



Anthropology Section - 2016

A34 Widening the Scope and Expanding the Field: An Argument for Sociocultural Anthropology's Seat at the Table

Sarah Wagner, George Washington University, Dept of Anthropology, 2110 G Street, NW, Washington, DC 20052*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how sociocultural anthropological studies of forensic science, particularly forensic anthropology applied in contexts of ongoing violence and post-conflict communities, elucidates the co-constituting relationship between science and society.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by fostering dialogue among members of its subdisciplines, especially physical and sociocultural anthropology, about the general field and its theoretical momentum concerning issues pertinent to the recovery and postmortem identification of missing/unknown persons.

Taking forensic anthropological investigations into human rights abuses and missing persons populations as the point of departure, this presentation argues for a more nuanced, theoretically informed understanding of how forensic science is executed and how its results affect lives and communities.¹ In doing so, this presentation builds on two conversations already begun within the Anthropology Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS): the 2014 decision to change the section name from “Physical Anthropology” to “Anthropology,” in which members acknowledged that sociocultural anthropologists were actively contributing to the general field through ethnographic analyses of forensic work; and the set of presentations on “Theory in Forensic Anthropology” delivered at the 2015 AAFS Annual Scientific Meeting. These initial discussions underscored the importance of considering the scope and application of forensic anthropology and which theoretical questions underpin its work.

This presentation goes further, asserting the basic premise that science is never apolitical; rather, it is situated within a specific sociohistorical context and bound up in co-productive relations of political will, social values, cultural practice, and economic conditions.² Two examples support this claim. The first is drawn from the forensic efforts to identify the 30,000 missing persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically the more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) men and boys missing as a result of the Srebrenica genocide, where scientific success has yet to translate into enduring sociopolitical repair, despite the goals of its international sponsors.³ In the Srebrenica case, tensions between individual (and individuated) identity and collective ethnonational identity are often exacerbated during the annual mass burial of identified victims in the communal cemetery of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial. Data culled from 12 years of ethnographic analysis of the identification efforts and its results, including the 20th anniversary of the genocide, July 11, 2015, document this tension.

The second example is of the United States military's decades-long efforts to account for its service members listed as Missing In Action (MIA) and presumed dead from the major conflicts of the past century. Recent attempts at reorganizing the government agencies tasked with MIA accounting make manifest the politics of national commemoration influencing not only the inner workings of forensic science but also how these results are perceived by the wider public.⁴ Debates surrounding externally dictated quotas for annual identifications, acceptable margins of error, and the role of forensic anthropology in the scientific process expose the politics of a cost-efficient model of MIA accounting.

In examining the co-productive relations between science and society (postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and contemporary United States), this presentation demonstrates that forensic anthropological efforts to document human rights abuses and/or recover and identify missing or unknown persons cannot be separated — analytically or practically — from the sociopolitical and economic conditions in which they unfold. In failing to recognize the contingent nature of knowledge production, scientists, policy makers, and the wider public risk overlooking, in particular, the political consequences of these forensic efforts.



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Reference(s):

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 3. Wagner S. *To know where he lies: DNA technology and the search for Srebrenica's missing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
 4. McEvers K., McClosky M. Grave science. *NPR/ProPublica*, March 6, 2014. <http://apps.npr.org/grave-science/>; and Mauriello T. The long journey home. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 22, 2015, <http://newsinteractive.post-gazette.com/longform/stories/thehomecoming/1/>.
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Sociocultural Anthropology, Missing Persons, Politics