

# Anthropologist turned politician: Illustrating Hage's concept of ethnographic vacillation

- Exploring the concept of ethnographic vacillation which Hage identifies as a “state of constant movement between political participation and analytical observation” (Hage 2009), this paper aims at tackling the following questions: how does one write the (political) emotions into one's ethnographic work? Should one do that at all? When does one stop being an engaged anthropologist and become a political activist with some knowledge of anthropology? And furthermore, to what extent should anthropologists even get engaged with the politics? In an attempt to answer these questions, I will critically examine my own position as an engaged anthropologist turned politician, following the notion that when one's solely observant participation reaches a point at which the anthropologist deems it as - not enough, (s)he is welcome and often obliged to engage.

**Key words:** applied anthropology, political engagement, anthropology of politics, activism

## INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual for anthropologists to develop certain emotions or sense of solidarity regarding their subject and/or interlocutors within the communities they research, which often leads to the intent of engaging or engagement itself, in developing solutions to perceived problems within the community. These actions are also often frowned upon by the anthropologists on the other end of the scientific scope of anthropology, who see the role of an anthropologist merely as that of an outside observer and researcher. However, more and more scholars break away from their original intent of simply

understanding the problem to that of actually working on solving it, and Besteman (2010) best sums the reasons why:

“Anthropology’s critical perspective, its ability to deconstruct assumptions about truth and normalcy, its empathy for marginalized groups, its holistic and comparative perspective, and its ability to place the individual in the context of the social makes it a powerful lens through which to challenge oppressive social structures, propose alternatives, and make visible the beliefs and interests that maintain a damaging status quo as well as the most effective strategies for challenging it” (Besteman 2010: 410).

Applied anthropology is a relatively new concept in the context of Croatian anthropology, but has a long tradition worldwide. Sillitoe (2006) states that the term was first introduced by Daniel Brinton back in 1896, and two decades later was used extensively in anthropological circles, primarily in the context of British colonial control. Recently, it refers “mainly to the employment of anthropologists by organizations involved in inducing change or enhancing human welfare” (Bennett 1996: 25). What makes it different from traditional anthropology is “its use of the discipline’s knowledge to address contemporary social, economic, or health problems facing communities or organizations” (Kedia and Van Willigen 2005). Overview of literature offers a variety of terms used in relation to applied anthropology: practical, activist, public, engaged - in trying to enlighten the purpose of it; or business, organizational, design, development, *medical* - in trying to elaborate on domains of application (Podjed et al. 2016: 56). I understand applied anthropology as Merrill Singer does: as a way of “solving human problems through the application of anthropological methods, theories, and insights” (Singer 2015: 151). Engaged anthropology, on the other hand, carries more of an activist connotation (Podjed et al. 2016: 55) while also orienting more towards the public promotion and presentation of important issues or engaging the “anthropological knowledge in debates and activities in the public sphere, away from lecture halls and the pages of academic publications” (Bringa and Bendixsen 2016: 3).

This engaging perspective is the position I am currently in. As a doctorate student, I examine the possibility of applying anthropology to further the (sustainable) development of Croatian islands, through three areas of application: 1. strategic planning of development - advocating that anthropologists make great consultants, because of their ability to gather, analyze and translate the needs and wants of the community to create better and more attainable strategies for future development; 2. project writing and management - showing how generalized propositions of tenders and lack of local perspective lead to unorganized and unsustainable development, creating solutions based on available funds while ignoring more pressing issues due to the lack of funds; and lastly 3. political activism and engagement - exploring how understanding and being a part of a decision-making process may influence changes on a local level while advocating for the un- or under-represented. The latter is what inspired this text and most of the (ethical) problems during my research.

## ANSWERING A CALL TO ACTION

I haven't begun my involvement with the community of Pučišća, a municipality on island Brač comprised of about 2000 people, based on the census of 2011, where I'm conducting a type of action research within the third area of application mentioned above, as an anthropologist, but as a wannabe member - someone who has an origin within this community (my mother being from this place), but was never actually a part of it. Rather, the rest of the community perceived me, when I moved there, as an outsider who occasionally sneaks a peek inside. This changed when I opened a volunteer center in the middle of the village and became a full-time resident, making myself very visible within the community, and soon - it's very welcome member. Volunteer center was a result of the project I wrote for the local NGO, which was funded by the Ministry of social policies and youths at the time. As things progressed, as my intentions became more and more clear, and by that I mean the idea of being there to serve the community, help it solve its smaller issues through volunteer work, public actions, social media and/or personal contacts, I was called to perform a bigger role within the community, by many of the people I developed a relationship with through my work.

At this point, I have already begun my personal research of the community in an anthropological sense, meaning I applied skills gained through the study of anthropology to try to comprehend situations that were still unclear to me as a new member of the community. This was mostly connected to the ongoing conflict of former workers of Jadrankamen, once a very prominent stone manufacturer, known around the world, and the new leadership of the company which, after the company was privatized, poorly managed and used for suspicious loans, brought it to bankruptcy resulting in a dramatic loss of jobs - from more than 700 to around 130. This all happened a few years back, with the most violent events escalating in 2012., leaving huge scars on the local community, who almost solely relied on the jobs provided by Jadrankamen, located at the edge of the village. During this time, local government was seen as an opponent to the community, since it did nothing or not enough, as perceived by one part of the community, to prevent all that has happened even though there wasn't much to do - it was private, not a state-owned company. My understanding of the situation, I must point out, at the beginning of my involvement, was shaped more by the thoughts, memories, and stories of the members of the community, and less by the actual research of the situation. The story of Jadrankamen was not at all unique or unusual, unfortunately, as it is similar to many other companies from the post-socialist era when privatization left people unprepared for the changes which came with it. However, having in mind that it is an island community, an island company, makes it that much understandable that the consequences were far greater than with communities not so geographically limited. Losing a workplace here usually means uprooting the entire family from the island, having so little to use to provide for them on the island. Agriculture and fishing were means to fill up the family's budget but never enough to sustain on them alone. Tourism, on the other hand, never fully developed, mostly due to the fact that the stone industry was so lucrative for so long.

It is in the aftermath of all this that I came into the picture and opened up a volunteer center in 2014., right in the middle of the village. And, this is also where my position of an outsider came in very handy - I wasn't burdened by this story and so many different narratives arising from it, I haven't lived through it since my own family members who worked in Jadrankamen were retired and not directly affected by the situation, I haven't been emotionally involved in the matter the rest of the community has. While the most violent scenes played out back in 2012., I was following the situation as it unfolded, from a student dorm hundreds of kilometers away, not being directly involved in any of it, meaning I haven't visibly taken a side, though I have emotionally. Rather, I tried to look at all the sides of this conflict to inform my future actions, which were not connected to it, but still in many ways shaped by it. In a way, I was playing a role of a professional stranger - "someone who is intentionally an incompetent member of society, and to whom elaborate stories (narrations) are told and explained in detail" (Granosik 2011: 46).

And, as I was trying to understand the ways of functioning of the community, I realized that the long-sought opportunity for practicing applied or rather engaged anthropology arouse. I found myself, as an independent researcher whose research was solely of personal nature and intention, with no professional outcome in sight or mind at that moment, contemplating the idea of performing participatory action research of some sort, testing the possibilities of applied and engaged anthropology within this community which I was becoming a part of. Simply put, participatory action research is "an action-oriented research activity in which ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge" (Park 2001: 81). It includes "collaboration on the goals of the project, the methods of research, and the analysis of the findings— [it] is another example of this form of collaboration and one where the goals of the group supersede those of the individual anthropologist" (Low and Merry 2010: 209). This type of research is relatively new in the Croatian context, and especially in the context of anthropology and ethnology. It is commonly used in community organizing and development, where it relies on the assumption that "the knowledge about a particular community is available and present within the community itself, that it can be articulated by actors in the process of researched social change, and that its creation, exchange, and application can benefit those same actors" (Škrabalo et al. 2006: 8). Anthropologists are equipped with precisely those tools and knowledge that enable them to access the community, process what they have learned, observed, and experienced, into data and information that can then be used by the researched community in carrying out the desired social changes. What sets this type of research apart from other methods of applied social sciences is precisely participation, i.e. active participation in social changes, "integration of action with research, and the practice-based nature of the knowledge that is entailed" (Park 2001: 81). This, of course, does not preclude possible difficulties in conducting research, which is based primarily on internal contradictions and dilemmas, which Schafft and Greenwood (2003) write about, and which are also evident in my research.

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TURNED INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

My interest in becoming a part of the local council was also influenced by the missed opportunities in terms of not using available funds to further the development or solve issues within the community, where the municipality is not financially capable of organizing and financing its own development. Since my daily job entails informing about available funds and writing projects for municipalities, businesses, NGO's, etc., it always bothered me why I never saw my own municipality on the list of approved projects, meaning they never applied for the funds. I wanted to learn more about why that is, see how decisions were made and perhaps influence them in a way that would result in seeing Pučišća's name more often on the list of approved projects. I often asked myself questions Agar brings up as well:

“Why are things this way? What power, what interests wrap this local world so tight that it feels like the natural order of things to its inhabitants? Are those inhabitants even aware of those interests, aware that they have alternatives? And then - the critical move that blows the old scientific attitude right off the map - maybe I, the ethnographer, should show them choices they don't even know they have. Maybe I should shift from researcher to political activist” (Agar 1980: 26 according to Granosik 2011).

So, I started turning my “attention to the very institutions and knowledge through which ideas of development were produced” (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012: 3). This topic combines well all of the three areas of my Ph.D. interest - for example, a project is acceptable for funding if it answers issues and problems raised in the strategic plan of development, which are produced and influenced by politics. My research into this field of inquiry thus far has shown that the local community is not included in the production of such documents which leads to the conclusion that they do not represent the needs of a community and most probably won't include project proposals which would solve more pressing issues in the community. To best illustrate this, I'll once again use an example from Pučišća, a short snippet which is my go-to when portraying the need of involving the community in the production of development plans. The last such plan for the municipality of Pučišća was produced in 2014, for the period until 2020. It is structured as most plans are - it has strategic goals as well as priorities, measures, and proposed projects which are supposed to help accomplish the goals. Projects are then divided into strategic ones, important ones, and others, first being the most important.

The first strategic goal Pučišća municipality aimed to reach was “Population growth, the reversal of the depopulation trend”, and it was to be done by implementing a couple of strategic projects, among which, in the first place - a morgue with a funeral hall. Since this paper is written in 2020, and a morgue with a funeral hall has been built, I am at liberty to say that this strategic project did not foster population growth, nor did it have any impact on the trend of depopulation. Understanding the importance of such communal services, I acknowledge that this is what Pučišća needed and waited decades for, but having in mind current trends in development, depopulation, etc. I must ask - was this really of the highest priority? And the answer to this question was supposed to be given by the community, one which still lives and organizes its business and lives in this municipality, not by the available funds, the ruling party, or a consult-

ant which wrote the strategic plan. I doubt that the community would choose to spend over a million kunas for a morgue instead of a whole day kindergarten care, which was voiced many times as a real concern, mainly for economic reasons, and female employment opportunities. In an ideal situation, the process should go as follows: consulting company (which employs scholars with knowledge and experience in qualitative research) would gather information from the community, analyze and summarize it, foster collaboration between all relevant stakeholders (community, business owners, public services, local government), propose solutions for perceived problems, take it back to the community for commenting and influencing the final product. This way, produced content aims at solving real problems, defines real priorities, and encourages future community involvement in the application of proposed solutions. A community that participates in the creation of development plans is more eager to participate in the implementation as well, because of the sense of ownership over such a document. Why this didn't happen in Pučišća (and many other places), is a topic deserving of an entire paper all on its own.

Adding to this scientific curiosity, my sense for social justice, an ongoing need to have a positive impact on the world around me (which stem from the years of activism), as well as a clear invitation from the community, is what drove me to the politics and made me a political actor in the upcoming local elections, as second on the list of independent candidates for the local council.

### **ANTHROPOLOGIST TURNED *GATEKEEPER* TURNED POLITICIAN**

This idea, of officially becoming a representative of the community, was at first flattering, then overwhelming. Much has been written about the anthropology of politics, but not as much about the anthropologists turned politicians. Debra Rodman wrote in an article for the Huffington Post that “while politicians base their choices on opinion polls and focus groups, we [anthropologists] take a nonjudgmental attitude and maintain a keen interest in learning about others to develop a real understanding of people’s lives and their views”, claiming that this is why anthropologists make great politicians (Rodman 2017). This is also what I thought I could contribute to the community through my political engagement and how I saw my future involvement. However, most debates don't go further from discussing the ethics behind the transitions from anthropologist to politician, as well as moral and scientific obligations and responsibilities this combination calls for, mostly nodding to the colonial tendencies it may entail. Yes, anthropology, in terms of involvement with the politics, may have a colonial history at some parts, as well as a hand in the Third Reich advancement or creating and maintaining apartheid, but still, it was and is mostly “committed to ideals of peace and fairness” (Bošković 2015: 17), which is how I justified my involvement in the early stages. Still, what is lacking in these discussions is the introspection and in-depth analysis of the position of the anthropologist, from a personal standpoint. In a way - a study of the scientist itself. This calls into mind a joke about the postmodern anthropologist who told his informant: “But enough about you, let’s talk about me”, which Hage (2009) wrote down in his debate on political emotions and ethnographic

vacillation, which are key elements on which I base this paper as well. Joking aside, a better understanding of one's position as an anthropologist turned politician might serve as a motivator for further engagement of anthropologists within the politics, which is necessary if we want anthropology to become a more visible and worthy actor in shaping and designing of the (better) future.

Khosravi wrote about this issue of personal involvement in terms of auto-ethnography, as “a research and a writing style where personal experiences are interjected into ethnographic writing” (Khosravi 2016: 54), somewhat similar to “writing culture”. He goes on to explain his own position of once undocumented migrant, a victim of a racially motivated attack and a scholar turned political activist, emphasizing the potential of linking and integrating his own stories into the experiences of the readers, public, and the community he or she works with. The point of engaging in autoethnography, he argues, is that it “offers an opportunity to communicate, link, and share experiences. By doing so, the individual, immediate and isolated experiences can be linked to the collective, accumulated, historical experiences” (Khosravi 2016: 56). The value of this approach comes from the reaction of the readers who manage to understand the experience, link it to their own, and possibly cooperate on the narrative which then may become a source of empowerment. Ellis wrote extensively about the power of autoethnographic narrative and well-constructed stories, in both academic as well as therapeutic and/or empowering sense, in her unorthodoxly constructed book titled “The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography” (2004). Ellis argues that “the goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care and concern” (Ellis 2004: 46). Of course, this then brings about vulnerability - during the process of research, as well as the process of writing (which is sometimes the research itself, in terms of writing as inquiry), and finally publishing. Khosravi writes: “Needless to mention, my engagement is not only political or academic but emotional as well. Auto-ethnography has been an ‘emotional participation’ (Hage 2009), that is, to share the same feelings of anger and sadness with people in the field got me closer to them” (Khosravi 2016: 55). Much of these kinds of emotions I have shared with the researched community even before contemplating any form of political engagement, and they have played an important role in the process of decision making on whether or not I should take part in the local politics.

Political activism is often the last resort of an engaged anthropologist, one where he or she has silently agreed or decided that his/her's solely scientific and academic involvement has reached a point at which the anthropologist deems it as simply not enough. I have personally come to this point many times, so much so that I now do not see any other point of the contemporary anthropology rather than the engaged one, even if it means dealing with the corrupt system of politics. Anthropologists must abandon the voyeur position and move on to become change-makers. “Some argue that participation of this kind changes the society being studied and question the ethical right to seek to change other ways of life. Others argue that those who fail to respond to the need for intervention are acting unethically” (Low and Merry 2010: 212). It is this exact

justification, of not being involved actually being unethical, which made me a political actor in the local community.

Here, many ethical problems come to mind. One is primarily the fact that anthropologists may misread the needs of a community which he/she wants to change. Who's to say the community wants or needs to change? On whose behalf does an anthropologist act? Who is (s)he representing and who gave him/her permission to even take on the role of a (re)presenter? This position was, in my case, inscribed onto me. I was asked to perform a role of community representative, very bluntly by many members of the community, and some even resented the fact I didn't want to run for mayor, stating that my intentions weren't honest; since this is the only way they perceived I could actually have a true impact - by completely changing the governing structure. My own self-image was not in correspondence with the one I acquired during my time as a manager of a volunteer center and I in no way felt prepared or capable of taking on such a role. Suddenly, I was supposed to become a gatekeeper for the community, a translator of sorts, between the community and the government, on a local level. This is where the anthropological knowledge came in handy - by analyzing how I was seen by the community, how I saw the community and how the local government saw me, I was able to gain some insight into the ethnographic triangulation as a process which contributes to a better understanding of the processes at hand and thus become able to change them. As Hviding writes, "usually such efforts by anthropologists involve the interaction with (...) the policymakers - to improve the conditions of and for the people - with whom the anthropological research record is concerned" (Hviding 2016: 151). Since I began my engagement with local politics not as an anthropologist, but as a problem-solver of some sort (based on my work as a volunteer center manager), it was expected of me to jump on the opposition wagon, without critically examining all of the modes of reality. This expectation was heightened by the understanding that a new political group is forming in an official capacity as a result of exceeding all other ways of influencing change within the community. This inscribed the status of opposition, automatically.

I was expecting this to happen, because engaged anthropology "as a values-driven approach, [it] also carries the potential for confrontation, as a collaboration with one group may imply or require opposition to another" (Besteman 2013: 3). Hage illustrates this very well with his distinction between the logic of political and the logic of intellectual inquiry, stating that the former implies the defensive position ("here is where I stand - if you're not with me, you're against me" type of rhetoric) and the latter implies the critical position which excludes emotions (Hage 2009). My reluctance to run for mayor was seen as cooperation with the current mayor, something I have the trouble of clarifying to this day when in reality, my reluctance was a result of not yet fully understanding the new position which I was put in - one that has to balance between the two types of logic, as well as the fact that I did not want to be mayor. My position was and is even more troublesome since it is existing in the community based on a view summed up in a before-mentioned saying "if you're not with us, you're against us", derived mostly from the conflict around Jadrankamen. This implies the unwillingness of one part of the community to move on from the dominantly negative



view of the current political situation and its actors, and on the other hand - the self-assumption of the local government and its supporters, strengthened by the fact that they ran mostly unopposed for over a decade.

In such a situation, fresh faces in the political arena were seen as long-anticipated opponents and possibly true change-makers. This notion was even enhanced by the fact that our list of candidates was so diverse - our political standpoints extending from far right to far left, and including students, young parents, business owners, unemployed, etc., making the group approachable for different points of view as well as establishing group's position as those above the traditional right-left distinction and in line with the idea of "better future for us all". However, even though our intentions were made clear from the beginning (saying we only wanted to become part of the council to have an opportunity to speak and react, not overrule the current mayor), what was expected of us by the supporting part of the community was quite different.

## **BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ANALYTICAL OBSERVATION**

Elections brought our group three places out of eleven in the municipal council, granting us the opportunity to voice our opinions (and most importantly - have them written down in the official minutes of the council sessions) as well as the opportunity to voice the concerns of the part of the community, one which for a long time haven't had its representative in the local government - one which longed to move on from the conflict. We, as independent council members, much like Barbara J. Dilly argues in her paper about development anthropology in a rural river town in Iowa (Dilly 2009), wanted to focus on "gaining community participation in the visioning and implementation of a culturally appropriate future" (Dilly 2009: 438) rather than focusing on the end product - economic development, for example.

However, what the seats in local council didn't grant us is the opportunity to have an actual impact on decision making, meaning our votes weren't a factor in deciding, since the ruling party had most seats in the council and therefore, had the power to outvote the opposition every time. This made our position somewhat pointless in a broader sense - we weren't actually able to influence the decision-making process, push our agenda, and make things happen when they weren't supported by the ruling party, and they usually weren't - out of spite and common practices of saying and doing the opposite of opposition, just for the sake of it. We also found it difficult to generate relevant discussion - our efforts were often ridiculed as naive and pointless since the end result was known from the beginning, making our presentations futile.

My personal position changed from an affirmative one (which we held during the campaign, focusing only on the possible solutions and positive examples rather than pointing out the shortcomings of the ruling party, which is what is usually done in political campaigns) to one of the naysayer "who constantly is unsettled and unsettle others" (Said 1994: 39), "whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront

orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations” (Said 1994: 9), on a quite smaller scale, of course. I saw my new purpose in this new situation in asking the uncomfortable questions, in enlightening situations which were not spoken about, by asking of the ruling party to explain certain decisions in length and by showing points of wrongful decision making, masked in language and procedures most council members as well as community members wouldn’t bother investigating further or even understand. One of these examples was a lengthy analysis of ways in which the municipality intentionally or due to lack of knowledge, passed on the opportunity to manage its own port concessions, in favor of the local businessman. Via online blog which we set up for longer and more in-depth texts about current topics and situations in the community, we shared an article I have written, disproving the key points of mayor’s explanation on why the municipality didn’t even apply for a concession on its own port. It was widely read and commented, online and offline, but in the end, it made no or just a slight difference, mostly in making people think about things they didn’t think about before. It did, however, made the ruling party even more arrogant and blunt in the showing of their superiority, now that they have seen that our analytical approach, based in facts, wasn’t going to weaken their position. This is best illustrated by the comment mayor made when he was asked by another council member from the opposition about the road he promised to build during his campaign - he smiled and said “oh, so you believed me? “.

Describing the ruling party as arrogant and blunt does not paint well my efforts of maintaining a degree of professionalism while conducting this action research, of course. I too, as Laura’s character in Ellis’s book on autoethnography wondered, have been questioning the ethical concerns of not liking some of the people in the study. Ellis replies, referencing Kleinman and Copp (comp. Love 1990), that “rather than suppressing our negative feelings, we should acknowledge them to ourselves and use them as clues to analysis” (Ellis 2004: 153). She even goes as far as to say that as ethnographers, we are obliged to feel whatever feelings may arouse in the fieldwork, as opposed to keeping our distance from emotional situations, since these feelings might provide a frame for understanding the experience of those we research and our own on a deeper level (Ellis 2004: 96). Realizing these kinds of emotions are not an obstacle but rather a new type of information, valid under the notion of autoethnography, I continued exploring the experiences and possibilities of my engagement in the local politics.

Soon, situations such as the one portrayed earlier with unwrapped mockery, became more often, and different types of tactics were used to disable and dishearten our voices - the ruling party would call upon our inexperience in the politics (as it is something to be ashamed of), my own unfamiliarity with local issues (roads, names of different parts of the village, and such) or our youthful naïveté trying to teach us “how things work around here”. It took us some time to assess the situation and be prepared for such humiliation, mostly because it truly was unexpected - this is a small municipality, with less than 2000 people living in it and a certain degree of respect was what I expected at the council meetings, if for no other reason, but for the fact that we live so close to each other and are dependent of one another. Of course, as Hage puts it - “this feeling of humiliation is only the tip of that enormous iceberg of ‘emotional field

experiences' that are not pleasurable to talk about" (Hage 2009: 134), but apparently make for good ethnographies (Ellis 2004). And just as Khosravi, I also often found myself in the situation Hage identifies as ethnographic vacillation: "a state of constant movement between political participation and analytical observation" (Khosravi 2016). Added to this is also an emotional element, of emotional participation which coexists with the former two modes of reality and which had an impact on my description of the ruling party, mentioned above. Just as with Hage, "what was difficult was not the fact that three states coexisted within me but the fact that they were often in a state of 'friction', and this state of friction generated another layer of emotions which were specific to the practice of ethnography and which were grounded in the ambivalence that is a necessary part of participant observation" (Hage 2009: 151).

This state of permanent balancing brought certain discomfort as I see the shifting of two (and sometimes three) personas prevail in favor of the political one - I find it hard to maintain the certain degree of scientific approach while performing the role of politician and representative of the community in a way which is different than the one anthropologists are accustomed to. As an anthropologist, I take special care of what is being said and what is written (by me), I research the topics on the agenda of council meetings thoroughly before forming an opinion on how I will vote and communicate during the meetings, etc. As a politician (and I write this term with such heaviness, realizing I don't like to be seen as one), I wonder if we're being told the whole story, what hides behind the topics on the agenda and what points of wrongdoing am I missing, which goes to show that I got accustomed to the role of the opponent quite quickly. Or is it that, maybe, just as in any fieldwork, "the real difficulty facing the anthropologist is trying to distinguish between what people say they do and what they actually do?" (Moeran 2007: 13) This is especially difficult when the field is politics, because "the subject positions we occupy determine not only the questions that we ask but also the answers that we get" (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012: 11). When, as part of a project I was managing, one NGO donated two trash cans designed and equipped for collecting dog feces, to the municipality of Pučišća, making it one of just a few Croatian places with such trash cans, they ended up being used to shoot fireworks at public festivities in Pučišća. After I repeatedly asked why they weren't put to the proper use, the mayor answered: "here I am working on multimillion investments, and all you want to talk about is the two trash cans". I replied with: "you want to work on investments worth millions, and yet you are not capable of installing two trash cans". At first proud of my response, later I wondered about how my own conduct has changed influenced by the experience of being a politician.

## **WRITING AS A METHOD OF KNOWING**

The question arose - when do I stop being an engaged anthropologist and become a political activist with some knowledge of anthropology? I would argue that it is when I stop writing and thinking critically about it, analyzing my experiences as well as all the accompanying "data", even when data consists of emotion only. As Ellis writes, referencing Laurel Richardson, "I write because I want to find something out. I write

in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it" (Ellis 2004: 170-171). Here, Hage's description of political emotions comes in handy - he defines them as "those emotions related to our sense of power over ourselves and our environment as we pursue those goals, ideals, and activities that give our life meaning" (Hage 2009: 141-142). Applied or rather engaged anthropology does this for me - gives my work meaning, and for quite some time, I felt powerless over the outcomes of my own participation in the local council, as though I am not representing fairly those that had elected me. This is not unusual, as Kirsch writes that the "feelings of powerlessness and the inability to effect meaningful political change are also pervasive in contemporary civil society" (Kirsch 2010: 69), which is where and how I began my active involvement with Pučišća. This sense of powerlessness made me angry because I felt inadequate in applying anthropology to bring positive change, beneficial to the community, which is how I saw my chosen direction within the field of anthropology. As Hage puts it: "there is something in the nature of my anger which is, at least, partly, a reflection of my position as an intellectual: someone who, by definition, is a passive person watching events unfold and having no capacity to practically bring about any change to them" (Hage 2009: 148). On one hand, I would feel comfortable in the role of an ordinary anthropologist - if I were just a researcher observing the council sessions, writing field notes, and later analyzing data, I would have no problem drawing the outlines of my research. But, as an applied anthropologist and autoethnographer, one which took a step further from classical participant observation, I was dealing with all sorts of negotiations - of analytical, political, and emotional modes of reality. Not only did I have to take into account my own emotions as a new form of the informant, but I also had to "continuously negotiate the terms under which emotions are subjected to 'observation' and constantly 'safeguard them in their savage state' in the very process through which they are experienced" (Hage 2009: 152). This negotiation is specific to anthropology and autoethnography and is the basis of the concept of ethnographic vacillation. This state occurs when one does not know what one wants and because one often wants contradictory things. Hage argues that "using Bourdieu's notion of *illusion* (investing emotionally in what is likely to be meaningful), we can say that vacillation is when we have contradictory *illusions* when there are many incompatible things giving meaning to our lives and we find ourselves pursuing them despite their incompatibility" (Hage 2009: 152). What is incompatible about being anthropologist turned politician is being analytical, political, and emotional at the same time, without neglecting any part of this triad. "It is the attempt to invest oneself in both social realities with their contradictory demands that create the specificity of the ethnographic modality of being" (Hage 2009: 152-153). What is helpful, on the other hand, is the idea that "you have to be emotional even to do good ethnography, since fieldwork almost always is an emotional experience" (Ellis 2004: 110).

Our initial disappointment and the sense of powerlessness were soon overwritten by a new-found effect we had on the community, one that to me as an anthropologist was of great importance. We soon found that the impact of our post-council writings - our reports on the sessions were widely read, shared, and somewhat enjoyed. As opposed to the official minutes of the council meetings which we found to be extremely censored

and selective in favor of the ruling party, our lengthy reports shared on social media and then recounted orally days after the council meetings, were more accurate versions of what actually went on. This is where the anthropological tools came to use - my analysis of the most important bits of the council sessions combined with basic skills of storytelling, painted a picture of corruption, favoritism, and modes of political governance through populism. It also critically observed our own position stating clearly our own failures and flaws, balancing thus between being opposition and being objective which I require from myself as a researcher. Here, objectivity should be understood loosely since one may never be fully objective, but rather in terms of being aware of different possible perspectives as well as the fact that the research such as this always involves “the paradox of professional distance and personal involvement” (Agar 1980: 7). Autoethnography also allows us to be less concerned about the representation, and more about the communication: “do our stories evoke readers’ responses? Do they open up the possibility of dialogue, collaboration, and relationship? (...) Do they help us change institutions? Promote social justice and equality?” (Ellis 2004: 195). Since the intention of our stories and reports was to inform the community of the decision-making process as well as to make them aware of the ways in which their life is affected by those decisions, produced texts ought to be simple yet informative, written in non-academic language, with clear points and yet provide a ground for critical examination of the topic. We, as independent council members, wanted to create a medium through which we could inform the community of current topics, but most importantly make them reevaluate their views and opinions, open up dialogues and thus inspire action. Joana Breidenbach, “an anthropologist and social entrepreneur, has argued that anthropologists are producers of original knowledge, they are good storytellers who can offer orientation in complex times - without eliminating any shades of gray, they can potentially build bridges between academic knowledge and the general public, and they focus on the broader contexts as well as observe the local behaviors” (Podjed et al. 2016). Adding on this, I would argue that anthropologists make great gatekeepers in terms of translating and voicing the needs and wants of the community to decision-makers while making sure their knowledge is not used to control (or colonize) the community, but rather to better the position and conditions of the community.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that today’s anthropologists must engage in the lives of their researched communities in order to put their skills, knowledge, and ethics to good use, creating, where needed, a positive social change. I also agree that “it is crucial for applied anthropologists to participate in interdisciplinary projects not only as ‘marginal observers’ but also to take leadership roles that would enhance anthropology’s contributions beyond the discipline and academia” (Peacock 1997: 13–14). Their, or rather our, voices should be heard in different walks of social life, and politics are no exception, especially in the context of policymaking which is a topic worthy of much more interest and elaboration all on its own. Three years into my mandate as the council member, I still struggle with balancing between political participation and analytical observation. However, since finding new ways of using my own emotions as data to be added to my observations as well as a tool to further our cause and my own research, I find myself in a state of ethnographic vacillation far less often.

Thus, it would be useful to broaden the debate on engaged and applied anthropologists turned politicians, to make it easier for those brave (or silly?) enough to step outside their usual scholar roles to explore the possibilities of creating a better world. Such debate must not shy away from emotions as an inevitable part of fieldwork.

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