

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Why don’t I forgive? They didn’t ask for forgiveness!”: Manich Msamah and Tunisia’s Politics of Unforgiveness

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## Abstract

Recent transitional justice scholarship has explored the role of emotions during periods of political transition. Scholars have taken negative emotions as both legitimate responses to past crimes and as supports to the pursuit of justice in the present. This paper argues that feelings circulate across a wide array of individuals, things, and processes that often sit apart from the formal, judicial spaces of transitional justice. To make this argument, I consider the Tunisian campaign Manich Msamah (I Do Not Forgive) and its articulation of an affect of unforgiveness in resistance to the proposed Economic and Financial Reconciliation Law. Formed in 2015, the campaign came about in response to the law and efforts, under the pretext of “reconciliation,” to return to public life figures from the repressive regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Drawing on affect theory, I argue that unforgiveness was stuck to particular individuals (figures from the old regime and circulated between a community of unforgiving activists), things (public spaces, posters, T-shirts and the ephemera of protest) and processes (accountability and substantive forms of justice). I argue that an affect of unforgiveness thus aided activists not only in their resistance to state-led reconciliation but also helped imagine alternative paths to justice in Tunisia.

**Keywords:** Tunisia; transitional justice; affect theory; social movements; forgiveness

## Introduction

On 14 August 2015, Tunisia’s transitional justice commission, Instance vérité et dignité (IVD), organized a debate around the recently proposed “Economic and Financial Reconciliation Law.” The bill, which had been tabled by Tunisia’s then president, Beji Caid Essebsi, sought to make Tunisia’s transitional justice process amenable to the restoration of figures from the old regime and its business associates, enabling businesspeople and bureaucrats to seek anonymous pardons directly from the government. The president of the IVD, Sihem Bensedrine, invited the prominent

activist and blogger Azyz Amami, and the professor of public law Jawhar Ben Mbarek, to discuss the bill. During the debate, Azyz Amami described the law as follows:

The image that this law puts me in mind of, do you know what it is? It's as if you're in the street and someone grabs you, hits you so hard he breaks your bone, and then takes your money. And you know who they are, you want to throw a punch at them. Some days later he will come and sit beside you in the café and say "Salaam, you have forgiven me!" When did I forgive you? Reconciliation occurs between a victim and aggressor, true or not? Is the government a victim? Is Nidaa [the ruling party] a victim of the corruption of public finances? I demand to forgive. And I am not forgiving.... This law will not pass.<sup>1</sup>

Over four years after the country's "Revolution of Freedom and Dignity," which saw the overthrow of the country's dictator, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Amami plainly interrogated the power dynamics of reconciliation and forgiveness in Tunisia's post-overthrow politics. In his analogy of the trauma of bumping into one's aggressor in a coffee shop, Amami questioned the logics of forgiveness and reconciliation without victim participation or agency. For Amami, forgiveness, when instigated by the perpetrator, proved distinctly inadequate to the task of social repair, obviating the experience of the victim, and upholding the authority of the aggressor. In his rhetorical questions—"Is the government a victim? Is Nidaa a victim?"—Amami returns the audience's attention to the subjects and objects of forgiveness: Who is the forgiver and forgiven? Who has the right to forgive? Who should ask for forgiveness? And what is deemed forgivable? Amami figures forgiveness in Tunisia as occurring across a landscape of power and points to the absurdity, and hypocrisy, of the Tunisian government claiming the right to forgive.

In this paper, I consider the circulation of unforgiveness and its collective, public effects during a transitional justice process.<sup>2</sup> The campaign Manich Msamah (I do not forgive) of which Azyz Amami was a founding member, worked to resist the economic reconciliation bill and uncover its reactionary aims. The economic, political, and social modalities of Tunisia's transitional justice process were not only

<sup>1</sup>A recording of the debate can be found at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_WPHZIPHqLA&t=242s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WPHZIPHqLA&t=242s). All translations from primary sources are the author's own. Transliteration follows a simplified version of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) transliteration system, both for sources in Modern Standard Arabic and Tunisian dialect.

<sup>2</sup>The paper draws on fifteen semi-structured interviews with key players in Manich Msamah. They were carried out between January and July of 2018 and all my interlocutors have been anonymized. The interviewees fell between the ages of twenty and thirty-five and, for the most part, held university degrees. They worked in a range of sectors including civil society, journalism, academia, and law. The majority were based in Tunis but often hailed from other towns and cities in Tunisia. My discussions with activists were loosely centered around three topics: the campaign's mobilizing strategy and tactics; the country's transitional justice process and its manipulation by certain stakeholders; and what unforgiveness meant in relation to transitional justice, reconciliation, and Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory more generally. Interviews lasted for between one and two hours and took place in public spaces (cafés, cultural centers, hotels, and parks). Interviews are supplemented by, and triangulated against, the analysis of the campaign's statements, press releases, slogans, chants, visual material, and activists' media appearances. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

debated within transitional justice circles, but also roundly questioned by ordinary Tunisians and subject to bottom-up resistance from a variety of different groups (Ketelaars 2018; Mullin and Patel 2016). In the following discussion, I pay close attention to how Manich Msamah enacted an affect of “unforgiveness” in resistance to the bill. Following recent critical transitional justice literature (Brudholm 2008; Jeffrey 2015; Mihai 2016), I argue unforgiveness should not be viewed as politically and socially unhelpful but rather as an affect that enabled ordinary citizens to develop critical and productive relations to the question of post-repressive justice in Tunisia. In doing so, I locate activists’ expressions of unforgiveness within the particular, contextual experience of post-overthrow Tunisia and thus develop a “thicker” (McEvoy 2007) conception of the local actors and forms of knowledge that inform, and intervene in, questions of justice in certain socio-historical contexts.

The paper makes two connected arguments. It first argues that Manich Msamah used the notion of unforgiveness to critique President Essebsi’s reconciliation bill and draw attention back to questions of accountability and substantive justice at a moment when reconciliation was the dominant mode of justice forwarded by the country’s political elite. Second, the paper proposes that the political thinking and affective work that was undertaken by Manich Msamah demonstrate the multiple forms of justice that are imagined in the wider public sphere during a transitional justice process. To consider these alternative imaginaries of post-repressive justice I draw on affect theory as a critical tool for understanding the enmeshment of the cognitive, emotional, and bodily. Affect theory takes emotions as relationally produced and turns analytic attention from the question of what emotions *are* to what they *do* (Ahmed 2004a: 4): How do emotions circulate in the world? What projects are they aligned with? And what are their political effects? Thinking with Sara Ahmed’s notion of the “stickiness” of affect, I argue that activists attached an affect of unforgiveness to certain individuals (figures from the old regime and between a community of unforgiving activists), things (public spaces, posters, T-shirts, the ephemera of protest), and processes (accountability and substantive justice). Before that, I assess the role and interpretation of emotions in transitional justice settings and recent scholarly work that has called for a more holistic understanding of the circulation of affect within society in the aftermath of repressive regimes.

### Transitional Justice and Its Emotional Imperatives

Transitional justice is an emotionally laden process (Bens 2020; Elster 2003; Vallee 2016). As societies reckon with past crimes and atrocities emotions are felt not only by those that “survived or witnessed trauma first-hand” but also extend to “the wider social and communal sphere” (Hutchinson and Bleiker 2008: 391). Those that advocate for transitional justice mechanisms hope to intercede in both individual and collective feelings, creating a context within which such emotions might be expressed, acknowledged, and produce a “healing emotional release” (Buergethal 1994: 539, cited in Minow 1998: 331). Victims are encouraged to give voice to their experiences of pain, trauma, anger, and fear; while perpetrators are expected to show their contrition through demonstrations of shame, guilt, and repentance. Beyond this immediate victim-perpetrator relationship, journalists, lawyers, judges, and observers, as well as the wider public, transmit, amplify, and transform the emotional valences of formal transitional justice processes.

That being said, transitional justice narratives are not value free, but imbue emotions with normative weight. Mechanisms including truth commissions, criminal courts, amnesties, and public apologies are assessed in terms of their ability to produce a “transmutation of emotion” (Elster 2003: 35), resolving negative feelings into positive ones. Emotional transformations become important markers of the passage of time, helping signal clear water between the crimes of the past and the inauguration of a new political order. As others have noted, these transmutations are underpinned by a master narrative that depicts liberalizing change as an intrinsic good and militates against the construction of alternative political formations (Dube 2011; Scott 2014).

Jon Elster (2003) argues that the emotions triggered during transitional justice are likely to produce particular actions (suffering, ostracism, flight, consolation) that, in turn, correspond to distinct legal and administrative reactions. Feelings of forgiveness, reconciliation, and mercy are considered conducive to restorative and reparative forms of justice, while anger and resentment are thought more suited to retributive justice (*ibid.*: 30). In contrast to the apparent emotional commodiousness of forgiveness and reconciliation, scholars note that the legalism of accountability can seem emotionally bereft, with court proceedings, formal testimony, and legal arguments seen as potentially alienating to victims of past atrocities (Andrieu 2014: 92; Minow 2000: 238).

While recent years have brought attempts in both the study and practice of transitional justice to combine restorative and retributive justice frameworks (Roht-Arriaza 2006; Buckley-Zistel et al. 2014), their synthesis retains an underlying logic that aligns particular emotions with forms of justice, and thus retains a number of guiding binaries: rational/emotive; accountability/reconciliation; retribution/restoration; individual/collective; legalistic/psycho-social. Here, I maintain that forgiveness is not limited to reconciliation work but, in important ways, seeps across such distinctions, feeding into understandings of retribution, accountability, the law, and the nation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are valued for their ability to bring about social and emotional repair, orienting a community toward a shared future (Moon 2004; Montiel 2002: 276). Forgiveness presents a “complex and multidimensional concept” (Shriver 1995: 6) that combines social, psychological, ethical, and affective modalities, and involves “a combination of thinking and feeling processes” (Montiel 2002: 271). Beginning from an inter-personal transaction between victim and offender, it is noted that forgiveness encourages an emotional transformation—a “change of heart” (Wolfendale 2005: 348)—in the forger. This may be limited to the overcoming of negative emotions, or, in its thicker conception, it may see negative emotions replaced by their opposites: feelings of love, generosity, and compassion (Jeffrey 2015: 39–41). Overlapping with acts of forgiveness, reconciliation presents (alongside democracy) one of the “final ends” of transitional justice (De Greiff, 2012: 52). Lederach, in his policy-driven exploration of reconciliation, conceives of reconciliation in spatial terms, describing it as “a place or location of encounter” (Lederach 1997: 30) where formerly antagonistic parties might reach accommodation. To encourage perpetrators to testify, a system of formal amnesty may be offered. This forgoes retributive justice in exchange for the apparently greater good of truth-telling and reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation, then, are depicted as fostering a new political community by encouraging individuals to treat one another as equal citizens (Moellendorf 2007: 209) and restoring a national community (Moon 2004: 186).

Observing the tendency to depict transitional justice as a healing of wounds of the past, Martha Minow, in a discussion of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, succinctly notes, “The paradigm is health, rather than justice” (1998: 327). Again, it is possible to identify particular emotional states and responses as idealized and promoted. Reconciliation is based in, and dependent upon, directing individuals toward certain emotional states so that an “atmosphere of revenge and bitterness gradually gives way to increased trust and acceptance of difference” (Montiel 2002: 271).

In recent years, scholars have reassessed the role of “negative” emotions in transitional justice settings (Brudholm 2008; Jeffrey 2015; Mihai 2016) in a bid to unsettle “the near-hegemonic status afforded to the logic of forgiveness in the literatures on transitional justice and reconciliation” (Brudholm 2008: 3). Mihaela Mihai (2016: 4) begins *Negative Emotions and Transitional Justice* by noting that, during periods of transition, there is a tendency to prioritize stability and peace “at the expense of substantive, meaningful justice claims.” In other words, in post-repressive contexts, policy makers view expressions of anger or animosity as expressive of remaining divisions and discord within the community, which can further antagonize and disrupt a nascent democracy. Mihai rejects this view and argues instead that institutional attempts to suppress public feelings of anger and animosity run the risk of reproducing these emotions over time. Not only this, Mihai contends that negative emotions are of democratic and moral value in the present and their public expression might act, “as markers of a sense of justice and as a crucial part of a democratic emotional culture” (2016: 16). At stake for Mihai is how such emotions are steered toward democratic civility. Specifically concerned with the role of courts in transitional settings, Mihai argues that criminal trials should not be primarily concerned with “satisfying victims’ desire for vindication,” but rather should play a pedagogical role, allowing “an outraged public to reflect on the judgements underlying their resentment and indignation” (ibid.: 126). Mihai’s analysis offers an important corrective to previous work that advocates for positive emotional states as de facto markers of societal repair. Nevertheless, she retains a fidelity to what Sipiwe Ignatius Dube describes as the “positive oversignification of transition” (2011: 179): the necessary move from a repressive to a democratic regime. As such, while she may take in a wider array of emotional responses and states, Mihai’s analysis continues to be circumscribed by transitional justice’s liberal telos, whereby the manufacturing of certain emotions dovetails with the construction of a new democratic liberal order.

### Atmospheres and Sticky Affect beyond the Commission

Scholars working in different disciplines have critiqued the institutionalization and legalism of transitional justice, proposing approaches that take a more bottom-up and wide-angle view of justice in the aftermath of repressive regimes (Jeffrey 2011; Jones and Brudholm 2016; Lundy and McGovern 2008; McEvoy 2007). In traditional transitional justice models, there is a “tendency to ‘see’ justice and justice delivery as quintessentially the business of the state” (McEvoy 2007: 424), while alternative voices and forms of knowledge are managed or silenced. Such non-state and civil society actors and spaces present important sites of justice, which might both influence transitional justice institutions and proffer alternative visions of justice.

The anthropologist Richard Wilson offers a valuable critical reading of the instrumentalization of reconciliation, and its imbrication in projects of nation-building and statecraft (2001; 2003). He suggests that in many countries that initiated truth commissions, “national reconciliation” is not primarily concerned with mediating between victim and offender, or between previously antagonistic social groups, but rather “reconciliation works at a much higher level of abstraction” through which “the nation-state is to be reconciled with itself” (2003: 367; see also Acorn 2004). In Wilson’s influential ethnographic account of the activities of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2001), he examines how transitional justice was put at the service of manufacturing consent and state legitimacy. Among elite circles, “rights talk” and reconciliation discourses became central to the centralizing project of post-apartheid governance. Nevertheless, Wilson argues that besides reconciliation there also existed “counter-vailing tendencies, emanating from informal justice and legal popular consciousness” (ibid.: 128), which ran from acceptance of the Commission, through procedural pragmatism, to resistance (ibid.: 129–30).

Here, I suggest that affect theory offers a useful addendum to critical transitional justice literature. Pushing against the institutionalization of emotions described above, affect theory conceptualizes the circulation of emotions within and outside the judicial spaces of transitional justice, producing affective “atmospheres” that a range of agents are embroiled in and can seek to direct (Bens 2018; 2020; Vallee 2016). Mickey Vallee notes that one of the benefits of such an approach is that it takes “affect as historical contingency ... truth commissions are at once responsible for the dissemination and distribution of affects, though distributed affects are always interrupted by affects of resistance” (2016: 48). Rather than taking emotions as given and their “positive” or “negative” valences as fixed, affect theory asks what are the social and historical relations that produce such hierarchies? And why do emotions’ negative/positive valences become aligned with certain ways of being and acting? In a departure from the study of emotions, affect theory understands feeling as an unruly combination of bodily, affective, and cognitive activity, relationally produced in the spaces between bodies (Ahmed 2004a; Massumi 1995).

Across her writing, Sara Ahmed calls on the metaphor of “stickiness” to capture the way that affect becomes attached to things and bodies (2004a; 2010a; 2010b). In Ahmed’s words, affect is “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (2010b: 29). In thinking about affect in terms of stickiness, Ahmed aims at how affect is “aligned” toward certain things and bodies, while, conversely, discounting other possible alignments. This might occur “sideways” linking together objects that are seen to be proximate in space or “forwards and backwards” in time, marking the trace of repression in the present (2003: 386). For Ahmed, affect is made sticky; technologies of power direct us toward emotional responses and attachments. Moreover, in the circulation of affect—its repetitive sticking and unsticking—bodies or symbols have impressed upon them meanings and values that, in time, come to seem natural or inevitable (2004b: 90–91). Ahmed gives the example of how, post-9/11, certain bodies were constituted as objects of fear, with words such as Arab, fundamentalist, Islam, and terrorist stuck together and to people (2003). Likewise, we might consider how, in a transitional justice setting, the stickiness of “forgiveness” works to align bodies in relation to one another, to the past and to the future. Victimhood, testimony, citizen, and democracy are combined to orient bodies towards forgiveness as a personal and societal “good.”

Ahmed, however, does not preclude the possibility for new orientations, alignments in solidarity, and forms of affective agency, which would challenge the given emotional order. She observes that there is a contingency to how we are affected. Because “bodies do not arrive in neutral” we do not always “feel like” others and might disrupt the emotional order of things (2010a: 39–41). She points to the figure of the “feminist killjoy” or “unhappy migrant” (and, we might add, the “unforgiving activist”) as those who challenge emotional and social norms; they make us feel uncomfortable, sit awkwardly, stick in one’s craw (2010a). In doing so, these agents point to new orientations to the world that “make room for possibility” (ibid.: 20), room for alternative senses of justice.

Before turning to the case at hand, I want to emphasize that my intent here is not to essentialize terms such as forgiveness and reconciliation, or take their meaning as universal, but rather to explore how meaning and affect become lodged in particular contexts. Emotions are always “imperfectly housed” (Anderson 2009: 77) in the names that we ascribe to them. This is further compounded when dealing with questions of translation and the travel of ideas. So, while I translate “*musamah*” as “forgiveness,” I do not assume that this translation straightforwardly “fits” and am sensitive to the ways that a Tunisian forgiveness might depart from Western conceptions. As was pointed out to me, when Manich Msamah refused forgiveness they did not have in mind a Western, Christian notion, nor were they speaking to the global circulation of liberal transition discourses, but wished to situate forgiveness within the Tunisian experience.<sup>3</sup> Unforgiveness was located within a lineage of resistance in the Arab world, with its sentiment compared to the twentieth-century Egyptian poet and dissident Amal Dunqul and his protest poem “Do Not Reconcile,” and was also seen to have a vernacular Tunisian meaning. Take, for example, the common Tunisian saying “*al-samah fi-l-mahkama*” (forgiveness in court) (which activists drew on), with its legalistic inflection and demand for retributive justice. That said, such etymological surveys can only take us so far. Besides “forgiveness in court,” the everyday saying “*al-samah dunya wa akhira*” (forgiveness on earth and in the hereafter) intimates a theological and unequivocal forgiveness that is at variance with Manich Msamah’s language of worldly and political unforgiveness. What is important is how such emotions were expressed, felt, and attached to particular projects and imaginaries.

### Tunisia’s Transitional Justice Process and the Economic Reconciliation Bill

After he came to power in 1987, Ben Ali set about building a far-reaching system of surveillance, repression, and incarceration, which defined, managed, and demarcated subjects as either loyal or dissident, friend or enemy (Wall 2012). If a narrative of Tunisia as a liberal, open society was projected to the West, domestically, subjects who were considered a threat to Ben Ali’s absolute rule (most frequently Islamists and Leftists) were arrested, imprisoned, disappeared, tortured, and exiled (Ayari 2016). This repressive security apparatus was combined with a system of cronyism that enabled the Ben Ali and Trabelsi (Ben Ali’s family-in-law) families to capture the country’s most lucrative companies and produce profitable monopolies (Murphy 2013: 48–49).

<sup>3</sup>Interview, 1 Feb. 2018. In his late twenties, Saif was a scholar and activist who worked at the Tunisian non-governmental organization Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES).

The Tunisian revolution brought Ben Ali's twenty-four-year rule to an end. It began in the south of the country after the street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in protest at again being humiliated by the police, set himself on fire outside the local municipal buildings. As others heard of Bouazizi's death protests spread and developed into "sustained, cross-class, geographically widespread mass-protest" (Angrist 2013: 547). Significantly, and as captured in the popular demand for "work, freedom, and national dignity" (*shughul, huriyya, karama wataniyya*), the Tunisian revolution combined a refusal of Ben Ali's neoliberal authoritarianism with a desire for economic, social, and political dignity.

In 2014, the Instance vérité et dignité (IVD) began uncovering the workings of Ben Ali's security state. Presided over by Sihem Bensedrine, a human rights activist, journalist, and long-time critic of Ben Ali, the commission's mandate included archiving human rights violations dating back to 1 July 1955 (a year before Tunisia's independence from France), recommending reparations for victims, holding the state and its institutions accountable, and institutional reform.<sup>4</sup> Human rights violations were defined as covering deliberate killing, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, and torture, alongside election fraud, forced exile, and—crucially for the story this paper tells—financial corruption and the misuse of public funds (Andrieu 2016: 284).

As others have noted, Tunisia's transitional justice process has been defined by a high degree of politicization, with domestic politicians and civil society actors, global transitional justice elites, as well as everyday citizens and social movements all forwarding differing visions of transitional justice in the country (Aboueldahab 2017; Andrieu 2016; Mullin and Patel 2016). At the same time as the IVD began its work, Nidaa came to power, a nationalist-secular party founded in 2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi, a veteran of Tunisian politics who had served under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Running on a pro-business, anti-terrorist ticket, the party had welcomed into its ranks a number of politicians with links to Ben Ali and his old party, the Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD). Following the 2014 general elections, Nidaa moved to form a "national unity government" with Ennahda (the country's Islamist party), bringing together two strands of Tunisian politics that had traditionally viewed each other as antagonistic opponents. The Nidaa-Ennahda coalition represented an act of "intra-elite compromise" (Lamont and Pannwitz 2016) and was interpreted by scholars as a bid to create a new hegemony of the ruling elite (Marzouki and Meddeb 2016). Both parties prioritized state stability, unity, and security—as expressed through the discourse of the "prestige of the state," or *haybat al-dawla*—and in the process delegitimized dissenting voices and dissenting political debate.

The IVD's work, with its potential to open investigations against politicians and businesspeople, and construct alternative visions of Tunisia's past (Mullin, Trigui, and Shahshahani 2019), presented something of a challenge to this new hegemony. From 2015 onward, Essebsi and Nidaa engaged in a lengthy war of position against the IVD, questioning the necessity of its activities, blocking access to the presidential and interior ministry archives, implying partisan loyalties within its ranks, and creating alternative political and legal channels of transitional justice. Nidaa's attacks on the IVD were combined with the normalization of the return of figures from the

<sup>4</sup>The full bill can be found at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TN/TransitionalJusticeTunisia.pdf>.



old regime (Aboueldahab 2017: 66–67). For example, at a ceremony to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the country's ministry of foreign affairs, Essebsi welcomed a number of figures from the Ben Ali era to the presidential palace, noting “the *azlems* [old regime figures] have returned to the Palace of Carthage. Did they ever leave?” (*Kapitalis* 2016).

On 14 July 2015, at a sitting of the Tunisian cabinet, Essebsi outlined a draft reconciliation law that, if passed, would create a new commission with the power to offer amnesty directly to businesspeople and civil servants who had profited from acts of corruption or the misuse of public funds. The commission would convene behind closed doors and repayments would not be made public. Essebsi and his allies framed the bill as a matter of economic necessity and argued that the legislation would encourage Tunisian businesspeople to reinvest in Tunisia and bring much-needed capital into circulation. As Essebsi stated in an interview shortly after the bill was announced, “[We must] make sure that those Tunisians who have the money [the Benalistas] return to invest in Tunisia and be of use to their country. There must be a transaction between the state and them, and that they repatriate their property to invest in us” (Royant and de Montesquiou 2015).

During the cabinet meeting where Essebsi presented the bill, he argued that, since the revolution, Tunisia had “endured” five years of uncertainty and ennui, asking, “What have we done? They [old regime cronies] are placed in prison; they leave prison. What’s the point?” Essebsi then questioned how to approach a past that he saw as irreducible to single corrupt individuals and crimes; in the President’s eyes, it encompassed an endemic system of corruption: “Three quarters of high officials have been thrown in prison when they have done nothing! What did they do? They lived in a corrupt system [*munthuma fasida*] and everyone went through this system. Who speaks? Even the judges refuse to raise their heads.”<sup>5</sup> According to Essebsi, when so many were implicated in Ben Ali’s far-reaching system of corruption it was impossible to place culpability, but reconciliation and amnesty might instead be used to help lessen the apparent fear that stifled Tunisia’s political and economic sphere.

Essebsi’s “elite instrumentalization of transitional justice” (Lamont and Pannwitz 2016: 278) entailed frequent recourse to a language of reconciliation and the need to “turn the page on the past” (Royant and de Montesquiou 2015). Loffi Dammak, an advisor to the President, explicitly summed up the logics behind economic reconciliation, noting, “Our project seeks to achieve accelerated transitional justice, specific and appropriate to economic issues” (Belhassine 2015). While perhaps deployed for cynical aims, the language and temporal logic that Essebsi and Dammak drew on in their articulation of the law relied on normative transitional justice narratives, and in particular the teleological imperative of reconciliation. Much like in South Africa (Wilson 2001), the language of reconciliation was used in the service of an image of a nation reconciled with itself in the name of the state’s economic and political health.

The bill’s vision of transitional justice as economic reconciliation did not go unchallenged. From within domestic and international transitional justice circles a critique was forwarded which argued that Essebsi’s bill replaced the IVD’s work with a shallow simulacrum of transitional justice. Sihem Bensedrine, in an op-ed for *La Presse*, notes that transitional justice aims to “restore lasting trust between citizens

<sup>5</sup>A video of Essebsi’s speech to his cabinet is here: <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/videos/vb.271178572940207/927862743938450/?type=2&theater>.

and the institutions that govern them” (2015), before going on to argue that the bill presented an existential threat to the IVD, undercutting its mandate and ability to investigate financial corruption, and leaving the commission as little more than a “wailing wall.” Meanwhile, the Tunisian director of Human Rights Watch, Amna Guellali, commented on how under Ben Ali corruption and human rights violations were “mutually reinforcing” (2015), so to argue it was possible to disentangle economic crimes from human rights violations was to misunderstand (or willfully misconstrue) the nature of Ben Ali’s specific form of authoritarianism. Guellali goes on to note that the bill offers no space for “truth-telling” and thus blocks “any future learning, teaching or institutional reform based on the findings” (ibid.). Furthermore, from outside Tunisia, The Venice Commission, following an official request by Bensedrine, published an analysis of the institutional aspects of the bill. The Commission concluded that the bill hindered institutional reform and came into conflict with the work of the IVD (European Commission 2015). In relation to the question of reconciliation, the Commission noted, “It is unlikely that the reconciliation procedure as provided for in the bill will permit the truth, a key element of reconciliation, to emerge, since the proceedings before the Commission are too brief for a detailed examination of the facts. Moreover, the public are not informed of the results of the reconciliation” (ibid.: 9). There was, then, a robust critique of Essebsi’s bill that came from the viewpoint of transitional justice practitioners and commentators. This centered on political interference in the work of the IVD and the bill’s potential to obstruct the kinds of public truth-telling needed to produce future trust in democratic institutions.

### Manich Msamah: The Development of a Campaign

If transitional justice practitioners focused their critique of the bill on its potential to affect the functioning of the IVD, activists situated the bill within a wider landscape of social, economic, and political transformation and struggle. The anonymous Tunisian blogger, -Z-, in characteristic style, writes: “Beji Caid Essebsi, apothecary of the medina, seducer of the bourgeois and seller of ready-made formulas administers a small dose of his poison: kill-the-revolution.... It was, it seems, his one and only mission: rehabilitate the *ancien régime*, restore old habits and whitewash the old Caid ... his magic pill—the one he thinks we will swallow—it is called: “national reconciliation” (-Z- 2015).

Activists began to depict the bill in counter-revolutionary terms, and as signaling a renewed alliance between capital, old regime figures, and the state (Ben Ghazi 2016). Azyz Amami’s public condemnation of the bill, which opened this paper, marked the emergence of public, activist resistance to the bill, with activists turning the public spaces of Tunis and other towns and cities into spaces where feelings of unforgiveness might circulate, stick to objects, and become lodged in place. In the rest of this paper I consider how Manich Msamah stuck unforgiveness to certain things, individuals, and processes.

Over the following days and weeks, Amami and other activists began to build a campaign that authored a collective critique of state-led economic reconciliation, reanimating public space as a site of protest and emotional expression. Initiated by a group of around twenty prominent activists and civil society actors based in Tunis, Manich Msamah started on 28 August 2015, when a small group of protesters silently marched from outside the headquarters of the national trade union (the UGTT), in

Place Mohammed Ali, to Hotel Afrique on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, where the NGO, I Watch, had organized a discussion of the bill. This was then followed by a week of protests in Tunis and other towns (Gafsa, Mehdia, Sousse, Kef, and Kasserine) (Beji Okkez 2015). These protests were often forcefully dispersed by the police, in Sousse with the use of tear gas, while activists associated with the campaign were subjected to preemptive arrests (Human Rights Watch 2015). The harsh repression of the campaign was justified by reference to the country's official state of emergency, which effectively put in place an open-ended ban on public demonstrations, as well as the potential to curtail freedom of expression and freedom of the media (Santini 2018: 23). Nevertheless, the day after the campaign's first press conference, held on 11 September, Manich Msamah mobilized around two thousand people on Habib Bourguiba Avenue.

Over the next three years, Manich Msamah organized more than eighty protests and demonstrations, on top of various petition signings, seminars, press conferences, media appearances, and cultural events.<sup>6</sup> The campaign marked each phase of its resistance to the bill by way of a series of different "rounds" that sat in relation to each attempt to pass a new iteration of the law.<sup>7</sup> Each round was accompanied by the claim that "it does not pass" (*mayata'adash*). Moreover, the campaign complemented its repertoire of street actions with public information campaigns that uncovered and demystified the content of each bill and its debate within the *Assemblée des représentants du peuple* (the Tunisian parliament). In September 2017, and after a "fourth round" of resistance, a significantly revised version of the bill, now limited to amnesty for some civil servants and recast as "administrative reconciliation," was passed, though it was much contested both inside and outside the parliament (Gobe 2017). It ended a period of intense street mobilizations where activists felt that they were on an equal footing with those in power: "It was beautiful as—for a moment—you and the state [*sulta*] were playing on the same level."<sup>8</sup>

While the campaign garnered broad support (its official Facebook page had some eighty thousand followers (Al-Waer 2019: 82)), it is estimated that there were around one hundred to two hundred members who were central to the campaign (Gordner 2019: 16). This core constituency was built around a group of well-known, Tunis-based activists who encompassed a range of political backgrounds and occupations: investigative journalists, lawyers, revolutionary bloggers, academics, party cadres, student syndicalists, and civil society activists. Mostly from middle-class backgrounds, members' estimated average age was twenty-seven (Al-Waer 2019: 82).

Many of the campaign's activists were fluent in the tactics and ethics of horizontal organizing and, though often schooled in the language and ideology of the traditional Arab left and committed to the "revolutionary process" of the uprising, depicted the

<sup>6</sup>In September 2018 the campaign published an extensive list of its varying activities on its Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/manichmsame7/posts/1926016187704403>.

<sup>7</sup>The first round lasted until October 2015, when the government announced the postponement of voting on the bill. "Round two" began in July 2016 after it was announced that the bill would again be tabled (Gobe 2017). After mass protests the bill was once again retracted. The third round of resistance began in April 2017 when the law was again put up for debate. After a mass protest on Habib Bourguiba avenue on 13 May, Essebsi chose to postpone the vote until after Ramadan when a final "fourth round" occurred.

<sup>8</sup>Interview, 17 Jan. 2018. Imen, originally from the town of Sidi Bouzid, was a graduate in languages and worked as a translator in Tunis. As well as being an active member of Manich Msamah, she had been involved in a number of other post-revolutionary social movements and Tunisia's national student union (UGET).

campaign in terms of the horizontalist and pre-figurative politics often associated with new social movements (Riahi 2018; Sghayr and Abidi 2016). For example, rather than construct a centralized “movement” (*haraka*), activists referred to Manich Msamah as a non-partisan umbrella “campaign” (*hamla*), while activists conceptualized their organizing in terms of Deleuzian “rhizomes”: a network of horizontal linkages that connected a diversity of activists, affinities, and struggles (Tili 2017).<sup>9</sup> As the activist Layla Riahi observed, this ideological flexibility enabled the campaign to intervene in a national political debate that was already framed by the ideas and language of transitional justice, while also retaining a space for more radical discussion over the meaning of the revolution and its realization (2018).

Following initial protest actions, Manich Msamah moved to broaden its social and geographic reach. The campaign, perhaps wary of being portrayed as a relatively privileged, middle-class band of Tunis activists, forged links with a range of civil society organizations (notably, Al Bawsala and I Watch), unions, associations, leagues, parties (such as Attayar al-Dimuqrati), as well as other social movements and campaigns. Moreover, as protests spread to other towns, members—in the spirit of horizontal organizing—were encouraged to establish their own regional branches of the campaign that would operate relatively autonomously. Some members of the campaign also pursued other projects in their bid to influence the country’s transitional justice process, such as offering legal representation to the families of the martyrs of the 2011 revolution or writing pieces for both domestic and international media outlets. In sum, the campaign’s core group of activists were able to draw on a range of skills, connections, and resources to rapidly build the campaign and develop a broad base of support in resistance to the bill.

### “Let the People Change the Atmosphere”

On 29 March 2018, at a protest called by Manich Msamah, a young activist stands on the steps of Tunis’s National Theatre holding a placard that reads: “The weather is gorgeous and the birds are tweeting and Sofiane Toubel is a traitor [*tahhan*].” While the steps are crowded with her fellow activists, enthusiastically chanting, she stands still, quiet, and composed and lets her sign do the talking.

The activist’s message wished to interrupt the apparent serenity of Tunisia’s transition and draw attention to figures such as Sofiane Toubel (a Nidaa politician and former member of the RCD youth wing) who symbolized the return of old networks of power and patronage. Her slogan thus intervened in Tunisia’s post-uprising “atmosphere” (Anderson 2009), or, in Arabic, *jaww* (translated as both “atmosphere” and “mood”), questioning the apparent serenity that offered cover for the return of old-regime figures. To do so, activists produced unforgiveness as a “sticky” affect (Ahmed 2004a, 2010a; 2010b) that could be attached to figures such as Toubel, drawing public attention to their pasts and arguing that their return to public life was neither inevitable nor just.

During interviews, Manich Msamah activists resisted the kinds of reconciliatory discourses and atmospheres that state elites generated in their bid to build a political and social consensus around the need to “turn the page on the past.” Ahmed, for example, an activist and law student who was involved in the Nabeul branch of the

<sup>9</sup>On anarchism in Tunisia, see Galián (2020, esp. ch. 3).

campaign, reflected back on his initial decision to join the campaign, and described to me how he came to understand himself as unforgiving:

Beji Caid Essebsi had come out with the reconciliation law. And I immediately said “no,” how can the President forgive people who stole from the state? How can he say, like we say in Tounsi [Tunisian dialect], “let bygones be bygones [‘*afa Allah ‘amma salaf*’] or “don’t mention it [*misalish*]”: “Don’t mention it if you stole, we forgive you, just give us a little money!” I found myself against this narrative, so of course I don’t forgive [*manich msamah*].<sup>10</sup>

Imen had been a vocal member of both the campaign, active in a number of social movements since the uprising, and the country’s student union. She explained her unforgiveness:

I do not forgive many things: I do not forgive the contract of the dictatorship, the contract that led to poverty and marginalization, I do not forgive the counter-revolution [*inqilab al-thawra*], I do not forgive the corrupt and those that ruined the country. Manish Msamah is something that can touch any Tunisians that have bad memories—collective memories—everyone is sure to have them.... Manish Msamah attracted people because the name itself touched people, not only because it was in *Derja* [Tunisian dialect] but because it’s true: the people do not forgive!<sup>11</sup>

Imen aligns her unforgiveness with a range of injustices from the Ben Ali era, before going on to claim that, by dint of these being injustices many Tunisians experienced, unforgiveness was a feeling that might “touch any Tunisian.” She viewed the actions and abuses of the old regime as a collective memory that offered a common referent and could be aligned with unforgiveness in the present.

Manich Msamah protests were notable for their embrace of satirical and confrontational protest tactics. Adopting the kinds of carnivalesque protest strategies that have been practiced by groups such as Ya Basta Association in Italy and Rebel Clown Army in Britain (Graeber 2002), they employed fancy dress and street performance to support protests as a space of emotional expression. Through a shared aesthetic, common language, and creative chants, activists constructed public space as a site of affect’s circulation and accumulation. Wearing the campaign’s T-shirt with its distinctive logo—a gavel in a red circle—and boisterously singing chants accompanied by a *tambura* (a two-headed drum), activists appropriated the language, aesthetic, and performance of the country’s football terraces. Activists made political claims in Tunisian dialect (*Tounsi* or *Derja*) and drew on slang and vernacular to articulate political demands in the language of the street, football terrace, and home. One student studying at the University of Manouba was arrested and sentenced to two months in prison after reciting lines of anti-authoritarian poetry by the Iraqi poet Muzzafar al-Nawab at a protest outside Tunis’s National Theatre. Activists roundly mocked the apparent offence that these actions had provoked, noting, “Now the police feel too!” Publicly expressing one’s unforgiveness reinforced activists’

<sup>10</sup>Interview, 12 June 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Interview, 17 Jan. 2018.

contention that such “negative” emotions were legitimate, public feelings that might be made to circulate and accrue meaning.

Manich Msamah gathered together an unforgiving community and translated the subjective experience of “I do not forgive” (*manich msamah*) into the collective feeling “We do not forgive” (*manach msamheen*). In this regard, internal debates around the campaign’s gendered name are revealing. Sarra, an academic at Tunis’s architecture school, recalled how some members of the campaign wanted to recognize that both men and women “did not forgive.” Sarra was adamant that unforgiveness should be oriented towards both male and female unforgiveness:

First there was a T-shirt with the slogan “Manich Msamah” written on it and some girls said, “What? I’m *manich msamaha*! I want a T-shirt for women!” Then there was some back and forth and there were some saying, “Why should we change it and print it again, it’s a detail,” and, “It’s a *mushkila logistique* [logistical problem], what’s this to you?” While others were saying “We don’t have a problem; what’s wrong with you? Women being women [*nisa’ yasir natwiyyat*].” But in the end, everyone was convinced; for Manich Msamah to work as a campaign one must feel it personally [*tahis ruhu*].<sup>12</sup>

Sarra’s recollection of the debate over whether the campaign’s T-shirts and tags should include the Arabic feminine marker, the *ta’ marbuta*, so that Manich Msamah became Manich Msamah/a indicated the extent to which the campaign strove for inclusiveness and the recognition of women’s unforgiveness. It also points to the politics and affect of deictic markers, how signs such as the *ta’ marbuta* align particular subjects and feelings—that I as a woman or as a man am unforgiving, as well as that we as a community are unforgiving.<sup>13</sup>

Sarra’s disquiet at the initial T-shirt design evinces the self-reflective work that went into making unforgiveness stick to symbols and subjects. At protests, during media appearances, and in coffee houses, Sarra and others wanted to put on a T-shirt that they felt truly represented their personal feelings of unforgiveness. Unforgiveness is not felt equally, not a general public atmosphere, but rather is entangled with previous histories, experiences, and subjectivities. Insisting that the T-shirt should include the *ta’ marbuta* (and others’ ambivalence) reveals the work (and resistances) when producing collective affects. While for some it seemed an insignificant detail whether or not the slogan recognized that unforgiveness passed across gendered bodies, for Sarra and others in the campaign, it was patently clear that to make people “feel it personally,” to stick together as a community of unforgiving citizens, required a sensitivity to the alignment of signs, feelings, and bodies. At protests, the visibility and form that emotional responses took were gendered and as likely to reinforce as contest gender norms; as Sarra intimates, to efface the *ta’ marbuta* was to render women’s unforgiving attitude to Tunisia’s transitional justice invisible and inconsequential.

Activists hoped to transform the country’s post-revolutionary affective atmosphere, circulating an affect of unforgiveness and encouraging its public, performative expression. The sense that Manich Msamah was involved in a project of affective transformation was neatly captured in the signoff to one of the campaign’s statements, which, written in *Derja*, pronounced, “...spare us the mind-numbing

<sup>12</sup>Interview, 28 Apr. 2018.

<sup>13</sup>I thank a CSSH reviewer for alerting me to this aspect to the addition of the *ta’ marbuta*.

repetitions of reconciliation. We've had enough of this, give us some variety to your absurd legal project and let the people change the atmosphere [*khali al-sha'b yabidl al-jaww*]" (Manich Msamah 2017). Likewise, the Manich Msamah activist Heythem Guesmi, in an interview with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), observed, "We have *changed the mood* with our drums, chants, text, and lyrics, and they are easier for the average citizen to understand" (Guesmi and McHarris 2018, my italics). As such, Tunisia's post-repressive "affective atmosphere" (Anderson 2009) was figured both as space that impressed particular emotional response upon ordinary citizens, while also offering the possibility for the public circulation of new affective orientations producing alternative reactions to the bill and the return of regime cronies.

From speaking to individuals within Manich Msamah circles, it became apparent to me that their unforgiveness stemmed from witnessing the return of figures from the old regime without any sense that they had paid for their past actions or offered public displays of penance or contrition. As one activist remarked, "How can you forget the past if it is always in your face? ... The past continues: the same system is ruling over me; the same faces. It makes me insane [*habila*]"<sup>14</sup> In activists' unforgiveness we see a refusal of the continuities, accommodations, and consensus that Essebsi sought to inure: the offensive reappearance of "the same faces," the same "system." To counter this, Manich Msamah looked to make these "faces" more accounted for and accountable in public spaces.

In spring 2016, activists began drafting "wanted" posters on the style of the American West that figured former government employees and regime cronies as objects of outrage. For example, mug shots of Abdelwahab Abdallah, Minister of Foreign Affairs under Ben Ali and nicknamed the "Tunisian Rasputin" (Belhassine 2011) for his ruthless manipulation of the country's media, were posted across Tunis, captioned "To be brought to justice not to the Palace of Carthage." These were followed by posters of Slim Chiboub, a businessman and son-in-law to Ben Ali, and Mohamed Ghariani, formerly Secretary General of the RCD. Instead of amnesty behind closed doors, activists made public the faces of prominent regime cronies, plastering them across cities and raising public awareness of key figures. As activists put it to me, they were struck by how, on occasion, a member of the public might approach as activists were flyposting, but would have little idea who the picture was of: "Who is that?" Most didn't know. Okay, Slim Chiboub is known since he is the club president of Espérance [one of Tunis's domestic football teams], so he is a public figure. But when we changed [the posters] to other personalities, people didn't know them! People would walk past and ask, 'Who is this? Why "Wanted"? Why do you want to punish [*iqab*] them?' At the very least it succeeded in changing the thoughts of Tunisians; it let them reflect a little."<sup>15</sup>

Through "wanted" posters, Manich Msamah targeted specific, individual crimes as a means to draw attention to the return of Ben Ali-style networks of patronage and clientelism and convey a sense of political and legal urgency. The posters, in dramatic fashion, encouraged Tunisians to ponder the past actions of characters such as Abdelwahab Abdallah or Slim Chiboub and their participation in public life in the present. In a similar fashion to the campaign's gendered T-shirts, the posters

<sup>14</sup>Interview, 17 Jan. 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Interview, 9 May 2018.

exemplify Manich Msamah's desire to extend an affective atmosphere of unforgiveness beyond formal sites such as the IVD and hold figures associated with the Ben Ali regime to account in public spaces. Manich Msamah's repertoire of action made the street a further site of accountability, where citizens might be engaged and provoked into critically reflecting on how they viewed the return of regime cronies. Finally, Essebsi himself was also the target of Manich Msamah's public denouncements and scorn. As one of the campaign's chants noted, "The government has been sold off / Essebsi became president / the snipers are a rumor," linking up the neo-liberal commitments of Essebsi's administration (Tunisia had been "sold off" to the IMF) with his notorious denial that the state deployed rooftop snipers during the revolution (Dami and Ben Sassi 2012).

### Unforgiveness, Accountability, and Justice

I now want to zero in on the alternative narratives of justice articulated by activists within Manich Msamah. I have surveyed the way in which unforgiveness worked to stick a community of activists together and draw attention to objects of outrage; here I consider how unforgiveness was also oriented toward transitional justice processes.<sup>16</sup> I spoke with my interlocutors in 2018 when, although Manich Msamah continued to mobilize around issues of financial and political corruption, police violence, and the official recognition of the martyrs of the revolution, the reconciliation bill had been enacted. As a result, many activists were inclined to widen their field of view beyond the immediate strategy of resistance to the bill and reflect more broadly on the campaign, parsing and expounding the language of justice and its relation to political transformation. Negative emotions such as unforgiveness can support "reflective judgements" (Mihai 2016) and allow citizens to recognize injustices and evaluate the reasons for their feelings. While activists' political commitments and understandings of justice may have differed somewhat, there was a shared conception of unforgiveness as an affect that returned justice into the hands of citizens, marking injustices that, in turn, oriented citizens to the continuing need for accountability and substantive justice.

In keeping with the campaign's horizontalist ethos, activists found unforgiveness helped mediate between competing political positions within the campaign and maintain an ambiguous relationship with the IVD and institutionalized transitional justice. As stated by Slim, a twenty-six-year-old law student from Manouba, Manich Msamah "chose a place that was between the two: We refused the reconciliation law without necessarily announcing or declaring that we supported transitional justice. It let us be silent about some things."<sup>17</sup> In addition to this strategic silence regarding its support for the IVD (see also Riahi 2018), we can discern other ways in which unforgiveness was used to intervene in dominant debates around Tunisia's transitional justice process without being co-opted by that process.

For example, activists' key demand for "accountability before reconciliation" (*muhasiba qabil musalaha*) appeared in keeping with orthodox transitional justice narratives and is consistent with the recent turn among transitional justice theorists and practitioners toward pluralist transitional justice mechanisms (Laplante 2014;

<sup>16</sup>I am thankful to the reviewers for helping me to refine my argument in this final section.

<sup>17</sup>Interview, 6 July 2018.



Roht-Arriaza 2006). Indeed, activists often outlined normative theories of accountability and reconciliation that were strikingly close to the terms of the IVD's mandate in Tunisia and resonated with transitional justice practitioners who refused the bill on the grounds that it impeded the IVD's work and occluded discovery of the "truth." Activists stressed that the path of transitional justice demands a variety of corollary moral obligations, including "discovery of the truth," "preservation of memory," "accountability," "reparations for victims," and "institutional reform," which all must occur before "reconciliation" (Manich Msamah 2016). Others maintained that Manich Msamah's "primary goal is to safeguard a sovereign process of transitional justice in Tunisia" (Sghayr and Abidi 2016: 29). Here is Karim, a member of the liberal oppositional party, Parti Démocrate Progressiste (PDP) under Ben Ali, discussing Manich Msamah's relationship with the IVD:

We have our reservations about the IVD; we have reservations over the way it works, but the more you practice bitterness the bitterer it becomes [*al-marr-l-amarr minhu*]. We announced that we had no relation with the IVD, but that we were committed to transitional justice and transitional justice as expressed institutionally; whether we like it or hate it. [Transitional justice] exceeds Sihem Bensedrine, it exceeds today's differences, it exceeds the IVD, for better or worse. We are devoted to the path of transitional justice, and we say that we neither support nor judge people.<sup>18</sup>

Karim's guarded commitment to transitional justice and the work of the IVD was also reflected in activists' circumspect approach when utilizing the language of transitional justice. Activists often spoke of the "wooden language" politicians and transitional justice practitioners employed, and their fondness for "long words."<sup>19</sup> During conversations, the explication of justice was scattered with mimicked scare quotes as interlocutors took care to demarcate and problematize their use of the language of transitional justice. They cited phrases such as "*musalaha*" (reconciliation) and "*'adala intiqliyya*" (transitional justice) as the sorts of discourses that abstracted from the everyday experience of injustice in Tunisia.

Where activists' conception of justice differed from that of the IVD and other transitional justice practitioners in Tunisia was in their articulation of forgiveness in relation to the two modalities of accountability and reconciliation. More specifically, unforgiveness offered, in the words of Sara Ahmed, a sticky "way of being directed" (2014: 99), which was oriented toward accountability and reparative forms of justice and departed from forgiveness's ostensibly more natural configuration in relation to reconciliation and restorative justice (Elster 2003; Montiel 2002; Moon 2004). "Accountability before reconciliation," then, was concomitant with an understanding of justice as entailing struggle in the present and reckoning with the kind of concrete, historical injustices that Manich Msamah drew attention toward. Similar in tone and logic to the English language protest slogan "no justice, no peace," there is an ambivalent relation between the two claims: while accountability must come before reconciliation, it does not necessarily lead to reconciliation in the future and leaves open the possibility of a continuing refusal to forgive.

<sup>18</sup>Interview, 29 Mar. 2018.

<sup>19</sup>Interview, 17 Jan. 2018.

I met Mohammed shortly after the country's 2018 municipal elections. In his early thirties, Mohammed worked at a call center on the outskirts of Tunis, but he hoped to pursue a career as a personal trainer and sports coach. Although he lived in Tunis, his family was from the Medenine governate in the southeast of the country and he had moved to the capital in his twenties in search of employment. When we met in 2018, Mohammed was wearing a *ta'allam 'awm* (learn to swim) T-shirt, which drew attention to the recent drowning of the nineteen-year-old football supporter, Omar Labidi, at the hands of the police. (Witnesses claimed that after Labidi pleaded with police officers that he could not swim an officer replied, "Then learn to swim" [Amnesty International 2019: 3]). As our conversation progressed, it was clear that his activism and engagement with Manich Msamah struck a subtle path between rejection of the Nidaa-Ennahda coalition and a belief in the possibility that engagement with politics "as it is" might still work to uphold and extend the freedoms that had been achieved since the uprising. During our conversation he repeatedly expressed his frustration at post-overthrow politics in which the "game of democracy" had been manipulated for the advantage of the old regime: "[Essebsi] wins power and in his first speech excuses [*afwan*] the old regime! Here there is no longer politics, there are no longer elections, there is no longer parliament.... You plotted the rules of the game exactly how you wanted them and despite having them just so, you don't respect them. I didn't make these rules; you made them!"<sup>20</sup>

For Mohammed, the sense that the Nidaa-Ennahda coalition had set, and then flaunted, the "rules of the game" was also seen in the instrumentalization of reconciliation. Mohammed told me, "They employ the humanitarian aspect of reconciliation for unhumanitarian aims," and then described the difference between reconciliation and amnesty: "Reconciliation it is as if you and I have been fighting; if we are to reconcile it is necessary for these two sides to meet each other, I cannot reconcile with you if you retain anger [*mutaghashash*] and I just accept this. Amnesty occurs with power [*sulta*]: I govern, and you are corrupt, and I know about you. Reconciliation doesn't really happen by the power of law: the state imposing reconciliation on the people through power; it happens between two people facing the idea of reconciliation."<sup>21</sup>

According to Mohammed, "power [*sulta*]" distorted reconciliation, emptying it of its ethical and human obligations. As he told me, "Even the ones who should apologize [*i'tithar*] didn't apologize. Why don't I forgive? They didn't ask for forgiveness!" This image of the state-led reconciliation passing over, and abstracting from, the "proper" affective transactions of forgiveness was also shared by Achref, a musician from Tunis, who argued, "[When] president Beji Caid Essebsi pardons corrupt businessmen and administrators, really reconciliation is taking place from the position of the state: the state is pardoning the state; the corrupt pardoning the corrupt; the regime pardoning the regime. If it is necessary for someone to forgive, it is people [*nas*], the people [*al-sha'b*], the masses [*al-jamahir*]."<sup>22</sup> For Achref and Mohammed, reconciliation was all too easily instrumentalized by the state (Wilson 2001; Acorn 2004), smoothing the way for the return of old regime figures to public

<sup>20</sup>Interview, 9 May 2018.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Interview, 11 June 2018.

life; unforgiveness, in contrast, was seen to obstruct such transactions and realign justice with “the people.”

This rejection of reconciliation as a state project was shared by the prominent Tunisian political dissident and commentator Sadri Khiari (2017). In a piece for the Tunisian online media outlet *Nawaat*, discussing the law, Khiari argues that, under the Nidaa-Ennahda coalition, Tunisia has seen “reconciliation of the same with the same” before going on to proffer the notion of “deconciliation,” the refusal to reconcile, as how “the Revolution thinks” (ibid.). Following a similar logic to Khiari’s demand for “deconciliation,” activists’ refusal to forgive aimed to turn attention away from questions of reconciliation and toward accountability. Achref went on: “It is our right, not the right of Beji Caid Essebsi. It is my right not to forgive. And it does not mean I support reconciliation ... forgiveness comes somewhat later, at the very least it must be voluntary and willing. Those that have been wronged, that experienced oppression, they decide if they forgive or don’t forgive, and if someone comes along and says ‘Hey, forgive them,’ they may still say, ‘No I don’t forgive.’”<sup>23</sup> As Achref infers, the refusal to forgive returned a measure of agency to individual Tunisians, in both their relationship to the abuse of the past and their right to harbor different affective relations to those sanctioned by the state.

As well as sticking unforgiveness to accountability for the crimes of the past, it was also projected into the future. The contingency of forgiveness—its potential to be withheld—allowed activists to retain the social and economic demands of the revolution as an “unfulfilled story.”<sup>24</sup> Many interlocutors would open their argument by rhetorically asking, “Why is there still...” (*‘alash baqi*) or turn to the refrain that “as long as...” (*midam*) to signal the ongoing nature of resistance. Moreover, to shore up their demand for justice in the present, activists regularly refused to suggest that political and social relationships might be mended in the future.

Marwan, a photographer, film-maker, and activist whom I met in a cultural café in Sousse, identified as an anarcho-communist, or “antifa,” and had no party or union affiliation. During our conversation, Marwan offered a picture of unforgiveness as a refusal to emotively respond to figures from the old regime. When I pushed him on whether he might forgive in the future, Marwan replied:

Never. Never. Yes, there is a law. This law should be practical and applied consistently. Me, I don’t really care [*je m’en fou pas mal*] who this person is. It must be that everybody who did something bad or harmful, that they go to trial, and they are judged, correctly, by this law, without raising controversy [*sans qu’ils font une polémique*], without me having to see their face on TV, I don’t even want to hear it.... Only, they will go to prison, afterwards they come out, and I don’t really care about them, if they spend a hundred years in prison or, I don’t know, they’ve paid what has to be paid, they’ve taken their assets—there are hotels or other things. It’s the state that takes these, because they haven’t paid their debts, afterwards I don’t care about him, for me they’re a citizen. They’re a citizen. So that’s why I don’t say I have forgiven [*j’ai pardonné*] or I will forgive, no no, for the moment I never forgive, I never forgive.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Interview, 9 May 2018.

<sup>25</sup>Interview, 5 July 2018.

Marwan insisted that he refused to “care” for individual cases, but simply cared that justice was served. Indeed, the campaign argued for a universally applied (but unexceptional) justice in the present: “Transitional justice does not require exceptional measures. A fair trial, sure, but we should try them and then they are accounted for—everyone.”<sup>26</sup> Marwan linked justice to the (in)visibility of old regime cronies—he does not want to see or hear them—and offers a form of accountability where their invisibility, their ability to pass as ordinary citizens, was a sign that individuals had been held to account. In a similar manner, Mohammed noted that he would entertain the possibility of “forgetting” only after accountability: “I will continue not to forget, I will continue to be indignant [*naqim*]. Of course, I would love to turn the page on the past; we would love accountability; and after we forget! We hold them to account and after they return as citizens among us.”<sup>27</sup> Marwan, Mohammed, and others, in departure from transitional justice discourses that stress the need for public reconciliation, presented a vision of social and political repair without the necessity of the emotional transactions of forgiveness and reconciliation; instead, unforgiveness, when aligned with accountability, was seen to offer adequate grounds for a collective future where those associated with the crimes of the Ben Ali regime might “return as citizens.”<sup>28</sup>

Unforgiveness, as directed toward issues of accountability and retributive justice, made plain the connection between historical injustices, and an activist’s sense of justice that was tied to an ongoing need for substantive and material forms of justice. To finish, Amal, an activist from Nabeul with a degree in agriculture engineering, made explicit the link between Manich Msamah and the concrete, historical circumstances that augured the need for social and economic justice. Amal eloquently wove together past injustices, the unfulfilled demands of the 2010–2011 revolution and her image of a more just Tunisian state:

By definition, if we talk of Manich Msamah, if we speak of cutting with the past, we speak of the declaration of independence, we speak about what France did to [the country’s] natural resources.... We speak of the whole history of robbery [*nahb*]; its continuation and its agents in Tunisia.... We live today with a majority of Tunisians, of youths, who are unemployed, that have no opportunities: the right to a life of dignity is unimaginable; the right to public transport is unimaginable; the right to public health and public education is unimaginable.... If only we saw returned stolen assets, if only there was accountability with all those who captured public property, there would be a state with resources to invest, jobs to offer, and a system that offered a life of dignity to all citizens.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Manich Msamah activists did not simply refuse transitional justice as a tool of the old regime, or dismiss it as a Western, liberal import. (Although both of these lines of

<sup>26</sup>Interview, 6 July 2018.

<sup>27</sup>Interview, 9 May 2018.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Interview, 13 Apr. 2018.

critique were certainly debated among Manich Msamah circles.) Rather, their interventions into the terrain of Tunisia's transitional justice process drew on the discourses and ethics of transitional justice that were circulating within Tunisia and assembled them into new arrangements, bringing to the fore questions of accountability and substantive justice. Though an adjusted version of the law was eventually passed, the Manich Msamah campaign succeeded in presenting alternative visions of post-repressive justice and political transformation. To that end, Manich Msamah found an affect of unforgiveness a handy tool that both countered Essebsi and others' discourses of state-led reconciliation and restoration, and imagined an alternative, activist's sense of justice. This was built around accountability as *sine qua non* for addressing the crimes of the past. Activists maintained that an affect of unforgiveness did not signal the failure of justice but its very possibility. In resistance to the telos of reconciliation and its instrumentalization as a tool of regime restoration, activists used the demand for accountability to advance an antagonistic stance towards certain political figures, realities, and relations. In other words, instead of seeing an old elite smuggled back into Tunisian public life under the pretext of "turning the page," unforgiveness oriented activists toward an understanding of justice based in substantive accountability in the present.

Analytically, my argument contributes to critical transitional justice literature that has looked to affirm negative emotions as both legitimate and productive responses during times of political transition. While normative transitional justice narratives prioritize the transformation of "negative" into "positive" emotions as the source of, and helping to signal, social and political repair (Minow 1998; Moon 2004), here I have considered unforgiveness as an affect that nurtured alternative relations to past injustices and visions of justice. The paper demonstrates how an affect of unforgiveness was used by activists to align particular individuals, things, and processes. Negative feelings act as, in the words of Mihaela Mihai, "markers of a sense of justice," and, in Tunisia, the feeling of unforgiveness marked a continuing deficit between the ideals of the revolution and their realization in the eyes of Tunisian citizens. Affect theory, and Sara Ahmed's thinking on the stickiness of emotion, helps nuance debates around the role of negative emotions during transitional justice. They foreground the political work that goes into circulating emotions and how they accrue in meaning and value via friction with other objects. As I have shown, unforgiveness required galvanizing and conscientious political action to stick it onto individuals ("faces" from the old regime, but also as a form of solidarity that connected unforgiving citizens), things (public spaces, posters, clothes, and the ephemera of protest), and processes (accountability and substantive forms of justice).

Politically, I have argued for the importance of activist actors and social movements in crafting understandings of justice and political transformation that depart from dominant representations of transitional justice. Transitional justice scholarship and practice, with its tendency to center attention on institutions and legal processes, overlooks other, non-institutional voices, subjectivities, and affects and, in so doing, renders them inconsequential. The case of Manich Msamah, therefore, is significant for what it tells us about the multiple sites of contention and disagreement over the meaning of justice and political transformation after a repressive regime. Without wishing to underplay the role of institutions in rebuilding a national community and state legitimacy, we need to recenter our critical attention around non-elite voices that often differ in their vision of justice from both the judicial norms of institutional transitional justice processes and scholarly transitional justice

narratives. Exploring these alternative visions of justice helps us to think beyond normative transitional justice discourses and conceptualize forms of justice that are grounded in ordinary citizens' sense of justice.

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