

# I Don't Know What to Do with Myself: 'I' as a Tool, a Voice, and an Object in Writing

Written by Katarina Kušić

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KATARINA KUŠIĆ, APR 14 2020

**This is an excerpt from *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*.  
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Fieldwork sets us up for a myriad of writing failures: not 'doing justice' to our topic, not representing our interlocutors 'faithfully', obscuring ourselves in a method that is inevitably embodied, immobilising in text something that is always fluid. This chapter dwells in the many anxieties that underpin writing failures by interrogating the use of 'I' in writing up our fieldwork in International Relations. In an attempt to *show* the different uses of myself in writing, the chapter consists of three sections. The first section is cut from the first full draft of my Ph.D. thesis.[1] The second part is the same section rewritten for the version of the thesis submitted for examination. I leave the two unedited as illustrations – even if I would now write them quite differently. The third part of the chapter discusses the very different uses of the 'I' in the pieces. Specifically, I interrogate my reasons for deciding *against* a more narrative style of writing – a decision that contradicts my epistemological and political commitments.

### The Cuts: From the First Draft of the Ph.D. Thesis

Fieldwork journal, Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD), *School of Knowledge: Srebrenica, mapping genocide, and post-genocide society*. [2]

I could write an ethnographic story about today's event on education about Srebrenica. I could write about the fact the only 20 people who clicked 'attend' on Facebook, meaning those who showed up, are still reluctant to make themselves so public and vulnerable to harassment. I could write about the comments on the event being about the usual conspiracy theories about Soros's [3] money and the wasting of resources on talking about the past. I could talk about the fact that, even though I've been talking about how nationalism is totally passé these days, the event still had to have police presence in front of CZKD. I could write about my friend warning me to expect inappropriate comments in the end, because that 'always happens at events like this'. I could write about the uncomfortable feeling of not only disgust and anger – fuelled by a film detailing the timeline of the Srebrenica genocide, but also the boredom caused by the impression that we are always talking about the same things, and wondering if this film will really benefit any one in any way.

This would make an excellent ethnography about the Balkans – complete with genocide and the simmering hatreds. But none of this really made an impression on me – I sat there, mildly interested, watching people around me and wondering whether different generations present have different reasons for attending – some of these people must have attended the anti-war protests in the early 1990s in Belgrade, while others were born into the 'post-genocide society' we are discussing this evening. None of this really impressed me, until Dr. Svjetlana Nedimović from Sarajevo started speaking. She looked distant and bored while others were speaking, and she started in a style that I deemed a bit too emotional: saying that it's hard for her to come to Belgrade for the first time, and explaining that she has a difficult relationship with a city she has never visited before. She also explained that she is reluctant to use the label of a political activist, but that she does 'street politics' [*ulična politika*] these days.

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She started the actual paper with an anecdote that quickly transported us from genocide timelines to contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). She was protesting the agreement to build a dam in a national park in BiH with a group of activists – ‘how can someone who has a “miserable four-year mandate” [*mizeran četverogodšnji mandat*] think that he has the right to decide on a destruction of a national park?’ They were standing in front of the office where the agreement was signed, the signature marking their defeat. In the discussion on what to do as the politicians were exiting the office, some of the activists had the idea to do an ironic applause. Svjetlana did not approve – irony has no place in this matter, except admitting defeat. As the politicians were walking out, she took out a rotten tomato from her bag and threw it at one of the people. She missed, but heard screams nevertheless – it was not her or the guy she aimed at screaming, it was her fellow activists. The screams were because she resorted to violence, violence that is unjustified, impolite, and unproductive.

Her first instinct was to attribute this to the ‘post-genocidal’ state of her society – ‘we are so traumatised, that we consider a tomato a violent act. But this would be too easy, this would not take into account our contemporary experience. And our contemporary experience is one in which the political act is defined by the EU and other international agencies in Bosnia and which cannot stand direct action’. She went on to deliver a paper about how the BiH people are the way they are (with constrained ideas of political life that cannot handle a tomato) not only because of war, but also because of the social and political order that they built in the past 20 years under the direction of international agencies.

Ethnography as text is necessarily representation, rather than reality captured: sitting in CZKD, I was aware of my power to write culture. I knew that I could represent Serbian society through these observations, and I also decided not to. My own position here is ambiguous: as a consumer of academic texts, I know what boxes to tick to make my representation ‘a good ethnography of the Balkans’ – some pain, suffering, and war are easily employed to ‘draw in’ the reader. However, I am also from the region – growing up with these issues somewhat removes the spectacle, I feel *bored* and in turn I feel *guilty* for that.

## The Submission: Excerpt from the Submitted Thesis

This not only reduces ethnography to a ‘data-collection machine capable of accessing unmediated reality in all its authenticity and accuracy’ (Vrasti 2008, 281), but also resonates with other sources of experience. Namely, it is easily mixed with the idea that we similarly *know* because we are somehow *from* a specific region – a fact which is also supposed to give us some unique, privileged access. Without denying the importance of context, I want to argue here that the main contribution of an ethnographic approach is *not* its privileged access, but its possibility to reflect upon issues of that access – the idea that no matter if we are at the desk, or immersed in the field, we always *know from a specific location*. This is what Jon Harald Sande Lie defines as anthropological reflexivity – ‘the constant and reciprocal relationship between fieldworker and informants, underscoring that the fieldworker’s position in the field influences the data that she gains access to and acquires’ (Geertz 1973; cited in Lie 2013, 205).

Here, the above mentioned ‘crisis of representation’ becomes more than doing away with ‘the field’ as an adventurous voyage to the ‘other’ lands – it also instructs us to pay attention to ways in which we are not only biographically, but also historically and socially connected to the sites we study (Gordon 1997; cited in Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 38). Instead of making ourselves disappear, a task impossible even with the best intentions, we are invited to reflexively consider these connections, how they influence the researcher, the researched, and the research itself. In my case, these connections are even more prominent as I grew up in what is today Croatia, in a region that shares a border and war history with Serbia. I travel with a Croatian passport that has free access to the EU (unlike a Serbian one), and my Croatian accent and dialect display my origin in every conversation I have in Serbia. However, while these facts made me a foreigner in Serbia, my language familiarity, the ability to read Cyrillic, and cultural proximity, marked me as one ‘studying their home’ among colleagues in the UK – in the eyes of British scholars, I was doing ‘native ethnography.’[4]

The last site for situatedness is the text itself.[5] Neumann offers two ways of going about this: one is the reflexive wager which produces a text that is centred on how the researcher herself is changed during the research process. Dauphinée’s *Politics of Exile* (2015) is probably the most famous example. The second option is the analyticist’s way

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– in this option, we do not focus on ourselves to interrogate the structures that make us and the world, we do not rely on introspection. Instead, an analyticist 'focusses on coming to terms with themselves as an instrument of data production' (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015, 815). The difference is also described as one between a *methodological* situatedness that is dealt with analytically, and a *methodic* situatedness that is dealt with reflexively: 'Where a reflexivist researcher tends to handle the relation between the interlocutor and researcher by asking how interlocutors affect them, an analyticist researcher tends to ask how the researcher affects the interlocutors' (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015, 817).

Following this distinction, this thesis falls into the analytical camp – I think of 'method as a question of producing data by bringing certain value commitment with [us] into the field' (Basberg Neumann and Neumann 2015, 818–19). Though my sense of self influences the research, and the research process influences my sense of self, I do not make space for this in a thesis that is ultimately not concerned with *me*. However, I also do not aim to erase myself from the text: it was *me* who read theories, spoke to people, thought about questions, and analysed observations. I make this visible in the text not to limit its scope, but to practice the ethnographic stance that emphasises that all knowledge is produced from a specific *location* –to practice 'strong reflexivity' by putting subjects and objects of research on the same 'critical, causal plane' (Harding 1992, 458). In doing so, I do not shy away from making knowledge claims, but make them with a claim to *strong objectivity* (Harding 1992).[6]

## Discussion

The first draft of the thesis saw each chapter open with a short vignette like the one in the first section above. I wrote them because I wanted to make myself *visible* even in the chapters that talk about more technical and conceptual aspects of my thesis: statebuilding, intervention, the local turn, and governmentality. I wanted to show the importance of lived experience for my own thinking: the thesis itself argues that lived experience is crucial for rethinking IR concepts. I decided to cut them out after a conversation with my supervisor, we made a joint decision to 'play it safe' and 'keep the ethnography to the ethnographic chapters'. Despite cruelly discarding them, I liked my vignettes – I stored them in one of the many 'scrap' files I kept, this one titled 'stories'.

When comparing the vignettes with the finished (submitted) product, I was jolted by the difference. Instead of relying on lived experience to explain the conceptual choices and biographical connections that formed my research, I relied on citation. In the submitted excerpt, I use feminist critiques of objectivity to recognise that the tool for knowledge production is the researcher herself. All knowledge is produced from a specific location that has to be discussed – I as a *tool* has to be accounted for in order for it to be a *good* tool.

At the same time, I claim the thesis is ultimately not about me. I am not the *object* of research. I am not Dauphinée's (2013) troubled researcher in centre stage, but I am the *voice* that needs situating. And I do this 'situating' in the thesis: I explain the curious situation of having been born in the same country as my interlocutors, but having now a Croatian passport that crosses borders far more easily than a Serbian one. I highlight the strange feeling of 'going home' to do fieldwork in a place where I understand the language and laugh at the jokes but a place that is not 'my country.' I do not write 'they' or 'the author' when describing my thoughts or actions. But I also do not start my chapters with stories.

When I asked myself why I used citations rather than stories, I first explained it by wanting to protect myself from a particular vision of failure. With the viva looming over my writing at the time of those final edits, I began to imagine horrible scenarios: failure of methodological rigour, failure of 'legitimate' knowledge production, failure to conform to the requirements of a successful Ph.D. thesis. What if the examiners do not see the connection between my stories and my theory? What if they say it has nothing to do with intervention? Instead, I presented my arguments through other people's words: by citing anthropologists, ethnographers, and IR scholars working on issues of positionality.

The anxieties turned out to be unfounded: my examiners were satisfied by the final product and I could slowly start to return to my writing with curiosity instead of dread. Seeing my writing with new eyes, I started resenting my own explanation of the cuts: it was not just fear of examiners that made me edit my thesis so ruthlessly. Saying this would be unfair to my examiners (who were open to different forms of writing), and to a generation of scholars who fought to

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create spaces within IR where authorial positionality is not only permitted but welcomed as an important analytical tool. How then, to explain the difference in the texts?

## *A Threat to Scientific Legitimacy or a Lack of Comfort?*

There are several ways to make sense of my writing decisions. My pre-submission anxieties are recognisable because they refer to the all-too-familiar ideals of detached, impartial, and objective science. They are rooted in the rigid parameters of 'objectivity' that have been so well picked apart by feminist scholars (Harding 1992; Haraway 1988; Rose 1997). Writing ourselves into our texts necessarily challenges these powerful ideals and can indeed be a scary endeavour.

The academe, however, has come a long way in the last few decades. Although it is far from being radically transformed, there are spaces today for storytelling, autoethnography, and narrative, both outside of and within IR.[7] Moreover, I have read and been inspired by this literature, I see it as something to aspire to. No, I do not think the fear of the 'I' delegitimising my text can explain my decisions.

Why, then, does the first sentence of the submitted text reproduced above read like 'the soul of [my] writing [was] eviscerated, [my] passions sucked into a sanitised vortex that squeezes the life out of the things [I] write about' (Doty 2004, 380)? What keeps me attached to such faceless writing if it is not the desire to conform to academic requirements?

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss less explored reasons for choosing not to write ourselves in: it is not *always* or not *just* because we are afraid of failing to meet academic standards of detachment and objectivity. I am convinced of the urgency of changing the ways we deal with authorial presence within IR, and of the analytical and pedagogical potential of narrative writing. Precisely because I recognise this potential, this chapter discusses the difficult roads early career scholars have to navigate when deciding to use ourselves in writing.

## **Intimacy, Authority, and the Neoliberal Academy**

Even though I confidently state in the thesis that the 'research is not about me', I now see that I was attached to the vignette precisely because 'myself' looms in the background not only as a voice, but as an interesting *object*: one who comes home, one who is strangely bored by genocide, one who is surprised by Svjetlana's talk and wants you to follow the same lines of thinking, to ask the same questions, and to believe the answers provided. It is me as an *object* of interest, not just a tool or a voice, that is expected to lead you there.

The 'good' writing I strive for in these vignettes does two things. First, I work on developing a particular style that recuperates some of the 'sounds, rhythms, texture, and energy' (Doty 2004, 382) lost in academic texts. I want to guide the reader through my thinking without them tripping over long words, technical jargon, and new concepts. Second, I hope to provide a context of human experience: I create a backdrop in which I am meeting a friend for a night out in Belgrade, using social media, thinking about the people I see sitting around me. This experience is meant to 'recover human connection' (Doty 2010) and prop up my theorising that is to come – I want to show the reader that life happens outside statebuilding interventions.

In their discussion of narrative IR, Elizabeth Dauphinée and Naeem Inayatullah (2016, 2) admit they do not really know *how* these narratives do the things they do, but they know that they depend on *intimacy*. Intimacy is supposed to help in 'constructing and embodying an extensive architecture of understanding' (Inayatullah and Dauphinée 2016, 2). And intimacy is what I wanted to make visible in the cut out vignette: intimacy between me and my friends who took me to events and explained things, intimacy between me and the issues discussed that comes from my particular background, and, finally, the intimacy between me and the reader who is invited into this world where I can admit to being bored by genocide.

In making sense of my own writing decisions – execution of style, voice, and presence – I see that *intimacy* in the text scares me. But, I do not (just) fear intimacy *delegitimising* my text. With the pressure of the *viva voce* removed, I

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recognise I am also afraid of how attractive it might be – or, more precisely, how I might use this intimacy for obtaining very particular versions of success. Here, I have two particular versions of success in mind: 'I' as a successful commodity in neoliberal academia, and 'I' successfully occupying a position of an unquestionable authority.

In this call for intimacy that would rebuild human connections and give shape to abstract concepts, I am invited to present my friends, my family, and, ultimately, my home, as a thing to be consumed by academia. My theorising comes from a particular biography and learning how this biography shapes my reading and writing is an unfolding process – an exciting route of discovery and re-evaluation. But to really put myself in the text would require much more than changing the rhythm and texture of my writing. It would require explaining why someone with a Croatian passport would research Serbia. I would have to dwell on how Yugoslavia can mean something to people who have no real memories of it. I would need to discuss the complicated ideas of home, migration, and politics – ideas that require me to bring in not just myself, but those I am closest to. I would have to tell the story of myself and everyone who makes me.

Ideally, presenting this biography as a part (or a start) of our theorising has a 'purpose' – it helps fight against the 'single story', or helps IR to grasp complexity, fracture, and relationality (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018). Someone might learn something about political transformations and the fate of people's hopes and dreams within them. The cynic in me, however, disagrees – in the best-case scenario, we shape students in our classrooms. And, if our writing is just right, we *might* shape 'the discipline'.

In the context of early career precarity, this intimacy is also necessarily strategic. It becomes a part of publication plans and CVs – I might be rewarded with interest, citations, or even jobs. It is true that there is still a long way to go to turn the cracks in 'fortress academia' into liveable spaces where different types of writing are not considered a liability (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018, 3). And there are no promises that the publications and jobs would really follow an attempt at narrative writing. But as a student of politics, I am painfully aware of the commodifying impulse that underlines these attempts, regardless of their outcomes. Whether my stories remain unread and forgotten, or become reviewed and cited, they have been turned into something that is evaluated by the metrics and standards of neoliberal academia which thrives on exclusion. I have turned my stories – and everyone who lives in them – into something to be consumed. Is it not treason to give our 'desires and wounds' (Inayatullah 2011, 6) to a ruthless system?

More than just citations and jobs, I would also be claiming a wholly different legitimacy: one that valorises personal narrative as a new authority. Despite my good intentions and the 'innocence in opening [myself]' (Doty 2004, 387), narratives are still powerful and seductive ways of ordering the world in a particular way (Wibben 2011, 2).

This move of 'ordering' according to knowledge accessible only to the narrator has been widely discussed in reflections on storytelling and narrative scholarship (Dauphinée 2016; Disch 2003; Ferguson 1991). As Megan Daigle (2016, 39) put it, the question is: 'By opening the door to the "I", do we lay out the welcome mat for any "authentic" experience – without further discussion?' Contrary to those who see narrative writing as closing off critique, the answer is no – narratives, whether ours or our interlocutors', do not imply a 'resurrection of a king unassailable standpoint epistemology' (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018, 2, 4). On the contrary, narrative should be coming to terms with partiality and fracture, and a move to open, rather than close, oneself to critique (Dauphinée 2016, 51, 52). Its political potential lies precisely in *disruption* of the 'imaginary wholeness' of linear narratives (Edkins 2013, 288).

The democratising potential of narrative scholarship is thus said not to come from texts and authors less prone to 'authoritarian or reifying tendencies', but because they open up a space for and depend on 'the reader's active intervention' (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018, 11). The 'readers' intervention', however, does not happen in a vacuum. The readers of my thesis have a well-defined image of the Balkans, they have detailed academic maps of characters and processes in which my interlocutors fit. I hoped to write *against* these representations and maps. And in fighting against these representations, positions of 'unassailable authority' become attractive.

Scholarship on the Balkans is overcrowded with representations, abstractions, and surprisingly resilient stereotypes.

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I admit to being tempted by a scenario in which my interpretation, even if its point is ambiguity, would *have to be* accepted, would over-write thousands of books on ethnic hatreds, would prevent anyone from unproblematically using the term 'civil society', and would banish forever the term 'transition' from graduate seminars. The question here is not about the *nature* of narrative writing, but whether *I* will be strong enough to resist ending tiring conversations with a simple and accessible claim to authenticity.

*What do you think, then, would be a more insulting failure – that these stories that use love as a strategy invoke contracts and fame, or that they remain unread and ignored?*

## End note

Authorial presence is not an easy solution, but a gateway into complex negotiations. These negotiations need to address not only the 'self-indulgence' of the author and the 'orientalist exoticism' of an audience that might be forcing 'foreigners to write about themselves' (Inayatullah 2011, 7–8, 2–3). They also need to address the attractiveness and political use of narrative as authority, and its market value in the neoliberal academy. Politics of voice do not end with the inclusion of ourselves, on the contrary![8]

I do not advocate more 'fictive distancing' (Inayatullah 2011, 5) or a return to 'fortress writing' (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018, 3). It would be counter-productive to offer any 'solution' at all. But in presenting a story of my own negotiation of these politics, I call for a more careful consideration of 'I' as an object, voice, and tool – not only what it can bring to our scholarship (as many have done), but how it might entwine with new and existing hierarchies. In presenting our souls to create a different kind of IR, we can easily forget that our 'souls' might be the last thing that early career researchers can protect from the market of academia. Consuming them uncritically might mean creating another unquestionable source of authority. Thus, instead of offering a 'how to', perhaps this lack of a conclusion is my way of becoming comfortable with some of the defining features of narrative writing: existing in/with ambiguity and abandoning the responsibility for closure (Inayatullah 2013). Instead of referencing works of anthropology and IR or offering a defence, like I do in the thesis, I hope we talk about the different failures that emerge from our writing *and* the contexts in which we write.

*\* The author would like to thank the workshop discussants and participants for their thoughts on the initial idea for this chapter. This chapter also benefitted from Jakub Záhora's reading and comments. All remaining mistakes are mine.*

## Notes

[1] Submitted to the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University

[2] CZKD is a cultural non-profit institution famous for its opposition to the regime of Slobodan Milošević and its nationalist policies in the 1990s, and working on highly politicised issues of transitional justice. Belgrade, 3 March 2016.

[3] Here, I refer to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the philanthropic donations of George Soros. These theories have been popular in Serbia and the region more generally for more than a decade but are now quite common in the US and the UK as well.

[4] The idea of 'native anthropology' was one of the products of the 'crisis of representation'. By 'repatriating' anthropology and studying and denaturalising 'home', instead of the Other, anthropology was meant to avoid practices that exoticise its subjects.

[5] For a great overview of how anthropologists have handled 'writing themselves in', see (Van Maanen 2011).

[6] An important point to note here is that I am in no way arguing for a hierarchy between 'native' and otherwise knowledge – the idea that everyone needs to only study their 'home' is not only impossible, but would also remove

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the majority of excellent works in general, and on the Balkans in particular. But what I am arguing for here is that whatever our *location* might be, we should ask ourselves why we ask the questions that we do, and how the tensions that inevitably arise from messy entanglements between us and our objects of study influence our research – not to lead us to paralysis, but to probe ever more.

[7] This literature is by now too large to review in a short space. Good introductions and overviews are provided by Carolina Moulin (2016), and Elizabeth Dauphinée and Paulo Ravecca (2018).

[8] Himadeep Muppidi makes a similar point: <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/03/23/reflections-on-narrative-voice/>.

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