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Bosnian refugees in Chicago: Gender, performance, and post-war economies

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Bosnian Refugees in Chicago: Gender, Performance, and Post-War Economies is a study of refugee migration through the experience of Chicago Bosnian refugees. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork in Chicago and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croegaert demonstrates how various overlapping structures and narratives shape the experiences of Bosnian refugee women: memories of Yugoslav socialism, U.S. neoliberal capitalism, NGOs, community-led entrepreneurial initiatives, war trauma, and anti-Muslim sentiments. By focusing on the physical and affective work that Bosnian refugee women do to (re)build their lives in Chicago, the book moves between the home—both the new and the old, Chicago and Bosnia and Herzegovina—and a public sphere where Bosnian refugee women perform the role of “refugee.”

While much has been written about trauma resulting from the Bosnian Wars, the book treats this topic indirectly. Not wanting to stigmatize and pathologize, it deals with the aftermath of violence that Bosnian refugee women are coming to terms with in a sensitive yet theoretically eloquent way. By expanding on Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, or *goli život* (literally naked life) in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian/Montenegrin, Croegaert brings into view “the social, sensual, and material lives [of refugees] that are regarded as expendable” (p. 7). Agamben traces his notion of bare life to Ancient Greeks who distinguished between two forms of life: bios and zoē, the manner in which a life is lived and the biological fact of life (*Homo Sacre*, 1998). It is precisely this linguistic coalescing which makes us unable to distinguish the two forms of life and thus underpinning states of exception and operations of biopower. Trnopoje concentration camp near Prijedor, BiH, operated as a state of exceptions where law was effectively suspended. Croegaert's interlocutors remember this time as a *borba za goli život* (a fight for bare life), emphasizing the agency of holding onto a bare life that is rendered as expendable by the state. The book reframes Agamben's concept of *bare life* by calling it *injured life* which “captures the ways that women used the injuries of material, physical, and psychological violence, forced migration, family separation, and status-loss as tools to diagnose the aftermath of the harms they endured and to develop their visions for the future” (p. 8). By situating injured life ethnographically, Croegaert seeks to counter discourses that on the one hand hyperfocus on the violence that Bosnian refugees endured and on the other that treat the refugee as a site of intervention.

The book also contributes to debates about anthropology “at home.” While American anthropology has perhaps moved away from the valorization of fieldwork “far from home,” ethnography “at home” still occupies a marked space in our discipline. This is not the case in the anthropological tradition in eastern Europe: the ethnological tradition in Yugoslavia, for instance, developed out of folkloric traditions which saw anthropologists studying rural traditions and village life at home. The

romanticized vision of a rural village untouched by the modern world that harbors exotic Others was still there, albeit internally. When it comes to its “at home” content, this book departs from this narrative. Croegaert, a Chicago native herself, did not have to voyage far both in a literal and figurative sense: her volunteering work in Chicago led her to the very women that she writes of in this book. The suspicion that some of her interlocutors treated her with initially, however, suggests an uneasiness of being treated as a study subject: the ideal-typical anthropological Other.

Unlike what the title suggests, *Bosnian Refugees in Chicago* is not only set in Chicago. Croegaert's ethnography is multi-sited, moving through Chicago, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the virtual. Chapter one explores the historical dimensions of Yugoslav market socialism and positions it in relation to the neoliberal intensification in the US as part of the larger transnational political realignment. In fact, Bosnian women in Chicago were able to quickly get accustomed to and operate small NGO organizations themselves because of their prior experiences with a system of worker self-management in Yugoslavia. Chapter two takes us inside Bosnian homes in Chicago, exploring the intricate kinship ties, post-2008 recession debt, and connections to the homeland. The multi-sitedness of the book extends beyond Chicago and Mostar to the virtual. Chapter seven explores the aftermath of the murder of Zemir Begić, a 32-year-old Bosnian immigrant, through Twitter posts. Under the hashtag #BosnianLivesMatter Begić's murder was picked up by right-wing Twitter and framed as a black on white crime. This incident presented a chance for Bosnians to transcend their racial ambiguity and “off-white” status. Counter-voices under the hashtag #BiHInSolidarity, kickstarted by a young female Bosnian American from Chicago, tried to combat the black on white hate crime narrative and helped finding common ground with African Americans.

Chapter three is set in Bosnia and Herzegovina and follows Ajla, a young woman from the small city of Stolac close to Mostar. While many families fled Stolac to Chicago during the Bosnian Wars, Ajla and her family remained. Like many young people in the region, she “yearned for the possibility to leave Bosnia—to travel freely throughout Europe, and to visit the United States and Canada, places where many of their family and friends had been resettled as refugees” (p. 63). This chapter also explores the intricate trans- and inter-ethnic social practices of young people in the city of Mostar. Croegaert writes about an encounter between Ajla and a school friend from a different ethnic group who after running into one another and happily stopping for a quick chat parted to different cafes: one frequented more by Muslim Bosniaks like Ajla and the other by Catholic Croats. Croegaert argues that “in these sort of encounters, ethnic difference is not ignored or glossed over, nor is ethnic difference celebrated or politicized. Rather it is acknowledged and minimized through social exchange” (p. 68). These ethnic dynamics are underexplored in the context of Chicago. Some of Croegaert's Chicago interlocutors are from mixed marriages, a term that denotes marriages between people from different ethnic groups. There is some discussion about mixed marriages but sustaining a deeper analysis of ethnicity presents challenges when working with a population that has fled their homeland because of ethnic conflict.

Chapter four takes as its subject coffee and coffee-making: a gendered activity that highlights the commodity-use and consumption practices of Bosnians in Chicago. Juxtaposing the Bosnian coffee-making and drinking practices, embodied in the concept of *ćejf* (a pleasure or enjoyment) with the American fast-casual approach to coffee—coffee to-go—Croegaert is able to locate not only individual reflections, communal evaluations, and leisure activities in their coffee-drinking practices but also show how preparing and drinking Bosnian coffee provides both a critique of neoliberal time while also “forwarding neoliberal taste aesthetics as a type of ‘slow food’” (p. 20). Her interlocutors used coffee, meeting for coffee, and the labor-intensive ritual that is Bosnian coffee-making to diagnose aspects of their lives.¹ Croegaert argues that “it is helpful to think of Bosnian coffee as a mnemonic device, as a practice whose elements emphasize memory and distinction of time among the diaspora” (p. 86). In other words, the very fast-casualness of American to-go coffee drinking culture juxtaposed with

slow Bosnian coffee drinking allowed Bosnian refugee women in Chicago to draw on other memories and differences between the U.S. and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While chapter five zooms in on audience reception of the trope of Balkan violence in theater productions and film screening in Chicago, chapter six examines performances of “the refugee woman.” This chapter describes what happens when Bosnian women retell their experiences in front of different audiences. Croegaert argues how a widespread acceptance of “giving voice” to refugees among human rights NGOs “indicates that [refugee] stories could function at times as a type of currency” (p. 119). She notes that Bosnian refugee women reframed the narrative of “giving voice” to “everyone has a story to share.” The book argues that underpinning this re-framing is a different language ideology in which stories are a co-production: if everyone has a story to share, one is also expected to listen and share their own. As a result, exchanges in stories became a way to level some of the inequalities between researcher and interlocutor.

Bosnian Refugees in Chicago demonstrates an exceptional and well-written ethnographic analysis that moves, like Bosnian refugees themselves, between different countries, spheres, and political contexts. It weaves together a set of complex historical context and discourse ranging from Yugoslav socialism, the 90s Bosnian Wars, the optics of Balkan violence, to the racialization of “off-white” appearing Bosnians in the U.S. racial hierarchy. The book captures how Bosnian refugee women, through their social and material practices, diagnose new hardships in the American neoliberal model: instead of coffee for *ćejf* there is coffee to-go and instead of working to live there is living to work. As such the book has something to offer to readers from a variety of academic disciplines.

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NOTE

¹ Bosnian coffee is also known as Turkish coffee. I should note that the two are *mostly* the same so that the coffee connoisseurs do not come after me.

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Silence and sacrifice: Family stories of care and the limits of love in Vietnam.

Merav Shohet. University of California Press, 2021. Pp. xvii + 267.

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It may seem counterintuitive for the title of a linguistic anthropology book to begin with the word “silence.” But in *Silence and Sacrifice: Family Stories of Care and the Limits of Love in Vietnam*, Shohet uses the tools of the discipline to skillfully analyze morally-charged care encounters, carefully attending not only to that which is spoken but also to that which is not