative is that crimes were committed by all sides. Furthermore, the Bosnian Serbs are seen as the victims of an international community oblivious to the plans and alleged intentions of Muslims, as well as blind to the killings of Serbs. Perpetration is minimized in this narrative, and seen as a legitimate defense, counteracted by arguments that all sides committed violence. In fact, while each group’s narrative concentrates on victimhood, perpetration is obfuscated by all, as it is framed as legitimate war defense.8 Victimhood and national redemption are thus key aspects to understand the contemporary identity politics in BiH, and the framework in which to place both memorial and religious buildings construction.

Religious Buildings and Symbolic Violence

A stone’s throw from the 1980s-built neighbourhood of Dobrinja, in Federation Sarajevo, lies a plateau topped by a church. A father teaches his son to make the sign of the cross in Orthodox fashion – three fingers crossing the body from right to left. This is Istočno Sarajevo (East Sarajevo), with its new apartment buildings, department stores, and café life, situated at the margins of Republika Srpska. According to urban planners at East Iliđa, the Republika Srpska municipality of East Sarajevo, the plateau will undergo a redesign project that will complement the recent renovation of St. Vasilje Ostroski church. The reconfiguration of space around the church aims to create the premier public space of East Iliđa, the meeting point of

8 The Bosnian Croat narrative also frames the 1992-1995 war as a homeland defense war, and refers back to the victimization of Croats during the Second World War at the hands of the Četniks (Serbian paramilitary), as well as hardships faced during socialism.
newly designed alleys, a place evoking centrality and sociability. Next to the church stands a memorial, still under construction, dedicated to Serbian victims of the war, and a life-size chessboard similar to the one in Independence Square. It is quite apparent that Istočno Sarajevo has been reconstituted with an eye toward compensating for the loss of the city center (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Memorial and chessboard in Istočno Sarajevo (East Sarajevo).

The centrality of the church in this spatial reconfiguration of Istočno Sarajevo attests to the importance of religion in contemporary Bosnia as a pillar of its three main national identities: Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Roman Catholicism. In Federation Sarajevo, the reconstruction of war-damaged religious buildings, mostly Islamic, was a priority. Moreover, there was in impetus in the construction of mosques and, more recently, of Catholic churches as well. The reconstruction of religious buildings responded to a need, for there was no construction of religious structures during the socialist era even as the city population was growing. Furthermore, post-war Bosnia witnessed a revival of religious practices, including increased attendance at religious services for all groups, and the increased (but still minority) use of the hijab by observant Muslim women (Mesarić 2013). The religious revival and return to tradition would seem to indicate the individual search for meaning amid the void that occurred with the end of socialism and the traumatic experience of war (Porobić).

However, the second reading of these religious buildings is that they embody and reify nationalist narratives. In both Sarajevo and Istočno Sarajevo, the construction of new religious buildings acts as a marker of spatial appropriation and differentiation. As in other contested
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Cities, religious buildings and practices become a proxy for the nation. The conflation of religion and nation is well-captured in Stef Jansen's depiction of the political regime entrepreneurs as “cleronationalist” (215). Architectural construction in Sarajevo echoes religious practices in Jerusalem, where participation in religious rituals becomes an incarnation of national struggle (Pullen et al. 2013). The conflation of religion with nationality has a long tradition in the region. As in Serbia, Bosnian Serb elites have traditionally maintained the Orthodox faith as essential to Serbian identity. Similarly, Bosniak identity has been built around the cultural-religious difference of what socialist Yugoslavia referred to as “Muslims by nationality.” In the aftermath of war, Bosniak political elites have remained close to the Islamic Community (Islamska Zajednica), the body charged with managing Islamic activities in BiH (Funk). The building of new mosques in residential neighborhoods was interpreted by many of my Bosnian interlocutors as evidence of how local authorities made religion a significant part of their politics.

The increase in the number and size of religious buildings has also led to a reshaping of both the cityscape and the symbolic presence of religious markers in urban space. The traditional landscape of Sarajevo has been one of a mixture of church towers and minarets. While the old religious buildings surviving side by side in the old city center tell a story of coexistence and multiculturalism, the new ones witness to division and dominance of a single group. New religious buildings in Istočno Sarajevo are exclusively Orthodox churches, while Federation Sarajevo is dominated by new mosques. Bevan points out that places of worship, “unintentional monuments” before war, become through their reconstruction “intentional monuments,” charged with political discourse. In addition, Viejo-Rose discusses the violent nature of reconstruction processes, echoing Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, Žižek’s idea of structural violence, and Johan Galtung’s concept of cultural violence. At times, reconstruction projects modify the building in order to carry a certain symbolic message. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, minarets and bell towers rebuilt a number of times taller than the original are quite common. According to Alma Hudović, a local architect, churches and mosques throughout Bosnia are “competing in their monumentality, clumsiness, the height of their bell towers and minarets” (personal interview, May 2014). Segregated patterns of religious construction reflect a direct appropriation of space by different groups and contribute to the shaping of what Hayden calls “religioscapes,” which reflect upon a form of antagonistic tolerance, of living apart rather than living together. New religious buildings thus emerge as centerpieces of reconstruction, as they restructure space, symbolically appropriating parts of the city for a particular group, antagonizing and therefore they have the potential of being read by the other groups as a form of symbolic violence, a conflict over space via other means. The reshaping of the city takes place in relationship to the success of a politics of difference.

The nation-building space appropriation processes were somewhat paradoxically enhanced by the insertion of international capital. In BiH, international capital flows have strengthened certain political discourses, particularly those related to identity or religious practices. Investments from Muslim countries in Sarajevo’s reconstruction or recent new developments have ranged from mosque rehabilitation/construction to office developments. Local preservationists have criticized the rehabilitation of certain mosques through the

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9 For a discussion of mosque architecture in post-war BiH, see Aksamija.
whitewashing of colorful interior decorations specific to the Balkan region. A famous example is the 1996 restoration of the Gazi Husrev Mosque in Sarajevo, funded by the Saudi government. The florid nineteenth-century decorations were stripped by the restoration team, who remodelled the interior in a simple manner. Their argument was a return to an original status, but critics accused the whitewashing of the mosque interior as an attempt to “purify” Islam away from its Balkan expression and closer to that of the Wahhabi Saudi funders. Furthermore, Islamic countries have been supporting new mosque construction schemes that stand out through their large dimension or stylistic differences from the Bosnian mosques. The King Fahd Mosque and the Saudi cultural center in Alipašino Polje, a deprived socialist neighborhood, have been the target of much discussion, as they are seen as a foreign presence bringing different practices, and an alien architecture (Figure 5). Some Sarajevans describe the Salafi groups using them as vešabije (Wahhabis), a term they use pejoratively. But beyond criticism regarding practices, many locals, including architects, dispute the design of such new mosques. Hudović comments that contemporary mosque architectural design, including reconstruction, is unsatisfactory, as Bosnian architects lack the knowledge concerning the design of religious buildings, while foreign donors exert an important influence (Hudović). Architect Isak Čavalić commented that a “new line of badly behaved architects” keep introducing grand un-Bosnian elements in mosque architecture (personal interview, August 2013).

The architects’ disapproval of “un-Bosnian” schemes mirrors the complaints in society about Salafi-influenced religious practice and teaching Salafism is seen by most Bosnians as a foreign imposition, perceived as a localized practice connected to Saudi Arabia, not as a
transnational movement (Kohlmann; Mesarič). Nevertheless, practices that were seen as the influence of Salafi preachers in new Saudi-built mosque and described as foreign to local Islam—like fully faced veiling, were in fact practiced locally in BiH as late as the 1940s, when local women from the upper classes were wearing the niqab (Mesarič). This contemporary emphasis on differentiation is related to the framing of Bosnian Islam as a different, European Islam, in contrast with an Arab / foreign Islam, reproducing Orientalist dichotomies such as the “good Muslim / bad Muslim discourse” (Mamdani). It further reflects what Bakić-Hayden calls nested orientalism, by examining how in the Balkans, but also Europe in general, societies perceive eastern (and southern) neighbors as somehow more “oriental,” non-Western, and backward. Bosnian Islam, however, is perceived as a more refined, Western form of Islam, in contrast to Salafi practices. Rooted in Ottoman practices of religious tolerance and in Hanafi jurisprudence (as in Turkey), its religious architecture mirroring the Ottoman style of mosques, Bosnian Islam was indeed different from its Middle Eastern co-religionists, not only from Salafi radicalism. The emphasis on the difference of the structures built by Saudi or Indonesian donors serves to highlight the specific identity of Bosnian Islam. In Sarajevo, it is also intrinsically connected to the urban imaginary of cosmopolitanism. Resistance, discursive or through architectural projects to challenge “foreign” mosque architecture, highlights the local narrative of difference through cosmopolitanism, associated indirectly with contemporary Western practices rather than with counterparts from the Islamic world. Mosque construction is at the center of identity debates, singularizing Bosniaks not only from the other Bosnian groups, but also other Islamic countries, emphasizing the cosmopolitan, open, liberal nature of local Islam and strengthening the cosmopolitan imaginary of the city.

Religious revival in urban space, coming through architectural (re)construction and social practices such as veiling, reflects a return to individual religiosity, but also a strengthening of nation-building through the equivalence of religion with ethno-national identity. However, architectural expressions and social practices within one religion (Islam) reveal the fluidity of interpretation, the segmentation of representation and experience, as well as the limits of looking at the religious architecture as the mere expression of the nation. Nevertheless, the restructuration of space through religious markers has a dimension of symbolic violence that advances antagonism and keeps conflict as a form of everyday life in the city.

Memorials in Reconstructed Urban Space: Between Humiliation and Potentiality

In a park in Federation Sarajevo’s dense Dobrinja neighborhood, alleys converge upon a sculptural ensemble of two women weeping, their heads covered in veils, representing Muslim mothers grieving over the deaths of their children. One figure represents a Bosniak mother, the other is Azeri. The memorial is officially dedicated to the victims of aggression against Muslims in Bosnia and in the city of Khojaly, in Nagorno-Karabagh, 10 uniting the suffering of the Muslim Bosniaks and Azeris at the hands of Christian Serbs and Armenians (Sarajevo.co.ba). The memorial suggests a bond between Bosniaks and Azeris through shared religion and victimhood, thus strengthening the message of the Friendship Park, a present

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10 The Khojaly Massacre, also known as the Khojaly tragedy, and in Azeri sources the Khojali genocide, was the killing of at least 161 ethnic Azeri civilians from the town of Khojaly on February 25-26, 1992 by Armenian armed forces, aided by the Russians, during the Nagorno-Karabakh War (Kaufmann).
from the government of Azerbaijan to the city of Sarajevo. The monument resembles other memorial places in residential areas. First, they are highly visible, located in actively used public spaces, often with a playground nearby. Second, the memorials are ethno-religiously marked, either through symbolism – as in the covered woman as a symbol of Bosnian Muslims – or through explicative text. Finally, the emphasis is on the victimhood of the group. In contrast with the monument to multiculturalism in the center of Sarajevo, the memorials in residential areas privilege the victimization message of the Bosniak group, or of the Sarajevans as a whole, versus ethnicized “Serbian criminals” (Srpski zločinci). Consequently, the reconfigurations of public spaces around such memorials brings residents constantly in contact with victimization messages. Nevertheless, frequent visits and informal discussions with residents about how they relate to the memorial in Dobrinja V, or to such memorials in general, show a general apathy and non-engagement with them (Figure 6).

Memorials have been an integral part of post-war reconfiguration of urban space in Sarajevo. By framing the suffering in war as a particularized ethno-religious experience, contemporary memorials in residential Sarajevo colonize the space with the narrative of one group. As memorials serve the role of ethnic markers, they prolong ethno-national conflict through symbolic violence. As Benjamin has argued, the “efforts to render politics aesthetic culminates in war” (241). Memorial structures in contested cities serve the needs of the present more than in other cities and thus continue conflict through other means (Anderson). In Beirut, they are used by young people to explain continuing antagonisms and contemporary
struggles of mistrust, division and prejudice (Larkin). In Vukovar, Croatia, they demarcate territory, perceived as “aggressive physical entities” that reinforce mental barriers with the “other” (Baillie 2013b: 128). The use of religious symbols infuses the sites with a perceived sacredness, which buffers them from critique (125). The rigid storytelling of these memorials does not match the restorative, healing goals and dialogical approaches of truth and reconciliation processes (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena).

I introduce here the concept of humiliation, which in contexts of contested space and contested narratives of the past, can be the engine of prolonging violence through symbolic means. I distinguish humiliation from shame, as humiliation always involves an “other.” Shame refers to the subject’s emotion regarding his or her self-esteem, humiliation is an emotion engendered by the intentional action of others to harm one’s self-esteem. For Margalit, humiliation is the main obstacle to reaching what he calls a decent society, inclusive to all and conducive to human flourish. Humiliation demotivates, harms self-esteem, but is also often the source of animosity and negative antagonism. Memorials deemed offensive contribute to the humiliation of the subject by referring to socially and politically heterogenous groups (including ethnic groups) in general terms as criminals or “bad.” Naming individual criminals can lead to shame for members of a particular criminal’s home group, but it is not humiliation. The latter is created through generalization of an entire group. In the humiliating power of architectural reconstruction and memorials lie the seeds of further antagonism.

Many memorials in BiH, and especially Sarajevo, function within this communicative framework of shaming and humiliation. Commenting on the basis of hundreds of memorials erected in BiH after 1995, Simić, a Sarajevo-based professor of transitional justice, asserts that he could not identify even five that would not offend anyone. Many memorials specifically blame “Serbian criminals” for killing the “citizens of Sarajevo.” This ethnicization of guilt functions in similar ways with the nationalist agendas of war: they conflate the nationalist platform of the warring Bosnian Serb leadership with the entire ethnic group. They point fingers of blame, leading to a symbolic humiliation of Serbs in urban space. While shame and guilt can function as reparatory mechanisms creating an accountability of individuals with regards to the society’s past, shaming and humiliation can also have the opposite outcome of creating feelings of exclusion that may lead to further animosities.

Memorials that do not fit the shaming pattern are few. For example, the memorial dedicated to the children who died in Sarajevo is abstract; it commemorates the victims without antagonizing a certain group. However, it was criticized for being dedicated to children who perished in “besieged Sarajevo,” therefore excluding children who died in neighborhoods controlled by the RS army, such as Grbavica and Lukavica. In order to seek the potentiality of non-humiliation memorial projects, two relevant precursors exist in Sarajevo: an exhibit on the siege and a proposed structure dedicated to an alternative “positive hero.”

The siege exhibit of the Museum of History of BiH has a very different take in telling the story of the war, careful about the possibility of humiliation. While it is not a memorial per se, it deserves mention because it is an outlier in a memorial landscape based on nation-building narratives that often include discussions of ethnic groups. The exhibit carefully presents the siege of Sarajevo as a story of resilience, not of group victimhood. As opposed to other
museums in other contested cities, like the museums of national struggle in Nicosia, the Sarajevo exhibit does not describe the conflict in an ethnic way as a Serb–Bosniak one; rather, it addresses the besieged people of all ethnicities, as well as their non-ethnicized savage attacker. While this has been controversial – in that some parents complain that their children do not learn who was responsible for the violence – it embraces the role of exhibiting the siege as it was understood by many people in Sarajevo at the time, focusing on the commonality of experiences.

Yet another alternative approach for dealing with the memory of war emphasizes the concept of the positive hero. In 2007, a Sarajevo street was renamed for Srdjan Aleksic, a Bosnian Serb who defended a Bosniak in his native town of Trebinje and was killed in the process (Moll). On the street, a plaque reads “Without people like Srdjan Aleksic and his heroic deeds, one would lose hope in humanity, and without it our life would have no meaning.”

As partisan memorials, it focuses on heroism and bravery and his courageous act is revered as a step of reconciliation in the region (Moll). In 2014, Jezdimir Milošević, the leader of a sports association, proposed the construction of a Srdjan Aleksic sports complex built on the entity line between Sarajevo and Istočno Sarajevo, in order to play a role of reconciliation through individualizing the heroism of the Serb and thus countering nationalistic narratives. It is part of a number of initiatives of civil society actors to highlight inter-ethnic cooperation and thus transgress the hegemonic narratives based on identity politics (Moll). Yet, the promotion of a Serb positive hero in Sarajevo is not without controversy. As Nicolas Moll’s interlocutor in Sarajevo pointed out, perhaps it is “too early to promote and honor a good Serb, as Serb society hasn’t critically addressed its criminal past yet” (Moll). Moreover, as Moll underlines, the figure of the positive hero is either universalized or ethnicized depending on what platform it serves, while it is also contradictorily politicized and de-politicized. Nevertheless, the existence of the narrative of an alternative, positive hero has the potential to open the ossified nation-building narratives and bring out transgressive memory practices.

Conclusion

Post-war memorials and religious buildings in Sarajevo have often originated from nation-building, identity politics-based platforms. Yet their mere presence in urban space also contributes to identity politics, as spatial appropriation or competition of religious buildings sustains the power games of different groups, while memorials can engender ongoing feelings of victimhood, humiliation, and animosity. Reconstructions and memorialization can antagonize the Other. In Sarajevo, while both memorials and religious buildings have the potentiality of repair, many of them contribute to shaming and humiliation, as well as sustain competition and symbolic violence.

The concept of humiliation hardly figures in discussions about how to represent the past. Humiliation is not shame, as it is not the subject’s own political emotion, but rather something inflicted on the subject. Humiliation is also what Margalit sees as the main obstacle to reaching a decent society. In the humiliating power of architectural reconstruction or memorials lay the roots for further antagonisms. As such, I argue that a vital ingredient of a thorough coming to terms with the past and a non-antagonizing reconstruction is the avoidance of humiliation.

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11 For more on Srdan Aleksić and his memorialization, see Moll.
through a reflection of what the impact of a memorial act and message can have on different people. The process is challenging and needs to consider how it relates to truth-telling, but also to emerging understandings of memory processes and conflict. One avenue of further research is how memorials can better engage with the practices of agonistic memory (Bull and Hansen), in which perspectives are not silenced and conflict is acknowledged. As Pullan notes, cities built on diversity can be good arenas of such agonistic processes. The discussion of identity politics and processes in Sarajevo is an appropriate prompt for the urgency of this discussion to take place.

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