# Ontological (In)Security Encounters and the Epistemic Violence of Genocide Denial

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# Ontological (In)Security Encounters and the Epistemic Violence of Genocide Denial

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**ABSTRACT**

While existing scholarship highlights the importance of collective identity as a driver for genocide denial by collective actors such as states, such analysis typically focuses on the ontological needs of the collective Self without taking into consideration its significant Other(s). This article argues for a postcolonial understanding of genocide denial as an epistemically violent ontological (in)security encounter between interconnected actors. Observing ontological (in)security encounters between epistemic subjects reveals different power relations between the Self and the Other at different stages of genocide, which shape the trajectories of denial. A preparatory stage of genocide might reveal a practice of epistemic violence with the purpose to create the Other as a separate, inferior epistemic subject and normalize a relation of *domination* of the Self over the Other, while a post-genocide context might signal a less uneven, nevertheless antagonistic relationship of *co-dependence* between two epistemic authorities. In situations of denial of historical genocides, otherness can also serve a source of mutual ontological security where a relationship of *coexistence*, or co-constitutiveness, of the Self and the Other becomes desirable. The main contribution of this article is offering a new interpretative framework for understanding the dynamics and trajectories of genocide denial and interrogating how it might be diminished or aggravated, in and through interactions between ontological security-driven needs by the communities involved. Denial is not merely a coping mechanism, but a vehicle of genocide with immense productive power that creates, discredits or erases subjectivities of political actors to not only normalize the relations of domination but also fulfil ontological needs of collective actors even after that relation of domination is transformed.

## Introduction

Genocide denial is a well-known and widely studied phenomenon in genocide studies, with much of the existing theorizing concerning the methods and impacts of denial, as

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well as ways to challenge it through legal and institutional reforms and activism.[1] In these bodies of scholarship, denial is at times conceptualized as a by-product, or a stage – often the final one – of genocide itself,[2] and ultimately a way in which individuals and collectives cope with something so disturbing or threatening as genocide and its legacies.[3] To a lesser degree, scholars have engaged in investigations of *why* actors, particularly collective political actors such as states deny, trivialize and minimize genocides. For theories of world politics that treat states as rational entities, states such as Turkey and Japan, who continue to deny well-documented and internationally recognized historical crimes,[4] or Serbia who rejects genocide judgements of international tribunals,[5] these behaviours appear irrational as denial is materially and reputationally costly and can negatively affect their economies and relations with other entities.

On the other hand, acknowledging the atrocities and apologizing to respective victim communities are seemingly materially and reputationally attractive in the age of "sorry states" and accountability.[6] Still, much research in genocide studies points to extensive benefits of state-sponsored genocide denial such controlling and protecting national identities, fuelling regional geopolitical ambitions, and even gaining or sustaining public support at home.[7] Scholarship on the politics of genocide recognition has similarly found motivations for activism in these areas, whereby collective memories of the genocide become a mechanism for strengthening national identity, legitimizing local rule, and giving moral weight and urgency to causes such as self-determination and secession.[8]

These studies highlight the importance of the need to preserve a particular sense of collective identity as a driver for both genocide denial and genocide recognition campaigns by political actors such as governments, and non-governmental and diaspora groups. However, they tend to focus on either perpetrator or victim group to discuss how each – and their practices – are affected by denial/recognition, and vice versa. In doing so they provide partial accounts of the role of identity (as the Self) in genocide denial/recognition, without its significant Other(s) and othered. They can therefore not fully account for the interconnectedness of genocide denial/recognition and identity beyond suggesting that denial supports perpetrator groups' collective identities and

[1] For example, Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2000); Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London: Penguin Books, 2016); Aida Alayarian, *Consequences of Denial: The Armenian Genocide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Rezarta Bilali, Yeshim Iqbal, and Samuel Freel, "Understanding and Countering Genocide Denial," in *Confronting Humanity at Its Worst Social Psychological Perspectives on Genocide,* ed. Leonard Newman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[2] Gregory H. Stanton, "The Ten Stages of Genocide," https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages.

[3] Cohen, *States of Denial*.

[4] Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–23.

[5] Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, "Knowledge, Acknowledgement and Denial in Serbia's Responses to the Srebrenica Massacre," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 1 (2009): 61–74.

[6] Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Kathryn Sikkink, "The Age of Accountability: The Global Rise of Individual Criminal Accountability," in *Amnesty in the Age of Human Rights Accountability. Comparative and International Perspectives*, ed. Francesca Lessa and Leigh A. Payne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[7] Bedross Der Matossian, ed., *Denial of Genocides in the Twenty-First Century* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023); Tunc Aybak, "Geopolitics of Denial: Turkish State's 'Armenian Problem'," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18 (2016): 125–44; Jelena Subotic, "Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide: A Reflection on a Controversy," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, no. 1 (2022): 71–82.

[8] Maja Catic, "Circassians and the Politics of Genocide Recognition," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 10 (2015): 1685–708; Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, "The Politics of Genocide Recognition: Kurdish National Building and Commemoration in the Post-Saddam Era," *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 3 (2017): 404–26.

recognition supports victims groups' identities to explain why some groups might feel more or less secure in light of, or indeed despite of, widespread denial or widespread recognition.

This article investigates identity-driven practices and processes of genocide denial through a postcolonial reading, proposing that genocide denial can only be observed relationally through a mutuality of experience between the Self and its Others. I analyse denial as an ontological and epistemological matter; a question of *being* – a sense of who one is in the world – and *knowing* – how one knows about the self in the world – for collective actors who know and exist relationally. I study genocide denial by collective political actors through the prism of ontological security needs, which places a continuous sense of self and security of self-identity at the core of the analysis. Unlike much of the literature on ontological security that focuses solely on the insecurities of those who deny, and often only great and rising powers such as Turkey, Russia or Japan,[9] I examine genocide denial through the relationship between both denialist and victim communities. This analysis demonstrates that ontological security seeking of one actor can keep the other actor in a place of severe insecurity;[10] or in fact that ontological (in)security of one actor is a condition for the other actor's own ontological (in)security.[11] Genocide denial is therefore a prime example of an ontological (in)security encounter.

Ontological needs are served by production and curation of desirable and undesirable knowledge. With knowledge as well as identity also being relational, the Self strives to revise and control the knowledge of and about Others to sustain a secure sense of collective self. In doing so the Self engages in epistemic violence through which the Other is first and foremost created, and later subjugated, discredited or completely erased in the processes of genocide. Genocide denial, therefore, is an epistemically violent, ontological (in)security encounter between the Self and the Other. Neither of these actors is homogenous nor speaks with a unified voice; my focus is on collective political actors, first and foremost governments and government agencies, and secondarily non-governmental political organizations united by the identity marker (nationality, ethnicity, etc.) that serves as the basis of persecution during genocide, and treated as a dominant, although not the only, political voice of the victim community.

Following Brigg's call for thick relationality,[12] I focus on relations between these entities, highlighting how they can change over time and through interactions. Observing denial as an ontological (in)security encounter between epistemic subjects through planning, executing, and dealing with the consequences of genocide reveals different power relations between the Self and the Other at different times. While a preparatory or early stage of genocide might reveal a practice of epistemic violence with the purpose to create the Other as a separate, inferior epistemic subject and normalize a relation of *domination*

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9 Zarakol, "Ontological (In)security and State Denial"; Maria Mälksoo, "The Transitional Justice and Foreign Policy Nexus: The Inefficient Causation of State Ontological Security-Seeking," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 373–97; Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–27.

10 Stuart Croft and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Fit for Purpose? Fitting Ontological Security Studies 'Into' the Discipline of International Relations: Towards a Vernacular Turn," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2017): 12–30.

11 Carmina Yu Untalan, "Decentering the Self, Seeing Like the Other: Toward a Postcolonial Approach to Ontological Security," *International Political Sociology* 14, no. 1 (2020): 40–56.

12 Morgan Brigg, "Engaging Indigenous Knowledges: From Sovereign to Relational Knowers," *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 45, no. 2 (2016): 152–8; Morgan Brigg, "Furthering Relational Approaches to Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 62, no. 4 (2025): 1046–60.

of the Self over the Other, a post-genocide context might signal less uneven, nevertheless antagonistic relationship of *co-dependence* between two epistemic authorities. Postcolonial literature also suggests that otherness may in fact be a source of mutual ontological security for both the Self and the Other, where a relationship of *coexistence*, or co-constitutiveness, of the Self and the Other becomes desirable.[13] In situations of denial of historical genocides, all these different relationships could be experienced at the same time by actors who crave knowledge about the Self, which can only be known relationally.

Such a relational analysis contributes to genocide studies by offering a framework of understanding the dynamics and trajectories of genocide denial (and genocide recognition) that can help explain when denial by collective political actors changes (in, for example, intensity or tactics) as well as interrogate how it might be diminished or aggravated, in and through interactions between ontological security-driven needs by the communities involved. The article also enhances scholarly knowledge of genocide denial as a phenomenon. My emphasis is not merely on how genocide denial harms – physically, emotionally, epistemically – for it does, but on how genocide denial *constitutes* identities, securities and relations among collective actors. Denial is therefore not merely a coping mechanism, but a vehicle of genocide with immense productive power; at its core, it creates subjectivities of political actors and discredits or entirely erases their epistemic authority to not only normalize the relations of domination but impact – positively or negatively – the ontological needs of collective actors even after that relation of domination is transformed.[14] This framework of analysis does not deem material factors as non-important but invites scholars to consider them alongside ontological (in)security encounters.

The conceptual contribution of this article is supported by three different cases of genocides against the Rohingya, Bosniaks, and Tasmanian Aborigines. They were chosen because they speak to different temporal phases of genocide: contemporary/ongoing, post-genocide, and historical, and hence make it possible to observe how relations between the Self and the Other fluctuate and change overtime, supported by different tactics of denial.

The article proceeds in four sections. In "Violent Encounters", I provide a theoretical backing to my relational approach to genocide denial and establish this article's main proposal, which is that genocide denial should be understood as an epistemically violent, ontological (in)security encounter. To support my argument, I discuss three distinct relations between the Self and the Other at different stages of genocide, which are characterized by varied levels of security/insecurity and the use of different tactics of denial. In "Separation and Domination", I discuss a relation of separation between the Self and the Other and domination of the Self over the Other in pre- and during-genocide Myanmar. In "Antagonistic Co-Dependence", I elaborate on the best-studied form of denial after the genocide, characterized by a relationship of antagonistic co-dependence between the Self and the Other; what I call an ontological push-and-pull, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, In "Towards Coexistence?", I take up a postcolonial invitation to explore otherness as a precondition for mutual ontological security and discuss how coexistence between the Self and the Other is imagined – and challenged – in situations of historical genocides in Australia.

13 Untalan, "Decentring the Self"; Kate Botterill, "Ontological Security as 'Being-With': Indigenous Sovereignty and Securing Against the Colonial Nation-State," *Political Geography* 116 (2025): 1–10.
14 Melanie Altanian, "Genocide Denial as Testimonial Oppression," *Social Epistemology* 35, no. 2 (2021): 133–46; Melanie Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice of Genocide Denialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024).

## Violent Encounters

Ontological security is broadly understood as "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice."[15] Ontological security is "a basic need" of individual as well as collective actors, sought and maintained through routinized, stable relationships[16] and a sense of predictability and order in the system.[17] All actors engage in routines of different kinds to sustain their ontological security and, in doing so, create relationships of attachment to the routines. Routines, in other words, "make the world knowable" and help actors feel secure about their sense of self.[18] In that sense, certainty, too, is a basic need. Uncertainty, on the other hand, is largely treated in ontological security studies as a threat to the security of self and self-identities.[19] As Mitzen posits, "[w]here an actor has no idea what to expect, she cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends."[20] By default, actors crave knowledge about the self and the world.

I draw on Giddens' theorization of the four fundamental existential questions,[21] and Ejdus' integration of this theory into International Relations to understand what makes actors in global politics ontologically secure or insecure.[22] Ejdus proposes that critical situations – which can be any situation an actor deems is critical or threatening for themselves – disrupt collective actors' responses to the four fundamental questions of existence, finitude, relations, and autobiography, bringing these questions "to the level of discursive consciousness," that is, actors' ability "to express their actions verbally."[23] Upon crisis, ontologically insecure actors proceed to restore certainty and ability to answer these fundamental questions, although not all fundamental questions may be triggered by every critical situation.

The first fundamental question is that of existence and being, "the struggle of being against nonbeing;" awareness of the self and of external reality.[24] By virtue of engaging in routine, everyday activities, human beings can confidently answer the question of being, Giddens claims. For collective actors, Ejdus suggests that answering this fundamental question necessitates trust in the continuity of their external environment and feeling "at home in international society."[25] The question of finitude is a temporal question. For individuals, it is about an awareness of non-being being part of one's own being; "subjective" as opposed to biological death.[26] It exhibits a fear of dying or of the unknown that death brings.[27] For some collective actors such as states, nations, and ethnic groups, especially minority groups, this could be interpreted as "a permanent fear of extinction,"

[15] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70, 344.

[16] Ibid., 343.

[17] Jelena Subotic, "Political Memory, Ontological Security, and Holocaust Remembrance in Post-Communist Europe," *European Security* 27, no. 3 (2018): 296–313.

[18] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," 347.

[19] Ibid., 345.

[20] Ibid., 342.

[21] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[22] Filip Ejdus, "Critical Situations, Fundamental Questions and Ontological Insecurity in World Politics," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21 (2018): 883–908.

[23] Ibid., 884.

[24] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 48.

[25] Ejdus, "Critical Situations," 888.

[26] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 48–9.

[27] Ibid.

although most nations embrace a narrative of long-lasting existence into the indefinite future.[28] The question of relations concerns "the existence of *other persons*."[29] It is about one's learning and interpretation of other persons' characteristics, as trust in others is essential to a coherent sense of self-identity. To answer this fundamental question one must have "faith" in the reliability and integrity of others.[30] Crucially, Giddens proposes that even "the slightest glance of one person towards another, inflexion of the voice, changing facial expression or gestures of the body|" may pose a threat to the orderliness of day-to-day life of an actor.[31] At the collective level, the ability to maintain stable and trustworthy relationships with significant others is key, where the Other is constitutive of the Self. The Other here includes both friends and foes.[32]

The final question relates to the continuity of self-identity. This continuity does not stem merely from one's continuous existence in a continuously lasting system, but necessitates a reflexive awareness that is routinely performed.[33] Self-identity refers to "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography."[34] In other words, it is about creating and maintaining a narrative about oneself.[35] Therefore, a person with a stable sense of self-identity will be able to reflexively grasp their feeling of biographical continuity and communicate it to others.[36] Trust relations are also important here as they allow the person to "filter out" any threats to the integrity of self-identity that might come their way. At the collective level, biographical narratives about the origins of a nation and where the nation is heading are perceived as mechanisms to combat anxiety,[37] and autobiographies are in that sense both past- and future-oriented.[38] Responding to the question of autobiography requires making sense of current, new and developing experiences in line with those of the past. These can be pursued even at the cost of physical security.

A closer look into the building blocks of ontological security shows that a stable sense of self in the world requires both knowing more and curating what is and is not known. Actors make sense of their past through selective activation of information about the self and others, which includes nurturing and policing collective memories. Collective memories are always selective, and the formation of political memory requires ordering of events, episodes, and symbols at the expense of others. Being that memories constitute collective identities, the security of one's sense of self is built on partial and/or privileged accounts of one's position or role in the past. When a crisis hits, the master narrative can be revised by changing the vision of the past self in different historical episodes.[39] This inevitably means that "inconvenient pasts" can be "erased, depoliticized, or manipulated."[40]

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[28] Ejdus, "Critical Situations," 890.
[29] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 50.
[30] Ibid., 51.
[31] Ibid., 52.
[32] Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*; Felix Berenskoetter, "Friends, There are No Friends? An Intimate Reframing of the International," *Millennium* 35, no. 3 (2007): 647–76.
[33] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
[34] Ibid., 53 (Original emphasis).
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 54.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Berenskoetter, "Friends, There are No Friends?"
[39] Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change."
[40] Eun A. Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations," *International Organization* 76, no. 4 (2022): 767–98, 769–70.

However, contrary to the mainstream IR scholarship on ontological security that has tended to construct actors such as the state as "a liberal, autonomous self" on a trajectory of "linear continuity,"[41] my approach in this article is that both knowledge and ontological security are relational. Both individual and collective actors exist – and know – relationally. A relational approach to ontological security is thus one where "security of the self is only conceivable within the context of durable social arrangements."[42] In Giddens' understanding of ontologically secure individuals, the individual is always "embedded intersubjectively into a web of social understanding"[43] whereby "[i]ntersubjectivity does not derive from subjectivity, but the other way around."[44] Equally, production, revision and protection of knowledge are always and only intersubjective relationships. All actors are relational knowers and what they know or do not know about the Self and the world always depends on what others know and do not know.[45]

Because ontological security rests on stable relations with others, characterized by mutual trust, otherness and othering play crucial role in the achievement of ontological security.[46] The relationship between the Self and the Other can be antagonistic and asymmetrical where the dominant Self achieves its ontological security by exercising power over the Other who in turn feels ontological insecurity because of this imbalance of power. Control over knowledge is essential for the establishment and normalization of such asymmetrical, antagonistic relations between the Self and the Other. Here postcolonial scholars introduce the concept of *epistemic violence* to describe "violence exerted in relation to production, circulation and recognition of knowledge."[47] At the core of postcolonial and decolonial thinking and writing on epistemic violence lies the creation of the Other. It is a violence that creates specific subjectivities and political subjects,[48] or in the words of Brunner, "a form of social relationships characterized by … the historically and social located denial of subjectivity, legitimacy, or existence of another individual or community."[49] The outstanding feature of epistemic violence is that it relies on there being two different categories of "'us' and 'the others' each with its corresponding epistemic role."[50] This is of course what Spivak talks about in "Can the Subaltern Speak?'" when she defines epistemic violence as "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other."[51] Epistemic violence helps

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[41] Botterill, "Ontological Security as 'Being-With'," 2.
[42] Simon Frankel Pratt, "A Relational View of Ontological Security in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2017): 78–85, 81.
[43] Croft and Vaughan Williams, "Fit for Purpose?" 15.
[44] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 51.
[45] Brigg, "Engaging Indigenous Knowledges"; Brigg, "Furthering Relational Approaches"; Bagele Chilisa and Donna M. Mertens, "Indigenous Made in Africa Evaluation Frameworks: Addressing Epistemic Violence and Contributing to Social Transformation," *American Journal of Evaluation* 42, no. 2 (2021): 241–53; Güneş Daşlı, "Victim Agency, Relational Autonomy and Transitional Justice: Experience of Saturday Mothers," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 18 (2024): 371–86.
[46] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 46–51.
[47] Moira Pérez, "Epistemic Violence: Reflections Between the Invisible and the Ignorable," *El Lugar Sin Límites* 1, no. 1 (2019): 81–98, 81.
[48] Claudia Brunner, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Violence: An Interdisciplinary Assemblage for IR," *International Politics Review* 9 (2021): 193–212; 204.
[49] Pérez, "Epistemic Violence," 81.
[50] Ibid., 83.
[51] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 1988), 280.

organize, legitimize and naturalize unequal power relations.[52] Ultimately, the result of long-term epistemic violence is normalizing relations of domination between the Self and the Other. Achieving this can be essential for the Self's ontological security.

Genocide denial, I argue, is an epistemically violent, ontological (in)security encounter. The collective actor who (and on whose behalf) genocide is committed produces and revises the knowledge deemed foundational for their own collective identity in order to write the genocide, as a critical situation, into their autobiography, by revising it, trivializing it and/or completely denying it happened. However, in doing so, this relational actor (and relational knower) curates what is and is not known by interacting with the collective actor othered before, during and after genocide. This is done in ways which, firstly, separate the Other as an epistemic and ontological entity different from the Self, and secondly, an epistemic entity that is inferior to the Self. This process can be characterized as epistemic violence that shapes both actors' subjectivities and establishes distinct epistemic roles and hierarchical relations of epistemic authority. Domination rests on a hierarchically organized binary relations between epistemic subject and object whereby the epistemic authority of the Other is discredited or completely denied; not even considered as intelligible or conceivable within that system. I explore this relationship in the context of Myanmar.

The relation of dominance can also evolve into one of co-dependence; an ontological (in)security push-and-pull. The Self evaluates own epistemic authority – to deliberate on the facts, roles, and dynamics of the genocide – by negating or revising the knowledge the Other produces or otherwise accepts as authoritative (e.g. knowledge produced by international fact-finding commissions or international courts) about the same genocide. The Other is established as an inferior epistemic subject through (and in preparation for) genocide and, as such, its knowledge is needed for the Self to build their own knowledge in the struggle to attain ontological security. While in principle, these relations can make the Self more secure while making the Other more or less insecure, the fact that the Other is, or becomes, an epistemic authority, and the lack of trust in the stability of this relationship triggers mutual reinforcement of ontological insecurities.[53] I elaborate on such a changing relationship in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Yet, the relationship between the Self and the Other can also be a relationship of positive co-constitutiveness. In Peace and Conflict studies of inter-ethnic relations, coexistence, while not always having positive connotations, is perceived as, at the minimum, establishing some level of peaceful social interaction between the Self and the Other.[54] "Thicker" forms of coexistence are observed where there are relationships of mutual trust, cooperation and working together towards shared goals.[55] Adopting a postcolonial approach, Untalan proposes that ontological security is "a condition of mutual

[52] Claudia Brunner, "Un/Doing Epistemic Violence while Trying to Change the World," *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik: JEP* 39, no. 1–2 (2023): 5–29, 8.
[53] Untalan, "Decentering the Self," 46.
[54] Louis Kriesberg, "Changing Forms of Coexistence," in *Reconciliation, Justice and Coexistence. Theory and Practice*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2001); Antonia Handler Chayes, "Imagine Coexistence," in *Introduction to Conflict Resolution. Discourses and Dynamics,* ed. Sara Cobb, Sarah Federman and Alison Castel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2020).
[55] Huma Haider, "(Re)Imagining Coexistence: Striving for Sustainable Return, Reintegration and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 3 (2009): 91–113; Tatsushi Arai, "Functional Coexistence in Intractable Conflict: A Decades-Long View of Conflict Intervention," *Peace & Change* 42, no. 2 (2022): 118–51.

coexistence between the Self and the Other," where thinking in terms of "we" is necessary to manage existential crises.[56] Here, the Other is not merely the source of the Self's insecurity. Instead, she conceptualizes a "third hybrid" postcolonial Other who achieves ontological security not by securitizing identity but by dealing with shared problems, understanding the destructive force of the colonizing West while thinking and being outside its logics.[57] Because genocide is committed and denied on the basis of identity markings (race, ethnicity, religion), this invitation to consider how the Other can make themselves more ontologically secure without making the Self more insecure is a challenging one. Nevertheless, I offer reflections on a historical genocide in Tasmania to discuss how the Other can be "a transformative agent" of ontological security, learning from its otherness to uncover "the inherent weakness of the dominant Self's perceived sources of ontological security."[58]

## Separation and Domination

While denial has often been treated as a process that develops once genocide is committed,[59] I here align with scholarly voices who propose that denial is a part of the violent dynamics leading to genocide; not simply a stage but "a constant feature" of it.[60] Theriault, for instance, calls this "anticipatory denial" whereby the intended future execution of genocide is being denied.[61] In particular, he emphasizes that the international attention given to actions or circumstances that might lead to genocide can potentially incite "perpetrators to attempt to create, ahead of genocide, a rhetorical and perceptual framework in which their actions will not be recognized as genocidal."[62] In her study of Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide, Göçek argues that the denial of collective violence against the Armenians has imperial origins more than a hundred years before such violence escalated to genocide.[63] The genocide itself was preceded by the 1894–96 massacres of Armenians that served as "pivotal events" and legitimated collective violence against the Armenians by kickstarting the official process of othering.[64]

In these early stages of genocide, the genocide-committing actor reconstructs both own identity and the identity of the perceived enemy through othering to justify the violence, gain control over the trajectory of the genocidal campaign, and ultimately achieve and normalize a relationship of domination between the Self and the othered. Genocidal campaigns involve a clear construction of the Other and a master script about threat and defence. The script is secured through repetition, that is, continuous reminders of the threat and the threatener. Hand-in-hand with such othering goes dehumanization of the constructed enemy. Massey proposes that dehumanization of the Other serves to justify

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[56] Untalan, "Decentering the Self," 40–2.
[57] Ibid., 40.
[58] Ibid., 41–2.
[59] Stanton, "The Ten Stages of Genocide."
[60] Altanian, *The Epistemic Injustice*, 7.
[61] Henry Theriault, "Is Denial the Final Stage of Genocide? Consolidation, the Metaphysics of Denial, and the Supersession of Stage Theory," in *Denial: The Final Stage of Genocide*, ed. John Cox, Amal Khoury, and Sarah Minslow (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 11.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present and the Collective Violence against Armenians, 1789–2009* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[64] Ibid., 42–3.

the upcoming destruction as it lowers moral restraints that most people act with and motivate the execution of genocide.[65] Through these myth-affirming rituals, individual identities are suppressed, and a person labelled as the enemy becomes defined through the markers of their collective identity, even if it is one they do not necessarily identify with.

Although these preconditions for execution of genocide are well studied in genocide studies, explaining them through the lens of epistemically violent ontological (in)security encounters is necessary in order to observe how the relationship between the Self and the Other could or could not change after the genocide. The creation of the Other is an act of epistemic violence; it establishes the Other as a separate and inferior epistemic subject, whose knowledges, including those on which their own self-identity rests, are treated as false, ignored, revised or completely erased. What follows this attribution of subjectivity as the Other is a planned, systematic and everyday denial of the Other's identity before and outside their otherness. Othering, as previously discussed, can be hostile to the onto-logical security of the othered subject. This situation puts the actor who is othered in a vulnerable, ontologically insecure position as the core existential questions concerning their individual and collective self-identity, relations with others and ultimately existence are being challenged, alongside the threats to the physical well-being.

Observe, for instance, Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya people in the years leading to the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2016–17. Legally speaking, it is yet to be decided whether the actions of the Myanmar military junta towards the Rohingya fall under the international crime of genocide,[66] although some states such as the US have recognized these crimes as such in highly political processes.[67] What I am more interested in are the lived experiences of the violence towards the Rohingya where such violence is understood as genocidal or aspiring to be genocidal. Key to the contemporary Buddhist nationalist thinking and state formation in Myanmar is the construction of Rohingya as "dark-skinned aboriginals," "foreign nationals, Bengali intruders or illegal immigrants;"[68] not only separate but also inferior to the collective Self. Creating such categories that sep-arate the Rohingyas from the Burmese Buddhists comes with an elaborate origin story of Rohingyas arriving in what is now Myanmar as a result of foreign invasions, whether that is by Arabs, Persians, or the British Empire.[69] In either case, the Myanmar state put forward an authoritative timeline about the "appearance" of Rohingya on the Myanmar territory in which the Rohingya are "illegal Bengali migrants," and in doing so suppressed the Rohin-gya people's own self-identification and knowledges it rests on.[70] It is illustrative therefore that in her defence of Myanmar in the genocide case at the International Court of Justice, the country's then-leader Aung San Suu Kyi refused to use the word "Rohingya."[71]

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[65] Simon Massey, "The Bosnian Genocide and the 'Continuum of Denial'," in *Denial: The Final Stage of Genocide*, ed. John Cox, Amal Khoury, and Sarah Minslow (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 114.

[66] International Court of Justice, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Gen-ocide (The Gambia v. Myanmar)," https://www.icj-cij.org/case/178.

[67] Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: US Recognizes Genocide Against Rohingya," https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/21/myanmar-us-recognizes-genocide-against-rohingya.

[68] Sakhawat Sajjat Sejan, "Strategic Denial of Rohingya Identity and Their Right to Internal Self-Determination," *Inter-national Studies* 59, no. 3 (2022): 234–51, 235.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Nasir Uddin, *The Rohingya: An Ethnography of Subhuman Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 30.

[71] Anealla Safdar and Usaid Siddiqui, "ICJ Speech: Suu Kyi Fails to Use 'Rohingya' to Describe Minority," *AlJazeera*, 13 December 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/13/icj-speech-suu-kyi-fails-to-use-rohingya-to-describe-minority.

The colonization of the territory of Myanmar by the British perpetuated the marginalization of the Rohingya.[72] The recent slaughter and expulsions of the Rohingya were thus not unprecedented but they developed on the back of numerous previous assaults on the Rohingya, including those committed by the Burma Independence Army in the struggle for Burmese independence. Post-independence, and particularly after the 1962 military coup, the political elites placed a more concentrated effort to promote nativism as a core foundation of the Buddhist Burmese national identity.[73] The Myanmar state today perceives "acceptance of other religious traditions … as an existential threat to both state and faith."[74] The development of the genocidal campaigns against the Rohingya since Myanmar's independence put forward a comprehensive strategy of denying Rohingya self-identity. This included, among others, enacting the Emergency Immigration Act in 1974 and the Citizenship Act of 1982, which essentially stripped Rohingyas of their Burmese citizenship. These legal developments excluded Rohingyas as an ethnic group by creating categories of "ethnic groups of Burmese origin" defined in relation to certain lands and perceptions of "nativity"; more precisely, an ethnic group could only be recognized as such if the people settled or lived in these territories before the British colonization in 1824.

These legal and institutional acts deliberately misrecognize the Rohingya, that is, they fail to affirm the characteristics and differences that the Rohingya hold valuable and accept their identity and history on their own terms.[75] In doing so, they secure a relationship of domination between the Self and the othered, normalizing the status of Rohingya as the unwelcome Other. In addition to the consequences of this process on the physical and human securities of the Rohingya, which have been tremendous, the process also puts a strain on ontological security of the Rohingya, impacting the key questions of existence as well as how the Rohingya as a collective actor reflexively perceive their own self-identity. In other words, it puts a significant strain on the group's autobiography as continuity and security of self-identity and whether it can be routinely performed.[76] In numerous interviews with displaced Rohingya, Hossain shows that most interviewed Rohingyas were aware of the classification they had been subject to as *the Other*, either by being forced to legally identify as "Bengalis" or being repeatedly told by the attacking Myanmar soldiers that they are "Bengalis."[77] As Uddin writes in his elaborate ethnography of the Rohingya, across generations, many Rohingyas would define their ethnic identity in opposition to that of Bengalis.[78] "We are not Bengalis, we are Rohingyas," some would say.[79] This is how genocide denial, treated as a constitutive part of genocide itself, is characterized by ontological security encounters, where a collective actor affirms a sense of self (identity, relations) by creating the Other as an inferior subject over which it can exert dominance, pushing the now othered subject into existential and physical

[72] Sejan, "Strategic Denial," 236.
[73] Naved Bakali, "Islamophobia in Myanmar: The Rohingya Genocide and the 'War on Terror'," *Race & Class* 62, no. 4 (2021): 53–71.
[74] Ibid., 61.
[75] Lisa Strömbom, "Thick Recognition: Advancing Theory on Identity Change in Intractable Conflicts," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2012): 168–91.
[76] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
[77] Mohammad Pizuar Hossain, "Stages of the Rohingya Genocide: A Theoretical and Empirical Study," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 35, no. 2 (2021): 211–34, 218.
[78] Uddin, *The Rohingya*.
[79] Ibid., 27.

dread. Such a process of separation and a relation of domination is established through epistemic violence. The presentation of the Rohingya as "foreign" and "unwelcome" in Myanmar is based on false "origin" story of the Rohingya, which can only become legitimated through the destruction of centuries-long histories of the Rohingya in Arakan (now Rakhine State) prior to the British colonization.[80] Histories of the Rohingya point to the presence of this population in Arakan dating back hundreds of years. In the words of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, a diplomatic and advocacy collective of Rohingya leaders, the "Rohingya are one of the two major indigenous peoples of Arakan" who have "material, spiritual, and historical connections" to the region.[81]

This epistemic violence of the creation of the Other as a separate and inferior epistemic subject leads to attempts to destroy the knowledge held by the Rohingya about their own histories and reshaping how the knowledge of the past is used to make sense of what it means to be Rohingya – and Burmese – in today's world. It precedes and follows the execution of genocidal violence against the othered. In the next section, I look at a different case of genocide denial in a post-genocide society, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to examine how the relationship between the Self and the Other evolves to one of co-dependence.

## Antagonistic Co-Dependence

Genocide denial after genocide is the best-studied form of denial. It can take different shapes and evolve over time. As Lipstadt shows in her study of Holocaust denial, it may start with denying that the crimes committed constituted "genocide" and claiming that they were instead crimes of a lesser degree, minimizing the number of casualties, or denying that there was a genocidal intent.[82] Eventually, however, such denial can grow into full-scale negation that the actions even happened in the first place. Equally, in the post-genocide period, the relationship between the Self and the Other can change from domination between hierarchically positioned collective epistemic subjects to one of co-dependence between two epistemic authorities who produce parallel knowledges about the genocide. Through genocide denial, the Self continues to engage in tactics of epistemic violence that seek to discredit the epistemic authority of the Other; yet the Other has relations with other actors that secure its epistemic authority and ability to be heard.

The goal of the denialist actor is to formulate authoritative knowledge about the past and shape the master narrative in a way that takes validity away from those who categorize this past as "genocide" in justified and seemingly rational ways. Such a goal is fulfilled through speech as well as material acts that aspire to restore master narrative script of the denialist actor as defender, liberator, or even a victim, aspiring to secure a dominant narrative about what happened. On the other hand, the othered collective actor writes its victimhood into its self-identity. Achieving the status of "victims" globally is a political process where not all suffering or all sufferers reach the standard of victimhood, although not all groups who have suffered in some way might wish to harness it as grievance.[83]

[80] Ibid.
[81] A.R.N.O., "About Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (Arno)," https://www.rohingya.org/about-arno/.
[82] Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*.
[83] Robert Meister, "Human Rights and the Politics of Victimhood," *Ethics & International Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2002): 91–108.

Those who have it might find the status of victimhood desirable because it reaps material and normative benefits.[84] For these reasons, victimhood narratives are often employed by populist and nationalist leaders and groups who promise to "correct" historical and contemporary grievances even where those grievances are significantly exaggerated.[85] The status of victims of genocide in particular makes these collective entities into "ideal" victims since their suffering is based on their identity markers – who they are and not what they did.[86] To achieve, secure or expand this status, the Other engages in knowledge production about the genocide. This includes not only genocide testimony at the level of individual, or genocide remembrance at the level of community, but also political projects of knowledge creation that seek to secure one's autobiography characterized by victimhood based on identity markers, and a clear delineation of threat from the denier.

What is key in this relationship is that both the Self and the Other need one another, engaging in knowledge production that depends on the other's knowledge production. In doing so, they engage in an ontological push-and-pull, where the actions of the Self seemingly make them more secure while making the Other more insecure; akin to the relationship described in the previous section. But the interaction does not stop there. In response to genocide denial, the Other can also seek to revise the tenets of its own autobiography to secure or magnify their victimhood, triggering further action from the Self. Ultimately, in this ontological push-and-pull, both subjects suffer from ontological insecurity. Genocide denial ruins any opportunity for trust in a stable relationship between the Self and the Other, at least initially. I use the example of Serb and Bosniak political communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to propose that the denial of the Srebrenica genocide ultimately makes both communities ontologically insecure.

The killing of 8,000 Muslim men and boys in and around the Srebrenica area in July 1995 by the Army of Republika Srpska is legally treated as genocide as per judgments by both the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).[87] That Srebrenica was indeed a genocide and not a lesser crime has been widely accepted by states and international organizations across the globe, exemplified by the recent adoption of a United Nations General Assembly Resolution that establishes 11 July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica.[88] The politics of genocide by Republika Srpska as a political entity has worsened in the recent years, evolving from a political apology – although without using the word "genocide" – in 2004,[89] to diminishing the qualification

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[84] Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Jelena Subotic, and Michael Barnett, "Constructing Victims: Suffering and Status in Modern World Order," *Review of International Studies* 50, no. 1 (2024): 171–89.

[85] Adam B. Lerner, "The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (2019): 62–87.

[86] Vandermaas-Peeler et al., "Constructing Victims," 184. Although it is worth noting that these are not homogenous groups but that there can exist hierarchies of victimhood within a single group treated as unitary from the outside.

[87] International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro),* Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2007, p. 43. Twenty individuals have been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for the crimes in Srebrenica. See International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "ICTY Remembers: The Srebrenica Genocide 1995–2015," https://www.irmct.org/specials/srebrenica20/.

[88] United Nations, "International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica, 11 July," https://www.un.org/en/observances/srebrenica-genocide-commemoration-day.

[89] "Dragan Čavić – Predsjednik RS (22.06.2004.)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsB-Wvia3fI&t=144s. In 2004, President of RS President Dragan Čavić issued a public apology for the "killings" in Srebrenica, stating that the "nine days of Srebrenica tragedy" represent a "black page in the history of Serbian people." It was furthermore added that those

of crimes by calling it "a fabricated myth,"[90] and glorifying war criminals convicted by the ICTY,[91] altogether establishing the script as well as a material environment that legitimizes the denialist account as the correct one.

To demonstrate the relationship of antagonistic co-dependence, I will focus on formal fact-finding and research bodies established by governments in the federal system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2018, having obtained a consensus among all Serb political parties, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska set up a new international commission on Srebrenica.[92] The commission consisted of members from a range of European states and the US, with Gideon Greif, a Holocaust scholar from Israel, serving as the Chairman of the Commission. In their own words, the Commission members had the goal of investigating and presenting "in an objective manner the suffering of *all* peoples in the Srebrenica region," which signals a level of recognition of the suffering of the Other.[93] However, in its 1,106-page final report, the Commission by and large focused on ethnic Serb victims. The denialist methodology was coated in the language of equality or reducing the difference. The commission "sympathized" with all victims of "the terrible civil war" and held that "all victims should be equally respected and remembered."[94] This sort of recognition, based on accepting the Other as a "universal" human being, and their suffering just the same as all suffering, fails to acknowledge the Other's distinctiveness and difference to the Self due to which they suffered,[95] which erodes the prospect of "we-ness", or mutual co-constitutiveness.[96] The Commission employed numerous tactics of denial, providing "evidence" that would minimize the qualification of the crimes committed in Srebrenica (from genocide to some lesser crimes); minimize the number of civilian victims (by for example calling the victims "combatants"), and enlarge Serb claims of collective victimhood (and diminish own responsibility) by focusing on the atrocities committed by the Other in the enclave of Srebrenica.

The Commission and its report are clearly political bargaining chips for the populist ruling elites in Republika Srpska to further add to the narrative of Serbs as "eternal victims" at the hands of both their neighbours and foreign powers. This does not negate the fact that the Commission's report services an ontological need as it deliberates on who Serbs are and are not in the world. It reveals an assumption (and a fear) that the Serb self-identity does not match its perceived identity in the international society, for Srebrenica became "the symbol of … Serb evil."[97] The report voices anxieties around the Srebrenica genocide changing how Serbs are viewed in the world, i.e. as "genocidal"

who committed the crimes in Srebrenica "in the name of the nation" therein committed crimes against their own nation.

[90] Jelena Subotić, "Holocaust and the Meaning of the Srebrenica Genocide," 76.

[91] Olivera Simic, "'Celebrating' Srebrenica Genocide: Impunity and Indoctrination as Contributing Factors to the Glorification of Mass Atrocities," *Journal of Genocide Research* 27, no. 3 (2024): 495–513.

[92] Dragan Maksimović, "Povući Izvještaj Komisije o Srebrenici," *DW*, 14 August 2018, https://www.dw.com/bs/nsrs-povu%C4%87i-izvje%C5%A1taj-komisije-o-srebrenici/a-45081221.

[93] Independent International Commission on the Suffering of All People in the Srebrenica Region Between 1992 and 1995, "Concluding Report," https://incomfis-srebrenica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Srebrenica%20Commission%20report%20-%20English%20lan.pdf (Emphasis mine).

[94] Ibid.

[95] Strömbom, "Thick Recognition," 171.

[96] Patricia Greve, "Ontological Security, the Struggle for Recognition, and the Maintenance of Security Communities," *Journal of International Relations & Development* 21 (2018): 858–82.

[97] Independent International Commission, 25.

people, "life-long offender", comparable to the Nazis.[98] To deny Srebrenica genocide, therefore, becomes necessary in order to preserve a desired self-identity.

This Commission, and many other examples such as history textbooks for school children,[99] and destruction of sites of atrocity,[100] demonstrate how genocide denial becomes written into the collective identity of the community on whose behalf genocide was committed. In Republika Srpska, as well as Serbia, acknowledging the genocide is perceived as anti-Serbian behaviour by both political elites and the general public; it goes against postwar Serbhood. This seeming inseparability of genocide denial from Serbhood is visible in Republika Srpska where even prominent opposition figures who challenge the long-ruling strongman Milorad Dodik, otherwise a fervent genocide denier, continue to deny Srebrenica genocide.[101] Memories, lived experiences and narratives that do not fit this master script about the war and the Srebrenica genocide are silenced, suppressed, controlled, or otherwise delegitimized as "fiction" or "unscientific findings."

Because this genocide is widely recognized internationally, Bosniaks as a political community have an epistemic authority that has allowed the victims' families and survivors to be recognized and to commemorate the genocide. Even prior to the establishment of the International Day of Remembrance by the United Nations General Assembly, 11 July was widely commemorated worldwide; for instance, the UK routinely marks it as the Srebrenica Memorial Day.[102] The village of Potočari hosts the Srebrenica Memorial Centre and Cemetery, and numerous other physical and online memorials (permanent and temporary) exist. At the ICTY alone, more than 1,000 survivors testified about the Srebrenica genocide-related events.[103] If one focused only on those practices, they could conclude that the abundance of genocide testimony and remembrance by and for Bosniak communities adds to the security of their self-identity. Taking a relational approach to these issues nevertheless reveals that the genocide denial by Republika Srpska has deep impacts on both ontological security and knowledge production by Bosniaks as a collective epistemic subject. While the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (majority Bosniak, but more ethnically diverse than Republika Srpska) has not had any successful official commissions of inquiry regarding Srebrenica or the war of the 1990s more broadly, other knowledge producers sponsored by the Federation have engaged in fact-finding projects that build on the legal judgements of the ICTY and domestic courts but also add new qualifications of crimes. An illustrative example is the Institute for Research on Crimes Against Humanity and International Law based in Sarajevo, a public scientific institution established in 1992 by a Law Decree of the Presidency of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[104] The research mandate of the Institute includes genocide, both specifically in the Srebrenica area, but also more broadly. Within this mandate, researchers of the Institute have produced numerous book-length publications that classify the crime of genocide as

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[98] Ibid., 718–24, 1038.
[99] Victor Toom, "Ontologically Dirty Knots: The Production of Numbers after the Srebrenica Genocide," *Security Dialogue* 51, no.4 (2020): 358–76.
[100] Hikmet Karčić, "Triumphalism: The Final Stage of Bosnian Genocide," in *Denial: The Final Stage of Genocide*, ed. John Cox, Amal Khoury, and Sarah Minslow (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).
[101] Adem Mehmedović et al., *Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report* (Potočari: Srebrenica Memorial Center, 2022), 50, https://srebrenicamemorial.org/assets/photos/editor/_mcs_izvjestaj_ENG_2022_FINAL_DI.pdf.
[102] Remembering Srebrenica, "2025 Memorial Day," https://srebrenica.org.uk/2025-memorial-day-booklet-web-version.
[103] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "ICTY Remembers."
[104] Institute for Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, "About Us," https://iziz.unsa.ba/about.html.

having been committed beyond the limited area of Srebrenica (as per the ICTY findings) in Brčko,[105] Ahmići,[106] Sanski Most,[107] and all of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[108] The narrative frame under which these publications operate – "genocide against Bosniaks" – existed before relevant ICTY judgements; it reflects people's lived experiences. These publications, however, are reactions to not only the legal qualification of genocide as temporarily and geographically limited to the Srebrenica area in July 1995, but also the denial coming from Republika Srpska, with which they are in conversation, seeking to discredit the denialist evidence and provide their own. For instance, in the book about genocide in Brčko there is a separate section on "Serbian truth" about the crimes and "genocide" in Brčko in which the author discredits the authors of publications that speak of crimes against the Serbs in the Brčko area by pointing to factual errors and omissions.[109] The examples demonstrate the interconnectedness of the epistemic and ontological, as they show how production of knowledge that claims that the genocide was committed against all Bosniaks serves to add to the epistemic authority of Bosniaks in the battle of meaning making about the war as well as expand and secure the global victimhood status of Bosniaks as an ethnic group and discredit any Serb claims for victimhood.

Still, at the core of both practices lies the issue of a lack of intergroup trust in a relationship of co-dependence. The practices I describe above can be ontologically soothing – or are perceived to be – for the leaders of a political communities on whose behalf a genocide was committed for they seemingly cleanse the collective autobiography from "bad" or "embarrassing" episodes and aspire to keep counter-narratives at bay. Yet, because the Self's ontological security depends on the actions of the Other, the production of new knowledge about those "bad" or "embarrassing" episodes (whether formally or informally) continuously puts a strain on the fundamental questions about the self, such as autobiography.[110] This ultimately makes the public – regardless of one's identity markings or indeed their recognition of the Srebrenica genocide – doubtful about the future of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the community level, these feelings can translate to mistrust and fear of the Other who is engaging in denying due to the perception of being threatened.[111] To illustrate, in her research on the effects of genocide denial on intragroup and intergroup relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Parent quotes an interviewee who stated "[w]e are in need of not being afraid of the other. I do not see this as being possible after what they have done to us. They don't even recognize their responsibility in what they did. What will be their next move?."[112] Golubović's ethnographic research with Serb women in Sarajevo demonstrates how anxiety around being a Serb in Sarajevo – on the account of the violence Serb armed forces committed against the

[105] Rasim Muratović and Ermin Kuka, *Genocid u Brčkom 1992–1995* (Sarajevo: Institut za Istraživanje Zločina Protiv Čovječnosti i Međunarodnog Prava, 2015).
[106] Rasim Muratović, *Genocid u Ahmićima 1993* (Sarajevo: Institut za Istraživanje Zločina Protiv Čovječnosti i Međunarodnog Prava, 2013).
[107] Mujo Begić, *Genocid u Sanskom Mostu* (Sarajevo: Institut za Istraživanje Zločina Protiv Čovječnosti i Međunarodnog Prava, 2017).
[108] Smail Čekić, *Genocid i Istina o Genocidu u Bosni i Herzegovini* (Sarajevo: Institut za Istraživanje Zločina Protiv Čovječnosti i Međunarodnog Prava, 2012).
[109] Muratović and Kuka, *Genocid u Brčkom,* 541.
[110] Subotic, "Political Memory, Ontological Security."
[111] Genevieve Parent, "Genocide Denial: Perpetuating Victimization and the Cycle of Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2016): 38–58.
[112] Ibid., 50.

population in this city – drives performance of ethnic ambiguity of deliberately avoiding being seen as a Serb by others.[113] Beyond people's perception of (a lack of) durable peace, there has also been a rise in hate speech in public discourse[114] as well as hate incidents, including vandalism glorifying the Srebrenica genocide.[115]

The examples from post-genocide Bosnia and Herzegovina provide insights into where a relationship between the Self and the Other can go from a relationship of domination between two hierarchically positioned epistemic subjects that benefits one actor's onto-logical needs. Although interpersonal and community-level relations in some situations can take the form of a peaceful coexistence,[116] at the level of collective political actors, antagonism persists. By examining genocide denial, we can see that neither the Self nor the Other is ontologically secure in a relationship characterized by antagonism by two nevertheless co-dependent epistemic subjects, and that despite being recognized as an epistemic authority and a genocide victim, Bosniaks still experience insecurities. This discussion of ontological push-and-pulls in Bosnia and Herzegovina might appear too deterministic, without a possible way out. In the final section, I engage with postco-lonial invitations to explore ontological security as relations of coexistence[117] or being-within,[118] going beyond antagonizing co-dependence. What follows is a discussion of what this might look like in environments of denial of historical genocides, with the hope that it will offer potential avenues for exploring this invitation further in contempor-ary cases.

## Towards Coexistence?

In the most extreme case of colonial genocides, the Other itself is deemed to be a non-existent categorical unit because it is believed to no longer exist as a result of destruction. Through this form of genocide denial, the Other is first deemed a severely inferior epis-temic subject to ultimately be denied their own subjectivity. In other words, not only is the Other silenced as an epistemic subject, but they are also not recognized as a standa-lone epistemic subject in the first place.

To illustrate, I use the example of colonial genocide against the indigenous popu-lations in Tasmania, who were for a significant period in history wrongly presumed to be "extinct." The destruction of Tasmanian Aborigines was committed by the settlers nearly wholly within the period of British colonial direct rule of what is now Australia.[119] The indigenous population in Tasmania is believed to have numbered around 6,000 people in 1803 when the British invasion of the island began. After widespread land

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[113] Jelena Golubović, "'To Me, You Are Not a Serb': Ethnicity, Ambiguity, and Anxiety in Post-War Sarajevo," *Ethnicites* 20, no. 3 (2019): 544–63.

[114] "OSCE Warns Against Hate Incidents Destabilising Bosnia," *Reuters*, 12 January 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/osce-warns-against-hate-incidents-destabilising-bosnia-2022-01-12/.

[115] Aleksandar Drakulic, "New Neo-Nazi Graffiti Painted on Walls in Prijedor, Bosnia," *BIRN*, 13 January 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/13/new-neo-nazi-graffiti-painted-on-walls-in-prijedor-bosnia/.

[116] Anders H. Stefansson, "Coffee After Cleansing? Co-Existence, Co-Operation, and Communication in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 57 (2010): 62–76; Johanna Mannerg-ren Selimovic, "Challenges of Postconflict Coexistence: Narrating Truth and Justice in a Bosnian Town," *Political Psy-chology* 36, no. 2 (2015): 231–42.

[117] Untalan, "Decentering the Self."

[118] Botterill, "Ontological Security As 'Being-With'."

[119] Ann Curthoys, "Genocide in Tasmania: The History of an Idea," in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. Dirk A. Moses (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), 231.

seizures, massacres, abductions, exiles, and incarcerations, Tasmanian Aborigines were considered "extinct" by 1876[120] with the death of Truganini who was perceived to be the last Aboriginal woman in Tasmania.

Although there continue to be calls for the British Crown to apologize and pay reparations for the violence against Aboriginal people in Australia,[121] Tasmanian Aborigines can hardly be seen as Britain's significant Other. They, together with other indigenous people harmed by the progress of the British Empire rather represent a collective Other, "the native", whose demise enabled the British Empire's "greatness" in relation to which Britishness is still often constructed. One rose in prominence through the exploitation of the other. In contemporary Britain, the destruction of Tasmanian Aborigines is a non-issue; the genocide does not form a part of public discourse or commemoration.

In Australia, there have been no apologies or memorials offered specifically regarding the Tasmanian genocide, although there have been other apologies offered to Australian Aborigines, particularly the "Stolen Generations."[122] Still, the foundational Australian national identity rested on whiteness and Anglo-ness, and consequently a separation from the indigenous as "the other within" (as opposed to migrants who may be perceived as "the other without").[123] Until the 1970s, White Australia was an official immigration policy (cf. the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901), but subsequently Australia adopted a new policy of multiculturalism. However, the new policy was not matched with similar changes in the "dominant cultural imaginary of Australia" as having a white and Anglo core which failed to systematically grapple with whiteness.[124] Therefore, dominant discourses of the collective Australian Self still prioritize whiteness as opposed to non-white Australians, which includes Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

The myth of extinction of Tasmanian Aborigines, although carefully curated,[125] is just that – a myth. This construction fails to see race and identities as unfixed and to recognize the survival of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. The category of "Tasmanian Indigenous" people did not exist as such for the people of the island who instead identified themselves in relation to place and language.[126] What colonizers labelled an extinct race were in fact at least several distinct nations with distinct identities,[127] while as many as five hundred distinct Indigenous groups lived on the mainland.[128] Moreover, collective identities of Tasmanian Aboriginal groups have been maintained, among others, by abducted Aboriginal women passing down Aboriginal culture and history to their mixed-race offspring.[129] These communities persevered and blossomed even though

[120] Shayne Breen, "Extermination, Extinction, Genocide. British Colonialism and Tasmanian Aborigines," in *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory*, ed. René Lemarchand (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
[121] Rebe Taylor and Greg Lehman, "Should King Charles Apologise for the Genocide of First Nations People When He Visits Australia?," *The Conversation*, 16 October 2024, https://theconversation.com/should-king-charles-apologise-for-the-genocide-of-first-nations-people-when-he-visits-australia-239092.
[122] Parliament of Australia, "Apology to Australia's Indigenous People," https://www.aph.gov.au/Visit_Parliament/Art/Icons/Apology_to_Australias_Indigenous_Peoples.
[123] Jon Stratton, *Multiculturalism, Whiteness and Otherness in Australia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2020); Jessica Walton et al., "Whiteness and National Identity: Teacher Discourses in Australian Primary Schools," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 21 (2018): 132–47.
[124] Walton et al., "Whiteness and National Identity," 132–4.
[125] Tom Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
[126] Breen, "Extermination, Extinction, Genocide," 72.
[127] William R. Price, "Overcoming the Myth of Extinction: The Path Toward Heritage Rights for the Tasmanian Aboriginals," *Heritage & Society* 10, no. 1 (2017); 68–90.
[128] Breen, "Extermination, Extinction, Genocide."
[129] Ibid., 88.

the Tasmanian government held them incarcerated on Cape Barren Island until 1951 denying them their identity and constructing them as "half-castes."[130] Throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century thinking and memories, "mixed-race" descendants of the Tasmanian Aborigines did not fit the story of British progress and were thus made invisible.[131]

For the victim communities, falsely deemed extinct, this sort of erasure triggers all fundamental questions of ontological security, above all, the question of existence. It can render all survivors and their communities "perpetually insecure" as their identity and continuous existence are questioned.[132] Self-identification is crucial to reinstate one's existence in the eyes of other actors in its external environment. It is illustrative, then, that the Tasmanian Aborigines have come to be known as the Palawa. As of 2021, up to 30,000 people in Tasmania self-identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander,[133] although not all those people would be Tasmanian Aborigines. This is a significant increase from the 1966 census when only thirty-six people in Tasmania self-identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.[134] What can at least partly account for the increase in people's self-identification as Aboriginal in Tasmania is the Aboriginal activism to redress some of the settler colonial wrongs. To make their own existence as a collective actor visible and their legal, economic and political claims recognized, Tasmanian Aborigines have continued to challenge the myth of extinction in Australia and beyond. For instance, in Tasmania, the Aboriginal Relics Act of 1975 restricted what can and cannot be qualified as Aboriginal relic on this island to the year of Truganini's death, 1876, under a false premise that Aboriginal activity in Tasmania ceased to exist with her.[135] In the amendments to this law in 2017, however, all references to 1876 were removed in this challenge of the legal codification of the myth of extinction.[136] At the international level, in 1982, as a part of the nomination process of the Tasmanian wilderness to be added to the world heritage list of the UNESCO, the International Union for Conservation of Nature produced a report, which stated that "Tasmanians are now an extinct race of humans."[137] In 2023, however, due to the challenges coming from the living Tasmanian Aborigines, the UNESCO agreed to amend the report and omit the reference. These initiatives have gone hand-in-hand with advocacy around regaining entitlement to land rights. As late as 1995 Tasmanian Aborigines were given ownership of twelve sites by the Tasmanian government (comprising only 0.06 per cent of state territory).[138]

Considering the specific circumstances of this genocide, which led to the false extinction, emphasis on self-identification is unsurprising. However, this does not mean that the

130 Ibid.
131 Curthoys, "Genocide in Tasmania," 236.
132 Theriault, "Is Denial the Final Stage of Genocide?" 20.
133 Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Tasmania: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population Summary," (2022), https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/tasmania-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary.
134 Australian Bureau of Statistics, "1301.0 – Year Book Australia, 2004," https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article52004.
135 Price, "Overcoming the Myth of Extinction."
136 Ibid.
137 Jano Gibson, "UN Agency Removes Assertions Tasmanian Aboriginal People Are 'Extinct' and Thylacines May Still Exist from Website," ABC News, 27 August 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-28/unesco-correction-tasmanian-aboriginal-extinction-thylacine/102778408.
138 Peter Scott, "People Who Were Not There But Are Now! Aboriginality in Tasmania," in Globalization and Marginality in Geographical Space, ed. Heikki Jussila, Roser Majoral and Fernanda Delgado-Cravidao (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 261.

Aboriginal populations in Tasmania do not advocate for genocide testimony and genocide recognition, for these aspects are fundamental episodes of the Palawa autobiography. Here, to go beyond a perpetual state of antagonistic relationship marked by ontological insecurity, Untalan proposes that the Other focuses not so much on identity anchors as they do on common problems, drawing its ontological security for its otherness without making the Self ontological insecure. In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart calling for constitutional reforms to establish "a First Nations Voice," that is, to allow Aboriginal people to act in advisory capacity towards the Australian government, and "a Makarrata Commission" that would supervise an agreement between the government and First Nations about truth-telling.[139] The underlying tone of the Uluru Statement was not antagonistic; it was instead one of coexistence; where the sovereignty of the Self, although in existence from "time immemorial", "co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown."[140] The statement invited the Other "to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future … coming together [towards] a fair and truthful relationship."[141] It signalled that the Self and the Other are, ultimately, Australian, and thus not necessitating the Other to reexamine who they are in connection to the violent past.

Importantly, the statement signalled an ontological need of a community to speak and carve its autobiography after its existence has been more secure. The statement says "[i]n 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard."[142] The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, who is a voice for the Tasmanian Aborigines, albeit not the only one, also advocated for establishment of a truth-telling commission to "create a permanent and official historical record of the past … rejecting the myth that with the death of Truganini on 8 May 1876, that 65,000-plus years of Palawa society and culture was removed from the face of the earth."[143] This proposal was more accusatory, as it was envisaged it would document experiences of "genocide and rape" as well as of "resistance, resilience, and survival."[144] Its demanded from the Tasmanian government and other state bodies to "give evidence," "provide documentation" on the oppression, and offer apologies "to the Palawa for past and ongoing injustices, abuse, and discrimination."[145]

When the proposal for constitutional reform that would grant the First Nations Voice was put to public vote in a referendum in 2023, it was rejected by 60 per cent of voters. The voting outcome was influenced by a range of political and socioeconomic reasons and cannot be explained through the lens of identity only.[146] But what was clear was that although regions with high proportions of Aboriginal population overwhelmingly voted "Yes",[147] some of the leading "No" campaigners included Aboriginal people who

[139] The Uluru Statement from the Heart, "The Statement," https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, "Treaty," https://tacinc.com.au/campaign/treaty/.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Nicholas Biddle et al., "Detailed Analysis of the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum and Related Social and Political Attitudes," *Australian National University*, 28 November 2023, https://polis.cass.anu.edu.au/files/docs/2025/6/Detailed_analysis_of_the_2023_Voice_to_Parliament_Referendum_and_related_social_and_political_attitudes.pdf.

[147] Jordyn Beazley, "Indigenous Communities Overwhelmingly Voted Yes to Australia's Voice to Parliament," *The Guardian*, 15 October 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/15/indigenous-communities-overwhelmingly-voted-yes-to-australias-voice-to-parliament.

rejected the initiative for diverse reasons. Tasmanian Aboriginal activist Michael Mansell claimed that an advisory capacity of the voice "endorses the right of others to decide … [and] is at complete odds with sovereignty."[148] Even though he recognized that "[b]oth white and black sovereignty can stand together," he criticized the idea of shared Australian identity by saying that the "[v]oice advocates describe themselves as 'Aboriginal Australians', the constitution as 'ours;' they accept Australia Day awards (imagine Palestinians being named Israeli of the Year!)."[149]

This case shows that epistemic violence that follows the physical destruction during a genocide can be so severe that it denies the Other's own existence and treats the Other as a non-subject, leaving them in a state of perpetual ontological insecurity. Importantly, it illustrates how the Other can embrace its otherness and resist the destruction (e.g. through self-identification as the Palawa) and establish itself as an existing epistemic subject, without necessarily triggering ontological insecurity in the Self whose fundamental questions about the Selfhood remain unchallenged. Finally, Tasmania, and Australia more broadly, offers insights into how the relations between Self and Other evolve in pursuit of ontological needs of each entity. While the self-identification efforts in Tasmania were followed by discussions about the core elements of the Palawa people's autobiography that concern settler colonial genocide in a way that demands accountability and redress, at the national level, leaders of Aboriginal communities advocated for truth recovery (only achievable relationally) by insisting on coexistence of the Self and the Other. Such an initiative points to a split in the Aboriginal stance towards what the relations between the Self and the Other could or should be and indicates that experiences of relations of separation and domination are still very much pertinent alongside aspirations and experiences of coexistence. The case of Tasmania cannot easily be "exported" to contemporary cases of genocide. It should be read as a thought exercise and invitation to continue to explore relations of coexistence, or mutual ontological security, between subjects with violent histories of genocide.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a postcolonial reading of genocide denial as an epistemically violent, ontological (in)security encounter between interconnected actors. The emphasis on the epistemic and ontological, as well as physical, psychological, and other violences in genocide studies serves to bring to the fore the relations between collective selves and others (and othered) that underpin and define both denial and recognition of genocides. My three examples have shown, I hope, how the relations between the Self and the Other change in different circumstances and different stages of genocide, including domination and co-dependence, and have importantly interrogated what less antagonistic relations between the Self and the Other might look like. First, I claimed that treating genocide denial as a constitutive part of genocide itself reveals the Other is created through acts of epistemic violence in a relationship characterized by separation of the Self and the Other as hierarchically positioned subjects and ultimately domination of the Self over the Other. This relationship might serve the ontological security needs of

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148 Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, "Aboriginal Empowerment," https://tacinc.com.au/2023/07/aboriginal-empowerment/.
149 Ibid.

the Self while making the Other more insecure. Second, I explored a situation of a post-genocide society that is characterized not by domination but a more co-dependent relationship between two epistemic authorities, one who denies genocide through revisionist knowledge and the other who advocates for recognition of genocide and victimhood status through fact-finding. In what I called an ontological push-and-pull, mutual trust and stability in a relationship are lacking, autobiographies are put under a constant strain and, ultimately, both collectives end up ontologically insecure. Finally, I looked at a case of a historical genocide to explore what a more positive relationship of coexistence, or co-constitutiveness, of the Self and the Other might look like where genocide recognition is absent, but where the Other has clear ontological needs to add to its autobiography as a relational knower. This example, a thought exercise rather than a finding, reveals that different groups might experience or envisage the relation between the Self and the Other differently, what might be interpreted as coexistence for some for others might be a sign of domination.

Ultimately, the article calls for relational approaches to the study of not just genocide denial but also genocide recognition, going beyond investigations of identity-driven politics of one or the other to examine how denial or recognition affect and are affected by an actor's sense of self in relation to its significant others. It would be fruitful for genocide scholars to examine under what circumstances denial turns into recognition through the fluidity of these mutually constituted collective identities. In aftermaths of active commission of genocide, where there is denial, this lens could offer us a productive way out of the often-paralyzing frustration that state actors are engaging in denial, trivialization and minimization of atrocities, which are sometimes dismissed as "inevitable" or "expected". Instead, it could lead us into projects which at their core seek to promote previously subjugated epistemes and epistemic subjects, expanding our understanding of "healing" after genocide to the healing of knowing and being for those whose senses of collective self, and their knowledgebases, are so severely threatened by those who deny them.

## Notes on contributor

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