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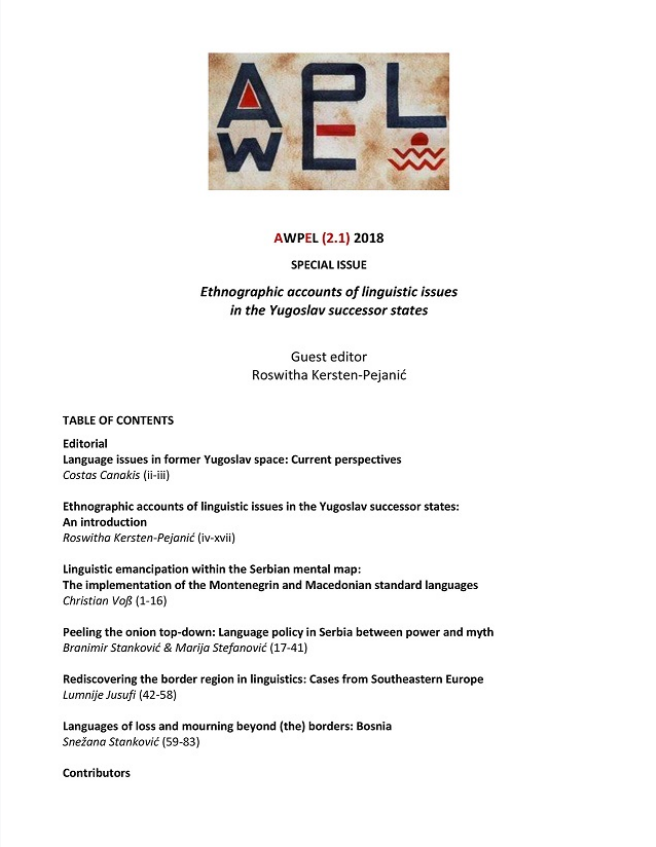
**Aegean Working Papers in Ethnographic Linguistics**

Vol 2, No 1 (2018)

Ethnographic accounts of linguistic issues in the Yugoslav successor states



AWPEL (2.1) 2018

SPECIAL ISSUE

*Ethnographic accounts of linguistic issues in the Yugoslav successor states*

Guest editor
Roswitha Kersten-Pejanić

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## Languages of loss and mourning beyond (the) borders: Bosnia

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doi: 10.12681/awpel.20024

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**To cite this article:**

Stanković, S. (2019). Languages of loss and mourning beyond (the) borders: Bosnia. *Aegean Working Papers in Ethnographic Linguistics*, *2*(1), 59–83. https://doi.org/10.12681/awpel.20024

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AWPEL

# Languages of loss and mourning beyond (the) borders: Bosnia

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**Abstract**
*The following paper deals with the language of commemoration of refugee women from ex-Yugoslavia, mainly Bosnia who escaped to Berlin during or after the violent conflicts in the 1990s. Handkerchiefs, personalised with names, birth and death dates of deceased family members, have arisen out of the embroidery therapy they have undertaken. These artefacts all resemble each other in that they recount the trauma of the loss of the beloved dead, whose remains were either found and then reburied, or the dead who remained missing. This micro-study aims at analyzing the verbal and visual means of expression employed by the refugee women in their embroidery. In treating language as a semiotic composition of oral and written verbal communication, image, sound, and movement, it leaves sociolinguistic discussions on the national languages which have emerged in the region behind and delves into the expression of loss and mourning inscribed on the handkerchiefs.*

## 1. Introduction

More than 20 years after the wars of the 1990s, around two hundred intellectuals from the Yugoslav successor states signed the *Declaration on the Common Language* that was published on 30th March 2017 in Sarajevo.[1] In opposition to the official view of the states of Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia,[2] the *Declaration* has proclaimed Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian to be four standardised variants of one pluricentric/polycentric language, as is true for Arabic, German,

[1] Original text to be found here http://jezicinacionalizmi.com/deklaracija/ (last accessed: December 2018).
[2] Slovenia and Macedonia were also constituent republics declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and 1992.

English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. This means that, despite local and regional diversities, there is one language spread across the countries mentioned above.

When the wars of the 1990s ended, the break-up of Yugoslavia was followed by the emergence of new states, nations, and languages. (Re-)building their own nation, each state, as a political entity, wanted to detach itself from the (new) neighbouring one. The resulting demarcation included two essential political components: language and religion. Known before as Serbo-Croat(ian)/ Croato-Serb(ian), the language had to split into four entirely distinct systems, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian. Following the ideology of *one state-one language*, language has gained a pivotal 'boundary-function' role. Politically integrating and separating, it started indexing 'its associated culture' (Fishman 1989: 35, 465). Within this framework, such labelling appears both as indexing (Ochs 1992: 338) and iconizing (Nöth 2000) social reality. Therefore, new national languages have developed as a result of specific planning where, as Bugarski mentions, "[…] languages have been imagined as unique national possessions, indispensable expressions of the collective spirit of their speakers […]" (Bugarski 2012: 233).

My paper aims at a somewhat different interpretation of (the) language(s) of former Yugoslavia. It deals with the commemoration language(s) of refugee women from ex-Yugoslavia, mainly Bosnia, and of some women from East and Southeast Asia, who have escaped to Berlin and undertaken embroidery therapy. Handkerchiefs, personalised with the names, birth- and death dates of the deceased, arose out of the therapy. They all resemble each other in telling the trauma of loss of the beloved dead, whose remains were either found and then reburied, or who remained missing. This process of working through trauma associated with conflict, violence and flight has grown into a project, The *Roll of Remembrance* [BCMS/Bosnian[3] *Rola Sjećanja*], run by the *Berlin Association for South-East European Culture* [German *Südost Europa Kultur e.V.*].[4] In 2017, they were displayed as a textile memorial wall (Fig. 1) in the exhibition *1000 Handkerchiefs to Never Forget* [German *Tausend Tücher Gegen das Vergessen*], organized by the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in Berlin.

This micro-study aims at analysing the verbal and visual expressions employed by the refugee women in their embroidery. In treating language as a semiotic composition of oral and written verbal communication, image, sound, and movement (van Leeuwen 2005), it leaves the sociolinguistic discussions on the emerged national languages behind by going into expressions of loss and mourning inscribed in the handkerchiefs. These expressions are those that stand "behind" and signify the "sensible world" (Greimas 1987: 17).[5] For this reason, I analyse the handkerchiefs by also paying close attention to the interviews with the three women gathered around the embroidery-work.

Being shaped by the experience of global mobility and attendant superdiversity, to reference Jan Blommaert and Ben Rampton who follow Steven Vertovec (Blommaert & Rampton 2015), this paper prefers to reason in categories of cross-

[3] Here, I refer to the perspective of the exhibition where the language was labelled Bosnian.
[4] http://www.suedost-ev.de/ueber_uns/wirueberuns.php (last accessed: December 2018).
[5] Although Greimas (1987) points to the distinction between natural and constructed ("artificial") semiotic systems, he clearly emphasizes its fuzziness, speaking of mutual translations within different languages defined as mythological, ideological, cinematographic or oneiric.

cultural communication. Therefore, despite ideologies and often artificially emphasized differences, it argues for reiterative, or formulaic, expressions that occur within different cultural and social settings. In this fashion, by referring to the *Declaration on the Common Language*, I aim to present how verbal and visual expressions of loss, mourning, and commemoration reveal forms that appear as shared or common, therefore going beyond cultural framing. Following Talal Asad and Peter van der Veer, I see culture(s) as a constant motion filled with translation(s) where we have to learn about "a new mode of life", to look into "implicit meanings", and bridge "different semantic universes" (van der Veer 2016: 11; Asad[6] 1986).

This survey addresses questions of sociolinguistic understandings of language, building on interdisciplinary perspectives on the anthropology of death, mourning, and commemoration. Along with the scholars who study death and mourning, I treat the phenomenon of death as a mode of life that generates diverse but mutually interchangeable systems of belief, performance, and emotions (Rosaldo 2004 [1989]; Rosaldo & Hockey 2001; Eng & Kazanjian 2003; Butler 2004, 2009).

The paper is divided into three sections. The first shortly reflects upon the science of mourning, introducing the different ways survivors attempt to deal with the deaths of loved ones whose bodies have not yet been recovered or who were exhumed from mass graves and reburied. The second part looks into the gendered nature of the *Roll of Remembrance*. Women are survivors, "alive archives" (Halilovich 2014), who, by inscribing the names of their loved ones on textile pieces, compose monuments and participate in shared commemoration. The third section looks at the visual, verbal and auditive roles of language in composing the *Roll of Remembrance*. Plant motifs in the form of flowers, leaves, fruit, and trees appear as the most frequently used decorations that surround the written names. The patterned nature of listed names and pictorial depictions of plants and landscapes recall poetic strategies of oral poetry and monumental uniformity encountered on military gravestones. The article closes by moving the focus from the monumental (poetic) language of the handkerchiefs to its political employment in commemorative practices pertaining to the painful past, the disappeared persons, and individual and collective traumatic losses. This reflection leads to the last question on representational languages, the ethical and teleological positioning of museums, and academic work.

Fig. 1 *Tausend Tücher Gegen das Vergessen* [*1000 Handkerchiefs to Never Forget*], *Museum Europäischer Kulturen*, Berlin, Germany © Courtesy of Julian Nyča/Nitzsche (2017)

[6] Talal Asad's poetics of cultural translation implies several layers: He underlines "the fact that the anthropologist's translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of learning to leave another form of life and to speak another kind of language" [141]; however, "learning to leave a new mode of life" differs from "learning about" [159]. Herewith, Asad introduces the second layer of "cultural translation" which occurs after returning from fieldwork, according to the "discipline, institutional life, and wider society" (Asad 1986: 159).

## 2. Distant and missing dead: Loss and mourning

The past of the 1990s, when the wars occurred in Former Yugoslavia, still lingers. It bears the scars of atrocities that shaped the 20th century in general and fundamentally changed the way we deal with remembrance and with writing history. Argentina, Bosnia, Chile, Cambodia, Rwanda, Spain, to name some of the places still suffering from their pasts, became topoi of dictatorship, genocidal violence,[7] and disappearances. Persons that remained missing made grief/mourning in these countries impossible.

A disappearance refers to a legal status of unresolved absence from society. On a personal level, it involves a situation where the living wait, hope, and search for their loved ones. Furthermore, the search itself occurs as a hope of and fear for the absentee's life. Such an uncertain loss[8] implies a restless state of hovering between the abovementioned emotions.

How is one to grasp several simultaneous losses: when a person suddenly needs to flee their country due to war; has to leave their home and loved ones who, for some reason stay behind; and those who went missing?

Marc Nichanian interprets the eyewitness testimony by Zabel Essayan [Yessayan] *Among the Ruins* as "writing beyond the sayable": to express testimony of the Turkish massacre of Armenians in Adana (southern Turkey) in 1909 is "beyond the representable, beyond all possible narration […]" (Nichanian 2003: 113). Reliving the "the catastrophe" through writing, Essayan searches for an "expression of limitless sorrow" and, by doing so, she transposes her written testimony onto the act of mourning (Nichanian 2003: 113, 116).

To address grief/mourning[9] over a (violently) deceased person, a lost community, places or objects implies attaching to the context of the absence. The conceptual view of this paper interprets it as the totality that appals one's world. In line with the authors of the volume *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss* (Bille, Hastrup & Sørensen 2010), I read absence as a

[7] The wars of separation in Former Yugoslavia were followed by "ethnic cleansing" and cruelties of genocidal proportions. In the aftermath of these events, the work through the past(s) has exposed the sensitive nature of language in its legal, political, and emotional use. In 2001, the ICTY and ICJ declared the 1995 killings in Srebrenica a genocide. I use the term "genocide" not only in line with a legal decision but also to transmit the absoluteness of violence and loss. Herewith, my intention is not to suspend any traumatic experience of the Yugoslav civil wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia with respect to Bosnian Muslims/Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins, and Serbs, but rather to implicitly address the denial, politicization, and banalization of violence.

[8] This paper speaks of loss mainly concerning unrecoverable separation from a deceased person. There are valuable studies that have addressed the (im-)materiality and semantic complexity of loss. Rozita Dimova deals with experiences of loss and lack of social privileges reflected in "consumed materiality" that ethnic Macedonians could afford during socialist Yugoslavia (Dimova 2013). In her article about the Palestinian women whose husbands were detained ("detainees") or dead ("martyrs"), Lotte Buch analyses "the intertwining of intangible loss and the texture of absence" in their lives (Buch 2010:86).

[9] Psychology scholars often differ in their treatment of grief, bereavement, and mourning. The Freudian concept of mourning as resolved grief and melancholia as endless grieving takes various interpretative directions. These interpretations remain, however, beyond the framework of this article, which regards the abovementioned emotions as states, processes, and actions that continuously intermingle and, therefore, are inseparable. For this reason, the paper will interchangeably use the terms "grief" and "mourning".

sedimented layer of material, experiential, and emotional worlds. The first section of the exhibition *Tausend Tücher Gegen das Vergessen* imminently announced the absence through the displayed photographs by Nihad Nino Pušija of the post-Yugoslav landscapes filled with stillness and alleged harmony (Fig. 2). However, through the attached interpretive descriptions and labels, they point to the hidden past filled with violence not to be forgotten. Writing about the exhibition *Hidden*,[10] which contained photographs of Afghanistan during 2002, Fiona J. Doloughan underlines the ways Paul Seawright suggested the layeredness of reality and "a sensitivity to the unseen" (Doloughan 2011: 39) where, in the words of Mark Durden, Seawright's "poetics of absence" indexes presence (Doloughan 2011: 39). The hidden or absent layers of this first section of the exhibition in Berlin were similarly revealed in the second section, containing the memorial handkerchiefs, as well as in the third part, on working through the past where history textbooks, teaching materials, and literary texts, mostly from ex-Yugoslav, countries were displayed.

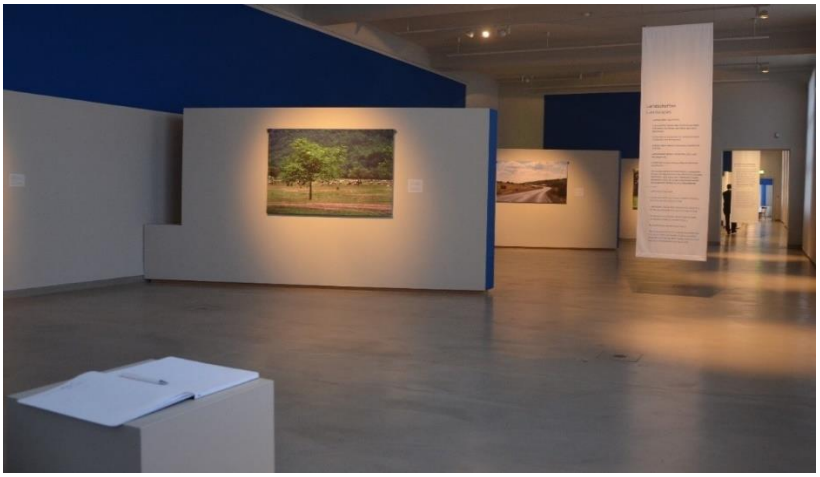

Fig. 2 The first section presenting photographs of the post-conflict landscapes
© author (2017)

As can be observed, the second area with the exhibited kerchiefs was framed by additional contents (photographs, historical and literary texts) with the aim to more clearly communicate the reality of war that caused mass deaths and immense loss.

Departing from anthropological and historical approaches to death, I employ mourning to denote its performative nature, not necessarily including kinetic and material practices regarding "what is done" (Jakoby 2012: 681), but implicating specific behaviour, whether on an individual, group or collective level. Despite the different disciplines, researchers mostly speak of mourning contextually, as a process framed within feelings of grief, expressed inwardly and outwardly through specific mortuary practices (Hallam & Hockey 2001; Kastenbaum 2003; Kearl 1989; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Williams 2006). In the discourse of ritual behaviours, mourning is emphasized as a liminal period that positions mourners between the dead and the living. Their bereavement and nearness to the world of the dead bear specific behavioural markers such as lamenting, clothing, hair and face treatments, and

[10] See Paul Seawright *Hidden*: http://www.paulseawright.com/hidden/ (last accessed: December 2018).

offerings at the grave –practices which are still observed worldwide.[11] When describing totemic societies in Australia, Emile Durkheim explains that "mourning is an obligation imposed by the group" in the form of a socially constructed response to loss (Durkheim 1995: 400). As shared communication, these gestures (re)affirm communal ties (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 35).

The similarly formalised language of such an iconography represents the thematic scope of this survey, as stated before. Analyzing the composition of the memorial handkerchiefs embroidered by the refugee women, this paper considers both ritualising flows and "the emotional force of death" (Rosaldo 2004 [1989]).[12]

The embroidery program started as a therapy aide employed by the Swiss artist Anna Bräger to help traumatised women in the *Südost Center.* The personalised approach within the group made it possible to address each personal trauma. Over the years, the work has grown into both a private and a communal act of healing and commemoration. Joining the handkerchiefs together in a specific diagonal grid pattern, Anna Brägger then created the so-called *Roll of Remembrance* (BKMS/Bosnian *Rola sjećanja*).-[13]

> *After these therapy sessions –usually on Fridays– the women would then move to Wittenbergplatz [Berlin] with the transparencies [on which they wrote the names of their loved ones […] to make Berliners aware of their painful situation]. Somehow they concluded that the transparencies were not an adequate medium to express their grief and desperation. Then they approached me and asked me whether I could help them find an artistically appropriate form of expression or even create it as a kind of movable object: one that brought people together, with their memories of the days when it all happened, especially in Srebrenica.*[14]
>
> Anna Brägger

One such approach has been developed by the New York Donor Organ Network (NYODN). The aftercare program for families of donors helps them cope and express the extraordinary situations surrounding the loss and organ donation of their loved ones. Similarly to Anna Brägger's approach, the families are guided to produce a work that would enable them to relive their memories (Jensen 2010: 63-80). The Memory Quilt and the Gift of Life Medal Donor belong to the most important "means of remembering the dead", where each patch personalises a donor, their "personal life[s] and stories behind organ donation" (Jensen 2010: 71). In that sense, as Susanne Küchler notes, the patchwork refers to tangible "relations of kinship" that "by drawing discrete elements together into a tightly structured composition, […] schematizes and thus enables the recall of biographical time" (Küchler 2014: 104).

Categories of belonging, ties, and kinship are profoundly destabilised when dealing with war-stricken families. Writing about *Srebrenica Potočari Memorial*

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[11] To mention an example, men from the Balkans or Iran, abstain from shaving for forty days while in some rural parts of Montenegro and Serbia lamenting is still present.

[12] For a broader perspective on the connection between emotions and mortuary rituals, see, for instance, the explanation provided by Durkheim who writes about "sadness" and "anger" within the ceremony of lamentation; we can observe similar feelings of anger –"headhunter's rage" – in the survey provided by Rosaldo. Durkheim underlines that the emotions expressed here are a matter of obligation, as "a ritual facade that must be adopted out of respect for the custom" (Durkheim 1995: 397, 401; Rosaldo 2004 [1989]: 167-178).

[13] More than forty-five meters long at the time of the exhibition in 2017.

[14] This segment originates from the interview displayed in the exhibition.

*Centre*, Lara Nettelfield and Sarah Wagner observe how the cemetery and its tombstones can reconstitute such families (Nettelfield & Wagner 2014: 43).

Death disrupts the wholeness of reality. The Great War has globally changed the perception and meaning of death. Persons remaining missing made grief/mourning impossible. War memorials, military cemeteries, and monuments listing the names of the missing or inscribed with the words "A Soldier of the Great War" or "Known unto God" have transformed grief into a communal or public act of mourning and celebration.

> ''Unknown'' became a marked category for lists of the dead and, by extension, the essence of the entirely new cult predicated on deep namelessness of the Great War. On the one hand, hopelessly nameless bodies came to stand for all such bodies, for loss of name, for loss of life and personhood: the universal body. (Laqueur 2015: 418)

Yet this "universal" language does not seem to be suitable enough to express the contemporary reality of violent deaths throughout the world. Similarly to Zabel Essayan, Nettelfield and Wagner emphasize totality of "erasures and losses: of the killed loved ones, destroyed social and emotional spaces of the living" (Nettelfield & Wagner 2014: 22, 151). Returning to the handkerchiefs, we regularly read written and visual motifs regarding "destruction of structures" caused by the war. The labels *nestao/nestala* 'disappeared' and *ekshumiran/a* 'exhumed' refer to the events that happened to the dead and the remaining loved ones (Fig. 3).

> *The therapy, as rudimentary as it may have been, allowed the women to accept their fate […]. It was then when the first mass graves were opened, and the fears became a reality. Many women were panicking. What will happen now? Will my son, my husband be found? There was great unrest because many then had their loved ones whom they could bury, but many still did not.*
>
> Anna Brägger

Fig. 3 "Alagić Mustafa / 21.11.1957 Rizvanovići./ Disappeared 20.7.1992 / Exhumed 19.8.1998. Volarić" © author (2017)

According to the explanations of my interviewees and Anna Brägger's words quoted above, such expressions did not *exist* before the war. One would say "they died" or "they were killed." These expressions referred to sporadic occurrences. Due to the wars, violent death was transformed from a particular and intermittent experience to a communal and continuous one. During the initial post-war years, the amount of found and identified bodies of the missing was low, so that both grief and commemoration, at the intimate and official sphere, stayed frozen for a while (Boss 1999). In such a frame, memorial books, inscribed with the names of the deceased and displaying their photographs, emerged as a response to the "impossibility of granting a place to the absent body" (Mandolessi 2014: 157). According to Jelena Blažan, a Berlin-based painter and designer who accompanies refugee women, and Anna Brägger, one of these books has served as a model for embroidering the memorial handkerchiefs (Fig.4).

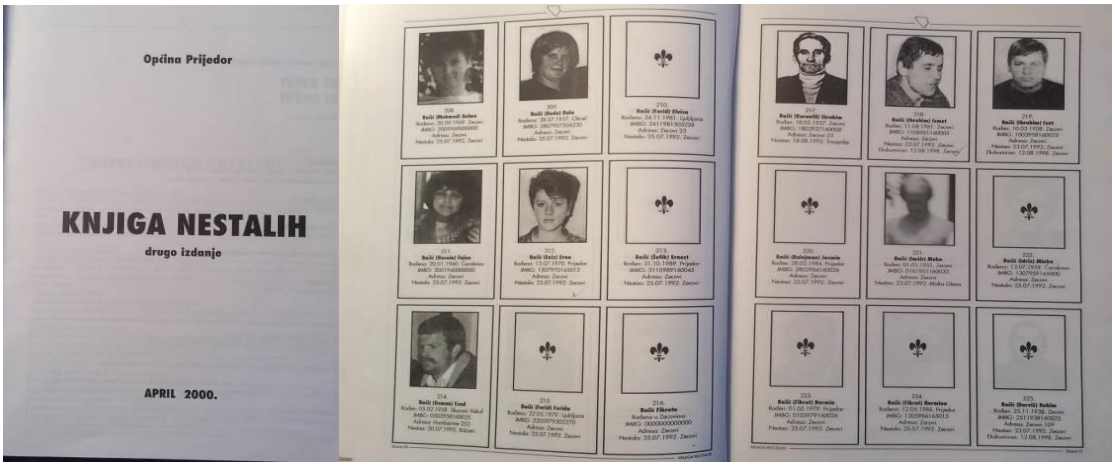


Fig. 4 "The Book of the Disappeared". The lines beneath each photograph report persons as missing or/and exhumed © author (2017)

When a person goes missing or violently dies, which practices does one adopt to honour their memory? Here we deal with the community of mourning women who translate their missing and dead onto the "mundane spaces" of handkerchiefs, materialise their memories (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 192, 184) and fill in the emptiness with the meaning of their names.

Fig. 5 and 6 The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery[15] © author (2018)

### 3. Monuments written by women

#### 3.1 Gendered grief

As the previous lines show, the *Roll of Remembrance* is highly gendered: It voices a female community of mourners –mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, female friends, and neighbours. Such gendered grief is well known in ancient and contemporary oral lamentation for the dead.[16] Ritualized mourning is not performed exclusively by women but also by men in, for instance, Montenegro, Albania, and Iran. However, here I will briefly relate the role of women. Be it patterned (formulaic) recitation, chanting or singing, their performance is a mediating act between the world of the living and that of the dead. From this perspective, the expression of individual and communal grief is an invocation whereby women appeal to the deceased to reconnect with their world. Besides establishing these vertical ties, at the same time they bond among themselves (Caravelli-Chaves 1980: 145). Anna Caravelli-Chaves refers to this bonding as "sisterhood in pain" when interpreting female performance in rural Epirus and Crete (Caravelli-Chaves 1986 cited in in Fishman 2008: 268).

The *Roll of Remembrance* embodies such a "sisterhood in pain" between the women from Former Yugoslavia and Asia. Beyond the familiar context, through the medium of the embroidered textile, they manifest the experiences of loss, pain, commemoration, displacement, and exilic life.

Nettelfield and Wagner devote particular attention to women survivors in the aftermath of the genocide in Srebrenica, showing how the burial rites and mourning practices they (had to) adopt enabled "[the gendered work of restoring and reordering

[15] The empty row in the first photograph means that some members of the family gathered in the burial ground remain missing. The second picture shows new grave markers, behind the white gravestones, erected in 2017, after the bodies of the disappeared had been recovered.

[16] It is necessary to note here that the paper refers to the elegiac forms which are orally performed. Islamic scholars officially prohibit the institution of lamenting. In contrast, it is a topos in the Hebrew Bible. My research is along the lines of Galit Hasan-Rokem's work on laments and motherhood, where both oral and written traditions of laments show similarities across the world, e.g. in the Balkans, Ireland as well as in some parts of Africa, Asia, and South-America (cf. Hasan-Rokem 2014; and also Seremetakis 1991; Fishman 2008; McLaren 2008).

families" (Nettelfield & Wagner 2014: 44). The new situation, affected by male absence, has translated traditional Islamic prohibitions around funerary practices into a necessity of the presence of women at burial and mourning sites.

This is precisely the too often forgotten sphere which Hariz Halilovich calls attention to. Death of male inhabitants in Bosnia meant "that women's men were killed: husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, and lovers"; along with these losses, women also suffered various other brutalities, nevertheless remaining invisible (Halilovich 2014: 239). Despite that, as Halilovich significantly points out, they have a crucial role in the search for and identification of the disappeared. Therefore, through their own bodies and by preserving some material pieces of their loved ones, such as documents and evidence, women become archives carrying emotions and information about the past (Halilovich 2014: 239-241).[17]

The *Roll of Remembrance* is, therefore, an extended after-part of materialised memories of deceased loved ones. Regardless of the initial therapeutic aim, we can see how "ordinary" acts and everyday consumer objects can change: embroidery itself and each decorated handkerchief reflect grief, remembrance, and offering. As Giunta and Sciorra note in their volume on women's needlework in the Italian diaspora, such unique women handicraft is treasured as "an artefact of imagination, a repository of dreams, hopes, disappointments, desires. It is the material for memory work" (Giunta & Sciorra 2014: 4). What arose here from the ordinarily stereotyped domestic female handicraft was a textile memorial wall[18] that, as I will show later, shares similarities with military gravestones, memorials, and monuments.

Beyond the mundane domestic sphere, women's craft itself is endowed with specific meanings throughout mytho-historical tradition. In the daytime, Penelope weaves a burial shroud for Odysseus's father, Laertes; at night, she unravels what she has woven. This work spans over three years in order to prolong her suitors' waiting. Such interchange between creation and destruction unfolds several readings: its occurrence is marked by Odysseus's absence that manifests as a delay in choosing a new husband and as the waiting for a return. To be awaited implies being alive to someone. In line with Barbara Clayton, Penelopean poetics suggests that the "retelling of a story" (Clayton 2004: 123) records the absence of the missing in terms of continuous life. This hope is thus a "life-affirming renewal and the constant possibility of new beginnings" (Clayton 2004: 124). Translating the handkerchief-work of the women, from (mainly) Bosnia, who suffer from the absence of their loved ones, into this poetics implies speaking of the continuous life of the dead. The connection

[17] The role of women in memory-making and breaking the silence on what happened to the victims during wars and dictatorships worldwide has gained much attention since the *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* started the struggle for the "truth" over their dead children who disappeared, the *desaparecidos*, during the dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). A similar case is to be recognised in Iran where the so-called *Mourning Mothers* protested against the state violence where people (their children) were detained, missing or killed. Orgnizations such as *Movements of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves* (see http://enklave-srebrenica-zepa.org/english.onama.php) or *Women in Black* (see http://zeneucrnom.org/index.php?lang=en) participate in the search for the disappeared and pursue their requests for a dignified acknowledgement of the victims and a confrontation of the past.

[18] Textiles are used widely in funerary customs worldwide. Whether it serves as an epitaph or as a burial shroud, such a piece of cloth has a sacred character. Wendy E. Closterman writes about "well ornamented" textiles as "women's funerary gifts" in ancient Greece that "served to take direct care of the dead" (Closterman 2014: 168-172).

between handiwork and story-telling is an old social practice as well as a poetic image. Narration as a process and a tale as a newly created world generate life. In the words of Jelena Blažan:

> *This work [embroidery] helped them talk more easily, speak about topics like who had lost a loved one, who had gone missing, or who had been found, who was buried the previous year, and by whom. As if they had built an altar that did not belong to them but to the whole world it [the altar] travelled through.*
>
> Jelena Blažan, Berlin, 2017

Conversational narration among the women (Norrick 2008: 84) creates a symbolic resting place that enables the return of the absent deceased and thus, to some extent, "normalises" their death (Renshaw 2010: 49). This "narrative presence" of the deceased (Jensen 2010: 72) and the portable altar materialise memories of the past life that can now be bridged to the new one. Whether performed among the community or at home, the sewing of a particular name and biographical data, along with images, resembles a sacred ritual: while their eyes follow the needle and its work, they dedicate the patch to a unique person who is present in their thoughts at that moment. In this sense, the sewn names embody real biographies that (can) overlap with those of the women who survived. As Derrida has shown, the name of a person (a friend) already implies their mortality; nevertheless, it also survives them (Derrida 2001). Therefore, names are not merely graphic signs, but wordings that show survival and gain the specific power to restore the presence of the absentee metonymically.[19] Ernst Cassirer reminds us of the mythical notion in which the name itself is inseparably tied to personhood: "the unity and uniqueness of the name is not only a mark of the unity and uniqueness of the person, but actually constitutes it […]" (Cassirer 1946: 51). That is why the names of the dead listed on memorials appear indeed "monumental", as Thomas Laqueur states (Laqueur 2015: 422), drawing attention to Vietnam Veterans Memorial and AIDS Memorial Quilt as "the most famous examples of monumental assemblages of names" (Laqueur 2015: 424). Furthermore, reflecting upon the memorialisation of the victims of the Holocaust, he draws a parallel between uttering prayers and reading the names of the dead, every year, when the names of Yad Vashem are read out (Laqueur 2015: 438). The prayer lists containing names of the living and the dead were and are still known in Christianity where they feature as a horizontal communication within the commemorating community and as a vertical communication that "sends" appeals and offerings towards the divine world (see also Ariès 2009 [1981]). From the Islamic point of view, making *dua* and reciting prayers for forgiveness and mercy, as well as performing acts of charity, is (also) mandatory, which can be quite the opposite of grave visiting, whether one discusses ritual prescriptions of the Sunnah, Shia or Sufi Islam. Nevertheless, as has been observed, tradition does change following the given situation as in the case of the commemoration that the women from Bosnia (have to) realise because their men are absent.

[19] In the Derridian concept of aporetic mourning that precedes the death of a living friend, it never ends and yet it seems impossible, the name of the deceased cannot "become a vocation, address or apostrophe […]" (Derrida 2001: 10) for it is captured only within ourselves. This paper, however, looks at inscribing or recalling the names of the dead as a healing and ritual mnemotechnic.

Fig. 7 "A soldier of the Great War/ Known unto God"/ "To the memory of these/ two British soldiers/ who died in 1915 and 1918/ and were buried at the time/ in Kosturno/ but whose graves/ are now lost/ Their glory shall not/ be blotted out."
Karasouli Military Cemetery, Greece
© author (2015)

Regarding their "monumental" nature, the catalogue-like *Roll of Remembrance* recalls memorial lists drawn up in the aftermath of the Great War. Military cemeteries of the Salonika Front[20] archive memories of persons "whose graves are now lost" and whose "names [stay] unknown" (Fig. 7). Like the words carved on military gravestones and memorial walls, the *Roll of Remembrance* speaks of the unidentifiable persons and those still scattered in anonymous burial grounds.

### 3.2. Perpetual poetic language

The similarity between the naming of military cemeteries and war memorials, and the handkerchiefs, denotes a particular formulaic language if we recognise it in terms of oral-formulaic theories. Formulas represent patterned (sets of) words and poetic images that function as a mnemotechnic tool, both within the fictitious world of the oral text and the real world of the singer/storyteller (Lord 2000 [1960]; Foley 2002; Honko 2000; Ong 2002 [1982]; Radulović 2015). In the case of the European cemeteries, including multicultural areas where mostly Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions merge, the formulaic funerary grammar comprises practices, epitaphial and visual expressions around and on graves in the form of offerings (prayers, conversations, flowers, messages, candles, toys, food). They imply a regular presence of visitors (Fig. 8). As can be seen in (Fig. 3), the *Roll of Remembrance* bears epitaphs, mostly in the form of biographical data, and decorative motifs as "[non-]temporary and [im]movable mementoes on graves" (Woodthorpe 2010: 121).

> *They [refugee women] could choose their own patterns. I explained to them that it could be a flower that holds particular meaning for them, or that they especially enjoy. It is like a gift they can give to the deceased.*
>
> Anna Brägger

[20] In 1915, during the Great War, Allied Forces opened the Salonika Front to help what was then Serbia against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria).

Fig. 8 Islamic Cemetery in Columbiadamm, Berlin, Germany[21] © Courtesy of Michał Piasek (2016)

Within this embroidery frame one finds the formulaic epithet *nestao* 'disappeared/missing' that alters according to the state of recovery of the body: if it has been found, the adjective changes to *ekshumiran* 'exhumed'. In both cases, these appellations strengthen the personal aspect of the displayed name. Among the names and dates, there are a few expressions that express grief, for example, "Ended Youth" and "Pain and sorrow last forever" (Fig. 9 and 10).

Fig. 9 "Pašić Ahmed / 1980-1995/ Ended Youth" © author (2017)

[21] Islamic symbols and the context itself are syncretised with mostly Christian elements/symbols like poinsettias or star-flowers as Christmas decorations, angel-sculpture, the picture of the deceased. A bench is a somewhat neutral element but doesn't belong to Islamic funerary context, for a cemetery is a place of rest where visits do/should not occur.

Fig. 10 "Kasumović Bećir. 1935-1995/ Pain and sorrow last forever" © author (2017)

Figurative motifs that emerge on the fabric correspond to mementoes left on military and civilian graves, and at monuments and memorial walls. The names are thereby framed by flowers, birds, butterflies, some structures (like a bridge and a town clock) as well as landscapes with mountains, ocean or gateways. As Jelena Blažan told me, the women would find the motifs in magazines, or they would recall the things the deceased was fond of like Fatima who "probably used to like cherries" (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11 "Paric Fatima. 1921-1995" © author (2017)

Remzija Suljić, my field-sister, is one of the women from the *Südost Center* who has embroidered around one hundred handkerchiefs. Her following words highlight this practice of visiting and decorating a grave by giving an offering to the dead.

> *I have embroidered one handkerchief for Ivan. He is*[22] *Catholic. Whenever I am in Srebrenica, I visit his grave and bring him flowers. Eighty-one: the two of them are buried, the rest are not. Their bones cannot be found. But we have put them into flowers. Each flower has a specific meaning. When someone is recovered, it is a joy to the family. […] The mother of Ivan did not want to bury him in the Catholic graveyard. "He died/fell together with them [friends and neighbours], so he should be buried where they are." We always visit the grave of the small Ivan. Bringing flowers. "This could only be Remzija" –[those are the words of his family when they come after me and see the flowers I left].*

[22] Here, Remzija Suljić does indeed speak in the present as if Ivan were still alive.

Remzija Suljić, Berlin, 2017 (Fig. 12)

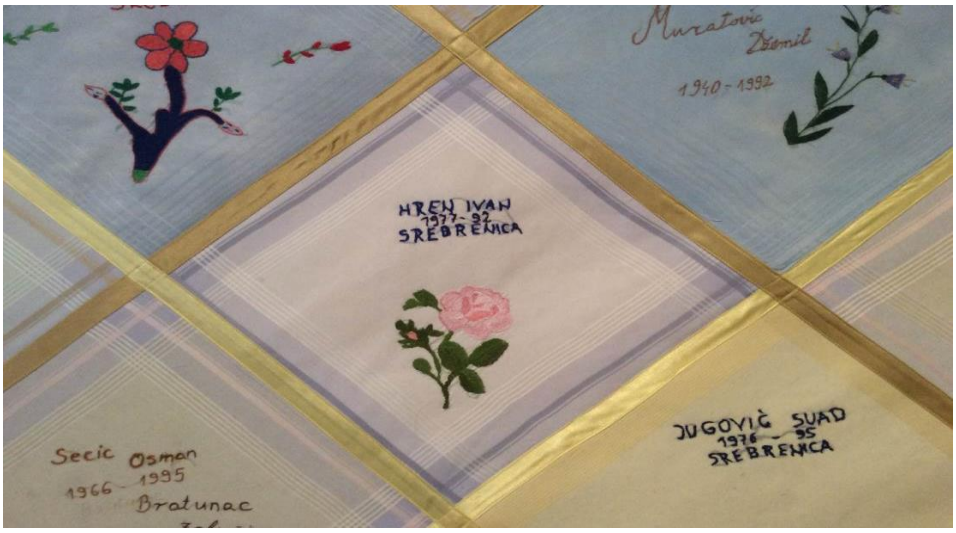


Fig. 12 "Hren Ivan. 1977-1992" © author (2017)

To "put" a dead person "into flowers" reveals a remarkable example of the poetics of translation.[23] Translation of absent personhood and body into cheerful coloured motifs aimed to evoke an atmosphere of life itself –the life of the survivors and their memories of the dead. As Hallam and Hockey note, "the presence of the inscribed name –physicality– enhanced through the accumulation of material gifts […]" fuses "word, image and material", restoring "to the dead the intimate worlds they had lost" (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 173).

As I mentioned in the beginning, not all the handkerchiefs were made by refugee women from ex-Yugoslavia. The work by the refugees from Asia, who also participated in the memorial embroidery in the *Südost Center,* shows a slightly different iconography of death and the dead. My interviewee could not tell me more about her embroidery peers, except that they "would come from Asia".[24] However, knowing that these women came from East and Southeast Asia, brief research and conversations with colleagues from the respective countries have confirmed echoes of Asian funerary beliefs and representations.

The motifs, like the bird and wall (with sea- and mountainscape), are originally Chinese and were used frequently in the funerary decorative style throughout the Han (206 BCE-220 CE), Tang (618-907 CE) and Song dynasties (960-1279 CE). As Wu Hung explains, analysing early Chinese tomb murals, the vision of the afterlife mirrored in the images of birds, mountain- and seascapes reflects "the hope of achieving a postmortem eternity" (Wu 2010: 54-55).[25] We observe similar embroidered scenes (Fig. 13 and 14).

[23] In oral Southslavic poetry, there is a well-known motif of a metamorphosis of the dead into a plant or a tree that would grow out of the grave.

[24] They came to Berlin as refugees as well. The organisation *Goldnetz* [*Golden Network*] directed them to the *Südost Center* where they could volunteer and do creative work that, in the beginning, would help them better socialize and connect with others who had similar experiences.

[25] This is standard knowledge within the contemporary Chinese cultural world. These dynastic tomb murals witness the life of the royal families, their belief systems, after-death and cosmological imageries.

Fig. 13 "Bahonjić (Sejdo) Rifet. 14.11.1965. Kamičani/ Exhumed 30.9.1998. Mirići"
© author (2017)

Fig. 14 "Hadžić (Osman) Husnija. 05.05.1924. Hambarine. Disappeared 12.06.1996 Hambarine"
© author (2017)

The passage-landscape, also seen among the motifs on the handkerchiefs, symbolises a soul's passing onto the other world. As in other religious systems,[26] the

[26] Religious concepts are diffused and should not be observed as strongly separated systems. The soul's immortality is universal in almost all of them where the turning point is the transfer from death to afterlife that has to be carefully prepared during life and then accompanied.

transition of the soul is characterised as a sensitive process that needs to be carefully maintained; in that regard, the ornamental system in the tomb was meant to ensure a pleasant eternity for the soul (Wu 2010; Rawson 2006: 385-386). This semantic register allows the following example to be also read as a trace of tomb-wall ornamentation. Birds, like the peacock and the swallow, feature as familiar symbols within the daily Chinese culture (Fig. 15). While a peacock is associated with virtue, happiness, and female beauty, the meaning of a swallow depends on the context, and it can refer to joy, love, melancholia, nostalgic longing and sorrow. These pictorial moments might echo the motif of the crane as an "immortal bird", common to the Taoist funerary canon of the Tang Dynasty that symbolises postmortem life (Wu 2010: 59). The fan motif belonged to the furnishing register of "the majority of Eastern and Han casket graves […] as posthumous 'home' of the 'dead" for, as Wu further highlights, following Xunzi and Hao Yixing,

> […] the practice of including "lived objects" among grave goods can also be comprehended from the perspective of a mourner: "Burying such articles is like moving house. The living cannot bear to treat the dead as dead." (Wu 2010: 40, 165)

Fig. 15 "Krnjić Vahid. 1965-1995. Srebrenica" © author (2017)

Furthermore, the figures of the peacock and the fan denote feminine space, which has been already addressed in the important issue of the female mourners and the ways their voices reach the world. Here, reading the names tells us they have voiced mainly the absent young and older men. Nevertheless, some textile monuments, similar in oral composition and graphic patterns, are dedicated to women (Fig. 11).

If we consider floral and landscape themes with respect to sounds, the ornamental system that we have seen during the analysis constitutes women's voices that address us through evocative language. Walking along the *Roll of Remembrance*, even if we do not read all the names, we read some of them, together with their

surrounding messages. Through this act of internal reading, the language from the handkerchiefs transfers to our voices. This is how, in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's words, "as a physical reality, [spoken] language does not only touch and affect our acoustic sense but our bodies in their entirety" (Gumbrecht 2006: 320). Complete attention to a written name, which becomes acoustic upon reading it, produces the presence of the absentee. Here, I follow Gumbrecht's notion of language as proximity that "under certain (varied) conditions, can make the past tangibly present"; thus, language becomes a "house of presence" (Gumbrecht 2006: 323, 326).

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has focused on language as a semiotic whole consisting of "resources" that (re)make meanings and produce different realities (van Leeuwen 2005: 3, 161). Reading, both visually and oral-verbally, the language employed by refugee women has shown its own "mobility and translocality" (Blommaert & Rampton 2011) in the way different cultural imageries have become interwoven. The embroidered handkerchiefs are, therefore, a work of double translation: the translation of loss, mourning, and commemoration from European (Christian and Islamic) cultures and of Asian (here, Chinese) funerary arts into one shared language. The participation of the women from Southeast and East Asia is an unusual situation: someone creates a gift, the monument, and dedicates it to an unknown receiver. Their position is reminiscent of the role of stone carvers who make a monument and engrave words supplied by an, often anonymous, family.

I have not dealt with the mythopoetic meanings of the particular motifs, for my interest focuses on how they constitute a compound poetic lexicon, which remains open to the interpretation of the viewer. Images of flowers and trees are common motifs in poetry, especially in oral poetry where they appear as recurring poetic phrases, i.e., formulas. Here we might read them in terms of metonymic concepts of the Edenic garden/Jannat [BKMS/Bosnian *Dženet*]: Pure Land where blessed souls are put to rest and can be reborn, according to a given belief system (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 40).

Various ornamentations on antique ceramics, textiles, manuscripts, weapons, and architectural objects like gravestones and walls support the view of language as a domain beyond cultural differences where meanings appear as mutually close and apprehensive. Lakoff and Johnson speak of "metaphorical imagination" that is "a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of unshared experience" (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 231). But what can be said about different cultural contexts that, nonetheless, show/have "shared experience"? Where Lakoff and Johnson see a need for "adjustment" to a worldview in different cultural contexts, I find the work of metaphoric "transport" and "translation" (see van Leeuwen 2005: 31) that creates cross-roads of contexts and experiences in the world of today inter-connected as never before. This is how our experiences, and that of others, allow us to address different sensibilities across cultures.

In such a way, the colleague who gave me some insights into Chinese funerary decoration also reported that she and her friends immediately recalled the motifs from the Tang poetry of Du Fu (712-770) when they observed and discussed the visual representations of the handkerchiefs. Du Fu's poetry reflects the suffering of individuals during the military conflicts of the Tang times:

Sighting of Spring[27]

The nation is in sunder, yet mountains and rivers still their stances hold and courses run,
Spring has come to Changan overgrown with unruly grass and trees.
Current affairs have me deep in sentiments, and tears overcome me at the sight of flowers,
Detesting separation from family so much, even the twitter of birds frightens me.
Military unrest has been continuing for months on end,
More valuable than tons of gold is a letter from family and kin.
My hair has greyed and grown thin,
There remains almost too little for the use of a hairpin.

The poem is composed of the contrast between the overgrown grass and trees in spring and the mourning subject, pictorially personifying mourning over the shattered nation and suggesting "military unrest" as a continuous totalising feeling, similar to the literary testimony of Zabel Essayan.

Choosing to speak about refugee women from Bosnia does not implicate any political affiliations; losses and sufferings swept across all the former Yugoslav republics involved in the war. My article has conveyed the worlds that I have personally encountered. I follow Peter van der Veer who argues for a "fragmentary approach to social life" whereupon a fragment can offer "a perspective on a larger whole" (van der Veer 2016: 9). Despite the incomparability of experiences of loss due to past fatalities, forms of mourning and commemoration can appear as paralleled, connected, and shared. Traces of these cross-cutting experiences and a sharedness can be seen among entries in the visitors' book, bearing an exact witness to the above-defined poetics of translation (Fig. 16). The following words in Chinese read:

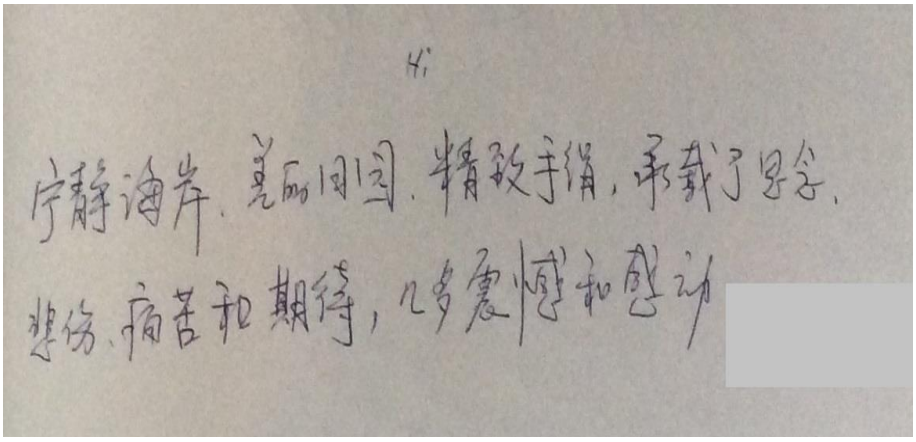

Fig. 16 © author (2017)

*Peaceful coast, beautiful landscape, and subtle handkerchiefs bear longing, trust, suffering, and hope. One is moved and deeply touched by this.*

Translation by Chang Liu

These lines show museological communication between exhibited objects, audience and mostly absent authors to whom the written messages are left. They convey

[27] Translated by Betty Tseng, https://28utscprojects.wordpress.com/2011/01/08/106/ (last accessed: December 2018).

visitors' feelings about the displayed content which becomes a platform for reflecting on their biographies, similar experiences and likes or dislikes regarding the exhibited.

The audience of viewers and readers fully supports the world created by the museum: the visitors "utter the disappearance [absence] of these dead" and "grant life" by reading the names inscribed in the *Roll of Remembrance* (Laquer 2015: 433; Williams 2007). Moreover, some of them act upon the displayed items by adding personal reflections, thus leaving traces of their presence.

As a place where private and public domains meet and as a site of memory, a museum forces a closer observation of the way exhibited items (can) affect the registers of remembrance. Displayed in the museum, the names on the *Roll of Remembrance* no longer signify only lost loved ones and intimate worlds but, moreover, the events and narratives attached to them. Like the objects in memorial museums, restored from the past, these names act upon the so-called "museum-effect", being "reported […], researched, arranged […], and written about", they become "historicized artefacts" (Williams 2007: 28, 47). As artefacts, they fall into the inventory of items with extraordinary value ready to be addressed by new visitors or groups and their political agendas. In this fashion, Corinne A. Kratz speaks of "rhetorics of value" within the "double-sided exhibition experience":

> […] it relies both on what visitors bring to exhibitions as well as what exhibitions bring to visitors, which is already the outcome of complex processes and decisions that shaped the exhibition. Rhetorics of value are part of what exhibitions bring to visitors, but visitors relate to exhibitions in different ways, through diverse interests and orientations. What they encounter in an exhibition provides resources through which they may experience and formulate their own values and identities, whether as individuals or members of social groups. People produce notions of value and identity in relation to objects and subjects on display, in relation to the experience they bring to the exhibition, and in relation to politics of representation at play in other contexts. (Kratz 2011: 29)

This raises the question of how intimate emotional languages of mourning and commemoration are overlaid with those languages that start iconizing certain narratives (Williams 2007: 54). As Renshaw notes, "the absent dead are a site of unresolved emotion and ongoing political tension, even 'outliving' generations of mourners" (Renshaw 2010: 49). While, in the words of my field-sister Remzija Suljić, women "put their dead into flowers" to provide them with a "place" to rest and thus regain order (see also Wagner 2010: 65), politically engaged readers ascribe other meanings to these dead.

The public language of mourning and commemoration bears strong axiological notions (Bartmiński [Бартмињски] 2011) through exterior sites where processes and objects are exhibited as values. When Paul Williams notes that the restored and exhibited objects from the past are "valued in entirely new ways" (Williams 2007: 28), he points to this axiological categorisation. That is why this language chooses distributional means to address potential political communities.

In light of this, there remains one important quest in dealing with language(s) that politically semiotize public sites. Here, Judith Butler observes the distributional force in addressing political communities (Butler 2009: 24, 2004: 22). Martha Nussbaum similarly defines language as a strategic means to generate "public emotions" via "public artworks, monuments and parks, through the construction of

festivals and celebrations […]" (Nussbaum 2013: 203).[28] As one of the public feelings, "love of the nation" creates competitive stories of victimhood. Dwelling on one's loss often entails becoming exclusive about the other's loss. In this manner, states mutually suspend the dignity of the missing. Within such a framework, being (un)identified, (un)claimed or never recovered, the body becomes a matter of political negotiations over victims, martyrs or perpetrators while the real individual past lives of the dead, as well as their families, remain invisible. *Mustafa*, *Ivan*, and *Fatima* are some of the exhibited names within the museum walls ready to receive new interpretations, values, and narratives they will stand for. Who they were and what they did and hoped for is insignificant "information" unless their lives turn out to be nationally desirable and "grievable". In that case, families and their suffering over loss become visible, for they contribute "consecrat[ion of] the past" and feature as "iconic for the nation" (Butler 2009: 38; Rosenblatt & Wagner 2017: 237).

Departing from the tension surrounding the split into four languages and the concept of the Common Language, this paper has regarded the language displaced women from Former Yugoslavia and some women from Asia have employed to overcome war-related trauma. To offer a methodological and epistemological response regarding violent past(s) and personal or collective losses worldwide seems to be a matter of meta-academic awareness that should move towards self-reflexive and engaged research (Halilovich 2016: 80).

Turning from the iconography of handkerchiefs to the potential political role in the public, I intended to expose the vulnerability of such "materialization" that might be used as a "political strategy" for fixing and imposing specific meanings (Hodder & Hutson 2003: 67, 210). For this reason, this paper has hoped to propose a mutually "reflexive translation" (van der Veer 2016: 148) across diverse cultural, epistemological, and emotional realities.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper would not have been possible without the continuous support and trust of Remzija Suljić, Anna Brägger, and Jelena Blažan. They allowed me to put in words what is *within them,* so I hope the article is true to their their experiences of loss and healing. Thanks are also due to Beate Wild, the curator of the exhibition, for introducing me the project *Roll of Remembrance*. Moreover, I am deeply indebted to my dear colleague and friend Chang Liu for her thoughtful guidance through the section on the Chinese cultural universe. My sincere appreciation also goes to Professors Peter Rutland and Wu Hung for their time and generosity in sharing their expertise and views. A dear colleague, Jana Vijayakumaran, kindly provided valuable insights into the funerary cultures of Sri Lanka and India, while colleagues Neven Isailović, Michał

[28] Textiles often plays a culturally and politically representational role. See works by Jochen A. Sokoly (2017) who writes about "the institution of the *tiraz*", the inscribed textiles, under the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Fatimids, that played an important role in symbolizing dynastic supremacy as well as the religious identity within the funerary practices. See, for example, the short video on the *keffiyeh* headscarf and various cultural-political appropriations and modifications: https://nationalismwatch.com/2012/12/21/appropriating-the-keffiyeh/ (last accessed: December 2018).

Piasek, and Željana Tunić were kind enough to read and comment on earlier drafts of this paper, a debt I dutifully record.

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