The Ethnographer Unbared:
Reflections on Ethnographic Media Research Processes

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Abstract: In this article, I unpack some of the challenges I faced doing ethnographic work on media production and consumption in the Balkans—particularly in the period of the 1990s-2000s in former Yugoslavia. I reflect on how my personal and intellectual background intersected with my fieldwork in a context that demanded constant (re)negotiation of my own identity, in relation not only to my participants and research colleagues in the region, but also to prevailing academic institutional practices. The article is not an autoethnographic account per se, but more a reflection on the research process in fieldwork sites experiencing great economic, political and social turmoil. As a young female researcher working in the area of cultural and media studies, I faced the problem of not being taken seriously by some research participants and colleagues early on, and had to identify and negotiate my way into the various cultural practices that would enable me to conduct effective multi-site research.

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1. Introduction

In what follows, I first position myself as a cultural studies and media scholar and outline the political and personal contexts of my early formative processes of growing up and how they changed over the years. I show how different conversations on war, traumatic past and media propaganda as an adolescent turned me into an ethnographer and shaped the way I work and write today. I explain my own intellectual transformation in terms of the critical figures who disposed me to take certain approaches in my research. I discuss how, while my initial interest in media, class, gendered and national identities and the rise of (ethno)nationalisms can be traced back to my personal experience growing up in former Yugoslavia, my research developed as an ongoing reaction to patriarchal university structures and the ever-growing body of quantitative work on the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. I argue that the scholarly literature produced during the 1980s and 1990s, while providing rich historical explanations at the national and international (diasporic) levels, overlooked how gender, ethnicity, religion and class violence have their own particular local histories and internal dynamics. Accordingly, this article is also a reflection on doing ethnography in a way that captures the contexts of daily living with the media in the different communities of former Yugoslavia. In the *first* part, then, I briefly describe how the dominant empirical and positivist research studies have ignored the cultural, private, everyday life experiences that different communities have about both living with the media and with the violent collapse of the former Yugoslavia, and the influence this had on my own research and writing. In the *second* part of the article, I outline a specific research project contesting the dominant discourses and reflect further on my experience of the role of gendered relations in conducting ethnographic research. [1]

2. A Self in the Research Encounter

It is important for me to state from the outset that there is always going to be *a self* in the research encounter, *a self* that needs to be acknowledged, reflected upon and taken into account for how we undertake our work. This is not always sufficiently recognized in the continuing debate over how academics need to build a relationship with those they research—how they should or should not study, observe, document, read, analyze, write, co-write, co-research and engage politically with media saturation, violence, poverty, oppression, marginalization, economic deprivation, and political polarization. This is a dimension in our relationship with the researched, I argue, that needs to inform the way in which we, the researchers, express ourselves through our work and engagement with our participants. [2]

I sensed early in my research that there is nothing productive in the process of merely collecting data *per se*; there must be *a communicative space* that allows for a *meaningful, trustful engagement* and *dialogue* between researcher and researched—and therefore the possibility of change (collective and individual). In my research and my relationships with my participants, I have followed an invitation by ORTNER to

> "always go beyond the deconstruction of public discourse and attend *ethnographically* to the ways in which discourses enter into people's lives, both invading them in a Bourdieuan, even Foucauldian sense and being implicitly or explicitly challenged by them in the course of practices that always go beyond discursive constraints" (1998, p.414). [3]

In an important way, then, I remember and critically reflect upon the role of the researcher shaped in a particular historical moment—in my case a female, white, middle-class academic, born in Slovenia, raised in former Yugoslavia, educated (graduate school), living in the West, and conducting research in different parts of the Balkans since 1996. The personal biography of any researcher is a dimension that needs to be taken into account, since we all speak from particular gender, class, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspectives. Within field sites that are themselves fraught with contradictions at every turn, I outline below how I have had to develop specific strategies to deal not only with the researcher-researched relationship, but also with my encounters and relationships with local academic colleagues in the region who would openly and sometimes aggressively claim "ownership" and "expertise" of the discipline to the extent of attacking the legitimacy of my own research. Drawing on these experiences, I continuously ask myself those classic ethnographer's questions: How should a researcher who grew up in the region but graduated and lived in "the West" negotiate expectations, pressures, questions, difficulties and attacks from local scholars who claim that *only* local scholars can understand, study and write about the region? How do researchers such as myself establish the necessary relationships of *trust* not only with our participants, but also with local researchers and co-researchers? And further, how to write, and how to think? [4]

In response to these questions, as I elaborate below, I have adopted the position that as researchers we occupy spaces "of betweenness" (KATZ, 1994, p.55). In those liminal spaces we are, I argue, well-positioned to engage with the ambiguity and the messiness, the uncertainties and inconsistencies, the spontaneity, the unsettledness and the openness of people's lives as they are lived in the media-saturated moments of the present. As I argue in this article, this form of long-term "in-between" engagement throughout years of fieldwork has affected and transformed my identity and psyche, my research and arguments, and the kinds of research relationships that I have been able to develop. My research allowed me to not only understand, but to wish to help to create a more equitable, humane future. [5]

3. The Liminal Space of a Researcher

3.1 Claudia RANKINE on liminal space

Claudia RANKINE is a Jamaican-born American author, researcher and artist, whose work engages with deep legacies of racism and her abiding concern for social justice. RANKINE's poetry—which has been described as a form of engaged sociology— has drawn on her personal experiences as well as on mass media artifacts and a range of experimental writing and artistic expression. In her new book "Just Us: An American Conversation" (2020), RANKINE engaged with historic and contemporary examples of white privilege and supremacy. The book reinforced for me how our work as critical media scholars, ethnographers and as interpreters of "structure of feeling" (WILLIAMS, 1977, p.8) or "ordinary affects" (STEWART, 2007, p.12) is extremely important, not only to contemporary social life, but also to our contemporary political worlds. RANKINE mixed essays with poetry and photography to make her point: "You say and I say, but what / is it we are telling, what is it / we are wanting to know about here?" (2020, p.18) In her own way, she is interested in the oldest and key questions in politics and sociality that continue to underlie so many of our ethnographic interactions: How ought we to live together? Where are the sites of encounter in which to ask and answer difficult questions about our vexed relationships to each other? [6]

What attracts me to RANKINE's writing in particular, is how her interest in *whiteness* (and racialized identities) turns her into an ethnographer of sorts. She is a dialogic author, working in a liminal space—a thinker who, like the proverbial philosopher, wants to learn from her conversations, rather than simply to impose her truths upon them. She asked us to listen to one another in ways that "allow both of us to exist at the same time" (p.6). She also *interrogated herself* during the ethnographic encounters that took place during her travels, in spaces like cafes, and planes, when she witnessed or started interactions with people—often white people—around her. When she was hanging out at different airports, over and over again, she communicated with white men: "After a series of casual conversations with my white male travellers, would I come to understand white privilege any differently?" (p.12). Put simply, RANKINE is interested in the psychology of white people, claiming that in order to find a politics that allows us to live together we need to study and explore different kinds of (social) relations, and imagine what we need to cultivate, what kind of collective life we hope to build. Deeply engaged encounters allow her precisely to ask with firm conviction: "What form of relation can include knowledge of historical dynamics and societal realities without preventing or interrupting intimacy?" (p.16) These approaches continue to provide a productive line of thinking for anyone attempting to come to terms with a society in which they are embedded and yet, at the same time, not fully, unreflexively subsumed, and have influenced my understanding of the structural tensions that permeate my own social world. [7]

3.2 My liminal space: Personal memories of supranational Yugoslav and national Slovene identity

The Yugoslavia in which I was *born* in the early 1970s was a country that promoted a supra-national belonging and appreciation of difference—one that was also an imaginative experiment in alternative ways of organizing society, mobilized around the centrality of workers, offering free education and health care and implementing socially owned factories. Because my mother was a TV News presenter and my father a print journalist for the national newspaper *Delo*, I lived in different parts of Yugoslavia during my youth—principally in Sarajevo, but traveling to and living extensively for long periods of time in all the parts of former Yugoslavia. In the late 1980s I was *growing up* mostly in Slovenia (at the time still in Yugoslavia) and felt and experienced how people around me were becoming increasingly caught up in the discourses and perceptions of ethnic differences, shaped by *Slovene* ethno-nationalism and media propaganda that questioned the supposed common Yugoslav existence. In high school between 1986 and 1991 I witnessed the rise of (ethno)nationalisms and the changes in the public spheres that had to do with "blaming the (ethnic) Other" (GOLDSTEIN, 2003) for the economic, political and cultural instabilities in which we found ourselves. I was heavily influenced in making sense of what was occurring around me by my high-school professor of literature, Marjana LENASSI LIPOVSEK and looking back now I can see she played a critical transformative role in how I would subsequently conduct research. She encouraged me to think about how both literature and media contribute to the construction and transformation of the meaning of "the Other," as well as of home, gender, class, community, the traumatic past, nation and citizenship. As a teacher, she encouraged her students to focus on the complexities and depths of *an encounter* and the associated *dialogue*. At the same time, she imparted a concern about the potential of violence erupting among Yugoslav people of different ethnic backgrounds because of the rise of nationalistic rhetoric, class conflict, and unresolved conflicts from the past—themes that were to feature in my future research. [8]

The break-up of Yugoslavia is usually associated with the wars that started in the summer of 1991. What is often not recognized, or taken seriously, is how the Yugoslav past was *never over* and *done with*, how it always continued into the present, with Yugoslav communities never reconciling with the traumatic past associated with the 2nd World War. I vividly remember conversations with family members about how the trauma of the past *lives with* and *within us,* how and where different uncles and family members during and after the war disappeared and were allegedly killed by either partisans or fascists. What sticks in my mind is how no one accepted responsibility or understood these as acts of violence. I can see now how those *conversations* were turning me into an ethnographer—just as Claudia RANKINE was turned into an ethnographer when she continued to listen in order to understand her white participants. These early family conversations I listened to were effectively about two different pasts. On the one hand, the version of the family members who continued to be proud Yugoslav partisans, who would tell me that they were the only ones who succeeded in drawing on their resistance to the fascist occupation to create a social revolution. On the

other hand, the version of the side of the family who lived in the USA, who would talk to me about how and why they left socialist Yugoslavia right after the war to settle in "free" Washington DC and Chicago. Either way, listening to the two sides speak about the 2nd World War helped me to learn about the plurality of "the past" and to begin to understand how it continues to haunt us if we do not address and deal with historic inequalities and crimes. Those family conversations raised questions that would become the focus of my later research: How can the soul of a community be healed after this kind of trauma? What does coming to terms with the past mean? How do we take responsibility for the past, and with that, the present? What would a reckoning require, and how might its many different forms (investigations, hearings, trials and public assemblies) be *mediated*? [9]

This period of the late 1980s and early 1990s was crucial in positioning me in a liminal space, in shaping my interest in questions of *storytelling* and *listening* to the Other. Prof LIPOVSEK's emphasis on encounters and dialogue and my attempt to reconcile the two versions of my family's past, led me to pose questions about the media's role in coming to terms with the past, and to reflect on the power of the stories we tell ourselves. I experienced from an early age how different those stories are depending on whether they are told in, for the most part, Slovene-speaking and Catholic Slovenia, or other much more ethnically diverse Yugoslav republics. I learned from my family how storytelling, as the philosopher Walter BENJAMIN pointed out, is a form that maintains the "communicability of experience" by encouraging the teller to put his/her own stamp on the story: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (1968 [1936], p.87). I engaged with the idea of how an invitation to tell a story, or to listen to one, challenges us to discover the ways in which history—in both senses of the term, as event and as narrative—can be reciprocally made rather than imposed from above. [10]

As Slovenia declared independence in 1991, the wars started and I was witnessing, as a young woman, the beginning of mass violence and genocide. I was studying journalism and communication studies at the University of Ljubljana, and it was kind of natural, given the formative experiences outlined above, to become committed to exploring the degree to which the media work as instruments of control and surveillance *versus* the level to which human agency exists in mediated spaces. I wanted to be allowed to thrust myself into the action, to evoke a sense of involvement, of being implicated, to foster a far more *intensely personal* mode of investigation than was practiced at the time, or even allowed (much less expected) at my university communication department. The time called for a deepened sense of the connection between the political and the personal. I felt that the issue of encounter—and, most significantly, the political dimension of the *specificity* and *particularity* of encounters—should be part of media research. Believing that *listening* and *creating a trustful relationship with my participants* matters the most, I parted ways with the primary mode of "doing" media and communication studies in the region. I rejected the positivist methods of the department, at the time heavily dominated by authoritative, powerful male

professors (and younger male colleagues) who "knew it all" and wielded considerable economic and political power, and I opted for a more reflexive stance. At the time—and perhaps still—there was a clear gender divide among the teaching assistants. The young female assistants, including myself, played the "girl Friday" role, running errands, supporting senior academics, making coffee, organizing events, greeting more senior, usually male, visitors and driving them to and from the airport. Our male counterparts were absolved of these tasks so that they could focus solely on their research and (political) careers. [11]

I was explicitly told that doing media ethnography in private spaces (homes) and focusing on gendered dimensions of media production and consumption was not a serious enough research topic and would not help me retain my academic job at the time. After graduation, I held an academic position at Ljubljana for two years, but experiencing how the patriarchal institutional culture inhibited my intellectual choices, relationships and research outcomes, I decided to follow the side of my family who had left socialist Yugoslavia after the 2nd World War to settle in the "free" USA, and undertook a PhD at University of Colorado at Boulder. On a positive note, my experiences with the institutional power imbalances and discipline-based identity politics at University of Ljubljana served to shape my concrete research projects, and (after reading BENJAMIN, 1968 [1936]) contributed to a broader understanding of the possibilities for change that are found in the researcher's autonomy, drive, engagement, emotions, and trust. [12]

4. Encountering Denial of War Narratives

In 1996, 14 years after had I paid my last visit to Serbia with my parents, I came to Belgrade independently, with the aim of trying to understand the particular types of media propaganda in the country and people's media practices (how, when, where and with whom do they watch TV news?) in order to write an article. There had been many changes since my last visit. The most important was that the common country of Yugoslavia was no more, and former Yugoslavs, from Ljubljana to Sarajevo, Belgrade to Skopje, were living very different lives and dying very different deaths, experiencing very different realities and cultivating very different lifestyles under different symbolic and material conditions. It was only in December 1995 that the Dayton Peace Agreement officially ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and there was a very slow international acknowledgment of the genocide there. Most of the people I had known in Serbia had left the country, and the rest who had stayed were eagerly planning to emigrate. Nationalistic leaders continued to frame the narratives, insisting that only ethnically pure nation states could provide freedom; denying genocide had ever happened in BiH. [13]

Serbian colleagues, mostly writers, journalists and artists, were generally not interested in having any kind of a discussion with me about media, and what they thought about what was going on at the time in Serbia, neighboring Croatia, BiH and Kosovo. They did not want to talk about, much less reflect, on genocide in BiH, wars, murdered civilians, destroyed cities, rape camps. I had hoped that they would share memories about the precipitating incidents and events—the early

signs of violence—the moments when rage and fear turned to violence and fear defeated hope. I was interested in tracing connections between responses to media and television coverage of the wars refracted through differing national subjectivities. But for the most part, *there was silence*, and the level of disconnection saddened me. Though the wars had taken the lives of tens of thousands, many of whom were victims of atrocities and mass executions, even writers, journalists and artists did not want to reflect on the ethnically based nationalism that created ideologies that viewed everything that is different as a threat and used force against it. I came to realize that the wars in Croatia and Bosnia were experienced, framed and presented to many of them as if they were taking place in far-away, distant and foreign countries, and did not loom nearly as large in their consciousness as the poverty, violence or hyperinflation that were on the rise at the time in Serbia. [14]

But there was something in their lack of interest in and attention to the wars that seemed to reveal a perverse disinterest and even denial of those wars, and of the role of the media in framing these. My first response was to view this attitude as a form of self-defense in the face of the magnitude of the war atrocities and the threat of being implicated in them. Perhaps it was a fear on the part of my interviewees that I might interpret any sign of engaged interest as akin to the political emotions that inflamed the violence. I understood that it is difficult to approach the prospect of incomprehensible violence, cruelty and hatred without finding some way to insulate oneself, an almost autonomic self-protective gesture, like the awkward laugh at an inappropriate moment. I also understood that assuming the stance of a detached researcher risked a form of complicity, that to talk calmly of such matters might betoken indifference to the atrocities. In my work, I did not shy away from the gravity of the events we discussed, but I also avoided any direct engagement with the political positions of my respondents. The goal was not to argue, but to learn. These topics are the most difficult to address, and one needs to believe—and to really feel—that the research matters: that there is a contribution to be made that can somehow move beyond the horror of the topic itself. [15]

When it came to my respondents, then, I wondered whether they were just reluctant to really understand the causes for the wars and ethnic cleansing taking place so close to home—and in the name of the homeland? It made me wonder whether the moment was, in a sense, "too soon" for the type of research I was pursuing. The recent history had not had time to be processed or made sense of —and I may have been searching for a "sense" or "meaning" that was non-existent. [16]

It was a specific kind of agony and frustration of listening to the memories and narratives of the past circulating among former Yugoslavs. My concern was with a critique of this particular kind of nostalgia, so often expressed by people in most of the republics in the former Yugoslavia then and now. At the time I had little sympathy for this "Yugo" nostalgia for one reason only. I see it as a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one's innocence and at the same time talk about what one had destroyed. In my later ethnographic

research, as a response to these earlier encounters, I have taken these nostalgic sentiments and emotions seriously, and attempted to get at the lived complexities of this tension. I have explored different sites where former Yugoslav nostalgic sentiments were expressed—from the town of Kumrovec where TITO was born, to various annual socialist festivals and youth celebrations. I have documented the ways in which participants at these events express particular nostalgic emotions and use passionate discourses. I have shown how Yugo-nostalgia serves as an avoidance mechanism that postpones indefinitely a crucial reckoning with the traumatic past, how creating a marketable version of the past requires smoothing over its rough spots and filling in its contradictions in order to consume it rather than engage with it. [17]

To return to 1996. I left Serbia two months later—and have never been able to write that article about my experience there. I have since returned—as a PhD student from USA—to conduct my fieldwork there, as both an insider and an outsider. As someone who was studying and living in the West, I became an outsider; yet I remained an insider, able not only to speak the languages but also share cultural memories and sensibility. Of course, insiderness-outsiderness goes beyond a dichotomy. It is always a process, fluid and multiple, contextualized in the time and space of the research. Yet, this binary helped me to reflect on my positionality at the time, as it does now. [18]

4.1 Researcher biographies, reflexivity and gender

As media scholars, and ethnographers, as in my case, we continue to theorize *the relationship* between the researcher and the researched. We continue to reflect on the dilemmas facing social scientists framed by earlier debates on power, ideology and reflexivity (ABU-LUGHOD, 1993; ANG, 1985; CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986; GOLDSTEIN, 2003; KAMPADOO, 2004; MARCUS & FISCHER, 1986; ORTNER, 1998; RABINOW, 1977). We discuss how much reflexivity to share and how much interiority to really inject into our descriptions (GOLDSTEIN, 2003). Research reflexivity, (gendered and class) identity negotiations and approximations, and ethical outcomes were always helping me to navigate a minefield of not just fieldwork, but also of compromised and politically charged academic spaces in the region. I had numerous helpful discussions about the complexities of thinking about gender, traumatic past, power and research reflexivity with four of my PhD advisers, Prof Donna GOLDSTEIN (cultural anthropology), Prof Andrew CALABRESE (media studies), Prof Lynn CLARK (media studies) and Prof Lynn STAEHELI (cultural geography)—all feminist scholars, who have highlighted the experiences of women in media, family, community and workplace in order to create gender-aware and class explanations of diverse phenomena. They all helped to prepare me to think about *a complex* range of people, of individuals that I would encounter while conducting fieldwork, and to appreciate the considerable differences within the communities I explored. They entreated me to understand ethnographic fieldwork as involving a great deal of my own creativity, openness, integrity, improvisation and resilience. They also helped me to understand and be able to resist attacks from fellow researchers, as I found myself subject to different forms of harassment. I have

experienced harassment—from sexual (as many other female researchers find and report) to professional ones—when a local, male colleague accused me of doing work that only pretended to be relevant by virtue of focusing on topics that were seen to be "hot" in Western academic journals. [19]

Because of my mentors' contributions, then, I have been energized by an invitation to do both: to question and analyze larger structural and systemic issues and focus on personal intuitions, reflections, feelings and memories. I started to critically self-reflect on my own biases, values and preferences, and theoretical predispositions: Do I have an anti-Serb bias if I am critical of Serbian media propaganda? Does my commitment to critical theory really lead to reductionism? Do my preferences to interview women limit me in establishing research relationships with male participants? Pondering such questions made me more aware of my own (gendered, ethnic, class) identities in the contexts I wanted to understand: How much does my privileged middle-classness influence my courage and commitment to change as a researcher? [20]

In so many ways, research reflexivity continues to be a key methodological tool in sorting through field research challenges, as much as witnessing and dealing with reactions to my own work in the region. Nothing had really prepared me for that—but what continues to be important is the centrality of my awareness of how my identity and affiliations are positioned *among* and *by* others. What I want to cover in the remaining sections is *my trajectory* as a critical feminist media researcher (not auto-ethnographer) and an exploration of my position as a *female* media scholar, working in the region in a specific post-war, post-socialist, neo-liberal context, committed to deep ethnographic work to achieve insights into the region's mediated worlds. I will argue that being a (younger) woman profoundly shaped my interactions with participants, whether interviewing journalists and editors in Serbia, audience members of popular television shows in Macedonia, filmmakers, or fans at music concerts around the region. [21]

4.2 The situated female ethnographer in Former Yugoslav context

When I began my PhD fieldwork in Serbia in the summers of 2001 and 2002, I had no clear idea that I would focus on the complex political, social, and cultural processes mediating the discourse and narratives of diverse communities in different parts of former Yugoslavia. I expected to write about the "older" generations of influential public intellectuals and their understanding of their role and responsibility in creating national identity, their (mis)use of media, and their (nationalistic; exclusionary) activism in different (national) public spheres during the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s. I wanted to record their memories and situate their interpretations in the context of media saturation, and to trace the relationships between the narratives of media and those that we weave ourselves. In a way, I wanted to think about things from the perspective of influential nationalistic public figures (mostly men) so that I would be able to think, write and speak about the situation. [22]

Overall, I wanted to understand the sheer force of the national imagination and the role of the media in national identity construction: how it informs the way people think and can saturate the way they may feel. I also wanted to document the rise of media propaganda and analyze how MILOSEVIC (and other nationalistic leaders), editors and journalists powerfully used the media to cultivate a direct bond with their audiences through the artificial creation of news. A strategy of oversaturation was used to control public and private conversations, and that derailed open democratic communication, and disrupted society. As a researcher I was in the right place at the right time, witnessing how new types of media controls came into existence and were crucial in building the autocratic power of nationalistic regimes that required the degradation of any *ethical authority*. [23]

At the beginning of the research, I was trying to capture the main protagonists, actors and creators of Serbian patriarchal nationalism (to compare it later to the Slovene and Croatian versions)—protagonists like the writer and politician Dobrica COSIC, who declared that "the Serbs lose in peace what they have acquired in war" (PEROVIC, 1999, p.11) and who saw the ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina only as a Serb liberation war (MILOSAVLJEVIC, 2000). I thought I needed to analyze their (ab)use of the media and the articulation of the nation through their masculine discourse. However, as I outline below, while trying to interview them cross-generationally I was going through some difficulties that had to do with my gender, age and country of citizenship at the time. [24]

5. Gendered Readings of a Researcher

In interviews with older generations of influential and populist Serbian intellectuals, I found myself mostly participating in their formal monologues that left me not only confused, but frustrated. There was no dialogue, no conversation between us. While they were clearly interested, and even flattered by being interviewed, they were often quick to establish their authority and knowledge over the young, female graduate student and take every opportunity to *simply educate me* about Serbia's just position in the past. The one-way conversations cum monologues would start with compliments of my gender and age, and continue in patronizing terms to monopolize the exchanges, which would usually last over three hours or so per meeting. The participants were using the interviews to present themselves as all powerful, intelligent, educated and highly civilized men, essential to the survival of their nations. [25]

I felt at the time I was getting mostly dry, selective, highly problematic and thin historic memories and official arguments, instead of any private, sincere, honest, deep and reflective narratives. I started to understand that the context in which I interviewed individual Serbian (mostly male) intellectuals would lead to numerous empty and wrong assumptions, leaving me feeling angry, tired and frustrated. To understand the former Yugoslav story, to explain it and learn from it, I started to realize, would require what I will call *inter-relational* imagination. In an examination of the relationship among media, identity and gender, and

specifically the constitution of social, national subjects, I opted for *an ethnography of different communities* in order to understand the ways in which, for example, media were being consumed and produced, and how nationalism was being constituted as a dominant way of belonging. [26]

5.1 How and why positionality matters while doing research

In pursuing my ethnography of different communities, there were complex ways in which my own identities and background positioned me in relation to my participants. I recognized the ways in which my identity as a white, middle-class woman allowed me to gain access, while at the same time my gender and class privilege (in the form of educational capital) set me apart. I spent a good deal of field time in four main settings: Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia and BiH. The challenge was how to encounter, in an everyday practical and meaningful sense, the media producers and audiences I wanted to spend time with. How to explore their media practices? How to create the *communicative space* that facilitated an encounter between researcher and researched? I made initial contacts through family friends and acquaintances, through civil society organizations, and other social venues. I continued to build on these relations and, crucially, it was always about *developing a relationship of trust*. It was also always about *a meaningful connection*. [27]

When meeting my participants, I mostly introduced myself as a researcher working within cultural and media studies. When asked, I would share my own memories, media habits and involvement in politics. Generally, I did not talk about my personal life. It was obvious, however, that most of them used the information about my Slovene background and my living all around Yugoslavia as a child to identify and frame me in ways that played an important role in defining their attitudes towards me. On the one hand, I was positioned as one of them, when we would bond and connect on common memories. On the other hand, I was a Slovene, studying and working in the USA. In that regard, my relationships were initially unequal in one important respect: I had been studying in the West and had a research position at a US University and, later, an academic job in Switzerland. [28]

Some things about me were visible to almost every informant with whom I have interacted—I was a single woman in her twenties, from a middle-class Slovene family. There were situations where I felt uncomfortable while interviewing male participants—even in my own generation it was challenging and difficult to get men to share ideas, opinions, personal stories and memories about media with me. In some of these situations, it was a performance and display of their political or economic power, and their often-apparent expectation to invite me out for a dinner or drinks. Again, it was gender, ethnicity, class, age and nationality, in combination, that heavily influenced my research interactions and communications. [29]

However, given the sensitivity of many of the issues and the politically charged character of the research themes, there was an understandable caution

surrounding my research that usually manifested itself in critiques of me for being a Slovene "judge" preaching about the power of media, dealing with a violent past, or reconciliation. I registered these reactions as an indication of the charged political climate in which the research was conducted. There was also some envy and jealousy about my work, with my being seen as someone who had the luxury and privilege, as one participant said to me, of "just coming here, and listening to people about use of media, and then leaving ... ." My own struggle was always how to think and write about my research critically, in a way that might matter—and to understand gendered, class and national belongings. [30]

5.2 In-between public and private spaces

During my extensive ethnographic fieldwork, there was never a clear line of separation between my personal life and my research. In more formal sites of research (for example, media production spaces), I observed (the social) interactions of my participants (media producers and/or media consumers). During my fieldwork, I spent most of my time-sharing day-to-day life with my participants. I was participating in different cultural and political activities, such as festivals, concerts, political celebrations, gatherings and protests. I spent time or lived in people's homes, where I was able to observe their use of media. That's where I usually ate as well, where I was caught up in everyday events, celebrating birthdays and getting the daily local news. Thinking, writing, analyzing and explaining what was happening around me and to me during research became a daily habit—cultivated, normalized and internalized. In many respects I was a researcher, participant, colleague and friend simultaneously. My participants and I established closeness and, in many cases, friendships. This obviously had an impact on them as well as me, since I became part of their lives—confirming how one cannot observe and research without influencing the research process itself. Still now, I keep contact with so many of them through e-mail. Given the closeness, even intimacy, that developed, it is impossible for me to say that I do not bear some love, affection and empathy towards them. This sentiment has been expressed by Lila ABU-LUGHOD, who conducted research in the Middle East:

> "Does using my knowledge of individuals for purposes beyond friendship and shared memories by fixing their words and lives for disclosure to a world beyond the one they live in constitute some sort of betrayal? [...] This is the dilemma all those of us who move back and forth between worlds must face as we juggle speaking for, speaking to, and, when we are 'halfies,' speaking from" (1993, p.41). [31]

To me, ethnography allowed an exploration of how people's stories related to the broader issues at play—in my research, the stories of feelings of belonging while surviving violence, poverty, and consuming (and/or producing!) media. This required a blend of theory and on-the-ground observation. For me, the notion of ethnographic context was conceived in terms of a "thick description" (GEERTZ, 1973) of local communities—including private homes where I studied everyday media consumption, public spaces such as concert halls and public parks where I observed reactions to statues and monuments, media newsrooms and civil

society organizations where I probed the daily activities practices of anti-government activists—and was expanded to include the broader political-economic context. [32]

5.3 And more reflexivity ...

Research on the human-to-human relations created in fieldwork is often viewed with skepticism by those who begin with the presumption of objective scientific informative inquiry. There are those who will continue to be more comfortable and convinced by positivist research strategies and writing techniques, such as statistical analyses, that are viewed as more objective and factual. But this is achieved only by extracting the researcher from the reader's view, which is itself *a political technique of authority.* It is problematic to think that disinterested styles of research do not reflect the predominant ways of understanding the world in a given moment. As Avram BORNSTEIN noted, "[p]roper social science requires transparency of methods and epistemology, which is better achieved by a healthy reflexivity, not the obfuscation and denial of subjectivity" (2001, p.550). By "reflexivity," he understood a reflection on the production of the text including the position of power the author has in her/his personal relationship with those being studied (p.568). [33]

I do not delude myself that my political concerns have not affected and been affected by my participants and my research. At the time of my fieldwork, as now, I was not merely against nationalism, but was advocating anti-capitalist politics rooted in situated class experiences. I was curious to witness many of my (left) participants' patronizing behavior *against* building class and/or gender alliances based on shared values, and against acknowledging shared historical interests. In the conversations, I would share how upholding women's resistance to (nationalistic) patriarchy needs to rethink the relationship between social domination and resistance, and talk about what resistance means to me, and in turn what it means to my participants. *Trust* was always the key here: this approach acknowledged both researchers and researched as *active agents* in knowledge production. In that way, my research was a product of that trustful dialogue, and the next section will show not only how post-war contexts structure typical research problems in new ways, but also how my writing is a product of a trustful dialogue (VOLCIC, 2009). [34]

6. Research on Reality Television, Affect and Liminality

While studying the rise of different reality TV shows in the region, I focused on the production and consumption of one of the popular shows: "That's Me"—a "Big Brother" style Balkan reality TV show (2004-2006). Filmed in Macedonia and featuring cast members from former Yugoslav republics living together, the show was described as an attempt to model and promote peaceful co-existence in a region recovering from the wars of the 1990s. It claimed to foster communication and understanding among young people in the former Yugoslav region. The producers decided to place twelve contestants of six different nationalities (a man and a woman from each country) from former Yugoslavia in a house in Skopje, Macedonia, where they engaged in the range of daily life routines from the mundane rituals of cooking and cleaning to talking with friends, playing sports, making music and falling in love. Through my ethnographic work, I was able to document the ways in which the commercial imperatives of a cheap, portable programming format align themselves with the promise of an engineered "social experiment" to reinforce, paradoxically, a naturalized version of nationalism. This is in keeping with the tendency of more politically inclined reality formats to serve as a forum for exploring social issues in microcosm—a strategy that tends to abstract away from broader social and economic issues in order to focus on interpersonal relations. While spending time with a producer, cast members and audience members of the show, I observed how reality TV politics—politics as entertainment—serves the double function of relegating citizens to the role of consumers and of fostering a savvy, reflexive attitude toward the staged character of real politics. Following the first weeks of production, and after meeting with some participants and a producer, when the show ended, I responded to their invitations to visit their homes. Using the purposive sampling method, I selected several young participants to be my key research participants, and I followed up with them in the region they came from—regularly and frequently meeting them either at home or in public spaces. Socializing with these young adults, and their families and friends gave me an opportunity to see and explore not only how they understand, but also how they consume media. I documented the ways in which the reality show managed political and economic conflicts by transposing them into the realm of the personal and embrace the participatory promise of the reality TV genre as a form of ersatz democracy: a promise of shared control reduced to "relationship marketing" that seeks to secure viewer loyalty. [35]

I understood my own ethnographic fieldwork encounter as a form of resistance to dominant media studies representations of how knowledge is acquired. Ethnographic work helped me to attempt to promote understanding across cultural and political divides, and provided me with models for grappling with injustice and offering visions of forms of collaboration that overcame deep differences. It was as if being in the field, doing fieldwork, and learning from my participants, guided me further into what *other crucial themes* were there to explore. My ethnographic work on media allowed me to argue how media could, if *owned* and led by diverse communities, and not only by private/commercial forces or the state, help to create storytelling practices in the face of trauma and

tragedy. Reading local newspapers, following the news, watching Mexican telenovelas, arguing over the remote-control with your family, joking, drinking coffee and talking about television programs, as well as listening to political speeches on the local radio, were all part of *an emotional aesthetic* that defies the sense of disempowerment, anger, frustration and anomie endemic to the political and economic desperation of the post-war, post-socialist, neo-liberal moment. [36]

I am guided by Hannah ARENDT's claim (1958, 1963) that *understanding* is a key condition for meaningful action in the world, where understanding means a possibility to come to terms with the world in such a way as to make change possible. My reflections during fieldwork, and then my writings, lectures and teaching after, all attempt to convey insights, knowledge, information, ideas, understandings and arguments. In addition, they aim to convey affect— enthusiasm, passion, compassion, sadness, empathy and anger: as this too is a part of what I term ethnographic research "engagement." We should convey *our own feelings* about what we are writing about, and not shy away from them. We should express our anxieties about the narratives and fears and hopes of our participants. We should share our feelings, anger, dreams, anxieties, fears and hopes about the structures that determine the people we study. All of this is a part of being "engaged," of caring deeply about the people as well as the themes, rather than adopting a stance of detached objectivity. What I have learnt from engagement in the field is that what matters is attitude and personality—which cannot be "distanced" from the moments encounter. Alive, inspiring human energy exists when we have encounters when we are connected, and together. BETHMANN and NIERMANN (2015) powerfully described how "engaging" and "observing" are two types of academic culture within the field of qualitative research. It is precisely our methods, ideas, emotions, evidence, arguments and, finally, our own writing and teaching, that can and need to provide new openings for interventions. Ethnographic writing continues to be relevant, and relationships we establish with our participants and our co-researchers matter now more than ever, when the social itself is displaced by technologies that falsely describe themselves as "social." [37]

7. Conclusions: Liminality, Research Relationships and the Importance of Researcher Biographies

Underpinning this article is the implicit argument that the personal biography of the researcher is a dimension that needs to be recognized, since we all speak from particular gender, class, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspectives, and the ways we define ourselves are determined by our history, politics, gender and class. [38]

What I have reflected upon in the article supports my position that it is important, now more than ever, *to continue to explore* the role of the media in people's everyday lives—how we make sense of the media systems, forms of representation, social relations and communication practices that serve as key sites for unraveling the complexities of global and local cultural, economic, and political configurations. One cannot understand media propaganda just by

analyzing, and then critiquing ideologies of political opponents. One cannot understand the workings of media representations just by analyzing, interpreting and deconstructing the representations. Can we say out loud that close reading in and of itself, by itself, is not that hard to do, and is certainly not enough? Similarly, doing fieldwork in and of itself is not enough and does not provide the kinds of "data" necessary *to explain,* for example, the power and effects of the media. Observing not only from the center of the action, but on the crucial sidelines. [39]

The rise of authoritarian populist forces in recent years has generated new challenges in affluent societies and long-established democracies, such as the US, UK, Germany, Italy, Greece and France, as well as destabilized states worldwide, such as in Venezuela, Brazil, Hungary, Lebanon, Turkey, the Philippines, Thailand and India. What explains the rise of these forces? What are the consequences? Many of us argue that communicating an understanding of *media power* is one of the key contributions we can make to making sense of social and political issues (see, for example, PECK, 2008). This is profoundly important, and I would argue that one way of being able to talk about media power in a way that our audiences can understand is through deeply engaged ethnographic work, informed by critical social theory. The understanding of media processes—for example, the changing news consumption patterns that lead to political polarization and the circulation of fake news—remains an ever pressing and unresolved challenge for our future, and here I see that the relations with my participants have helped me to grasp and understand the power of media. They have provided me with otherwise inaccessible insights into the process by which people are constituted as ethnic, classed and gendered subjects, the varied ways in which the political space is being redefined by media, and the role of the media in creating a sense of national belonging. In that, I have come to understand how our dispositions as researchers must be crucial in the *making of an encounter,* and then *building relationships* within all different research layers: that means our participants, colleagues and co-researchers alike. What I have found in my ethnographic research is that when my participants become aware that I am reflexive and honest about the encounter itself, aware of the issues and engaged in what is taking place—that I care—then the basis of the encounter is different. [40]

In my current work (2015-2022), I have shifted my own research focus to study media in USA, Australia and Switzerland (the countries I have lived and worked in for the last 20 years) and brought my own knowledge from former Yugoslavia to the analysis of new forms of media propaganda and the rise of new types of populisms and nationalisms. Allowing for self-reflexive conclusions, my decision to pursue my recent academic research outside of my home region is also the result of the bitter, highly gendered, academic politics in Slovenia. Although the experience of the petty rivalries that can characterize a claustrophobic academic setting in a small country had been a part of my academic training, I witnessed its pathological consequences up close, when a friend and colleague was the subject of a dishonest attack on her integrity by academic rivals with ties to the main media outlets. The combined bitter attack on her work was the result of internal institutional politics and almost ended her career. The lesson I drew was

to see the continuing strength of current-day political pathologies and sickness in the region and the practice of older social forms, remnants from an earlier time of socialism, such as cronyism, sexism, political corruption and favoritism. The experience made me realize how we are all *subjects-in-relation*, and the importance for who we are and aspire to be of the relationship not only with our research participants, but also our colleagues and co-researchers. Given that we are all transformed by these encounters, more of our focus needs to be devoted to our professional and ethical relations with co-writers and co-researchers, with whom we need to create and sustain *relationships of trust*, just as we do with our participants. [41]

I am writing this article during the lock-down in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 2021. It is as if the pandemic has given new urgency to my thinking about ethnographic research and relationships in the field. Against the background of forced a-sociality, I have gained an enhanced sense of how greatly I benefited from the close engagement with my participants, and I am reminded of the ways in which the research is also able to show the influence of my presence on my participants. [42]

This all takes us back to my opening proposition that there is always going to be *a self* in the research encounter, *a self* that needs to be acknowledged. This is a dimension in our relationship with the researched that needs to inform the way in which we express ourselves through our work and how we engage with our participants. RANKINE's writing continues to resonate deeply with me: if we are to create relations that are capable of holding the *historical* dynamics and social realities of gender, race, class and nationality in the face of the increased polarization and fragmentation of (social) media, we need to commit to ethnographic research, engagement, deep thinking, and reflections beginning with our own biographies. [43]

Acknowledgments

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