9 Fooled into fieldwork

Epistemic detours of an accidental anthropologist

Francisco Martínez

Epistemic de-centring

Certain stories of failure can stalk us wherever we go, reverberating and giving form to our professional identity as (accidental) anthropologists. Field accidents situate us in a condition of negative capability, making it difficult to know how to go on while facing our limits of comprehension. They also decentre us from our original plan and from our object of study, generating dynamics of disorder and epistemic detours.

In this chapter, I engage with a set of field accidents and failures and unresolved questions in my research experience in Georgia. Normative approaches would simply dismiss the learning and argue that these encounters lacked systematic engagement and ethnographicness. Yet, following the proposal of this volume to step into peripheral paths to knowledge, I show that fieldwork is not necessarily guided by an understanding of what significance or relevance are, nor does it have to follow well-planned techniques that involve systematic methods for assembling data.

Fieldwork is destabilising rather than instrumental, thus it can hardly be determinate and result-oriented. Here, it is proposed as an epistemological position, characterised by openness to be surprised and to fail, and by the acknowledgement that there are different ways of 'knowing reality'. The awareness of our limited knowledge makes possible an excess of ideas and of relations, and lead us to unfamiliar territories and to questions that were not previously mapped. It is in this sense that entails an oscillating movement through multiple spatial and temporal frames – producing questions to be answered out of the field, and material to be analysed with tools and concepts not always available in the present.

This kind of learning is beautifully shown by Anton Chekhov in a letter written to his friend Suvorin in Sakhalin Island: 'I saw everything, so the problem now is not what I saw, but how I saw it' (1999: 171). Building up on Chekhov's ideas, we could say that mine was an ethnography merely half-seen and of things situated on the outskirts of my comprehension, certainly not understood to the end. The referred stories of failure appeared to be beside the point, neither originally casted as ethnographic, nor planned within a conventional methodological frame. How I gained access to local knowledge and what I learned with these events was not seriously ethnographic, but profoundly anthropological (Ingold 2007),[1] thus complicating the relationship between research experiences and knowledge production.

Besides reconsidering the accidental nature of anthropology as a discipline, some other questions answered in this chapter are: How could we incorporate the accidental wisdom generated in the field into anthropological analyses? Which are the similarities and contrasts between the fieldwork of journalists and anthropologists? And what commitments do anthropologists have in the field, and what kind of bonds do we make because of those commitments?

Half-consistency

In February 2010, I visited Abkhazia as a special correspondent of the *El Mundo* newspaper to attend the ceremony in which Sergei Bagapsh re-assumed the presidency of the separatist republic in the Caucasus. I had been working for the newspaper for eight months, and was based in Istanbul. As I speak Russian, and the correspondent in Moscow, Daniel Utrilla, had enough territory to cope with, it seemed like a good idea to extend the domains of my office and also to visit a region I had heard of and read about so much during my time living in Russia.[2]

I entered Georgia through the Turkish border (Sarpi) and stayed in Batumi for a couple of days with two colleagues. We then visited Poti, a port on the Black Sea that has gained strategic importance due to the new energy infrastructures related to the oil and gas transported there from the Caspian Sea. Finally, we took a *marshrutka* to the Enguri River. In my fieldnotes, I wrote that people talked a lot about Mikheil Saakashvili, then the president of Georgia, yet they often referred to him in ambivalent ways: handsome and intelligent, but too polemical and cocky. I also noticed a great number of potholes on the roads and cows freely crossing them, which generated some considerably disruptive driving.[3]

Once in Sukhumi, the capital of the breakaway region of Abkhazia, we stayed in a cheap hotel, about 20 minutes walking distance from the centre. Still affected by multiple wars, there was not much on offer for accommodation back then in Sukhumi: a pricey hotel (Ritsa) for diplomats, businessmen and international delegations, a students' dorm, and then the Vesna, where we stayed, which, despite undergoing a recent renovation, had no Internet. In my time there, I held, for instance, an interview with the newly appointed prime minister of Abkhazia. The headline of the interview, as published by the newspaper, was: 'Independent is the one who knows how to assume independence and is able to defend it.' Among the notes compiled from the interview, I found:

> Sergey Shamba recriminates to his secretary for not having offered us tea, as we were waiting for him to finish with the delegation of Russian astronauts visiting Sukhumi. Shamba receives us in his former office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, which shows furniture of Soviet design in the typical Soviet autumn colours (a particular coat of green and brown). He began the interview with a contemplative gaze, yet at the end of it, he stared at me while answering questions about Kosovo and Chechnya.
>
> (Figure 9.1)

Figure 9.1 Sergey Shamba. Francisco Martínez

But what makes these observations and records of conversations simply journalist notes, and not fieldnotes themselves? Is it so that notes not taken to end up in an ethnography should not be considered as fieldnotes, or are we instead discussing issues of personal reflexivity, ways of approaching informants, appreciation of the social and cultural locatedness of knowledge, and research design and protocols? My answer would be that fieldnotes do not simply allow an instrumental thickening of the analysis; while they are also distinct because of being open to the possibility of several valuations by a range of people and at different times, thereby creating an unpredicted surplus of ideas, meanings and interpretations to be mined years later – richer than what the researcher was aware at the time of data collection (Strathern 2004: 5; also Marcus and Okely 2007).

For instance, after re-reading another of my notes for preparing a journalist report, I discovered something that I did not note back then, namely the half-consistency of many of the things I was perceiving then, starting with the very independence of Abkhazia – a fact that some might believe, others might not, and some others in turn might only half-believe (see Navaro-Yashin 2012). See this note, for example (Figure 9.2):

> We go from Gali to Ochemchira, a city that the Georgian army did not expect to lose but was indeed lost, like what also happened to Gali and to the Kodori valley. Here in Ochemchira, the remains of a destroyed amusement park appear as an open wound from the war, left visible still as in the case of the burnt parliament in Sukhumi. It is hard to say if the houses are half-built or half-destroyed.

Gia, our hired driver, is half Abkhaz half Georgian. He lost his whole family during the siege to Tqvarcheli: 'We ate once a week and we went to fight every morning. After a while, you take it as normal'. He regrets: 'So much politics and, as always, it is normal people who end up suffering. After the war everything was very hard, both for the Abkhazians and for the Mingrelians. People are already fed up with politics, they just want to live in peace'.

Abkhazia's landscape combines mountains and valleys with access to the sea and fertile fields. The south, however, is ghostly broken, crowded with burned and abandoned houses. We enter one of them, which is currently being rebuilt with the help of the Danish Refugee Council. Segrevan Kobalia is the father of the family and, while they finish rebuilding the house, he lives with his wife in a 5 m^2 cabin. The wife prefers not to say her name, and explains: 'We found the house burned, but I can't accuse anyone. The war burned it' … Another similar cabin is located on the right, in which her daughters with her sons-in-law and grandchildren live altogether. 'Where am I going to go? I have my house and my family here; And what am I going to do in Georgia? I have no property, I could not survive there', laments Kobalia. The family receives a monthly pension of less than 15 euros from Tbilisi, and yet, even if we insist on asking about politics, they refuse to talk more on the topic (they cannot talk of what has abandoned them).

Figure 9.2 Ochemchira. Francisco Martínez

The insights provided here might be still on the way of becoming ethnographic material, even if they were not written by someone identified as an anthropologist but as a journalist. These insights show, however, a different reflexivity and indirectness than that of a journalist. Different professions take different things for granted and also engage with contradictions differently, showing distinct ways of seeing and knowing the world (Shore and Trnka 2013). For instance, anthropologists demonstrate a high degree of responsibility towards the informants and also commitment to (and accountability by) everyone involved in the research. However, journalists practice a different approach to sources in the name of the 'public's right to know', the assumed role of the watchdog of society and an alleged commitment to 'the truth' (Awad 2006). Also, journalists' doings show different ways of making sense, of listening and of drawing facts together, as well as more wariness of the dangers of subjectivity than anthropologists (Bird 2010). Further, compared to anthropologists, journalists have a different writing time because of their urgent deadlines and the need for quick delivery – as if it were a commodity (Hannerz 2004). Such divergence in the use of time in journalism and anthropology writing eventually generates different effects of distance or coevality, affecting matters of representation (Fabian 1983).

As an answer to the acceleration of news, an abundance of information and a sense of redundancy in contemporary media, a rather immersive slow form of journalism has emerged in the last decade – slow not in terms of how the story is told, but of how it is *handmade*. In Tbilisi, I met with Paul Salopek, a National Geographic fellow (and winner of two Pulitzer prizes) who was walking around the world, retracing the footsteps of our ancestors, in a journey on foot across four continents (over 34,000 kilometres). I had the chance to spend several evenings with Paul at Nodar's Newsroom café, while I also travelled with him for a few days, learning that his observations (after having worked as a foreign correspondent in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America) could be way more anthropological than mine, despite my academic training in this discipline.[4]

Robbed into the field

Nowadays, there are hundreds of options for accommodation in town; however, ten years ago it was still a time of cyber-cafés and Sukhumi was a place where young people had a sense of 'temporal marginality' (Frederiksen 2015). Indeed, in town there were just two public places with an Internet connection: the central, fancy hotel previously referred to and a cyber-café. Immersed in finishing my report for the newspaper, I failed to notice a group of youngsters slip under the desk and steal the bag containing my laptop, photo-camera, passport and wallet. Once I noticed it (too late, as they had already vanished with my stuff), I called Maxim Gundja (then acting minister of foreign affairs and the man I had interviewed the day before), who invited me to his office. For a week, I was using his desk phone to call official authorities in Moscow, Istanbul and Tbilisi to let me cross the border and receive a German safe-conduct pass to get out of Georgia. Half-jokingly, Gundja invited me to stay longer in Abkhazia, get a local wife and work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (they needed Spanish-speaking diplomats).

The public broadcaster of Abkhazia, Apsua TV, reported the robbery and asked the locals to 'at least' give back my documents to the police (something they actually did, albeit a month later). One of the explanations put forward by Apsua TV was that Georgian provocateurs had attacked a Spanish journalist in an attempt to damage their international image. I had to stay there for a week, exploring different options to flee from Abkhazia despite not having any documents (while also hoping that the robbers would appear again, after having capitalised on my laptop, wallet and photo-camera). One of my travelling companions, Marc Morte, decided to change his travel plans and stayed with me, covering my costs until the situation was resolved. The condition of negative capability made us surrender to a state of receptiveness, able to tolerate anxiety, and to be in uncertainty – without the need to understand what is going on (Bion 1970).

We were in a standby situation, and yet many things continued to happen to us; we travelled around the country, and once back to Sukhumi we were often checking trash bins in the parks and on central streets in the hope of finding some of my documents. I met twice with the head police officer. The first time, and after my detailed description of the scene, he showed photos of over a hundred young men who could be potentially suspects of the robbery. I could not recognise any of them. Feeling like I was part of a crime film, I seemed to be embodying a nightmare. The second time I met the head police officer was a day before my departure. Then, I questioned the officer's will to help effectively. He became very upset and said that the country was still affected by the recent wars, that I should have known where I was coming to, and that they had to deal with other issues, not just my robbery. It made me feel immature and unprepared for what I was doing.

Now, ten years later, I re-read some of the emails I exchanged back then with some colleagues. For instance, after informing the editor in chief of my newspaper about my robbery, he replied with two brief emails (12 February 2010): 'You have 3200 characters for the report plus 900 characters for a support box. Your "Soviet" phones don't work'; adding half an hour later: 'Can we help you with something? Can you send what I have asked you?' I also exchanged some emails with Utrilla (the correspondent of my newspaper in Moscow), saying to him: 'I will learn something from this' (15 February 2010). Originally, the email seemed to say that I would be more attentive while travelling to certain zones; yet, looking back, what I meant is that this event was impelling me to make certain decisions, such as quitting the (stressful and precarious) profession of journalism. Indeed, a year later I began a PhD in Anthropology, and the robbery turned out to be unexpectedly crucial to my academic career.[5]

On Tuesday 16 February, I finally crossed the Enguri River, which functions as a *de facto* border between the two states, an invisible frontier that does not appear in maps but greatly affects the life of two neighbouring cities, Gali and Zugdidi. Once I was in the *de facto*-controlled Georgian territory and had presented all the required documents, the official guards made a phone call and asked us to wait there for 15 minutes. The guards gave no explanations but invited my companion and I to get into the cabin and have a cup of tea with them. They even ordered Misha, the driver of our *marshrutka* (minibus), not to leave without us. Then, without introducing themselves, a TV crew arrived and

began to ask questions while recording us on their TV cameras. After I refused to participate in the suspicious show, they vigorously took on Marc, who said that my laptop and documents were stolen in a café in Sukhumi, 'a normal situation that could have happened anywhere'.

Marc went to Armenia, while I took Misha's *marshrutka* to Tbilisi, where the Spanish honorary consul (Mikheil Akhvlediani) met me, fed me and cheered me up with stories about the royal Bagrationi dynasty. When I took a taxi and said to the driver that I was Spanish, he replied that he had just seen on TV how 'the Russians had kidnapped a Spanish journalist in Abkhazia' to avoid the journalist showing how bad the living conditions were on the other side of the Enguri River. Once I arrived at a hostel, I checked my mail; Marc had written, saying 'We have to repeat this experience' (17 February 2010). Also, an officer from the delegation of *Transparency International* in Tbilisi wrote to invite me to visit their office and speak about what had really occurred since there were two contradictory versions of the same incident. Only then did I realise that the taxi driver was talking about me, since Imedi TV and the Georgian Public Broadcaster had reported that two Spanish journalists had been arrested and had their belongings confiscated by the Russian army. The report showed my companion talking, albeit with a Georgian voiceover that did not accurately translate his words (in fact, saying almost the opposite).[6]

That was also when I met Nikoloz Gambashidze ('Nik') for the first time. I remember very well the tension around that moment. As I had no wallet, I asked my brother to buy my airfare from Georgia. Yet, once at the airport, I was told that the ticket was not valid. The German safe-conduct pass would expire at midnight, in less than an hour, so in desperation I called Joan Puig (a Catalan living in Tbilisi with whom I had had a couple of drinks that evening) to come and pay my airfare in situ. Joan arrived with Nik a few minutes before midnight…[7] Five years later, Nik became my 'Lazarus' in Georgia. In my nine months of fieldwork, we went on more than twenty excursions, all over the country. Nik studied history and worked as a guitar teacher and in a communications office, yet in the early 2000s he had to reinvent himself as a taxi driver in order to be able to pay for the higher education of his children. Nik talked naturally about these life meanderings, and when I asked about the extent to which a person can become other than what he is, Nik replied that he was affected by circumstances that lie beyond individual control (Martínez and Agu 2016).

Rumour has it that when Nik was younger, he liked to smoke weed. My friendship with him makes me reconsider, though, what is to be shared (and concealed) about Nik in this chapter, and, overall, on the need to be opaque in certain instances while writing an ethnography by practicing a 'measured economy of disclosure' (McLean and Leibing 2007: 13). What we can disclose about Nik, however, is his passion for 1970s music, particularly Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and The Beatles. During our trips, Nik recalled the difficulties involved in getting hold of these bands' LPs back in the Soviet era. Often, he also remembered the glorious European days of Dinamo Tbilisi, when the football team played in the UEFA tournaments and defeated clubs such as Liverpool, West Ham and Feyenoord. Nowadays, Nik is a fan of *el Barça*, and after the great games of this Catalan club and of Messi, he repeats 'Big victory!' (in English).

He claims not to understand the lyrics of the songs of his favourite bands, but 'the pleasure I get from listening to them cannot be wrong'.

Nik took Joan as one of his own, almost like a kin member, despite not speaking a common language and talking through body gestures and signs, and repeated expressions such as 'Big victory!' I wonder what was *gained* in such inventive dialogues based on incomplete understanding and distorted communication, instead of what was lost in them (Crapanzano 2014). For a decade they met almost every day, when Nik drove Joan to his office, while they also met for dinners, for excursions and to watch football together. Most of Nik's clients are Europeans, the majority of whom are associated with the EU mission. Nik has a calm demeanour and talks like a true cosmopolite, aware of what is going on in the world, knowing about different notions of taste and value, and showing a sophisticated understanding of things. However, he has left his country on only two occasions (a few days each to Turkey and Russia). As Nik confessed, he believes that if he is away from Tbilisi for more than a week he might fall ill. He has friends who emigrated abroad in the terrible, chaotic 1990s, and Nik has been repeatedly invited to visit them. Indeed, he likes to imagine visiting them, but he is too busy making ends meet, saving money, taking care… trying to construct livable lives for himself and his family. It could also be that his imagining replaces the actual possibility of travelling abroad; since, as in the case of The Beatles' lyrics, imagination takes him further.

Personally, I think that Nik does not want to go abroad because he is afraid that what he might encounter could be worse than what he had imagined all these years. Also, in Tbilisi Nik is a master, an urban *capo*, knowing the city like the palm of his hand. And I am not talking about merely cartographic knowledge, but, more importantly, about being street-smart, knowing tricks, gestures, side-paths and all that does not appear on the maps, nor adheres to any script. As shown by urban ethnographer AbdouMaliq Simone in his research in Jakarta, Hyderabad and Freetown, peripheral wisdom can be understood as a particular oscillation between opacity and transparency, openness and closure, and refusal and engagement, challenging the systemic logics and grammars aimed at defining what that knowledge is, and opening up the interstices, as 'a space for multiple compensations' and improvised living (Simone 2019: 116) (Figure 9.3).

In 2010, Nik had an old Mercedes, but more recently he was driving a hybrid Japanese car with right-hand steering and the radio in the Japanese alphabet. He is used to a world in which things are not the way they are supposed to be, being familiar with ambivalence and lack of meaning. One of the few solid certainties of Nik's life is the Georgian Orthodox church. After a painful, personal episode that ended up well, albeit one which I am not allowed to share, Nik devoted himself entirely to this faith and he now respects all Orthodox fasting periods and demonstrates a profound religiosity. Still, he shows himself as culturally open, crafty and with a charming sense of non-travelled cosmopolitanism. However, debates on LGBT rights in the country make him very upset. Indeed, talking about this topic has been the only time I saw Nik agitated, saying that 'After all, Georgia is Georgia, and Europe is Europe'.

The last time we met, Nik took me to his summer house with his son. On the way back, each of us had to choose our favourite Pink Floyd song. 'Now we can finally call each other friends', he said.

Figure 9.3 Nik. Francisco Martínez

But is it so that in the periphery, one is impelled to make new friends, and when in the centre only allies? Geopolitics might unfriend neighbours, turning them into enemies; but the opposite case might also happen: friendship can be fortified in unfriendly contexts. Then, people with no blood ties can be ready to help and support one another, generating an extended notion of fraternity despite, or rather because of, sharing difficulties, struggles, or a sense of peripherality (Frederiksen 2013). As part of human survival, friendships evolve not at the expense of pain but are instead tied together with self-defence and the work of getting on from day to day, sharing each other's resources in hard times (Terrell 2015). These are stories of mutual support, of hospitality, loyalty and solidarity, dissolving boundaries and dichotomies. Yet in peripheries, friendships can also be experienced in a rather ambivalent way, having less to do with emotions than with personal favours and doubt. In these situations, friendship can be performed not only as a role but also as a status, being eventually associated with notions of male honour, as well as becoming an instrument of social control (Brković 2017; Khalvashi 2013; Zakharova 2015).

Friendship is a universal sentiment, but it does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it occurs in specific locations and historical times. In other words, friendship takes place and unfolds in time, based on experiences such as sharing hopes, problems, plans, thoughts, joy and material things (Beer 2001). I often consider the extent to which liminal experiences, such as geopolitical border crossing, strife and need of care, whereby equality is embodied and a sense of consciousness and suspension of knowledge are generated (Turner 1973), might make the footprint of friendship stronger, even if not free of utilitarian instrumentality.

Otherwise, friendships developed in the field might also appear as 'accidental communities' (Rosen 2018), bonded together through elements of chance, contingent struggles and ephemeral incidents. When conducting fieldwork, we are persons in-between, holding double responsibilities, both to our professional community of practice and to our community of informants (Jaarsma and Rohatynskyj 2000). The anthropologist is a subject that knows with and through others; yet our ways of being in-between dovetail with our methodology, in both the analytical sense,[8] and the empirical dimension.[9] Also, specific ways of being in the field as well as specific relations between places, times and people eventually affect what can be known; that is, the quality of being knowable (Holbraad et al. 2018).

Missed chances

How far can the consequences of our errors and accidents reach in the field? In my time in Abkhazia, I managed to publish several reports and interviews in *El Mundo*. Some of the proposals that were not accepted by the newspaper were pitched to other journals or re-written and published in other languages.[10] However, due to the accidental circumstances and my need to leave Georgia quickly, I missed the chance to interview the former president of Georgia and former minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze, who died four years later. I also lost most of the photos and videos I made in the field, as well as most of the notes written about a group of young emigrées engaged in recovering Abkhazian folk music. I remember their mixed feelings about the expectations of returning to the country of their ancestors, and the difficulties of integrating into the new Abkhazian society, suffering from material shortage and having to learn Russian as their lingua franca (Figure 9.4).[11]

I managed to find some notes, for instance those of my conversation with Cemre Jade, a professor at Sukhumi State University, who came from Turkey. She compared this return to that of the Jews to Israel, yet acknowledged that 'some have returned back to Turkey after a few months here. Those who come with many expectations do not adapt – the conditions are difficult. There is no hot water, there is no heating. However, more and more arrive every day. I have been here three years now, and to me, it compensates for the difficulties.' Before arriving, Cemre was manifestly anti-Russian; after three years here, however, she had moderated her position: 'The diaspora has as much right to complain about the ongoing Russification as those who live here to try to improve their living standards through Russian investments. But Moscow should still apologise for the genocide of the nineteenth century.' The two main waves of emigration occurred around 1860, when Tsarist Russia conquered the Caucasus, and in the 1930s under Stalin. 'That was centuries ago, the times have changed and now the Russians help us', argued Nart Gechba, who had recently arrived from Jordan. Iban Bakik also came from Jordan, and thinks that 'it is not the same to see our country in photos than to live here. I advise people to come and see the actual situation and then decide whether to stay or not' (Figures 9.5 and 9.6).

In the field, I was not aware of the relevance and research potential of the people I was meeting. For instance, when I interviewed Viacheslav Chirikba, I focused on

Figure 9.4 A group of young emigrées. Francisco Martínez

the rare Basque–Abkhazian dictionary he had written (arguing that these two languages had the same roots). However, I ignored that Chirikba was about to become the new minister of foreign affairs, after Maxim. I had the same feeling of having missed a chance a few years later in Tbilisi when I failed to interview a man whose job was to guard ping-pong tables in a public park next to the stadium of Dinamo Tbilisi, and charge us (the players) for it. As I learnt while playing with him, that was his only income. I went there to play table tennis for quite a while. Yet immersed in gaming (mostly with my friend Alex), I did not arrange a proper interview with this man, whose job is to capitalise on something that, in principle, belongs to everyone. Indeed, one day, when it started to rain, the man simply left the park and Alex and I could play ping-pong for free for several hours. Of course, in the pauses between matches, we did talk, but I did not care to take notes as I could not prevent the potential relevance for my research of this encounter. The problem, however, is that once I returned to talk to him properly, months later, he had vanished – along with the ping-pong tables. A year later, and then two years later, I came back and he was not there anymore.

Rather than simply experiential, being in the field is equal to a journey that goes from knowing to not-knowing, gathering new questions in your pocket and challenging the preestablished significance and meanings of things; it serves to make you aware of your own epistemic limits, of what you ignore and of the fragility of the things that we construct. In some cases, fieldwork impels us to

Figure 9.5 Chirikba. Francisco Martínez

opt for longer paths instead of taking the expected straight ones, which lead 'to endless questions about the value of ethnographic analysis of any kind' (Holbraad et al. 2018: 4).

As noted in the introduction to this volume, the peripheral also shows a particular openness to the unknown and accidental, and a complex oscillation between engagement and withdrawal. We can thus think the peripheral as an de-centred standing, instead of a counterpoint. It is situated at the fringe of dominant paradigms, inhabited as a zone of questions, empirically multiple, emergent, mysterious, conflicted, vexed, ambiguous and conditional.[12] Nonetheless, the periphery, as *terra ignota*, is not always a beyond, but it can also be the in-between – found in the interstices, in the grey zones of interacting, showing a complex, oscillating relation between the abstract and the concrete, between the rupture and the continuity, often manifested 'as a collapse of distinctions' (Frederiksen and Knudsen 2015: 13), not always knowing what is the beginning and the end.

Accidented anthropologist

This chapter echoes an accidental anthropology, built upon a confessional tone and sense of failure. It reflects on the intrinsically uncertain character of fieldwork, often risky and messy, resisting plans and making unclear where the field ends and begins. Indeed, these stories carry both instances of success and failure, exploring the peripheral as an epistemic fringe, characterised by discontinuity,

Figure 9.6 Me and the ping-pong guard playing. Alex Bieth

the suspension of knowledge and a need of reinvention – three of the basic features of any liminal condition (Turner 1973).

In *The Accidental Anthropologist* (2006), Michael Jackson narrates how his involvement in academia has not been a clear route, but more of an accidental one determined by contingent factors and decisions and threshold experiences. After acknowledging that he does not really understand his own life trajectory, Jackson adds that for reasons he cannot fully fathom, he was always coming back

to anthropology – finding in this discipline 'a mission and a refuge' (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 58). One of the key points that Jackson seems to make is that his personal openness to the accidental and the peripheral conditioned his trajectory into the discipline, which took place through unexpected incidents and dislocations. We can also argue that rather than learning anthropology, one *ends up* an anthropologist. For that adventurous deviation, one does not have to avoid failures in the field, but only accidents from which it is impossible to recover.

Accidents and failures are taken to involve a mistake and to have meaning, which is not always the case. This is noted, for instance, by Lee Ann Fujii (2015), who argues that accidents are not merely an intrinsic part of fieldwork but are also constitutive of data.[13] After presenting five stories from her field research on local violence in Rwanda, Bosnia and the US, Fujii proposes 'accidental ethnography' as a mode of attention to the unplanned moments that take place outside our research plans, as a methodology of gathering valuable 'non-data'. Frank Pieke (1995) also discussed how the haphazard conditions under which fieldwork is conducted might turn out to be crucial for our interpretative insights, turning unexpected events into opportunities. In his case, the protests of the Chinese People's Movement in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, in May 1989 made obsolete his carefully designed research plan. Then, after changing his initial plan and switching all his attention to the protests, he discovered the unexpected risks of this decision in being asked to become a human shield and putting his Chinese academic counterparts in a vulnerable situation.

Several publications show an increasing interest in how accidents are not necessarily a failure but simply a piece of empirical material. Based on his fieldwork in Taiwan, François Bouchetoux (2014) analysed methodological failures that generate nausea and feelings of shame and guilt. In his view, reflexivity is the strategic device through which anthropologists cope with the awkwardness, boredom and miscommunications of fieldwork. There are more inspiring examples of how to incorporate the accidental into our research. For instance, Dariusz Jemielniak and Monika Kostera (2010) have gathered nine stories from organisational ethnographers to speak about different gaffes and slips that have occurred during their fieldwork. Interestingly, these tales had been excluded from their final texts, instead taking success stories as more relevant for the chosen topics. However, as the informants acknowledge, these errors had important consequences of for the construction of the ethnographer's identity and of research narratives. Another example reflecting on the research plans that do not go too far or never began is the volume *The Lost Ethnographies* (2019), edited by James Smith and Sara Delamont. This project shows how ethnographies that didn't work still shed light on how ethnography works. In the field, as they argue, nothing is ever wasted, and we might *gain* to learn things despite situations going awry or plans falling apart.

In this chapter, I try to interpret similar situations by reflecting on what kind of learning they entailed for me, as a researcher. Accidental episodes that were not central to research appeared, however, as highly relevant components of anthropological knowledge-making. Incidents, on hold situations and inattentiveness to the ethnographic relevance of the learning can be thus an important part of any

construction process in anthropology.[14] The novelty brought by peripheral methodologies might be, therefore, the researcher's openness to embrace the unknown and hazardous, as well as to incorporate accidental, uncontrolled experiences to our ethnographies.

Conclusion: Remaining on the way to knowledge

In a continuous dialogue that goes back and forth to past events, this chapter discussed how we become anthropologists in relation to certain places, informants and events. It developed as a series of episodes that combine empirical and analytical reflections on research accidents in which it was unclear what could come out from the experience and even how to proceed in the field. I accounted for a series of accidental experiences that opened up unexpected professional reconsiderations and analytical possibilities about how anthropologists conduct their professional works and lives. By putting accidents and failures at the centre of analysis, I have tried to understand how research experiences mature with us, providing a methodological engagement with my epistemic troubles, as well as an analysis of the peripheral and the accidental in the field. As Jackson (2006) foregrounded, not-knowing can be cultivated as a way of being on the way to knowledge and accidents practiced as a form of learning. It could be, however, that we remain on hold, or incidentally deviated from the straight institutional line, certainly not progressing as planned, and yet intensively in the field.

Despite rarely being acknowledged in ethnographies, moments of perceived failure and negative capability show, however, relevance to understanding the production of anthropological knowledge. The insights included here are not yet ethnographic, as the research was not originally conceived as ethnographic.[15] They work, nonetheless, to contextualise the productive potential of accidents and failures in the field and in learning, as well as what they reveal and teach despite implying stepping out from the expected ways of knowing. Here, failures are taken as speaking of the insecurities, detours and self-doubts that accompany the research process, and also as a way of reflecting on episodes that shape our professional careers at-cross-purposes.

All these are relevant epistemological and disciplinary concerns that address the subjective dynamics of data collection in a way that allows analytical questions to emerge from field accidents. We could conclude by speculating upon the concept of a *de facto* fieldwork, in contrast to a *de jure* one – to distinguish between those practices that are disciplinarily recognised as belonging to the method, yet fail to acknowledge how fieldwork exists in reality; and those field experiences that were not originally designed as ethnographic, yet contribute to generating relevant anthropological knowledge (in the confines of what is recognised as data and of fieldwork itself).

Ultimately, what the chapter shows is the elasticity of what we understand as the field – we, anthropologists, often talk about the field, but it is not entirely clear what we mean by that, partly, because we always end up creating it. In my case, I ended up falling into an anthropological field accidentally, by remaining on hold, and without being aware of the content and contour of my research. With the years,

this field has been expanding (as I go along with new life and professional experiences), growing in density, and, in some cases, becoming messier and vague.

Notes

1 Anthropological insights are elaborated through fieldwork, yet not always based on systematic, instrumental techniques. As Tim Ingold insists (2007), anthropology is not simply ethnography, and ethnography is not merely an anthropological technique. In his view, these two activities have different objectives and also produce different types of narratives. Yet Ingold's concern (and complaint) does not merely concern the differences between the two, but, more importantly, about the contraction of anthropology into ethnography. He has also criticised the tendency to attribute 'ethnographicness' to all our encounters in the field, undermining the ontological commitment of anthropology as a discipline, which is characterised, in his view, by a 'long-term and open-ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context' (Ingold 2014: 384).
2 The Caucasus (as a location) and Europe (as an ideal) are still the main others of the Russian identity.
3 Nine years later, I wrote an essay accounting for the different types of holes in Georgia and reflecting on the kind of effects that they generate – enabling and defying human agency simultaneously, keeping people on hold and perpetuating a particular order, as devices for connecting and disconnecting (Martínez 2019c).
4 Once we departed, Paul kindly wrote an essay for an exhibition I co-curated; here an excerpt of his text: 'The Republic of Georgia was a primitivist painting... The country people were crookedly built, too: swollen-handed and weathered. The women wore gumboots and strata of faded sweaters … a handmade society… In Georgia I gripped door handles made of baling wire. I warmed myself at wood-fired stoves hand-snipped from sheet metal. At one roadside spring, someone had poked a well-whittled stick to a dented tin cup: a custom-made dipper of such exquisite balance and proportion that it added pleasure to the act of drinking… Azerbaijan has been shaped by a single resource for more than a century: oil. The Azeri countryside was tidier. Villages were more grid-like. (One of the first things to vanish in affluent post-industrialized landscapes is the curve.) … The houses were professionally engineered and squared, and finished with blown stucco. Doorknobs were machined, mass-produced. The doors closed flushly within precise, factory-made frames. People dressed in newer and better-fitting clothes. It was nearly impossible to find dirt roads to walk on: ribbons of pavement unspooled over the least hamlet capillary in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan had been reshaped by machines for other machines—steamrollers working for cars' (Salopek 2016: 159–160).
5 There is something that always precedes fieldwork, as well as also a *during* and an *after* temporality in anthropological research too (see Chua 2015).
6 See the article then written by Transparency International: http://transparency.ge/en/node/568
7 Writing this passage made me feel like a fictional character, as if I were a sort of Harry Houdini (an early anthropologist himself), driven to prove (and showcase) my escaping capacities to sceptics.
8 Investigating relations through relations (see Strathern 2020); focusing upon the discrepancy between the de facto diversity of practices and the ideal, normative formats (see Miller 2007).
9 A transformative, transcendental experience is constituted through interactions and recognition (Pina Cabral 2017)
10 In English, Italian and Russian, besides Spanish, being published in the *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Mediterráneo Sur, and Russia Beyond the Headlines* An example of this is my report about the IDP's in the Gali region: https://www.rbth.com/articles/2011/04/14/we_have_to_say_we_are_abkhazians_so_we_do_12732.html

11 In Turkey, there are around two million Circassians (Northern Caucasians), of which over 500 000 are Abkhaz. The diaspora is also present in Jordan, Syria and Israel, and the de facto government of Sukhumi has been trying to attract them back (not just Abkhazians, but also Cherkeshes, Kabardinos, Shapshugs).
12 Elsewhere, I have presented myself as an expert in peripheries, discussing different notions of disciplinary and personal peripherality. As I have written, the experience of peripherality does not imply a previous condition of centrality. Also, the use of peripherality rather depends on the researcher's background, interest and aptitudes, 'To be at the margins is a circumstantial condition that requires particular muscles, such as openness to risks and collaborations with unexpected epistemic partners, and also the ability to resist or adapt to rapid changes and ruptures… getting to know the tricks that help to mobilise resources and overcome discontinuities' (Martínez 2019a: 184).
13 Relevant for 'what they suggest about the larger political and social world in which they (and the researcher) are embedded' (Fujii 2015: 525).
14 Moreover, we should consider failure not merely as an endpoint but also as a new beginning, a liminal point of assessment, interrupting the expected flow of things (Miyazaki and Riles 2005; Appadurai 2016; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016: Martínez 2019b).
15 The material provided is not the result of a well-planned research, but rather the outcome of happenstance observations in which I was not in control of things, nor knowing what to know. Even so, these insights provide a surplus of anthropological ideas. Nonetheless, even if the analysis of these insights might contribute to discussions about borders, friendship and politics at the margins of a globalised world, this study does not try to prove anything in particular; rather, it fathoms the possibility of turning stories into data by accounting for several dead-ends and new beginnings.

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