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Ethics, Epistemologies, and Humanitarianism:

Exploring Alternative Ways of Knowing About Missing Persons in Post-War Azerbaijan.

Introduction

"I just hate fortune-tellers", remarked a senior humanitarian worker at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who had closely interacted with family members of missing persons in post-war Azerbaijan. This was in response to my discussion about Sarmaya aunty, who had found some solace in a story provided by a fortune-teller after her son's disappearance. "They mess things up and they deceive", he added. Sarmaya aunty's son Mahir disappeared during the First Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (1988-1994). My last visit to Sarmaya aunty took place in November 2022, and sadly, she passed away from a heart failure several weeks later. Although exhumations of unidentified human remains were underway in Azerbaijan at that time, no results had been announced prior to her passing. She held onto the knowledge imparted by the fortune-teller as truth and derived some comfort from it. This incident prompted me to delve deeper into the implications of humanitarian forensic positivism and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge over others. Based on a 12-month ethnographic fieldwork and my previous two-year experience as a humanitarian worker with the ICRC in post-war Azerbaijan, this paper aims to provide an answer to the following questions: Given the impossibility of conclusive knowledge, what kinds of alternative forms of knowing come to dominate our perception of reality? What forms of knowledge are prioritized by various institutional actors, and what implications do such prioritizations entail?

Humanitarian workers emphasize the immense challenge faced by family members of missing persons in post-war and post-disaster settings, highlighting the impossibility of achieving closure

and "moving on" in the absence of identifiable bodies. According to this perspective, the only means of attaining truth and closure is through the application of forensic technologies, which can provide scientific evidence to validate the fates of the missing individuals. However, in many contexts, even forensic technologies cannot guarantee a definitive resolution due to various factors such as the lack of political will, the inherent difficulty in locating the remains of those who are missing, or the unfortunate circumstance of family members passing away due to old age before exhumations and identifications can be completed.

During the First Nagorno-Karabakh war, a total of 3,890 people went missing on the Azerbaijani side, while some 400 individuals were registered as missing on the Armenian side. Azerbaijanis and Armenians coexisted side by side in the South Caucasus for many centuries, albeit not without tensions. Inter-ethnic violence erupted multiple times in the early 20th century, but was somewhat subdued with the establishment of the Soviet Union. However, the latter's nationality policies, which transformed the vast territory of the Soviet Union into a federation of nation-states, hindered the full embrace of the "friendship of peoples" ideology between the two ethnic groups. In the final decade of the Soviet Union, inter-ethnic tensions resurfaced. As a result of the First Nagorno-Karabakh war, both Armenia and Azerbaijan forcibly displaced members of the opposite ethnicity from their territories. The conflict is yet to find its resolution.

To address the aftermath of the conflict and assist the affected populations, ICRC has been actively engaged in Azerbaijan and Armenia. The organization is at the forefront of clarifying the fates of missing persons in post-war Azerbaijan[1]. From 2014 to 2022, the ICRC office in Azerbaijan collected DNA samples from thousands of family members of missing persons to aid in the

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[1] However, they emphasize that their work primarily revolves around supporting the government and fostering local capacities in order to avoid alienating the authorities.

identification of human remains. As a humanitarian worker, I participated in this process from 2017 to 2019. Prior to that, the organization gathered antemortem data, which is also intended for use in the identification process along with DNA samples.

At the time of writing this article, the Azerbaijani government is conducting exhumations of unknown graves. The extraction of DNA samples from the newly discovered human remains and their matching with samples collected from family members has just commenced. The identities of some of the remains were announced in August 2023. They were said to belong to fifteen individuals, who were registered as missing in Azerbaijan. However, the general public and families of missing persons are not fully informed or consulted regarding the ongoing exhumations. The information that is shared through the media is often speculative and tends to incite nationalist sentiments rather than providing insight into the exhumation process and the complexities of forensic work. It remains uncertain whether the identification work will be continued and if the remaining surviving family members will live to witness that day.

When collecting antemortem data and DNA samples from family members of missing persons, the International Committee of the Red Cross heavily relied on the emotional labor of the so-called accompaniers. The ICRC assigned accompaniers to families in each district of Azerbaijan, who were part of the psycho-social support program and themselves had missing family members. The organization decided that involving family members of the missing persons in the collection of antemortem data and DNA samples would greatly help establish rapport and trust in the process. Initially, the accompaniers were paid for their involvement, but their salaries ceased in 2020. However, the organization still expected them to play a crucial role in transmitting knowledge and providing emotional support to other family members in their respective districts. They were occasionally invited to Baku to meet with forensic experts and authorities and receive some

updates about the ongoing exhumation process. Afterward, they were expected to share this knowledge with families of missing persons in their districts. However, this process started to resemble a "broken telephone" scenario, as the accompaniers were ill-equipped to effectively transmit forensic knowledge due to their lack of training and understanding in complex and multidisciplinary forensic work. Additionally, logistical difficulties arose from their inability to afford travel to remote areas where many families resided. As the unpaid accompaniers were tasked with being the sole source of knowledge for thousands of family members of missing persons, a situation emerged where many people had no or incomplete awareness of the ongoing proceedings.

In my research conducted with family members of missing persons in post-war Azerbaijan, I have observed that other ways of knowing, such as dream narratives, fortune-telling, and visceral sensations, can provide some sense of comfort and a unique form of truth, albeit one of a rather delicate and fragile nature. The positivist foundations of forensic knowledge production, which prioritize scientific objectivity and empirical evidence, can often dismiss or overlook these alternative forms of knowing. The insistence on a singular, scientific form of knowing can undermine the experiences and perceptions of the families, limiting their agency and relegating their knowledge to the margins. This paper highlights the significance of recognizing and validating alternative forms of knowledge in understanding and addressing the needs of family members of missing persons. By acknowledging the importance of personal narratives, cultural beliefs, and social memory, humanitarian interventions can adopt a more holistic approach to supporting the family members of disappeared persons in post-war and post-disaster contexts. This approach recognizes the complex interplay between scientific knowledge and other ways of knowing, and it allows for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive response.

The idea of "closure" has been challenged by some anthropologists with regards to forensic involvement in different parts of the world. More specifically, Sarah Wagner's research (2015) focuses on the implications of receiving only partial remains of missing kin, which further hinders the capacity to come to terms with one's losses. The incomplete and fragmented nature of human remains and the absence of corporeal integrity challenges the ability to construct a complete narrative of loss. Similarly, in her study of the aftermaths of exhumations of unknown graves in Cyprus, Elizabeth A. Davis (2017) observed that "forensic knowledge of the deaths of the missing inadequately stands in for knowledge of the causes and circumstances of those deaths, hindering the closure offered to relatives by the CMP [the Committee for Missing Persons] and leaving their desire for truth and justice unsatisfied" (235). While forensic knowledge is certainly valuable, it has its limitations. The emphasis on the technical aspects of identification and cause of death may overshadow the broader political context in which these deaths occurred. In cases of conflict or human rights abuses, understanding the broader context is crucial for addressing the systemic issues that contributed to the disappearances and ensuring justice for the victims and their families.

The literature that explores the different culturally salient ways and mechanisms that families of missing persons employ to address their losses is rather limited. By examining the ways in which these cultural mechanisms interact with scientific knowledge and social meaning, this paper challenges the prevailing forensic universalist and positivist assumptions about closure. In doing so, I also apply the anthropological insights adopted from the study of experiences of uncertainty in the face of misfortune to think about why people resort to other ways of thinking, knowing, and doing things. As Susan Reynolds Whyte (1997) argues in her study on the pragmatics of uncertainty within the context of eastern Uganda, "Recalcitrant experience, non-compliant afflictions, and all the uncertainty and concern they engender, also dispose some people to other

modes of acting", and "people simply try other things in the hope they might help" (231). In this paper, I also develop the concept "speculative affordances" to describe the potential interpretations that families of missing persons derive from the environment of uncertainty and not-knowing, which are influenced by their prior experiences and the prevailing atmosphere of secrecy and bureaucratic incompetence.

Humanitarian forensic and psychological regimes of truth and positivist understanding of "closure"

The recognition of the importance of returning the remains of the deceased to their families in the aftermath of armed conflicts dates back to the first Geneva Convention of 1864, forming the core of international humanitarian law (IHL). Locating, exhuming, and identifying human remains after acts of mass violence have by now become central components of transnational discourses of human rights and humanitarianism as well as transitional justice practices (Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Rojas-Perez 2017; Sanford 2003; Wagner 2008; Rosenblatt 2010). In the 1990s, genetic analysis became an integral component of the identification process, supplementing existing methods. This advancement in technology has facilitated the identification of numerous human remains that were recovered from mass graves. As Francisco Ferrándiz and Antonius Robben (2015) observe: "DNA technology has revolutionized the forensic field, transforming biological identification almost into a fetish of sorts, and is responsible for new cultures and politics of identification and reparation" (9). What followed was the emergence of a forensic regime of truth based on "rigorous methods, evidence based findings, new forms of technical and digital imaging, scientific custody, electronic archive building, and increasingly standard DNA identification and its associated logics of genetic kinship and statistical probabilities" (ibid, 8).

The growing importance of exhumations for the achievement of transitional justice has pressured the ICRC, working to ensure the application of IHL in armed conflicts, to engage extensively with the consequences of these gruesome events. As a result, ICRC stepped up its commitment to ensuring that the families have "the right to know" what had happened to their missing relatives, including through inaugurating its forensics department in 2003 to guarantee the proper handling of human remains. Management of dead bodies is now an integral part of this humanitarian organization's involvement and response to disasters across the globe. The recent surge in exhumations in the aftermaths of violent events is in a way a response to the humanitarian ethics of care that "through resignification of death as human value" (Rojas-Perez 2017, 15) calls for a "a more effective disposal of the bodies of those who are either killed or "let die" in the name of protecting the body politic" (ibid, 16).

Such an approach resulted in the development of a universal moral imperative to exhume as part of a standardized humanitarian "kit", which is seen as "eminently portable, as suitable for one country or disaster as another" (Dunn 2017, 72). However, there are certain political consequences and institutional processes that are obscured when exhumation and identification of unknown remains stands in for the achievement of justice through the application of the forensic regime of truth and fetishization of dead bodies (Klinenberg 2001). Questioning corporeal epistemology with its widely held belief that social truths are inscribed on a body, Klinenberg (2001) calls attention to what the body can obscure, when it is turned into a core object of analysis. He thus presents a "cautionary tale for scholars who use body as a lens into the social" (122), making these bodies so visible that almost no one can see what had actually happened to them (ibid). It has also been acknowledged that the forensic technology's place in unearthing truths and effecting repair is rather complicated (Steadman and Wagner 2020), especially in the absence of trust in scientific

methods endorsed and applied by governments or institutions that have previously been either implicated in originary acts of violence or proved themselves to be inefficient in terms of clarifying the fates of disappeared persons.

This forensic regime of truth goes hand in hand with the psychological regime of truth established through humanitarian interventions. Together, they imagine a linear understanding of grieving and achieving closure in the aftermath of violent loss. These regimes of truth maintain that for the families of missing persons to achieve closure, it is essential to exhume unknown graves and return the families the remains of their missing kin. The latter will put an end to the ambiguity of loss and help the families return to 'normal' life. Such an approach automatically assumes that returning bones and bodies to the families of the victims following exhumations and identification of unknown remains will in itself be sufficient for the achievement of closure. It also renders invisible the political violence of massive deaths and relegates the issue of identification and proper burial of dead bodies to the private domain, including through reducing the experience of forced disappearance to the framework of trauma, which "has come to provide the present-day grid of intelligibility to govern the postconflict traffic of dead bodies" (Rojas-Perez 2017, 257).

In *Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) trace the emergence of humanitarian psychiatry as part of the new diffuse global concept of trauma, which "has formed within less than a decade, and which bears witness to an important shift in mental health care" (10). They observe how the scientific etiology, diagnostics, as well as approaches to rehabilitation of PTSD have since the 1980s been imported through humanitarian interventions in post-conflict and natural disaster settings to different cultural contexts. Rejecting the naturalization of the concept of trauma, the authors call for the importance of reflecting on how "it has become standard practice to send psychiatrists and psychologists to

places where people have been involved in or have witnessed dramatic events" (7-8). Along the similar, but more critical lines, Vanessa Pupavac (2001) speaks about the emergence of the so-called "therapeutic governance", where "viewing experiences through a therapeutic lens, trauma counseling, or what is known as psycho-social intervention, has become an integral part of the humanitarian response in wars" (358).

Interesting in this regard is the study by Isaias Rojas-Perez (2017) of forensic exhumations of mass graves in search of the bodies of victims of the 20-year internal war in Peru and the ways in which Quechua mothers of the disappeared relate to these forensic practices. Rojas-Perez develops the conceptualization of "subjunctive mourning" as a response of the Quechua mothers to the failure of forensic experts to deliver on their promises of recovering, identifying, and properly burying the bodies dumped in mass graves. Subjunctive mourning is a response to "an agonizing ambiguity of knowing, but not being certain, that the unknown human remains might belong to their missing relatives" (ibid, 226). In other words, in the absence of forensic and scientific ability to confirm the identities of the dead, the Quechua mothers articulate their mourning in the mode of "might be". Such a conceptualization of mourning blurs the boundaries embedded in linear understanding of dealing with one's losses, which is articulated through psychological and psychiatric practices of humanitarianism and which postulates that a healthy mourning process necessitates certainty (to be able to get over one's losses, one has to know). Such a linear understanding of the mourning process echoes Freudian distinction between melancholy and mourning and fails to account for the cases when melancholy and mourning, uncertainty and near-certainty, expressed in the mode of "might be", coexist within the same temporal framework.

This paper draws inspiration from Rojas-Perez's conceptualization of "subjunctive mourning" to show how the achievement of a sense of determinacy can also come along and coexist with a

lingering sense of uncertainty about one's missing kin. What happens in this space of ambivalence, when we look at it outside of humanitarian forensic and psychological regimes of truth, which postulate that locating, exhuming, and identifying human remains are the sole prerequisites for families to potentially "move on" in their lives?

Other ways of knowing

Sarmaya aunty

I met Sarmaya aunty for the first time in the summer of 2020. We sat beneath a tent in the yard of her house in one of Gabala's villages, seeking refuge from the scorching summer heat in the cool shadows. She treated me to a local variation of pilaf, a rice dish boiled in bouillon broth and served with chestnut and chicken. Her daughter-in-law cared so tenderly for Sarmaya aunty, that at first I assumed she was her daughter. Little did I anticipate, at that very moment, that I would find myself offering consolation to her two years later, following the sudden demise of Sarmaya aunty due to heart failure.

As we sat in the garden sipping tea that afternoon when I first met them, Sarmaya aunty started to narrate the story of her son Mahir, who disappeared in 1992, during the First Nagorno-Karabakh war. She did little beating around the bush before rushing to retell the story of her encounter with a fortune-teller Malahat. The conversation on that day mostly revolved around the fortune-teller and the "truth" that she had conveyed to Sarmaya aunty. Indeed, all her subsequent narratives about Mahir would revolve around the words of the fortune-teller.

> In Baku, I met a fortune-teller named Malahat. She assured me that Mahir was alive and anyone claiming otherwise was mistaken. I visited her while my husband was still alive, and she informed me that if I had come earlier, my son would be with me now. It was three

months after Mahir's disappearance when we sought her guidance. Malahat revealed that my son was not deceased, but rather under the care of a Christian [Armenian] woman who had developed romantic feelings for him. In an attempt to test her abilities, I presented her with photographs, deliberately showing her someone else's picture. Unfazed, she dismissed it, asserting that the image did not depict my son. She then requested the concealed photograph, which, upon revealing, she immediately identified as my son. She adamantly proclaimed that he was alive, married to the Christian girl who kept him close.

Malahat proceeded to provide vivid descriptions of my son, stating that she could visualize him before her eyes. She pointed to her forehead, adding that he had a scar on that spot. She disclosed that the scar resulted from an incident where he was accidentally struck by a piece of wood. Curious, she inquired about the person responsible. I said, I swear I can't remember. It was his grandfather, she said. Why did he do that? Struggling to recall, I eventually confessed that it was indeed his grandfather. Malahat questioned the motive behind the act, and I recounted that it occurred when my son was a child, innocently playing near his grandfather and inadvertently being struck by the wood. Triumphantly, she declared, "See, I told you. Your son is alive, albeit disabled. This Christian girl has fallen in love with him and keeps him by her side". Ever since then, I remain in a state of anticipation, patiently awaiting his return.

I saw Sarmaya aunty for the last time on November 17, 2022. Positioned upon her bed, she found herself in close proximity to a wood stove, whose blazing warmth rendered the room insufferably hot. In order to alleviate my discomfort, I positioned myself adjacent to the door, eagerly anticipating a refreshing influx of cool air. "I suffer from chills all the time, my daughter", Sarmaya aunty lamented. "I am very unwell these days", she added solemnly. After inquiring about her

latest treatment, I asked her if she had received any news or updates about the ongoing exhumations. With a shake of her head, she replied in the negative, but promptly added: "However, Malahat, the fortune-teller, has told me that my son lives, he is not dead". She went on to recount the story told to her by the fortune-teller once again, seemingly attempting to convey that the subject of exhumations held no relevance nor interest for her, as her son was not deceased. Her face lightened up as she retold this story, and it seemed to me that she found some comfort in the knowledge that her son was alive. She passed away several weeks after our last meeting and I couldn't stop thinking about the kinds of symbolic violence inherent in forensic positivism. Such a rigid approach to knowledge upholds only a singular perspective, disregarding the significance of Sarmaya aunty's personal truth. In a time when the definitive fate of Mahir remains unknown and inaccessible to absolute certainty, how can one justify denying Sarmaya aunty's narrative its place in the realm of truth?

Reyhan

I had known Reyhan, the wife of missing Salim, for a considerable period before commencing my ethnographic fieldwork in Azerbaijan. During my time working with the ICRC, she would join us, the humanitarian workers, on visits to families of missing persons in the country's Zagatala and Balakan districts, where we collected DNA samples. She was one of the accompaniers trained by ICRC psychologists in providing emotional support to family members of missing persons in distress. Reyhan was in her early twenties when Salim disappeared in the war. She had to raise their two toddlers alone and assume the responsibilities that she had previously been unaware of. She has been one of the most energetic and hard-working persons that I have ever met in my life. Despite having to juggle the challenges of being a single mother and working to support her two children, she successfully provided them with a good upbringing, ensured their education, and

helped them secure good jobs. This achievement is even more remarkable considering the gender-related limitations prevalent in the rural environments of Azerbaijan.

During my fieldwork in July 2021, when we sat down with Reyhan to discuss her experiences, I asked her about her thoughts on what might have happened to her husband. She shared that she had held onto the hope of his eventual return until one day when she had a dream. She proceeded to narrate the details of the dream.

> I used to frequently see him in my dreams... How I lost my hope...In the dream, I would often find myself submerged in the sea, like being inside an aquarium, swimming in the water within the enclosure. It was a dark environment, and I would move through the water. Although I wasn't drowning, I remained immersed. I would search for Salim, and sometimes I would mistakenly believe he had returned, only to realize it was just an illusion within the dream. One night, I witnessed him accompanied by a distant relative. He brought several glass sheets, one of which had shattered into pieces scattered around the yard. I assumed he had brought them using a tractor. In the meantime, I tried to gather the fragmented glass pieces. Then I found myself lying stretched out on the bed. Salim approached me, as if tending to a sick person, folding the bed sheet, the blanket. He folded the blanket at the edge of my bed and sat there, holding my hand. In the dream, I also saw a mirror with fragments scattered everywhere. I called out, "Salim... I am seeing you in my dream again". I spoke within the dream, expressing my fear that it might be another dream. And you know what he told me? Meanwhile, my thoughts were focused on his hand, as my hand was in his hand. I spoke to him, but my thoughts were with his hand. His hand warmed up mine. My hand felt warm. He responded, saying, "Oh Reyhan, I have been with you for 20 minutes, yet you still don't believe that I have come". I swear, that's what I saw

in my dream. My thoughts remained with his hand. I wanted to get up, but I woke up at that moment. I realized there was no one beside my bed, yet my hand felt warm - the hand he held in his hand was warm, while the other hand remained cold. Leyla, I started shivering. I got chills. I held onto my children... it was 3 or 4 in the morning, I held them close. I don't know how I made it through the rest of that night. One hand was warm - the hand he held, while the other hand remained cold. Since that day, I have lost hope. It means his soul came to visit me. It was his soul. Later on, I was told it was his soul that had come to see me. The hand he held was so warm. It was after that dream that I lost hope. Perhaps it was the day he died, at that moment he perished.

I had that dream almost a year after he left to fight in the war. Before that, I used to dream of crossing the sea. It felt as if I was inside something like an aquarium, looking at the sea in that way. Somehow, I had to reach somewhere, or something like that, as I searched for him. I used to have such strange dreams. And then, I had that dream and I lost hope. Later on, I was told it was his soul. He himself also told me, "I have been with you all this time. You don't believe it, but I am here with you". After that, I rarely see him in my dreams.

She would refer to her husband as "my late husband", having accepted the certainty of his death. The example of Reyhan shows us how people can refer to dreams and accompanying visceral sensations in constructing their truths amidst the absence of forensic evidence. It exemplifies the profound impact that dreams can have on individuals in their quest for resolution, particularly in situations of uncertainty and longing. Reyhan also takes agency over interpreting her condition by making her own reality.

Chimnaz

I have been acquainted with Chimnaz since 2018, when I initially met her in a village of the Oghuz district to provide information about the work being conducted by the ICRC to clarify the fates of missing persons in Azerbaijan. During that encounter, I also gathered DNA samples from both her and her brother, which would be used for future exhumation and identification purposes. At that time, we had no knowledge of whether the government of Azerbaijan would ever utilize those samples as intended. Chimnaz mentioned that I resembled her late daughter Sabina, leading her to frequently call me for casual conversations about various topics. As time went on, our relationship grew stronger, and I visited her often, particularly to spend time with her delightful toddler grandchildren.

Chimnaz and her brother Vugar held contrasting perspectives regarding the fate of their missing brother, Ilgar. Vugar had come to accept the certainty of Ilgar's demise after conducting extensive search activities and gathering information from his brother's comrades and other parents whose children had vanished in the same area. Based on this collected data, Vugar believed that Ilgar had likely been interred in one of the nameless graves at a cemetery in Aghdam. Following one of his visits to that cemetery, Vugar experienced a dream that left Chimnaz convinced that Ilgar was still alive. In the dream, Vugar received a phone call and upon answering, he heard Ilgar's voice. "Why are you searching for me at the cemeteries?", Ilgar inquired. Curious about Ilgar's whereabouts, Vugar was abruptly awakened, realizing it had all been a dream. "Had he not woken up so soon, maybe Ilgar would have revealed his location", Chimnaz lamented later.

Subsequently, when television broadcasts displayed images of skeletal remains following recent exhumations in an Azerbaijani district, Chimnaz vocalized her unease in response to the unsettling

sight. "I feel distressed witnessing those skeletons, those bones. I prefer not to see such images. My hope remains for Ilgar's safe return", she expressed, yearning for her brother's return alive. "Maybe, he has married an Armenian girl, has a family there [in Armenia], and can't come back here", she added. The borders separating Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to remain closed, resulting in minimal interaction between the two nations. Neither Armenians nor Azerbaijanis are able and allowed to travel to each other's countries.

"Or perhaps, they are keeping him somewhere as a prisoner of war, confined in a basement or a similar location where he is unable to reach out to us, but still alive," speculated Chimnaz, delving further into her assumptions. This time, her assumption echoed the once-prevailing official rhetoric that claimed several missing individuals were held captive in undisclosed Armenian prisons, shielded from public scrutiny and international humanitarian inspections. More specifically, in his speech in November 2018, the former head of the State Commission on prisoners of war, the missing, and captives and present minister of the defense industry Madat Guliyev said the following: "We have the information that they [prisoners of war] are exploited in harmful industries, and this is being kept secret from international organizations. We have also been informed that they are being subjected to psychological pressures"[2]. There has been no evidence to support these claims. Chimnaz's speculation also resonated with the widely circulated rumor surrounding an Azerbaijani prisoner of war, who purportedly endured inhumane conditions while in Armenian captivity and was eventually released during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. The rumor was later refuted by the authorities, but quickly came to acquire the status of truth both among the families of missing persons and the general public. The rumor also opened

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[2] The interview had been published on the website of the State Commission, but it has recently been removed. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve the citation from my personal notes.

up a space for very intense affective investments, further reinforcing national support for the war cause, with devastating consequences.

Chimnaz, strongly holding onto the belief that her brother was alive, had an aversion to hearing any news confirming his death. In such a circumstance, what kind of closure would she attain if presented with forensic evidence validating his demise?

On December 20, 2022, I headed to check on Chimnaz once again. As I was about to leave, she insisted that I stay and wait for her brother Vugar to come. "He can talk about these things more eloquently", she said. He had just returned from a village in the Aghdam district, where he believed the remains of their missing brother were buried. As the unidentified remains were making its way to the village cemetery in the 1990s, a local *mullah* would take pictures of the remains and number each body before burying them in marked graves. Over the following years, other families unburied the remains that they believed belonged to their missing kin and reburied them in their home districts. By the time Vugar made it to the cemetery, he expected to find three intact graves. However, once he made it to the cemetery in that village, he realized that these three remains had been removed from their graves as well. Below is the conversation that followed between Vugar, myself, and Sadagat, a sister of another missing person, who also came to visit Chimnaz on that day.

> *Vugar:* So someone has taken out all the bodies from these graves in Aghdam, but I couldn't figure out who it was. I reached out to the Military Prosecutor's office and they told me that it wasn't them. I also reached out to the Ganjah Prosecutor's office. They also said that it wasn't a part of their jurisdiction. You know, I have been trying to give them

some tips on who might be buried in these graves, because I have investigated this matter and I have this information that my brother might be buried there. They might not know this.

I: Well, maybe it was the State Commission on the Missing and Prisoners of War or the State Security Service? The state commission is part of the state security service. That is their job and most recently they have exhumed graves on the Martyr's Alley in Baku. Also, the same situation was in Imishli, where a local cemetery *mullah* had buried the unknown martyrs and taken pictures of them before the burial. So, all those graves have been exhumed, but we still don't know what happened after that. We don't know if there was any DNA analysis performed or even any match.

Sadagat: You know, back in the nineties there were so many cases of people giving us false information, so they could extract money from us. I am thinking maybe now whoever has taken the bodies from these graves is just trying to do the same? They would just randomly call one of us and say: "Here, we identified your son or your brother. Here is his body. Pay us this and this". And then we take the body, but how can we know for sure it is ours? It has all decomposed by now; we can't look at it and recognize it. It is all just bones. They will say that the lab works and the analyses were done, but how would we know for sure?

Vugar is deeply impressed by this assumption and firmly believes in its possibility. As he comprehends the plausibility of this situation, his face becomes increasingly concerned. In an attempt to gather more information, I search for the phone number of the State Commission and make a call to inquire about the matter. However, they do not answer the phone, causing Vugar, who was previously quite talkative, to suddenly fall silent and withdraw into himself. I hand him

the phone number and urge him to contact them on another day. Following my suggestion, he reaches out to them the next day, and they indeed confirm their involvement in the matter. They promise to return his call once all the necessary lab work is completed and there is any potential match. Vugar insists that they expedite the process by considering the information he has gathered, but they remain indifferent.

Speculative Affordances

It was at the moment of the described encounter between Vugar and Sadagat that I started developing the concept "speculative affordances" to refer to what the space of not-knowing offers to those inhabiting it. In doing so, I draw inspiration from the term "affordance" as developed by psychologist James J. Gibson (1966) to describe what the environment offers to the individual. It was also adopted in archaeology to refer to the perceived or potential uses and actions that can be inferred from artifacts, features, or landscapes. The concept can allow us to examine how individuals or groups perceive and interpret their surroundings and how these perceptions shape their actions and interactions. The political environment and histories that family members of missing persons inhabit serve as the capabilities that determine how they will interact with this space of not-knowing. While humanitarian actors anticipate trust in the process of exhumations, the families' previous encounters with abandonment, scams and machinations, political manipulations and the authorities' suggestive remarks, hinting that their missing loved ones may be held captive in undisclosed prisons in Armenia, combined with bureaucratic incompetence and an atmosphere of secrecy, all converge to influence the ways in which the families experience the space of uncertainty and not-knowing.

That Sadagat and Vugar would speculate about the possibility of false identifications and receiving the bodies of someone else's missing relatives is not a product of their over-stimulated imagination, but precisely a "speculative affordance" offered by the environment, in which they find themselves. The state agencies have neglected to inform any of the families that they had exhumed unnamed graves in various locations. The fact that Vugar was struggling to determine who removed the remains from the unnamed graves, and that the different state agencies he contacted did not provide assistance, is indicative of the atmosphere of bureaucratic incompetence and indifference that perpetuates the state of uncertainty.

When I asked humanitarian workers at ICRC about the reasons behind families wholeheartedly accepting rumors about missing persons as the truth, they expressed similar sentiments. They stated, "Of course, they will always hope that their children are still alive. This is such a deeply psychological response". While I do agree that the hope against all odds is a very probable human response in such uncertain circumstances, what they leave unattended is how this response is also an affordance offered by the environment of not-knowing. That Chimnaz would refer to popular rumors to speculate about Ilgar's whereabouts is then a "speculative affordance" offered by the political environment in post-war Azerbaijan.

This story serves as another example to demonstrate that receiving the bodies might not necessarily translate into achieving closure. "Speculative affordances" can introduce new anxieties and apprehensions, particularly when trust in the process and comprehension of forensic techniques are lacking. Consequently, it becomes even more crucial to establish an environment that recognizes alternative ways of coping with personal losses that may not align with the framework of forensic epistemological certainty. Establishment of trust is essential in the process of clarifying the fates of missing persons and, as Wagner and Steadman (2020) observe, "despite the technical

advances and faith in its efficacy, DNA technology and its results may be meaningless to families without their trust in the science and their participation in the very decisions about how that science should address their needs" (284).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The stories of Sarmaya aunty, Reyhan, and Chimnaz shed light on the multifaceted nature of knowing and truth-seeking in ambivalent contexts. These stories challenge the dominant paradigm of forensic epistemological certainty by showcasing the significance of other sources of knowledge and personal truths.

Sarmaya aunty's unwavering belief in the fortune-teller's prediction, despite the lack of tangible evidence, exemplifies how faith in spiritual insights can offer comfort and hope to those experiencing loss. Her narrative underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting personal truths that may diverge from scientifically verifiable knowledge. As anthropologists and philosophers studying human relationships with their dead have shown, it is not about whether one believes Sarmaya aunty's truth or not, but about opening up new possibilities for engaging with one's loved ones. As philosopher Vinciane Despret (2019) observes in her study of spirit mediums and the meanings that their statements generate, "the question is not whether what he says is true or not but, rather, to understand what his statement touches on and what its effects are. It makes sense, it becomes true, it reconstructs the story in a way that now has a connection to reality" (245).

Reyhan's dream about her missing husband not only shaped her understanding of her husband's fate but also offered a mechanism for her to process complex emotions and reconcile the unresolved. However, after the already-mentioned rumor about an Azerbaijani prisoner of war in Armenian captivity circulated during the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh war, Reyhan's truth was

challenged. At that time, she expressed her doubt, saying, "You know, my husband was a mining engineer. Perhaps, the Armenians have kept him hidden in some undisclosed location and are compelling him to work for them in construction. They might have recognized the value of his skills and wouldn't be willing to let him go". During our subsequent encounters, Reyhan refrained from voicing her doubt and reverted to recounting the dream that had brought her a sense of determinacy. This story serves as an illustration that even though families may find some semblance of determinacy, it can be susceptible to challenges within the political environment of uncertainty, which fosters the circulation of rumors and gives rise to "speculative affordances". Reyhan's experience demonstrates that the experiences of ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt should be thought of in relation to different knowledge and truth claims (James 1995) that shape how humans make further sense of their situations within specific contexts. This semblance of determinacy achieved by Reyhan then doesn't amount to a final resolution, but allows her and other families in similar situations to claim agency in the interpretation of their lives. Recounting one's dreams as a form storytelling, in turn, serves as "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (Jackson 2002, 34).

Chimnaz's contrasting perspective with her brother, Vugar, also highlights the diverse ways in which individuals construct their truths in the absence of concrete evidence. While Vugar accepts the likelihood of his brother's death based on collected information, Chimnaz holds onto the belief that her brother is still alive. Her aversion to accepting forensic evidence that can potentially validate his demise demonstrates the profound impact of personal beliefs and the need for alternative methods of coping with loss.

These narratives collectively challenge the notion that forensic methods can bring closure to the families of missing persons. They underscore the importance of recognizing and respecting the validity of personal truths and other ways of knowing in the process of coming to terms with one's losses. Acknowledging the diverse ways in which individuals navigate uncertainty and construct their narratives is crucial for providing support and understanding to those affected by the disappearance of their loved ones. Moving forward, it is essential for humanitarian forensic and psychosocial support work to consider the role of other ways of knowing in the experiences of individuals grappling with unresolved loss. It is also important to consider that technological interventions risk compounding the experience of uncertainty by taking the families into a new, unfamiliar territory. Alongside, these narratives demonstrate how people may refuse to live through yet another experience of uncertainty – that of not knowing whether forensic technology will ever be able to deliver on its promise of locating, exhuming, and identifying the remains of their loved ones. Achieving closure, if ever possible, can be made even more painful in an agonizing wait for a DNA match.

This does not suggest that forensic exhumations and identification should be disregarded. Countless family members of missing persons with whom I have interacted in Azerbaijan yearn to "have a site to mourn" for their missing loved ones, where they can receive their remains and lay them to rest. Forensic technologies can and do play a crucial role in making that happen. Instead, this article seeks to emphasize the significance of considering how the larger political context intersects with individual narratives and how individuals interpret their circumstances in light of their personal histories and cultural beliefs. Understanding the historical and political context is crucial for comprehending the complexities that individuals face in making sense of their situations. It highlights the need to go beyond a narrow focus on scientific truth and recognize the

broader factors that influence people's understanding and healing processes. By incorporating these broader considerations, a more holistic approach can be adopted, one that acknowledges the interplay between the individual and the political, and fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of forensic exhumations and identification on the lives of those involved.

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