Noit Banai and Marina Gržinić Mauhler

Introduction

The conflicts of today cannot be understood in isolation from their historical precursors. The contestation of memories and the search for justice and reconciliation are ongoing processes that reflect both local and global dynamics. The geopolitical organization of empires during the *longue durée* of modernity has had a profound impact on current conflicts. Many of today's struggles can be traced back to the colonial legacy, where arbitrary borders, imposed governance structures, and extractivist economic policies have created divisions that continue to inflame tensions. In the Middle East, for example, the consequences of colonial-era decisions still linger in the form of sectarian divisions and national identities. These histories implicate a wide spectrum of modern disciplines, techniques, mechanisms, and epistemologies through which populations are represented, counted, classified, or otherwise enumerated.

The ideal of the nation-state often postulates a homogenous identity that unites its citizens. This notion creates pressure to conform that marginalizes those who do not fit or willingly assimilate into the national narrative. Beneath the surface of this fictive unity lies a pervasive fear of difference—be it ethnic, cultural, or ideological. This fear leads to violent processes of othering, resulting in social fragmentation and conflict. These identities emerge when groups set themselves apart from others, which often instigates the justification of violence and exclusion.

At the crux of the nation-state model is both a fantasy of wholeness and anxiety about minor differences, which together produce predatory identities ready for conflict. The dynamics of belonging become predatory (necropower) when the safety of one group is perceived as a threat to another. As we witness the carnage inflicted on civilian populations in the wars being waged in Ukraine/Russia and Israel/Palestine, it is probably unnecessary to list the countless episodes

of violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide that have occurred on national soil and extra-territorial colonial dependencies as a result of "the fear of small numbers."[1] In the twentieth century alone, under both capitalist and communist regimes, the ideology of the sovereign nation-state as the basis for governmentality, citizenship, and representations of the "people" has gone hand in hand with large-scale efforts to protect the national ethnos and its singularity against any perceived contaminations.

Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the past and a commitment to fostering dialog and empathy among those whose narratives are marked by violence and trauma. In this way, it may become possible to find pathways to a more just and reconciled future that honors the complexity of collective memory while acknowledging the wounds of the past.

Although it is still unclear what this future epistemology of belonging might look like, we propose case studies that investigate a heterogeneous constellation of discursive objects, material and technological practices, and representational and symbolic artifacts across various geographic territories and historical temporalities in which conflicts have taken shape in a bid to constitute a "people."

What emerges in this special issue is the conjunction between nation-state formation and the ongoing production and enactment of violence towards individuals and communities via ethnic, racialized, gendered, and antisemitic discrimination, the brutal deployment of military power, and the intensification of technological exploitation. In addition, it demonstrates that the conflicts surrounding us are an outcome of an age marked by post-socialist transitions to neoliberal global capitalism; the legacies of colonialism, the Cold War, and the Holocaust, and the emergence of new paradigms of governmentality.

The concerns examined in this special issue intersect and are mutually constitutive; we have organized them around four topoi: Ideology, Aesthetics/Politics, Language, and Conflict(s)/War(s).

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[1]   Arjun Appadurai. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Ideology: considers both the macro articulation of ideologies in the production of historical realities and their micro interpellations, negotiations, and re-iterations within specific local contexts. It includes a new interview with the German sociologist Klaus Theweleit, who revisits his seminal book *Male Fantasies* (1977), a psychoanalytic study of the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany, in the context of contemporary modalities of violence and authoritarianism; the curator and cultural theorist Joshua Simon delves into the ways that the current neoliberal digital regime organizes every aspect of everyday experience by making life available as both labor and debt for capital in real life and online; the political scientist Sophie Uitz researches multidirectional memory and transnationality in recent examples of counter-monument practices in Austria's capital city of Vienna, specifically with regard to the struggle against antisemitism, racist discrimination, and anti-Romaism.

Aesthetics/Politics: grapples with the effects of biopolitics, necropolitics, and racialization in the constitution of national publics and the possibilities of imagining alternative futures. The art historian Noit Banai analyzes contemporary aesthetic strategies through which muted archives of memory have been activated in Israel/Palestine and builds upon them to articulate the concept of "trans-national specularity," through which a comparison across and beyond national borders can be forged; the interdisciplinary scholar Jelena Petrović, meanwhile, focuses on the war history of the present, the aesthetics of resistance, and the politics of affect in the context of the post-Yugoslav space and points to a common ground of politics and art that uncompromisingly counters the governing (post-)Yugoslav discourses of never-ending wars; finally, the curator and exhibition organizer Elisa R. Linn traces the legal, representative, and societal status of migrant Others in the "closed society" of the GDR as an example of how Germany has been profiting from labor migration on both sides of the Wall. Linn lays out how migration from German reunification onwards until today is represented as a sudden and temporary issue, camouflaging a colonial and racist past and necropolitical present.

Language: investigates the constituent role played by discourses in the articulation of identities and begins with the anthropologist and media theorist Lia Lola Vlado Kotnik's defense of Judith Butler's theoretical contributions in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) for a contemporary analysis of the discontent and

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fear elicited by transgender people; the linguists Kern and Vičar draw on the perspective of queer linguistics, which presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that binary systems for categorizing gender and sexuality are natural, universal, and indisputable, and explore the extent to which grammatical gender both constrains and facilitates the realization of transgender and non-binary identities among speakers of Slovene. The translator and writer Miha Marek compares the language used in the original publication of *Autoemancipation!* (1882), a seminal text of early Jewish nationalism, which arguably established Zionism as a movement functioning in the German language, with its translation into Yiddish (1884) and asks whether different notions of nationalism appear in each version.

Conflict(s)/War(s): delves into the mechanisms, techniques, and representations of military disputes within modernity/coloniality. The theorist Vesna Liponik presents a close reading of the novellas *Godzilla* (1955) and *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955) by Shigeru Kayama in order to investigate the relationship between animal victimhood and resistance, and to identify the novel phenomenon of animals as saviors. The philosopher Nina Cvar posits the process of erasure as a structural element of modernity that appears uncompromisingly in its histories and, in particular, in contemporary politics via global necrocapitalism; the theorist and artist Marina Gržinić foregrounds the geopolitical struggles in Ukraine/Russia and Israel/Palestine as a field in which interconnected issues have come to the fore, among them the decoupling of sovereignty from territoriality and hence the emergence of the "war state."

The understanding that contemporary conflicts are deeply rooted in the complex interplay of post-socialist transitions, neoliberal global capitalism, and historical legacies is crucial for analyzing the dynamics of violence and discrimination today. Comprehending these interconnected factors is essential for analyzing the multifaceted nature of the current conflicts. By recognizing the historical and structural roots of violence and discrimination, we can better address the ongoing challenges and work toward more equitable and just societies. Engaging with these themes allows for a critical analysis of how past injustices inform present struggles and shape future possibilities.

The transition from a state-controlled economy to neoliberal policies led to widespread privatization, resulting in economic instability, increased unemploy-

ment, and social dislocation. These changes have exacerbated inequalities and fueled resentment and conflict. With the transition of states, issues of national identity also became increasingly apparent. Neoliberalism prioritizes market mechanisms over social welfare, which can undermine community solidarity and exacerbate divisions. This economic framework often favors certain groups over others, further entrenching existing social hierarchies.

Almost all post-colonial nations face persistent economic exploitation that has its roots in colonial practices. The exploitation of resources and labor is still manifest today in inequalities and conflicts in which former colonial powers often play a role. The colonial history has left deep scars, including the erasure of indigenous cultures, traditions, and identities. Contemporary movements often emerge as forms of resistance to this legacy and lead to conflicts over land, resources, and cultural and political recognition.

During the Cold War era, many nations became battlegrounds for ideological struggles between the superpowers. The remnants of these conflicts continue to influence geopolitics, often leading to militarization and violence that spills over into civil conflicts. The ideological divisions of the Cold War have not yet fully dissipated. They are still operative in today's political landscape, where factions vie for power, often resorting to brute force to achieve their goals.

The advent of modern technology has changed the way states govern the population. This often leads to increased surveillance and control mechanisms that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. New forms of governance focus on managing populations through policies that favor certain identities over others, leading to systemic violence and discrimination against those deemed "undesirable," or even superfluous.

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Furthermore, the intertwining of different historical struggles often complicates today's conflicts. For example, the stories surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are closely intertwined with broader global dynamics, which include colonialism, nationalism, and the Cold War. The legacies of past empires and conflicts thus continue to shape today's reality as communities grapple with their histories in the global context. These wars without end have been accompanied by various and disparate attempts at transnational justice and reconciliation. These include the contestation of histories and memories by victims and

perpetrators who once shared territories preceding nation-states, who lived to-gether in the same nation-state, and/or who seek to build new state structures after conflict and genocide. In these instances, the victims seek recognition and justice for their suffering, while the perpetrators or their supporters often resist this recognition by framing their actions in the context of survival, defense, or national interest. This struggle for the supremacy of the narratives complicates efforts at reconciliation, as each side interprets history through a lens shaped by trauma and ideology. Their competing narratives, interpretations, and un-derstandings are often also entangled in other histories of struggle related to the geopolitical organization of empires during the *longue durée* of modernity.

In regions where wars persist, the quest for transnational justice and reconcil-iation is intertwined with broader historical contexts and political aspirations. Transnational justice mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) or truth and reconciliation commissions, attempt to redress these histori-cal grievances. However, their effectiveness varies greatly depending on the lo-cal context. In Rwanda, for example, the courts attempted to address crimes and facilitate healing after the genocide. However, they have been criticized for not sufficiently taking into account the complexity of ethnic identity and historical injustices. In Syria, on the other hand, the lack of a unified mechanism for jus-tice has led to fragmented approaches, with local courts often operating without sufficient support or recognition from the international community.

The consequences of this process show that the nation-state model is unable to adequately resolve the structural violence and systemic inequalities that fuel antagonisms. The current conflicts, which are often characterized by ethnic cleansing, displacement, and state-sanctioned violence, show the limits of this model. The nation-state, with its rigid borders and exclusionary policies, con-tinues to maintain and reproduce systems of power that perpetuate the colonial legacy and reinforce the cycle of violence, marginalization, and dispossession.

The traditional framework of modern/colonial epistemology, epitomized by the Westphalian nation-state, is no longer sufficient to deal with the complexity and horror of today's conflict zones.

In the global South and in post-colonial spaces, the nation-state has often be-come a site of contestation where the aftermath of colonialism merges with

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modern forms of imperialism, leading to ongoing instability. In many conflict zones, state actors fail to protect their populations. Instead, they contribute to violence through authoritarian governance, militarization, and the suppression of dissent.

The horrors of the current conflicts—whether in Israel/Palestine, Syria, Myanmar, or Ukraine—make it clear that the current international framework is not sufficient to intervene effectively. These conflicts show how the nation-state's inherent desire to place its sovereignty above human rights exacerbates suffering. Meanwhile, non-state actors, such as insurgent groups and transnational corporations, exploit the chaos and further destabilize regions.

In the face of these challenges, the need for a new model of belonging that goes beyond the violent legacy of the Westphalian order becomes clear. This model must embrace transnational solidarities and rethink political organization beyond the nation-state in order to create spaces for justice, inclusion, and collective healing that address the root causes of violence and exploitation.