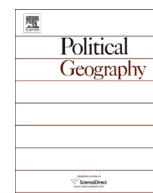




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“Over our dead bodies”: Placing necropolitical activism



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ABSTRACT

Analysing a struggle between Palestinian campaigners and Israeli authorities over an ancient Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem, this paper explores the role of necrogeography in contesting urban boundaries, asserting historical legitimacy and realizing emancipatory spatial practices. The article bridges an existing gap between the geographical study of death spaces, and the necropolitical realities of conflict in late modernity. The case-study analyses one arena of contemporary urban geopolitics of death in Israel–Palestine, and the myriad of factors that shape its dynamics of struggle and power relations. The article argues that the multiple avenues of nuanced and creative political action found in necrogeographical research over the past two decades offers a lived alternative to the politics of despair that often dominates the prevailing conceptualizations of necropolitics.

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If Jerusalem had a “Top 10” list of conflicted sites, December 2005 would have seen a new and unexpected entry: The Mamilla Muslim cemetery – or *Ma’aman Allah*, as it is known in Arabic (meaning “Allah’s safe haven”) would have joined the Temple Mount/*Haram El Sharif*, the Israeli Separation Wall and the Jewish settler enclaves in Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. Despite its long history and central location near the bustling downtown of West Jerusalem, Mamilla Cemetery was badly neglected for decades and attracted little public attention. The relative anonymity of the place was disrupted when controversy broke around plans by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Centre to build a “Museum of Tolerance” on a plot at the edge of the cemetery. Shortly after construction began, human remains were discovered on site and the Israel Archaeological Authority (IAA) was called to exhume the bones. This did not go unnoticed, and in 28 December 2005, a small delegation from the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement arrived on site to inspect the excavation. Though the initial encounter appears to have been cordial (Reiter, 2011, p.19) a political storm soon ensued: accusations that Israel was desecrating an ancient Muslim graveyard drew media headlines and produced a heated domestic and international debate. Despite legal objections and a vocal public campaign to halt the project, the Israeli Supreme Court rejected petitions against the

planned museum in October 2008 and final planning approval was granted in July 2011 (Lidman, 2011).

Media coverage and legal procedures focused almost exclusively on the plot designated for the museum, which was surrounded by a tall metal fence, barbed wire and CCTV cameras shortly after excavations began. These imposing fortifications in the middle of the city quite literally overshadowed the remaining grounds of the cemetery.

Aiming to provide a more complete analysis of spatial power and politics, in this article I shift critical attention from the overt operation of violent power to minor spatial practices that utilize geopolitical, material and cultural-discursive sensitivities to reclaim necropolitical agency in this era of late modern conflict. I argue that processes of violent fragmentation and friction that typify late modern colonial occupation (cf. Azoulay and Ophir, 2013; Mbembe, 2003; Weizman, 2007) have dramatically altered the status of territory and in turn, heightened the political importance of the limited places still accessible and available for contesting political interventions. The article therefore offers a dialogue between traditional engagements with the spatiality of death in geography on the one hand, and necropolitics, which considers death as part of contemporary systems of biopolitical governmentality, on the other. The former provides an analytical sensitivity to nuanced assemblages of death-places, while the latter draws critical attention to the particularities of conflict in late modernity and the challenges they pose for political and geopolitical action.

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The case-study analysis is based two research periods in Israel and the Palestinian West Bank in July–September 2010 and June–August 2011. During this time, tensions around the cemetery rose sharply, with weekly demonstrations held in Mamilla and operations to demolish gravestones carried out twice by Israeli authorities. Several of the activists were issued restraining orders by Israeli Police and Shin Bet (Israel's security service), which prevented their access to the site. Every demonstration was monitored and filmed by riot police. Under these conditions, Palestinians who took part in the campaign were increasingly concerned for their personal safety and wary of retribution by authorities. A political environment in which Palestinian-Arab collaboration with Zionist and Israeli authorities has a long and deeply controversial history (Cohen, 2009), poses significant challenges to any researcher seeking ethnographic participant observations (Megeran, 2006), and in particular, one whose name is unmistakably Jewish-Israeli. Only a handful of activists agreed to be recorded or quoted directly. At the same time, the Palestinian campaign in Mamilla made extensive use of print and broadcast media to garner support. This secondary corpus enabled a critical consideration of public narrations, cultural-political tropes and “emotional investments” (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008) in the production of an activist necro- and geo-political discourse. Additionally, over 100 h of participatory observation of demonstrations, gatherings, press briefings and meetings, as well as informal conversations with activists in East Jerusalem and the West Bank provided valuable insights into the dynamic of place-based necro-activism. The theoretical discussion was further grounded by historical data gathered through secondary literature and public documents issued as part of court proceedings or held at the Al Aqsa Institute in East Jerusalem.

Structurally, I set out by drawing the two scholarships incorporated into the analysis of this paper, namely, necrogeography and necropolitics. The following sections constitute the analytical core of the article, demonstrating the significance of closer interrogation of the redrawn lines of urban conflict, its material manifestations and the cultural-political narratives and horizons revealed through these struggles. I conclude by directly addressing the need for a critical necropolitical agenda that avoids the politics of despair that continues to dominate it.

Interrogating necropolitics

Over the past two decades, significant analytical effort has been invested in revisiting the socio-culturally and politically contested nature of landscapes associated with death and bereavement. Early research into necrogeography, a term coined by Kniffen (1967), which focused on the spatial logic and architectural features of cemeteries and mortuary landscapes more broadly (Kniffen, 1967; Price, 1966) was followed by more critical approaches that interrogated the cultural politics, power relations and contested meanings that intersect in the making of deathscapes (Graham & Whelan, 2007; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Kong, 1999; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010a, 2010b). Particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts, burial grounds have played a pivotal role in indigenous assertion of history and communal identity (Turnbull, 2002), resistance to land dispossession (Bollig, 1997) and the use of subversive practices in the face of colonial urban policies (Kong, 2012; Yeoh, 1996).

As a ceremonial space of collective solidarity, cemeteries and funerals have long provided powerful arenas where grief can be harnessed for political mobilization (Tamason, 1980). Funeral processions in Northern Ireland and Palestine often turned from ritual to riot (Alimi, 2007; Jarman, 1997; Tarrow, 2011). Wary of the powerful combination of collective grief and anger, the Apartheid regime in South Africa banned mass funerals in the mid 1980s, sparking violent confrontations with Black mourners who defied

the decree (Associated Press, 1985; Cowell, 1985). Aretxaga's (1988) work importantly highlights the role of cemeteries and funerals in the social reproduction of radical Basque nationalist ethoi and their significance as arenas of activist socialization. As pivotal sites of performance of national and historical identity (Mosse, 1991; Feldman, 2007), cemeteries have also been subjected to deliberate destruction during periods of inter-state armed conflict or intra-state ethnic violence. Case studies from Cyprus (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010), Kosovo (UNESCO, 2005) and Finland (Raivo, 2004) highlight the links between necrogeographies and more explicit geopolitical struggles over sovereignty, borders and territorial possession. Raivo's analysis of the restoration of cemeteries and war graves in Kerelia draws attention to the actions of non-state, voluntary groups involved in reconstruction process (2004, p. 68), and the interconnected re-cultivation of the area's Finnish past.

Despite its stated interest in questions of power and sovereignty (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010b, 5), necrogeographical research has had surprisingly little dialogue with contemporary challenges of urban geopolitics. Three challenges seem particularly relevant in this regard. First, Fregonese (2012, p. 298) rightly urges urban-political scholars to place greater critical emphasis on “those understudied spaces where everyday civility is being maintained at the centre of conflict, and that pass under the radar of official planning and political processes and documents.” This is not simply an interest in the mundane manifestation of politics, but a call to explore the myriad of urban networks and infrastructures that are not bound by official planning procedures (Pullan, 2006), and may in fact operate in direct opposition to them (Gandy, 2006). Second, new forms of urban sovereignty are similarly important, particularly in the context of divided cities with competing claims over boundaries, space, and historical rights (Calame & Charlesworth, 2012; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011). These include Agnew (2005, 456) notion of “actually existing or effective sovereignty” that is not subjected solely to the State, or the idea of hybrid sovereignty which “thinks beyond the State as a secured container of power, and identifies geographies of power shaped *both* by the State *and* by the non-state” (Fregonese, 2012, p. 294).

The third challenge regards the fragmentation of urban space and the rise of enclave geopolitics within the city. Existing conceptualizations of enclave geopolitics focus primarily on cross-border antagonisms concerning what Vinokurov (2007) defines as “hard territorial enclaves”, surrounded by a state which has no sovereignty over them and with no direct connection to the mainland. Meanwhile, “soft enclaves” of language, culture and religion (Berger, 2010), are seen to have limited impact on questions of sovereignty, power and territorial struggles. For urban studies scholars, residential enclaves are used to refer to bounded, enclosed and fortified spaces that attempt to segregate populations and restrict unwanted circulation (Caldeira, 1996; 2000). These enclaves operate on a distinct juridico-political structure, and residents are bound by a separate set of rules and norms that are imposed by the governing body of the enclave. Kaker's (2014) research on the enclavisation of Karachi importantly illuminates the emergence of urban enclave geopolitics both as a critical response to global insecurity and as an instrument of intrastate social and ethnic stratification. As clearly defined spaces associated with specific communal, ethnic or religious history, I posit that death spaces function as a spatio-cultural component of a broader “enclave geopolitics” that typifies the struggle over territory in Jerusalem. Though seemingly associated with “soft” cultural enclaves where communal identities and dissenting memories are performed, I argue that necro-places establish a symbolic and physical hold on territory and are therefore powerful geopolitical instruments in establishing political-historical “strongholds” in the conflicted urban space.

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