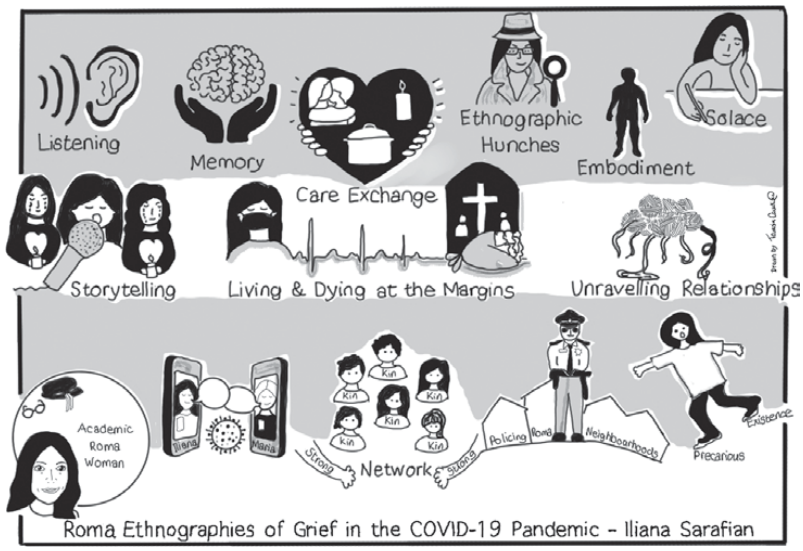
6

Roma Ethnographies of Grief in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Iliana Sarafian

Themes discussed in this chapter

- research participants' ways of expressing loss and grief under existing and new forms of disadvantage and inequality created by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- interrelatedness of researcher's and research participant's experiences in unanticipated moments;
- use of ethnography and autoethnography including the potential of ethnographic listening.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought multiple forms of grief to the surface of life: the loss of plans, the loss of connection with others, the loss of freedom to do the things we used to do and, tragically, the loss of livelihoods and loved ones, all required dealing with. Yet the pandemic also normalized this loss, it silenced it, and it made it somewhat acceptable and expected. Grief became part of the everyday. So, in the following pages, I explore the silenced lived experience behind the expressions of grief happening amid the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of the ethnographic materials presented in this chapter is the ineffable nature of pain and suffering in Roma lives brought about by the compounding effects of historical inequalities merged with the emergencies of the pandemic. In an unprecedented way, the crisis exposed the existing precariousness of the Roma everyday and highlighted the disparities existing in their lives, households, relationships, losses, hopes and potentialities. The crisis also revealed the fragility and the strength of Roma kin-based, mutual, communal and social structures to counteract the inadequacy, belatedness and confusion of state responses (Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020; Sarafian, 2022b; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023).

Just as the pandemic took place unexpectedly it also affected abruptly the research methods used to capture the complexity of lived experiences. This has been a time when researchers, arguably more so than previously, have recognized the importance of exploring alternative methods. Thus, this chapter is as much about the context in which research takes place as it is about research methods in unanticipated times such as the COVID-19

pandemic. Evident in the structure of the chapter is my intent to privilege empiricism over theory by first affording space to ethnographic storytelling of lived experience and then locating the narratives as contributing to theory and method, rather than vice versa. The methodology I employ is an amalgamation of ethnography and evocative autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016), with my point of departure being grief as experienced by my friend Maria, whom I first met in 2012 during fieldwork in the Bulgarian town of Radost.[1] I endeavour to illustrate the predicaments of the COVID-19 crisis by conveying Maria's and my own experiences of grief while relating these to a collective Roma dealing with the end of life and mourning under unforeseen circumstances.

I must note that I use autoethnography to suggest a way of facilitating new epistemologies in times of crisis, and a dialogic and critical interrogation of method and knowledge production (Denzin et al, 2008; Chawla and Atay, 2018; Smith, 2021). The politics of my identity as a Roma woman and a researcher coalesce and complicate each other through autoethnography 'as a mode of writing, and a way of life' (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, 45). I do not employ autoethnography for solipsistic interests but to give way to agency where it is due, to give back and to reciprocate for the stories shared with me (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012). I aim to recognize and to 'bear witness' (Hill collins, 2000) to the many struggles faced by Roma in the pandemic as an accelerated continuum of existing crises. I also provide narrations of Roma agency, mutual support and survival. I set out to uncover the emotionality of grief as an intensified state of human vulnerability and to explore grief as an action, practice and lived process (Cholbi, 2022). In between these considerations, I reflect on an unresolved tension between worldly and academic deliberations – grief as a philosophical term and grief as a quotidian expression.

Ethnography in the way of life

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, governments introduced various measures to contain the spread of the virus. Across Europe and Bulgaria, public health measures involved the policing of entire Roma neighbourhoods while restricting movement and impacting on lifelines and livelihoods (Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020). A tragedy unfolded, one of lives lived under political, socioeconomic and emotional distress. While measures adopted by public authorities focused on dealing with the excess of contagion containment, social distancing and pandemic mortality, the emotional, collective and ritual aspects of dealing with death and mourning were swept away by the prioritization of biopolitical safety and protection concerns. This act of neglecting the cultural, religious, communal and ritual aspects of mourning created conditions for trauma, loss and lack of closure (Bear et al, 2020; Simpson et al, 2021; Hernández, 2023; Silva Júnior, 2023).

Maria, my fieldwork friend, and I had kept in touch in the years following my doctoral research (2012–14), and as the pandemic happened, I learned of her economic insecurity and struggles to care for her children and family. Her partner had left her when she was pregnant with her second child. It was impossible to find enough money for food, clothes and shoes, and sending her children to school had become impossible. This is how she came to the attention of the social services. When I met her for the first time, back in 2012, she was fighting for her two children to not be taken into state care. In time, she managed to find a job at a local sewing factory, her mother helped with providing accommodation and, after a brief stay in foster care, Maria's children were reunited with her. In the following years, Maria's mother suffered from poor health and, after her death, Maria's younger brother Jasen stepped in to provide shelter and support.

Maria had never imagined that Christmas 2020 would be the last she would spend with Jasen. He contracted COVID-19 and passed away aged 43, at the end of December 2020, leaving behind a wife and three young children. When Jasen died, Maria lost a brother, a friend, a supporter and another key figure in her life and future. Jasen was a truck driver and the main breadwinner. His premature death left an enormous physical and emotional hole in the lives of his family members; it destabilized their livelihoods and derailed their plans. Now Maria, a single mother with two children who shared a household with Jasen and his wife and children, had become the family head. As the older sister, she needed to step into the role of guardian, provider and matriarch and attempt to rebuild the structure of the future, that of her children and her brother's children. Jasen's death ruptured the fabric of kinship, intimately woven to provide essential informal support and care for one another. Thus, Maria and her sister-in-law agreed to share the responsibility of looking after all their children, five in total. This kinship strategy was governed by the necessity to survive physically and emotionally both as individuals and as mothers to children who carry the potentiality of life and its practicality.

Maria's and her sister-in-law's salaries from the local sewing factory were not enough to support their family. A couple of months after Jasen's funeral and during another COVID-19 wave across Bulgaria, in early March 2021, Maria therefore travelled to England to start a job on a fruit-picking farm. She was caught in the impossible situation, again, of leaving her children behind with relatives to find a job abroad. One morning, Maria called me from a city in the Midlands. Like others in the urgency of the situation, she needed to provide for her now larger family financially and she found a physically demanding job outside Bulgaria far away from them. "I have become the father and the mother of everyone. My brother helped me while he was alive, so now I must do this for his children and his wife," she explained to me. Gradually, her voice changed, and she began crying: "I need to speak to someone. You are in England like me. I know you can understand because both of us are away

from our families in Bulgaria. I cannot bear this pain inside me … I tried to be strong, but I cannot be strong anymore." Maria's life situation was exacerbated by the sheer accumulation of previous histories of pain, suffering, poverty and struggles to survive. As it happened, the pandemic also buried Maria's grief under the unpredicted material circumstances of life and the priority to care for her family. When I asked her about the risk of contracting COVID-19 she replied: "I either die of COVID or my children die of hunger. I had no choice, I had to travel." She needed to appear strong, take risks, encourage her family and provide support while suppressing her expression of sorrow. Maria thought that giving space to grieving was threatening to bring about more economic, social and relational loss, but her sorrow kept resurfacing and had become overwhelming. This was when "this horrible feeling of not being able to breathe came back. I need to talk, cry, and shout … it is so heavy," Maria told me on the phone. The enormous burden of unexpressed grief entangled with the pressure of past and present responsibilities had taken a toll on her. Maria's silenced grief needed tackling and, days after our call, she went back to Bulgaria to be reunited with her family.

Maria's call reminded me of another call I received in January 2021, less than a month after Jasen's death. My aunt in Bulgaria called me early one morning to say: "He is gone …", followed by a highly unsettling pause. "What do you mean he is gone?" I asked. "If you can … come home. The funeral will be tomorrow," she said through tears. The range of the intensely overwhelming emotions I felt at that moment escapes description. I hung up the phone to take a breath. My disbelief gradually turned into multiple thoughts that crossed worlds, spaces, households and futures. Resembling Maria's case, in a close-knit Roma family such as mine, the death of a loved one impacts on immediate kin and wider social networks. My uncle Kiril, my mother's younger brother, a man who had always supported me and my family, was taken away from his children, wife and family. My uncle's death came as a caesura in connectedness, time and the presence of a loved person; what is more, my kin network and its future changed course, its disruption cut deeply into the meshwork of relationality, meaning-making, practicality and support. Like Jasen, he was the family breadwinner and the employer of several people in the neighbourhood. The families in my neighbourhood, as in Maria's family, live in close proximity and they depend on each other for their social and economic survival. Therefore, death comes as an exceedingly traumatic unravelling of multitudes of interdependent relationships and intimate social networks, not only for immediate family members but for others too.

I called my aunt minutes later, trying to sound as composed as I could, and then I understood more. My uncle had complained of chest pain. He was taken to the hospital where he initially tested positive for COVID-19, only to have a second, negative test. His heart attack was diagnosed after a delay, and five days later he passed away. When I met my uncle (then aged

54) in the summer of 2020, I never imagined that this would be the last time I would see him alive. After the call from my aunt, I desperately searched for flights to Sofia the same day, but the number of flights during the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly reduced and there were no available seats. I managed to find a flight to Sofia early in the morning the next day, but I arrived in my home town only minutes before the funeral procession in the late afternoon. When I arrived a large crowd of people were already gathered outside my uncle's house. There was no embracing, no human contact, only the terrifying sounds of human pain and loss of life, hiding behind protective surgical facemasks. I could not make it to my uncle's 'sitting up' (*престояване/prestoyavane*) – the practice of not leaving the body of the deceased alone in their home and throughout the night until the burial next day. Again, like Maria's family, my family lives in a community with no access to funeral homes. The preparation of the body for burial, the purchase of a casket, the digging of the grave, the administration of death records, the consoling of the bereaved and a multitude of other tasks are undertaken by family and community members themselves. All of this happens within 24 to 48 hours after death, according to the Bulgarian legal requirements for dealing with deceased bodies and in cases where measures cannot be taken to store the body of the deceased for longer.

The strength of the kinship response to death lies in the very networks of kinship, mutuality, consolation, emotional support, practicality and respect for the individual. People, close kin or not, are there to console and to show humanity using expressions such as: "I am sorry for your loss", "Life goes on", "He is in a better place now". Dealing with grief is sought not through comforting words only, but through deeds, acts of kindness and solidarity. Bringing food. Cleaning. Visiting the home of the deceased. Yet, due to COVID-19 restrictions, Jasen's funeral, which happened in December 2020, was not the usual public affair. His body had to be isolated to prevent viral spread. The Radost Roma learned of his death on Facebook, which provided an outpouring of condolences from the online community. There was no 'sitting up' throughout the night. His securely closed coffin arrived on the day of the funeral directly at the Roma cemetery in Radost. Maria and her family were not allowed to visit him while in the hospital and they could not see his body at the funeral. The macro biopolitics of the state (Campbell and Sitze, 2013) intervened in the minuscule world of the household, including in its rituals and ways of dealing with grief (Silverman et al, 2021).

Nevertheless, such sanitizing containment was not new to the people of Maria's Roma neighbourhood, which was located on the outskirts of the town. Long before the onset of the pandemic, neighbourhoods such as hers had already been portrayed as spaces of contamination. During my fieldwork Radost was perceived by the locals as an unregulated, dirty and dangerous site, warranting enforced spatial boundedness and segregation from other

neighbourhoods in the town. Amid the pandemic, Roma settlements such as the one in Radost were once more perceived as threatening sites (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021), associated with 'racist morbidities' (Murji and Picker, 2021) and eliciting the need to be contained and controlled (Sarafian, 2022a and 2022b; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023). The pandemic enabled the continuation of residual, already established marginalization trends (Simpson et al, 2021), and it also disrupted the kinship structures, the meaning-making rituals and the daily life of Roma neighbourhoods.

Disrupted life and death

The pandemic affected the Roma everyday in unparalleled ways. Kinship, social, professional, educational, household structures and arrays of relationships were impinged on. In many countries, the COVID-19 social distancing regulations did not allow people's participation in the dying process of their relatives and friends (Simpson et al, 2021; Silva Júnior, 2023) . This physical distancing, enforced to curb the spread of the virus, added another layer of impossibility to caring for loved ones, to paying respect to the deceased and their families and to grieving. Ritual, in all its forms, was impossible and forcefully interfered with by the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maria felt that she could not grieve "properly, as is done" in her community, for several reasons. She was not allowed to see her brother during his last moments in the Radost hospital. "It feels as if he has gone abroad with his truck for work. I never saw, touched, or cried over his body. I could not tell him how much he meant to me." His funeral was void of the familiar ritual, the 'rites of passage', to help the acceptance of his finality and of a moral and symbolic communal order (Van Gennep, 2013). Moreover, for Maria the death of her brother did not cause only emotional pain: it caused fissures in practical livelihood. Her grief was intensified because the socioeconomic circumstances prevailed over the expression of emotionality and mourning.

Maria tells me:

> 'Grief is hard to explain. It is like sea waves. They come and go. One minute I am angry, another time I laugh and then I just want to cry again. It hurts in my soul and in my body … I have no choice but to get on with life, to provide for my children. Life for me is only worth living for my children now. This is the life of many Roma.'

For Maria's community, early mortality was already a familiar occurrence before the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistically high and early mortality is an undeniable and tragic trait of Roma lives in several European countries, as Roma have lower life expectancy and worse health outcomes as compared to their non-Roma counterparts (Gloria and Deirdre, 2016; Orton et al, 2019).

Experiencing mortality was and continues to be commonplace. In the case of higher mortality, ritual becomes a coping mechanism (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Rosaldo, 2014), a form of communal prescribing, a support framework for survival, to deal with the unbearable pain of pre-existing traumatic memories and the experiences of the present – of being people living and dying at the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). In Maria's neighbourhood, the way to deal with death, loss and grief happened through the rituals people performed, consisting of consolation, exchange of resources and mutuality that they provided for each other in time of mourning. These various forms of mutual support stepped in when the state had withdrawn and implemented social bordering (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023).

The crisis revealed both the strength and fragility of these kinship relationships, communal and social organizations to counteract the effects of the pandemic. Inside Maria's neighbourhood, community members kept in touch with Maria and her sister-in-law for 40 days after Jasen's death, when the mourning ritual of visiting the home of the deceased finished. The locals found ingenious ways to check in on them, to bring food and consolation. Mourning is a relational process, a mechanism to maintain and create meaning-making in gatherings and rituals (Klass et al, 2014). This is in accordance with the unspoken practical rule which Maria and I have known for life, and she tells me:

> 'Our people are together when it comes to death and funerals. It is our way. There is hardly any person from the neighbourhood that would miss the funeral. It is like the law. No matter whether you have had arguments or you did not like the deceased, you must show respect. It is in death that we show who we really are. It is easy to go to a wedding but to go to a funeral is a matter of respect, it is human, it is Roma.'

These forms of 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2011) and solidarity are there for a reason. They represent the communal and kin way to help and to show compassion to the family of the deceased; they are there to reciprocate a universal trait of what it is to be human and to empathize; and they carry the communal aspect of preservation of identity, including through silence (Fraser, 1992; Williams, 2003; Stewart, 2004). This communal respect is about belonging to the same group, the group that has been historically ostracized and discriminated against. It is the material and cultural survival of this very group and its rituals, identity and kinship postulates that people live by and perform in order to affirm belonging. The goal is the practical association with the bereaved so that no one will have to meet and deal with mortality alone. This mutuality then also carries the communal expectation of the exchange of kindness, of care, of propelling the culture of the kin and the group forward. Such a kinship survival process is about 'relatives

living each other's lives and dying each other's deaths' (Sahlins, 2011, 1). Bereavement then becomes communal and dealing with it and the historicity it carries is a public matter. The pandemic restrictions interrupted these communal ways of necessitating survival, they disrupted life and death.

The unexpected death of a significant other brings uneasiness, enormous pain and a range of other emotions (Rosaldo, 2014). Maria was grieving Jasen's death; she was grieving for not being able to say goodbye to him while also being overwhelmed by the socioeconomic impact of his death on her family. She found herself in an unbearable position. As I relay, or even 'translate' (Behar, 2003), Maria's experience, I tap into my perspectives of grief and why I chose to write about her story. Maria's experience resonates with my own dealings with grief. Uncle's death hit me hard. I had lost my grandmother the year before, but I was able to say goodbye to her in person before she passed away. Being with my grandmother physically in her last moments helped my mourning journey. My uncle's unexpected death brought much heartache to my family. I wanted to help Maria, my family and myself, and in April 2021 I approached a community centre in London offering bereavement counselling. Through the materials they sent me I discovered that speaking and writing down the emotions in coping with the death of a loved one could help. So, Maria and I speak often as we learn to express the emotional worlds we inhabit. When I was approached by the editors of this volume to write a piece exploring the possibilities and pragmatics of doing Romani studies during the COVID-19 pandemic I kept thinking of Maria's life as well as the two disrupted lives, the two Roma tales of untimely death and the multiple life destinies impacted upon by the passing of Jasen and Kiril. "Grief never fully goes away", Maria teaches me, as she prepares to travel back to England for another fruit-picking season. I am prepared to listen to her calls, hoping that I will finally be able to meet her again in person as the COVID-19 pandemic dissipates.

Positionality and method in unforeseen circumstances

Grief is difficult to understand, it is 'emotionally complex and seemingly idiosyncratic … it confronts our understandings and resistance to think of the people we love as impermanent' (Cholbi, 2022, 2). How was I to make sense of these encounters and could I call what I was dealing with ethnography (Behar, 1996)? I gradually came to value the potential of the ethnographic ear (not the eye) in 'participatory listening' to capture the nuances and developments of Maria's life story and to examine my own experiences (Forsey, 2010). Facing death, loss and absence is when one's entanglements with others become most deeply felt (Derrida, 1995). As researchers we can be drawn into spaces of human life that we do not 'know how to go about getting out except through writing, which draws others there as well, making them party to

the act of witnessing' (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, xii). Ethnographically, it can take a while for investigators to comprehend the lives of their interlocutors in the field, to seemingly sort out the messiness of life and explain it using theories and methods. But what more can academic theories possibly disclose to our informants about the facts of grief, poverty, hunger, socioeconomic dependence of related kin and the struggle to survive (Denzin et al, 2008)? Maria and my family could not relate to theory, but they did understand the sharing of common experiences and what in research is called positionality. When methodology, theoretical considerations and positionalities converge, I find my personal experience of grief, which I tap into so as to be able to make sense of Maria's story, better or at least partially, at a time when I was not able to meet her in person.

Here I employ ethnography as a method with a twist, a method that can adjust itself, to tell stories that have shaped me more than I have shaped them. This method may be what is called 'accidental ethnography', an attitude and a process of pushing back the boundaries of the established forms of research, of planned initiatives, to engage with the complexities of human life as they appear (Fujii, 2015; Poulos, 2018). In social science this approach has also been called 'accidental wisdom' (Calhoun, 2004), whereby serendipity as a scientific method not only tests the research hypothesis but also brings new ideas and research questions to the fore (Pieke, 2000). Undoubtedly, there are potentials as well as complications when we engage with the alhoun, C. 2004. 'Accidental wisdom: Robert Merton's serendipitous findings', Book Forum, Summer. emotional aspects of the human condition, and these can be research junctures of uncertainty, indeterminacy and serendipity entangled with the familiar and established social and cultural grounding. These moments can follow on from fieldwork, similar to what Sarah Pink calls 'ethnographic hunches', when we think we know something but a serendipitous moment during our fieldwork or in our research relationships, not part of the predetermined analysis, emerges from 'checking things out with each other' (Pink, 2021, 35). In my PhD research, I spent months doing fieldwork, including collecting stories of rituals involving death and grieving (Sarafian, 2023, 35–41), but it was Maria's grief story that I 'stumbled into' when I realized that grief is one of the enduring themes that followed on from fieldwork, transcending the 'seeing' component of physical presence and enabling both 'listening' to what I thought I knew and learning to be open to new ways of research analysis.

Crucially, tackling my researcher's position(s) is also a relevant methodological consideration (Harding, 2004). Anthropology teaches us to empathize with our informants. We live with them, we step into their worlds, we create relationships and then we leave, attempting to articulate what we saw, heard, felt and embodied in the spaces and time-bound moments we inhabited. Importantly, however, often the relationships we create during fieldwork are not severed with the end of our research projects, there may be a series of

encounters to follow, sometimes through social media where the field can be reconfigured to encompass a digital space (Pink et al, 2015). Our 'fields' can follow us; beyond physical and digital presence, we embody their joys, struggles and continuum of learning aspects in our own lives (Okely, 2007). Along the way, Maria contacted me and I then found myself examining my experience together with hers. Rather than trying to exclusively be a neutral listener, I learned from her. Maria helped me to come to new understandings, to an 'ethnographic hunch' (Pink, 2021), a shared, collaborated understanding through conversations about what grief and loss entailed.

Maria and I have become more open to discussing grief and loss in our calls. "I am learning more and more to express what I feel and now I teach my children to do the same," she tells me. I, on the other hand, am learning to be a better listener as an ethnographer. My encounters with Maria teach me that when human beings seek advice, what is said is often less important than the process of voicing and listening to one's pain, emotion and, in this case, expression of grief. Unquestionably, there are themes that are challenging to listen to and write about; these can be vexing to discuss and comprehend. Grief is one of those themes for me as it is for others (Scheper-Hughes, 1993; Rosaldo, 2014). Yet ethnography, with all its strengths and depths, can bring uneasy themes to the surface and form them into 'possible' knowledge (Pandian, 2019). As anthropologists we can be surrounded by serendipitous moments, grounded in relevant and contextualizing knowledge prerequisites of anthropological fieldwork. Following long-term fieldwork, my epistemological inference or 'ethnographic hunch', prompted by Maria's shared expression of grief, is that there are unresolved, sometimes unexpected, quasi-accidental moments of worldly and academic considerations – grief as a philosophical and analytical term and a mundane expression, grief as a process and action, grief as individual and collective expression (Cholbi, 2022).

Having learned about 'the reflexive turn' in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), I have come to appreciate that I cannot write about grief, as well as other themes involving human experience, through 'clean and sanitized', non-compromised theoretical and methodological explanations only (Tomaselli et al, 2008). The search for value-free science and for theory is limiting in that it cannot help me to grasp the serendipity, the 'inbetweenness of things' (Basu, 2017), the liminality, the transience of life, the unsettled rites of passage, the meeting with human mortality, the uncoupling of vital relationships, the subjectiveness and the centrality of grief to human existence. Methodologically, I have engaged with a subject which is difficult to convey and deal with, but it is also amenable to reflection and analysis through evocative storytelling (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). These are the stories we tell as 'I-witness', where we need to be the persuading 'I's first (Geertz, 1988), when we 'concentrate on meanings that can take readers into the heart of lived experience' (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, 34). Moreover,

ethnography is a practice of education, altering our own perceptions of the world, beyond the generating of 'data' and learning about the societies we study (Ingold, 2014).

By reflecting on my own experience of grief and sharing this with Maria I acknowledge my relationality with her. Maria taught me to write her story by placing me into conversation with her and my own analytical and emotional preconceptions. Ethnography is a dialogical process and researchers are intrinsically implicated by the research they do (Okely and Callaway, 1992). There are links between our positionality and the narratives of our informants. Arguably these can be 'partial connections' (Strathern, 2004), 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) and 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld, 2005). These are positions of seeing, listening and being which require a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973); positions concerned not with the authoritative voice of the researcher but with their autobiography and the way their life experiences influence the research they choose to undertake.

Sharing how I have come to know, and my position, is not only an ethical research consideration but also a way to delve deeper into the researcher's identity and its markers – be they gender, race, class or other. Ethical research codes and guidelines often focus on the rights of individual interlocutors, on securing the anonymity, informed consent and confidentiality of our informants, but they are less about co-production, reciprocity and the ways our studies impact on the lives of those whom we study outside the realms of our research (Ryder, 2021). In pre-pandemic times, conducting long-term fieldwork and participant observation enabled me to live with and be a part of the daily lives of my interlocutors. This participant observation and 'doing ethnography' became an embodied knowledge (Okely and Callaway, 1992; Halstead et al, 2008). Such life experiences, sensory experiences, emotions and embodiments influence our personal views of the world and the ethnographic story and the themes we present (Pink, 2015). Some themes can follow us beyond fieldwork and writing up. These themes inhabited and distilled by the stories of the people in our research projects can find us, we do not necessarily look for them, but these are important to be reflected on.

Finally, autoethnography is also a way to respond to a call to produce knowledge by making visible, centring conceptions, understanding, knowing, being and doing research together with our interlocutors (Denzin et al, 2008; Rappaport, 2008). This mutuality of knowledge production is not about a self-indulgent politics of who speaks, writes and represents, be they Roma or non-Roma, but it is a cogent and intellectually defensible way to acknowledge eagerness to learn and convey meaning-making in everyday life. I employ autoethnography to reciprocate the stories shared with me, to acknowledge and to make sense of the many struggles faced by the silenced Roma narratives enveloped in the pandemic avalanche of

emergencies, security and state control. The emotional entanglements of positionality involved in the writing of autoethnographic texts enhance our awareness of inequalities in research, and so it is my hope that they can enable us to ask better questions and utilize research methods with genuine candour and care for the people and communities we research (compare Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have reflected on life during unanticipated moments and research on uneasy themes. Death, closure and ritual during the pandemic happened at odds with previously established social norms, causing disruption in dealing with loss (Simpson et al, 2021). These snippets of disrupted life can be found in the potent narratives of our informants. Sometimes, as I have shown here, we as researchers come across fragments of information almost accidentally or serendipitously because fieldwork and people's stories, sorrows, joys, disappointments, satisfactions and losses can follow us. Maria's story of life, grief and survival has been one of these post-fieldwork constants for me and our dialogues prompted an 'ethnographic hunch', consisting of the realization of the need to write about the experiences of grief.

I also drew on my long-term fieldwork and positionality – Ruth Behar calls this 'at once the inscription of a self and description of an object' – to blur the boundaries between 'self and other' (Behar, 1996, 20). Methodologically, I have presented a dialogue between ethnography and autoethnography. This dialogue speaks to theory, it listens and responds, and it connects lifeworlds, materialities and emotions, including those that need to find a voice and their own story. This endeavour is also about studying the conditions of being human, precisely what anthropology does, through ethnography as a way of thinking and always in the making, in dialogue with the people we study.

Finally, while I have presented a specific ethnographic and methodological case, I think I have also illuminated *something*, not everything (Geertz, 1973, 4), that is at stake for us as researchers who make attempts at the interpretation of culture while being confronted by our own pain intersecting with the distress and despair of others. Ultimately, the explanation of this *something* is related to how often we find ourselves at a loss to do anything about *it* while finding solace in the act of writing ethnographically. It is my hope that we as researchers in Romani studies can challenge monolithic categories, not assuming *something* but provoking, and asking more questions, not necessarily answering them while utilizing methodologies privileging, recognizing, constructing and validating the agency, that of the individual and collective Roma.

Lessons and recommendations

- Ethnography is a powerful way of bringing out the spaces 'in-between', the aspects of social life which we cannot quite put into words and the themes which we are afraid of or not willing to engage with.
- Ethnography is not only about seeing and being in the field in person. Ethnography is about listening, embodiment and memory. Ethnography is also about a continuation and building up of established and new relationships.
- Autoethnography can be empowering; it is not only a method for the researcher to share their own story and positionality, but it can be the means to reciprocate, share, respect informants and critically engage with their own understandings of the phenomena under study.

Note

[1] Radost is the anonymized name of one of the localities of my doctoral fieldwork.

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