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# From Displacement to Emplacement

## Bosnian Muslims in Urban US

FETHI KELES  
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One can see place everywhere in research among migrant populations. The concept is even more ubiquitous when the migrants in question are forcibly displaced from social and physical worlds they called home: The Bosnian Muslims I have been interacting with during my dissertation research in Central New York

have lost familiar places as a result of the 1992–95 war in the Balkans which tore apart Former Yugoslavia. They wandered around as refugees in European countries whose democratic liberalisms were neither democratic nor liberal enough to accept them as moral equals. Confronted with a lack of *stable* place, they then sought permanent resettlement in the United States. In this commentary, my aim is to emphasize that making place, or *emplacement*, is as central to refugees' experiences as losing it. Anthropologist David Turton ("The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia," in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2005) uses the term *emplacement* to refer to place-making practices whereby refugees constantly tell stories about the former place, maintain links to imagined or actual places of belonging, and re-organize the new places according to familiar categories (for example, by bringing familiar objects from the former place). Below I draw material from my ethnographic work to offer examples of emplacement illustrating the struggles, surprises, disappointments and achievements of Bosnians in striving to create a homely place in the US over the past fifteen years. Ultimately, I hope this brief account reminds readers that as much as anthropologists need to document and explain power relations which uproot people from their homelands, they should also attend to refugees' remarkable capacities in making the world a place of their own again.

### Narratives of People in Motion

I carried out dissertation fieldwork in Central New York among two groups of Bosnians, most of whom transitioned into the urban US as refugees during the latter half of the 1990s. About 130,000 of approximately one million Bosnians who left their home country during and after the war in search of safety have resettled in the US. While some migrated directly to the US after spending brief periods in refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Croatia, others arrived in the US after several years of settlement elsewhere, for example Germany and Turkey. Upwards of 12,000 Bosnians live in New York, and more than half of them live in the two upstate New York cities where my fieldwork took place.

In the extensive narratives I have gathered in long and short interviews, place, literally, is all over the place. To begin with, descriptions of earliest struggles to make sense of just where one has arrived after arduous and

heart-wrenching journeys are laden with remarks on one's immediate physical surroundings. Observing the decrepit buildings around him in his first week in the central New York city he was resettled to, a then-refugee (and now a US citizen) Bosnian Muslim told me: "that day when we came to [city]...it was kind of funny, I expected you know, from TV you see all this glamour and stuff, you see some buildings that are actually, it looks like the war was not in Bosnia... A few days after, when we walked around and saw how everything looks like, my sister made a comment. [She said] I think we came from the future to the past!...you see those power lines? Not even in Bosnia we have those anymore!"

Not surprisingly, no conversation with a Bosnian Muslim, or *Bosniak*, whose hometown is Srebrenitza is likely to go without some comments on death. But sometimes there was more to those comments than the expletive references to Ratko Mladić and his coterie, and the atrocities they committed in that town back in July 1995. The secretary of the newly established local Bosniak religious-cultural organization, a Srebrenitza himself, talked to me of death and told me why the organization's administration was upset that they had to bury community members who passed away in the US in cemeteries where they were not allowed to position the body in the grave so that the head faces the direction of the place dictated by their religious tradition, *qibla*, or the Holy Ka'aba in Mecca. One needs to rest in peace, sure, but one also needs to rest in the right place.

Refugee experiences involve more than the loss of places called home *then*, they are also about production of places called home *now*.

Refugee experiences involve more than the loss of places called home *then*, they are also about production of places called home *now*. For example, vegetable gardens I saw in the backyards of many Bosnian townhouses not only featured delectable zucchinis, peppers and tomatoes but also represented tropes of nostalgia and efforts to carve something tasty out of the US experience. Just about all the proud showings of these gardens to the lucky anthropologist were accompanied with statements to the tune of "we used to have a huge land in our village back in Bosnia where we grew everything, this one is small but it's still OK." The more the new place looked like the old one, the merrier the families seemed to feel.

### Importance of Emplacement

A dedicated focus on such place-making practices as those in this piece could help us remember that refu-

gees, such as those displaced from war-torn Bosnia and resettled to the US, are more than objects of ethnographic curiosity: They, too, are America. Their ambivalences, failures, successes, dreams and pursuits, the clunkers they drive through potholed-out streets, the soccer balls they kick on the field in a public park, the run-down homes they purchased in the not-so-good neighborhood and spent three months to repair with their impeccable TLC communicate us important reminders about how they create place after they lost it. Failure to heed those reminders "[...] makes it more difficult for us to identify with the suffering stranger, to see him or her as an ordinary person, a person like us, and therefore as a potential neighbour in our neighbourhood" (Turton 2005: 278). In addition, studying refugee emplacement can open up new theoretical vistas in understanding the broader process of integration, in particular by inviting us to go beyond considering formal attributes (such as employment rates and economic self-sufficiency) and locate traces of that process in everyday life, and to thereby think more comprehensively about integration.

*Fethi Keles is the current SUNTA Student Councilor and the Chair-elect of CORI. Funded by a scholarship from Die Zeit-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, his dissertation research focuses on Bosnian refugees in the US and the consequences of involuntary migration.* ☞

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