Women and Bosniac Nationalism

The 1992–1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) was notorious for two kinds of highly gendered ethnic violence: ‘ethnic cleansing’ and mass rapes, the victims of which were overwhelmingly Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims). Feminist scholars and activists, many of them from established feminist circles in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, have produced insightful critiques of the ways in which gender was constitutive of the region’s ethnically based nationalisms that fueled the violence (e.g. Bracewell 1996, 2000; Drakulić 1993, Kesić 2001, Korać 1998, Knežević 1997, Mežnarić 1994, Mostov 1995, 2000; Žarkov 2007). These analyses were necessarily focused on Serbian and Croatian nationalisms, both as ideologies behind the war violence, i.e. towards enemy ‘others,’ but also because many of the authors were personally observing the effects of these movements on gender ideologies in their own societies.

As valuable as these studies were for the understanding of gendered nationalism and its effects on women, they offered little about the women most affected by the ideologies and violence they decried. Bosnian women (of any ethnic background) seldom appeared in this literature as active beings, contributing further to their image, already enshrined in the international media (Mertus 1994), as passive, silent victims, seen as suffering all the more because the iconic image of the Bosnian war victim was a backward, rural Muslim woman who conformed to the orientalizing stereotypes of ‘the Balkans’ (Helms 2008, Todorova 1997, Žarkov 1995, 1997). Moreover, the focus on nationalisms in Serbia and Croatia left those of...
the Bosniac dominated parts of BiH unexamined from the perspective of gender. This can be explained in part because of the relative weakness of feminist activism, academics, and journalism in BiH compared with Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. More to the point, this focus is more likely a result of unwillingness to scrutinize the leadership and ideologies of the group most widely viewed as the ‘good guys’: Bosniacs were the most numerous victims and victims of Serb (and Croat) nationalism-fueled offensives in which gender-based violence against women was especially notorious.1 Still, Bosniac (in the ethno-national sense) and Bosnian (as relating to the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina) varieties of nationalism share in the same gendered logics as those among Serbs and Croats, including in the ways in which wartime rape and other atrocities are discussed and understood. At the very least, like nationalisms everywhere,2 they are no less infused with gendered meanings, even if the specifics differ. As I show in this chapter, images of women are particularly effective in evoking and strengthening national narratives of victimhood, in this case the collective victimhood of Bosniacs and Bosnia.3

I explore these connections through an examination of several images memorializing one of the main pillars of such narratives: the orchestrated murder of an estimated 8,000 Bosniac men and boys by Serb forces that overtook the UN-protected ‘Safe Area’ of Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia on July 11, 1995, in the final months of the war. BiH photographer Tarik Samarah produced a series of pictures related to this event as a contribution to keeping the memory of genocide alive. I analyze several of these photographs and their different incorporation into poster and billboard designs, in two instances, designs by Sarajevo artist, Šejla Kamerić. I explore both their content as well as the new meanings created by their intentional and unintentional placement in the public landscape of Sarajevo. The conclusions I draw are read against more than a decade of ethnographic research on topics of gender and representation primarily in the Bosniac dominated parts of BiH.4

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1 There are of course those who would disagree with this characterization but they do not tend to be feminists or critics of the gendered bases of nationalism.

2 A large literature on gender and nationalism addresses common ways in which national(ist) projects are constituted through images of women and other gendered and sexualized representations. See among others Mosse (1985), McClintock (1993) and Yuval-Davis (1997).

3 While this paper deals mainly with visuals, in other work I explore the resonance of dominant images among Bosnian women themselves (Helms 2003a, 2003b, 2007).

4 I have been conducting fieldwork on women’s activism since 1997, most intensely over two years in 1999–2000 in the Bosniac dominated town of Zenica as well as in Sarajevo and other parts of BiH.
I begin with some clarification of the terms ‘Bosniac’ and ‘Bosnian.’ While these are sometimes used interchangeably, especially in the international media, there is a distinct difference in local meanings and political connotations. Various political forces representing the Bosniacs, or Bosnian Muslims, starting with the late President Alija Izetbegović’s SDA (Stranka Demokratske Akcije, Party of Democratic Action) have championed a united, multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovinian state, a stance that explicitly opposes the separatism of Serb and Croat nationalisms, both in terms of territorial-political configurations and in the claim that ‘Bosnia’s ethnic groups’ cannot live together. Also promoting the ideas of multi-ethnicity and tolerance in various ways are a host of anti-nationalist, secular, Bosniac and non-Bosniac citizens who support a unified state with a Bosnian-Herzegovinian identity that does not specify ethnic or religious affiliation and opposes the territorial separation wrought by ethnic cleansing as enshrined in the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war (see Bose 2002). Compared to the degree of ethnic homogeneity among supporters of Serb and Croat nationalisms, supporters of what might be called Bosnian nationalism are more diverse: there were Serbs, Croats, and others who fought in the Bosniac-dominated Bosnian Army against Serb and/or Croat forces, just as there are more non-Bosniacs (up to 20% of the population) who remained in Bosniac-dominated areas like Sarajevo (Markowitz 2006). At the same time, many Bosnia supporters also oppose Bosniac nationalists’ efforts to assert Bosniac primacy over territories in their control and to define this Bosniac identity through religious devotion to Islam. Bosniac nationalism has long been dominated by religious leaders and politicians who have pushed for the prominence of Islam in public life and made other discursive and legal moves that make non-Bosniacs and secular Bosniacs uneasy (Bougarel 1997, Helms 2008). They have done this while simultaneously offering a discourse of multi-ethnic tolerance and support for a united Bosnian state, perhaps, as some charge, only cynically in the

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5 The SDA at first led the defence of a multi-ethnic BiH state only to later mould the Bosnian Army into a fighting force of the Bosniac (ethno-)nation premised on devotion to Islam (see Bougarel 1997; Hoare 2004). Support for a multi-ethnic BiH remained the official position, however.

6 There are endless other areas of ‘messiness’: there were non-Serbs who fought in Serb military formations, non-Croats fighting with Croat armies, and people from ‘mixed marriages’ or ‘other’ ethnic backgrounds who chose their affiliations regardless of dominant assumptions about who was who. Fighting, like political orientations, thus did not map exactly onto group identities but was more contingent on local specificities and loyalties, perhaps best illustrated by the conflict in northwest Bosnia between two groups of Muslims. On the war, see e.g. Burg and Shoup (1999).
hopes that Bosniacs would still dominate or to satisfy western governments that have wielded considerable power over BiH since the signing of Dayton. For our purposes here, it is important to note that both Bosnian and Bosniac nationalist stances condemn the war violence by Serb and Croat nationalist forces and stress that the majority of victims were Bosniacs, but that motivations for these positions vary widely: from a sense of ethno-religious victimhood, to loyalty to a (non-ethnic) Bosnian identity, to a universal concern for human rights, and everything in between, sometimes all at once.

Nationalisms everywhere strive for their nations to be recognized as collective victims, never aggressors. Vlasta Jalušić has argued that the nationalisms of the former Yugoslavia are not built only on various distortions and selective remembering of the past but also on what she terms "organized innocence," which allows for, even justifies, further victimization of ‘others’ (2007). The point is thus not to identify one's nation with the miserable condition of victimhood but to convince both the world and one’s presumed co-nationals of the nation’s ‘innocence’ as a basis from which its cause can be seen as moral, its actions justified, and just. No ambiguity is allowed in these depictions: members of one's own nation can only be victims, enemy groups only perpetrators. And those affected by the conflict (or past conflicts) can only be identified in ethno-national terms. This ‘arms race’ of victimhood has perhaps inevitably led to claims on behalf of nearly every ethno-national group in what was Yugoslavia to the status of the Jews as victims not only of genocide but of the worst genocide, the Holocaust (see Power 1999). Comparisons of Serb ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaigns against Bosniacs to the Holocaust began early in the war as part of attempts to urge western governments to do something to stop the carnage or to chastise them for inaction (see Hansen 2006, Hayden 2008a). Since the war's end, however, and throughout the politi-
cal struggles of the post-war period, such parallels have persisted as a basis for claims to collective innocence and moral standing (Miller 2006).

Given this ideal of depicting ‘innocence,’ it is perhaps not surprising that victim discourses have frequently been conveyed through images of women. In situations of armed conflict, women, along with the children and elderly in their care, represent the innocent. They epitomize the civilian, widely rejected as a legitimate target of war violence, whether directly or as ‘collateral damage,’ despite the fact that modern wars tend to produce higher civilian than military casualties. ‘Innocence’ thus stems from essentialist presumptions about sex roles: women are assumed to be unconnected to political or military spheres, while men are targeted as potential (political or military) threats (Carpenter 2006, 2003; Helms 2007, 2003a; Jones 2000). In Bosnia, the iconic victims have been precisely those seen as the farthest away from the centers of political and military decision-making, even from ‘modern’ life in the city: the rural women survivors of the Srebrenica genocide. These associations are not straightforward, however, as the next section details.

Srebrenica: Gender and Genocide

‘Srebrenica’ has occupied a key position in Bosnian and Bosnian narratives (Dimova 2009, Duijzings 2007, Miller 2006), often standing in as the master signifier for the entire war. It serves as the ultimate symbol of Bosniac victimhood, the brutality of the Serbs, or the destructiveness of nationalism, whether specific (Serb) varieties or in general. The ubiquitous description of Srebrenica as the worst massacre in Europe since WWII is both statement of fact as well as a repeated discursive link to the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. This link was strengthened by the 2001 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) judgment against Bosnian Serb General Radislav Krstić which declared that genocide had been committed at Srebrenica. A less satisfying message came from the 2007 ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) where BiH had sued Serbia for genocide. The ICJ accepted the ICTY’s characterization of Srebrenica (but not ethnic cleansing in other parts of BiH) as genocide, ruling that Serbia was responsible only for failing to prevent it. But even the question of genocide at Srebrenica is far from settled, first because some suspect the courts

narratives closer to the Serb way of “being in history,” i.e., interpreting all events through notions of collective ‘ethnic’ victimhood (2007).
of various political motivations, but also because the rulings left many openings for critique, chief among them being inconsistent interpretations of the definition of genocide (for opposing criticisms, see Hayden 2008a, 2008b; Hoare 2010). In other words, the case for recognizing genocide against the Bosniacs continues to be contested, not only among Serb nationalists and their supporters (who may never accept the genocide label or see Bosniacs as victims) and among those seeking to broaden the genocide label to all Bosnian Serb actions against Bosniacs in the war, but also among the foreign officials who have decision-making power over the fragile BiH state (see Bieber 2005, Bose 2002). It is therefore urgent that the case for (innocent) victimhood is made in the strongest terms possible and in the registers that will appeal especially to those in western governments.

One of the problems with the hyperbolic rhetoric of what Samantha Power calls “Holocaustizing” (1999) is the impossibility of living up to the role of the helpless victim and the pattern of Nazi killings; as “implicated victims” it can be shown that ‘they’ are not completely innocent (ibid., 54; quoting Helen Fein). The Bosniacs/Bosnians, if viewed as a ‘side’ in the war, did have an army, which fought back, even at times going on the offensive or committing and allowing atrocities (Hoare 2004), including in the Srebrenica region (Duijzings 2007, Sudetic 1998). It is precisely the question of whether the dead at Srebrenica were civilians or soldiers that is one of the main bases to conflicting assessments of the killings. One of the first steps made in arguments that downplay the seriousness of the crimes is to refer to the killed men as soldiers who ‘died in the fighting’ for the enclave. Indeed, the rationale given to the Dutch UN Peacekeepers by the Bosnian Serb Army during the capture of the enclave for why they had to detain men of fighting age (a category they applied so broadly that young boys and old men were also taken) instead of expelling them to

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11 The 28th Division of the Bosnian Army engaged Bosnian Serb forces as they attempted to lead thousands of civilians through the forests to safety. These were also the forces that had earlier undertaken numerous forays into Serb-held territory in attempts to enlarge the enclave or connect it to Bosnian Army held territory nearby. It was during these raids that many hungry and desperate civilians also took part in attacks on Serb villages in which many Serb civilians were killed, forming the basis for Serb claims to victimhood in the region (see Duijzings 2007).

12 Such critics, who include many Serbs in BiH and Serbia, tend to also minimize the numbers of dead, going so far as to equate them with numbers of Serbs killed by Bosniacs prior to the fall of Srebrenica. While such arguments persist, both the Bosnian Serb and Serbian governments have officially acknowledged the extent of the killings, but without using the term ‘genocide.’ On ‘Serb’ narratives of Srebrenica see Duijzings (2007) and Miller (2006).
Bosniac controlled territory with the ‘women and children,’ i.e. the clear civilians, was that they were potential or probable soldiers who needed to be screened for having committed war crimes. To be clear, while there was a Bosnian Army unit in Srebrenica when it fell, the vast majority of the roughly 8,000 murdered men and boys were unarmed civilians. Moreover, whether the men were soldiers, soldiers out of uniform, or ordinary civilians, their capture and systematic execution along with later organized efforts by Bosnian Serb forces to hide the remains of the dead, should make their classification irrelevant. Nevertheless, it has been of great importance to narratives of Bosniac victimhood that Srebrenica’s dead be classified as civilians. Reminders of the presence of Bosnian Army soldiers apparently threaten to compromise the view of innocent Bosniac victims and Serb culpability.

Images of the women survivors of Srebrenica communicate this emphasis on several levels at once. Most straightforwardly, as women they are the quintessential civilians in opposition to (male) soldiers. They are also assumed to be, and frequently portray themselves as, mothers, further evoking the private sphere of the home, the counterpart to the implicated arena of politics and the military, and alluding to the innocent children and elderly in their care (Helms 2003a). Their mere presence, alive, further communicates crucial information about their absent male relatives, their “most beloved” (najmiliji) as the survivors often call them. The women appear in a mode of femaleness that suggests a complementary maleness: if the women are mothers, then the missing men are sons, i.e. children, the ultimate innocents. As women searching for ‘their men,’ they draw our attention to men who were embedded in family relations: they were responsible husbands, caring fathers, and dependent sons rather than detached ‘men’ who may have taken up arms or posed a threat.13 Stef Jansen (2010) has articulated two modes of masculinity dominant in Bosnia across social classes: the responsible family man or ‘father’ and the fierce, independent womanizer, or ‘frajer’ in local parlance. Jansen stresses that these two modes can be expressed simultaneously or over different periods of life in the same individual. It is thus all the more imperative in discourses about Srebrenica to stress family related images of the killed

13 A similar effect is achieved by portrayals of the clothing and personal items found with the murdered men’s remains. See especially the posters produced by Ajna Zlatar and Anur Hadžiomerspahić for the tenth anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica (http://www.ideologija.ba/#), which pictured such clothing with international brands and logos photographed by the Podrinja Identification Project (see Wagner 2009).
men rather than the equal likelihood, according to the dominant norms of masculinity, that these men may have used violence or asserted dominance over others. Even when the Bosniac men who joined the Army are mentioned in other contexts of the Bosnian war, they are still associated with the responsible ‘father’ mode, taking up arms to defend their families rather than out of a macho propensity to violence (see Helms 2010b and Kanaaneh 2005).

The distinctions between military and civilians, or legitimate war deaths and violations of international law, that are crucial to representations of Srebrenica rest on generalizations and assumptions about both gender and ethno-national groupings. The classification of Srebrenica as ‘genocide’ in the ICTY’s Krstić ruling was no exception. Since the entire population had not been murdered, ‘only’ the military aged men, the Defense in this case reasoned that the genocide label should not be applied. In response, the Prosecution argued, and the judge agreed, that, due to the “traditionally patriarchal society” of the population, Serb forces would have known that killing just the men “would inevitably result in the physical disappearance of the Bosnian Muslim population at Srebrenica” (ICTY 2001: 211–212). No one seemed to need any further explanation. As the judgment put it, it was “common knowledge” that this rural population was “patriarchal,” that men were the leaders and breadwinners – and potential fighters – while women remained uneducated and dependent (ibid, 209). The assumption was that patriarchal norms would prevent women from remarrying or having more children, and from carrying on the coherence of the group as community leaders.

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14 The ‘frajer’ is the positively judged ‘boys will be boys’ spin on the more negative violent, barbaric enemy man. These distinctions are frequently articulated through ethno-national differences (Helms 2010b).
15 This section draws on my analysis in Helms (2010a).
16 The definition of the targeted population as “the Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica” (or sometimes of “Eastern Bosnia” from which many of the refugees had come) was also crucial to the genocide ruling (Hayden 2008b: 397–400).
17 Note that a seemingly opposite argument was made in favour of classifying mass rapes as ‘genocidal rape’: by targeting the women of an ethno-national group with rape and forced pregnancy, the intention and effect was to inhibit the future reproduction of that group (defined in terms of ‘ethnicity-as-blood’). See e.g. Žarkov 2007 for a critique.
18 In addition to the social and legal barriers, the first obstacle to Srebrenica women re-marrying or having more children was simply that there was a shortage of men (Helms 2010a, Jansen/Helms 2009). As for the assumption that the women would remain silent, this has been contradicted by the very active and vocal associations of Srebrenica women who have testified in war crimes trials, staged demonstrations, and protested in the media, earning the derogatory label ‘jet-set victims’ and accusations that they were being ‘manipulated’ by (male) politicians (Helms 2009a).
These assumptions and the failure to question them reflect an orientalist view (Said 1978) of Muslim society and a balkanist view (Todorova 1997) of rural Bosnia, both presumed to be highly oppressive of women (Helms 2008, 2006; Žarkov 1995). For outsiders, all of the Balkans seemed tainted in this way, especially Muslim communities (Todorova 1997), while local populations tended to locate the patriarchal, the traditional, and the backward – the ‘Balkan’ – in the rural (Helms 2008, 2006; Stefansson 2007). Thus, images of Srebrenica women evoked innocence for the reasons discussed above but also exuded a sense of the wretched, pitiable victim from the underdeveloped world. This was underscored for those familiar with Bosnian society by the headscarves and *dimije* (colorful baggy trousers) worn by many of the Srebrenica women (but notably not usually by their publicly visible leaders) and always part of the typical way in which they were depicted. This was clothing that marked them as both Muslim and rural as well as female (Bringa 1995) and for locals indexed the hostility felt by urbanites toward the mostly rural refugees who had inundated the cities as a result of the war (Stefansson 2007).

‘Srebrenica’ and Bosniac victimhood in general have thus typically been depicted through images of ‘Srebrenica women.’ The most common is that of the mourning woman: women survivors praying over the burial biers (*tabuts*) or graves of their loved ones, or beside images of bones emerging from mass graves. The women pictured are typically older, always in headscarves, and frequently weeping. Some of the most moving images pair such women with shots of row upon row of the green *tabuts* in which the remains of the missing are buried, or in front of the marble tablets bearing the endless names of the dead. A second form of these images indexes the injustice of the tragedy and the failures of the ‘international community’ to prevent it or bring its perpetrators to justice. Srebrenica women appear protesting, demanding the truth about the missing and punishment for those responsible. Often, it is just their angry faces that convey the outrage felt by many on behalf of the victims as well as toward the Serb perpetrators and the politicians that continue to belittle the crimes. These modes of representation repeat themselves in a variety of ways, as the images examined below make clear.

*Headscarves, Bones, and Coca-Cola*

Every year since 2003, commemorations of the Srebrenica massacre have taken place at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Complex just down the road from Srebrenica in the village of Potočari where the Dutch UN
troops were headquartered and where most of the survivors last saw their loved ones alive. Since then, commemorations have taken place alongside the (re)burial of recovered remains of the victims on July 11, the day the enclave fell to the Serbs. The day itself is filled with highly scripted political speeches and appearances as much as more private individual survivors’ experiences of grief (Wagner 2009, Miller 2006). In the Bosniac dominated areas, the anniversaries receive full media coverage, the week leading up to the 11th saturated with special television programs, news features, interviews with survivors, and coverage of ongoing war crimes trials. Summer is in any case a bustling time of year in Bosnia and especially Sarajevo, as Bosnians now living in the ‘diaspora’ descend on the country, as do many foreign visitors from aid consultants and activists to tourists to artists and academics visiting during summer holidays. Some come expressly for the Srebrenica commemoration. There is a feeling that the eyes of the world are upon Bosnia once again as they were during the war. Art and photo exhibitions, performances, lectures, and posters in prominent places remind those who might be distracted by other aspects of life of the terrible events in Srebrenica and of the war in general.

In late summer 2003, a series of billboards appeared throughout Bosniac dominated areas reminding viewers of the tragedy of Srebrenica and announcing the official opening of the Potočari Memorial Complex scheduled for September of that year. The billboards used some of the poignant images taken by Tarik Samarah alongside the single word “Srebrenica,” the date of the burial (20.09.2003), and below in smaller type, “memorial marker, Potočari cemetery” (spomen obilježje mezarje Potočari), using a word for cemetery that indicates it is for Muslims. Among images of bones and coffins was also that of an old woman’s wrinkled face, staring into the camera with an expression that is at once sad and stern. Samarah identifies the woman as a “Srebrenica mother,” photographed at a refugee camp near Tuzla in 2002. This information is not necessary, however, next to the word “Srebrenica.” We see only the woman’s face, but this single word invites the viewer to imagine it framed by a headscarf, her body clad in the typical clothing of an older Bosniac woman from rural Eastern Bosnia. In keeping with dominant images, we imagine her a simple woman with little schooling. And she is certainly a pious Muslim believer. Her wrinkled face tells us she is both a mother and a grandmother; it could hardly be otherwise. The word “Srebrenica” also tells us why this woman is both sad and stern, grieving and accusing. We know she has lost loved ones, that those missing are men and boys, that she hasn’t been able to bury the bodies, that she is a refugee without a permanent home or a source of
income once supplied by male breadwinners, and that no one has been made to answer for the crimes that led to her suffering. As an old woman, now ‘alone’ without husband, sons, or grandsons, she is an indisputable victim. For those familiar with the context, all this can be read from the simple image of the woman’s face (or half of it). The face and the word together convey both the immense individual grief and the collective tragedy of ‘Srebrenica.’

The billboards in this series were placed around the city as any other advertisement, such that they mingled with the rest of the visual landscape, competing for the attention of passersby with other ads and reminders of other concerns. In one spot on a major Sarajevo road, the billboard with the old woman’s face appeared next to an advertisement for Coca-Cola (see Figure 1). The Coke ad showed a group of young people of both sexes laughing and drinking Coke, their colorful clothes and the red side panel contrasting starkly with the black and white somberness of the Srebrenica billboard. “With every bite, a swig of Coca-Cola!” it proclaimed. Compared to the conditions in the Srebrenica enclave or even besieged Sarajevo during the war, the idea of having Coca-Cola – or even food for it to wash down – seemed like an extravagance. The ‘western-ness’ of Coca-Cola and the scene of youthful flirting and consumption thus evoked the common feeling in Bosniac majority areas of BiH that ‘the West’ had ignored the atrocities and suffering of the Bosnian war, failing, or worse, not caring to come to the aid of a Muslim population. They were too busy enjoying the fruits of their wealth and the imperatives of consumerism to recognize a moral need to respond. One might further reflect on the young people drinking Coke as reminders of the children and grandchildren lost by the woman in the Srebrenica billboard, indeed lost to the whole community of Bosniacs from the enclave following the logic that the targeting of the male population was deliberately meant to prevent the future propagation of this population. In this way, the pairing might trigger sympathy for the Srebrenica survivors but it also might incite anger at the perpetrators of the massacre and international officials who let it happen.

Another Srebrenica billboard bearing the image of the hand of a forensic anthropologist grasping the bones of an arm emerging from the dirt appeared next to a near-pornographic ad presumably for women’s stockings (see Figure 2). The ad featured a female model wearing a black mini-dress, thigh-high stockings, and spiky high heels. She crawls on all fours.

Also a Samarah photograph, taken during the exhumation of a secondary mass grave: http://www.tariksamarah.com/images_genocid/pages/022_ruka_u_rucl.htm.
Figure 1. Srebrenica commemorative billboard alongside Coca-Cola ad. Sarajevo 2003. Photograph © Edin Hajdarpahić.
with hips raised, her long black hair spilling to the side of her face as she purses her lips seductively for the camera. It is not clear what this billboard was primarily advertising but it was certainly also selling (male-defined, heterosexual) sex. Its placement next to the Srebrenica image neatly juxtaposed this view of sex with the seriousness of death, war, crimes, and victimhood. It was a contrast of two opposing moral worlds, marked by very different images of women: young, sexy, and fashionable vs. the elderly, sad, victimized woman of Srebrenica, or the sober professional of the foreign woman anthropologist holding the hand bones of the Srebrenica victim in the mass grave.\footnote{The living hand is identified as belonging to Eva Klonowski, anthropologist from Iceland (ibid.).}

Consumerism and images of the West are often associated with sex, whether more egalitarian, as in the flirting Coke drinkers, or more objectifying of women, as in the stockings ad. While some in Bosnia saw open allusions to sex as modern and positive aspects of western culture, others saw them as signs of a dangerous abandonment of spirituality, traditional values, and morality which is slowly rotting western society from the inside and is therefore not to be emulated (Helms 2008). The juxtapositions of these two ads with the Srebrenica billboards can thus be read through two opposing but equally common dichotomous worldviews: one might see the balkanist opposition of the prosperous, carefree West with
the Balkans mired in violence and suffering, but equally possible was an immoral, materialist West contrasted to a morally superior Bosnia/Bosniac nation being sacrificed by an uncaring world.

The incongruity was not restricted to attitudes about the West. It also recalled the tension in BiH society between, on the one hand, war victims and their supporters demanding justice and insisting on constant public reminders of the war’s atrocities, and on the other, those who were tired of such reminders and wanted life to “move forward.” Indeed, on the many occasions I have been in BiH during the Srebrenica anniversary, I have listened to complaints by all sorts of Bosnians about the media saturation with the topic of the war. They were tired of thinking about it, they said, and they did not want to be reminded of those difficult days no matter how they had personally experienced them. Even war victims who appeared in the media, otherwise met with sympathy, were often received with exasperation and rolled eyes. The women of Srebrenica were especially visible and especially resented in this way.

The reminder of the war was only part of this resentment, however. In the main it was fueled by a more general urban disdain toward rural refugees who had ‘invaded’ the cities, as noted above. Srebrenica survivors, as the most visible and vocal refugees, were thus a poignant symbol of national suffering invoked by the same urbanites who spared no compassion for the refugees’ plight when complaining about their rural ways and ‘primitive mentalities’ seen as degrading everything from politics and social life to behavior on public transportation and the cleanliness of the streets.

_Bosnian Girl_

Among Samarah’s Srebrenica photographs are the images of graffiti left on the walls of the battery factory in Potočari by the Dutch UN peacekeeping troops headquartered there.21 One that stands out is a gendered slur: “No teeth…? A mustache…? Smel like shit…? Bosnian Girl!” (Bosnian should be read to mean Bosniac, as in the population of the Srebrenica enclave. I return to this designation below.) Such a level of disdain for a population they were supposed to be protecting makes all the more plausible the eventual complicity of the Dutch in the surrender of civilians to death and expulsion at the hands of the invading Serbs. It can be seen as an even further insult when one considers the situation at the time the

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graffiti was written: the desperate conditions in the enclave (among other things hardly conducive to adequate grooming practices) had propelled many women to trade sex for food or favors from the UN soldiers or powerful Bosniac leaders, and both groups had engaged in various forms of sexual abuse of Bosniac women (NIOD 2002). Seen in light of the whole war in Bosnia, the implied (or denied) sexualization of the “Bosnian Girl” was even more chilling against evidence of mass rapes and sexual torture, the majority by Serb forces against Muslim women. Even the hint of possibility that Muslim women might be willing sexual partners clashed uncomfortably with the otherwise dominant image of Bosniac women as passive but noble victims of rape (Helms 2003b, Hromadžić 2007, Žarkov 1997). If anything, it was a reminder that war had put Bosniac women in a position of vulnerability to ‘other’ soldiers – Serbs, Croats, and even UN troops – and away from the protection of ‘their’ men, a further blow to Bosniac masculinity.22

Thus, when the graffiti was publicized, after the fall of the enclave and in the context of the whole Bosnian war and the post-war period of international intervention, the soldier’s words had an even wider meaning. His attitude towards the ‘locals’ showed a broader disdain on the part of ‘the west,’ first in refusing to intervene militarily during the war and thus save thousands of lives, and later in the sorts of stories that emerged about how western aid workers and political representatives treated the local population as an inferior society. This was but one strand of feeling toward the west, as there were also many Bosnians who expressed their profound gratefulness to the US and NATO, for example, for ending the siege of Sarajevo when they bombed Serb positions in the last months of the war. But it was a love-hate relationship, as the arrogant and ignorant attitudes of many of the foreigners who now descended on BiH to work on various aspects of reconstruction (see Coles 2002) began to irritate people. Especially after the 9/11 attacks on the US, complaints of anti-Muslim bias or western actions unfavorable to Bosnia were heard more and more, though in the form that corresponded to individuals’ worldviews and political orientations. The Dutch graffiti was yet another piece of damning evidence against the west, not only for the failures in Srebrenica but more generally.

To these connotations, Sarajevo artist Šejla Kamerić added several new layers and a boost of public visibility with a poster entitled “Bosnian Girl.” The image overlaid her own photograph – looking stern but

22 On the logic of wartime rape in Bosnia, see among others Mostov (1995), Korać (1998), Sofos (1996), and Žarkov (2007).
confident in a white tank top – with the Dutch graffiti, creating a stark contrast between the soldier’s description and her own image as a “Bosnian girl” (see Figure 3).23 Here was an explicit challenge to the arrogance of the west, a proud statement against the ugly stereotypes reproduced


in the international media. The contrast was not only with the attributes listed, but between the beautiful, worldly, educated artist from the city (who could surely spell in English better than the Dutch soldier!) and the image of the typical Srebrenica refugee. However, as I have written elsewhere (Helms 2008: 111–113), there were those in Sarajevo who interpreted Kamerić’s image not only as an indictment of the ‘international community’ but also as a conscious distancing of the urban, cosmopolitan artist from the despised rural refugees epitomized by the Srebrenica enclave population.

Posters of this image first appeared in July 2003 in Sarajevo pasted in clusters on billboards and hung in multiple copies along the route through the center of the city that would be taken by a set of remains of Srebrenica victims as they were driven to Potočari for (re)burial. The posters were thus waiting to bear witness to the procession of the remains, just as human onlookers would. The presence of these remains, and the knowledge that thousands more were waiting to be identified and given a proper burial, would remind onlookers of the fate of the population addressed in the graffiti, further strengthening the impact of the artist’s shaming gaze.

The posters were jarring at first, at least to those who understood the English. I saw many Sarajevans walk up to them (as I had also done) to read the small print at the bottom, also in English, which explained the context and origin of the graffiti. They talked about it in social gatherings, where those who did not understand were filled in. With the absence of explanation in the local language, the posters seem to have been directed primarily at a foreign audience, to remind the many visiting westerners of their own complicity in the Srebrenica tragedy they were now in BiH to commemorate. Some Bosnians felt comforted by the foreigners, whose presence legitimized their feeling of collective victimhood. But others were fed up with the ‘war tourism’ just as they were fed up with everything that kept attention on the war and its victims and away from the many other problems of the post-war period. Kamerić’s poster thus refocused attention on Bosniac victimhood, not so much at the hands of the Serbs, though this was not lost in her message, but even by their supposed allies in ‘the west.’ At the same time, however, it constructed a sophisticated, cosmopolitan ‘us,’ just as modern as those western visitors, as the ones with the worldly knowledge to condemn on behalf of the wretched, silenced victims. Women, young and old, rural and urban, visible and

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24 This poster was in fact later displayed in Berlin, Japan, and elsewhere, and incorporated into subsequent pieces by the artist.
invisible, were the powerful symbols conveying these varying senses of national victimhood.

Srebrenica Visits Anne Frank

Yet another Samarah photograph shows another “mother from Srebrenica” contemplating a poster outside the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam. The woman’s back is turned to the camera, as are the backs of the two girls in the poster, Anne and Margot Frank. The sisters appear in the famous photograph taken by their father of them on the beach looking out over the water wearing matching halter swimsuits, their dark hair bobbed in the style by which we recognize Anne Frank. It is a carefree scene, weighed down by the knowledge of how their lives were cut short. The Srebrenica mother is identified only by her headscarf and long coat. We cannot see her face or guess her expression. We cannot see whether she is young or old. She is not an individual but “a Srebrenica mother,” a symbol of the massacre, of Bosniac victimhood, of genocide. Again, the woman’s headscarf conjures up a host of associations, starting with the woman’s ethnicity and religion: Bosniac and Muslim. Her rural origins can also be surmised, even though she is not in the typical village dimije – the headscarf paired with the designation of Srebrenica is enough. Her identification as a mother from Srebrenica further implies it was her children – her son(s) – whom she lost in the massacre, even if she also lost other male family members. This loss is underscored by the scene of children with which she is confronted, children who were also killed in an act of collective violence.

Of course, it was not just any violence but the Holocaust. In asking us to accept a similarity between Srebrenica and the Holocaust, this photograph taps into attempts by Bosniac leaders to appropriate the moral righteousness and collective innocence of the Jews as ultimate victims (see Miller 2006). The appearance of a Srebrenica survivor with a famous victim of the Holocaust thus places Srebrenica in the same category of genocide, its victims in the same position of moral superiority, and the perpetrators as

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25 Rural women often don a skirt in place of dimije when they leave their village or neighborhood (see Bringa 1995).
26 Hayden (2008a) catalogues what he sees as efforts to mould representations of the Bosnian war into those of a contemporary Holocaust even while events were still unfolding, including the search for a Bosnian Anne Frank, thirteen-year-old Zlata Filipović, whose diary of life during the siege became an international bestseller.
equally monstrous. This equation also facilitates the ease with which the genocide label gets applied to the whole of the Bosnian war, rather than only to Srebrenica.27 Widening of this designation correspondingly deepens the basis upon which claims to innocence and righteousness can be made and more effectively obscures the many fewer but nonetheless serious instances during the Bosnian war when Serbs or Croats were deliberately killed, ‘ethnically cleansed,’ or tortured in camps by Bosniacs and their allies.

Accomplishing this link through the image of females is at first glance a statement about the innocence of the victims and the injustice of their suffering, since women and especially girls are never considered ‘legitimate’ targets in war. But given the logic of determining genocide, their different fates point to further considerations. In the Jewish genocide, the whole population was targeted – young and old, males and females. So Anne and her sister did not survive.28 But the Srebrenica mother was allowed to live, this genocide having been determined by the logic that the killing of the male population served the same purpose of annihilation of the group. By living she is able to testify to the crime; although the woman in the photograph is silent – we do not see her mouth – the women survivors of Srebrenica have been anything but. Indeed, the image of this woman in the Netherlands reminds us not only of the Dutch troops that played such an infamous role in the surrender of the enclave but also that the ICTY is located here. And unless she has resettled here as a refugee, what else could such an impoverished, rural woman of little education be doing in the Netherlands aside from testifying at the court against the Serb perpetrators? We are thus reminded simultaneously of the seriousness of the crimes, the weight of the genocide pronouncement by the ICTY, the ethnicity of the victims, the suffering of the survivors/mothers, and the victimhood and innocence of the Bosniacs.

The tie to the Holocaust was further strengthened through another poster design by Kamerić, which added to Samarah’s photograph the headline, “1945–1995–2005.” Two genocides were thus linked in time,

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27 Parallels between the Holocaust and Serb ‘ethnic cleansing’ can certainly be drawn, starting with the persecution and killing of ‘ethnic others,’ but so too are there many differences in the character and scale of these atrocities, the Holocaust having been much bigger in absolute numbers, in the range of different places from which Jews were deported and killed, and in the proportion of the larger population that met its end.

28 The Nazis did make selections at different points in the killing. In fact, Anne Frank and her sister were sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as slave laborers rather than being gassed immediately upon arrival to Auschwitz as were younger children and many of the elderly and ill. The “Final Solution,” however, envisioned the ultimate killing of all Jews.
Srebrenica as a later incarnation of the first, with the present marked by the ten-year anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica in 2005. The poster was printed on a large banner and hung on the side of the Sarajevo Ashkenazi synagogue where it was visible from one of the main central thoroughfares in the city, just across the Miljacka River (see Figure 4). Most obviously, the placement was meant to reference the Jews, as the primary victims of Nazi persecution and killings. Sarajevo and Bosnia had also been occupied by the Nazis and made part of the quisling Independent State of Croatia led by Croat Ustaše. Nearly 70% of the Bosnian Jewish population perished in WWII. After emigrations to Israel during the socialist period and the recent war, Sarajevo’s Jewish population has dwindled to around 800 (Džidić 2008). The synagogue is thus minimally in use. There is a vibrant, if small, community, but there is no rabbi (one comes in from Israel to officiate at High Holidays) (see Markowitz 2010: 112–143). The reference could thus be read as a warning of what had been meant for the Muslims of Bosnia, or of what had actually happened to the Muslims of Srebrenica.

But the connection to the synagogue could also have a more ambiguous meaning if one considers that Nazi and Ustaše atrocities during World War II had their local supporters among Croats and not a few Muslims, especially in the Srebrenica area (Duijzings 2007). Indeed, the Ustaše dutifully aided their Nazi sponsors in annihilating the Jews in territories under their control, but their special obsession was to rid the country of Serbs, which they attempted with particular viciousness (see Dulić 2005). In other words, members of the same group that had now been found to be perpetrators of genocide in Srebrenica had been murdered in massive numbers by the same Nazi surrogates who had virtually destroyed Bosnia’s Jews. The massive WWII losses among Serbs were in fact prominent in Serb narratives of victimhood, which frequently likened those events to the Holocaust, especially where Serbs and Jews were murdered together.

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29 Paul B. Miller, who briefly discusses this same banner, notes that it was also hung in Zagreb a year later at the site of a synagogue that was destroyed in WWII (2006: 322).
30 Between 10,000 and 12,000 from a population of 14,000 Bosnian Jews are estimated to have been killed (Malcolm 1994: 176), 7,092 from Sarajevo alone (Donia 2006: 201).
31 Again, there were obvious differences that must not be played down, such as the much larger scale and scope of the Jewish Holocaust but also, most importantly, for definitions of genocide, differences in intent. Dulić argues that Ustaše intentions toward the Jews were clearly genocidal, whereas it is less clear that they wanted to annihilate the Serbs in toto rather than rid the country of their presence through a combination of killings, expulsions, and conversions (2005). See Hoare (2010), however, on the problems with excluding even this form of intent from classification as genocide.
Figure 4  Banner by Šejla Kamerić using Tarik Samarah’s photograph, hung on the side of the Ashkenazi synagogue in Sarajevo. Photograph © Elissa Helms.
in the Jasenovac camp in Croatia (Denich 1994, Hayden 1994), and vilified Muslims for having joined the Ustaša (see Duijzings 2007). Of course, ethnic violence in WWII Bosnia had also claimed the lives of many Muslims, victims of Serb royalist Četnik forces, especially in Eastern Bosnia and including Srebrenica (Duijzings 2007; Dulić 2005). Beginning in the last days of socialist Yugoslavia, Bosniac nationalists have pointed to WWII as one of a string of historical genocides against the Muslims (Sorabji 2006). The 1945 on Kamerić’s poster was thus also open to a reading that stressed the historical continuity of (Serb) genocidal attacks on Bosniacs as a nation.

However, such complications of history were not likely to occur to most Sarajevans and sympathetic visitors who viewed the banner on the synagogue. Its placement was more apt to invoke the oft-repeated cliche of Sarajevo’s multireligious and multicultural character, made visible by the spires of Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical churches, the Ashkenazi synagogue, and the minarets of dozens of mosques all clustered near each other in the historic center of the city. Repeated as a retort to separatist Serb and Croat nationalisms that insisted that members of Bosnia’s main ethnic groups could not live together, the image was one of ethnic tolerance and embracing of difference through what Hajdarpašić (2008) notes is a distorted equation of multiculturalism with multiconfessionality, with religion as the primary marker of ethnic difference. In contrast to the many mosques and churches that were destroyed throughout BiH as a part of Serb (and Croat) ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaigns, Sarajevans were proud to have such diverse houses of worship still standing in their city. Coupled with narratives of victimhood, it stood as proof of the tolerant, morally superior Bosnian and Bosniac ‘nature.’ The synagogue was always part of this point, even though the population it served was now tiny. In fact, tourist shops in the old Turkish quarter of Sarajevo (which was once teeming with Jewish businesses: Donia 2006), apparently without irony, sold mugs and T-shirts with images of these church, mosque and synagogue towers under the slogan, “Sarajevo: the European Jerusalem.”

Efforts to ‘balance’ one nation’s losses in WWII with that of the recent war also tend to erase non-ethnic aspects of WWII, i.e. that many victims fell as Partisans and anti-fascists rather than because of their ethnic background per se. On a similar retroactive ethnicization of the socialist period, see Gilbert (2006).

Presumably this made reference to Jerusalem’s multireligious character rather than its long and unsettled history of conflict and territorial divisions among its religious groups.
This celebration bordering on fetishization of multiethnicity, multiculturalism, and multireligiousness – often flippantly referred to as “multi-mult” – was both heartfelt principle for many Sarajevans and official narrative of Bosniac nationalist leaders, such that it was difficult to tell the difference between the two, when in fact there was one. It was also touted by the agents of foreign intervention and spokespeople for the ‘international community’ as the principle that would allow BiH to emerge from the devastation of the war as a democratic, whole state and member of the European Union (see Gilbert 2008, Hajdarpašić 2008). However, it masked the ways in which non-Bosniacs did not always feel at ease in the now Bosniac dominated city, opposition to attempts at strengthening Islamic influence in public life, and the dissatisfaction felt by those who wished for a return to idealized socialist times when, they said, “nobody knew who was who.” Kamerić’s banner swept such problems aside, however, by evoking the moral superiority of tolerant Bosniacs and multicultural Sarajevans simultaneously with a Bosniac victim narrative, which foreclosed any consideration of the nuances and diversity of Bosnian politics in everyday life.

Conclusion: Subtlety and Ambiguity

One could ask whether the creators of these images intended to convey a Bosniac victimhood discourse or were instead motivated simply by an urge to witness, remember, and reflect on a terrible atrocity. Without presuming to know these intentions, I have discussed the wider context in which these images appeared, reflecting on their possible meanings given the dominant currents of social and political stances in post-war BiH. The artists mentioned come from a youthful, urban, educated milieu that cultivates a moral politics of anti-nationalism, valuing ethnic tolerance and support for a multi-ethnic BiH. At the same time, there is considerable overlap with discourses of Bosniac nationalism, and in a way with all nationalisms of the region that interpret wars and politics through collective ethnic categories. Regardless of motivation, there is a shared urgency to condemn wartime atrocities such as Srebrenica or the siege of Sarajevo.

34 In the cases of Samarah and Kamerić, both have linked their work to the wish that society should be reminded of the events of the war despite tendencies to forget (see Samarah's website op. cit.; Heta et al. 2009: 38). Miller, however, notes that the front of the book of Samarah's Srebrenica photographs features the prominent label “Genocide” in bold letters on black background, a presentation Miller found “manipulative” (2006: 312).
to insist that Bosniacs be recognized as the most numerous victims of the recent war, and to have perpetrators brought to justice. There is thus an unspoken tension between recognition of suffering and criminality on a universally human basis, and reinforcement of the logic of territorially based ethnic collectivities that fueled the violence in the first place.

Most of all, there is room for ambiguity, as in the identifier of the ‘Bosnian Girl’ herself. It is clear we should understand this to mean Bosniac; it is easy to imagine the Dutch conflating ‘Bosnian’ with ‘Muslim’ as has been common in the international press since the beginning of the war. While at first glance, this slippage could be read as a challenge to the depiction of ethnic ‘sides’ to the conflict, in most cases, as with the Dutch graffiti, it is merely a mistaken means of referring to Bosniacs. Perhaps ‘Bosnian’ is easier than trying to understand the complicated history and differences in popular usage of ethnonyms for the Bosniacs.35 The effect, however, is to exclude non-Bosniac supporters of a BiH state, rendering all Serbs and Croats as nationalist separatists (effectively erasing all ‘others’) and playing into the kind of overlap between Bosniac and Bosnian narratives I am concerned with here. The identity of the ‘Bosnian Girl’ is at once perfectly obvious (Bosniac/Muslim) but also ambiguous: It introduces a muddled zone of overlap whereby the ‘Bosniac victim’ can claim the moral status of the tolerant, anti-nationalist supporters of BiH – a ‘Bosnian,’ non-ethnic identity that nevertheless relies on a sort of liberal multicultural classification of citizens into ethnic ‘camps’ (Arsenijević 2007, Hajdarpašić 2008).

This is an ambiguity of motivation, however, not one that relates to the main message of victimhood – of Bosniacs, of civilians, of innocents – which is important for both the Bosniac and Bosnian projects but for different reasons. Those who privilege the logic of ethnic collectivities require ethnically defined victims and perpetrators, something easily readable in these images. Those who oppose ethnic nationalisms (not just particular ones) can point to the victimization of innocents targeted solely because of their ethnic background as the terrible consequence of such ethno-national logic. But highlighting victimhood in the name of opposing atrocities can easily serve to bolster the national cause associated with the victimized group. Those who are aware of this dilemma must therefore struggle to express their opposition without reifying ethno-religious dif-

35 ‘Bosniac,’ instituted in 1993, was the most recent official name change in a long history of consolidation as a ‘nation’ (narod) for a group referred to colloquially also as ‘Muslims’ in an ethno-national sense (see Bringa 1995).
ference or reproducing ethno-collective worldviews. The images analyzed here reflect this difficulty.

There are many much more overt examples one could choose to demonstrate how images of women are used to construct discourses of Bosniac victimhood. The images discussed here are among the more subtle, avoiding the sort of crass demonizing of ‘the other’ often found in representations of victimhood. These images are silent about the perpetrators of the war crimes they nevertheless reference, although they sometimes point explicitly to the culpability of outsiders such as the Dutch. Instead, victimhood and grief are foregrounded, a focus strengthened by the use of images of women, especially mothers. However, they are unequivocal about the identity of the victims and about what identifying characteristics are even important. It is collective, ethno-national identity that is conveyed, sometimes overtly through images of headscarves or Islamic grave markers, but at other times only implied or legible to those ‘in the know.’ In the all-or-nothing logic of competing collective victimhood where ethno-national categories are the sole determinants of perpetrators and victims, guilt and innocence, the morally compromised and the righteous, there is little room for subtlety or explorations that complicate the neat view of ethno-national groups as moral actors in their own right (Brubaker 2002). Instead, discussions on the future of BiH continue to be tethered to assessments of collective victimhood as signaled by the simplicity of images of headscarves and mourning mothers.

References

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