Memories from the Margins: Violence, Conflict, and Counter-Narratives

Edited by

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Memories from the margins: violence and counter-narratives—introduction

Nina Parish and Daniele Rugo

In memory of Lokman Slim

Abstract: This supplementary issue looks at how informal, often unrecognised, memory practices are used to deal with the legacy of violent conflict as a way to heal trauma, demand justice, and build sustainable peace. By drawing on case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, India, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Vietnam, the articles examine informal practices of memorialisation that challenge amnesia and hegemonic discourses of conflict by creating spaces for dialogue and exchange.

Keywords: Memory practices, violent conflict, amnesia, justice, dialogue.

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In societies affected by armed conflict, learning from the past can prevent violence, promote justice, and contribute to sustainable peace. For these societies, however, collective memory is often fragmented, monopolised by political elites, and mirrors societal inequalities. State institutions enforce amnesia over the past and dictate who is allowed to speak. The heritage of the conflict remains unresolved and can fuel new outbursts of violence and instability. Citizens therefore strive to bypass and challenge hegemonic narratives and state-enforced silence by devising bottom-up practices that create spaces for dialogue and advance demands for justice and accountability. This *Journal of the British Academy* supplementary issue looks at how these informal, often unrecognised, practices are used to deal with memory as a way to heal trauma, demand justice, and build sustainable peace. By drawing on case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, India, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Vietnam, the articles examine informal practices of memorialisation that challenge amnesia and hegemonic discourses of conflict by creating spaces for dialogue and exchange.

This issue emerges out of the project, *Memories from the Margins*,[1] funded by the British Academy, focusing on the memory work produced in informal archives and oral histories from Lebanon's Civil War (1975–90) and Syria's ongoing conflict (2011–present) to create a documentary film, an online archive, and teaching material, as well as producing research articles from our findings. In Lebanon, countering amnesia is seen as a way to delegitimise the sectarian rhetoric that—together with the persistence of cultural violence and martial infrastructures—fuel the sense that the war has not ended. In Syria, forms of narrative production beyond state-sanctioned ones can become mechanisms for transitional justice and help foreground local perceptions overlooked by an overly internationalised process. This issue and the project therefore shift the focus on the agency of local actors and local field dynamics.

Our project's aims are to study (a) how bottom-up approaches to memorialisation can be inclusive, address citizens' lack of agency, and contribute to sustainable peace in contexts marked by obstruction from formal institutions; (b) the efficacy of personal archives in challenging amnesia or hegemonic narratives of conflict and advancing demands for justice; (c) the sensory, aesthetic dimensions of the heritage produced by conflict; (d) the link between the ways in which heritage of conflict is dealt with and the emergence of new violence; and (e) the transfer of unconventional practices and methods from one context to another. The articles in this issue engage with these aims in a variety of ways using a number of different case studies from autobiographical narratives about child refugees from Rwanda and Vietnam to the use of oral histories in an exhibition developed at the Ulster Museum in Belfast. They are not all

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[1] http://www.memoriesmargins.com

traditional academic articles written by researchers employed by universities. We are interested in different forms of responses to these ideas as attested by pieces written by memory activists, such as Salma Kahale, the Founder and former Executive Director of the non-profit Syrian civil organisation, Dawlaty. They in no way provide an exhaustive overview of using informal memory practices to deal with difficult history but instead suggest some theoretical frameworks, such as Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen's agonistic memory,[2] Viet Thanh Nguyen's just memory,[3] or Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory[4] and implicated subjectivity,[5] and methodological practices such as object biographies and oral histories that could be applied to or used in different contexts. They all engage with and reflect on the complex interface between collective memory and personal recollections of war and violence.

We begin with three articles that deal with our project's case studies. Carmen Hassoun Abou Jaoude (University of Saint Joseph, Beirut) and Daniele Rugo (Brunel University London) are both researchers on the *Memories from the Margins* project. Their article, 'Marginal memories of Lebanon's Civil War: challenging hegemonic narratives in a small town in North Metn', focuses on the significance of the 'hidden public culture' formed by individual memories of violent conflicts, with particular reference to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90).[6] Moving from an understanding of memory as a terrain through which individuals can produce counter-hegemonic narratives, and contest authoritarian governance and repressive memory scripts, their article examines how intimate memories can contribute to understanding the power relations that structure official memories of war. By shifting focus to individual memories, everyday practices, and material culture, exemplified here by interviews with inhabitants of a small town in North Metn, a district in Mount Lebanon, the article emphasises the importance of lived experiences of conflict as a way to challenge the normative construction of political subjectivities in a sectarian state and therefore become sites of resistance. Broadly speaking, Abou Jaoude and Rugo advocate for the use of personal memories and informal archives in research into violent conflicts as a way to challenge the exceptional–spectacular character of war and broaden our understanding of conflict's different lived experiences.

The case study of Lebanon and the idea of personal memories disrupting the state's hegemonic production of history and memory are further explored in the article by Lynn Hodeib (independent researcher), 'Objects of transgenerational memory: challenging hegemonic historical narratives of war in Lebanon', which takes

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[2] Cento Bull & Hansen (2016).
[3] Nguyen (2017).
[4] Rothberg (2009).
[5] Rothberg (2019).
[6] Abou Jaoude & Rugo (2021).

as its focus objects embedded in the domestic life of the first and second generations of people who witnessed the Lebanese Civil War.[7] The article analyses stories surrounding two objects—a tray and a bowl—that survived the war, and took on layers of memory later heard and retold by the second generation. These objects demonstrate ways in which the legacy of intergenerational memory is produced and transmitted—and how these alternative spaces and stories inform present struggles, including the October 2019 revolution. Hodeib firstly discusses how material objects operate as intergenerational symbols of the experiences of war and as media for the process of narrativisation. She then goes on to explore the role of the material as a witness to what resists language and as a locus to memory's temporality. In the final section, Hodeib examines the affective dimension of the material object as it provokes an opening to narration and challenges linear understandings of history. This study of material and domestic objects seeks stories that resist closure, and is essential to understanding today's struggle against the Lebanese political class.

Attention is shifted from the memory work of everyday objects to that done through oral history in Syria and the important work carried out by the non-profit civil organisation, Dawlaty, in the article by Salma Kahale, 'Oral history as a method of promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive justice'.[8] The Syrian Oral History Archive programme, developed by Dawlaty, aims to ensure collective memory of the Syrian conflict is built based on truth telling, recognition of marginalised communities' experiences, and mutual understanding. This online platform encompasses the voices of ordinary Syrians—with a focus on women and marginalised youth—and acts to recount both individual and collective recollections of the 2011 Syrian Uprising and the Syrian conflict thereafter. Created to build a collective narrative on the experience of the last decade in Syria, the modality of oral history testimony has itself become a tool in promoting justice and empowering citizens. The impact of historical documentation in this form both validates the lived experiences of a generation of Syrian citizens, and empowers local communities, who play a direct role both in the methodology of collecting testimony and in producing community art.

The power of oral history in uncovering, recording, and exhibiting informal memories of violence is further explored by Chris Reynolds (Nottingham Trent University), in his article 'The symbiosis of oral history and agonistic memory: *Voices of 68* and the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland'.[9] Reynolds offers a reflection on the potency of combining oral history and agonistic memory. Via the specific example of a recent collaboration between Reynolds and National Museums Northern Ireland

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[7] Hodeib (2021).
[8] Kahale (2021).
[9] Reynolds (2021).

on the subject of 1968, he argues that the symbiotic relationship between this methodological approach and theoretical underpinning provides a potentially effective response to the current and pressing challenge of managing the legacy of the Troubles as part of the Northern Irish peace process. The success of this approach in the particular and difficult context of Northern Ireland suggests that there are potential lessons for other post-conflict societies coming to terms with the challenges of their own difficult pasts.

George Wilkes (King's College London) examines alternative ways for post-conflict societies to deal with the past at a local level, in his article 'Cross-communal acts of commemoration designed to promote peace at a local level in Bosnia-Herzegovina'.[10] Wilkes describes two distinct senses in which local remembrance activities are used to build peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina: to counter nationalist conflict narratives and to demonstrate cross-communal recognition on the local level. The existing literature on such activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina foregrounds the objective conditions in which the combination of memory activism and peacebuilding is necessary as a counter to the uses made of remembrance by the main ethnonationalist parties to justify their divisive rule. The article draws on the concepts of Michael Rothberg—multidirectional memory and implicated subjectivity—to show how the divergent forms of local peacebuilding and memory activities imply choices which also have a subjective, relational element. To enable the reader to understand these choices, the article first reviews the historical, political, and social conditions faced by activists. Secondly, it explores ways in which the subjective, relational dimension of these choices are also keys to understanding ways in which their variety and their engagement with local realities are not captured in objectivising literature on peacebuilding and memory work.

Adriana Rudling (Universidad del Rosario, Bogota) and Lorena Vega Dueñas (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogota) continue this exploration of community memory work and activism in Colombia, in their article 'Liquid graves and meaning activism in the Colombian armed conflict: the "bottom-up" recovery and memorialisation of victims of forced disappearance'.[11] The use of non-burial methods in the context of the Colombian armed conflict can be traced to the early 1950s. Focusing on the period starting in the 1980s, Rudling and Vega Dueñas aim to define the agency of the community members of Puerto Berrío (Department of Antioquia) engaged in the recovery of human remains from the Magdalena River. Covering three main elements, namely the preservation of the remains salvaged from these liquid graves, their 'baptism' using fabricated names, and the 'adoption' of their souls in exchange

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[10] Wilkes (2021).
[11] Rudling & Vega Dueñas (2021).

for small favours, they argue that this complex practice is inherently political. This community-level meaning activism arises as a consequence of the harm-amplifying reality of a pathological state. It is a form of resistance to (in)formal rules of necro-governmentality imposed by the non-state armed groups, the Catholic Church, and, most importantly, by the state. They highlight the double role of the state, on the one hand, as a rule-of-law agent that rallies for the equal treatment and protection of its citizens and, on the other, a fragmented anomic agent that persecutes specific groups and individuals placed outside this realm of protection to be treated as 'internal enemies'. Victims recognise both the ill disposition of the state and the precarity of the legal–bureaucratic administration of forced disappearance but continue to challenge both through these individual and community-level resistance practices as well as mobilise legally and politically to hold the state to account. They conclude that the 2016 Final Peace Agreement represents a renewed opportunity for a 'virtuous state', where the element of victim (and citizen) participation or inclusion in the transitional justice mechanisms arising from it seeks to dignify and recognise their struggle for justice and historic resistance.

Jaideep Gupte (University of Sussex) and Syeda Jenifa Zahan (University of Sussex), in their article 'Silent cities, silenced histories: subaltern experiences of everyday urban violence during COVID-19', bring these engagements with informal memories of violence into the here and now by reflecting on how institutional responses to COVID-19 can further hinder the emergence of informal memories and the role of the researcher in this process.[12] The public health containment measures put into place in response to COVID-19 have precipitated a significant epistemic and ontological shift in 'bottom-up' and 'action-oriented' approaches in development studies research. 'Lockdown' necessitates physical and social distancing between the research subject and researcher. This raises legitimate concerns around the extent to which 'distanced' action-research can be inclusive and address citizens' lack of agency. Top-down regimes to control urban space through lockdown in India have not stemmed the experience of violence in public spaces. Some experiences of violence have dramatically intensified, while others have changed in unexpected ways. Drawing on their experiences of researching the silent histories of violence and memorialisation of past violence in urban India over the past three decades, Gupte and Zahan argue that the experience of subaltern groups during the pandemic is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. Exceptionalising the experiences of violence during the pandemic serves to silence past histories and disenfranchises long struggles for rights in the city. At the same time, however, the authors argue that research practices employed to interpret the experience

[12] Gupte & Zahan (2021).

of urban violence during lockdown in India need to engage the changing nature of infrastructural regimes, as they seek to control urban space, and as subaltern groups continue to mobilise and advocate, in new ways.

The issue closes with two articles which consider the potential of literature and the visual arts to engage with, represent, and express informal memories of violence. Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy (University of Cambridge), in her article '"Nothing ever dies": memory and marginal children's voices in Rwandan and Vietnamese narratives', examines narratives which reclaim memory as personal and as a collective plea to understand the structural discrepancy at play from the child who is victim of war.[13] She analyses the memoir of a Tutsi refugee child[14] and an autobiographical narrative by a Vietnamese refugee in Canada[15] to gauge the extent to which such narratives create their own memorial spaces and in so doing reclaim their marginal memories and centre them. Ultimately Kistnareddy tests Viet Thanh Nguyen's theory that memory can be just and that, in this ethical recoding of memory, the humanity and inhumanity of both sides are underlined.

Hasini Haputhanthri (International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo), in her article 'The past in our art: confronting the contemporary in an ancient society',[16] explores the works of contemporary Sri Lankan artists. While the use of ancient iconography in modern and contemporary art is a fairly common approach among artists, not much attention has been paid to understanding how local artists make choices between tradition and modernity, history and memory, negotiating past and the present at personal and communal spheres. In Sri Lanka, ideas and representations of the past play a central role in social discourses. Not only that, there are competing versions of the past: historic past—the domain of historians, archaeologists, and museologists—and 'practical past'—the domain of writers, filmmakers, and artists, which, is also the past of the 'common man'. By analysing the works of *Hanusha Somasunderam* and *Jagath Weerasinghe*, the article illustrates how artists investigate the past in unique ways, different from how figures such as historians, archaeologists, and museologists deal with 'the past'. Haputhanthri argues that these artists' works offer intricate palimpsests of the historic and mnemonic strata; and that their practice is an essential way in which societies understand and express their past in relation to their present.

Whilst this *Journal of the British Academy* supplementary issue is diverse in methods, geographical contexts, and theoretical engagements with memorialisations

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[13] Kistnareddy (2021).
[14] Habonimana (2019).
[15] Thúy (2010).
[16] Haputhanthri (2021).

of violence, all the contributions share an understanding of memory as an active force that keeps shaping the present. In the cases discussed here, memory work becomes a form of activism that renegotiates power structures, challenges hegemonic legacies, and becomes a vehicle for accountability and justice. Precisely because of this, memory work often has a disruptive and oppositional significance, requiring as much an effort of recall as one of creation, a rewriting of time. This work requires courage and it is clear that the stakes can be very high for those who make of memory a matter of justice.

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Marginal memories of Lebanon's Civil War: challenging hegemonic narratives in a small town in North Metn

Carmen Hassoun Abou Jaoude and Daniele Rugo

Abstract: This article focuses on the 'hidden public culture' formed by individual memories of violent conflicts, with particular reference to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). Taking memory as a terrain through which individuals can contest authoritarian governance and repressive memory scripts, the article argues that personal memories of ordinary citizens can contribute to illuminate the power relations that structure war memorialisations. Through a series of interviews, the article analyses militia practices in a small town in North Metn to challenge the idea that militias were merely defending a territory from external enemies. Militia abuses against the populations they were meant to defend during the Civil War are also used as a starting point to reflect on Lebanon's present. This case study is then used as a starting point to advocate for the use of personal memories in the research of violent conflicts as a way to broaden our understanding of conflict's lived experiences.

Keywords: Lebanese Civil War, individual memories, militia, conflict, lived experience.

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'*This is worse than the war*', said Salma, a 72-year-old woman interviewed in North Metn.[1] She was referring to the massive explosion that devastated Beirut on 4 August 2020. As a result of the blast, in a few seconds over 200 people were killed, 6,000 wounded, and 300,000 left homeless or displaced. Pending the results of an investigation, many in Lebanon blame the negligence and corruption of present and past Lebanese governments for the explosion. Almost 1,700 tons of nitrate ammonium were stored in the port for over six years, despite the authorities receiving a number of warnings as to the potential danger. In the aftermath, Salma and many others who like her had lived through Lebanon's Civil War (1975–90), have relived their experiences of the war's worst days. The blast has refreshed the trauma of the conflict and the following decades of Israeli bombings (in 1993, 1997, and 2006) and targeted assassinations (between 2004 and 2013). The conviction that the war never actually ended—despite the official cessation of hostilities in 1990—persists among the Lebanese. The idea is reinforced by ongoing political violence and by the fact that the warlords of yesteryear—protected by years of impunity—still monopolise both power and the official memory of the conflict.

Given this premise, this article contends that the 'hidden public culture' formed by the memories of ordinary individuals can play a crucial role in our understanding of Lebanon's past wars and present condition. Furthermore, the argument aims to illuminate more broadly how these memories can support a bottom-up understanding of violent conflicts and the narratives built in their course and aftermath. This article does not intend to neglect the importance of mnemonic socialisation, the idea that memories are constituted interactionally and that collective frameworks offer ways for individual experiences to be rationalised and validated. As Lorraine Ryan aptly summarises, 'our individual memory inescapably reflects group memory as we incorporate past inexperienced group elements into our own memory and construct our individual memories with society's explanatory tools' (2010: 157). The article therefore accepts the idea that 'memory is the product of conflicts, power struggles and social contestation, always fragile and provisional' (Bell 2009: 351).

However, as the case study presented here shows, a sustained encounter with ordinary individual memories of conflict, marginalised by elite discourses and official accounts, can challenge the idea of war as a spectacular/exceptional event and move our attention to everyday experiences and therefore everyday impacts of violence. When we invoke personal memories, we intend to emphasise those narratives that have not been sanctioned as authoritative, but also have not been accepted into national or even local discourses and maintain the potential to challenge official narratives and public discourses. It is not a matter of negating the interactive and

[1] Interview, North Metn, 27 August 2020.

shared nature of memory-making, but of shifting the focus onto how memories of ordinary individuals, excluded from official scripts and therefore marginal, can challenge the consolidation of hegemonic narratives and reopen the status and interpretation of those collective memories taken as given. The argument developed here attempts to show that, whilst memory is always predicated on the interaction between private/everyday/individual memories and official/collective ones, this interaction can take the form of a dispute, in particular when what is at stake is the legacy of a violent conflict. The article also aims to show how individuals' attachment to their own lived experiences (and the memories formed therein) can be a site of contestation of a dominant narrative that negates that lived experience. We focus on the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) as exemplary of a protracted conflict that has a highly fragmented (if at all existent) national memory, dominated by accounts of the ruling political class. In this context, the marginal memories discussed above constitute both a site of resistance to political and sectarian elites and introduce a different understanding of the conflict.

Lebanon's post-conflict settlement (formalised in the 1989 Ta'if Agreement), has been to a large extent monopolised by the very political–military actors who fought the war. The Amnesty Law from 1991—which has pardoned all crimes against civilians—has promoted a selective amnesia that has reinforced the narratives of specific leaders to the detriment of those of ordinary citizens. Political leaders have used and continue to use memory to advance their own local and geopolitical agendas and interests. As a consequence, the case of Lebanon allows for the study of situations where memory discourse becomes an explicit and pivotal tool for the construction of political subjectivities. A focus on personal memories underlines the importance of power relations in the construction of official narratives and the dissonances, omissions, and assumptions they facilitate. Since the end of the war, leaders and political parties have exercised a monopoly over which narratives of the conflict are accepted into public discourse. In the absence of a history textbook to explain the Civil War, this type of memory work has often been legitimised by State officials and institutions. Artistic productions, such as films and plays that have emphasised the dissonance between official and marginal narratives, have been the subject of explicit and implicit censorship. Nevertheless, over the years a lively and robust civil society has made efforts to challenge this censorship, whilst social media and street protests have contributed immensely to breaking the silence. Marginal memories have the potential to challenge hegemonic narratives in a country where warlords are still in power and instrumentalise the war memory for their own benefit. Sune Haugbolle, for instance, writes that political parties actively look for ways

to inscribe their sectarian hagiographies of martyred leaders and soldiers in national history and symbolism. Nevertheless, these sectarian memory cultures, whether in East Beirut or in the Dahiya, were essentially defensive and divisive narratives of the past that claimed ownership of individual memories on the basis of sectarian identity. (2010: 79)

In Lebanon, memory work is often employed as a tool to nurture and corroborate sentiments of fear and resentment within parties' circles of clients and supporters. One could say that in the case of post-war Lebanon officially sanctioned memories are used to found the legitimacy of powerful figures who have transitioned from warlord to political leader. As Sune Haugbolle and Andres Hastrup note, 'official renderings of historical events frequently sit uneasily with lived experience of the communities and individuals who have suffered through oppression and violence' (Haugbolle & Hastrup 2008: 141). Bell's critique that scalar differences should be emphasised as much as similarities is also pertinent to our argument, meaning that we should think of individual memories as operating in unique ways, rather than just assume that 'the "collective memories" of large groups of people operate in ways analogous to those of small groups, and even (in a problematic psychologisation of the political) individual minds' (2009: 350).

While much has been written about the Lebanese Civil War, little has been done to understand the conflict through its everyday, social and cultural dimensions. Many studies have emphasised the role of leaders, local political and sectarian groups, and international actors in the war,[2] but we know much less about the experiences, views, perceptions, and stories of ordinary people during the fifteen years of armed conflict. What was it like to live under the protection and authority of a local militia? How do

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[2] The bibliography is too vast to be mentioned in full here, but it is worth noting some recent memoirs, written both by political–military leaders and members of various militias. For instance: Amine Gemayel (2020), *Al-Ri'âssat al-Muqâwima, Muzakkarât* (A resistant presidential mandate, Memoirs) (*Manchourât Bayt al-Mustaqbal*, Lebanon); Michel Aoun (2017) *Ce que je crois*; *entretiens avec Désirée Sadek* (Beyrouth, Fondation Michel Aoun); Georges Kassis (2019), *Yawmiy*ât Shahida. Wafâ' li abtâl al-mou-qâwamat al-loubnaniya wa amâna lil haqiqa (Witness diaries. In loyalty to the heroes of the Lebanese resistance and in honesty to the truth) (Beirut, First volume, Dar Sa'er al-Mashreq); Yussef Bazzi (2007), *Yasser Arafat m'a regardé et m'a souri* (Paris, Verticales Éditions). In addition, a long list of biographies on political leaders could be compiled, including the recent: Nada Anid (2014), *L'homme de cèdre: les trois vies de Samir Geagea* (Paris, Calmann-Lévy); Michel Aoun (2007), *Une certaine vision du Liban; entretiens avec Frédéric Dumont* (Paris, Fayard); Igor Timofeev (2000), *Kamal Jumblatt: Al-Rajul wa al-ustura* (Kamal Jumblatt: the man and the legend) (Beirut, Dar An-Nahar); René Naba (1999), *Rafic Hariri: un homme d'affaires premier ministre* (Paris, L'Harmattan). It is also worth mentioning those works focusing on the war seen through the lens of political parties and militias, such as the two volumes of Alain Ménargues' (2004) *Les secrets de la guerre du Liban* (Paris, Albin); Mara Albrecht & Akar Bassel (2016), *The Power of Remembrance: Political Parties, Memory and Learning About the Past in Lebanon* (Louaize, Forum ZFD and Center for Applied Research in Education at Notre Dame University); and Franck Mermier & Sabrina Mervin (eds) (2012), *Leaders et partisans au Liban* (Paris, Karthala-IFPO; Beyrouth, IISMM).

they perceive the conflict and its actors today? What have they transmitted to their children, grandchildren, and families since the official end of the war? How do they believe violent conflicts could be prevented in Lebanon in the present and the future?

Interrogating ordinary individuals' memories could offer ways to reinterpret crucial moments of the conflict and revisit assumptions as to the conflict's dynamics. In Lebanon's case, one of the most resilient narratives is the idea that sectarian militias functioned solely to protect civilians from the same community/religious confession in the areas they managed. During the war, many regions were under the control of the political and paramilitary factions that had replaced State authorities and sometimes operated in collusion with these. Due to the level of territorial fragmentation during the conflict, regions were also referred to as 'cantons', in reference to the Swiss federations. Political parties and their militias ruled these cantons with the professed mission to protect the local population from a threatening 'enemy'. Leaders often used this narrative to legitimise the militia's existence and mobilise support. This article aims to contribute to challenging these narratives about the past, gathering memories of ordinary people that often conflict with hegemonic narratives.

One of our interviewees, Dolly, 60 years old, recalls how the practice of kidnapping local businessmen and wealthy people to extract ransom was widespread. Dolly, who today is the mother of three young adults, says, '*My father was kidnapped multiple times by the local militia. They used to threaten him if he didn't give them the money they asked for.*'[3] Her sister Ghada, a 61-year-old lawyer, harbours a deep-seated resentment towards the militia that abducted her father, but also numerous other people in her town, and committed abuses in the very region they were supposed to protect. These include imposing illegal taxes, seizing goods and products from stores, and creating a kind of 'arbitration court' that 'judged' people beyond the reach of the State's judiciary, extorting money and arbitrarily detaining people. Ghada explains that:

> militiamen, some of whom we knew from our village, used to invade my father's store and take food or beverage supplies with the excuse that these had expired to re-sell them in their so-called cooperative stores or supermarkets. They robbed people, businesses and the Beirut port, which was controlled by Christian militias during the war.[4]

Ghada's father Habib who also owned a cinema had to pay a special tax for every ticket sold. The militiamen used to attend the movies without paying, but accepted they had to leave their weapons outside of the screening room, hanging in the cloak-room. '*They were even given a number to identify the "item"*', recalls Joe, 58 years old, who was a teenager at the time and used to help his family running the cinema. '*I remember that one day militiamen started shooting in the air inside the cinema, to*

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[3] Interview, North Metn, 24 July 2020.
[4] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.

frighten and intimidate people', says Fouad, who regularly visited the movie theatre, the only one in the region at that time. Fahed, 65 years old, a former employee at the cinema, recalls that '*once the screening of a film was interrupted by a group of armed men ordering people from the audience to get out and help filling sandbags for the militia in anticipation of a battle*'.

What emerges from this study is that civilians within specific communities had to suffer various types of abuses and violations from the very same militias that were meant to protect them and this also in cases when the militia shared the community's sectarian affiliation. These people have almost never had the opportunity to question the formal narratives or to express their views and tell the story of their life during the decades of continuous conflicts. This research[5] attempts to reverse this reality and explores individual narratives in a small town in North Metn, in what was called the 'Christian' or 'Eastern'[6] region as a case study that could support a different understanding of the Lebanese conflict, its aftermaths, and the continuous state of turmoil and crisis, including the present predicament. The article is divided in three parts: the first section looks at the interplay between individual and collective memory; the second section focuses on the case study of a community in North Metn, a district in Mount Lebanon, to analyse how individual memories can demand a rewriting of national histories and become therefore sites of resistance; the third section broadens the scope to highlight how a focus on individual memories shifts our attention onto the everyday dimension of conflict.

Individual and collective memories

Cultural theorists have often been reluctant to accept the significance of individual memories or have sought to minimise their value (Green 2004: 41). Partly this is because individual memories often challenge the continuity and homogeneity that national narratives (in particular those enforced by the nation state) tend to pass off as natural. The testimonies collected here form part of a set of memories largely

[5] This article emerges from and shares the aims of the research project 'Memories from the Margins. Bottom-up Practices for Dealing with Conflict-Produced Heritage in Lebanon and Syria' (https://www. memoriesmargins.com).
[6] In the opening stages of the war, the capital Beirut was divided between West (with a majority Muslim population) and East (majority Christian population) along an imaginary line called 'demarcation line' or 'green line' in reference to the vegetation that had started growing in what had become a no-man's land. This divide was also then applied to the regions situated geographically to the West of Beirut (called also 'Muslim regions') and to the East of the capital ('Christian regions'). This divide was symbolic of the cleavages between the Lebanese people during the war that resulted in demographic transformation due to massive internal displacements.

repressed and erased from public discourse by official narratives and accounts. It is significant that the social movements and protests that have animated Lebanese cities since October 2019 have freed the personal narratives related to militia practices and their leaders' behaviour. When people on the streets shouted 'All of them, means all of them', they aimed their chants precisely at those warlords who stand accused of replicating war practices in the time of peace. The rejection of political parties and leaders who have played a role during the conflict is indicative of this newly found liberation of marginal memories.

The capacity of individual memories to 'contest and critique cultural scripts and discourses' (Green: 2004: 42) is an obstacle to their inclusion in both public memory and in those analyses that assess its work. As Anna Green suggests, however, 'oral history allows us access to the range of expressive possibilities in a given society', but this implies a broadening of the horizon and requires that 'we remain open to the richness and variety of individual consciousness' (Green: 2004: 43).

The influence of the work of Maurice Halbwachs on memory studies is partially responsible for this resistance and the omissions this position has produced. As Ryan writes, the perception is that Halbwachs's work produces 'a complete negation of any autonomous individual agency or resistance' (2010: 155). Halbwachs emphasises the 'unity of outlook', assigning mnemonic agency to the group, which imposes its conventions on the individual remembering subject. Halbwachs ties memories of individuals tightly to social groups, thus giving weight to the primacy of collective memory. As Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering suggest, 'in memory studies, too often sight is lost of the individuals who engage in acts of remembering' (2012: 82).

Following Steve Stern's work on Pinochet's Chile (2010), Salwa Ismail in her analysis of memories of the Ba'ath generation in Syria suggests reading the relation of public and private as mediated by 'emblematic frameworks' (2018: 98). Ismail describes these as 'frames of recollection that enable individuals to make sense of their personal experiences and to locate these within remembrances of a collective or shared national life' (98). In this sense, then, interrogating personal narratives is important, because these show how 'personal and intimate everyday life experiences aggregate in the life of an individual to form a composite of the national experience' (122).

Jose Van Dijck's concept of 'personal cultural memory' moves a step further in considering personal memories as an autonomous way to negotiate and potentially challenge established national and public narratives. As Van Dijck writes, 'personal (re)collections are often subsumed as building blocks of collective history rather than being analysed in their own right' (2007: 2). The idea of personal cultural memory seeks to develop a path out of this impasse and Van Dijck defines it as follows: 'the acts and products of remembering in which individuals engage to make sense of

their lives in relation to the lives of others and their surroundings, situating themselves in time and place' (6). Interestingly, Van Dijck also suggests that 'aspects of memory need to be explained from processes that derive from individual identities' (9). Attending to these processes might also help uncover the expressive nuances of memory, once this becomes narration. Aïda Kanafani-Zahar admirably captures the varying speeds of memory, its pauses and abrupt stops, but also its precipitating movements, 'once emerged, a memory possesses a fervor and a liveliness that provokes a profound agitation in the speaker' (2011: 131). Kanafani-Zahar places memory on a register of transformations and possibilities: 'precise, clear, lucid or tumultuous, alternately grave and light […] numb and lively […] it wanders and then recoils' (2011: 131). She finally concludes, 'memory has a life of its own' (131), a life that accompanies and becomes one with the life of the victim, in particular when this is also memory's victim, victimised not only by injury, but by official memory's ignorance and neglect of that injury. In this case a personal memory and its testimony is not just a factual story, but a way to reconstruct, repair, and regain an identity. Describing the position of the individual in Lebanese society in relation to memory and testimony, Kanafani-Zahar writes that, whilst 'the status of the testimony in Lebanese society is that of an "I" heavily marked by a communitarian "us", nonetheless, the narrativization of memory channels an individual project' (133). Our interviews concentrate on the voice of the individual, rather than assuming that it matches accepted collective narratives.

A suburb in North Metn

This study relies on memories of ordinary individuals gathered in a small coastal town located in a suburb north of Beirut in North Metn, a district of Mount Lebanon. The fieldwork of our research took place in Spring and Summer 2020 and coincided with a major political crisis and large-scale protests, an almost unprecedented economic and financial crisis, a series of lockdowns imposed to contain the spread of Covid 19, and the aforementioned Beirut blast. Testimonies gathered from May to September have been inevitably affected by the ongoing situation and the interviewees reflected the despair and frustration generated by the current turmoil. To varying degrees, all the individuals interviewed have experienced the war and its consequences, whether directly or indirectly.

Interpretations of the series of conflicts that ravaged Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 vary dramatically in popular, official, and academic renderings. Some argue that the war was not Lebanese because regional and international agendas determined its onset and course. Others contend that it was based not on civil popular mobilisation but on the actions of militias, and others still that it was not one war but a series of

wars, each with a different agenda. The conflict came to an end through the so-called Ta'if Agreement signed in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia in September 1989 and approved by the Lebanese parliament on 5 November 1989. The agreement describes Lebanon as a sovereign, free, and independent country and a final homeland for all its citizens. Following the Ta'if agreement, the amnesty law of 1991 (General Amnesty Law No. 84/91) granted a general amnesty for crimes perpetrated by all militias and armed groups during the years of the Civil War, before 28 March 1991. This general legal framework has resulted in a system of impunity that has had a significant impact on the post-conflict settlement. As Lyna Comaty recalls, 'Lebanon's post-conflict model has been diagnosed as having failed at building peace' and 'there is neither consensus on the causes of the outbreak of the war, nor on the solutions and methods to build peace (2019: 3). Samir Khalaf describes Lebanon as 'adrift', trapped in a disparaging threefold predicament: alienation from the past, anxiety and unease about the present and uncertainty about the future' (2012: 17). Sami Hermez writes that 'for many in Lebanon, the past persists and threatens to continuously fold into the present' (2017: 150). Rather than amnesia, Hermez speaks of a 'structural power to silence people in society' (149). Because of this, 'civil society was forced to try to redeem these violent acts as crimes, as the only and final space for possible closure and hope for accountability' (191). Evoking the work of Kansteiner, Hermez suggests that memory has to be a way to confront hegemonic systems of power, 'rather than think of the work of memory in terms of denial and amnesia, we might want to remember Gramsci, and to think of the processes being played out as one involving the dominant social order trying to assert hegemonic control over history and truth' (153). Similarly Haugbolle writes that 'Amnesty and amnesia were not just effects of passivity and laissez-faire but also conscious policies applied in the name of national reconciliation' (2010: 71–2).

The dossier of the disappeared and kidnapped deserves particular attention. Despite the progress made recently with the establishment of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons (Law 105/2018), whose members were nominated in June 2020, the fate of the disappeared remains a lens that reveals a whole series of obstacles. As Kanafani-Zahar writes, 'the impasse over the issue of the disappeared is intimately linked to the fact that militia leaders have become ministers' (2011: 90). Haugbolle concludes, 'when there is no echo of (often traumatic) personal war memories to be found in collective memory, the reality of those memories are liable to be put into doubt' (2010: 72–3), therefore entrenching and perpetuating forms of injustice.

In the case of Lebanon, then, there is a clear antagonism between individual and informal, non-official memories and the State's selective remembering, often intertwined with a political process to shield leaders not only from rival parties/communities, but from the community they are meant to provide for and protect. In the absence of a shared national narrative, hegemonic narratives have crystallised

around a set of figures: the leader (*al-Zaim*), the hero (*al-Batal*) or resistant (*al-Mouqawim*), and the martyr (*al-Shahid*), leaving little space for the memories of ordinary people, including victims. Civilians and their stories in particular have either been written out of history or have been co-opted into political narratives. As Haugbolle notes, 'it was common practice for cultural and political elites to appropriate the story of the civilian victim and imagine his or her memories. In contrast, his or her own voice was seldom heard' (2010: 137). These counter-hegemonic narratives could offer an alternative to the official accounts of the war and offer opportunities to understand further the conflict and its legacy, including Lebanon's present political and social crisis. These personal and family memories could be put at the disposal of the next generations that could complement or even oppose the formal history imposed on the country and its youth. They could contribute to dealing with Lebanon's past and foster social cohesion, truth-seeking, and national reconciliation processes. The case study presented here in particular sheds light on the unknown stories of ordinary people who not only faced the violence committed by the so-called 'foreigner' or 'stranger' (*al-Gharib*) or enemy (*al-'Adu*), but also had to confront the burden and oppression of local militias who were supposed to protect and defend them. This phenomenon is not unique to this town. However, whilst these practices were all too common in many cities and towns in other regions of Lebanon, little research has documented them and in particular very few stories have been gathered from the affected communities.[7] Whilst in a number of cases militias replaced the State's functions and created infrastructures to provide services, social aid, and healthcare, they also committed abuses against members of their own sect or community, and are known to have committed human rights violations (including killings and kidnappings), most of which remain undocumented to this day. These abuses and violations committed in total impunity were often justified by the militias as ways to maintain order in the absence or inaction, and sometimes with the complicity, of regular troops, local police, or internal security forces. The wealthiest or at least the well-off residents, shops and business owners and traders, in particular those who were not affiliated to these groups, had to pay illegal taxes (*Khuwet*) and offer pro bono goods and services. Whilst some supported these groups with more or less conviction and paid their dues, many were forced to contribute to the 'war effort', and when they refused to do so

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[7] Civil society organisations have made sustained efforts to collect stories as a way of dealing with the past from a truth-seeking and truth-telling perspective. For instance, Act for the Disappeared a local NGO (non-governmental organisation) launched in 2014 a virtual memorial 'Fushat 'Amal' (space for hope) gathering stories of persons missing in war. The International Center for Transitional Justice initiated in 2012 an oral history project 'Badna Naaref' (We Want to Know) to promote intergenerational dialogue on the Lebanese war. See also the ICTJ report, *How People Talk About the Lebanon Wars. A Study of the Perceptions and Expectations of Residents in Greater Beirut* (2014).

were threatened and even physically abused. These practices, which benefited from a general lack of accountability, did not disappear with the formal end of the war, but were recycled and adopted by the warlords, their followers, and partisans who had by then occupied official positions within state institutions.

In 2019 the protesters of the October Revolution explicitly rejected the political class in its entirety. The protests also revealed a profound distrust of institutions, which have effectively been occupied by militias that have moved from the battlefield to the heart of the state. For the protestors, the violence that the authorities have used in response to their demands is the continuation of the Civil War militias' practices. One of the slogans chanted during the protests, 'We are the popular revolution, You are the civil war', is indicative of this rejection and demonstrates the awakening of large parts of the Lebanese to the leaders' instrumentalisation of fear and threats presented by the 'other'.

The massive participation in the protests of people coming from different regions and sects has in a way addressed the legacy of the past and put in place the foundation of a true national reconciliation. The parallel between the past oppression and the current management of power is therefore striking. The Beirut blast is read by many as a direct manifestation of the post-war institutional violence, and culture of impunity that accompanies it.

The town selected for this research is representative of other localities across the country, many of which are still under the direct or indirect influence of these political parties, still deploying a diffuse use of violence, with strongmen, 'security men', body-guards at the service of the party's officials. Dima de Clerck (2012), for instance, discusses the perpetuation of the 'militarization of Lebanese society'. Since the end of the war, thousands of ex-militia fighters and followers were enrolled in the security sector or recruited in the civil administration. Fighters were able to pervade the administration and further corrupt it, 'instead of becoming "civilianised"', writes de Clerck. This situation makes the investigation more challenging and justifies why most of the interviewees expressed the intention to remain anonymous.

The authors approached a Lebanese family, whose story centres around Habib, the patriarch, who during the war ran a food wholesale business and managed a family cinema and theatre. The story of this man told by his family and friends has unlocked other stories, individual memories centred around Habib, his shop, his theatre, and his town, but also provides insights into the practices of a local militia during the war. Two generations were interviewed: the first is the generation who were adults at the time of the conflict, mainly parents who had to provide for their children, protect them, and try to transmit to them the same values with which they were raised. The second generation is composed of their children, who were young children or adolescents at the time of the conflict. The latter consider themselves the 'generation

of the war', a lost generation who experienced the conflict and its aftermaths with bitterness and frustration. The war they knew as children officially ended, but the post-war settlement has delivered a country still mired in unrest.

The study uses semi-structured interviews with individuals, allowing further interventions and comments from their family members who could be present during the discussion. We noticed that conducting the interview in the presence of the family's members is of great interest, as those who witnessed the war participate in the discussions, giving their version of the story, reminding the main interviewee of details and events they could have forgotten. The discussions trigger stories and emotions that become an opportunity for family members, old and young, to talk about forgotten or untold memories. The individual interview could transform into a group meeting, with debates reflecting on incidents, people, and special moments: both the agreeable and the disagreeable, the sad and hurtful events. These discussions between family members have truth-telling and truth-seeking effects on the audience, particularly on the youngest (grandchildren), who were born after the end of the war. In many Lebanese families talking about the war is still an uncomfortable exercise or even taboo, so these intergenerational dialogues triggered by the interviews are likely to have lasting impacts on all members. One man's story facilitated the appearance of multiple individual narratives in a snowball effect. Each interviewee guided the authors to another participant who would complement their narrative, adding information and data in a complex puzzle.

Dolly cannot forget what her father Habib went through during the war to meet the local militia's demands:

> *he disappeared multiple times, he didn't come back from work at night and my mother used to receive calls that he was only visiting them. She had to write cheques to get him back. For them, even though he was in debt, the bank could give him loans. He used to work hard so they knew he had cash. They hurt my father a lot.*[8]

He was continuously forced by the local militia to make financial contributions. When he was unable to do so or refused to, he was invited for a 'coffee' or a 'chat' at the party's regional headquarters. If he did not understand the message of these calls and visits, he was kidnapped and detained in the headquarters offices or in a container until his wife, Angele, delivered a cheque. Angele, 84 years old, still finds it difficult to discuss what happened to her husband, her fears for his safety and how she had to collect the money and write a cheque to save Habib's life.

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[8] Interview, North Metn, 24 July 2020.

> *They used to kidnap him saying that he is their 'guest' until I handed them the money. The worst was that the party's partisans who detained my husband were people from the village and one of them was even a relative,*

she recalls.[9] This happened many times and the family had to wait anxiously for him to return home safely. The local militia used to visit every store and every house to collect money on a monthly basis. Ghada recalls how her friend Dania received the visit of the militia's 'money collector' on the day when people were visiting her house to offer condolences for her recently deceased mother.

> *He stood at the door waiting to collect them money, while people were there paying respect to the dead woman. My friend refused to pay him. The contributions my father paid to the militia have been noted in the store's accounting books. I still have these and copies of checks we paid.*[10]

Fouad, 67 years old, remembers how he had to accompany his father to the militia's HQ to pay a 'visit' and how he had to wait for him in the car hoping he would return safe and sound. '*I once took my father there. Their main headquarters in North Metn. I waited there for him. When he came back, he said nothing at all.*'[11] The memory of the humiliation and despair his father and his family experienced for years until his death in 1982 is still vivid and Fouad holds the militia responsible for his father's early death, '*he could have lived longer if the militia didn't make his life impossible*'. Dolly and her family still bear a grudge against the political party and its leaders thirty years after the end of the hostilities. '*How can our children and grandchildren forget or forgive those who are responsible for their grandfather's kidnapping, bankruptcy or death?*', wonders Ghada, who blames the continuous kidnappings by the local militia for her father's dementia and early death.[12] Habib's family have transmitted to the younger generation their resentment towards the militia. This is today a very influential political party in the North Metn region and considers itself currently as an 'opposition party' with a clean record fighting the State's corruption and calling for accountability. The parents make sure that their children are aware of the party's legacy of abuses and violations. This heritage is of course neither limited to the North Metn region, nor to this particular militia; it is present in many families and communities across Lebanon. Since October 2019, young people have expressed in street protests and on social media their distrust of the current ruling class, drawing the parallel between their war practices and the mismanagement, wrongdoings, and policies of the past thirty years.

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[9] Interview, North Metn, 5 July 2020.
[10] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.
[11] Interview, North Metn,10 July 2020.
[12] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.

Testimonies such as the ones presented here can be read in terms of the 'subjugated knowledges' and 'counter-memories' discussed by Michel Foucault (2003: 7). Foucault offers a twofold definition of subjugated knowledges: 'historical contents that have been buried' and 'naive knowledges', 'knowledges from below' (7). It is the reappearance of this differential knowledge (8) that makes critique possible. As José Medina writes, 'Foucault places practices of remembering and forgetting in the context of power relations in such a way that possibilities of resistance and subversion are brought to the fore' (2011: 10). Drawing on Foucault's work, Medina further suggests that memories could challenge coercive epistemic frameworks and that therefore it is crucial to mobilise those whose memories do not fit existing historical narratives, 'scattered, marginalized publics, tapping into the critical potential of dejected experiences and memories' (11). Where official histories 'create and maintain the unity and continuity of a political body' (14), counter-histories try to challenge and interrupt this continuity.

Three major events were mentioned during the interviews as having had the greatest impact on this North Metn town and its residents. The first took place in 1975 during the early stages of the war, when local militias fought for the control of the town resulting in its first victims and wounded. The second event happened a few months later. Fouad, a medical student at the time of the incident, recounts how a delegation representing the town had visited the leader of the main militia in the region to ask for help to get rid of a rival political party whose behaviour had become intolerable to many. To deploy its forces the leader asked for a large sum of money that the town could not afford.[13] The delegation decided then to create an independent group that would guarantee the safety of the town. The militia leader was not happy with this decision and a few days later his militia killed four young men, associated with the independent group formed to defend the town. To claim the assassinations and assert their power, the militiamen rushed to hang their leader's poster over a building that the independent group used as headquarters. For Ghada, who was 16 at the time, it was the first encounter with the war. She helped transport the killed and the wounded to the city's hospital with a group of friends. She recalls the story without hiding her emotion: '*I still remember that day, the boys lying on the ground drowning in their blood and how we rushed to the nearby hospital. We knew them all.*'[14] The third event took place on 17 August 1985 with the explosion of a 250-kilogram hexogen bomb placed in front of a busy supermarket, resulting in the killing of 32 people with 85 wounded.[15] Many in the area suspected the bombing to be the work of the local

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[13] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.
[14] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.
[15] *AnNahar* (Lebanese newspaper), 18 and 19 August 1985. Cited by ICTJ (2013).

militia in its struggle for power in the region. Fouad says: '*I think it was them, because all that was being done to Habib* [his father-in-law] *was done to many in the region, including to the owner of this supermarket chain. I think he had stopped paying, he was fed up.*'[16] Thirty-five years later, the families of the victims refuse to forget, and the younger generation bears the trauma of the crimes committed against their relatives and town. Nothing has been done to address the legacy of abuses committed by the militias that were in principle committed to protecting the local population. It is significant that, in the elections that have taken place in the past three decades, the town's voters have always avoided voting for the candidates representing the old militia and political party. It is their way of expressing their bitterness and in a way addressing the war's heritage.

The testimonies and stories gathered here signal to something true of Lebanon's Civil War, but applicable to a broader context. In the context of changing memory cultures in the Middle East, Haugbolle writes that, whilst the national sphere is often still saturated with state-enforced rhetoric, 'increased access to information, means of expression and political participation are introducing previously "intimate" views of the past into public deliberation, thereby challenging state-centred narratives of national memory' (Haugbolle & Hastrup 2008: 137). In most cases the state's control relegates disruptive memories to the margins of public discourse and erects homogeneous accounts as walls against potential attacks. However, as Achille Mbembe writes, every archive, 'is at once a breaching (*frayage*), an opening, and a separation, a fissure and a breaking, a crazing and a disjunction [...] no archive exists without its cracks (*lézardes*). One enters into it as though through a narrow door, with the hope of penetrating in depth the thickness of the event and its cavities' (2019: 172). Memory therefore becomes one of the tools that artists and activists alike can use to revisit and renew 'the rich legacy of contentious politics and radicalism' (Haugbolle 2019: 287).

War, experience, and the everyday

It is precisely from these margins that subversive memories can begin to exploit the cracks in the archive of national memory. In a similar way and notwithstanding its limited scope, this study also shows that attending to personal memories offers important elements for a study of war as a set of experiences felt in the everyday. Personal memories, normally marginalised in global politics, but also in historiographies dedicated to armed conflicts, reveal war as an experiential continuum. As feminist scholarship has emphasised, 'war is a social activity of collective violence around

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[16] Interview, North Metn, 10 July 2020.

which a wide variety of bodily experiences are created, altered, and can themselves create or constitute war' (Sylvester 2013: 65). This approach allows for a renewed look at conflict and, as Christine Sylvester suggests, can 'jog the mind into a different quadrant of knowing and understanding' (2010: 123).

Thinking about conflict as experienced means bringing to the fore elements of war that are traditionally excluded, looking for deeper ways in which war reaches into society, means understanding conflict not as a discrete event, but as a continuum, therefore starting earlier and going on for longer and populated by a wider variety of actors and means. It also means abandoning the idea that we can always fashion a coherent narrative, but that we have to acknowledge the complex and pervasive (everyday) nature of conflict. As Laura Sjoberg writes: 'starting with the lives of people, gives us not just a different method of studying war, but a different view of war, one which draws our attention away from national interest politics to the individual that touches and is touched by war physically and emotionally' (2013: 253).

To study war as experience requires, therefore, that the human body come into focus as a unit that has agency in war and is also the target of war's violence. It also means introducing and doing justice to the affective elements of armed conflict. The study of individual memories can contribute profoundly to reorienting our understanding of war, showing, for instance, how militarisation occupies everyday life and opening up that 'different realm of thinking' (271) alluded to by Sjoberg.

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Objects of transgenerational memory: challenging hegemonic historical narratives of war in Lebanon

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Abstract: This article examines how objects embedded in the domestic life of the generation of the Lebanese civil war and the subsequent generations evoke stories that disrupt the state's hegemonic production of history. The article explores stories surrounding two objects that survived the war, and took on residues of memory later heard and retold by the subsequent generation. These objects illuminate ways in which the legacy of intergenerational memory is produced and transmitted—and how these alternative spaces and stories emerge in present struggles, including the October 2019 revolution. In the first section, the article examines how material objects operate as intergenerational symbols of the experiences of war and as media for the process of narrativisation. In the second section, the argument explores the role of the material as a witness to what resists language and as a locus to memory's temporality. In the third section, the article looks into the affective dimension of the material object as it provokes an opening to narration and challenges linear understandings of history. This search through material and domestic objects seeks stories that resist closure, and is essential to understanding today's struggle against the Lebanese political class.

Keywords: Narrative, affect, memory, objects, temporality, transgenerational, Lebanon.

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The bowl

This bowl is called tasset al rahbeh *and originally it belongs to my grandmother. My mother taught me how to fill it with water, make a prayer, and then drink from it. I remember drinking out of the bowl as shelling happened outside. When I think of the bowl, I see an image of soldiers creeping on me behind my back, trying to break into our house. Growing up, this image kept recurring and I always thought it was an actual event I experienced when I was a kid. … My mother was always reluctant to share what happened during the war. … But I recently asked her about the bowl and I found out that I did not live at the time of the incident and that the image of Israeli soldiers invading the house was my mother's experience and not mine, yet I believed it lived in both of our memories.*

Sarah (personal communication, 2019)

Tasset al rahbeh (bowl of horror) is the Arabic name for a small metal bowl in which Quranic texts are inscribed in a circular form. As the name suggests, the bowl is known historically in the Levant for its use in popular Arab medicine to cure fear and panic. Through the bowl, Sarah—a member of the second generation of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90)—describes a memory associated with the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, before she was born. She recounts her mother's experience of seeing soldiers approaching her house, an event that took place soon after the Sabra and Shatila massacre carried out by the right-wing Christian Lebanese militia in alliance with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in September 1982.[1] The bowl is one of many objects that witnessed the Lebanese civil war and were passed down to the subsequent generations.

The tray

Growing up, my parents never spoke of the war. If they did, they would only mention events and clashes between political parties in passing flashes, or express their longing for pre-war times. I learned that a weighted silence—a common reaction to traumatic experiences—was their only response to more personal questions about their lived experiences. However, after the start of the 17 October 2019 uprising and during the coronavirus lockdown in spring 2020, the silence broke.

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[1] During the massacre in the Sabra neighborhood and adjacent Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, between 460 and 3,500 civilians were killed. Responsibility for the massacre rests with the right-wing party and militia known as the Phalange (Kataeb Movement).

My mother told me that she decided to go and check on the house in Burj Hammoud that our family had evacuated during the war. She said she had never visited since they were displaced in 1976. I asked her about the visit and wondered what made her think about going during a pandemic. She described the building, then told me about the room where she was almost shot. She mentioned a tray that I have seen at my grandmother's house since I was a child. She told me how a bullet went straight into the tray above her head. She described how a sniper had probably been following her shadow, how she took the tray and went back downstairs, how she stared at the hole all night long. The story haunted me for days. I dreamt of the house and the sniper that night and kept thinking about the tray. I had pushed for stories about my family before, but this was the first time my mother chose to share a memory herself.

When the Taif agreement was signed and ratified in 1990,[2] the notion of '*La ghalib, la maghlub*' (no victor, no vanquished) became a foundation to the pact between Lebanon's sectarian political parties, which are still in power today. This marked the onset of Lebanon's neoliberal regime. With the amnesty law of 1991,[3] the ruling class attempted to enforce a state-sponsored amnesia for their atrocities and massacres, including the fate of 17,000 forcibly missing and disappeared people.[4] Compounding the censorial measures imposed over the events of the past, the silence surrounding the memory of war speaks to Lebanon's political and social order, which shapes the discourse of public and private memory. The dominant ideological discourses aim to obscure the public's collective memory of war, and yet objects such as Sarah's *tasset al rabeh* and my family's tray survive and disrupt this script.

Between 2019 and 2020, I conducted a series of interviews with the second generation of the civil war in Lebanon about objects inherited from the past generation. My search was not only for the stories of these objects, but also for the narratives left silent since the end of the war. In the story of the bowl, Sarah and I found a fragment of a buried and censored collective memory. In my mother's retelling of the story of the tray, I discovered the familial and personal space through which I began to investigate transgenerational memory. While writing from a personal and auto-ethnographic space holds challenges, it allowed me to start asking questions of my

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[2] According to Hassan Krayem, the Taif agreement was arrived at as a way to provide 'the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon' (1997: 411–12).

[3] General Amnesty on 26 August 1991. The Lebanese National Assembly approved a law granting amnesty for war crimes, governing crimes committed during the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990 (O'Ballance 1998: 213).

[4] In Lebanon, the fate of the estimated 17,000 persons who were forcibly missing and disappeared between the years 1975 and 1990 is unknown until this day (Beyhum 2020: 3–15). For more, check the work of *Act for the Disappeared* (https://www.actforthedisappeared.com/).

own family's history, and motivated me to ask others about their stories. My own experience of transgenerational memory pushed me to investigate how the remnants of the past—such as the material object—are channels through which we, as a subsequent generation of war, can access our position within narrative and history. I am interested in how we partake in constructing narrative, shaping memory, and finding alternative processes of historiography—especially within the current struggles against the Lebanese ruling class.

This article is concerned with the marginal and residual forms of memory residing in the materialities carried across generations. The argument examines how objects embedded in the domestic life of the generation of war and subsequent generations function as placeholders for narratives that disrupt the hegemonic and the linear within the production of history. This analysis explores stories surrounding these two specific objects that illuminate the ways in which subjects remember, narrate, and deal with the legacy of trauma and memory across generations—and how these alternative spaces of memory inform our ongoing and present struggles.

The object as symbol

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud introduces the notion of multigenerational transmission of trauma by addressing the relation between trauma and its enduring impact on the individual character.[5] The individual becomes the vehicle through which traumatic happenings are carried over and established in the ongoing future or history of families, people, or nations. Similarly, when examining the impact of the Holocaust on the generation who survived it, Nadine Fresco writes about the 'deathly silence' of the survivor/parent and of the transmitted 'wounds of memory', linked to the parents' silence, which profoundly alter the children's experience of time.[6] Schwab described this transmission as a 'transgenerational haunting', which is often mediated through private individual and familial histories.[7] These haunting legacies of trauma tend to reside in family secrets and in other forms of silencing. Marianne Hirsch points out that the 'post-memories'[8] of a generation once removed from the event become 'as full and as empty as memory itself'.[9] In the context of the Lebanese civil

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[5] Freud (2016: 23; first published in 1939)
[6] Fresco (1984: 416)
[7] Schwab (2010: 13-14)
[8] Post-memory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 2008: 102–4).
[9] Hirsch (1997: 9).

war, the 'deathly silence' points to the ways in which the so-called 'war generation' is prevented from accessing their subjective, affective, and embodied memories. It also speaks to what Weissman describes as a 'psychic split' experienced by the subsequent generations who are born into the post-war silence.[10] I argue that this psychic split is not only a result of the inheriting of traumatic memory, but is also an outcome of living in the same spatial sites of their parents' trauma, under a continued state of war in its symbolic, economic, social, and political structures.

The story of the bowl does not represent a memory of a time past. Rather, what it embodies cuts through the present moment and across generations, to simultaneously inhabit the past, present, and future. Examining this physical object as a locus for the performance of post-war memory allows one to pose the following question: How does the object facilitate the symbolisation of experiences of war? How can the material hold what is inaccessible in—or at least resistant to—language? How does the material take on the residue of unresolved and often unspoken traumatic events? In the case of the *tasset al rabeh*, the bowl takes on the subject's interwoven memory, shared by Sarah and her mother, embodying two generations simultaneously. This dual memory is symbolised by the multiple associations Sarah has in her regular interactions with the bowl. The object evokes both an intergenerational ritual and a recurrent image of soldiers breaking into the house. Sarah associates this with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, an event now engraved in Lebanon's historical memory.

Sarah did not live through her mother's experience of the invasion, but she carries its residues, which can be described as a post-memory through which the children of survivors attempt to fill the gaps of what is unsaid, and rely on imagination containing the reverberations of 'the transmitted wound'.[11] The case of the *tasset el rahbeh* indicates how the object in itself becomes ahistorical. It does not have a position in history, until it is spoken of in relation to the transgenerational ritual or the event itself, thereby mediating the entry into narrative. The bowl's role as symbol[12] is also manifested through the cross-generational ritual of drinking from the sacred water. This 'totemic ritual'[13] perhaps depicts what cannot be expressed in words in response to threat. I suggest that in the absence of the word, ritual comes in as an embodied narrative rather than a spoken one. The object, in its role of symbol, can be considered the presence of such absence.

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[10] Weissman (2004: 21–4).

[11] Fresco (1984: 43–6).

[12] I use symbol to point to the object's role in the realm of the Symbolic order. Lacan notes that the word is 'a presence made of absence because the symbol is used in the absence of the thing' Evans (2006: 1–6).

[13] Totemic ritual as an archival technique: as a means to record, understand, and remember (and forget) the great event of human prehistory 'totemism helped to smooth things over and to make it possible to forget the event to which it owed its origin' (Freud 1978: 144, first published 1913).

In Sarah's experience, there also seems to be an element of what Jaques Lacan describes as the 'Imaginary',[14] which pertains to a pre-linguistic and perceived or imagined visual that operates on the basis of identification.[15] It also speaks to what Walter Benjamin describes as the imaginative character of memory in his principle of construction.[16] Within the constructive part of remembrance, memory is worked upon through a collage of historical images that elicit a shock-like encounter with the past, sometimes defamiliarising the present. This gap between the image and the word highlights the function of the object in the Symbolic,[17] and in the production of narrative. However, even when the object mediates the entry into the Symbolic register, the compact void of the unspeakable—what cannot enter language—points towards what remains as excess or a residue. This residual, I argue, is held by the object and pertains to the Lacanian order of the Real, which I will discuss in later sections.

The case of the tray is also an example of how the encounter with the past surfaces in moments when the social and political structures of the present are being shaken. This is represented by my mother's return to the house she fled during the civil war, at a time when the country had just witnessed a new uprising, followed by the lockdown triggered by the rise in Covid 19 infections. The October 2019 uprising brought together decentralised movements protesting the oppressive social and economic practices of the ruling class. The uprising stirred collective memory in spaces of pro-test and evoked marginal narratives from the civil war, as the bodies of protesters reclaimed public spaces that the ruling class had blocked off from public access since the end of the war, such as Beirut's dome and the National Theatre. My mother's sudden urge to revisit her old neighbourhood, and her remembering and telling of the story of the tray, was perhaps triggered by this affectively charged time, followed by the stagnation and isolation of the pandemic. As Pierre Nora writes, 'memory is absolute' and 'takes root in the concrete, in spaces and … objects'. The tray in my mother's story is perhaps what Nora also conceptualises as a 'lieux de memoire', and as both 'a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name' and a site that is open 'to the full range of its possible significations'.[18] As the tray provides a cross-generational entry to the Symbolic, it carries the memory of the event itself, but it also becomes a site of significations that brings me, a member of the second

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[14] 'Lacan regarded the "imago" as the proper study of psychology and identification as the fundamental psychical process. The imaginary was then the … dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined' ('Translator's note', in Lacan 1994: 279).

[15] Lacan (1991: 210).

[16] Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 587).

[17] 'The Symbolic Order pertains to the Realm of language, narrative and representation. It is the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions and the acceptance of the law (big Other)' (Lacan & Fink 2006: 67).

[18] Nora (1989: 7).

generation, closer to the alienated past. The memory of the tray surfaced at a time where the subsequent generation was publicly evoking the social, economic, and political trauma and legacies of the past, in relation to the uprising and current struggles. The tray can be considered a site of memory that unfolds 'an invisible thread linking unconnected objects',[19] highlighting the key role of collective memory in mobilising the affective and psychic of our current movements.

For some contemporary frameworks of trauma studies, transgenerational memory is examined only through the individual psychological mechanisms affected by historical trauma. Some areas of the field also developed important psychological frameworks that foreground the symptomatology and embodied manifestations of such experiences.[20] However, this article argues that the psychologisation of collective trauma, as effective as it may be with regard to presenting descriptive frameworks, risks reducing the experiences of the subject to a master-narrative of suffering. This approach to understanding trauma merely assesses the effects of events past and sometimes risks reinforcing a subjectivity of victimhood in the process of narrativisation. As Fassin and Rechtman describe it, the modern framework of trauma produces a specific discourse of memory, time, and mourning, where there is an unprecedented ability to talk or experience oppression and violence.[21] I suggest that the master-narrative of suffering present in some descriptive and apolitical frameworks of trauma moves the subject further away from their position and agency in narrative. In the case of the subsequent generation, the position of victim also limits the grounds of signification of transgenerational stories, especially when subjects are still living under the systemic and structural violence that inflicts these external traumatic events.

In the specific case of Lebanon, where I argue that the discourse of memory is subject to systemic repression, such approaches to memory further suppress the channels that allow stories to be told transgenerationally and influence how we understand and participate in current struggles in relation to past events. Such frameworks position the 'past' and its narratives in an illusory historical and chronological linearity, further distancing the events of the civil war from the political and social structures of the ongoing oppressive regime. Within the structure of sectarianism, narratives of war are often reduced to a discourse of victimhood, especially through certain frameworks introduced by international non-profit organisations (INGOs). The approach of many 'peacemaking' INGOs in dealing with the past reinforces the identitarian discourse of sectarianism, and falsely frames conflict as a result of failed coexistence. Civil society interventions, such as fostering 'civil, non-violent dialogue',

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[19] Nora (1989: 23).
[20] For reference see the work of Herman (2015) and van der Kolk (1996).
[21] Fassin & Rechtman (2009, 30–1).

reinforce the active depoliticisation of subjects and their narratives. The existing literature on the role of INGOs highlights the damaging reproduction of narratives of victimhood, and the influence of international funding on the ideological framing of memory discourse.[22] While there has not been significant academic work on the NGOisation of the memory of the civil war in Lebanon, there are strong parallels with broader analyses of NGOisation. For instance, NGOised interventions in the form of 'conflict resolution' programming in the aftermath of clashes between the communities of Bab al Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli[23] provide a clear example of the neoliberal NGOisation of narratives of war. I argue that the ideological frameworks through which mainstream NGOs operate position violence at the heart of intergroup identitarian differences. This approach obfuscates an understanding of the conflict as the product of systematic manipulation of Tripoli by the Lebanese ruling class, which has incited sectarian clashes for political and economic gain. This 'economy of victimhood'[24] solidifies the ground of ideological identity-based narratives, and reinforces state-centric discourses that ultimately preserve the status quo. These discourses portray sectarian identities as entities within themselves, when the sectarian system is in fact the structural building block that guarantees the reproduction and continuity of its laissez-faire capitalist regime. As Mahdi Amel described, the construction of sectarianism in Lebanon camouflages other social cleavages, such as class, and masks the actual structure of political control.[25]

Objects and materialities provide an alternative space of engaging with memory, pushing against the ideological sectarian discourse on memory and history. In an attempt to find the affective, embodied, and subjective through materialities, this article looks for the remnants of events experienced by the generation of war and how they impact and influence subsequent generations in their battle against the ongoing crimes of the ruling class. Exploring this alternative space is an attempt to free narratives from predetermined frameworks, therefore looking anew at how Lebanon today wrestles with the silence, and deals with war and post-war experiences. Through the material, I look for the space through which we can mourn what we have lost and uncover what defines our present struggles.

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[22] For more on NGO frameworks of victimhood: see Abu-Assab *et al.* (2020); Kosmatopoulos (2012); Jad (2003).

[23] Armed conflict between Sunni Muslim residents of the Bab-al-Tabbaneh and Alawite Muslim residents of Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli (1976–2015).

[24] 'Economy of victimhood that is ultimately dependent on funding provided by states in the Global North' (Abu Assab *et al.* 2020: 482).

[25] See Saouli (1991: 86–9).

The discourse of memory in Lebanon is not only impacted by censorial measures imposed by the state.[26] While forgetting is an organic and necessary process of remembering and dealing with traumatic memory, literature on post-war memory commonly assumes that collective amnesia constitutes the phenomena affecting collective and social memory in Lebanon.[27] This article argues instead that Lebanon is not amnesiac towards its past, but that the war is actually ongoing, omnipresent, inscribed in the Symbolic order and coded into the social, political, and economic structures of Lebanon. The erasure of narrative and memory is enforced by a state of repression also inscribed into various spatial and temporal realms of what is called the 'post-war era'. The Symbolic order signifies the continuation of war through the establishment of a clientelist system, designed by and serving the interests of the ruling class. It signifies the war through neoliberal policies that shape the spatial memory of Lebanon, its structural violence and militarisation, and the social relations determined by the ideological structures of the sectarian system. Spatially, this state of repression is manifested through the construction of Solidere, a $2-billion firm managing the reconstruction of Beirut's central business district after the civil war. As Makdisi puts it, the construction of Solidere was a violent process of 'purification of all historical associations', where buildings were rendered 'to pure space, pure commodity, and pure real estate'.[28] It is also manifested in the continuous covering up of mass graves and the erasure of neighbourhoods, such as Beirut's Ghalghoul, which was reduced to a series of parking lots after the war.[29] As for the discourse of war, the ruling class only invokes war memories to contest or defend the post-war confessional balance of power, or to advance intra-sectarian political privileges. This evocation of ideological discourses indicates how the regime recreates itself at the level of the Symbolic order, and also points to how it recreates the ideology of 'the sectarian other'.

The state of repression through which the regime reasserts its ideological premises points to the practices of narrative erasure. Repression here pertains to the symbolic over-coding[30] at the level of the social and political, thereby shaping desire and subjectivity. Psychoanalysis considers that the subject comes into being in the process of subjecting itself to the symbolic codes within which it finds itself placed.[31]

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[26] I use the term 'state' to refer to the Lebanese ruling class, authorities, government institutions, and security forces.

[27] For more on collective amnesia: see Launchbury *et al.* (2014); Nagle (2017); Haugbolle (2010).

[28] Makdisi (1997: 661–7).

[29] See Battah (2017).

[30] 'Metaphor (Law) and metonymy (code)—which produce competing notions of the subject—an enfranchised, conscious, linguistic subject and a disenfranchised, coded, object' (Matviyenko & Roof 2018: 48).

[31] Bucci (1995: 15–19).

Repression, as Lacan describes echoing Freud, is not some undefined mass exerting weight against a door we refuse to open, but it is inseparable from the phenomena of 'the return of the repressed'.[32] Repression pertains to something that continues to function, and continues to speak in the place where it was repressed.[33]

When it comes to the cross-generational memory of war, the repression that the subsequent generation of war experiences is also tied to an alienated memory and history, especially when this memory is not lived but inherited. Alienation here pertains to the erasure of the subsequent generations' position in relation to the struggles of the past and the ways in which these movements erupt in their social and political realities today. The story of the bowl is an example of such an eruption, where Sarah re-encounters the material object through the realisation that the memory is not actually her own. It is at such instances that the material remnant ruptures the coded symbolisations and leads us to ask: How does the encounter with the material object disturb the Symbolic order, allowing the subject to access their personal, affective, and embodied memory?

Object as witness

The stories of the tray and the bowl illustrate how narrative is evoked in the presence of the subsequent generation of war and point to the ways the construction and narration of stories occur in the cross-generational space. The object also introduces another role that the material carries, which is that of witness. I argue that the role of witness points first to the temporal function of the object cutting through past, present, and future and unfolding the nonlinear nature of time and history. Second, it underlines the ways in which the material object holds the remnants of the unsymbolisable, and thus is simultaneously present in the Symbolic order and outside of it.

First of all, by looking into the intergenerational space of narrative, I seek to explore how narrative is continuously constructed and transformed between the generation of war's telling and the subsequent generation's listening, and retelling. I argue that what constitutes the transgenerational space is not only the crossing of memory between the past generation of war and the present or subsequent generation, but also the ways in which narrative surfaces and transforms within this space. By stepping away from the traditions of materialist historiography and by positioning the object

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[32] 'Repression itself ... reproduces substitutive formations and symptoms … indications of a return of the repressed' (Freud 1957, first published 1915).
[33] Lacan (2019).

as a locus to access collective memory, I seek to understand the ways in which the subject not only enters history through the remnant and the marginal, but also produces history through their own narrativisation.

As Benjamin describes, remembrance is simultaneously a creative 'constructive' and 'destructive' process.[34] Benjamin recognises that memory constructs the past in the same movement as it destroys its linear form. The concept of construction is that of a collage, or a juxtaposition of past and present 'in the cause of defamiliarising or estranging that present from itself'.[35] As for the destructive end of remembrance, it points to the retroactive process of narration. It indicates the ways in which articulating the past historically means to grasp it as a memory capable of retroactively altering the past.[36] Remembrance, in other words, does not occur in homogeneous time, as seen through the stories evoked by the bowl and the tray. Rather, it evokes the structuring of time; time becomes configured around the significance of a particular memory. This phenomenological description of time experienced in memory resonates for Benjamin with time experienced historically, socially, and communally.[37] The constructive and destructive processes of remembrance shed light on the ways in which the material object—an element that evokes a sense of estrangement from the present of telling—brings that present in conversation with the past event.

Examining this constructive and destructive nature of remembrance, one can see a distinction between the past as it 'really was' and as it is remembered. Going back to traumatic narrative, Freud recognises that trauma has the structure of myth, where human history differs from chronological time, specifically because it is subject to myth.[38] From a psychoanalytic view, this mythical structure of traumatic narrative points not to the past, but evokes a discourse on the present. The process of remembering does not necessarily discover 'what really happened' or produce a discourse on the past as a product of its time, but it is rather a process that takes on meaning retrospectively. As Freud stated, 'the very temporality of subjectivity is unequivocally retrospective'.[39]

Indeed, this retroactive process of remembrance also speaks to the ways in which narrative is shaped and transformed in the presence of the listener, and the ways in which the subsequent generation of war partakes in the process of remembrance, influencing what is being spoken and unspoken, and ultimately retelling the story

[34] Wilding (1996: 2).
[35] Wilding (1996: 51).
[36] Wilding (1996: 62).
[37] Benjamin in relation to 'the temporality of the calendar' (1969: 261).
[38] Shepherdson (1995: 10).
[39] For temporality in psychoanalysis and the retrospective orientation of Freudian theory, see Bowie (1993).

from their position as post-war subjects. In the case of the tray, the evocation of memory occurred during the stagnation of the 2020 coronavirus lockdown that followed the October 2019 uprising; these two ongoing events stirred affect, memory, and the discourse of war. The time and space through which my mother tells the story of the past underlines the role of our generation as listeners partaking in the process of remembrance, at a time where we represent the forefront of movements happening on the street.

The analytic take on narrative and remembrance also illuminates the process of historicisation and the mythical structure that configures it. As Lacan writes, 'History is not the past. History is the past in so far as it is historicised in the present—historicised in the present because it was lived in the past.'[40] In Benjamin's words, remembrance is history's 'original vocation',[41] as it is not far from the structures of the individual remembrance. He also argues that history is incomplete, and 'open'[42] as it is always being reconstituted and created in the present. This incompleteness underlines how history is produced by telling. In the case of Lebanon, Benjamin's framework sheds light on the ways in which dominant narratives, symbols, and state ideals shape what is considered to be historical—and what is left out. As Benjamin suggested, 'articulating the past historically ... means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger'.[43] Moments of danger appear both in the stories of the *tasset al rahbeh* and the tray: the *tasset al rahbeh* evokes an image that pushes Sarah to investigate its source and articulate it in relation to a moment in history. The memory associated with the tray is evoked when spaces of the past, such as the house from which my family was displaced, are revisited at a time when political and social structures are being shaken. Historic trauma is also 'made known through moments of truth that flash up retroactively through the individual'.[44]

By examining the ways in which the intergenerational space engages in the process of remembrance and narrativisation, I turn the focus to the object's role of witness, which underlines the relationship of temporality with how we remember and how we tell our stories. I argue that the object as witness inhabits the past, present, and future and underlines the nonlinearity of time and our experience of it, particularly when we remember and tell stories. In the case of the tray, the object plays the role of witness at the moment of the event (my mother's near-death experience with the sniper). It is also a witness to the after-event (displacement), and the time in which it is spoken of in the cross-generational space. This temporal 'cutting through' highlights how the

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[40] Lacan (1991: 12).
[41] Wilding (1996: 2–3).
[42] Benjamin *et al.* (2003).
[43] Benjamin *et al.* (2003).
[44] Brooks (2016: 7).

object is simultaneously the representation or embodiment of the subject (the generation of war) at the time of the original event, and the remnant that gazes upon what happened, inhabiting the present in the past and vice versa. Moreover, I suggest that the object as a witness is both inscribed in the Symbolic register and present outside of it. The tray acts as a symbol to my mother's experience and brings her closer to her position as a subject in the narrative. However, the tray also triggers what goes beyond the Symbolic, and what becomes implicated in the work of remembrance intergenerationally.

As witness, the material moves against the temporality of commodity capitalism and its influence on the discourse of memory. Under the neoliberal capitalist Lebanese state, time and memory are both subsumed by an ideology of 'moving on' and 'putting the past behind us', which sustains and re-creates the political, economic, and social symbolic of memory. I suggest that the material object interrupts the state's imposed linearity of time within the capitalist discourse of memory in Lebanon by evoking the past within the present. The subsequent generation—cut off and alienated from the embodied and affective memory—experiences the imposed linearity of time that distances the struggles of the past from those of today and reinforces a commodification of time and memory. In contrast, the material object inhabiting past and present illuminates the ways in which the events of the past comment on the present.

By examining the temporal nature of the material object within its symbolic role of witness, I suggest that the material cuts through the political and social Symbolic order and disturbs the ideologically imposed linearity of time. The cutting through of the Symbolic brings into question the role of what is un-symbolisable and what cannot be spoken, both in the experience of the generation of war and the subsequent one. I suggest that the unsymbolisable is held by the object, and is part of what escapes the Symbolic register. In Lacanian terms, what cannot be symbolised belongs to the register of the Real. The Real pertains to what is impossible to represent and master, but is always calling for symbolisation. Encounters with the Real, as it is associated to trauma, seem to dislocate our representations of reality but also provoke the construction of new representations. The Real escapes our attempts to symbolise or represent it, and escapes social reality, which is organised through images and symbolic structures.[45] I suggest that the role of the object as witness, as being both inside and outside the Symbolic, also belongs to the paradoxical nature of the Real. I argue that the Real is evoked by the object in the world of the subject as a remainder or residue. In the same way that Freud conceived repressed trauma as an interruption to the mental life of a subject, this interruption implies an outside to the Symbolic.[46]

[45] Feldstein *et al.* (1996: 181–4)
[46] Freud (1936: 18–21).

In the same vein, this interference implies repulsion from the Real to any linear temporal periodisation. I suggest that it is the register of the Real, manifested through the encounter with the object, which brings the temporal question of memory and the process of the narrativisation to the forefront. As Harris put it, the objects embedded in history evoke an explosive power that tears apart the present.[47] Benjamin speaks of a messianic arrest,[48] which represents a moment of interference in a temporal or experiential series, and brings about a radical 'now-time'[49]—a flash that ruptures time's continuity and provides a glance onto an alternative present. In other words, and particularly in the world of the subsequent generation, there seems to be an experience of what the Lacanians describe as the 'return of the Real', where the return is figurative. The 'return of the Real' involves an eruption of contingency, and a disturbance in the symbolic world of the subject.[50]

Interferences or eruptions from the Real are present when Sarah, who thought that her memory is what triggers fear, encounters a past alien to her, which in turn shakes the grounds of her present associations and significations. Through the encounter with the object, the process of remembrance and narrativisation can bring to light what is cut off from our subjective and embodied memory, and perhaps what is unknown and redemptive of the past and the present in it. Redemption here highlights the incompleteness of historical narrative, and calls for continuous forms of signification. I suggest that the material remnant is the portal into a shift in the symbolic structure of our narratives. The material serves as a medium through which we rework and rewrite the stories that brought us to the present, and which continue to shape our realities intergenerationally.

Object as affective opening

Interviews with the subsequent generation demonstrate how the generation of war expresses memories of that time through a technical description of events, or flashing of images removed from the subjective and personal memory. When addressing the past, the generation of war also tends to resort to nostalgia for the pre-war time. Expressions such as 'Beirut was the Paris of the Middle East in the past' or 'Lebanon was like Switzerland before the war' came up in several interviews with members of the generation of war. However, when it comes to the stories of objects retold by the

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[47] Harris (2010: 4).
[48] Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 396).
[49] McCole (1993: 4).
[50] Wilcox & DeLillo (2002: 121–2).

subsequent generation, memories seem to be charged with affect. In this section, I look into the ways in which the object allows us to examine memory's affective reservoir and the ways in which affect complicates the trajectory of remembrance and narrativisation cross-generationally.

The distance of the generation of war from their embodied and personal memory speaks to the ways affect is also cut off from the way they remember and narrate the events of the past. For the generation of war in Lebanon, the past manifests as nostalgia for the 'pre-war era', aside from the haunting silence around memories of war. Hook indicates that unreflecting forms of nostalgia fail to subject the past to adequate examination[51] and considers that the past is fixed and sealed off in a unique remoteness. This past thus becomes a static utopia, irretrievably lost, and shut off from any meaningful relations with the present.

Nostalgia is not a remembering that induces pain, but instead seeks to remember what has yet to be imagined.[52] Therefore, the loss of a pre-war home for the generation of war in Lebanon only ever existed in a future. Nostalgia experienced by the generation of war in relation to the pre-war years can be, in effect, emotions produced by the unresolved nature of the past and its traumatic residues. Building upon this notion, Boym considers that what drives restorative nostalgia is essentially anxiety, rather than longing. He argues that nostalgia 'is not the sentiment of distance and longing'; it is rather 'the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and restored tradition'.[53] Nostalgia in this case becomes a protective shield against the anxieties of history.

In relation to remembrance and narrative, nostalgia participates in dismissing the political reality of Lebanon's pre-war situation. I refer here to the ways nostalgia, by painting a picturesque image of the pre-war era, eclipses marginal narratives that present alternative interpretations of what led to the outburst of war. These include the social movements in the decade before the war, such as the Ghandour Factory strike in 1972,[54] the student movement rising in 1968,[55] and the fishermen's movement in 1975[56] that protested the oppressive economic practices of the regime. All of these can be traced to the present movements and their demands.

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[51] Hook (2012: 220–5).

[52] Bonnett (2010: 25–8).

[53] Boym (2002: 44–5).

[54] Ghandour is one of the oldest and largest Lebanese-owned industries, specialising in food processing and the manufacture of candy and baked goods. The government's crackdown in response to the strike caused the death and injury of many workers.

[55] See Farsoun (1973).

[56] Strike in response to the attempt of former President Camille Chamoun to monopolise fishing along the coast of Lebanon.

When it comes to the following generation, the relationship between affect and memory is influenced by the ways in which the generation of war recalls and transmits the past. I hypothesise that the subsequent generation experiences a melancholic relationship to the past, shut out from its reality. According to Freud, in melancholia, the loss of object is 'unknown' and as Agamben suggests in *Stanzas*, it is the appropriation of an object of desire that cannot be had in reality.[57] I suggest that the subsequent generations of war hold a position in relation to the past that is melancholic, thereby influencing their relationship to loss, desire, and identity when the object of loss is unknown.

For the subsequent generation, melancholia places memory in a backward-looking and frozen attachment whose grounds, I suggest, are disturbed by the physical object. While there is not space in this article to explore the full complexities of melancholia, I reference it in order to underline the affective nature of the gap between what is spoken and unspoken of the past. The melancholic symbolises the ways in which we are cut off from relating to our losses or desires. Melancholia, in this case, can be understood as a representation of that which appears alien, external, unstable, and uncertain. One sees this in the anxiety that haunts Sarah's relationship to the memory of soldiers, as it simultaneously seems alien and familiar to her. What is uncertain is also evidently influenced by the structures of repression that further encode the relationship of the subsequent generation's with the unknown lost object. This melancholia is also a 'melancholia of representation and signification'.[58] What cannot be signified indicates the transgenerational experience of what has not been mourned and thus not symbolised in narrative. I consider that mourning is not merely a means to 'work through' the past in order to put it behind us, but a process that can instil movement to produce new symbolic representations, especially as past struggles break into our present moments.

By investigating the material object as an affective repository that triggers embodied memory, this article suggests that the object breaks through the structures of nostalgia that render remembrance as a form of imaginary escapism for the generation of war, and influence the ways in which the following generation positions itself in relation to the past inhabiting the present. I suggest that the material object, eliciting affect, opens the possibility for narration across generations, and shakes the grounds of temporality within remembrance. I consider that the affective states triggered by the material object rupture the stagnation evoked by nostalgia and the blockage or fixation produced by the traumatic. As Enderwitz suggests, 'the affective turn breaks with the linguistic paradigm. It shifts attention to the body, to relations, forces and

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[57] Agamben (1993: 20–1).
[58] Enderwitz (2015: 100).

intensities: towards a "being-in-the-world" that is not reducible to language and cognition.'[59] I suggest that the affective triggered by the material creates an opening in two ways. First, it opens the temporal structures of remembrance. Second, it shakes the grounds of narrative and signification, by bringing up desire, loss, and what shapes subjectivity. In other words, affect—when triggered by the material remnant—creates a hole in the Symbolic register and elicits questions about our stories and histories that erupt in the form of affect. This rupture, evoked by affect, underlines how stories are continuously told, represented, and deconstructed as they navigate the space between what is—and is not—symbolic. I include the story of the tray in my analysis to understand how, as a member of the subsequent generation, I participate in the process of remembrance and ongoing construction of narrative. The story of the tray illuminates how affect moves across generations. It also reflects how my own associations, from witnessing and participating in the uprising, partake in constructing the transgenerational narrative.

From an analytic lens, affect, sometimes enigmatic and disorienting, opens the pathway to a constant interplay of signification, where some affects relate to meaning (the Symbolic) and others relate to the falling away of meaning (the Real). In the case of the *tasset al rahbeh*, the object evokes the mother's affective memory in association to Sarah's experience with the bowl. The moment Sarah tells the story from her position and relationship to the object, affect moves her to find new representations to her experience as it relates to her own subjectivity. It is also the moment at which affect complicates the trajectory of time and remembrance, evoking a queer temporality.[60] In this case, affect belongs to the register of the Real, defamiliarising the present and unsettling meaning. I borrow here Benjamin's terms and suggest that affect comes in to 'blast open the continuum of history'.[61] The *tasset al rahbeh*, as a signifying name to a bowl, speaks to the function of the object in relation to affect. The bowl, at a basic level, can be considered a witness to the fear induced by the state of war. The *tasset al rahbeh*'s function in relation to the subject, however, indicates how the object elicits what seems to go beyond the emotion of fear. Indeed, as affect theorist Brian Massumi describes, affect is pure intensity, and a bodily register that 'is not semantically or semiotically ordered', while emotion is 'an intensity owned and recognized'.[62] In other words, the bowl and its symbolic associations both soothe the fearful child from the perceived threat and open a space that holds what goes beyond signification.

[59] Enderwitz (2015: 1–5).
[60] See Freeman (2010).
[61] Benjamin & Jennings (1996: 396).
[62] Massumi (1995: 85–8).

Affect is what drove Sarah to ask questions around the bowl. It is also where she found an entry point to her position within the story, and where narrative found new grounds of signification. Similarly, the tray, as a placeholder to the moment where the sniper shot the bullet, elicits affect moving beyond meaning (partly translating into a dream). What is left out from the story appears as an enigma. This enigma pertains to the raw state of the Real register, lacking symbolic articulations. In the case of the bowl, even when memory is associated with the original event (Sarah's mother's memory), the affective residual comes in to deconstruct these associations by implicating Sarah's experience, thereby taking the story to a new space of signification.

By navigating the space between the Symbolic and the Real, the material eliciting affect mediates the subsequent generation's entry into narrative, and opens the pathway to connecting with losses and desires which are at the core of subjectivity. For the subsequent generation, the act of narrating the experiences of the past speaks to the ways in which narrative does not end at the moment of reception. In other words, what occurs in the transgenerational space is not merely an act of inheritance of memory or story. I suggest that affect here is what shakes the course of narrativisation by implicating the subsequent generation's subjectivity. It is also what initiates the work of historical interpretation cross-generationally.

For instance, nostalgia—and arguably melancholia—assumes an origin to memory, a beginning and end, and a temporality that brings about a closure to signification. From the position of the subsequent generation, the material object evoking affect dislocates this assumed origin and highlights the fragmentation of memory within the process of remembrance and its narrativisation. That the story of the tray came up during lockdown, and after the beginning of October's uprising, highlights how memories of war are triggered by affectively charged times. By complicating the temporal trajectory of memory, affect negotiates the space between 'then' and 'now' and ruptures the assumption that narrative has a clear origin. This opening elicited by affect appears in the bowl's story, where Sarah realises that the memory is not originally hers, and experiences a sense of destabilisation to what is being signified. As Sami Khatib describes when referring to the Benjaminian messianic redemption, the restoration of the past's repressed potentialities is an opening that 'ex-poses the present as changeable' and configures the rewriting of history as a destabilisation of the 'solid ground of the present as historical outcome of the past'.[63] From a psychoanalytic perspective, an affect evoking deconstruction within narrative can be considered an intergenerational transferential process mediated by the material object. It is also an interminable process that leads to the work of interpretation.

[63] Khatib (2017: 17).

The messianic redemption called upon through the material object leads us to discuss how we relate the narrative to what is happening in Lebanon today. The past lives in our current movements and speaks to them; we experience this in the encounter with the affective material to narrative and its endless shift of signifiers. This article is not concerned with memory as merely a process of inheritance or preservation, but also as an opening to the 'repressed potentialities of the past'. In looking into how this past inhabits our current spaces and seeps into the cracks of what is unsaid, we attempt to find an opening onto the past, present, and our imagined alternative futures. In a country where the regime and state institutions have all but annihilated our historical memory, the search through material and domestic objects is a search for stories that resist closure.

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Oral history as a method of promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive justice

Salma Kahale

Abstract: In a context in which Syrians are divided by conflict lines and information wars with no clear pathway towards comprehensive justice and peace, oral history projects that are community based, gender sensitive, and victim centred can provide an avenue for justice and empowerment. In a conflict where women's voices and those of other marginalised groups are ignored or silenced, oral history can re-centre these experiences and voices, and provide a new perspective on the conflict and avenues for a solution. The Syrian Oral History Archive program powered by Dawlaty encompasses the voices of ordinary Syrians—with a focus on women and youth—and acts to recount both individual and collective recollections of the 2011 Syrian Uprising and the Syrian conflict thereafter. From its inception in 2016, the Archive has sought to create a mechanism and process which empowered Syrian communities and marginalised groups to tell their stories, influence the dominant narrative about the conflict, and shape the agenda around justice.

Keywords: Syria, SOHA, gender-sensitivity, marginalised group(s), conflict, transitional justice, oral history.

Note on the author: Salma Kahale was the Executive Director of Dawlaty for over six years, leading its work on inclusive justice, civic engagement, and campaigning with families and survivors of detention and disappearance. Salma is a Syrian feminist and social justice activist with over 15 years of experience in gender, youth engagement, and child protection programming and policy development. Salma's research interests include gender, justice, agency, and community organising.

Introduction

Ten years after the start of the Syrian uprising, military operations and political processes seem to have stalled and a transition to a peaceful and just society remains a distant hope. As the regime has regained control of large swathes of Syria and other actors entrench the occupation and control of various areas, gross human rights violations and war crimes not only remain unaddressed but continue to occur, carried out by the Syrian regime as well as all other de facto authorities. Debates and negotiations amongst international and national actors have rarely taken into account the experiences, views, and needs of civilians on the future of Syria and on justice, especially the views of women, youth, and other marginalised groups.

The lack of a political transition, and an inability to create national processes to deal with violations, has not stopped Syrian activists and civil society from seeking avenues for justice and accountability. Nor has it stopped efforts to create dialogue and peace-building across conflict lines. Civil society has an important role to play in promoting and seeking justice for Syrians, in the present and in the future. The Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA) is one such tool for providing justice for Syrians, in particular those whose voices and experiences have been marginalised. SOHA aims to be a mechanism for symbolic justice on the individual and community level, by creating a space for acknowledgement, agency, and social dialogue. The Archive is also well positioned to inform other mechanisms for transitional justice, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

SOHA has begun to fulfil such a role, even with the limitations and challenges it faces in a complex and dynamic environment.

Syrian context

Politically and geographically divided

Ten years ago, Syrians chanted 'one, one, one, the Syrian people are one' as they marched for freedom and dignity across Syria. The heavy bombardment and fighting to quash the uprising have now subsided in many areas of Syria as the regime has made military gains, with the support of its allies. Yet, whilst the regime has regained control of many parts of Syria, the country remains divided under the de facto rule of a host of local and international powers. In addition to a military dynamic that seems unable to produce a clear 'winner', the political process seems equally unable to bring a resolution to the conflict. None of these tracks seems close to producing tangible progress towards fulfilling the aspirations of Syrians who marched in the streets for freedom only to suffer the brutality of war and repression.

Across Syria, living under the control of the Syrian Regime, Turkey, and its allied militia (the Syrian National Army), Hay'et Al Tahrir, and the Syrian Democratic Forces, civilians face a multitude of human rights violations and increasingly difficult living conditions. These include continued unlawful detention and disappearance, targeted assassinations, sexual and gender-based violence (in particular of women and girls from minority communities), as well as land confiscations and displacement. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with increasing sanctions and the economic collapse in neighbouring Lebanon, '[risk] refuelling the root causes of the conflict, which included deepening poverty and inequalities'.[1] Today, Syria is divided up into multiple areas of influence and the majority of Syrians have been displaced from their homes, neighbourhoods, and country. Throughout the conflict, Syrians have been increasingly restricted from traveling between different areas of Syria. Those who could leave for neighbouring countries have found themselves trapped there due to travel restrictions and an inability to get legal residency. The political divides, coupled with travel restrictions within Syria and to neighbouring countries, have further alienated Syrians from each other. This has led to a lack of knowledge about the experiences and perspectives of different communities, entrenching localised thinking and priority setting.

Representations of the conflict

The physical restrictions, coupled with systematic misinformation campaigns, have led one of the best documented conflicts in history to be filled with misunderstanding, misinformation, and mistrust. During the conflict, the regime and its Russian allies sought to reframe the conflict as a war against terror. They have conducted concerted campaigns online with bots and trolls, backed by Russian state agencies, to spread false information about humanitarian workers and chemical attacks.[2] In addition, while the fighting raged, the Syrian regime began efforts to rewrite and memorialise its version of the conflict. In 2016, Bouthaina Shaaban, the foreign policy advisor and spokesperson for the current president and his father before him, launched Wathiqat Wattan, an NGO (nongovernmental organisation) with a mission 'to preserve the national memory and save it from loss distortion and fraud, and to give the chance to Syrians to participate in writing the modern Syrian history'.[3] There have also been examples of Syrian opposition activists and their allies tampering with videos and conducting misinformation, albeit nowhere near the systemic level of the regime

[1] Commission of Inquiry (2020: paragraph 29).
[2] Syria Campaign (2017).
[3] Wathiqat Wattan (2020).

and its allies. Within the broader media framing, much has been written about ISIS' savvy use of the media.

Representations of the conflict in international media and policy circles have shifted over the years from an early focus on protests to a focus on geopolitics and warring parties, especially on the regime and ISIS. Civilians, women in particular, were brought up as victims of the conflict. Their agency, experiences, desires, and the potential role they could play in deciding the future of Syria or developing strategies around justice or ending the conflict were marginal. Opposition delegations to political negotiations were created through the support, influence, and pressure of external actors, much more than through on-the-ground presence or representation of a certain constituency.

The marginalisation of women

While there have been efforts by many Syrian and international organisations to document violations of human rights and to develop transitional justice plans and mechanisms, the methods of documentation and focus have often lacked gender-sensitivity and victim-focus.

Women have played leading roles in their communities and on a national level during the conflict, yet their experiences and voices have been marginalised by Syrian and international actors alike. Since the very beginning of the conflict, local women's groups, such as the Dammeh women's collective in Zabadani which negotiated with state security for the release of prisoners, played an important role and women leaders included two founders of the revolutionary coordinating structures, Razan Zaitouneh and Suheir Atassi. There was strong coalition work, including the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD), which was founded in 2014 by a diverse group of Syrian women activists with a history of political and social organising, demanding a seat for women at the highest level of the peace talks. Research by Syrian and international feminist groups has highlighted how women's groups across Syria have played and continue to play an important role in peacebuilding and justice in their communities.[4]

Women's groups continue to perform a vital role in challenging authoritarianism and oppression, yet they are faced with 'criticism and sometimes ridicule from the communities. Women fear from taking part in these activities as a result of the continued marginalization of women, as politics is considered a man's domain.'[5] The marginalisation takes place at the level of national and international institutions.

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[4] Ghazzawi *et al.* (2015).
[5] WILPF & Dawlaty (2020: 45).

For example, the SWIPD was downsized and distorted to create an advisory board to the then UN special envoy Staffan De Mistura, the Women's Advisory Board—which did not fulfil the aspirations of women to be involved in decision-making processes.[6] Ms Zeitouneh and her colleagues were forcibly disappeared inside Syria, whilst Ms Atassi was sidelined and actors such as Dammeh are not acknowledged for the real power they hold in their community and their experience of politics and negotiation is downplayed or ignored.

Tens of organisations and thousands of activists have worked to document human rights violations throughout the Syrian conflict in an effort to bring justice to victims, particularly in the form of prosecutions. The work has often focused on the documentation of killings, detention, and other human rights violations, in which gender analysis is generally limited to the number of women who faced these violations or a specific focus on sexual violence and the violations against 'women's honour'.[7] Many actors, particularly international and Syrian feminist organisations, have sought to broaden the scope of documentation, analysis, and approaches to justice; however, this is met with the attitude that 'there is a certain "right way" to achieve accountability and viewing measures other than trials as "soft justice"'.[8]

Syrian and international feminist organisations have been working to elaborate the additional and different impact of the conflict and of human rights violations on women and to bring that analysis into the debate on justice and accountability in Syria. Pre-existing discriminatory laws and patriarchal culture have led to women being disproportionately impacted by authoritarian practices and violence.[9] For example, detention is experienced differently by women, whether as detainees who face targeting as hostages, sexual violence and torture, or societal stigma after release,[10] or as relatives of detained and disappeared persons who face harassment and exploitation in their search for a loved one, or legal complications to custody, freedom of movement, and property rights due to discriminatory laws.[11] Human rights reporting by feminist organisations on the impact of sieges and bombing of health infrastructure analyse the impact of these forms of collective punishment on women's participation as well as their health, in particular reproductive health.[12] In addition to expanding the scope of the violations and harm that is analysed, feminist organisations have also tried to expand the discourse and strategies on justice, building on

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[6] UN Women (2016).
[7] SNHR (2020).
[8] Kabawat & Travesi (2018: 6).
[9] Dawlaty & WILPF (2020).
[10] Nassar (2015).
[11] Dawlaty & Women Now for Development (2018).
[12] Badael Foundation *et al.* (2016).

women's lived realities and drawing on their understanding of concepts of justice, security, and peace.[13]

The state of justice

When the protests in Syria started, many human rights and democracy activists and organisations were focused on developing transitional justice plans. Syrian activists and organisations especially were determined to learn from neighbouring countries, such as Iraq and Lebanon, and to ensure that accountability, reparations, and institutional reform measures were ready, context specific, and Syrian led. Workshops, studies, and surveys with Syrians were implemented to develop a framework for 'the day after'. These plans were often envisioned as national processes, taking place after a clear transition, though they lacked a gender-sensitive lens and community buy-in. As the conflict wore on, the fall of the Syrian regime or the signature of a peace agreement that led to a transition have become more distant, the exercise of planning for such a day became less relevant, and new strategies have had to be developed to fulfil the desire for justice.

As a transition eludes Syria, justice efforts have largely focused on three tracks: case building for prosecution, victims organising, and memory preservation. Many efforts are now focused on case building to hold individuals from all sides, as well as the Syrian regime itself, accountable for crimes against humanity using international mechanisms, like the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and national courts where universal jurisdiction applies, such as in Germany, France, and Sweden. As prosecutions begin, some justice actors have been working to ensure that gender-sensitivity is mainstreamed and sexual and gender-based violence is prioritised in accountability efforts.[14] A criminal complaint by the European Court for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) has successfully resulted in incidents of sexual violence being indicted 'as acts of crimes against humanity committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population in Syria, not—as before—merely as individual cases under German criminal law'.[15]

Other efforts have focused on supporting victims of detention, disappearance, and other crimes to organise and advocate for their demands. These include the founding of several groups of families and survivors of detention and disappearance, such as Families for Freedom, the Caesar Families' Association, the Association of Detainees

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[13] Ali (2019).
[14] IIIM (2020: 13).
[15] ECCHR (2021).

and the Missing of Sednaya Prison, and the Coalition of Families of Those Detained by ISIS. Victims' organisations, many led by women, have succeeded in entering policy and advocacy discussions that were often reserved for male lawyers or human rights defenders.

International and Syrian civil society organisations, artists, and academics have also worked on memory preservation and remembrance efforts, sometimes through the prism of justice but also with the goal of building an understanding of the conflict amongst a Western audience or amongst Syrians themselves. Efforts to document the testimonies of Syrians have often aimed to tell their story to an outside public in the hopes of spurring action on the conflict, often with the lens of recounting the revolution. These include literary endeavours such as the 2012 book *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* by Samar Yazbek and Wendy Pearlman's 2017 *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices From Syria*. A groundswell of movies and documentaries have told the story of Syrians during the conflict and through their displacement, such as *The Return to Homs*, *Last Men in Aleppo*, *The Day I Lost My Shadow*, and *For Sama*. Many of these movies have received accolades abroad but remain largely unseen or consumed by Syrians themselves.

Others efforts are more scholarly in nature, aiming to highlight experiences of refugees to their new compatriots in Europe or Syrians from different areas to each other. These include the *Syrian Oral History Project* by the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide studies that aims to create documentation for scholarly study, understanding of Syrian refugees by European host societies, and a body of knowledge for accountability work.[16] Syrian civil society organisations have sought to preserve the collective memory of the conflict for Syrians as well, including the Citizenship League which has published a series of books with citizen's testimonies, along with the publishing of testimonies of Syrian mothers from across Syria to 'allow different perspectives to present examples from different regions suffering from the same condition, regardless of the political position'.[17]

In a context in which Syrians are divided by military and information wars with no clear pathway towards a comprehensive justice and reconciliation processes, there is a need for efforts to encourage Syrians at large but especially those who have suffered human rights violations to speak about their experiences, demands, and needs for the future. There is a need for their experiences to be heard and acknowledged, not only by their fellow citizens in other areas but also by others within their own communities. Oral history projects that are community based, gender sensitive, and victim centred can provide that space, as well as providing an avenue for justice and empowerment,

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[16] Ungor (2020).
[17] Syrian League for Citizenship & Besme International Group for Humanitarian Assistance (2017).

or potentially creating a basis for reconciliation. In a conflict where women's voices and those of other marginalised groups are ignored or silenced, oral history can re-centre these experiences and voices, and provide a new perspective on the conflict and avenues for a solution.

The Syrian Oral History Archive

When Dawlaty was founded in 2012, one of its core pillars was to advocate for and prepare for the development of Syrian-led, context-specific transitional justice processes. Dawlaty's mission is to enable Syrian civil society partners, marginalised groups, and young men and women to achieve democratic transition in Syria. This included the development of a transitional justice process to address the violations of forty years of dictatorship and the conflict that followed. We also hoped to engage in a historic opportunity to redefine the basis of the social contract in our country. For a transitional justice process to be transformational it needed to be Syrian led with the ownership and engagement of our own communities, especially those that have been historically marginalised.

Dawlaty sought to build knowledge and awareness within communities, especially amongst young activists, so that they could not only participate in transitional justice processes but to also help shape and lead them. With partners, Dawlaty investigated how various mechanisms could be applied in Syria based on local conditions and history.[18] It conducted research with young people, reporting on how they understand and can engage with transitional justice and what their priorities are in that regard.[19] With Badael, a partner Syrian civil society organisation, it developed a manual to train civil society activists on transitional justice. However, by 2015, as the conflict entered a new phase with the Russian intervention in Syria, it was clear for Dawlaty that a different kind of engagement with Syrian youth and communities was required in order to build knowledge, capacity, and networks for justice. A justice that may be many years off. This led to the development of what is now known as the Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA)**.**

In 2016, Dawlaty began working with Syrian civil society partners to collect oral history testimonies of Syrians from marginalised communities in different areas of Syria. Dawlaty defines marginalised communities as social and geographic groups, as well as victims of human rights violations, that have been historically disenfranchised

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[18] Dawlaty & No Peace Without Justice (2014).
[19] Saleh & Al-Taleb (2016).

and have not been represented in or participated in decisions about their own lives, communities, and country. Dawlaty and its partners sought to bring the realities of marginalised groups into mainstream and dominant histories and discourses of the Syrian conflict, to influence the justice agenda with the experiences and demands of these communities, and to empower them to advocate and help shape the agenda for peace and justice in Syria.

Today, Dawlaty has collected over 400 audio testimonies of which 310 will be available through a publicly available online platform, with varying levels of permissions and access. As part of its first collections, Dawlaty and its partners have collected the stories of women relatives of detainees, and young people aged between 18 and 24.

Methodology

While Dawlaty's methodology has changed over the last five years, as the situation and our learning have evolved, there have been several guiding principles that have grounded our work and our approach.

Identifying under-represented and marginalised groups

In selecting communities that we wanted to work with together with our partners, we reached out to individuals and groups that are insufficiently visible or under-represented, such as young people. In 2016, through their work with the community, Women Now for Development identified women relatives of detainees, the issues they face, and their priorities as under-represented in peace and justice discussions, including in women and peace forums. Another partner organisation approached us about documenting the experiences of Palestinian refugee youth during the conflict. Collaboration with partners who work with communities forms a core part of our work and guides our prioritisation of themes or communities on which to focus.

Working with communities

Dawlaty worked with partners to identify individuals from the relevant population with whom we could work to develop the themes, collect the testimonies, and develop outputs. In addition, young people who participated in our civic engagement activities were invited to take part in the Oral History programme and were trained on transitional justice, memory work, and oral history interviewing skills and concepts, as well as on psychological first aid and self-care. The young interviewers worked in groups to identify topics and events they wanted to explore, which in turn guided the identification and interviews with young narrators. Interviewers and narrators were also

engaged in reviewing outputs and developing awareness-raising and advocacy activities inspired by their testimonies.

Immediate results for communities

Dawlaty worked to join the collection of stories with ongoing projects that provided more immediate results for communities. This helped us overcome fatigue regarding justice. Activities included supporting report writing, advocacy, and movement building with the communities whose stories we are documenting. In 2019, based on the testimonies that they collected and their personal perspectives, young interviewers developed recommendations on youth, peace, and justice which they presented at a roundtable event with Syrian organisations working with youth. Women relatives of the disappeared, narrators, and interviewers participated in events based on their testimonies, including a brainstorming workshop with civil society and artists, theatrical storytelling events with the public, report launching events in their communities, and advocacy trips to Geneva. Early on, these efforts inspired the launch of Families for Freedom, a women-led movement of families of detained and disappeared persons.

Filling the gap of representation

As much as possible, given security and logistical restrictions, we have sought to fill the gap of representation in which the views and needs of people across conflict lines are gathered. Due to the repressive environment in government-held areas, as well as initial hesitation amongst some groups working on justice to engage civilians in those areas, there is an under-representation of people in regime-controlled areas, as well as areas controlled by radical groups, in much of the literature on justice. Dawlaty and its partners collected testimonies in seven different communities in Syria, including in two communities in regime control, as well as in several different areas of Lebanon and Jordan. While most of the stories were collected in Arabic, some of the stories collected in the North East of Syria were narrated in Kurdish.

The archive is by no means representative of the varied experiences of Syrians, even amongst our target population, but it is not complete. We continue to identify ways in which to work with communities across Syria, so that in our effort to contribute to a new narrative we do not create new patterns of exclusion. Here, however, there is a tension between our efforts to be local, specific, and community based, while at the same time creating an inclusive and representative process. This in part can be addressed through strong collaborations with organisations and groups with strong relationships and expertise working with specific communities.

Collaboration

We have sought to partner with organisations with specific expertise in relevant areas or have a strong footing within the community targeted. While we expanded into new communities with which we had not worked before, the process of gathering testimonies, collaborating with communities on knowledge production and advocacy, was at its strongest when working with a partner who had the trust of communities and a strong understanding of how best to engage them. Dawlaty will continue to make collaboration with other community partners a pillar of collecting, archiving, and developing outputs for justice.

Limitations

There are clear challenges and limitations for an Oral History archive with an aim of working on justice while the conflict is still—as defined—ongoing. Community-based oral history projects, including SOHA, aim to have a longer term relationship with their narrators, as opposed to a study or a human rights documentation endeavour. In addition, 'in the case of the creation of archival oral history collections, the principle of giving voice to a person or group often implies attributing them a form of authorship by explicitly mentioning their names'.[20] However, due to the war, displacement, and security concerns, we were often unable to keep in touch with narrators. In addition, we are unable to give individual authorship of testimonies to narrators. Even in cases where we received permission to use the testimonies in full, we have often opted to anonymise the testimonies, especially as a number of the areas in which we have worked have been retaken by the Syrian regime.

> Interviewees who speak about more recent events not only run the risk of reliving their trauma, but also of revealing incriminating evidence that could lead to retaliation. In post-conflict zones, this calls for extreme care in the process of selecting, informing and keeping contact with narrators and in the subsequent handling of the data.[21]

Collections

Youth voices: young people shaping transition, citizenship, and identity

> *The word 'displacement' means tragedy. It is a tragedy on all levels of human life, and changes a person's life. ... Displacement comes and destroys all your plans and changes them. It destroys your reality and makes it bitter and painful. I was not considering*

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[20] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 28).
[21] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 31).

> *leaving my village or migrating unless, for example, there was something that would*
> *improve my life and my future. And even if … it would be for a certain period and I would*
> *then go back … one's home and his family and country are very precious to them.*
> (24-year-old man, Daraa)

The youth collection includes 194 stories by young people between 18 years and 24 years old collected between 2016 and 2018. Young interviewers worked in groups within their communities to identify specific incidents that they wanted to ask narrators about, such as the chemical attack in Ghouta, the bombing of the local market, interruption to education, or engagement in the armed conflict. Testimonies focus on youths' experience of the conflict, elaboration on a specific incident or theme that was identified by the youth interviewers of that community, and the narrator's understanding of concepts such as justice, responsibility, and diversity, as well as how they see themselves in that process. The youth collection will be launched in 2021, highlighting such themes as the disruption of education, involvement in armed conflict, displacement, as well as disruption of social and economic development. What the testimonies communicate are feelings of safety, belonging, alienation, and deprivation of personal agency that youth experience as they relate to these violations. These testimonies allow us to go beyond narrow interpretation and impact of violations, as well as bringing these issues out of a humanitarian/youth development framework into a justice framing.

Stories for empowerment and justice: women relatives of the detainees and disappeared

> *A man was detained once he went to ask for his cousin. No one knew his whereabouts. So,*
> *when I saw that no one wanted to go with me, I went by myself to the security branches*
> *… all of them.* (32 years old—Aleppo)[22]

Dawlaty and its partner, Women Now for Development, collected 213 women's personal stories as family members of detained and disappeared persons between 2016 and 2018. The stories of wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of persons who are detained or disappeared in Syria were collected in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. As elaborated in the report 'Shadows of the Disappeared: Testimonies of Syrian Female Relatives Left with Loss and Ambiguity' published in 2018, the testimonies highlight the process of searching for a loved one that women engage in, as well as the harassment and exploitation they face in this process. They detail economic deprivation, social and psychological stress, and social alienation that women face as a result of the violation, especially when it is coupled with gender-biased legislation and a patriarchal society. In addition to understanding the challenges women face, the testimonies

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[22] Dawlaty & Women Now for Development (2018: 28).

provide insight into the methods of resilience, coping, and regaining agency that women have.

Narrators and interviewers, many of whom were also women relatives of disappeared and detained persons, played a leading role in promoting the stories and demands of women. The report, 'Shadows of the Disappeared', was launched in local communities from which the stories were collected. Local leaders and civil society activists in Rural Aleppo and Idlib listened to and engaged with women narrators and activists as they shared the report results and discussed local dynamics and needs. Narrators attended the telling of their stories in Beirut to a Lebanese audience by actors. One of the greatest achievements of the project was the emergence of the Families of Freedom movement, inspired by a workshop that brought together narrators, activists, and cultural actors, which centred the testimonies. The women of the movement have become a prominent voice on the issue of detention and they have inspired other family and survivor groups to form. When we started gathering testimonies in 2016, there was fear and stigma related to speaking as female relatives of detained and disappeared persons. Today, their presence as stakeholders in any advocacy or consultation has become all but required.

SOHA as a tool of achieving gender-sensitive, inclusive justice

> *After the strike, some of the children became sick for a week because of the dust, and some students were absent for weeks due to the state of panic and terror in the students and parents.* (26-year-old male, Daraa)

> *A woman cannot protect her daughter. They are taking girls against their parents' wishes. Daesh says 'you either give her to us as such, or something bad will happen to you.* (25-year-old woman, Yarmouk camp)

> *They took me out, and I asked them 'where are you taking me?' and they said 'don't be afraid, we're going to the student union security.' Of course, I knew this was a lie. They walked me outside and took me through the university gate. Of course I didn't know where I was going, and I was handcuffed and held. Next thing I knew, I was at the State Security branch in Latakia. They took us to the branch, and of course the reception was beatings and insults, and atrocious methods and tactics.* (24-year-old man, Deraa)

From its inception, the Syrian Oral History Archive sought to create a mechanism and process which empowered Syrian communities and marginalised groups to tell their stories, influence the dominant narrative about the conflict, and shape the agenda around justice. In discussions with community partners and experts, we identified oral history as a tool that would allow for communities to engage with justice in the context of an ongoing conflict, building capacity and creating space for organising and

dialogue, whilst also trying to avoid the fatigue and backlash that may result from discussions of a future transitional justice process that has not materialised.

Empowerment

> *My story is not just my story. It is a widespread phenomenon. There are mothers who are in prison and their children have become orphans. My story is not just a personal matter, I am telling it to raise awareness for every mother who lost her husband and for every grandmother raising orphans. My message is also to every brother who has left his sister and her children to handle things alone.* (34-year-old woman, rural Damascus)

Community-based oral history projects have the ability to empower individuals and communities, through speaking, being heard, and feeling acknowledged. Particularly for individuals and communities that have been historically marginalised, finding a space to tell personal stories can provide a semblance of justice and possibly, even healing. 'Oral history as a form of transitional justice is the practice of empowering victims of war by providing them with the opportunity to voice their experiences in the form of a spoken dialogue that is documented in a durable form.'[23] Having one's story documented and forming part of a broader collection of stories, available in a public archive, can be a powerful acknowledgement of the experiences that this individual and community went through.

Community-based oral history can provide an opportunity for victims and communities to speak about their experiences and gain acknowledgement in a way that is more empowering and holistic than formal mechanisms, such as truth commissions. Truth commissions can have political aims or a limited scope that does not create space for all the experiences, as well as local identities and meanings that impact on grievances and understandings of justice.

> Scholarship has increasingly highlighted the limitations of institutionalized top down forms of transitional justice, as such trial and truth commissions, in terms of helping individuals and communities to overcome a violent past. Their criticisms point generally towards their limited value for thick social construction, their potential to re-traumatize victims and to not account for all their acknowledgement needs, or their lack of inclusion of all justice stakeholders.[24]

In working with local youth, SOHA created space to reflect on local incidents in the conflict that were important to the youth in those communities. The archive aims to create a process through which narrators and their communities are empowered to tell their stories, in all their facets and all their complexity. Eschewing human rights

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[23] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 22).
[24] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 11).

documentation approaches which focus on some of the most difficult experiences of that person's life and engages them as victims, the Archive wants to engage these individuals on their overall experience of the conflict, the violation(s) they have faced, their methods of coping and regaining agency, as well as their engagement with the concepts of justice. However, the aim of SOHA was not solely empowerment at an individual level, but also at a community or communal level. Narrating your own story, while contributing to a collective story can help individuals and communities reassert agency.

Informing justice & transitional justice efforts

The cause of unemployment is firstly, the fact that factories here have closed. There isn't one factory working. Secondly, the cause of unemployment is that we thought the revolution would progress ... the regime would fall. It turned out not to be a revolution or anything, the rebels did this and work here. ... There were buses for them, and they get paid at the beginning of every month. You go 12 hours here and 12 hours there. Young men and people, where did they start going but to the leaders of military factions. People started being paid 50,000 or 60,000 (SYP). A young man, for example, gets paid 60,000 for the first month, and then another for another month and a third. He gets married and has children by the end of the year. (25-year-old man, Yarmouk refugee camp)

My son's arrest has had serious repercussions on our family on every level, psychologically, financially, emotionally. Every aspect of our lives has been turned upside down. I became a more solitary person. I stopped visiting acquaintances and friends. I only go out to the market when I need to buy something and I go straight home afterwards. Our life is no longer what it used to be. We are deeply depressed and we keep to ourselves and no longer socialize with neighbours and relatives. His older brothers left to Jordan and my two youngest sons also left out of fear. One emigrated to Germany. That miserable day when a big wave of refugees left for Europe, he left with them. We used to beg our children not to wander far away. Even my husband never steps out of his shop anymore. There is no sense of safety and security in this place. Even in my own house, I feel afraid. (45-year-old woman, Daraa)

From its outset, Dawlaty and its partners decided that the archive and testimonies were not aimed to be used for legal procedures. However, we sought to influence the scope of what is defined as justice, who gets to define it, and what remedies and mechanisms are developed to achieve it. In particular, through engaging with female relatives of detained and disappeared persons, Dawlaty and its partners sought to expand the scope of discussion on detention to include families, to understand the gendered impact of that violation and to bring attention to the voices and needs of that population. Our oral history programme was developed, not only as its own justice mechanism or intervention, but also a tool that would inform other processes.

Oral history can provide us with more nuanced, particular, and subjective understandings of justice than traditional consultation processes and can bring more meaningful insights to the design of its mechanisms. There have been many surveys, pieces of research alongside consultation processes, to elaborate what Syrian civilians view as justice or their needs and priorities. Often, these consultations can offer an idea or snapshot of these people's priorities and attitudes at a certain period of time, in specific circumstances. In our experience of working with young people on the ground, specific incidents that happen around the time of an interview can influence people's attitudes towards such concepts as justice, revenge, and reconciliation and thus make those kinds of consultations less reliable. However, 'Oral History has significant potential to shed light on the localized and often intangible justice needs of those affected by a conflict and the dynamic processes shaping them.'[25] It can provide space for experience sharing that goes beyond predefined identities and violations that the surveyors have identified and allow us to understand the local, complex relationships that form their understanding of conflict.

In the context of a frozen and long-term conflict, community-based initiatives such as SOHA can also inform or move peace processes and negotiations.

> There is an inability for women to address their issues at the peace table as the politics of participation prevents women from voicing it. While each woman's experience is vastly different depending on her geographical location or her social group, it is also intensely subjective. If they are not given a platform to be heard, they will also not be included in formal mechanisms of peace or justice where decisions that impact their security and needs are made.[26]

In a context in which detention was often left off the agenda by all parties, SOHA created a space for women relatives of the disappeared to speak about their experiences and demands and to organise together, eventually leading to their more formal engagement in discussions with stakeholders.

Memorialisation

> *In the beginning, we didn't know what it was that we were hearing. It was a truly unforgettable day. As I said, at dawn they started shelling, shelling. … Very heavy shelling. I mean, in every neighbourhood a missile landed, and this missile is what we cannot forget, it just shakes buildings and shop windows. Windows of shops would shake. The situation was truly horrible. We are here and we don't know what to do. We hid in the corridor at first, then we hid in a closed room with no windows, fearing they might*

[25] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 21).
[26] Hettiarachchi (2016: 4).

strike again. They told us: they might hit again the same night. We hid in one room and then in the corridor, thinking it was safe. We would feel all the doors of the apartment just shaking from the bombing! It was a day I know how to describe! (20-year-old woman, Irbeen)

Oral history can be a tool for justice in itself, by providing symbolic or historical justice, an acknowledgement of the experiences of victims and communities that have lived through the conflict. Symbolic forms of justice 'are understood as those localized and non-judicial measures that aim at reparation, acknowledgement and community healing through the recognition of victimization, the establishment of moral accountability and facts, as well as remembrance'.[27] The importance of symbolic justice is in its focus on victims, where accountability measures often focus on the perpetrators. 'Oral history datasets can be considered as a symbolic form of justice in their own right, allowing silenced, marginalized or subaltern narratives of the past to be propagated against the backdrop of hegemonic interpretations of the past.'[28] The existence of a public collection of testimonies from individuals and communities whose experiences are ignored or actively suppressed and misrepresented can be a powerful acknowledgement and contribution to justice.

SOHA aims to work with narrators, community groups, and cultural actors to ensure that the collective memory of the Syrian conflict is built by Syrians, based on truth telling and recognition of marginalised communities' experiences, and that it aims to create mutual understanding. Art and culture provide tools to bring to light stories and have conversations that are otherwise difficult. We will work with community and cultural actors to engage narrators in telling their stories to their communities and other communities across Syria, in neighbouring countries and further abroad. Dawlaty has worked with Syrian and Lebanese artists and cultural organisations, using art, storytelling, theatre, and installations to tell the stories of women relatives of the disappeared and the experiences of youth in the Syrian conflict, as well as the story of civilians in Eastern Ghouta.

Oral history accounts can provide an antidote to traditional forms of memorialisation, whether the hyper-masculine wartime heroes, selective and elitist narratives shaped by who are most articulate and with access to speaking and publishing platforms. 'The perspectives of articulate survivors who are able to frame their testimonies didactically … tend to have a disproportionately large bearing on public narratives.'[29] In addition, war memorialisation is often dominated by masculinist memorialisation, focusing on soldiers and war heroes, or even on 'superstar' activists

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[27] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 12).
[28] Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 56).
[29] Neumann & Andersen (2014: 13).

in the case of a revolutionary struggle. 'The "hero", stereotyped and distilled into a set of idealised masculinities, dominates this narrative. Subordinate masculinities and femininities are marginalised or discarded entirely.'[30] A collective, public archive creates new spaces to acknowledge and elevate subordinated and marginalised voices and experiences that cannot compete with the 'hero' discourse.

Conclusions: oral history as a part of, not instead of, justice

Memorialisation and acknowledgement are a part of justice. They do not replace nor circumvent the need for other mechanisms, such as reparations, accountability, and institutional reform. 'Community "truth-telling" initiatives are clearly limited because they have limited ability to uncover previously unknown information from outside agencies, obtaining some form of official recognition or recompense, or in pursuing accountability.'[31] In addition, community-based efforts that occur without a frame of transition or a guarantee of safety can have limited impact, as fear of retribution or prosecution can hamper truth-telling and community dialogue. A focus on community discussions and localised efforts can also reduce the conflict to a community conflict or a 'civil war' as the Syrian conflict is commonly misnamed. In pursuing community-based approaches, we must look at how broader systems and apparatuses, as well as national and international actors, operate at the local level and impact on individuals and communities; rather than allowing them to become invisible.

In a frozen conflict, a divided geography and fragmented and displaced population, oral history provides us tools to support marginalised individuals and communities, especially those that have faced human rights violations to engage with and seek justice. It provides opportunities to empower individuals by creating space for them to speak and to have their story acknowledged as part of the collective story and memory of the conflict. It can be a tool to create inclusive memorialisation of the experiences that Syrians went through, providing symbolic justice and opening the way for other forms of justice in due time. Given all the limitations of a context in which a transition to a more peaceful and free society is distant, a community-based oral history approach is an important component of a broader effort for justice and a tool that helps us to push the bounds of what justice is possible to achieve and for whom.

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[30] Hettiarachchi (2016: 4).
[31] Lundy & McGovern (2005: 44).

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The symbiosis of oral history
and agonistic memory:
Voices of 68 and the legacy of the past in
Northern Ireland

Chris Reynolds

Abstract: This article offers a reflection on the potency of combining oral history and agonistic memory. Via the specific example of a recent collaboration between the author and National Museums NI on the subject of 1968, it will be argued that the symbiotic relationship between this methodological approach and theoretical under-pinning provides a potentially effective response to the current and pressing challenge of managing the legacy of the Troubles as part of the Northern Irish peace process. The success of this approach in the particular and difficult context of Northern Ireland suggests that there are potential lessons for other post-conflict societies coming to terms with the challenges of their own difficult pasts.

Keywords: Oral history, agonistic memory, Northern Ireland, 1968, museums, post-conflict, difficult pasts.

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Introduction

This article offers a reflection on the potency of combining oral history and agonistic memory. Via the specific example of a recent collaboration between the author and National Museums NI (NMNI) on the subject of 1968, it will be argued that the symbiotic relationship between this methodological approach and theoretical underpinning provides a potentially effective response to the current and urgent challenge of managing the legacy of the Troubles as part of the Northern Irish peace process. The success of this approach in the particular and difficult context of Northern Ireland suggests that there are potential lessons for other post-conflict societies coming to terms with the challenges of their own difficult pasts. Starting with a brief overview of the context that has seen Northern Ireland move from conflict to peace, there then follows an outline of the challenges faced by the peace process in overcoming the legacy of the past. The potency of oral history as a potential mechanism in post-conflict contexts is then analysed before a focus on its effectiveness and limitations in the case of post-Troubles Northern Ireland. As a response to the obstacles faced by current initiatives on this issue, it will then be argued that underpinning such an approach with agonistic memory, as exemplified by the recent *Voices of 68* project at NMNI, provides a fruitful response to the specific challenges facing Northern Ireland with potential opportunities for its application elsewhere.

Northern Ireland: from the 'Troubles' to an era of peace

Ireland's troubled history did not begin in 1968. Indeed, the era now commonly referred to as the 'Troubles' was just the latest and most recent chapter in a long and fractious relationship with England that stretches as far back as the 17th century (Foster 1988, Lee 1989). In the thirty years following 1968, Northern Ireland experienced a period of sectarian conflict that resulted in the deaths of over 3600 people and left its population traumatised for generations to come (Hennessey 1997, McKittrick & McVea 2001, Patterson 2007). The three decades of violence that, crudely speaking, pitted the Catholic / Nationalist / Republican (CNR) community against that of the Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist population (PUL), was eventually brought to a close with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998.[1] In the period since the onset of peace, the region has made great strides towards a certain degree of normalcy. There have been many, many positive changes that are welcomed by all

[1] The published version of this landmark peace deal can be read here: https://assets.publishing.service. gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf

concerned and ought to be celebrated. In addition to the end of daily deaths and destruction that punctuated the Troubles era, one can also point to significant improvements for Northern Irish society that are examples of the rewards that peace has brought (Bairner 2008, Tonge 2013: 92–3, Byrne 2014). For example, there has been huge economic development with lots of inward investment that, during the conflict, was simply not forthcoming. This has led to much improvement in terms of general infrastructure and improved standards of living. Particularly symbolic in this respect has been the explosion of the local tourist industry. On the foundations of peace, and bolstered by local sporting successes and a booming film industry, tourism has become a totemic example of just what the region is capable of in this context of peace (Boyd 2019). One could also point to the strengthening of devolved political institutions that has witnessed former enemies share power and lay the political foundations of a brighter future.

However, it would be wholly incorrect to suggest that Northern Ireland can be considered as having overcome the consequences of the Troubles (Armstrong *et al.* 2019). It almost goes without saying that a thirty-year conflict of the nature of the Troubles would leave deep and difficult wounds that could not simply be overcome by economic progress and sporting successes. Indeed, in the period since 1998, the peace process has charted a path that has been littered with hugely difficult issues that have required careful management before peace could continue to advance (Power 2011, Cochrane 2013). Underscoring these difficulties is the fact that, whilst the GFA did bring violence to an end, it did not necessarily solve the underlying issues that characterised the conflict (Dingley 2005, Cochrane 2013). Divisions remain, as do the associated tensions and difficulties, which explains why peace is described as a process, and by no means mission accomplished.

One could point to a whole range of issues that continue to provide significant obstacles for the advancement and consolidation of peace. In recent years, tensions have continued to build around issues related to identity that have manifested themselves through the expression of divisions in relation to questions of flag-flying, marching, culture, languages, and debates on rights (Fenton 2019, Savage 2019, Walker & Carrol 2019).[2] Trying to filter down the accommodating principles of the GFA across this range of highly sensitive and emotive issues has, and continues to be, hugely challenging for all parties interested in maintaining peace. The inherent tensions of the community are translated by stark differences over such issues and in turn risk perpetuating differences and present significant challenges for the process. Take, for example, the recent debate around Brexit. The UK's 2016 decision to leave

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[2] The 2012–13 Belfast City Hall flag protests are just one example in recent years of the ongoing tensions and divisions that are never far from the surface in Northern Irish society (Halliday & Ferguson 2016).

the European Union exposed the underlying issue that has defined tensions in Northern Ireland since 1921: the border between the north and south of Ireland (Tonge 2016, Cochrane 2020). In taking this decision, the UK risks undermining one of the central tenets of the GFA—the careful management of the border. In so doing, it has brought discussions around the future of the border to the fore and consequently exposed tensions within the Northern Irish community over this crucial issue. Broadly speaking, the PUL community and their political representatives backed the Brexit decision and insisted that any future agreement must ensure that Northern Ireland falls into line with Great Britain with the region maintaining its political union. The CNR community and its political representatives broadly opposed Brexit, fearing that it would result in the inevitable imposition of a hard border between north and south. Such a scenario would, in their eyes, not only jeopardise the fundamentals of the GFA but could also provide major problems for its long-term objective of a united Ireland. It is no surprise, then, that the question of Northern Ireland has been amongst the most problematic and potentially dangerous issues in the entire Brexit debate. The manner with which it has exposed underlying tensions around the border question—as exemplified in the spate of serious PUL unrest in opposition to the Northern Ireland protocol in the spring of 2021 (O'Toole 2021)—is but further evidence that the GFA may have ended violence but the fundamental issues that characterise divisions remain. Another central challenge facing the maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland, which is arguably just as sensitive as that of the border, relates to the highly sensitive issue of managing the past.

The peace process and the challenge of the past

As Northern Ireland has emerged from its period of conflict, one issue of particular importance and sensitivity has been how the past is remembered and passed on to future generations (Hamber & Kelly 2016, McGrattan & Hopkins 2017). This has been particularly problematic for many reasons. Fundamentally, the persistence of division has meant that the antagonistic manner with which the different communities have constructed their narratives on how the region finds itself where it is today has not simply disappeared with the advent of peace. During the Troubles, each community sought to make sense of their predicament and justify their particular stance where stories of the past played a critical role (Lundy & McGovern 2001). This would lead to the emergence of starkly different memory communities that effectively built up opposing and contested narratives that only further served to entrench the divisions that characterised the conflict (Lawther 2014). As attempts are made to try to

build a new and peaceful future, it is obvious that such contested narratives on the past cannot be allowed to continue to sow divisions in the same manner and this explains why so much attention has been paid to this particular issue by all parties involved in trying to chart a course towards sustainable peace.

In the immediate aftermath of the GFA, and despite some commitments to addressing this issue, little in the way of concrete measures were put in place to confront the legacy of the past. So hard-won was the cessation of violence, and given the wide range of other urgent and potentially deal-breaking questions (decommissioning, the status of prisoners, etc.), it is clear now that the peace process needed to acquire a certain degree of maturity before this highly sensitive issue could be met head on (Power 2011, Cochrane 2013). So how and why is the past such a difficult issue? Firstly, the fact that divisions perpetuate means that communities in Northern Ireland continue to look back on what happened and why through the optic of such divisions (McDowell & Braniff 2014, Viggiani 2014, Smyth 2017). As a result, parallel and contested narratives on the past are still very much in place and provide a significant challenge before, if ever, they can be reconciled, or at the very minimum be stripped of their potential to undermine the advancement of peace (Brown & Grant 2016, Beiner 2018). Furthermore, the temporal proximity of the conflict means that many people continue to live with its devastating consequences and, as a result, find it very difficult to engage with this question in a constructive manner (Bell 2003). Such sensitivities are not helped by ongoing and deeply difficult questions about the role of the state and security forces and accusations of collusion, as well as other hugely questionable acts and tactics deployed by the various protagonists of the conflict (Dawson 2014). The combination of such factors helps explain why the 'legacy' debate is integral to securing a peaceful future whilst at the same time it is such a significant challenge. Legacy issues go well beyond the question of contested memories and feed into and off sensitivities around identity, culture, and symbols. Such factors translate into significant and substantial issues (such as the plight of victims, reparations, compensation, memorialisation, and commemoration, to name but a few) that remain unresolved and have a tangible and important impact on the daily lives of much of the Northern Irish population (Pinkerton 2012, Brewer & Hayes 2015, Dawson 2017). The inherent difficulties in confronting these challenges provide some explanation as to why, in the early years of the peace process, the issue of the past was very much kept in the background while the foundations for peace were laid.

However, in more recent years, as the peace process has bedded in and gained sufficient maturity, increasingly, the issue of managing the legacy of the past has risen to prominence as a top priority (Potter, 2016). Indeed, one can point to a range of

initiatives that have emerged in recent years that have placed the question of the past as a central priority for governments in Belfast, Dublin, and London.[3] The 2014 publication of the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) set out a range of measures that sought to provide concrete steps towards constructing a strategy for overcoming the difficulties of the region's divided past.[4] One consequence of the SHA was the creation of a commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT).[5] This body was set up to produce a report with proposals on overcoming the central challenges facing the future of the peace process, one of which was the issue of the legacy of the conflict. More recently, the government launched a public consultation entitled 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past', the results of which are to be fed into a carefully constructed strategy.[6] A striking common denominator across these initiatives has been the insistence on the deployment of oral history as an important mechanism in whatever strategy emerges.[7] Before discussing why this makes sense within the particular context of Northern Ireland, let us first briefly turn our attentions to the general effectiveness of oral history and how it has become an increasingly prominent feature in the quest to build peace in post-conflict societies around the world.

Oral history and its effectiveness in post-conflict societies

The debate around the use and effectiveness of oral history is well trodden (Frisch 1990, Portelli 1991, Thompson 1998, Della Porta 2014). General consensus exists on how its deployment offers a distinctive and useful means to treat the past that brings a certain number of advantages beyond those resulting from traditional historical methods. For example, there is broad agreement that the use of oral testimonies allows for the construction of historical narratives that invert any top-down approach and provide the grounds for the construction of narratives from below (Lynd 1993). As such, the result is an inclusive tapestry of perspectives that helps create a more

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[3] Such initiatives include the 2014 Stormont House Agreement (NIO 2014), the formation of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) commission in 2016 (https://www.fictcommission.org/en), and the 2018 Northern Ireland Office public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past' (NIO 2018).

[4] NIO (2014).

[5] https://www.fictcommission.org/en

[6] NIO (2018).

[7] This is by no means the first time that such an approach has been advocated. Indeed, one could view such initiatives as building on the recommendations of the 2009 Eames and Bradley report (CPG 2009) as well as the work carried out by bodies such as the influential Healing Through Remembering. For more information, see https://healingthroughremembering.org.

representative picture of how the past was experienced and is remembered. This broader base of perspectives, it is argued, enables the construction of a narrative that goes beyond the stereotypical gatekeepers by providing space for previously marginalised perspectives. The potential that emerges, it follows, is for a genuine challenge to dominant, often limited, hegemonic narratives of the past (Bryson 2016: 306–11). This is not to suggest that oral history provides all the answers when attempting to overcome the inadequacies of traditional methods. Nor is it true that this particular methodological approach is without its limitations and critics (Jessee 2011). Indeed, much caution is required when handling and managing first-hand testimonies. In particular, careful management and awareness of context are required when assessing whether such testimonies can be taken at face value (Strangleman 2017). As Maurice Halbwachs has argued, our recollections of the past are largely determined by the needs of the present—an awareness of the motivations and contexts that lie behind individual testimonies is essential in ensuring that such material is handled in an effective and constructive manner (Halbwachs 1925, 1950). Much work has been carried out to probe the methodological robustness of the process of gathering, analysing, and disseminating oral histories to help ensure that its effectiveness is not compromised, and the full potential is realised (Thomson 2007, Aras *et al.* 2012, Ritchie 2014). It is perhaps the increased sophistication around oral history as a methodological approach that explains its growing prominence and, in particular, its increasingly prevalent deployment in post-conflict societies.

One is able to identify a huge number of examples from right across the world where, in locations emerging from a period of conflict and trying to lay the foundations of a brighter future, oral history forms a central part of peacebuilding strategies (Humphrey 2002, Schaffer & Smith 2004, Bickford 2007, Hamber 2009). Examples from Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Argentina, Sierra-Leone, and South Africa, to name but a few, all demonstrate the increasingly prevalent turn towards oral history as a fruitful mechanism to help chart the very complex post-conflict course in a diverse range of contexts and circumstances (Field 2011, Bouka 2013, Park 2013, Kaifala 2014, Wali 2018). That oral history has risen to such prominence in such difficult circumstances is to be understood by the distinctive characteristics it brings to how the past is handled. As argued above, such an approach breaks out of the limiting, dominant, official narratives and encourages a much more inclusive gathering of voices to help make sense of the past. It is, in many respects, recognition that, in order for post-conflict societies to take positive steps into the future, there is a requirement to firstly go back and effectively handle the past. Oral history provides the grounds for such an approach to be bottom-up and one that cultivates a terrain to encourage a much broader base of the population affected to become involved. By breaking out of official paradigms and institutions it enables a much more thorough, representative,

and complete picture of the past to be constructed, one where all sectors of society feel they have a space to voice their own experiences, understandings, and memories. Only by broadening the base in this way is it possible to gather as representative picture of the past as possible and, in so doing, widen the net of perspectives gathered by demonstrating that everyone's story must at least be given the opportunity to be heard. The act of gathering testimonies enables people who have hitherto felt marginalised in how the memory of conflict has been constructed to feel that their voices and their perspectives are part of the complex picture of making sense of conflict. This feeling of participation is an essential component in laying the foundations for peace and is a further explanation why such an approach has become increasingly prevalent and popular in the difficult and challenging contexts of post-conflict societies.

Having established the credentials of oral history as a widely recognised and deployed methodological approach in post-conflict societies, it is hardly surprising that, in the context of Northern Ireland, one is able to highlight many examples of peacebuilding projects and initiatives that have embedded oral history as a core element of their methodological approach. This is something that has not gone unnoticed by state actors as they struggle to find solutions to this most urgent of challenges facing the peace process.

The deployment of oral history in post-Troubles Northern Ireland: effectiveness and limitations

A common denominator across the range of initiatives launched in response to the legacy challenge is the emphasis on the deployment of oral history. For example, in the 2014 SHA, one of the key recommendations was the creation of an Oral History Archive that would provide a platform for citizens to recount and deposit their personal experiences of the conflict. This emphasis on oral history has been maintained as the process has continued to (very slowly) develop and, as evidenced in both the public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of the Past' and the summary of its findings published in 2019, this particular element remains a priority for those trying to scope out the strategy and is an approach that appears to have the backing of the general public.[8]

Such an evident trend is partly explained as a consequence of the wider recognition as to the effectiveness of oral-history-based strategies in post-conflict circumstances. However, from a more localised perspective, one can also point to a whole range of very successful and well-developed projects that have placed oral history at their core

[8] NIO (2019).

and have developed during the years since the onset of peace and which are great examples of what can be achieved by deploying such a strategy (Hamber & Kelly 2016, McEvoy & Bryson 2016: 84–6). For example, Elizabeth Crooke provides an analysis of a striking case of how and why the oral history approach has proved so popular and potent in one particular Belfast community that found itself at the heart of the Troubles (2007: 124–8). In her analysis of the Duchas Sound Archive that has provided a platform for residents of the Falls Community to offer testimonies of their experiences of life in the community during the conflict, Crooke demonstrates how 'the conceptual foundations of oral history are very suited to the objectives of the [Falls Community] council and reflect its concerns' (127). It is, she argues, the provision of such a platform that empowers citizens who have felt marginalised that best explains why this has been such a successful example for the challenge of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.[9]

The combination of increasing general recognition of the effectiveness of oral history with the concrete examples of its effective and popular application at grassroots level in Northern Ireland goes a long way towards helping us make sense of why this particular approach has gained such momentum in recent and ongoing work on the construction of considered strategies as part of the peace process. However, there are limitations to how such projects have emerged and potential risks in terms of what they can do in order to overcome the divisions that continue to lie at the core of the challenge of dealing with the region's difficult past. Whilst these grass-roots projects have provided potent platforms for citizens to find a voice in negotiating their post-conflict trajectories, many are focussed within specific communities. As such, they foster and develop the construction of communal memories that rarely come into contact with those beyond their own communities and potentially run the risk of consolidating intercommunal divides.[10] It is perhaps this particular challenge that has prevented any real progress being made by those bodies advocating the creation of an oral history archive coming up with a clear and structured sense of how it would work, both in terms of collecting testimonies, and in relation to their dissemination (Bryson 2016). It is one thing providing a platform for people to deposit their recollections and accounts of the conflict, it is an altogether different challenge to make sure that this very process does not run the risk of entrenching divides and generating further tension (McEvoy & McConnachie 2012, Dybris McQuaid 2016: 65–6).

[9] Other examples of such projects include the Corrymeela Community Project (https://www.corrymeela. org) or the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council's PEACE action plan (https://keep.eu/projects/ 20034/Causeway-Coast-and-Glens-Bo-EN/).

[10] It should be noted that many cross-community activities and projects are also part of this peacebuilding process. A range of examples can be found via the following: https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/ northern-ireland/

However, this is not to say that an oral history approach is to be avoided: on the contrary. Indeed, what is proposed here, and exemplified by a pilot project with NMNI, is the deployment of oral history with the added theoretical underpinning of agonistic memory. Such an approach, it will be argued, provides the necessary scaffolding for the full exploitation of the potential unleashed through the deployment of oral history whilst at the same time it negates the risk that a free-for-all platform provides in creating more problems than it resolves.

The symbiosis of oral history and agonistic memory

In their 2016 article *On Agonistic Memory*, Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen added a new memory mode to an ever-growing list (Cento Bull & Hansen 2016). Drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe, they proposed a new approach to memory that encourages the bringing together of contested perspectives on the past as a constructive and potentially fruitful means to overcoming the difficulties inherent in dominant mnemonic practices. Mouffe has effectively argued that the post-war shift towards cosmopolitanism was one that, whilst understandable and not without its benefits, has in recent years reached its limits and has in fact become the source of much contemporary tension (Mouffe 2000). The drive to frame our politics around the need for consensus and agreement that so defined the post-1945 era was one that inevitably led to the marginalisation of certain communities that did not sit within the dominant model. It is precisely such communities, it is argued, that find themselves on the margins of society that have risen to prominence and have underpinned the rise of populist politics that has become such a threat in recent times (Mouffe 2005). Taking the European Union as an example, Mouffe outlines how this cosmopolitan project has marginalised large swathes of the European population and it is these very marginalised people, who feel they have no representation and no voice, who are the driving forces behind the greatest threats to the European project (Mouffe 2012). In order to overcome this challenge, Mouffe argues that we need to move to a model based on agonism, that is, one that is not afraid of different ideas, one that welcomes the clash of perspectives, and one that reintroduces the notion of conflict to how democracies can and should function. By providing the space for such divergent perspectives and making this clash part of how our democracy works, we can overcome the inevitable re-emergence of antagonism that the cosmopolitan approach set out to eradicate.

Cento-Bull and Hansen mapped such a paradigm onto mnemonic practices and argued that the way in which dominant memories had been forged in the same era followed a similar cosmopolitan approach that, through the quest for consensus, may

well have led to some sort of general agreement, but ultimately marginalised those perspectives on the past that sit outside the prevailing discourse. The absence of any space for divergent perspectives has afforded those forces challenging the dominant model the possibility to instrumentalise tensions around difficult moments in the past to pose serious problems and generate tensions that have inevitably fed into mounting political instabilities (Cento Bull & Hansen 2016: 393). They, like Mouffe, argue that the time has come for an approach to memory based on agonism.

In order to test and refine the theory of agonistic memory, a Horizon2020-funded project entitled UNREST was undertaken between 2016 and 2019.[11] As part of this extensive project, the team embarked on two case studies: one which examined mass grave exhumations in Spain, Poland, and Bosnia, whilst the other explored representations and methodological approaches of five European war museums. One of the findings of these case studies that is of particular pertinence in the present discussion relates to the use of oral history. The project team concluded that, whilst there were many examples of the deployment of oral history within the museums in question, they were 'used to offer plural narratives in terms of gender, age, and social background within a consensual over-arching perspective' (Cento Bull & Hansen 2020). It could be argued, therefore, that a potentially fruitful opportunity is being missed—even more so when one considers the contention that there exists an inherently mutually reinforcing relationship between the deployment of oral history and agonistic memory.

Sidelined voices find themselves marginalised precisely because they have not been able to find a place in, or have been ostracised from, the drive to formulate a consensus on the past. Therefore, by deploying an agonistic approach to the past, the quest for consensus is removed and those people who felt that their voice previously had no place are made to feel as though they do belong, even if their particular perspective is not in keeping with the traditionally dominant narrative. The convergence of the broader-based methodological approach of oral history and the theoretical underpinning of agonism works to maximise the potential of each individual element, rendering them perfect partners in the quest for a much more constructive approach to the past. It is precisely this combination that lies at the heart of the effectiveness and success of the NMNI project entitled *Voices of 68*.

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[11] http://www.unrest.eu

Voices of 68

Between October 1968 and February 1969, Northern Ireland experienced a period of upheaval with the emergence of a movement that sought to challenge the state in relation to issues around the question of civil rights (Purdie 1990, Prince 2007, Reynolds 2015). This relatively brief moment would mark a significant turning point in the recent history of the region and witnessed a sequence of events that saw the movement swell, forcing the government to offer concessions, before eventually awakening sectarian tensions that preceded the onset of the conflict that would become known as the Troubles. The descent into violence in the aftermath of this moment characterised the manner in which this period would be remembered. Memories of this era would, like everything else, be divided across communal lines, with two broad interpretations taking hold (Farrel 1988, Kingsley 1989). For the CNR community, 1968 represented an attempt to find a peaceful resolution that was met with violence and therefore resulted in the emergence of violent, armed conflict. The PUL community, on the other hand, constructed a narrative that posited the events of this time as none other than the latest attempt by Republicans to challenge the constitutional status of Northern Ireland with the civil rights movement as none other than a front for the IRA (Reynolds & Parr 2020). Such contested perspectives were only consolidated and deepened as a result of the thirty-year conflict of the Troubles and only with the onset of peace in 1998 has it been possible to attempt any sort of recalibration of the memory of Northern Ireland's 1968 (Reynolds 2017, Campbell 2018).

Indeed, in the years following the GFA, and given the change of context that this represented, new possibilities were opened to reconsider pivotal moments of the past. In the case of 1968 specifically, two interrelated developments emerged. The new context of peace facilitated a fresh take where the place of the Northern Irish experience could be located within the increasingly prominent transnational paradigm that had become a staple of 1968 studies (Reynolds 2015). Alongside and connected to this fresh perspective, it also became possible to problematise the dominant, limited, and contested narratives of this period from within. Such opportunities were developed in the 2015 study *Sous les pavés … The Troubles* that in turn was used as the underpinning study for a collaboration with NMNI on its representation of this vital period.

Starting with a minor intervention in the permanent galleries of the Ulster Museum in Belfast, this collaboration sought to incorporate the findings of *Sous les pavés … The Troubles* via a greater emphasis on the international context of the period (2015). This opened up and facilitated further expansions of the project that would lead to a complete overhaul of the permanent gallery and the development of an educational programme (Reynolds & Blair 2018). Building on the success thus far, an expanded temporary exhibition entitled *Voices of 68* was curated and displayed to

coincide with fiftieth anniversary of 1968 in 2018. A touring version was also created that travelled to thirty-five destinations across the UK, Ireland, Europe, and the US. Education activities were at the heart of a range of public-facing events and a digital version complemented the physical iterations of the project (Black & Reynolds 2020). The final stage of this fruitful collaboration saw an adapted version of *Voices of 68* installed in the permanent gallery of the Ulster Museum in August 2019. This exhibition, in its various iterations, tells the story of Northern Ireland's 1968 via the juxtaposition of contested narratives on the various stages of the tumultuous weeks and months between October 1968 and January 1969. Combining videoed testimonies with images and documentary footage from the time, it presents a wide range of perspectives from former activists, participants, bystanders, interested observers, and others well placed to comment. Far from favouring a single narrative through an authoritative voice, the exhibition invites visitors to draw their own conclusions on how this crucial period should be remembered and encourages recognition of the complexities of memory in a divided society.

The success and expansion of this collaboration can be attributed to this innovative combination of the methodological approach of oral history and theoretical underpinning of agonism. From the outset, throughout its development, and across the multilayered tapestry of outputs, these two elements were important watchwords (Reynolds & Parr 2020). The project centred on and showcased oral testimonies that sought to stretch above and beyond the traditional gatekeepers in how this period is remembered. Instead, there was a strong focus on radical multiperspectivity by ensuring that, in addition to the usual suspects, a space was provided for a broad range of views that included those that have hitherto been marginalised in how this story is told.[12] It was the symbiosis of oral history and agonism that arguably made it possible to reach out to and secure the engagement of thirty participants across a quite diverse spectrum of viewpoints. The oral history approach provided its usual platform for hitherto marginalised voices. Its capacity to do so was enhanced via the deployment of agonism that explicitly welcomed and indeed encouraged perspectives that went beyond the typically dominant narrative. Explaining and being wholly transparent about this innovative approach was an essential factor in ensuring such widespread participation and positive engagement from the interviewees. In addition, by recalibrating the overall perspective on Northern Ireland's 1968 via the international

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[12] The following people were interviewed as part of the project: Paul Arthur, Paul Bew, Gregory Campbell, Ivan Cooper, Anthony Coughlan, Austin Currie, Anne Devlin, Michael Farrell, Mervyn Gibson, Denis Haughey, Erskine Holmes, Anne Hope, Judith Jennings, Bernadette McAliskey, Nelson McCausland, Eddie McCamley, Eamonn McCann, Chris McGimpsey, Dympna McGlade, Aidan McKinney, Maurice Mills, Geordie Morrow, Mike Nesbitt, Hubert Nichol, Henry Patterson, Brid Rodgers, Bríd Ruddy, Carol Tweedale, Eileen Weir, and Fergus Woods.

context as a starting point, and as a result of the trust invested in NMNI, it was possible to create a sense of 'narrative hospitality' (Ricoeur 1995: 5) that ensured the garnering of a wide range of views that reflected the intercommunal and intracommunal diversity of experiences and memories. The resulting range of outputs and activities enabled the presentation of contested narratives on the past where this agonistic clash of voices was able to provide an innovative and potentially fruitful alternative strategy in the ongoing challenge of dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. The fact that the project was able to expand and develop as it did is in itself evidence of the effectiveness of this approach. However, it is when one examines the general reception, examples of feedback, and the tangible impact that its true potential becomes evident.

A blueprint for managing the past in Northern Ireland?

A vital element of the project's iterative development was a focussed emphasis on garnering feedback from across all those involved and key end-users. Reflections from the general public, project participants, schoolteachers and their pupils, NMNI, and key players in policy development were not only useful in helping ensure the effective development of the various stages of the project, they also provide an insight into the success of the approach and a recognition of its effectiveness. The explicit insistence on multiperspectivity that brought some unexpected voices into the debate on this period was unquestionably uncomfortable for some. Doubts were indeed expressed as to the inclusion of certain viewpoints and, as is evidenced in the feedback examples below, not all those who engaged with the project and its range of outputs were entirely comfortable with the challenge that such inclusion represented:

> *This is also a very difficult and upsetting topic; Honestly, I was deeply disturbed by the insensitivities of some of the speakers today; I feel that it was very insensitive to include DUP members criticising the events that history agrees were valid and necessary events; Too heavy on the extreme Loyalist/Unionist side. Gregory Campbell? Nelson McCausland??; It may trigger people's emotions who lived through the Troubles; Gregory Campbell equating his family being poor with the systematic oppression of Catholics was particularly offensive.*[13]

However, such criticisms were generally quite rare with, as exemplified by the reflections of one visitor to the exhibition, an overwhelming acceptance of, and importance attached to, the need to listen to alternative viewpoints, however difficult:

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[13] Feedback examples on *Voices of 68* exhibition and GCSE study day.

The exhibition at the Ulster Museum is unsettling—being confronted by some narratives about '68 that you believe are wrong. But that is the point and it is quite discomforting. […] One has to be prepared to listen to other viewpoints. I think that the material should be the start of a critical debate as to what did happen.[14]

The potency of such a polyvocal approach was singled out as vital by one of the exhibition hosts:

The project has demonstrated that as a society, we can engage in difficult events that are within our lived memory. The exhibition was a great tool to do this, mainly because it contained a range of different viewpoints and perspectives.[15]

A project interviewee, and iconic 1968 activist, commented thus on the effectiveness of the approach deployed:

[The] *purpose was clearly to approach the past in an innovative manner with the objective of learning from it so as not to repeat history. We cannot change the past. We cannot 'move beyond it'—it shapes us and our present. We can however change how it impacts in the present and shapes the future.*[16]

Such a view was shared by a fellow interviewee from the opposite end of the political spectrum:

It is therefore very important that opportunities are provided for differing perspectives to be heard and challenged—the lies that have been created have to be countered where possible. The fact that such opposing views were brought together is an important aspect of this project and whilst it was a great challenge for me, I was made to feel very comfortable in expressing my own views.[17]

An experienced teacher who participated in the project's education programme highlighted the radical impact of this engagement for him:

'Voices of 68' has changed my approach to how I teach the events of 1968/1969 in NI. […] 'Voices of 68' really is essential viewing for all students on NI in the 1960s.[18]

Such an impact is also discernible amongst the student feedback received, as exemplified from the following testimony of one such pupil:

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[14] Visitor feedback on *Voices of 68* exhibition.
[15] David Robinson, Good Relations Officer at Belfast City Council—written testimony following hosting of exhibition.
[16] Bernadette McAliskey, project participant—written testimony.
[17] Maurice Mills, project participant—written testimony.
[18] Greg Toner, Head of History at Assumption Grammar School, Belfast—written testimony on participation at GCSE study day.

> *Well, it's kind of really like a really primary source in a way because they were on it and it's like really kind of mind-blowing that they're still here in a way because it seems so long away but it really wasn't and it's just so shocking how that's our history and we get to be a part of that, we get to look back at our history that's so mind-blowing.*[19]

In addition to this positive feedback, it is possible to identify and highlight examples of the tangible impact of the project and its approach in terms of the broader question of dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. The examples below demonstrate how this has included direct influence amongst important actors and bodies involved in informing and shaping state-led strategies on this most urgent of challenges for the peace process. For example, the following testimony excerpt underscores the potency of the project in helping define NMNI's approach to the past:

> *From an institutional perspective, this has been a hugely valuable project for NMNI. Its various strands have provided a range of lessons that we can apply to our more general approach to dealing with the challenge of the past in Northern Ireland. The 1968 collaboration in many respects has become a model we can now apply to how we treat other such topics.*[20]

The influence of this project on NMNI is equally identifiable when we consider this institution's response to the 2019 public consultation on 'Addressing the Legacy of the past'. Drawing on the example of *Voices of 68*, it argues:

> *that a more discerning and critical approach is included in structuring the Oral History Archive, that rather than acting only as a repository, people could record their experiences in a more meaningful way and invest in something that has wider application. This would present much greater opportunities for effective dialogue.*[21]

Returning to the education sector, another teacher/participant in the study-day programme set out his perspective on how the project connects to the broader challenges faced:

> *Projects such as this underscore just how important it is for our young people to make sense of our past and understand how it is that we find ourselves in our current predicament. The 1968 project goes a long way towards helping enhance the level of understanding of what was such pivotally important moment.*[22]

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[19] Student feedback on GCSE study day.
[20] Karen Logan, Senior Curator of History, NMNI—written testimony.
[21] NMNI (2019), 'Addressing the Legacy of Northern Ireland's Past: A Response from National Museums NI' (unpublished document).
[22] Declan White, Head of History at Edmund Rice College, Glengormley, Northern Ireland—written testimony.

Such a perspective was shared by a fellow teacher who outlined his belief that:

> *the project has made it easier for teachers to confront the difficulties of teaching such a sensitive area of our recent past. […] Given the importance of education to our future here in Northern Ireland, I believe that this project offers up significant lessons in terms of the ongoing and very difficult debate around how we deal with the legacy of the past as part of the peace process.*[23]

The following reflection from a member of the Community Relations Council team provides an insight to the perceived potential of the project within such an influential body:

> *It is an example of what can be achieved with joint societal responses to such challenges; the presentation of different perspectives through conversations and debates in safe spaces where the focus is on respect for different opinions but a determination to have such discussions.*[24]

Finally, consider the following testimony of a FICT commissioner on his direct experience of the impact of this project and its approach:

> *As author of the unpublished chapter on Education, in the draft FICT report, I can say that the project has helped shape my thinking on the chapter's content. In certain areas it has influenced my conclusions on how teaching Northern Ireland's contested history might be appropriate in a society emerging from conflict.*[25]

Conclusion

There is no suggestion here that the *Voices of 68* project is a panacea for the challenge of dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the project did meet with some criticisms and difficulties across its development and there are important lessons to be taken into any future initiatives that seek to build on the work to date. Nor is it being suggested that what has been effective in the case of 1968 can be lifted and simply applied to other contentious moments of the region's recent past. The same caution towards any such one-size-fits-all application is an equally important consideration when weighing up the pertinence of such a model in other parts of the world coming to terms with the past as part of a post-conflict pathway to peace.

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[23] Helen Parks, Education Manager for History, Government and Politics at Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)—written testimony.

[24] Gemma Attwood, Policy Development Officer at Community Relations Council, Northern Ireland—written testimony.

[25] Independent commissioner on the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) commission—written testimony.

However, and with these caveats in mind, the successful development and expansion of the *Voices of 68* project, with the symbiotic combination of oral history and agonistic memory at its core, do merit testing in terms of the broader challenge of managing the legacy of the conflict as part of the Northern Ireland peace process. If such an application is able to touch a similar nerve and make further inroads in terms of influencing and informing emergent strategies to address this most urgent and sensitive of issues, then its appropriateness beyond the case of this specific region will certainly be worthy of exploration.

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Cross-communal acts of commemoration designed to promote peace at a local level in Bosnia-Herzegovina

George R. Wilkes

Abstract: This essay describes two distinct senses in which local remembrance activities are used to build peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina: to counter nationalist conflict narratives and to demonstrate cross-communal recognition on the local level. The existing literature on such activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina foregrounds the objective conditions in which the combination of memory activism and peacebuilding is necessary as a counter to the uses made of remembrance by the main ethnonationalist parties to justify their divisive rule. The article draws on the concepts of Michael Rothberg—multidirectional memory and implicated subjectivity—to show how the divergent forms of local peacebuilding and memory activities imply choices which also have a subjective, relational element. To enable the reader to understand these choices, the article first reviews the historical, political, and social conditions faced by activists. Secondly, it explores ways in which the subjective, relational dimensions of these choices are also keys to understanding ways in which their variety and their engagement with local realities are not captured in objectivising literature on peacebuilding and memory work.

Keywords: Bosnia-Herzegovina, politics and remembrance, local peacebuilding, implicated subjects, generations.

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Introduction

A select number of civil society initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina have in recent years used remembrance practices as a tool for peacebuilding. Two distinct forms of peacebuilding are evident, and to describe them requires a conceptual framework that embraces more relational dimensions of these activities than is common in the peacebuilding literature. Advocates of a more oppositional approach to peacebuilding have argued that such activities are critical to build a culture of memory that counters the (ab)uses of memory in ethnonationalist politics; a second set of activities represent the pursuit of peace as a gradual socialisation process, and do not adopt a deliberately oppositional stance. This essay draws on Michael Rothberg's recent publications on relational dimensions to the combination of peacebuilding and memory work in order to cast light on the premises and the choices made in such peacebuilding practices.

First, the context in which peacebuilding and memory work is set with a brief overview of divergent perspectives on the violence of the recent past. The challenges of memory and peacebuilding work in Bosnia-Herzegovina are further complicated by the fact that there is no immediate prospect of an agreed history or political analysis on the basis of which actors may converge.

Second, the premises for combining memory and peacebuilding activity are examined in relation to the developing academic literature. This introduction gives a conceptual context for the application of this literature to the distinctive situation faced in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the nature of peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina is the subject of continuing dispute, the essay examines the ways in which the agency of activists and their community partners are understood from two perspectives—the critical peacebuilding literature and the work on memory activism developed by Michael Rothberg. The objective and subjective and relational strategies they suggest are then used to reflect on recent attempts to combine memory and peace activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The next sections of the essay then probe divergent interpretations of the political and social contexts and their reflections in the design of peacebuilding and memory activities. Where some observers emphasise that the conflict narratives associated with the largest political parties have important or deep social roots, others see the remembrance events associated with these conflict narratives as of real interest only to relatively distinct and small political elites. Twenty-five years later, what 'memory' means is also very different for those who experienced the war and for younger citizens who did not directly experience it. Some analysts observe that the lack of a culture of memory presents new challenges for the communication of peaceful forms of

remembrance to the new generations. It may alternatively be asserted that the primary challenge lies in the need for multiple forms of memory work for successive generations in different locations across the country.

The essay finally addresses the local dimension of those cross-communal commemoration experiments which seek to advance peace at a local level. The distinctive challenges of creating recognition and solidarity across divided local communities produce a different dynamic for joint remembrance activities than exists at the wider state level. The present discussion examines some of the local peacebuilding activities. The aim is to discern the respects in which attempts to perform acts of mutual recognition, away from the political tensions over conflict narratives which press on actors at the state level, can be better understood, drawing on Rothberg's notions of implicated subjects and multidirectional memory.[1]

A brief note to introduce my own perspective and involvement. I have worked since 2011 with a diversity of academic peacebuilders from Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbours, and over the course of that time have been part of a research team which has completed a series of studies of attitudes to peacebuilding in thirteen towns and cities across the country.[2] The framing of the obstacles and opportunities for memory and peacebuilding work presented here is intended to reflect their gritty realism and determination to enact long-term change. The article is not, however, intended as a validation of peacebuilding activities, but as an attempt to describe the choices of peacebuilders with sensitivity to the contexts in which they are conceived.

Narratives of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The conditions in which memory work and peacebuilding activism are combined in Bosnia-Herzegovina are vigorously contested across the country, with the effect that activism is easily dismissed or viewed as having marginal impact. As a first step towards clarifying how this activism works from the perspective of activists, some preliminary comment on this narrative contest and on the distinctive conditions in Bosnia before, during, and after the killings of the 1990s is necessary.

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[1] Michael Rothberg (2019).

[2] The first two are online: George Wilkes *et al.* (2013), *Factors in Reconciliation: Religion, Local Conditions, People and Trust* (https://relwar.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/edinburg-eng1.pdf), and George Wilkes *et al.* (2012), *Reconciliation and Trust-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Survey of Popular Attitudes in Four Cities and Regions* (https://relwar.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/edinburg-engweb2.pdf). Two further studies are forthcoming: Davor Marko *et al.* (2021), *Reconciliation—Means to Fight Insecurity or Resist the Politics of Division: Citizens in 13 BiH Local Communities Talk about Reconciliation and Trust Building Processes*, and Ana Zotova *et al.* (2021), *Building Trust and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Perspectives from Stakeholders*.

A hundred thousand citizens were killed between the onset of armed conflict in 1992 and the Dayton Accords of November 1995.[3] To describe this as a civil war offends citizens from across the country who experienced the fighting as a war of aggression and a genocide, involving hostile forces from outside Bosnia's borders and enabled by the international community.[4] The largest number of dead by far (82 per cent, according to the count in the *Bosnian Book of the Dead*) were Bosnian Muslims, and the conditions in which this happened mean that the extent to which Bosnian Muslims were targets of genocide across the country, and not only in Srebrenica and the UN 'safe zones', remains the subject of different understandings. Many Serbs and Croats also view their plight as the result of a deliberate genocide, unrecognised by the international community. Thousands of citizens from all backgrounds were interned and appallingly mistreated in camps and prisons. Two million citizens were displaced. Even after the Dayton Accords brought an end to the armed conflict, the process of ethnic cleansing continued as refugees sought security, minorities were subjected to various forms of arms-backed pressure to leave, and the displaced were blocked from returning to their former homes. The continuation of genocide by these means has remained a live issue in public interventions made by Bosnian Muslims long after the end of armed conflict.[5] Weapons were no longer firing, but for many the conflict is live—it is not a 'post-conflict'.

Engaged observers have never shared narratives about the nature of the armed conflict and of the plight of civilians at the hands of ethnic cleansing.[6] Some observers, with the prominent public figure Jakob Finci, do not accept that any functional post-war definition of the killing can have purchase across the public sphere, such is the entrenched nature of the war of narratives.[7] Chaos encouraged the speed at which atrocities spread across the country. Locally, the nature of conflict changed greatly, often month by month. Very different situations were experienced across the country —and those who remained in their homes had quite different experiences to the millions displaced or imprisoned. The memories they hold often do not fit neatly with the narratives of the local political leadership, let alone the narratives of the more distant leadership which claims to represent their national group at the higher political levels, in Sarajevo, in Pale and Banja Luka, or in Mostar.

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[3] The most widely recognised count, based on extensive research, is given by **Mirsad Tokača** *et al.* (2013).
[4] For a scholarly counterblast to the notion that this was a civil war, see Josip Glaurdic (2011). For an accessible introductory history of the war, see Noel Malcolm (1996).
[5] For example, CNN (2010).
[6] The contest over terminology is usefully addressed in relation to 'objectivising' historical publications in David Campbell (1998).
[7] Jessie Barton-Hronešová (2020: 116).

In these conditions, it may be argued that a policy of deliberate amnesia—in the style of David Rieff's 2016 *In Praise of Forgetting*—would be preferable to any form of memory work that could be seen as partisan, and which is likely to be seen as partial in its coverage. In parts of society, versions of this view may be more common, and a wide range of critical observers have argued that in practice crimes are treated with amnesia by the political class.[8] Amnesia has nevertheless not been a popular argument in the post-war public sphere in Bosnia-Herzegovina—partly in view of the criminality of combatant actions, partly because victims' groups organised in all parts of the country have opposed amnesties for their persecutors, and partly in view of the threat of future repetition.[9]

The memory of violence is perpetuated in the political and the social spheres, though this may be understood in different ways. The war, the ethnic cleansing, and the genocide of the 1990s remain regular features of the political discourse of the political parties and their associated media.[10] The continued competition between former armed adversaries is one of the primary tools used in electoral competition, and political conflict over wartime enmity is reheated before every major election in the country, a point underlined in the scholarship on peacebuilding treated next. Judgements about how far these discourses are shared beyond the political elite may have a determining influence on memory and peacebuilding activities. While some memories of local violence can be ever-present, others may be deliberately repressed, and the impact of public and private trauma naturally implies memories which are silent rather than silenced—Stef Jansen has indicated the impact of these different patterns in accounts from nearby villages in Croatia,[11] as have Monika Palmberger and Dino Abazović in commentaries focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina.[12] There remains a gap between the literatures on social memory and public and political behaviour in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and this affects assessments of the relationship between memory and peacebuilding activity. It is far from clear that voting habits reflect the wartime memories of the older generations, and, insofar as they do, wartime service and support for the main ethnonationalist parties do not correlate with opposition to peacebuilding activity.[13] To add to this, the younger generations have no personal memories of pre-war Yugoslavia, nor personal memories of the violence and depriv-ation of the 1990s. The assumptions made in interpretations of the political and social

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[8] See further in, for instance, Barton-Hronešová (2020).
[9] Louise Mallinder (2009).
[10] See, for example, Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016: 8, 33).
[11] Stef Jansen (2002).
[12] Inter alia, Monika Palmberger (2016) and Dino Abazović (2014), treated further below.
[13] George Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 50, 54–5).

realities which activists seek to change, and which have a determining impact on their agency, are explored further in subsequent sections of the essay.

Applying recent academic literature on memory and sustainable peacebuilding activism to developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina

A deliberately 'critical' literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation has grown greatly in the past two decades.[14] In this body of scholarly literature, the pretensions of external peacebuilders to support a liberal approach to peace based on democratic values is contrasted with the importance of conceiving peace as being built through local agency, norms, and interests.[15] In some of this work, local memory is seen to be overridden or ignored in peacebuilding or reconciliation interventions, and much literature argues against the two concepts completely.[16] Against the pretensions of reconciliation activity to deliver peace for victims, critics such as Thomas Brudholm, for instance, have asserted the right of victims to insist on public respect for their memory, and—as Brudholm puts it—to maintain their rightful resentment of wrongs done to them.[17] Peacebuilding and reconciliation discourses meet similar objections in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Critics may see abstract political discourse about peace and reconciliation as an irrelevance, as a political subterfuge, or as a personal threat. By contrast, a body of academic and activist literature on the transformation of post-conflict trauma embraces the need for peacebuilding and memory work in Bosnia-Herzegovina and internationally—eloquent representations of which are gathered in a recent volume edited by Julianne Funk.[18] In this work, it is commonly judged that the only escape for society from the cycle of violence is to address traumatic suffering deliberately.[19] For scholars who instead address the transmission of memory and its political and social resonance as more complex—more complex in contextual terms and more subject to the diverse forms of agency and to the subjective positions taken towards memory by agents—this equation between trauma and the repetition of violence may appear less automatic. This is the space into which Michael Rothberg has stepped with his *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) and *The Implicated Subject* (2019).

Rothberg's work is used below in discussion of the agency and subjective position of memory and peace activists working at the local level in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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[14] For a review of the range of dimensions of this literature, see, for example, Roger Mac Ginty (2014).
[15] See, for example, Stefanie Kappler & Oliver Richmond (2011).
[16] See, for example, Thomas Brudholm (2008) and Valerie Rosoux (2018).
[17] Brudholm (2008).
[18] For example, Julianne Funk *et al.* (2020).
[19] See especially chapters 1 and 2 in Funk *et al.* (2020).

His work is deliberately intended to work across divergent contexts, encompassing social and political divisions after the Holocaust, after slavery in the USA, in South Africa, and in Israel/Palestine. Rothberg constructs memory activism as a normative alternative to the preservation of narratives which oppose perpetrators and victims. The application of multidirectional memory in Bosnia could consequently reflect the opposition of many peacebuilders to the competition of memories over the war in Bosnia and elsewhere in the Former Yugoslavia, as Stephanie Edwards has argued.[20] Arriving at a satisfactory alternative to the opposition between perpetrator and victim is not easy, however. In this essay we are seeking to address the respects in which multidirectionality and implicated subjectivity may work in a Bosnian context, in which social and political realities weigh heavily on trust in any narratives about peacebuilding and memory work. Rothberg's work is certainly useful insofar as he takes the normative dimension of this discursive competition seriously. His concept of 'implicated subject' in principle allows space for the normative demands of all parties involved in encounters that cross divisions over memory of violence. In Rothberg's view of the implicated subject, all are 'implicated' in structural violence, and for this reason we are not solely set against each other by the choices of perpetrators to enact violence. To elaborate on what it is that creates relationships which are capable of transforming conflict over memory, Rothberg describes the making of collective memory as 'multidirectional', involving potentially all those who are engaged in memory-making, as activists, or as members of society, and as individuals responding to very different conflicts and contexts. This point, in principle, responds neatly to the ways in which individuals and communities across Bosnia-Herzegovina hold divergent memories of conflict and violence to be relevant to their identity and their future. This normative framework could easily appear utopian. The multidirectional space for encounter between agents of change who are jointly implicated may, as some critics of Rothberg's work have noted, best be seen as an ideal, or as an objective, for peacebuilders to aim at, rather than as a template for describing what in fact takes place when memory and peacebuilding work bring different social groups and generations together.[21] It will be suggested below, through reflection on commemoration activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, that sceptics and critics of this work may still see use for a multidirectional perspective insofar as it makes the subjective and relational nature of memory and peacebuilding work visible. It will be suggested that Rothberg's process of 'implication'—because it focuses on subjective, relational processes, and does not skip quickly from assertions of wrongs to objectives for future harmony—may help to cast light on very different

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[20] Stephanie C. Edwards (2020).
[21] For example, David Tollerton (2020: 175).

forms of peacebuilding and memory activity, without validating particular normative discourses or processes of socialisation.

Trends in commemoration:
politics and commemorative peacebuilding activities

The number of commemorative peacebuilding activities began to grow in Bosnia-Herzegovina around 2010, fifteen years after the war ended. Their objective is widely framed[22] as a reaction against the use of wartime commemoration by the largest political parties to stoke support from the three constituent peoples, Bosniak, Croat, and Serb. Acts of commemoration which contrast to the normative ethnonational remembrance narratives may be seen as acts of dissent and sometimes of courage, the more so if they are represented as standing against not only the hold exercised by a small set of political elites over the public sphere in the country, but also a widespread social pressure favouring continued distance across ethnonational divides. The pressure exercised on the public sphere and at community level—and the question of whether this should be seen as political, or both political and social—is of central importance in understanding the strategies of memory and peacebuilding activists in the country.

The political commemoration of key events during the war and genocide of the 1990s is partly shaped by the institutional forms fixed in the Dayton Accords of 1995, which divided the state into two larger territorial entities, the Federation and the Republika Srpska, as well as the District of Brčko. There is a considerable and growing academic literature on the political use of commemoration to stoke fear and thereby to exercise control over the aspirations and votes of the country's once mixed, and now largely nationally separated, population. This literature paints numerous respects in which these commemorations are effectively divisive.[23] The traumatic events of the war are relived annually, and at significant times of year, marking the founding of each political entity, or the commission of atrocities. Commemoration is used to stoke fear and hostility, both by opportunistic political leaders from all of the largest parties and by smaller communities dedicated to a hardline ideology marked by Croat, Bosniak, or Serb nationalism. While leaders who seek to project a responsible attitude may distance themselves from a hostile discourse, formal commemorative activities nevertheless continue to proceed on the basis that each of the constituent

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[22] For example, Nerzuk Ćurak (2016); Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016).

[23] See, among many publications treating this, the interesting article by a Sarajevo-based remembrance and peacebuilding practitioner, Nicholas Moll (2013).

parts of the state must mark its own wartime experience by itself, without recognition of the different perspectives of other parts of the population. One of the best known proponents of peacebuilding activity in the country, Nerzuk Ćurak, a political science professor at the University of Sarajevo, critiques this culture of politicised remembrance in the strongest terms: far from constituting a culture of memory, these commemorative markers preserve the violence in the institutional structures which divided the population; they rest on a culture of denial of the rights, perspectives, and experiences of the other which is in itself violent; and they grip the population in emotional trauma with the purpose of preserving the elite interests which unleashed the war in the first place.[24] Professor Ćurak argues that a culture of peace cannot co-exist with these structures. A peaceful, inclusive, multicultural 'Bosnian' society should proceed from a rejection of the culture of violent commemorations altogether. It would be better, he argues, for children to go on exchanges between the separate entities and to create a Bosnian culture of memory together. Critics of this form of peacebuilding in the country may view this either as unrealistic, as Leftist, or as deliberately favouring a majoritarian perspective, a formula which from a Serb and Croat nationalist perspective is widely seen to reflect only a Bosniak/Muslim interest.[25]

Peacebuilders working with this oppositional approach counter the ethnonationalism of the commemorations of each camp with an affirmation that these politicised activities are not an extension of popular collective memory, but rather the denial of a culture of popular memory. This is a leitmotif in the activism and publications of another leading advocate of commemorative peacebuilding, Adnan Hasanbegović, a former veteran who founded a movement of (mostly left-of-centre) veterans-turned-peacebuilders, from all of the formerly opposed combatant forces, and created the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) in Sarajevo as a vehicle for their collaboration. Hasanbegović—like Professor Ćurak—distinguishes between the monumental form of nationalist and militarist commemoration activity, that is the official representative commemorations in which civic leaders from the main political parties praise heroic wartime sacrifices in the abstract, but ordinary victims are decentred, and a 'culture of memory', which he sees is lacking at a wider social level.[26] Seen from this critical perspective, the politicised nature of these nationalistic commemorations means that certain acts are commemorated with formal ceremonies, others excluded, and the

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[24] Nerzuk Ćurak (2016).

[25] For a polemic against the use of Bosnian cultural history as a framework for memory work, suiting international donors but overlooking local traditions and sites of memory, see Tonka Kostadinova (2014).

[26] See, for example, Centre for Nonviolent Action (2016), which was co-authored by Adnan Hasanbegović and colleagues. For an overview of the academic literature on cultures of memory on which Hasanbegović and Ćurak draw, see Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (2010).

choice is made in a manner to be expected of the patriarchal and hierarchical system which predominates in the main political parties. This means that official commemorations are often led by representatives of the former parties to conflict, and they therefore centre the narratives of these parties on wartime conflict and sacrifice. By contrast, the victimhood of the wider population is given the attention of political leaders primarily in symbolic and abstract terms: individuals may seek to represent categories of victims politically by identifying themselves as public faces of organisations aligned with one of the political causes which emerged through the armed conflict. These ethnonationally-homogenous organisations are widely represented in the formal commemorations. In practical terms, this abstraction makes striking politics insofar as many individual victims of the worst violence still do not have ready recognition or support, twenty-five years later. The political elites, which gain energy from the memories associated with those wartime causes, are sustained by hierarchies which have economic as well as social dimensions. Therein lies a structural violence which Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and other peacebuilders insist must be addressed if a real culture of peace is to be built. In this critical perspective, peacebuilding activities through commemoration should not only be encounters in which violent and peaceful memories are spoken of but the structures of violence are ignored. A different perspective would follow from Rothberg's account of peacebuilding and memory activism as a relational process which embraces contesting narratives. This would make sense of the perspective of insiders to those communities, for whom encounters which do not address political or structural violence may be valued as acts of humanisation. The choice for peacebuilders is whether first to prioritise rejection of past wrongs, or first to attempt the process of humanising victims as individuals. In Rothberg's account, this is a strategic choice relating to the process of change, and not only depending on judgements about wrongs or future objectives.

One reason for the oppositional approach prioritised in the activism of Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and their colleagues lies in their analysis of the hierarchies at work in social and political affairs. In the contrast between formal public acts of commemoration and more socially or culturally resonant acts of remembrance, the approach taken by Hasanbegović, Ćurak, and other advocates of alternative acts of remembrance reflects a perspective on the sociology of collective memory which is relatively hierarchical in its view of the social structures at work. It parallels, for example, the distinction between formal and informal, public and private, in Jay Winter's influential work on remembrance of the First World War.[27] This formal–informal distinction is often drawn starkly by the peace activists who adopt this critical approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In these circles, public events and the media are

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[27] Jay Winter (2006).

seen to be dominated by a small grouping of partisan elites, and beyond that there is no organised public sphere. Winter uses fairly generalising terms in describing evidence of wider remembrance practices as reflections of the social agency of a survivor generation, and attributes a similar agency to later generations, again generalising, who were addressing their own changing needs and contexts through new remembrance practices. However, amongst activist circles in Bosnia this sense of agency is expressed through the acts of an equally small group of survivors whose peacebuilding and memory activism places them at the political and sometimes the social margins in their communities. The Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) has one of the most public programmes tackling the shortcomings of remembrance, focused on acts of solidarity by veterans. As will be seen from their archives,[28] veterans from all sides of the conflict come together through the work of the CNA to attend otherwise mononational gatherings of veterans and to display the recognition that ordinary combatants share a common sense of victimhood: they are not the beneficiaries of the war, nor of the post-war regime. The solidarity amongst disillusioned veterans generated through the CNA has also led to widely recognised acts of solidarity between veteran associations in the two entities protesting against government neglect.[29] CNA activists are keenly aware of what Rothberg would describe as their implication—or their positionality—and use it to undermine the conflict narratives of political elites which they hold to be abusing their central political and social position.

The weight of political structures on memory activism is also a dimension of the CNA's work with younger generations, and the contrast between party political uses of remembrance and CNA activism shapes the aims and content of their educational activities. CNA veterans from each of the combatant forces have been a much-used resource for the Living Library (*Živa biblioteka*) events, arranged in localities across the country by Pro-Budućnost.[30] At the local level, where young people grow up in communities that are separated by ethnonationalist conflict narratives, the veterans of the Living Libraries nevertheless see the prospect of building understanding based on their individual testimonies, often local perspectives, addressing the real local contexts in which they meet. As CNA speakers testify to the horrors of war, they also attest to the lack of connection between divisive political elite interests and the experience and welfare of ordinary veterans, and of their local communities.

The extent to which the CNA and other peacebuilders choose to focus on conflict in their work at the local level also deserves attention. The bold discourse of CNA activists can be contrasted with the continuing limitation of steps towards reconciliation

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[28] Online at https://nenasilje.org/en/reports/
[29] See, for example, Aida Cerkez (2012).
[30] Reports of these events are searchable on https://www.probuducnost.ba/

at the elite level. From the CNA's perspective, this is natural, since the elites are the defining power behind the most influential public institutions and media, and their interests are not served by undermining their conflicting narratives about the war. Taking a step away from the objective analysis offered by this activist circle, other perspectives may be held to be responsible for the extent to which CNA activists can be far more direct about the continuing impact of political conflict on individual lives than many peacebuilding initiatives which work at the elite level. To take one of the most notable attempts to advance the public commemoration of civilian victims from all sides and of all nations to date as a vehicle for this discussion: in 2017, the Religious Leaders Council brought the most senior religious figures of the country together to tour sites of atrocity committed against civilians of all three of the main constituent peoples in the 1990s. Hitherto, the Religious Leaders Council had been very deliberate in differentiating its public reconciliation work from the political sphere. On this occasion, they were nevertheless accompanied by the media and by political leaders from a second tier, rather than the most senior party leaders. During the tour, the announced intention of the religious leaders was stressed, to offer their respective prayers rather than speeches.[31] Interventions addressed to the press by the religious leaders were deliberate about the lack of progress made in reconciliation by political leaders, and were firm in condemning the wartime civilian murders as criminal acts, but equally carefully they did not differentiate between the nationalities of perpetrators, insisting that the innocent civilian victims were equally victims. The public act of peace and reconciliation, as the Religious Leaders Council conceived it, was carefully limited by a sense of their roles in relation to public and political life. Viewed in this framing, they were bold—the Serbian bishop in particular. This was not simply the act of functionaries serving a self-justifying public structure that was based on conflict alone. It might better capture the self-imposed limits on the action of the Religious Leaders Council to view its actions through a lens in which structures or systems are not self-explanatory, but are reproduced through the kind of reflected activity outlined above; in this light, the religious leaders were cautious about taking steps that might seem to undermine the beliefs of large sectors of public opinion, limiting risks in the view that the public sphere is not controlled by a fixed structure or elite, but they were also bold in their statements about the need for political change based on common principles, in sharp distinction to the positions taken by political leaders.[32]

The self-imposed limits or the constraints on political leaders are greater still. Whereas the most senior regional leaders have made a show of their penitence and

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[31] Igor Spaic (2017).

[32] For an example of such a perspective on systems of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).

recognition of the victims of other communities through visits to sites of atrocity—most notably the visit of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to Srebrenica in 2015[33] and the visits of successive Croatian presidents to Ahmići in Central Bosnia in 2010 and 2018[34]—the most senior Bosnian Serb, Bosniak, and Croat leaders have not taken such steps. At a more local level, we will see examples of politicians who make efforts to show their recognition of the experiences and perspectives of other communities by attending remembrance events in their area, but this is not being done by political parties in a systematic way.

Social attitudes to memory and peacebuilding activities

The pressure exerted by political party elites can be understood as a structural or systemic constraint on reconciliation activity. Peacebuilding and memory theorists may understand this systemic influence in competing ways: as broadly reflective of wider society, or as a distinct imposition on popular attitudes.[35] While observers may gain impressions about the nature of this social dimension from immersion in a community, or from public sources, there are complications in generalising from either: individuals do not easily share their considered reflections on peacebuilding activities, even within their own families and communities, because the associated emotions and relationships are sensitive;[36] the attitudes individuals hold on peace-building activities may differ according to whether they are associated with the private, the communal, or the public and political sphere, to contested spaces or to locations identified as home; and attitudes to the social and political changes implied in peace-building and memory activism in the abstract do not necessarily match responses to the practical experience of these events. For activists who seek impact through activities geared at different generations, additional challenges apply, as the experiences of those who lived through the violence of the 1990s are dramatically different from the experiences of the younger generations.

   In 2012, the research team with which I have worked surveyed 616 individuals from four cities, and in 2013, we surveyed another 2060 individuals from thirteen cities across Bosnia-Herzegovina.[37] Participants responded to questions about their attitudes to a wide range of reconciliation activities and priorities. My purpose in relating some of the findings here lies in the extent to which they diverged from prior

[33] BBC News (2015).
[34] DW (2010); IBNA (2018).
[35] Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).
[36] Dino Abazović (2014).
[37] George Wilkes *et al.* (2012, 2013).

expectations, set by literature which either emphasises the strength of ethnonationalist social and political narratives or which suggests that support for peacebuilding and transitional justice would be greatest amongst the most educated.[38] Both surveys indicated strong support for peacebuilding activities, particularly those which involved ordinary people. The second survey investigated attitudes to different types of peace-building activity in greater detail. To summarise a few points germane to the understanding of how social and political factors relate to attitudes to peacebuilding and memory work, a general pattern presents itself. The strength of the support expressed for forward-looking peacebuilding activities was generally above 70 per cent of respondents across the thirteen locations. By contrast, support for activities which would investigate the causes and consequences of the war, or which would involve apologies from political leaders or justice for war criminals, was consistently around 40 per cent across the country. The popularity of memory and peacebuilding activities was consistent across the population's national and religious divides. The respondents also trusted ordinary local actors to advance reconciliation activities far more than they indicated trust in political or religious leaders—again, the contrasting figures were above 70 per cent and above 40 per cent. Insofar as the figures spoke to a distance from the elected political elite felt across the population, this was shared as strongly by the voters for the large parties as by both the smaller number of voters for non-nationalist parties and the large proportion of citizens—one third—who declared they did not vote. It may be inferred from the data that politically controversial issues relating to the armed conflict, and elite political involvement in activity framed in terms of peacebuilding and reconciliation, were favoured or trusted by fewer respondents. Even so, support for youth visits to sites of atrocity, and for dialogues involving youth and veterans, was extremely high, indicating that these were not divisive in the way that elite political activity was seen to be.[39]

The thirteen-city survey also offers a resource for assessing differences across generations.[40] The trend in favour of reconciliation and memory activities was far more emphatic amongst older respondents. Observers of contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina may see evidence for the disengaged attitude among the generations born after the war in many sources. These younger citizens have had their formative experiences in a segregated community, and often in segregated schooling. Public debate was stirred in 2015 when the documentary series *Perspektiva* talked with youth on either side of the divide in Mostar: though there is no physical barrier to stop them, interviewees talked about never crossing the river; their attitudes to the other

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[38] Marta Valinas *et al.* (2009).
[39] See Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 5–8, 16–25).
[40] Wilkes *et al.* (2013: esp. 59–60).

were distant, and they showed no nostalgia for the mixed city which Mostar had been before the 1990s.[41] As in Mostar, so too the reality in which young people live across the country is mostly distant from the ethnonational and the religious other. The exceptions are in parts of a relatively few cities where national groups continue to coexist. Memories of violence—which could be formative for older generations in the way that Monika Palmberger describes in her ethnographic investigation of generations and memory in Mostar[42]—are also a distant interest to the post-war youth, a point affirmed in reflection sessions following the survey's publication.[43] The challenge of understanding how these younger generations will receive memory and peacebuilding activities begins with evidence that members of these generations do not relate ethnonational loyalty to interest in remembrance, let alone to acts of remembrance conducted by the political parties. Whether the next generations will accept, reject, or emphasise conflict narratives, or whether the trend instead is to an even more distant disinterest, is not set in stone.

Grounded local commemorations

The turn to local cross-communal commemorations as peacebuilding instruments reflects both a search for spaces protected from the continuing post-conflict competition and also the realisation that a wide range of young interlocutors are best engaged where they live and where they are educated. Rothberg's work on the 'implicated subject' appeals as a tool for assessing the impact of memory work in these settings precisely because the subjectivity of those involved in these local encounters is foregrounded. By contrast, much of the peacebuilding and memory literature on which activities in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been based have used objectivising or generalising frameworks to explain the change required from a culture of violence to a culture of peace, based on common values, as Professor Ćurak describes it. The nature of local contexts has been a matter of relatively little interest in this vein of peacebuilding literature. A more deliberately subjective focus makes sense of the degree to which the diverse localities in which these activities are situated make quite distinctive environments for peacebuilding and multidirectional memory work. The prospects for achieving distance from the party political competition, or for engaging with the younger generation in their home environment, may prove to have little to do with distance from the largest centres of ethnonationalist political opinion.

[41] *Perspektiva* (2015).
[42] Monika Palmberger (2016).
[43] Davor Marko *et al.* (2021: section on Youth).

Quite different approaches to local peacebuilding work follow from choices to engage with or to transcend partisan conflict narratives. A bold attempt to set out the grounds for local peacebuilding based on patterns of grass-roots dialogue and sociality was presented by the Nansen Dialogue Centre in 2015, in a report which described local communities as distant enough from partisan conflict in the public sphere to be able to allow courageous individuals the freedom necessary to promote peaceful relations.[44] In focus group discussion in the smaller cities covered in our 2013 survey, locals emphasised that committed individual bridgebuilders made all the difference to the public reception of solidarity activities at the local level.[45] And yet they also attested that the pressure to respond to the conflict narratives applied within the party political sphere is also applied by party figures in towns and cities across the country, affecting the scope for cross-communal peacebuilding in civil society, in public schools, or in public sector employment.

The local also presents opportunities and challenges specific to activist circles focused on highlighting the negative influence of political structures at this level. The activities of the CNA, for instance, engage in or provide education about local commemorative activities to the degree that political structures remain a meaningful focus of conflict, or a foil for an embracingly inclusive political future for the country. What the local means in this work is affected by political networks that connect local and national or global actors, activists or their opponents. An example of a deliberately oppositional activism in which notions of implication very clearly play a central role is presented by the White Armband movement, centred on the annual memorialisation of killings in Prijedor, at the heart of the Republika Srpska.[46] The network of implication here is international: White Armband Day annually draws a 'translocal' network of activists to protest against the wider political structures which committed atrocities against civilians in Prijedor, and which continue to act against survivors in denying the atrocities or in shutting survivor voices down in the spaces in Prijedor in which they suffered or in which they seek redress. White Armband activists foreground political and economic ties which justify international involvement in countering denial at the site and more widely in the Republika Srpska. Even so, the local is the realm of greatest importance to the movement's political focus, and it is given the appearance of being defined in its public relations work by the fact that this is where victims were killed or driven out. Activists direct attention to local rather than to abstract victims, and remembrance activities in response have focused on the value for local communities of the humanisation of these victims, and on the

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[44] Nansen Dialogue Centre (2015).
[45] This was highlighted in focus groups and public meetings covered in Davor Marko *et al.* (2021).
[46] Johanna Paul (2021).

obstruction posed by the focus on the agents of violence in party political remembrance.

Where organisations such as CNA have designed a programme of critical memory work for use across the state, premised on a common approach to past and present, more ostentatiously local initiatives may attend in deliberately distinctive ways to the particular neglect of victims felt in local communities. Thus, in 2020, Sead Djulić, a co-founder of the Mostar Youth Theatre, wrote and staged a play in memory of the victims of the Grabovica massacre of 1993, killed by members of the army he served in. *Uspavanka za Mladenku* (*A Lullaby for Mladenka*) was acted by Mostar teenagers from a diversity of backgrounds who had not experienced the war, and the perform-ances—including one performance attended by families of the victims—reignited public discussion of the persistent lack of recognition and impunity for the murders.[47] This again is an example of the scope for activists to stake out their position or their identity in relation to local memories of violence, and against local political structures which have fostered forgetting. The performance was a reflection of the distinct fate of the Mostar region during the period in 1993 when combatant forces sought to divide Muslims and Catholics. There is a dimension here, beyond this, in which the implicated subjects involved in the performance staked out their position and identity on the basis of memories of coexistence from before the war. It was perhaps only possible to stage this dramatic reunion of older and younger Bosniak and Croat locals to the degree that youth from the city retain, as Monika Palmberger has described it,[48] an aspiration to preserve local relationships at the civic, human, and neighbourly levels—a desire not captured by the *Perspektiva* documentary on the experience of youth in Mostar.

Rothberg's notion of the implicated subject is more useful still in describing the dynamics of local peacebuilding work which embraces political actors as part of a cross-community socialisation process, rather than rejecting the violent, predatory political system outright. Activities of this nature are staged deliberately in communi-ties across the country, including in the seamline between the two political entities in which violent ethnic cleansing had most prolonged and effective impact. Sometimes they reflect outside interest in and support for peacebuilding in a community, but such activities are also promoted by local figures. Every summer, for instance, Bosniak returnees from the area of the town of Rudo, near the border with Serbia, mark the deaths of family members killed by members of the Bosnian Serb army by laying flowers in the river there. In 2017, the mayor, Rato Rajak, was invited to speak at the

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[47] Nikola Bačić (2020).
[48] These themes are explored further in the context of remembrance activities in Mostar by Palmberger (2016: e.g., 21).

event, although he had served in that army and clearly represented the 'other' side in the conflict. In his speech, Rajak was frank about the existence of different perspectives, emphasising that these did not characterise the relationships between Serbs and Bosniaks in the local area, which were personal and greatly prized.[49]

This kind of event contrasts starkly with the activism of CNA, and from the perspective of those peacebuilding movements which judge their primary task to be to unseat the political elite which perpetuates the conflicts of the 1990s, the speech by the mayor is of little evident significance. It is not evident that it should be dignified with the term 'peacebuilding', and perhaps his role in terms of 'remembrance' was perfunctory, and the mayor's political position in this objectivising perspective makes the event still more suspect. However, the survivors and their families in Rudo had sought the mayor out, and media reports make it evident that this was in some degree a meaningful act for both parties. In Rothberg's terms, both the Bosniak returnees and the mayor could measure the sacrifice they made to an identity based on the clash of victim and perpetrator, an identity which serves practical and wider political purposes in their context. Objectively, the encounter could be dismissed as a staged moment in the mayor's itinerary. The mayor did not set out the ground of his involvement in a common rejection of violent crimes committed by his side. On the contrary, that he underlined his involvement implied a movement between different perspectives on the past and a desire for personal relationship in the present. If this is not to be dismissed outright, a subjective tool such as Rothberg's is needed. By admitting a personal dimension that may develop in parallel with an acknowledgement of different judgements about the past, the invitation to the mayor, and his response, may be seen as unusually bold, rather than simply a formal performance reflecting perhaps mutual economic or political interests.

Examples of such relationships can be found in other locations in which returnees make a small and unequal minority, living alongside communities which include those who murdered their family members. The demands this places on attempts to combine local peacebuilding and remembrance work can be seen from the day of solidarity which joined the communities of Doboj South, Petrovo, and Usora, in 2018.[50] The events they staged together constitute one of the most deliberately inclusive instances of cross-communal remembrance to date. But some sensitivity is required in order to determine whether or not they were simply the heavily choreographed performances of the three community mayors, or a vehicle for the creation of new relational spaces in which mutual suffering could be acknowledged.

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[49] Alen Bajramović (2017).
[50] PRO-Future (2018).

These three communities include residents from different nationalities divided during the war, divided now by the inter-entity line. The municipalities had been among the first thirty-two communities to join the Pro-Budućnost peacebuilding programme (funded by USAID and coordinated by Catholic Relief Services) in 2014. A day of joint remembrance was chosen by the local committee which coordinated among the municipalities as a way to give substance to their common adherence to the programme's Platform for Peace. The three mayors joined each other for a day in which they paid respect at different locations to the civilian victims on all sides. They were joined by the schoolchildren and other members of the three communities, with the mayors underlining that they intended their own acts to indicate to these members of their community above all their desire to live together in peace. In celebrating the committee of locals who had made this possible, the Pro-Budućnost programme singled out Slađana Lazarević with an award reflecting both the achievement that this event constituted, and also her resilience in promoting similar activities over time against local resistance. Ms Lazarević, in receiving her award, noted that this was one of the two events of which she was most proud.[51]

To discern what is performance and what authentic or effective peacebuilding requires close attention to perspectives that are limited or constrained by felt differences across the communities, and which are also potentially liberating insofar as they are multidirectional, describing a relational basis for shared futures defined by a demonstration of common purpose (and not by the common purpose alone). The challenges of peacebuilding at this local level can be intuited from the form it took. Participants were not presented with a forceful challenge to the cultures of nationalism, violence, and denial, but were instead directed not to take those political cultures as a basis for local coexistence. The mayors exhorted listeners to see that the victims on all sides were humans; that 'the victim and the criminal have neither religion nor nation'.[52] This is not a rejection of the political structures which create division nationally or locally. The premise for the event to take place was rather that participants joined as divided communities who seek peace. The divergent identities of the victims implicitly mattered, even as participants were exhorted not to draw distinctions. The participants were involved not as perpetrators and victims, but as implicated subjects, as Rothberg has described it, acknowledging a sense of responsibility through their participation, and being encouraged to focus on this responsibility as the leitmotif of the mayors' interventions. If our position is to judge whether the event was a formal affair, a choreographed show, this may be enough to unsettle any interest we might have in the outcome. Certainly the mayors were centred, or centred themselves, in the

[51] Bug (2020).
[52] *Buka* (2018).

formal proceedings which were presented to the attending children. Rothberg's relational approach may allow a quite different perspective on the presence of the schools, however: even granted that this entailed a formal demonstration that the offices of the mayors had the power to bring whole schools together, the presence of the children also meant the communities were creating a new space in which divisive politics were joined in a perspective to embrace a common future.

To entertain doubts about the motives of public leaders belongs to the territory for activists and scholars alike. Nevertheless, the experience of communities and generations coming together in such a politically sensitive context breaks with the patterns of political normality, and its value could survive a degree of scepticism. As Rothberg has indicated, the active involvement of individuals in acts of remembrance that break ground across divided and excluded communities can provide an experience which frames the future-facing dimension of the remembrance activity, quite separately from the exhortations and interests of the municipalities. Seen in this light, if there is a charge to be laid against such events that they are depoliticising situations of injustice, there is also the possibility that joint remembrance events can constitute a step towards creating a personal relationship and a political community which will take as a foundation stone the significance for community members of their community's victims.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have sought to foreground the conditions in which a combination of peacebuilding and memory work is chosen as a means of resistance to the continuing impact of divisive ethnonationalist politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The essay shows how competing approaches to peace and to the politics of memory address objective political and social obstacles in more and in less combative terms. There is a subjective dimension to each of these approaches, which this essay has addressed through Rothberg's treatment of implicated subjecthood and—with respect to the difficult involvement of younger generations in particular—multidirectional memory. Rothberg's toolkit frames subjective identity and relationships through a deliberately normative and activist lens, and we have sought here to distinguish ways in which it can also serve to cast light on the processes through which peace and memory activists in Bosnia-Herzegovina indicate that they are implicated, and not only that they should be.

I have presented an overview of common objectivising perspectives in the existing literature on peacebuilding and on the creation of a culture of memory in the country —notably represented here through the works of Nerzuk Ćurak, of Adnan Hasanbegović, and of the Centre for Nonviolent Action. We may ask where and when these activists use their implicated subjectivity, or their positionality, as part of their

otherwise objectivising activism. The combination of peacebuilding and memory activities are, for this set of critical observers, a necessary means for overcoming structures of violence, opposing them with a culture of memory and a culture of peace. These activists take their position in activities which contrast formal and informal commemoration. They oppose the politics of remembrance which centres violent actors and their post-war successors with their own journeys to anti-war activism, and with their validation of the experiences of a population ill served by elites and elite culture. This deliberately radical activist approach has been increasingly applied at a local level. In designing activities for this local context, the subjectivity of these activists becomes apparent in a new sense. At the local level, the project of humanising individuals and communities has a reality. These realities form a counter to ethnonationalist ideologies in which remembrance of wartime sacrifices highlights victims at a symbolic, abstract level. There is some space for marginal political activist movements to take centre stage in peacebuilding work at the local level, thanks to a degree of separation from the state-wide party political contest. At this local level, the CNA activists and their supportive networks have nevertheless engaged on the basis that the future of the country lies in a common set of values for citizens, not in the political recognition for diversity across the country's communities.

Those local activities which, by contrast, join peacebuilding and remembrance without a radical or an oppositional framing are more obvious candidates for Rothberg's subjective and relational approach insofar as this subjective, relational dimension is centred in their activism. For this strand of peace and memory activism, these local activities are first valued because it is possible locally to bring real people together, in a process of socialisation which transcends their different identities. The extent to which this peacebuilding process is deemed to be more important than the ongoing competition over divisive political narratives is implied, but it does not structure the activities as clearly as is the case for the critical peacebuilding movement. To the degree that this second form of local activity aims to embrace political actors, the approach taken does not rest on a contrast between formal and informal activity, between norms or cultures. This makes it more difficult to assess the motivation of these activities and their impact in objective terms. For this reason, it is these activities which are more challenging to assess primarily or solely in objective terms. Rothberg's reflections on the dynamics of memory and peacebuilding work across communities divided by conflict and by atrocity are especially useful in clarifying the subjective value attached to these activities, their relational value. This subjective sphere may be more difficult to evaluate where activities are performed or choreographed in order to encompass formalities and institutions, but the tools offered by Rothberg nevertheless allow a description to encompass relational elements of a local activity which indicate where it has transformative elements, realism, and/or local authenticity.

Rothberg's notions of multidirectional memory and subjective implication in acts of violence and of reparation are most clearly relevant to the stated objectives of this second form of peacebuilding and memory work. They may nevertheless also helpfully be applied to the former set of peacebuilding activities, which assume the basic challenge for peace activists is to confront a culture of violence in the public sphere. Critics of Rothberg have noted that this subjective conceptual framework is more reliable in its reflections on ideal situations and objectives than in describing pre-existing realities.[53] Here, we have explored instead the extent to which the two contesting approaches to the design of peacebuilding and memory work covered here both work with the importance of relational thinking, whether this starts with oppositional or with inclusive approaches. Both sets of activists use their subjective identity in opposing violent narratives about objective national realities. We may equally apply the same subjective and multidirectional criteria to both sets of activist projects insofar as they seek to engage a younger generation whose interests are distant from the political competition over remembrance as it has been experienced by the older generations. The extent to which the activities of both tendencies rely on locality and seek to involve a detached younger generation foregrounds how far the two approaches to peacebuilding and memory work are not solely determined by objective realities, but also rely on strategic choices about the open prospects for new relationships to develop that can withstand those realities. Rothberg's toolkit is a really useful resource for evaluating those choices.

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Liquid graves and meaning activism in the Colombian armed conflict: the 'bottom-up' recovery and memorialisation of victims of forced disappearance

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Abstract: Although the use of non-burial methods can be traced to the early 1950s, this conceptual paper seeks to define the agency of the community members of Puerto Berrío (Department of Antioquia, Colombia) engaged in the recovery of human remains from the Magdalena River since the 1980s. Covering the preservation of the remains salvaged from these liquid graves, their 'baptism' using fabricated names, and the 'adoption' of their souls in exchange for small favours, this complex practice is political. This community-level meaning activism arises as a consequence of the harm-amplifying reality of a pathological state and is a form of resistance to (in)formal rules of necro-governmentality imposed by the non-state armed groups, the state, and the Catholic Church. We conclude that, despite the fact that relatives recognise the precarity of the legal–bureaucratic administration of forced disappearance, they have expressed a renewed expectation that the search, location, and identification be part of a new 'virtuous state' in light of the 2016 Final Peace Agreement.

Keywords: Forced disappearance, internal armed conflict, Colombia, community-level agency, memorialisation, necro-governmentality; Puerto Berrío; rivers.

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Introduction

The Memory and Conflict Observatory registers more than 80,000 cases of forced disappearance in Colombia between 1958 and 2018 (CNMH 2018), little over 50,000 of which are subject to a complex regime of reparations established in 2011 (Unidad para las Víctimas 2017). The pervasiveness and impunity of this human rights violation in Colombia give the country the unenviable first place amongst its neighbours (Humphrey 2018: 454). The result of abuses committed by *all* violent actors of the armed conflict, including state security forces, forced disappearance was outlawed first with the 1991 Constitution and subsequently dealt with legally using a mix of ordinary and transitional justice mechanisms (Humphrey 2018). While acknowledging the importance of the legal mobilisation of the relatives of those forcefully disappeared (García-Godos 2016), this conceptual article takes a different direction. Building exclusively on a review of secondary literature, we focus on Puerto Berrío, in the Department of Antioquia, to develop a theoretical understanding of the agency of the community members who undertook to recover mutilated human remains from the Magdalena River, safe-keep them in funeral niches in the local cemetery, and treat them like relics invested with magical powers. Following Kaplan (2017), we argue that, insofar as this practice implied *resistance* to the (in)formal rules imposed by the state, the paramilitary, and the Catholic Church, the agency of those carrying it out can be understood as fundamentally political.

On the one hand, we selected this site because, although reports vary with regard to the exact number of victims of forced disappearance, there is some agreement in both official records and academic work that the Department of Antioquia and the region of Magdalena Medio, where Puerto Berrío is located, has the highest number of victims in the country (CNMH 2013a, Mingorance & Arellana Bautista 2019). On the other hand, this emphasis is due to the peculiarity of this practice that emerged here starting the 1990s and sustained itself for nearly two decades. The prohibition on recovery of remains from the Magdalena River imposed by the paramilitary groups, their primary perpetrators, and the ban imposed by the Colombian state were the most potent tools applied to contain the development of this custom. While these prohibitions pertained to the potential legal implications relating to criminal charges and the identification of the remains, the Catholic Church sought to restrict access to the funeral niches containing the salvaged remains to prevent the performance of pre-Christian rites.

Despite the fact that the inhabitants of Puerto Berrío expended little effort on legally mobilising to change the formal rules (Díaz 2008) or organising to challenge the control of the non-state armed groups (see Navarro 2018), their resistance to tripartite regime of 'necro-governmentality', to borrow a term from Rojas-Perez (2017),

can be understood as fundamentally political. Community members grounded their actions in a sense of moral equivalence of victims in death, which bears a resemblance to the depoliticising discourse of humanitarianism promoted by the 2016 Final Peace Agreement between the government of Colombia and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army, FARC-EP). Nevertheless, since they exposed themselves to great personal (see Zulver 2019) and legal risks in engaging in these practices, the community members indirectly made a political statement that reclaimed their agency.

The article unfolds in three sections. The first section discusses the rise of forced disappearance, relating it to the various actors who have made use of it in the armed conflict. The second section offers a broad brushstroke explanation of the legal regimes governing this crime and the recovery of human remains. The third section gives the context of violence in which this practice developed in Puerto Berrío and conceptualises the political agency of the community members, situating it between the humanitarian and the legal mobilisation of victims' groups. Finally, the conclusion summarises the strands of this discussion and contextualises some of the challenges involved in the implementation of the Final Peace Agreement with respect to forced disappearance.

Forced disappearance in the Colombian internal armed conflict

The actors of the Colombian internal armed conflict can be grouped in four blanket categories, namely the insurgent groups, the paramilitaries, the narco-traffickers, and the state security forces. Forced disappearance dates back to the 1950s and the period known as *La Violencia* (Uribe 2013). It re-emerged in the ongoing conflict in the early 1970s as a counter-forensic method used by reactionary sectors of the security forces that opposed peace negotiations with the guerrillas and illegally detained citizens (believed to be) part of, or colluding with, Leftist insurgent groups (CNMH 2013b: 200). However, over the following decade it was slowly transferred to the paramilitaries who, sometimes working with narco-traffickers, used it as a terror tactic with two separate aims. First, since it dissuaded massacre survivors from testifying or returning to their homes, forced disappearances shored up forced displacement and made land available for the expanding market (Grajales 2011: 777). Second, granted that the introduction of human rights compliance evaluations limited the military's anti-subversive activities, starting in the late 1990s the paramilitaries were increasingly tasked with the 'cleansing' of the civilian population (Tate 2015: 83ff). By the early 2000s, this conduct became a means of generalised social and territorial control, making anyone who transgressed social norms a target for the paramilitaries

(CNMH 2013b: 370). Cases of state forces acting in collusion with paramilitaries were also registered, starting in 2000 (CNMH 2013a: 64).

Most forced disappearances are concentrated in the post-1995 period and originate in the south-east and north-west of the country (CNMH 2013a: 63). Of the little over 50 per cent of the cases where an alleged perpetrator has been identified, about 15 per cent are deemed paramilitary victims, between 3 and 5 per cent as targets of the guerrillas, and less than 1 per cent victims of security forces (CNMH 2013a: 37). All these actors select their victims (Restrepo 2004: 178) to fulfil long and short-term goals, but the population pools they draw from depend on their interests. The insurgents' well-established practice of extortive abductions perpetrated primarily against upper and middle-class citizens and politicians and government officials meant that assassinations followed by disappearance were rare. When the paramilitaries inherited this practice from the security forces, they continued to use it as an anti-Communist doctrine against a select group. They gradually became more indiscriminate in their attacks throughout the 1990s (Restrepo 2004: 178), eventually descending into socio-economic cleansing (CNMH 2013a: 143).

The struggle for the control of energy and mining resources, land, and the routes for (il)legal commercial activities initially brought the guerrilla groups to the region of Magdalena Medio in the 1970s. Fears that the security forces could be overwhelmed by the guerrilla presence prompted local elites, supported by the state, to establish self-defence groups (Mazzei 2009: 80). These units slowly morphed into anomic paramilitaries throughout the 1980s and, operating under different names, worked towards absolute mastery over the region over the next two decades (CNMH 2013a: 143). The strategic position of Puerto Berrío as a node for the transfer of coca paste out of the Magdalena Medio, coveted by the paramilitaries (Defensoría del Pueblo 2015: 3–4), meant that the inhabitants of this municipality had become witnesses to and victims of systematic human rights violations since the 1990s (CNMH 2017: 314–15).

Clandestine grave sites and non-burial methods, such as crematoriums, rivers, and ravines have been widely used in Colombia as a counter-forensic measure, sometimes following dismemberment (Gómez López & Patiño Umaña 2007: 176ff). Since the body of the victim is the main evidence of the murder and on-site burials or abandonment after a massacre would more readily draw the attention of the authorities, rivers became a common disposal method for paramilitaries (CNMH 2017: 338). Human remains have been recovered from at least 109 rivers in the country (CNMH quoted in Rutas del Conflicto 2019a), with the Magdalena River and its tributaries taking centre stage (CNMH 2016: 21). The Department of Antioquia, where Puerto Berrío is located, stands out with the highest absolute number of disappearances in the country (see Mingorance & Arellana Bautista 2019). The paramilitaries are the primary actor responsible for the nearly 600 victims registered in Puerto Berrío (CNMH 2017: 30),

which gives this municipality of barely 50,000 inhabitants the terrible twelfth place in Colombia (Mingorance & Arellana Bautista 2019: 11). The disposal of (mutilated) human remains in the Magdalena River as well as the prohibition on their retrieval imposed onto various communities living along its waters, cemented the reign of terror of the paramilitaries this region.

The legal treatment of forced disappearance in Colombia

The legal (and bureaucratic) treatment of forced disappearance sees the amalgamation of both transitional and ordinary justice frameworks. This section offers a brief account of these mechanisms, emphasising the reporting and search of persons presumed disappeared. It does not seek to be exhaustive or elaborate on the deficiencies of (implementation of) each legislative act. Rather, the authors aim to illustrate why the community-led practices emerged as an undeniable humanitarian argument counterposed to the state's regulatory power in this area (Humphrey 2018).

The creation of the intricate web of mechanisms that criminalises forced disappearance, beginning with the 1991 Constitution, is largely due to the political and legal pressure exercised by relatives' associations. For instance, the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared People (*Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos*, ASFADDES) campaigned since its establishment in 1982 in favour of this constitutional ban (ASFADDES 2003). Article 12 now forbids forced disappearance together with those acts that usually accompany and support it such as torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading punishment. Law 589/2000 typified forced disappearance as deprivation of liberty by a member of an illegal armed group or public servant followed by denial and concealment and excluded it from pardons and amnesties.[1] It also created the *Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda* (CNB, the National Search Commission), where two of the nine members were representatives of human rights NGOs (non-governmental organisations), as well as a register of victims.

Forced disappearance is also dealt with in the Colombian transitional justice framework starting with Law 975/2005, known as the *Ley de Justicia y Paz* (Justice and Peace Law, LJP). Since any legal treatment of forced disappearance before the 2000 categorisation would have violated criminal procedure (López Díaz 2009), it is unsurprising that the litany of amnesties that supported the peace processes with

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[1] Articles 165–7 of the Criminal Code and Article 3 of the Military Criminal Code outline the penalties for forced disappearance and explain that, together with torture and genocide, it cannot be considered an act related to military service.

several guerrilla groups since the early 1980s only considered kidnapping.[2] By comparison, the LJP, which facilitated the mass demobilisation of more than 30,000 paramilitaries (López Morales 2020) and more than 17,000 individual guerrilla members (Criollo 2020), initiated a slow shift towards a greater recognition of victims' rights. While it continued the practice of exchanging legal benefits for peace, following legal action by victims' representatives, the Constitutional Court conditioned the receipt of alternative sanctions on the perpetrators' effective contribution to the victims' rights to justice, truth, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition (see Gallón Giraldo *et al.* 2007: 54). This interplay between victims and the Constitutional Court resulted in a benevolent legalism (Eslava 2009: 191–2) that sought to balance the nation's political need for peace and the rights of victims by specifying a compassionate limit to the transition.

The LJP considered victims' rights to truth about the forcefully disappeared particularly important. Operating under the National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation that coordinated the implementation of the LJP, the Group for Historical Memory contributed a key element of historic truth on emblematic cases around the country (CNMH 2013a). Nevertheless, the nature of the LJP as demobilisation legislation meant that it was regressive in relation to Law 589/2000 because it directly excluded victims of forced disappearance by state agents and tied the reparation and truth afforded victims to the accountability process of perpetrators (Díaz 2006: 530). Despite the best efforts of the victims to expand the provisions of the LJP, the endemic problems of the justice system, especially the limited resources granted the Office of the Attorney General to investigate, set the stage for de facto impunity and restricted victims' rights reparations and the right to truth in practice (Mejía Alfonso 2017: 466). And yet, some measure of satisfaction has been achieved, with more than 9,300 bodies being recovered through the LJP, little over 4,300 of whom were identified and returned to their families (Fiscalía General de la Nación 2018).

Law 1448/2011, known as *Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras* (Victims' and Land Restitution Law, LVRT), went further than the LJP and widened the understanding of the victim. Chapter IX (Article 139) specifies that the rights of victims to reparation, particularly satisfaction, extend to the recovery and the return of the remains of the direct victims of forced disappearance to their families. In response to this chapter, a protocol for the 'dignified return' of remains was created in 2016, to ensure that relatives would not be re-victimised in the course of the search, location, and return of the remains (see Ministro de Salud y Protección Social *et al.* 2016). This implied a shift in the operational logic of the Office of the General Attorney from

[2] This is the case of Law 37/1981, Law 49/1985, and Law 104/1993.

human rights or criminal forensics to a humanitarian forensics that sought to promote a therapeutic agenda (Humphrey 2018: 468). This new perspective is further developed under Point 5 of the 2016 Final Peace Agreement, which deals with victims and transitional justice, and the legislation that supports and implements it. First, the orientation of the transitional justice system of the Agreement is grounded on a model of 'responsiblising pardons' (Vega Dueñas 2018) that advances the restorative justice typology of the LJP (Uprimny Yepes 2006). Second, it reforms the system for truth, justice, reparations, and non-repetition established by the LVRT and adds three new judicial and extra-judicial mechanisms. While the first refers to the investigation and prosecution of those responsible using an alternative sanctions' regime, the second deals with historic and forensic truth (see Naftali 2015, 120) through a truth commission and a special search unit for the disappeared.

The most important transformation with regard forced disappearance has been the unreserved adoption by the *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas Dadas por Desaparecidas* (the Unit for the Search of People Presumed Disappeared, UBPD) of a relief and humanitarian perspective with respect to the families (Ramírez Zapata 2020: 56). Furthermore, given the functions and outlook of the institutions of the Agreement, it is also expected that they would coordinate their activities to generate a register of clandestine burial sites, mass graves, and other irregular non-burial methods (Ríos 2017). The recovery by the UBPD of more than 100 bodies from the cemetery in Puerto Berrío in March 2021 highlights both these points. First, this move responds to the precautionary measure ordered by the judicial organ of the Agreement, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, at the call of victims involved in the collective Case 01 on deprivation of liberty before this instance. Second, the statement made by the Director of the UBPD on the site recognises the humanitarian nature of the work of her institution as well as that of the 'strangers who adopted these bodies and looked after them as if it were their [own family members'] so that we could recover them today, and bring their family that great relief to the pain left behind by that disappearance' (UBPD 2021).

Despite the widely recognised instrumental weakness of the law by ordinary Colombians, including the relatives of the forcefully disappeared, these overlapping legal regimes stand as a testimony of the endless desire that law can help us make sense of the everyday (Lemaitre 2007, Eslava 2009). The move from ordinary legislation to the transitional justice framework has had mixed effects for victims, as some have been left out while others have seen their rights recognised due to either the letter of the law or its deficient implementation. The Peace Agreement promises a new age of humanitarian action with the establishment of a long-lived institution dedicated to the recovery, identification, and dignified return of remains.

Puerto Berrío: memorialisation through resistance

The rules and actors that govern dead bodies, which Rojas-Perez (2017) calls 'necro-governmentality', are widely considered to have two sides. On the one hand, it covers government action that regulates and implements forensic exhumations as a part of the state's international law duties. As such, it is the process by which atrocities are given a 'bureaucratic response' through legislation regulating ordinary criminal justice and creating extraordinary measures like truth commissions to analyse conflict-related violence (Teitel 2000: 78). On the other hand, it considers the legal and political actions of victims who rarely remain passive but organise to transform international and domestic legal regimes that fail to recognise (the extent of) their harms (see Keck & Sikkink 1998, Kovras 2017). Thus, the ways in which the state enacts its obligations to locate and identify the disappeared is of critical importance as it has effects on how families and communities mobilise (Rudling 2019). Furthermore, since these legal frames seek to address the suffering of the victims, they also have undeniable effects on how their relatives experience loss, grieve, and memorialise the disappeared (Gatti 2014: 52).

Because the majority of those targeted are men and the majority of the relatives engaged in the search are women (Dewhirst & Kapur 2015: 4), the trope often used for the activism of the latter across Latin America is that of Antigone (see Sant Cassia 2005, Honig 2013). The eminent example is that of the Argentine *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. Like the heroine in Sophocles' play, who committed to recover her dead brother's body for a dignified by burial against the prohibition of his murderers, the Madres reframed their motherhood strategically. Publicly mistreated as crazy women and physically attacked by the supporters and agents of the military regime (Loveman 1998: 513–15), the Madres used predominantly symbolic forms of protest. Their appeals to their right to know the whereabouts of their disappeared children put in motion a 'boomerang effect' that eventually gave rise to a nationwide condemnation of the military regime (Risse & Sikkink 1999) and reshaped (inter)national law (Keck & Sikkink 1998). Furthermore, the comparisons with Antigone are not gratuitous given that, like this Greek mythological figure, political action exposes activist relatives to great personal and legal risks. Since this crime was used as a terror tactic that relied on secrecy and impunity to intensify the harms of the relatives and societal panic, the 'stubbornness' of the Madres' agency cost some of them their lives (Humphrey 2018: 454).

The practice that took hold in Puerto Berrío went beyond the retrieval of the mutilated remains of the forcefully disappeared from the river. Community members undertook to preserve these remains in funeral niches in the local cemetery, protecting them from further retaliation by their victimisers by using fabricated names

to 'baptise' them. Some 'adopted their souls' and treated the remains as relics capable of working miracles like Catholic saints or beatified people in exchange for looking after the niches, bringing them candles and flowers. According to Triana de los Ríos (2017), this complex practice disobeyed a triple prohibition. While non-state armed groups could not tolerate the defiance of their control implied by the retrieval itself, state agents were apprehensive about the counter-forensic effects of the retrieval and baptism. For its part, the Catholic Church resisted the adoption and memorialisation as a pagan animist rite. Although those carrying out these interventions did not direct their agency against the agents of repression in the way the Madres did, this labour placed them in harm's way. Recognising that all 'space of memory [is] a space of political struggle' (Jelin 1998: 29), their actions must be read as a political state- ment about their resistance to being administered by the paramilitary, the state agents, and the Church (see Rojas-Perez 2017). Concretely, these actions can be placed in the interstice between 'bottom-up' political actions and humanitarian commitment. They can be distinguished from the former because they result from spontaneous decisions without crossing over into the realm of political collective action (see Lundy & McGovern 2008). They foreground the moral equivalence of victims, and the personal risks these community members took in carrying out the retrievals implies a political position with respect to the paramilitary, the state agents, and the Church. Without explicitly seeking to do so, these individuals created an archive of remains with an increasingly important effect, given the renewed structural efforts to locate the disappeared through the mechanisms of the Peace Agreement (Ávila Cortés 2019).

Puerto Berrío, once 'the self-proclaimed counterinsurgency capital' of Colombia (Tate 2007: 52), was a stronghold of paramilitary action along the Magdalena River. Starting at the end of the 1970s, groups known under different names, such as *Muerte a los Secuestradores* (Death to Kidnappers, MAS), Macetos, or Autodefensas, began acting in the area initially as self-defence groups. The acquiescence of the military to these activities turned into active assistance in the early 1980s when, dissatisfied with the ongoing peace negotiations with the guerrillas, the security forces began training and patrolling the region together with the paramilitaries (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010: 278). Paramilitary-led repression spread from the 'experiment site' in Puerto Boyacá, where these groups had the support of the emerald extraction and farming sectors to 'cleanse' the area from the FARC and its (suspected) followers, to Puerto Berrío, where they met with the backing of the XIV Brigade of the Armed Forces stationed there (Reyes Posada 1991: 37–8). Testimony by one of the paramili- tary commanders active in the area reveals that, given increasing disciplinary action against members of the military, the latter delegated the execution of human rights violations to the non-state armed groups in the 1990s (CNMH 2013b: 121).

Thus, the history of community resistance against conflict-related violence dates back to the early 1980s in Puerto Berrío. Trade unions, non-governmental human rights organisations, and the office of the mayor organised several marches in 1982 to protest against the activities of non-state armed groups and their collusion with the military (CNMH 2013b: 56–7). Their persistence led the Office of the Attorney General to release a report identifying more than 160 paramilitary members, nearly 60 of whom were active members of the security forces. The reaction of the Armed Forces to these findings is evidence of the precarity of the Colombian state in legally regulating and protecting its citizens from harm. Anticipating the legal treatment of the cases named in the report, the Minister of Defence made provisions for all members of the Armed Forces to contribute one day of their wages to support the defence team (CNMH 2013b: 59). The involvement of the state forces with the paramilitaries and the business sector became so pathological that the latter made use of both state bureaucracies and the force provided by non-state armed groups and the security sector to extract financial benefits (Gutierrez-Sanin 2019). Moreover, this alliance meant that those who filed complaints or investigated alleged abuses, including forced disappearances, exposed themselves to great personal risk, despite only seeking the protection afforded to them by their rights.

The paramilitaries' prohibition on the recovery of the remains doubly underscores their power in Puerto Berrío. First, when the dismembered bodies floated by, they acted as a mnemonic prompt for the community who lost their loved ones not to interfere with the social and territorial control objectives of these groups lest they meet the same fate. Evidence that, starting in the 1980s, family members murdered by the paramilitaries would be purposely buried in unmarked graves to protect them in death and wakes being poorly attended to protect survivors (CNMH 2017: 340) suggests a similar intent for the 'baptism' of the niches of the disappeared. Second, for the communities downstream from Puerto Berrio, the remains of the disappeared were 'a message that anticipates the horror that would be visited upon those who do not follow the orders of the masters of war' (Nieto 2012: 27, translated by the authors). Finally, those discovered engaging in the retrieval of bodies could pay for it with their lives because this could also prompt a legal process that could bring law enforcement to the area to identify and prosecute those responsible (Rubiano 2017).

The necro-governmentality that had developed since the 1991 Constitution, with its complex regime of policies, institutions, legal experts, and professionals tending to the well-being of victims, held little power in Puerto Berrío in the best of cases and had harm-amplifying effects in the worst of cases. Shocking as it may be, not only are there known cases of trivialisation of missing persons' reports by the authorities (CNMH 2013a: 58), but also leaking of privileged information, and outright collusion with non-state armed groups (CNMH 2017: 99). This ostensibly thin line between

the norm-making and enforcing capacity and illicit associations of the Colombian state brings to mind serious questions about its pathologies (see Gutierrez-Sanin 2019). In a more modest way, the ban enforced by the Office of the Attorney General in the early 2000s on the retrieval and 'baptism' of remains points to the same contradictions. Owing to its potential counter-forensic implications, this state agency argued that the intervention of untrained (and unsanctioned) civilians broke the chain of evidence, altered the physical evidence relating to the murder, and 'baptising' the remains in the cemetery could lead to difficulties in identifying and returning them to their families (Rutas del Conflicto 2019b). Tensions between the state and the pious locals of Puerto Berrío who had 'chosen' the niches in the local cemetery, erasing the identification numbers assigned by the legal investigators attached to this office, rose in 2006. The response of the technicians was swift, but compassionate: they began placing the identification plaque inside the niche itself before sealing it off to avoid any confusion (Rodríguez Camacho 2015).

The Catholic Church also intervened in the system of necro-governmentality to prohibit the 'adoption' of the souls of those placed in the funeral niches because they considered this contrary to Christian dogma. The worship of the forcefully disappeared, known as NNs[3] all over Latin America, strengthened the devotion in the creed of the souls in purgatory, recovering the traditional belief in the *animero*, a character who accompanies the souls of the deceased on their journey to their final destination. This figure directed the procession every night in November, the month of the souls in purgatory, to remember the dead, show solidarity with their plight, and return to them the humanity they were denied as well as ask them for favours (Gómez-Sepúlveda & Figueroa-Salamanca 2019). The tradition was interrupted in November 2011 when the parish priest of the local church restricted entry to the cemetery at night. The *animero* insisted it be opened, initially calling on the local authorities. Reflecting the same desire for the law to resolve everyday problems, two years later he brought an action of *tutela* against the municipality and the parish, claiming that his and the other devotees' rights to freedom of religion had been violated. Nevertheless, the judge sided with the Church authorities and the municipality who had argued that, as the cemetery was part of the Catholic faith institution, it was the private property of the Church who could itself regulate the activities carried out there. The rituals carried out by the animero were, thus, considered 'a superstitious practice, product of a deviation of the religious spirit that leads us to believe in things removed from the [Catholic] faith and reason' (Hoyos 2014, translation by the authors).

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[3] Where bodies were recovered, the victims were buried as NN or 'No Name', sometimes with minimal information about their gender and the circumstances of their retrieval (see Uribe 2013).

For Gatti (2014: 29), the victims of forced disappearance 'are sheared individuals … bodies separated from their names; consciences cut off from their physical support; names isolated from their history; identities deprived of their voting cards, their citizenship papers'. Once they become victims, those forcefully disappeared are defined by what is not known about them, that is their final moments, their resting place, their identity (Muñoz & Pérez 2005: 222). Their disappearance induces a catastrophe of meaning, where victims are not quite dead, but they are not alive either. They have left the realm of citizens endowed with rights to inhabit a sort of permanent limbo where the NNs subsist until the bodies are reunited with their identities (Gatti 2014: 30–1). Relatives, forensic archaeologists, and legal professionals alike become 'activists of meaning' whose purpose is to recover their identity (Gatti 2014: 37). The community members in Puerto Berrío recognised this naming catastrophe in the mutilated remains they recovered from the Magdalena River, but were in no position to reunite them with their identities given the continued reign of the paramilitaries in the area. In fact, given similar subterfuges used for victims of assassinations by paramilitaries referred to above, the burial of these fragmented humans in unmarked niches or assigning them new names through 'adoption', introduced another layer of protection from the wrath of the perpetrators.

Conclusion: what does the future hold for the forcefully disappeared?

Although the paramilitaries no longer exert the same type of control in the Department of Antioquia, the practice of choosing, adopting, baptising, and looking after the mutilated remains of those disposed of in the Magdalena River continues in Puerto Berrío. The 'Do not erase, paint or change the details of the NNs' that adorns the entrance to the pavilion of the local cemetery that houses these remains (Rutas del Conflicto 2020) attests to that. Accustomed to receiving the remains of those murdered upstream, community members created a political identity around this practice and continue to defy both the state and Catholic Church. Its logic sees it firmly inserted between the legal mobilisation of relatives that challenged legal frameworks since the 1990s and the current humanitarian discourse adopted by the state. Since the inhabitants of Puerto Berrío not only rescued the remains, but made them their own through 'adoption', this complex memorialisation practice has become a symbol of its resistance to necro-governmentality and disobedience of the multiple bans.

Given the extent of the use of forced disappearance in the region of Magdalena Medio, it is easy to see why Puerto Berrío could become an unequivocal test site for the mechanisms emerging out of the 2016 Final Peace Agreement. The materialisation of the UBPD as a one-of-a-kind body is an opportunity for both victims and the

state that highlights the dialogic nature of necro-governmentality. The humanitarian vision of the UBPD builds on the understanding that the passage of time compounds the harms caused by forced disappearance. Yet, recognising the technical impossibility to locate, identify, and return all the remains, prioritisation criteria have been introduced for the cases with the highest likelihood of success. In order to counterbalance prioritisation as a detraction from the universality principle of humanitarianism and offer relief to all relatives, the UPBD works with a series of guidelines for participation that underscore dignification (Ramírez Zapata 2020: 16). This reflects a desire for the law to be more than the source of pragmatic solutions for real-life problems. Like the *animero* of Puerto Berrío who turned to the courts to seek the protection of his devotees or the relatives who mobilised to expand victims' rights, the aim here is to give a principled solution to forced disappearance that encapsulates a symbolic recognition of the specificity of the crime. In colluding with the perpetrators of this crime in Puerto Berrío, more than precarious, the state revealed itself to be pathological. Like no other moment in recent Colombian history, the Peace Agreement reaffirmed a belief in the law as a means to heal past disorders and create a 'virtuous state' (see Dávila Saenz 2018). By tasking a party actively opposed to the peace negotiations with the FARC with the implementation of the Agreement, the democratic game has introduced an important variable in the last two years. While the Duque administration has yet to firmly retreat from these provisions, little has been done to fast-track implementation of the Agreement to the great disappointment of the victims (Benavides Vanegas & Borda Guzmán 2019: 16).

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Silent cities, silenced histories:
subaltern experiences of everyday urban violence during COVID-19

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Abstract: The public health containment measures in response to COVID-19 have precipitated a significant epistemic and ontological shift in 'bottom-up' and 'action-oriented' approaches in development studies research. 'Lockdown' necessitates physical and social distancing between research subject and researcher, raising legitimate concerns around the extent to which 'distanced' action-research can be inclusive and address citizens' lack of agency. Top-down regimes to control urban spaces through lockdown in India have not stemmed the experience of violence in public spaces: some have dramatically intensified, while others have changed in unexpected ways. Drawing on our experiences of researching the silent histories of violence and memorialisation of past violence in urban India over the past three decades, we argue that the experience of subaltern groups during the pandemic is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. Exceptionalising the experiences of violence during the pandemic silences past histories and disenfranchises long struggles for rights in the city. At the same time, we argue that research practices employed to interpret the experience of urban violence during lockdown in India need to engage the changing nature of infrastructural regimes, as they seek to control urban spaces, and as subaltern groups continue to mobilise and advocate, in new ways.

Keywords: COVID-19, India, cities, urban violence, GBV, subaltern, memorialisation, urban disaster response, informal settlements, urban space.

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Introduction

It was a momentous scene. On 28 March 2020, hundreds upon thousands of daily-wage migrant labourers gathered at the Anand Vihar Bus Terminus and the immediately surrounding areas to be 'evacuated' (Mahaprashasta & Srivas 2020) out of India's capital, New Delhi. It had been only four days since India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in a television broadcast 'a total ban on coming out of your homes … every state, every union territory, every district, every village, every town, lane and neighbourhood in the country will be locked down' (see *India Today* 2020a from 0:40s to 1:01s). With only four hours' notice, this was seen by many as 'the most severe step taken anywhere in the war against the coronavirus' (Gettleman & Schultz 2020). Later in the broadcast Modi warned Indians would have to bear the economic costs of lockdown, and pleaded for all to 'stay where you are' (see *India Today* 2020a from 2:13s to 2:30s). As construction sites, businesses, and markets up and down the country closed, migrant labourers were left stranded in urban centres as even the local and national transport systems shut down. It had taken only a few days for their savings, already depleted by the disruptions caused by the Delhi riots a month earlier (Gupte 2020a) and demonetisation, to evaporate. With hunger and fear setting in, the promise of state-provided bus transportation back to their rural homes in neighbouring states had sparked the sizeable gathering.

As these spectacles of human suffering unfolded, the impacts of lockdown were also playing out on the very structures of social interaction, community mobilisation, and accountability between citizens and the state, that have been integral to subaltern experiences in Indian cities. The brutal enforcement of lockdown carried out by the police and other local urban authorities across many countries, has unleashed a more direct violence, prompting the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to note that there has been an alarming rise in police brutality and civil rights violations under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures (OHCHR 2020). The experience across Indian cities was no different. Reports noted rising levels of violence directed towards those employed in already stigmatised labouring relationships, including those involving waste picking, garbage dump management, solid waste clearing, cleaning, and sanitation labour (see, for example, HRW 2020). *The Lancet* also noted minorities faced heightened risks given that 'the spread of misinformation driven by fear, stigma, and blame [have been used] to fan anti-Muslim sentiment and violence' (*Lancet* 2020). For the urban 'subaltern classes' (as theorised in A. Roy 2011), the lockdown was yet another experience of violence and subjugation, understood as part of the 'terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics' (224) that have come to characterise cities of the Global South.

Lockdown and the enforcement of social distancing have also meant that community organisations that represent or work with the 'subaltern' have found their usual methods of mobilisation, gathering for solidarity, and daily routines to check-in with community members have been curtailed. Certain types of 'action-oriented' and 'community-driven' (often known as 'bottom-up') research practices too have had to cease (see, for example, the impact on research amongst vulnerable groups during COVID-19 in Townsend *et al.* (2020)). Many have switched to using online or other distanced methods. This raises legitimate concerns around the extent to which 'distanced' action-research can be inclusive and address citizens' lack of agency. Public health containment measures in response to COVID-19 have required significant epistemic and ontological shifts in 'bottom-up' and 'action-oriented' approaches to development studies research. However, subaltern groups continue to reshape their connections with and within the city. Their memories, practices, and personal narratives continue to challenge the hegemonic narratives and practices of violence and the collective amnesia around violence. Drawing on our experiences of researching the silent histories of violence and memorialisation of past violence in urban India over the past three decades, we argue that the experience of subaltern groups during the pandemic is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. Exceptionalising the experiences of violence during the pandemic serves to silence past histories and disenfranchises long struggles for rights in the city. At the same time, however, we argue that research practices employed to interpret the experience of urban violence during lockdown in India need to engage the changing nature of infrastructural regimes, as they seek to control urban space, and as subaltern groups continue to mobilise and advocate, in new ways.

The following section summarises how we understand the memorialisation of everyday violence, building to an understanding of memorialisation practices as tools subaltern groups use to uphold the often silenced and forgotten violence inflicted upon them. The next section presents the experience of what has come to be known as the 'first wave of COVID-19' in Indian cities. We then present two moments of historical violence, the citywide riots in Mumbai and a gang rape in Delhi that gained nationwide attention, to highlight the continuities between the violence experienced by subaltern groups historically and during the pandemic. We then reflect on the implications for researching what we term the violence 'of' the pandemic.

Memorialisation of everyday violence

> Sumatha,[1] a housemaid, refuses to bandage her leg. She would rather the wound from a rat bite fester, than show that she is injured. To her, a bandage is a sign of weakness; a sure way to signal that she is losing whatever footing she has in her day-to-day survival in the neighbourhood. … She says there are vultures out to get her and her jobs; she must not allow them to get near. During the last riots, she had got hurt, and lost all her jobs. (Gupte 2011b: 190).

How must we understand the memorialisation of everyday violence as a cultural or societal response? Memorialisation practices are central to societies and, in turn, play a critical role in social research that centralises culture and symbolism in understanding social worlds (Harvey 1979, Tuan 1979, Cosgrove 1998). As practices of cultural production and meaning-making (Macdonald, 2013, Ashley 2019) memorialisation 'signifies aspects of the past as important: the making-valuable, through conscious acts, those objects, places, events, practices, memories, ideas, even sensibilities that are attached to the past in some way' (Ashley 2019). Memorialisation 'helps us string past events in our minds, providing them with historical meaning' (Zerubavel 2003:13). Such practices are, however, defined and perpetuated by gendered roles, particularly where these intersect with the everyday experience of subaltern groups, that may or may not afford men and women the time and resources to reflect or partake in memorialisation practices. Time-consuming responsibilities of unpaid care and domestic work, predominantly carried out by women and girls, and various forms of exploitative labour relationships can leave little time or energy for reflection.

While academic research predominantly focusses on tangible cultural products and landscapes to commemorate violence, conflict, and their victims (Lunn 2007, Gillen 2018, Wise 2020), memorialisation is also an affective experience that evokes 'strongest emotions' (Read & Wyndham 2016: 13). We therefore define memorialisation as both tangible and intangible practices which help in dealing with loss, suffering, and grief, and provide multiple ways in which violent experiences can be transcended over time. By extension, memorialisation for us becomes both an individual and collaborative practice and experience. We recognise it as a spatialised practice, even when the spaces of memorialisation are not static and fixed in time. The selection, design, and location of memorialisation spaces are all central and political oriented to the acts of remembrance, honouring and sharing the memories of violence. On the one hand, '"[m]emorializing" [i]s an important way that society organises and valorizes space' (Ashley 2019: 29), and on the other, space can enable, hinder, and regenerate memories and narratives of violence (Petersson & Wingren 2011).

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[1] Pseudonym.

As a socio-cultural practice, memorialisation is too often understood to be 'outside of the political process—relegated to the 'soft' cultural sphere as art object, to the private sphere or personal mourning, or to the margins of power and politics' (Brett *et al.* 2008: 2). In our view, this misinterprets the politics of memorialisation and its role in social justice, peacebuilding, and the development of a collective sense of self (Wang 2008). Social groups employ memories and recollections to (re)constitute experiences of violence, particularly in post-conflict societies in order to ensure transitional justice and peacebuilding (Ruwanpathirana 2016, Rolston 2020). Yet, their practices can be deeply structured by political relations such as colonialism even when the 'affective and conscious space-making' practices are transformed by the communities over time (Ashley 2019: 33). Similarly, the State can critically hamper or enable memorialisation practices (Naidu 2004: np). For instance, Read & Wyndham (2016) argue that Chilean transition to democracy has been an incomplete and bitter journey for the survivors of the Chilean military dictatorship because of many state-led obstacles to memorialisation attempts by the victimised social groups. In turn, memorialisation practices undertaken by the state have the potential to reinforce specific, and dominant, narratives of violence. However, the state can also actively use memorialisation practices to overcome a contentious and violent past by performing its 'duty to remember' (Rolston 2020: 320). Memorialisation practices are thus deeply political and 'intersect with power relations and inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society's political and economic resources' (Hoelscher & Alderman 2004: 349). As a political practice memorialisation inevitably reflects the socio-political context in which it is undertaken (Holloway 2020). Questions such as who gets memorialised, how, why, and by whom hold significant political value and shed light on socio-political constructions, tensions, values of the past, present, and possibly of the future (Foote & Azrayahu 2007).

Important to the arguments of this article, memorialisation practices not only provide insights into socio-political processes but also serve as useful methodological tools. Violence is often researched post facto and is often narrated as fixed events that *had* happened in the past. In grounded research on violence, memorialisation practices act as heuristic devices in understanding histories, narratives, and effects of violence on individual and collective identities and social (power) relations (Keightley 2010, Ashley 2019). The combination of subjective/objective and tangible/intangible aspects of memorialisation allows for analyses of how members of the communities perceive, live, and alter the memories of violence and conflict (McIlvenny & Noy 2011). Memorialisation practices as methods unearth the hidden dynamic of violence from the past through the present into the future (Springer 2011, Tyner *et al.* 2014).

As a result, we recognise memorialisation practices as political tools used by subaltern groups to remember and remind us of the silenced and forgotten violence

inflicted upon them. Subaltern groups 'struggle from below' to undertake and get their memorialisation practices and interpretations acknowledged within hegemonic narratives. These struggles are not grandiose expressions like war memorials yet are central to making their voices heard and recognised, both within and outside of the research context. Ethnographic methodologies that centralise memories, participation, and co-production of knowledge are particularly useful in bringing subaltern groups together and making their voices chronicled and heard. In turn, memorialisation practices play a central role in producing spaces of resistance by subaltern groups (Pinkerton 2012, Suarez & Suarez 2016; Haripriya 2020).

The exceptionalisation of COVID-19 in Indian cities

As we write this article on 18 September 2020, more than 5 million people have been infected by COVID-19 in India.[22] India introduced a national lockdown between 25 March and 31 May 2020, and a gradual reopening to slow down the spread of the pandemic. Three cities—Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai—account for more than 40 per cent of the total cases (Rukmini 2020, Sharma 2020). During the pandemic, India's gross domestic product declined to 23.9 per cent with a projected negative growth rate of 4.5 per cent in FY 2020–21 (NSO 2020, Dave 2020). The impacts have been felt the hardest in the informal sector, which accounts for more than 86 per cent of India's workforce which is largely uninsured, with limited savings, and minimal worker rights such as workplace health and safety (Bonnet *et al.* 2019). Daily-wage earners were amongst the first to experience extreme hardship. As work opportunities for manual labour began to dry up, the police also dispersed the regular spots at which workers gather in the mornings to seek employment (Daniyal *et al.* 2020). Informal wage workers in the construction sector are a particular example where impacts of 'the non-availability of regular work, shortages of food, burden of large family size, and social evils of living in a slum, [harassment] by goons as well as contractors with minimal support from trade unions and government' (Dhal 2020), were exacrebated by a near complete lack of employer responsibility or labour rights.

There have also been major disruptions in access and supply of food, healthcare, public transport, and education and associated nutrition programmes, especially for

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[2] India experienced a 'first wave' of COVID-19 from June to September 2020. During this wave, seven-day national rolling averages of positive cases peaked at just about 60,000 cases. This article is based on our critical reading of this period of the pandemic. However, as we submitted the final version of the article, much to our dismay, India is undergoing a far greater 'second wave' of infections from February 2021 continuing through to May 2021, with the seven-day national average of positive cases well above 120,000. See https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in.

the marginalised population, in addition to issues like overcrowding, heating, and poor to non-existent options for self-isolation, especially in low-income and slum areas (Golecha & Panigrahy 2020) which aggravated the socio-economic insecurities and inequalities of urban living during the pandemic. These factors have led to mass reverse migration from cities to villages and small towns, with most migrants leaving cities by any means, including walking, due to the suspension of public transportation. In turn, migrants have faced impacts such as deaths due to hunger and exhaustion, lack of access to healthcare when needed and unsupervised childbirth, and inhumane treatment such as spraying of chemical disinfectant on returnees (BBC News 2020a, Choudhari 2020, Kumar 2020).

Direct forms of violence, such as police brutality, violations of human rights and gender-based violence (GBV) have been common during the pandemic (Gupte 2020b). Police brutality was seemingly endorsed as a necessity 'to safeguard interests of the general public' (Chaudhari 2020). The militarised enforcement of the national lockdown exacerbated existing patterns of police brutality in many Indian cities, which has been upheld under the guise of enforcing the lockdown restrictions. According to a Public Interest Litigation filed at the Bombay High Court, at least fifteen had died of police brutality as of 3 July 2020 (Chaudhari 2020). The primary victims of police brutality are minorities and marginalised communities, such as Muslims and working-class migrant workers, daily-wage earners, and street vendors (Kalita 2020, Nazeer 2020). GBV, especially domestic violence, also increased during the lockdown. According to the National Commission for Women, there was a 94 per cent increase in complaints about domestic violence with a total of 587 cases reported during the period 23 March to 16 April 2020 (Nigam, 2020). The lockdown considerably heightened the proximity of survivors with abusers, limited survivor's access to support services, and limited their physical mobilities and access to safe physical spaces (Erskine 2020). Many GBV services, in the absence of concerted government policies, have shifted to online and phone-based systems, which raises critical issues of access, and the trackability and confidentiality of the survivors of GBV (*ibid*).

As palpable as they were, these experiences of violence were exceptionalised as they came under the gaze of 24/7 news media. As an estimated ten million migrant labourers began walking hundreds of kilometres from their worksites in cities that were locked-down to their villages, 'carrying children, clutching their meagre possessions, crowding disrupted transport networks, beaten and resourceless, [facing] hunger, destitution, the wrath of the police and suspicion of communities and tragic death' (Sengupta & Jha 2020: 153), their journey became the subject of a media spectacle shown live by 24-hour live news channels. International and local news networks alike showcased the momentous and immense movement of vulnerable people. Reports chronicled hundreds of migrant deaths (see, for example, Wallen 2020), while

interviews were conducted with the labourers as they stopped momentarily to rest, or even as they walked tirelessly (see, for example, BBC News 2020b). Video reportage showed labourers being made to crawl (see *India Today* 2020b) or huddle on the road as they were forcefully sprayed with disinfectant by overzealous authorities (see BBC News 2020a). The episode of a 15-year-old girl transporting her injured father hundreds of miles on a pedal-bike stands out. The girl, Jyoti, was dubbed 'India's Lionhearted Daughter' and even approached by The Cycling Federation of India (Gettleman & Raj 2020). Prime Minister Modi called on Indians to clap, ring bells, or bang on steel plates as a way to show collective appreciation of the migrants, amongst other emergency responders (*India Today* 2020c).

We note however that, alongside the exceptionalisation of violence in the media and in many organs of popular discourse, it was simultaneously invisibilised in official data. According to available provisional information, 81,385 accidents occurred on the roads (including national highways) during the period March–June 2020 with 29,415 fatalities (GoI 2020). Despite this, in Parliament, the government revealed that no official data on the specific circumstances of the migrant labourers walking back has been collected. Similarly, the National Commission for Women noted that, despite the increase in anecdotal reporting of domestic violence, almost 86 per cent of the survivors did not officially report it (Kapoor 2020, Nigam 2020).

Everyday violence in Mumbai and Delhi

The violence under the everyday of the pandemic is not exceptional. It fits within a much longer trajectory of everyday violence as experienced by the subaltern. We describe below two monumental episodes of past violence, a deadly bout of citywide riots in Mumbai lasting from early December 1992 to mid-January 1993, and the brutal gang rape of a young middle-class woman in Delhi in 2012, which triggered countrywide protests.

Nilu,[3] a resident of an inner-city neighbourhood in Mumbai, had lived through several serious incidences of rioting, including the citywide riots. When asked why he thought riots and public disturbances were such a common phenomenon, he replied:

> Nilu: All this [referring to the various episodes of local violence I had described to him] needs to be done around here. Something or another comes up to *bhadkao* (incite) everyone, then people take *fayda* (advantage) of the situation. Everyone has their own problems. And this happens very easily, you don't know, suddenly people act like they are mad. But they are not really mad are they? They are just taking

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[3] Pseudonym.

advantage of the situation. And let me tell you, people do take advantage, things they wouldn't do get done (as quoted in Gupte 2011a: 112).

The 'everyday-ness' (Scheper-Hughes 1993) of this violence is a relational and interactive reality that is separate from but intertwined with the physicality of death, injury, and destruction. Even when describing the devastating violence of the 1992–93 citywide riots, respondents recalled ordinary everyday interactions as meaningful experiences intertwined with the exceptional circumstance of the riots. One respondent recalled:

> one day one chap would come banging on the door, so I would quickly give him some money, or food or whatever the neighbours were giving … the next day someone else would come. … My neighbour's son would go out and he knew who actually had control during the nights … then we knew who to pay [for protection]' (Gupte 2011a: 113).

These everyday experiences that so significantly shaped the experiences of those who did not benefit from the protection of the city police seem, however, to be lost in official accounts. As Chatterji and Mehta argue on the basis of rich and detailed ethnographic research, 'we do not find a sustained effort to put together these events of violence, much less reflect on their common modalities' (Chatterji & Mehta 2007).

Two decades later, on 16 December 2012, Nirbhaya, a middle-class young woman, was gang-raped in a moving bus in India's capital city of Delhi. Nirbhaya was returning after watching a movie with her male friend. After being refused auto rides, they boarded a private bus to return home which was occupied by six men, including the driver. The men beat up the couple and 'brutally assaulted, gang-raped and eviscerate[d]' Nirbhaya before leaving her and the friend on the sidewalk (Kaur 2017). Nirbhaya died of her injuries a few days later. The widely reported incident caught the sentiments of the entire country; thousands of women and men protested the lack of the state's ability to provide safety for women while demanding fast-track legal trials and death penalty for the perpetrators. And yet, the Nirbhaya case also rekindled personal and collective memories of violence and trauma that many women suffer in silence every day. Violence against women in public spaces is highly normalised in Delhi (Zahan 2020a). Fear and violent experiences shape women's lives, and there is a tacit acceptance that violence is a part of life that women have to adjust to by making conscious decisions about how they access public spaces. In turn, many women modify their spatial practices in the city to produce safer geographies (Vishwanath & Mehrotra 2007, Zahan 2020b). The social acceptance and distancing of violence against women (VAW) from public debates are achieved through practices such as censoring, silencing, victim-blaming, and the use of fear as a discursive tool of control (Zahan 2020a). The protests became a catalyst for the recognition of normalisation of violence that

all women undergo in Delhi and other Indian cities. In other words, recognition and justice for Nirbhaya were considered justice for all women. Nirbhaya soon came to be recognised as 'India's Daughter' (see DenHoed 2015) who stood for *all* women— potential and actual victims of violence—in public spaces. At the same time, many argue that the emerging forms of feminist activism which focus on the occupation of public spaces have the tendency to fall prey to neoliberal agendas of individual choice and responsibility (S. Roy 2011, Taneja 2019); that actions to mobilise a reclaiming of public space do not challenge the power relations that produce VAW in the first place. For instance, Datta (2016) argues that there is a 'lack of critical reflection on the spatiality [non-urban] and intersectionality' that shape VAW which stifles 'progressive interventions' in the area (Datta 2016: 173; see also Rajalakshmi 2020).

Researching the violence 'of' the pandemic

There are epistemological, ontological, and safeguarding repercussions for researching the violence 'of' the pandemic. Proximity between the researcher and subject, between the subaltern and the state, and importantly, between and within communities themselves, is a legitimate health risk in present circumstances. This bears significantly on the ethical considerations of research on the urban condition, and poses a legitimate challenge to long-standing participatory action-research paradigms (as in Chambers 1994). Epistemologically, what does it mean to conduct research on subaltern urbanism 'from a distance'? Ontologically, how is 'proximity' related to 'participatory', 'community-driven', or 'action-oriented' research? These questions require urgent and continued visitation. Equally, safeguarding concerns of conducting research in marginal spaces, and with marginalised people living and working in precarious urban spaces in low-income neighbourhoods in the Global South (as elaborated by Aktar *et al.* 2020), also need to be revisited in light of heightened risks and vulnerabilities (see, for example, Stranded Workers Action Network 2020).

We are noting here the violence 'of' the pandemic as violence that has in some direct or indirect way been caused or reshaped by the pandemic. Its (re)occurrence is not exactly aligned, spatially or temporally, to the pandemic. On the one hand, we very much expect its trajectory to be long lasting, particularly for subaltern groups, and amplified beyond the pandemic by unequal infrastructural, labour caste, and class relationships in the city. On the other hand, and as the previous sections have already articulated, subaltern experiences of violence of the pandemic thus far have not been exceptional but fit within everyday negotiations and other power relationships within the city that predate the pandemic. And while these negotiations and

relationships are characteristic of subaltern urban experiences, they are also silenced by top-down institutional responses to city making. As Datta (2020) has artfully shown, the time and speed with which top-down interventionist regimes mobilise the logics of a 'technological fix' to violence in the city, leave behind 'those in the urban peripheries [who] encounter and negotiate [the city's] spatio-temporalities through a slow violence of life that is invisible and unfolding over time and space' (1318). It is notable that techno-utopian interventions by the state, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, also displayed a similar socio-temporal mismatch with subaltern experiences. While they were quick to identify dense informal areas as high risk, tech-based interventions such as mobile apps with track-and-trace functions were uncritical and unnuanced towards the deeply unequal socio-economic relationships that also characterised these areas. The solutions proposed assumed access to digital infrastructures, whereas access is deeply gendered (World Wide Web Foundation 2015); they assumed people's movements were voluntary and that isolation was easily enforceable, whereas the labour and other socio-economic relationships of the subaltern are often *compulsory* in nature (Gupte & Mitlin 2021) and isolation is not possible (Wilkinson 2020).

The nature of such interventions notwithstanding, grass-roots activity of and in relation to subaltern groups in low-income urban settings has not ceased during the pandemic, even if it has responded to the pandemic in many significant ways. Community groups in low-income across various contexts in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa have continued to provide links and interactions with and between state agencies to address local needs (Gupte & Mitlin 2021). In Indian cities, too, self-organisation by subaltern groups has continued to meaningfully shape the urban condition (see, for example, Auerbach & Thachil 2021), in continuation of the mass mobilisation movements that have historically advocated housing rights in the face of eviction and demolition drives by 'neoliberal populism' (A. Roy 2010) seeking to redevelop informal spaces in the city. Similarly, Patel and Gupta (2020) noted that women-led grass-roots organisations in various countries, including India, Nepal, and the Philippines in Asia, and Kenya, South Africa Nigeria, Malawi, and Zimbabwe in Africa, generated practical responses to the coronavirus pandemic, from disseminating information, to relief and assistance funding, even when these women were themselves the victims of the pandemic.

Concluding reflections

The public health containment measures instated in response to COVID-19 in urban India have inflicted a particular kind of violence on subaltern groups. This violence,

which we term the violence 'of' the pandemic, has been direct in its physicality, manifesting through the brutal enforcement of an infrastructural regime seeking to control urban space by the state, the police, and other urban local authorities, as well as dominant non-state groups. But it has also indirectly permeated the everyday experiences and infrastructural interactions of subaltern groups in the city. We have highlighted two noteworthy dynamics in this regard. First, the violence of the pandemic experienced by subaltern groups is not an aberration from their sustained experiences of everyday violence predating the pandemic. For this reason, exception-alising their recent experiences belies a much longer and deeper experience of violence and silences their long-standing struggles for rights in the city. Second, the modes and mechanisms by which subaltern groups express agency and advocate for their rights has been impacted by physical and social distancing.

These impacts notwithstanding, community groups have continued to operate through the pandemic to deliver essential services and advocate for rights. For this reason, it is important for action-oriented participatory research methods to navigate the significant epistemological and ontological shifts with care. It stands to reason that researching the violence of the pandemic requires a continued engagement with the habitation, livelihoods, self-organising, and memorialisation of subaltern groups. And that not privileging this continued reality bears the risk of misinterpreting, or worse entirely silencing, the experiences of the violence of the pandemic in the city. Indeed, it is at this precise moment when heightened vulnerabilities are being faced with new agency, that research and advocacy need to jointly transcend the obstructions from lockdowns, and physical and social distancing measures.

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'Nothing ever dies': memory and marginal children's voices in Rwandan and Vietnamese narratives

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Abstract: Memory is a highly contested notion insofar as it is claimed by the collective (Halbwachs, Young) and deployed within a variety of political and socio-cultural contexts. For Viet Thanh Nguyen, the 'true war story' can be told by those who lived through it, thereby wresting power from 'men and soldiers' and dominant structures (*Nothing Ever Dies*, Harvard UP, 2017: 243). Examining the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, this article examines narratives which reclaim memory as a personal and as a collective plea to understand the structural discrepancy at play from the child, who is victim of war. It examines the memoir of a Tutsi refugee child, *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* (C. Habonimana, Plon Récit, 2019) and an autobiographical narrative by a Vietnamese refugee in Canada, *Ru* (K. Thúy, Liana Lévi, 2010), to gauge the extent to which such narratives create their own memorial spaces and in so doing reclaim their marginal memories and centre them, while grappling with the imperative to forget. Ultimately it tests Nguyen's theory that memory can be just and that in this ethical recoding of memory, the humanity and inhumanity of both sides is underlined.

Keywords: Tutsi genocide, Vietnamese refugees, childhood narratives, war, memory, affect.

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Introduction

> All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.[1]
>
> <div align="right">Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*</div>

Memory is a highly contested notion insofar as it is claimed by the collective and deployed within a variety of political and socio-cultural contexts.[2] Discussing the notion of postmemory,[3] Viet Thanh Nguyen underlines the potential inwardness of the pain of memory and the subsequent agony that this causes for those who cannot deal with their past (2017: 268), which he seeks to eschew. For the writer critic, 'total memory' is impossible and memory has been commodified by those who wield power (2017: 4), as is the case of the Vietnam war, where memory is processed through the lens of the GIs and North America's retelling of the war. Nguyen promulgates a recuperation of memory, which he terms 'just memory' as an ethical apparatus which empowers the reader to understand the humanity and inhumanity of both sides during the war (12).

According to Nguyen, 'the problem of war and memory, is […] first and foremost about how to remember the dead, who cannot speak for themselves' (4). However, remembering is fraught since memories involve a complex ethical framing, which leads him to advocate for a:

> complex ethics of memory, a just memory that strives both to remember one's own and others, while at the same time drawing attention to the lifecycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change. (12)

In this way, Nguyen gestures towards the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting as inherent to any study of memory. Studying memories of war, in this context, represents a 'negotiation between remembering one's own and remembering others [which] does not mean that competing memories can be reconciled, only that submitting to only one ethical memory at the exclusion of the other, will never suffice' (18). It also involves understanding that the absence of memories is at stake where certain powers are able to control what is remembered and what is forgotten. For the writer, the 'true war story' (243) can be told by those who lived through it, thereby wresting power from 'men and soldiers' and dominant structures. Nonetheless, in so doing,

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[1] Conversely, in his foreword to *The American War in Vietnam*, G. Kurt Piehler asserts that 'many wars are forgotten despite the best efforts to preserve their memory' (2017: x).
[2] See Halbwachs (1992) and Young (1993).
[3] See Hirsch (1997).

those who write their own experiences of war and strife '[leave] one fraught territory to enter one nearly as perilous' (243).

In his introduction to *Memory and Postcolonial Studies*, Dirk Göttsche asserts that 'literary studies across languages have benefitted particularly from the new alliance between Memory Studies and Postcolonial Studies', insofar as literature creates a new poetics of memory (2019: 14–15). Writing personal experiences of war and the ways in which memories might be presented through different literary forms become a crucial aspect of discussing the dialectics of remembering and forgetting. It is from this point of view that I examine autobiographical narratives of two war refugee children from Rwanda (former Belgian colony) and Vietnam (former French colony and American ally) who grew up in Rwanda and Quebec, respectively, and through educational infrastructure, acquire the means and ability to speak of their experiences. I study narratives which reclaim memory as a personal and as a collective plea to understand the structural discrepancy at play from the child who is a victim of war. In particular, I examine a testimonial memoir by a Tutsi refugee child, *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* [I, The Last Tutsi] (Habonimana 2019) and an autobiographical narrative by a Vietnamese refugee in Canada, *Ru* (Thúy 2010) to gauge the extent to which such narratives create their own memorial spaces and in so doing reclaim their marginal memories and centre them. Ultimately, I test Nguyen's theory that memory can be 'just' and that in this ethical recoding of memory, the humanity and inhumanity of both sides is underlined.

Remembering Rwanda, reliving hell

> While just memory might lead to an enlightened forgetting of the horrors and conflicts of the past, it can also lead to a tragic awareness of what is irreconcilable within ourselves and within those near and dear to us. When it comes to war, ethical memory illuminates how war neither emerges from alien territory nor is fought by monsters. War grows on intimate soil, nurtured by friends and neighbors, fought by sons, daughters, wives, and fathers. (Nguyen 2017: 18)

In his essay, Nguyen highlights the fact that wars are not always fought between strangers and governments. Indeed, Nguyen argues that war is deeply intimate insofar as it involves the people who are the closest to each other and this is fully instantiated in the Tutsi genocide of Rwanda in 1994.[4] Termed a 'massive human

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[4] See also Florence Prudhomme's *Cahiers de mémoire, Kigali, 2019* (Prudhomme & Muller 2019) wherein the philosopher discusses the need to hear from the victims first-hand as they recount the murderous intent of neighbours and sometimes even family members.

failure' (Berry & Berry 1995: 2), it is a series of events that, despite being 'so widely covered by the media', 'largely [remain] misunderstood by the international community' (Berry & Berry 1995: 4). Between April and July 1994, one of the most disastrous massacres of the 20th century took place as the Hutus purged the majority of the Tutsis in Rwanda. Charles Habonimana, a Tutsi, was twelve at the time, son to a cabaret owner and homemaker mother, and sibling to seven other children, of whom only one other survived the genocide. As the last remaining Tutsi child in his village, he was not only given the front seat to the assassination of Tutsis but also maintained alive so his body would be preserved for the Hutu children to know what a Tutsi looked like. He was to be the last to die (Habonimana 2019: 53). Taken hostage by Sebuhuku, the regional Hutu chief whose edict it was that he be spared until no other Tutsi existed, he is enslaved, suffers from utmost violence, both verbal and physical, until he is eventually rescued by the Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR) / Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). *Moi, le dernier Tutsi* is an account of his memories of those three months, as well as his reflections on the aftermath of the genocide and the role of his own memories in paying tribute to those who died during the war, including his parents and siblings. In this section, I discuss the ways in which Habonimana (aided by his co-writer Daniel Le Scornet) constructs his narration to recreate those events and allow the reader to live through his experiences with him as living memory in the present rather than as a series of events which remain in the past.

   In an insightful essay on the language of killing and suffering as related to the atrocities perpetrated in Rwanda, Christopher Davis argues that the term 'genocide' '[conjoins] personal and collective suffering to a catch-all moniker that does justice to neither' (2019: 396). Habonimana's narration goes a long way in combining both a personal narrative of events and the historical narrative, as he provides a detailed overview of the timeline and events as they unfold. From the very title of the memoir, the use of the tonic pronoun 'moi' shifts the focus to the boy's experiences. The definite article 'le / the' reinforces the uniqueness of his position as he is paraded in front of the Hutus. Equally the text is carefully constructed so that the narration is urgent, and this is reflected in the syntax and through the opening and closing sentences of each chapter. Indeed, Habonimana's narration begins with a shocking juxtaposition of childhood and death: 'Je m'appelle Charles, j'ai 12 ans et je vais mourir / My name is Charles, I am 12 and I am about to die' (9). Childhood is deemed to be the antithesis to death here since the latter should, under normal circumstances, occur in old age. The violence of the first sentence and the despair it underlines are exacerbated by the fact that people with whom he and his family have lived and interacted are now demanding that their blood be shed: 'des centaines de visages connus, voisins et amis d'hier, accourus pour assister aux exécutions comme on va à une fête de famille. Ils veulent voir. Ils doivent voir / hundreds of known faces, neighbours and friends of

yesterday, running to witness the executions as one would a family party. They want to see. They must see' (9). As Nguyen has outlined, the intimacy of war is evoked here as friends become foes and sing for their entire clan's death. The speed at which such a reversal occurs belies the so-called friendship that was shared.

The horror of the betrayal is reinforced by the Christian imagery of Jesus Christ's road to Calvary.[5] Indeed, the chapter itself is called 'Calvary' and the hill on which all the Tutsis are assassinated is renamed road to Calvary, in an ironic reinterpretation of the New Testament. While Christ may have died to save humanity, here humans kill other humans to prove their superiority, thus invalidating the premise of the Biblical sacrifice, and delegitimising the Hutus' quest. The Catholic priest, a legacy from the missionary work in Rwanda, is crucified like Christ (10), and his last moments are likened to Christ's 'Passion' (11). In front of the young boy, his friends from football watch the massacre unfold in front of their voyeur eyes. Their eyes register their interest and their investment in the bloodshed even as their friends are rapidly butchered before them. The Hutu enemies acquire the characteristics of hunters as the semantic and lexical fields of hunting and butchery are deployed: 'la chasse / the hunt', 'les captures / the captures' (11), and his father is killed 'comme un animal à l'abattoir / like an animal at the slaughterhouse' (12). The Tutsis are dehumanised so that it becomes easier for their killers to think of them as prey. For Charles, this means that he is living through the last vestiges of his humanity as he is asked to witness before also being reduced to mere flesh. Witnessing is here a form of torture and not a way to remember. The Hutus will only remember their own victories over the Tutsis and choose to forget their own inhuman actions. The circularity of the first chapter as it ends on the emphatic and repeated 'J'ai 12 ans et je vais mourir / I am 12 and I am about to die' (12) brings to bear the immediacy as well as the imminence of death for the boy. Later he comes back to this scene, depicted through short emphatic sentences as they reveal the shock of the child as it is etched in his memory:

> Fidel est mort.
> Papa gît à mes pieds.
> J'ai 12 ans et je viens d'assister à la mise à mort de mes deux héros.
>
> (Fidel is dead.
> Father lies at my feet.
> I am twelve and I have just witnessed the assassination of my two heroes.) (52)

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[5] According to the New Testament, Jesus is tasked with carrying his own cross on the way to Golgotha, where he will be crucified. Along the way, he falters and falls a number of times and meets several people, including his mother and his apostles.

For Nguyen, part of the ethics of memory is 'reminding ourselves that being human also means being inhuman' (Nguyen 2017: 72). The Hutus in this narrative are depicted both pre-genocide and post-genocide to highlight the drastic changes in their demeanour. Thus, setting his story through a time-stamped historical rendition, the narrator informs us that on 6 April 1994, at approximately eight in the evening, a 'tsunami de violence / tsunami of violence' erupts in the country (Habonimana 2019: 13), as overnight the Hutus became the enemies. He depicts the time pre-genocide in his village as peaceful: 'au village Hutu, Tutsi, Twa vivent en harmonie. […] Il n'y a ni apartheid ni ghetto. Les mariages entre Tutsi et Hutu sont nombreux / in the village, Hutu/Tutsi and Twa live in harmony. […] There is neither apartheid nor a ghetto. There are many marriages between the Hutu and Tutsi' (14). Nonetheless, he acqui-esces that there were multiple instances in the past where the Tutsis had been in danger (1959, 1962, 1973), thereby testifying to the fragility of the peace which is taken for granted by the children since they have not lived through these trying times. In reality, the fact that the parents and heads of family have a contingency plan for such eventu-alities speaks to a recurrent event, which reached its apogee in 1994. Indeed, the Tutsi families retreat to a form of refugee camp where they believe they will be safe, since it is where they sought refuge in the previous skirmishes, while others are massacred across the country in a concerted effort by several Hutu factions. We are informed that refugees from the previous strife against Tutsis were already in neighbouring countries, even if, for the child, the different groups had lived in relative harmony in recent decades.

In an interview with Mehdi Ba of *Jeune Afrique*, Habonimana explains that: 'Les événements que j'ai vécus pendant ces trois mois sont restés imprimés. Je n'ai oublié ni les bruits, ni les mots, ni les images du génocide des Tutsi. Mon récit porte surtout sur les événements du mois d'avril 1994, ceux que j'ai le mieux mémorisés / The events that I experienced during these three months are imprinted in my memory. I have not forgotten the sounds, the words, nor the images of the genocide of the Tutsis. My text focuses particularly on the events which took place in April 1994, those that I recollect the most'.[6] Indeed, most of the narration focuses on that initial month as the child looks on in horror as Tutsi houses are burnt in their village. He also watches, as much a voyeur as his former football teammates, as his personal cow is savagely mutilated 'malgré l'horreur, je suis incapable de détourner mon regard de cette scène dantesque / in spite of the horror, I am unable to avert my gaze from this Dantesque scene' (35). The reference to Dante stresses the hellish scenes of torture and senseless killings, which is compounded with the disgust of unknowingly being fed the meat from his own butchered cow by someone whom they consider a family friend (42). However, he

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[6] Mehdi Ba (2019).

is blissfully unaware of this fact as he feasts on the flesh of his beloved cow and is only told the truth much later. The inhumanity of the Hutus is emphasised here as they become both butchers and cattle themselves in the narration: 'une dizaine de bouchers qui chassent en meute / ten or so butchers who hunt as a herd' (49). Moreover, the narrator refers to himself as 'gibier / prey' (66) and the appalling reality of children being murderers is associated with the same imagery 'des enfants ont participé à la chasse à l'homme, ont tué, ont torturé / children participated in the man hunt, they killed, they tortured' (134). Indeed, when the Hutus are bloodthirsty and Sebuhuku threatens to kill him, it is a child, like him, who displays the most urgency to end his life: 'un gamin excité s'approche de moi […] décidé à me tuer illico / a young boy approaches [….] deciding to kill me right then' (98). Thus, in this narrative, inhumanity is not only exhibited by the adults who are bent on ethnic cleansing but also children who mirror their elders' gestures and feelings. Children, far from symbolising innocence, are on a par with the adults, thereby explaining the fact that they, too, are judged by the village councils later.

The notion of inhumanity is also deployed with regard to those who animalise others to deny the humanity of those they kill: 'toujours lorsque les humains veulent exterminer, ils bestialisent leur proie / when humans want to kill, they always animalise their prey' (74). According to Frantz Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre / The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, rep. 2002), colonial powers employed the same principle when they enslaved colonial others.[7] Through the use of what Fanon terms the 'langage zoologique / zoological language' (2002: 45), they reduced those they colonised to the status of animals so that they did not feel they are mistreating human beings. The Tutsi genocide was not effected on people of different 'races'. Here, Habonimana highlights the fact that it was a 'racisme sans race / racism without race' which they faced (2019: 130), wherein Sebuhuku is regaled with stories of 'une journée de chasse aux Tutsi bien remplie / a full day of Tutsi hunting' (69). The child witnesses these gory tales as he has by now become the leader's slave (88) and is privy to this 'litanie des morts / litany of the dead' on a daily basis (89). From this point of view, Habonimana underlines the fact that the Hutus were as culpable of enslaving and degrading other humans as the former colonisers of Rwanda. In fact, the narrator reinforces the fact that hierarchies existed before colonisation, but they were principally along territorial lines. Colonial powers fragmented the society further by encouraging the opposition between Hutus and Tutsis as both ethnic communities vied for power under colonialism (90). Habonimana decries the fact that Europeans did not heed the warning signs of an

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[7] On another note, in his introduction to his edited volume *Memory and Postcolonial Studies* (2019), Dirk Göttsche underlines the fact that 'Postcolonial discourse uses memory—both individual and collective—to promote critical knowledge of the history of colonialism' (1).

impending massacre and left it too late before they intervened, so that the FPR soldiers were the only means of salvation as the Tutsis were decimated.[8] The genocide of 1994 was also not the final battle as skirmishes and attacks occurred again in 1997 and 1998 as the narrator points out (123), testifying to the tenuousness of peace.

Throughout the memoir, the narrator alternates between a historical analysis and a personal portrayal of events as he has experienced them. Writing about telling such a story, Habonimana reveals that it is impossible to relate these events: 'Comment raconter […]? Je ne peux pas raconter / How to tell […]? I can't tell' (64–5). Yet, tell he must, for history will remember the general events, forgetting the particular events, while he will remember the individuals who were brutally assassinated in front of his young eyes. Thus, it is with pathos that he depicts the Catholic convert, Vincent, who prays for the perpetrators and the victims alike even as he is dying (83). Equally the horror of putrefaction as the bodies decompose on the hill and have to be buried in mass graves is related in detail (92). Later, the entombment of women and children, including his own mother and siblings as they sing passages from the Bible to ask for forgiveness for their killers is portrayed with anguish and gravitas (94–5). This poignant episode, as he loses his mother and siblings, is also contrasted to the singing of the killers as they ask for the narrator's death (97). Nonetheless, the Hutus are not all assassins, as Sebuhuku's wife, Francine, and Sebuhuku's parents give him refuge and protect him when others hunt him. In fact, Sebuhuku himself, in spite of his role as head of the Hutu killers, in many ways protects Habonimana and allows him to live on several occasions, even as the horde clamours for his immediate assassination. In this way, the narrator does see the humanity of the Hutus who spare him and enable him to escape.

Through his survival, Charles inadvertently becomes the repository of memories inasmuch as he is the only one who has heard the list of all those who were killed since he was serving Sebuhuku when the killers reported their day's work: 'moi seul connais le registre complet des assassinats dans mon village / only I know the complete register of all the assassinations in my village' (119). Habonimana informs us that 'la mémoire d'un gamin de 12 ans est redoutable / a 12-year old boy's memory is formidable' (132). For the survivor, in time the massacre and its history will be properly written and for now, only those like him, who lived through these events and the bare life of survival,

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[8] In March 2021, the Commission Duclert, which investigated the role of France in the genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda twenty-seven years after the event, confirmed that France gave its support to the génocidaires (the people conducting the genocide) rather than the victims, both before and during the massacre. The report concludes that France had a 'responsabilité accablante / overwhelming responsibility' based on a 'faillite d'analyse / failure of analysis' and the decision makers as being blinded to the facts. The report has been accused of being edulcorated given that it concludes that France was not expressly complicit in the genocide itself. (See Survie 2021.)

can attest to the events they witnessed.[9] It is due to this formidable memory that his services are called upon in assisting the village justice system in imprisoning the man who killed his father and raped his mother (135). Redress and punishment for those who acted against the Tutsis is of fundamental importance so that justice is obtained for those who perished.

Towards the end of the text, Habonimana pivots the narrative to address his deceased family and acquaintances and reveals that his writing is commemorative as it speaks for the dead: 'ce n'est pas mon parcours, mon odyssée, ce sont les vôtres, c'est pourquoi il faut ma parole / it is not my journey, my odyssey, it is yours, that is why my words are necessary' (144). And, indeed, he goes as far as describing his children as representing those who passed away during the genocide, in a form of genealogical continuity (144). In an unpublished exchange, Habonimana tells me that 'd'abord le but était de rendre hommage aux disparus puis raconter ce qui est arrivé, sauvegarder leur mémoire / in the first place, the aim was to pay tribute to those who died, then tell the story of the events, treasure their memory' (personal communication (pc) 2020). As Marie-Odile Godard states, texts such as Habonimana's are 'marqueurs de mémoires / markers of memory', insofar as they enable the authors to write about their past and also 's'adresser aux disparus, pour leur dire la douleur du manque / to speak to the dead, to tell them of the pain of missing them' (in Prudhomme & Muller 2014: 261). Nevertheless, more than a tribute, the book is also Habonimana's way of writing the 'inoubliable / unforgettable' (2019: 162), in a manuscript he tells me it took him fifteen years to write. Writing in his case becomes a way of coming to terms with a past which is always present: 'c'est toujours ma vie / it's still my life' (pc 2020). For Habonimana, writing this memoir was intended as a means of 'dégager tout ce qui m'empechait [*sic*] de poursuivre ma vie au futur / getting rid of whatever was stopping me from living for the future' (pc 2020). It is also an acknowledgement that history might repeat itself and if so, 's'il m'arrive quelque chose, le monde sera au courant de mon enfance perdu [*sic*] / if something happens to me, the world will know of my lost childhood' (pc 2020).

Thus, writing childhood memories of war is both cathartic and horrific as the writer is forced to face his fears and trauma, as delineated by Nguyen. The path to piecing together memories of war is fraught and while those who must be remembered live again through the narrative, it also conjures up memories of those who committed atrocious acts. While Habonimana sought refuge within Rwanda and with those he knew, others, such as the Vietnamese refugees, were not always able to do so, and their memories of their country and the war, are tempered by language and identity issues.

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[9] Olivier Nyirubugara (2013) warns of the dangers of remembering and forgetting in Rwanda as it is also the memory of the violence perpetrated against Hutus by Tutsis which fuelled their wrath during the genocide.

The Vietnam within

Though most people know the Vietnam war through the lens of American theatre, novels, and film performances, such as *Miss Saigon* (initially performed onstage in 1989), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Quiet American* (novel by Graham Greene 1955, film 2002), the region had suffered from different power struggles, from the French colonisation, to the Japanese invasion, to the French again in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Communist takeover of North Vietnam plunged the country into further chaos in the 1950s and culminated in the fall of Saigon in April 1975, with the repatriation of Americans and some of the Vietnamese allies. The American defeat in Vietnam is deemed to be a 'thorn in the side' of political powers (Pelaud 2010: 20). Popular retellings of the war have tended to favour the American perspective, eliding the role played by the South Vietnamese as American allies and creating a sense of malaise in the Vietnamese themselves. For those who have been displaced due to the war and have elected to live in North America, 'acknowledging that they [the Vietnamese who died in South Vietnam] are worthy of remembrance' (Espiritu 2016: 19), is as important as the American's commemoration of their own soldiers.[10] While the USA seems to only want to remember the Vietnam War as the US soldiers fighting against the Viet Cong (Communists), creating their version of good against evil, they should not forget the role played by the ARVN (South Vietnam) soldiers who fought alongside them, some of whom were later granted asylum in the USA. Thus, there is an 'urgent need for the Vietnamese refugee story to be told from multiple vantage points in the face of traumatic silencing, both for North American and international audiences' (James 2016: 46). From this perspective, Hao Pham argues that writing about the war and the singular experiences from the vantage points of the Vietnamese 'becomes a political act, in representing an alternative voice to the mainstream' (Pham 2013: 18). For Pham, this process, which he calls 'counter-memory', 'goes against the mainstream dominant memories of an event' (19). For others, like Nathalie Huyh Chau Nguyen, 'the reappropriation of the past may reveal traumatic experience and devastating loss … but also be regenerative' (N. Nguyen 2010: 7). It is from this perspective that I focus on Thúy's first novel, *Ru*, which not only won the Governor's Prize in Quebec (2010), the RTL Prize (2010), and the Canada Reads prize (2010), but also the hearts of many people in Canada and around the world through her depiction of life in Saigon, the refugee experiences in Malaysia, and integration in Quebec. I examine the ways in which the protagonist reconstructs

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[10] See also Karin Agilar-San Juan's argument that 'that view is a partial, distorted, and exclusive rendition of history that does much more to shape a U.S. national identity than it does to illuminate the complexity of the Vietnamese American experience' (Aguilar-San Juan 2009: 62).

her childhood memories and reinscribes the fallen Vietnamese into the folds of collective history.

According to Donna Bailey Nurse, the text is 'Thúy's lightly fictionalized account of her own experience'.[11] Indeed, Thúy left Vietnam with her family in the 1980s, at the age of ten. As part of the boat people,[12] they travelled to Malaysian refugee camps and later were welcomed into Quebec. Like the writer, An Tinh Nguyen, the protagonist of *Ru*, hails from a well-to-do family in Saigon and falls into precarity in refugee camps. She becomes a child 'whom war transforms into a dispossessed and displaced individual' (Sing 2016: 181). From the inception, the narrator places her birth within history: 'Je suis venue au monde pendant l'offensive du Têt / I was born during the Têt offensive' (Thúy 2010: 11), thereby underlining the links between personal and the collective history as the event heralded the fall of Saigon. Thus, the narrative itself is carefully constructed in such a way as her present, as the mother of two sons Pascal and Henri, is imbricated in her past life in Saigon, during the occupation and in the refugee camps. This is effected through the way in which the narrative adopts a see-saw movement as memories are recollected with each anecdotal account.[13] In a form of what Jenny James terms 'bricolage', that is, a 'textual process where stories graft onto one another' (James 2016: 44–5), Thúy foregrounds 'adaptation and repair' (42), as Vietnamese families scramble to piece together a new life in Quebec, while maintaining links with the past.

The commingling of History and personal histories evokes Espiritu and Pham's notion of counter-memory, while here allowing the known History to carry the narrative as the multiple stories of the Vietnamese who lost their lives are foregrounded, saving them from the abyss of forgetting. In an early part of the text, the Vietnam war is recounted through the stories of the people who died on the way to relative safety in the Malaysian refugee camps. One of the bare lives on which she focuses her initial forays into the recesses of her memory is that of the mother who is rocking her scabies-infested child in the boat in which they are travelling, a memory which is conjured up by her own admission to not having experienced maternal feelings at first when her children were born. The present and memories of past events become interconnected in this narrative as she fashions a complex retelling of the refugee experience. Another memory, this time related to the boat and the other innocent people trying to survive, is that of the little girl who was 'engloutie par la mer / was devoured by the sea' (2010: 16), and whose memento was her footwear left behind as she slips and falls without anyone knowing. The fear of the Communists is compounded

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[11] Donna Bailey Nurse (2018).
[12] For a detailed account of the boat people see Barbara Vaillant (2013).
[13] See Buss (2018).

with the fear of the pirates who are attacking the boats and raping girls and women. Rather than the deaths of soldiers, here the atrocities experienced by individuals who are outside the power struggles between the Americans, the South Vietnamese soldiers, and the Communist soldiers are retold to highlight the countless other lives which were lost during this period, lest we forget that they, too, died in the name of the war.

But memories of Vietnam itself and the experience of occupation come later, with the family ceding half of their house to the Communist army. Thúy's narrator's evocations of this period is sensitive and cognisant of the naiveté of some of the Communists themselves, especially the young ones who are following orders. The 'jeune inspecteur encore enfant / young inspector, still a child', who is tasked with occupying her family's house and ensuring their possessions are at par with the other households', is portrayed with humanity as he thought he was saving South Vietnam from the Americans (2010: 58). As with Nguyen, Thúy acknowledges the humanity of the other by depicting the other side of the coin. In emphasising the brainwashing of the Communist Northerners, she brings to bear the humanity that links both the Communist soldiers and the narrator's family as they bond, even though this is quickly ruptured by orders from above to destroy the very cultural material such as music and books, which had united them (60). The subsequent realisation that the family should leave Saigon and travel towards freedom from the Communist regime further disrupts the incipient cordial relationship. Nonetheless, Thúy carefully navigates this by homing in on the fact that this inspector, along with many others, were also victims of the war, and their fate remains unknown. Remembering the war, involves not only remembering the negative, but also not forgetting the positive aspects of the enemy, even if it is a difficult prospect, as Nguyen reminds us.

Moreover, the narrator's memories of arrival in and adaptation to Quebec, their new society, are also lived in a range of ways. Invoking maternal imagery, the narrator depicts her first teacher as a 'maman cane / mother goose' keeping her offspring in line and looking after their well-being (2010: 24). Granby, the town in which they first settle, is portrayed as a roosting chicken which keeps its hatchlings warm (43), and later, as the biblical 'paradis terrestre / earthly paradise' (49). The host country is contrasted to the hell of the boats inside which they travelled when they left Vietnam, and the red earth on which they slept in the Malaysian refugee camps (32). These personal recollections allude to a happy integration process, so much that Thúy herself has been hailed as the poster child of refugee integration and success.[14] Nonetheless, within the narrative, Thúy does not gloss over the difficulties presented by a society whose language the child does not speak. According to Sing, 'at the time, Vietnam had two native languages, and the speakers of one were unfamiliar with the idiom of

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[14] See V.T. Nguyen (2013).

the other' (2016: 184). Since the narrator was born after the departure of the French, her native language is Vietnamese. Conversely, her parents have a good grasp of French, which allows them to find work easily. For An Tinh, navigating her way during her initial days in Quebec is problematic both because she is a quiet child and due to her lack of linguistic skills. Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us that 'The immigrant, the refugee, the exile, and the stranger who comes to these new shores may already have a voice, but usually it speaks in a different language than the American lingua franca, English' (V.T. Nguyen 2017: 198). Of course, he refers to his own particular circumstances in the USA, but the narrator of *Ru*, also underlines this particular hurdle: 'j'étais étourdie par tous ces sons étrangers qui nous accueillaient / all those strange sounds that welcomed us made me dizzy' (2010: 22). Moreover, since Quebec is part of Canada, where English is also spoken, the narrator must also grapple with English. The narrative stresses the problems of being a Vietnamese refugee through the recollection that when her mother forces her hand by sending her to an Anglophone cadet camp, she experiences bullying (39). Thus, even Quebec's welcome is mitigated by the circumstances of the person who arrives. The memories of good and bad experiences are woven together to allow for a balanced depiction here.

This dichotomous portrayal of the positive and negative impacts of displacement is taken further as the narrator returns to Vietnam on assignment for work. The allegorical deployment of stories to underline the rupture between siblings and North and South Vietnam (2010: 64–6) is correlated to the stories of her sons Pascal and Henri and the ways in which they have learnt to live together in peace, despite Henri's autism. Vietnam is also where An Tinh realises that she has become Canadian, through the eyes of the Vietnamese waiter who does not believe she is Vietnamese as she is too self-assured and has become too 'American'. She had lost the Vietnamese people's 'fragilité, leur incertitude, leurs peurs / fragility, their uncertainty and their fears' (2010: 127). Though she still considers herself to be Vietnamese at the time, such reflections augur a form of hybrid identity, which she claims as she recognises her ability to be both Canadian and Vietnamese. In spite of the nationalist rhetoric which only considers white Caucasians as Canadian, she chooses both countries even if they each reject her in her alterity. These episodes also lead to memories of another hybrid entity, emblematised by the children of Vietnamese prostitutes and American GIs, whom she calls 'la face cachée de la guerre / the hidden face of war' (132). While some have been able to take advantage of the US's repatriation programme, others have not been able to do so and live in limbo between two worlds and two identities. In inscribing such stories, Thúy reminds us that there are many facets to a war and to survival. While History may choose to forget individuals who belong nowhere, or perhaps in both countries simultaneously through their birth right, personal history involves permanent re-negotiations of such complex identification processes.

The narrator herself returns to Canada and through her partner and her children, re-anchors herself in Quebec, ending her narrative on a message of hope for the future.

Conclusion: the poetics of 'just memory'?

As she draws her narration to a close, An Tinh reiterates the need to understand that her children's future is connected to the 'personnages de son passé / characters from her past', who have 'secoué la crasse accumulée sur leur dos / shaken the dirt accumulated on their backs' to reveal beautiful feathers which adorn her sons' sky (2010: 213). For Thúy's narrator, 'un horizon en cache toujours un autre et […] il en est ainsi jusqu'à l'infini / a horizon hides another one […] and it will always be so infinitely' (213). Through her poetic words, she reinforces the notion that there are many layers to every story and history. For Thúy, through telling stories and evoking such memories, both the personal and the collective are braided together so that the next generations can understand and mourn. But it is important to remember that memories are also fallible and forgetting can be part of the process of survival. Throughout her narrative, Thúy has underlined the dualities at play. In many ways, she lends credence to Nguyen's premise that 'only through forgiveness of the pure kind, extended to others and ourselves, can we actually have a just forgetting and a hope for a new kind of story where we do not turn to the unjust past' (V.T. Nguyen 2017: 292).

Similarly, Habonimana's text ends on the notion of forgiveness. For a nation to repair its rifts, the national discourse is, as his eloquent chapter title asserts, 'Pardon et réconciliation / Forgiveness and Reconciliation' (2019: 138). Inscribing the aftermath of the Tutsi genocide of Rwanda through historical events mapped out with dates, Habonimana identifies the 2014 Commemoration of the genocide as instrumental in thinking about a common future for the people (139). Nonetheless, as Nicki Hitchcott suggests, 'the Rwandan government's campaign for reconciliation has generated a national discourse of forgiveness and forgetting, which leaves genocide survivors in a difficult place, torn between the (often involuntary) impulse to remember and the duty to forget' (2013: 76). Though Hitchcott conceives of forgetting as a duty, there is also a measure where forgiveness itself can only occur if contrition is true and amends are made. Yet how can survivors like Habonimana forget such traumatic experiences? Although moving on might aid with forgiveness and reparation, it is difficult for those who were witnesses not to remain afraid that such events might recur. When asked whether he still fears another genocide, Habonimana admits, he is always afraid, and that is why he wrote this memoir, so that people will know what has

happened to him (pc 2020). The duty here is also to remember so that others may be aware of how quickly life can change.

Thus, both texts speak to the importance of considering the individuals' memories alongside collective History. Marginal voices provide insight into the everyday of war and strife. Through their remembrances of their past, readers find a cautionary tale of what could be if nations are rent apart from the inside, and when people who look like them reject them due to ethnic or political ideologies. In inscribing their experiences, the poetics of memory allows them to correlate justice, the beauty of writing, and constructing a narrative which belongs to them and to those who passed away.

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The past in our art:
confronting the contemporary in an ancient society

Hasini Haputhanthri

Abstract: Sri Lanka is an ancient culture that has evolved into a complex post-colonial society with a multitude of identities, hybridities, synchronicities, and paradoxes. The 'idea of the past' is explored by analyzing its iconographic and semiotic representations in contemporary art in work by three Sri Lankan artists. Contemporary artists respond to and re-mold their artistic traditions in depicting their day-to-day lived realities. Is the past a burden or a basis, is it inescapable or unwarranted, in projecting their contemporary truths? Does art become a practice of constant negotiation between the past and the present? How do these artists support or challenge the mainstream historic narratives intrinsic to social conflicts in the island? Ideas and representations of the past play a central role in social discourses. There are competing versions of the past: the 'historic past' and the 'practical past', which is also the past of the 'common man'. While some contemporary artists draw from mainstream historical narratives, one finds a critical and reflective art practice in contemporary visual culture in Sri Lanka. The work of Jagath Weerasinghe and Hanusha Somasundaram illustrates how artists respond to and investigate the past, and their approaches from History, Archaeology, and Art History, the professions most associated with 'the past', are delineated. These artists make valuable contributions to modern historiography through their art that can be read as intricate palimpsests of iconography, narrative, and memory; through visually challenging dichotomies, making their practices signifiers of the ways in which societies understand and express their past in relation to their present and themselves.

Keywords: Practical past, history, memory, art history, archeology, contemporary art, ancient culture, iconography, narrative, post-colonial, Sri Lanka, identity, Jagath Weerasinghe, Hanusha Somasundaram.

Note on the author: Initially trained as a sociologist at Delhi University India and Lund University Sweden, Hasini Haputhanthri later specialised in Oral History and Museum Anthropology at Columbia University New York. She has worked with several international and local organisations on peacebuilding in Sri Lanka for the past fifteen years, most notably with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) where she led the arts and culture programme for ten years. Her publications include *Archive of Memory: Reflections of 70 Years of Independence, Cultural Fluency: A Transformative Agenda for Caring Communities*, and *Museums, Memory and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka* (Colombo, Historical Dialogue, 2020). She also drives the projects 'Shared Sanctity: Art and Architecture of Religious Confluence' and 'World Art and Memory Museum' a collaboration with seven other countries. She speaks regularly on social inclusion, culture, and heritage management issues on a variety of international platforms.

'Every generation gets the Renaissance (or the Upper Paleolithic) it deserves.'
R.H.A Corbey, R. Layton, J. Tanner, 'Archaeology and Art' (2004)

Figure 1. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Untitled III*, 2016, used tea bags and ink on paper, 28 cm × 76 cm (courtesy of the artist).

Prelude

'One of my earliest childhood memories is of my twin brother and I weeping inconsolably as we watched our mother through the grimy window, heading out to pluck tea with a huge cane basket on her back'[1], narrates Hanusha Somasundaram, an artist hailing from the central highlands of Sri Lanka. Her community has been the backbone of the island's economy for over a century, contributing to the most well-known, enduring international brand name the island boasts of—Ceylon Tea. And yet, plantation workers remain one of the most marginalised groups in the island, with their socio-economic indicators and living standards falling way below the national average. Brought over from Southern India to Ceylon as bonded labourers[2] in the 19th and 20th centuries by the colonial British to work in the flourishing tea, coffee, and rubber plantations, Somasundaram's ancestors are yet to garner a place in the history books.[3]

[1] De Alwis & Haputhanthri (2020: 146).
[2] Though the term 'slavery' is not used to refer the indentured labour practices (also referred to as bonded labour) of the British in Ceylon, some of the practices and conditions are similar.
[3] For more details on the upcountry Tamil community in Sri Lanka, read Bass & Skanthakumar (2019).

Sri Lanka: past and post-war challenges

More than seventy years since it gained independence from British colonial powers (1948) and a decade after the end of the civil war (2009), Sri Lanka is still struggling to address some of the key challenges of creating an inclusive and just state for all its communities. The seven decades that followed independence witnessed multiple conflicts based on class and ethnicity more overtly, as seen is the struggles of the Southern youth rebellions in 1971 and 1988 and the ethnic riots and civil war in the North East, spanning 1983 to 2019. Further to these pronounced fault lines, religion, caste, and gender continue to operate as fragile topics prone to quick inflammation. A plethora of literature indicates that, though the end of the armed conflict has brought important and immediate relief to affected communities, the island 'has not resolved many issues relating to majority–minority relations and power sharing in the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. Despite numerous political proclamations and a major change in government, limited progress has been made in regard to post-war ethnic reconciliation in the country.'[4] Somasundaram's community has experienced these power struggles and endured the worst repercussions, including being stateless and being repatriated to India.

The role of history in shaping these unresolved conflicts of the present has been explored in-depth by South Asian historians, archaeologists, and other social science scholars such as Romila Thapar (India), K.M. de Silva, Sudharshan Senevirathne, Neera Wickramasinghe, and Nirmal Dewasiri (Sri Lanka), to name but a few. Not unlike most fledgling countries in the world emerging from colonial experience, Ceylon/Sri Lanka has struggled to reformulate an inclusive identity for itself, capable of accommodating the historical diversity of its communities.

This article argues that a failure to shift paradigms in history-making/writing/narrating in articulating a modern, inclusive identity, lies at the heart of the biggest challenges the country faces in reconciliation. Furthermore, it promotes an interdisciplinary approach in making/rewriting/narrating the past by looking at visual art practices of contemporary Sri Lanka, that attempt to contribute to reshaping the discourse on Sri Lankan identity. The article will delve into the works of artists from different communities and explore how they narrate their own histories, challenge artistic traditions, and possibly contribute to a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach to the past.

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[4] Bass & Skanthakumar (2019: xiii–xiv).

Visual art practices in Sri Lanka: a brief overview

Sri Lanka has a long history of visual arts such as painting, sculpture, and murals under a courtly tradition. While painting and sculpture can be traced back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE, some of the murals of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial monarchic eras inscribed from 600 CE onwards can still be found in ruins and archaeological sites around the country. Although religious and monarchic art were the most ubiquitous from the ancient era, Sri Lanka came to welcome many cultures from all over the world, being an important port of call in medieval travel. Hence one may find art styles and relics typically from Arab cultures, Europe, and the Far East, as diverse populations passed through its shores.

After British colonisation in 1815, art practices took a new turn. Whereas the visual arts (painting, sculpture, murals) were previously tied to a personal caste association, the colonial period saw a decoupling and 'art' took on a form of its own, embraced by the middle class. A watershed moment of modern art in Sri Lanka was the establishment of the '43 Group, a group of affluent Sri Lankan men who practised various visual arts: painters, sculptors, photographers, and a cartoonist. They sought to develop an expression of 'Sri Lanka' through their styles and their work can be read as part of the cultural anti-colonial movement of the time. Their social affluence and metropolitan nature created a distance from rural realities that enabled them to idealise the rural, particularly images of the village and women. From the 1960s onwards, this style of painting continued, compounded by the revival of traditional styles, to counter the 'Western' influence from local art.

The next crucial turn in Sri Lankan art came in response to the social and political strife of the 1980s onwards, as class struggles and ethnic warfare broke out. The 90s Art Trend saw the emergence of politically motivated art that commemorated and challenged Sri Lanka's violent realities as well as reacting to rapid globalisation and economic liberalisation. Sri Lanka, currently still dogged by social and political unrest, continues to have a politically engaged visual arts scene, although abstract work and other experimental styles try to push forward as well. Many younger artists have also turned towards digital technologies, experimenting with digital photography, graphic design, and video art.

As mentioned, this article illustrates how contemporary Sri Lankan artists draw from, position, and represent their work in relation to their own past as individuals but also the past of the island. Before discussing these examples, it is necessary to outline some concepts that will facilitate an interpretation of these works.

The theatre of the past: some useful concepts

Under history, memory and forgetting
Under memory and forgetting, life.
But writing a life is another story. Incompletion.[5]

The mantra of modern societies is 'living in the present moment'. And yet, it often seems that people are obsessed and even trapped in their past/s. The present moment exists under the pressure of the past, especially in fragile contexts like Sri Lanka, where the past plays an important role in framing contemporary discourses.

The past comes packaged in many different forms, stages, and mediums: in fairytales absorbed as children; in school textbooks; on television; in literature, art, theatre, dance; in the newspapers; in places of worship; in museums and heritage sites; on the road through statues and memorials; on public walls as graffiti; and on and on. All of this has led to a degree of exoticisation of the past, aptly captured in the opening lines of L.P. Hartley's The Go-Between: 'The Past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.'[6]

What does the past mean to us as individuals, and as collectives? How do we engage with it? Sri Lankan artist and archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe, whose works will be discussed later on, highlights the need to unpack the idea of the past, arguing that there are many versions of the past.[7] The version that gets highlighted and the others that get dropped reflect the power hierarchies and agendas of those specific societies in specific times; colonial, nationalist, cold-war, or post-capitalist projects present their own histories. These are the official narratives one encounters at national museums or finds in history textbooks. Competing closely with these official narratives are the academic versions—the historic and the archaeological accounts constructed through textual sources and material culture in keeping with empirical and objective epistemologies. As Michael Oakeshott writes, there exists yet another dimension, the 'practical past'—the domain of writers, filmmakers, and artists, which coincides also with the past of the 'common man'. The 'practical past', according to Oakeshott, is the 'version of the past that most of us carry around with us in our minds and draw on in the performing of our daily tasks where we are compelled to judge situations, solve problems, make decisions'. It is made up of 'all those memories and illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes and values'.[8]

[5] Ricoeur (2004).
[6] Hartley (1953).
[7] Weerasinghe, interviewed by the author, 15 August 2020.
[8] White (2011).

In this context, it is important to explore memory as another 'source' of the past. Today, memory studies (academic) and memory work (applied practices) have emerged as a notable form of historiography with powerful methodologies such as oral history. Memory work is a process of engaging with the past which has both ethical and historical dimensions.[9] In his evocative essay 'Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire', French historian Pierre Nora makes some poignant observations regarding the distinction between memory and history: 'real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies—and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past'.[10] Nora points out the widening gap between the two, and how one is eradicated or suppressed by the other, especially by equating the two. Nora's passionate plea was to move away from the idea of monolithic national culture bolstered by chosen historic interpretations to a more nuanced understanding of how people remember themselves.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur mused that, today, people live in a 'memorial culture' where they experience a frenzy of memorialisation on the one hand and a culture of amnesia on the other. One could add a frenzy of historicisation to that as well, especially referring to the popular media where the world seems to escape from the brash and dire realities of the present by revelling in the glories of the past in the form of slick historical dramas and films.

This article acknowledges that all these versions of the past exist in tandem and shape the present moment. The tensions and conflicts within these versions create what this article defines as a 'theatre of the past'. Before turning to some examples from Sri Lanka, it is necessary to unpack not only the different versions of the past, but also its relationship with art.

Visual arts as representations of the past

When an artist creates, the act is shaped, in a way, by the pressure created by the past on the present moment—be it psychological, socio-political, or any other; it is influenced by the past—of the artist, his/her community, or the larger context. Artists turn to their memory in their art, not only as a cathartic act, but also to document and bear witness to the dynamics of the present conditions and their histories. In the same way, artists turn to their art-historical traditions and cultural memory of their contexts for inspiration and technique. Simultaneously, they also respond to the stimuli created by

[9] Gabriel (2004).
[10] Nora (1989: 8).

the contemporary world they live in. Sri Lankan artist and art historian Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan highlights the parallels between art and history in his presentation 'Representing the Past: Art as Method'.[11] He argues that, just as history is not the past per se, but a representation of the past, art is also a representation. In keeping with ideas expressed by David Summers (2003), Shanaathanan points out that:

> The word representation obviously and literally contains the term 'present', and that it also proposes the presentation of something as well as presence of someone by whom and to whom presentation is made. Representations become familiar through constant re-use and come to feel 'natural' and unmediated. A key concern is the way in which representations are made to seem 'natural', despite the fact that they change over time.[12]

There are some key points on the nature of representation that need to be highlighted: representation is unavoidably selective, foregrounding some things and omitting others. Furthermore, representations require interpretation. Meaning is always subject to individual interpretation. Representation always involves the 'construction of reality' from a particular point of view. And, finally, systems of representation are the means by which certain ideologies are formed. These ideologies then create ways of looking at texts, and eventually, such value systems position their subjects, requiring them to be interpreted in accordance with them.

History, according to Sanathanan, is a representation of the past mediated by evidence (textual, material, etc.), methodology as well as ideology and subjectivity. Art represents history as it is both a product of historical discourse and also produces and disseminates historical discourses. The works of the artists will be discussed to illustrate these points in the following segment, illustrating how these tensions of history and memory, the grand narratives and alternative and marginal stories, mythic and practical pasts, exist simultaneously. In order to properly contextualise the works of the artists presented, a few examples of how mainstream art deals with the past will be presented first.

The grand narratives: art and myth

Consider, for instance, the artist Prasanna Weerakkody, whose works are popular representations based on mainstream historical narratives of the island (Figures 2, 3).[13]

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[11] Sanaathanan (webinar presentation 2020).
[12] Summers (2003).
[13] See https://prasannaweerakkody.com/

Figure 2. Prasanna Weerakkody, *Fall of Elara*, undated, acrylic on multi canvas, 6 ft × 11 ft × 3 canvases. Private collection of Bandula Weera-Wardane, London (accessed at https://prasannaweerakkody.com/).

Nirmal Dewasiri argues that representations of ancient history play an important role in the articulation of modern Sinhala Buddhist identity.[14] Based mainly on the historical text Mahavamsa, the grand historic narrative focusses mainly on selective mythic events such as the arrival of the Sinhalese in the island, the arrival of Buddhism, and the legendary battle of King Dutuegemunu and Elara which is central to the understanding of Sinhalese and Tamil identities today.[15] Dewasiri contends that these myths provide the framework for the grand narrative that the ordinary person finds it easy to relate to, and that a certain level of mythification is unavoidable when representing ancient history. Weerakkody's works are fascinating illustrations based on these mythic events and his works are on public display in several state institutions as

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[14] Dewasiri (webinar presentation 2020).
[15] The importance of this 1st century CE event should be understood, especially when one notes how it continues to influence current politics. For more details, see a paper done by the students of Strategic and Defense Studies at General Sir John Kotalawela Defence Academy, 'The First War of Unification in Sri Lanka: A Critical Analysis' accessible at http://192.248.104.6/bitstream/handle/345/2821/200.pdf? sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Figure 3. Prasanna Weerakkody, *Desecration of Kelaniya Viharaya by the Portuguese*, 2011, oil on canvas, 12.5 × 6.5 ft. Private collection of Bandula Weera-Wardane, London (accessed at https://prasannaweerakkody.com/).

well as being included in notable private collections. In fact, it can be safely assumed that this type of art is what the common person relates to the most, as they would already have the reference frame to understand these works. Their own knowledge of mythic events, school textbooks and school graffiti projects, popular media representations—all add to the accessibility and readability of Weerakkody's work. More of his works can be easily accessed online, and while the article will not go into Weerakkody in-depth, his works provide a backdrop to start understanding the works of the other artists presented.

Countering grand narratives: Hanusha Somasunderam and Jagath Weerasinghe

The works of Hanusha Somasundaram and Jagath Weerasinghe represent visual practices from two communities in Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe and Somasundaram also represent two generations and Somasunderam's focus on gender also adds another layer of intricacy as she works through her community's experience. Weerasinghe illustrates an alternative perspective that exists within the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist community, while Somasundaram illustrates a minority group in the island.

Hanusha Somasundaram explores her society and her own existence through unorthodox mediums, confronting the struggles of her community in the last hundred years. As mentioned earlier, her community has not made it into mainstream historiography and her work has immense potential to contribute, if we engage with art as a form of historiography along the lines of a practical past. Somasunderam uses materials associated with the everyday practice of drinking tea, such as tea strainers, tea cups, and tea bags, as well as the pay slips received by tea pluckers that calculate their daily wages according to the weight of tea leaves plucked. Describing how she came to work with used tea bags, the artist explains:

> When I became pregnant, I kept wondering how my mother had managed to continue plucking tea on the slippery hill slopes with a 20kg basket of tea leaves on her back and twins in her belly. Up to that point, I had been working on a series of installations with tea cups and strainers. I wanted to highlight how the suffering of tea pluckers seeps into every aspect of their lives and leaves an indelible stain on them and their offspring.[16]

For Somasundaram, used tea bags are not an unusual choice of material for an artwork. They are symbolic of the stain she carries; illustrative of her experience and physical habitus. As seen in her artwork *Untitled III* at the beginning of this article (Figure 1), her ability to draw evocative objects from her daily existence and memory that are deeply personal and, at the same time, collectively representative of the history of her community is what gives 'voice' and 'impetus' to her work.

Another work by Somasundaram, aptly named *Mother tongue* (Figure 4), delves into the language politics that define the existence of her community, with tongue-like tea strainers embossed with lettering from Sinhala, Tamil scripts, and the English alphabet. The language one speaks acts as a 'strainer' of one's life experiences. It is not only the tensions between the three official languages, but also the variants within a particular language: for example, the Tamils spoken in the North and the East of Sri Lanka are different from the Tamil spoken by the plantation communities in the central highlands as they are a community with a unique historical trajectory. Thus language becomes an identity marker, denoting one's provenance: in Somasunderam's case, that they were the descendants of the indentured labour brought to the island in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus language is not merely a tool of communication, but also a negotiator of one's origin and status (caste) in this particular case.

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[16] De Alwis & Haputhanthri (2020: 146)

Figure 4. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Mother tongue*, 2016, mixed media on tea strainers, dimensions vary (courtesy of the artist).

In *Untitled II* (Figure 5), she combines her personal memory—the image of her mother with tea baskets—with one of the most epitomic historical images of Sri Lankan art canon—the *Sigiri Apsara* from 5th century AD (Figure 6)—leading to one of her most challengingly intertextual works.

The Sigiriya frescos have long been heralded as the most sublime classical painting in the Sri Lankan art canon for, quite literally, centuries. Believed to be built by Kasyapa I (477–495 CE) as a fortified palace complex with pleasure and water gardens, Sigiriya remains one of the most sophisticated examples of urban planning in the first millennium. Abandoned after his fall, it went back to being a rock shelter monastery once again, albeit this time with an elevated sky gallery full of *Apsara* paintings. As colonial antiquarian turned archaeologist John Still observes, 'The whole face of the hill appears to have been a gigantic picture gallery.'[17] Unlike the women who arrived centuries later to work in the hill-country plantations that Somasundaram paints, the women of Sigiriya have held a central place in the

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[17] Still (1907: 43).

Figure 5. Hanusha Somasundaram, *Untitled II*, 2016, used tea bags and ink on paper, 55 cm × 37 cm (courtesy of the artist).

island's imagination. Not only do they appeal to 'modern' senses, we are aware that they have been the centre of attention throughout the centuries, simply from the visitors' feedback recorded on the 'Mirror Wall', containing graffiti starting from the 6th century onwards. Here is a selection of sentiments expressed for the *Apsaras*:

> *I am Lord Sangapala*
> *I wrote this song*
> *We spoke*
> *But they did not answer*
> *Those ladies of the Mountain*
> *They did not give us*
> *The twitch of an eye-lid.*

Figure 6. Unnamed artist/s, *Sigiri Apsara* (figure B10), 477–495 CE, fresco/natural paint on lime plaster on Sigiriya rock, Sri Lanka (Bernard Gagnonm 18 January 2006, *Sigiri apsara*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sigiriya_ladies_01.jpg).

> *The song of Lord Kital*
> *Sweet girl*
> *Standing on the Mountain*
> *Your teeth are like jewel*
> *Lighting the lotus of your eyes*
> *Talk to me gently of your heart.*
> *Ladies like you*
> *Make men pour out their hearts.*

Archaeologists have deciphered nearly seven hundred such graffiti poems, dated between the 6th and the 13th centuries, enough to indicate that it was not just a courtly minority who responded to these works. Bandaranayake notes that 'the poems are not only revealing comments on the paintings themselves but also an insight into the cultivated sensibilities of the time and its appreciation of art and beauty'.[18]

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[18] Bandaranayake (1986: 27).

Modern discourse on *Sigiri Apsaras* revolves around the interpretation of the figures. They are described as goddesses, courtly ladies, cloud maidens symbolising thunder and lightning, and so on. The limitations of our answers and our understanding indicate the problem with art from our past: without the systems of localised and temporal knowledge, we cannot know for certain who they really are or what they meant to their creators, patrons, and original audiences, even when we know the sentiments and impact on ancient audiences though Sigiriya graffiti. This has not reduced the power of the image, however; in fact, mystery usually leads to a heightened appeal, and the *Apsaras* are today mass produced as souvenirs, used in tourism promotion, and found in national art curricula, establishing the iconography as a popular and potent symbol of visual culture.

By taking the definitive figure of a *Sigiri Apsara* and juxtaposing it with the image of a tea plucker, perhaps her own mother, Somasundaram transcends the bridge between personal memory and public history. 'Much attention is paid to a group of inanimate women on a rock face while living, breathing women whose sweat and tears prop up our economy, are ignored', she observes, demarcating a critical space for dialogue with her 'other', namely those who are not plantation workers. The British, though currently absent from the scene, are nevertheless implicated in her own history, the story of tea; they are also implicated in the way the mainstream art discourses view the *Apsaras*. It is this intertextuality that gives Somasundaram's work the power to illustrate the conceptual tension Nora highlighted between history and memory. While the use of ancient iconography in modern and contemporary art is a fairly common approach among artists, not much attention has been paid to understanding how local artists make choices between tradition and modernity, history and memory, negotiating past and the present in personal and communal spheres.

The works of Jagath Weerasinghe offer another opportunity to explore layers of the past in contemporary art in Sri Lanka. Born in 1954, Jagath is not only senior to Somasundaram in age, he is both an artist and an archaeologist, an art historian and a teacher, and remains one of the most influential figures in the development of a new generation of artists who were more attuned to and bravely addressed contemporary issues in Sri Lanka. Weerasinghe himself coined the term '90s Art Trend', describing the politically conscious work of his peer group.

Weerasinghe belongs to the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist community, which plays an important role in his art practice. In an interview with Sabine Grosser, Weerasinghe describes his situation as 'highly influenced by the Buddhist traditions and destabilized by the postcolonial context as well as the long lasting political violence'. Grosser further notes 'Among other things, he was appalled by the attitude of the Buddhist clergy that supported the ongoing civil war—contrary to the

Figure 7. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Broken Stupa*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 54 × 40 cm (courtesy of the artist).

Buddhist philosophy. In his paintings he combines his examination of the virulent topic of war and violence in his country with his personal positioning as a Buddhist.'[19]

The *Broken Stupa* is one of Weerasinghe's earlier works, completed right after he returned to the island after studying in the USA (Figure 7). The socio-political disarray the island experienced in the 1990s possibly accentuated his reverse culture shock. Sri Lanka was recovering from an insurgency in the so-called 'Sinhala Buddhist South', and still fighting protracted civil war in the 'Tamil Hindu North'. The idea of continuity of the ethno-religious identity categories is a central historical narrative in Sri Lanka. This is captured in the '*wewa – dagaba – gama – pansala*' idiom, which

[19] Grosser (2015).

directly translates into pairings of 'tank/reservoir – stupa and village – temple' signifying the nexus of agrarian economy, community, religion and the overarching omnipresence of religion in the physical architectural form of the stupa (*dagaba*).

The stupas of Sri Lanka can be seen as a parallel to, for instance, the Pyramids of Egypt, not merely in their structural synonymity of precision, scale, and geometric simplicity, but also in terms of giving symbolic architectural form to national identity of the post-colonial state. Originating in India, the stupas were constructed across the dry zone tank civilisation that flourished in the island from around the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE by the ruling monarchs. It is hardly an overstatement to say that it is the dominant architectural form that defined a millennium and continues to do so today, where the island's religious majority is still Buddhist.

Weerasinghe, as a Buddhist, depicts this perfect, sacred architecture as broken and scattered, indicating a civilisation undone at its core despite its clinging to past glory. This depiction is almost sacrilegious. Instead of projecting its serene perfection—signifying the subliminal state of *nirvana*—Weerasinghe projects the chaos that he witnesses in his contemporary society, through the shattering of the stupa. In fact, he is projecting the lack of that subliminal state, the core Buddhist values that the majoritarian Buddhist polity no longer possesses. His rhetorical question 'And why do I think that I can make a perfect painting when everything else in the world is totally screwed up and collapsed …?'[20] sums up these sentiments perfectly.

Broken Stupa is not the only work of Weerasinghe in which he projects the disorientations of the present he lives in, through the past—through archaeological, architectural, and art-historical forms provided to him through his past—which certainly influence his sense of identity. *Celestial Violence* is a series of paintings produced in response to the rising nationalistic fervour Weerasinghe experienced in the country (Figures 8, 9). For him, the island with a so-called 'Buddhist' majority had experienced cycles of violence, which sat at odds with the philosophy of non-violence. Weerasinghe also notes that people try to justify and rationalise this paradox by always invoking narratives of a grand past, heavenly intervention, etc. So the violence, symbolised by the knives that were often used as weapons in communal riots, became a means to an end—a way of making a heavenly paradise on the island.

Weerasinghe is not the only artist in Sri Lanka who traces the historical trajectories through their contemporary compositions. Artists like Bandu Manamperi, Pala Pothupitiya, Anoli Perera, and Koralagedara Pushpakumara all showcase portfolios that are rich in material drawn from the past and in dialogue with historical narratives
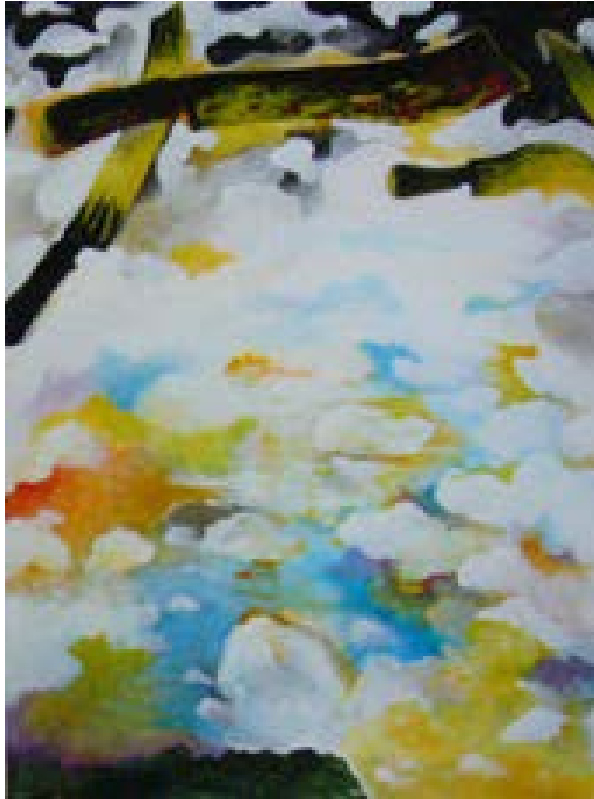
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[20] Grosser (2015).

Figure 8. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Knives in Heaven*, 2007, acrylic on canvas (courtesy of the atist).

of the past.[21] While these artists come from Southern Sri Lanka, mainly from a Sinhala Buddhist community, they do challenge the ways in which other contemporary artists like Weerakkody represent the past. Other artists such as Thamotharampillai Sanathanan and Jasmine Nilani Joseph have worked on their experiences of living through the armed conflict in Northern Sri Lanka. Abdul Halik Azeez and Firi Rahman capture the experience of their urban communities, sandwiched between the dominant Sinhala–Tamil identity dichotomy. The corpus of their work deserves proper attention, especially in understanding how their work can contribute to contemporary discourses on the past.

[21] The word count does not allow the author to delve into this array of works, but this corpus warrants an in-depth study into the topic.

Figure 9. Jagath Weerasinghe, *Celestial fervor*, 2007, acrylic on canvas (courtesy of the artist).

Conclusion: visual practices and the practical past

One of the first questions to emerge from the analyses developed here relates the nature of the past we encounter in the works of Somasumdaram and Weerasinghe. By reflecting on these artworks, one arrives at a nuanced understanding of the past—that is, that there are many versions of it, written, dug up, narrated, taught, recreated, represented, repressed, and forgotten. As observed in Sri Lanka, though most certainly not limited to it, the versions that get highlighted and the others that get dropped reflect the power hierarchies and agendas of those specific societies in specific times; These are the official narratives one encounters at national museums or find in history textbooks. The illustrations provided through the work of Prasanna Weerakkody indicate that the works of Somasundaram and Weerasinghe do not exist in a vacuum and in fact are responding to these grand and exclusive narratives. Weerasinghe attempts this by questioning his own identity and portraying traditional iconography in a critical light and Somasundaram highlights the missing voices and perspectives of her community in mainstream discourses.

The past encountered in the works of Somasundaram and Weerasinghe comes close to the notion of 'practical past', where the past is presently functional and fulfils certain needs for their creators and their audiences. To this effect Michel de Certeau observes that 'fiction is the repressed other of history'.[22] We see elements of this in Somasundaram's work: by bringing a group of people ignored by mainstream historical narratives, and by putting the focus on women, Somasundaram is reclaiming and filling a gap in history through her art. This functionalist interpretation can also be extended to Weerasinghe's work, but a semiotic reading can reveal the way in which the ideas and patterns present in their work refer beyond themselves through repeated, re-moulded, transformed, and appropriated iconography and forms. The works of these two artists provide a critical counterpoint to the official and even academic versions of the past, and the power relations present in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

However, this does not suggest that the grander and mythic representations of the past as seen in the works of Weerakkody are not functional for the Sinhala Buddhist majority. The opposite might actually be true. The overriding focus on an ancient/mythic past, the popularity of such representations as well as continued state patronage offered to these works, indicates the need to treat these works seriously, and bring them into a dialogue with the works of other contemporary artists from different communities.

Weerasinghe is both an artist and an archaeologist but considers himself as contributing to a critical understanding of archaeology, and through his visual practice, provide critical counterpoints to works such as those of Weerakkody. For instance, Weerasinghe notes that archaeological evidence is often inconclusive and ambiguous and are subjected to double hermeneutics. As we have lost certain contextual knowledges, we have to use our own modern frames of reference to interpret these material cultural objects of the past. Thus archaeological claims to the past can only be at best tentative. As in his visual practice, Weerasinghe counters some of the fundamental methodologies used in Sri Lankan archaeology in constructing the past.

While Weerakkody identifies himself as a historical painter,[23] Weearasinghe and Somasunderam do not necessarily call themselves so. Weerakkody depicts the stupas under siege from colonial powers; in other words, Sinhala Buddhist identity under external threat, while Weerasinghe depicts stupas broken with no visible external attack, symbolising the shattering of Sinhala Buddhist identity from within. While the former artist's work is easily considered historical by the common person, feeding into official narratives, the latter artist's works do not.

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[22] de Certeau (1986: 29).
[23] See https://prasannaweerakkody.com/

But are the works of artists like Weearasinghe and Somasunderam, also history? Perhaps the more accurate formulation of the question is a more general and perennial one and is not to be limited to the work of the above artists. Is art, more generally, history?

In an article aptly titled 'Is art, history?', Svetlana Alpers discusses the history of history and art history as separate academic disciplines in the Western context, and the consequences thereof.[24] Griselda Pollock argues that 'crucial questions have not been posed about how art history works to exclude from its fields of discourse, history, class, ideology, to produce an ideologically "pure" space for something called "art", sealed off from and impenetrable to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations'[25]. Similar claims can be made regarding the historians, on the other end of the spectrum. In a moving reflection of his own experience of being a student of history, W.M.Meister claims that 'At the time at Harvard, "History" as a discipline depended on written sources: then common categorizations of "pre-history" (before written sources) and "proto-history" (with undecipherable sources), were left to the discipline of Archaeology.'[26] Fields of art and literature were entrapped within a 'pure' space, as Svetlana Alpers points out, and Meister observes the common clichés of the time as being 'the better the literature, the less it might offer as "historical" substance'. In a Sri Lankan context, the works of art by Weearasinghe and Somasunderam could be less recognised as historical representations as they challenge and provide counterpoints to the grand narrative, as well as providing an alternative methodology to mainstream historiography. As admitted by Weerasinghe himself, the past they talk about is far from being accepted in school history books, and their art from art-history curricula.[27]

These pertinent observations by a host of scholars, albeit from different disciplines, indicate the limitations of interpreting and understanding the work of contemporary artists, especially in non-Western contexts, and also explain to some degree the reasons for failing to assess and acknowledge their impact—for not considering art as significant historiographic contributions. Even the limited analyses of two artists presented in this article, clearly indicate the need for a more inclusive, fluid, holistic perspectives which are less rigid and categorical. Transcending disciplinary cleavages of history, archaeology, art history, literature, and memory studies as well as anthropology to the embodied practices such as art and performance can support researchers in finding better cultural models to understand our pasts.

[24] Alpers (1977).
[25] Pollock (1980).
[26] Meister (2019: 428–9)
[27] Weerasinghe, notes taken during artist interviews, 2020–1.

Furthermore, the artworks discussed above challenge temporal and spatial dichotomies: past–present, East–West, among others. In his practice Weerasinghe raises the bar by outright rejecting the ideas imposed by the West, such as a 'perfect composition'. One can perhaps argue that this is what makes the Weerasinghe's work exceptional, despite his training and extended exposure to Western models. The practices these works exhibit find their own localised, culturally specific visual languages to express truths, while effectively remaining accessible to audiences universally. When discussing other dichotomies, the history–memory tension one often finds in contemporary discourses resolves itself on these canvases. Fact and fiction, ancient and modern, myth and reality, sacred and profane, merge in the works presented.

Finally, through the iconographic, formal, and aesthetic reading of the works one can clearly detect the continuity of the past—in the forms of *Apsara*, as well as the stupas. However, they are also transformed on the canvases of these artists—an *Apsara* mesomorphs into a tea-plucker, and sacred, perfectly spherical stupas sink into formless chaos. Yet, one continues to recognise the stupa, the *Apsara*. By this I do not suggest an unbroken seamless continuity from the earliest depictions to the contemporary; nor do I suggest the opposite—a clean break or departure from the traditions. An attempt to do so leads to a reductionist and linear understanding of the past, which this article has tried to avoid from the outset. Instead of continuity or discontinuity, a more appropriate perspective, especially in terms of art practice can be said to rest on continuity and change. In use, language or art is constantly used to refer to, and comment on, real-life situations familiar to the performer and his or her audience. Even when one can observe cultural continuity through ancient creators and their present-day descendants, as seen in the iconography of the works of these artists, this in no way suggests that their meanings are the same as in the past.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion is to note that we may never conclusively understand our past, nor the art from our past, as we have lost those meanings and thus lack the temporally and culturally specific knowledge to do so. Similarly, understanding the works of the artists discussed in this article also requires temporally and culturally specific knowledge, which one must not take for granted. These artists make valuable contributions to modern historiography through their art, which are intricate palimpsests of the historic and mnemonic stratums; they do that through visually challenging ideas of reductionism and dichotomies taken for granted, thereby making their practices signifiers of the ways in which societies understand and express their past in relation to their present and themselves. The reason why we must enrich our forms of creating our past–present–future is that these exceed a mere attempt at understanding the past in our art—they are in fact, a most creative way in which we could gift the best of our contemporary selves, for our future.

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