

Social Change Symposium

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Title: Long-distance Mourning for the Missing: Gaps, Absences and Silences in Two Diaspora Contexts



Abstract: In recent years, we have witnessed the proliferation of scholarly interest in the role of war memories in shaping social identities and migratory patterns within the global-local framework, shifting the focus from transnational to translocal practices of mourning and remembering the lost: countries, homes and people. From the disciplinary standpoint of Sociocultural Anthropology and Global Studies, this thesis adds to the debate by critically exploring the reverberating impact of the unresolved casualties from the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. The war statistics included more than 100,000 killed and some two million forcibly displaced people. More than 35,000 (predominantly Bosniak men) fell into the category of the missing—but were actually killed and subsequently buried by their executioners (Serb military and police) in a series of unmarked mass graves at secret locations across the country. By focusing on the everyday lives of the Bosniak survivors from two different localities (Prijeedor and Srebrenica), fleeing distinct episodes of genocidal violence in Bosnia, I seek to unveil the challenges they face in relation to the unresolved loss of their family and community members and life in exile. By drawing upon the methodological pluralism of multi-sited, conventional and digital ethnography—in combination with narrative inquiry and elements of participatory action research—I have explored the range of sociocultural implications of the mass disappearances for the surviving families and communities in the diaspora. These range from the suspension of mortuary rituals in the absence of bodies to be buried to the role of religion and biotechnology in negotiating closure to the reconstruction of kinship, gender roles and norms in the aftermath of genocide, as well as the transgenerational legacies of the absences male relatives and forced displacement. Additionally, I discuss the social dynamics of the translocal commemorations of the missing in Melbourne (Australia) and St. Louis (USA) and the use of digital technologies in mediating long-distance mourning and remembrances. With this work, I argue for greater recognition of the lasting effects of war disappearances as well as for appreciation of the surviving families' resilience and remarkable capacity to reconstruct and regenerate in the face of a genocidal loss.