The Ethnographer Unbared: Academic Kinship, Elective Affinities and (Re)Negotiating Researcher Positionality

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Abstract: Based on ethnographies conducted in post-genocide communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Bosnian refugee diaspora groups in Australia, Europe and the USA, and fieldwork on the island of Tanna (Vanuatu), in this article I discuss the challenges of the researcher and the researched in negotiating the space between perceived cultural insiderness and professional outsiderness. Firstly, I start by outlining the concept of academic kinship, the intellectual and social connections and networks that sustain and set the parameters for the researcher's construction of reality. Building upon the idea of kinship and elective affinity, I then move on to discuss examples from the fieldwork and literature relating to "doubly-engaged ethnography" (PACHECO-VEGA & PARIZEAU, 2018, p.1)—involving both *emic* and *etic* perspectives—and consider ethics and politics of this research approach. I conclude with an ethnographic vignette from my fieldwork on *an island of strangers*, highlighting how the mutual commitment to elective affinity and embracing both *emic* and *etic* perspectives create a dynamic research context in which different engagements in the field open up a conceptual space where the local and the global intersect, and where the roles of researched and researcher, insiders and outsiders, continue to be negotiated and (re)defined.

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1. Academic Kinship

Kinship is one of the key concepts in anthropology (EVANS-PRITCHARD,1969 [1951]; LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1969; RADCLIFFE-BROWN, 1941). As anthropology students learn quite early in their training, the idea of kinship in many societies and cultures is not a straightforward genealogical, or bloodline connection between different members of a family. It is rather a set of interpersonal relations that are negotiated and experienced—as Janet CARSTEN (2000) has described —and, in many instances, such relationships are closer to the idea of elective affinities and fictive *Wahlverwandtschaft* [kinship] than blood relatives. In the research field, the concept of kinship can be very useful to researchers, helping them to do their initial social mapping, informing their understanding of different relationships and positions of power within a social group and providing them with an orientation for how to position themselves in relation to their participants. In the process of figuring out the web of social relations among the people they research, the researchers themselves often become "adopted", defined and recognised in relation to a "family" or their key research participants and collaborators. As will be discussed later in this paper, the researchers' adoption into a web of kinship sometimes also includes familial titles like brother, sister, older brother, older sister, uncle, grandfather or grandmother. Ethnographers and other social researchers conducting fieldwork in cross-cultural contexts will be familiar with these roles and positionings and how they are acquired. [1]

In this article, I discuss another form of kinship-like relationship—or elective affinities/fictive kinship—that is very much overlooked and hardly recognised in academic literature. I am drawing upon the idea of academic kinship outlined by Kathleen McCONNELL (2012). As McCONNELL argued, "academic work no matter how solitary is made substantive in the relationships we keep with one another" (p.13). Thus, in addition to its social aspects, academic kinship also includes its intellectual domain, involving university networks and bodies of knowledge common to a group. Like with any other kind of kinship, this form of kinship is also based on developing and sustaining ongoing relationships that are mutually meaningful and involve different degrees of reciprocity, care and emotional investment. Such relationships do exist among some prominent scholars who have become known for their shared co-authorships of concepts, publications or a particular body of work—such as, for instance, Gilles DELEUZE's and Felix GUATTARI's philosophical opus (DOSSE, 2011). Sometimes, these intellectual relationships might indeed involve traditional forms of kinship involving members from a single family or a couple (also known as "dual-career couples")—for example, Aleida and Jan ASSMANN, the well-known memory studies scholars. [2]

A special intellectual kinship often develops between research supervisors and their graduate students. Indeed, in German language, the term for PhD supervisor is *Doktorvater* [literally the father of the doctorate] or *Doktormutter* [the mother of the doctorate], a title still used at universities in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. Rather than seeing this as patronising, we might recognise that the title emphasises a strong bond that implies respect, care and responsibility.

Indeed, having supervised a doctoral candidate socialised and educated in Germany, I was referred to as his *Doktorvate*r, which made me realise that, at some level, being mentors, advisers and role model academics to our graduate students also entails parental qualities and responsibilities to some extent: we share their anxieties as they face various challenges and we take pride in their achievements. Like with our own children or family members, some make us prouder than others. [3]

I met my *Doktorvater*, Professor Ron ADAMS, well before I commenced my PhD training. Our relationship started in a professional research context, with Ron needing help in organising a conference in Sarajevo, but from the beginning the academic mentoring and guidance I received had strong elements of friendship based not only on academic interests but also on a shared sense of humour and broader interests in culture, literature and social justice. Back then, some 20 years ago, I was a recent migrant who had arrived in Melbourne after a circuitous and somewhat tortured journey from war-torn Bosnia. Within the small cohort of my new Australian friends, Ron was already close to two of them: Rob WATTS, also an academic and Ron's life-long friend since undergraduate days in the 1960s, and Greg GOW, a former and according to Ron's own account his most brilliant PhD student. Since then, Ron and I have been on an academic and friendship journey together, which involved the completion of my PhD under Ron's supervision, co-teaching and co-researching, co-authorship of publications, presenting joint conference papers around the world, and taking students on study tours and community development projects. I could go on with the list, but the point I want to make is that what underpins all these activities we have undertaken together over two decades is a strong bond based on reciprocity—which extends right down to our annual pre-Christmas dinner at the same Melbourne wine-bar close to the University, a ritual characterised by our playful acting out of whose turn it is to pay. [4]

In the course of supervising my PhD, Ron also became a scholar of the Bosnian genocide, and deepened and extended our elective affinity. On several occasions, he visited my research sites (in Bosnia, Vienna, Melbourne), initially in my company and later also on his own. My research participants, friends and relatives became Ron's participants and friends. There is now a history of a very active social relationship involving many stories, anecdotes and a web of connections. Coming back from my fieldwork in Bosnia, my suitcase always carries special presents for Ron from his Bosnian network: a pair of handwoven woollen socks, a bottle of home-made plum brandy (*šljivovica*), a small traditional carpet ... All this comes from a small village, located on the left bank of the river Drina, in eastern Bosnia, which during the 1990s went through a complete obliteration and genocide, and where Ron and I have been conducting research and taking our students on study tours since the mid-2000s (ADAMS & HALILOVICH, 2021; HALILOVICH & ADAMS, 2013). When the plans for reconstructing the local mosque, burned down in 1992, started to take form in 2018, Ron's name appeared on the list of people who donated money to resurrect what had been the heart of the village. For me, a cultural insider with personal and family connections to the place, a contribution was expected, but it earned

Ron, a sympathetic outsider, an additional honourable status among the locals. Now, he is *vakif* [patron] of what is the most important communal building in this post-genocide community. [5]

Just as Ron has joined me on my research and personal journeys—and has been adopted by my research participants and collaborators into their community—so too have I become part of Ron's scholarly and personal world. Our academic kinship has expanded also to include other generations of academics: I was fortunate not only to engage with the important body of literature written by the late Professor Greg DENING, a world-renowned historian of the Pacific and Ron's *Doktorvater*, but also to meet him in person not long before he passed away in 2008. DENING's ideas and scholarship, acquired through reading his works and facilitated by Ron, continue to be a source of academic inspiration to me, so that I regard Greg DENING as my *Doktorgroßvater* [academic Granddad], an important scholarly ancestor in my intellectual academic kinship network. Moving across generations in the other direction, I have introduced Ron and his approach to research to the PhD students I have supervised over the past decade, with Ron having direct and indirect input into several of their theses. In this way, the academic kinship network connecting both of us has encompassed different generations of academics and resulted in a multidirectional flow of ideas, values and knowledge beyond our direct social relationship. Recently, this has extended to being introduced into Ron's kinship network on the South Pacific Island of Tanna, to which I will return towards the end of this article. [6]

2. Researching From Inside, Outside and In-Between

I am a practising ethnographer and much of my research takes place on-site, in the field (lately, also on-line), among the people who are the main protagonists of my research and who form and perform their own varieties of kinship and elective affinities. Anthropology, my academic discipline, has long been regarded as the *science of the other*, where the researcher is one of *us* and the researched are *them*—the *other*, members of the foreign cultures, those different from *us* about whom *we* want to learn and understand more. In order to unveil the meanings of the participants' actions, anthropologists are required to engage with the researched at a very close, personal level (GEERTZ, 1973). In the process, the researcher gradually moves from the *culturally neutral*, outsider's perspective, to the perspective of an insider, adopting at least to some extent a view and understanding of a person from within the culture being studied; gradually forming kinship-like relationships with at least some of their participants. This process is closely linked to navigating between emic and etic perspectives. [7]

Originally defined by Kenneth PIKE (1967) in relation to the phonemic and phonetic analysis of language—the first concerned with meaning and the second with sounds of a language—*emic* and *etic* have come to stand for the two main perspectives employed in ethnography: the insider's and the outsider's point of view (HARRIS, 1976). Long before these terms were conceptualised, the importance of the two perspectives was recognised by anthropologists such as Bronisław MALINOWSKI, who emphasised the importance of understanding

cultures from "the native's point of view" (1922, p.24). More recently, however, anthropological research has increasingly been done *at home*, i.e. in the researcher's own cultural setting; thus, turning anthropology from the *science of the other* to one of the familiar or proximate (ČAPO & HALILOVICH, 2013; ČAPO-ŽMEGAČ, GULIN ZRNIĆ & ŠANTEK, 2006). This anthropological turn has not stopped there; several researchers—like Shahram KHOSRAVI (2007), Jayne PITARD (2017) and Lejla VOLODER (2008), for instance—have also used themselves as their primary research subjects, focusing on and describing their personal experiences relating to the topic under investigation. Unlike the traditional ethnographies of the *other*, these researchers have produced ethnographies of the *self*, or autoethnographies—forms of self-narrative that places the self within a social context, seeking to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010; REED-DANAHAY, 1997). [8]

These methodological shifts have made the categories such as *us* and *them*—as well as the divide between the researchers and the researched—very fluid, while ethnographers are challenged to find and redefine their own *etic* and *emic* perspectives. The "incomplete and unstable nature of insiderness", as Patricia O'CONNOR (2004, p.169) called it, with all the complexities and challenges, has been an integral part of my research. In this article, while largely focusing on the *practical* phase of research, involving data collection and construction, I recognise that all the stages that precede and follow up on fieldwork are equally important and mutually interdependent—from conceptualising a research project, to devising ethics protocols and recruitment strategies, to writing memos and research reports and ultimately to making theoretical advancements and contributions to knowledge of the phenomena under investigation. In all these different stages of research, academic kinship, elective affinity and negotiating *etic* and *emic* perspectives can play an important role and influence the kind of data we collect and conclusions we make. [9]

3. A Bosnian Researching Bosnians

A significant part of my research over the last two decades has revolved around the places and people in Bosnia, my original homeland, and the Bosnian refugee diaspora groups in Australia, Europe and the USA—i.e. other Bosnians with whom I share many cultural connections and whose experiences sometimes mirror my own. For instance, many of my research participants and I have shared and continue to share the realities of forced displacement from Bosnia and migration and emplacement in *host* countries. However, these shared realities— influenced by various socio-cultural, political, generational, gender and even geographical factors—can also be seen as quite different in many respects. As sociologists Peter BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN (1967) recognised over fifty years ago, realities are socially defined, but "the definitions are always embodied, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality" (p.134). As a researcher and a "definer of reality", I am aware of my positioning and my subjectivities not only in relation to my research participants

but also in relation to the broader context of the topic of my research into forced migration and genocide. [10]

In his seminal work "From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences", Georges DEVEREUX (1968 [1967]) wrote that "influence exerted by the scientist's ideology, ethnic-cultural, class and occupational status, operating within the framework of certain culture-historical trends and also of scientific fashions", is always present—albeit rarely acknowledged—in research as if "science is supposed to be supra-personal" (p.133). More recently, there has been a shift in this regard, with many scientists acknowledging the presence and importance of personal dimensions in the research context. For instance, in her book "Reflexive Ethnography", Charlotte A. DAVIES (2008) argued: "all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research" (p.3). Moreover, she added, "not only the personal history of ethnographers but also the disciplinary and broader sociocultural circumstances under which they work have a profound effect on which topic and peoples are selected for study" (p.5). These statements strongly resonate with me. There can be no denying my drive for researching politically motivated violence, forced displacement, refugees and migrants. Beyond an academic inquisitiveness and the epistemological relevance of the themes, my research has been driven by a search for answers to ontological questions that affect me at a deep personal level. [11]

These ontological questions relate to the fact that I cannot claim historical and personal distance from the issues of forced displacement, ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia. All these issues have had a direct impact on my life (HALILOVICH, 2005, 2013). Hence, my interest in the matters affecting survivors, refugees and migrants stem very much from my own experiences. However, while reflexive and personal, my research into these questions has not turned into an autoethnography. My approach has, rather, been close to what Raul PACHECO-VEGA and Kate PARIZEAU (2018, p.1) called "doubly-engaged ethnography". They argue that ethnography involving vulnerable communities— as has been the case with much of my research—must focus on three main issues:

1. positionality (recognising our multiple subjectivities as insider/outsider, knowledge holder/learner and how they influence the research);
2. engagement vs. exploitation (how can we meaningfully incentivise participation in our studies without being coercive/extractive); and
3. representation (what are the ethics of representing violence as expressed by vulnerable respondents) (pp.1-2). [12]

While adhering to these methodological, analytical and ethical principles, I fully acknowledge my double roles: as a cultural insider born and socialised in Bosnia and a professional outsider, an anthropologist scholar living in Australia. Thus, my ethnographic approach to researching violence, displacement, forced migration and associated phenomena can be seen as a mix of both *emic* and *etic*

perspectives. It also comes very close to what ČAPO-ŽMEGAČ et al. (2006) termed "Ethnology of the Proximate", arguing that research always incorporates the autobiographical elements—regardless of whether they are consciously repressed in the text or not. As they note, "in cases where the researcher is practically, cognitively and emotionally living with the field, the research is a continual blend of personal experience and the creation of anthropological knowledge" (p.287). [13]

Unlike some other social researchers whose research on recent conflicts has involved perpetrators of violence (DRAKULIC, 2004; SHESTERININA, 2019), my research has not dealt with soldiers, potential war criminals or a broad category of war veterans, but has been largely focused on genocide survivors, families of the missing and their associations such as Mothers of Srebrenica. Consequently, developing a sense of empathy with and duty of care for my participants has come as both an innate personal response and as an acquired professional competency. However, as Anastasia SHESTERININA concluded, "empathy is not as straightforward in intensive fieldwork on violence and war as the general guidelines for researchers suggest" (2019, p.192). [14]

As there is no universal recipe for how to deal with empathy (or resentment) and other emotions in the field—or in the text—each researcher is challenged to find their own way of dealing with their emotional and cognitive selves. Sometimes, in the field and when describing the events, interactions and stories I engage with during my research, I let the *me* fade from the picture, let my presence and personal elements disappear between the lines, to focus on the exchange between the participants I observe (HALILOVICH, 2008, 2016). At other times, I acknowledge my presence by using first person voice or through reflexive descriptions of my own feelings, thoughts, expectations and role as a researcher in a given situation. Either way, at no point do I claim to be representing a value-neutral social reality. As Thomas CUSHMAN (2004) insisted, "the accounts produced as a result of anthropological work are never neutral, in spite of their rhetorical pretensions to being so" (p.7). [15]

In moving across different research sites—a context in which much of my research has been taking place—personal, ethical and political issues seem to be even more challenging than in those at a single research site. As George MARCUS (1995) argued, "the conventional 'how-to' methodological questions of social science seem to be thoroughly embedded in or merged with the political-ethical discourse of self-identification developed by the ethnographer of multi-sited research" (p.113). As he noted, the movement among sites and levels of society "lends a character of activism to such investigation" (ibid.). That *activist role* has often overlapped with and indeed deepened my ethnographic exploration, in terms of both the nature of the data collected and advancing the human rights cause of my informants: refugees, internally displaced persons and genocide survivors. [16]

4. Ethics, Politics and Activist Research

In my research involving fellow Bosnians, being a *cultural insider* has definitely been an advantage in understanding the issues and gaining access to prospective participants and establishing trusting relationships. At times, the insider status provided me with access to information that might have been off limits to outside researchers (EDWARDS, 2002); not that I subscribe to the view that a researcher needs to come from the same ethnic, religious or social background in order to understand their subjects (VAN DE PORT, 1999). Often, the insider positioning comes primarily from the informants themselves, who perceive the researcher as *one of us*, someone whose elective affinity is expected and sometimes even taken for granted. [17]

In regard to the ethics of my research, I cannot but agree with CUSHMAN (2004) that "anthropologists have specific ethical obligations to: a) avoid producing work that legitimises or rationalises the accounts of perpetrators of mass violence; and b) avoid producing accounts which deny the phenomenological realities of social suffering" (p.7). These ethical imperatives imply that researching genocide or refugee condition can never be apolitical or *objectively neutral*. As MARCUS (1995) put it, "when conducting ethnographic research one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments" (p.113). The way to deal with these commitments, he argued, is "not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar, but in being a sort of ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system" (p.114). [18]

For me, once in the field(s)—that in some instances literally were killing fields during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia—there was no easy way out of the *ethnographer-activist* role, nor was I looking for an easy escape (HALILOVICH, 2008). Instead, I came to realise that doing ethnography of genocide and displacement inevitably leads into researching and dealing with the harsh realities of causes and consequences of these human-made disasters (HARRELL-BOND & VOUTIRA, 1992). The forced displacement executed through "ethnic cleansing" and genocide in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 was carried out through the systematic violation of human rights, the complete disregard for the lives and dignity of others. Therefore, my research expanded into dealing with the issues of dispossession, personal loss, dramatic flights and homelessness. [19]

Some of my participants from ethnically cleansed communities in Bosnia presented me with testimonies and first-hand witness accounts of horrific war crimes and information about war criminals who continued to benefit from their deeds. While tempted to use the full names of the alleged war criminals as reported by my respondents, I opted for aliases, but my writing about these war crimes subsequently led to an investigation by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). My participants insisted on my keeping their own original names and their identities in my notes and publications (HALILOVICH, 2013). They were worried if they were to "hide behind fake names" that the integrity of their stories would be compromised. Participating in

the research provided them with the opportunity to get their stories "off their chest", to get them told to and recorded by someone who cared and showed sincere interest in them, to someone whom they perceived as one of them, an insider—and who effectively became their advocate, assisting them in addressing at least some of the injustices they had endured. [20]

Confronted with the magnitude of the loss of human lives and the continuing institutional discrimination against the survivors who returned to their destroyed places after the war ended, my advocacy and activism could be seen as an "emergency response" prompted by "an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within [this] particular lived domain" (SOYINI, 2005, p.5). In addition to academic publications and presenting papers at international conferences and seminars, my response also involved speaking about the devastated communities and their day-to-day problems on radio and TV, participating in documentaries, and writing a number of articles in widely read newspapers and magazines within and outside Bosnia. The dissemination of information about the places and the living conditions of returnees has resulted in some of these places being put back on the map (literally) as re-inhabited human settlements and some residences were provided with material aid. [21]

This action-research approach might alarm traditionally-oriented researchers, for whom the ethnographer has been expected to convey their fieldwork in the text as rational, academic, task-oriented, scientific and apolitical—with the personal and literary considered soft, lacking in rigour, too subjective, even emotional and *feminine*. But, as Edward BRUNER (1993) argued, writing is a political act. "Those who claim", BRUNER wrote, "that what is literary is not political or that humanistic interpretative anthropology does not deal with political issues are rather dead wrong, as any act of representation of the Other is inherently political" (p.6). I have not tried to disguise that my research, the issues explored, the findings and their broader social impacts are highly political (HALILOVICH, 2013, 2016). Regardless of the real or perceived insiderness, it would be almost impossible, as well as ethically problematic, to explore issues involving discrimination, marginalisation, war crimes and genocide without making these political issues the subject of political action. As Victoria SANFORD (2006) argued, "issues of authority and subjectivity matter to all who work in the field trying to contextualise and sometimes categorise the meaning of surviving genocide and other crimes against humanity" (p.31). Similarly, Marie SMYTH (2001) pointed out that "in the face of human suffering ... it may be impossible to remain rigidly within the research role, and not cross the line into intervention" (pp.8-9). [22]

Crossing that line also implies that the ethical imperative *primum non nocere* is not sufficient when researching communities subjected to various human rights abuses that range from *banal* institutional discrimination to the annihilation of whole communities. Such an approach does not compromise the validity of our research. On the contrary, as SANFORD (2006) argued, "activist scholarship reminds us that all research is inherently political, even, and perhaps especially,

that scholarship presented under the guise of 'objectivity', which is really no more than a veiled defence of the status quo" (p.14). [23]

The most common reason for researchers' activism and advocacy comes simply from the fact that they "cannot escape physically, ethically and emotionally the suffering and the brutality of their research subject and the historical epoch they live in" (BOURGOIS, 2006, p.xii). While *inability* to physically, ethically and emotionally distance themselves from their participants may be even more pronounced by researchers who come from the same cultural background as their participants, David TURTON (1996) insisted that all researchers involved in refugee research need to include the alleviation of human suffering as an "explicit objective of their research" (p.96) and ultimately aim to influence the behaviour and thinking of policy-makers and practitioners, so that their interventions are more likely to improve than worsen the situation of refugees and displaced people. [24]

5. An Australian Bosnian Among the Swedish and American Bosnians

At various times in the course of my research, the questions of insiderness and outsiderness, or *emic* and *etic* perspectives, have resurfaced both in my *native* Bosnia and in the Bosnian diaspora (HALILOVICH, 2013, 2016). While to a complete outsider Bosnianness—like Germanness, Europeanness or Australianness—may seem an identity category with clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, in reality most researcher-insiders realise that their insiderness is much more delicate and subject to a range of situational and relational factors (KUSOW, 2003). Some readers might point to the Bosnian ethnic and religious identities as obvious exclusive categories when it comes to Bosnian insiderness. However, in my research with Bosnians of various ethnic backgrounds, I have regularly come across other, less obvious but not less exclusive, group identities such as regional belonging, local dialects, country of residence, adopted second language and cultural norms of the host country, time of migration, gender and even generational belonging. Some of these generational, diasporic and regional differences, which made me feel more like an outsider than an insider, I experienced during my research with the Bosnian diaspora communities in Sweden and the USA. [25]

In the naval city of Karlskrona, in southern Sweden, I discovered that the majority of Bosnian refugees who settled there come from the western Bosnian towns of Banja Luka, Prijedor and Prnjavor—a part of Bosnia also known as Krajina. The fact that all these communities come from the same broader region of western Bosnia has led to the development of a distinct, regional Krajina identity of the Bosnian diaspora in Karlskrona. Apart from clear trans-local and trans-regional settlement patterns of Bosnians in Karlskrona, what was also striking to me about the Bosnian presence in this historical and cultural jewel of southern Sweden was the extent to which, quite disproportionate to their actual numbers in the city, Bosnians featured in the city's cultural scene (HALILOVICH, 2013). [26]

During one of my stays there, I was given a tour of the Maritime Museum and a history lesson about the Swedish navy by a group of (western) Bosnian high school students and their Bosnian teacher, also a curator at the Museum. While I could hear, and understand, their distinct Krajina dialect—different from the Bosnian I speak—during this tour I became even more aware of my outsider role in relation to my participants, who, through their narrative performance, positioned themselves as insiders, making personal connections with the history of their new country. This was especially obvious when my tour guides used the terms *we*, *us* and *our* to refer to Sweden and its history. But, then again, they displayed a degree of pride when, amongst thousands of exhibits—some dating back several hundred years—they showed me a mini submarine made in Sarajevo during the Yugoslav era. This object had a symbolic value to them as a material link between their parents and their own histories and identities, as if to say: in our Swedish history there is also something from our old country. The history lesson I was given by these teenage Swedish Krajina Bosnians effectively intersected at different generational, local/regional, national and transnational levels, and as a Bosnian-Australian born in eastern Bosnia I felt more on the outside of the fascinating story than in it; not to mention all the side-conversations in Swedish from which I felt completely excluded. [27]

In St. Louis (USA), however, where my most loyal research participants were Bosnians from the region of Podrinje, or the river Drina valley, in eastern Bosnia, I naturally felt my *emic* perspective to be much stronger than with the Swedish Bosnians in Karlskrona. As well as the Bosnians from the river Drina valley living in St. Louis, my research included participants from other parts of Bosnia who settled in "the largest Bosnian city outside Bosnia" (KARAMEHIC-OATES & KARAMEHIC-MURATOVIC, 2020). The fact that I hardly knew any of my participants before meeting them in St. Louis was of secondary importance to my Podrinje participants; we could easily find many connecting points—from our love for the river Drina to speaking a familiar regional dialect to knowing about places, events and people *we*, Podrinje insiders, shared as a part of our regional identity and history that in this faraway place was perceived as a solid base of an elective affinity. Not surprisingly, I was warmly welcomed as *one of us*, a kin, in the re-territorialised Podrinje community in St. Louis (HALILOVICH, 2013, 2016). Forming fictive kinship relationships with fellow compatriots is a quite common practice among many migrant communities. As Helen Rose EBAUGH and Mary CURRY (2000) pointed out, in migration context, "fictive kin systems expand the network of individuals who provide social and economic capital for one another and thereby constitute a resource to immigrants as they confront problems of settlement and incorporation" (p.189). [28]

In some way, the fictive kinship and my *emic* perspective impacted upon the data collection and what kind of knowledge was produced in the process. Many of my interviews with the Podrinje insiders turned into two-way conversations in which I also responded to many questions posed by my participants, thus creating a joint narrative of displaced Podrinje. However, I opted for a more *etic* perspective when exploring their contemporary migrant realities in St. Louis. In fact, our different experiences of migration, my acquired Australianness and their

Americanness, often set us apart. Most of my fellow Bosnians from Podrinje living in St. Louis weren't aware of how much they had become Americans over the last two decades, but my Australianness did not escape them; they even made fun of my Australian English and some typical Australian phrases I used. [29]

I also became aware of gender and generational aspects with many of my Podrinje participants who were women, war widows, who had often lost sons of my age in the war. In the interviews, many of the women told me about how they lost their relatives in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. More than once, I was told how my looks, age or speech reminded them of someone close they lost in the war. As much as I felt cognitively and emotionally immersed in and overwhelmed by their stories of pain and loss, I could only imagine how it must feel for a mother to lose her children in such tragic circumstances. As a man and someone who did not go through the most tragic experience a parent could survive, my insiderness remained partial, caught somewhere between empathy, hopelessness, shame and anger. As Ghassan HAGE (2009) argued, talking about researchers' emotions in the field necessarily brings out personal dimensions specific to each researcher; "this is so even when concentrating on emotions that are to do more with the social, political, or structural location of the anthropologist in general than with his or her specific biography" (p.62). [30]

6. Ethnographic Encounters on an Island of Strangers

The island of Tanna, on the Pacific archipelago state of Vanuatu, might have come as the remotest place from my biography and closest to the traditional idea of what an anthropologist's work looks like. Many of the seminal anthropological texts—from Bronisław MALINOWSKI (1922) and Margaret MEAD (1928) to Jean GUIART (1956)—deal with the Pacific and its remote island cultures. In fact, during my undergraduate studies, reading some of these works sparked my passion for anthropology. Even though my trip to the Pacific islands did not come at the beginning of my research career, somehow it felt like a belated initiation into my long-adopted discipline and academic identity. But this visit for me was much more personal and a result of my academic kinship rather than merely following a research curiosity. [31]

In my mind, I followed the footsteps of a young Australian PhD researcher who, in the early 1970s, had travelled to Tanna to conduct fieldwork for his thesis on a century of European contact with Tanna, 1774-1874. His own first contact with the locals was facilitated by the European administrators on the island, which at the time was still a colonial territory, the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. Soon after his arrival on the island, the colonial officials assigned the young researcher to an old man on the other side of the island, who had been instructed to look after and be of assistance to the *young master*. The two complete strangers felt both confused and uncomfortable about ending up under one roof. There was a wall of silence between them. When the young researcher expressed his intention to leave the place next day, his host pleaded him to stay. The young master learned that his host's wife had died recently and so had his son, and the old man was now living on his own, looking after his two orphaned

granddaughters, still mourning and visibly struggling with his host's role. He also admitted he didn't know how to host the young white *master*, that he had felt ashamed for not being able to provide adequate food, cutlery and a bed to his assigned guest. The mutual emotional disclosures resulted in both men crying and any tension that was building up between them evaporated with their tears. An innate human connection was established and this was a somewhat awkward start of a friendship between the researcher and his research participant. The old man's name was Miaki and the Australian PhD student, the *young master*, was Ron ADAMS. Sadly, two years later Miaki died. Ron successfully completed his PhD and subsequently published his book "In the Land of Strangers" (ADAMS, 1984), a perfectly suitable title reflecting not only on a century of European contact with Tanna but also on Ron's own first contact with the Tannese. I remembered this and many other stories and anecdotes from Ron's continuous engagement with Tanna, now stretching back over four decades. [32]

My arrival on Tanna, in August 2019, took place under very different circumstances than those Ron encountered in the 1970s. I arrived in Ron's company, who was not regarded a stranger on the island any longer, but instead had earned the highly respectable status of a *kaha* [elder, grandfather]. This is not a mere symbolic honorary status extended to an outsider: Ron has truly become a member of the Iarkei[1] village community, his primary research site on the island. Having participated in many important events involving different tribes, taken records of oral histories and genealogies and written about the life on Tanna across several different generations, Ron is widely known and respected across and beyond the island. He has living memory not only of the present generation Tannese but also of their late fathers and grandfathers, and thanks to his research using 18th and 19th century archives, also knows about many of their distant ancestors and their roles as chiefs, warriors and farmers. A lot of that historical knowledge was captured in Ron's original PhD thesis, a bound copy of which I noticed on a wooden shelf in chief Charlie KAUKARE's hut in Iarkei. This was probably the only book in the village (at least the only one I saw during my stay) and it was treated like a sacred scripture, even though there were not many people in the village who could or did actually read it. [33]

The chief Charlie KAUKARE—who along with the tribal title passed on from his late father, Chief David KAUKARE also inherited the role of Ron's host—welcomed me, not as a stranger but as someone who was related to his *kaha* Ron. The KAUKARE's family has been Ron's *family* on Tanna, looking after him and mediating Ron's contacts with the locals for over two generations now. However, even though I believed I was mentally prepared for this visit, in many regards I felt like a complete outsider as this was my first time in such a cultural environment. Arriving on a tiny aeroplane, landing on a small paddock on the edge of a jungle that was the airport, and then being driven on a pickup truck was all something I only read about or saw in the movies. Instead of a village of the sort I was used to in Bosnia and across Europe, the *village* we arrived in, after some 90 minutes of dangerous driving through the jungle, was made of several

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1   The village of Iarkei is also known as Yarkey in French.

small bamboo huts spread through the lush jungle dominated by giant tropical trees, including the surreal looking *banyans* growing on top of other giant trees. As I expected, there was no electricity, but the darkness of the jungle, which started shortly after the sunset, was darker than anything else I had experienced before. The sound of the jungle and the ocean at night was also something completely new. The eruptions coming in regular half-hourly intervals from the Mount Yasur volcano, a few kilometres away from the village, reminded me of the artillery explosions during the 1990s war in Bosnia ... But after a few days I got accustomed to everything that was different here and started to appreciate much of it (though not the roaring sounds of the eruptions). [34]

7. A Muslim Epiphany

In the days that followed, in Ron's and Chief Charlie's company, I visited the places and met the people I knew from Ron's stories and publications, observed and participated in everyday activities of the village, including drinking *kava* with the local men and listening to their stories at the village's *nakamal*.[2] I realised early on that the only way to conduct research on Tanna was through the researcher's active participation in social activities, be it *kava* drinking, hanging around or attending a variety of religious services. In all these ethnographic encounters, I was particularly interested in the cultural aspects that represented a blend of local traditions, rituals and ceremonies (*kastom*) and various modern influences—from European (Christian) to American (*cargo cults*) to more recently Chinese (infrastructure projects) and Muslim (the newest religion on the island). Unlike other similar societies in the Pacific, where modernity has in many cases prevailed over *kastom*, Tanna is still regarded as an example of how local *kastom* and global modernity can coexist (LINDSTROM, 1982). [35]

After observing and participating in *kastom* and Christian ceremonies, that both heavily influenced each other and had their own Tannese variations, we went to visit Iwel village in the centre of the island, where the first Muslim community on Tanna has been established in recent years. The village, made of several huts spread on a plateau high above the ocean, did not look distinct from any other settlement we visited on the island. A woman in her forties, dressed in a colourful skirt, common among the Tannese women, and a matching headscarf, welcomed us and introduced herself to us as Aisha. To my "As-salamu alaykum", a standard Muslim greeting, she enthusiastically replied "Wa alaykumu saalam!". Upon hearing my first name, Aisha promptly established that I was a Muslim and took me excitedly to her husband, Chief Jimmy NOANKAN, and other village men at the nearby *nakamal*. Having converted in 1999, Chief Jimmy NOANKAN, also known by his Muslim name as Abdullah, was the first convert to Islam on Tanna. He was a charismatic man in his sixties and, with a long white beard and a round Afghan-style hat on top of his head, resembled a fearsome Afghan mujahedeen. A few other men, including Abdullah's son Abdul Karim, had similar beards. As they all were the first generation of Muslims, who grew up with *kastom* and Christian traditions—and hardly had any direct contact with other Muslims—they

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2 A traditional meeting place across the Vanuatu archipelago, used for communal gatherings, ceremonies and the drinking of *kava*.

seemed as though they were still learning how to style themselves like *proper* Muslims and for some reason, they adopted the distant Afghan style. I must admit, it suited them somehow, but this is a topic to be explored in a separate publication; here I will focus on my propelled elective affinity and *insider* status in the community I visited for the first time in my life. The Iwel villagers were very excited that a fellow Muslim was visiting them, and soon I was referred to as a *brother*. This was the first time for me as a researcher to become aware of how my Muslim name and perceived religious background could position me as a fellow co-religionist and a partial insider (*brother*) in an otherwise unfamiliar sociocultural context. [36]

I even experienced a *Lazarus moment* when taken to see a single grave near the *nakamal*, where the first local Muslim to die on Tanna was buried according to the Islamic rites. The deceased, who passed a year earlier, was my namesake. I was moved by the coincidence, a truly serendipitous situation, which instantly got interpreted by my hosts as a sort of miracle, a sign that God Himself had sent me there. There was something comforting in being recognised a *brother* by the first native Muslim community on Tanna. As an anthropologist, I was also excited to have found *my village* in the Pacific about which I wanted to learn and write in the future. *Sister* Aisha and *brother* Abdullah showed me a hut turned into their mosque. (Luckily, I was not obliged to lead a prayer or deliver a sermon, something that frequently happens to Ron in *his Christian village* of Iarkei.) Chief Jimmy Abdullah NOANKAN invited me to stay in his village while on Tanna and I promised that the next time I come I would stay there. This was my intention, but the plans to return to Tanna in some six to eight months got spoiled by the COVID-19 pandemic. [37]

However, my inability to travel to Tanna did not prevent me from continuing and even strengthening my elective affinity with the Iwel community. Shortly after returning to Australia, I started receiving regular updates from Tanna in the form of short texts, photos and videos sent to me via *Viber* by Abdullah's and Aisha's daughter Zafirah. Zafirah keeps recording and sending me photos and short videos about everyday life in Iwel as well as of the Muslim, *kastom* and national festivities—such as observing the month of Ramadan, circumcision ceremonies or celebrating the 40th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence. In fact, Zafirah, who as a primary school teacher in the village might be also among the most educated there, has become a trusted research collaborator on Tanna. Now that I have an active connection with the village and an informal *Muslim insider* status, I also occasionally send small donations for communal projects such as building a mini fuel station or supporting educational activities for the children. I know that Ron has been supporting *his village* of Iarkei and the KAUKARE family in similar ways for many years now. Like Ron, I have been treating these actions as acts of reciprocity, an essential principle for sustaining all form of kinship. [38]

8. Conclusion

In this article I attempted to demonstrate how elective affinities as a web of meaningful relationships emerge in the field. I also aimed to highlight the importance of academic kinship, encompassing both its social and intellectual dimensions, and how such relationships influence research directions and shape the landscapes of knowledge. The discussions involving different research contexts described in this article point to how the researcher's *emic/etic* position is rarely fixed and stable. As much as insiderness may be taken for granted, when researchers conduct research with fellow co-ethnics and people coming from a similar socio-cultural background—or outsiderness might be anticipated in researching *foreign* cultures and societies—the experience in the field often challenges any preconceived ideas about when, how and to what extent any researcher is able to claim or sustain a purely insider's (*emic*) or outsider's (*etic*) perspective. Whereas researcher-outsiders are expected to move from a purely *etic*, or outside, perspective closer to the one of cultural insiders, the researcher-cultural insiders may be required to move in the opposite direction—to adopt a more *etic* perspective in order to enrich their ethnographies by considering the field (and the participants) from *outside*. However, these shifts are not only dependent on the researcher; participants' agency is always part of the researcher-researched interplays and shapes the research context, in terms of which establishing relationships along the principles of elective affinities often plays a crucial role. [39]

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