

T O TOUCH, TO HEAR, TO FEEL

Can Ethnography Dissolve Narrations of Fear?

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This paper deals with the social, cognitive, and affective consequences caused by the devastating earthquake that hit the Banija region on December 29, 2020. The natural disaster is understood not only as a catastrophe but as a kind of catharsis that has exposed layers of political negligence, difficult pasts, and deep connections to the environment. The author interprets (mediatized and face-to-face) personal narratives of natural disaster, ruination and regeneration, solidarity, and mutual understanding as the basis of making new affective communities and triggering processes that resolve national (and nationalistic) narratives and contribute to community empowerment. The paper's methodological framework embraces participatory ethnography, the theory of folk narratives (Bausinger 2018 [1958]; Borland 2021; Bošković-Stulli 1984; Ranke 2018 [1967]; Rudan 2020, Shuman 2005), the ethnography of the senses (Bendix 2000, 2005), and the "deep implicancy" knowledge of reflecting what makes the "human inseparable from all matter" (da Silva and Neuman 2018). The author concludes that villagers co-habiting with nature (but also depending on it) make sense of their unique experiences of disaster, comparing it with other humans' suffering and organizing a narrative frame that "makes the allegorical personal, the cosmological local" (Shuman 2005).

Keywords: the Banija earthquake, ethnography of disaster, natural vs. social catastrophes, narratives of ruination and revitalization, ethnography of senses, narrative democracy

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe.
(Benjamin 2003: 184)

Nowhere is it more possible to encounter this much sorrow constantly being transformed into love than in Banija. I write down this love from the hands that touch trees as if they were a child, that touch animals like children, the earth.
(Herceg 2022)¹

This debate opens with Walter Benjamin's provocative idea that catastrophe is not an act of nature but one of human inaction – incompetence, inability, or a lack of willpower and knowledge to transform a stroke of nature into a renewal of life or an evolutionary cycle. Metaphors of seismic activity, ruptures, turns, and twists are commonplace in social and intellectual history as the markings of groundbreaking

¹ Monika Herceg. "Reportažni esej: Hrabrost preživljavanja na Baniji", 3 March 2022. Available at: <https://express.24sata.hr/top-news/reportazni-esej-hrabrost-prezivljavanja-na-baniji-25665-express.24sata.hr> (accessed 5. 3. 2022.).

shifts and jumps. In order for new material and spiritual foundations to arise from the ruins, it takes a great deal of effort, vitality, and imagination. It takes the “very effort of reaching, of reaching up, of reaching out, of reaching for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility” (Ahmed 2014: 204). Poet Monika Herceg would say that it also takes a lot of love – love towards the earth and its fruits, love towards the animals and plants that function as a unique microcosm comprising the habitat of people in rural areas. Love is a broad term for affective and moral attachment, care, and concern for human and nonhuman animals, things, and objects that encompass the peasant’s existence in space and time² and “achieve actualisation with every instance of retelling” (Marks 2015: 195). This paper interprets the earthquake that hit Petrinja and numerous other locales in Banija on December 28 and 29, 2020, as a natural disaster but also as a metaphor for the existential shockwave and the experience of a community faced with fear, mortality, bodily vulnerability, and mutual dependability, by “recognizing one’s misfortune in the misfortune of others” (Nussbaum 2019: 445), which lends a new facet to the “imagined community.”

When I started researching narrative forms and communicative practices employed to mediate the experience of the earthquake, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the social crisis, my interest was directed toward a shared atmosphere of fear and anxiety in our time.³ I tried to learn how natural disasters and the pandemic (cf. Jambrešić Kirin 2022), the global crisis of the economy, society and democracy, the crumbling of health and social institutions, a mistrust of science and rational thinking, and a rhetoric of new divisions were shaping the condition that Martha Nussbaum (2018) termed an introduction into the “monarchy of fear.” However, the more I talked to the inhabitants of Banija about their misfortune, loss, grieving, anger, everyday worries and fears, and life values, and the more I learned about, read, and observed their life stories, the more I realized that “the affective turn” in the humanities also needs a shift towards the question of “how we can theorize positive affect and the politics of good feeling,” that is, “how feelings participate in making things good” (Ahmed 2010: 30). Like numerous journalists, volunteers, social activists, and researchers visiting the ruinous and dilapidated landscapes of Banija, I have also wondered how it is that the mixed feelings with which we return home both “sting and keep us warm,” just like homemade schnapps from Banija, as Monika Herceg remarks. As I will argue later, I believe that the narrative performances and oral tradition of the Banija *homo narrans* are key for this affirmative emotion that corresponds to what Husserl terms the “core sphere,” a balance between affective and moral economy

2 The ecological and animalist paradigm, as well as theories of the Anthropocene, force anthropologists to once again re-examine the definitions of what is human, what is socio-historical, and what is cultural-geographical “in a given space and time” rather than pursuing biopolitical and related paradigms interested in the way *bare life* is regulated “within relations of power” (Prca 2001: 225).

3 The “Narrating Fear: From Old Records to New Orality” (2017–2021) project was financed by the Croatian Science Foundation. In addition to about fifty original scientific papers, the project involved the publication of two thematic collections: *Naracije straha*, 2019, and *Encountering Fear*, 2020. This paper is edited from the opening presentation at the 18th conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (*Encountering Emotions in Folk Narrative and Folklife*, Sept. 5–8, 2021, virtual Zagreb).

that produces a sphere of practical action (cf. Ahmed 2002: 32). In short, most of my interlocutors from Banija used their self-representations as a means of describing and shaping sustainable cognitive, moral, emotional and ecological practices, firmly based in folklore and religious notions about the meaningful world, good life, and dignified death, which differ considerably from ones promoted by consumer capitalism. A researcher's sense of meaningful action within an "anthropology of shared concerns" (Jansen 2020b) may, of course, also be critically interpreted as professional "self-gratification," a contribution to "humanitarian ideology," or a desire for a greater role in society. Bearing in mind the complex problem-matter of textual representation and systemization of (ethnographic) experience (White 1980), I still believe that the rhetorically particular ways in which the inhabitants of Banija/Banovina⁴ present their deprived and elliptic lives to a wider public is a certain shift "that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life" (Ahmed 2002: 50). This approach aligns with Marc Augé's assumption that the living word⁵ and storytelling ability are what connects ethnologists (and folklore researchers) and their interlocutors concerned with universal questions of fate, oblivion, and death (Ože [Augé] 2003: 68–69). Although the modes of critical fabulation (cf. Hartman 2008) of these topics differ between quotidian and scientific discourse, there is an ever-greater sense of interconnectedness and mutual dependency since threats (such as nuclear war) have become universal and evenly distributed as well. Until recently, the severe consequences of climate change and wars were regarded as features of the "third world," however, today, "[w]e have entered the age of catastrophes. They will be universal in effect because the problems of the world are now universal" (Okri 2020). In addition, pent-up frustrations in the scientific and social fields are also universal, given that nowadays, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than (genuine) social change.

Narratives about the Petrinja earthquake and the teleogenetic plot

I have borrowed an initial supposition about the importance of a narrative exchange of experiences amidst chaotic, extreme, and uncertain times from Michael Wilson (2014), who claims that storytelling is largely akin to the experience of the confusion, disorder, and contingency of a moment. The narrative articulation of impres-

⁴ In this paper, I use both names interchangeably and completely equitably because the inhabitants of numerous small towns, villages and rural communities of this region use them in this way, continually filling them with historical, sociological, ethno-national and contextual meanings. Cf. Alemko Gluhak. "Analiza jezikoslovca Riječ Banovina ravnopravna je Baniji, drugačije tumačenje je neznanje", 13 Jan, 2021, *Večernji list*. Available at: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/rijec-banovina-ravnopravna-je-baniji-drugacije-tumacenje-je-neznanje-1460763> (accessed 10. 10. 2021.).

⁵ Some philosophers also regard the living word and other people's voice as the foundation of ethical relations: "It is a voice which circumvents all discursive argument and offers firm ground for moral judgment beyond discursivity, beyond the intricacies of deductions, justifications, and deliberations" (Dolar 2006: 85).

sions, sensations, and attitudes is realized as a “fine mess” and the “performance of the moment” capable of encompassing and transcending the contradictions and paradoxes of life’s situations, as well as the mixed feelings of both the narrator and their interlocutor. For that same reason, narratives (about one’s self and others) are able to adapt so well and so quickly to the conditions of internet communication and the new hypertextual and pictographic tools for lending shape to sensations, emotions, and commentaries about external events (Wilson 2014). Despite an ambiguous epistemological evaluation of narrativity, as a catalyst of both rational insights and irrational opinions, prejudices, and conspiracy theories (Livingston 2009), narration serves to organize knowledge and provide explanations of experiences “both by allowing us to see our own, seemingly unexplainable, experiences in other people’s stories and by helping us to understand the otherwise unfathomable experiences of others” (Shuman 2005: 146). Genre patterns and narrative techniques of mediating experience are at the core of interpersonal communication. Both psychoanalysts and folklore researchers know that it ‘takes two’ to witness the “drama” of someone’s intimate world and that verbal coding of intense emotions such as fear requires an understanding of the face-to-face interaction, social framework, oral tradition, as well as ethical norms of an individual and the collective (cf. Rudan 2020; Polgar 2020).

Instead of artistic communication in small groups, social networks today play the most prominent role in shaping the dominant hybrid strategies of (self)representation and the semantic construction (as well as blurring) of binary notions of private and public, emotional and rational, verbal and visual, humorous and serious, important and irrelevant. The result of this process is a gradual globalization of digital folklore and the notion “that expression online becomes increasingly reminiscent of traditional forms of face-to-face interaction while also hiding its fundamental differences” (Peck 2020: 6). One such example illustrating that “disaster-specific cultural products emerge in the wake of disaster, are spontaneously produced, and are publicly consumed” (Webb et al. 2000: 9)⁶ is the story of the Big Đuro and Baby Đuro bears. On the one hand (unconsciously), the story relies on the folk legend about the dragon and the earthquake and, on the other, on social networks across which it spread, acquiring the status of a new “disaster oral legend” from Petrinja. The story that the earthquake was caused by the trembling and twitching of the bears waking early from their hibernation was created and conceived as a puppet play for psychotherapeutic work with children by associates of psychiatrist Dragan Puljić in Petrinja.⁷ Their intention was to help explain the (unfathomable) causes

6 In the course of my research, I only heard one belief legend, told in two versions, about the causes of the earthquake in the village of Slana near Glina. Stories about the “miraculous salvation” of life, that is, avoiding death at the last second were much more frequent, along with new legends about a “miraculous statue” that was left unscathed in the heavily damaged churches and chapels, which I heard from female residents of Hađar, Strašnik, and Majur.

7 The therapeutic game involving bears was conceived by psychologist Irena Zulić, psychiatrist Marija Čopo and Martina Omerhodžić with an MA in nursing. Cf. “Jutarnji s timom psihijatra koji pomažu djeci.” *Jutarnji list*, 9 Jan, 2021. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/jutarnji-s-timom-psihijataraj-koji-pomazu-na-baniji-dijete-3-kako-se-zovem-potres-15022687> (accessed 1. 10. 2021.).

of the earthquake to frightened children, employing this conceptual metaphor to help them come to terms with the unpredictability and intensity of the experience of subsequent daily earthquakes. Big Đuro and Baby Đuro became part of popular culture and earthquake folklore thanks to media articles and social networks. The story could be seen as an inadvertent version of the folk legend about the dragon or mythical fire-drake (*pozoj*) whose underground jolts cause earthquakes, whereas the puppet performance takes cues from the folklore puppet play, *Šante i Pante*, versions of which Nikola Bonifačić Rožin documented during his field research around Banija villages between 1945 and 1960 (cf. Bonifačić Rožin 1963). These instances of contemporary and traditional culture overlapping and drawing on each other only confirm that verbal folklore exists as long as there exists a social purpose that it satisfies and a spiritual need to which it responds.

Narratology teaches us that the more intense a personal experience, the more potent our emotional reaction to it will be, accompanied by a growing need to lend it (alternative) narrative form and share it. The need to describe, understand, and remember the unique, dream-like, and “magical” experience of the earthquake as a shared experience (of all residents of Central Croatia and beyond)⁸ triggered a “tsunami” of authentic and harrowing stories from Banija. By means of narrative mediation, the devastating earthquakes in Zagreb and Banovina that occurred amidst the social standstill during Covid-suspended time were transformed into a teleogenetic plot (Davis 1992)⁹ and a historic notch, disruption and fissure in the homogenous time of daily life. Not only was the earthquake in Petrinja and the surrounding area unexpected and tragic in its consequences (taking seven lives, wounding many, and damaging almost 40,000 housing structures), but it also occurred in the period of Christmas festivities and in the midst of the strictest quarantine. Therefore, we might say that it represents a climax of the pandemic stance (cf. Jambrešić Kirin 2022), as well as a catharsis of the transitional *social drama* (Turner 1974) that has been dissolving and reshaping the social fabric in the majority of post-socialist societies over the past three decades.

This debate is aimed at encouraging a discussion on the extent to which it is possible to interpret the affirmatively framed Banija disaster narratives, functioning as an invitation to social mobilization and grassroots political participation, as the teleogenetic plot of a long-term social drama. Is it a genuine shift that transmutes the national (and nationalist) “grand narrative” into a story of civic unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding, in contrast to the (ineffectual) actions of political elites? Unlike war as a narrative turning point, full of painful memories of destruction and devastation, of exile and displacement, the latest catastrophe stands out as a counter-narrative of self-organization and heroic acts of ordinary people who come to each

8 According to the data of the Seismological Survey of the Faculty of Science in Zagreb, in the period from Dec 28, 2020, to mid-August 2021, over 1200 earthquakes were recorded in the Banija area, which would amount to six earthquakes per day if they were evenly distributed.

9 For Lennard Davis, the teleogenetic understanding of history entails a “reworking of past events by means of subsequent occurrences” (1992: 361), that is, the ability to discover social, ideological, and anthropological forces behind historic events and occurrences based on the effects and consequences they produce.

other's aid regardless of their ethnic, social, and other differences (cf. Jambrešić Kirin 2020). In the aftermath of the natural disaster, at least for a short while, it seemed possible that "another mental contagion..., a contagion of courage, good health, and solidarity" (Okri 2020) would develop, a contagion that democratized and "communalized" all the citizens, united by a sense of vulnerability and awe before the unpredictable force of nature.

Crumbling Banovina/Banija as the unconscious of Croatian society

Of the 173 thousand inhabitants of the earthquake-stricken Sisak-Moslavina County, 118 thousand are in need of some form of humanitarian aid, 60 percent of which belong to vulnerable groups. (...) The people we have mentioned today are triply affected. On the one hand, they are affected by the pandemic, they have been dramatically impacted by the earthquake, which has, in turn, revealed the problems with which they had been coping for years and decades prior. (Šimonović Einwalter 2021)¹⁰

If we agree that there are several parallel realities, as well as temporalities, in modern-day Croatia, the youngest EU member state, there are two dominant ones. On the one hand, in 2021, the capital of Zagreb and the Adriatic coast attracted more than one million tourists, recording 55.3 million overnight stays.¹¹ On the other hand, darkness engulfs the peripheral zones of Croatia, where increasingly fewer people live and work. The inhabitants of fringe border areas continually relocate to bigger cities and to more developed EU countries, creating the impression that those who stay in the peripheral rural areas are the ones who have no other option.

At every turn, I hear, see, and feel that the earthquake is the height of a "systematic project to disregard and destroy the health, livelihood, and psychic endurance of a very particular population" (Stoler 2016: 378). It rests on the economic, socio-cultural, and demographic devastation of the area marked by war and ethnic conflict of the 1990s, followed by migrations and ethnic homogenization of the population, as well as deindustrialization (cf. Potkonjak i Škokić 2016). Or, as Sonja Lončar and Dario Pavić conclude in their study of abandoned, empty, and undesirable real estate in Croatia:

The results of the geographical distribution of the abandonment rate indicate that the most abandoned areas are those that have been affected most severely by the war activities during the 1990s. These are also the areas from which the

¹⁰ Tena Šimonović Einwalter, "Procjena humanitarnih potreba", Dec. 1, 2021. Net.hr, Available at: <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/gotovo-118-000-potresom-pogodenih-stanovnika-banije-treba-neku-vrstu-humanitarne-pomoci-1ede1a80-52a5-11ec-9dba-4a41d2da1da2> (accessed 1. 12. 2021.).

¹¹ "Odlični turistički rezultati: Premašen broj noćenja iz cijele 2020. godine" 18 August 2021. Available at: <http://privredni.hr/premasen-broj-nocenja-iz-cijele-2020-godine> (accessed 1. 9. 2021.).

Serbian population was displaced during the final operations by the Croatian armed forces in 1995. (...) this area is characterized by negative demographic, economic, social and cultural circumstances. (Lončar and Pavić 2020: 222)

Moving away from sentimental and parochial media reports on how the miserable but stately rural people of Banovina, the “elite” of the former *Militärgrenze*,¹² struggle with the hardships of survival, we could paraphrase Slavoj Žižek¹³ and state that today’s crumbling Banija/Banovina is structured as “the unconscious of Croatia.” Drastic changes in the social fabric and the landscape are consequences of the ruin left behind by wars, earthquakes, and exile, but also of “the strike of the Real” and the discovery of “a dirty secret” that a large part of Croatia, as the outer region of the EU, is becoming a repository of “human waste,” along with actual depositories of dangerous and radioactive waste. We knew that capitalist visions of constructing new tunnels, bridges, and modern motorways towards the Adriatic did not touch upon many rural areas in Croatia. Still, it was the earthquake that confronted us with the circumstances of people who live life on the margins of civilization, without any definite or stable rules (Tsing 2015), without access to roads, running water, telecommunication services, and sometimes even without electricity. Their presence marks the space of a new *Militärgrenze e* – the Frontex mechanisms of protection of the outside borders of the EU, which, to them personally, offer neither mobility nor protection of “freedom, security and justice,”¹⁴ while the necessities of life prompt them to devastate forests or to engage in the cross-border smuggling of tobacco, drugs, and people. However, my intention is not to illustrate anthropological theories about postimperial ruination, necropolitics (Mbembe 2019), and “human waste” in remote areas that could just as easily be applied to other peripheries of Southeast Europe and the Global South.¹⁵ I shall demonstrate that narrating one’s personal experience is a way to channel negative emotions and experiences, but it is also a way for local subjects who “are not fooled, not crushed, not homogenized; indeed, they are creatively appropriating or reinterpreting what is being thrown at them” (Graeber 2004: 99) to gain social empowerment. I believe that, thanks to their role as a “bridge to understanding others” (Shuman 2005: 150), it is precisely such post-earthquake personal narratives that have assumed a central place, both in the public sphere and the social and humanistic discourse on the aftermath of this natural disaster.

12 “The people living near that border, from Vojna Krajina, officially the *Militärgrenze*, even if they were poor, belonged to an elite of the era that would go on for centuries.” Miljenko Jergović. “Majske Poljane, kratka povijest jednoga sela”. Portal 24 sata, 31 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.24sata.hr/news/jergovic-majske-poljane-kratka-povijest-jednoga-sela-737169> (accessed 1. 10. 2021).

13 Slavoj Žižek. “Talks films and Balkans with Slavoj Zizek.” 9 December 2008. Available at: <http://www.euronews.net/2008/09/12/euronews-talks-films-and-balkans-with-slavoj> (accessed 1. 10. 2021).

14 Frontex highlights the following as one of its particularly important goals: “We recognise people, institutions and their roles and demonstrate respect by treating these as valuable and important” (<https://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/our-mission/>).

15 According to official government data (portal potresinfo.gov.hr), from January to August 2021, 1388 residents from Petrinja, 1136 from Sisak, 177 from Glina, and 160 from surrounding municipalities relocated from the area. According to the 2021 national population census, the sharpest decrease in the number of households was recorded in Sisak-Moslavina County, with 14.7% fewer households compared to the 2011 census (portal popis2021.hr).

Feeding the hunger of mass media for sensationalist portrayals and powerful messages,¹⁶ as well as the social network as the most democratic and most emotional form of human communication (cf. Peck 2020), new hybrid forms of vernacular narratives have begun to appear daily, jointly shaping the cultural moment in which we live. Like elsewhere in the world in the aftermath of a natural disaster, in Croatia too, a wave of solidarity prompted “a unifying process of symbolic action that strengthens both the individual and the community,” which persisted for a while “through a collective response of assistance” (Letukas et al. 2009: 3). Like in other deprived post-Yugoslav regions, the inhabitants of Banija used the “depoliticizing discourses of humaneness to assert their (political) claims to survival and wellbeing in the context marked by the dominance of ethno-nationalist rhetoric” (Brković 2016: 97). As time went by, the situation in the field became more complex, creating competing and antagonistic voices (cf. Pavlić 2021), especially once the affected population realized that private donations, as well as the donations of international and domestic humanitarian organizations, civil and religious associations, were the only effective recourse in rebuilding their damaged homes. However, narratives about the humanitarian response of fellow citizens and the inefficiency of state institutions still dominate the public discourse.

Coming out as winners, as heroes of life

Since the war-torn 1990s, metaphorically speaking, this region has entered “a bizarre universe, a flipped world on the other side of the mirror. It is all that the everyday is not – it is turbulent, unstable and unpredictable” (Tripathy 2021). The daily life that for decades has been harrowing, uncertain, and stagnant, fuses the exceptionality of wartime and the provisionality of the post-war. The living conditions are more or less the by-product of the pitiless state protectorate of the *subsidized* regions, which are becoming increasingly widespread across Croatia (cf. Obad 2020). Amid the struggle for survival, apathy, and frugal life in isolation and on the margins, the natural disaster produced an emotional and existential shock, “a magnificent awakening (...) from a nightmarish dream” (Kljaić 2021: 128). Disrupting the immobility heightened by epidemiological measures in force in December of 2020, the “greater evil” that befell the inhabitants of Banija suddenly accelerated the passage of history, directing the attention of every state- and privately-owned media towards probably the least visible corner of Croatia. The media interest in the affliction of the dwellers of small rural communities and isolated hillside villages, as well as the utter poverty in which many of them live, restored their stature and their voice. At the same time, the narrative power of eloquent self/representation overnight turned them into our

¹⁶ A discursive analysis of Croatian web portals from January 2020 to April 2021 has revealed that conceptual metaphors of war and “fighting” the invisible enemy predominated in reports on the Covid pandemic, while metaphors of the apocalypse were prevalent in reports on the Petrinja earthquake (Lacković et al. 2021: 38).

compatriots and contemporaries. For over a year, the emotional life stories and the moral integrity and dignity of the resilient elderly men and women of Banija, at one with nature, have been a part of our (mediatized) reality marked by two natural calamities, as well as by the joint criticism directed at the incapability of government institutions to tackle their fallout.

The residents, until then perceived as either a majority or minority population, as cogs in the electoral machinery that allowed a handful of politically “suitable” minority representatives to participate in the local government, were suddenly invited to speak out about their precarious daily struggle, the hardships and challenges of this “elliptical life” and even about being the “chosen people” in a biblical sense – “we have been chosen as the ones capable of dealing with misfortune” (Kljaić 2021: 114).¹⁷ Even when it is mediatized and redacted by the media, the narrative discourse of the rural inhabitants of Banija is rich in formulaic expressions, catchphrases, wise observations, and rich metaphors based in oral literary traditions. This has been confirmed in my spontaneous conversations with the afflicted and in semi-structured interviews. It seems that the earthquake turned the remaining Banija peasants into “heroes of life,” who survive on their own ruins, persisting like “wilful, obstinate and recalcitrant old folks” (Kljaić 2021: 131). Unlike them, the lives of the nameless and faceless elderly in Covid units were, with or “without Covid-19, considered lost, unnoticeable, basically finished, without future” (Marković 2021).

Feminist anthropologist Sara Ahmed believes that obstinate and wilful subjects can turn even the greatest hardship into a creative means of action, resistance, and aspiration toward a new social reality and constellation of power. Wilful, persistent, and principled subjects, to a great extent, come from exploited and marginalized social groups, while hardships, obstacles, and disruptions of any kind make their actions bolder and more far-reaching:

Disturbance can be creative: not as what we aim for, not as what grounds our action, but as the effect of action: disturbance as what is created by the very effort of reaching, of reaching up, of reaching out, of reaching something that is not present, something that appears only as shimmer, a horizon of possibility. (Ahmed 2014: 204)

Jagoda Kljaić, a writer and journalist from Glina, convincingly writes about Banija residents’ sense of historical “markedness,” which is, nevertheless, not entrenched in trauma (Jansen 2020a: 65). She believes that, despite existing on the geographical margins, the peasants live “at the centre of social and state turmoil... as much in 1941, as in 1991 and 1995,” aware of collective casualties and historical challenges, but, in the manner of true *bricoleurs*, not concerning themselves with the coherence of belief systems or the stability of truth. The soil that nourishes them is an inex-

¹⁷ Stef Jansen insightfully described the “exclusivist logic” of the inhabitants of post-Yugoslav regions, who believe that their existential troubles and their human qualities are incomparable to those of other people. On the other hand, their deepest desire is the “desire to regain a dignified place on the world map, threatened and deformed by experiences of the last two decades” (Jansen 2020b: 33).

haustible source of instances of perseverance and flexibility but also of tenderness and noble charity:

Coming out as winners from these events, as heroes of life who go on among and atop the ruins, make their rounds of the sheep and the beehives, plough, harrow and disc, use garden diggers, prune their vines and fruit trees, feed and milk their cows, make cheese and cream, hammer on old and new wooden boards and beams, walk on rooftops, drink coffee in the yard, deck the tables in their containers with hand-embroidered tablecloths... (Kljaić 2021: 89)

From an ethnological point of view, it is not surprising that the people of Banija “deeply rooted in the agrarian milieu and bounded by it; in tune with nature, yet fatefully dependent on it” (Muraj 1992: 215), were not as touched and prompted to share their narratives by the natural disaster – simply one in a string of tragedies, destructive episodes, and hardships – as by the solidarity and direct aid of Croatian citizens.¹⁸ On the other hand, the life stories of the inhabitants of rural Banija spurred the empathetic action of all those who came to help or simply report on the extent of the devastation. Photographer and organizer of the Smaragdni Eco Film Fest (SEFF) in Hrvatska Kostajnica Daniel Pavlić, who was one of the most active volunteers in the region, highlighted a fundamental folkloristic attitude in the encounter with these narratives:

All of these villages have their scarce inhabitants with their stories. But what is a story if it is not told? Actually, a story does not become a story unless someone listens to it or reads it. (Pavlić 2021: 123)

Though often disfranchised in their social position, these people still possess authority over their life story and the competence to tell it in a tragic, humorous, or mixed mode, depending on the context, occasion, or their interlocutor. One of the numerous personal narratives that illustrate the paradoxical twistedness of life’s facts and affective states in the gray area of the daily struggle for survival recounts the episode of a peasant from Zrinski Brđani at Šamarica (Zrin Mountain). He was genuinely relieved to receive a positive result of the second (PCR) test for Covid at the hospital in Sisak, because he feared that without a serious diagnosis, he would have to pay for a taxi to take him back to his isolated village:

“You know, I had Covid about a month ago,” M. tells us. “Trouble really never comes alone. I was running a high fever, so they transferred me to Sisak. They did a test, and it was negative. Then a tall doctor came to see me and asked if I had had a regular or a quick test. I said it was one of those quick ones. Well, that’s not right, the quick test won’t do, you should do a regular one, the doctor told me, not wearing any kind of mask. He explained he was immune to Covid (...) And I just kept thinking how I would get home, because the vehicle that

¹⁸ During family gatherings, as they remembered the “great event,” my interlocutors would often start to cry while relating the generosity of the volunteers, especially the football fans, who came to their aid on the very same day.

brought me to Sisak was long gone. God, it's getting dark already, so how will I get home if they don't keep me overnight?! (...) After that, the doctor came back and told me I did have Covid. So, I say to him "Well, thank God I do, so I don't have to think about how I'm going to get back home!" (Pavlič 2021: 67)

This conversational sequence is told in the form of a short story with a sudden twist and happy ending, marked by economy of language and performativity of telling; the dialogical units have been faithfully transmitted and "performed," and suspense is achieved by means of quick-paced storytelling, whereas the dramatic moments (the fear of testing negative and taking a taxi home) are rendered as a lively inner monologue of the teller. However, the "secret ingredient" that confirms the aesthetic and cognitive value of this story and highlights the teller's "clever wit balancing between jocularity and seriousness" (Ranke 2018: 124) is dark humor. The expressiveness and black humor of the narrator also reveal the spiritual attitude that superimposes daringness and resilience over fear and caution. The ironic mode is not "newer" than the fairy tale or belief legend, warns Hermann Bausinger, but rather, "as if it were demonstrating that the real world is not new, but simply one of many possible previously known perspectives of the world" (2018: 439)¹⁹. A witty and expressive narrator, like the one cited above, makes us reflect on how "the spirit of creative man" reshapes not only the narrative modes but also the conditions and outcomes of one's own existence (cf. Ranke 2018: 128).

In accordance with "their concept of the good life" (Nussbaum 2019: 63), Banija's peasants equitably share their modest resources with the animals on their farms, as well as with those even more vulnerable and helpless than themselves. Their vitalist attitude is discernible in the stories in which they plead with the structural engineers to assign them the "yellow" instead of the "red sticker" (barcode) so that they would not have to leave their life-threatening estates. To these hardy and proud people, caring for the health of their livestock and farm animals,²⁰ as well as the self-sufficiency and freedom to make decisions about their own lives, are more important than their own safety and the comfort of organized accommodations:

I talk to people. During the day, they stay in their containers afraid that some "rebuilding commission" will come and, if they find them inside the houses with yellow and red stickers, they will not receive funds for renovation. At night, they sleep in these houses, because the campervans and containers are hard to keep warm. (Pavlič 2021: 111)

There are many such emotional stories of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) of the people devoid of illusion, eccentric and resilient people who resist both life's hardships and the attempts to sentimentalize or ethnically or politically manipulate their

¹⁹ More recent theories about laughter similarly stress that it is related to the "fundamental evolutionary parameter of survival of the human species: our ability to notice the errors, irregularities and deviations from the previously established logic of deduction" (Govedić 2012: 5).

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum reminds us that children's attachment to and care for animals is often in adult age supplanted by the teaching that "human beings are the only sources of intrinsic value" (2019: 451).

social suffering (cf. Kleinman 1989, Renault 2010). There are also many informal practices, instances of improvisation, illegal construction and dealings, noncompliance with regulations, and distrust of state institutions, which anthropologist Christan Giordano terms “the social logic of informality” (2015: 123–133). I will only mention a problem I came across in most of the villages concerning the people who were not registered residents in the area prior to December 29, 2020, which is a prerequisite for being able to submit a formal earthquake damage report. Transgenerational memory of the practices of living with extended family and mobile dwelling in the Military Frontier, along with the socialist boom of illegal construction, is at the root of unresolved ownership relations and the chaotic state of land registries. Among other reasons, lacking or missing ownership documentation is structurally slowing down the implementation of the action plan to remove and rebuild earthquake-stricken buildings.²¹

Unfit dwellings, unfinished structures, and recent ruins, as well as the failure of life projects, in addition to several generations of the same family residing under the same roof, all undoubtedly contribute to a sense of defeat, resignation, and “slow death” (Berlant 2011: 95–119) saddling the elderly families in these deserted villages. The emotionally charged part of my conversation with a woman in her sixties in the village of Borojevići took place because she mistook my husband for her cousin, who had not visited for some time, combined with the fact that the elderly couple rarely receives visits from their daughter and grandchildren who live in Slavonia. Her monologue, which combines “hope for a good life” with “the history of sentimentality around children” (Berlant 2011: 171), is, in fact, a nostalgic reminiscence about a brighter past:

If only there were young people around, it would take years off you! It would give us greater hope. If you don't have hope, it's rough. If there are no children playing ball and shouting, youth riding bicycles, laughing, and playing music and all that, to me that's a deserted village. (...) It is all lovely for you in passing, but if you had to get up day and night to this lovely loneliness, you would think differently. (*Desanka*, 12 August 2021)

This conversational sequence is also presented in the form of a short story with a coda signaling a rounded narrative and the poetic figure of loveliness-loneliness (employing a neologism “divnoća” in order to achieve a rhythmic, poetic effect). Performative traits such as pauses, sighs, and exclamations contribute to the literary value of this hypothetical narrative. The coda is also formulated as a punctum of a constructed dialogue, with me as an empathetic interlocutor who “conceals” her position of power, by which the narrator also assumes the position of a social critic. The ethical relationship of unequal parties in a conversation, as well as the ethno-

²¹ According to the data of the Solidarna Foundation, about 89 per cent of commercial objects and 20 per cent of houses in the Sisak-Moslavina County do not have the proper building permits. Cf. <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/potros/solidarna-i-rotary-planiraju-do-zime-na-banovini-sagraditi-11-protupotresnih-kuca--655824.html> (accessed 1. 2. 2021.).

graphic eliciting of powerful emotions, is a problematic point when considering the “therapeutic effect” of narrating about one’s life. However much the personal stories “are shaped to ensure a coherent, authentic personal identity amid the chaos of daily life,” they are equally burdened by “the fragmentation of experience, and the blurring of personal and more than personal” (Shuman 2005: 151). Often, performing the personal story in front of a stranger means “the reshaping of experience through the artful deployment of narrative patterns and invented dialogue in the spontaneous voiced text” (Borland 2021: 40).

To Touch, to Hear, to Feel: Concluding Remarks

I borrowed the title of my paper (*To Touch, to Hear, to Feel*) from Zagreb psychiatrist Dragan Puljić, who was one of the first experts to help the residents of Petrinja. His words neatly correspond to Bendix’s concept of “the ethnography of listening” (Bendix 2000). Based on his experience of working with the most traumatized inhabitants in the early days after the earthquake, he concluded:

Yes, I am a psychiatrist, but even I am not an expert on human suffering. (...) One should be honest and look people in the eye. (...) One should hear, see, and touch. That is all the wisdom there is. (...) Medications are not the key. We prescribe them in maybe 10 percent of cases. (...) They do not need any psychologization, they just need to be seen, heard, and touched. They just need the presence of another person. (...) They seem frozen on the outside, but, inside, their experience is very intense. Paradoxically. It is such a high degree of suffering that we have no right to play experts. One should feel that one is not alone. (Puljić 2021)

My experience from the field is very similar to the description of “every person in Banija [having] her or his own story, not only one, but many” (Kljaić 2021: 20), just waiting for a tectonic disturbance, either geo- or sociological, that would, similar to the liquefaction of fine sand, “expel” these stories to the surface from the depths of their wounded being. When the world is in disarray and time out of joint, space opens up for creativity, empathy, and “sensory democracy.”

I realized that to the people living on the geographical and social margins material aid is not the most important thing. The fact that they became interlocutors, followers, and contacts of journalists, volunteers, or researchers who included them in their social networks, and rendered them relevant speakers about their own future, meant a lot more to them.²² Or perhaps this is only my superficial impression, the

²² In developed countries such as Japan, a similar phenomenon known as *kodokushi* presents a serious societal problem, being described as: “the process by which a large number of people die in the most absolute loneliness in their homes, their death being unknown for a while and usually being found days or weeks later due to the odors of decomposition.” <https://en.yestherapyhelps.com/kodokushi-the-wave-of-solitary-deaths-ravaging-japan-15215> (accessed 1. 2. 2021.).

fancies of a naïve advocate of “self-effacing ethnography” (cf. Jambrešić Kirin 2021), who, with a small offering of material assistance, approaches everyone with the same everyday questions of *How are you? How did you endure all that? How do you live these days?*

This essay has attempted to outline the answers to only a handful of the numerous questions that have arisen and continue to arise for me in the field(s) of Banija/Banovina. For instance: Have the countless reports about “the ordinary people” from Banija, in the contentious media “domain of representation where humanization and dehumanization occur ceaselessly” (Butler 2004: 140), really empowered their voices against the hegemonic discourses of political players who blindly abide by the guidelines and demands of the EU (cf. Asad 2015)? Will the media’s hunger for the latest spectacle of human misfortune push out the interest in the devastated “Banija house” in the vicinity? Has the shared experience of thousands of subsequent tremors reshaped the residents of Central Croatia into an affective community that uses “sensory democracy”²³ to articulate “the art of revolt” and the political demands for a change of legislature on reconstruction and faster rebuilding? In what sense is direct and online exchange of opinions²⁴ about (egalitarian) life values and moral principles of a community a true alternative to “narratives about roots, native soil or the cultural attachment to a landscape” (Jansen 2020a: 9)? Is the ethnographic tribute to the narrative authority of a person from Banija truly a contribution to the social effort to build a better local community and a more democratic society on the ruins of an antagonistic culture of the post-war period? What do cultural theorists read from the fact that Danilo Kiš’s “condensed novel about an ordinary Yugoslav man” in the titular story from *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* centers on a Banija resident from the emblematic Komogovina (cf. Thompson 2021: 120–22)?²⁵ How important are Banija’s folklore and literary heritage (cf. Kirin and Vrga 2021), aesthetic communication, and culture for the recognisability of a region and for the identity of its living, as well as deceased inhabitants?²⁶ Can narratives “polished as though by generations of telling” (Thompson 2021: 127), in which folk beliefs, metaphysical aspirations, and the quest for a quiet coexistence of different religious and ethnic communities, in turn, shape the social ideal to which we aspire? Are the ability of “attuned” listening (Bendix 2000) and the art of storytelling “our last remaining democratic spaces,” helping us “to stay sane in an age of division” (Shafak 2020)?

23 Political scientists underline the necessity of taking a step back from “senseless democracy” not capable of producing meaningful political involvement towards “sensory democracy” that emphasizes “the role of ‘watching’ and ‘listening’ within sociopolitical relationships (Ryan and Flinders 2018: 133).

24 On communication and other strategies of resolving social problems in communities built around antagonistic cultures, compare Douglas and Ney 2003: 105–132. On the importance of war narratives for the understanding of invisible borders and unarticulated points of contention in “troubled locations” in the region, cf. Jansen 2020a: 67–95.

25 Mark Thompson reveals that Kiš modeled the story on the biography of Đuro Miočinović, the father of Mirjana Miočinović, Kiš’s first wife (Thompson 2021: 114–124).

26 Cf. the excellent poem by Monika Herceg titled *Pokojnici u gradu čija zemlja pomiče njihov vječni san* [*The dead in a city whose land moves their eternal dream*] from the recital *Grad po mjeri čovjeka koji može voljeti* [*A city tailored to a person capable of love*] (Petrijnja, 6 November 2021), available on the *book&zvook* audiobook mobile application.

What we are able to conclude is that personal narratives about the experience of the natural disaster have empowered the inhabitants of devastated areas in their regional supraethnic identity. A civil regeneration of Banija residents occurred, with them assuming the roles of citizens, not as members of a particular ethnic or social group. Their criticism of the partitocratic model of the reconstruction is turning them into *rebels* rather than social *outcasts*. The readiness of a wider community to hear them, offer them concrete aid, but also, to include them in the networks of solidarity and social economy;²⁷ has endorsed them as individuals possessed of personal dignity. The ability to recognize one's own misery in the misfortune of others prompted "processes through which something seemingly private and isolating can also help to shape a wider collective – which by nature is both public and political" (Hutchison 2016: 12–13). The personalized, concrete aid from the citizens was a response to the specific needs of "the people from containers." At the same time, private donations helped to build approximately fifty substitute and permanent residential structures. This was aided by the publication of emotional life stories establishing direct contact between the afflicted families and the donors, but also by the power of imagination, to recognize the vulnerability of others as a trait of their universal humanity. The recent death of the elderly woman Ljuba Obradović²⁸ from the village of Donji Klasnić when her rundown house caught fire turned her tragic fate into a parable of the (dis)appearance of the local "red man" of the "second-hand time" with their "notions about good and evil, about heroes and martyrs" (Alexievich 2013: 9). The news prompted a flood of empathetic comments, becoming a fact of local history.

Reading Banija narratives as a teleogenetic plot of the national story allowed them to be interpreted in the sense that the natural disaster has produced a (positive) social reshuffling, heralding a shift in the treatment of developmental socioeconomic inequalities between rural and urban areas, the capital and other regions (cf. Obad 2020). At least temporarily, the dominant national narrative about historical and social animosities was supplanted by the story of civil unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding in opposition to the political elite's need for power. A profound connection between the space of dwelling and the space of telling, the space of wild thought that defies the dominant narratives about the good life and dignified death, is a source of obstinate perseverance and adaptability of the rural population of Banija and Banovina. Their ability to adapt to difficult existential and environmental

27 Citizens initiatives Ljudi za ljude, Solidarna Foundation, Dobro Dobrim DoDo Associations and several others build networks of solidarity and connect buyers with agricultural producers from Banija based on the sustainable model "from field to table."

28 In the past year, countless video reports and news articles have been produced about grandma Ljuba Obradović, turning her into the 'poster boy' of the hidden, abandoned, and miserable Banija, which her stubborn "natives" refuse to leave. She was killed in a fire on 1 February 2022, which was covered by various news portals: "On Tuesday, trenching through mud, because there is no road to Ljuba's house, these same people found the remains of her home. The modest elderly woman who spent her life in poverty, refusing to leave her rundown shack and abandon her native land, is still missing. Her stubborn cat is missing too. There is nobody around." Cf. <https://365dana.info/2022/02/02/izgorijela-je-kuca-bake-ljube-o-njoj-jos-nema-vijesti-puhovi-joj-vise-nikad-nece-remetiti-san/> (accessed 15. 2. 2022.).

conditions is in stark contrast to the conformist urban feeling of (in)security and anxiety. Genuine care for ecological sustainability and the rage caused by vile forest exploitation and deposits of all types of waste in their native land tie them to other *alterglobalists*. The crucial point that I have acquired from this (unfinished) study is the realization that the experiences of disaster and borderline states do not necessarily lead to trauma but rather may increase our capacity to learn, mature, and change our mindsets. Narrative practices as a powerful means of (re)shaping reality and experience are a reflection of what philosopher Catherine Malabou termed “brain plasticity.” This neuro-cultural metaphor interprets the ability of our cognitive apparatus to adapt to difficult existential circumstances and harsh environments as the ability to create and empower:

As if we know more about what we can *endure* than about what we can *create*. Accordingly, true brain plasticity comes down to finding out what the brain can *do*, not just what it can tolerate. (Malabou 2010 [2004])

Philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva believes that “the possibility of transformation ... makes us universally human in its spiritual-ethical sense” and that we mostly “learn through water and its phasing.”²⁹ What she describes as “deep implicancy” is “the primordial moment of entanglement prior to the separation of matter evolving into the planet we know.” A myth-like view of the world as a “single mass of human and [...] non-human elements” (da Silva and Neuman 2018). It is precisely this myth-like sense of profound unity with nature and all its particles that is the organizing principle in the stories about one’s own life, in a way that makes “the allegorical personal, the cosmological local” (Shuman 2005).

While traveling through Banija/Banovina landscapes last summer, two perspectives blended – one that offered a visual and bird’s-eye poetics of the soil in which sinkholes, faults, and other traces of “the new geological rumblings of the planet” surfaced, followed by drone shots that are already part of the collective memory of the Croatian earthquake – and the other, a semantic and sensory perspective, marked by a face-to-face encounter and the excitement of an old man looking forward to my return to his village, so that he could start telling a story right at the gates of his house. I dedicate these verses from Derek Jarman’s film *Blue* to him:

*One can know the whole world
Without stirring abroad
Without looking out of the window
One can see the way of heaven
The further one goes
The less one knows
(Jarman, Blue 1993/94).*

Translated by Andrea Rožić

²⁹ The comparison of life’s unpredictability, variability, and elusiveness with the flux and flowing of rivers or sailing through rough seas, is one of the oldest in the history of storytelling.

 COMMENTS

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Disaster, Subjecthood, and Empathic Listening

Renata Jambrešić Kirin has provided ample food for thought about a complex set of relations and paradoxes that emerge when disaster strikes. Her portrait of the self-fashioning Banija/Banovina residents and the ways they have been reimagined by a Croatian national audience is compelling and timely. I want to extend her observations by offering comparative materials from my hemisphere. In North American folklore, the emblematic case for the role of narrative in disasters is Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005 and laid bare the ongoing injustices Black residents face due to state neglect and social stereotyping. Pat Jasper and Carl Lindahl's "kitchen table" methodology trained survivors who had relocated to Houston to interview each other, capturing their perspectives while at the same time offering opportunities for empathic connection (2006). In his published work on the Survivors of Hurricane Katrina in Houston project, Lindahl (2012) argues that the prior stigmatization of the people affected (because they are Black and poor) resulted in unequal access to and control over narrative constructions of events. Media "truths" prevailed, resulting in additional deaths and greater victimization of survivors. Lindahl references Rebecca Solnit's (2009) work on the temporary utopias created in the immediate aftermath of disasters to underscore the ways that community-led disaster response during Katrina brought out the best in people because the dispersed, on-the-ground, human-to-human approach feeds a human need for social connection and mutual care. Jambrešić Kirin points to a similar phenomenon in Banija/Banovina with this difference: a formerly stigmatized group became a potent national symbol of survival *because the media picked up and transmitted their stories* instead of rehashing old stereotypes. She asks whether narratives of hope amidst the ruins and the solidarity they engender might be the "teleogenetic plot of the long-term social drama" that will move the polity toward civic unity across rural/urban divides. Whereas such unity across differences may be difficult to sustain over the longer term, I agree with Jambrešić Kirin that, as ethnographers, we should document these powerful moments of grassroots solidarity not only to create a lasting

record but also, as Jambrešić Kirin suggests, to participate in the project of thinking differently, of simultaneously reimagining and enacting the good life with our interlocutors.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the enormity of the government failure to adequately respond to the crisis precipitated an outpouring of solidarity missions. Yet despite these early interventions, the new beginning for New Orleans after the floods was predicated on removing its poor Black residents to make way for a whiter, wealthier city (Elie 2019). What is notable in the Croatian case, as Jambrešić Kirin eloquently demonstrates, is the way that outsider reporters/ responders refigure elderly, rural subjects of an ethnically-marked border zone from traumatized victims to self-reliant subjects, whose struggle to overcome the assaults of nature have become emblematic for a broader constellation of Croatian citizens, wearied by the failure of post-socialist neoliberalism to fulfill their desires.

This collective refiguring of the marginalized peasant brings to mind another Christmas earthquake in a similar geographic periphery. On December 23, 1972, the capital city of Nicaragua was flattened, killing thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands without shelter. At the time, the country was ruled by a ruthless family dictatorship, which was working to stamp out small groups of armed rebels. Anastasio Somoza, the elder, was known to have crowed, "I don't want an educated population; I want oxen," an apt encapsulation of his disregard for the impoverished peasant majority of Nicaragua (Holloway 2011, 408). But it was the kleptocracy of Anastasio, the younger, who siphoned off the aid flooding the country after the earthquake, that turned the populace definitively against his regime. In 1972, people were forced to rely on each other to dig themselves and their loved ones out of the ruins (Walker 2003).

A mere six years later, the country was galvanized by spontaneous insurrections in the indigenous-identified neighborhoods of Masaya in the south and Leon in the north. The Indian, who until then had been viewed as an atavistic holdover, stoic in his subjection, was suddenly leading the movement for change. With Somoza's departure on July 17, 1979, the country witnessed a brief flowering of people's power. Campaigns to tackle myriad social problems--extending literacy in 1980, eradicating measles, subsequently--succeeded through mass mobilizations of the citizenry. Simultaneously, the country experienced a flowering of the arts: poetry, painting, and festive enactments. All this activity drew international admiration, inspiring countless first-world pilgrims to flock to the country, offering their assistance and technical expertise in service to a nascent social revolution. These solidarity activists were shocked when a mere ten years later, the noble, self-determining Nicaraguan peasants turned their backs on the revolutionary experiment and voted for a U.S.-backed, neoliberal regime that promised to end the ongoing civil war.

I offer this brief summary of a forgotten place as perhaps a closer comparison than Katrina of the ways that marginalized subjects 1) become self-actualizing in response to catastrophe, 2) are revalued by influential outsiders, leading to 3) improved self-image that further empowers them to act 4) and subsequently must

struggle against outsiders' "fixed" expectations of them as a condition for their ongoing solidarity. Shortly after the 1990 regime change in Nicaragua, photographer Susan Meiselas, who had documented the 1979 revolution, returned to the country to track down her former photographic subjects. In that different socio-historical moment, some went so far as to deny that they were the person depicted in her album. Her film, *Pictures from a Revolution* is an extended lament focusing on her own sense of loss, confusion, and betrayal as ordinary Nicaraguans moved from a position of boundless hope to bitter resignation. A decade later, another pair of outsider videographers, journalists Peter Raymont and Bill Gentile, retraced their 1988 journey through war-torn Nicaragua to find out how Nicaraguans they had met during the Contra War were navigating their postwar reality. The pair were shocked to find instances of former Contras and former Sandinistas making common cause against a new regime of indifference toward the rural peasant. In both cases, the solidarity activists, invested in confirming their own ideas about peasant revolutionaries, initially failed to recognize the flexible positioning of peasant-subjects and the ongoingness of life in the countryside. Perspectives shift for those who are living the reality. As a consequence of this oversight, the record that outsiders produced in the post-revolutionary moment is not as aligned to the peasant's need for self-determination as the one they had produced in an earlier moment. The Nicaraguan case suggests that cataclysmic change must be supported by ongoing, slow activism that fits into and supports the quotidian rather than upending it. Today, Daniel Ortega, the former revolutionary leader, is once again in charge, but his stance regarding the Nicaraguan people now aligns with Somoza, the elder. Once again, youthful movements for self-determination are met with violent repression by their putative leaders.

The inhabitants of Banija/Banovina, it appears, are experiencing their moment of recognition. Marginal figures isolated by age, ethnicity, and geography from a nation increasingly oriented toward Europe, they are also close to the land, nonconformist, working in subsistence and/or underground economies detached from the national norm. In this sense, they easily fill the slot of a Croatian local character, a contemporary equivalent to the idea of a national folk (Borland 2022). Jambrešić Kirin's emphasis on self-fashioning in their media portraits brings to mind the Freirian (1970[1967]) and Boalian (1993[1974]) concepts of personal liberation tied to a collective struggle for justice. To what degree, I wonder, are the journalists and folklorists who are working in solidarity with the residents of Banija/Banovina functioning as facilitators of this liberatory project? After all, without the respectful reception of their stories, their endurance, black humor, and willful nonconformity would not have been embraced and amplified as emblematic of an alternative narrative of what it means to be Croatian.

Jambrešić Kirin rightly argues that material needs are subordinate to the search for meaning, purpose, and the opportunity to decide for oneself what the good life is. I am reminded of economist Amartya Sen's definition of development as the freedom to choose one's life according to one's own priorities, a freedom that is predicated on greater access to education, human rights protections, and more democratic

systems of governance. Meanwhile, political theorists, recognizing that the ability to speak and be heard is not (and probably never was) available to most citizens of contemporary democracies, are moving toward a notion of democracy as a form of deep listening, a sensory democracy that recognizes the agency of political audiences as well as political actors (Ryan and Flinders 2018). This attention to the audience and the ways that listening well to one's subject empowers them to speak coordinates with Regina Bendix's call for a broadening of the ethnographic project to include participatory sensing, not only as a means of documenting the occasions of performance more fully but also to recognize our own role as ethnographers in the ongoingness we document (Bendix 2000). Our responsiveness to the residents of Banija/Banovina or to any other marginalized group who have been ignored, maligned, or neglected is a political act that resonates with and supports the imagining otherwise these subjects are voicing. The importance of these moments of empathic connection cannot be overstated.

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How to Detect an Earthquake's Emancipatory Aftershocks?

Returning to Banija/Banovina and to her core interest in narration, in this moving article Renata Jambrešić Kirin (hereafter RJK) displays the erudition and analytical versatility that we have come to expect from her. As elsewhere, her writing is rich and suggestive, opening up a broad set of issues. For the purpose of this conversation, I will address, step-by-step, only a few components of what I believe to be her (cumulative) argument in the hope that my selectivity will be complemented by that of other contributors.

A first step revolves around the empowering potential of the very act of narration of one's suffering. Of course, narration can also foster frustration, self-pity, and self-victimizing paralysis. But, as RJK shows, when occurring in certain conditions, narrating their predicament can help people to organize knowledge, develop explanatory frameworks, and affirm their subjectivity in a communicative process of mutual recognition. An encounter with a compassionate ethnographer may constitute such favorable conditions. More generally, the author suggests that a key factor concerns visibility and audibility, which leads her to account for the role of mass and "social" media. As she points out, after the 2020 earthquake the mostly elderly residents of the rural sections of Banija were "suddenly invited to speak out" about their struggles and hardships. Up to then, they had been pretty much absent from the map for

most other people in Croatia, despite living only a one to two hours' drive from the center of Zagreb. Now intense media interest "restored their stature and their voice" – in other words, it made them visible and audible to fellow citizens, and it gave them a sense that they *were* visible and audible to those others. In that way, in RJK's words, their "narrative power of eloquent self/representation overnight turned them into our compatriots and contemporaries." Indeed, she states that this acquired status of interlocutors, of "relevant speakers about their own future" was more important to them than material aid.

RJK draws attention to the specificity of the eloquence of these interlocutors. It is infused, we are told, with "formulaic expressions, catchphrases, wise observations and rich metaphors based in oral literary tradition." The example of the story of Big Đuro and Baby Đuro is provided, as are passing references to the claims of other authors, but this promising argument remains elliptical. Rather than *stating that* her Banovina interlocutors displayed a "fundamentally folkloristic attitude," my learning as a reader could have been enhanced by *showing how* this emerged in ethnographic encounters. The more striking examples we get now are hardly folkloristic, even if some are really witty, such as one featuring a man's expression of relief that his positive Covid test at Sisak hospital meant he did not need to worry about transport back to his house. As RJK argues, there is both narrative authority and narrative competence here in a sharp, ironic mode.

A second step in the author's argumentation concerns an interesting social effect of the mutual recognition made possible by that post-earthquake invitation for people from Banija to speak for themselves. The territory of today's Sisačka-moslavačka županija has long housed an ethnonationally diverse population with roughly 50/50 proportions of people identifying as Croats/Catholics and as Serbs/Orthodox, with the latter predominant in the rural southern hills. The displacements of the 1990s war and its aftermath eventually shifted these proportions to about 80/20. During the last decades, then, on the rare occasions when Banovina, and especially its more rural parts, made a media appearance, ethnonationality featured prominently. Yet, the earthquake, RJK states, sparked collective action that entailed "the making of new affective communities." This allowed the emergence of an alternative "regional supraethnic identity," even a "civil regeneration." On the one hand, a shared predicament, caused by a disaster considered to be of non-human origin, enabled the non-political self-positioning of people in Banija as suffering, yet dignified individuals, indiscriminately struck by mighty, capricious Nature. Yet, on the other hand, we learn that such depoliticization was accompanied by a degree of repoliticization, which RJK traces in a register of solidarity and critique of institutions and political functionaries. From "social outcasts" reduced to their ethnonational identity, she writes, these people became "rebels" against the ethnonationally compartmentalized partocracy that, yet again, showed its inadequacy in the institutional response to the earthquake.

The nature and the degree of this shift are at the heart of what I identify as a third step in this article, addressing the political (some might say "cosmopolitical") impli-

cations of the emergence of Banovina peasants as public enunciators of legitimate narration beyond the ethnonational. Here RJK's writing is, perhaps inevitably, more tentative, as shown in her frequent use of the term "possible" and in the fact that many of the passages addressing such issues are phrased as questions. Yet, overall, she clearly wishes to emphasize the emancipatory ("affirmative") dimension of the narrations she encountered in Banija. This is reflected in her title, as well as in her alignment with certain strands of affect theory. Interestingly, RJK suggests that narration allowed her interlocutors to develop a "teleogenetic plot," i.e., a retrospective reworking of the earthquake as an event that "produced a (positive) social reshuffling, heralding a shift in the treatment of developmental socioeconomic inequalities." Noting sharp contrasts with war narratives, which she addressed in some of her well-known earlier studies, ultimately, RJK formulates a rather strong claim here, speaking of a "catharsis of the transitional social drama." What this amounts to, I think, is a suggestion that the post-earthquake narratives from Banovina documented in this text herald some kind of rupture, or at least that they contain the possibility of such a rupture.

So, what exactly is coming to an end here, according to the author? In my reading, this would be a conjuncture that we may refer to as predominantly postwar and postsocialist. And which new start does RJK detect? A key term here seems to be "sustainability." The author repeatedly emphasizes the "myth-like sense of profound unity with nature" among Banija peasants. This she reconnects to folklore and to religious frameworks of meaning, morality, and dignity. Unfortunately, we are not given insight into the everyday practices and subsistence strategies of her interlocutors, nor are we really introduced to the moral repertoires they invoke. As a reader, I would have benefited from some inductive argumentation in which RJK would work closely through ethnographic material, for example on their agricultural labor and on the ways in which folklore inspires those individuals' narratives about their activities, about life and death, about people and (the rest of) nature. As it is, we have to take her word for it. This is easily done where she refers to the resilience and adaptability that marks her interlocutors "in stark contrast to the conformist urban feeling of (in)security and anxiety." Indeed, I appreciate that RJK shows a desire to move away from more "sentimental and parochial" celebrations of resilience. Yet as the grandson of a farmer and the nephew of three farmers (true, far from Banovina) I find it requires somewhat more goodwill on this reader's part to nod along with the statement that "genuine care for ecological sustainability" renders these people critics of "consumer capitalism" akin to other "alterglobalists." Let me be clear: I would very much like this to be the case. And, in this text, I would have liked the author to show me empirically how it was indeed the case.

Nevertheless, despite such remaining ethnographic hunger on my part, I found RJK's offerings highly suggestive and stimulating of further lines of inquiry. To close this comment, I will turn to two of those.

The first concerns the temporal dimension of the "affirmative" argument, which leads me to reflect on the significance of melancholy in many anthropological de-

tections of emancipatory potential. In some passages RJK qualifies her optimism, speaking of possibilities of critique and sustainability that appeared “at least for a (short) while,” “at least temporarily.” So, what about the longer term? From our current vantage point, can we detect any longer term at all for the Banija exemplified by her interlocutors? The population of today’s Sisačko-Moslavačka županija reached its numerical peak in 1931. Losing a considerable part of its population in WWII violence, its predominantly rural part, where the research was conducted, was no doubt considered a “pasivni kraj” in Yugoslav socialist times, with many people leaving subsistence farming and moving to urbanized centers. Devastated again in the 1990s war, Banovina came to exemplify the population decline of the “subsidized region.” In the last three decades, first due to successive war-time expulsions, then to limited return (especially, but not only, of Serbs), and then as part of the recently intensified exodus from Croatia, the županija has lost about 44% of its population. This raises questions of social reproduction. RJK’s interlocutors are overwhelmingly elderly people, and the chances that any of their children will inhabit their homesteads seem minimal. Who or what are these peasants being resilient *for*? Who will continue their “sustainable” way of life, and how? Who could continue it even if they wanted to? An interlocutor like Desanka from Borojevići is clearly aware of this predicament, as she explicitly makes the link between children and hope when she speaks of her “deserted village”: “If only there were young people around, it would take years off you! It would give us greater hope.” Perhaps then we should read RJK’s text as a eulogy for a *past* way of life. Such a retrospective gaze, affirmatively reconstructing the fullness and meaningfulness of ways of life that are expiring is, of course, common in ethnology and anthropology, and this does not mean no emancipatory inspiration can be drawn from it. Yet this is affirmation in the melancholic key, which poses the question of possible applicability in totally different spatiotemporal configurations.

For me, a second line of inquiry was sparked by RJK’s insightful comments on the forging of mutual recognition through shared human vulnerability. Here I wonder about the specificity of the particular disaster that struck Banija. Is an earthquake particularly likely to ignite mutual recognition between human beings who are reminded of their generic smallness by a gigantic seismic event? Perhaps earthquakes are experienced as among the more *natural* of natural disasters, as, to my knowledge at least, it is difficult to identify human actions in their causality. Awe at the arbitrary might of Nature is probably the more common affect it evokes. RJK suggestively weaves her text around ways in which this can nevertheless feed into political critique. Perhaps we could extend her explorations in relation to the idea of the “anthropocene,” where “nature” is considered to be irrevocably co-conditioned by human action. Comparatively, we could ask which different emancipatory potential could be drawn from the aftermaths of, for example, floods. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, catastrophic floods have been met with a similar reduction of the ethnonational focus, at least “for a while,” through “recognition of the vulnerability of others,” acknowledged as a universal human trait. Yet these floods have also com-

plicated our thinking about “natural disasters.” Floods, and their causal links to, for example, deforestation, the spread of asphalt cover, waterway management, all the way to carbon emissions, force us to address how humans can be both victims of and (often unwitting) agents of destruction and deterioration. This brings back in human action and its (un)intended consequences, always in highly stratified ways: if an extractive paradigm of nature underlies consumer capitalism, or indeed all of modernism, it remains important to acknowledge, as RJK suggests, that human beings do not *equally* participate in it, contribute to it, and profit from it. In that way, we can further deepen the critical lessons to be learned from more or less “natural” disasters beyond victimization and resilience.

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Fear Comes with Large Eyes, Pain with a Small Mouth, and Empathy with Big Ears? Or: The Potential of a Teleogenetic Plot as an Incident of Consecutive Reality

For me, Banija was a landscape I experienced only through the media until September 2021, when I visited the region as a researcher and “brushed up” against it affectively. This is a place of numerous devastating traumas caused by wars, political mismanagement, and natural disasters. These are well-known facts that, although apparently self-evident, complicate researching the causes, sequence, and consequences of the aforementioned devastations. This is due not only to the challenge of creating a communication context, as is the case with researching all “difficult” topics, in which we as researchers can serve as empathetic listeners, unobtrusive witnesses of someone else’s story, which they have a hard time narrating (and which is even impossible to narrate to some extent). The problem is much more complex, and it is necessary to examine it from the perspective of the emotional registers that encourage and manage research.

From a (self-)reflexive humanities research position, the physical, and consequently the emotional and cognitive presence in a region of “unimaginable” deprivation and devastation, “only sixty kilometers from the capital metropolis” seems complex for several reasons. It is complex because of the primordial fear of encountering and confronting human suffering. It is complex because it comes with a great discomfort caused by the inevitable colonization of other people’s pain, suffering, and trauma, after which the visitor has to return “ashamed” to their “warm home” or their “comfortable academic cubbyhole.” It is also complex because one is aware of the very modest impact of one’s own epistemology on the “real” world and the future

course of other people's pain, suffering, and trauma. It is complex also because it requires dealing with the local religious, national, political, interest, and other relationships that caused pain or hindered healing, and becomes more complicated when it meets the researcher's "preferences," which would ideally either be suppressed for the benefit of everyone or kept quiet on some of them. Conducting research in Banija while encountering other people's pain is also difficult because of the problems of how appropriate it is to say something about the encounter with human suffering if one can even find the courage and wisdom and overcome discomfort. It is also difficult because one has to endure the uneasiness of knowing that the observer will inevitably romanticize human resilience, which, though undeniable, is only a reflection of the cruel necessity that popular wisdom defines as "between a rock and a hard place." It is especially difficult to imagine a future for a suffering person, to encourage that person to imagine it themselves or to narratively shape their imagination.

From a methodological, epistemological, and primarily from a human point of view, it is necessary to take into account that, as warned by Emmanuel Levinas (1988: 156), even when we are ready to experience insight into other people's suffering, we are always in danger of failing to attach sufficient meaning to the suffering we are witnessing or think we are witnessing. We can very easily overlook someone's suffering and translate it into diverse emotional registers due to the context and genre in which the suffering is communicated, even if we try to understand (and imagine) its past and imagine its effects in the future. Despite this, as people, even ones with a research agenda, or even as people who have a radically blurred research and private perspective, we offer various ethical, emotional, narrative, and, ultimately, epistemological responses to the alarm of human pain and suffering.

In the lead text by Renata Jambrešić Kirin, the borderline or extreme positions at our disposal in the encounter with other people's suffering are precisely stated: for example, the position of "professional self-gratification" or the position of regret arising from the fact that our profession does not have a greater social role. "Self-effacing ethnography" (Jambrešić Kirin 2021 and in the lead text) or the similar "ethnography of care" (Vukušić 2021) which, although difficult to systematize as "institutionalized" methods, are found between, on the one hand, the idea of the insurmountable antagonism of pain and human suffering and, on the other, language and the idea of pain and suffering as experiences that, although they call into question language and communication, are very strongly related to language and expression. Asking an interlocutor, "How are you doing?" (or a similar question), although banal, is the basis of the ethically responsible research ethnography of Banija and similar deprived and ruined areas. This is not the skillful management of the narrative context, as discussed by William Labov, who started conversations with questions that open up possibilities for stories that are worth telling, i.e., stories that are more pointed (cf. Labov 1984: 56). It is also of not a case in which we are simply trying to avoid "discourse directed to someone outside of the immediate peer group of the speaker" (Labov 1984: 46) or simply trying to get rid of the ballast of the research situation (ibid.), which some folklore research can legitimately aim for. It

is about the fact that this position enables the pain and suffering felt by our interlocutors to be seen as an essential experience of language. Pain and suffering are the essential experience of language, and this is due to a failure of articulated language available to the latent story of suffering and pain and because, on the one hand, interlocutors who are suffering have the urge to express their pain and suffering, and on the other hand, there is an inability to say anything about pain and suffering, to describe it or convey it (cf. Freber 2019: 145). Despite the difficulties of “forcing” pain and suffering into language, the lead text of Renata Jambrešić Kirin shows that the pain and suffering of the Banija people require expression because, by the nature of things, their articulation is impossible, but not necessarily in an antagonistic manner through a comprehensive and destructive confrontation. Ilit Ferber notes that the fierce antagonism between pain and language shows that pain is most accurately defined in relation to language, and language is manifested in relation to the experience of pain (ibid.: 145–146). Therefore, when meeting the people of Banija who have experienced “indescribable” suffering for the umpteenth time, we are not necessarily talking only about the narratives that are created on the ruins of language, on its fragments and debris. Still, the disharmony and antagonism between language and pain guarantee the power of language and the possibility of expression. I assume that these statements, despite all the mentioned weaknesses and the very idea of such research, deserve our attention (not only attention but care as well).

Likewise, the reflections in the lead text lead us to think that isolation from others caused by pain is not the only consequence of pain. Pain and suffering, regardless of the impaired quality of communication, simultaneously “push” us toward the other, even when they do not evoke clear empathy and a meaningful ethical response. Pain deepens our connection to others and opens up a wide and diverse range of expression, but also a “reading” of pain that is never an innocent act of “following a narrative” (Braid 1996). Despite the difficulties of ethnography of “heavy” topics that touch us deeply as human beings, which we resist at the same time, though they still attract us in spite of and/or because of this, they ethically “castrate” us, they prevent the “ease” of an ethnographic encounter which is complex in any circumstances.

With “large eyes” and “large ears,” as researchers, we have to find a way to listen to those with “small mouths” and to “engage” with Banija and all other difficult and painful places of our interlocutors. We also have to do this by constantly asking “How are you?” as suggested in the lead text, despite the justified criticism that by doing so we diligently “consume other people’s trauma” (cf. Yaeger 2002) and colonize other people’s silence (cf. Freund 2013: 235).

In the end, the answer to that question, the narratives which come from it, are in favor of the idea that what appeared to be a teleogenetic development at the moment of great media and public attention, in actuality, was just another in a series of consecutive events. The media, civic and activist interest in the residents of Banija, which led some to conclude that the earthquake was the best thing that could happen to them¹, is basically over, and it is quite possible that this was a story within a

1 During my field research, I heard this statement several times.

story that was shaped by a complex interplay of pain and suffering on the one hand and compassion on the other. The media fashioned an image of the prototype Banijan as “willful, obstinate, and recalcitrant old folks” (Kljaić 2021: 131 according to Jambrešić Kirin in the lead text) who were condemned to live. Only such a picture could induce tolerable sympathy from the community. The pain and suffering that we, as ethnographers, can “brush up against” and which springs forth from our interlocutors in interpersonal interaction when asked the question “How are you?” is something else entirely. This is the moment when we can see that the background of the narrative involving the “heroes of life,” resilient people, full of humor, the joy of life, and love for their region, etc., also reveals the archetypal story of Philoctetes. This story, in its plentiful variants and interpretations (see Ferber 2019: 17–20), is used as a template for reflecting on the relationship between pain and language, pain and empathy, a person in pain, and a witness to the suffering. The people of Banija suffer the consequences of social and natural adversities in “indescribable” pain and suffering. At the same time, witnesses feel more and more compassion, not necessarily as *something about someone* or *toward someone*, but also as, literally, feeling someone else’s pain.

The personal narratives of the people from Banija do not simply cause a singular, subjective sensation. They also have the potential to cause public, shared pain. Even the image of the Banija household, which does not rely on propositional and communicative language with the intimate bonds which form between interlocutors, constitutes the basis for a community based on empathy. Furthermore, in the stage in which language is “born,” we feel or sympathize with the suffering of others even more strongly and directly (Ferber 2019: 47). This stage of pain is often unbearable for the witness. It forces them to run. Compassion is constituted by an effective dynamic between the intensity of pain and the ability of people affected by the disaster to contain it. “Holding back the tears” and forming a self-narrative of resilience and stubbornness in order to endure hardships become a source of a growing, strong sense of compassion. This does not mean that resilience is a matter of choice and, ultimately, a permanent and actual state of affairs. However, the self-narrative of resilience, through humor and acceptance, can only be seen and made available for an empathic response. Metaphorically speaking, the festering, horrible, devastating Philoctetes wound of the people from Banija is not to be seen. That pain, like many such pains, is condemned to a cry without a response, to suffering in silence, against the background of a difficult, though still “ordinary” life on the periphery of our attention (not only our attention but also our concern). Can humanities such as, for example, folklore studies or cultural anthropology, whose academic discourses are often mixed with literature or activism discourses, do anything with such pain without merely echoing it analytically? We can only hope.

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The lead article by Renata Jambrešić Kirin, “To Touch, to Hear, to Feel. Can Ethnography Dissolve the Narrations of Fear?” results from the recording, reflecting, and interpreting events in the area affected by the earthquake in December 2020 and succeeds in highlighting several current and relevant topics. Although the author’s observations come from specific situations in Banija/Banovina, they point to processes and trends that are common not only outside this region but also beyond Croatian borders. In this review, I will refer to certain issues which correspond with my professional and academic interests, which for the last ten years have been focused on the changes affecting Croatian regions, primarily changes visible in space, in the condition and use of urban and rural settlements, the treatment of regional and local heritage, and quality of life. The first issue is raising awareness of the proximity and scale of the area which, due to various circumstances, is placed on the “margins of civilization.” The second issue deals with the power and effects of narrating and the possible one-dimensionality of narratives. The third issue relates to the (in)ability to transform narratives into a means of achieving social change.

The earthquake that hit the Banija/Banovina area in December 2020 drastically and permanently changed the living environment and everyday life of the area’s inhabitants. The natural disaster attracted media and public attention to an unimaginable extent for this part of Croatia (only an hour’s drive from the capital of Zagreb), which had been neglected for decades. In the months following the earthquake, the mass reaction of citizens and volunteer experts from different parts of the country and abroad helped mitigate the consequences of the earthquake (especially damage to property and infrastructure) and provided psychological and human assistance. Initiatives from enthusiasts on the ground presented models for the relatively quick and efficient provision of safe housing, quality food, health and psychological services, and other means of help necessary to overcome the crisis. However, it is an undeniable fact, especially taking into account that twenty months have passed since the earthquake, that this wave of goodwill, humanity, empathy, and concrete solutions has failed to inspire, shake, and change the existing practices and systems of state and public administration, local and regional governments (counties, cities, and municipalities), which have been destroying a large part of Croatia for decades.

In addition to moving stories about the experiences of the disaster, the earthquake unexpectedly highlighted the systemic problems that had been accumulating for decades, reflected in numerous personal and family stories about deprivation, poverty, and loneliness. Being left to their own devices, the decades-long struggle to

secure what citizens in some other parts of the country are provided with, mistrust of the government and external factors (which can be partly explained by the historical circumstances of life on the border) (cf. Štefanec 2021), have led to specific ways of existence and living for the area's inhabitants who were portrayed, in the stories after the earthquake, as "eccentric and resilient" (p. 49) people, resourceful inhabitants of Banija/Banovina, left to their daily struggle for a decent life. These stories shocked the Croatian public, to say the least. Still, it is hard to say how much they raised awareness that the Banija/Banovina case study, which presented itself because of the recent disaster, is only a fragment of the reality that almost a third of Croatia has to deal with. "The margins of civilization" are much closer and more widespread than a cursory glance suggests. They affect not only Banija/Banovina but also Kordun, Lika, Dalmatinska Zagora, Slavonija, as well as other parts of Croatia (cf. Lončar and Pavić 2020).

The decades-long "institutionalised neglect" (cf. Kanafani 2016) of citizens and their needs has led to a situation in which citizens of a large part of Croatia do not have adequate access to health, social, cultural, and educational services. Generations of children, young people, and adults have been denied the opportunity to live and prosper on equal footing with their peers in other parts of the country. The disparity in the quality of life among Croatian regions is confirmed beyond any doubt by a number of quantitative and qualitative economic and sociocultural indicators, including the risk of poverty rate, the share of beneficiaries of the minimum guaranteed income in the population, the share of the gross average salary, the share of the sales value of industrial products and exports, the vital index, the number of doctors per 1,000 residents, the number of kindergartens per number of children aged 0–4, the ratio of teachers to pupils, cultural activities expenditure, etc. (cf. Lončar and Pavić 2020). Furthermore, there are a number of indicators that are less often discussed, such as (negative) changes in urban and rural settlements (the physical condition of buildings and their usage, availability of services common in urban areas, etc.), attitudes toward regional and local heritage, the perception of the region and place as one desirable for life, the feelings of the inhabitants, etc. Although every bit of help, no matter how small, was welcome, facing facts that have been converted into numbers opens up questions about the possible ultimate effect of individual actions from below on people's lives (material and human) and whether, in order to secure a dignified existence, much more extensive and complex sets of activities that involve systems and practices implemented from above are necessary.

Due to the great media and public interest in the post-earthquake situation, the residents of Banija/Banovina and their life stories became the focal point of television and newspaper reports that were published on a daily and weekly basis and shared on social networks in great numbers. Jambrešić Kirin states multiple positive effects of this "tsunami" of authentic and harrowing stories from Banija" (p. 43),

among them being the contribution to the “civil regeneration of Banija residents as citizens,” i.e., raising awareness of this region’s existence, its inhabitants, and their needs. I would add that one of the contributions is the name Banija coming back into usage, as it was abandoned and undesirable in the public for thirty years prior to the earthquake (cf. Lončar 2014). However, it is necessary to consider whether this process of creating narratives about the region and its people and channeling them to the public had some less positive effects. Can the good intention of presenting narratives about the victims and the needy have the opposite effect and serve as an argument for ongoing inaction?

Numerous stories and TV broadcasts about the earthquake-affected area focused on the negative phenomena. Media reports presented the “deprived and elliptic lives” (p. 41) almost sensationally: stories about poverty and misery, abandoned old people, hamlets without infrastructure, etc. These stories certainly contributed to the creation of the dominant narrative about contemporary Banija/Banovina. Unfortunately, other stories carried less weight and did not successfully reach the public, so they remained mostly unknown. Of the many broadcasts on national television, with the actors of the post-earthquake reconstruction offering their opinions in the late evening hours, including employees of municipalities, cities, counties, ministries, universities, institutions, and others, I believe not one broadcast was dedicated to the values and resources that we should not abandon in the process of reconstruction and recovery, and which should serve as the basis for planning the regeneration of the entire region. We can ask ourselves how could other “affirmatively framed [...] narratives” even be “pushed through” or be made more visible, if at all?

One should note that the area affected by the earthquake is characterized by exceptional natural and cultural-historical values and heritage with international and national, as well as regional and local significance. The entirety of this heritage is impossible to list here. Still, much is said by the fact that ca. 40% of the area of Sisak-Moslavina County is covered by areas of protected nature and areas that fall under the Natura 2000 ecological network with numerous strictly protected species, including special reserves, a nature park, regional park, significant landscapes, a monument of park architecture, a park-forest, etc. The value and significance of cultural-historical urban and rural entities, individual historical buildings and sites, and numerous expressions and practices of intangible cultural heritage bear witness to the harmony and coexistence with nature, which make quality development possible, especially the development of organic, agricultural, and food production and rural and cultural tourism. The area holds an exceptional importance for national history, as evidenced by a number of historical sites, one of them being a fortification heritage connected to the Croatian noble family Zrinski, the Military Frontier towns where the intellectual and military elite gathered and served as hotbeds for Croatian National Revival activities which led to the Croatian national anthem being composed in the Peleš house in Glina (Lončar 2022). Although this list and stories could be continued indefinitely, they were not suitable and could not fit into the almost one-dimensional ideas about how the Banija/Banovina area has nothing of value to

preserve or invest in. This supported the already well-established neglect of this area and these people, and it gave rise to arguments about how repairing historical buildings, building new roads, expanding the utility network, and improving the quality of health and other services makes no sense and is unprofitable.

In the lead text, Jambrešić Kirin analyzes the role and importance of the “narrative exchange of experiences” (p. 41), the activity of narrating and narration as the outcome of narrating and expert (folkloristic, anthropological) treatment. More specifically, the author encourages discussion about whether talking about one’s personal life can have a “therapeutic effect” for the narrator (p. 51) and whether narratives can be “a bridge to understanding others” (p. 45). If we continue in the direction of searching for the possible roles of narration, can we imagine their transformation into a form that will promote a “greater role in society” (p. 41) and help to achieve “social change” (p. 41), which are advocated the text, but also evaluate it as practically difficult to achieve? Can the experiences and knowledge mediated to the anthropologist be mediated further, into practice, with the aim of bringing about social changes? Can and should anthropologists be more assertively involved in the creation of public policies and thus truly work to empower communities and individuals?

Demographic, economic, sociocultural, and environmental challenges of the modern era are a legitimate and represented topic in academic research and educational content, as well as in European and national policies. Global challenges – especially climate change and sustainable growth, poverty and inequalities, access to clean water and food, education and health services, etc. – require finding perspectives, answers, and solutions with the necessary involvement of (academic) experts from different disciplines. Humanities play a key role in these activities, which is not only a result of the requirements of development policies (including public funding of research), but also of social responsibility, which some European universities and institutions proudly point out as their model and guideline. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss desired overcomes in order for the humanities to become relevant stakeholders in these processes and to effectively influence public policies. The already ongoing debates include arguments for the need to overcome individualism, act through institutions, focus on systematic dialogue with policymakers and other disciplines, and to develop the expertise necessary to have such conversations (Brom 2019, Brom 2020). Academic research that wishes to influence public policy has to understand the context, perceptions of stakeholders, norms and values, hopes and fears (Brom 2019). This issue comes to mind when Kirin Jambrešić claims that narration and narratives have a kind of power and can increase listeners’ “capacity to learn, mature, and change our mindsets.”

Anthropologists are privileged in the sense that they can get to know and learn from ordinary people through direct contact and conversation, long-term stays, or repeated visits to a place and community. The local knowledge they obtain in their

research and its interpretation, especially as a “network of knowledge, understanding, and information about the local community and its practices” is considered important for shaping public policies in a satisfactory manner, as well as its effectiveness and legitimacy (Petković 2014: 108). If the stated arguments are accepted, narration and narratives can be the basis for shaping guidelines and creating programs and strategies for long-term development, especially in areas related to vulnerable and marginalized communities, the use and preservation of public goods and values, as well as other aspects of everyday life of the individual and the community, including disaster recovery. Can the stories collected from the area affected by the earthquake – about old people who live alone in houses without electricity and water, about children who walk for miles to reach the school bus, about farmers who cannot market their products, etc. – be shared further than anthropological texts, in what way and for what purpose? Should anthropologists take responsibility for transforming and redirecting stories toward the wider public and policies in order to truly help “local subjects [...] to gain social empowerment” (p. 45)? Ultimately, do experts in the humanities have the right to choose, or is this a question of social and personal responsibility of academics and individuals for the benefit of humanity?

R EPLY

Renata Jambrešić Kirin

First of all, I would like to note that I wrote the commented article during the first seven months after the devastating earthquake of December 28 and 29, 2020, whose epicenter was located in Petrinja and the surrounding area. I presented the first version of the article at the 18th congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research on September 5, 2021 (online congress in virtual Zagreb, September 5–8, 2021). At that time, my goal was to describe the immediate and impulsive community response full of new meanings which came about due to the cataclysm that created a new epic caesura in the collective memory of the Banija region and which seems to have finally ended a *longue durée* timeframe defined by twentieth-century war, destruction and persecution. I wanted to present the verbalized and other psychosocial and sensory reactions of the inhabitants caused by the accumulated stress and recoil of an unstable social and restless physical landscape characterized by cracks, shifts, and liquefaction of the ground and extreme seismic activity. In the meantime, I have written two more (unpublished) texts elaborating and supplementing certain propositions from this article, examining them in a different light and in a significantly different affective context dominated by frustration, disappointment, indignation, and resignation because of the hopelessly slow pace of the government's reconstruction project and its vague and confusing principles. The elaborated and insightful comments, as well as the valuable suggestions and critical remarks from the outstanding academics and commentators of this article, will be of great help when finalizing forthcoming texts. I take this opportunity to sincerely thank them.

Personally, the disaster left a great impression on me as it affected my family and disrupted my everyday life, leaving me torn between work and caring for vulnerable family members who either remained “at the epicenter” or came to stay in my apartment in Zagreb. In the article, I tried to connect several disciplinary perspectives from which it is possible to interpret the extraordinary, complex, and paradoxical consequences of a natural disaster – autoethnography, disaster anthropology, affective anthropology, and folkloristic theories of narration and intersubjective communication – but also to find a form of writing that would convey dramatic self-actualization, the emotional intensity of fresh trauma, suffering and pain, fear and uncertainty in constantly and repeatedly shaken domiciles and, above all, the renewed faith in a wider community that cuts across (in)visible ethnic, class and cultural boundaries. I agree that the article is occasionally pervaded by an exalted tone and plenty of thematic sidelines, which is a consequence of my desire to record the

affective force and sensory quality of the Rashomon-like event, which, not because of the destructive spectacle but because of the mass response of the citizens of Croatia, can be classified as a first-class Event. And such an Event, according to the philosopher Alain Badiou, represents a rupture that brings about new political subjects and “ruptures the appearance of normality, and opens a space to rethink reality” and that “which always lies beneath a particular social order.” “Only in an Event can the excluded part be visible. An Event succeeds in representing a part [of the community – RJK] which is previously unrepresented” (McLaverty-Robinson 2014). Although the passage of time has shown that the mass mobilization of Croatian citizens did not produce revolutionary subjects nor threaten the existing power relations and centralized state administration, the self-organization of citizens elicited new images of collectivity, prompted certain solidarity economy projects, and a number of interregional initiatives, and raised awareness of the power of united and motivated citizens. Residents of the deprived rural communities of Banija found themselves in the center of public attention. They were finally represented as fully fleshed fellow citizens whose self-aware actions, courage, and vitality, in contrast to their suffering and deprivation, aroused not only empathy but also a sense of civic responsibility for the current unjust social order with drastic regional differences in development, quality of life and rate of emigration (cf. Lončar and Čavrak 2022: 25–31).

In this sense, the article discusses a “temporary utopia” and “the ways that community-led disaster response [...] brought out the best in people” (Borland) in the first months after the earthquake. **Katherine Borland’s** comment, with its example of the devastating earthquake which struck Nicaragua on December 23, 1972, and the years-long political metamorphosis of its most disenfranchised populations, is extremely important because it made me aware of the dynamics of the “solidarity mission” as a complex relationship between the local (deprived) community and external “influential outsiders.” Borland shows how the rural indigenous people in Nicaragua went from being passive subjects who stoically endure their subjugation, racialization, and natural cataclysm to becoming revolutionary subjects and initiators of mass uprisings, only to turn their backs on the “revolutionary experiment” ten years later and support the pro-American neoliberal regime. Three of the four mechanisms of political subjectivation described by Borland – (a) the self-actualization of marginalized subjects in response to a disaster, (b) their re-evaluation carried out by influential outsiders, (c) an enhanced self-image that further empowers local populations to act – can be clearly recognized in our example from Banija. However, the fourth aspect, related to the difference between the mostly leftist activist outsiders, and the rural conservative, ideologically inconsistent and ambivalent imagining of the “ideal” political community, deserves a more thorough discussion. It essentially dovetails with **Stef Jansen’s** final remark. Jansen believes that with my affirmative discourse on the vitality, resilience, and self-sustainability of elderly Banija farmers, I failed to describe their recent crisis survival strategies and that I wrote a “eulogy for a *past* way of life” of the peasants “in a melancholic key”.

I could agree with Jansen’s remark that under the first impression of organizing new forms of sociality in the vacuum created by a paralyzed state administration, I

slightly romanticized the willingness of those affected to turn a new page and articulate their dissatisfaction with nationalist, clerical and conservative policies that strongly bind them (symbolically and ideologically) to the wartime past and regressive narratives closer to the nineteenth than to the twenty-first century. The local elections in May 2021 already showed that my perspective on the natural disaster as a teleogenetic turning point for dominant narratives that shook the existing political mindset and attenuated the importance of ethno-national tensions was too optimistic and the result of an affective impression.¹

However, I disagree that the concept of self-sustainability is not inherent to local knowledge and experience in the Banija region and that its prerequisite is a positive balance of social reproduction. What I refer to as the “self-sustaining agenda” of the rural existence of elderly people is more akin to the philosophical concept of a *fulfilled* and *meaningful life* than the sociological definition of a good life. This agenda implies a reflection of a broad experience of the world, a feeling of authenticity, human work as an organic exchange with nature, the capacity to manage in one’s own life context, protection provided by a religious experience, coexistence with domestic and other animals and functional aging in one’s own home. The rich folklore tradition of this area, as well as its partial actualization in my interviews, which I could not present in detail in this short article, confirms this set of life values together with the intrinsic need for mythical thinking, an imaginative and numinous refiguring of the world (cf. Bošković-Stulli 1983, Jambrešić 1992, Muraj 1992, Kljaić 2021).

On the other hand, I agree with philosopher Paolo Virno that all contemporary modes of existence are ambivalent, or, we might say, they contain within themselves “both loss and salvation, adaptation and conflict, servility and freedom” (Virno 2004: 14–15), and that old people in isolated villages most often cannot choose the way nor the place of their existence. However, even those who can do so and whose children or social workers offered to relocate them to the city or a nursing home most often choose to stay on their property – even when they had to live in tin containers and improvised dwellings. For many of them, the broad experience of the world also implies transnational knowledge about modes of aging and surviving in different parts of the world, their advantages and disadvantages, thanks to contact with their children and relatives who relocated after the 1990s war.² For these people, the “world without the self” is prioritized in relation to the “self without the world,” and their courage, dignity, awareness of identity, and local affiliation translate

1 I am aware that sensory and affective ethnography are forced into compromise due to the capitalist “affective regime,” which assumes that emotions and emotional events offer a simpler, clearer, and deeper truth about social subjects and social relations. However: “Emotion doesn’t produce clarity but destabilizes you, messes you up, and makes you epistemologically incoherent” (Berlant 2008). Although the simultaneous coronavirus pandemic in Banija took the lives of more people than the earthquake, my interlocutors reluctantly, curtly, and with a sense of unease talked about family members who had just died of Covid-19. They avoided connecting these emotionally difficult and tragic “motifs” with the volunteer visits and sudden liveliness in deserted villages, so they preferred to talk about positive “heroic narratives” about a community united by a humane and solidary response to a disaster.

2 For example, my next-door neighbor in village of Slana (b. 1947) has nieces and nephews in California, Australia, Austria, and Germany and is quite familiar with real estate price trends, living costs, and the level of social and health care in these countries.

into narrative authority and their willingness to tell the story of their own difficult and elliptical life. This is largely a consequence of the historical experience of a life full of war traumas, but also the feeling of continuity of life on a “hard border,” and yet “at the center of social and state turmoil... in 1941, as well as in 1991 and 1995” (Kljaić 2021: 89). I want to believe in the emancipatory power of transgenerational and local memory of Banija inhabitants who remember, among other events, the anti-fascist uprising and the smaller (armed) rebellion in the Glina area (end of 1949 and beginning of 1950), which was the result of forced collectivization and the “slow recovery from war losses and destruction” (Čavrak 2022: 17). For instance, the extent of the earthquake damage to family houses renovated under the government’s development measures for so-called “areas of special state concern” (1996–2018) for the first time caused systematic criticism from both below and above as this low-quality, unsuccessful reconstruction program did not spur revitalization. In this instance, the local wisdom would opine that a basic revitalization principle was ignored: “the barn builds the house, not the other way around.”

Jelena Marković’s comment contains an extremely important discussion on the assumptions of the “folkloristic segment” in my (unfinished) research, in which the anthropology of emotion and sensory ethnography combine with narratology and trauma studies, self-effacing ethnography and ethnography of care. My procedure is, however, a constant analytical and discursive search for an ethically appropriate, epistemological, and “fair” approach to vulnerable and deprived subjects. Their often elliptical, allusive, fragmentary, and concealed narratives provide a glimpse of their constant effort to “organize knowledge, to develop explanatory frameworks and to affirm their subjectivity in a communicative process of mutual recognition” (Jansen). As a researcher who tirelessly searches for a “fundamental mode of being, which, in principle, could give rise even to developments very different from those prevailing today” (Virno 2004: 95), I tend to record and interpret affirmative examples of human virtue, self-healing, “cruel optimism” and resilience in the neoliberal landscape of general ambivalence, cynicism, opportunism, and resignation.³ From the numerous assessments coming from the philosophy of language, starting from Wittgenstein’s claim that it is better to remain silent about pain than to trivialize it with conventional phrases to Dolar’s warning that the ethical relationship is based on listening to voices (Dolar 2009: 81), I follow the theoretical principle proposed by Jelena Marković. She is right to claim that in the case of narratives filled with

³ As a small contribution to the folkloristic argumentation on the importance of the interactional situation, the quality of the interlocutors’ relationship and the type of atmosphere – in what we call “empathetic listening” and “participatory compassion” – I mention the narrative situation involving a group conversation that happened this summer in a settlement, whose houses are mostly used for weekend stays, at the site where Glina flows into Kupa. After a long time, six residents of this settlement gathered to discuss typical topics while eating chilled watermelon (weak earthquakes usually felt at night, bad telecommunications network, damage caused to gardens and orchards by animals coming from the forest, wells drying up). In this relaxed atmosphere, one of the interlocutors, born in this village but currently living in Linz, began her personal story with a special warmth, but also unease, in her voice: “Every time I eat watermelon, I remember the summer of 1995 and the watermelons we were greeted with in Sremska Kamenica as displaced persons. To ease our suffering and the suffering our children, the people there fed us heaps of watermelons.” This was followed by a shorter, but pithy and vividly told story about the experience of exile in Vojvodina, divorce and leaving for Austria with an underage son.

other people's pain and suffering, "we are not necessarily talking only about the narratives that are created on the ruins of language, on its fragments and debris, but the disharmony and antagonism between language and pain" (Marković). This means that I try to focus my attention, sharpened or dulled by my senses, on critical fabulation (Hartman 2008), creative distancing, stylistic nuances, and aesthetic qualities of the textual record of recorded oral narratives in which traces of both individual and communal experiences of subjectivation have been preserved. As a folklorist, I believe that this "wonderful human invention – story and narration" (Bichsel 2002: 12) greatly contributes to understanding the contemporary chaotic and ambivalent times "and our experience of life as time" (ibid.). The role of social networks in this process is to establish a dialogue on the "parallel contemporary" experiences of those citizens who continue to live in their hometowns and neighboring areas and those who have moved but (occasionally or virtually) return to it in order to ameliorate the "metropolitan shock" and its effects: "uncertainty of expectations, the unpredictability of assignments, fragile identities, ever changing values" (Virno 2004: 98). I believe that the power of narration and empathetic listening is "one of our last remaining democratic spaces" (Shafak 2020) which, despite the distortion and instrumentalization of personal stories by classical and digital media, contributes more to interpersonal understanding in an informationally interconnected society than all projects of directed development of "civil society." We are witnessing how the narrative mediation of the personal destinies of protesters, often victims, against autocratic regimes triggered mass social protests and demands for social change (from the Arab Spring to the last demonstrations in Iran).

With this observation, emphasizing the central place of narration and public polylogue in democratic culture, and making the theoretical horizon of folklorists more akin to that of literary theorists and cultural theorists, I refer to **Sanja Lončar's** contribution. Her articles (Lončar 2014, Lončar and Pavić 2020, Lončar 2022) provided me with a valuable and comprehensive insight into the complexity of the socio-historical processes that led to the years-long marginalization and ruination of the earthquake-affected region and ingrained a resilient psychosocial mindset characterized by the "daily struggle for a decent life" among its impoverished, neglected and deprived residents. The programmatic text by Sanja Lončar (2022) is particularly valuable, wherein she proposes specific projects for the preservation of the natural and cultural-historical heritage of Banija/Banovina, and presents it as a "springboard" for the comprehensive regeneration and long-term development of the Sisak-Moslavina region. I sincerely hope that local governments will include some of these proposals in their development projects, especially when it comes to cultural tourism, and that when creating new centers of "heritage interpretation," they will not overlook those who epistemologically deal with the heritage, and not only participate in the protective work and advocacy. However, I am skeptical of the claim that humanities scholars should be directly involved in shaping public policies and strategies as groundwork for promoting and achieving social change. The concepts of applicability, performativity, instrumentality, and usefulness of knowledge

and skills coming from the humanities, which have recently been described in lists and prescribed as *outcomes* of an education in the humanities, were the subject of a prolific epistemological debate not so long ago (cf. Bagarić, Biti, Škokić 2017; Prica 2017). Ines Prica showed that dominant academic policies follow neoliberal ideology and lead to the social differentiation of academics while diminishing the material position, autonomy and importance of the humanities, which, in principle, are not useful for the reproduction of the capitalist system. The result of this ungrateful position of a “marginal discipline” are latent antagonisms between the “critical orientation” of Croatian ethnology on one hand, which does not shy away from questioning power relations, the political matrix of dominant narratives and the political cynicism of the ruling elites, and the pragmatic current on the other hand, which goes along with, identity politics that are frequently theoretically revised. The case in which the authors of the study *Social and Economic Revitalization Program for the Areas of Sisak-Moslavina County Affected by the Earthquake* (cf. Čavrak 2022) were rejected as local experts and carriers of local knowledge makes it obvious that knowledge, expertise, excellence, innovation and goodwill are not enough for an academic to become an “influential outsider,” let alone an equal stakeholder in public (development) policy. The position that advocates “the importance and credibility of what is known, the conditions in which the knowledge of the marginalized, the poor, and especially women, is unnoticed and ignored” (Prica 2022) is deeply connected to the humanities but also carries a political message. We cannot expect that it will be a message welcomed by partitocratic elites. Unfortunately, in a society that is still polarized and socially and regionally unequally developed, in which the fundamental concepts of “conservative” Croatian ethnology – heritage, memory, and (national) identity – are regularly abused by “conservative” political actors to secure their control over the levers of power and authority, I believe that ethnologists and folklorists should encourage a culture of resistance against the current policies of fostering racial, ethno-national, gender and other intolerances. And the culture of resistance is most effectively encouraged by fostering humanistic expertise and the capacity for learning, maturing, and empathy in our students, as well as in other social subjects we communicate with.⁴ In order to perform this task – which implies the effort of imagining the horizon of new possibilities – honorably, folklorists and ethnologists should learn more from artists than from social arbiters. An uncertain encounter with local and marginalized knowledge is inevitable in order to shape and fill the terms like “generational revitalization,” “sustainable lifestyle,” “green transition,” “solidarity economy” with current meaning, as time is running out. As the poet Monika Herceg states in her poem: “the world is slowly / becoming what it has always been: / an accelerated ruin.”

4 Of course, we must not give up on ethnographic work, new projects, organizing meetings and dialogues with cultural and other social subjects in the area affected by the earthquake, as the collaborators of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research are trying to do in their project “Banija As Metaphor and Metonymy” which started with the first eponymous academic congress in Glina and Zagreb on October 5 and 6, 2022. The material and economic reconstruction of the houses and the environment, stuck in the administrative and political deadlocks of “postponing the future”, can be initiated from the possibility of creating new mental maps and imagining the future.

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