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Ron Haviv, photo from “Blood and Honey”

The Face of Genocide

Donna-Lee Frieze

This desecrated photograph can be understood through the concept of the Other, Emmanuel Levinas’s distinctive contribution to western philosophy. Always capitalized, the Other is not an alien other who disturbs my freedom, or who is an extension of me. Rather, the Other is the one who is treated ethically, who commands my highest respect, and is apprehended in all their Otherness. This is Levinas’s explanation of the ethical: to face the Other is to humanize the Other, and to regard the person as a unique being. Levinas’s thesis is, in short, the antithesis of the genocidal perpetrators’ assessment of faceless others.

These concepts of Other and other are captured in this untitled photograph, tinged with red hues that implicitly signal a bloodbath. Taken sometime before 1996, it is reproduced in Ron Haviv’s stunning photographic essay, Blood and Honey: A Balkan War Journal. The caption explains how the photograph was all that remained when this Bosnian family returned to their home in Sarajevo: even the windowpanes had been looted.

The photograph is partly located in the realm of everyday life. Someone, perhaps a friend or passer-by, has carefully composed a photograph of a respectably-dressed family standing on the banks of a river in a serene rural setting. Once, this was a normal—or perhaps special—family shot. Now, however, its ordinary aspects have been rendered manifestly dystopic: the faces of the family members have been erased by deliberate scratches.

Why are the faces erased? Why not the entire person? According to Levinas, to define someone by the corporeality of their facial features alone