

Language as Landscape:

NAVIGATING POST-CONFLICT

RECONSTRUCTION WITH BOSNIAN YOUTH

Heather Hermant

A FEW HOLES SHOT THROUGH A BOARDED UP WINDOW LET IN LIGHT, illuminating old toys, a photo on the wall of a once young couple. Two boys and a girl sit around. They came to visit their grandmother when the war started. The first week, they watched TV and played outside. But “the big bang” put an end to electricity. Light and TV became old candles and even older toys. Nothing but silence surrounds them now, their presence almost irrelevant to the world. They are afraid of the great authority of the dark silently floating around their fragile bodies. Five-year-old Vladimir is the childish cry behind the silenced voice of fear.

Vladimir (almost crying): I'm calling grandma if you don't give it baaaaaack!!!!!!!

Marica (angry, pulling his hair): Oh, you're such a cry baby, here's your stupid toy!!

Vladimir: Why can't we go outside and play?

Marica: We can't go outside, dummy, something strange is happening ... can't you hear?

— From *The Turtle* by Vladimir Tomić, 2003¹

From 2001 to 2004 I worked as a facilitator for the Brčko Academic Scholarship Program. Brčko District is the only entity in Bosnia² where all public infrastructures, from government to policing to education, integrate the three predominant ethnic groups: Croats (Catholic), Serbs (Orthodox Christian) and Bosniaks (Muslim).³ The Program coincided with the ethnic reintegration of the Brčko District school system, a gradual process that began in September 2001. The Scholarship Program was initiated and funded by the U.S. Department of State and administered by AYUSA International (Academic Year in the U.S.A), an international youth exchange organization based in San Francisco with a regional office in Belgrade.⁴

The Program brought together twenty-two high-achieving teenagers of all ethnic backgrounds for the purpose of “bolstering desegregation and school reform by introducing promising youth ... to successful models for



Students from 2001, self-titled 'Pioneers,' play chess in the central park. Note the name of an American sports figure etched onto the table.

pluralism in the U.S.⁵ Participants attended a summer school in Brčko, where they developed projects to be carried out in their home communities in the fall. They then spent the winter in the U.S. living with volunteer host families and attending high school. Upon their return, they did follow-up community work. Four groups of students participated between 2001 and 2005. By June 2004, the last students to have spent high school in segregated classrooms graduated.

In this chapter I describe tensions I encountered with the youth in Brčko and discuss how I navigated these through narrative arts-based practices. I focus on how English, the operating language of the Program, emerged as an instructive site of refuge, collaboration and exclusion. Brčko students associated English with a successful future, and it made sense to improve their English in time for their trip to the U.S. English also served as an available space for sharing difficult memories, which might be politicized or silenced in their local languages. However, in a broader context, English holds geopolitical meaning, which I felt acutely while my students may not have, especially given that the Program began just prior to 9/11 and ran through the start and escalation of the war in Iraq.

Ethnic reintegration among Bosnian students has been intimately tied to a mandate to bolster integration of Bosnia into global capitalism. In Brčko, international peacekeeping soldiers, U.N. appointed administrators and funders, and post-conflict reconstruction NGO workers (like myself) have largely operated in English or German, the languages that are guiding market integration, and have worked with translators. Market expansion is led in Brčko largely by the United States in competition with European Union countries, to whom Bosnia can offer a potential source of resources, cheap labour and consumers. As was the case with post-communist Eastern Europe, privatization is likely to ensure that most formerly state-owned, state-run industries will be controlled by foreign multinational corporations. Bosnia is also of strategic interest geographically for both the European Union and the United States, located as it is between the Middle East and Europe. It was in this general context that my students were being offered scholarships to participate in an English-language based, U.S.-funded initiative. Given the mix of mandates at play, I came to view English as a problematic mediating bridge, a temporary tool to use carefully, and move away from as I worked with the youth.⁶

I illustrate this view through a discussion of newspaper (2001), theatre (2003) and peer mediation (2004) projects. I layer my reflections with excerpts from my own diaries and memories, and with student narratives and interview excerpts I gathered, in order to show how the process felt to me. Through these excerpts I point to conflicted metaphors of home, shelter and migration.

What did I bring and what was my position as part of the Program? I am a Canadian performer and journalist. I lived in Budapest and worked throughout the region from 1997 until 2003. In 2001, I was invited to be a workshop facilitator for the Scholarship Program summer school, initially to lead workshops in journalism. I took on greater responsibility in subsequent years, influencing the summer school program design, bringing in other facilitators to work with me and structuring the summer school around a broader vision of community building and the arts. I did most of the Bosnia work before I began to use "community arts language" to name my collaborative, improvisational approach to "teaching." I operated from an assets-based model of community development, which, contrary to strategies that produce dependent communities, aims to identify and mobilize local strengths for building unexpected relationships and for maximizing contributors to projects.⁸

I do not speak the languages of Bosnia, once known as the single language of Serbo-Croat. Language is a focal point of conflicting ethnic nationalisms in Bosnia. In 2001 my colleagues and I, our students and the broader community safely referred to all local speech as "the local language." Today, local people more openly refer to their languages as Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. These are mutually intelligible, just as dialects of English are, though Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet, an alphabet often not intelligible to young Croats and Muslims for a host of reasons that range from segregated schooling to refugee experiences abroad. Not knowing any of these languages was central to my experience. However, my own multilingualism (English from birth, French from age five in a francophone school, Hungarian later in life) shaped my awareness of language issues in Bosnia.

WRITING BRČKO: THE NEWSPAPER PROJECT

Jay (my American colleague) draws a sketch of Europe on the blackboard. He is preparing students for how much or how little their American hosts might know about Bosnia from the news. "Opposite Italy over here maybe, Croatia," he says. "Bosnia. Oh yeah, and Kosovo." He draws a circle. Just then a local teacher in the back of the class blurts out angrily, "Kosovo is NOT a country! You cannot draw it like that!" A group of students cheer. They must be Serbian, united behind Kosovo. I see the divide for the first time, from the outburst of some and the silence of the others.

— *Journal excerpt, 2001*

The 2001 students came into the Program one month prior to reintegration, the first to sit in an officially sanctioned multi-ethnic classroom since before the war. Ten months earlier, protests against reintegration had shut down the schools. Walking home in mixed company was a bold act that summer. In a context where people *are named by* forces of ethnic nationalism, narrative is a potential site of agency in self-definition, a site of dialogue through listening to others' experiences, and a site of collaboration and community generation. I understand "narrative" as any telling based on real life history. Through gathering community narratives in and out of class, students generated the material for Brčko District's first multi-ethnic student newspaper. The shared production process was an enactment of a new multi-ethnic imaginary in a larger context of segregation (or rather, a re-enactment of a very old multi-ethnic imaginary damaged to the brink of erasure by war).

To get the newspaper laid out and printed, AYUSA hired Bora, head of the Brčko Press Centre, to give journalism workshops and see the paper to printing. I took notes during his workshops, where students flipped back and forth between local languages with Bora, and English with myself and Jay, the foreign facilitators, while Serbian colleagues sat with and sometimes translated for us:

S and A say they will interview the mayor. S says 75% of youth want to leave Bosnia. What's he gonna do about that? J asks where the stat came from. Bora says the source should be quoted. E asks what alphabet the paper will be in. D asks whether there will be ads. Bora says we have to decide. O says we don't have space for ads. S says she can't read Cyrillic. E says everyone knows Latin. Jay says why not drop English, and do Cyrillic

and Latin. S says why not do all three. There's widespread support for this. R says writers can just write in their own language. S says we have to show we're multi-ethnic. M says but we all study English and we all understand Latin, it's international. Bora says all alphabets are international. A says the editors should decide on the language. The main editor says no, that's not democratic. Bora says he has no problem with a trilingual layout.

— *Journal excerpt, 2001*

The language issue would become most challenging at the layout phase, when space constraints forced compromises on content, which were necessary to accommodate the translations. In the meantime, I ran workshops that began with a self-interview, where students wrote their own autobiographical statements and presented these to the class. I then asked those listening to re-present each autobiography as a biography. This was part of a strategy to talk about listening, how to zero in on the main points presented and how to recognize where the listener might be interpreting incorrectly. This prepared them to go out and interview people of their own choice in the community. For example, one student who was herself interested in becoming a police officer, interviewed two Scottish community police officers from the international peacekeeping force. Two other students interviewed their mayor. Students then presented their interview experiences to the class. We worked on how to shape the interviews into articles. We analyzed sample articles for balance. We talked about how to identify and give voice to different stakeholders as part of the objective of fair reporting.

At the same time, students were working on their own creative non-fiction, writing stories about their own life experiences. We formed editorial teams according to their interests, and they were charged with tasks ranging from reporting news to reporting sports and fashion, handling photography and art and doing translations. By the time summer school was finished, there was a wealth of material. I left Brčko as they entered the layout phase with a fairly clear idea of the mix of material they wanted to see in the paper, representative of the activities they had engaged in throughout summer school. Bora was to then help them with layout for a target launch date in the fall.

The first issue was politically correct. It deferred to authorities and was written in English, with translations in Latin or Cyrillic alphabets accor-

ding to the chosen language of the author of each article. The American district supervisor's visit to the class with the mayor was on the cover. The mayor's interview took two pages. Creative writing about students' wartime experiences, funny or not, were not included. Bora had a lot to do with how this issue turned out, so the students asked to work autonomously on the second issue without adult intervention. In the next issue, the big headline read "HI! This Is Who We Are ..." Creative writing, funny and not, took up the most space, and all the writing was published in English. Several subsequent issues were also published in English.

Creating this one project together was a major accomplishment, but I was left asking how much the product — and its audience — mattered. Program participants, American hosts and local youth who understood English could access the content of the English-language issues, but many locals did not speak English. Did students choose English partly to avoid local judgement? The choice had primarily been about youth asserting their control of the paper, but I wondered if internal group unity had been forged at the expense of the community. I also worried about asking students to risk too much through writing assignments on real life experiences, challenges, memories and dreams. Was I a voyeur, encouraging stories that fit neatly into post-conflict aid metanarratives, or worse, risking students' retraumatisation?

ORAL STORIES: THE THEATRE PROJECT

Late one night, through a hole in the boards, the boy spots a turtle in the garden. He sneaks out and befriends this creature with its house on its back. He confides his fear of the dark, and invites the turtle to his birthday. His cousins ridicule him for his wild imagination. After a very long time, the boy's mother returns. She cries with relief that the children are unharmed. Vladimir asks hopefully, "Mom, can we bring the turtle home with us? Can I have a party?" He is more upset about leaving the turtle behind than he is happy to see his mother again. When the family is reunited in their flat that night, the war over, they hold hands and make a vow to forget.

— From *The Turtle* by Vladimir Tomić, 2003

I structured the summer school of 2003 around an oral history project as an example of community building through the arts. The theme was "What is Home?" I had students collect stories from elders in their segregated neigh-



Rehearsal in the school theatre against a graffiti board back-drop.

bourhoods and bring them back to share with the class, while also sharing their own personal stories. I invited another facilitator to work with me to help the students adapt four of these stories to short plays.⁹ I also had them write their own personal monologues about the meaning of home. The monologues and the plays formed the theatre night, in which all students from the summer school performed. Some of the students also made giant graffiti paintings to exhibit at theatre night, one of which served as a backdrop for the performance. All summer school students participated as actors in one of the plays, and some also recited their monologues on the meaning of home. Through this event, crafted from local experience, students and their audience “visited” across the ethnic and generational divides, in a shared space. The theatre night took place in a high-school theatre. Guests included parents, family, friends, teachers, local press, politicians and internationals.

The Turtle was one of four stories adapted to stage for the theatre night. Another play told the story of an interethnic marriage that had stood the

test of time, and was adapted from the life of two very elderly neighbours of one of the students. Two other plays addressed anti-Roma (Gypsy) racism and teenagers coming of age. The latter, about a girl striving for independence, made controversial use of music, which accompanied TV announcements of the dead during the war. Students chose it for a choreographic sequence in which the girl breaks free from what holds her back. They saw this as giving a cue to their elders to move past the war.

During the theatre night, we were once again faced with the language issue. The students wanted to perform in English, but part of my motivation for doing the project was to build bridges within the community and to celebrate it through its own stories. To perform only in English would be to exclude a large part of that community. Ultimately, students wrote synopses of the plays in the local languages, which they printed and handed out to the audience. A student from each play also introduced his or her group's play with an overview in their own language.

Interspersed between these short plays, eight students recited their monologues on the meaning of home. I asked four of these students to recite their monologues in their own languages so that those in the audience who did not understand English would understand some of the monologues and have a sense of what the monologues in English might be about. This was a very difficult decision for me. I had suspected with the newspaper project that English had been a medium through which students could share difficult stories with one another, while partially protecting the tellers from broader local judgement. Thus, when theatre night came, I assumed it would be difficult to recite a monologue about home in a local language, because the war and its impacts were very much present in these monologues.

It came down to a judgement call on my part. The students I asked to recite in a local language were students I felt were confident about doing so and whose stories did not seem to me to be potentially contentious in a public multi-ethnic arena. Where before my students had used English themselves as a place of refuge and exclusion, on theatre night, I felt I was using the value of English as a simultaneous outlet and a refuge many of my students seemed to need. For those who did not understand English, I hoped that the body gestures would tell them what the words did not, and that the words that could be understood might speak to those words that

were not understood. It was like a dance around and through a complex landscape. Still I wondered whether even having had just a few of them recite their monologues in the local languages might have been pushing them to risk too much.

The following summer (2004), I had a group interview with several of the students from that theatre night. Here is what two of them had to say about their experiences reciting the monologues:

B: I had to do mine in the local language ... If I had to do it in English, I would have just said, "Here's what I wrote," but in Bosnian everyone could understand. It's more personal in your own language.

Me: Did it make you feel nervous?

B: Yeah, a lot.

C: It's safer in English.

In reflecting back on the theatre project, I realize that these students identified this contradiction: they felt their messages of reconciliation and the need to get past the war urgently needed to reach their elders. Yet most of these adults, including many of their parents, could not understand English.

METAPHORS IN MOTION: THE PEER MEDIATION PROJECT

I hear TRAINS, first time since the war! They've almost finished rebuilding the leveled mosque. The strip is packed at night. It definitely feels different than 2001 when there was no one out, so much tension. Maybe I can't tell if there's tension anymore.

Our neighbour who has no roof on half her house is weeding in slippers and housecoat. More tile on her bombed roof each year. I'm watching a stork labouring a curve, wings outstretched, winding to landing behind her roof, its neck tucked in like plumbing as the feet reach for place.

— *Journal and video diary excerpts, 2004*

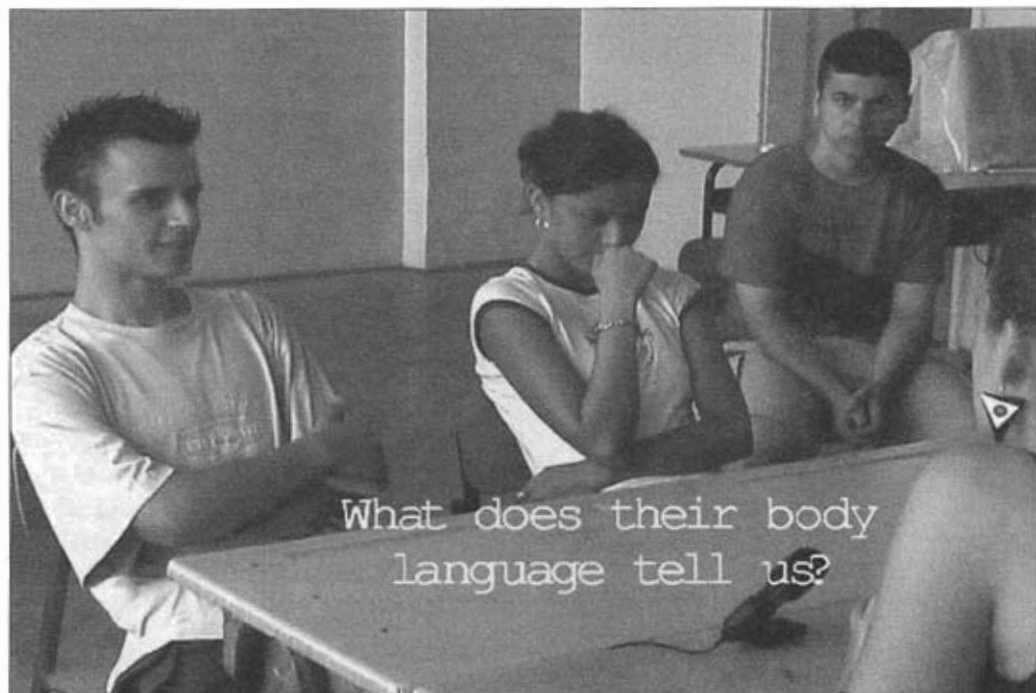
In August of 2004, I trained students in Peer Mediation, an alternative dispute resolution system run by and for youth.¹⁰ This strategy empowers young people to solve their own problems and uses theatre techniques and role-playing. Students learn how to use non-judgement and facilitation

skills when they assist others in resolving conflicts, and at the same time learn to understand their own individual behaviour patterns. Peer mediation programs exist in schools across North America and Europe. One of Canada's oldest programs is found at Toronto's Westview Secondary School, where I first observed peer mediation training and talked to students about its effectiveness, before I left again for Bosnia.¹¹

I felt peer mediation could answer a challenge I posed for myself. In the summer school program, I wanted to find a way to move beyond English towards a sustainable and ethical exit strategy for the Program in its final year. In 2004, I went to Brčko a week before summer school began and spent one week training eight former students of the Program so that they could shadow me and assist me as I trained the final group of twenty-two participants. I also worked with two local teachers to ensure that they could provide adult support for the students in the long term.

My aim was to have students from across the generations of the Program work together in running their own peer mediation project as a collective and seek their own funding if they so desired. I viewed mediation as a project that could enhance the strengths of Brčko, reinforce non-violence strategies and empower youth. I wanted to train the students in English and then have them act out mock mediations in their own languages to see how it felt, what kinds of adjustments and changes they might make to adapt the system to their context and then to lay out a plan from what they had learned for initiating a broader community project in their own languages.

Over the four weeks of training, students brought real conflicts from their own lives to the workshops, and we turned these into role plays. One such role play emerged from one participant's conflict with his father over wanting to get his eyebrow pierced. We converted this into a conflict between a boy and his girlfriend who didn't want him to go ahead with the piercing. In one improvisation, without discussing what the outcome might be, two students played the part of disputants and two played mediators. Through much back and forth, the disputants told their sides of the story and listened as the mediators summarized each time a disputant spoke. From the sidelines, I reminded them of the steps they needed to keep in mind: it was the the mediators' roles



A mediation over a contested eyebrow piercing. From Peace Starts With Me.

to encourage the disputants to say how they felt each time they heard the other disputant talk.

Ultimately, the four students arrived at a solution that had been jointly proposed and negotiated by the two disputants. As a class we then talked about how it felt for the four actors to do the mediation. The mediators talked about the frustration of maintaining a stance of non-judgement. The class offered their feedback on how the mediators had performed. We analyzed the feasibility of the solution, which was more about communication within the relationship of the young couple than it was about the piercing. We could have done this same mediation with different students, ten different times, and we might very well have seen ten different solutions. The solutions the students came up with were often quite different from what I as an adult might have proposed or foreseen. The point, however, is that over and over again the students acted as if they really were disputants, or mediators, and they worked hard to maintain their calm, their

commitment and their willingness to listen and arrive at a solution. We filmed some of the mock mediations for a peer mediation training video entitled *Peace Starts With Me*.¹²

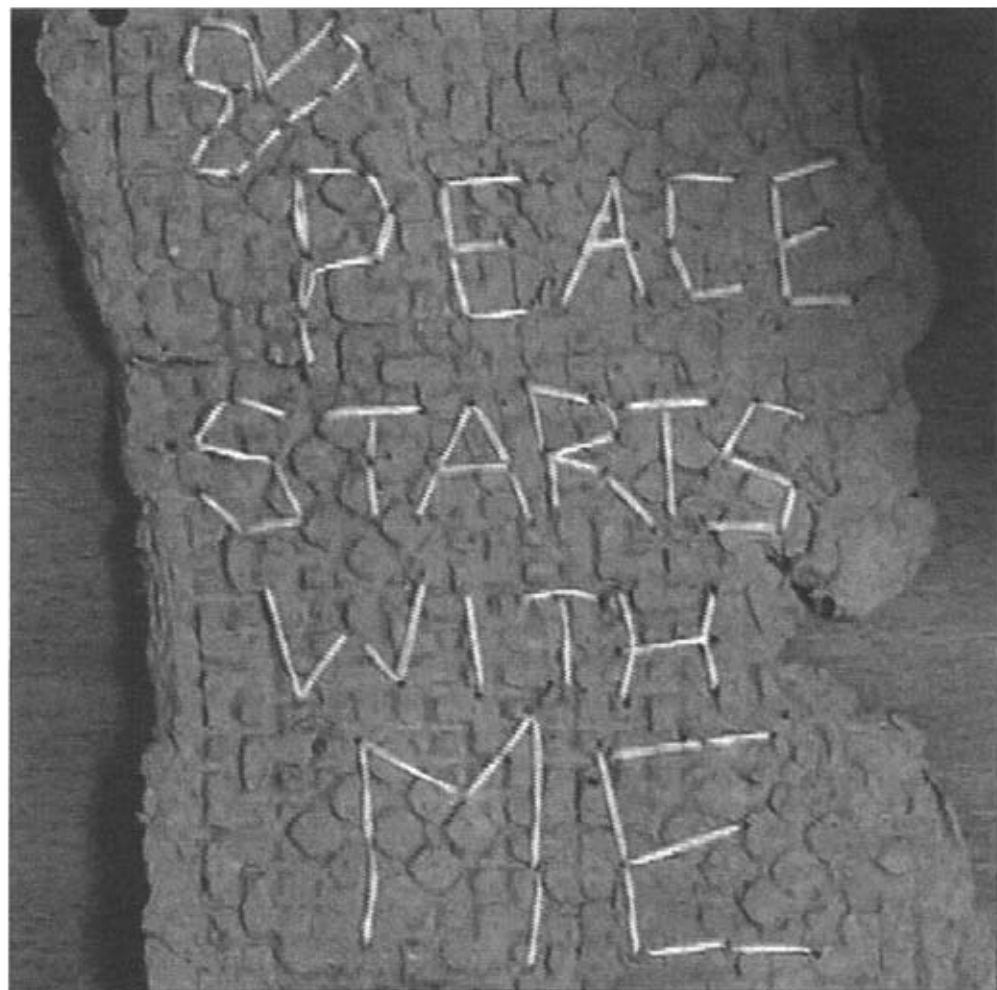
By enacting many such mediation scenarios throughout the training, the students expanded their repertoire of behaviour, challenging themselves to think about how they act socially on a daily basis and how they might transform their approach to disagreement in their daily lives. They also saw what they could accomplish as mediators and, as disputants, how great a feeling it was to facilitate a workable solution. I watched as their initial skepticism about the feasibility of a peer mediation program in Brčko gave way to enthusiasm.

We did mock mediations in the local language today. I asked How did it feel? "It sounds really funny." What sounds funny? "There are just some things that sound strange in our language. 'Make eye contact' doesn't really have a translation." I'm so glad these issues came out because they became aware of what work they have to do to think about whether this could work here. They were really excited. It was fantastic.

— *Video diary excerpt, August 2004*

Throughout the mediation training, we also undertook a parallel project aimed at underscoring the importance of community interaction in projects. To this end, we ran a homemade card project. Students brought in trash paper from which to make homemade note cards. They distributed these to friends and family, who inscribed onto them mottos for young people to live by. Mottos are mini-narratives that affirm local knowledge. They resonated inspiration as we explored conflicts through mock mediations. "If you want to love and respect others, first you should love and respect yourself," reads one, in English. "You will never know the rose if you don't also know the thorns," read another in Cyrillic. Through mottos, the community contributed to this youth empowerment and non-violence project.

This final group of the Scholarship Program also held a theatre night at the end of summer school. Amid dance sequences, music and plays, they incorporated mock mediations in order to present the mediation idea to the public. This time they performed in the town's largest public venue, in all local languages, plus English. At the end of the performance, they floated like birds across the stage, embracing each other as they crossed



The author's contribution to the postcard collection, 2004.

paths, then wandered off stage and through their audience, handing out the motto-inscribed note cards, disseminating local knowledge across the ethnic divide.

From the peer mediation training, students have now also created a local language peer mediation training manual and with the co-operation of local principals, they are running peer mediation workshops in their own languages with elementary school students. They don't need English

to do so. In class and out, this last group of students, who entered the first fully reintegrated schools in Bosnia in September 2004, all comfortably refer to the “local language” as “Bosnian,” “Serbian,” “Croatian” or “our language.”



In Bosnia, group arts processes built space in which trust could be cultivated (though not necessarily realized) among students and between myself and my students. The resulting productions — a newspaper, plays, mediation — are like quilted canopies that I continue to look at, as ways to remember and to process the meaning of unresolved contradictions. I carry these contradictions around like loose threads tied around my index finger, reminding myself of their rich value. Among the many questions these arts practices undertaken with youth in Bosnia unveiled was the question of finding the right language with which to navigate. Through not knowing, and at the charged and often uncomfortable intersection of the local and the global, what I came to realize is a more complex understanding of what language *is*. Language is a context, culturally and experientially crafted and deployed. Sometimes it is the texture of a well-known home. Sometimes it is a state of departure, of arriving, of moving towards, within or away. Sometimes on the trajectory between languages we can find a place for hovering around what is so difficult to express.

NOTES

A Martin Cohnstaedt Graduate Research Award for studies in non-violence from York University's Centre for International and Security Studies supported this research. Photos and film stills by myself and student comments from interviews conducted by myself in 2001 and 2004. Names withheld to respect privacy.

I dedicate this chapter to the young people of Brčko and to Orunamamu, storyteller, mentor, friend and grandmother-in-residence at the YellowLegs Storytelling Museum, Oakland, California.

1. Tomić was a Scholarship Program participant and was seventeen when he wrote this play, which is based on his own life. He lives in Brčko. The excerpts are assembled from my own Program archives from 2004 and from an unpublished script-in-progress given to me by Tomić in 2005. Used with permission.
2. I use Bosnia for Bosnia and Hercegovina.
3. "Bosniak" accommodates those for whom religion is not the only identifier, given that Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats each have religious and cultural terms through which to self-identify. Bosniak also avails the term Bosnian to all regardless of ethnic identity. However, I never heard anyone use Bosniak in Brčko, neither locals nor internationals. I use Muslim, Serb(ian) and Croat(ian) according to local practice.
4. At the suggestion of American educator Jay Miller, the Program's first facilitator, Milena Krstić of AYUSA Belgrade hired me.
5. "Brčko Program: Program Goals." *AYUSA Online*. Retrieved 10 March 2005 from www.ayusa.org/about/grants?grant=Brčko.
6. On how participants interrupted metanarratives of aid and globalization, see Heather Hermant, "Narrative and Arts-Based Strategies for Conflict Resolution: A Case Study from Brčko District, Bosnia," in Ryerson Christie and Elizabeth Dauphinée, eds., *The Ethics of Building Peace in International Relations: Selected Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Centre for International and Security Studies* (Toronto: York University, 2005), 233–258.
7. Deborah Barndt, "By Whom and For Whom? Intersections of Participatory Research and Community Art," in Ardra L. Cole, L. Neilsen, J.G. Knowles and T. Luciani, eds., *Provoked by Art: Theorizing Arts-Informed Research* (Halifax: Backalong Books and Centre for Arts-Informed Research, 2004), 221–234.
8. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993); John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, "Assets-Based Community Development (The Role of Nonprofit Organizations in Renewing Community)," *National Civic Review* 85, no 4 (1996), 23–27. Am Johal, whom I invited in 2002, introduced the model. We emphasized that goals need not be weighed in economic terms.
9. I invited actor-educator Ben O'Brien in 2003 to help transform stories into theatre. Jelena Gasić of youth NGO One World Our World Belgrade fulfilled this role in 2004. O'Brien introduced me to the work of Michael Rohd, *Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue: The Hope Is Vital Training Manual* (Portsmouth, UK: Heinemann, 1998). Rohd uses methods of Augusto Boal, American improvisational theatre guru Viola Spolin and others with the aim of empowering communities through theatre.

10. See D. W. Johnson and Roger Johnson, "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research," *Review of Educational Research* 66, no. 4 (1996), 459–506; D. W. Johnson and Roger Johnson, *Teaching Students to be Peacemakers* (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1995).
11. The Westview mediation program was set up by Claude Grimmond as part of his master's thesis work at York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies many years ago. I observed peer mediation classes at Westview taught by Theresa Smith (herself trained by Grimmond and no longer with Westview) who provided me with resources I used in Brčko. Irena Radić of AYUSA Belgrade organized the logistics of contacting and bringing together a group of eight past Program participants for voluntary peer mediation training in August of 2004.
12. Heather Hermant and Brčko Peacemakers, *Peace Starts With Me: A Peer Mediation Training Video* (unpublished). Filmed by Marko Jočić .