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## In this place: Specters and memories of genocide in North America

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Neveser Köker



From her ancestral homelands in the Eastern Mediterranean to her new home in Canada, a descendant of genocide survivors discovers the ghosts of mass murder are with us wherever we go.

In Semezdin Mehmedinović's latest novel, *My Heart*, the Bosnian author recounts the story of a run-in with a Navajo receptionist at a hotel in Navajo Nation territory, in northern

Arizona. He resents being mistaken for a “white man,” and then reflects on the absurdity of this resentment, asking, “Do I have the right to self-pity, in this place?” The sentence is a beautiful summary of the out-of-body feeling of being a white-passing foreigner and immigrant in North America. It echoed in my mind as I lived through my second “Canada Day” north of the US border, amid the [discovery](#) of unmarked graves of Indigenous children.

As an anti-nationalist, I have always been skeptical of national holidays. I do not believe in unquestioned love for, and loyalty to, nations and nation-states, nor do I rejoice in displays of patriotism. In fact, I often wince at gratuitous displays of flags, which suggest fascism is lurking just around the corner. Indeed, in recent years, fascism has stopped lurking in corners, instead taking center stage all around the world. To cite only a few examples: the world’s harrowing indifference to the mass murder of Syrians in the names of “national sovereignty” and “anti-imperialism;” the crowning of a notorious genocide denier, [Peter Handke](#), as a literary genius by the Nobel Committee for Literature; and the opening of a so-called “Military Trophy Park” in Baku, a [theme park](#) that effectively glorifies ethnic cleansing.

I immigrated to Canada in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, after living for almost twelve years in the United States, where unquestioned patriotism is the norm. When I learned that “Moving Day”—the annual tradition that sees [over 100,000 people](#) move house on the same day—was a more momentous occasion than the national holiday with which it coincided (at least in Montréal), I was relieved. This year, I wanted to join the gathering to honor Indigenous children, but I could not muster the energy to deal with my own anxiety about being in close proximity with strangers.

Instead, I took an accidental stroll through the Saint-Laurent Cemetery (I'm still learning not to rely on Google Maps for walking directions in and around Montréal). Because it was an unexpected detour on a day off, and because I am fascinated by how people commemorate their loved ones, I read the tombstones carefully. At some point, the Francophone family names started giving way to Arabic ones. Then came Armenian, then Turkish names. The latter were often accompanied by Armenian, Greek, or Levantine-sounding forenames. Birth dates ranged from 1890 to 1960. Some had presumably settled here after surviving genocide in 1915, or after being dispossessed by the Republic of Turkey in 1942-1943, or perhaps after the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955. Others were probably born in Ville St. Laurent or Montréal, after their parents survived the (still-ongoing) ethnic cleansing of Anatolia.

I am too agnostic to offer a mystical interpretation of the unexpected detour that brought me to strangers' tombstones on 1 July, but it was quite the timely coincidence. It was a national day of "celebration" in the country I now call home; a place that seems much more humane and much less brutish than anywhere else I have lived. And yet, in this same country, hundreds of unmarked graves of children forcibly separated from their parents in the name of "education"—or, rather, in the name of a colonial mission civilisatrice—have just been found for the fourth time in as many weeks. Also a day of mourning, then.

The unexpected walk through the cemetery ended up being an apt metaphor for how I spent the day. I sat quietly and contemplated my family's stories, and the glaring silences and absences therein. There is no family headstone for us,

because everyone's graves are scattered across what is now Turkey, Greece, and the Caucasus (and probably elsewhere, too). On the one side, there is my great-grandmother, who died in her 30s in a strange town on the coast of the Black Sea, far away from her hometown in Chios, because some bureaucrats and statesmen decided she "belonged" in Anatolia. There is also my grandfather, born in a land-locked town in southern Anatolia after his parents fled genocide in the Caucasus, who is now buried in a coastal Mediterranean city. On the other side, there is my other great-grandmother, born in Harput in the early 1900s, who lived into old age with her children, grand-children, and great-grandchildren by her side, but never spoke about 1915; never wanted to speak about 1915. These are only the stories I'm most familiar with, though I'm sure there are others. My family's collective memory almost entirely disappears if we go further back into the twentieth century. It is nearly impossible to find out where and how the members of my family tree lived before 1910.

I don't think we are unique in this regard. Certainly, there was enough political upheaval in the Republic of Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the twentieth century for some to say it may not be worth knowing much about the distant past. I am increasingly convinced that this argument—which is a slightly less offensive version of "the past is in the past," or "let's leave history to historians"—is a form of genocide in and of itself. It willfully ignores the fact that, for many, the past cannot remain in the past. It also denies that the present is configured in the way that it is because of the past.

A world built on genocide can only sustain itself through the perpetuation of genocide. Where does that leave us; those

of us who do not want to perpetuate genocide? Those of us who demand accountability, recognition, and justice for survivors? Carrying scattered graves with us wherever we go, finding unmarked graves wherever we settle.

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