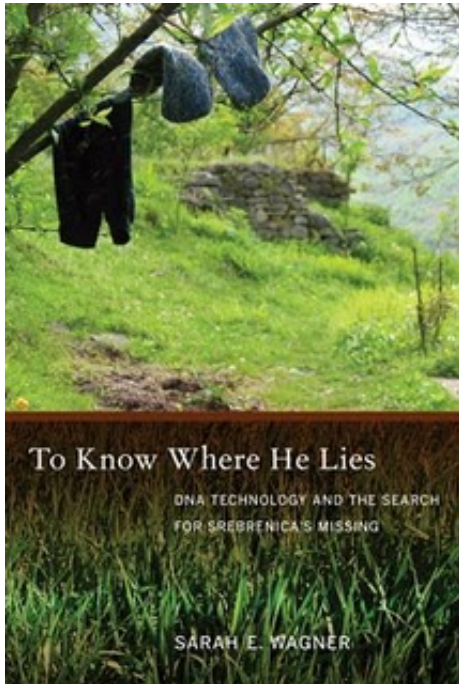


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## Sarah Wagner's To Know Where He Lies

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By Peter Locke



### **To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing.**

Sarah Wagner

[University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu), 2008.

*Reviewed by Peter Locke (Princeton University)*

Sarah Wagner's ethnography *To Know Where He Lies* examines the innovative DNA technology developed to identify the remains of the estimated 8,000 men and boys killed in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is characterized throughout by remarkable emotional reserve and analytical humility: theoretical ambition is sharply circumscribed, if it is present at all, and the terrible loss and grief of Wagner's key informants—the bereaved women of Srebrenica—are consistently approached from a respectful distance, with sobriety and sensitivity. In this, says Wagner, she is emulating the dispassionate and somber seriousness, the "careful restraint," and the dedication to detail and documentation that she observed among the scientists and case managers of the ICMP (International Commission on Missing Persons), the organization most responsible for carrying out the identification

process (19). As an anthropologist, Wagner clearly feels greater responsibility to the concrete social and scientific realities she chronicles—the magnitude of the crimes committed in and around Srebrenica, the scope and scientific achievement of the ICMP’s response, the dramatic contrasts between human capacities for cruelty, on the one hand, and resilience, on the other—than to high-flown theoretical debates in anthropology and science studies, which might seem self-important, if not beside the point, in light of her material. Latour and Rabinow are briefly invoked, and Halbwachs’ mentor Henri Bergson pops up here and there to offer guidance on issues of social memory; but otherwise Wagner’s book remains firmly, laudably anchored in the concrete details of the extraordinary story she has to tell.

Following a clear and compact introduction, Wagner’s opening chapter relates the background and events of the fall of Srebrenica and the genocide—Europe’s first since WWII—that ensued. Though her emphasis on the shared culpability of the “international community” (in the guise of the UN) is helpful for understanding postwar developments, there is little to distinguish Wagner’s able retelling from histories and journalistic accounts—which she handily reviews in a few pages—already available; thus those familiar with the history may skip ahead to subsequent chapters. In brief: from 1992 on, as Bosnian Serb forces “ethnically cleansed” eastern Bosnia of its non-Serb population, Srebrenica became a rare place of refuge for Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) from surrounding areas. It was declared a UN “safe area” in the spring of 1993, and its population eked out an existence, sustained by UN aid convoys and protected (ostensibly) by a small, lightly armed unit of Dutch soldiers, until July 1995. In July’s opening days, Bosnian Serb forces, led by General Ratko Mladić—now, following Radovan Karadžić’s capture in July 2008, the last remaining major fugitive from the war crimes court in the Hague—tested the UN’s resolve by taking control of key UN peacekeeping positions in the mountains around Srebrenica. Threatened NATO airstrikes never came, and so on July 11th Mladić and his forces entered the town. Most of its population had fled to the Dutch headquarters (“Dutchbat”) in the nearby village of Potočari; some men decided to walk through heavily mined forests toward Tuzla (a harrowing trek that would come to be known as the “March of Death”). At Potočari the Dutch soldiers allowed (and even assisted) Mladić—who promised that no one would be harmed—to separate males, including children and old men, from females, and to send the former away on buses. While the women and girls were bused to Bosniak-controlled territory and released, over the following days the men were taken to nearby fields and warehouses and executed—by the hundreds, by the thousands—in a carefully planned and coordinated action. Many of the men fleeing through the woods to Tuzla were likewise captured and killed. The bodies were subsequently buried in mass graves.

It is what happened next—the unearthing of the remains and their reburial by Serb forces in secondary mass graves—that later propelled the innovations in DNA identification technology that Wagner examines. The Bosnian Serbs, she explains, sought both to annihilate the Bosniak presence from the Srebrenica enclave and to hide all evidence of the deed, “to create the illusion that their victims had never existed” (56). The exhumations and reburials mixed body parts and possessions from multiple individuals, and even scattered parts of the same body across two or more sites; traditional forensic identification techniques were thereby rendered all but useless. Secondary graves are unique in the history of mass murder: as the head of the Bosnian Federation’s Commission for Missing Person explains to Wagner in an interview, they are “a kind of innovation that the Bosnian Serbs patented” (82). One technological innovation (of genocide) compels another (of recovery and accountability). “The technology of violence implemented by the Bosnian Serb forces,” writes Wagner, “required a counterpoint system of technology, one that could take the random and minute pieces of human genetic material and render order to the commingled bones of the mass graves” (15).

The remainder of the book, after a chapter introducing the “people and place of postwar Srebrenica,” focuses on describing the development, implementation, and implications of this “counterpoint” technology, assessing its efficacy both as a technical instrument of identification and as a sociopolitical instrument of post-conflict social repair. The succession of chapters follows the journey of the missing through the entire process, from the technological and forensic work conducted at graves and in labs, to the visits of “case managers” to individual families to gather information and confirm identification, to, finally, the collective burials of newly identified remains, held annually on July 11 at the Srebrenica-Poto?ari memorial center, completed in 2003 on the former site of the Dutchbat compound. Ethnographic vignettes, clear explanations of technical procedures, and telling (and often moving) details consistently demonstrate the remarkable thoroughness of Wagner’s fieldwork, her mastery of Bosnia’s difficult Slavic language (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, or BCS), and the intimacy of her access to the social interactions and entanglements generated by the identification process. This level of access, in turn, testifies to the sensitivity and care by which she earned the friendship and trust of her interlocutors. She lived for months in Srebrenica, getting to know members of “Women of Srebrenica,” a support and advocacy organization for the thousands who lost husbands, sons, and brothers; she interned at the ICMP offices and laboratories in Tuzla, learning the technical ins-and-outs of the new DNA science; and—most strikingly—she accompanied case managers on their visits to families of the missing, observing extraordinary, and often shattering, moments of grief as women signed off on papers confirming the identification of their sons’ or husbands’ mortal remains.

The technology works by analyzing and comparing DNA extracted from blood samples contributed by family members of the missing—the more, the better, and including samples from victims’ wives—to DNA extracted from body parts, primarily bones and teeth, exhumed from the secondary mass graves. It is, as one can imagine, and as Wagner carefully demonstrates, an utterly massive undertaking to carry the missing “from grave to grave,” sorting through and extracting genetic material from thousands of bones, not to mention trying to match decayed possessions—articles of clothing, the odds and ends men happened to have in their pockets as they left Srebrenica—to particular sets of remains, even with the aid of advanced software, DNA technology, and unparalleled scientific (specifically genetic) expertise. Wagner takes pains, moreover (and in good anthropological fashion), to show that the achievement of identification is not an exclusively technical or scientific feat, but depends equally on the social relationships forged between ICMP professionals and family members, on the “subjective” knowledge and memories the latter provide, and, ultimately, on the family’s recognition and agreement that the remains identified by DNA technology are in fact those of their relative. Wagner critiques how these social and subjective aspects often become invisible, both in media representations and in the ICMP’s own procedures, and argues for a more holistic approach to the identity of the missing throughout their journey: “In representing an individual as a series of numbers, the technology reduces the missing person’s existence, which travels during this state of prolonged absence along a trajectory of recognition, to too narrow a plane. In short, it prioritizes the missing person’s genetic profile over his social being” (120).

The key point, urges Wagner, is that science and humanism are inextricably intertwined forms of knowing and intervening, and privileging the former as a tool of post-conflict social repair—multi-level recovery in war’s aftermath as a technical operation—risks neglecting the multiple, and multivalent, problems, needs, and processes of social transformation that characterize societies like Bosnia. “Memory, imagination, and supposition, therefore, do not exist on the opposite side of some vertical line drawn between their subjectivity and the objectivity of DNA science,” Wagner observes. “Rather, these different kinds of knowledge gain significance within the process of identification in relation to one another” (150). She is also careful to understand and emphasize the limits of identification to bring about a sense of closure for the bereaved, a resolution to grief, much less the lofty aims of the international community—rejected outright by many Bosnians—of reconciliation and forgiveness. Wagner conveys poignant stories of families who feel the absence of their loved ones like a presence, daily; she evokes the pain of the void in their knowledge of their relatives’ fate (which identification cannot wholly fill), the incomplete and endless mourning, the wrenching permanence of loss. “And for those who had returned to their prewar homes,” she writes, “the melding of

memories and imagination gave the fleeting sensation that their children were right there, just around the corner” (158). No technology—however advanced, and however sensitively intertwined with humanist and humanitarian impulses—can fully heal the social, familial, and individual wounds opened by the events of July 1995.

The missing, and the process of their identification, mean different things—and are manipulated in different ways, to different ends—for the range of stakeholders in Bosnia. For the scientists of the ICMP, Wagner observes, the missing are scientific and technical problems to be resolved; for Bosniak nationalist politicians and religious leaders, they are emblems of collective victimhood, proofs of who bears greatest guilt for the social and material devastation wrought by the war; and to Bosnia’s international overseers and humanitarian workers, their identification represents the possibility—the limits of which Wagner has so powerfully evoked—of “sociopolitical repair” and reconciliation (8). In her chapters on the annual memorial ceremony and collective burial at Poto?ari, Wagner discusses the oft-noted manipulation of Srebrenica for political gain by Bosniak nationalists, and points out the unintended consequences of the identification and reburial process, which include deepening divisions between Bosniak and Serb communities, especially in eastern Bosnia, where Serbs have constructed their own counter-memorials and begun to conduct counter-ceremonies for their own war victims on July 12. This is (to say the least) a troubling outcome, as it reinforces Bosnia’s entrenched, stagnating politics of competing victim claims and unresolved wartime grievances; and Wagner, noticeably, does not venture ideas or suggestions about how the process could be otherwise implemented to lessen divisive ramifications. This omission, perhaps, along with her reluctance to dwell on nationalist manipulations and maneuverings, is made in favor of emphasizing the personal meanings and effects of the Poto?ari ceremonies for the families of the missing. Yes, says Wagner, the missing, especially via the annual burials, are slotted into different collective categories, to different (and sometimes lamentable) strategic ends; but the individual experiences of the bereaved families, the importance of the ceremonies for their own processes of grief and going-on, consistently exceed and escape, cannot be encompassed by, these collective movements, and deserve as much or more emphasis in any account.

Indeed this accent on individual and intimate experiences of the process of loss, identification, and reburial—as against the concurrently operating collective processes of nationalism, religion, and international interventionism—guides Wagner’s efforts throughout the book. After an interesting final chapter critically exploring the worldwide uses and implications of the Bosnian DNA technology—it has been applied, to differing degrees, for differing motivations, and to differing ends, in the

wake of the 9/11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2004 Asian tsunami—Wagner reminds her readers in a brief Epilogue that “these aspects of the identification process... are not the main point of this study. Rather, at its core, this book is about why people seek out the remains of their loved ones—what it means to them—and how the advent of a DNA-based system of post-mortem identification has helped transform this process of recovery, remembering, and reckoning. It is a reminder that among the various registers of meaning, the individual is our entry point into the social” (266). It is this strong claim and intention, perhaps—evident, if incompletely achieved, throughout the ethnography—that makes the strange absence of detailed individuals in Wagner’s book stand out: we are introduced to a handful of key characters, including Nura and Hajra, the leaders of Women of Srebrenica, and Enver and Senad, the case managers whom Wagner accompanies on family visits; but we never get to know them in depth, their histories and motivations, their despairs and aspirations. In this Wagner is, no doubt, doing her best to respect the privacy of her friends and fieldwork interlocutors, even as she works to evoke the layered emotions and trajectories of their experiences in general terms—a task in which she is undeniably successful. Yet the power of certain scenes, in which, for example, Enver and Senad work through the final approval of an identification with a bereaved mother (who never appears again in the book), make one wonder how much more effective an ethnography could have been created by tracing at least—or perhaps only—one family and their missing relatives through the entire process, “from grave to grave,” coming to know their experiences and struggles, and the meaning of the new technology to them, personally and in depth.

It is hard to fault Wagner for erring, instead, on the side of respect for the privacy and the grief of her informants, of modesty in argument and of careful, sober diligence in the act of building an ethnographic record of a new and important science. In documenting the ways the Bosnian DNA technology breaks new ground, Wagner herself breaks little, ethnographically or theoretically. Yet this choice is itself courageous, allowing Wagner to produce a remarkable ethnography: a thorough, sensitive, and moving record of an extraordinary and wrenching human and scientific story.

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