

## Notes on memory, home and fieldwork

*Vjosa Musliu*\*

In October 2013, I was on my way to the city of Mitrovica in Kosovo to conduct fieldwork. I planned on interviewing local ‘civil society actors’ on the international intervention for my PhD project. Being my birthplace, Kosovo was still an important part of what I considered to be ‘home’. I left the country when I was 18 to study abroad, and it had been nearly 10 years since I had lived there. Notwithstanding the yearly visits and my frequent writings for the local media, I began to notice a kind of detachment from what I still sometimes call my ‘homeland’ over the years. For instance, unlike during the first four or five years abroad, no longer did I have the anxiety of missing out on things in Kosovo. No longer did I read the news every day to keep in touch with developments there. Most importantly, no longer did I long to go there, even for a couple of weeks. The war experience and the aftermath of ‘liberation’ had created in me and my co-nationals a sense of belonging, sacrifice, and devotion. Everybody’s persona – everyone’s life – was seen as a contribution to a greater nationalist project: the building of the country and the struggle for its survival. It had always been suffocating, the way this home – Kosovo – had owned me – the way it had owned all of us. Initially, my solution for escaping this suffocation was choosing not to live there anymore. I wanted to be free, even if that meant renouncing this home permanently. I first became aware that I had had this suffocating feeling only after years of living abroad, and it started to disgust me. As my routine, surroundings, and life goals were no longer shaped by ‘Kosovo,’ the suffocation had become less of a ‘normal’ state of being.

So, in 2013, I was not just going back ‘home’ for fieldwork. I was going back to a city that kept intact all the memory of that war. Situated in northern Kosovo, the city of Mitrovica had become the epitome of ethnic division and segregation following the 1999 NATO intervention. In the aftermath of the war, after the NATO troops (a French division) took control of Mitrovica, the Serbs left the south and most Albanians left – or rather did not return to – the north, and so the town was quickly divided at the River Ibar/Ibër. Ever since, at the northern end of the bridge, local Serbs organised to keep an eye out in case any sort of trouble was coming from the Albanian south. They were called the Bridge Watchers.

Despite the international intervention and Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, Kosovo’s independence remained contested not only by Serbia and Kosovo’s Serbs, but also in the international arena. The ambiguous political status of Kosovo further fuelled the inter-ethnic conflicts following the end of the war. Nowhere was this contestation as present as in the city of Mitrovica, traditionally inhabited by Serbs. With the exception of the NATO forces, neither Kosovo’s government nor the international institutions

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\* Dr Vjosa Musliu is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Political Science, Free University of Brussels (VUB). Her work focuses on EU external relations with the Western Balkans, the performative turn in Europeanization, and poststructuralist approaches to IR. She can be reached at [vjosa.musliu@vub.be](mailto:vjosa.musliu@vub.be)

were able to extend their control and jurisdiction to this part of the country until 2014. In the absence of any rule of law or functioning institutions, this entire area had turned into a black hole for smuggling and other illegal activities. The bridge that divided the two parts of Mitrovica now marks the ‘border’ of a newly founded city. Ever since, the bridge has become the personification of segregation, fear, mistrust, and violence. In cleaving two ethnically homogenous zones, the bridge also divides two different realities and conceptions of what Kosovo is and, most importantly, *whose* it is. The Albanian part in the South declared itself a municipality of the Republic of Kosovo. The Serbian part in the North, being a staunch contender of the newly formed state, saw itself as part of Serbia and opposed any contact with the Albanian part. 16 years after the war, with the decentralization plan, the northern part of the city became a city of its own, called Northern Mitrovica.

I spent a couple of months arguing with myself, with my family still living in Kosovo, and with my PhD supervisors in Belgium, that it was crucial for my project to conduct interviews in the city of Mitrovica. Concerned about my physical security, my supervisors were hesitant. ‘Can’t you do the interviews via Skype?’ asked my main supervisor. ‘Well, that wouldn’t be rich and convincing enough, methodologically speaking. It’s not just about the interviews, it’s more about the fieldwork itself,’ I argued. They pressed. ‘You are a better evaluator of the situation there, but there is no point in taking risks, especially because you can do the interviews via Skype.’

I insisted that my project would be incomplete without narratives from people in Mitrovica. Because Kosovo Serbs were never in favour of the international project that eventually made Kosovo an Albanian-dominated state, I wanted to know whether and how their narratives differed from the ones I had already collected from Kosovo Albanians. I wanted to talk to people and understand what it meant for them to live there – how they situated themselves in post-conflict Kosovo. In my PhD report, I wrote that the aim of the research visit was to understand the everyday reality in the North. I wanted to find out what type of transport kids use to get to school. Where do the youngsters hang out? Where do they get married? Where do they shop for groceries? Until I arrived in North Mitrovica, I remained oblivious to the personal dimension of my visit and focused on the research instead. Thinking about it now, it seems like I was trying to trick myself into going there, much like a parent would trick a child into going to the doctor promising an ice cream afterwards. I guess I wanted to go and prove to myself that there was nothing that could hurt me in that place - no memories, no past, no fear. I wanted to walk around the streets of the city and be able to say-without-saying: I’m alive and I am well. I won! You did not defeat me. This ‘you’ was not a person, a subject, a state, or a military. It was also not solely located in North Mitrovica. For me, the ‘you’ was in every ‘Serbian sphere’: a table in a café comprised of Serbs in a Serb populated city. I remember when I first visited Belgrade in 2002 and then again in 2006. Just by walking among hundreds of people in Terazija square, I felt like I was demonstrating my victory, just by being there. Having not been killed, disappeared in some mass grave, or locked somewhere in Kosovo unable to recover from the war – these were my victories. Much like my Belgrade visit, nobody in North Mitrovica would know that there was an Albanian wandering the streets, and even less so that she is ‘winning’ with every step she takes. But, that was not the point. I knew there was a spectator that was seeing all of this – me.

Even while living in Kosovo, I had never stepped foot in the city of Mitrovica. Growing up in southeast Kosovo (a two-hour drive from Mitrovica), I knew Mitrovica only as the backbone of Kosovo's economy. In my history classes, it was customary to hear about how the coal resources of Mitrovica were 'unjustly exploited by the government in Belgrade to build new industries.' Any time my parents would voice a charge of discrimination against the Serbian regime, they would say a phrase in Serbian 'Mitrovica works so that Belgrade can develop' (Mitrovica radi, Beograd se gradi!). What I learned about Mitrovica after the end of the war were tales of people losing their houses depending on which side of the bridge they were located; people selling their houses at very low prices to escape from newly created homogenous ethnic zones; tales of depression as the economic situation became dire; reports of rape and pillage, especially in the first five years after the war. The news, information, and anecdotes that would circulate about the city were systematically pointing to its lack of security, its inter-ethnic frictions, and violence. In other words, like many other Albanians, I had come to understand that, if the war had ended in the rest of the country, it was frozen, or rather dormant, in the northern part of Mitrovica. All it would take would be a provocation from Albanians for the war to erupt again. With hindsight, I came to understand that people do not ordinarily go to Mitrovica for interviews or fieldwork. Ethnic Albanians like myself do not go there for any sort of reason. 'When you go there, you will see it for yourself. It is as if you're living in the 90s again. Nothing has changed. It's like even the time has stopped,' said my friends in Pristina as I was telling them of my decision to go to the North. Most of them had gone to the North to sell or buy property. 'It really cannot be that dramatic,' I thought to myself. 'There's certainly a normal routine just like anywhere else.'

As a 12-year-old, I remember watching the news on BBC, *Deutsche Welle*, and other international media during the war in Kosovo. Like a lot of other people, my family and I never left the country and had been witnessing both the war waged by Slobodan Milošević against the Albanians and the NATO air strikes against Serbian military sites on the one hand, and the war that was talked about on TV on the other. Even though there may not be an earthly way to depict the war in a human fashion, I remember being far more terrified of the war that was unfolding on TV than of the actual strikes happening at night as I tried to sleep in a six-meter-square basement along with 20 other kids. While a lot of the occurrences of the war were filtered by our parents, there was also a need to humanise and normalise the attacks and their frequency, as well as things like the people who disappeared without a trace. For instance, during the explosions at night, when observing that some of us kids were shaken by the intensity of the strikes, my uncle would say things like: 'This one was a NATO bomb.' We knew that NATO was aiming for Serbia's military, not us – the civilians. So, claiming that a bomb was just released by NATO and not by the Serbian military forces reassured us of its harmlessness. 'Don't cry! There's nothing we can do! It's a war, these things happen!' I remember my parents and other elders in the family telling us this rather assertively when trying to make sense of why someone might have been killed, or why we were saying goodbye to so many of our neighbours who were leaving to escape to Macedonia or Albania.

The night NATO started bombing Serbia, my family and I were displaced from our home by the Serbian military. We used to live in the city centre, an area traditionally inhabited more by Serbs than by Albanians. We went to my uncles, who were living in the same city, but in an Albanian populated district, and we stayed there until the end of the war. Alongside our new neighbours, we created volleyball fields using the abundant potato nets that we had stored in the basement. Nobody knew how long the war would last, so people had bought durable foods

such as pasta, flour, oil, and potatoes. In addition to the volleyball matches, on the 1st of June in 1999, a couple of weeks before the end of the war, we also organised a show for International Children's Day composed of a painting exhibition hung on the walls of the house, a theatre play, and two poetry recitals. And although that 'program' was all inspired by the theme of the war and a wishful liberation, there was a festive element to it too. We cleaned the yard thoroughly, arranged a couple of chairs for the elderly of the neighbourhood and put on our best clothes for the performance.

That very same war we were living ourselves, interspersed with volleyball matches and 'cultural programs,' had no filters on the TV screen. The war on TV was far more black and white than our daily life with it. It was all about the balance of the dead, the injured and the escaped. There were no humans in it, just statistics. There were no volleyball fields made out of potato nets for us kids to play during the day nor 'volleyball tournaments' in our yard. We were updated on the strikes at the 4 pm news broadcast from *Deutsche Welle* and then again at 6 pm from *Voice of America*, right before the electricity cut out. 1999 was not the period of the Internet in private homes yet. So, other than stories from internally displaced people, the only and ultimate source of bringing you the macro war in your own room, on your breakfast table, was television.

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I arrived in the city of Southern Mitrovica on a rainy autumn day. Walking from the bus station towards the city centre, I observed a number of new buildings that were supposed to give the grey city a reboot. The post-war architecture was weirdly cohabitating with the older, pre-war remnants. Once an industrial city, the southern part was now filled with tiny shops and kitschy shopping malls. Billboards and ads advertised a new bank, a new shopping mall, or a new method to gradually pay for your new electric appliances. All the labels were in the Latin alphabet – all in Albanian. The Kosovo and the Albanian flags were omnipresent and often side by side with the US flag, something that you see all over Kosovo, too. The US was instrumental for NATO's intervention against Serbia and the Albanians retain a strong gratitude towards the US.

I didn't know anyone in the city, so I began to look for information and tips on how to get to the North. Everyone – literally everyone – I talked to was curious and slightly apprehensive. 'Why on earth do you want to go there?' The owner of a coffee bar next to the bridge suggested that, because I was working for a Belgian university, my employers should have arranged my visit with NATO soldiers. '...and you're a woman! Are you sure you really need to get there?' he asked further. I started to picture myself in a NATO Humvee, with a bullet proof vest, as I would interview people from a cultural centre or a university professor. Eventually, it was one of the customers at the bar who showed me to the municipal building that acts as an intermediary office between the Northern and the Southern municipalities. He insisted that if I am going north, at least one 'state' authority had to be aware of it (just in case). He was kind enough to even walk me all the way to the municipal building. 'Have you seen the movie *No Man's Land*?' he asked, referring to the Oscar-winning film by Danis Tanović that depicts the Bosnian war. 'That's what the North looks like,' he said.

I have to admit, I thought all of this reaction was a bit exaggerated. I found it difficult to believe that nobody ever went to the north. Up until 1999, these people had had their houses

in the North. They had lived their lives there. The same was true for the Serbs, for whom the South was their home before 1999. All the fuss made it seem as though no exchange whatsoever had taken place in 16 years between what were, after all, two parts of a city divided by a non-functional bridge. 'I went there a couple of times myself. My brother, he lives in Sweden, he sold his piece of land. There's nothing left for us there,' he argued further. He was talking as if he was describing something trivial, rather than of his previous life, or his previous home. I thought I should not push him more with questions. I understand that a lot of us go through pain and loss differently. But the researcher in me doesn't stop. 'What happened to mixed marriages and mixed relationships in the city?' I asked. 'What do you think happened?' he answered. 'Well, there weren't really that many. But they left Kosovo for good,' he responded.

And so, as I was walking, struggling to make sense of these reactions, I entered the municipal building and observed a slightly chaotic, busy environment. All the counters were busy. Serbian, Albanian, and Bosnian were spoken all at the same time. All the clerks were women. My turn came. A seemingly lethargic clerk came suddenly alive when I told her that I wanted to find a way to get to the North to conduct some research. Like other Albanians in the South, she informed me that, actually, it would be better if the people I was going to interview would come somewhere close to the neutral zone, where the municipal building was. Unable to convince her of the importance of this trip, I left the building. One of the clerks who had overheard us talking followed me outside. With her cell phone, she called a 'taxi driver' who would get me to the North for a couple of dinars. 'He will take euros too!' she assured me. As I was entering the car, she discretely handed me a piece of paper and said, 'Drop me a line at this number when you get there, ok?'

I hopped in a red Yugo with no signs of a taxi on it. 'I use this car – it's actually my wife's – to earn a living. What else is left for us to do here?' asked the Serbian taxi driver. Later on, I learned that due to the lack of public transport, many people in the North were doing the same. I smiled politely, looking at him in the rear view mirror, not knowing what to say. In the meantime, I kept thinking of the whispering voice of the clerk 'drop me a line at this number when you get there...'

We passed through a narrow street that seemed abandoned, with demolished houses on both sides of the road. A couple of Serbian flags, here and there. At the turn of the road, the view opened up on what seemed to be a city culminating in a square. Serbian flags and nationalist graffiti were omnipresent. On both sides of the road, there were little shops and boutiques. The products inside were arranged and displayed in the fashion of the 1990s, much like my dad's old shoe shop. Cyrillic script was everywhere – a homogenous Serbian space. Yugo cars, among others, bore Serbia's licence plates. The news hour in the car radio was announcing the weather forecast. Rain was expected in most of 'Kosovo and Metohija.' In the meantime, I received a 'Welcome to Serbia' text message on my cell phone. I was no longer in the divided city of a contested state. According to Telekom Srbija, I was in Serbia. Not only was I suddenly back in another country, but, stranger than fiction, I was back in time – in the 1990s. All the imagery I was seeing from the car window brought me back to my childhood – to Kosovo after Milošević had come to power. I suddenly felt that maybe the war had never happened. Maybe I was still living in that exact same country, at that exact same time. I was brought back to the 'present' by clenching my fists hard in the attempt to hold back my tears. This was no time to be emotional. I had to soak in all of that environment, all

that the public space had to offer, but not for me, not yet at least. All of that had to make sense for the research, first and foremost. Feeling responsible towards the research was probably the only way I could pull myself together to actually make it through the trip. But it looked like I could not continue tricking myself any longer. The visit had already become overwhelming, before it had even started. My breathing became arrhythmic and it felt like my inner organs were all upside down. Would I be able to walk around the city and claim my victory? Would I be able to announce that I am not defeated? These feelings and questions made me finally accept that this was not a research visit. This was a trip for *me*. This ‘detail’ that I had grossly neglected was suddenly *the* reason why I was in North Mitrovica. Overwhelmed as I was, it never occurred to me that I could just ask for a ride back to the municipal building, cancel the interviews, and go back to breathing normally. In the meantime, I did not want any of this to be of notice to the taxi driver, who, knowing or sensing how uncomfortable I was, kept on finding a song ‘in English’ on the radio, so that I would not have to listen Serbian. Without exchanging much conversation during the trip, we were both aware of each other's sensitivities.

I paid the taxi driver in euros and started to walk, half-conscious, in the streets. I was walking around a museum, a museum from my childhood. And, just like in a museum, I was walking slowly, trying to observe everything around me in complete silence. Unlike a museum visit however, I was seeing ghosts. I was constantly haunted by ghosts that kept appearing, over and over again. These ghosts were not the armed soldiers, the masked paramilitary forces of the war. They were our Serbian neighbours, who, one night during the war looked at us in silence as we were leaving our home escorted by the Serbian military. I saw myself feeling humiliated, defeated, and feeling less of a child. Less of a person. The ghosts were the men and women in suits who one day came to the kindergarten and we, the Albanian kids, were no longer to attend the same kindergarten with our Serbian friends. At that time, as I was collecting my belongings – my slippers, my duffle bag, and my pyjamas – for the very first time, as a five-year-old, I understood that we were different. We were different not because we were speaking different languages. But because we had to be removed from the kindergarten and make room for the Serbian kids. They did not like us. To my recollection, that was the first time I experienced being treated unjustly and violently. Later in the 1990s as the segregation grew deeper, we were also removed from schools, our parents were removed from public jobs (courts, police structures, post offices and the like) and before I was eight, I had started to think of the Serbs as my enemies. They had become people who wanted to erase me, my family, my language.

Contrary to what I learnt in therapy, I had no interest in confronting them, nor in posing the question ‘why?’ or ‘why me?/why us?’ Among these ghosts, I was just trying to see myself. The version of myself that outlived the war. A version of me that had not had the chance to fully understand, to cry, to scream, to heal, to forgive, to forget, to feel. The moment of liberation, the aftermath of the war, is a treachery. The excitement of life, of liberation, of survival, encapsulates you. There’s no time for remembrance. There’s no time for closure. From statistics of death, in the aftermath of the war, we became statistics of successful international state-building. Precisely because the authentic conservation of the past in North Mitrovica was so disturbingly vivid, I saw a chance of going back in time. I saw a chance not to celebrate but to self-destroy, to feel, and to hurt. In doing this, I started to feel dizzy and nauseated.

I needed to rest for a bit, so I headed to a brasserie called ‘Pizzeria Siena’. There were just a few people scattered around the tables of the relatively tiny place. It was not quite 11 am. I noticed I was being observed. I was a stranger in this small city. I sat there, took out my cigarettes and texted the guy I was supposed to interview in three hours. ‘I am already in the North. Do you think we can do the interview earlier?’ I felt like I should do the interview as soon as possible. Right now! Along with the dizziness, I noticed that a feeling of urgency and panic was soaking me. A phone call from the clerk in the South brought me back to ‘life’. I instinctively knew it would be a rookie mistake to answer her and talk in Albanian. Responding in Serbian would equally display my accent. I rejected her call and sent her a text instead. ‘I am in the North waiting for my interview. Thank you very much, it’s all fine. I just don’t want to be heard speaking in Albanian here.’

It was a good thing I could smoke inside the brasserie. Kosovo had just passed a law banning smoking in public areas. But then again, this city was not Kosovo. It was 11 am now and I had not had my breakfast yet. But that was not what I needed. I ordered a Lav instead – a Serbian beer. While the waiter was bringing my beer, I realised that the words ‘smoking kills’ on my cigarettes were written in Albanian. These were cigarettes I had bought in ‘Kosovo’ (in the South). The ones I later purchased in the North bore the words in Serbian. I turned the pack of cigarettes upside down and worked on my beer. ‘Good to hear that. Please let me know when you get back to the South!’ the clerk texted back. Even though I was obviously feeling threatened, I was not afraid of anyone. I was not afraid, either, that something terrible would happen to me. I was afraid of the intermittent episodes of travelling in time and seeing ghosts of myself. I was terrified because I was a mere spectator of these shifts, of the travels, of the awakenings, with no power to do anything about it. And yet, along with the lack of power, there was also this cautious willingness and curiosity to actually travel in time and see what happens....to see what it would be like. To see the familiar again.

A sandwich and an espresso later, I decided to take a tour around the city. I entered in a supermarket just to check the scenery of shelves and the types of products. In a weird way, it was comforting to see ‘Cedevita’, ‘Euroblok’, ‘Plazma’, ‘Eurocrem’, ‘Mešavina’, ‘Životinske Carstvo’ folded nicely in one shelf under the handwritten prices in Serbian dinar. I grew up with all these products. These were all tastes of my childhood. And even though I had seen almost all of these products displayed in the shops of my hometown, they carried a whole different meaning when accompanied by the prices in Serbian dinars in that city. I did not buy anything, though. I guess all I wanted was to observe. I bought a bottle of water instead. ‘I will give you your change in dinars,’ said the cashier as I handed her a banknote of five euros. ‘No problem at all,’ I responded. After that, I went on and entered in a small boutique that looked to me like a Yumco branch – Yumco, once a solid Yugoslav clothing brand. At this store, I would buy my leggings, my gymnastics outfit, my ballerina dress. This is where I bought my dark green skirt, which I thought went with everything. As I opened and folded clothes for 10- and 12-year-old girls, I did notice a conscious moment of happiness, albeit a troubled one. It was a comforting moment in that difficult day. Again, I was hardly interested in talking to the shopkeepers, observing other customers or even buying stuff. All I wanted was just to see, to be around these objects.

While walking around the city, I experienced intermittent moments or episodes of being there and not being there; of travelling in the past while remaining in the present. These were not interruptions of conscious and unconscious, like the ones when you’re overly drunk or high,

or when you blackout and do not remember particular moments. Far from it. I was able to be present and not present in different decades. I was able to inhabit two different versions of myself and watch the two collide. I could, for instance, sense when I was ‘living’ the moments of the 90s. The physical and emotional reaction was so overwhelming that I would initially feel dizzy, strangled – about to throw up. And, right after this, I started to feel afraid, about to run. At the same time, I was observing ‘myself’ or the ghost of myself struggling, trying not to drown. All of this would not have lasted more than a couple of minutes, though the intensity and the depth of it would only be compared to dream-like episodes.

It was coming to 1 pm. My first interview was scheduled at the EU Cultural Centre. A guy of my age welcomed me in. He ordered two cups of coffee for us and said right away: ‘I don’t know how beneficial these interviews will be. You should have gone to Pristina or Gracanica. Over there, people are connected to Kosovo’s government and to internationals. They have funds and will probably have interesting things to tell you.’ And then, I realised that, because I had emailed him in English from my university account and was sitting there with him in the North, he thought I was Belgian. No way in hell would an ethnic Albanian go over there. ‘You know, I am Albanian. I grew up in Gnjilane,’ I said to him, using the Serbian pronunciation of my city and curiously waiting for his reaction. He looked at me and smiled. I went on: ‘I really wanted to come here, and the fact that you are saying there are no interesting stories from here is intriguing for me,’ I said. ‘Oh, in that case, this will definitely be interesting for you then. I actually thought you were Belgian. I usually meet Albanians in the South,’ he explained. Like all my interviews in other parts of Kosovo, he talked about the same fears, the same problems, the same obstacles related to unemployment, to education and corruption. After a 40-minute talk with him, I was brought to normality. This city and its people were sharing the same problems as the guys in the South I had talked to earlier – the same problems as even my own parents faced.

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I had planned to stay longer and maybe schedule other interviews for the coming days, but I decided I wanted to go back. Not only was I reassured that I wouldn’t be able to handle another research day there, but I felt I needed to leave as soon as possible. Given the importance of the bridge, I decided not to take the taxi on my way back. I wanted to walk and pass through the famous bridge over which Albanians in the South and the Serbs in the North had exchanged so many Molotov cocktails, stones, and hate speech for 16 years. Apart from a police car parked at the edge of the ‘Albanian side’ of the bridge, there was nobody else passing. The river underneath was grey and silent. In the middle of the span, there was a pile of grit, which seemed to have been placed to impede vehicles passing. To cross the bridge, I had to make my ‘climb’ over the pile of grit. While being at an elevated point, I noticed that a group of men in their late 20s were watching me from the North as I departed. I don’t know if these were the Bridge Watchers, but I sure felt watched leaving the city.

In the span of a minute’s walk across the bridge, I felt happy for having experienced that trip. At the same time, I understood that most probably this would be the last time I will ever step in the city. I certainly wouldn’t like a similar confrontation yet again. I felt disenchanted by the idea that I could claim ‘victory’ by confronting the objects and places of the past. In the meantime, I realised that the sandwich in the morning was the only thing I had eaten all day. But I was not feeling hungry. I only felt tired and thought I needed a good long sleep.



A five-minute walk after passing the bridge, I was at the same bar in the South. The owner was unloading a van with drinks when he greeted me: ‘So, you’re back! It’s crazy up there, isn’t it?’ ‘Yeah,’ I answered. But why was it crazy? On the way back to Pristina, I realised there was not going to be another interview, another session of fieldwork there. I had no willingness to go back, precisely because I understood that this was never going to be merely a research visit. And if I had to go there for myself or my ghosts, I could wait for a couple of years until I had taken the time to digest this day. Back in Belgium, apart from the interviews conducted in North Mitrovica, the rest of the emotional aspects, according to the department I worked in, did not fit in the officialdom of the PhD. As one of my professors put it: ‘Most of these notes are very impressionistic and diary-like evidence. Stick to the interviews.’ It has been four years since I finished my PhD, but I felt that a whole chunk of the soul of my research never saw the light of day.

A short while after my visit to North Mitrovica, I decided it was time for me to watch Roberto Benigni’s iconic movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which tells the story of a Jewish father filtering the war to his seven-year-old son until the very last moment when he is taken by the Nazi police to be executed. I had avoided the movie all these years thinking that I wouldn’t be able to cope with the emotional disturbances it could cause me. And although my husband had to stop the movie a couple of times so that I could reach for yet another glass of water or yet another napkin, I made it through. At the end of the movie, I felt exhausted, shattered, but also somehow at peace. As I was trying to normalise my breath and calm down, I felt like in my own story I had no one to blame, no one to forgive. Whatever happened, it really did not matter any longer. It did not carry any anger, any revenge nor did it carry any pride. It just was.

In the spring of 2016, I did go again to the north of Kosovo. Not just to North Mitrovica, but to Zvečan and the surrounding villages. I went to have a couple of beers at ‘Hajdučki Han’ – a local restaurant – with some Serbs from the North that I had befriended in time. I did not feel like proving or manifesting any sort of victory. There was no one and nothing to claim victory to or over. This did not mean that the place had normalized itself and it was just another ‘town’. It had still remained a ‘Serbian space’, where I would still be watching out for ghosts. Though I still saw ghosts, they didn’t make me drown, neither did I feel they were defeating me. I know they are there, and they will always be: my very own beloved ghosts. I guess I learned how to live with them.

It has been thirteen years of living abroad, of which eight have been in Belgium. I don’t feel at home in Belgium, or anywhere else for that matter, but I feel comfortable and at peace. Other than learning Dutch and making a handful of Flemish friends, I never got the type of familiarity with and affection for Belgium that I associate with my former relationship with Kosovo as home. But, I only know home as possession and violence, and maybe the reason why I feel good in Belgium is that I am comfortable enough by not being at home. As I write this story now, I have to stop time and again to open the window of my office, reach for another napkin and drink more water. And in all honesty, I don’t know whether I’m crying because writing about this is, and will always remain, difficult, or because a lot of these fears and feelings that have connected me to Kosovo seem very estranged now. Maybe I will never know.