

This article was published in Anthropological Quarterly 92(4). To cite:

Golubović, Jelena. 2019. “‘One Day I Will Tell This to My Daughter’: Serb Women, Silence, and the Politics of Victimhood in Post-War Sarajevo.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 92(4): 1173-1199.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/746283>

“One Day I Will Tell This to My Daughter”: Serb Women, Silence, and the Politics of Victimhood in Sarajevo

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on fieldwork with Serb women who lived through the siege of Sarajevo, this article examines how the moral economy of victimhood allows us to recognize certain classes of victims only by failing to recognize others. From 1992 to 1995, Sarajevo was held under siege by Bosnian Serb forces. In the post-war context, Sarajevan Serb women often find that their ethnic identity has become bound up with the figure of the aggressor, but this ascription goes against their subjective experiences of the war. Against the cemented narrative of collective (Serb) guilt and (Bosniak) innocence, they find their experiences of wartime suffering to be unwelcome. I argue that this silencing is symptomatic of a moral economy which demands a pure dichotomy between victims and perpetrators, in which violence committed against the perpetrator “side” is rendered ungrievable. I then discuss the gendered connotations of the figure of the aggressor, and what it means for Serb women to feel this shame. Finally, I show that personal accounts of suffering are not the only narratives being silenced; I also gained access to clandestine ethno-nationalist scripts, fueled by a sense of precarious belonging in the post-war city. [Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, ethnicity, gender, nationalism, postwar, Sarajevo, silence, victimhood]

Introduction

Things happened that are not spoken about. I am not going to publish an open letter in *Oslobodjenje* [a daily newspaper]. But one day I will tell this to my daughter. When she is older, so that she knows what we went through.

The above words were spoken by a Serb woman in Sarajevo towards the end of our interview.¹ They capture a tension between wanting to share one's story and wanting to remain silent, between seeking and evading recognition. Serb women occupy a complex position in post-war Sarajevo, one that blurs the dichotomous categories of victim and perpetrator. While they belong, strictly ethnically speaking, on the side of the army that besieged the city for nearly four years from 1992–1995, they nevertheless experienced violence, displacement, and loss. In the post-war context, they often find their claims of suffering to be unwelcome for they disrupt the dominant narrative of the war: a narrative of collective, ethnicized (Serb) guilt and (Bosniak) innocence. Through practices of silence and concealment, Serb women attempt to navigate a terrain of everyday life in which their ethnic identity has become bound up in the figure of the aggressor, a figure to which few of them are willing to relate.

Drawing from one year of fieldwork (2017–2018) with Sarajevo Serb women, I present their narratives as an effort towards an “ethical memory” (Nguyen 2016) of the siege of Sarajevo, one that can capture the experiences of the city's Serbs without denying or relativizing Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) memories of suffering. Listening to their narratives requires us to consider how recognition of suffering is granted or refused, in other words to consider the politics of victimhood in the aftermath of violence.

Anthropologists have increasingly focused their attention on the politics of victimhood. But this body of literature is marked by a certain discomfort, for while the discipline is generally poised to be sensitive to the experiences and perceptions of others, analyzing the political underpinnings of victimhood can be interpreted as calling into question the authenticity of victims' suffering (Jeffrey and Canda 2006). Anthropologists have often navigated this discomfort by performing a conceptual separation between victims as people who have *experienced* violence and suffering, and victimhood as a *political* construction (Ronsbo and Jensen 2014). In other words, analyzing the politics of victimhood should not undermine the experiences of victims, rather it should make visible the effects of claiming or denying victimhood as an individual, collective, or national identity.

Despite the noted discomfort, researching the politics of victimhood opens the door to numerous valuable questions: What is the relationship between victimhood and innocence? How should we respond when the suffering of one group obscures that of another, or when two groups make competing claims to victimhood? And importantly, how can we account for the “performative power” of our own scholarship, depending on whether we choose to foreground the *politics* or the *experience* of victimhood (Jeffrey and Canda 2006:290)?

Through a focus on Sarajevo Serb women, I consider how the *moral* power of victimhood figures in who comes to be recognized as a victim and who does not, and what is at stake when we construct moral hierarchies of suffering. Although victimhood stems from experiences of great suffering, it also lends moral capital to those who claim it as a resource (Danneskiold-

Samøe 2014, Fassin and Rechtman 2009, Meyers 2011). The moral weight of victimhood derives from the representation of the “pure” victim as passive, innocent, and incapable of committing harm. It thus demands a clean separation between victims and their perpetrators. Any blurring of this line, any suggestion of fault or complicity, may taint the victim as inauthentic and thus undeserving of compassion (Enns 2012, Helms 2013).

Numerous scholars have emphasized the inadequacy of the victim-perpetrator dichotomy for understanding war and conflict, while also noting its stubborn persistence. They have pointed out that these two subject positions are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive: people may find themselves simultaneously in the position of victim and perpetrator, or they may be caught outside of this dichotomy as bystanders, witnesses, martyrs, survivors, or beneficiaries—all complex categories full of internal differentiation (Derluyn et al. 2015, Doná 2018). Like any false dichotomy, the victim-perpetrator dichotomy produces a gap that it cannot contain, a space of “friction” where the two sides meet (Tsing 2005).

Located within this gap, Sarajevan Serb women have remained relatively silent about their war-time and post-war experiences, and researchers have often been reluctant to engage them (Armakolas 2001). Their silence is a product of the moral economy of victimhood in Sarajevo as well as in anthropological writing on the Bosnian war. I argue that the moral capital of victimhood comes at the price of a kind of blindness in which we can recognize one class of victims only by failing to see another. It obscures the suffering of those who are deemed too “impure” for the status of victim, and this hierarchy of recognition is an integral part of its moral economy. Moral victimhood is not simply a resource, it is a scarce resource in that it can only be held by one side.

In turning to Serb women’s narratives, the point is not to recast Serbs collectively from perpetrators to victims, nor to equate the suffering of Serbs and Bosniaks in what was an undeniably asymmetrical war. The point is to begin to dismantle the victim-perpetrator dichotomy and the ideology of the pure victim that sustains it. This dichotomy may offer clean lines, but it cannot account for complexity and ambiguity in the experience of violence and its aftermath. It does not help explain how a person can inhabit multiple and contradictory subject positions all at once: how they can be victims without being “pure” or innocent, how they can be complicit while also experiencing a devastation that deserves recognition.

I first offer some background context, outlining the position of Serbs within the siege of Sarajevo. I then outline the framework of the moral economy of victimhood, drawing on philosophical writing on victimhood, anthropological research on Bosnia-Herzegovina,² and my own fieldwork data, which illustrates how Serb women navigate post-war social and moral boundaries through a mixture of silence and concealment. Finally, I consider the gendered connotations of the figure of the aggressor: that women in particular feel the shame of being marked as the traditionally male figure of the aggressor speaks to the power of ethnicized scripts of innocence and guilt. It also reveals how in the context of the siege, the suspicion of complicity or betrayal seeped into everyday social exchanges involving both women and men.

Throughout this discussion, I foreground voices that have mostly been kept silent. But the different voices in this study do not speak in unison. In addition to uncovering personal accounts

of suffering that had been (self-)censored, I also gained access to troubling ethno-national scripts that blended personal experiences of violence with harmful political rhetoric, fueled by a sense of precarious belonging in the post-war city. In both cases, I find that those stories and experiences that are censored by the dominant narrative are not simply forgotten because they are silenced; they are pushed into the private realm where they are remembered and retold quietly. As the woman quoted in the epigraph stated, “Things happened that are not spoken about... But one day I will tell this to my daughter.”

Context: Serbs in the Siege of Sarajevo

Sarajevo is a city that visibly bears the marks of war. Walking along, you come across white plaques commemorating sites where civilians were killed by “Serb criminals” (*srpski zločinci*), or metal plaques listing the names of fallen soldiers. On the sidewalk, the scars from mortar shell explosions have been filled in with red resin, at once repairing the damage and leaving it visible as a form of commemoration. Many building facades are so severely punctured by shellfire that they are painful just to look at, until over time your eyes adjust and you stop actively noticing. One of my research participants, a retired editor in her 70s, showed me a wall cabinet in her apartment with a bullet hole through the door. “That’s from 1992. I haven’t gotten around to getting it fixed.”

In 1990, when Bosnia-Herzegovina was still a constituent republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Bosnians voted in three ethno-nationalist parties, one for each of Bosnia’s major ethno-national groups: the Muslim SDA (Party for Democratic Action), the Serb SDS (Serb Democratic Party), and the Croat HDZ (Croat Democratic Union). Despite their incompatible politics, these parties had agreed to form a coalition government in order to achieve their shared short-term goal of defeating the communist opposition (Maksić 2017).

By 1991, the question of Bosnian independence was on the table. The Yugoslav republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia all declared their independence in 1991. Wars had erupted in Slovenia, and to a greater extent Croatia, between separation forces and the Serb-dominated Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA). In anticipation of Bosnia’s possible secession from Yugoslavia, the SDS had begun declaring Serb Autonomous Regions within Bosnia (later declared to be Republika Srpska, or Serb Republic), and establishing a parallel government structure for Bosnian Serbs. Less than a year after the elections, in October 1991, the tripartite coalition had unraveled: the SDS delegates walked out of the Bosnian parliament following an inflammatory and now infamous speech by SDS president Radovan Karadžić, in which he threatened that if a war over independence were to break out, the Muslim nation would disappear, defenseless (Donia 2015).

In early 1992, an independence referendum took place. The majority of Bosnian Serbs boycotted the referendum, but it passed nevertheless with 99.7 percent support from a voter turnout of 63.4 percent of registered voters. The SDS viewed the secession as illegal; Bosnia’s declaration of independence was met with war.

For nearly four years, much of the city of Sarajevo was held under siege by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), which profited from the support of Serbia and the JNA. The siege

deprived Sarajevans of basic needs such as food, water, electricity, and gas; exposed them to mortar shells, grenades, bombs, and sniper fire; and resulted in nearly 5,000 civilian deaths. “I must have been so naïve before,” one of my research participants said. She had spent the entire war in Sarajevo with her Bosniak husband and their three children. “I thought a war was something that happened between two armies, on a battlefield. I didn’t know that it could be...like this.”

The majority of Serbs left Sarajevo shortly before the siege or in its early months, leading to the popular perception among other Sarajevans that the Serbs were complicit, and creating a reluctance, among some, to see Serbs return to the city after the siege was over (Maček 2009, Sorabji 2006). However, approximately 10,000 Serbs remained in besieged Sarajevo (Jansen 2015). Although there has been little research on them, Donia writes that they have become “one of the most controversial aspects of the siege” (2006:322). Indeed, they have been made use of by those on various political sides: the Serb ethno-nationalist side has often painted them as hostages of the Bosniak army in Sarajevo, forced to stay in the besieged city against their wills (Ribar 1995, Zurovac 2011). On the other hand, liberal academics have sometimes painted them as conscientious defenders of Sarajevo’s multicultural way of life, “refusing to leave” despite the danger of staying, and thus denying Serb ethno-nationalists their agenda of separating multi-ethnic communities (Donia 2006:322). This latter representation fits well with the favored public image of the siege, of a multi-ethnic city fighting to preserve its values of tolerance and a “common life” (*zajednički život*), but it only tells part of the story.

In addition to the threat on their lives from VRS aggression, Sarajevan Serbs faced internal threats within the siege due to their ethnic association with the besieging army. It is important to note here that many non-Serbs who found themselves on the other side of the siege lines, in VRS-held territory, were terrorized in a much more systematic way by the VRS and the SDS, as were “disobedient Serbs” who did not want to join the army (Vuksanović 1996:23). Nevertheless, thousands of Serbs fled besieged Sarajevo in the summer of 1992 because of hostilities such as mass detention (Donia 2006). As the siege went on, fears escalated among the Serb community that they could be beaten or even murdered as a form of revenge, and that such acts could occur with impunity (Vuković 1993). One of my participants, a seamstress now in her 60s, recalled this sense of anxiety:

During the war, I ran into a friend of mine, a Serb woman, and she was dressed all in black mourning clothes. Someone in her family had died in a shelling, I think. I ran up to her and asked, “What are you doing? Do you want everyone on the street to know you’re a Serb?”³ And she said, “I know, I know, but this is the custom.” I was worried she might run into the wrong person, someone who had recently lost someone and might be driven to take it out on her. You never know! It was no time for customs.

While many Serbs felt targeted on account of their ethnicity, it was not only Serbs who faced internal threats. When the siege began, there was not yet a Bosnian army (ARBiH), so in the meantime, the police force teamed up with armed criminal gangs and paramilitary units which would eventually come to operate under the command of the ARBiH (Kaldor 2012). The siege created an environment of lawlessness in which power was easily abused; the militarized criminal gangs became notorious for robbing, abusing, raping, and murdering the civilians they

were allegedly defending (Andreas 2008). These crimes are a well-known public secret in Sarajevo, but they are highly contentious. There is both a public and an official unwillingness to acknowledge or commemorate this aspect of the siege.

The following two scenarios are telling. First, a government commission formed in 2006 to investigate crimes that took place against civilians within the siege managed to spend 340,000 Bosnian marks (approximately 170,000 euros) and produce zero reports by the end of its year-long mandate (Dnevni Avaz 2007). And second, activists from the organization “*Jer me se tiče*” (Because I Care) erected a small plaque in 2015 for the civilian victims of war crimes committed in besieged Sarajevo by the 10th mountain brigade of the ARBiH, under the leadership of Mušan “Caco” Topalović. Caco was a gangster-turned-army-commander known for robbing and “disappearing” civilians (particularly, but not exclusively Serbs) by throwing their bodies into the Kazani caves on the outskirts of the city. The commemorative plaque was destroyed two days after it was erected; meanwhile a plaque bearing Mušan Topalović’s name has been installed for years on the outside wall of an elementary school: part of a memorial for fallen soldiers.

The end of the war resulted in the partition of Bosnia into two ethnically defined entities, with the boundary line running through the outskirts of Sarajevo. While most of the city belongs to the (Bosniak-Croat) Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, certain peripheral districts fall under Republika Srpska. The war changed the demographic picture of Sarajevo dramatically, as many people, especially Serbs, left, and many Bosniak refugees moved in (Stefansson 2007). From a pre-war population of 25 percent, Serbs now constitute less than four percent of the population of Sarajevo.⁴

More than 20 years after the end of the war, many Sarajevo Serbs still grapple with an enduring sense of stigmatization due to the ethnic association of Serbs with aggressors (see Golubović 2019). One participant, a retired civil engineer who spent the war in Sarajevo, put it this way:

For some people, if you are Serb you are automatically guilty...I don’t like to complain, because then people will very quickly tell me, “If you don’t like it, you can just leave.” ...But I don’t feel that I belong in Republika Srpska either... There are some people who look at me like they hate me, like I am guilty for everything. But I didn’t contribute to this war in the slightest way, not even with my pinky finger.

For the above woman, the feeling that others viewed her as “guilty for everything” was particularly painful because she had spent the entire war in besieged Sarajevo, thus informally earning what Sorabji (2006:8) refers to as a “wartime pedigree.” In the moral economy of post-war Sarajevo, this pedigree distinguishes Serbs who stayed as morally superior compared to Serbs who left, since it is suspected that many of those who left relocated to VRS-held territories and joined the attack on the city.⁵ The problem, as Sorabji points out from the perspective of Sarajevo Bosniaks, is that it is more or less impossible to discern a stranger’s wartime pedigree, to know what they did during the war, and therefore to know how one should behave towards them.⁶ While there is certainly some truth to the view that some Serbs who left were complicit (see Vuksanović 1996), this generalization does not leave room for much complexity; people stayed and left for various complicated reasons, and these decisions did not necessarily reflect their political views. Nevertheless, this popular delineation is important for understanding that

“Sarajevan Serbs” cannot be understood as a wholly undifferentiated group within the moral landscape of the post-war city; it matters who stayed and who left.⁷

The Moral Economy of Victimhood

At a social event that I attended with a friend in Sarajevo, I was introduced to three of her acquaintances. Striking up conversation, they asked me what my research was about. When I responded that I was studying the war-time and post-war experiences of Sarajevan Serb women, one of the three leaned across the table towards me and said, “So, tell me, did *the Serbs* suffer in Sarajevo during the war?” Taken aback by her tone, I began to stammer, “Well, I’m sure you can imagine what a difficult situation—” when she cut me off to ask her friends, “Did you hear that? Did you hear? *The Serbs* really *suffered* in Sarajevo during the war.” Her friends responded with light laughter and the conversation moved on to more sociable topics. Although this encounter is not representative of the many welcoming conversations I had about my research in Sarajevo, it demonstrates from an everyday perspective how hierarchies of victimhood are constructed and maintained, and how certain narratives are policed or rendered impermissible in social settings.

To understand why the woman across the table was so reluctant to see Sarajevan Serbs as victims, to acknowledge that they suffered during the siege—and, relatedly, why she was so quick to recast Sarajevan Serb women as “the Serbs”—we must deconstruct what victimhood has come to signify. As a figure who evokes sympathy and compassion, the victim occupies a paradoxical position of power and powerlessness. Although the label of victim denotes helplessness and suffering, the language of victimhood and trauma invests victims with significant moral capital or “moral currency” (Enns 2012:28), affording them the resources to pursue various political goals, whether to gain refugee status, demand compensation, or simply seek recognition of their suffering (Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

The idea that victimhood could be a resource, a source of moral capital, is somewhat disquieting, for it seems to go against the deeply ingrained notion of victimhood or trauma as a wound that never heals. We understand wounds to be a burden, not an asset. As a result, victimhood has often been placed beyond judgment or reproach, even within critical traditions (Enns 2012). But in fact, victimhood can be leveraged as a resource, and, in the absence of other political and economic capital, it may indeed be the only resource available to those who have lost so much (Helms 2013, Hronešová 2016).

But the moral capital of victimhood depends on more than just the recognition of suffering; it depends on the association of victimhood with *innocence* (Helms 2013, Jankowitz 2016, Meyers 2011, Turner 2010). The victim must be seen as a “pure” victim: one who is inherently moral and good. Any suggestion that the victim was complicit or responsible for her own fate jeopardizes this pure status, making her a compromised or “troublesome” victim (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013:493).

The notion of the pure victim locates all responsibility and blame on the side of the perpetrator. It thus establishes a firm dichotomy, for victim and perpetrator constitute *relational* categories; just as victimhood must be “pure,” untainted, we understand perpetrator-hood to be totalizing in an inverse sense. It comforts us to imagine perpetrators as positioned outside of humanity, as

morally remote, as evil. But this is a construction that often only takes us further away from understanding and explaining violence (Clark 2009, Fujii 2008).

My sense is that for the woman across the table, Serbs in besieged Sarajevo were troublesome victims. While she may not have taken issue with a research project that explored how all Sarajevans experienced the war, my decision to research Serbs alone certainly troubled her.⁸ In the moral economy of victimhood, such a project can be seen as threatening: acknowledging suffering among the perpetrator side is cast as inappropriate or morally questionable because it seems to absolve perpetrators of their crimes by classifying them as victims *instead*. Additionally, it seems to take attention away from the “authentic” victims, thus flattening out the asymmetrical context in which conflict often takes place. Folded within the taunt, “Tell me, did *the Serbs* suffer in Sarajevo during the war?” is a moral claim that Bosniaks suffered more, that they suffered because of the Serbs, and that to tell a story that seems to invert these categories constitutes an injustice against the violence they endured.

The issue at stake is not merely that each side in a conflict will tend to emphasize its own victims. The problem with the moral construction of victimhood is that its absolute categories do not allow for complexity, ambiguity, or coexistence: every acknowledgment, every concession to the other side is seen as a threat or a negation. We need to pause in order to ask: What are the implications of a construction of victimhood in which recognizing suffering on the side of the other constitutes a threat to the claims of the first? Similar to Butler’s (2009) concept of grievability, in which the frames we use allow us to recognize some lives as more valuable, and thus more grievable when lost or injured, than others, the moral construction of victimhood renders only certain violences visible, only certain losses grievable.

The invisibility of certain classes of victims, especially those categorized as belonging to the perpetrator side (see Ballinger 2012, Douglas 2012), is expressed in Burnet’s concept of “amplified silence” (2012:11). Writing about post-genocide Rwanda, Burnet argues that while the state-sponsored national mourning period creates space to grieve Tutsi victims of Hutu violence, it also “amplifies” a fearful public silence about those deaths that fall outside the ambit of the official story, for example the Hutu who were killed by the genociders for refusing to participate, or the Hutu and Tutsi who were killed by Rwandan People’s Front (RPF) soldiers in order to eliminate opposition to the post-genocide RPF-led government. These deaths are rendered invisible and ungrievable, as there is no public space to mourn or even acknowledge them.

The “amplified silence” of Sarajevan Serbs was expressed by participants as a lack of acknowledgment within the dominant narrative that drives them to keep their stories private. One participant, a woman in her 40s who works in development, put it this way: “It’s kept hidden. It’s not talked about in Sarajevo—at all. Here they say, ‘we took care of our Serbs,’ and some did, but that’s not the whole truth. People here just don’t want to talk about it.” Another woman, the retired civil engineer quoted earlier, said:

I’m glad that I was here during the war, even if it was very hard. Because I saw it. Maybe it would be harder for me now if I had gone away to Belgrade or something, and now people

here could tell me how it was just great [for Serbs] here. No, I saw from the inside. Nobody can tell me stories.

As I will show in the following section, researchers are not exempt from amplifying this silence; anthropological literature has attended to the stories of Bosniak victims, but it has remained relatively quiet about the experiences of Bosnian Serb (or Bosnian Croat) victims.

The Politics of Victimhood in the Anthropology of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Bosniaks were undoubtedly the biggest victims of the war. According to the 2010 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) estimate, there were 25,609 Bosniak civilian casualties and 42,492 military deaths. These numbers include the 7,000–8,000 men and boys killed in the space of only five days in July 1995 at Srebrenica, an act of genocide by the VRS and paramilitary groups. By comparison, there were 7,480 Serb civilian casualties (and 14,298 military deaths); 1,675 Croat civilian casualties (and 7,182 military deaths); and 4,995 other deaths (Zwierzchowski and Tabeau 2010).

The anthropological attention devoted to Bosniak victims has been valuable in creating space to hear their stories and give due respect to their painful experiences, but it has also resulted in numerous unintended and problematic effects. Helms (2013) argues that the narrow focus on Bosniak victimhood has had the effect of flattening multi-dimensional people into the one-dimensional figure of the victim, reducing their identities to their suffering, reducing their lived experience to an event. In other words, Bosniaks have often been “given voice” only in cases where they speak as victims.

And implicitly, the focus on Bosniak victimhood casts Serbs collectively as perpetrators, which has resulted in a lack of will among both scholars and journalists to seek out their stories (Kempner, Perlis, and Merz 2005; Nikolic-Ristanovic 2003). The ethnic bias in the literature thus speaks to a more fundamental moral bias, reflecting an anthropological predisposition towards the marginalized and the oppressed (Armakolas 2001, 2007; Blee 2016; Bougarel, Helms, and Duijzings 2007).

In certain instances, the reluctance to engage Bosnian Serbs in research merely reflected the situation on the ground: Maček explains in her ethnography of wartime and post-war Sarajevo that she would have liked to interview more Serbs, but that they generally “kept a low profile” (2009:178) in what they perceived to be a hostile post-war regime. She writes, “Serbs were really the losers in Sarajevo; they were scared to stick out, so I did not insist on more meetings” (2009:18). However, as Simic points out, self-censorship may constitute part of a feedback loop, as Bosnian Serb victims understand their testimonies to be “unwelcome and of interest to very few people” (2016:100).

I should note here that recent critical work on Bosnia has sought to move away from ethnicized accounts of suffering by highlighting instances of ethnic fluidity or hybridity (Baker 2015, Markowitz 2010). Rather than representing Bosnians as members of static ethnic “sides,” anthropologists have called attention to numerous local-level cases where ethno-national affiliation has been far less important for defining in-group boundaries than other factors of

social or cultural similarity (Hromadžić 2013, Kolind 2008). Ethnic divisions are certainly not the only divisions in Sarajevo society: boundaries are drawn every day between “authentic” urbanites and rural newcomers, between returnees and those who stayed throughout the siege, between religious and secular people, between the economic elite and the so-called “ordinary” class (Stefansson 2007). In the context of research that aims to displace ethnic frameworks, taking a single ethnic group as the focus of study may seem to build walls where others have been tearing them down. However, research on Bosnian Serbs is important to begin to fill out a body of literature that has largely neglected them. And, in the context of Sarajevo, the everyday experiences of Serbs offer unique insights into the structure and maintenance of the post-war ethno-moral landscape.

But researching Bosnian Serbs does require a certain caution. Acknowledging Bosnian Serb victims can be conflated with “offer[ing] propaganda material to the Serbian side” (Stiglmayer 1993:138) and fanning the flames of Serb ethno-nationalism. To be sure, there is a perversely close relationship between victimhood and ethno-nationalism, and numerous scholars have explored the phenomenon of competing victimhood between Bosniak, Serb, and Croat ethno-nationalisms that plays itself out on the local level (Halilovich 2011, Selimovic 2010), in media (Janíčko 2015), and in commemorative practices (Duijzings 2007, Sokol 2014, Wagner 2008). Serb ethno-nationalism in particular is rooted in historical claims to victimhood dating back to the Ottoman occupation, as well as events in living memory such as the genocide of Serbs in World War II by the fascist Ustaša regime, comprised of Croats and to a lesser extent Muslims. In Bosnia, Karadžić abused the memory of World War II to send the message that victimized Serbs needed to create ethnically pure territories in order to *defend* themselves against future violence (Bringa 2002; see also Das 2007, Mamdani 2001, Turner 2010).

Researchers studying the politics of victimhood after conflict need to be aware of how their research could be misused to further ethno-nationalist agendas. Simply because an experience of victimization is true, does not mean that it cannot also be framed in such a way that blurs the line between personal experience and political rhetoric.⁹ To avoid this trap, my strategy is to write about Sarajevo Serb women’s experiences of suffering without ever dis-embedding them from the broader context of the siege. I fold their narratives into a critique of the moral economy of “pure” victimhood, and I make space for recognizing certain women as complex victims (Baines 2016, Bouris 2007, Moffett 2016), victims who may be implicated or even complicit in the same violence that harms them. For if we continue to subscribe to the ingrained association between victimhood and innocence, we only fuel the relentless competition over victimhood, and we contribute to amplifying the silence of those who do not fit the ideal of what an “authentic” victim should look like.

Amplified Silence, Reticent Narrators

It was not an easy task to find Serb women who were willing to tell me about their experiences during the war and their everyday lives in post-war Sarajevo. There was an apprehension towards speaking that manifested itself in multiple ways, such as heightened concerns about confidentiality and audience. Despite the standard confidentiality measures of obscuring names, ages, and identifying markers, one woman reported back that two separate acquaintances whom she had contacted on my behalf declined to participate because they felt afraid.

Among those who did choose to participate in the research, this sense of apprehension, insofar as it had been present at all, was not always resolved, and would come across in the interviews in various ways. It might manifest spatially—as in the choice to meet at home or take a walk together, rather than meeting in a cafe where other people might listen in, and therefore “we couldn’t speak as openly.” Or, it might be embodied—as in lowered voices or cautionary glances behind one’s back when speaking about sensitive matters in public spaces. Or, it might manifest in social practices of concealment: some of the women I interviewed opted not to tell their friends or acquaintances that they were participating in research at all; one introduced me as a friend of her daughter’s when we ran into her neighbors during our walk.

To be sure, there were many Sarajevan Serbs who experienced the siege and the post-war period without feeling hostility or endangerment due to their ethnic background, but they were generally not the ones who felt compelled to share their experiences with a researcher. Four of the woman I interviewed nevertheless fell into this category, as did numerous women with whom I had informal conversations, and they frequently made a point of emphasizing to me how their social relationships remained intact throughout the siege, how they continued to relate to their friends and neighbors “as people,” and not as members of ethnic groups. One of these women, a retired academic, interwove her own relatively positive experience with that of her less fortunate cousin. In her early 60s when the war started, she and her husband sent their children away and remained in their downtown apartment:

Nobody bothered us during the war. Not once did anybody come and rob our apartment, or search through our things. That is what I want to tell you. But for my cousin in the Old Town, it was a different story. Five times they went to my cousin’s house. But here, we were lucky... We spent the war in the basement. My husband was old, so I went out and got supplies, I walked around, I picked up packets, I brought them home, I picked up mail from our children when it arrived through one of the foreign journalists. I joked that I was in charge of external affairs! And no one bothered me or asked for my documents, not even once. Mind you, I never went to the Old Town.¹⁰ I heard stories about what was happening over there. I didn’t want to go, to have them ask me, “What are you doing here?” So all in all, it was fine for me (*tako da sam fino prošla*). That is what I am trying to say.

In contrast to the above excerpt, in which the participant wished to convey that her personal experience of the siege was not worsened by her ethnicity, I found that once snowball sampling slowly began to roll, my research topic and my own ethnic legibility as a Serb combined to position me as sympathetic to Serbs, and thus tended to attract a certain type of participant: one who had ethnicized grievances to air. The majority of participants shared stories of ethnically targeted violence or hostility during the siege, from smaller injustices such as being denied humanitarian aid, to much larger injustices, such as being falsely accused by one’s neighbors, or having a family member detained in a make-shift prison.

The majority of participants foregrounded a sense of ethnic stigmatization that has lasted into the post-war period. Often, asserting victimhood involved distancing oneself from the figure of the aggressor by emphasizing one’s innocence—“I didn’t contribute to this war in the slightest way, not even with my pinky finger”—which spoke to the power of the pure victim construct. It also

signaled an unwillingness to reflect on the collective *responsibility* (as opposed to individual responsibility or collective guilt) of Serbs for crimes that were committed in their name (Gordy 2013).

Even though it was frequently emphasized in interviews, the figure of the victim must be understood as only one subject position among the many that these women inhabit. Paradoxically, this subject position was emphasized in interviews precisely because it was not recognized in the course of everyday social life. In order to achieve an understanding of how “backstage” and “front stage” presentations of self differ (Goffman 1959), I supplemented interviews with participant observation, inserting myself into social settings with research participants to the extent possible. Since in their daily lives participants felt they were viewed as aggressors instead of recognized as victims, the interview provided a backstage space where participants could discuss events and experiences that they felt would be impermissible in public. Yet, the interview was also in itself a kind of performance, where participants could step into roles (i.e., victim, Serb) that they felt they could not freely play in public.

Due to my positionality, I also found that those participants who harbored ethno-nationalist views often assumed that I shared their views. In contrast to Jansen’s (2016) observation that Bosnians may tend to conceal their ethno-nationalist sentiments in the presence of a (judging) researcher, the assumption that I too must be a nationalist allowed me to access contentious and clandestine narratives. In these narratives, personal experiences of victimization during the siege were often conflated with the suffering of Serbs as a nation (see Verdery 1996), while the suffering of Bosniaks was denied or minimized (see Gordy 2013). In a small minority of cases, women who had spent the war in besieged Sarajevo, who had lost loved ones to VRS shellfire, justified the siege as an act of defense in protection of a unified Yugoslavia. Such women therefore viewed themselves not as victims of VRS violence per se, but of Bosniak separatism that, in their view, had made the siege possible, or even necessary. They were complex victims, implicated in the very violence to which they were also subject (Baines 2016, Bouris 2007).

Interviews with Sarajevan Serb women thus revealed a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990) that included both personal narratives of violence and stigmatization (with which it was easy to sympathize), as well as, for certain women, ethno-nationalist scripts that challenged my sympathy by reminding me “what relation their pain bears to the pain of others” (Das 2002:109).

Shame and Practices of Concealment

To ask someone in Sarajevo whether they are Serb can be a loaded question, whether it is intended that way or not, due to the continued association of Serbs with aggressors. Another major reason why it was initially difficult to find participants was due to the fact that many Sarajevan Serbs do not identify, at least not publicly or primarily, as Serbs, but instead as Sarajevans or Bosnians—categories that encompass people of various ethnicities in a civic or national umbrella. While several women in this category opted to participate in my research, many likely did not see themselves as appropriate interlocutors.

It is important to note that while I have posited two crude categories here—Serbs who identify as Serbs and people of Serb ethnic heritage who do not identify as Serbs—ethnic identity is not

static for people in either category. Participants revealed multiple, shifting modes of identity that at times complemented and at times contradicted one another (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004). Those who did not identify as Serb in social life might slip into this identification when speaking about their relatives, just as those who did identify as Serb might slip into a Sarajevan or Bosnian identification when it suited them more. This movement between identifications should not be taken as a sign of inauthenticity, especially since these categories overlap. Instead, it should attest to the agency and “social intelligence” of subjects in navigating a complex social landscape (Fassin and Rechtman 2009:11).

However, as is the case with identity in general, it is often not up to us how others perceive us; we depend on others for recognition (Butler 1997, Fassin 2008). I found that people of Serb ethnic heritage who did not identify as Serb were nevertheless often identified this way by others, at least tentatively. For example, one acquaintance considered approaching two of her colleagues about participating in this research. “But I feel too uncomfortable to ask them if they’re Serbs. I mean, their names are Serb, but they would certainly call themselves Sarajevan.” Another acquaintance said, “I have one person in mind, but she doesn’t declare herself as Serb; actually one of her parents is a Croat.”

These statements reveal the tension between identity and recognition. We may self-identify or self-declare as one thing, but certain factors, in this case our names, may give us away to others as being something else. These statements suggest that respect for others’ self-identification (i.e., addressing people as they would like to be addressed) is achieved through an interplay between knowing and not knowing, or pretending not to know. The women in question were *addressed* as they declared themselves— say, as “Sarajevans”—but they ultimately were not *perceived* this way, but rather as “Serbs who identify as Sarajevan.”

Several participants discussed wanting to avoid “drawing attention” to themselves as Serbs. The situations that they most frequently associated with feeling ashamed or unwelcome were those in which they had to state their names outside of friendly social contexts; for example, giving your name at the post office and noticing a fleeting look on the face of the worker behind the window, or a sudden change in demeanor. Interpreting such interactions, where nothing is explicitly stated, depends on reading the minds of our interlocutors. And since this is not possible, it depends on assigning meanings to glances and gestures, meanings that may or may not have been intended, that may or may not be “there” (see Golubović 2019). But the issue is not whether the person at the post office really feels a certain way when they hear a Serb name; the issue is that the women giving their names do. As Portelli writes in regards to the accuracy of oral history interviews, these narratives “tell us less about events than about their *meaning*” (2016:52).

Gender, Complicity, and the Figure of the Aggressor

What does it mean for Serb women to feel this shame, to feel cast as aggressors in the collectivist script of the war?¹¹ Given the dramatic decline of women’s engagement and representation in Yugoslav politics by the start of the 1990s (Bracewell 1996), the violence and nationalism of the subsequent decade are often mistaken to be exclusively masculine enterprises. In a post-war landscape where politics has become a dirty word, signifying a male realm of corruption, war-

profiteering, greed, and public lies (Hromadžić 2013, Jansen 2016, Kolind 2008), many victims' associations and non-governmental organizations have mobilized around gendered terms such as "mothers" or "women" in order to position themselves as morally respectable actors (Helms 2013, Wagner 2008). In doing so, Helms (2013) argues that they have relied on positive but nevertheless essentialist descriptions of women as inherently more peaceful, nurturing, and forgiving than men (see also Kouvo and Levine 2008, Todeschini 2001, Žarkov 2007).

But not all women are seen to be equally peaceful. Helms discusses how even within women's activist organizations, the narrative that "all women," regardless of ethnicity, were passive victims of male nationalist violence became broken up by implicit qualifications that Serb women "had clearly failed in their *gendered roles*" (2013:138): in their roles as mothers, they had raised violent sons; in their roles as wives, they had encouraged violent husbands.

In the course of my fieldwork, I found that very few of the Serb women I met invoked the script strategically employed by activist organizations, of women as more peaceful and thus less responsible for the war than men. They felt unfairly marked as aggressors, but they generally viewed this as an ethnic rather than gendered label. There are two main reasons for this.

First, in addition to the fact that women were active participants in the military apparatuses of all three sides in the Bosnian war (Omanić et al. 2010), the siege of Sarajevo in particular created opportunities for complicity and betrayal that were not confined to those war-time roles gendered as male, such as soldiers, snipers, or politicians. One form of complicity involved the widespread rumors that those Serbs—men and women—who had stayed in besieged Sarajevo were colluding with the snipers in the hills, that they were standing at their windows and sending signals about when to shoot their own neighbors. And, as mentioned earlier, those Serbs who left the city at the start of the war were also viewed as morally complicit. In contrast to the popular local narrative that Sarajevans were in denial to the point of naivety that war would be coming their way (Sheftel 2011, Weine 1999), Serbs who left the city at the start of the war are often considered to be traitors who, through SDS channels, had prior knowledge of the coming siege, and whose moral crime—committed by both men and women—is that they failed to warn their neighbors (Armakolas 2007, Sorabji 2006). In the worst cases, it is suspected that they left in order to join the VRS and partake in the destruction of the city.

There are numerous documented cases where such betrayals indeed occurred (Vuksanović 1996). However, based on interviews I conducted with returnees, I found that even those who left several months into the siege, and even those who left only after their families experienced ethnically targeted violence (such as their Serb husbands being forced to dig trenches for paramilitary units under the command of the ARBiH), were not spared the suspicion that they had prior knowledge or that they had left to join the other side. From their perspective, they left as refugees, but upon their return they found themselves scorned as aggressors for a moral crime of which men and women were equally suspect.

The second reason that research participants viewed the aggressor as an ethnic rather than gendered figure speaks to the relative success of the ethno-nationalist project of making ethnicity the most salient and most fundamental social category, one that could eclipse all other distinctions such as gender, class, rurality/urbanity, and so on. Since ethno-nationalist politicians

claimed to represent the will of the people, they committed crimes “in the name of” those people as an ethnic whole. Žarkov thus writes that “both Serb men and Serb women [were] defined as enemies, and essentially violent” (2007:185). Recall how quickly the woman across the table relabeled “Sarajevo Serb women” as “the Serbs.”

One of my participants (the one who showed me the bullet hole in her wall cabinet) told me that during the siege, when a group of Bosniak refugees moved into her apartment building, she became anxious that they would seek reprisals against her. It did not matter that her husband was not a Serb (and therefore she could not be one of those Serb women rumored to be encouraging her violent husband). The defining marker, she worried, was her ethnicity.

Refugees moved into the apartment across the hall. They were from Ilijaš [a suburb of Sarajevo that was under VRS control during the war]. Serbs had come to their house and thrown them out. Some of them were killed and others thrown out. Twelve of them were in that apartment...I was so afraid of them because Serbs had chased them out of their home, and killed them, and I thought, “I’m done for.” But they were gentle...Once, they brought me a zucchini, a huge zucchini. I was so happy.

She chose to end this story on a positive note, with a giant zucchini. But her initial fears that she could be targeted for retaliation for crimes that were committed “in her name” demonstrates the primacy of ethnicity over gender. In contrast to the activist narrative of all women as peaceful victims of male nationalist violence, here, ethnicity eclipses gender.

Conclusion

In presenting the narratives of Sarajevo Serb women, I have offered ethnographic data from within a blind spot, exploring a context in which the acknowledgment of suffering has been largely withheld. I have argued that the moral economy of victimhood circumscribes what can be known about the siege of Sarajevo, and restricts who can be grieved. Because this economy depends on a clear separation between victims and their perpetrators, because it depends on the association of victimhood with innocence, those complex and ambiguous experiences that blur the line become contentious and are often silenced. Finally, I have argued that the “amplified silence” of Sarajevo Serbs drives their memories into “hidden places” (Burnet 2012:111). But it is not only stories of victimization that are silenced in this process, so too are more unsavory ethno-nationalist scripts about the war.

It may be relatively easy to acknowledge the suffering of Sarajevo Serbs if we paint them as altruists who remained in the besieged city as an act of anti-nationalist resistance; it is much harder to acknowledge the suffering of those Serbs on the other extreme, who spent nearly four years under siege but were nevertheless quietly holding out for a VRS victory. It is easier to write them off as ideologically complicit and therefore ineligible for the compassion that we reserve for (pure) victims. But this easy morality becomes more complicated when we consider that they also suffered the siege’s internal zone of paramilitary violence and ethnically-targeted reprisals. Refusing to recognize narratives of complex victims only drives them underground, and renders the internal violence of the siege ungrievable. This article thus attends to the gap in the victim-perpetrator dichotomy in order to consider how, in the messy reality of war, people

may come to inhabit multiple and contradictory subject positions, how they may be morally complicit in the violence that surrounds them while still experiencing a loss and devastation that deserve some form, however complicated, of recognition.

While this discussion has pertained to the war in Bosnia, the issue at stake is much broader. How do we acknowledge suffering on the side of the perpetrator? And how do we do so without losing sight of the context of war, the asymmetry of conflict? Knowing the horrors of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime, how to come to terms with the violent and forced expulsion of at least 12 million ethnic Germans after World War II by the victorious Allies, Yugoslavia, and Romania, during which 500,000 to as many as 1.5 million died (Douglas 2012)? Knowing the atrocities of the Hutu-led genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, how to treat the deaths of thousands of Hutu? And how to render those losses visible, or come to value those lives as grievable, without declaring the scales to be balanced, or worse, presenting this other side as the only victim?

Nguyen (2016) contends that even in asymmetrical wars, it is never enough to remember only “our own” victims, nor is it ever enough to remember only others. Especially where accounts of the past are competing and conflicting, an “ethical memory” insists on remembering both, since each side contains what the other has chosen to forget. The narratives presented here are not the “true” version of the siege and its aftermath, but they do provide access to a partial truth that has often been overlooked. In interviews, these narratives were often relayed to me in the spirit of contributing an additional layer to the existing knowledge of the siege. But, in certain cases, these narratives were infused with a nationalist rhetoric that asserted itself as the only truth, not merely a layer on top of others.

Nguyen writes that ethical remembering is dynamic rather than conclusive; it does not guarantee that competing memories will be reconciled, nor that we will feel better for having remembered:

...it can also lead to a tragic awareness of what is irreconcilable within ourselves and within those near and dear to us. When it comes to war, ethical memory illuminates how war neither emerges from alien territory nor is fought by monsters. War grows on intimate soil, nurtured by friends and neighbors, fought by sons, daughters, wives, and fathers. (2006:18)

Acknowledging the suffering of one’s enemies does not mean justifying their political cause, absolving them of guilt for the violence they also inflicted, or declaring the suffering of both sides to be equal. It means recognizing their lives as grievable. This article aims to contribute to an ethical memory of the siege and its aftermath by filling in some voices that had been left silent; it asks, where is the overlap and where are the contradictions, what becomes solidified and what becomes contested, when these voices are taken into account?

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful to Parin Dossa, Sonja Luehrmann, and Sina Fazelpour for their ever-valuable comments, and to Paige Raibmon for her engagement with a much earlier draft that took a second life in this essay. I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful challenges. And lastly, I am most grateful to the women in Sarajevo who gave me the gift of their time, their company, and their stories.

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Notes

¹ All interviews were conducted in the local language; all translations mine. Most interviews were recorded. For those that were not, excerpts quoted are reconstructed from my fieldnotes and jottings.

² In this article, I use Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bosnia interchangeably.

³ Wearing black mourning clothes is customary among both Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats.

⁴ According to the 2013 census, the post-war population of Sarajevo is 80.74 percent Bosniak; 3.78 percent Serb; 4.94 percent Croat. The remaining 10.54 percent fall under the controversial category of “Other,” which includes all those who do not fit into the restrictive ethnic categories that the government offers (Bosniak, Croat, or Serb). This category thus includes Jews, people of mixed ethnic heritage, people who refuse to identify themselves ethnically for political reasons, and people from other ethnic or national backgrounds (Markowitz 2010).

⁵ The popular moral delineation between those who stayed and those who left does not only apply to Serbs. As Čengić (2017) points out, it also pertains to a perceived moral discrepancy between those Sarajevans who stayed throughout the war and those Sarajevans who left because things were difficult, but left with the intention of returning, thereby leaving others to work to better the situation for them. But, in the case of Sarajevan Serbs in particular, leaving the city often meant being perceived as joining the other side.

⁶ This difficulty may explain why Serbs (women and men) I met in Sarajevo who had stayed in the city throughout the siege often found ways to bring this up in conversation, effectively informing others of their “wartime pedigree.” For example, they would often say things like “Oh, but we who were here throughout the war know that...” or “I have always loved Sarajevo, even throughout the war.” (For other examples of how the experience of having stayed throughout the siege gets woven into Sarajevan’s life narratives and visions for the future, see Čengić [2017]).

⁷ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who helped to clarify this point.

⁸ As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, the woman across the table may have been taking issue with my decision to focus my research exclusively on Serb women instead of on Sarajevans more generally; she may have seen this decision as resonating with official Republika Srpska rhetoric which foregrounds the victimization of Serbs without acknowledging the suffering of others.

⁹ This concern is particularly pressing now due to a new political development in Bosnia. In February 2019, after this article was accepted, Milorad Dodik (the ethno-nationalist president of Republika Srpska) announced plans for a controversial new commission: The Independent International Commission for Investigating the Suffering of Serbs in Sarajevo from the Period from 1991 to 1995. This commission is troubling not because it aims to uncover facts about the experiences of Serb civilians in the war, but because it evidently seeks to sanitize and re-write the past in the process. Coming from a government that thrives on denial, that has repeatedly exaggerated the number of Serb victims while relativizing or denying the suffering of Bosniaks and Croats, this commission has been heavily criticized by numerous scholars as a flagrant manipulation of transitional justice (Rudic 2019). The creation of this commission makes it more difficult to write about Serb women’s experiences without ceding data to the ethno-nationalists, but it also makes it all the more critical to dismantle the moral economy that fuels the relentless competition over victimhood, and to arrive at an “ethical memory” of the siege (Nguyen 2016).

¹⁰ The Old Town refers to Sarajevo’s baščaršija, the Ottoman part of the city, a 15- or 20-minute walk from her apartment (although much longer in siege conditions).

¹¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who asked this question and pushed me to further consider the implications of gender.