Damjan Božinović and Stijn Vervaet

Translating Memories of the Bosnian War: Translators as Memory Brokers of Violent Conflict

One of the most dramatic scenes in the 2005 memoir *Postcards from the Grave* by Emir Suljagić is when he recounts his unexpected encounter with Ratko Mladić, the commander of the Bosnian Serb Army (Army of the Republika Srpska), hours before the genocide in Srebrenica.[1] Asked by the Serb officers to present his identification at a checkpoint, Suljagić gave his translator ID, which Mladić himself inspected. Suljagić had to explain where he came from, that he translated for the UN, that he had never been a soldier of the Bosnian Army, and that he was a minor when the war started (2005, 184). After this brief exchange of words, which would haunt him for years, Suljagić was released; the "yellow paper, coated with plastic" (2005, 184) saved his life. Suljagić, who was seventeen years old at the time, survived the genocide because he was employed by the UN as a translator, and he was subsequently evacuated together with the Dutch peacekeepers.

This episode encapsulates the precariousness of wartime translation and spotlights the intersection of translation and memory. Not only did Suljagić's temporary profession save his life, but translating during wartime also enabled him to tell the tale of the genocide and of his own survival *afterwards*, giving the events in Srebrenica their literary afterlife. Furthermore, the episode highlights the highly problematic role played by the international community before and during the genocide. As Guido Snel notes, "there is a strong sense throughout Suljagić's literary memoir that the failure of the international community to act appropriately was due to its incapacity to identify with the citizens under siege, who were consequently considered as part of the same, alien, 'Balkan' cultural constellation as the besiegers, hence as part of a hopelessly diverse and convoluted realm on the rim of or even outside Europe" (2014a, 195). Suljagić is very critical of the disengag-

1 Emir Suljagić's 2005 non-fiction book titled *Postcards from the Grave* [*Razglednica iz groba*] is a harrowing account of life in Srebrenica, Bosnia, during the war in the early 1990s, which culminated in July 1995 when the Bosnian Serb Army killed more than 8000 Muslim men and boys. Suljagić is today the director of the memorial centre in Srebrenica. For a discussion of Emir Suljagić's memoir, see Snel 2014a and 2014b. The Bosnian Serb Army was created on 12 May 1992, when units of the Yugoslav People's Army units stationed in Bosnia and Herzegovina were transformed into the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS), under the command of General Ratko Mladić (Delpla, Bougarel and Fournel 2012, xv).

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ed and overly passive role taken by the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica, but at the same time it was precisely a bureaucratic formality in the form of his ID issued by the UN that ensured his own survival.

Bella Brodzki (2007) argued, building upon Walter Benjamin, that translation is more than interlingual transmission, as it is actually a necessary condition for the survival of memory. Benjamin's much-quoted preface *The Task of the Translator* (Benjamin 1997 [1923]) to his translation of Baudelaire describes translation, in Bella Brodzki's elegant phrasing, as "a redemptive mode that ensures the survival, the living on of an individual text or cultural narrative, albeit in a revised or altered form" (2007, 1–2). As Jacques Derrida importantly stressed in his text *Des Tours de Babel* (1985), Benjamin used two different terms *überleben* [survive] and *fortleben* [continue to live, live on] as two sides of a coin that time and again return in literary and artistic works that address the mutual entanglement of memory, especially traumatic memory, and translation, as this article will show.[2]

This chapter takes the role of translation both as praxis and as metaphor as a point of departure for discussing the complex travels of memories of the Bosnian war. It asks what the role of art and cultural translation is in countering balkanising views of Bosnia,[3] and how translators serve as mediators of memory. We explore two case studies that, each in a different way, articulate, recall, and help circulate memories of the war, and shed light on the various roles of translation and the translator in these mnemonic processes. The first is the 1999 bilingual anthology of contemporary Norwegian poetry devoted to the Bosnian war titled *Mourning That Blooms Dark* (*Sorg som blomstrer mørkt*, 1999), edited by the Bosnian-Norwegian poet and translator Munib Delalić, who also translated the Norwegian

2 For recent scholarship on the nexus of translation and memory, see Siobhan Brownlie's *Mapping Memory in Translation* (2016), which engages with theoretical concepts from memory studies and applies them to translation studies. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2018) proposes that translation can be used as an analytical lens for re-thinking migration, and we would also add for examining memory. In *Translating War* (2019), Angela Kershaw explores the remediation of memory through translations of war literature in the Anglo-French context. Building upon Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of literature that is "born translated" (2015), Eneken Laanes has recently argued for the need to study "memories that are born translated", suggesting "translation as a new model for conceptualising the transnational travel of memories" (2021, 1).

3 By balkanising views we mean what Maria Todorova (1999) described as Balkanism, following Edward Said's understanding of Orientalism, as a set of predominantly negative stereotypes perpetuated by mass media and culture, that frame the Balkans as Western Europe's less civilised Other.

poems into Bosnian.[4] The second case study is the 2020 film *Quo Vadis, Aida?* directed by Jasmila Žbanić. By looking at the figure of the translator, we draw equally on translation and memory studies. In this context, translation lays bare the potential and limitations for the transnational travel of memories of violent conflict at different scales, within and across European borders.

The first section explores the ways mnemonic migration is fostered by poetry in translation, which we read as a zone of convergence between the expressions of empathy, ambivalence and guilt in the anthology *Mourning That Blooms Dark.* This anthology consists of poems by twenty renowned Norwegian contemporary poets, including well-known names such as Paal Brekke, Stein Mehren and Jan Erik Vold, and it borrowed its title *Mourning That Blooms Dark* from the closing verse of the poem "War" ("Krig") by Sidsel Mørck (Delalić 1999, 64 – 69): "The refugee's resting place / is a mourning that blooms dark"[5] (Delalić 1999, 68). The poems are placed side by side in Norwegian and Bosnian. Delalić was not only the initiator of the project and the editor of the anthology, but also served as the primary translator of the poems into Bosnian. How the book came into being demonstrates how the memory of the Bosnian war travelled to a new setting in a process that exemplifies memory in motion and its perpetual transformation across borders of different types (Erll 2011). A first mnemonic migration could be said to occur when Norwegian poets, in a dynamic process of premediation and remediation (Erll and Rigney 2009), decided to write about the Bosnian war. A second way of memory travel can be seen in Delalić translating the Norwegian poems into Bosnian. We argue that the anthology unveils a link between what Elisabeth Oxfeldt has called "Scandinavian feelings of guilt" (2016, 2018) and empathy with the victims of the Yugoslav wars, and of the war in Bosnia in particular. Even more so, the poems facilitate what Michael Rothberg (2019, 12, Ch. 5 and 6) calls "long-distance solidarity", meaning "solidarity premised on logics of difference rather than on sameness and identification". At the same time, the poems and translating practices discussed here have the potential to shed light on similar issues in the present, like the war in Ukraine.

The second part of our chapter turns to the figure of the translator in Jasmila Žbanić's multiple award-winning 2020 film *Quo Vadis, Aida?* The film narrates the Srebrenica genocide from the perspective of the main character, Aida Selmanagić, a local Bosnian teacher of English who translates for the Dutch UN forces that were

4 Delalić was born in Ljubuški, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1950 and emigrated as a war refugee to Norway in 1993, where he later taught Yugoslav literature at the University of Oslo. He is a prolific translator of modern and contemporary Norwegian prose fiction into Croatian.

5 "Flyktningens hvilested / er en sorg som blomstrer mørkt". All the translations from Norwegian in this chapter are ours.

responsible for protecting Srebrenica.[6] The film illustrates the blatant complicity of the international community in the subsequent genocide. It zooms in on the personal drama of the protagonist, who survives because she is a UN employee but eventually loses her husband and both of her sons, but it also brings to the fore the precarious position of the translator in a war zone. Aida is literally and metaphorically caught in the crossfire between the perpetrators (the army of Republika Srpska), the victims (the inhabitants of Srebrenica, including her own family), and Dutchbat, the supposed peacekeepers, and she occupies a liminal space in several respects. Presented as a survivor of genocide and a mediator of memories, the character of Aida sheds light on the complex entanglement of translation, witnessing and remembering, including questions of trauma and survivor guilt.

We analyse the figure of the interpreter as a mediator, not only between languages, but also of the collective memory of the genocide. What both case studies have in common is the overall sense that Europe did not do enough to prevent the genocide and stop the atrocities in Bosnia. In the conclusion, we sum up how our case studies foster reflection upon the potential and limitations of travelling memory. We will demonstrate that the poems go a long way to provincialise Scandinavian memory culture, while the film asks about Western Europe's complicity in, and responsibility for, the war crimes that happened during the Bosnian war.

Writing and translating poetry: The poetics and ethics of long-distance solidarity between feelings of empathy and guilt

Before analysing the poems in *Mourning That Blooms Dark*, we will look at the foreword, as this meta-text points the way for understanding the dynamics of mnemonic migration, circulation, and the translation of the literature about the Bosnian war in the Norwegian context. Delalić notes the double purpose of the anthology, which is meant primarily as a testimony to the war in Bosnia from an outside perspective, but also gives readers from the former Yugoslavia an insight into contemporary Norwegian poetry.

Delalić first encountered Jan Erik Vold's poetry about the war in Bosnia in 1996, and this prompted him to collect work on the same topic by other contempo-

6 Srebrenica had been declared a Safe Area by the UN Security Council on 19 April 1993 and was put under the protection of the United Nation Protection Forces (UNPROFOR, known as the blue helmets), which was first a Canadian unit and later a Dutch battalion.

rary Norwegian poets. He himself says that the result is a collection of poems that undoubtedly vary "with regard to generation, poetic form and, of course, the strength of their poetic expression" (Delalić 1999, 6), but that nonetheless offer an insight into modern Norwegian poetry, centred around a common topic. Delalić (1999, 7–8) suggests furthermore that the book is a window into how others saw the Bosnians at a time when their identity and survival were at stake, and it is a sign of support for the Bosnian cause that tells them "You are not alone". Although Delalić himself doubts the actual power of literature to intervene effectively in politics, the book nonetheless serves as valuable literary evidence of transnational solidarity and empathy.

As several of the poems suggest, vivid images of the war reached the Norwegian spectator or poet mostly through the mass media, and they served both as a source of inspiration for the poems and as the subject matter for them. These poems illustrate the importance of what Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (2009) call the dynamics between premediation and mediation in the construction and circulation of cultural memory, meaning how the images of the war that circulated in the mass media actually premediated some of the lyric reflections upon the war in the poems. Some poets, such as Paal Brekke and Lasse Tømte, reflect on how the media impacted their own perception of the war. Other poems seem to have been directly inspired by the poets' personal encounters with refugees from the war, as in the case of Ida and Mathis Mathisen (Delalić 1999, 8). Poems such as those by Paal Brekke show that he, and probably other poets of his generation as well, cherished personal memories of travel to socialist Yugoslavia and participation in literary events in the country.[7] These personal contacts at the state and regional level were mirrored and enabled by several bilateral initiatives and organisations that fostered Yugoslav-Norwegian friendship, most of which were directly initiated by the memories of the forced labour of Yugoslav citizens, mostly from Serbia, in German work camps in Narvik in the north of Norway.[8] As Delalić puts it, freely paraphrasing Brekke, Norwegian poets went through different stages, "from love to the

7 Perhaps, though this remains only speculation, Brekke's personal experience as a war refugee in Sweden in the Second World War might have fostered his understanding for the Bosnian cause even more.

8 Material and non-material instances of these bilateral relations include the establishment of the Norwegian-Yugoslav friendship association and several declarations of friendship between Norwegian and Yugoslav, now mostly Serbian, municipalities, but also smaller post-war monuments in the Vigeland park in Oslo and the 1987 House of Yugoslav-Norwegian Friendship in Gornji Milanovac, which changed into the House of Serbian-Norwegian friendship in 2008. For the problematic aspects of building Yugoslav-Norwegian friendship on the foundations of a notion of victimhood that, moreover, blended Yugoslav victims of Nazism and partisan fighters, see Ognjenović 2016.

previous country to distrust when the Yugoslav state building started cracking in its joints to the observer's desperation and helpless withdrawal, confronted with all this evil" (1999, 6–7). In this respect, the anthology shows that mnemonic migration was a multi-faceted process that happened as a result of real-life migrations and the communication between people, as well as in response to exposure to the mass media.

Equally though, *Mourning That Blooms Dark* could be seen as offering the Bosnian reader, and also the Croatian and Serbian reader, a window into modern Scandinavian poetry, turning this book into a two-way street in which memory and mnemonic exchange have the potential to travel in both directions. Though it is difficult to gauge whether that potential is actually realised and what the outreach of a book is once it begins its afterlife (on reception, see section III of this volume), *Mourning That Blooms Dark* nonetheless offers valuable material for understanding how transnational solidarity becomes articulated in literary form. One of the recurring motifs that bind most of the poems together is the interplay of empathy and guilt, which is interwoven with reflections about the deep ambivalence of these feelings. In "In the Plane (Over Yugoslavia on our Way to Crete)" ("*På Flyet* (*Over Jugoslavia på vei til Kreta*)") for example, Jul Haganæs questions the morality of flying over Yugoslavia on the way to a summer holiday, while knowing very well what is happening down below:

> We are on our way / to southern beaches / at the sunny-blue sea / sailing freely / above shining / homes of clouds // But we know – about / the crunched land / with walls of blood / down in the shadow / where we should have been / with extended hands // How perplexing / that a creator / loves us so much / that we are on our way / to the promised land / even though we / don't do / anything. [9] (Delalić 1999, 36)

The final lines seem to articulate a mix of guilt and shame, suggesting that Yugoslavia is where the speaking subject and his companions should be, stretching out a helping hand. Indeed, the speaking subject wonders where this almost undeserved privilege comes from – it is undeserved since they are on their way to Crete, "the promised land", even though they are not doing anything about the war raging below.

Elisabeth Oxfeldt and her research team have observed that "Scandinavian feelings of guilt" (Oxfeldt, Nestingen and Simonsen 2017; Oxfeldt 2017, 2018) proliferate in contemporary literature and culture in Scandinavia, across different gen-

9 "Vi er på veg / til sudrøne strender / ved solblått hav / siglande fritt / over skinande / skyheimar // Men vi veit – om / det krasa landet / med blodvegar / nede i skodda / der vi skulle vore / med utrekte hender // Gåtefullt då / at ein skapar / har oss så kjær / at vi er på veg / til det lova landet / sjølv om vi / ingenting / gjer".

res and media, both highbrow and lowbrow. Superficially, "Scandinavian guilt" could be described as an offshoot of "liberal guilt" or "white guilt", which are feelings of guilt felt by those born in an economically, socially, culturally or genetically privileged milieu. In the US, white guilt is specifically related to the country's legacy of slavery and so is framed within the national context as guilt towards a national Other, while feelings of guilt in Western Europe may similarly be related to the colonial past of different countries. Scandinavian guilt, however, seems to emerge from contact with others who are not as privileged, either from witnessing global injustices through the media, or from encountering migrants and refugees, who have been arriving in Scandinavia in bigger numbers since the 1990s, and more recently it has also emerged in reaction to the participation of Scandinavian countries, especially Denmark and Norway, in international warfare and weapons exports (Oxfeldt 2016, 12–14). Taking her cue from Judith Butler, Oxfeldt further points out that narratives of guilt in the Scandinavian context can indeed function as stories that run against the grain of idealised media images of Scandinavia, including the widespread notion of "Nordic exceptionalism" (Oxfeldt 2016, 14), which suggests that because they allegedly had no colonial history, Scandinavian nations do not share the burden of colonialism with the British, the French, the Belgians or the Dutch. Feelings of guilt can in other words serve as an avenue leading towards transnational solidarity (cf. Butler 2010, 47; see also Rothberg 2019, esp. part III).

Several of the poems in the anthology echo feelings of guilt that are similar to those suggested by Oxfeldt and seem to ask the question that is central to Butler's 2010 book about grievable lives; are Bosnian lives less grievable than Norwegian or West-European ones and if so why? In the poem "Dying Bosnian" ("Dødende Bosnier"), Brekke's lyric I reflects on its own position as a subject. He is steeped in luxury, lying next to his swimming pool while watching a portable television screen that shows how a wounded Bosnian peasant is lying on the ground in front of his burning house, prodded with machine guns by two men in camouflage uniforms, and he calls himself "the coward in an outside-land"[10] (Delalić 1999, 28). A horrible perplexity that is triggered by an awareness of how the mass media and especially the internet, which was emerging as a new technology at the time, make the contemporaneity of events very palpable pervades several of the poems. One of them is Lasse Tømte's poetic vignette "Naked Moose" ("Naken elg"), which evokes the paradoxical feeling of living in parallel worlds, where the poet is safe in his house in snow-covered Scandinavia, while citizens in Bosnia are killed by snipers, killings that are recorded and published on the internet simultaneously:

10 "Jeg er den feige i et utenfor-land".

> The house lies in a snowdrift. Into the snowdrift goes a phone cable, a lifeline and umbilical cord. I'm digging myself in, take my place at the PC and connect myself to the world. *Hello?* Cool, these 1990s. *Is there anyone there?* [...] On the net you can follow what is happening in Sarajevo from hour to hour. [...] When the man on the roof shoots, hits, and a human being falls, a notification about the event ticks on the net. I'm reading it in the same instant. I'm sitting in the snowdrift and reading it.[11] (116)

The internet connection that connects the poet to the world like an umbilical cord thus becomes a tool that the perpetrators in Bosnia can use to record their crimes, letting the poet follow the killings in real time in an uncanny way. When the reader reaches the end of the prose poem, the narrator's earlier comment "Cool, these 1990s" ("Fete, disse nittiåra", 116) takes on a rather cynical sense.

Paal Brekke's poem "Dying Bosnian" ("Dødende Bosnier") addresses even more openly the contradictory ethical responses that stem from the mixed feelings of closeness and remoteness, of involvement and detachment.[12] The poet recalls his own memories of Yugoslavia, from Belgrade, where he was "driven to the countryside in a limousine" where "Tito gave a speech, and I read a poem", to encounters in Zagreb, Dubrovnik, and Ljubljana, and at the end of the first stanza he sums up his own personal relationship with the country as "and so I loved Yugoslavia" (Delalić 1999, 24). But as the subtitle "studies in the ambivalence of an outsider" [*studier i en utenforståendes ambivalens*] suggests, the poem then goes on to think through the ambivalence of the position of the outside observer who is speaking, and to put this relationship in a historical perspective. Images from the Bosnian war on television remind the poet of the suffering of the Jews in the Second World War, and also of colonial policies in Africa:

> as in a déjà-vu on the screen I see also
> how naked Jews are chased with rifle butts
> into the gas chamber
> and I see in the same déjà-vu the handsome
> cricket boys in khaki and pith helmet
> wide-legged in their kano, midstream on

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11 *"Huset ligger inne i en snøskavl. Inn i skavlen går en telefontråd, livline og navlestreng. Jeg graver meg inn, setter meg ved pc'en og kobler meg inn på verden. Hallo? Fete, disse nittiåra. Er det noen der? [...] På nettet kan man følge utviklingen i Sarajevo fra time til time. [...] Når mannen på taket skyter, treffer og et menneske faller om, tikker meldingen om hendelsen ut på nettet. Jeg leser det i samme øyeblikk. Sitter inne i snøskavlen og leser".*

12 Paal Brekke (1923–1993) was an important Norwegian modernist poet and translator, who made his debut as poet at the age of 20 as a refugee in Sweden during the Second World War.

the African river
to subjugate an inferior race.[13] (Delalić 1999, 28)

Brekke's use of the imagery of the Holocaust and colonialism to try to describe and grasp what is going on in Bosnia points a finger at Europe's dark legacy, which continues to contaminate the present. Such poetic imagery arguably serves to shed light on the current conflict by drawing an analogy with other well-known instances of state-supported extreme violence and historical injustice. Michael Rothberg (2009) discussed this logic in *Multidirectional Memory*, in which he shows how Holocaust remembrance can help articulate seemingly unrelated historical injustices and state supported violence elsewhere, such as colonialism and slavery, either by offering mnemonic templates or by lending vocabulary. In the closing stanza, the poet in an apostrophe addresses the dying Bosnian who is the subject of his poem, admitting that awareness of history repeating itself does not offer any consolation to the victims of the war, nor does it give the dying Bosnian a voice. After this apostrophe, which for an instant appears on the portable television to bring together the speaking I and the Bosnian war victim, the poet can only conclude by repeating his earlier reflection that he is "the pale cowardly observer in an outside land" (Delalić 1999, 28).

However, it would be reductionist to argue that what the poems are doing is merely, or mostly, articulating feelings of guilt. As Iris Maria Young puts it, while guilt is backward-looking and related to our deeds in the past, "the meaning of political responsibility is forward-looking" (2011, 92). Quite a few of the poems in Delalić's anthology address questions of responsibility, and so Oxfeldt's point about Scandinavian guilt gains an additional dimension. Importantly, the question of responsibility is mostly framed through the lens of Europe as an entity with ethical duties. A number of poems address Europe's responsibility explicitly, such as Jan Erik Vold's poem "This Europe they are talking about" ("*Dette Europa de snakker om*") with the suggestive subtitle *Bosnia 93 – Warszawa 43*, which points at the complicity of Europe while drawing parallels with Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto:

This
Europe
they are talking about, this Europe

13 "som i et déjà-vu på skjermen ser jeg også / nakne jøder føyses med geværkolber / inn i gasskammeret / og ser i samme déjà-vu de kjekke / cricketboys i stivet khaki og med solhjelm / skrevende på sin kanonbåt, midtstrøms opp / den afrikanske floden / for å underlegge seg en mindreverdig rase".

is burning. This
Europe they are praising, is now killing
its
own people. That which happened
in Auschwitz, is now happening
in Bosnia-Hercegovina
Does one have to be a politician, to be able
not to see this? (Delalić 1999, 118)[14]

Again, the reference to Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto is not made by chance, since the Holocaust has served as a reference point for subsequent conceptualisations and debates about a number of extreme crimes against humanity, from slavery to the war crimes and genocide in the Yugoslav wars of succession. The poem suggests that Europe is a broader community with certain ethical responsibilities, an idea that also is implicit in Žbanić's film *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, which is discussed below.[15]

Expressions of friendship and love for Yugoslavia and Bosnia are also highlighted, which amplifies the feeling of collective guilt around the events of the war.[16] Delalić (1999, 10–11) mentions in his introduction that the book is a symbol of Norwegian-Bosnian relations. Interestingly, most of the poets in the anthology were born before the Second World War and so belong to a generation that remembers not only the struggle against Nazism but also a different, peaceful, socialist Yugoslavia, where they had friends, colleagues, and translators.[17] The Bosnian war in summary seems to function in many of the poems as a trigger for Scandinavian guilt, but it is also a cue for the poets to think about issues of international solidarity and the role of Europe as peacekeeper in its own house, the question of whether Europe treats the Balkans in general, and Bosnia in particular, as its internal other, and all the way to questions of transnational memory. However, while the Norwegian poems explicitly bear witness to the suffering of Bosnian citi-

14 "Dette / Europa / som de snakker om, dette Europa / brenner. Dette // Europa de lovpriser, dreper nå Sine / egne. Det som skjedde / i Auschwitz, skjer nå / i Bosnia-Hercegovina / Må man være politiker, for ikke å se det?".

15 See also Jan Erik Vold's "Requiem in October" ("Rekviem i oktober"), which likewise calls out the EU for its inaction.

16 This friendship has many interesting chapters. One of the streets in Skopje, North Macedonia, for example, bears the name of Thorvald Stoltenberg, the father of Jens Stoltenberg, the incumbent secretary-general of NATO, who helped during the aftermath of the 1963 earthquake, since he was a diplomat in Belgrade at the time.

17 As it happened, they also grew up in an era in which life in Norway was far less prosperous, before oil started to be exploited on large scale, and Norway was not necessarily perceived as one of the rich, privileged parts of the world.

zens, it seems as if the translator has erased himself from the anthology and made himself invisible. This erasure echoes Stahuljak's (2000) criticism of testimonial genres such as Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah*, and of trauma studies in the late 1990s, specifically Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, which use the translator as a mere metaphor, thus erasing them from historical testimonies: "Although the act of translation thus represents the process of testimonial transmission, the translator is nevertheless reduced to a position of minor consequence", whereas "the interviewer, the historian and the spectator are thus given testimonial stances" (Stahuljak 2000, 39). In the next section we approach the question of mnemonic migration from yet another perspective, focusing now not only on film, which as a genre is usually considered the medium par excellence for creating prosthetic mnemonic communities (Landsberg 2004), but also on a particular film that puts the translator as witness and survivor in the limelight.

Quo Vadis, Aida? The interpreter as implicated subject, witness, and survivor

At the very beginning of *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, after a brief opening panning shot of the Selmanagić family, the film transitions to a black screen with the words "Europe, Bosnia – July 1995" and "Evropa, Bosna, juli 1995" in white letters, in English and in Bosnian, immediately after which we see the army of Republika Srpska entering the town of Srebrenica. The choice of words and their order is not incidental, though it may seem redundant to place the word "Europe" next to "Bosnia". Emphasising the seemingly self-evident fact of Bosnia being in Europe sets the tone for the rest of the film though, and foreshadows how translation is inseparable from the greater picture of war by reminding us of Apter's thesis that "the translation zone is a war zone" (2006, ix), and setting the stage for the protagonist Aida, who as a translator becomes a witness, survivor, and subsequent mediator of memory of the genocide. By placing the word "Europe" first, the film literally states that a heinous crime happened in the middle of Europe, with Europe as a geographical signifier, while simultaneously highlighting the prominent but often neglected role played in the Srebrenica massacre by Europe as a metonymy for the international community stretching beyond its physical borders. Conversely, the coupling of Europe and Bosnia can also be interpreted as an oxymoron from a geopolitical and cultural point of view of the centre and the periphery, because has Europe ever regarded Bosnia as constituent part of it, or is the whole region destined to lie perpetually on Europe's outskirts? This question is particularly haunting in the case of

Srebrenica, since, as Guido Snel (2014a, 2014b) emphasised, the perceived non-Europeanness of Bosnians, and of the people framed as Bosnian Muslims in particular, may have fed into the international community not identifying with, and so not properly protecting, the inhabitants of the enclave they were supposed to protect.

As Dijana Jelača pointed out, the glaring omission of on-screen physical violence that characterises *Quo Vadis, Aida?* is quite atypical for a film that deals with such a brutal theme. The film succeeds in "conveying the horror of mass atrocity without making a spectacle out of death and suffering, without subjecting the traumas of the victims and survivors to an exploitative gaze" (Jelača 2021, 201). Rather than fetishising graphic violence, Žbanić focuses on Aida's personal battle and the actions or inactions of the parties involved and their consequences, both immediate and future. While Jelača builds on the absence of spectacle and the politicisation of violence in the film to conceptualise what she calls "women's world cinema [which], made by women, speaks to women's experiences" (2021, 198), we argue that Žbanić's choice of a female protagonist who is at the same time a wartime translator is not accidental, but allows her to show how translating and witnessing, survivor trauma, and remembering genocide are entangled in multiple ways.

After the opening credits and images of tanks entering Srebrenica, the scene moves to representatives of the Bosniak community, including the mayor, asking for direct military help from the Dutch battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Karremans as the town is taken over. As the interpreter, Aida is also present at the table at the Dutchbat headquarters and the film places her as the focal point of the scene, in the middle of the frame, as a symbolic border *and* a bridge between Bosnia and Europe. The atmosphere is unbearably tense as those present listen to a radio broadcast about the advances of the army of the Republika Srpska, while we see the actors in extreme close-up at the table, with almost everybody in the room smoking nervously, which simultaneously gives a sense of camaraderie and amplifies the overall anxiety, the mayor fidgeting with a lighter, Aida with a notepad, and Karremans with a marker pen. After a brief silence, Karremans explains the situation to the mayor and assures him that everything possible is being done to block the Serb advance. The mayor begs for help and complains that not enough is being done, since the same story is repeated daily, while the enemy gets closer by the minute. Aida not only translates from English into Bosnian and back again, but she also serves as a cultural mediator and bridges the gap between two different registers. Karremans attempts to stay composed and uses quite vague military lingo in a bureaucratic fashion, while the mayor's Bosnian is unsurprisingly more direct, down to earth, and emotionally invested, which further exem-

plifies the misunderstanding between Dutchbat and the people caught in the enclave.

The opening negotiations scene involving the mayor and Karremans is quite indicative of how the responsibility of the UN forces is depicted, as at one point, Karremans says to the mayor: "I am just a piano player", wanting to suggest that he has only a minor role in the conflict. Karremans actually said these words followed by "don't shoot the piano player", during his conversation with Ratko Mladić on July 11 to ease the tension when he was confronted about firing at the soldiers of the Army of Republika Srpska (Dobbs 2012; Sijpels 2011).[18] This was a last-ditch effort to halt the advance of the Army of Republika Srpska and prevent them from entering Srebrenica. In the film, the mayor looks at him in disbelief and asks Aida to clarify the meaning of the phrase, to which she responds that he is just a messenger, or a pawn in the game. The mayor hurls insults at him which effectively ends the meeting. The scene serves as a proverbial example of shooting the messenger, or the translator,[19] and sets the stage for the inquiry into the failure of the UN to prevent the genocide.

From the very beginning of the film, the audience sees that Aida is an indispensable link in the chain of communication, as she is physically and verbally more than a conveyor of messages from one language to another.[20] At one point, she interrupts the mayor when he gets too carried away, and she asks him to pause so she can convey the message in the clearest possible way, so that Karremans will comprehend the gravity of the position the Bosniaks have found themselves in. She does not pause him just because he is saying too much at once, she pauses him so that she can filter and re-package the message, intervening directly in the process. Aida is hesitant at first to translate the mayor's accusation when he says that Karremans will be accountable should the Serbs enter the town, in order not to complicate the negotiations further by possibly irritating a UN officer. Conversely, when she interprets Karremans's words to the mayor, she attempts to sound as reassuring as possible, though it is not clear whether she or Karremans are convinced by what he is saying in the first place. Aida herself wants to believe him, which is why she has a reaffirming tone in her voice despite the troubled expression on her face. This juxtaposition of emotions is brilliantly portrayed by Jasna Đuričić, whose acting in this scene perfectly captures the immense pressure put on the interpreter, as Aida looks absolutely exhausted by the toll that translating during a war has taken. This scene recalls an important point made by Stahul-

18 This has been changed in the film for narrative purposes.

19 Cf. Beebee 2010.

20 Stahuljak (1999) points out that this is typical for wartime translators.

jak, who argues that wartime translators are the embodiment of the conflict they interpret, torn between political allegiance and professional neutrality: "In order to translate the violence of the war, she becomes herself the site of a violent conflict" (1999, 36).

In his article titled "Shoot the Transtraitor! The Translator as Homo Sacer", Thomas Beebee highlights the paradox that translators and interpreters face: "If the translator works literally, then she is reduced to a mere machine or mouthpiece of the author, unworthy of ethical treatment; if she alters the text, then she may be persecuted for incompetence, for unethical behaviour, or for expressing her own opinions rather than merely conveying those of another" (2010, 303). However, in Aida's case the stakes and the eventual consequences are infinitely higher than possible accusations of incompetence and unethical treatment, since she is responsible for much more than just her own life. Beebee (2010) is referring to Agamben's (1998) concept of the *homo sacer* from antiquity, who is the sacred man who exists outside the law, and who may not be sacrificed but may be killed without legal consequences, as his life is essentially not worthy of either taking or saving. In a sense, this encapsulates Aida's situation very well, since she indeed exists outside the laws that govern the safe area of Srebrenica. Her job as a translator for the UN gives her much greater rights than the vast majority of the Bosniaks caught in the enclave during the genocide, because she is allowed to move around the factory complex where the Bosniaks are seeking shelter for example, and she manages to pull out her husband and her sons from the crowd outside the fenced area and get them in. However, this seemingly privileged position does not in the end benefit her much, as the survival of her family and several thousands of other Bosniaks eventually proves to be unattainable. Although Aida herself survives and is eventually evacuated, her position outside the law makes her lose everything except her own life.

Aida manages to smuggle her family inside the compound after she convinces the UN official that her husband, an educated man, is a perfect representative for the people of Srebrenica in the negotiations with Mladić. As they are ushered in, we hear a barely audible 'I am *just* a translator here' from Aida, as the other people are confused by what is happening and demand answers, which she provides albeit shyly. Before Aida puts forward her husband's name as a negotiator, she tries to persuade someone from the crowd to volunteer for the task. When she addresses the crowd, she is significantly more persuasive than the UN official whose words she is translating, adding words and phrases, trying hard to get somebody to cooperate. In that sense, Aida embodies the paradox Beebee describes, as she is

constantly balancing between staying true to the message and enhancing it, because the stakes are simply too high for her not to intervene.[21]

While her husband is in a meeting with Mladić, the army of the Republika Srpska enters the complex in search of armed men. Aida attempts to reassure people that there is nothing to fear since the search is just a formality. Again, we see Aida attempting to look more confident and optimistic than she actually is, so that at this point she comes across as a guardian more than an interpreter. As the plot develops, Aida does less and less interpreting; the more hopeless the odds get as the enemy closes in, the more diminished her role as an interpreter is, until it has fully disintegrated and been taken over by her role as a mother in a futile attempt to save what can be saved. The corporeal aspect of translation and interpretation comes to the fore, and Aida, as an embodiment of the conflict and its tragic outcome for the Bosniaks, is gradually transformed from a physically static and seemingly optimistic participant at the negotiating table to a more kinetic figure, jostling around the factory compound in the hope of preventing that which the spectator of today knows is going to happen. Not only does this character development add to the overall tension and create a sinister atmosphere, it also serves as a powerful commentary on the nature of wartime translation itself.

In what is arguably the most emotionally charged scene as the film reaches its climax, Aida begs on her knees for a UN official to put her family, or at least one son, on the list of people who will be evacuated. Her husband is granted permission as a negotiator, but since the sons are not, he refuses to leave them. The UN official gives them a bureaucratic explanation for the refusal, effectively sentencing them to death. The three men are put on a truck with others and driven away to a nearby cinema, which has been repurposed to be used for mass executions. After a moment of silence and close-up shots of the frightened men, AK-47 rifles protrude through the projector holes – we see muzzle flashes, and the scene cuts to nearby children who are playing football. Disturbed by the noise of automatic rifles, they run away, and the scene fades out.

So how does the translator function as a mediator of memory in *Quo Vadis, Aida?* To answer this, we approach the interpreter in a way that gauges the involve-

21 Later, in one of the very few scenes in which Aida is not featured, the Bosniak delegation together with Dutchbat negotiate the terms of surrender with Mladić. Karremans believes that he has managed to negotiate a solid deal for the Bosniaks, while the Bosniaks themselves who are present are not convinced and feel that the whole process was a charade, which eventually proves to be true. Aida's omission from the scene has a strong symbolic value because the official explanation for her absence is that Mladić has his own translator and that her services are simply not needed. Although the interpreter is nominally a non-implicated, neutral figure, every side in the war has their own interpreter and their own way of interpreting history.

ment not only of the interpreter herself but of all the parties involved in the question of responsibility. The issue is raised on two levels. One is the involvement of the peacekeeping force and the role of the United Nations, Dutchbat and the EU in the genocide. This involvement is depicted by showing the peacekeepers as taking a bureaucratic stance of "these are the rules, I am just doing my job", as is highlighted during the decisive moment when Aida's family is denied a place in the convoy in the midst of the massacre.[22] The second level is shown in the final part of the film, which explores the question of ethical and moral responsibility towards the victims from the perspective of a survivor, through survivor guilt, reconciliation, and cohabitation with the perpetrators.

After Aida's family is killed, the film cuts to a scene of a car driving through a snowy landscape. We soon learn that this is Aida returning to Srebrenica after an unspecified time following the main events. The contrast in the scenery is sharp. The first part of the film is set during the summer heat and aesthetically has a warm, saturated colour palette, but cool tones are now employed to symbolise not only death and sadness but also the post-war change in Srebrenica; Aida comes to a town that has changed completely and become an ethnically, politically, socially and ideologically different place. The temporal rupture also importantly indicates the different roles that Aida inhabits over time, as the film never fixes her identity as a victim.

The onlookers scan her as she walks the streets, and the actors stare almost directly into the camera in what seems like complete surprise. Filming Srebrenica residents from Aida's point of view creates the impression that the audience is being subjected to their gaze, as if both Aida and the audience are being asked "What are *you* doing here?". Aida goes to her old apartment, which is now inhabited by a young mother and her child; Aida picks up a small case containing all that remains from her previous life, including several photographs of her family. Finally, she asks the woman to vacate the apartment as soon as possible so that she can move back in. On her way out, she is greeted by a neighbour in passing. Aida realises that the man is a war criminal, one of the Serbian commanders during the genocide. To make matters worse, he is the husband of the woman she has just talked to, which puts her in a complete state of shock.

The scene shows the complicated dynamic between the idea of post-war reconciliation and the possibility, or impossibility, of the victim and the perpetrator coexisting. In addition to her role as a wartime interpreter, Aida is transformed

22 The way in which the Dutchbat, and Karremans in particular, is represented in the film recalls Hannah Arendt's (1964) characterisation of Eichmann as someone who refuses to take on responsibility for his own acts but instead presented himself as a cog in a machinery, minimising his own role in the mass destruction of Jews.

into living proof of the genocide, who now serves as a mediator between the past, the present and the impossible future, forced to live next to the perpetrators of the genocide. Recalling Stahuljak's (1999) point that interpreters are the embodiment of war helps us see how Aida embodies not only the war as an interpreter but also the memory of the victims as a victim herself. Aida seems to exemplify at least two different types of witness: the witness as third party [Lat. *terstis*] and the witness as survivor [Lat. *superstes*] (see Agamben 2002, 17; Assmann 2006, 85–92).[23] In the portrayal of responsibility, Aida's character encapsulates not only the responsibility towards the memory of the victims, but also the responsibility towards the ethical and aesthetic representation of victimhood in film. In the closing scene of the film, we see Aida attending a school play, having returned to her pre-war job as a schoolteacher. The children dance cheerfully in slow motion, while we see the Serb commander in the audience, watching his son perform. Aida looks directly into the camera, which mirrors an earlier scene when she was looking through the fence of the factory complex. Even if the war is over, the feeling of being left alone remains, perhaps akin to "the feeling of cosmic loneliness which a man sentenced to death can feel", which Suljagić (2005, 10) highlights in his first description of life in the enclave of Srebrenica.

Conclusion

As Doris Bachmann-Medick observed, "the disrupting dimensions of migration constitute a central and defining force. I am referring here on the one hand to the active power of migrating individuals: the power to deal with cultural displacements, discontinuities, interventions, and shifting social contexts; to be confronted with misunderstandings and obstructions: and even to exercise agency in triggering social transformations" (2018, 275). Perhaps this also applies to the translator and the agency they have in mediating memories and fostering the travelling of memories on different levels. As our case studies show, translators and translation play a crucial, and sometimes unexpectedly varied, role in fostering mnemonic migration. Translation can sometimes have an activist edge, as in the case of the poet and translator Munib Delalić, himself a migrant and a refugee, who brought together poems that shed a specific light on the way the Bosnian war was perceived in Norway. In *Mourning That Blooms Dark*, the poets reflect on the Bosnian war as outsiders and simultaneously critically speak of, and on behalf of, Europe. These

23 Both Agamben and Assmann follow Emil Benveniste for their etymological mapping of the different origins and meanings of our modern understanding of witnessing and testimony.

poems articulating feelings of guilt and empathy could be read in line with what Oxfeldt has named Scandinavian guilt, but they also show how "memories are mobile, histories are implicated in each other" (Rothberg 2009, 313) and how feelings of being implicated can serve as a platform for thinking about issues of transnational solidarity and responsibility. In doing this, the poems help the reader rethink and remember the Yugoslav wars beyond the borders of the ex-Yugoslav cultural space. If we consider the Norwegian poems to be a *translation* of the Bosnian war from a Scandinavian perspective, then we can see them as de-balkanising, in the sense that translation challenges the ideas of distance between the us in Scandinavia and Europe and the them, the Other, in Bosnia.

Quo Vadis, Aida? then brings to the fore other aspects of translation as a crucial force in mnemonic migration, showing as its protagonist a wartime translator who moves beyond the role of the linguistic go-between and becomes a witness, a victim and a survivor. At the same time, the film shows how being a victim or a perpetrator or an implicated subject "is not an ontological identity" but "a position that we occupy in particular, dynamic, and at times clashing structures and histories of power" (Rothberg 2019, 8, 48), thus creating an ethical complexity that does not make the film easier to watch. *Quo Vadis, Aida?* could be called a film that is born translated, as it is a co-production from several countries, in which four languages are spoken, and which shows how Srebrenica is, and should be, part and parcel of Europe's collective memory – a conclusion that was already suggested in the mid-1999s by the Norwegian poets in Delalić's anthology. Sooner or later this will need to be addressed in terms of how Europe is implicated. As the poet Terje Skulstad wrote, "we decided that the Balkan nightmare is a religious-tribal war" (Delalić 1999, 98); the categories that Europe used to describe the war were indicative of its very unwillingness to understand and intervene.

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