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Researching in Proximity to War. A Love Story.

Giulia Carabelli and Maria Adriana Deiana*

“Peace” as Keeping going.

We met in the afternoon in one of those glorious Sarajevo sunny days. We sat in the terrace outside, overlooking the hustle and bustle beneath the popular shopping centre. I always feel uncomfortable doing interviews. There is a sticky sense of guilt for interfering in somebody’s life to turn it into a story that I can’t seem to shake off. “Will I come across as more knowledgeable now that I live here? Will I be able to ask better questions after all these years of reading on the war?” I had invested so much hope in “gaining access to the field” through interviews and, when no one had answered my calls for the past two months, the fear of failure started to loom large. “I cannot fault this indifference for, I, too would be tired of speaking to researchers about the war. But ... I’m different.” Deep down I believed so. These are the voices in my head as I introduce myself to Dženana, hands sweating and butterflies in my stomach. I set the recorder on the table and begin asking questions pretending those feelings are not there. I’m taken away in Dženana’s deep knowledge and passionate answers, forgetting about my script almost immediately. She conveys such a profound sense of frustration and anger, progressively raising her voice as she outlines with extreme clarity the failed promises of peace. This constitution “recognises you only if you were part of the war and I’m tired of this... I am tired of people asking me about nationality!” Piece by piece, she disentangles this intricate mess left by war and international intervention: the forgotten victims of violence, now *boring stories* that nobody wants to hear. The silence over social justice. The myth of civil society. The empty buzzword of human rights. “There are no human rights if you are hungry!” she nearly shouts. Her words are infused with that peculiar mixture of longing and loss for the peace that could have been, an indefinite register that I have since come to associate with Sarajevo... “Sorry for being so pessimistic,” she says when the interview is over. I don’t know how to reply. I mumble something about how grateful I am about her honest and passionate answers. “I’ve learnt a lot,” is all I manage to say when I

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wish her goodbye. I start walking back to my flat, lost in my thoughts, biting my lips as I try to convince myself that, yes, it was a good interview. As I enter Ferhadija I'm distracted by the familiarity of it all. All of Sarajevo seems to be out for a stroll in the sun, shopping or sitting at the cafes in front of the Cathedral. I disappear in the slow crowd following my usual path home, along the line of shoe and jewellery shops in Baščaršija. As I reach the square filled with barbecue smoke from the busy surrounding restaurants, I feel like staying out for lunch. I turn towards Balkan Café in the hope of seeing some familiar faces, only to find its doors still closed after the umpteenth late night. I head on towards "my" neighbourhood, walking along the bridge in front of Vijećnica and its scaffolding armour. I am walking slowly, taking it all in, like the best Sarajevans, or so I like to believe. Suddenly, I am reminded of the precious data I carry with me, and I speed my pace towards our building. When I listen to the interview again, a sense of disappointment creeps back in. "Hmm It does not really say anything about agency, I need to get better at asking questions," I mutter to myself. Months later, when I read my transcription of that interview, I'm struck by a sentence I had completely ignored at the time: "Even in Srebrenica, people live together. They don't love each other. So what? But they live close to each other. After genocide! C'mon. It's a lot! It's a lot!! In the simplicity of that statement, I could suddenly sense what the enormity of outliving conflict might mean.

"Peace" as a minefield.

It's a hot summer night in Mostar. There are young people walking up and down the pedestrian area where I live. The loud speakers outside the many crowded bars repeat, at regular intervals, all the summer hits. I sit with friends on the terrace of my tiny studio flat. I have been living here for more than six months. I laugh a lot with my friends. We became very comfortable with each other. We trust and protect our friendship. Someone says he is exhausted, he couldn't sleep for many nights now. I ask what keeps him up... It's *reeeally* hot, I comment automatically.

"When I fall asleep, I hear gunshots. I see the eyes of a little girl alone in the Old Town. She is scared and I don't know what to do. I wake up with my heart pumping... it happens almost every night," he explains unalarmed.

Nobody comments. The atmosphere becomes instantly heavy and uncomfortable. The woman sitting next to me rolls her eyes expressing her clear (and yet silent) disapproval of the story. If she talked, I know she would dismiss him with a brief and judgmental "pathetic", as she did on other similar occasions. They would start quarrelling over this. It happened before. Another woman laughs silently, staring at the sky... her laugh is so contagious that in a moment, we all laugh, I am not sure why... For how much time we spend together, there will always be reminders that I can't fully understand where I am because I was never there... in the war. There are judgments I cannot make – is it pathetic to tell about the trauma of the war at a dinner party? Or should it be respected? Is justice a matter of naming the ethnic group responsible for a crime? Or is it more just to invoke and embrace amnesty, to move beyond what cannot be settled? The war is everywhere: tombs, ruins, collapsed infrastructures, political chaos, and yet it's so absent from my everyday in Mostar because it is unprocessable. It is certainly a memory to be circumvented in the circle of my friends that re-emerges only after too many drinks when one loses editorial control of personal memories. I can see that there have been proactive attempts at leaving the war behind (at least for a while) and to do something to make life *normal* again... finding a partner to settle down, building a house, enrolling in dance classes, learning a new language, making plans so the past didn't need to define the future. It's difficult for me to assess whether silencing the war is a matter of wishful forgetting, compartmentalising, or an attempt at de-dramatizing life

because I never dared to ask. Surely there is sorrow in Mostar, there is death, there is violence and little closure. But what I have experienced resonates also with joy, happiness, enthusiasm and the urgent desire not to be always identified with *the war*.

Giulia

My first time in Mostar was winter 2005. I was with a group of international researchers interested in the post-war physical reconstruction of the city. We spent a week there interviewing local politicians and planners along with representatives of international aid agencies. The ethnic division was a problem they all seemed very busy to solve even in the absence of a defined plan of action. One morning over breakfast in Hotel Ero, I am talking to the architect in charge of all the United Nations redeveloping plans. He tells me with stupor how he had just received a call from a civil servant asking if he could go to a congested traffic intersection and write suggestions on how to ameliorate the car circulation there. He says this is not what he is there for. He is the head of a large international project to rebuild the city! To monitor traffic is the job for some clerk at the department of urbanism... a student could do it! – he adds visibly upset. They called him, he explains, because, at the municipality, people from the two ethnic groups were forced to work together but they refused to do so. Of course, they hope the reconciliation process will collapse so they can return to work independently. In that tragicomic exchange between the local municipality and the United Nations official, the ethnic division of Mostar materialised as a fact that could not be resolved. Or, at least, I thought, what I witnessed didn't seem to offer a viable solution. Yet, I was also convinced that the visible tension between the local and the international officials was the real issue and I strongly believed that nobody knew exactly what they were doing there, which was the main problem. A few years later, while I was actively looking for funded PhD programmes, a friend forwarded a call for research proposals on ethnically divided cities suggesting I could write about Mostar since I had done some work there already. And, suddenly, her idea made perfect sense to me. I became excited about proposing to return to Mostar: a place that was quite familiar and where I had contacts who could support my fieldwork but also a place I had never fully understood, which I left with so many unanswered questions. I returned to Mostar in 2009 willing to discover more of what the ethnic division had done to the city; how people understand and relate to the division in their daily routines. Clearly, living in Mostar for a longer period made me realise how superficial my expectations of the ethnic division were but, mostly, I became aware of how much the division and the war were alive and yet also so totally over. Fights between Croat and Muslim groups would happen periodically and for multiple and equally mundane reasons, such as football matches or drunken attacks at late night. Surely, the ethnic war was there and it had never ended, as all the newspapers were eager to advertise. But what I mostly observed was that the war had exhausted people in Mostar. The war had left them deprived of aspirations but, also, the overpowering role played by the war in all post-war narratives had exhausted the space that people felt war should take in their lives. Many wanted to move on, they wanted to disassociate from this past.

In 2014, I was in Mostar with a group of postgraduate students for a summer school in urban design that I helped to organise. Several activists from Mostar joined us to discuss their plans to activate an environmental hub in the outskirts of the city so that we could develop this project together. Towards the end of the school, Ana, an activist and a good friend of mine, came to pitch her ideas about how to improve the cultural offer of the city willing to contribute to our ongoing project. At the end of her talk one of the participants asked for her comment on the future of the divided city: *Is she hopeful?* Ana's jaw becomes stiff, her eyes spell impatience. People in the room, myself included, become uncomfortable until she speaks again. She says that she is tired of this question. She says, in a way that expresses both

anger and a plea, to stop asking her about the division. You must understand, she continues, that the division is all people are interested in when they visit Mostar. The truth is, she doesn't care about the ethnic conflict. She argues people need to move on and focus on the future, not the past. She screams with exhaustion that she does a lot for the city, for the youth, to create new things and she doesn't want to comment on the war. I know from previous conversations with her that she perceives questions about the war as annoying because they undermine her efforts to change the division, to erase it, and to move on from the war. Some in the group could not understand why Ana believed so firmly that not talking about the war or the ethnic conflict could make things better. On the contrary, if the division is the main problem of the city, why shall we not talk more about it? I suddenly remembered how, the first time I was in Mostar, I felt exactly the same: I thought the ethnic division could be ameliorated if the people in charge could communicate better, if there was a more efficient plan... But then, living in Mostar, I realised how the war and its legacy had become also an excuse to condone corruption, nepotism, and power struggles that had little to do with ethnic rights. I still don't know whether it is possible (or fair) to forget or bypass the war but I became sure of the importance of those gestures that challenge the ethnic division by showing that there is more than war in Mostar. This is why I decided to write about hope, activist struggles, and inclusive projects: because I believe that the future of Mostar has not been written by the war. And this is my way of showing solidarity with those, like Ana, who decided that, if the conflict cannot be solved, we should at least stop letting it define what Mostar is.

Maria

I remember the many late nights out in Sarajevo and Mostar filled with dancing, cigarettes and intense conversations of our memories and dreams. We would often end up plotting with our girlfriends all the interesting stories about "post-conflict life" we could write together - on love tribulations, on friendship, travelling and music. We joked about creating a feminist dictatorship, fantasising about all of us coming together in a cool sisterhood of sorts to tell it like it is. "Until one day you are all going to leave us here," Dunja said once, shattering the fantasy of togetherness with a puff of cigarette smoke. Moments like that were like bee stings, necessary daily reminders of the histories that brought us together, but also inevitably kept us apart. The presence of war had manifested itself in the family stories and teenage memories we shared with each other as our friendships developed. For when you and I were "watching" the war from our living rooms in Italy, Dunja, Nela and the rest of our gang had lived through it. I "saw" glimpses of war in allusions to family and friendship breakups, in memories of displacement, as well as in the complaints about the ugly, old-fashioned clothes that people were charitably sending over. Through my discomfort in listening to experiences of trauma, grief and violence, I also began sensing that there was more in those stories. It was impossible to disentangle war's shadows from the impulse to organise concerts and art exhibitions, go out dancing and be fashionable, that our friends talked about. Life "post-war" was also our friends' ability to talk about the war without dwelling on it. It was the intricate layers of pessimism, hope and generosity in their words and manners. It was the sharp sense of humour when they mocked us for being "spies". It was their frustration with knowing that we were going to leave Bosnia sooner or later. As we returned to Belfast for the final write-up, we sat at our dinner table on many a night dissecting the stark narratives of "post-conflict life" as we continued to stumble through invitations to academic events on nationalism, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and divided cities. We both resented how academic norms disciplined us to reduce the complexities of lived experiences in the mess of conflict, international interventions and its aftermath to one-dimensional explanations, whether nationalism, violence, trauma, political apathy and so on. Yet, how to tell those stories? How

to convey that there is more than war, nationalism and division? How to account for our presence, stake and structures of feeling that brought us there?

I remained complicit in this reductionism despite my hunch about the complexity and messiness of life post-war. I believed that I could construct “better” stories about the role of women and feminist activists in post-Dayton Bosnia. I wanted to show that there is more than victimhood in the complex wartime experiences of the women I encountered. I fooled myself into thinking that I could convey the complexity I had experienced “there”. Armed with determination, I had laid out all my literature on the office table, neatly organised around topics and coloured post-its. Then it was the interviews’ turn. I had diligently transcribed all my files and even learnt entire sections by heart. As I stared at the “data” on the table for days, the realisation: I could not make sense of it all. Had I wasted my time? Had I not been rigorous enough? Had I failed as a researcher? Friends had told me of the moment when things start falling into place. It happened unexpectedly, just as they had said. It felt as if one day I could suddenly see the three themes coming together: identity, belonging and agency. I had my analytical chapters! I could finish the project! The result was a coherent dissertation which was assessed very positively and, yet, the sense of shame began to lurk again. Once printed, I kept it hidden from view, and against feminist best practice, I only emailed a copy to a handful of participants. Then the dreaded deadline of a publication forced me to re-open the thesis. A mixture of despair and embarrassment took over me as I read through those pages. I could barely reconcile the one-dimensional narratives of grandiose gestures, of grief, passion, anger and disillusionment with the mundanity, slowness and everyday routines, in their contradictions, I had encountered. I had written a narrative devoid of complex bodies, emotions and atmospheres: people meeting for coffee, enjoying the sun, getting angry at the unfulfilled promises of peace and frustrated with our naïve questions about peacebuilding. But also keeping going, even if it was “just” going back to live there, even if it was just an imitation of normal life. Lauren Berlant writes about the political in often imperceptible strategies of adjustment to “histories that hurt”. I couldn’t dismiss anymore the complicated emotional states of both discomfort and complicity, pessimism and feelings of entrapment, produced through my imperfect relations with our Bosnian friends and research participants. I now know that through these fraught and ambivalent experiences, convoluted, intuitive and visceral, I have formed my (ever partial and incomplete) understanding of what enduring and outliving war might mean. To do so, I had to reconsider my own stake in the process.

Giulia

When writing up my doctoral work, I, too, struggled to find a lexicon able to embrace the very inconsistencies of my lived-life in Mostar and, more often, I struggled to make space for positive emotions as I realised how they could be read as totally misplaced – the privileged feelings of a summer visitor who enjoys the sun and cheap cocktails for a long weekend, telling friends how amazing Mostar is. Like in the story I told at the beginning, the Mostar I experienced was fun and friendly but beyond laughter there was the difficult legacy of the conflict that I didn’t need to deal with but all my friends did. I guess what I still struggle with is to find a way to complicate the representation of Mostar that could allow me to convey how *post war* indicates both the difficult legacy of the conflict and the desire to escape from it, which often shape (creative) attempts at *being normal*. I decided to write mostly about young people countering nationalist politics. I focus on art production to explain how youth *makes space* for practices that refuse to become embedded in existing divisive politics. Of course, they struggle to become visible. Clearly, they cannot solve the problems inherited from the war. But they tell how Mostar is not *just a divided city*; they tell how people resist nationalism and violence. Do these stories downplay the conflict in Mostar? Where is the

balance here and how do we tell conflicting stories so that they can make sense together? How do we take a position knowing how powerful these representations can become? I started re-drafting my doctoral work for publication as a monograph only in 2017 – five years after completing it – and I was still unsure whether I had found the right way to write about Mostar. The examiners had very appreciative words for me but they found there was too much of me in my work. I didn't fully understand what they meant until a retired professor of urbanism who worked in Mostar in 1996 asked me for a copy to read in 2014. When he meets me, the first thing he says is that I write as an angry person... he wants to know where all the anger comes from. The professor wondered how I could be so angry about injustice in Mostar when I am not even *from* there.... I thought a lot about it when I started re-writing the manuscript three years later. I believe that anger grew in me as I witnessed the daily injustice caused by the empowered nationalist system and how it impacted my friends' lives. Angry-writing was my way to attack and dismantle existing narratives of Mostar as the hopeless, divided city because, *yes, little seems to work here but there are so many young people, my friends, who are trying to change things and nobody cares!*

In 2018, I am contacted by two documentary film-makers. They are about to go to Mostar for the first time to make a movie about the legacy of the conflict. I send a note suggesting that the ethnic division they are interested in is rather contested and it would be interesting to look beyond it, to explore how the border has lost sense for many who wish to create a more inclusive and tolerant environment – I send some of what I wrote for them to get an idea of what I am suggesting. They reply immediately thanking me but, they fear, this is not what they need because, well, they are looking for the *real* picture. I am puzzled. Does my work tell a lie about Mostar? How can they know, since they were never there? Clearly, they associate the *real story* with the ethnic division and my writings are not about this. So, I find myself angry again, after so many years. Why I care so much about this place remains confusing to many. How did I become so passionate about Mostar that I need to correct and condemn narratives that don't do justice to the city I know? That's because for a long-time Mostar was home. I have been moving, travelling, changing addresses every couple of years for more than a decade. It's hard to tell what home is, surely it doesn't associate with a geographical place. Rather, home to me is that place where I can call someone up in the middle of the day and they meet me without planning. I lived in places that I would never call home but Mostar was home within months. I moved with no expectations other than finding data to assemble. I planned to stay for six months. After two months, I could not imagine being elsewhere because of series of fortunate encounters. I met the members of Abart, a local platform for art production and urban research, as soon as I arrived in 2009. They were working on a project called “art in divided cities”, which seemed something I would be interested in. I never asked to work with them. Rather, I became part of the group organically, because we liked each other instantly. We laughed at the same things, we had similar interests in fashion, music, art and architecture. In December 2009, I was prepared to spend my first weekend in Mostar at home, alone. Instead, I received a text message from one of the girls from Abart. The text said to go and meet them at 10pm, there was live music. I joined them in the concert hall of the Youth Centre that lately became my office, they were drinking and dancing and I joined them feeling like we were old friends. This doesn't happen that often and I won't be able to tell how it happened then; it was magic! Of course, in Mostar, not everything was fantastic. I had to make sense of the place where I lived, which was often puzzling. I (not-always-successfully) attempted to gain trust from people whose knowledge I wanted to access. These were people with power who often stereotyped me and thought I was either ignorant or suspiciously ambitious – as many other foreign officials, I was told, who went there to improve their careers. This was far from being easy. But I also found myself living a good life in Mostar - I met interesting people, took part in art projects, danced a lot,

had a huge birthday party, and made friends for life. Because of the people I became friends with, I re-focused my entire project, which abandoned the idea of studying what the border does to embrace the struggle of grassroots activists against nationalist politics. The border remained central to my research, of course, but now I had a clear viewpoint to assess it. The division was there to be challenged and not enabled, this is where my anger comes from. It comes from sharing my days with people I respect, whose work I admire, people who are seldom acknowledged for their work, which questions the post-conflict condition of Mostar in critical, intelligent and ironic ways. If I had to scream to let people know about them, I would do it. So, I screamed with anger, but my work didn't become more relevant because of that.

In 2013, I am at workshop with (mostly) young scholars conducting research in the region of former Yugoslavia. I introduce myself, saying that I used to live in Mostar. I could tell they expected me to complain. Instead, I told about how much fun I had in summer partying every single day of the week for months. They looked confused. Was it not the city of hard-core nationalists? Did I know about (neo)fascist groups active there? I found myself in the position of justifying my first-hand experience of Mostar because it was unexpected. I had to contextualise promptly and add that, of course, this is a very problematic city and yet, not everybody living here is a violent nationalist ... During the actual workshop, my presentation about youth activism in Mostar was dismissed quickly as *naïve*. But what they also (silently) contested was my argument that one can experience and attach positive emotions to the portrayal of Mostar: that in Mostar there is hope. Further, my project was not attempting to solve the division by re-emphasising the legacy of war and its effect in the present. My work presented a different portrayal of Mostar: the city that tries very hard to move past its war history, which made my project quite irrelevant to their discussion.

Maria

Oh yes ... "but WHY here?" I have also lost count of how many times someone posed this question to me in Sarajevo. My answer has always been vague, perhaps because I'm still figuring out what brought me there. As for many other Cold War kids, images of the Yugoslav wars in the Italian news accompanied our daily family meals. This was also the moment in which glimpses of what I can now describe as feminist curiosity about women and/in war began floating in my head, particularly through the stories and images of those fleeing the war, who were arriving Italy. On one level, I went to Bosnia to find out what had happened to those women and fellow teenagers in the aftermath, whose stories started to fade away in the news when we all stopped caring about Bosnia. This curiosity about women and war, however, was also propelled by something more personal: I am in awe of how bodies, affects, and relationships that have been broken, lost, traumatised through violence, also endure, live on, keep going in compromised conditions of existence. While watching reports on contexts touched by war I have often found myself wondering "How do people survive?" I imagined the strength of body, mind and spirit necessary to survive conflict as something nearly mythical, so removed from the projection of who I am. I grew up thinking that my emotions were a sign of fragility and weakness that would undermine my ability to convey arguments in a rational and authoritative way. Travelling there was also an act of rebellion against the identity of the studious, politically engaged, but over-emotional daughter that myself, my parents and family had constructed over the decades. In attempt to dispel the myth of my weakness, I went to Sarajevo looking for war. On my arrival, I was startled by the sight of the mountains surrounding the city. Suddenly, the images featured in the news reports and evoked in all the books and articles about the siege I had devoured assumed a sharper light. It was like a puzzle finally coming together. A strange sensation of fear and

excitement overtook me as I looked around, like butterflies in my stomach. And yet, there was also a certain familiarity.

Yugoslavia was close to home for us, geographically and, more importantly, affectively and ideologically. For my grandfather, a member of the Italian Communist Party, it had represented the last bastion of hope for a fair socialist society: seeing it crumble on national TV was the end of history and “our” family utopia. I grew up listening to my grandfather’s fairy tales on the Leninist revolution and about a guy called Karl Marx, who wanted workers to own the means of production. Our family history had been intertwined with Italy’s post-WWII divisions between Christian Democrats and Communists. We were the “good communists,” my granny used to tell me, those who want to work and share resources. We were, at least officially, suspicious of the U.S. and its capitalist society and we learnt to admire the strength and talents beyond the Iron Curtain, especially during sporting events when we would always cheer for athletes from USSR, GDR, China, Romania and Yugoslavia, of course. Having never been there, grandad spoke very highly of Yugoslavia as an imagined neighbouring “paradise”: Its very existence over-there enough to prove that a fairer version of socialism was possible. And so, without really understanding the complexity of the wars, “we” saw ourselves on “their” side, of those people whose dreams and “happy” life under socialism were being destroyed, and with it our own dreams and aspirations. As I started to discover more of Sarajevo, I felt a certain disposition towards those who spoke about the promises of “happy” life under Tito that had been shattered through violence and post-conflict transformation. Perhaps this is why, rather than dismissing these longings as nostalgic, I wanted to stand in better proximity to my attachments to the socialist legacy and their contradictions. I felt drawn to the signs of Sarajevo’s socialist past, from Titova street to the trams built in Czechoslovakia to Dom Mladih, the youth centre in Skenderija.

I was fascinated by how the city reverberates with the multiple layers of its history in ways that didn’t quite match with my initial obsession with war. Just like its citizens, the cityscape, excessive and messy, conveys survival, endurance and adaptation to the multiple forces, interests and interventions that have converged in the city. These, of course, include the steady incursions of international characters who, like myself, had arrived attracted by the post-conflict affective economy of research, NGOs, embassies, the military or travel and discovery. As much as we tried to empathise with our Bosnian friends’ critiques of international intervention and dissociate ourselves from the “international community”, life in Sarajevo was also made of friendships, relationships, dinner parties and socialising with fellow international visitors who had also fallen in love with this “magical” city. At times, this felt like an uncomfortable parallel universe. We might have been there because we were attracted by the absurdity of war and violence and the seductive promises of redemption and conflict resolution, but we brought with us our own longing and desires, adding more complicated layers to our encounters in and with Sarajevo. I often found myself suspecting that, beyond our professional interests, we all seemed to be looking for some kind of meaning and purpose. In my case, I now know that lurking in my desire for closeness and understanding is also a self-interested longing for having a meaningful stake in politics and history. The tension between my search for solidarity and the distance afforded me by my own imbrication in the presence of the international community has thus been at the core of my struggle to belong.

Giulia

Your words make sense to me and I agree with you that much of what I did in Mostar came from the desire to support political struggles in Mostar that resonated with my political beliefs. A couple of new books about Mostar have been published recently. They are ethnographic works assessing various topics from education to border crossing and I loved

reading them because I could return (virtually) to Mostar and see the city through the eyes of the writer. However, what really struck me was how, in these books and other publications, the Youth Centre that had become the epicentre of my social life in Mostar is described as a place of exclusion rather than inclusion. They say the place is quite intimidating as it seems that people here form a cohesive group that doesn't invite membership. In contrast, I wrote about this place as one of the few inclusive spaces in the city. But, in fairness, the reason why I felt immediately included was that my piercings, fashion style, music choices and political leanings that had been shaped by frequenting similar youth/cultural centres – usually squats – in Italy, made me automatically accepted, as I was part of “the same scene”. Of course, for me this was also about finding my place in Mostar in a place that felt familiar (even though it wasn't) and eventually became home. What you say about inhabiting the position of *being a foreigner* whilst, at the same time, feeling *local* because of participating in quotidian practises that attach you to the local scene really points to how the sense of belonging to a place shapes and grows. I know that my position of better proximity, if you wish, with grassroots activist circles in the city shaped my research and representation of Mostar – including believing firmly in the possibility that social and political change could still happen. I now realise it was possible only because I could easily access those circles whilst I couldn't, for instance, access official political circles and authorities.

Maria

I feel that we cannot take for granted what standing in better proximity might mean, though. Recently, I found myself grappling with this question when a fieldwork encounter, in Pristina this time, confronted my own assumptions, challenging me again to translate into writing sensations and feelings that appeared inexplicable, irrelevant, mundane. On my first trip to Pristina, I realised I had nearly forgotten the solitary days of fieldwork spent wandering around, people-watching, taking notes and pictures, in constant search of Wi-Fi, coffee and people who are willing to talk and help you. I again found myself fulfilling every inescapable stereotype about researchers in the Balkans, also known as *spies*, as we were humorously labelled in Sarajevo. This time the sense of incursion felt somehow heavier: a short assignment to meet people at EULEX and conduct interviews about gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping. I felt uneasy about my narrow focus: as if you could put a peacekeeping mission in a bubble and forget the hovering history of conflict/peace, the imposing nationalist monuments and constant reminders of *the international* dotted around the *newborn* city. Or, perhaps you could. When describing the latest cool hang-out place in the city, a friendly international expert later warned me: “People come here, they go to Soma, and think that everyone is a hipster and all is good in Kosovo.” Was I becoming one of THOSE superficial researchers? I worried.

I had been looking forward all week to meet a group of feminist activists. When I arrived, I was hoping my experience also as an activist would make my presence feel less intrusive. My two hosts were extremely passionate. I was reminded of the inspiration I seek in fellow activists and students alike, which I took as a sign of familiarity. Our conversation was engaging, and at times uncomfortable when the topic of foreign researchers and local knowledge came up, the inevitable hierarchy of those terms. Those who don't even contemplate that local researchers might be writing interesting analysis, articles, PhD thesis about Kosovo. I nodded understandingly, yet feeling untouched by the critique. After all, I thought, I am not one of those researchers. I took time to study and make contact with the “local” scene. I have spent the last 10 years of my life studying the Yugoslav wars. I have lived in the Balkans. *I get it.*

As we recalled different herstories, from the women's resistance in Kosovo to feminist activism in Northern Ireland, I felt a sense of shared commitment to feminism building up in

the room. I switched off the recorder, relaxed and enjoyed the chat with my fellow feminists eager to hear more about their activities and Pristina's history.

During my walks around the city, I was fascinated by its complex architecture, in which I saw reflections of nation-building, religious references and post-conflict reconstruction. One of the main avenues in the city had been dedicated to President Clinton. I found that reference particularly amusing (who needs or likes Clinton, right?) and wanted to share it with my hosts on the assumption that *we* would all laugh at this *cheesy* reference together. "Oh yes, what is the story with the Bill Clinton Boulevard?" I asked smirking in search of commiseration among my newly acquired *peers*. The reply was unexpected: "Well, when you are in the middle of a war, and Bill Clinton is the first international to say we must stop it, you can understand what it meant for the people here," my host replied.

I froze in the sudden realization of my sense of alienation. The friendly conversation continued seemingly unfettered. Yet, the fantasy of sympathy and common ground I had built around our commitment to feminism was shattered, spotlighting the distance between our histories. In that fleeting moment, my simplistic assumptions about what is at stake in standing in better proximity became palpable: I had seen myself as an ally in virtue of a shared politics of activism and assumed that those shared values would overwrite our different experiences of proximity to war. That instant brought to light how I had taken for granted my positioning as a researcher on the assumption that *I get it*, I understand the geopolitical hierarchies underpinning research on the Balkans without realising that hierarchies are inevitably reproduced in every encounter. Ultimately, it has prompted me to reconsider *standing in better proximity* as an ongoing struggle against the seductive power of naïve ideas of solidarity, belonging and knowing.

Afterword

In this conversation, we re-engage with the fieldwork we conducted in places that are usually associated with (post)war such as Mostar, Sarajevo and Pristina to discuss how we feel about these cities. We started from the intuition that the way we feel about these places matters because it encapsulates and synthesises our struggles to understand, to fit in, to search for home and to find meanings in the relationships we built in our fieldwork.

We have experienced the boundaries of fieldwork as shifting, complex and multifarious through the (un)doing of friendships, emotional bonds and (mis)understandings that linger in beyond the ostensible field. For a long time, we have carried these affective experiences with us, unable to let them go but also not sure how to write them in (or how much).

In making sense of emotional states and affective moments in our research encounters, we experienced the fundamental challenge of translating what is ephemeral and affective on the page. Taking our own stakes and attachments seriously has proved difficult in ways that perhaps we did not anticipate. It has unravelled a process of unlearning that dabbles with feelings, affective moments and sensations as intrinsic to our *work* and politics. Attending to the affective dimension of fieldwork encounters allows for alternative stories of what counts as research and knowledge to thrive.

We cannot help but view our research in proximity of war as a love story, even though we might not do this explicitly in the paper. In laying bare our attachments, friendships, and affective orientations that shaped our encounters in the "post-war" cities we have studied, researched and lived, love is what comes to our minds. We experienced it as a force that makes space for new possibilities, but that also crushes expectations; love is what made us sound naïve and idealistic but also patient, forgiving, and excited. Friendships and relationships allowed us to attach positive experiences and expectations to the cities we initially only associated with war and intractable divisions. Our essay is ultimately a love

story, because it makes explicit in different ways how we cared for these cities, how we found home there, and how we became attentive to their contradictions and complexities, as well as to the hopes that these places could flourish away from the war that they are mostly still associated with.