

‘Being There’ and the Frustrations of living on the other side of the Globe: Reflecting on observations of exhumations in Spain

This paper aims to shed light on my experiences in the field and the issues surrounding the need to ‘be there’ in the action as part of the ethnographic method. Ethnography seeks to document close up social interactions producing ‘thick description’ to generate insights into the social world. Often during ethnographic fieldwork at excavations and exhumations conversations and activities take place both inside and outside the immediate vicinity of the event. The experience of the context of fieldwork highlights the importance of the researcher ‘being there’ to engage the wider audience and participants to these events. Living in Australia meant it was very difficult to respond to the rhythms of the exhumation process which proved to be logistically and bureaucratically complex and unpredictable. Exhumations in Spain are not merely closed scientific investigations, they are social, political and legal events open to the public. This is especially the case with exhumations conducted by the Association for the Recuperation of Historic Memory (hereafter ARMH). An exhumation event is centred on the victims and their relatives, who are usually accompanied by community members from their home town where the missing were killed. These events are socially and personally rich moments for ethnographic work bringing together people unified by their shared memory of past traumatic events. In order to conduct ethnographic observations the researcher needs to gain access to these communities and social actors. This means that the researcher is required to negotiate the terms of access and in which capacity they will present or the role that they will play – as researcher or member of the exhumation team. However, initially I was not prepared for the fact that observing exhumations was not a taken for granted likelihood of being there. Firstly, the complexity of living in Australia so far away from where the exhumations were taking place in Spain meant that it was not easy to be there in time for many of the exhumations that have taken place in the last few years. Secondly, dealing with the bureaucratic waiting game has meant that often I am not in the right place at the right time. Thirdly, the added complexity based on the passage of time since these victims were killed adds an additional layer of difficulty in being there and observing the action of the exhumation. These three points highlight the difficulty of studying events such as exhumations. While these events are rich ethnographic moments uniting the past and present through the bodily recovery of the disappeared. How can the researcher access all the necessary information from the various participants in a short time?