etnološka tribina 43, vol. 50, 2020., str. 182-196

REFUGE(E)S IN THE DIGITAL DIASPORA

Reimagining and Recreating Ethnically Cleansed Villages as Cyber Villages

Hariz Halilovich
Iris Kučuk
Social and Global Studies Centre, Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne

DOI: 10.15378/1848-9540.2020.43.08 original scientific paper, submitted 16. 3. 2020., accepted 18. 7. 2020.

Based on digital and conventional ethnography, this paper discusses how Bosnian refugees utilize digital technologies and new media to recreate, synchronize and sustain their identities and memories in the aftermath of ethnic cleansing and genocide and in the contexts of their new emplacements and home-making practices in the diaspora. In addition to discussing representations of displacement and emplacement in the "digital age", the paper also aims to make a contribution to the understanding and application of digital ethnography as an emerging method of inquiry in anthropology and related social science and humanistic disciplines. While some researchers see digital ethnography as a form of research based exclusively online, it is also crucial to understand the online world in the context of the real world – made of real people, places and social relations.

Keywords: refugees, digital diaspora, cyber villages, digital ethnography, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

The current media reports about the Syrian refugee crisis in many ways resemble the stories about the plight of Bosnian refugees more than two decades ago. At the time, millions of people from across Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter "Bosnia") fled their homes, looking for safety in European countries such as Austria, Germany and Sweden, as well as beyond Europe. While many of them believed that their displacement was of a temporary nature until the situation in their homeland had calmed down, the longer they stayed in the countries of their temporary refuge, the less certain the likelihood of their return became. Over the last two-and-a-half decades, the "former" Bosnian refugees have become a distinct transnational migrant community, who represent one of the largest and globally most widespread migrant groups from the former Yugoslavia (Halilovich et al. 2018; Valenta and Ramet 2011). Besides embodied interactions, their collective identities and memories as members of the global Bosnian diaspora – and people coming from and living in very particular localities – have been increasingly mediated, performed and sustained through the internet and mobile technologies. Unlike contemporary refugee groups, who use

mobile technologies to organize, track and record their escape while it is still in progress (Valenta et al. 2020), Bosnian refugees came in contact with these technologies much later in their "refugee cycle", i.e. only after they had immigrated, or settled in their countries of refuge (Halilovich 2013a; Holmes and Castañeda 2016). However, due to a very broad dispersion of refugees from Bosnia, which involves at least three continents – Europe, North America and Australia, information and communication technologies were found to be useful and they were adopted at a very fast pace and a high rate across a broad spectrum of different generations. These technologies and social media continue to play an important role in how the Bosnian diaspora operates on a day-to-day basis.

In the process of adopting the internet as their preferred medium of communication and reconnection with the members of their pre-war local communities, many of the refugee groups from Bosnia have been able to reclaim their local identities and memories by creating vibrant translocal cyber villages as an alternative to the places lost. Usually starting as an individual exchange of scanned photographs, documents and other records between people coming from the same place, many such grassroots initiatives have grown into sophisticated portals and online repositories of documents, images and stories about their "former" local places. Some of the places destroyed during the 1992–95 Bosnian War now only exist in cyberspace and as a part of the digitally mediated social relations of those who identify with the lost places.

Historical background

The 1990s will be widely remembered as a decade of rapid globalization in which digital technologies radically reshaped how we interact, work, trade, access and disseminate information, and even how we think about our personal and collective selves. While some saw the last decade of the twentieth century as the start of the end of history as we knew it, as Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed, others talked about a new era marked by the compression of time and space (Harvey 1990) in which the world would become a global village (McLuhan and Powers 1992). However, for many people from villages and towns across Bosnia – and for many other people from the region now known as the former Yugoslavia – the 1990s foremost came to symbolize a decade of violence, social fragmentation and displacement. In addition to immense personal tragedies that involved the loss of human life and property, for many Bosnians the tragic events of the 1990s have also become emblematic of the loss of their place-based, political and social identities, and certainties (Halilovich 2008; Lee et al. 2019).

As was widely reported at the time, the 1992–95 Bosnian War created the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War Two (Zitnanova 2014). While close to a million Bosnian citizens became internally displaced persons, a further 1.5 million

became refugees and asylum seekers predominantly in the Western European countries and Scandinavia, and later on in the USA, Canada and Australia (Halilovich et al. 2018; MHRR BiH 2014). Their lives were irreversibly changed not by the digital revolution of the 1990s, but by becoming refugees, immigrants and members of the Bosnian worldwide diaspora. Nonetheless, digital technologies and new media have had – and continue to have – a significant impact on recreating, reimagining and reimaging their shattered social worlds.

Bosnia, along with Rwanda, might have even tainted the reputation of the 1990s as a decade of global digital revolution, because this decade will also be remembered for mass violence against "ethnic others" on a scale not seen since World War Two (Cushman 2004). The violence in Bosnia culminated in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide in which more than 8000 Bosniak men and boys were executed by the Serb forces (Nettelfield and Wagner 2014). Combined with the ethnic cleansing[1] campaigns of the towns and villages of eastern, northern and western Bosnia, in which more than 100,000 people perished and close to 40,000 were declared as missing, this episode continues to shape the memories and identities of many Bosnian families and communities in both Bosnia and among its worldwide diaspora (RDC 2007; Halilovich 2019).

According to the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MHRR BiH 2014), the Bosnian expatriate community – or the Bosnian diaspora – presently includes about 2.4 million people, who live in approximately 100 countries around the world. The vast majority of them became migrants as a result of forced displacement during the 1990s Bosnian War. While the emigration trend continued during the post-war period up until the early 2000s, generally through what is called "chain migration", the emigration from Bosnia subsided. However, it did not cease completely.

A note on method: onsite and online ethnography

While adhering to their tradition, and practicing ethnography as a holistic research approach, contemporary ethnographers are increasingly challenged with finding appropriate ways of studying new forms of technologically mediated human relations and experiences, including those of people on the move, i.e. migrants and refugees (Brinkerhoff 2009; Halilovich 2013a). Digital technologies have created new possibilities for anthropologists and other social researchers to investigate displacement and emplacement – as well as new challenges – not only onsite but also online (Hickey-Moody 2020). In an age when connectivity, as much as mobility, has become one of the key features of migrant realities, any research into social histories of contemporary migration, forced or otherwise, needs to take into account the role

[1] "Ethnic cleansing" is a euphemism for genocide that emerged as a term and policy during the war in Bosnia and was widely practiced by the Serb militias across the country during the 1990s. Its equivalent is the policy of "racial hygiene" propagated by the Nazis during the 1940s.

of new media and digital technologies in migrant communities and their everyday realities; hence digital ethnography becomes a logical extension of conventional ethnography rather than its substitute. As such, conventional and digital ethnography, or onsite and online fieldwork, should not be seen as separate but rather as complementary since ethnography still continues to be concerned with social stories, and its epistemological basis remains unchanged (Hjorth et al. 2017; Horst 2016; Pink et al. 2016). As such, digital ethnography – with its digital field sites comprised of text, video or images that reflect social relations dispersed across many nations, cities or intellectual geographies – expands beyond the internet to capture social lives and transactions mediated by communication technologies such as the mobile phone that have become crucial to maintaining social networks and relationships across the world (Horst 2016).

In practice, this has meant that researchers have been required to expand and modify their research methods and techniques in order to capture and understand the new forms of being and acting of the displaced, such as the use of mobile phones, video and the internet. For many migrants and refugees, applications such as web 2.0 tools, websites, online portals, YouTube, blogs and forums have become the norm rather than the exception (Gilliland and Halilovich 2016). Thus, like conventional ethnography, its digital version aims to unveil the multiplicity of meanings of social relationships, experiences and practices by individuals and groups, now mediated electronically. While ethnographic research has always been associated with fieldwork, usually "out there somewhere", more recently ethnographers have been able to access their "field" and observe their participants from afar by engaging in online research. These new opportunities have also created new methodological, epistemological and ontological challenges for ethnographers conducting online research. One of the main questions that relates to all the three sets of challenges with which the researchers are confronted is how to "stay put" and establish their physical and literal presence in a field that is by definition fluid, unstable and changeable – that is, virtual.

While acknowledging that it would be hard to come up with a finite answer to this question, when dealing with this particular challenge, the approach we have adopted in online research is to position and interpret the "sites" and interactions in cyberspace in relation to the actual places and actors in real space. As described in this paper, for many refugees the cyberspace and "digital social networks" are deeply meaningful and often the only possible alternative available in reconstructing and maintaining a sense of belonging to their original communities. Hence, this paper argues that research into contemporary forced displacement most often requires elements of both conventional and digital ethnography – or "on-site and on-line fieldwork" (Postill 2011).

While digital ethnography, as a research method takes the ethnographer beyond geographically situated places into the domain of cyberspace and digital media, it ultimately expands beyond mere data collection on the internet; it also transforms into media through which narratives of mixed forms of existence – real/virtual, now/then and here/there – are being told and created. As an end-product, digital ethnography

enables the ethnographer to move beyond text-based ethnography by presenting their findings in a multimedia form involving not only text, but also video, sounds and pictures. Use of hyperlinks embedded in online text is gradually reframing our use of references and notes with the ability to link the reader directly to our data as well as to other resources referred to in the text; and this turns the traditionally passive reader into an engaged viewer, observer of and commentator on the issues discussed. The contemporary reader of digital ethnographies is also able to interact with the content and the author by engaging in online forums, leaving comments and making suggestions. Unlike conventional ethnographies and academic papers written for a limited audience of academics and experts, digital ethnographies and other online publications can now be accessed by anyone with access to the internet and public libraries. This can further enrich our ethnographies – nowadays, our most rigorous readers are very often our own research participants who can provide us with valuable feedback and verify our findings, adding an additional emic perspective. Moreover, many ethnographers have also increasingly been using blogs as a form for online field notes and reflexive journals, in which they provide their participants, research collaborators and academic and wider audiences with information about the fieldwork and data collection while the research process is still underway.

Understandably, this new approach requires rethinking ethical concerns such as informed consent, data protection and confidentiality, so as to exclude the possibility of adverse effects on research participants that relate to the publicized online material (Halilovich 2008). In the context of this paper, it should not be forgotten that forced migrants, or refugees, are by definition highly vulnerable people; thus their personal safety must remain the ethical imperative for every researcher, especially those using the internet and other digital technologies for data collection and dissemination of research findings (Hjorth et al. 2017). As the institutional ethics committees and individual disciplines are still cataloguing and debating the ethical challenges related to online research, as with onsite research, it is ultimately the responsibility of every researcher to be proactive in assessing and resolving any potential risks when conducting such online research.

The Bosnian diaspora: from ethnic cleansing to cyber villages

To different degrees, as in other diasporic communities, the Bosnian diaspora has been consolidated around the shared past, collective narrative and migrant experience rooted in both social reality and the social imaginary, which provides a basis for a distinctive group identity (Halilovich 2013b). In the process of diaspora formation, a variety of formal and informal social networks play an important role (Čapo 2019). Formal networks are usually defined around a particular aspect of shared identities such as nationality, ethnicity or religion, which are forms of more abstract or "imagined" group identities, as Benedict Anderson (1983) famously put it. On

the other hand, there are many more informal networks with much stronger social glue representing "real" relationships based on family background, kinship, friendship and place of origin such as a particular region, city, village or neighbourhood (Halilovich and Efendic 2019). These bonds represent important cohesive factors among the diaspora as they very often link different individuals and groups to a wide global network of likeminded people, a phenomenon described as "translocalism" (Čapo and Halilovich 2013). The idea of translocalism both challenges and complements the discourse of transnationalism in migration studies (Glick Schiller 2008; Vertovec 1999). By pointing out that transnationalism has been regarded as a key field of study in international migration, Al-Ali (2003) also identifies a number of limitations of transnationalism when it comes to refugees and forced displacement. She argues that transnationalism tends to put an emphasis on state and national borders, while often ignoring social factors and identities rooted in a particular locality, culture and experiences. In many cases, these factors play a decisive role in migration patterns – and digital technologies have made them even more significant, as they challenge the spatial, political and cultural boundaries that nation states have traditionally posed.

Such "translocal" factors are evident in the worldwide Bosnian diaspora both in the real and cyberworld. For instance, as described in this paper, the largest number of former residents of the municipality of Zvornik (a regional centre in eastern Bosnia) – who were forcibly displaced as part of the ethnic cleansing policy – today live in Austria, mainly in and around Vienna (Tretter et al. 1994; Halilovich 2013a). In addition, St. Louis in the USA, among other locations, has become home to a community from Žepa, in eastern Bosnia (McCarthy 2000; Halilovich 2013b). These and many other similar settlement patterns have been created due to social networks based on family, friendships and local communities from the former homeland.

While the displaced groups from Bosnia have tended to resettle in clusters based on their pre-war local social networks, digital connectivity has enabled them to negotiate their new diasporic realities beyond geography and real-time limitations, effectively creating a vibrant "digital diaspora" that provides its members with a sense of interconnectedness and communal continuity (Hozic 2001). Unlike the traditional understanding of diaspora, the Bosnian "digital diaspora" also enables individuals who remain in Bosnia to be part of "their own" diaspora groups. The two examples from the digital Bosnian diaspora described below demonstrate how digital technologies have shaped how Bosnian migrants and refugees sustain and perform their identities and memories across different space and time boundaries.

Zvornik blues in Vienna

Austria's capital was a point of arrival as well as a transit city for many Bosnian refugees during the 1990s (Halilovich 2005). In total numbers, Vienna accommodated

the largest number of Bosnian refugees in Austria. The first large wave of Bosnian refugees arrived in Vienna in the summer of 1992 (Franz 2000). While they came from many different parts of Bosnia, the largest single group were victims of ethnic cleansing from the municipality of Zvornik (Tretter et al. 1994). They were escaping some of the most brutal atrocities taking place in the region at the time.

This ethnic cleansing included a range of genocidal acts ranging from killings to illegal detentions, torture, rape and expulsion of whole populations from their ancestral homes – and these acts had a clear ethnic pattern (Bećirević 2014; Cigar 1995). Of the targeted "ethnic other", i.e. the Bosniak population of Zvornik, those who were not killed, or who did not manage to flee, were put on cargo trains and buses and transported to the border between Serbia and Hungary. Via Hungary, some 20,000 Zvornik survivors of this ethnic cleansing reached Austria in the summer of 1992 (Franz 2000; Tretter et al. 1994). Most of them were accommodated in refugee hostels in and around Vienna. The strong presence of the Zvornik pre-war *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) community was an important factor in why so many Zvornik refugees chose Austria – and Vienna in particular – as their preferred refuge destination (Franz 2000).

Among the 20,000 Bosnian refugees from Zvornik who arrived in Vienna in 1992, there were also people like Marinko, who did not fit in with the "ethnic profile" of the refugee group. Marinko – who up to 1992 worked as a primary school teacher in a Bosniak village called Sjenokos near Zvornik – was an ethnic Serb. When, in May 1992, the armed Serb militias attacked the village, killing, rounding up and expelling its residents, Marinko, at the time in his late twenties, chose to stay with his pupils and their families rather than use his "ethnic privilege" and be spared from violence and humiliation by siding with the Serb "co-ethnics" who were attacking the village. By putting his moral principles and his own safety above his ethnicity, he exposed himself to the additional risk of being regarded as an ethnic traitor. While he still claims that this was nothing heroic and just something that every teacher in his position would have done, his fellow Zvorničani (people from Zvornik) in Vienna have never forgotten what Marinko the teacher did in 1992. The day Marinko was expelled with the villagers of Sjenokos was also the last day he taught in a classroom.

During our fieldwork in the Zvornik area, between 2015 and 2019, we visited the abandoned and destroyed villages where Marinko and many of his fellow Zvorničani lived until 1992. What we found there were layers of material destruction – the looting, shelling and burning down of homes – that hinted at the immense suffering that the people who once lived there must have gone through. Over the years, that destruction had become almost completely concealed due to nature's influence, with trees now growing directly out of former homes and lush vegetation having turned the once idyllic villages in the Drina valley (or Podrinje) into surreal miniature jungles, with hardly any traces of human life left. In addition to the material destruction, many locations around Zvornik have also become known as sites at which the victims of the Srebrenica genocide were summarily executed in July 1995 (Halilovich 2017). Several mass graves of the genocide victims were uncovered close to these former villages.

Among the overgrown ruins of destroyed homes that dominate the landscape in eastern Bosnia, the school building in the village of Sjenokos was still standing almost intact. The single-storey building with its red roof, fading white walls and a long row of frontal windows resembles most other local schools in the region built between the two wars: World War Two and the 1992–95 Bosnian War. Coming closer to the school, we noticed a complete absence of children's voices; or more precisely, there was a complete absence of any human activity in and around this former school. The children – the descendants of the parents who once learned their first letters and numbers here – were now students of primary schools in Vienna, and many other places far away from Zvornik. Unlike the children, the once popular teacher from Sjenokos has not been able to find himself a new school in Vienna, or in any other place ever since leaving Bosnia.

For the last 27 years, Marinko – a former teacher, a poet, a keen blogger and a peace activist – has been stretched, teetering between unemployment, underemployment and earning an income mainly from working as a labourer and a carer in one of the many nursing homes in Vienna. However, these jobs, and his often prolonged periods of joblessness, have not altered any of his "old" identities. Among his fellow "Bosnian Austrians" from Zvornik – many of whom are his former students – Marinko is still their most popular teacher and poet. Via his blog *Provincijski razgovori/Provincial conversations*[2] and his YouTube channel, Marinko's poetry also reaches Zvorničani, and other audiences, in other destinations across the globe.

Offering rich primary "data" – in the form of text, video, voice and photographs – on Zvorničani in Vienna as well as their lives prior to, during and in the aftermath of their hometown's ethnic cleansing, Marinko's blog was an important site for the digital ethnography that we conducted. Marinko's online poetry in a multimedia format does not only lament the past and how life once was; it also deals with many important issues and challenges faced by himself, his fellow Zvorničani and other Bosnian migrants – as well as more generally by any migrant in Austria. Some of the themes of his poetry include unemployment, discrimination, and prejudices against foreigners (*Ausländer*) in Austria. This socially engaged poetry is written and performed by Marinko in German, in a distinct Viennese dialect. As with the other research site described in this paper, the digital ethnography of Zvorničani in Vienna complemented fieldwork in the actual site by adding an important dimension to understanding the translocal communities following the forced displacement, and to gaining insights into the "new" lives of community members in the places in which they resettled.

For Marinko, this "new" life – especially one that is performed in an online context – is in many ways an affirmation of the "old" life and the pre-war values from back home. By continuing to be recognized and admired by his "former" Bosniak neighbours, he is not only able to continue living his "true" identities as a teacher, poet and political activist, but can also escape the limitations of his "real" jobs and his immigrant status in Austria.

[2] http://www.yurope.com/people/marinko/yugo/index.html (accessed 5. 3. 2020).

Despite the fact that over the last 27 years their status has legally changed from de facto refugees to *Gastarbeiter* to, more recently, Austrian citizens, in reality many of the displaced Zvorničani – like Marinko – are where they were when they first arrived in Austria: working in underpaid jobs for which they are usually overqualified, living in almost ghettoized *Ausländer* (foreigner) parts of the city, building houses or buying apartments in their "old homeland" in which they do not live for most of the year. While this is how Zvorničani in Vienna are perceived by and in relation to others, they comprise a very vibrant community of their own: they maintain a closely knit social network with regular communal gatherings, festive events, humanitarian activities and commemorations. Through such performances – in both real and cyberspace – they continue to live and imagine their local Zvornik identity despite the fact that they will most likely never return permanently to their lost hometown. Thus, with the help of digital technologies, many Viennese Zvorničani are effectively living multiple "temporary lives" with social presences spanning across both the real and cyberspace, as well as the past and present.

Online fieldwork @ Žepa

Žepa Online offers another story about digital diaspora and an alternative place that has been a site for our digital ethnography. As with the case of Zvornik, we have also visited the real Žepa, or what is left of it, and met with people from Žepa who live in the diaspora.

For much of its long history, Žepa used to be an important town, or more precisely a cluster of some 15 villages and hamlets, nested in a remote mountainous region on the edges of the river Drina canyon, in eastern Bosnia, some 150 kilometres upstream from Zvornik. What we observed during our several fieldwork visits to Žepa over the last five years has been very reminiscent of what we saw in the Zvornik region and other parts of ethnically cleansed Podrinje: the wilderness has taken over most of the destroyed villages. Parts of the gutted homes protrude from the newly grown forests that have taken over complete areas and made them hardly accessible. In contrast to the still visible human-made destruction, partially covered by the green vegetation, the emerald-green Drina and the steep cliffs of its canyon make Žepa look like a spectacular tourist destination. Unsurprisingly, one of the few reconstructed buildings is a small motel that overlooks the mesmerizing turquoise river. Our host, a part-time returnee who has been spending his summer months there for the last 15 years, tells us about Žepa's long tradition and rich history as well as its own local cultural norms, dialect and distinct way of life. Known as proud highlanders, the people of Žepa were associated with many both positive and negative stereotypes, as proud and stubborn people. With his historical novel *The Bridge in Žepa*, the Nobel-Prize-winning author Ivo Andrić may have contributed to such somewhat exotic perceptions of people from Žepa that still persist within and be-

yond Bosnia. The old stone bridge from the Ottoman era, which inspired Andrić's writing, is still there and remains an inspiring historical and architectural piece to occasional visitors like us, the two researchers, who wandered through the remains of Žepa in the summer of 2019. However, the original and century-long purpose of the bridge as a safe conduit to enable people to cross the river largely ceased in 1995, when Žepa was emptied of its traditional inhabitants.

In terms of ethnicity and religion, Žepa residents or Žepljaci were (and still are) Bosniaks and Muslims. Bordering Serbia and being inhabited by non-Serbs sealed Žepa's fate in 1992, when Žepa was attacked by heavy artillery and bombed by Serbian jets (Bećirević 2014; Cigar 1995; Kurtić 2006). Between 1992 and 1995, Žepa was completely besieged by the Serb forces, separated from the territories under the control of the Bosnian government and practically cut off from the rest of the world. Like Srebrenica, in July 1995, Žepa was overrun by Serb troops, with the Serb General Mladić personally commanding the operation (Pomfret 1995). However, unlike the mass executions of men and boys at Srebrenica, most Žepa men survived, some by fighting their way through until reaching the distant town of Kladanj, others by crossing the Drina into Serbia and surrendering themselves to Serbia's army and police. Those who crossed into Serbia were detained in improvised prisons by the Serbian police, and many were tortured and abused (Kurtić 2006). After being registered by the International Committee of Red Cross as Prisoners of War (even though most of the men were civilians), they were allowed to resettle "in third countries", but not to return to Bosnia and their native Žepa. The US was willing to accept the detainees and most of the surviving men from Žepa ended up in St. Louis and Atlanta. Over the following months and years, many members of their families who remained in Bosnia and other countries joined them. This effectively created a chain migration, with relatives, friends and neighbours sponsoring more fellow Žepljaci to migrate to the US. Today, St. Louis probably has the largest concentration of people from Žepa anywhere in the world.

While most villagers survived, their village ceased to exist as a social place; during the Serb offensive in July 1995, Žepa was completely ethnically cleansed. It was depopulated and the place was literally erased from the map: all houses, administrative buildings and mosques were looted and then destroyed. Nonetheless, the survivors from Žepa who now live thousands of miles from their original village proved that places are made of people and their social and affective relations, rather than of bricks and mortar. They recreated their sense of belonging to their local place through their relationships with each other as well as by sharing their memories in the forms of photographs, documents and stories of their old home village with other fellow Žepljaci now living in St. Louis and worldwide.

As we personally witnessed, last in July 2019, Žepa remains largely in ruins. There are many destroyed houses, and sometimes whole hamlets, completely overgrown with vegetation, and so it is even hard to recognize that people lived there up until some 25 years ago. However, Žepa has another reality: for anyone interested in finding out about Žepa on the internet, *Žepa Online* and the affiliated Facebook group

appear as representing an intact and vibrant village full of human activity, a place that one would love to visit or live in.[3] There are pictures of the village's iconic buildings and houses, the legendary Žepa bridge, monuments and cultural symbols as well as photos of the pristine natural surroundings. One can engage in chats and discussion forums with residents of this online village, and also read opinion pieces posted by renowned Žepa intellectuals living in different places.

Along with embedded videos with local music and satirical prose, there are also political discussions taking place, as well as options for conducting more one-to-one conversations or a group chat on the *Žepa Forum*. An online library hosts a free collection of e-books about Žepa as well as references for other relevant publications and information about how they can be ordered. *Žepa Online* also contains an archive of the village's history, which includes extensive records of what happened there during the Serbian aggression of 1992–95. One can visit an online memorial and read about those who lost their lives during the war. Next to it is an obituary for Žepljaci who died more recently in various corners of the globe. In recent years, since a handful of Žepljaci have started returning to their home villages, *Žepa Online* regularly informs its readers of individual and communal projects taking place in the "real" Žepa. In so doing, it acts as a hub through which people can get involved in humanitarian and community work aimed at supporting their fellow Žepljaci either back in Bosnia, in St. Louis or elsewhere. Today, *Žepa Online* is more than a resource for people with origins in a village in eastern Bosnia; it is a place where Žepa identity is asserted and performed in a variety of ways.

Understanding refugee emplacements in cyberspace

As the described ethnographies demonstrate, by utilizing digital technologies the deterritorialized Bosnian communities of Zvornik and Žepa have been able to recreate and maintain social links with the members of their original communities in the diaspora as well as with their *matica* – i.e. with their original hometown, village, region and homeland. This online connectedness gives the translocal networks both a transnational and a virtual character. Žepljaci, Zvorničani and members of other Bosnian translocal communities regularly "meet" in cyberspace, on one of the many websites, forums and groups devoted to a particular place in the old homeland, but many of them also meet in real space in social clubs in places where they live or travel to. Sometimes they blend the two worlds – real and virtual – and perform traditional social events such as casually catching up over a cup of coffee through live-streaming. The affective dimensions of such digital encounters are important in nurturing kinship relations and expectations across different generations, sometime spread across different continents and several time zones. Loretta Baldassar and Raelene Wild-

[3] See: https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Interest/%C5%BDepa-398133808676/ and http://www.zepa-online.com/ (accessed 5. 3. 2020).

ing (2019) have written how digital technologies have been used to provide long-distance care in migrant communities, a practice they have termed "digital kinning". On several occasions, we observed these practices among members of the Bosnian diaspora. Among others, they involve regular video calls and "peeking" into the everyday realities of their family and community members living in different, distant places. Such direct and indirect forms of interaction, enabled by online means of communication, imply that connectivity, but not necessarily mobility, has become one of the main features of contemporary diaspora groups such as Bosnians.

For ethnographers of forced migration, it is critical to identify and follow these new threads in both real and cyberspace, while keeping in mind that their primary focus remains on their participants, i.e. on real people and their actions (Maitland 2018). This is in line with the established anthropological perspective that places an emphasis on practice and agency, i.e. on the experiences, feelings, meanings, imagination, narratives, metaphors and social networks of the people who are the subjects of anthropological inquiry. As Pink and colleagues (2016) point out, ethnography is still about telling social stories. In a most practical way, digital ethnography has enabled researchers to remain engaged with their research sites from a distance and to explore and be a part of the social networks of their participants in a way that disregards the constraints of space and time (Hjorth et al. 2017).

As "the web" – or the "digital world" created on the "world wide web" – is replicating, supplementing, sustaining and, in the case of forced displacements, often substituting the real world, in some ways, digital ethnography can be seen as a contemporary version of multi-sited ethnography. In line with George Marcus' view of multi-sited ethnography – requiring the researcher to follow the people, the metaphors, the plots, the stories, the biographies and the conflict (Marcus 1995) – digital ethnography requires the researchers to follow the same threads via the links, tags, hyperlinks, blogs, search engines and a plethora of other paths and nodes in cyberspace. Like multi-sited ethnography "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations" (ibid.: 90), digital ethnography in refugee studies represents a qualitative study of performances of identities mediated electronically, which represents socially networked places made up of people dispersed across many localities as a result of forced displacement (Landzelius 2006).

Drawing upon Ulf Hannerz's ideas about studying down, up, sideways, through, backwards, forwards, away and at home by tracing webs of relations between actors, institutions and discourses (Hannerz 2006), the "digital exploration" described in this paper goes beyond real and imagined fixities and certainties of place and cannot be seen in isolation or disentangled from the life stories and experiences of research participants. Retracing and being a part of these paths has involved a journey that took us regularly beyond the realm of the "real" world and into the domain of its cyber, virtual or digital enactments. Consequently, the explorations described in this paper go beyond real and imagined fixities and certainties of place and cannot be seen in isolation or disentangled from the life stories and experiences of our research participants.

Digital ethnographies of forced migration are inevitably also concerned with the actors and content beyond the digital or cybersphere. As several refugee scholars have argued, for contemporary refugee groups, cyberspace acts as both an extension of the places and networks in real space and often as their replica and the only alternative left (Halilovich 2013a; Landzelius 2006; Maitland 2018; Lenette 2019). Therefore, when researching any form of mobility today, we advocate for the adoption of a "mixed ethnography" approach – integrating elements of both conventional and digital ethnography, or "onsite" and "online" fieldwork – to interpret the sites and interactions in cyberspace in relation to actual places, issues and actors in real space.

Conclusion

Starting as a response to forced displacement and the systematic destruction of local communities and their memories and identities, Bosnian cyber villages are now flourishing on the internet, mediated through digital technology and acting as alternate worlds and places of defiance as well as vibrant social hubs for interactions and performances of distinct local identities, memories and spatial practices within the Bosnian diaspora. The existence of cyber villages demonstrates that, even when it is reduced down – or elevated – to the level of an ideal, *the place called home* remains a symbolic anchor, a metaphor around which narratives of belonging and memories of home are constructed and performed. As two of the many contemporary ethnographers who have put up their virtual tents in the midst of these cyber villages, rather than advocating for an end of ethnography as we have known it, we argue that contemporary social researchers should practice and interpret digital ethnography foremost as an extension of the existing ethnographic traditions – from Malinowskian fieldwork to the multi-sited ethnography that George Marcus (1995) advocated.

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Zbjegovi u digitalnoj dijaspori. Zamišljanje i kreiranje etnički očišćenih mjesta u virtualnom prostoru

U radu se, iz perspektive digitalne i konvencionalne etnografije, razmatraju načini na koje izbjeglice iz Bosne i Hercegovine koriste digitalne tehnologije i društvene mreže kako bi ponovo stvorili, sinkronizirali i održali svoje identitete i sjećanja nakon etničkog čišćenja i genocida, a u kontekstu novih mjesta življenja i praksi stvaranja doma u dijaspori. Uz diskusiju o tome kako su nova mjesta življenja i iseljeništvo predstavljeni u "digitalnom dobu", rad također doprinosi boljem razumijevanju i primjeni digitalne etnografije kao novije istraživačke metode u antropologiji i srodnim humanističkim i društvenim znanostima. Iako neki istraživači vide digitalnu etnografiju kao istraživanje koje se zasniva isključivo na *online* istraživanju, od izuzetne je važnosti promatrati *online* svijet u kontekstu stvarnog svijeta, koji je sačinjen od stvarnih ljudi, mjesta i društvenih odnosa.

Ključne riječi: izbjeglice, digitalna dijaspora, virtualna sela, digitalna etnografija, Bosna i Hercegovina