

# What Might Have Been Lost: Fieldwork and the Challenges of Translation

Written by Renata Summa

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RENATA SUMMA, APR 5 2020

**This is an excerpt from *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*.  
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The extract from my field notes (see below), written a month before I had to leave Sarajevo on my second research trip for my Ph.D. thesis, illustrates two main concerns that I had during my research, and which will be at the centre of this chapter. The first one, which I discuss in the following section, is the attempt to 'capture the city'. Indeed, the text above exposes the anxieties of realising the difficulty of understanding 'what is really going on' in Sarajevo and the desire to blend in the everyday of the city to 'grasp it'. Although I had already reflected on the problems of treating the fieldwork as raw data that the researcher can collect to arrive at a 'true account' of the situation on the ground, I still could not completely overcome those scholarly assumptions that isolate 'theory' from the 'real world' and distinguish the subject from the object. The second concern is the multiplicity of experiences which comprise the fieldwork. How do we translate the myriad of narratives, interviews, opinions and the variety of life stories into coherent social analysis? How do we translate the sounds, rhythms, emotions, coffee breaks, friendships, breakdowns, and failures into a cohesive text? How do we translate the inconsistencies of the everyday life of fieldwork into knowledge? Those are the questions that I will tackle in the second part of this chapter.

I will soon go back home and I am thin, exhausted, a lint; lean but tanned. I am thin due to coffee, beer and rakija, to the smoky rooms and *that* language, that pops in my ears, that is lost in my mouth and which tells me that it is possible before it denies me any sort of understanding. I am thin due to the sleepless nights. How many? All of them. Due to the prayers I hear when the day rises. I live out of air, caffeine and curiosity. I live to always ask for more, and always receive more. I live in the slow pace of the crowded trams, tirelessly walking back-and-forth through the narrow and steep streets, *trying to cover every inch of this city, trying to grasp it all*. I live out of sunshine, yes, when there is some. Out of wind, yes, when there is some. I live out of stories and wounds, so many of them. I live out of songs, bells and dogs barking through the night; out of the smell of clean sheets, sweaty scarfs and sugary smoke. Burnt firewood, forest, river and jasmine. I live out of these eyes, thousands of them, and their improbable colours. And by living like this I lose myself. I lose weight, nights of sleep, appetite, purpose. This city seems to escape me. (3 May 2015)

### **The Quest for Legitimacy: Trying to Capture Sarajevo**

Sarajevo has frequently made me feel like an outsider, if not a fraud. I moved to the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the middle of my Ph.D. to conduct research in everyday places both in Sarajevo and in Mostar, to understand how ordinary people enacted and displaced ethnonational boundaries that were institutionalised by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The encounters I had with the 'local population' and with other researchers frequently made me uneasy and questioned my legitimacy as a researcher. Indeed, I have never fallen into the most frequent categories one thinks are necessary for a researcher to get interested in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). I am not from BiH nor from the Bosnian diaspora. I do not come from the 'region', i.e., ex-Yugoslavia, nor from Western Europe, which has been naturalised as an actor who should look at the fate of BiH as their responsibility (Brljavac 2011). Instead, I come from Brazil, a country which made my interlocutors raise their eyebrows every time I

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mentioned it.

Why would someone from Brazil be interested in Bosnia? I have tried to answer this question frequently, searching for alternative and better explanations each time someone asked it. Usually this question was raised while I was in the company of other researchers, mostly Europeans, and along the following lines: 'I understand why an Italian or a German would be interested, but... Brazil? This is so random'. Even though those questions reveal and reproduce a geographical epistemic imaginary that I refute – who can produce knowledge and about what – it is needless to say that such comments only reinforced my feeling of non-belonging. They were a constant reminder that I was an outsider in BiH.

Indeed, the production of knowledge in academia relies not only on what is being stated but also on who makes the statement. Legitimacy to make statements is, thus, a fundamental pursuit of the researcher's life and conducting fieldwork is perceived by many as a way to achieve it. After all, it is frequently argued that fieldwork is the moment when the researcher goes out of their ivory tower to meet the 'real world', to make a truer encounter with the object of their research. This presumed direct contact with the object – in opposition to the mediated contact provided by, for example, written work on the matter – would give the researcher, one assumes, an additional, more exclusive and complex knowledge of the object. Therefore, fieldwork is frequently mobilised as a legitimising experience: one has been there, thus one knows and is entitled to talk/write about it.

This chapter argues that knowledge produced during the fieldwork is already mediated and interpreted. Moreover, it suggests that there is a preceding step one has to face even before being able to claim this (often contested) status, and that questions the very (il)legitimacy to conduct fieldwork in the first place. I argue that, in my experience, my outsider status was the reason behind the quest for 'capturing the city'. If the subject cannot make proper sense of the situation or is not authorised to produce knowledge about it, then the object would have to play a leading role in revealing its own true nature. Nonetheless, such a statement stands in sharp contrast to what I understand about how research and knowledge are produced, i.e., that the researched object 'holds no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality' (Campbell 1992, 11); or, according to Foucault (1984, 127), 'we must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face which we would only have to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge'. This is why it is so difficult to 'grasp the city'.

Moreover, my positionality did affect my research more than I had anticipated. I had already foreseen that being a young female researcher would probably constrain some opportunities during this period. I had heard about how male researchers are usually taken more seriously than women. Still, it would have been useful to engage more deeply in discussions about how gendered power relations could disrupt relationships of trust that had taken quite some time and effort to build, limiting the possibilities and paths the research could take. However, I had not anticipated that other features would be so important while conducting my fieldwork, and I mean not only the fact of being a foreigner but also – and more specifically – the place I come from.

Let me be clear here. I acknowledge that the place I come from was less a 'real' obstacle to getting interviewees, and more a source of doubting the legitimacy of my presence there. Sometimes, it actually helped me getting access since most people thought I was 'exotic' and seemed more open to discuss 'delicate issues' with someone who was understood as more neutral. Although I had prepared myself to conduct this work, by reading extensively about my research topic, taking 'Serbian/Croatian' language classes and having actually been there a few years prior to that, the overwhelming feeling that overcame me as soon as I landed in Sarajevo was one of being a stranger, of having so much more to learn than to state, of looking around, and doubting if I were making *proper* sense of the situation.

I conducted fieldwork in Sarajevo three times from 2014 to 2015, in a total of almost six months, to try to make sense of how ordinary people enacted ethnonational and international/local boundaries in their everyday lives in a post-conflict society. One of my first steps when I got there was to take a bus to the neighbourhood crossed by the Inter Entity Boundary Line (IEBL), an official boundary drawn by the international community during the Dayton Agreement's negotiation to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina into two administrative entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shared among Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republika Srpska, led by Serbs) – a site where I would spend a significant amount of time doing research. It was a December afternoon, a usual Friday. There was

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snow on the ground and virtually nobody walking on the sidewalks in this suburban area, just a few cars rushing from one side to the other. I had walked across/through dozens of empty blocks, closely paying attention to all the details such as street names, official signs, dwellers' names on the block entrances, graffiti on the wall among others, trying to understand what it meant to live there, how it felt to live in a former war front which was transformed into two distinct neighbourhoods. After walking back and forth a few kilometres, I went back to my place not only with frozen hands and nose, but also with the feeling of impossibility. After all, there was *nothing really going on* there or, if there was, I could not understand what it was. The city seemed coded, locked and secretive. Walking was one of the practices I adopted to try to 'open up' the city in order it to reveal its secrets to me.

That is why I was, in my 'spare time', 'tirelessly walking back-and-forth through the narrow and steep streets *trying to cover every inch of this city, trying to grasp it all*'. De Certeau (1984) warned us about the meanings of walking the city, which surpass the division between the researcher and the object of the research. Indeed, when one walks, one 'writes' the city as well and becomes a practitioner by making

use of spaces that cannot be seen (...) The paths that correspond in these intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility (...) The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other (De Certeau 1984, 93).

Thus, the city we walk is already a city we are producing, by occupying its spaces, connecting its arteries, attributing meanings to its places. It is a city where the 'walker actualises its possibilities, by making it exist' (Ibid., 98), while also inventing other patterns and creating new meanings.

My field notes, however, reveal that my concerns of that time went in different directions. I still kept trying to capture the *truest* meaning of boundaries enacted in the city. I was still wondering if there was a more *real* Sarajevo than the one that I was experiencing. Behind those concerns, lay implicitly the idea that the city had an essence which I, as a researcher, was responsible to grasp, to expose, to translate into academic knowledge.

I wake up sweaty and decide to extend my stay for another three nights, almost four

days. One way to avoid thinking that, now, I have only a month left. In fact, it is only

three weeks (...) (Field notes, 7 May 2015)

All the elements presented above – the feeling of non-belonging (and, on some days, of being a fraud), the uncertainty of attributing meanings to people's actions, the pressure to understand what was really going on in the city – gave me the impression that the results of my work were never enough. I needed to stay longer, to walk more, to carve out new information. The following questions haunted my stay in Sarajevo: How long is long enough to actually capture the dynamic of a city? How many days do I need to be there to be taken seriously, how many interviews do I have to conduct to produce relevant knowledge, how many kilometres do I need to walk before the strange becomes natural?

By the end of my last research *séjour*, I came to accept that my attempts to 'grasp' the city were impossible. However much I could try to cover, I would always fail to grasp it. No matter how many voices I heard to try to overcome my limited subjectivity, my work would always be subjective. No matter how closely I looked at Sarajevo, the city would always escape. Although I had attended many research seminars and have read about post-empiricist and post-hermeneutic modes of inquiry (Shapiro 2013, 21), it was only by failing to capture the city that I have finally understood the impossibility of 'collecting data' in order to grasp any essence of Sarajevo beyond the many everyday practices, experiences, encounters, and stories that I had lived or heard during my fieldwork.

## The Difficulty of Translating Fieldwork

When I went back to London, where I was doing part of my Ph.D., the first question my co-supervisor asked was

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'what contribution did the fieldwork make to my thesis'. I froze and could not formulate an answer right away. I thought about this rich period when, after almost two years locked in the library, my work was, for months, mostly to talk to people and to pay close attention to the city's everyday – again. I had interviewed dozens of people, made a few good friends, experienced an earthquake for the first time, been chased by stray dogs, been exposed to both the saddest stories and the famous Bosnian sense of humour; in short, I had lived tirelessly all those months. My memories of those periods are full of emotions, sounds, scents, and contradictions, all of them hardly translatable into academic knowledge. How could I connect them to the established body of literature I was relying on? How could I do justice to the plurality of life to which I was exposed during this period?

Since my main interest in conducting fieldwork was to understand how ordinary people enacted everyday boundaries in contemporary BiH, one of greatest challenges was to translate the multiplicity of approaches my interlocutors had regarding their enactments and displacement of boundaries in those two post-conflict cities into a cohesive account, or at least an account which did not contradict itself. Dealing with such a large amount and variety of information gathered often around the same topic – often a disputed one – and transforming it into knowledge is perhaps one the biggest challenges of conducting this kind of work.

Dauphinée (2013) has brilliantly explored an important aspect of this challenge. In her book 'The Politics of Exile', while she describes the semi-fictional encounter between an American professor who works in Canada and 'who has built her career on the war on Bosnia' and a veteran Serb who had moved to Canada after the war, she illustrates the different meanings attributed to a specific event according to one's position. Stojan, the war veteran's character, disagrees on the periodisation of the Bosnian war as it is established in history books. While the official narrative states that the war started on the 6 April 1992, Stojan disagrees: 'For me, it was something very different than what you described (...) it was unclear when it began, (...) for example, I was just at home in Pale at the time you say it officially started. And I didn't know it had started' (Ibid., 54). War only came to him the day his brother got recruited to join the newly instituted army of Republika Srpska (VRS). Republika Srpska is a territory within Bosnia and Herzegovina that unilaterally declared independence in January 1992, constituting, at the same time, its own Army (VRS). This event is usually considered as one of the main steps leading to war in BiH (1992–1995).

In Dauphinée's book, the encounter with Stojan's character evolves into a situation in which the professor questions everything she has ever written on Bosnia, and as a result destroys all her work. This might be a strong image which Dauphinée employs. However, information one comes across during fieldwork and which do not corroborate or do not fit into one's own hypothesis or the more established narrative might provoke a similar research earthquake. Coming into contact with dozens or even hundreds of different points of view might turn the task of generalising or trying to produce a coherent narrative of the researched subject very difficult. Thus, although Dauphinée's book is more about the ethics of research and the (im)possibility of love as ethics, it also helps readers think about how different positions and experiences – in that case, during the war – get translated (or not) into academic knowledge.

This was an important issue for my research due to the multiplicity of positions that I had encountered during fieldwork. Indeed, the interviews I conducted focused on my interlocutors' own experiences and impressions of their everyday lives in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not rarely, the responses I received were quite contradictory vis-à-vis each other. This is not so surprising: I was not asking them about the official version of the facts – even though those are also deeply disputed among different communities inside and outside BiH – but about their own experiences. However, that posed a challenge, again, of how to translate a multiplicity of positions into an understandable construction of academic knowledge. One way of making this more transparent is to adopt a written strategy and style which is not totalising, i.e., which exposes the fragmentary character of the production of knowledge. Acknowledging the messiness and complexities of the situation allows for not dismissing the plurality of narratives while fixing a single story.

One way to tackle the challenges of translating fieldwork is through the writing style. In my thesis, I thus, adopted 'snippets', 'small fragments inserted on the narrative in order either to illustrate some points or to allow for further analysis, as a method of presenting the research' (Summa, 2019). Because everyday life is much messier than what is stated by official documents, this heterogeneity of practices and voices needed to be made explicit. The 'snippets', therefore, stressed the precariousness of the order in which everyday life is embedded, revealing, instead, the cracks

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through which alternative spatiotemporal practices may emerge. Therefore, using 'snippets' affects the writing and the ways of presenting the text: it sometimes moves from one place to the other, bringing different voices on the subject and creating a heterogeneous picture of the places I had explored.

However, this method does not solve the problem entirely and could never fully reproduce the movement of the field into a written text. In writing, we inevitably freeze our interlocutors' experiences and turn what it is dynamic into some degree of stasis. That became clear when, after completing my Ph.D., I went back to Bosnia and Herzegovina to give some feedback to my interlocutors there. Since I had interviewed many people during my fieldwork, I decided to look only for those whom I considered to have given bigger contributions to my thesis. One of the first challenges was finding them again. I went back to some of the everyday places that figured in my thesis only to find that many things had changed: the barman I had interviewed had been laid off, the NATO forces who were very keen to talk to me and showed me around their military base had been deployed to other missions or returned to their home countries, some friends had left the country along with thousands of young Bosnians from all ethnonational belongings to find better jobs in Western Europe. While I had been locked in the library for a year finishing the thesis, the lives of those who populate my work had shifted, and so the everyday places that were central to my analysis had changed. I kept wondering how different the stories would be – how much had the city changed? Going back to Bosnia and Herzegovina was the final reminder that the everyday always escapes: the city is in permanent movement and it is only possible to be grasped punctually and for a very short period of time.

## Conclusion

This chapter does not exhaust all the difficulties of conducting fieldwork. Through a reflection on my fieldwork experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I suggested two main concerns that preoccupied me while I was conducting my fieldwork in BiH, and while I was trying to make sense of it back in WHERE. The first of them regards the insistence and, at the same time, the impossibility of discovering a more real city that, for a long time, seemed coded to my eyes. My days were haunted by the impression that the city always escaped my attempts to grasp it and the sensation that so much had been lost: in translation, in the stories I had not heard, in the people I could not interview, in the spaces I could not get access to – but also in lazy weekends when I would prefer to go out with my friends instead of going to the outskirts of Sarajevo once again. The second concern came to the fore when I had already left BiH and had to deal with this heterogeneous corpus of 'things' – interviews, impressions, thoughts, pictures, emotions, memories – that composed but not exhausted my fieldwork experiences. How could I turn them into academic knowledge? Again, my impression is that so much got lost along the way.

Neither of those points are about turning failure into a productive or desirable experience. However, having struggled with both of those questions, I came to wonder if the fieldwork is not, in fact, about the possibilities and impossibilities of translation. If there is not a 'more real city to be grasped', the only stories that are possible to be told are the translations of ours or our interlocutors' experiences located in particular places and in particular times.

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