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Citation: Ngo, B.H. 2019. Missing. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 265-267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6920>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

Missing

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6920>

Article history: Accepted 1/11/2019; Published 22/11/2019

Consider an old woman in Bosnia hugging a fleshless skull that she takes for her son, on the sketchy evidence of a familiar shoe found nearby. This woman is suffering from a unique kind of loss that defies closure, in which the status of a loved one as 'there' or 'not there' remains indefinitely unclear. One cannot tell for sure if the loved one is dead or alive, dying or recovering, absent or present. Not only is there a lack of information regarding the person's whereabouts, there is no official or community verification that anything is lost—no death certificate, no wake or sitting Shiva, no funeral, no body, nothing to bury.¹

The loss described by Pauline Boss was a 'unique kind of loss that defies closure'.² This is because the nature of death was assumed from their disappearance rather than having solid evidence that Boss listed: no death certificate, no body. For the family and community grieving, there is no corpse for the funerary practice. There is no knowledge of their deaths except for their lack of presence or contact, so there is an agonising continuation of doubt over the missing.

To be missing or to disappear, not only is denying family, friends and community the culture of closure to collective grieving, but it is highly politicised and used by numerous government strategies. State-run kidnappings, mass burials and asylum seekers missing at sea are a few examples of how power has meant certain social and cultural groups go missing. Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore wrote 'visibility and invisible dimension of human life, including the representations of human bodies, work together to create the social order as we know it'.³

Missing bodies are the means to understand the ways in which neglect is distributed within social structures and social order, where invisibility shows the possible lack of value and care placed upon lives and bodies. The haunting of the missing bodies and the unknown dead is a strategy which many nation states used to maintain power, as Avery F. Gordon wrote, 'The exercise of state power through disappearance involves controlling the imagination, controlling the meaning of death, involves creating new identities, involves haunting the population into submission'.⁴

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

In 2013, I lived in Vietnam. I rode my bike from my grandparent's village in An Lai, a village commune in the center of Vietnam, to the nearby Huế city. One sultry January evening, there was the musty, burning smell. The air was cascaded with fragments of flaky paper, rising and showering in smoke. Along the streets, people were lighting joss paper, spirit paper money. They lit them in piles on the street, in front of their houses. Joss paper is usually burnt as a way to symbolically give to the spirits of loved ones: usually present in death ceremonies and death anniversaries, usually in the grounds of the family home. However, this particularly evening, whole communities were lighting up joss papers and not just within families. My bike ride was illuminated by sparks of crackling flames along the roads.

I enquired and found out that it the first day of the anniversary of the Huế Massacre, in which thousands have died through mass killings and summary executions, January–February 1968. The unknown dead, the missing. This ceremony was held outside the home, onto the streets, as a shared responsibility of the community - it acknowledges that loss for the missing is communal. Those who died in mass graves. Those whose bodies were not buried or cremated by their families. Those whose deaths had no certainty. Communities create alternative ways for grieving for the missing as an attempt to create a communal closure to unsolved grief on a massive scale.

Phuong Ngo's artwork and performance, *Article 14.1*, uses the notion of burning joss paper in death ceremonial practices to address, in a similar fashion to the communities of Huế, those missing, but this time, not for those missing in mass graves, but for the Vietnamese boat people missing at sea. It was exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney as part of the Sydney Festival, 2019. Ngo, like my family—although he is not in my family despite sharing the same family name—comes from parents whom were boat people and whom escaped Vietnam in 1982.⁵ A poignant piece of his family history was that his aunt and cousin were boat people who disappeared at sea. A photo of them is shown in the exhibition. Part of his art was that he spent 10 days with the food rations his parents consumed during their passage; 10 packets of instant noodles, a bag of dehydrated fried rice, and a can of condensed milk.⁶ He folded thousands of paper boats using the joss paper and visitors to his exhibition can participate in the folding of paper boats.



Figure 1 Corner of the Phuong Ngo's *Article 14.1* exhibition, MCA, January 2019, photograph taken by author

It is making a memorial of the thousands of those missing at sea. It was an attempt to comprehend massive loss that had no closure – the uncertainty of missing bodies, missing stories. At the end of the 10 days, there was the burning of boats ceremony, in which Ngo burnt joss money paper boats, in their thousands. Onlookers contemplate the enormity of the missing. I was there, at Circular Quay outside the MCA, and smelling, yet again, the burning of joss paper, and hearing the slight crackling of the fire, mixed with the stagnant air of humidity and dust. The missing seeps everywhere.

Endnotes

1. Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to live with unsolved grief*, Harvard, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 6.
2. Ibid.
3. Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore, *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility*, New York University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 33.
4. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008, pp. 115.
5. Steve Dow, "'I won't give up': why an artist is living in a gallery making 10 000 paper boats', 18 January 2019, *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jan/18/i-wont-give-up-why-an-artist-is-living-in-a-gallery-making-10000-paper-boats>>
6. Ibid.