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Communitas of Mourning

Women in Black and Dah Teatar between War Protest and Theater

Introduction: How to Counter the Narrative Framework of War Crime Denial

The region of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is affected from a post-traumatic unease that continues to shape the collective and cultural memory.¹ Numerous war crimes were committed in the 1990s during the Yugoslav Wars,

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¹ See Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervae, eds., *Post-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Literature and Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); Jana Dolečki, Senad Halilbašić, and Stefan Hulfeld, eds., *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018); Gorana Ognjenovic and Jasna Jozelic, eds., *Nationalism and the Politicization of History in the Former Yugoslavia: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65832-8_1.

a series of separate but related ethnic conflicts and wars of independence from 1991 to 2001. Most of the war crimes are well documented and were investigated in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague between 2003 and 2017.² In 2004, the International Court of Justice and the ICTY declared the systematic killing of more than 8,300 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995 as genocide. The killings were perpetrated by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska, with the involvement of a paramilitary unit from the Republic of Serbia. Until today, Serb political leaders have refused to accept the designation of the crime as genocide and continue to deny any direct involvement of the Serbian State. Also, the denial of other atrocities and the glorification of war crimes and criminals remain widespread in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to a report published in June 2021 by the Srebrenica Memorial Center, there were 234 instances of genocide denial in the regional public and media discourse between May 1, 2020, and April 30, 2021, most of them in Serbia.³ The report outlines three narrative frameworks used in genocide denial: “disputing the number and identity of victims,” the recounting of “conspiracy theories which challenge the rulings and integrity of international courts,” and “nationalist historical revisionism.”⁴

The denial and its narrative frameworks not only retain and prolong the political conflicts, but also preserve the friend-enemy opposition based on national and ethnic divisions in the successor states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. By attempting to control the public collective memory through the relativization of well-documented facts, they also block the process of reconciliation.⁵ In general, the historiography of the Yugoslav Wars is still strongly influenced by current political problems and dominant nationalist parties. On the level of official, state commemoration, a strong focus of the states on their own role as victims is evident. Multi-perspective considerations and reflections on the responsibility for what happened during the Yugoslav Wars manifest themselves in non-state commemorative practices—and especially in artistic practices.⁶ This observation leads me to the initial questions for my case study: How can artistic practices, especially theater, break with the very clearly denoted and mediated positions of Us vs. Them in a national wartime or post-war context? Which strategies can disrupt, disturb, engage, move, and mobilize a larger public to counter

² See website of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.icty.org/>.

³ See Adem Mehmedović, Kadira Šakić, and Tijana Cvjetičanin, *Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2021*, eds. Monica Hanson-Green et al. (Srebrenica: The Srebrenica Memorial, 2021), <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/assets/files/1625819683-srebrenica-genocide-denial-report-2021-english-language.pdf>.

⁴ See Mehmedović et al., *Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report*, 15.

⁵ Ognjenović and Jozelić, *Nationalism and the Politicization of History*, 1–9, 336.

⁶ See Beronja and Vervaet, *Post-Yugoslav Constellations*, 1–19; Doležki et al., *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars*, 1–33.

the denial and forgetting and to confront and dislodge entrenched beliefs? And what role do the arts play in combating the erasure of past violence from current memory and in creating new visions and forms of commonality?

As Stefan Hulfeld, Jana Dolečki and Senad Halilbašić stated in their 2018 anthology *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars*, responsibility becomes a crucial topic of wartime theater, which has to deal with “the responsibility of those who produced and witnessed art, or those who made use of performative acts to achieve or promote certain ideological agendas, as well as the responsibility of those who carried out war activities or atrocities.”⁷ The editors note that during the war, the state-funded theaters, especially in Serbia, continued their activities in a certain kind of oblivion, pretending that the war was happening to others.⁸ Discussing the role of Serbian state theater in the 1990s, they refer to Irena Šentevska’s research, in which she called its productions “spectacles of forgetfulness.”⁹ Most of the state theaters concentrated on creating repertoires either based on historical narratives or providing their audiences with the possibility to “escape” the violent reality. On the other hand, there existed an alternative movement in the independent theater scene. Dubravka Knežević pointed out already in her 1998 article “Marked with Red Ink” that theater is as much a tool of the state propaganda as an instrument of the opposition. She described how in the early 1990s several artists and students organized performances and theatrical protest actions against the Serbian regime in the streets of Belgrade.¹⁰ She also mentioned the vigils of *Žene u crnom* (Women in Black) and a street-performance of Dah Teatar, which drew my interest to a very specific aspect of the actions of the two groups: grieving for the others.

In wartime and post-war situations, the opposition of friend and enemy often condemns the dead “enemies” to be ungrievable. To grieve for the excluded others during the Yugoslav Wars and their still complicated aftermath means to break with the friend-enemy opposition based on national divisions. By examining the vigils of Women in Black in Belgrade and the play *Priča o čaju* (*The Story of Tea*) by Dah Teatar, I will explore concrete strategies through which grief was made possible beyond this friend-enemy opposition and the ways in which it can be broken. I am also interested in how the actions of Women in Black and Dah Teatar bear witness to the events and to violence of the war, and how they create a space of resistance, remembrance, and being together.

⁷ Stefan Hulfeld, Jana Dolečki, and Senad Halilbašić, “Introduction,” in Dolečki et al., *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars*, 5.

⁸ See Hulfeld et al., “Introduction,” 14.

⁹ See also Irena Šentevska, “In Search of Catharsis: Theatre in Serbia in the 1990s,” *Südoestropa* 65, no. 4 (2017): 607–631, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2017-0041>.

¹⁰ Dubravka Knežević, “Marked with Red Ink,” in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London: Routledge, 1998), 52–61.

Žene u crnom (ŽuC) is a local section of Women in Black, a worldwide feminist organization with more than 10,000 members. In Belgrade, they emerged as part of the resistance movement against Slobodan Milošević (former president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), and specifically as a feminist critique of nationalism and militarism. Since October 1991, they have regularly organized public anti-war actions and vigils in Belgrade's Republic Square, and commemorations on the sites of atrocities committed in the name of the Serbian nation. Dah Teatar was founded in 1991 in Belgrade, just as the Yugoslav Wars started. In many of their plays, they drew attention to war crimes such as Srebrenica and Štrpci, to recognizing the suffering of others and to confronting the violence of war. Also, they have staged various performances on Belgrade's Republic Square together with Žene u crnom.

The Communal Mourning Practices of Professional Mourners

In relation to the question how a space can be opened for people to grieve with others beyond the nationalistic friend-enemy opposition, two theoretical aspects are of interest: the connection between mourning and community, as elaborated by Ulrike Reimann, and the theatricality of mourning as a cultural activity, discussed in Gail Holst-Warhaft's studies about grief and its political uses. Reimann describes lamentation as a communal practice that has been anchored in a wide variety of cultures and is still practiced today – especially in Serbia and Montenegro, but also in Ireland, Georgia, Romania and Finland.¹¹ Working on her book *Trauern in Gemeinschaft* (Mourning in Community) she visited the last professional mourners in Montenegro and Serbia. There, she observed that mourning was performed as “a lively production, a theatre of gestures, words, music and dance.”¹² Women, usually the oldest women in the village, dressed in black, sing, lament, and weep over the deceased. They mourn on behalf of his or her family; the lamentation functions as a form of communication between the living and the dead. Through the lamentation of mourners at funeral rituals, it becomes easier for everyone else to cry and grieve for the lost one. The lament opens a space to perceive and express feelings publicly.¹³ Thus, direct contact is established between all participants and furnishes a sense of a shared vulnerability. Reimann argues that experiencing others in pain makes one aware that the pain of others also triggers one's own

¹¹ Ulrike Reimann, *Trauern in Gemeinschaft* (Basel: Synergia Verlag, 2016), 54.

¹² Reimann, *Trauern in Gemeinschaft*, 103.

¹³ See Reimann, 59–100.

feelings and consternation. This creates a connection to the others, an awareness of the “body of the community.”¹⁴

According to Gail Holst-Warhaft, mourning is a “cultural activity” that can be described as theatrical. As an expression of an affect that is publicly performed, it is located in the field of representation and is more frequently enacted by women. In her book *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses*, Holst-Warhaft argues that what mourning and its rituals are about is the way people display grief as an emotional state, how they act it out, or how others act it out for them in public. Laments, for example, are an expression of genuine grief and mostly part of the rituals of mourning. Often, the women who sing laments are not directly bereaved.¹⁵ The author argues that

the use of professional mourners who beat their breasts, wept, and tore their hair out at funerals was so widespread in Europe and the Middle East, so frequently condemned and yet persistent, that it must have filled an important social need to see grief performed.¹⁶

Mourning as a cultural activity could be seen as a spectacle that is enacted for an audience: funeral rituals and theaters both need the action choreographed. Professional mourners act on behalf of and in the name of another person. Often their passionate, theatrical expression of grief in lament is valued, according to Holst-Warhaft, in the same sense that an actor’s performance is measured.¹⁷

In her book, Ulrike Reimann describes the mourning of different communities. I agree that mourning is a communal practice, but in order to do justice to the two subjects of my case study, it is necessary to ask what kind of community is meant. Regarding the post-war-situation in Bosnia, Serbia, and Montenegro, Reimann writes that in some regions the dead of the war are not mourned. On the basis of several interviews with locals, she explains that mourning does not take place on the one hand because some relatives are still considered missing, and, on the other hand, because the pain is too intense. She states that mourning falls silent when there is too much of it, especially when there is too much pain associated with war crimes.¹⁸ She points out that in mourning rituals, lament is used to express that something is irrevocably lost; if a human life is extinguished, then it is worth lamenting.¹⁹ To mourn would mean to acknowledge that the war

¹⁴ Reimann, 104.

¹⁵ See Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1–5.

¹⁶ Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion*, 4.

¹⁷ See Holst-Warhaft, 4.

¹⁸ See Reimann, *Trauern in Gemeinschaft*, 103.

¹⁹ See Reimann, 63.

crimes actually happened, that the possibility for missing persons to be alive is gone, that it is a fact that they were murdered, and that not only people from one's own national and ethnic group died, but also others.

Response-Ability

Looking at the theatrical aspect of mourning brings into view how dealing with grief is determined by conventions and rules. Institutions, secular and religious, have also periodically sought to control the rituals of death and mourning for their political purposes.²⁰ But however much it is controlled, there is always an element of the unexpected about grief, which is seen as disruptive to the public and hierarchical order. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler argues: "Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential."²¹ Using various images of violent acts and examples in which different groups are set against each other, she demonstrates that open grief as affective responses to the death of others is highly regulated by regimes of power through identity politics.²² Especially in times of war, mourning often reveals censorship: the lives of those regarded as enemies are not considered valuable, therefore they are no longer worth of mourning.

An un-grievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and un-grievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others—even if it means taking those latter lives.²³

Butler shows that if people are to question acts of war, they must face the fact that human lives are lost because of these acts, and that these lost lives mattered. As the stories and images of war are represented in the media in ways that ensure and sustain blindness towards others, the potential to see and feel is carefully controlled, so that it is not possible to engage with others, feel their pain, or at least to acknowledge the entanglement with the other(s) and to let oneself be affected by it. Therefore, she sees a need for a new way of thinking and talking about other people, a way that respects the relation to others.

²⁰ See Gisela Ecker, ed., *Trauer tragen – Trauer zeigen: Inszenierung der Geschlechter* (München: Fink, 1999), 19.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 39.

²² See Butler, *Frames of War*, 39–40.

²³ Butler, 38.



Women in Black, Forming a Vigil

REPUBLIC SQUARE, BELGRADE, 1996

When Butler argues that grievability presupposes that someone is considered grievable in the first place, she places at the center of her concept of grief the question how the line between the grievable and un-grievable is drawn. In order to foreground this demarcation, I propose to speak of response-ability,²⁴ where “response,” “ability,” and “responsibility” meet. Responsibility is defined as “a duty to deal with or take care of somebody/something, so that you may be blamed if something goes wrong; blame for something bad that has happened; a moral duty to behave well with regard to somebody/something.”²⁵ Response-ability emphasizes the ability to respond and always refers to the moment of negotiation of a responsibility that was previously assumed to be fixed. It means allowing the question of who is able to respond and who is not, and this makes it possible to ask about responsibility relationships.

²⁴ The term response-ability is inspired by Donna J. Haraway. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 38–39.

²⁵ www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/academic/responsibility?q=responsibility.

Regarding Benedict Anderson's idea of a nation as an "imagined political community, being imagined as both limited and sovereign,"²⁶ we have to consider in each case whether grieving communities are exempt from being limited or not. In cases of a mourning community, where it is clear who is being mourned, the question of response-ability does not arise. There is no questioning of the responsibility that was taken as a self-evident fact. For the purposes of my analysis, I will follow Jean-Luc Nancy's distinction between communion and community²⁷—without presenting the philosophical implications of these terms, but using them as operational schematizations. Communion is a closed community and due to its closedness it is also exclusionary. In the examples of *Žene u crnom* and *Dah Teatar*, this is the imagined political community. This moment that negotiations begin as to what community is, the idea that a communion is self-contained is undermined. I will call this moment of negotiations *communitas*, as the term "community" is embedded in Nancy's philosophy, and I wish to indicate the distance between this general philosophical way of thinking and my specific analyses of historic subjects. The *communitas* of mourning, then, is the moment that enables the negotiation of community, mourning, and responsibility in an assembly of people.

The Politics of *Žene u Crnom*

Below I will examine the actions of *Žene u crnom* to show, on the basis of the theatrical strategies of their politics of mourning, at which moment a *communitas* of mourning opens. To place this politics of mourning in its specific historical context, I draw on the work of Athena Athanasiou, an anthropologist who accompanied the members of *ŽuC* over ten years. As she explains in her 2017 book *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black*, the historical context in which *ŽuC* were acting can be described as nationally and heteronormatively framed, as during the breakup of the Yugoslav Republic national leaders, to mention only Slobodan Milošević, sustained a public culture of ethno-historical memory, "particularly through gendered modalities of the male national hero and the mother of the nation."²⁸ She states that in "responses to national, colonial,

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 6.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–70.

²⁸ See Athena Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 8, 104–107.

and postcolonial traumas of our times, the politics of mourning has always been premised upon gender, kinship, and national normativity.”²⁹

Statements such as “We mourn all victims” or “Not in our name” were written on the banners during the weekly silent vigils organized by *Žene u crnom* in Belgrade since October 1991.³⁰ The group are a local section of the feminist anti-militarist organization *Women in Black*, founded in Jerusalem in 1988 after the start of the first Intifada in Palestine, when a small group of Israeli women, supported by Palestinian women, marched into the West Bank to protest the occupation. Dressed in black, they stood in a prominent place every Friday, usually for an hour in the afternoon. Gradually, the Israel/Palestine movement spread worldwide, holding vigils and commemorations, usually in central public squares or in front of major buildings and monuments.³¹ In Belgrade, their initial appearance was part of the first, completely spontaneous reaction of Belgrade citizens to the outbreak of war in Croatia. According to Dubravka Knežević, the evening the news informed about the first carnage, all members and supporters of civil-oriented associations assembled in front of the Serbian Parliament “to light candles in memory of all the victims of the war, no matter of which nationality.”³² A “group of women of various ethnic origins and with quite different social and educational background” joined the event. They were all dressed in black, and carried banners, candles and flowers. In order to increase visibility, they went to the main Belgrade square and stood there in a silent vigil for one hour. Since then, they have kept on standing there every Wednesday afternoon, regardless of right-wing provocations or weather conditions.³³

The statements “We mourn all victims” and “Not in our name” accentuate what members of *ŽuC* in Belgrade consider as their politics; they clearly positioned themselves against the war and the national politics of mourning, and through the vigils they have held until today they raise public awareness of war crimes and of the recent criminal past.³⁴ On the one hand, they question the normative frames that regulate what kinds of losses can be mourned, or, in the case of Serbia, which of them are even considered as existing. In the early 1990s, Serbia did not officially acknowledge being at war or committing war crimes. In all of their actions, *ŽuC* have drawn attention to the fact that they mourn not only the victims attributed

²⁹ Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning*, 1.

³⁰ “We are still in the streets. . . .” *Žene u Crnom*’s website, accessed August 8, 2021, <http://zeneucrnom.org/en/we-are-still-in-the-streets-on-street-actions-and-actions-in-city-squares>.

³¹ See Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning*, 88; Athena Athanasiou, “Nonsovereign Agonism (or, Beyond Affirmation versus Vulnerability)” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 256–259; Bojan Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air: (Post)-Yugoslav Anti-war Activism and Its Legacy* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012), 162; “We are still in the streets.”

³² Knežević, “Marked with Red Ink,” 57.

³³ See Knežević, 57.

³⁴ Athanasiou, “Nonsovereign Agonism,” 256–259.

to the Serbian community, but all victims of the war. On the other hand, they remind the passers-by in the streets of Belgrade that massacres were committed in the name of the Serbian nation and thus also in their name as Serbs. Since Serbia still does not accept responsibility for these atrocities, their politics also raises the question of who bears responsibility towards the victims and their relatives, and draws attention to the fact that this must be renegotiated.

Standing in the streets to protest and to mourn for all victims is not without risk. During wartime, ŽuC confronted their fellow citizens with the atrocities committed by the Serbian nation. Since the end of the war, they have been calling attention to the need to recognize these crimes and remember them. As a consequence of being moved by, through and toward the disavowed losses that were considered “enemies,” the members of ŽuC are themselves imagined as part of the “enemy.” As a consequence, they are threatened and attacked in the streets, exposed to the aggression of passers-by. Since 2008, their actions are under police protection.³⁵

The violence towards ŽuC arises in the moments when their anti-war actions and vigils break the national community what I have called communion. To blur the demarcation line between the grievable and the un-grievable and to advocate mourning all victims, ŽuC use theatrical strategies. Dubravka Knežević stated that their “choreography” depends on “how many women have joined the particular ‘standing.’ Sometimes the women stand in line or in a circle, sometimes the circle is a moving one, sometimes it sways from a line to circle, then to a line again, or to a semi-circle.”³⁶

Politized Black

Pictures of ŽuC’s vigils show what their name already suggests: their members wear black clothes. The importance of the color black for their actions is evident in the following statement from December 17, 1992:

We are a group of women who stand in silence and black every week to express our disapproval against war. We have decided to show what the women’s side of war is. Women wear black in our countries to express their grief for the loved ones. We wear black for the death of all victims of war. We wear black because people have been thrown out of their homes, because women have been raped, because cities and villages have been burned and destroyed.³⁷

³⁵ Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air*, 162–163.

³⁶ See Knežević, “Marked with Red Ink,” 57.

³⁷ Statement of ŽuC, December 17, 1992, quoted in Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air*, 165.

In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Croatia, wearing black is a convention for expressing grief. ŽuC use black as a color that stands for mourning for all the victims of war. This politicizes the color. In their fight for the recognition of all the dead, the color black takes on a new meaning. Through their consciously feminist positioning on “the women’s side of war,” ŽuC oppose the nationally normative framework of mourning. As Athena Athanasiou has pointed out, they position themselves on the women’s side without reproducing the image of feminine, idealized mourning:

Given that the cultural idiom of mourning—in the former Yugoslavia as elsewhere—is imbued with the nationalistic and heterosexist fantasy of the “mother of the nation,” the weeping mother who has honorably sacrificed her sons to the nation’s military pursuits, ŽuC undermines the normative role assigned to women by nationalism and kinship normativity by re-embodying the sign of mourning outside the sanctioned boundaries of proper femininity and national allegiance.³⁸

Like professional mourners, ŽuC are representatives of the pain and grief of others; they act on behalf of and in the name of the victims of war and their relatives. But unlike professional mourners, ŽuC are not representatives of a visible community. They represent the demand for an assembly of people in which mourning is renegotiated beyond national divisions.

Stajanje—Performative Staging of Silence in Public Space

Silence, such as the minute of silence at funerals, is a central gesture in the context of mourning. ŽuC’s performative staging of silence in public space is not only the central theatrical strategy of their politics; it also serves as a demarcation from the conventional gesture of silence. ŽuC wrote in a public statement in 2007:

We choose silence because we reject superfluous words which disable thinking about ourselves and others. Silence is a feature of the lives of many citizens, both men and women. The media have silenced us, but for us silence is in its entirety an expression of our disagreement with this war . . . important experiences are expressed and felt through silence . . . silence here from where the war started is a protest, it is our scream and warning. With our silence and our blackness we want to express shame and empathy.³⁹

³⁸ Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning*, 71.

³⁹ Statement of ŽuC, quoted in Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air*, 168.

Like the color black, the silence in their action is politicized. The silence of ŽuC is a protest against a language in which they cannot express themselves, against the media in which they don't get a place to express themselves, and against the war which, according to the nationalist and heteronormatively framed historical context, must not be spoken out against.

The reference to silence being “a protest,” “scream,” and “warning” makes it evident that silence is not inaudible; performatively enacted by the bodies of ŽuC, it becomes loud. In the process, not only does their presence become noticeable, but also their break with the existing normative framework. According to Athanasiou, the silence of the participants in the actions of ŽuC performatively underlines the limits of what can be said and heard in public and makes silence as such articulate.⁴⁰

Silence is the central aspect of ŽuC's theatrical strategy of performative standing in public space. This standing still, called *stajanje* can be seen as “a timely and de-authorizing response of the avalanche of media images of grieving women at historical as well as contemporary graveyards.”⁴¹ *Stajanje* opposes media images that use national representative strategies and “call for reparation for the sake of the nation.”⁴² Here, mourning is a performative modality of a counter-memory that “is about a performative and transformative engagement with the political, which induces other presents and futures, by rendering possible what is simultaneously crossed out.”⁴³ The temporality of ŽuC's activism does not refer to a linear and progressive passage of time.

One means of bringing about this confusion of time is what Athena Athanasiou describes as a “poetic of ‘standstill.’” She argues that *stajanje* can be seen as an incalculable moment of new and intensified awareness, which might take the form of a rupture or crack, even a revolutionary occasion, into the order of homogeneous, chronological time.

In this spatial poetic of “standstill” as a moment for acting, activist subjects stand in principle outside themselves: affected, estranged, non-presupposed, and constantly-being made outside in the polis. Their collective bodily presence evinces an agonistic way for performing the political as a space for appearing bodies.⁴⁴

She refers with this “rupture” to Walter Benjamin's *Dialektik im Stillstand*. In his essay “What is Epic Theatre?,” Benjamin writes that epic theater breaks the

⁴⁰ See Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning*, 254–262.

⁴¹ Athanasiou, 10.

⁴² Athanasiou, 10.

⁴³ Athanasiou, 14.

⁴⁴ Athanasiou, 181.



PHOTO © VESNA PAVLOVIĆ

Women in Black, 5th Year Anniversary

REPUBLIC SQUARE, BELGRADE, 1996

continuum of actions and brings the scenes out of a “dialectic at a standstill.” This is the moment in which the spectators begin to think and question, in which they can discover the condition to which they are exposed with a new awareness.⁴⁵

Athanasίου argues—in reference to Cecilia Sosa’s observations about the assemblies of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina⁴⁶—that *stajanje* highlights ŽuC’s use of the female body in collective political action and transforms the individual bodies of their members into “an acting monument, or a monument of collective acting” which nevertheless “defies monumentalisation.”⁴⁷ The author describes *stajanje* here in relation to the recipients. Her remarks can be complemented by a statement of Staša Zajović, one of the co-founders of ŽuC, about

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre? [First Version],” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso Books, 2003), 3, 4, 12.

⁴⁶ Unlike the mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who protest in public squares with pictures of their children, the *desaparecidos*, killed and buried in mass graves in Guatemala and Argentina, the vigils of Women in Black are not only attended by mothers. See Athanasίου, *Agonistic Mourning*, 78, 180.

⁴⁷ See Athanasίου, 180–181.

the role that *stajanje* has for the participants: “Feelings, opinions, passions and thoughts of many people are incorporated in ŽuC as a collective act, as a product of collective work.”⁴⁸ Coming together on the basis of shared grief and condensing it into a political message, the group becomes an assembly in which members feel free to express their emotions and to be aware of the pain of others, but also to be able to ask what kind of responsibility they have towards the victims of war.

At this point, the question arises when can a *communitas* of mourning be found in ŽuC’s actions? It can’t be the moments when members of ŽuC are attacked—although the attackers are responding to a *communitas* of mourning that poses a threat to the national and heteronormative framework of mourning. Similarly, there is no *communitas* of mourning when passers-by show no reaction; it might only occur when the theatrical strategies of ŽuC affect the passers-by. The condition for the occurrence of the *communitas* of mourning in this case is that ŽuC use the conventional black as a recognition marker—the passers-by can recognize the color of mourning—but they politicize it through the integration into their political action. Being affected by mourning together with members of ŽuC, standing silently in public space as a collective act, entails entering a process of negotiation. In this moment, it is a mourning for all the victims of war, and thus beyond the national and heteronormative framework of mourning in which the victims of other nations become invisible. This moment is one of response-ability—as the boundary between the grievable and the un-grievable is blurred, and one of *communitas*—as the existing nationally-oriented communion is broken. The *communitas* of mourning is the moment that opens the possibility of negotiating what mourning is, but it is not the subsequent negotiation itself. The negotiation is always prefigured by the concrete strategies that open the *communitas* of mourning and by the historical context to which these strategies respond.

The Politics of Dah Teatar

In order to respond to and overcome certain patterns of hostility and violence unleashed by the war, Dah Teatar has developed several techniques and strategies to enable the audience of their performances to see themselves as part of a larger network of relationships, that is, to see themselves in relation to those perceived as “the others” in the war. In what follows, I will examine the central scene of *The Story of Tea*, a play first performed by Dah Teatar 2006 in Belgrade. The scene stands as an example of the strategies that Dah Teatar uses to open a *communitas* of mourning.

⁴⁸ Staša Zajović et al., eds., *Žene za mir* (Belgrade: Žene u crnom, 2007), quoted in Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air*, 164.

Founded in 1991 by Dijana Milošević and Jadranka Anđelić, Dah Teatar staged its first performance, *This Babylonian Confusion*, at Belgrade's Republic Square in the summer of 1992. Confronted with the beginning of the Yugoslav Wars, they asked themselves what the responsibility of artists is in dark times. They decided "to use their privilege of having a public voice"⁴⁹ to speak out against war, nationalism and for the transformation of the society. *This Babylonian Confusion* was based on Brecht's anti-war poems. One quotation became the motto of the theater company: "Will there be singing in the dark times? Yes, there will be singing about the dark times." The company's practice is characterized by the use of modern theater techniques. They work with the body, voice, rhythm, speed, and juxtaposition, also using visual and performance art in their plays. Their practice can be linked directly to the work of Eugenio Barba; on two different occasions, in 1989 and early in the 1990s, Dijana Milošević and Jadranka Anđelić worked at Barba's Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark. Although he has been an influential mentor for the two directors, Dijana Milošević claims no distinct method for her independent theater company. Their work stems from, and is more clearly defined by, processes developed by the performers themselves under the directors' guidance.⁵⁰

In 1993, Dah Teatar expanded its activities by founding the Dah Theatre Research Centre. Their initiatives include demonstrations, lectures, performances, festivals, meetings, networking and workshops with various international non-institutional theater groups and communities involved in coming to terms with or remembering war. The members of Dah Teatar believe that theater is a vehicle to make different voices heard and thus can enable communication between different nations, peoples and histories. Plays such as *The Maps of Forbidden Remembrance* (2000), *The Story of Tea* (2006), *Crossing the Line* (2009) and *The Presence of Absence* (2013) aim to initiate an engagement with the past, drawing attention to war crimes such as Srebrenica and Štrpci, to recognize the suffering of others and to confront the violence of war. All four abovementioned plays were not only performed on stage but also in public spaces during the vigils of *Žene u crnom*, or were developed in cooperation with the activists.

Like ŽuC, Dah Teatar has a political approach to mourning. Milošević argues that theatre can open a shared space for mourning:

The power of the theatre lies in its power to cast light on dark truths and allow a process of mourning to occur in society. Theatre can create indeed a necessary space for collective mourning, for collective witnessing, for remembrance and action.

⁴⁹ Dijana Milošević, interview by Sandra Biberstein, January 19, 2021.

⁵⁰ Milošević, interview.

It is important to ask the question: how to create space where we can meet and be together, a place to mourn, and not be in opposition with one another?⁵¹

Thus envisioned, this theater space offers the possibility to negotiate the question of community and alternative, collective mourning. In several interviews⁵² Milošević said that it is crucial for Dah Teatar to create shows and actions that deal with the public mourning; because of the ongoing denial, Dah Teatar is committed to create a space for talking about “harsh stories” and to give people the chance “to hear the other through the theater, especially to those who consider the others as enemies.”⁵³

But what techniques does theater use to create a “place to mourn” and produce a “mourning process”? In order to answer this question, I will focus on the play *Priča o čaju* (*The Story of Tea*) that premiered in 2006 and was staged in small theater spaces in several villages in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as at small festivals all around Europe and in the United States.

The Reenactment of a War Crime

*The Story of Tea*⁵⁴ is about missed opportunities, lost people, languages and truths. In this loose adaptation of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, Dah Teatar addresses the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, as well as the massacre of Štrpci, which took place on February 27, 1993. At 3.48 pm, train no. 671 from Belgrade to Bar, Montenegro, was stopped by members of a paramilitary force known as the Avengers at the railway station of Štrpci, in the vicinity of the Serbian-Bosnian border. Twenty passengers were forced to leave the train and taken to a small village near Višegrad, where they were stripped naked, robbed, and a few days later killed. To date, the remains of only four victims have been found.⁵⁵

The Story of Tea was performed by three actresses and one actor in various places, mostly small intimate black box theaters with audience capacity of seventy-five up to a hundred. The first impression the audience gets is the set design by the

⁵¹ Dijana Milošević, “Some Thoughts on the Quality of Attention,” in *The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader*, eds. Teresa Brayshaw, Anna Fenemore, and Noel Witts (London: Routledge, 2020), 163.

⁵² See Dennis Barnett, ed., *DAH Theatre: A Sourcebook* (New York: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁵³ Milošević, interview.

⁵⁴ *The Story of Tea*, premiered 2006, <http://en.dahteatarcentar.com/performances/the-story-of-tea/>.

The following analysis is based on a recording provided by Dah Teatar. The English translation was taken from the subtitles of the video.

⁵⁵ Among the abducted, there were 18 Bosniaks, one Croat and one person of unknown origin. Depending on the source on the Štrpci massacre, either 20 or 19 passengers are mentioned. *The Story of Tea* mentions the 19 identified passengers. See “Štrpci Case: What is Your Name?,” blog of Youth Initiative for Human Rights, February 26, 2020, <https://www.yihr.rs/en/strpci-case-what-is-your-name/>; “Crime in Štrpci—26 years, no justice for victims,” blog of Youth Initiative for Human Rights, February 26, 2019, <https://yihr.org/crime-in-strpci-26-years-no-justice-for-victims/>.

artist Neša Paripović—one of the most prominent representatives of conceptual art in Serbia in the 1970s—who creates all set designs for Dah Teatar. The theater space is arranged in such a way that the spectators are seated facing each other, as in a train compartment. The action takes place between the two sections of the audience. On the floor are two white runner carpets separated by a sidewalk of black floor. Red paint on parts of the runners suggests blood spilled on them. At the end of these runners are wooden boxes that open and close like suitcases. During the play, the set design and props are constantly reinterpreted and over-written with new meanings: the runners, for example, become train rails.

The performance moods of *The Story of Tea* shift constantly: there are scenes where all actresses are singing and dancing, the next moment harsh stories are told. Their performance is characterized by ruptures and slow-motion movement. The alternations between joy and sadness give the play a rhythmic structure. The central scene of *The Story of Tea* alternates between a retelling and reenactment of the atrocity that was committed in Štrpci. It was also performed as a site-specific piece in Knez Mihailova Street in Belgrade during the annual vigils “Remembering of the Crime in Štrpci” organized by ŽuC in 2016.⁵⁶

The scene starts with Sanja Krsmanović-Tasić serving tea to the other characters played by Maja Mitić, Aleksandra Jelić, and Jugoslav Hadžić. Jelić starts reading a page from a newspaper: “27 February 1993,” then tears up the newspaper and puts the shreds in the teacups of the other actresses. Hadžić, who previously appeared as a soldier, covers his cup and turns away, then leaves the stage. Jelić continues: “Train number 671. Station Štrpci.” With these keywords, she evokes the memory of the war crime that was publicly reported in the newspapers the very next day. The reaction of actor Hadžić shows that he does not acknowledge the information about the war crime. It might be argued that his reaction symbolizes the Serbian government’s refusal to acknowledge the atrocity in Štrpci as a massacre committed by the Serbian paramilitary forces.⁵⁷

Packing her suitcase, Jelić continues: “19 citizens of Republic of Yugoslavia have been kidnapped from the train and killed.” Mitić, who sits now next to her on a suitcase, adds: “Just because they had Muslim names. By whose orders do the train conductors write down names of passengers on train tickets?” She addresses the question to the spectators. But before anyone could answer, the two shrug,

⁵⁶ This analysis is based on a recording of the performance available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swh3rk2mzxu>.

⁵⁷ Of the approximately 30 suspected perpetrators, Nebojša Ranisavljević was the only person convicted for his role in the crime. He was arrested in October 1996 and sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2002. It was not before December 2014 that another 15 people were arrested and charged for their involvement in the massacre. Also, the families of the victims have been ignored by the state authorities responsible for the care of civilian victims of war (the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs). The relatives of the victims, under Serbian law, are deprived of the right to obtain the status of family members of civilian victims of war, because their family members were killed outside the territory of Serbia, although they were Serbian citizens. See <https://www.yihrr.rs/en/crime-in-strpci-26-years-no-justice-for-victims/>.

look up and hurriedly get up. Jelić stands on a suitcase, positioning herself like a statue. After this brief introduction to the massacre in Štrpci, a reenactment starts. As the two actresses progress through what might have happened on the train, they also move on like a slow train. As Jelić awakens from standstill, Mitić moves the suitcase from the rear to the front, so that Jelić can step on it. Her facial expression is serious, her gaze straight ahead. She is holding a passport, tries to throw it away several times, but Mitić gives it back to her each time. Then the actress shrugs again, holds her hand in front of her mouth to suppress a scream, points at someone with her outstretched arm. She pretends to see someone being taken off the train. Jelić says: “She has nothing else to lose” and pauses, bent forward. Mitić also interrupts her performance and takes a seat on the back suitcase. Then she continues the story: “Almost a thousand passengers were witnesses to the kidnapping.” She puts her outstretched index finger to her lips, telling the spectators to be quiet: “Shhhhh.” Jelić straightens up, looks in shock and disbelief at the spectators, and once again takes the position of a statue, with hands raised in front of her face.

These moments of interruption mark the shifts from the narrative mode to a reenactment. By retelling and asking who helped make this atrocity possible, the two actresses keep addressing the issue of responsibility. Their reenactment raises the question of what happened beyond the representation of this case in the national media. While certain narratives of this events circulated in the media, the performers of Dah Teatar not only recall the events but bring the past actions into the present. In doing so, they create a space where the past and present collide.

In the subsequent part of the reenactment, Mitić and Jelić alternate between the roles of passengers and soldiers, saying “Let the child go, what did it do?” or “May their mothers scream tonight. . . .” Then they interrupt again; Jelić, still standing on the wooden suitcases, recounts the reaction of the 19 passengers abducted from the train: “In silence they left the wagon compartments. They did not even complain or beg for mercy.” Mitić continues moving the suitcase rear to front, so that Jelić can step on it. Then she says: “Don’t take him, he is my neighbour.” “Do you want to be taken too?” answers Jelić. When they say that the kidnapped were taken away, two violinists accompany them with a monotonic lament. Then, Mitić picks up the back suitcase but does not put it in front of the other one. This time she walks away, saying: “The train went on like nothing happened.” Because the suitcase that Jelić is supposed to step on is not there anymore, her foot remains frozen in midair; metaphorically, an abyss opens before her. She freezes in this pose, balancing on one leg, standing there like a statue that could fall into the abyss at any moment.

This distinct rupture in the performance marks the moment of the kidnapping and death of the nineteen passengers. In repeating what might have been the reaction of the witnesses, the question of responsibility and complicity is raised. In the reenactment, the two actresses not only perform what might have happened

on February 27, 1993, when the train was stopped, but they also describe what did not happen, when the paramilitary forces went from one compartment to another, asking people to leave the train. Namely, the other passengers stayed silent and watched on. Only few tried to object; one was taken and killed. In their performance, Dah Teatar does not judge this silence, but asks indirectly how the passengers dealt with the situation they have witnessed. Since the audience find themselves in the position of train passengers due to the arrangement of the theater space and the reenactment, this question is also addressed to them.

To Grieve for the Excluded Other

The question of who is to blame and who should be held accountable comes up in the next part of the scene. Jelić asks who the accomplices of the perpetrators are. Again, her performance is fractured: she awakens from rigidity, then freezes again. From her statuesque position she now quickly changes to another, pointing with both arms to the floor: “What kind of people could dig out human remains and bury them again? What kind of man could sit in a dredger and take out somebody’s bones?”⁵⁸ Still standing on the suitcase, she straightens up, turns to the audience with her arms outstretched and asks: “Where are all those people who did that?” She points her arms to the floor again, turns around and asks: “Where do they live? Are they maybe our neighbours?” She positions herself again like a statue raising her arms, stretching them hopefully towards the sky. Then Sanja Krsmanović-Tasić steps forward and pins onto the white dress of Jelić nineteen black plaques with the names of the murdered men. She does this with ritual-like serenity and diligence. It is the visual and emotional climax of this short scene.

In the last part of the reenactment, Jelić has taken the role of the murdered civilians. As the names of the dead are pinned to her dress, the actress is transformed into a living memorial. Through this action, the nineteen cups of tea the actors had served to nineteen spectators in the beginning of the play acquire a new meaning. They could have been the ones selected to leave the train. At the very end of the performance, the actresses put nineteen candles in those cups. The audience sits in silence as the actresses leave the stage. The candles light the faces of the spectators as they look at one other. In this way, Dah Teatar has created a space for mourning, resembling a vigil.

⁵⁸ As satellite images showed what appeared to be mass graves, the Serbian forces that perpetrated the genocide exhumed these graves and reburied hundreds of bodies in several secondary graves in other areas under their control. Some of the remains were re-distributed again to other locations to form tertiary mass graves. See Jugo Admir, “Artefacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Symbols of Persons, Forensic Evidence or Public Relics?,” *Les Cahiers Sirice* 19, no. 2 (2017): 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lcsi.019.0021>.

The moments of interruption in the performance can be described as a temporal figure of the in-between. An interruption is not only a rhythmic change in the dramaturgy of the play, but also a transition or changeover, in which—to use Benjamin’s term—a “shock” is inherent. It opens as a dissonance of perception, an interval of the unpredictable. Time in this scene is characterized by interruptions of sequences and thus questions the continuum of events. This leads to a state which is not a static condition but a zone of reciprocal activity of the spectators. It is a moment in which the spectators have the possibility to reflect, to think about the responsibility of being a witness.

The *communitas* of mourning in the play *The Story of Tea* occurs in the moments when the spectators can discover the event with a new awareness. Furthermore, Dah Teatar organizes conversations with their audiences after a play. As they have been performing in front of different audiences, including war veterans, Dah Teatar has never been able to predict the audience reaction. So far, Dijana Milošević recalls that audiences have invariably been supportive and emotionally affected.⁵⁹ The common initial reaction is silence and a shared feeling of numbness. People seem visibly shaken by what they have seen and often stay in their seats for a few minutes without speaking before slowly getting up and engaging with others.⁶⁰ Of course, the situation of the theater itself is one of negotiating. No matter to which national community the spectators belong, by becoming witnesses, they are confronted with the question to what extent they want to negotiate a new community with the other persons present. Because Dah Teatar creates a space to mourn and remember the victims that are officially not acknowledged, it is a moment that allows the spectator in this specific historic context to meet and grieve with others regardless of their national belonging. This moment opens a *communitas*—as the question of being together beyond any friend-enemy opposition arises, as well as that of response-ability, as there is a new awareness of being responsible and of grieving together for the excluded others.

Conclusion

The analysis of ŽuC’s vigils and of the main scene of the Dah Teatar’s play *The Story of Tea* has highlighted the particular strategies through which grief was made possible beyond the friend-enemy opposition in a very specific national wartime and post-war context. In ŽuC’s vigils, there are two strategies. First, the wearing of black takes on a politicized meaning. In the conventional framework,

⁵⁹ See Milošević, interview.

⁶⁰ See Dijana Milošević and Olivera Simić, “Enacting Justice: The Role of Dah Theatre Company in Transitional Justice Processes in Serbia and Beyond,” in *The Arts of Transitional Justice: Culture, Activism, and Memory after Atrocity*, eds. Peter D. Rush and Olivera Simić (New York: Springer, 2014), 103.

the color black stood for mourning for relatives; in the case of ŽuC, it stands for mourning for all victims of the war. Thus, wearing the color black leads to a break with the nationalist heteronormative framework of mourning. Second, *stajanje* is a strategy to be noticed in public space. In this way, ŽuC counter the media images depicting national mourning. *Stajanje* aims to create a rupture with conventional mourning to enable alternative mourning for all victims of the war, thus creating a new awareness, a counter-memory that is beyond a national framework. The strategy also serves the ŽuC members to appear to the outside world as a collective act and to feel that they are a collective indeed.

The politics of Dah Teatar is not only to confront the audience with a retelling of the events of a war crime, but also to create conditions that expose the spectators to a new state of awareness. In *The Story of Tea*, the performance is characterized by ruptures. This is most evident in the moments when one of the actresses pauses, her posture is frozen, and her body visually becomes a statue. The first moment of interruption in the discussed play marks the change from the narrative mode located in the present to a reenactment of the actions that happened in the past. The second moment marks the moment of the death of the 19 passengers and opens a space in which the question of responsibility can be asked. The third moment opens a space for mourning and remembrance of the victims.

In both cases, ŽuC and Dah Teatar use these particular strategies to open a space for people to perceive others and grieve with others publicly, to expose themselves and also the passers-by or the spectators to a shared vulnerability. They open a space for being together and for remembrance of the excluded others. At the same time, they disrupt the denoted and mediated position of an enemy that in nationally framed mourning is considered ungrivable, and confront the passers-by or the audience with the question of responsibility that was taken as a self-evident fact before. In this clash of the question of *communitas*, responsibility, and grievability, a *communitas* of mourning can be determined.



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Abstract

Communitas of Mourning: Women in Black and Dah Teatar between War Protest and Theater

In wartime and post-war situations, the opposition of friend and enemy—based on national divisions—often condemns the dead “enemies” to be ungrievable. To grieve for the excluded others in such times means to break with the friend-enemy opposition. This article examines how the friend-enemy opposition is broken in the case of the actions of Women in Black and Dah Teatar in the context of the civil war in Yugoslavia. By analyzing the vigils of *Žene u crnom* (Women in Black) in Belgrade and the play *Priča o čaju* (*The Story of Tea*) by Dah Teatar, the author discusses the particular strategies through which grief was made possible beyond the friend-enemy opposition and how these strategies open a *communitas* of mourning. The term “*communitas* of mourning” refers to the concept of grievability, proposed by Judith Butler in *Frames of War*.

Keywords

communitas, grievability, Women in Black, Dah Teatar, response-ability, war, protest

Abstrakt

Żałobna *communitas*: Kobiety w Czerni i Dah Teatar między protestem antywojennym a teatrem

Podczas wojny i w rzeczywistości powojennej przeciwstawienie „przyjaciel–wróg” oparte na podziałach narodowych często odbiera zmarłym „wrogom” prawo do żałoby. Opłakiwanie wykluczonych innych w takich czasach oznacza zerwanie z tym przeciwstawieniem. Autorka artykułu analizuje dwa przypadki przekroczenia opozycji „przyjaciel–wróg” w kontekście wojny domowej w Jugosławii – działalność grupy Kobiety w Czerni i teatru Dah. Analizując czuwania belgradzkich *Žene u crnom* i spektakl Dah Teatar *Priča o čaju* (Opowieść o herbacie), omawia strategie umożliwiające opłakiwanie zmarłych poza tą opozycją oraz to, jak otwierają one żałobną *communitas*. Koncepcja „żałobnej *communitas*” wyrasta z refleksji nad życiem godnym opłakiwania zaproponowanej przez Judith Butler w książce *Ramy wojny*.

Słowa kluczowe

communitas, opłakiwalność, Kobiety w Czerni, Dah Teatar, odpowiedzi/alność, wojna, protest

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