

Damir Arsenijević, Jasmina Husanović, and Sari Wastell

# **A Public Language of Grief: Art, Poetry, and Transitional Justice in Post-Conflict Bosnia\***

## **Introduction**

Amongst the myriad of mechanisms that comprise transitional justice practices, art, poetry, and performance seem to be pushed into the background. In the aftermath of mass atrocity, criminal prosecutions, truth and reconciliation commissions, and reparations all seem more exigent components in the effort to create disparate forms of accountability that might underwrite peaceful and just futures. The top-down and legally over-determined nature of transitional justice has long been a point of criticism (McEvoy 2007, 2008). Even memorialization often takes a backseat in processes of transitional justices, and when memorials are eventually completed, they take the shape of monuments and plaques, statues, and buildings. Somehow, we want our memorials to be both durable and timeless even as they reference specific – and passing – moments of history. The more ephemeral nature of much cultural production seems paltry by comparison, gestures simply not grand enough in the face of the abject violence that preceded them.

In a recent conference hosted by the ICMP (International Committee for Missing Persons), the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme/Sarajevo), the Embassy of Switzerland in Bosnia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's Ministry of Justice, two invited speakers, Louis Bickford and Gabriella Citroni, offered a plethora of examples of innovative and fluid forms of memorials (Bickford 2010; Citroni 2012). Their message was clear. Memorials must be about the living as much as the dead. They must be more about the process of civic engagement, debate, and memory rather than the product of an immutable version of history. For a variety of reasons, this understanding of memorials might be particularly true in the states of the former Yugoslavia.

One need not rehearse the longstanding plaint against “ethnic” divisions in Bosnia and how these divisions, whether the cause or the product of the Yugoslav wars, left a country with three sets of politics, three versions of history, and

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three conflicting visions for the country's future.<sup>1</sup> In such a climate, one can imagine that there might be fewer platforms available for a unified civil society and for social movements that not only bridge divided communities but also offer a regional purview.<sup>2</sup> The Dayton Peace Accord not only reified Bosnia's multiethnic character but also ensured that that reification would operate across almost every institutional form of social interaction.

All of this leads to an inevitable paradox. In a post-conflict situation where the need for supra-ethnic communal associations and dialogue is paramount, it is difficult to find social spaces in which such interactions could fruitfully be pursued. Paula Pickering notes that even NGO activities, which are mid-level points of supra-ethnic interaction, fail to link ordinary people except in a hierarchical fashion that discourages repeated interactions (2007, 124). The intransigent role of ethnicity (and the presumably volatile relations between different ethnic communities) leads to a further problem. In the name of political correctness and for fear of instigating further ethnic violence, there is an injunction *not* to say many things. Human rights and the dangers of hate speech are often invoked by the international community to silence debates that might threaten to unleash the affective, ethnic ties they have tried so hard to contain. As a result, civil society in Bosnia remains fractured, controlled, and worryingly stagnant. Therefore, if grass roots or bottom-up movements are inevitably over-determined by a cross-institutional injunction to cooperate only amongst co-ethnics, where is one to go in order to move beyond this impasse?

In this paper, the authors want to argue for the central role of cultural production – of art, literature, poetry, and performance – in the realization of a truly emancipatory politics for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Working through two disparate case studies, we aim to show both the potential of as well as the great challenges faced by artistic expression as a mode of peace-building in Bosnia. We contend that there exists a sort of bureaucratic complicity between the international community and the ethnically-differentiated Bosnian state that allows for a wholly unproductive management of memory and affect, and that this collusion confounds efforts towards establishing a supra-ethnic civil society capable of debating its own future. Forever focused on accountability for past events,

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**1** The authors take the view that both the cause and product renderings are unsatisfactory. Of course, the so-called ethnic differences existed prior to the war. Although these differences may not have constituted divisions, they were also not a *sui generis* invention. However, new meanings clearly became attached to such differences through political mobilization as well as people's own experiences of conflict (see Bougarel et al. 2007). Jansen (2005) offers a compelling account of the "ethnic numbers" game.

**2** See Pickering (2007) for the best analysis of this accepted state of affairs.

Bosnians do not at present have the means to demand accountability from both the international community and their own current leaders. What Bosnia sorely needs, we propose, is a shared and share-able “public language of grief” (Arsenijević 2011b). We refer here to a particular sort of affect that engages with the losses and remnants of the catastrophe besetting forms of sociality and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its regional as well as global contexts. Our focus is on such engagements and interventions in knowledge and cultural production as a way to generate hopeful solidarities and communalities and to host an emergent subject of the politics of hope, a subject capable of materializing new possibilities of social and political transformation towards equality.

## The new paradigm of memorialization and its relationship to cultural production

Speaking about these new possibilities in the politics of memorialization, at the above-mentioned conference, the plenary speaker, Bickford, contrasted the classic model of memorialization with what he referred to as the “new paradigm.” Within the classical model, in the aftermath of the conflict and during the nation building that accompanies it, the focus is placed on the actors involved in the war. Heroes and the fallen are commemorated; the glory of the nation is magnified; and common folk are assimilated into the greater body politic. In this rendering, the war is the hinge between a before and an after moment; in other words, the war is imagined as the moment of transition.

The new paradigm, by contrast, centers on confronting the past, the moment of conflict, in order to build a better future. The present is the moment of linkage, of transition, and this moment demands that all members of a society, not simply the political elite who benefited from the war, engage with the traumatic memory. It is a moment of civic dialogue, of shared efforts at reconciliation, of the recognition of what *everyone* has suffered through. As Bickford noted, in this new narrative, “all victims are equal *as victims*” [emphasis added] (Bickford 2010).

Of course, this new paradigm of memorialization is a direct product of the ascendancy of transitional justice and its victim-centric disposition. It might also be noted that in this paradigm shift in memorialization, one can most clearly see the tacit acceptance of New War Theory in the appeal to a new approach towards post-conflict peace-building (Duffield 2001; Kaldor 2006). However, the point that we should underscore here is the extent to which the new paradigm is intrinsically about shared engagement. It is also about the contingency that such

an engagement must necessarily entertain. Histories are not yet fixed and taken for granted and perpetrators not irrevocably differentiated from victims.

In the Bosnian example, where there is little agreement on whether there was one war or a plurality of wars and where international intervention ended the conflict in a stalemate, the ground seems to be overly ripe for an internationally-driven new paradigm approach. However, the very ambiguity created by the stalemate is also the greatest source of anxiety about the country's future. This anxiety paralyzes any attempts at a different memorialization in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. What dominates in such a context is a consistent recourse to look for a definitive history of the war in the transcripts and judgments of legal proceedings.<sup>3</sup> And while one might agree that certain incendiary topics, such as labeling an event as genocide, are best adjudicated in legal forums, this does not mean that those determinations should not be open to critical commentary. Furthermore, the law should not maintain an exclusive ownership over language it has itself expropriated, giving once familiar terms new and unrecognizable meanings.

Of course, both accusations of genocide and the denial of genocide provoke strong reactions, and that is precisely why the law should serve as a benchmark, a reference point to orient debate. However, it is necessary to recognize both the potential and the limits of law as an arbiter of history and memory in post-conflict societies. In an article discussing the unique characteristics spawned by the phenomenon of collective violence being (legally) managed in terms of individual punishment, Mark Drumbl (2005, 593) cites a lecture given by Justice Albie Sachs at the Columbia University School of Law. In it, Sachs posited a four-

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**3** One might cite the RECOM initiative, a trans-regional coalition that aims to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a significant departure. In its literature, it explains that “The RECOM Initiative does not offer an alternative to war crimes trials conducted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) or by local judiciaries in the Balkans, but it addresses the limitations of a perpetrator-oriented approach to the truth about a conflict-ridden past. The trials have failed to bring about a public debate about war crimes both inside the countries and between the countries in the region. The trials have failed to be perceived as a legitimate mechanism for establishing the full truth about all crimes that happened in the past” (2009). However, should the initiative prove successful after the current signature-collecting phase, their petition will “be submitted to all respective parliaments in the region, together with a draft Statute of RECOM in order to petition all states in the region to jointly undertake the task of establishing the regional commission” (RECOM 2009). This suggests that no matter how laudable an initiative, we will still be looking at a highly regulated and top-down endeavor. Furthermore, RECOM is facing difficulties in Bosnia because it failed to gain adequate support from the local civil society movement. Civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been further fragmented by a multitude of vertical cooperation gestures (involving region and Europe) and very few horizontal ones that would connect different parts of Bosnia.

part typology of truths. Law, he suggested, dealt with “microscopic” and “logical” truths but had little concern for “experiential” and “dialogic” truths. Ultimately, what initially looks like a recuperation of memory through the establishment of facts in a courtroom setting might in actuality serve as “a re-traumatizing process of microscopic dissection” for both participants in legal proceedings, and equally importantly, for the stakeholders outside the courtroom with their faces pressed up to the glass of law’s promise of historical truth, still seeing neither a reflection of their experiences nor a clear sign as to how these truths promise a different future (Drumbl 2005, 594).

Likewise, Shoshana Felman so cogently asserted: “law’s story focuses on ascertaining the totality of facts and events. Art’s story focuses on what is different from, and more than, that totality” (2002, 278). With the caveat that law’s facts should not be understood as absolute truths but as legal truths, the authors would agree entirely. The point underscores the unique remit of art and, perhaps, of the appropriate division of intent between art and law.<sup>4</sup> Felman goes on to say: “Law is a language of abbreviation, of limitation and totalization. Art is a language of infinity and of the irreducibility of fragments” (2002, 279). Would we really want engagement to happen solely in an abbreviated and limited form or would it be better to accord with the *fait accompli* acts of memorialization in the classic paradigm?

Cultural production, in a variety of forms, was intrinsic to the making and breaking of the state that was the former Yugoslavia (Arsenijević 2010; Husanović 2010). Literature, poetry, and theater did not simply reflect a mobile political climate; they helped to direct the winds of change that would sweep over it. Certainly, poetry and prose continue to be mobilized for political purposes in the here and now of twenty-first-century Bosnia. Ethno-nationalist leaders, complicit with the international community, endorse work that undergirds the indisputable nature of ethnic division in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a move that “merely pacifies social antagonism into incommensurable differences” (Arsenijević 2010, 67). Alternatively, there is a counter-discourse of what Damir Arsenijević has termed “false universalization”: “The poetry of false universalization [...] is a melancholic statement of the trauma of the lost world and the alienation caused by the re-defined meanings in the new one” (2010, 174).

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<sup>4</sup> Feldman makes these observations in the context of her analysis of the Adolf Eichmann trial. She contends that the great difficulty with the trial was that it attempted to engage in both art and law simultaneously: “The Eichmann trial sought [...] not only to establish facts but to transmit (transmit truth as event and as the shock of the *encounter* with events, transmit history as experience)” (2003, 261; original emphasis).

In contrast to this, there exist voices and practices in cultural production that re-politicize post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina along more inclusive lines. Such re-politicization entails acknowledging the position that the vast majority of citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a “new community of the excluded” (Arsenijević 2010, 194), deserving of shared dialogue – a debate that could rehabilitate inclusion into a new politics based on the fusion of knowledge production, cultural production, and a sensibility of the thread of the everyday as intrinsically political and not merely ideologically over-determined. In terms of its ethical-political stance, this vernacular of “politics must enact a peculiar fidelity towards the looming specter of a very particular ‘face’/‘body’ that universalizes the predicament of being violently excluded from dominant biopolitical orders” (Husanović 2009, 100). This new community will need to universalize its shared predicament in order to enact social transformation; it will need to go beyond the oppositional then articulate and materialize through concrete acts affirmative politics. The two case studies that follow will draw the framework of such affirmative politics and discuss the extent to which concrete cultural practices have enabled the coming together of this new community.

## Case study 1: From reading poetry in parliament to a new parliament of poetry

In 2008, Arsenijević coordinated the activities of the Department for Civil Society Initiatives at the International Commission of Missing Persons (ICMP) in Sarajevo. He devised a public campaign to commemorate the international day of missing persons, entitled *I Have the Right to Know*, launched on 30 August 2008. Part of the public campaign was the display and public readings of contemporary Bosnian poetry in the Bosnian parliament, poetry that speaks truth to power in such a way as to demand justice for the whole of Bosnian society to know the whereabouts of clandestine mass graves. However, even before the event was launched, an unanticipated furor was stirred up because the ICMP and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) deemed that some of the poems included in the selection were “not good poetry.” A couple of poems by Marko Vešović and Šejla Šehabović included word *chetnik* and references to the existence of concentration camps. The inclusion of these words was what the international representatives used to assess that these two poems were of poor quality. Furthermore, the international representatives judged such references – conjured in the name of suffering, remembrance, and the importance of encouraging ongoing discussions – to be too incendiary to appear in

the Bosnian Parliament. They were, therefore, censored from the program with little conversation about the positive effects their inclusion might have potentially had. The representatives of the ICMP and ICRC eventually censored the public campaign *I Have the Right to Know* (Vešović 2008, 3).

This incident can only be read as an index of the powerful potential of poetry to speak to people about their own pasts and futures. Indeed, if those futures were shared publicly instead of remaining privately imagined, they might have a profound transformative effect. If citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina were to produce a hopeful future that breaks the bounds of the everyday horror of transition in the country today, the agents striving for emancipatory change in Bosnian society would need to draw on the demotic and artistic idioms that enable us to talk about suffering experienced in war and genocide as a public matter. In doing so, the production of social and cultural capital by using art to create a truly public space of engagement, by reasserting the right, importance, and productivity of creating a civic consciousness through open debate, is a form of capital that can only enhance all efforts at social reconciliation and the building of a durable peace in this country. It is how a truly “unbribeable life” is mobilized in quotidian practices – as life “that refuses to be bought off in the face of a politics that aims to de-sensitize it in relation to the workings and effects of the terror of inequality [...] [and] enacts its refusal to be bribed in its demand for and its insistence on the politics of equality for all (Arsenijević 2011b).

Immediately following the 2008 case of censorship, a group of Belgrade-based artists and theorists decided to move the exploration of how poetry may engender a public space for imagining and discussing a future that has a shape to the program of the Monument Group [Grupa Spomenik]. In this manner, the Monument Group, an artistic-theatrical group, intensified its collaboration with the theoretical scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina and commenced work on a novel platform to facilitate public discussions of genocide in Srebrenica. In 2008, the Monument Group’s task was to examine in the fields of art and theory the ideological coordinates of international and local management of denial and amnesia related to war and genocide. The group devised a series of interventions between 2008 and 2010 entitled *Mathemes of Reassociation*. These interventions comprised various art exhibitions, publications, performances, public readings, and workshops.<sup>5</sup> The platform has developed and expanded as a result of individual and collaborative work during the last decade carried out by the

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<sup>5</sup> Details of all the *Mathemes of Re-association* interventions by the Monument Group are from Belgrade October Salon 2008, Zagreb 2009, Novi Sad 2010, and Banja Luka 2010.

group's members. The work generated a political space in which it would be possible to discuss the wars of the 1990s and the (post-)war collectives on territories of the successor states to Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The premise of the Monument Group was that there could be no successful three-dimensional monuments built to the Yugoslav wars; the only possible monument would be a public discussion about the war and its ongoing effects. Poetry has been pivotal in initiating and developing such discussions, so the format of "public reading and analysis of poetry" was devised and realized as installations with a particular duration. Each installation is accompanied by a "distributive monument," a physical object containing a poem and a short essay written by individual poets discussing their motivations for writing the select poems. Public discussions through poetry were devised not to fetishize the dead but to stand as a call to the living and to engage in the joint creation of memory and a social script by taking a stance in relation to war and genocide with no prior guarantees.

The Monument Group's postulate is that there is a lack of language that could re-politicize the objects of (post)-war everyday life collected after mass killings, rapes, deportations, ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, and other mass crimes. Mathemes of Re-Association provided a platform for the articulation and the development of strategies in the fields of theory, art, and culture that focus on the understanding of post-genocide collectivities in the former Yugoslavia, amongst which Srebrenica is only the most well-known. In a series of events during the October Salon 2008 in Belgrade, the Monument Group opened a public discussion around the claim "Where genocide was, there will be a political subject."<sup>6</sup> Its method was to draw on psychoanalysis, philosophy, theory, literature, art, anthropology, and forensic archaeology. Through the opening lecture performance, *Oroditi kost* (Arsenijević 2008), the group set the tone for the language it was proposing for the public discussion. This language would be used to articulate and enact the interruption of governance over both the dead and the living exercised by the triad "the Scientist-the Bureaucrat-the Priest" (Arsenijević 2011a). The decision to use contemporary Bosnian poetry (and the censored poems in particular) as a building block of the framework of Mathemes of Re-Association led to the creation of public space in Serbia, where denial of genocide and war dominates. In such a created public space, the artistic and theoretical scene from Bosnia could posit genocide and its effects as topics to be discussed publically using the concepts of the critique of ideology.

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<sup>6</sup> The October Salon was set up in 1960 in Belgrade as a venue for the exhibition of and investigation into contemporary art.



In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the urgency to deal with the denial of genocide and its effects guided the decision to convene in October 2010 for the first public reading and analysis of poetry in Banja Luka. This public reading took place within the Spaport Biennial and the exhibition *Where Everything Is Yet to Happen* Second Chapter: Exposures curated by Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača. To engage in such an exposure was “to take part in a transformative quest” because making the public call for participating in poetry reading and analysis was “to emancipate the actual process of searching, the uncertainty of the outcome and also, through the continued joint commitment, to create the conditions for empowering the existing alliances and to create new mutualities” (Bago and Majača 2011, 35). The format of the public reading and analysis was novel and risky. Questions that led the devising of this format were: how is it possible to hold a setting of a public discussion in which confrontations around war and genocide are possible without them breaking into a conflict? How can anger, which is always already there and needs not necessarily always be destructive, be transformed by making it an integral part of a social script? The relation, based on explicit articulation of mistrust and anger, enables a discussion about loss as properly social rather than hegemonically ethnic or solely private. It also enables something that goes beyond the posited choices articulated in injunctions to remember or to forget. What is enabled is the start of a mourning that creates some new meaning of loss and goes beyond the compulsion to repeat and reenact. Mourning and solidarity are in that sense closely related because both are relational and enable the creation of new meaning and new social ties. With the awareness of relational qualities shared between mourning and solidarity, the title of the public poetry reading event was *Vrijeme je da se upoznamo onakvi kakvi stvarno jesmo* [It’s Time We Got to Know Each Other as We Really Are], a verse taken from the poem “*Bratstvo jedinstvo* [Brotherhood unity]” by Damir Avdić Graha.

The method of work for these public poetry sessions is always explicitly outlined in the protocol that frames the collection of poems published as distributive monuments [*kajdanke*]. *Kajdanka*, in its original meaning of a music sheet, is a direct reference to the performative dimension of public reading of poetry. What does it mean to read from the same sheet in a community that is riven with tensions, dominant injunctions to deny or remember war and genocide in a very specific way? How does this public reading open up a space for the confrontation between posited individual and collective meanings of war and genocide but also a space for non-sense as yet un-created meanings? How does it bring together the given text of poetry and the open discussion in a frame of working through and creating of a new text in a session that has its beginning and end? How do participants read and analyze poetry together? Participants

jointly discuss two most important themes – past and commonality – with poetry creating a setting for the discussion in such a way that the collective coming together to read and analyze poetry thinks about the future that they desire: that forgotten future that they are forbidden to contemplate in the current political framework, which presents itself as the only possible one. They all engage in free associations based on the content of the poem. This means that they speak whatever thoughts occur to each of them, with as little censorship as possible, when they hear either the lines of a poem or the words of others during the reading and analysis. In the joint creation of memory and social script through poetry, the past and the present are brought into a productive conflict through which participants expose and articulate their own positions in relation to war and genocide, positions that are always political. In these public sessions, poetry reminds us that the social script is open and constructed, with multiple perspectives merging and separating through free associations. There is a reminder that because the social script is inherently constructed and uncertain, it need not inevitably lead to collapse, chaos, and destruction. All the while, there exists a structure – a setting, created through poetry, in which history is brought to justice in such a way as to uphold equality among speaking beings and to strengthen the communal capacity to release us from the emotion of the impossible.

Articulating this seeming impossibility, exposing flights into helplessness that accept ready-made images of the shapeless future, dealing with the deep mistrust whilst being surrounded by the prevailing fantasy of salvation – these are the things that a public reading and analysis of poetry has enabled but in such a way that it treats them not as communal losses from the war but as communal gains. Public readings and analysis of poetry enable a shift in perspective from hopelessness to hope by counting the gains of everything that has survived. This communal sharing of our individual and collective articulation treats these gains as something we have to start with if we are to envision and materialize a more just future. In these readings, we are given an insight that “trauma can help in overcoming trauma,” as the poet Ferida Duraković claims (2014). Poems and our public discussion of them short-circuit the prevalent imagery of helplessness, asserting a different possibility and reminding us of the creative *tension* in, what Dinko Kreho (2010) calls: the “forgotten future tense.”<sup>7</sup>

In the following vignette, the poet Adisa Bašić (2014) reflects on one of the short-circuits that emerged at a public reading of her poetry: “I remember two young men, who reacted to the erotic poem about the former concentration camp inmate by talking about their fathers, who had been imprisoned in concen-

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7 “Forgotten future tense” enables Kreho to emphasize how social critique actualizes the future.

tration camps: it was only later that we found out that one of these was a Bosniak, the other a Croat; while talking about the experience of living with a former concentration camp prisoner, ethnicity is completely irrelevant.” There it is – for a moment, albeit a brief one, we are invited to recuperate a life that has survived and a commonality resulting from the experience of survival. In doing so, we discover and learn hitherto unknown ways of speaking, reading, and listening; in creating and rehearsing jointly the social script, we make space for new subject-positions. This social script, jointly composed, is now part of our common shared experience, and the words of others become our own through dialogue. “These readings expose before me the process of reading – the text finalizes itself before your eyes, finds a collocutor, gains sense. The significance this had for me was to be present at and be a part of an entirely intimate act” (Bašić 2014). In the shared intimacy of the setting created and supported by poetry, the commons of the shared social script enable us to espouse the words of others as our own. As the poet Šehabović (2014) claims, “this is the type of solidarity I seek in my poetry”.

## **Case study 2: Mathemes of Re-Association: Interventions into the public language of “telling the story of a mass grave” and “mapping genocide”**

The search for this kind of solidarity and commonality in shared collective spaces, whilst engaging with the traumatic contents of everyday life and politics in the post-SFRY region, is also evident in the Monument Group’s series of interventions entitled Mathemes of Re-Association. Indeed, the struggle to find words conducive for affirmative political gesture in a terrain framed by two issues – “telling the story of a mass grave” and “mapping a genocide” (Husanović 2008, 2009, 2011) – has characterized the last three decades of artistic, cultural, and knowledge production in this region. Many interventions and collaborations of artists, scholars, students, and activists in this period have fought the inability to think and talk about the wars and the (post)-war collectivities, struggling to do so within the framework of emancipatory politics.

The Monument Group intended the public production of Mathemes of Re-Association to navigate politically through the terrain of post-genocide culture as a culture of lies, a culture of denial, and a culture of amnesia. This culturalized terror of governance, produced and practiced by a range of local, regional,

and international actors, is understood to mask the ongoing exploitation of governed life (as bare life, or as labor power<sup>8</sup>), turning it into a collection of enclaves. It is also testament to the inability of various forms of authority to find properly political rather than managerial solutions to the crises of transitional societies. In opposition to this, Mathemes of Re-Association's production and public events in Belgrade, Zagreb, Novi Sad, and Banja Luka critically explored the genocide industry constitutive of Srebrenica today that holds the potential to reveal ethno-nationalist politics in all its bankruptcy and testify to the limits of multiculturalist identity politics. In Srebrenica, we are witnessing the current stalemate in the form of ethnic apartheid involving post-genocide collectives, including not only the relationships existing between refugees, survivors (women, men, children), the international scientific community, the local government, civil society initiatives, and NGOs but also the destroyed houses and newly built ones, identified and non-identified human remains, buried and non-buried individuals, identified and non-identified mass graves, and so on. The ideology of reconciliation has left a political wasteland in Srebrenica today, rendering it a society of the symbiosis of dead and living, perpetrators and victims, functioning through apartheid where traumatic injustices endure. However, the paradigm of reconciliation has its distinct technologies and economies, a coalition of science, administration, and religion encircling the management of remains of those killed in genocide. How is it possible to think and enact new collectivities, communalities, and solidarities in the face of the material abject that permeates the everyday of the post-genocide society?

Through lectures, readings, and exhibitions with theorists, artists, and activists, as well as with the staff of ICMP, Mathemes of Re-Association explored how genocide in Srebrenica is construed as an object of science, law, and international administration in the work of ICMP. This process consists of a set of forensic doctrines and bioinformatic technologies (the forensic DNA analysis and database management designed to identify the remains of the genocide victims found in mass graves and other sites, or to "help find the missing through the means of science," as was repeatedly expressed by the ICMP staff members during many field visits to their facilities), as well as a set of legal-administrative mechanisms that purport to produce a "story of a mass grave" and a "map of genocide" in the service of transitional justice, reconciliation, and civil society development (Husanović 2011, 505–512). The "Bosnian technology," as it is called by Wagner (2009), can be summed up as follows: through the process

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**8** For more on the concept of bare life (Agamben 1998) as labor power in the Marxian sense and a matter of exploitation and ghettoization, see Sylvester (2006).

of re-association of bodily remains of those killed in mass atrocity, it construes a *matheme*, containing a description of the place and method of killing the victim, and through which, after the DNA analysis, the bodily remains retroactively acquires identity. In other words, through a hyper-expert discourse, the missing become “mathemes” or mere bar-codes before they are re-associated with their identity and a form of ethical and political visibility is restored to them.

Through a series of debates, texts, exhibits, and performances, *Mathemes of Re-Association* transformed into a public classroom on the knowledge-technology complex behind the governance of the missing, where DNA identification technology was politically analyzed in order to shed new insights into the relationship between states and their citizens in moments of crisis and disorder, mass atrocity and its aftermath (Wagner 2009, 249). By fixing identity to nameless remains through a public gift of identification (granted not only to families but also to ethno-nationalist orders that reinsert them back into their projects<sup>9</sup>), sovereign power reasserts itself through “a mechanism for tabulating losses and indexing postdisaster/postconflict political will” (Wagner 2009, 255). The process of identifying nameless remains thus feeds directly into modes of ethno-nationalist commemoration and political mobilization of affect that are still as profitable as ever. This completes the circle as modern science and religion identify their object, thereby repeating the procedures of the politics of atrocity. After Srebrenica, we do not have silence. On the contrary, its name speaks of a mute coalition of science and religion: science that construes identity and religion that gives it “dignity” and meaning at the price of repeating and reiterating the procedures of the politics of terror and atrocity by other means. In contrast to this knowledge-technology complex, *Mathemes of Re-Association* remained faithful to an uncomfortable surplus, a remainder of the process of identification and culturalization, that is to say, those bodily remains that cannot be identified by modern science. What remains, in other words, are bones without identity, something that has no identity. It is possible neither to construe its identity nor to count it nor to render it dignified and deserving of religious burial and mourning rituals. This abject remainder opens up the space of politics, of a specific type of subjectification that is not based on identity or counting and that opens up the process of remembering, whose task is to break up parallel conver-

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<sup>9</sup> Ethno-nationalist identity politics is the primary logic of violence that produced the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which resulted in ethnic cleansing and genocide. It is also the matrix that has framed post-war politics and everyday life in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the 1990s.

gences of contemporary construction of identity and the culturalized politics of terror.<sup>10</sup>

Mathemes of Re-Association interventions engendered promising public spaces and a new form of solidarity in thinking about genocide, where each participant may position her- or himself politically in relation to it through a new language that critically engages with the ideological mechanisms perpetuating the politics of genocide for two decades. This new public language rejects those dominant public languages of biopolitical statecraft that go hand in hand with administrative demands from a new leviathan – internationalized forms of governance framed as a therapeutic management of affect and yet pre-occupied with the politics of security and freedom through internationalized practices of ghettoizing life (Husanović 2011, 502–503). Instead, Mathemes of Re-Association platform insisted on producing and practicing a new politics of hope beyond both ethnic and multicultural discourses of nation and religion, law, and science. It collaborated outside of the dominant protocols of civil society in the post-SFRY region (involving international organizations, cultural policies, inter-state cooperation program) and against the current paradigm of reducing everyday life in a post-genocidal society to the management of cultural and ethnic differences through hyper-scientific and (extra-)legal practices of governance. The Monument Group’s interventions gathered people across the divisive terrain induced by the politics of affect concerning genocide in a proclaimed effort to enact emancipatory gestures in the fields of arts and theory and to impact productively on everyday lives against identitarian culture and the politics of terror. Their gesture was that of a resistance to the paradigm of culturalized identity in “transitional justice,” seeking that which stands against the culturalization of politics, which exploits the capital of the living and dead through new and old forms of political authority.

The public engagement around the Mathemes of Re-Association project effected various new paths and interventions towards affirmative and universal politics of the new subject through the public language of political humanity and equality whose “poetry does not stem from the past but only from the future” (Marx 1852). When witnessing the legacies of atrocity, ethical and social relationships must be forged anew, based on the critical reflection on the origins and methods of violence where mass atrocity is only the culmination of everyday biopolitical control over life and death. An affirmative politics of witnessing

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**10** The psychoanalytic term *abject* refers to that which has been violently expelled from the symbolic order, social or cultural, inhabiting the liminal space that shatters the division between the object and the subject and the encounter of which represents a traumatic experience. For more on the notion of abject and abjection, see Kristeva (1982).

trauma and thinking through genocide does offer a space for a new public language of grief and hope as well as ways of subjectivization, which are an authentic challenge to both the ethnocratic mobilization and aseptic liberal management of affect. The question of how to embody justice in a post-genocidal political community that lives with the realities of mass atrocity poses a challenge, where academic engagement needs to follow non-institutionalized and non-state spaces of publicity (fields of cultural production, art, and activism). Spaces and public voices created by new solidarities and subjectivities beyond the closures of institutional politics are the promising site for social and political transformation. The Mathemes of Re-Association thus operated as an “emancipated community” where the participants acted as “storytellers and translators” engendering a different public language of witnessing trauma, repoliticizing the effects of it, thinking through political violence, and acting upon radical contingencies in the world around us (Rancière 2007). It has been a process of producing radical relationality in a way that strikes back through emancipatory politics, its center being the political subject where genocide was.

## Transitional justice after positivism: Some conclusions

In the aftermath of what Mark Osiel termed “administrative massacre,” victims, whose silence is finally being broken, want facts (2000). They want to know numbers, names, and locations. The feeling is that the victims will be able to move forward only when a true history of the conflict in question has been established, and with this they will then be able to carry their societies forward with them. Perhaps this is why criminal prosecutions and truth and reconciliation commissions seem to take precedence in transitional justice programs. Notwithstanding Osiel’s claim that courts “fragment our settled perception of reality into contending stories and counter-stories” by offering a “narrative multiplicity” (Osiel 2000, 271), they also provide the finality of judgment. Indeed, many scholars expect that an institution like the ICTY can and must offer the official and indisputable history of the conflicts in which the crimes they adjudicate took place (Wilson 2011).<sup>11</sup> The sense seems to be that legal and quasi-legal modalities of truth telling are best suited to elucidating “what really happened,” and

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<sup>11</sup> Wastell has argued against this position strenuously, noting that the “facts” that war crimes trials establish are adjudicated facts, open to be contested further, and that the truths arrived at by trials should be understood as legal truths (2008).

can memorialization and reconciliation can be realized only when a single, factual history of events has been established. While this sequencing of transitional justice elements seems both commonplace and self-evidently reasonable, one might want to sound a note of caution. It also seems a perfect *modus operandi* for memory management.

Certainly in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, memory management has been shored up by the well-intentioned, but ultimately ill-founded acceptance of the tacit chronology of transitional justice initiatives. At the Memory/Sjećanje conference discussed throughout this article, the participants, while disagreeing about the “facts” themselves, all seemed to agree that the facts needed to be established before issues of memory and memorialization could be broached. Speakers and audience members alike repeatedly asserted that it was perhaps “too early” for memorials. Despite being asked to think about memorialization as a process, a debate, a pedagogical activity, conversation seemed doomed to return to a discussion of where to put up plaques and monuments, and this required knowing the facts inasmuch as one would not want to put up a physical index of an incontrovertible historical truth only to discover one had got the “facts” wrong.

In her presentation, Saliha Duderija, the Assistant Minister in the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of BiH and the leader of the working party that is drafting a transitional justice strategy for the country, repeatedly emphasized the need for a specifically Bosnian concept of transitional justice.<sup>12</sup> A transitional justice strategy that did not start from a uniquely Bosnian conceptual framework, she argued, could never adequately deal with the many particularities intrinsic to the Bosnian situation that might not be evident in other post-conflict societies. Her reasoning, which the authors agree with entirely, belied the fact that not only Duderija but also most of the attendees in the hall seemed wholly unreflective about the extent to which a very foreign and under-examined conceptual framework actually over-determined the two days of discussion. Leaders of victims’ associations, government ministers, foreign and “local” NGO workers alike, all seemed to speak in unison in the language of “transitional justice” – not only employing its specific lexicon but also failing to interrogate many of its underlying assumptions. In short, “transitional justice” had become in Bosnia, what Partha Chatterjee elsewhere referred to as a “derivative dis-

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<sup>12</sup> The need for context-specific post-conflict interventions, although largely ignored in the early days of transitional justice’s maturation, is now widely recognized. See, for example, the particularly apt discussion offered by Rama Mani (2002).



course” (1993).<sup>13</sup> Well after transitional justice practitioners have come to query the one-size-fits-all model of transitional justice interventions and to deconstruct some of the movement’s earlier underlying presumptions, the certainties of an older discourse seem to have colonized the imaginations of those looking to effect social reconciliation in Bosnia.

A privileging of positivism in the guise of transparency and accountability, the resulting temporality of transitional justice programs, the dyadic rendering of restorative versus retributive models of justice, all seem to be above the level of debate in Bosnia. The sum outcome is that very little substantive debate actually occurs – a situation only exacerbated by the reification of ethnic categories and the concomitant injunction not to say anything that might offend someone who is not a co-ethnic, thereby potentially instigating further violence (as discussed at the start of this paper). Therefore, the voices of the victims, allegedly at last free to be heard, resound across the society as a social movement of silence couched in the language of caution and political correctness, and too often requiring a foreign presence to establish objective and unambiguous facts. Without opening the spaces of cultural production – of art, poetry, and performance – to create platforms for a real discussion of what happened in Bosnia and its neighboring countries, the silence of the murdered dead will be mirrored in the silences crafted by the absence of a “public language of grief” (Arsenijević 2011b).

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<sup>13</sup> In this vein, Chatterjee’s distinction between “civil society” as opposed to “political society” is particularly apt (2004).

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