

## 'It Takes a Serb to Know a Serb'

Uncovering the roots of obstinate otherness in Serbia

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*Abstract* ■ In this article I discuss two domains of knowledge that my Serbian informants labelled as impenetrable to Western knowledge: carousing in Gypsy bars (a practice called *lumpovanje*) and Serbian history. 'This is something only Serbs can understand' is what my friends and informants would tell me over and over again. Uncovering the realms of lived experience that inform this sense of being definitely Other, I will explore the theoretical implications of this obstinate otherness for the anthropological project.

*Keywords* ■ implicit social knowledge ■ *lumpovanje* ■ otherness ■ Serbia ■ war traumas

In an article called 'Ourselves and Others', Edmund Leach describes anthropology's quest to make sense of 'the others' as follows:

We started by emphasizing how different are 'the others' – and made them not only different but remote and inferior. Sentimentally we then took the opposite track and argued that all human beings are alike; we can understand Trobrianders or the Barotse because their motivations are just the same as our own; but that didn't work either, *'the others' remained obstinately other* . . .

Leach's pithy words<sup>1</sup> – published in an issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1973 – may not weigh up to more recent, sophisticated analyses of how anthropology makes its 'others', but the issue brought up in the last line struck me as fully relevant still.

During my fieldwork in Serbia – where I investigated the peculiar musical and extra-musical communication between Serbs and Gypsies during bacchic celebrations called *lumpovanje* – I met a lot of people that might be labelled 'obstinate others'; people who stubbornly persevered in their otherness. (This is a predominantly male story, about male perspectives. Although my experience tells me that women on the whole seemed to be less inclined towards obstinate otherness, this is a purely impressionistic view and a topic that would require further investigation.) Not only did my informants refuse to contribute their part to Johannes Fabian's famous sketch of fieldwork as 'a form of communicative interaction with an Other,

one that must be carried out coevally, on the basis of shared intersubjective Time and intersocietal contemporaneity' (Fabian, 1983: 148); they fiercely denied the possibility of intercultural understanding.

The confrontation with these obstinate others was a sobering experience. When I travelled to Serbia I may have been counted as one of Leach's sentimental anthropologists who cling to the idea that all human beings are alike. I therefore expected to find some common ground with the Serbs on which identification, empathy, communication and, in the end, understanding might prosper. I did not know all the 'do's and don't's of the reflexive turn in anthropology – avoid 'exaggerating cultures' in order to be able to categorize them as 'other' (Boon, 1982); diminish the 'cultural distance between anthropologists and anthropologised' (Cohen, 1994: 5); dare give up the a priori superiority of anthropological knowledge and 'seriously play with the possibility of the truth and authority of [an] alien culture' (McGrane, 1989: 127–8) – but I had heard the echoes and had taken them to heart.

There was – and still is – good reason to be this careful. The Balkans have functioned as Europe's Other for centuries. Time and again, travellers, scholars, writers and artists have depicted this part of the continent as the very near Orient, a land of European savages, fierce warriors, archaic myths and cruel customs.<sup>2</sup> I intended not to join the ranks of my pre-decessors, however much my being intrigued with the phenomenon of lumpovanje may have had a smack of yet another romantic soul in search of exotic Balkan folklore (as my informants never failed to bring home to me). To the contrary: my research explicitly aimed at clarifying the complex interplay between Serb and Gypsy, Self and Other, identity and alterity. I had even realized that, in a way, I was studying a mirror movement of my own journey to Novi Sad – a Serb visiting the Gypsies in many ways resembled an anthropologist visiting the Serbs – and I had taken this mirror movement to be an advantage, a circumstance that would keep me from theorizing about 'them' without reference to 'me'.

The 'obstinate others' that I met in Serbia, those people who told me in a thousand different ways 'No way! You are not going to penetrate our Otherness! We are different!' were not interested in intercultural dialogue.<sup>3</sup> They were up for exclusivity, for being essentially different. Over and over again they told me that I should not expect to be able to grasp everything about them, insisting that some differences between Serbs and people from the West are for *real*. To boost my project and keep up research morale I took refuge in the thought that this 'real' was not 'real' in any ontological sense. The complete erosion of the Titoist slogan 'brotherhood and unity among the Yugoslav nations'; the nationalistic euphoria orchestrated by Slobodan Milošević and his propaganda officials; an escalating war . . . I could see why these people needed to believe that it takes a Serb to understand a Serb. Yet underneath that response – too quick, too slick – I began to feel that the

high-minded intentions and lofty ideals of 'communicative interaction with an Other' were being put to the test.

This article, then, is a story about the enormity of the project envisioned by Fabian and others, and the serious difficulties one may encounter in its implementation. Starting from McGrane's advice that the anthropologist should 'seriously play with the possibility of the truth and authority of [the] alien culture', I'll consider the possibility that (some) differences between Serbs and Westerners are for real and unbridgeable at that. More particularly, I will focus on the conviction among many of my informants that my efforts to grasp the significance of lumpovanje were bound to fail. Investigating possible grounds for this conviction, I will explain why I became increasingly convinced that the 'obstinate others' had a point. It seems that in our vigorous attempts to make up for centuries of colonization and decades of impetuous othering in anthropology, we have focused so much on common divisors between ourselves and the people we study, that 'the other' that figures in anthropology begins to look 'just like us': they are as rational, as philosophical, as calculating as we are (or we are as 'wild', as 'superstitious' and as 'exotic' as they are). The motives for this urge to equalize are noble without doubt. But is it what we ought to be doing?

### Novi Sad's 'really real'

On several occasions, my Serbian friends and informants had spoken about the Gypsy tavern – the arena for Serbian lumpovanje – as the heart and soul of their society. Their remarks had tickled my curiosity, all the more since the statement often came in a conspiratorial tone of voice. My curiosity only intensified when I started to visit these places and witnessed the scenarios that unfolded during these Gypsy-orchestrated bacchanals.

I had become acquainted with Novi Sad, the capital of the northern Vojvodina region, as a town that prided itself on being the cradle of a *European* Serbia. The *Novosadjani* never grew tired of pointing out the Austro-Hungarian past of their community, its geographic location in the Pannonian plains, the Habsburg façades of their homes, the many Germanisms in their dialect. They ranged themselves behind the banner of civilization and *kultura*, that peculiar central European blend of courtesy, good taste and a well developed sense of etiquette and decorum; and they were ever ready to blow up the contrast between themselves and their countrymen further south whom they labelled, with barefaced contempt, 'Balkan dwellers'. Living on what they perceived to be the very border between Europe and the Balkans, the people from Novi Sad sought to locate themselves firmly at 'our' side of the line.

In the Gypsy cafes, however, dedication to the ideals of civilization and *kultura* seemed to vanish. 'Give me wine! Let it all crash down!' runs the

opening line of a drinking song that was very popular while I was doing my fieldwork

Give me wine!  
 Let it all crash down!  
 Bring Gypsies to my table!  
 Let them play!  
 Let them torment me!

In comparison with the petty bourgeois society that Novi Sad strived to be during the day, the Gypsy cafes in and around Novi Sad came across as enclaves of passion and theatrical wildness; nightly stages on which were acted out precisely those poses and scenes which the people from Novi Sad turned up their noses at and dismissed – ‘That’s the Balkans, that’s not us.’ Under the rousing guidance of the Gypsy musicians the spotless banner of *kultura* was torn down with obvious relish and dragged through the mud. Instead of control I found exaltation; instead of moderation, excess; instead of frugality, extravagance; instead of clarity, intoxication; instead of reason, emotion; instead of compliance with rules, prohibitions and taboos, the deliberate violation of them; instead of constantly deferred gratification in the name of a constantly receding future, a direct celebration of the moment, of the here and now.

I was fascinated by the enormity of the contrast. I told myself: if these fine citizens declare carousing in the Gypsy tavern to be the ‘heart and soul’ of their society then this is the phenomenon that I need to study. Why settle for anything less than the arena they themselves proclaim to be their ‘really real’?<sup>4</sup>

The wish not to dawdle over a world of appearances and make-believe, but to go ahead and penetrate the ‘really real’ of a culture was – retrospectively – too rash, too eager. Soon I was confronted with the ambiguities surrounding *lumpovanje*. To begin with, people didn’t like to talk about it in any serious way. Typically, the ‘expert on the subject’ was always someone else. When I *did* manage to address people about their carousing, I received comments that were utterly contradictory. One moment the phenomenon was depicted as trivial, unworthy of scholarly attention; the next moment I would find myself in the company of someone who – staring into the depths of his whiskey glass while tossing the ice cubes – would produce a solemn statement saying ‘dear friend, you have to realize that for some people, *lumpovati* is everything’. One day I would be introduced to someone with the ironic-yet-not-uncomplimentary remark, ‘He’s from Holland, he speaks our language and he visits our Gypsies: he’s becoming a real Serb’, the next day someone would tell me that he could not think of a better example of Western squandering and decadence than a university financing a PhD dissertation on *lumpovati*. I clearly remember the fierce objections from a friend when I suggested that the expression ‘Let’s go to life itself’ – one of many phrases expressing the intent to go *lumpovati* – could be more than

just 'a manner of speaking'. There was no deeper meaning to it. I was instructed not to see 'something behind everything'. Yet I also remember the Serbian colleague who had promised to give me some comments on a preliminary outline of my research plans but had to confess that he could not bring himself to read the text. With blushing cheeks he explained that he was afraid that after reading the research plan, his nights with the Gypsies would never be the same.

The ambiguities I encountered, the simultaneous invitation and discouragement to continue my search, might well be explained by the contrast between the scenarios unfolding in the Gypsy tavern and the collective everyday efforts to materialize the notion of *Mittleuropa*. I was poking my nose into affairs that, with reason, took place at the latest hour and in the most distant places. I was inviting people to reflect on something that was granted the right of existence on condition that it was not reflected upon. However deep its significance might turn out to be, lumpovanje was cloaked in triviality, and should – in the serious kind of conversation that men of science bring about – remain just that: a trivial diversion.

There was, however, more to these double messages about my attempts to grasp the significance of lumpovanje. No one brought this home to me more forcefully than a proclaimed connoisseur of Gypsies and *kafane* in the village of Celavići.<sup>5</sup> Here's the story.

## The connoisseur

'If anyone can tell you about lumpovati, it must be him. . .'

My colleague from the ethnological museum of Novi Sad was most definite about this matter. When an occasion arose, he drove me up north to a place called Celavići. It was there that the connoisseur was stationed as a guard and housekeeper in a monumental building that turned out to be one of the hunting lodges of the late Yugoslav leader Tito.

He was waiting for us at the gate; a stubbly beard, a lambskin coat, his breath steaming in the bitter cold. His looks were as faded as the hunting lodge, an ochre villa in a state of handsome decay. 'If ever you want to sell cigarettes' – is what I find in my diary of first impressions – 'this should be the man.'

'Here's that anthropologist from Holland I was talking about', my colleague said as he introduced me. 'You know, the one who is studying our Gypsies and our *kafane* (taverns).'

'Hmmm', said the man as he gave me an appraising look. We shook hands. They were firm hands. I remember them well: big and calloused hands.

He took us inside and showed us around the hunting lodge. The rooms were spacious and freezing cold. It was hard to tell whether the animal trophies on the walls were coated with dust or frost. We spoke about Tito's legacy, about the war, about the inability of the West to understand the matters of the Serbs. In one of the bedrooms, on a hatstand, hung a satin sleeping gown. An elegant pink affair with a lace collar. There was a joke about Jovanka, one of Tito's spouses. My colleague and the man were laughing hard. I giggled along, feeling stupid. I had missed the point of the joke completely.

In a nearby restaurant we had lunch.  
 ‘So can you tell me about lumpovanje?’

I had asked it in a lull of the conversation. I had sought to make it sound like a casual point of inquiry. Instead I heard a squeaky, schoolmasterish voice starting a scholarly investigation. In a flash I pictured the scene as the arrival of the craniometrist unrolling his tape measure to start his work with the natives (‘craniometry’ is what my father would jokingly call the anthropologist’s profession).

‘Lumpovanje?’, the man replied. ‘That’s about being so pissed that you find yourself lying under the table.’

There was something provocative in what he said. Again, he held his eyes fixed on mine; as if trying to assess whether his rude language had created a breach in the impenetrable air of politeness and sociability.

Then he turned to my Serbian colleague from the ethnological museum, pointedly averting his eyes from mine. The story that followed was about a bacchanal in a joint called Petlov Salaš. It was a story for people in the know, full of references to implied knowledge and shared understanding. Resentful for being shut out from the conversation I noted that this was merely ‘one of these stories’: the Gypsies had played until early morning; he had been thrown out by the waiter; he had stumbled over the misty dike alongside the Danube, in the direction of Novi Sad; back home – ‘God knows how I reached it’, he said, laughing proudly – his clothes had been smeared with mud and vomit. Not a coin had been left in his pocket.

I made a head-note saying ‘nothing special here’. I had heard this kind of story many times before.

As we walked back to the car, the man turned to me and told me that if ever I wanted to learn about Gypsies then I would have to drink with them, or, better still, to fuck them. No other method would do. He illustrated his words by simulating pelvic thrusts, as if the concept ‘fucking’ needed further explanation. Maybe this pantomime was inspired by doubts about my proficiency in the Serbian language. Maybe there were muted, erotic motives. Or maybe the man was merely displaying the fundamental doubt I had found with many more Serbs, who judged Westerners to be ‘cold’ and ‘hyper rational’ to the cost of their sexual prowess. Yet whatever it was the man was trying to convey, he had managed to touch a weak spot. My meeting with this expert left me feeling like a total nerd; unfit to even fathom the essence of Gypsies and lumpovanje.

While my difficulties with closing in on a highly ambiguous subject matter like lumpovati might have been overcome by building up rapport, by being tactful (or whatever it is that anthropologists do to worm a secret out of their informants), the man from Celavići – who, as befits partly fantasmatic figures, never got a name – seemed to declare it, unabashedly, a mission impossible. I was not going to grasp the significance of lumpovati because I was simply ‘unfit’ to produce the knowledge that I was after. As an academic, as a Westerner, as a stranger in Serbian society, I lacked something essential to be initiated into the secret joys of the Gypsy tavern (it’s a safe guess that he would have specified this ‘something essential’ as ‘the balls’).<sup>6</sup>

My meeting with the man from Celavići highlighted all the disquieting sensations that had accompanied my research endeavours in Serbia from the very beginning:<sup>7</sup> amidst the turmoil of the Gypsy cafe my academic

background was a handicap, the tools of science were incompatible with the arena I intended to explore, and my half-hearted attempts to impose a rigorous method on a situation and subject matter that resisted it seemed slightly absurd. His display of doubt also conveyed that these 'professional deformities' were but symptoms of a much more personal impotence: too prissy, too dull, too much on the alert, too rational and distant, too pre-occupied with order, too frightened to give up control. Don't expect to understand the ways of Dionysus while standing aside, watching, remaining unscathed and pristine, quietly plucking away on Apollo's lyre, is what the man from Celavići seemed to imply. Without drinking or fucking, without mud or vomit, you're not going to know.

Once the inkling had been taken out of the haze, it was a fact to be dealt with. The first response was irritation. I felt annoyed about this monopolization of passion, provoked by this claim on exclusivity, by yet another Serb saying that they, and they alone, were in the know.

'No one is going to stop this scholar from cracking the code of lumpovanje', I thought, unwilling to give in. In my imagination I took the man from Celavići on a tour in *my* hunting lodge, showing him my trophies: Here! Had I not notebooks full of observations that were to be described? Song texts about carousing that were to be analysed? Literary fragments that were to be read? Native utterings that were to be interpreted? And besides – I would wave a copy of Anthony Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community* in front of his face – could it not be that all this talk about the uniqueness of lumpovati is merely a smoke screen that helps you people to create group boundaries, a deliberate vagueness behind which is nothing? Maybe – I opened Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and showed the marked passages on 'the Other' – maybe there is nothing there behind your drinking and fucking: just drinking and fucking. Or should we take your words to be just another example of what Marta Savigliano calls 'autoexoticism', I asked him, just another example of 'exotic others laboriously cultivat[ing] passionate-ness in order to be desired, and thus recognized in a world increasingly ruled by post-modern standards' (Savigliano, 1995: 212)?

The attempt to smother his words of doubt and pitying looks in piles of paper proved futile. A weak spot had been touched. Consequently, the man from Celavići was not impressed. His answer came calm and self-assured: 'Well, all of that may be true. But I just think that is not all. I think there is more to it.'

### **You don't know us, you don't know our history**

Scepticism about Westerners trying to understand the matters of the Serbs was widespread and not limited to the realm of lumpovanje. History was another realm (and as I am about to argue, the two domains are much closer than one would expect).

'You don't know our history.' I don't know how many times I heard this remark. Sometimes it was whispered with fatigue, sometimes hurled at me in a querulous tone of voice. 'You don't know our history' would usually follow a news report saying that some figure of international standing or some human rights committee had once more read Serbia a lecture about its misbehaviour in the war zones or its violation of the rules of diplomacy and international communication. Sometimes it would follow a remark from me that, according to my informant, was too critical. 'What do you know? You don't know our history!'

'You don't know our history' was not an encouragement to intensify my studies. Quite the reverse. Underneath the polite applause that lauded my efforts to study the Serbs I often discerned resentment about my interest in Serbian language, culture, history. 'You don't know our history' was, above all, a statement of fact. Don't bother, is what the phrase seemed to imply, you're not going to find out, for if you really want to find out what our history is all about, learning our language, reading our books or knowing the facts does not suffice.

An aside in Dušan Popović's stout, three-volume history *Srbi u Vojvodini*, 'The Serbs in Vojvodina', exemplifies how knowing Serb history is presented as a matter of empathy and, consequently, an exclusively Serbian affair. 'The life of a refugee was never easy', the historian writes in his discussion of the Great Serb Exodus of 1690, when 30,000 Serb families, fleeing the Ottoman Turks, left their motherland to seek refuge in the Habsburg lands:

To seek refuge in a strange land, in the middle of winter, without a roof over one's head, without food or heating, that wasn't easy. Up to this day we can sympathize with the misery and agony of our people, the echoes of which ring through the scanty yet deeply painful descriptions that history has left us. All these descriptions start with laments: 'Oh!', 'Uvi!', 'Ole!', 'Avaj!' and 'Lele!'. Our people has not known more burdensome days, and we feel these events more than we can demonstrate them, for documents are few, and biased at that. (Popović, 1956: 322, trans. MvdP)

We feel the events more than we can prove them. 'Oh', 'avaj' and 'lele', wordless wailings – interjections in a sad song – that, according to Popović, have more meaning for Serbian history than the documents, that are few and biased to boot.

We may smile at this sentimental outburst in a text that, in other passages, so obviously aims at achieving the distant and unaffected tone of the academician. But maybe we should not.

Published in 1956, and presumably written soon after the Second World War, Popović was working in the shade of unspeakable horrors that had happened in his native Novi Sad. On 23 January in the year 1942 the invading fascist Hungarian forces ordered *razzias* (round-ups) to be held. All the city's inhabitants had to stay inside for three days, with the windows shut and the curtains drawn, so that the Hungarian police could carry out

their murderous mission.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies were dragged out of their homes and butchered. The story is not included in Popović's history of the Vojvodina Serbs, which (safely? conveniently?) halts in 1861.<sup>9</sup> But we can read about the events in Pavle Šosberger's history of the Jewish community of Novi Sad.

For three days lawlessness held sway in the city, and every person's life depended mainly on drunk, primitive policemen and soldiers who visibly enjoyed killing. . . . On the orders of the commanding officer in charge of the razzia, units were despatched to clear the bodies off the streets and to take them in army trucks or trucks belonging to the city to the Danube, where they were pushed under the ice. It has been established that the soldiers and policemen robbed the bodies, pulling rings off fingers or even cutting fingers off to gain possession of the jewels. They also took money and valuable clothing for themselves. (Šosberger, 1988: 40, trans. MvdP)

The Novi Sad massacres and killings haunt the work of writers such as Aleksandar Tišma and Danilo Kiš, both long-time residents of the city. Kiš's Jewish father was taken to the Danube, but survived the horrors: the hole in the ice got clogged up with the dead bodies, and, as Kiš once said in an interview, 'due to this technical problem, the execution was somewhat delayed'. In 'Život, Literature' (1993) he has left a spine-chilling account of these 'cold days': a filmic reconstruction of the events, based on documents and, as the writer explains, 'snatches of sentences from the recollections of survivors':

View on the frozen Danube. At the local bath, where the bathing cubicles are, there is, as if cut in a mass of glass, a great hole in the ice; a plank has been thrown over the hole. Soldiers around it: there is frost on their moustaches, steam comes out of their nostrils. From the direction of the bathing cubicles comes a young woman, completely naked. She walks hand in hand with a little girl. The girl is naked, too. Their skin is purple from the cold. The soldiers push them on the plank. They shoot them through the head and stab their bodies with bayonet thrusts. The victims fall into the dark green water of the Danube. A civilian pushes them under the ice with a boathook.

This scene is registered from a godly perspective, with the absolute objectivity of the grey winterclouds, from a position where voices don't get through.

Now the focus broadens and we see the people standing lined up behind the bathing cubicles. From this height, where a camera is located *that does not tremble*, we cannot make out individual faces; we can hardly see whether we're dealing with men, women or children. Somewhere in the back of the line, in the group of people that arrived here with the last truck, we just discern a man with a hat and spectacles, in a grey overcoat, because the one who has posted the camera up in these heights (to resist the temptation of details, the description of naked bodies and scenes full of humiliation – for example when the body responds to mortal fear in its own way – to avoid scenes of rape, of crushed skulls and blood in the tainted snow, and to escape from the voices, screaming, wailing, laments, pleas, prayers and appeals, to thus arrive at godly objectivity in that godless world) because that person, biased as he is, can't help it that he discerns in that mass he who is his father. (Kiš, 1993: 19–20, trans. MvdP)

Aleksandar Tišma, although blindfolded in his darkened house, speaks of the *razzias* as ‘the most crucial experience of his life’. Asked about the violent break-up of Yugoslavia along ethnic lines he mentioned the Novi Sad massacres as the basis of his understanding

That is the most crucial experience of my life: coming outside and seeing the blood in the snow, the brains still spattered against the wall. So I know what that is, ethnic frenzy, I know what imbeciles people can become.<sup>10</sup>

Yet above all, these writers have recorded the impact of the events, the void that was left once the snow and ice had melted. In his novel *Hourglass*, Kiš presents the dramas at the side of the river Danube as a missing page in the diary of a survivor. There is no explanation why that page is missing. The reader may deduce that the writer of the diary was unable to find the words to express the horror or could not bear to read it . . . all that Kiš leaves us with is a blank line in the layout, and two footnotes. One from the author, saying: ‘Incomplete. A page is missing’. The other from the translator, saying: ‘In the massacres of January 1942 the victims stood in line, waiting to be killed and pushed under the river ice. Some were released after waiting for hours (trans.)’

In *The Use of Man*, Aleksandar Tišma takes his readers on a walk to the outskirts of Novi Sad, some months after the massacres:

Those back streets, overgrown with grass and lined with squat, low houses, almost entirely inhabited by Serbian agricultural workers and small tradesmen, were scenes of the greatest cruelty when the Hungarian troops arrived. The soldiers, carrying out their raids, were not in the least restrained by the sight of such modest means, such neglect. There, among the houses with damp walls, faded flowers in the windows, the image of the killings still hovered, muted. The people who in the evenings came out to talk at their gates still pointed to the lampposts from which their neighbors had been hanged, and to the darkened windows of the homes from which a friend had been led away. For these people, there was no topic of conversation more lively. (Tišma, 1988: 115)

As usual it is literature – not the writings of official history – that reminds us how deep the horrors of war have penetrated into the locales of everyday normality. And as writers such as Tišma and Kiš explore the voids in post-war realities, the ghosts that haunt a community, the wounds that plague a society, the invisible burdens with which history has saddled its actors, they rub our nose in that well known but often disregarded fact that there is more to reality than what is there to see.

Blood in the snow. Brains spattered against the wall. The acknowledgement that no diaries can convey the horrors of war. ‘Oh!’, ‘Uvi!’, ‘Ole!’, ‘Avaj!’ and ‘Lele!’. ‘You don’t know our history.’

No. I don’t.

## **The void**

Let me – mindful of Novi Sad’s traumas – return to the project of communicative interaction with an obstinate Other, more in particular to

McGrane's advice to 'seriously play with the possibility of the truth and authenticity of [an] alien culture'. Let me, in other words, consider the plausibility of the belief displayed by many of my informants that something essential about their 'us' cannot be grasped by Westerners or scholars; that there is a difference, that the difference is for real, and unbridgeable at that.

Faced with the magnitude of suffering and cruelty that the Novosadjani have had to incorporate in their worldview – for the bitter irony is that victims and perpetrators of savagery are united in their knowledge of the dark side of humankind – the insistence on being other becomes more than the mere chauvinism of the nationalist. After Kiš and Tišma, after Vukovar, Sarajevo, Mostar and Krajina, the peevisness with which my interlocutors rejected the possibility of intercultural dialogue and understanding takes on another dimension. In it one may descry the voice of experiences untold, tragedies unaccounted for; a voice that marks a void, a missing page in history, a blind spot in the programme of civilization.

We have, over the last few years, received a clue as to what kind of experiences may be stored under the lid of obstinate otherness:

I was obsessed. Every single night, for months on end, I found myself in front of the TV set: newspapers spread around me on the floor, stacks of clippings and video-tapes on my table, zapping from one channel to the other, hoping to find yet another news report, yet another documentary, yet another talk show about the war in former Yugoslavia.

This TV war was quite different from the one that I had experienced in Novi Sad; its horrors much more palpable, its drama much more bloody and yet, for all of its realism, this condensed war of the media was much more distant, much more unreal. Something happens to despair when it is subtitled.

'How is it possible?', people in Holland would ask me. 'You've been with the Serbs. How is it possible that these people are doing this? How is it possible?'

The question came in many forms. Radio talk shows gave me 5 minutes to explain the horrors to friends evenings on end. The question remained, however, and the pertinence and insistence with which an explanation was sought for the occurrence of this violence, this cruelty, this barbarism in the heart of Europe never changed.

Only later, when the Balkans once more were declared to be not quite European, I came to understand that the questions had been rhetorical.

For what possible answer could there have been? Can you plumb the depths of the barbarian's soul while refusing to give up your civilized self? Can you inspect the cesspool without getting smeared? I think not. And I think most of us reckon the price too high for saying 'Aha! I see! Now I recognize, now I understand why neighbours batter each other's heads!'

We rather say that people in the habit of battering their neighbours' heads are different. They are not like us. They are 'the Balkans'.

The question 'How is it possible?', repeated over and over again, was to remain a question. An unanswerable question. Because in its quality of being unanswerable it best proves our being different. We are not like them.

I don't want to be judgemental about this refusal to search for an answer: many times during the war I would have liked to join the chorus that labelled the Balkans a different world: a land where tragedies are too tragic – and

cruelties too cruel – to be measured with the scales that our world has on offer; a place where the facts of life are incompatible with the framework of our existence. The temptation to comply with the man from Celavići – to shake those firm hands once more and say ‘okay, let’s face it, you Serbs are utterly strange’ – was there. Yet it was also something of a non-option, as it felt like a declaration of bankruptcy of the anthropological project.

The thoughts of the Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek helped me out of the deadlock of mere condemnation. ‘Far from being the Other of Europe, ex-Yugoslavia was, rather, Europe itself in its Otherness, the screen on to which Europe projected its own repressed reverse’ (1994: 212). Žižek argues that the West was fascinated by the bloody drama in Sarajevo; he goes so far as to paraphrase (with consent) a political analyst saying that:

... the West provided just enough humanitarian aid for the city to survive, exerted just enough pressure on the Serbs to prevent them from occupying the city; yet this pressure was not strong enough to break the siege and allow the city to breathe freely – as if the unavowed desire was to preserve Sarajevo in a kind of atemporal freeze . . . a fantasy-body, eternalized in the fixity of its suffering, outside time and empirical space. (1994: 213)

Although I do not follow Žižek’s insinuation that Europe sought a deliberate prolongation of the horror show called Sarajevo, I see that his comments on the work of fantasy in the media coverage and mass consumption of Sarajevo are to the point. I know what Žižek is talking about when he says that in the Western gaze at Sarajevo repulsion comes hand in hand with fascination and *jouissance*, obscene enjoyment. I’m aware that there was something addictive about my zapping sessions in front of the TV set, my craving for utter drama. I cannot deny that at one point – to my great embarrassment – rumours about a peace treaty in the making evoked feelings of disappointment rather than joy.

Uncomfortably I conclude that it is not the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’ that is for real. It is something else. For notwithstanding the fact that I can recognize and even empathize with Žižek’s thoughts and insights, they remain distant, cerebral, intellectual constructs. I can pay lip service to them; I can underscore the barbarity that hovers in Western civilization (the trench war of 1914–18, Auschwitz, the Dutch military campaigns in Indonesia, Vietnam, or for that matter, the Novi Sad massacres carried out by Hungarians and Germans, role models of civilization and *kultura* on the Pannonian plains . . .); I can say ‘yeah, yeah, there’s a beast in everyone’; I can confess my sins and hint at the hidden erotic agendas of my research; I can point out that lustful sparkle in my eyes as yet another shell hits the distant city; I can sprinkle my texts with obscene words and bawdy songlines to indicate that some academicians, too, know about these things. I can do all that, but the more important fact is probably that I can flirt with these dark undercurrents inside as I wish. For I *am* civilization. And knowing that no one is going to cancel my membership of civilization, the flirtation with the wild man inside remains a private game. I play it while I sit behind my

word processor, thinking, reflecting, introspecting. Beware: I am not trying to say that these thoughts and introspections are false or mendacious. It's just that outside the strict setting of text production, they are of no consequence. No matter how much I dig to uncover the wilder drives and moods in my being, the civilization of that being is never under discussion. Not for one moment. All I need to do is turn off my PC – click! – and walk down the street, a free man.

The Serbs that I met – obstinately other or not – showed nothing of this loose, non-committal relation with the barbaric. Almost without exception they felt compelled to say something about the wild man inside. Sometimes they would proudly reclaim their barbarian disposition, in a pose of fierce resentment against civilization, as the army commander in the hills around Sarajevo quoted in the weekly *Vreme*, who dreamed of the times 'without electricity and computers, when Serbs were still happy', a patriarchal paradise without cities, 'that breeding ground for every imaginable evil'.<sup>11</sup> More often, however, they would address the barbarian unwillingly, hesitantly, full of shame. Editorials and letters to the editor in newspapers after the outbreak of war best convey the mood. Many portray the war as an anachronism, an 'impossibility at the beginning of the 21st century' and explain the events as 'a regression into the 19th century', 'a return to the Middle Ages', 'pre-historic times'. Above all, however, the writers of these letters and articles perceive the war as a lapse into a state of wildness and primitivism. The fact that the first peace negotiator, Lord Carrington, had won his spurs in Africa elicited bitter comment. 'Lord Carrington has proved before to be able to calm down tribal chiefs . . . he's an expert in intertribal dispute':<sup>12</sup>

After the anger and irritation with which Lord Carrington awaited our tribal chiefs in The Hague . . . he has returned to our soil, with a smile, and with optimism, as befits the English gentleman who is on a safari among the barbarians, who butcher each other so lustily, yet are not insensitive to gifts out of the wide world . . .<sup>13</sup>

I'm not a supporter of the idea that the world community should send us someone to keep us apart and calm us down, but I can well imagine the shock and dismay people in Europe must feel when they see, at the end of the 20th century, a barbaric country displaying inhuman behaviour. And the puzzling thing is that we are not barbarians. But if we are not, then what is this poison in us?<sup>14</sup>

In an article describing the plundering of the Dubrovnik coast by Montenegrin forces the reporter comments bitterly that 'In the village of Cavtat they "visited" the art gallery of Vlaha Bukovac. So let nobody think the Montenegrins don't have an eye for art and culture.'<sup>15</sup> And whereas writer Dragan Velikić discusses the primitivism of all the Yugoslav nations – 'the Serbs are not ashamed of their barbarians, in barbarism they find the power of their ethnos and the triumph of their myths'<sup>16</sup> – an appalled citizen from Belgrade hopes to escape from the barbarian by giving up his Serb identity. Under the title 'I want to be a Bushman' (the choice is not at random) he states:

In view of the monstrous behaviour in some Serb circles and among the Serb leadership, I feel nothing but shame about being a Serb. I will therefore do everything to arrange that another national status will be written in my passport: it may be Libyan, Angolan, Iroquois, Bushman, but never again Yugoslav or Serb . . .<sup>17</sup>

This, then, seems to be the real difference: the apparent pressure many Serbs experience to think of themselves in terms of barbarians – or at least to position themselves against the barbaric – and my freedom in this respect; the realization that I don't have this urge, that even though I'm quite prepared to emphasize the wildness lurking inside, this acceptance remains largely a cerebral exercise.

It is plausible that power relations are at play here; my comfortable position in civilization being a direct result of belonging to a nation in the core of Europe, their unease following from an internalization of the orientalist constructions of 'the Balkans'. Elsewhere, I have elaborated this theme, showing how the history of Serb nationalism clearly indicates that, from the very beginning, Serbhood has been defined in a double way, stressing 'European-ness' in contrast with a 'backward' and 'primitive' (i.e. byzantine, oriental, tribal, archaic, barbaric) past, yet illuminating and even glorifying backwardness and primitivism to arrive at a distinct Serbian sense of self (van de Port, 1998; see also Todorova, 1997). Here I would want to address the question how these historically constructed images are 'installed' in the individual Serbian actor, feeding his sense of being definitely and essentially 'other' (as well as the mirror question why the obvious barbarism of the West fails to take root in my being).

The thought presents itself that this difference stems from the fact that 'they' and 'we' have built our notion of self, our view on human beings and our perspective on the world on different experiential histories. In my history, or in the history of my parents, there are no direct confrontations with blood in the snow, or brains splattered against the wall. Up until my fieldwork in Serbia, war belonged to the sphere of fiction: books, films, plays, TV shows. The first victim of war that I can trace in my genealogy belongs to my grandmother's generation, an obscure great-aunt who lost her life in the bombardment of Liège in the First World War (tellingly, the poor woman's death has become something of a family joke: *la pauvre* had tried to seek shelter standing in the basement, but as the bombardment had swept away the house, only the lower part of her body was found, still standing – so the myth has it – on the stairs to the basement). People actively involved in war – in whatever way – don't figure in my family history, and are probably not there.

For my Serb informants the drama of war is experientially much closer and, in comparison with Holland, a much greater number of people were exposed to direct violence.<sup>18</sup> It goes without saying that the impact of a personal experience of war is infinitely more burdensome than the experience of a war from hearsay. Yet in itself, that simple truth does not explain the

'obstinate otherness' I encountered in Novi Sad. The people who consciously lived through the Second World War are now in their sixties and seventies: they are not the people I hung out with in Novi Sad, not the people who hurled their 'you don't know our history' at me, not the people who now can't help but ask themselves about the barbarity of their kind.

There are other arguments, however, to keep following this lead. I do not know in any great detail how recollections of the war figured in the upbringing of a post-war generation in Yugoslavia. Titoist history presented war as a dramatic yet glorious and heroic event, losses being marginalized by Partisan bravery and success. So did the Serb nationalist rhetoric, as it revived the notion of glorious defeat in the battle of Kosovo, and proclaimed its credo that 'Serbs lose in times of peace and win in times of war'. The more personal and less heroic recollections of war that are relevant to my argument were difficult to collect. Close friends with whom I discussed the matter spoke about a complete silence in their homes, shot through at irregular intervals with horrific images of fear, misery, destruction and death. The silence, however, doesn't say much about the actual impact war traumas may have on the victim's children, as studies of children of Holocaust survivors reveal (Epstein, 1979; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Berger, 1997).

Michael Taussig's notion of implicit social knowledge (1987: 366–92) may be of help to conceptualize the tension that must have been there under the sunny progress-oriented perspectives offered in Tito's Yugoslavia. And so may a closer look at *lumpovanje*.

### Implicit social knowledge

In his study *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* (1987), Michael Taussig describes implicit social knowledge – and I will freely paraphrase a complicated argument – as an underground reservoir of knowledge in a society. One might picture this reservoir as the old garbage can where official history throws the stinking by-products of its glorious course: the senselessness and amorality, the cruelty, the maddening fear, the losses, the tragedies, the suffering, the misery. People would rather pass it by, this rotting, sickening mess, but everybody knows that it is there, sending forth in its smelly perfumes a condensation of the repressed experiences of generations upon generations. In Colombia, the setting of Taussig's argument, implicit social knowledge manifests itself in the form of *mal aires*, evil winds, that stem from the pulverized corpses and bones of the pagan victims of pre-conquest times, and harm people, susceptible people with weak blood. An apt image, because what distinguishes implicit social knowledge from conscious ideology is its essentially inarticulate and imageric character: it is, as Taussig says, a 'nondiscursive knowing of social relationality and history'. In its vagueness and intangibility, implicit social knowledge is everything that social scientists who define research as an empirical fact-finding mission would want to

avoid. Yet to do so would be to deny the enormous power of this motivational force in the lives of individuals and groups. For those who know how to tap this source of knowledge, those who are in possession of the magic wand that brings these images to life – in Taussig's case Indian shamans and healers, in the Serbian case political leaders and their propaganda officials, as well as (as we shall presently see) Gypsy musicians – are truly powerful. Implicit social knowledge, says Taussig, is:

... what moves people without their knowing quite why or quite how, ... what makes the real real and the normal normal, and above all ... what makes ethical distinctions politically powerful. (1987: 366)

The idea of a reservoir that contains unspoken knowledge about social relationality and history, and sends forth evil winds, is highly relevant to Novi Sad. As we have seen, central European etiquette and a sense for *guten Verhalten* never came without the tension of the void; for people in the know the neat Habsburg facades were tainted with the silenced bloody dramas of war. Whispers of unspeakable horror could still be heard on the promenades of the Danube. As long as the reservoir rested, however, it was possible to pretend the smells were not there. Within this scheme, lumpovanje – that highly ambiguous phenomenon presented to me as Novi Sad's 'really real' – stands out as an anomaly, a flagrant violation of the collective efforts not to stir up the stinking mess in the garbage can. It therefore merits another, closer look.

### **Lumpovanje: in the realm of the imaginary Gypsy**

My dictionary – its tone self-assured, its definitions unhampered by pitying looks from Serb informants over abortive attempts to unearth the depths of their lumpovanje – says that the term lumpovanje is, somewhat surprisingly, derived from a German verb, *lumpen*, which means 'to carouse'.<sup>19</sup> There are a great many other expressions that refer to the events in the Gypsy cafe and they all might be read as indicative of the happenings unfolding there. *Napraviti lom*, 'to make a shambles', or *razbiti čaše*, 'smashing glasses', are often used as synecdochical indications for lumpovati. *Terati kera*, a somewhat archaic expression, literally means 'to drive the dog away' and should perhaps be understood in the same way as the German *die Sau raus lassen*, suggestive of an animal within that is temporarily let loose. Somewhat archaic but interesting is the verb *Srbovati*, used by Živko Marković in one breath with lumpovati to designate the behaviour of the 19th-century bohemians in Novi Sad's taverns: the verb is derived from the root *Srbini*, Serb, and therefore would mean 'to Serb', or 'to act like a Serb'. In the colloquial, however, people would mostly speak about 'having been with (or going to) the Gypsies'.

The presence of the Gypsy musician as the instigator of the scenarios

unfolding during lumpovati is central to understanding the phenomenon. In effect, lumpovanje can be interpreted as the creation of a fantasy-space, the dramatization and acting out of an imaginary Gypsy-world, the contours of which can be found in many forms of Serbian popular culture (van de Port, 1998).

What is most intriguing about this imaginary Gypsy world is its uncanny resemblance with the world as it looks in times of war. A stock-taking of typical 'Gypsy scenarios' would have to include the image of a people constantly on the road, wandering aimlessly, without a clear destiny. They sleep in the open air, in improvised shelters or ramshackle carts. They live a life without a proper home, without a proper job, without money and consumer goods. They are always hungry, always sick, always barefoot. The poem '*Ciganska Torba*' ('The Gypsy's Bag') by Ivan Glišić (1990) speaks about experiences that must be all too familiar to the refugees from Vukovar, Sarajevo and Srpska Krajina:

old hats  
squeezing shoes  
a crust of bread  
wanted in the bad times  
  
when the days are thirsty, barefooted  
and naked  
even the Emperor halts  
for the Gypsy's bag

In this world of the Gypsies life is always on the verge of total disintegration: as they fight their fights, betray their loved ones, indulge in whatever nature urges them to do, events always head in the direction of loss, destruction, homelessness. The overwhelming sense of doom in the realm of the imaginary Gypsy is pointedly captured in a story that has been recorded in several versions all over Serbia and is named '*Cigansko Carstvo*', 'The Gypsy's Empire':

*The Gypsy's Empire.* All in all the Gypsy's empire lasted three days. The first day the emperor hunted his mother through town, the second day he hung his father, and the third day he was thrown out by the Gypsies themselves.

I could cite numerous other examples, but these should suffice to suggest that these highly popular, highly sentimental Gypsy tales may be read as Balkan history in disguise: an alternative reading of the past, without the heroic battles from epic poetry and without the happy partisan optimism of Tito's Second World War. Gypsy tales enable Serbs to reflect on (to be confronted with, to discuss, cry over, laugh bitter laughs about) the unspeakable parts of their history. And as it is 'only the life of the Gypsies' they are exploring, they can do so without having to jeopardize the post-war normality of their petty bourgeois society.

Under the cover of this cultural form, the implicit social knowledge of generations becomes accessible to everyone. Children's books about the

life of the Gypsies, the great many Gypsy jokes that circulate in this society, the stock play *Koštana* – Carmen in Serbia: a must for every amateur theatre group – highly popular Gypsy movies by cinematographers such as Aleksandar Petrović and Emir Kusturica; they provide more than an imaginary window onto the world of these eternal strangers.<sup>20</sup> As was said about a collection of poems that was published under the telling title *Bol: Ciganska Rapsodija* (Pain: a Gypsy rhapsody):

... with fine strophes and exquisite words we are led into the world of the Gypsies, a world that is basically ours, although we may not have realized that. Poetry about Gypsies is never plainly about Gypsies: it is poetry about every human being. (Dretar, 1991: 80)

In the kafana, the local pub and the scene of lumpovati, Gypsy musicians rule the scene. And as they inspire their patrons to undo the bands of civilization, to drink and squander, dance and sing, laugh and cry, smash their glasses and make a shambles, smear their decency with mud and vomit, implicit social knowledge seeps in. During lumpovati, the ‘Oh!’, ‘Uvi!’, ‘Ole!’, ‘Avaj!’ and ‘Lele!’ of Serbian history merge with the sad interjections in a Gypsy song and with the emotions and corporealities this song arouses in the Serbian customer. During lumpovati, implicit social knowledge becomes embodied and transforms into a matter of the heart. This, at least, is what the story of Goran Stajić<sup>21</sup> suggests.

As for many of the middle-class citizens from Novi Sad, Goran Stajić could only perceive this war as an impossibility that had proved to be possible. His understanding of himself, his compatriots, his society were severely shaken.

‘I begin to lose control, things are getting out of hand’, was one of the first things he said when he took his seat on a Novi Sad terrace where we had agreed to have some drinks. He was much too late and a little drunk. It was a warm, sultry summer night and we were talking about the war that raged in eastern Slavonia, just a little further up the Danube. I told him that the contrast was hard to digest: the world as it was at a Novi Sad terrace, with its fashion-conscious people toasting each other and having polite conversations, and the nearby reality of eastern Slavonia, where, at that very moment, people were being brutally butchered. Stajić slowly shook his head, a sombre look on his face.

‘You are wrong’, he said. ‘There is no difference between the people on this terrace and the murderous gangs up there.’ He told me that the civilization I witnessed was nothing but a thin layer of varnish.

‘Ultimately’, Goran Stajić said, ‘we Serbs are all the same.’

These remarks were nothing like him; it was as if I was talking to another person. Like many others in ‘Habsburg’ Novi Sad, Stajić had always accredited the violence to the Serbs from down south; the ‘colonists’, as he would call them, the ‘hot-headed Balkan Serbs’ who were moved to these fertile northern plains shortly after the Second World War to help realize the ambitious agricultural programmes of the socialist government.

‘We, the Serbs from Vojvodina, have lived with others for centuries. There was never any problem until these mountaineers came to our land’, he used to say. ‘We’re not like them. We’re different.’

For some reason, that story had changed now.

‘I feel so threatened’, he said. ‘When they give me a gun tomorrow and send me to defend my country I will go. I’m ready for it.’

Again, I responded with disbelief. I knew Stajić was not a violent person. Yet in order to convince me of the changes that had taken place in his mind he told me an anecdote.

There had been four of them: Stajić himself, a female colleague from his newspaper, and two politicians from Belgrade. They had made reservations for the back-room of a well known restaurant in order to discuss important matters in privacy. Matters of war, I could deduce from his words, because at some point during lunch two volunteers had arrived, 'straight from the East Slavonian front, looking for silencers'.

'They were big men', said Stajić, 'they had served in the foreign legion; the kind of men that only drink fruit-juice. The type that you know can kill.'

Stajić and his colleague had also ordered a Gypsy musician to come and play in the back-room. It was the old tamburica-player from the restaurant's houseband. He had sat with them, just a bit behind the female colleague, as if 'to play softly into her ears'. They had been drinking wine and singing the old songs.

'Our songs, the songs from Vojvodina', he said.

There had been a song by Miroslav Antić as well, called 'Molitva', 'Prayer'. Later, back home, I looked it up in Antić's famous collection of Gypsy poems. It was a poem about the yearning for something to hold on to, for things that stay put. A song against uprootedness.

Then he talked about the drunkenness that had come over them. They had ordered one bottle of wine after the other. They had drunk the wine from the empty icebowls. Stajić had smashed several glasses to pieces. They had crashed to the floor, 'into a thousand pieces'. In his entire life he had never done that – 'maybe once, during a wedding, but that was just for fun'.

The feeling had been 'great', he told me when asked about it.

One of the men from Belgrade had carried a gun, loaded and all. At one point he had brought the thing out and put it on the table. They had made jokes about the direction in which it pointed; in turn, they had turned the gun around, aiming the barrel at one another. Later they had baited the old Gypsy musician with it. They had forced him to play something beautiful, something sentimental. They had yelled at him that he should sing the complete songs, that he should not try to leave out a couple of stanzas or so. With the gun pointed at him he had refrained from such dirty tricks. He had trembled with fear, the old Gypsy.

Goran Stajić spoke about it in a sober voice, without the bravado that usually accompanies stories like this. But he spoke without shame as well. As if he were talking about someone else. As if asking: 'Was it me who did this?'

Later on in our conversation we returned to the event. I asked him whether it had been tempting to make the Gypsy do something at gunpoint.

'Very much so', he said. I tried to imagine it. Thinking out loud I said: 'It must be that sensation of power. You are, in a very direct way, in charge of things.'

He agreed.

The sequence of events during the bacchanal is one of becoming more and more (in Stajić's opinion: deteriorating into) the 'hot-headed-Balkan-dweller'. It starts with singing the 'old songs from the Vojvodina' (undoubtedly to impress the two southern guests with Habsburg *finesse*); then, the appearance of the militia-men (cold, fruit-juice-drinking killers); the drunkenness of Stajić and his guests; the smashing of glasses; the mock war

at the table; resulting in the abuse of the Gypsy musician, forcing him to play something fine and beautiful at gunpoint (how civilized can you be under the threat of violence, they seem to ask themselves). After the event, Stajić seems convinced that divides between Habsburg and Balkan Serbs are futile, that civilization is nothing but a thin layer of varnish. For he has been with the Gypsies. And having been there, he now embodies the world described by Tišma and Kiš, a world that comes with blood in the snow and brains splattered against the wall.

Goran Stajić tells me that civilization in Serbia is a thin layer of varnish. His voice is soft, but is backed up by the roaring of distant cannons. He has held the gun. I am still trying to imagine, vicariously, the sensation of power. There's no denying there is a difference between us. And the difference is for real.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

I must assume that 'obstinate others' are not peculiar to Serbia, and that the relevance of these reflections is therefore wider. Every fieldworking anthropologist must have met them, although I don't read much about them.<sup>23</sup> The absence of 'obstinate others' in ethnography, I guess, follows from our inclination to label them 'incorrigible spoilsports' and continue to work with informants who did open up for dialogue. A tempting solution, and – fieldwork being hard enough as it is – maybe a wise one. And yet I can't help regarding this retreat into the small circle of cooperative others, who often turn out to be the stranger-handlers of the community, the not-so-others, the culture brokers that speak the same language as the researcher, as something of a failure of the discipline that pretends to make sense of other people's otherness.

The effort in this article has been to explore otherness, rather than common divisors. The exercise has highlighted that people in other societies carry with them experiences that are alien to our conceptual and emotional frames of reference and I have suggested that this awareness on their part may foster the view that it takes a Serb to know a Serb. Obviously, traumatic histories are not the only motive people may have for presenting themselves in this particular fashion. My informants regularly told me that I should not expect to understand them for they didn't even understand themselves anymore. 'How can you study our society? You've come to study a *circus!*', I was told. Supporting the idea of being incomprehensible to others may also have helped to pre-empt criticisms of Serbia's role in the war, and shame or embarrassment felt over this. Obstinate otherness certainly helps to by-pass feelings of guilt. Such motives, however, are not in contradiction with the line of reasoning that I have presented here. Quite to the contrary. Arguments (and excuses) that are rooted in the implicit social knowledge of a society, arguments (and excuses) that invoke the stinking and sickening

garbage can of history are – as the corporeal imagery suggests – likely to display an aura of absolute truth and must be taken seriously.

The exercise in these pages has also highlighted the enormity of the project envisioned by Johannes Fabian and others, and the serious difficulties involved in its implementation. What is the meaning of 'understanding' when the anthropologist claims to understand the refugee from Bosnia, the warrior from Liberia, the street children from Mexico City. What is the nature of dialogue when we engage in a conversation with the survivor of an Algerian massacre, the people who survived a famine, a raid, a natural disaster? Impossible as it may be to answer these questions, we have no choice but to pursue it. Traumas such as the experience of war affect a people's understanding of who they are, what to expect of others, what kind of place the world is. It colours their life expectations and informs their relations with the future. In short: it leaves an imprint on a people's ethos and worldview. And as long as cultural anthropology may be described as the discipline that seeks to clarify the opinions and practices of a particular group by reconstructing their particular ethos and worldviews, then, surely, the impact of war experiences must be reckoned with. A closer look at the realm of popular imagination – the domain where implicit social knowledge finds the guise to be safely expressed – may be one way to go about this.

## Notes

- 1 Quoted in: Talal Asad (1986: 142).
- 2 As Bakić-Hayden and Hayden have pointed out, the orientalist rhetoric – that relies for its force on the ontological and epistemological distinction between (north)west and (south)east – has not only produced a rift between Europe and the East; it has also been applied within Europe itself to construct a divide between Europe 'proper' and those parts of the continent that were under Ottoman (hence oriental) rule (1992: 1). Slavoj Žižek says: 'In ex-Yugoslavia, we are lost not because of our primitive dreams and myths preventing us from speaking the enlightened language of Europe, but because we pay in flesh the price of being the stuff of *others'* dreams. The fantasy which organized the perception of ex-Yugoslavia is that of "Balkan" as the Other of the West: the place of savage ethnic conflicts long since overcome by civilized Europe; a place where nothing is forgotten and nothing learned, where old traumas are replayed again and again; where the symbolic link is simultaneously devalued (dozens of ceasefires are broken) and overvalued (primitive warrior notions of honour and pride)' (Žižek, 1994: 212). For an elaboration of the argument, see also Todorova (1997) and van de Port (1998).
- 3 To be sure, I also met Serbs who – as an anonymous reviewer of this article with fieldwork experience in Serbia put it – 'sadly shook their heads over this claimed incomprehensibility'.
- 4 The expression 'really real' is borrowed from Taussig (1987).
- 5 The name is a pseudonym.
- 6 For a discussion of the problem of the academic representation of Dionysian

- rites, see for example Michael Taussig's comments on making academic sense of the shaman's *yagé*-induced hallucinations (1987: 443 ff); or McKim Marriott's famous and hilarious description of 'The Feast of Love' (1966) in an Indian village (one year, Marriott fully participates in the hashish-induced celebrations; the next year he stays sober and writes his notes).
- 7 In a recent work on the ethnography of the tango, dance ethnographer Marta Savigliano (1997: 6) stated that: 'marginality, misfitness, naivete, awkwardness, patience beyond the call of duty and frustration with a smile are some of the very corporeal experiences to which a wallflower/ethnographer is and accepts to be submitted in the course of fieldwork. The passivity involved in learning from others' activity will eventually deliver the strategic production of knowledge. Actually, wallflowering is somewhat prescribed by the participant-observer technique in that the desire to go native or to become totally involved in a given 'culture' should be persistently frustrated by the demands of objectivity or, at least, of maintaining the distance required for the production of anthropological interpretations. But anthropologists are wallflowers with a vengeance. The tense marginality of the expert in the midst of a participatory project metamorphoses into a manipulative work of representation and interpretation as soon as the institutional, discursive field of anthropology is regained.'
- 8 I do not know the reason for this command, but it struck me as a curious detail: blindfolding a city for the horrors that civilization can bring about.
- 9 The story of how Novi Sad Hungarians were slaughtered shortly after the war isn't included in the volumes either.
- 10 Interview with Raymond van de Boogaard, *NRC Handelsblad*, 15 June 1991.
- 11 *Vreme*, 3 Nov. 1991.
- 12 *Borba*, 5 Sept. 1991.
- 13 *Borba*, 24 June 1991.
- 14 *Borba*, 11 Nov. 1991.
- 15 *Vreme*, 3 Nov. 1991.
- 16 *Vreme*, 16 Nov. 1991.
- 17 *Borba*, 9 Jan. 1992.
- 18 Statistics, however unreliable in this part of the world, tell a story of massive death. During the two Balkan wars (1912, 1913) and the First World War one out of three Serbs died as a result of violence, hunger and epidemics. The numbers from the Second World War are as shocking: the official statistical figures speak of 1,706,000 victims, 305,000 of which were soldiers. This figure represents 11 percent of the total population.
- 19 It also provides a quotation, presumably from a text on 19th-century bohemian life in Novi Sad, saying that '*lumpovala je više ili manje cela inteligencija; čak se smatrala da u lumpovanju ima nečega genialnog* (more or less everybody in intellectual circles indulged in *lumpovati*; they even maintained the idea that there was something genial about *lumpovanje*).
- 20 There are many other reports as to how, in various parts of Europe, Gypsies are the means by which the majority in a society represents its own otherness to itself. See, for example, Bell (1984) and Stewart (1993) on Hungary, Brandes (1980) on Andalusia, Guy (1975) on Tsjechia, Lemon (1996) on Russia, Mróz (1984) on Poland, Rakelmann (1980) and Schopf (1980) on Germany.
- 21 The name is a pseudonym.
- 22 The case of Goran Stajić teaches us that *lumpovati*, the exploration of the imaginary realm of the Gypsies, might be perceived as an instance of what H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen has labelled 'social fetishism': the creation of

powerful images that give members of a group a partial understanding of a dreaded external reality, while at the same time blocking their progress towards more realistic interpretations (Thoden van Velzen, 1990: 79). Novi Sad's war traumas have left the community needing to forget about the horrors of war and the impossibility of doing so. *Lumpovati* allows for an approach of the realm of horrific memories, without actually entering it (1990: 81).

- 23 The typology of informants by Dean et al. (1967) mentions many different types of people, with many different motives for being willing to speak out, but the 'obstinate other' is not mentioned.

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