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# Contextualities of listening to soundscapes: the past and the present converging in Sarajevo.

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# Contextualities of Listening to Soundscapes: The Past and The Present Converging in Sarajevo

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## Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between autobiographical memories and personal and group identities in the post-conflict soundscape of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The discussion will focus on the perspectives of residents and their intersecting narratives, collected in interviews, on the city's soundscape. I will relay intimate experiences of the city's soundscapes, contextualized from the position of a listener who is native to the city. The ways in which memories of the recent war (1992-1996) inform conversations reveal links between traumatic memories and experiences of environmental sounds. From the religious calls of mosques and churches to inhabitants pleading for help on the streets of Sarajevo, the complexity of contexts that play a role in knowledge production about the city will be explored through listening and writing. The article, in the form of praxis, aims to accentuate the importance of local knowledge of soundscape as a means of decolonizing the sonic arts discourse. An interest in the ways that the city's inhabitants engage with contemporary soundscapes and how the past informs our present knowledge about places guides this inquiry.

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## 1. Theoretical Frame and Scope of the Essay

This paper draws on a research study that explored Sarajevo's soundscapes through the personal experiences of residents between 2015 and 2019.<sup>1</sup> I conducted semi-structured interviews and performed numerous soundwalks alone, with and without recording equipment. In this article, I interweave personal and contextual insights about the city (its history, culture, and language), quotations from interviews, field recordings, and photographs. I am a female, born in Sarajevo in 1987 and living there until 2015, when I moved to Scotland.

This Sarajevo study was part of an international practice-led doctoral research conducted in two towns and two cities. In central Bosnia and Herzegovina, the research focused on Maglaj, a small town I did not know first-hand, and Sarajevo, the city where I had spent most of my life. In North-East Scotland, Banchory was selected as a town unfamiliar to me and Aberdeen as a city where I have resided for several years. The study explored the ways that personal identities and histories inform the experience of listening on site. The research revealed the intricate ways that individuals give meaning to what is heard, or "perception as mental insight, or a sense made of a range of sensory information, with memories and expectations" (Rodaway 1994: 10). It also revealed the importance of understanding socio-political contexts that are often not accessible to a listener who visits the place for the first time, due to a lack of personal experience (Zećo 2019).

The study found that listeners make sense of what they hear based on their understanding of a place and their personal history, expressed through narratives.

*[...] storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything at all. The stories we create are the memories we have.* (Schank and Abelson 1995: 33)

Furthermore, narratives help "contextualize events, to make them sequential, causal, and even symbolic." They help individuals make sense of sensory information, but they also "do the same with the world within us, where the construction of identity is paramount" (Monk, Lindgren, McDonald and Pasfield-Neofitou

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<sup>1</sup> "The hearer, or listener, is at the center of the soundscape. It is a context, it surrounds and it generally consists of many sounds coming from different directions and of differing characteristics" (Rodaway 1994: 86).

2017: 246). As this article will contend, Sarajevo is a complex space where sonic cues are exchanged between neighbors in multistory buildings and people inhabit the sites of their memories in everyday life. Soundmarks of religious and physical territories illustrate how "spaces are fundamentally contested sites" (LaBelle 2019: 192) in the city. The research resonates with the artist and author Brandon LaBelle's approach to acoustic territories, which are contextual and political:

*[...] acoustics is shaped by the normative patterns that often define spaces, contributing to what can be heard and where, who may speak or not, what types of behavior can enter into the time signatures of an environment and by whom. (LaBelle 2019: 190)*

Moreover, it is not just that what is heard is shaped by socio-political power relationships in a place: different social groups experience public spaces differently, depending on their social or migrant status, gender, and personal history (Massey 2001). Therefore, this practice-based research recognizes the "political" as consisting of intersectional engagements with sites through listening and does so by prioritizing residential perspectives of soundscapes. The duration of one's relationship with a place greatly influences one's sense of place and belonging (Tuan 1977), while previous experiences form preconceptions that inform one's sensory engagement (Massey 2001; 2005).

The complex socio-polity of Sarajevo is revealed through ideas on sonic territorializations as well as direct engagement with the concurrent sounds of Muslim calls to prayer and church bells and various individual reactions to these sounds. The sounds of sirens and fireworks in contemporary soundscapes of sites of memory and trauma trigger recollections in those who lived through the war. These sites challenge the notion of the pathetic trigger (Voegelin 2006; 2010), expanding it to include the capacity of sound to evoke memories related to sites in the city (Zećo 2019). Artist and writer Salomé Voegelin borrows the term pathetic trigger from John Ruskin, an art critic of the Victorian era, who uses it to denote the incitement of strong and even violent feelings. This study establishes the pathetic trigger as a key mechanism of a listening experience that "generates the truth as an experiential truth for me" (Voegelin 2010: 177).

When asked to describe contemporary soundscapes in their immediate environments, interviewees often referred to their past and present experiences, a phenomenon we can contemplate through Voegelin's concept of timespace:

*listening produces such a monistic value similarity between time and space, whose differences are worked out in a signifying practice by the 'inhabiting' subject. (Voegelin 2010: 125)*

All subjects lived in Sarajevo at the time of their interviews and had little or no formal musical training. By favoring a natural listening mode<sup>2</sup> that reflects the "primitive tendency to use sound for information about the event" (Schaeffer 2017: 87), the study problematizes power structures of knowledge production in which an outsider's perspective determines the discourse about the soundscape of a place (Zećo 2021).<sup>3</sup> Some descriptions of the "material" aspects of experienced sound, such as intensity and the ways that architectural features of a place shape the sound, are introduced when appropriate. The descriptive elements outlined by R. Murray Schafer are useful in this case:

*estimated sound's distance from the observer; estimated intensity of the original sound; how distinctly sound is heard; texture of ambience (hi-fi, lo-fi, natural, human, technological); isolated occurrence or how often sound is repeated; environmental factors including presence of reverb, echo, drift and displacement. (Schafer 1994: 135)*

The semi-structured interviews promote an awareness of soundscape and the role of soundscape in forming a sense of place (Zećo 2019) through the following questions: Do you pay attention to everyday sounds? What sounds do you find relaxing or annoying?

These questions reveal individual and cultural differences in the perception of noise in urban areas within the context of acoustic ecology. The responses challenge Schafer's notion that "technological sounds are strongly disliked in technologically advanced countries, while they may indeed be liked in parts of the world where they are more novel" (Schafer 1994: 147). As the interviews progressed, participants shared more

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Schaeffer explains that by "natural listening we mean the primary and primitive tendency to use sound for information about the event" (Schaeffer 2017: 87). He refers to this type of listening as natural because it is applicable across different geographies and can be used to refer to both human as well as animals listening. For instance, he posits that individuals lacking specialized training have a "subjective" mode of listening, not because they hear "anything and everything", but because the ear and "aural perception (ouïe)" are not refined" (Schaeffer 2017: 87).

<sup>3</sup> I examined the socio-political "entanglement" of the researcher and a place that is listened to with or without recording equipment. In a move towards decolonizing field recording practices, I tackled listener bias as related to gender and educational and social background.

details and descriptions of their acoustic environments, prompted by questions about the sounds of their homes, their neighborhoods, and the like.

Although the interviewees were not asked about the past and their experience of the war, those memories emerged and were acknowledged during the interview. As in everyday conversations, references to times before, during, and after the war were common as respondents referred to the sounds in the context of their personal histories. As the pedagogue Nicholas Monk suggests, autobiographical memories shape personal identities and are "critical for our sense of who we are" (Monk et al. 2017: 55). While acknowledging these references as part of a shared first-hand experience of conflict, I did not ask follow-up questions, being aware that conversations could trigger stress and symptoms of PTSD (Kanton Sarajevo. Ministarstvo Zdravlja 2009). Specific recollections of war can be found in Evy Schubert's work regarding Sarajevo's acoustic territories, based on her research in 2009 and 2010 (Schubert 2018).

All interviews were conducted in the interviewee's native language<sup>4</sup> – Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian<sup>5</sup> – including one in English with a Scottish emigree who has lived in Sarajevo since the 1990s. All the interviewees lived in Sarajevo at the time of the interview.

Field recordings were gathered while walking. They were recorded with a handheld boom microphone that gave me the freedom of movement to respond quickly in public spaces. Situational awareness and understanding of the local culture and customs helped me to navigate the various situations in which I was asked what I was doing and why I was recording.<sup>6</sup>

The article discusses sites in the city such as the "Brutalist neighborhood" Alipašino Polje,<sup>7</sup> the Markale Market, and Mount Trebević. These sites were selected as particularly insightful examples in which the

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<sup>4</sup> The study was conducted in Scotland and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>5</sup> The differences in spoken Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian can be difficult to distinguish in central Bosnia and Herzegovina, and such differentiation would lead to identification of the national identities of those involved. Alternatives terms for locally-spoken languages are occasionally used in everyday language, such as *maternji jezik* (mother tongue), *naš jezik* (our language), and the like.

<sup>6</sup> Standing out as an unfamiliar object, the boom microphone in my hand occasionally attracted attention. Both my gender and body language influenced the reactions of the public, as passers-by asked me if I was carrying a bomb or a gun.

<sup>7</sup> Although most of Sarajevo's post-World War II architecture would generally be characterized in the West as Brutalist, in the local context these buildings are referred to as socialist tower blocks. Many cultural assumptions associated with, for example, UK multistory buildings in economically deprived neighborhoods have little in common with the multistory neighborhoods in

perspectives of residents and tourists strongly diverge. The latter two are sites of memory and trauma, but they also play a meaningful role in contemporary community life. Markale Market is a fruit and vegetable market in the heart of the city, and Mount Trebević offers a popular picnic area in close proximity to the city.

This practice-based methodology – including soundwalks, personal notes, sound recordings and interviews – is revealing the complexity of information that shape meanings through listening to environmental sounds. The personal history of each participant – along with their gender, age, and understanding of language and local customs – actively shapes their listening experience (Zećo 2021). In response to a growing body of literature that aims to expand our understanding of the social and political contextuality of sound (LaBelle 2018; 2019; Thompson 2017; Goodman 2012), this article examines who is listening to sounds and what those sounds mean to them. Who contributes to the discourse? Another example of research that includes multiple perspectives is Peter Cusack's project *Sounds from Dangerous Places* (2012), which shares the stories of locals of Chernobyl about their experiences of place. Later, in his project investigating the sounds of Berlin, Cusack collaborated with other sound professionals without making clear what their relationship to Berlin is (2017).

In light of the above, this article represents a form of praxis that involves numerous voices and types of information. I invite the reader to engage with both the field recordings and the text. Some of my subjective reflections are formatted in italics.

The reader should practice a reflexive attitude and "have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Drever 2002). In this case, they should engage with the content while remaining aware of their preconceptions, prior knowledge of the city or bias about it. The field recording of a cable car on Mount Trebević is available in a longer and shorter version. The reader is invited to listen to the longer excerpt while reading the article and to engage with the other content of the submission in chronological order, including the shorter recording of the cable car when offered in the text.

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Sarajevo, particularly as regards the diverse demography of their inhabitants in Sarajevo in terms of income, age, and level of education.



Figure 1. Cable car with panorama of Sarajevo.

[Click here to play audio](#)

Sound File 1: Mount Trebević – Inside the Cable Car (long version)

## 2. Soundscapes of Sarajevo's Built Environment

The histories of the city of Sarajevo, as well as specific locations in the city, contribute significantly to the overall context that shapes listening experiences. Visually, Sarajevo is an assemblage of architectural styles developed over four hundred years of the Ottoman Empire and three decades of Austro-Hungarian rule, whose end was heralded by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914, an event that catalyzed the First World War. After the Second World War and occupation by Axis powers, Sarajevo became the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), later in the text referred to as Yugoslavia.



This architectural assemblage also affects the soundscape. In the oldest part of the city, there is a maze of Ottoman-inspired shops. Artisans make copper objects, repair shoes, and sell leather accessories. The cobblestone streets are narrow, and street level restaurants and cafés with their low ceilings welcome guests in outdoor spaces. Architect Mensur Demir describes how the street noise radically diminishes as one enters the courtyard of the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque. The water fountain conveys an impression of silence that intensifies the further one progresses inside the building:

*So, upon leaving the crowd [of the pedestrianized street], we enter a polygonal space [of the courtyard]. There a "shoebox" or a square space within which sound reverberates uniformly. Everything disperses as you enter the area of silence. [...] For me, somehow, this transition from the street to the courtyard is often like an acoustic shower, like a mental shower, while the religious ritual requires, first, the washing of the extremities, followed by the face. So there is a physical cleansing before you enter the first vestibule, and then you enter the space for prayer, which for me is a resonant instrument, a niche for prayer towards which you speak. So, imagine that you are speaking into a niche in the wall that first shapes and then bounces that sound past you.*

*Above the people there is a dome in the form of a hemisphere resembling the archetype of a bell, which returns the sound with some delay. It is as if someone had given you a piece of stone and told you to carve a musical instrument out of it. (Demir 2016)*

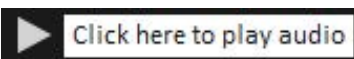
In this recollection I notice Demir's intimate knowledge of architecture and the Muslim ritual of prayer. As he is a good friend, I also recognize that some of these sentences might have been composed for tours he used to give to architect colleagues visiting from abroad. I do not perceive the courtyard or interior of the mosque in this way, perhaps because I am less familiar with the religious ritual or because I lack training in architecture.

Although there are some traditional shops around the mosque, most of them seem to be commercialized, probably not even producing the coffee sets, carpets, or slippers themselves, although creating that impression. Genuine products are actually difficult to find. The performativity in which locals and visitors engage in places of intensified tourism are in play here. Hand-made products are mixed with imported goods that are produced so as to appear local.

The performativity of a narrative and the struggle in interpolating information arises from a complex relationship of locals with the city. In articulating a difference between visitors and resident perspectives, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out that a visitor and a local will focus on different aspects of the environment.

*We may say that only the visitor (and particularly the tourist) has a viewpoint; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures. The native, by contrast, has a complex attitude derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment. (Tuan 1974: 63)*

Sound File 2 reveals the atmosphere of pedestrian areas and sidewalks in summer, especially during Ramadan, when public spaces are filled with family life. With the setting of the sun, the long fast that begins at sunrise ends with the sound of the cannon from the nearby hill.<sup>8</sup> Children play, bottles of soft drinks and water are opened, and food is served in restaurants and cafés that spread into every inch of available space, occupying public squares and sidewalks.



*Sound File 2: Street in Old Town at the Time of Iftar, the Breaking of the Fast, During Ramadan.*

This scene of Sarajevo's public spaces, within the context of Ramadan, resonates with LaBelle's take on sidewalks, which he does not position geographically:

*The sidewalk is a threshold between an interior and an exterior, between different sets of rhythms that come to orchestrate the dynamic passing of exchange each individual body instigates and remains susceptible to. (LaBelle 2019: 62)*

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, pedestrian zones, squares, and sidewalks erupt in life during the long summer evenings: people stroll around to see and be seen by others, to exchange information, or to have a meal. The pace of walking is slower than on a typical sidewalk in a big city like London, a pace orchestrated by social and architectural factors. People navigate between tables on the streets, meeting and greeting, stopping and chatting. Small streams of people flowing from the old town converge on the wider sidewalks

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<sup>8</sup> "The shot from the cannon from the Yellow Bastion, in the old Sarajevo settlement of Vratnik, every evening marks the time of iftar (breaking the fast after the sunset) in Ramadan – the end of a long day of fasting for Muslims" (*Sarajevo Times* 2020).

of the city center; their rhythm becomes more uniform and steadier, but still occasionally interrupted by meetings and greetings, street vendors, and tourists stopping to take photographs. Ottoman-era spaces give way to Austro-Hungarian design. The buildings are tall, some with ornate facades, and they house shops, cafés, and banks located along the flow of pedestrian traffic. The architecture and acoustic characteristics, together, create the sense of an expansive space.

Toward the west, the tall high-rises of Yugoslav times have been joined by post-war architecture. The large residential areas of Otoka, Grbavica, and Čengić Vila were built after the Second World War, while Alipašino Polje, with its stacked high-rises, marks the peak of Yugoslav "Brutalism." Later, the neighborhoods of Dobrinja, Vojničko and Aerodromsko were added, built for the 1984 Winter Olympics. The event was considered a celebration of socialist ideals of peace and unity in this city surrounded by four mountains, where the events of the Winter Olympic Games took place.<sup>9</sup> The soundscapes of these – now largely neglected – neighborhoods is revealed in part through the stories told by residents. The acoustics of high-rises, both inside and outside, are marked by reverberation and echo, the signature qualities of the soundscapes of these sites.

Indoors, one hears the sounds of walking in the stairwells and lifts rattling to a stop or perhaps the neighbor's children dragging their bicycles down the stairs. These sounds evoke a sense of being part of a larger structure:

*Collective residential buildings are like ships: there is always something splashing against them, something knocking. These buildings breathe. They should be thought of in terms of energy: before work in the morning, everyone turns on water, electricity, appliances. And when that structure reaches a peak, strained to the limit, everyone shuts it down and leaves the ship, disembarks for the city, transferring to some other ship where they are rowing, paddling, or whatever. (Demir 2016)*

Neighbors often know each other well, visit each other and maintain and organize regular tenant meetings. Each tenant takes part in the custom of mutual overhearing and listening that establishes a sense of security.

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<sup>9</sup> Significant international interest in Yugoslavia's modernist architecture has led to the recent exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948-1980* (2018-2019) at MoMA. The exhibition foregrounds a key contextual aspect – Yugoslavia's specific geopolitical position as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, resisting formal alignment with either the capitalist West or the socialist East during the Cold War of 1945-1990 (MOMA 2018).

For example, my sister moved during the COVID pandemic, and, as I live abroad, I could not visit her for 18 months. When I first arrived in front of her tower block, I stopped to call her to ask her to open the main door because the intercom is faulty, and I did not have a key and was not sure which floor she lived on. Within seconds of my arrival, while I was trying to reach her by cellphone to come downstairs, a female elderly neighbor opened her window and asked me who I was looking for. Meanwhile, another neighbor held the door open for me to come in. It was impossible for me to stand outside the building for even three or four minutes without being noticed and asked about my motives.

While this episode might illustrate for some a complete lack of "privacy," in conversation with my sister I learn that she experiences a sense of security in these patterns of behavior. As a single woman who lives alone and travels a lot, she takes comfort in the fact that she has such alert and attentive neighbors.

In larger apartment blocks, tenants communicate through listening and producing noise. The neighbor of the couple playing music too loud bangs a wooden spatula against the pipes of the radiators in their flat. The central heating system connects all the apartments to the large heating facilities in the neighborhood. This allows sound to travel along the maze of pipes from one living room to another. Occasionally residents bang the walls that separate individual flats. In the case of radiators and walls, the disgruntled party bangs three to four times on the surfaces and then waits while listening for a response in the form of reduced noise. This sequence is repeated for as long as necessary.

Lecturer of popular music and media studies, Marie Thompson, explains that sensitivity to a neighbor's noise resists generalization (2017: 23), suggesting that in Eurocentric cultures a

*growing intolerance towards bell peals also points towards the broader social shifts that influenced a rising demand to have control over one's own sonic environment – the growing emphasis on the individual's right to silence and the subsequent increase in noise complaints, as well as the right to make sound in one's own home. (Thompson 2017: 22)*

According to Thompson, these trends "corresponded with the nineteenth-century expansion of the bourgeoisie" (Thompson 2017: 22). The reasons why Sarajevans seem to have a greater tolerance for noise, and tend to resolve disagreements through the use of sonic cues, illustrates the importance of recognizing

sonic diversities, including social and political contexts. Thompson foregrounds the idea that "noise requires a listener capable of processing, evaluating, and judging [noise]" (Thompson 2017: 23).

Tenants' intimate relationship with their built environment is reflected in the nicknames of residential buildings, such as *stometarka* (the one that is a hundred meters long), *šibica* (matchbox), and *papagajka* (parrot-like). Large neighborhoods are organized by numbers, the logic of which often only residents and city planners comprehend. For instance, Dobrinja 4 and Dobrinja 5 are located the furthest apart within their area of the city.

Between these large Yugoslav-era buildings are children's playgrounds and parks. Under the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors from the windows far above, the voices of children echo throughout the space. These are the sounds I miss the most in Scotland, as communal playgrounds are rare in Aberdeen, and children rarely play unsupervised. In many Western countries, Mosquito devices are used to generate high-pitched noise to 'dissuade loitering youth' (LaBelle 2019:133) from hanging out in pedestrian zones and shopping centers. These technologies are not widely used in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Groups of teens gather and "take over" ownership of public spaces. My family home overlooks a large public playground that is occupied by youth at different times of the day, from preschoolers playing dolls and riding bicycles to teenagers in the evening. Their voices can be heard until midnight sometimes, and if the group is too loud, tenants complain from their windows and threaten to call the police.



Figure 2. Image of the football and basketball playground.

[Click here to play audio](#)

Sound File 3: Alipašino neighborhood – football game.

[Click here to play audio](#)

Sound File 4: Alipašino neighborhood – playground and park.

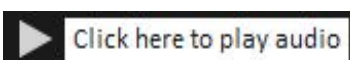
Thompson refers to a similar study conducted by Jaqueline Waldock in Liverpool, England. She points out that those in areas often "excluded from acoustic ecology's praxis, due to its underlying 'beauty bias'" (2017: 111) do not always react negatively to the noise from their neighbors, even in the UK.

Such a reaction might be understood as similar to residents' reactions to the trolleybuses and trams that connect the Sarajevo neighborhoods. The sound of a tram rattling on poorly maintained rails while moving

is a noteworthy soundmark.<sup>10</sup> Inside, one inhales the smell of the crowd and metal as the metallic parts and joints sway en route. Rides in trams offer multisensory experiences as one takes in and listens to high school students chatting, people travelling to work, and elderly passengers reading newspapers in their seats.



Figure 3. Sarajevo tram.



Sound File 5: Tram in the city center.

<sup>10</sup> As I quote a few paragraphs further, a soundmark is "a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community" (Schafer 1994: 10).

## 2.1 Sonic Iconography


I use the term "religious sonic iconography" (Zećo 2019) to denote religious voicing in public spaces, such as the peal of church bells and the Muslim call to prayer. These sounds are charged with meaning in the post-conflict space of Sarajevo. The term sonic iconography indicates the carrying of potent connotations; their power lies in the realm of belief and myth, with religious institutions playing a central role in the determination of their meaning. Many residents are proud that the city is still home to communities of Muslim, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Jews, whose main places of worship are only a few hundred meters apart in the city center. The sound of multiple religious calls voicing together is a soundmark of Sarajevo, "a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community" (Schafer 1994: 10).

Traditionally, the sonic range of the church bell would circumscribe the area of an individual parish, and Schafer points out that Christian missionaries used the sound of the bell for "acoustically demarking the civilization of the parish from the wilderness beyond its earshot" (Schafer 1994: 55). This indicates a colonial place-making connotation of the bell, the symbolism which, according to Schafer, "has diminished or ceased" in many societies today in relation to Christianity. However, the role of a bell in marking both the time and religious rituals in multireligious and post-conflict spaces has its own contemporary significance.

The visual and sonic presence of Islam in Western Europe through the sonic and visual presence of mosques is a contested issue. In the UK, mosques are rarely allowed to play a call to prayer, and when they do, it is "often only for the midday and afternoon prayer, this makes for a further 'acoustic' claim on the non-material spaces of a locality" (Gilliat-Ray and Birt 2010: 144).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the connotations of both churches and mosques are combined and complicated depending the area in which they are voiced. Similar to churches, each mosque has a community of worshippers who usually live close enough to hear its call to prayer. This call permeates the public sphere five times a day, from sunrise to sunset. The times of the calls change with the seasons, and occasionally they chant on the hour, coinciding with church bells. During these moments, both voice their presence in unison.



 [Click here to play audio](#)

*Sound File 6: Dobrinja neighborhood – religious calls.*

I made this recording unplanned on a Sunday morning in my neighborhood. It is from the area where my father was wounded several times at the beginning of the war in 1992. The incidents took place not far from a then improvised war hospital, where he was treated. During that time, the neighborhood was cut off from the rest of the city, and my mum, sister and I stranded in another part of the city, did not hear a word from him for months. Dogs often bark during morning call to prayer.

Mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina often use amplification systems that increase the volume of the Ezan (call to prayer). Although churches might use amplification as well, the loudness of the Ezan also depends on the vocal performance of the mujezin (muezzin), who, prior to widespread use of amplification, was visible on the balcony of the minaret.

The use of amplification in public spaces is generally reserved for protests, advertising in shopping districts of large cities, and various alarms and bells used for schools and security systems. The sound of church bells and the call to prayer could be perceived as evidence of multireligious communities coexisting. This can also be considered a key example of the instrumentalization of sound for the territorial demarcation of public space.

According to the architectural historian Azra Akšamija, during the Bosnian War, approximately 72 percent of mosques were destroyed or severely damaged, and 70 percent were rebuilt after the war (2010: 321). The reconstructions of mosques and the sound of their call to prayer were symbolic of healing and recovery. However, the actual number of new mosques and, to a lesser extent, churches that have been (re)built in Sarajevo is often debated. Most of Sarajevo's mosques were located in the old town, while socialist-era neighborhoods did not contain places of worship. Following the war, a case was made for building mosques in these neighborhoods (Akšamija 2010).

One of the most criticized mosque construction projects after the war in Sarajevo was the Ciglane Mosque. Ciglane, a neighborhood built in the 1980s and home to about 5000 inhabitants in 2010, had not contained a single religious building prior to this mosque, which was considered to be "a sign of the intensification of Islam in post-war and an example of an ethno-national demarcation of territories" (Akšamija 2010: 333).

The other example mentioned by Akšamija is the largest mosque in the Balkans – the King Fahd mosque and Islamic Cultural Center, built with the aim of promoting "intercultural exchange between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bosnia and Herzegovina" (2010: 342). The mosque and cultural center have been either heavily criticized or promoted by groups with opposing views. In these discussions, taking place in the media and within communities, the presence of the call of prayer and the degree of its amplification was debated.

Sarajevo has never opened up a public discussion about the sources of funding for these new religious buildings, which did not exist before the war. The fear is that foreign investments in religious buildings and cultural centers might result in radicalization within communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and threaten the *zajednički život* (common life) of the different religious communities and identities living together. Religious identities are closely intertwined with ethnic and national identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country of three constitutive peoples, *Bošnjaks* (Bosniacs), Serbs and Croats. The debate around places of worship is closely linked to national identities and representation in governance. The project of re-affirming identities in which religious and national factors play defining roles is at the heart of the country's political problems. As historian Robert Donia puts it, "Sarajevans have yet to discover or invent a full spectrum of cultural, political, and educational institutions that are free from both communist and nationalist authoritarianism" (Donia 2006: 352).

Sonic iconography presents one of the most potent examples of the use of sound (daily) as an ideological vehicle in public space. In the post-conflict society, the sounds of church bells and Ezan permeate the spaces surrounding spires and minarets. The sound waves meet, interweave, and infiltrate public and private spaces. Against the backdrop of the city's turbulent history in the last century, one might wonder as to the purpose of such a distinctive sonic presence of religion in the city.

The following quotation – written in 1920, shortly after the end of the First World War – reveals the complexity of residents' perspectives on religious voicing in the city:

*Whoever lies awake at night in Sarajevo hears the voices of the Sarajevo night. The clock on the Catholic cathedral strikes the hour with weighty confidence: 2 am. More than a minute passes (to be exact, seventy-five seconds – I counted) and only then with a rather weaker, but piercing sound does the Orthodox church announce the hour, and chime its own 2 am. A moment after it the tower clock*

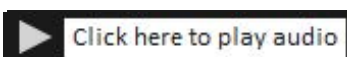
*on the Beys' mosque strikes the hour in a hoarse, faraway voice, and that strikes 11, the ghostly Turkish hour, by the strange calculation of distant and alien parts of the world. The Jews have no clock to sound their hour, so God alone knows what time it is for them by the Sephardic reckoning or the Ashkenazy. Thus at night, while everyone is sleeping, division keeps vigil in the counting of the late, small hours, and separates these sleeping people who, awake, rejoice and mourn, feast and fast by four different and antagonistic calendars, and send all their prayers and wishes to one heaven in four different ecclesiastical languages. And this difference, sometimes visible and open, sometimes invisible and hidden, is always similar to hatred, and often completely identical with it. (Andrić 1920/1992: 117-118)*

The soundmarks of Sarajevo, described above by Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Ivo Andrić, enact territorial demarcation through sound. The multiethnic tensions that Andrić writes about worked as a catalyst for the First World War and would tear the country apart again toward the end of the 20th century. The turmoil and pain experienced during the recent war will be felt for many years, leading to social isolation and economic hardship. Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and its health care system is corrupt and inadequate.

At the same place that Andrić describes in his text, I recorded the plea of an unknown young man who is seeking help for another boy named Ivo Andrić:

*Naš dragi Ivo Andrić je dječak iz Sarajeva koji je nažalost obolio od metaboličkog oboljenja. Pomozite dragi građani našem dragom Ivi Andriću da ovaj dječak nastavi sa svojim liječenjem. (Our dear Ivo Andrić is a boy from Sarajevo who unfortunately became ill with a metabolic condition. Dear citizens, help our dear Ivo Andrić so that this boy can continue his medical treatment.)*

This young man repeated this plea incessantly for several days while collecting money for his sick family member or a friend in front of the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Sarajevo. The site is a well-known meeting place and is packed with cafés and street vendors.



Sound File 7: Appeal for help for Ivo Andrić in front of Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Due to the state of the health care system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, children are often sent abroad for treatment, which is financed solely through charities. It is common for relatives to collect money for their loved ones and solicit for donations in public. Cases of fraud and fake appeals are also common.

This appeal for help is just one example of how listening to a particular sound can lead to a wealth of contextual information. Listening that embraces the contexts of the site can generate knowledge that links sensory stimuli, autobiographical memories, and broader histories of place in intimate ways.

### 3. The Past and Present on Sites

The city experienced 1,825 days of siege during the Bosnian war (Cerkez 2012). Life in the neighborhoods described above was crippled during this time. Water had to be carried up many floors in canisters to flats without electricity and heating. Upper floors of high-rise buildings became death traps, and during bombardments people gathered in the damp and cold basements.

During the war, most of the infrastructure – such as transportation, electricity, and water supply systems, hospitals and schools – were heavily damaged or destroyed. Many residential buildings were also significantly damaged, and 11,541 citizens – including 600 children – lost their lives (Sito-Sucic 2012). According to author Steve Goodman, for children "fear comes through the ears rather [than] the eyes" (2012: 66).

But I don't remember the fear. Perhaps these memories are not accessible to my adult mind; perhaps the jumbled-up moments from the past lie in a locked drawer. On my first day at the improvised school in the basement of my building, I was given a big sandwich and a jar of milk. I remember thinking: this is my life, my normal, probably everyone lives like this. I could not remember peacetime. The stories about life before the war seemed fantastic to me, hardly believable.

Such devastation and the nature of the warfare, in which the civilian population were experiencing imminent threat around the clock every day, have left many scars in the city. At every corner, the names of the people who died during this period are commemorated. Plaques can be found on the walls of schools, public and residential buildings and bridges and in markets and parks. This recent past turns the city and many of its

gathering places into memorial sites. Certain expressions in everyday speech – such as *samo da ne puca* (just as long as there is no shooting) and *čuvaj se* (beware of) – are testimony of this past.

In 2009, a study in Sarajevo and its immediate surroundings showed that up to 82 percent of citizens between the ages of 31 and 50 exhibit some war-related stress symptoms. Of them, 30 percent suffer severely and are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kanton Sarajevo. Ministarstvo Zdravlja 2009). Yet, as of now, no large-scale mental health support is available.

Jim Marshall, a resident of the city for twenty years, spent a year and a half in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war, participating in an international aid program. He observed that: "a year, year and a half of war is like 10 or 15 years of normal life, you know. So, I understand a lot of it, I understand people's, how it affects people's moods and how it affects people's behaviour" (Interview with Marshall 2016).

When asked about sounds that trigger memories, he described:

*The worst sound I have ever heard in my life was not actually the sound of shells exploding. It was the sound of the sirens going off in the city before you knew the shells were coming. There was something that really, really disturbed you know, really deep in your stomach, you know. There was something very, very terrifying about that.* (Interview with Marshall 2016)

During another interview, Mensur Demir also described the sound of sirens, but in the following way:

*A siren marking a general emergency, in childhood, gets eternally engraved as a moment in your head, [precisely a moment when] a siren is warming up and starts. Before it really starts to shout, announcing a general emergency, we must all flee to the basements and such, and yes, before this shout, you already feel goosebumps, and you move before it [the siren] even starts shouting. Then, a few years later, I hear that same siren used in Jungle or Techno [Electronic Dance Music] and wonder how come [this is] some strange copy of that same symbol. The same signal [is displaced] into a kind*

*of [tolerable] alarm, into some madness of ecstasy, of individual dance in a mass of million. (Demir 2016)<sup>11</sup>*

It is difficult to articulate these feelings and memories as, according to Goodman, a siren's "very modulation of frequency produces a state of alert that can undermine and override cognition" (2012: 66). Additionally, "to prolong survival, it is claimed, the body has developed three basic affects in response to fear: the fight, flight, and freeze responses. These three affects travel down three lines: the fight, flight, and freeze responses" (Goodman 2012: 66).

Although I was relocated several times within Sarajevo during the war, I don't remember the sirens. It is possible that I spent some of the worst periods of bombardments in Dobrinja, very close to the line of fire, so sirens were not used, or my childhood brain could not process them. I do remember, though, that we could distinguish the type of weapons and the caliber of the ammunition flying around us.

My mum once relayed to me what my dad told her about the moment he almost lost his life. He realized – through the sound he heard – that the projectile was going to hit very close to him, but he didn't have time to throw himself to the ground. Instead, he rotated his body and used his arms to protect his vital organs from the blast of shrapnel. "After the bang, I thought, 'Nothing has been left of me,'" he told her.

The sound of sirens or fireworks is often mentioned as a trigger for war memories. This shows how memories of sound become part of the common experience of life, part of the group identity of people who experienced the conflict first-hand:

*However, in terms of memory, yes, that, I think that aspect [sound] is very interesting. That we often, quite by accident, return to the topic of war. We were talking about Sarajevo before this interview, about the river, the [sonic] impression of the river during the war period, when we didn't have glass*

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<sup>11</sup> The interviewee recalls the sound of sirens at raves that he experienced as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Germany that evoke his memories of sirens announcing a general emergency. He struggles to articulate his experiences, and his sentences are broken as a result.

*in the windows.<sup>12</sup> The acoustic impression was very different because there was no public transportation either.*

*So, the second association that often comes to my mind, which you could hear from some Sarajevans who were here during the war, is an aversion to fireworks. Fireworks have marked some cultural events or celebrations in most of these urban environments. However, the sound of fireworks, as well as the visual and auditory experience, triggers a sense of torment in a certain number of people, including myself. This is perhaps one of the worst sounds. It is some kind of shooting, explosion, meaning [an association with] those sounds that are likely directly associated with war experience.*  
(Interview with Adla Isanović 2016)

Through these narratives we also realize that although most sonic experiences are culture-specific, sounds that indicate direct threats such as sirens provoke instinctive responses:

*While the ability to interpret sounds and attribute likely causes to them is learned culturally so as to instruct on the particular danger to each species, it is also argued that this is built on top of an evolutionary hard-wired instinct to respond appropriately, for the sake of survival, to any threat indicated by sound. (Goodman 2012: 66)*

The relationship between these two aspects – hardwired responses to threatening sounds and cultural specificities of listening – will be discussed below in relation to sites of trauma and memory.

### 3.1. Sites of Memories: Markale Market

Markale Market in the very center of Sarajevo is one of the sites that is commemorated due to the great loss of life. It was the scene of two artillery bombardments, one of which took place in 1994, killing 68 people and injuring 144. The second took place in the following year, killing 43 and injuring 84 (Mackic 2018). These sites are remembered not only by those who were near the site and survived or those who rushed to the aid of the injured and barely alive. The place is also remembered because it was quickly reachable by television

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<sup>12</sup> Windowpanes were destroyed by the sound/pressure waves of exploding shells. Heavy-duty plastic sheets donated by the UNHCR were widely used to replace glass panes.

crews in the aftermath of the event. The events and subsequent coverage resulted in some of the most shocking sound and images captured during the siege of Sarajevo, and they are engraved in people's minds.

*In rare times during the war when electricity was available and adults were watching the news, [as a child], I was shouted at to go to another room, to play, and not to see, not to see the footage of Sarajevo broadcast by CNN and watched in my city. The sound couldn't be escaped or muted, and the sound of a suffering person in pain is so uniquely and universally human across geographic areas.*  
(Zećo 2019: 140)

Offering footage of the massacre, along with a few other iconic images, as a symbol of the siege of Sarajevo is an example of the crucial role fulfilled by war journalists. The Balkan conflict was the first war on the European continent after the Second World War, and media attention was directed toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. Internationally, footage of the conflict, featuring struggling civilians and refugees, flooded viewers' television screens around the globe. The footage appeared at the time of the rise of reality TV and soap operas at the dawn of the age of satellite TV. This "CNN effect," as it was called, meant that war became "real" through the broadcast of images (Sontag 2003: 105). This is one illustration of "the determining influence of photographs in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and ultimately what evaluations are attached to these conflicts" (Sontag 2003: 105).

Listening in Markale Market now, as an emotionally charged place, I notice that merely slowing down to listen turns my attention from the openness of the space, street, and conversations to the specificities of this place, actualizing Tuan's proposal that slowing down turns space into place (Tuan 1977). The space of a market inevitably becomes the place of the Markale Market. Memorialized images from news broadcasts, YouTube clips, documentaries, the sights and sounds of people being slaughtered by bombs creeps up uninvited and overwhelms the mind.





Figure 4. Markale Market.

[Click here to play audio](#)

Sound File 8: Markale Market.

Although I practiced soundwalking throughout the project, it was not until this site that I realized that soundwalking as a practice of attentive listening can activate memory retrieval. This occurs despite the sensory abundance (Rodaway 1994; Chion 2016) in which I am immersed while listening, here.

I notice the sounds that I am directing my attention to, what is happening behind me and in front of me, but I also notice the visual traces of history. Gradually, I become aware of the cognitive aspect of perception. Through the process of listening to sites imbued deeply with memory, meanings are created and feelings emerge. I then wonder where the memories come from.

In Markale Market, surrounded by walls covered with the names of the dead, it is very difficult to distinguish between a personal memory created by the direct experience of horror and what is a memory planted in the mind by the media. These images and sounds, once experienced, become part of one's identity, of collective memory, and this consequently shapes how we listen to and sense a place.

When I listen to the sounds of Markale Market now, there are no sounds that act as pathetic triggers (Voegelin 2006). Visually, yes, there is a modest monument and a shell buried in the asphalt that many pass by daily without noticing. In this case, the site of the market itself acts as a pathetic trigger, and the memories that are triggered depend on the listener's experience of the conflict. This might be direct experiences with these events or images and videos that were broadcast on television. Most Sarajevo residents still remember what they did on the days of the bombardment in 1994 and 1995, and if they did not experience it first-hand, they have memories of the footage.

Markale Market today is a place of remembrance. Every year the market is temporarily closed in order to receive politicians and members of the public commemorating the past. The next day it becomes again a site of exchange, of conversation superimposed on a collage of fresh fruits and vegetables – flowers for sale on one side and flowers of tribute lined on the street next to the monument on the other.

### 3.2. Sites of Memories: Mount Trebević

Mount Trebević housed one of the main venues for the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics. Known for the bobsled run on its slopes, this 1627-meter-high mountain was popular as a resort during the Yugoslav period. For residents of the city in the valley below, it was a refuge from the smog in winter and the heat in summer.

Although it was accessible by car, in the pre-war period many residents used the cable car that connected the old, Ottoman part of the city to the mountain in a few minutes. The cable car was damaged during the war and rebuilt in 2018, when I had the opportunity to ride it and record my return trip from the mountain from inside the cable car.

[Click here to play audio](#)

*Sound File 9: The cable car arrives in Sarajevo.*



*Figure 5. Trebević Mountain – bobsled run.*

The relationship between the mountain and the city is complex, and to understand why some residents still refuse to visit the mountain, it is necessary to look into the past. During the war, Mount Trebević cast a dark shadow that threatened to swallow the city beneath it, plunging its inhabitants into an inferno of fire and smoke. Armies were positioned on the slopes of the mountain, targeting civilian residents day and night. Areas of the city that came under direct fire were called "sniper alleys."

For years after the war, the mountain was haunted by this past. The invisible border dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Federation and Republika Srpska runs along the slopes of the mountain. Some areas that had contained strong military posts were cleared of landmines only in 2020.

In 2014, I went to the mountain with a war veteran who had not been there since 1990. The silence in the car was broken by his occasional comments about the poor condition of the road or how the place used to look much nicer. Before long we reached the remains of the concrete foundation of a platform where he shared a story about the café that used to be there, and the viewing platforms of a former cable car station, which was demolished during the conflict. As we walked along the mountain paths, he noticed a few bullet casings here and there while listening to the sound of the wind. He stated firmly that he "won't be coming back for a long time" (personal communication 2014).

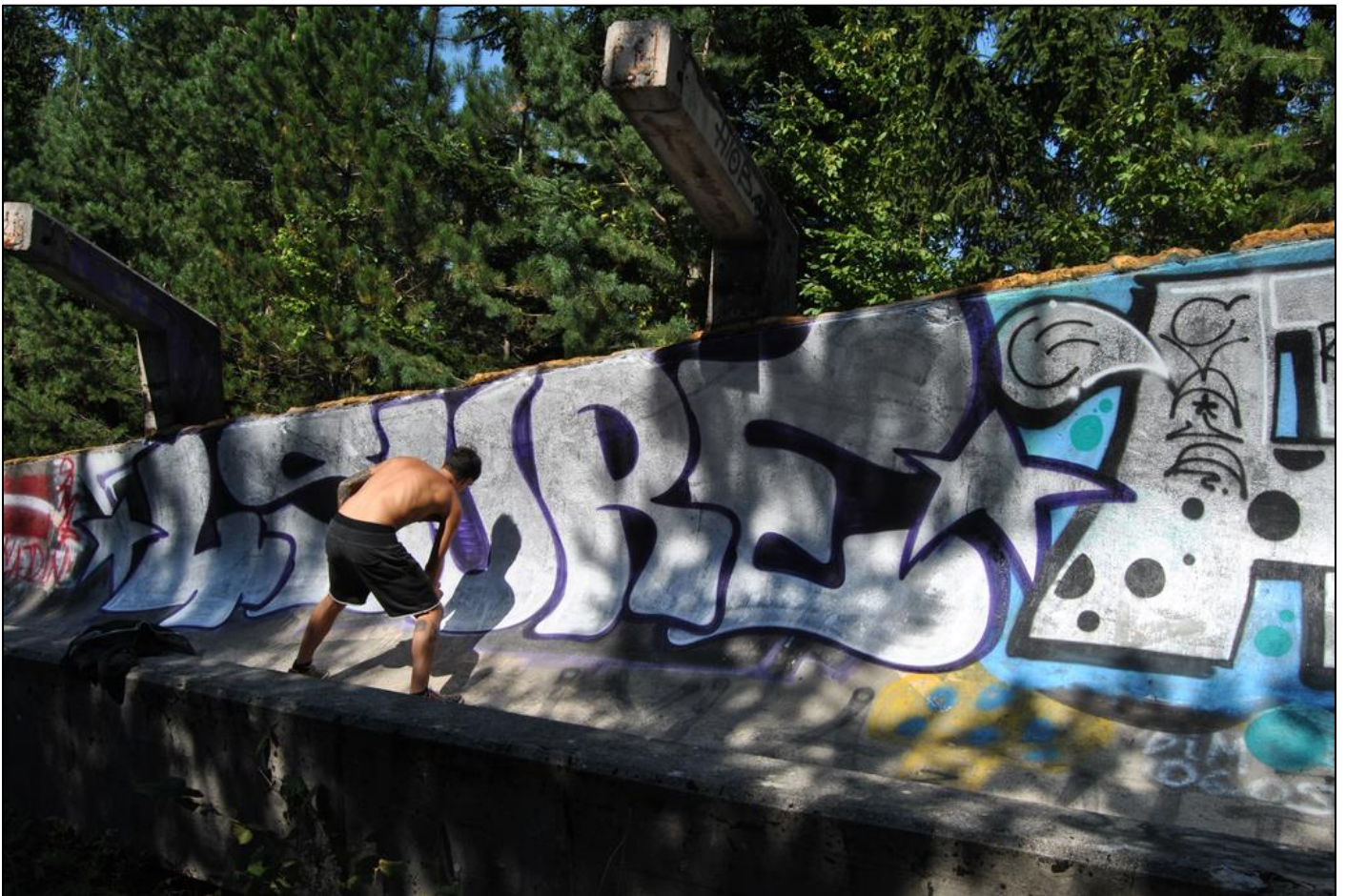



Figure 6. Trebević Mountain – graffiti artist.

 [Click here to play audio](#)

*Sound File 10: Trebević Mountain – graffiti artist.*

In the proximity of viewing platforms of the cable car, now, the derelict bobsled is covered in graffiti. Some sections of the site are used as a trail for mountain bike races. In one of the sections, I captured the hiss of spray cans being used by a graffiti artist from Italy. While listening to him and his girlfriend, I noticed other visitors roaming around.

I found myself in the midst of tourists, capturing a graffiti artist spray painting a destroyed Olympic monument. In a strange turn of events, the favorite picnic site of Sarajevans and the place that had attracted crowds of tourists in 1984 for the Winter Olympics became the location from which the citizens were most threatened during the war. The mountain was the dark shadow from which livid streaks of fire rained down on the city.

Now, tourists return to photograph and take in this powerful place where different histories converge. The audio recording I made, listened to out of context, could come from anywhere, although the voice of a middle-aged woman walking by locates us somewhere in central Bosnia and Herzegovina. The woman, contrary to stereotype encourages the graffiti artist by saying "bravo, bravo" and "they are filming, filming and drawing."

## 4. Conclusion

Sarajevo is said to be a place where "East meets West" due to its history, multireligious communities, and geographic location in the heart of the Balkan region. While it is easy to fall into a stereotyping listening that exoticizes and "orientalizes" its soundscapes, listening to its divergent sites is generous and generative. Visitors who have no personal experiences of conflict will engage with the sites of memory and trauma differently than residents with such experiences. In making this distinction, I sought to encourage an intersectional and reflexive approach (Zećo 2021) to the study of acoustic environments. Although Sarajevo is a powerful case study that reveals the diverging experiences of locals and visitors, I believe that the nuances of local perspectives should be explored in many other parts of the world. I argue for the regular inclusion and consistent prioritization of local perspectives as a method for decolonizing the discourse.

Applying this would increase an awareness of individual biases and power structures. Ask: Who is listening and or recording? Who is writing? Who is contributing?

As can be read and heard in this article, it is challenging for locals to describe their relationships with, feelings toward, and experiences of listening to (and in) a place. Listeners are entangled in multiple layers of socio-political, cultural, and personal factors that inform their listening. Memories of sounds shape personal identities and influence listening in the present. This process is illustrated here with the example of sirens and fireworks: past experiences with these sounds are part of each listener's personal history and also inform new experiences with such sounds when they are encountered in various contexts and places.

My personal experience of migration – through which I have gained intimate insights into the soundscapes of other places – has guided my choice of recordings. While the sound of a Sarajevo tram or religious calls to prayer are well-known as characteristic sounds of Sarajevo, sounds of the Markale Market or of a street artist spraying a neglected Olympic monument are more ambiguous. Their connotations are only unlocked through engagement with a text, a praxis that allows the reader to discover the layers of meaning and full scope of the research through engagement with the sound and written material presented in this submission. As such, I don't offer frameworks for future engagement, but my aim is to disrupt and expand listening practices by providing insights into an intimate and contextual dimension of listening. I developed this approach during my studies in Scotland, experimenting with listening to field recordings divorced from their original contexts, critically drawing upon the tradition of reduced listening<sup>13</sup> (Schaeffer 2017, Chion 2016). During these sessions, I became aware that some Scottish listeners might have difficulty even recognizing religious calls in my recordings and the ways these sounds might be employed in territorial demarcations of public spaces. This insight led me to weave together different types of accounts – personal recollections, interviews, and contextual information – for this article.

Sites such as Markale Market and Mount Trebević were selected as examples of places of trauma that still play an important role in contemporary daily life. People buy fruits and vegetables at the market and use the cable car to reach the mountain. Past and present converge with rich multisensory experiences at these sites, as I discovered during my soundwalks as well as from overhearing the conversations of passersby and

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<sup>13</sup> Reduced listening is a "mode of listening that deliberately and artificially abstracts from causes – and [...] from effects – and from meaning in order to attend to sound considered for itself and not only with regard to its sensible aspects of pitch and rhythm but also of grain, matter, shape, mass, and volume" (Chion 2016: 267).

speaking with people I know. These sites open up wide areas of research, and neither the interviewees nor I claim objectivity in this paper. However, the range of responses highlights some of the ways listeners engage with the contemporary sounds of the city. The paper also foregrounds contexts, which in this case are not a "fixed ground," finite and simplified (Bal and Bryson 1998), but which are infinitely complex, as expressed by Sarajevans.

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