

De-Sanitizing Truth in Anthropology: On Boundaries of Ethnographic Reflexivity, Familiarity and Field Roles in Working With the Survivors of Bosnian Genocide

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Abstract: In this paper, I reflect on various ethical, practical and methodological challenges encountered in the field during my anthropological inquiry into the legacies of the Bosnian genocide at home and abroad. I focus on the importance of the researcher's honesty and self-reflexive engagement with the subject(s), particularly in sensitive contexts such as genocide. I discuss my experience of negotiating various social roles ascribed to me in the field, and how they shaped my research process. I also consider the methodological challenges of working with *difficult stories* of surviving the genocide and the absences of family members who perished in it. Drawing upon a *mixed ethnography approach* in combination with narrative inquiry and elements of participatory action research (PAR), I demonstrate complexities inherent in long-term ethnographic engagement with the community life that almost vanished. I reflexively engage with the question of *how we maintain intellectual, emotional and ethical engagement with the subject of research without sacrificing our academic integrity or human connection embedded within these interactions?* Subsequently, I argue for a supportive scholarly space that welcomes discussion about vulnerabilities, ambiguities and fears encountered in the ethnographic field and emerging subjectivities which further shape the final *interpretation of cultures*.

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1. Introduction¹

One of the overarching tenets of ethics in social science research—especially anthropology for its solitary engagement with the subject under investigation—is to speak the *truth*. However, the *minor* ethical formalities (rather than substantial concerns) many times seem to deflect from the ethnographic truth. Quite often academic conventions, the requirement for linear and somewhat dramatically structured narrative, or impenetrable shield of statistical *values* and *significance* (of whether something is worthy of entering the discourse or not) under the umbrella of the general idea(l) of conducting social research effectively produce a very sanitized account of the truth. As a result, comprehensive accounts of culture are frequently divested of inherent serendipities, surprises, synchronicities, awkward conversations, silences, misinterpretations, unreliable accounts, heightened emotional responses and wounded subjectivities—the integral aspects of any cultural life which, to the greatest extent, only ethnographers are ever truly exposed to. [1]

The mere exposure to other human beings (as subjects) inevitably brings about unpredictable outcomes, revelations and incidents that comprise the meat of ethnographic experience. Within the present discussion, I seek to add to the body of scholarship on reflexive anthropology, rooted in the premise that ethnographic work is inherently *intersubjective*, in the sense that it is comprised of interactions between various subjectivities encountered in the field (GEERTZ, 1973). As SALTZMAN (2002) explicated, these subjectivities refer to those of researchers, underpinned by the theoretical reasoning of their discipline and representations and viewpoints of their participants. To integrate all of these and translate them into a legible cultural text, researchers are faced with the complex task of self-reflexive negotiation of different roles and challenges throughout the research process. With this paper, I reflect on various ethical, practical and methodological challenges encountered in the field during my anthropological query into the legacies of Bosnian genocide at home and abroad, where my research subject intersected missing persons, memory and forced migration. The following is a de-sanitized account of my experience of working on my PhD research project, in which I ethnographically explored the socio-cultural implications of the unresolved issue of the missing persons from the Bosnian genocide for the surviving families who were forced to resettle in the United States and Australia. [2]

I will start with the description of my research approach to the study of missingness (Section 2), elaborating on the ethical methodological and practical premises behind the chosen methods of data collection. In Section 3, I move to delineate my ethnographic positionality and discuss the challenge of negotiating multiple social roles ascribed in the field. I expand my discussion to consider wider ethical and practical challenges of long-term engagement with the field within the context of genocidal legacies (Section 4), particularly the studying of elusive phenomena of missingness and memories of the disappeared. I conclude with argumentation for deeply reflexive and honest accounts about the difficult

¹ The title of my wider project within which my PhD is situated is "How the Missing Matter: Gaps, Absences and Silences in the Three Diaspora Contexts."

moments, moral dilemmas, familiarity bias and personal vulnerabilities discovered in the field in a way to inform and enrich the interpretation of data rather than sabotage the scientific inquiry through *self-indulgent* introspective accounts. [3]

2. Research Approach

The subject of my PhD project—where the dichotomies of life and death, presence and absence, hope and credence are all blurred, and in the yet-unexplored human capacity to integrate them—demanded a carefully-tailored methodological approach. Informed by EDKINS' (2011) critical reflection on the subject of instrumentalization of missing persons for political purposes, and MALKKI's (1995) critique on the depersonalized representation of refugees, I refused to collect any form of quantifiable data about the people and their stories, sufferings, and memories. Rather, I adopted a purely qualitative approach in line with my discipline, anchored in methodological pluralism and richness of data, thus ensuring a comprehensive portrayal of the phenomena of interest (YIN, 2010). As noted, the present paper is derived from my PhD research with the Bosnian genocide survivors resettled in Australia and the USA, within the theoretical premises of sociocultural anthropology. As CLOSSER and FINLEY (2016) discussed, the power of anthropological theory, embedded within its methodological practice, is in capturing the linkages between broader social structures and intimate lived realities. The main instrument through which these contextual nuances are grasped is an ethnographic method. [4]

I framed the methodological design within "the anthropological triangle" featuring ethnography, contextualization, and back-and-forth intercultural comparisons (BÄLLAN, 2011; ŠKRBIĆ-ALEMPIJEVIĆ, POTKONJAK & RUBIĆ, 2016). Through ethnography, I engaged with the actual Bosnian diasporic communities who were exiled from their homes in Prijedor² and Srebrenica³, now resettled on three different continents (i.e., North America, Western Europe and Australia) and in cyberspace. I drew upon different tools and methods in the quest for an exhaustive account of how the problem of protracted absence affects displaced families. To achieve this, I adopted a mixed ethnography approach (HALILOVICH & KUČUK, 2020), integrating conventional, multi-sited and digital ethnography⁴. By qualitatively examining the dynamism of memory and identity, which are naturally organized and (re)constructed through personal stories, I deployed narrative as both an object and method of inquiry. Moreover, since my research approach accentuates the empowerment of participants through their inclusion in the knowledge production, I decided to integrate elements of PAR framework, as a form of activist scholarship which fosters community-building and social change within my main research approach (KINDON, PAIN & KESBY, 2007; McINTYRE, 2008). I find it important to emphasize that PAR was not my primary methodology

2 Prijedor is a town in northwestern Bosnia which was ethnically cleansed of its indigenous non-Serb people (Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats).

3 Srebrenica is a town in eastern Bosnia where the Serb army committed genocide on Bosniak men in July 1995.

4 However, in this paper I focus solely on my in-person encounters and ethical, practical and methodological challenges encountered in the "traditional" field.

but rather a supplement to the main ethnographic approach through which I fostered a closer engagement with my participants. This participation was reflected in the participatory engagement in commemorative and funeral events, and the joint organization of communal activities, recruitment, logistics, collaborative analysis of the archival materials and feedback on my interpretation and ideas. [5]

2.1 Calibrating ethnographic instrument

My view of ethnography derives from SANJEK's (2010) conception of it as representing both the *process* and the *product*: where the former (*process*) relates to ethnographic function as a method employed to produce the latter (*products*)—i.e., ethnographic texts, the holistic monographs that open the window on cultural and social phenomena (BÄLLAN, 2011; SPENCER, 1989). Accounting for the multi- and transnational context of my study (between Bosnia, Australia, and the USA), I shifted from the traditional single-site ethnography and its macro-systemic contextualization to encompass different sites, cross-cultural dichotomies, and interdisciplinary approach, constituent of what MARCUS (1995) defined as *multi-sited ethnography*. This was illustrated by venturing into the intricate context of ethnographic comparison; tracing two different groups of people with their *things* and *conflicts*—displaced Bosnians from Prijedor and Srebrenica. I also tracked their intercontinental dispersion and the subsequent unraveling of their identities, memories and biographies. [6]

Another feature of multi-sited research that was attuned to my context is the conceptual juxtaposition and unification of social phenomena that previously appeared to be "worlds apart" (MARCUS, 1995, p.102). I found this relevant for my study, as I dealt with two different, yet contextually interlocked phenomena—the *missingness* and the *displacement*—which I sought to consolidate through different conceptual frameworks supportive of my fieldwork findings. The multi-sited approach was an auspicious supplement to the conventional ethnographic mode, since it has been featured in the studies of Internet communication, cultural views of biotechnological advancements, and migration studies—namely the trans-cultural reproduction and construction of identities in global-local frameworks (MARCUS, 1995)—all of which were contained within my broader thematic scope. [7]

Although some scholars such as POLLNER and EMERSON (2001) advocated for the practice of emotional detachment from their participants in the name of objectivity and scientific rigor, I concur with others such as GEERTZ (1988), HIRSCH (1996), and MARCUS (1998), who rather cherished the authenticity that unravels in the interaction between anthropologists and their subjects. As MARCHIVE (2012, p.7) argued, ethnography is the social science where researchers are the most embedded within the world they study, and in which they are the most susceptible to developing close relationships with their participants. These ties, he argued, directly influence the process of achieving knowledge and constitute the main source of data (pp.7-9). In addition, HALILOVICH (2008) postulated that the sole act of conducting research with the

survivors of genocidal violence, such as refugees, inherently provides sufficient moral justification—or more precisely, an obligation for social researchers to proactively engage in disrupting the *status quo*. As I write in this paper, through constant awareness of my positionality vis-à-vis my participants and self-reflexive practice, I endeavored to keep my preconceptions, biases, conclusions and situatedness within the research in check. [8]

2.2 Collecting data

Considering my anthropological discipline, my primary data collection methods were participant observation and ethnographic in-depth interviews. Participant observation, principally conceived as an observational method of culture through researchers' extended immersion in it and their participation in everyday activities (CALHOUN, 2002) has significantly changed and expanded, with the recent pendulum shift towards the *participatory* research paradigm which I also adopted through inclusion of PAR elements. My conception of participant observation resonates with SHAH's (2017, p.45) understanding of it as a "form of production of knowledge through being and action" and as a praxis, a dialectical process through which the theory is actively produced. She described the four core principles of participant observation upon which I based my approach to the field, namely: the *long-term engagement* with the culture, *understanding the social relations* within a group, *holism* of social life and the dialectics of *intimacy and estrangement*. In the same manner, I engaged with the community of displaced Srebreničani and Prijedorčani⁵, both through participation and observation—not only of the daily practices of my respondents but also of the public events that memorialize the missing persons in the diaspora and Bosnia, geographically and virtually. Examples would be my participation in the annual commemorative hike across Eastern Bosnia, known as the Peace March; the religious commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide in St. Louis; the commemorations held for victims of the Prijedor genocide, both in Bosnia and Melbourne, as well as participation in more intimate social gatherings. The latter ranged from community picnics, women's virtual chatrooms, Ramadan dinners (*iftars*) and various religious festivities, to Bosnian diaspora *anti-war protests*, and even weddings—where I took the role of a wedding filmmaker and a photographer. [9]

Considering the sensitive nature of the research topic and the target population subsequently *hidden* and hard to reach (BROWNE, 2005), especially in the diasporic contexts, as well as the fact that despite my cultural background I was still an outsider to the field(s) where I conducted my research, in reaching my participants I heavily relied on the snowball sampling technique. I usually had a community gatekeeper for different groups (e.g., widows, children of the missing, men survivors)—usually either a renowned community actant or an activist who would connect me with a group of people willing to share their stories with me. Other times it was a person who would introduce me to the rest of their family, and from there, my sampling would expand to neighbors and close friends of the participants. In the words of NOY (2007, p.332), this meant that I had to

5 *Srebreničani* is the term for people originating from the town of Srebrenica. *Prijedorčani* refers to people of Prijedor.

"relinquish" some degree of control in the sampling process to my participants, often resulting in intrafamilial chain interviews that carried certain bias and familiarity, which I discuss in this paper. [10]

I recorded my ethnographic observations as field notes and as my personal ethnographic reflections, in addition to taking photographs and videos of events I attended. Despite my initial plan to audio-record every interview, circumstances of surprise inherent to ethnographic participatory practice required me to adapt to the conditions at hand and to accommodate my participants' levels of comfort. It was therefore not possible to tape every interview. On some occasions they arose spontaneously, others were informally structured, and at the times I felt as if more rapport was needed in order to ask for permission to record. Hence some interviews were tape-recorded, whereas I took notes for others—upon asking my respondents if they were fine with it. For the most sensitive discussions, where I judged that my respondents needed me to just sit, listen, and pay undivided attention, I refrained from recording notes on-site. In these cases, I would record notes as soon as I left the interview. Accounting for the unreliable nature of memory, I would not quote directly in my writing if I did not have a verbatim transcription. [11]

Even though I planned my interviews to go for one hour on average, due to the unpredictable nature of ethnography they often played out differently than imagined. Most of my interviews lasted for approximately two-to-three hours. While exhausting at times, I never ended an interview on my terms⁶, in order to demonstrate my respect and gratitude to the respondents for their decision to share with me their difficult stories in the first place. Nor did I discard the stories my participants told me about cases of their close (living) family members and their ways of grappling with their absences. I found them not only a valuable addition to the first-hand accounts, but also noticed how my respondents sometimes guarded themselves by re-telling other people's stories. As a fellow Bosnian, I was aware of the cultural imperative of stoicism and the methods generally employed by Bosnians to avoid showing our vulnerabilities, hence I took everything—including the second-hand narratives and even the reluctance of my participants to share theirs—as data on their own. [12]

All interviews and formal conversations were conducted in supportive environments that met the confidentiality and safety standards of the participants. Although I had a list of possible locations, due to COVID-19 safety measures and the sensitivity of the topic I let my participants choose the venues they felt most comfortable with. In the beginning these were often parks and shopping malls, and later, as we established rapport and word about me spread to their neighbors and friends, we moved interviews to home settings. [13]

6 That is, if my participants felt like talking beyond one hour, I continued listening until recognizing that they wanted to stop the interview.

3. Finding One's Role(s) and Grounds in the Field

Unlike the mainstream methodologies in the social science that "aim to construct a purified relation between knower and known, carefully bracketing other potential identities and expectations by controlling the contexts and media of their engagement" (LEDERMAN, 2007, p.319), ethnography's intrepidity to engage with the raw form(at) of social reality has been a target of ethical scrutiny that in many ways molds its final product—cultural text. The ethnographic model is distinctive from other methodological frameworks in its entailing feature of "Undesigned Relationality" (BELL, 2018), where ethnographer's identity is not fixed and clearly delineated from other roles, which is typical of most other forms of social research. [14]

As ALCOFF (1988) underscored, within the research setting our identity aspects such as race, gender, class etc., are markers of our relational *positions*, rather than mere essential qualities. Upon its recognition of having a powerful influence over the research process (approach) and outcomes (interpretation) (ROWE, 2014), the notion of positionality has been justifiably garnering more attention and prominence in social science research. SAVIN-BADEN and MAJOR (2013, p.71) further explained positionality as a reflection of "the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study." This is particularly salient within anthropological research considering its colonial legacy in maltreatment, "exoticisation" and reduction of the humanness of indigenous people throughout the world (JACOBS-HUEY, 2002, p.792). This background has been followed by a "corrective agenda" (GWALTNEY, 1993, cited in JACOBS-HUEY, 2002, p. 792) that dropped alienating and intrusive methods of inquiry and reinforced an approach reflexive of researchers' positioning in the field (HARRISON, 1997 [1991]). [15]

3.1 Personal positionality

It has been long understood that "where you stand doubtless helps to determine not only what you will research but how you will research it" (PUNCH 1986, p.94). Awareness of one's positionality within the research is usually ascertained through deep reflection and self-awareness of one's personal views, and of the background which invariably determines them (GARY & HOLMES, 2020). GRIX (2019 [2004]) broke down this process of locating oneself in relation to three areas: 1. the research subject, 2. the research participants, and 3. the research context and process. A growing body of scholarship on the intersection of positionality, power in knowledge construction and representation reduces (not by necessarily simplifying) this issue to dichotomic categories of an insider (emic) and an outsider (etic) (MERRIAM et al., 2001). From this standpoint, I located myself within my research project by fully acknowledging my positionality as a blend of both emic and etic perspectives. [16]

First and foremost, I found myself as a cultural insider, as I share the same cultural roots with my participants—being a white Bosnian Muslim from southeast Europe. This identity was defined as a homogenous "other" by their Serb

compatriots, and thus a target of the genocidal violence of the Bosnian War (1992-1995) (FOURNET, 2007). However, this point of cultural relatability was simultaneously at the heart of our empirical dissemblance, since I am in no way a victim, survivor, or anything on that spectrum because I was born after the war. I have no memories of the genocide that befell my co-ethnics, nor have I ever been victimized for my cultural identity (with an emphasis on the Muslim component)—unlike my participants and their missing family members. I have no direct or indirect⁷ experience even remotely resembling those of being in exile, losing a home, or losing family members to violence or disappearance. [17]

In addition, the intersection of my age and gender created another dialectical tension in relation to my participants within the context of the research. Like the majority of my respondents, I am a woman, yet by contrast, I am young, and although married, I did not have children during the time of my PhD research. This meant that by default, my standpoint deprived me of understanding the idea of motherhood and the inherent values and emotions involved. This position by far distanced me the most from understanding what a mother's loss of a child, let alone the *unfinished* one feels like. As mentioned before, such disposition posed an impediment in my ethnographic endeavors to relate to Bosnian women's prioritization of family values (CROEGAERT, 2020; EASTMOND, 2006; FRANZ, 2003) and their conception of loss. In this sense, I occupied an experientially determined *etic* position. I came to understanding that my situatedness within the research was a double-edged sword, since it challenged me to relate emotionally and intellectually with unfamiliar phenomena. Conversely, the very lack of experiential relatability bore the reduced risk of biased and self-indulgent interpretation of the data with the researcher's personal experience. [18]

Another layer of my cultural *outsiderness* was the fact that I lived in (post-war) Bosnia for the majority of my life—whereas my participants have spent the same time living in their adoptive countries over the same period. However, speaking the same language, and being (relatively) familiar with the vernacular, customs, and traditions through shared ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage, I was not fazed by the aspects of community life I had immersed myself in as an ethnographer. Despite my cultural familiarity, I recognized that my regional origin added value to my cultural *outsiderness*. I was born and raised in central Bosnia, which unexpectedly shone a light on many intracultural differences between myself and my participants from eastern and north-western regions. Central Bosnia has been traditionally a Bosnian Muslim-dominated region and did not suffer as gravely as the former two areas during the ethnically intermixed war. Because of this complex relationality I found working with the Bosnian genocide survivors far more personally confronting than anticipated, where I naïvely presumed that our shared culture would bridge the experiential gaps across which relatability rests. In the following sections, I address some of these

7 My family was very fortunate not to lose anyone in the war, none of my relatives suffered protracted torture and captivity, rape or similar grave human rights abuse; nor does anyone from my family suffer from a war-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or physical wounds—to my knowledge. Both of my parents remained in Bosnia during the war; however, I have many distant relatives who were forced to flee and resettle in Western countries.

intricacies that shaped my interpretation and understanding of the culture of mourning and remembering the missing from a distance. [19]

3.2 Negotiating multiple social roles ascribed in the field

ROWLING (1999) noted that reflexivity becomes a vital mechanism of monitoring and managing emotionality and sense-making during the research process, particularly in studies of loss and grief. This is an essential step to being able to inform a meaningful interpretation of the experiences, rather than being overwhelmed by them. As FAUST and PFEIFER (2021) emphasized, the managing of different *boundaries* within the field—such as the degree of proximity and distance from it and its agents—is an integral part of the research process. Relational proximity and distance are often ascertained through the roles that researchers sometimes unknowingly take on in the field. [20]

Moreover, since anthropology is not a common term in everyday Bosnian vocabulary, its mysticism seemed to sometimes have had an alienating effect (WAX, 1995, p.330). A *psychologist* or a *sociologist* were more familiar terms to my participants and usually associated with their preoccupation with trauma and larger social structures. My participants therefore often tried to make sense of my role within the community by ascribing to me specific identities and cultural roles, usually based on my positionality (JACOBS-HUEY, 2002; SMITH, 1999). In some of these cases I was confronted with the challenges of negotiating multiple identities—those imputed by my participants, such as the social roles of *co-ethnic fellow in a foreign land*, an *"Honored Guest"* (SHAHRANI, 1994), or a *"pseudo-daughter"* (KONDO, 1986, cited in JACOBS-HUEY, 2002, p.793), with my primary role being a *researcher*. [21]

Generally, these externally attributed social roles only affectively shaped my proximity to the field, without much interference with my data collection. However, some other identity aspects inferred and ascribed to me by my participants complicated my interactions and the broader anthropological quest. This is detailed below. Following FAUST and PFEIFER's (2021, p.82) argument to more intensively engage with the "ambiguities, contradictions and intersubjective, ambivalent encounters in the field to capture more nuanced and complex realities," I go on to reflexively consider the challenges encountered throughout my fieldwork with Bosnian genocide survivors. [22]

3.2.1 A pro-bono psychotherapist

On a few occasions I witnessed *snowball sampling* phone calls through which my respondents helped me recruit others, and subsequently learned about their perception of my role within the community. One such event occurred during my emotional encounter with Saliha⁸, who survived the Srebrenica genocide with an infant in her arms and lost two brothers in it. As the summer rain poured around us as much as the tears down her face, both of us were awakened from the emotional trance we shared under the gazebo by the ringing of her phone. It was her friend Minka, another survivor of *ethnic cleansing* in Prijedor. Saliha used the opportunity to connect us, and sobbed while she said over the phone: "This girl, she asks you about everything and you can talk whatever you want about what we went through. Everything matters to her. She is like a psychologist—she listens to you while you pour everything out." [23]

In some ways I was glad to hear that Saliha had made use of my listening ear, and that I was not perceived solely as a *taker*, but also as a *giver*. This was at the crux of my ethical reasoning prior to commencing my fieldwork—the principle of equal standing between the researcher and the researched as much as the context allows. For many of my participants, I was indeed a *silent psychologist*, although I did not ask such prompt questions typical of psychology as: how does that make you feel?; nor cut short the natural silences with: what are you thinking about right now?. Rather, I let those silences speak their truth and allowed myself to "be alongside" or alternatively "with" my participants in grief (ROWLING, 1999, p.167), prioritizing their needs in distress over the needs of the research, as argued for by ROSENBLATT (1995). Similar occurrences were noted by BUCKLE, DWYER and JACKSON (2009) and SKINNER COOK and BOSLEY (1995) in their studies with bereaved adults, contending that participation in the research on grief—despite the common flagging by the research ethical boards—may actually be beneficial and quite therapeutic for the affected participants, as it provides a safe space for them to share their inner struggles. [24]

However, what warrants more scholarly attention is finding a balance between the scholarly and the therapeutic dimensions of in-depth interviewing—which, depending on the research approach, may disproportionately overtake the researcher-participant relationship. In my case, I soon realized that this passive and accidental embodiment of the role of an *accidental* psychologist was a slippery slope, and such perception was affecting my relationship with participants, my data, and myself. For example, during one phase of my research, I was frequently invited by some participants to go for *interview walks*—which represented an alternative setting that I had to accommodate, since at the time of my fieldwork the social distance and mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 pandemic precluded any prolonged, static, or face-to-face encounters in close contact in Melbourne. During these walks, conversation topics would often be focused mostly on everyday mundanities, which did not add much substance to my subject data. Thus, the lines between the imagined categories of myself as

⁸ All participants have been deidentified and anonymized, and all the names featured in this paper are fictitious.

researcher, and my participants as subjects, became blurred. I realized that they felt comfortable with my listening, as well as with the confidentiality embedded within our conversations. [25]

However, my participants also became aware that the many gaps in our positionalities did not allow for these casual interactions to continue in the long run. Ultimately, I was still perceived at the time as a young, unmarried student, and many of them had children or grandchildren at a similar age to myself. The only overlap of our everyday realities was therefore the research project in which we both participated—and, in a way, *performed* our roles. This was an uncomfortable situation, where both sides were afraid to explicitly tackle the topic that had brought us together—the *missing persons* and the broader reverberations of the genocide. I noticed that to retain my attention, some of my participants would occasionally mention something related to my research interest, but the conversation would soon take a turn to a different, unrelated topic of *their* interest. It was a kind of trade-off, where I would get my piece (or rather crumbs) of data, and in return my participants would get my undivided attention and reflection on whatever they felt like talking about. We all tiptoed around the *elephant in the room*, and avoidance to tackle the main topic posed a serious obstacle in early phases of fieldwork. [26]

It is important to reiterate that this was not the case with all participants, but only with a small group. However, I believe that discussing these instances is insightful and worthwhile, as it was one of the core challenges that I needed to address in order to proceed in my research. Breaking the associations with my role as an imagined therapist and giving more active direction throughout my ethnographic interactions was the turning point of the project, which spread across three countries and continents (i.e., the US, Australia and at home in Bosnia). When I was preparing for the two months of fieldwork in the Midwestern United States, where the greatest re-territorialized group of Srebrenica survivors resettled, I decided to opt for a more explicit approach. This was a necessity due to my limited time in the field and my self-established milestones of success. As anticipated, the downside of this approach was a thin rapport, and the absence of ethnographic proximity to participants which I had developed with many of my subjects in Melbourne due to our multiple encounters and prolonged exposure to the culture (SANSON & LE BRETON, 2020). [27]

However, this deficiency was recompensed by the close relationships I developed with my host family in St. Louis (USA)—Hasija, who lost two brothers in the Srebrenica genocide, and her husband Adil, who lost his father in addition to many other relatives. Being immersed in their everyday lives, sharing intimate moments such as family dinners, religious festivities, ritual commemorations of their missing relatives, watching films which portray their tragedy, and becoming "like a third child to them"—as Adil emphasized many times, due to my age and peerage with their own children who had left home not long prior—came with the benefit of strong rapport. This strong connection also granted me the confidence to ask personal questions without the constraints posed by my outsidership. [28]

3.2.2 *A harvester of the exotic and the extraordinary*

Returning to the gazebo on a rainy summer day, the woman from the other line of Saliha's phone call was excited about her description of my role and immediately *signed up* for an interview session the following week. Minka, a mother of two, lost her husband, brother and father in the *ethnic cleansing* less than three decades ago. She migrated to Melbourne alongside thousands of other Bosnian refugees upon threats of repatriation from Germany in the late 1990s, not knowing what happened to her loved ones. We met at the same locale where I had met Saliha, however, rather than being faced with tears, her narrative challenged my anthropological inquiry in a different way. Despite my articulate interest in her *present* life and emphasis on details related to her time in Australia, her understanding of what should be said in the interview with an *anthropologist* differed. Minka was adamant to tell me her riveting story of exile from Bosnia, and—for the sake of discussion relative to methodological challenges and revelations in working with forcibly resettled genocide survivors—I decided to share her story here. [29]

Following the exilic trajectory of many Bosnian war widows, Minka ended up in Slovenia, from where she then departed to Germany. In the attempt to illegally cross the Austrian-German border, with two small children and her teenage sister-in-law Alma, they were all caught and detained by Austrian border police. Minka hid their passports in her son's diaper, and they were transported to a *collective center* in Austria. Upon liaising with other Bosnians in the center, Minka arranged to buy train tickets for Berlin and cross the *wild border* across the Bodensee at the junction between Switzerland, Austria and Germany. It was February, and the temperatures were very low. One Bosnian man carried her older child on his shoulders, followed by Alma, and Minka with a baby in her arms. They managed to cross the freezing lake on foot and boarded the train to Berlin. This was Minka's second country of resettlement, where she lived for a few years until Austrian police tracked her down and brought her to court for her illegal border-crossing. Minka recounted how, despite making her way out of it, visa conditions for Bosnian refugees became increasingly restrictive to the point where "my kids slept in boots because every night *Gestapo*⁹ could have busted in our homes and deport us instantaneously. We were always prepared." Eventually, she moved to Melbourne with her two small children, while forensic scientists from Argentina to Norway looked for her loved ones' remains in the dense Bosnian forests (KOFF, 2004). [30]

The exilic route of Minka is not quite representative of Bosnian war widows' lived experience of forced migration. Certainly, Minka's attempt to cross the border,

9 Minka and many others who shared her position as illegal migrants in Germany in the late 1990s, for whom the country was supposed to be a transit destination towards the final place of resettlement, referred to the German and Austrian border police in derogatory terms, such as "Gestapo," with the aim of illustrating the "terror" of their unresolved migrant situation, persecution that changed form even after they fled the genocidal violence in their home country. The term here is not used with the goal of reproducing the historical use of it and its equation of the contemporary Austrian police with the secret police of Nazi Germany, but is used as it was said in the quote by my widowed participant from Prijedor and left uncensored to preserve the accuracy of the data.

reminiscent of KHOSRAVI's (2010) auto-ethnographic account of "'Illegal' Traveller," epitomized many of the challenges Bosnian women faced upon being left to fend for their families without men in a foreign world. However, Minka's narrative was significantly more dramatic than the bureaucratically laden routes that most of the women undertook, and her choice to share with me this 'exoticism' forced me to re-examine my methodological aims, as this was not the first time that my participants shared the most riveting parts of their life, instead of their everyday realities. [31]

I found that many survivors considered their current lives less narratively captivating than their experiences of crossing the mountains, barely saving their lives, or the *surrealities* of life in the ravaged society of Bosnia post-genocide. My participants intended to give me *the story*, as they simply thought that was what I wanted to know about—the grand narratives of heroism: divine intervention, horrifying scenes of death and gore, the hallucinatory torments that baffled them on their way to safety and the dialogues that changed their life course. Later, on reflecting as to why this was occurring, I understood that my insiderness of growing up in the post-genocide Bosnia, being generally attuned to the gruesome scenes of mass grave excavations on the evening news and the collective summer funerals of the remnants of my compatriots, in other words, the *familiarity* with the context of the missing, might have been the explanation. [32]

In addition to my anthropological presence, my relative familiarity seemed to have created an expectation in my participants that they needed to impress me with the data, rather than to simply present me their realities as they were. Indeed, in her research with bereaved AIDS activist groups, GOULD (2015, p.168) argued, "familiarity potentially poses a problem for any ethnographer in the sense that growing knowledge of a social group's common sense can impede other ways of understanding what is happening." Indeed, I was aware of these biases since the very beginning of my ethnographic engagement with the topic and monitored how my internal familiarity with the culture and the subject of research—as integral to our shared contemporary social realities—molded my approach to it. Early on, I tried experimenting with detachment and fostering my outsidership so as to achieve a *better* and more *objective* view of the phenomenon, before realizing that the positionality with which ethnographers arrive in the field ought to be harnessed as a potential, rather than an impediment. For GOULD, it was to recognise the power of feelings as tools for sourcing and deepening the analysis of the subject at hand, whereas for me it was to accept the incompleteness of my emic/etic positioning and leverage these shortfalls to enrich the process of knowledge production. [33]

3.2.3 A dark tourist, a tribunal spy?

On other occasions, my participants' idea of my anthropological presence and my (perceived) quest *for the extraordinary* was not met with approval. For example, when I attended the diasporic commemoration of White Armbands Day in Melbourne, my attempts to meet more Prijedorčani and ask them for a potential interview faced backlash. Upon meeting one man who survived the concentration camps in Prijedor (like the vast majority of local non-Serb men), and introducing myself, he looked at me and with a heavy dose of cynicism responded: "What did you come for here? A *camp story*?" I found myself feeling uncomfortable, because that was not my intent, and furthermore, I avoided asking my participants from Prijedor about the camp experience, being aware of the re-traumatizing potential embedded within those recollections. Instead, I retracted and respected the man's concerns. [34]

On the other side of the hall where everyone gathered after the commemoration, another participant attempted to introduce me to Minela, who lost her teenage brother and father in Prijedor. As I started to tell her about my research subject, she interrupted me by saying: "My mother warned me not to talk with you. She said that we closed that chapter in our lives and don't want to go back there." Naturally, I did not insist but respected their choice to remain silent. However, as I understood from our following encounters in various diasporic community gatherings, Minela's mother remained wary of me and was not happy with having me around. It turned out that she also conceived of me as a devoted collector of other people's tragic stories, and thus *safeguarded* her own by all means. [35]

I reflected on the term *target population* in social science and its distancing effect within the context of sensitive topics, such as genocide in particular. My *target(ed) population* of genocide survivors from the town of Prijedor, in effect, were a target of the Serb nationalist genocidal campaign because of their Muslim (and to a smaller extent Catholic) identity. Their resettlement to faraway multicultural lands, such as Australia and the United States, was essentially their attempt to blend in and escape the cultural *othering* that left them dispossessed and my anthropological quest might have been (mis)perceived as such, were I to hazard an interpretation of these events. There were very few instances over the course of my research recruitment, however, when survivors of the Prijedor genocide were notably less willing to engage with me in contrast to their counterparts from the eastern region of Bosnia, who were adamant in voicing their tragedies. [36]

I tried to discuss this recruitment challenge with those Prijedorčani who accepted participating in my study. War widow Remza, now in her sixties, from the village Hambarine above Prijedor, who lost her husband, two brothers and many relatives—gave me the possible explanation for the reluctance of her former townsfolk to speak with me. As she was wrapping a headscarf around her head,

peeking through the white lacy curtains in expectation of our ride to the mosque, where the ritual of *tevhid*¹⁰ was to be held for the victims of Prijedor, she said:

"Why don't they want to talk, you ask? Well, you know, we were questioned a lot after what happened there. Those that came before you (other researchers) to interview us, you know, many of us suspected that they were sent by the ICTY¹¹ and we don't like getting involved." [37]

Remza's explanation was nothing new, since the anthropologists' inquisitive work—the avid notetaking, detailed depth interviews, and their regular presence within the community—has been a subject of suspicion and associated with government espionage since the times of BOAS (POLLOCK, 2018; PRICE, 2000). I understood the specific concerns of my participants as well, as some of them shared that even upon resettlement, their families had received threatening letters concerning their testifying at the ICTY and domestic courts in Bosnia. Some of my participants in the diaspora shared with me that they collaborated with foreign intelligence agencies in their efforts to account for resettled war criminals and that they were a target of serious threats by their Serb *still-*neighbors¹² in the diaspora. I did not have a solution to deal with these situations and suspicions, and I also did not want to reinforce their concerns further through any sort of forced reassurance about my clear intentions and openness about my work. Instead, I respected these concerns and re-directed my recruitment efforts elsewhere. [38]

By nature, ethnographers' presence within any community tends to disrupt the normal flow of cultural life, where our ignorance and curiosity about local custom and tradition spur its cursive unraveling (AAMANN, 2017). The imbrication of various social roles within the field might tell us that those who ascribe these roles to us researchers are merely trying to understand from which place we are coming, as much as researchers are trying to understand their worlds. With this paper I seek to add to the decades-long ongoing debate, or rather the process of reinventing anthropological ethnography as a collaborative practice between a researcher and *the researched* populations, by suggesting a reflexive engagement with the participants' perceptions of the study, their role and the role of the ethnographer with it. [39]

In this context, it might be prudent to mention the model of a *doubly reflexive ethnography*, conceptualized by DIETZ (2010), which completes the contrast of emic and etic dialectic through integrating and relating the reflexivity of a researcher with the reflexivity contributed by the collaborating actors (ibid., see

10 *Tevhid* is an Islamic mortuary ritual where the living supplicate for the souls of the dead through collective recitals of the holy book, Qur'an.

11 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was a United Nations court that dealt with war crimes committed during the wars on the former Yugoslav territory.

12 Following the disintegration of the country, many former Yugoslav refugees ended up in the same recipient countries, and even cities—such as St. Louis. Such resettlement policies made everyday lives in exile quite difficult and confronting for the victims of genocide, many of whom continued seeing their persecutors. For examples, refer to the book "Black Soul" (RAHMANOVIĆ, 1998).

also DIETZ & MATEOS CORTÉS, 2022). While DIETZ (2010) with his reflexive model focused mostly on collaborative data analysis, I argue for expanding the focus to encompass the reflexive interaction and role-awareness throughout the ethnographic process. This argumentation links to similar discussions from previous *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (FQS)* articles, such as AAMANN's (2017) deeply reflexive ethnography, inclusive of challenges that arise in the field as data in and of themselves, and VANGKILDE and SAUSDAL's (2016) argument for an approach rooted in "mutual participatory observation" (§35), where a researcher acted as an initiator of a dialogue on a subject pertinent to the researched community. This methodological shift "From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation" was previously discussed by TEDLOCK (1991), which she described as narrative ethnography, in the sense that ethnographic text encompasses both the character and the process of the ethnographic dialogue between the researcher and the researched population. By being aware of the roles that ethnographers occupy in the eyes of their participants, across cultures and contexts of research, researchers might be able to better ascertain participants' motives and capacities of engaging in the studies, and subsequently it may also shed more light on the data obtained from them—as well as the data withheld from the researchers. Concomitantly, the negotiation of multiple positions within the field comes with its complexities where, as SHUTTLEWORTH (2001, p.103) noted, "The more roles the ethnographer occupies in relation to his/her informants the more likelihood that conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas will occur." [40]

4. Ethical and Practical Challenges in Working With Genocide Survivors

One of the main ethical principles of conducting social research is to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects (HAMMERSLEY & TRAIANO, 2012). However, working with the people whose lives, liberties and dignities have been violated within the framework of PAR raised questions of agency and advocacy, which sometimes may clash with the strictly demarcated lines of conducting ethical research. Usually, upon the research disclosure and the presentation of the informed consent form, where I explained that all data will be de-identified and each participant ascribed a pseudonym, survivors generally protested and asked for their identity and story to be disclosed to the fullest. "I don't have anything to hide. Feel free to put my name, my surname and everything I tell you as it is, because I have nothing but truth to tell you"—Osman, one of my participants in St. Louis, said, encapsulating the attitude of many of his former townfolk now dispersed across the globe. For many survivors the sole act of participating in the research through sharing their stories of survival and loss embodied a form of truth activism. Especially for those living in faraway countries for more than two decades, thus being far removed (and excluded) from the ongoing memory battles—such as the locally and politically disputed truth of bestialities that happened against the non-Serb people of Prijedor in 1992—participation in the formal scholarly project represents an opportunity to contribute to memory-making efforts on a broader scale. In that sense, their participation

was empowering, while it also provided a chance for survivors to share their grievances and reflections with a researcher (SKINNER COOK & BOSLEY, 1995) —which would not have been discussed otherwise due to the culturally taboo nature of missingness. [41]

Like SHEFTEL and ZEMBRZYCKI in their work with Holocaust survivors in Canada, I encountered a similar dissonance during my interviews with Bosnian genocide survivors, in terms of our intersubjective preparedness to tackle the subject of genocide. As they said:

"as ugly as Holocaust memories may be, they tend to be interviewee's familiar territory for recounting ... no matter how much we had explained the ethos of the project, interviewees still expected us to want factual, narrative recitation of their Holocaust experiences ... This is what made them comfortable" (2010, p.200). [42]

Paradoxically, what many experiential outsiders might perceive as a *conversational minefield*, despite its utter intrusiveness and the pain it evokes for them, the participants deem it as their comfort zone. As NAYAR suggested, the genocidal memory transforms the everyday into *extreme everyday* that becomes the ultimate mode for organizing the memory itself, with history of ethnic tensions "deemed to exist within the ethnically marked, decrepit, and emaciated bodies, their relations and their progeny" (2020, pp.212-213). I was cognizant of the re-traumatizing potential that each story was charged with, never pushing my participants to recount stories which would induce a psychological discomfort that they would not want to deal with. I set this criterion, presuming that it would be impossible to tell the story of separation from your beloved whom you never saw again. [43]

Certainly, in addition to respecting the autonomy of my participants in active knowledge production through incorporation of PAR principles, I followed the main principle of conducting anthropological research: *do no harm*.¹³ However, in studying the legacies of genocide which inherently carries the risk of unintended psychological harm through potential re-traumatization, the question of what constitutes *avoidable* harm is debatable, as is to what extent it is tolerable for those who consciously engage in the research knowing that it might bring about unwanted onslaught of painful memories. Foreseeing this possibility, I ensured that participants in both localities were aware of potential re-traumatization and were provided with contacts of local mental health services which are free of charge. [44]

Primary to my reflexive engagement and following personal intuition, I let survivors gauge what *harm* constitutes for them. The majority of my participants made a psychological trade-off to share their stories, despite their disturbing content, for they saw a higher purpose in their participation in the study. The argument they made was always the same: "If we don't talk then it (the genocide) would be forgotten, and we cannot let that happen." They saw harm in letting

13 See the American Anthropological Association, "Ethics and Methods—Learn and Teach," <https://www.americananthro.org/ethics-and-methods>[Accessed: October 20, 2022].

their stories dissipate with their own eventual demise, insofar as voicing them became their moral obligation. The *duty to remember* the grave tragedy that befell Bosniak genocide survivors became an established cultural imperative, woven into the sole mode of their beings. Although a vast majority of my participants were completely honest and made themselves vulnerable in our exchanges, entrusting me with their most difficult memories, I still had encounters where I could not shake off the gut feeling that some stories—as I later confirmed—did not quite check out with the facts available to the public. These instances of *unreliable witnesses* posed an ethical challenge, where stories appeared to be either completely fabricated—as was the case in different contexts of genocide, through which fraudulent *survivors* sought to preserve the truth about genocide (i.e., Holocaust, DANILOFF, 2009; YUHAS, 2016)—or significantly augmented as a possible product of unspeakable trauma. This challenge was reflected in being torn between either consciously ignoring the suspicion, accepting the narrative data at face value, or engaging in some form of "Ethnographic Refusal" (ORTNER, 1995) through which I would have completely denied the truth of the person who decided to speak with me. In the last case, which seemed like a more ethical thing to do, I would have done a great injustice to the persons in the event that their story was in fact truthful. I met this challenge by reflexively assessing which parts of the story spoke to me as veracious and resonated with the previous (more empirically representative) survivor accounts. There is a poor share of scholarship in social sciences tackling this methodological and ethical dilemma, which ought to be discussed more. [45]

At other times, the *duty to remember* seemed to motivate my participants to speak with me for different reasons, such as out of fear of being reprimanded by the rest of the community in case they refused, or they felt obliged by their colleagues who connected us to do them *a favor*. This was the case because of the snowball sampling technique I used in the communities I visited with their tight social bonds, rather than out of fear of a potential breach of our confidentiality agreement. Thus, some would, although carefully, insist on "giving me what they can" (as commonly stated in their words) and even demanded questions from me, even though I ensured them that their willingness to talk is completely voluntary and confidential. Eventually, my anthropological perceptivity attuned me to recognize these instances and I would adjust my interview agenda accordingly. This meant asking survivors about their present life, their job, family, adaptation to the new culture and visits to Bosnia, rather than tiptoeing around the painful past. At other times I counted on their preparedness to sit and talk with me, as I always informed them in detail about my research interests prior to our encounters. To add another layer of reassurance about my intentions, I attended interviews with participants recruited through their friends whom I had already interviewed—this way they had someone trustworthy to advise them in deciding whether to engage with me in my ethnographic quest. Navigating such a complex emotional and ethically opaque terrain taught me that in the context of studying genocide and its legacies, specifically the phenomena of (protracted) grief and (unresolved) loss, the reliance on situational ethics (PUNCH, 1986; REID, BROWN, SMITH, COPE & JAMIESON, 2018) based on a deep reflexive engagement with the field as a whole does more justice to those involved in the

sharing of knowledge vis-à-vis adherence to absolutism and rigidity of formal ethical guidelines. [46]

4.1 Studying gaps, absences and silences¹⁴

In previous studies on disappearances, we can find that the practices involved in the search for the missing persons are more than locative since they represent transformative processes that reveal the emotional vibrance and transition in response to the protracted absence and ambiguous loss (BOSS, 1999; STEVENSON, PARR & WOOLNOUGH, 2016). They are self-reflective, experientially (re)constructive and affective in themselves. When I commenced my PhD fieldwork in suburban Melbourne, I found myself staring at my research questions, one of them concerned with the manifestation of *absences* of the perished men in the everyday lives of the surviving families in the diaspora. How does *absence* manifest itself? Despite a few fragile preconceptions, I realized that I needed to find it myself—between the lines of transcribed interviews. [47]

The majority of the studies dealing with *missingness* tend to be focused on social and moral ambiguities relative to the perceived condition of people's absence, in terms of their rights to privacy to *go missing* and the family's right to seek them (FYFE, STEVENSON & WOOLNOUGH, 2015; PAYNE, 1995; REES, 2011). However, the case of the Bosnian missing has a peculiar dimension, in that they are, almost certainly—if not in the rare case of hopeful denial—dead, but their bodies, *corpus delicti*, are missing, if not entirely, then partially missing. The embodiment of their partial sub-existence is legible in the amount of their skeletons retrieved from the mass graves. The teasing question of the completeness of their death, measured in the quantity of the bones restored, and thus the *grievability* of life lost (BUTLER, 2004), gave rise to a novel cultural taboo which cannot be explicitly tackled. I also learned that the grievability of individual absence is subjectively determined, despite the attempts to collectivize ritual burials, classify death (as martyrdom) or (mis)appropriate victims for political gains. [48]

In essence, scholars concur that complexities of absence reveal that going missing transcends a simple notion of change in space, but as STEWART (2020) alleged, the concept of *missingness* implicates sociality—a relational context that defines what absence is and is not. Similarly, EDKINS propounded that "people are not missing in the abstract. People are only missing in relation to those who know them and are concerned for their wellbeing and want to know their whereabouts" (2011, p.13). I learned this principle throughout my fieldwork in Bosnia, Australia and the United States with numerous families of the Bosnian missing, in my elusive attempt to grasp the very notion of missingness. [49]

As an ethnographer, my role was to attune my anthropological sensibilities to the culture I was entering. I thought, although naïvely, that my relative cultural *insiderness* and my academic background in psychology would ease my inquiry

¹⁴ The title of my wider project within which my PhD is situated is "How the Missing Matter: Gaps, Absences and Silences in the Three Diaspora Contexts."

into the absence. Soon, I found myself over-building rapport with my participants, where at one point, our encounters became prosaic, saturated with chatting about the mundane which turned into becoming my comfort zone. I realized that I was afraid to tackle the absences which we all knew I came for but pretended were not there. No one volunteered to raise the question of absences, simply for the fact that it was too painful. I was intimidated by their palpability and conceptual heaviness. How do you talk about something that is not there, yet shapes reality in every living moment of those troubled by it? [50]

At times, my participants would feel sorry for me, for not obtaining the data I came for, and instead they would try to *show* me what the absence looks like. But I would flinch—telling myself that it was too early, too personal and too intimate for me to go there. I started to understand the complexity of research with the survivors of genocide, for the closer I became to them, the closer their loss felt to me, amplifying my insiderness as much as my outsidership. My research was internally compromised by my own troubles in negotiating the roles within it and my emotional reluctance to tackle the research subject. Recognizing this initial failure and weakness was the catalyst for my better understanding of my (dis)position(ality) within the field and leveraging it in my further ethnographic work. As WAX (1977, p.325) noted: "If fieldworkers did not suffer human frailties, they would be likely to be unable to comprehend the ongoing human lives of those they wish to study." [51]

It would be misleading to say that I had proficiently navigated my participants' realities, since it was more of a moving back and forth, between people, places, stories and my own self-reflections. As SHEFTEL and ZEMBRZYCKI (2010, p.193) concluded, challenges that researchers encounter in working with "difficult stories" in terms of gaps, disengagements, silences and emotional responses all lead to the recognition that both our participants and we as researchers are more than just (re)collections of stories—and our data as well. [52]

4.2 Studying the memories of the missing

The category of the missing, whose ontology is reluctant to adhere to the dichotomic categorization of life and death, ultimately challenged my perception of them within my own research. Studying the missing persons' lives, (probable) deaths, identities, cases of missingness, incompleteness of their post-mortem materialities, and second-hand memories, made them not an object, but rather a subject of my research—equal to the population of the living who helped me learn about them. Emotions embedded within the narratives that surviving families shared with me instilled the missing with a certain dose of life. Their ontological volatility reflected on how they merged categories within my research and troubled my perception of them, where sometimes, the missing became my *target population*, and other times they became a thematic category in my data analysis. Answering the question relative to the maintained presence of the missing in the everyday lives of the survivors was a conundrum in itself. The simple and logical premise was—through the memories. As I entered the field, I figured that I would need to tackle the subject of how the memories of the missing

have been performed upon. This would require entering the expansive field of memory studies. [53]

In post-conflict societies, memorialization of the collective loss and suffering has been particularly salient for its capacity to tackle past injustices by uncovering the truth, act as a symbolic form of reparation to the survivors, serving as a social reflex against future repetition and as a pedagogical tool for the upcoming generations (SWEENEY, 2015, p.10). Yet, in the context of commemorating the missing genocide victims, DiGEORGIO-LUTZ and MANDUJANO (2020, p.90) point out that the void created by the absence of the individual identity depersonalizes the genocidal violence, limits the possibility of memorialization and ultimately hampers the process of reconciliation. [54]

During the early phase of interviewing Bosnian genocide survivors, I felt a palpable disconnect between my participants and myself as we danced around the subject of personal remembrance. As an experiential outsider, I felt that I had no right to pry on such an intimate sphere of my participants' inner lives, particularly when it came to their private remembrances of their perished relatives. It felt forced and lacked substance. What had brought me to anthropology was my very resentment of these common features in social science research. I understood that to learn how the missing are remembered I needed to meet *them*, to familiarize myself with a person who disappeared and memories from the times charged with less tragedy. I started asking my respondents about the first memories they had of their perished ones, about their character, their flaws and virtues, their hobbies, jobs and their different roles: as a parent, a husband, a brother, a friend. I asked widows about their family vacations, festivities, their first dates, dances, and the last times they saw their missing husbands. Suddenly, their memories and the feelings invoked felt closer to me. [55]

This was the case with Remza. At the outset, she was surprised when I inquired about seemingly irrelevant aspects of her life in the context of research and gave me scarce answers as if she did not want to let me in her shrine of remembrance. Later, her eyes started to glisten as the tight knot in her throat disentangled. Remza talked about her missing husband Sudo, their first dates, their marriage and the traveling they undertook together, his wilfully disobedient character and the home they made together. I listened and tried to imagine with her, to remember the memories I never had without poking into any explicit meanings. After that evening, I felt like I knew a part of Sudo and hence, a part of her that was missing as well.

"It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (BUTLER, 2004, p.22). [56]

These words of BUTLER came to my mind when I reflected upon my notes derived from Remza's narrative, shedding more light on my understanding of re-constitution of identities in relation to unresolved loss. With this in mind, I felt honored to walk her to *tevhid* in the Deer Park Mosque and sat next to her as she counted the beads embroiled among her fingers, stare far away, chanting the prayers for her missing Sudo and numerous cousins whose youthful laughter used to fill up her street in the village of Hambarine, as she watered the garden in the same backyard through which she later dug looking for her husband's remains. [57]

Like Remza, many other widows I interviewed were surprised by my interest in their personal memories and keepsakes. Indeed, it was a strange situation, I contemplated later on, presuming that rarely had they been asked about their most intimate loss by strangers on the quest of writing a book about it. They would defend them by giving me cut-off answers, and promptly changing the subject or getting physically preoccupied with some activity, such as offering food or making coffee, only to later become consumed by their own narrative. I realized that only when I, as an anthropologist, allowed myself to get closer and partake in my respondents' own memory-making processes, was I becoming consumed with their tragedies as well. Those memories were not mine, nor was I re-appropriating the tragedies of my research subjects, which I was particularly cautious to avoid to the point where, as noted in the sections above, I became almost intimidated to tackle the sensitive points of the topic at hand. Nonetheless, it was hard to deny the impact their stories of loss had on me, such as becoming closer to my own family and fostering those ties more intensely at the expense of other social connections during my PhD experience. [58]

Within social sciences, and anthropology in particular, the practice of interweaving one's empirical inclinations with "The Ethnographic Imagination" (WILLIS, 2000) has been long known as a self-reflexive practice. In her research on death and aging among geriatric and imprisoned adults, VISSER (2017) called for scholarly attention to acknowledge the impact of the research on death and grief on the emotional experience of the researchers, arguing for their transparency through reflexive engagement at the expense of being subjected to the scrutiny of the wider academic community. Similarly, WOODTHORPE (2007) argued for the incorporation of emotionality of a researcher into discussions of methodology and analysis, suggesting that reflexive accounts where researchers usually confront their own fears of mortality can inform, enrich and increase the quality of research on death and bereavement. VISSER (2017), VISSER et al. (2021) and ROWLING (1999) argued that publications of self-reflexive accounts in the recognized journals on grief and death play a major role in positively re-affirming the researcher subjectivities rather than seeing them as an expedient. [59]

The tension between achieving a constructive reflexive account which ought to inform the research and the trap of navel-gazing, where many fall "into an infinite regress of excessive self-analysis at the expense of focusing on the research participants," as FINLAY (2002, p.532) put it, continues to be a subject of methodological papers and an ongoing in-situ experimentation (WOODTHORPE,

2007). As discussed before, considering the sensitive nature of the research subject, in my ethnographic texts I refrained from overly poetic and self-indulgent introspection and accounts of relatability with my participants, yet retained reflexivity as a tool of deepening my data analysis rather than as a therapeutic means of inserting myself into the scene (PROBST, 2015). In the end, as much as we strive to create a perfect research design and fieldwork plan, presaging the obstacles and techniques to circumvent them, ethnographies are inherently *messy* (PLOWS, 2019). As LAW (2019, p.ix) noted, the recognition of methodological performativity taught us that ethnographers in particular are never "simply describing," but rather transforming, be that themselves or the cultural worlds they were privileged to enter and leave their footprints on (GEARY, 2019), or those who read their accounts. [60]

5. Conclusion

With this paper I sought to address the ethnographic subject of contention—the mismatch between what is encountered in the field and the ethnographer's account of it (PLOWS, 2019, xiii), which is often sanitized through academic expressions, deliberate omissions for the sake of narrative flow, *lost in the translation of culture* (GEERTZ, 1973) or even adhering to word count, which precludes more holistic sociocultural interpretation. By drawing upon my personal experience in the field(s), recounting various ethical and methodological challenges which I encountered and accounted for in my final interpretation of the culture of mourning and remembrance of the Bosnian missing, I sought to illustrate the inherent complexities of immersing oneself into the culture. The aim was also to contribute to subverting the academic myth of a know-it-all researcher and argue for deeper engagement with the research subject at the expense of preserving this pristine academic (self-)image. I hope that my reflexive account and honesty about my vulnerabilities in the field can prompt other ethnographers to wonder: how can we achieve an intellectual, ethical and methodological balance between respecting the culture of our ethnographic interest and getting the most out of it while fostering our academic integrity? [61]

I am also hoping to add to an ongoing discourse that recognizes that researchers are not perfect, nor impeccable in their ethical choices, let alone decontaminated of personal bias and opinions. These are more likely to emerge in the production of scholarly work which is based on raw data and deep engagement with subjects of their work (i.e., ethnography). The social science researchers are, necessarily, as NAZARUK (2011, p.81) suggested, denuded through their reflexivity through which they essentially construct the meaning of culture. The practice of reflexivity and frankness about their own struggles as humans in interaction with other humans renders researchers vulnerable, and in turn, makes them more human. Allowing oneself to be vulnerable with the participants effectively contributes to leveling out and balancing the power dynamics that are a regular subject of contention in social science research. At its core, as GEARY (2019) noted, social science is based on the enactment of the researchers and their subjects who reflect on each other's contribution, and both sides are altered by each encounter. Researchers are denuded because they are exposing their human

selves to those who are from the other side exposing their storied selves, and this direct exchange—liberated from the walls of numbers and chains of statistical significance of human experience—is what makes those narratives more proximate and relatable to the readers of ethnographic texts. And this is where the change usually starts. [62]

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