

# **NARRATING VICTIMHOOD**

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# NARRATING VICTIMHOOD

*Gender, Religion and the Making of Place in  
Post-War Croatia*



Michaela Schäuble



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To  
Heinz & Veronika  
and  
Ivan & Mara



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# Preface

## *Ways of Looking and Knowing*

A few months into my fieldwork Marko took me up a hill called Kriz [cross]. Standing under a huge marble cross we had a spectacular 360-degree view overlooking vast parts of the Central Dalmatian hinterland: the barren rocks of the Dinaric mountain range separating Croatia from nearby Bosnia-Herzegovina to the north-east, the large fertile Sinjsko polje plateau that stretches beside the small town of Sinj, and the mountains to the south that cut off the area from the Adriatic sea. Small hamlets, part enveloped with smoke, lay speckled across the immediate vicinity.

Marko regularly set up his telescope on this hill and would immerse himself in observing the surrounding landscape for hours. Bringing me along to this spot, he said, he wanted me to see where he belonged and to understand why he could never live anywhere else. Standing up against the strong, chilly north wind, the *bura*, Marko directed the viewfinder to the curve of the River Cetina, the half-abandoned aerodrome of Sinj, his parents' *vikendica* [weekend house] in the mountains, and the steep rugged hill where the medieval fortress of Sinj had once stood. He also pointed to the unmarked course of the border with Herzegovina and showed me where his army squad was stationed during the Domovinski rat, the Croatian Homeland War, in the 1990s.

Marko's telescopic view enabled him to perceive the surrounding landscape as a framed and separate object that, according to Eric Hirsch's definition of place, can best be viewed when gazed upon from a distance (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; see also Green 2005: 89).

Looking at the landscape through his telescope, Marko had precise points of reference and knew exactly where to look for them. When he passed the telescope to me, however, I not only failed to see or recognise any of the places he mentioned but also found myself unable to ascribe meaning or emotional sense to anything I was looking at.

In his analysis of the social formation of symbolic landscape Denis Cosgrove notes that one of the prevailing notions of landscape is attributable to the visualist paradigm and has been continually fostered by technical innovations. Over the past few centuries, he writes,



**Figure 0.1.** The hill Kriz [cross] from which Marko and I were looking at the surrounding landscape. Photo: M. Schäuble

the idea of landscape came to denote the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, the scenery (literally that which is seen) which is viewed by a spectator. It implied a particular sensibility ... closely connected to a growing dependency on the faculty of sight as the medium through which truth was to be attained: 'seeing is believing'. Significant technical innovations for representing this truth include single-point perspective and the invention of aids to sight like the microscope, telescope and camera. (Cosgrove 1984: 9)

Although I could relate to the aesthetic dimension of the surroundings and enjoy the scenery of the Dalmatian hinterland, the detached and disembodied vision of the 'single-point perspective' did not, I thought, offer me much of an overview over my field site or help me to approach it better. 'Zooming in' seemed to me a rather unsettling way of looking – more irritating and disorienting than anything else.

It was only much later, after I left Croatia, that it occurred to me that the significance of Marko's telescopic view and my view as an anthropologist amounted to something much more than simply two different or opposing ways of looking. His view and mine, I realised, became

metaphors of situated and embodied knowledges (Haraway 1988: 583) that enable understandings of practices and politics of positioning in the course of 'making sense' of the world and relating to surroundings. As an instrument of vision Marko's telescope mediates standpoints and draws attention to the partiality not only of sight but also of knowledge production in general. Anna Grimshaw in her analysis of ways of seeing in modern anthropology stresses that vision 'functions as a methodological strategy, a technique, within modern ethnographic practice' and simultaneously constitutes 'a metaphor for knowledge, for particular ways of knowing the world' (Grimshaw 2001: 7). Through imagery of vision, observers position themselves both spatially and socially. It became clear to me that Marko uses the telescope as an optical instrument of disengagement from the world surrounding him and thus avoids visual reciprocity. His deliberate spatial detachment from his physical surroundings and withdrawal from the social environment are closely related to his experiences as a volunteer in the Homeland War. At the age of nineteen and without any prior training, Marko had been stationed at a missile defence unit in the nearby mountains, monitoring air traffic. Today, almost twenty years after the ceasefire, he still suffers severely from symptoms such as flashbacks, hyperreflexia, insomnia and acute anxiety attacks. He is very restless at times and has difficulties handling complex social situations that involve many people. He told me that he feels best when he does not have to interact with other people and can wander around in the mountains by himself. Climbing up a hill with the telescope was his way of distancing himself from the world while still being able to take a close look at it and, as he put it, feel in control. The clearly framed images and the disembodied gaze seemed to provide him protection from the presence of things, and possibly helped him to refocus by physically narrowing his visual field.

'Vision is *always* a question of the power to see,' writes Donna Haraway (1988: 585). Clearly this is true too of anthropology. The privileged status of anthropological ways of looking facilitates specific ways of knowing. When 'looking at' or 'seeing' the landscape, Marko and I not only situated ourselves differently in our surroundings but also embraced different meanings and connotations.

To Marko the barren mountain slopes and the vast plain of Sinjsko polje meant rootedness and offered a source of calm, whereas to me they aroused no such feeling. Marko's way of looking, infused as it was with historical, biographical, commemorative, emotional and imaginative knowledge(s), rested on a sense of belonging that materialised in the very landscape around him and his viewfinder. The cultural and

experiential lenses that I was looking through, by contrast, disabled me from sharing Marko's view in any comprehensive way.<sup>1</sup> He, along with other interlocutors and friends in 'the field', tried to educate my perception of the world. Yet it was only little by little that I improved my understanding and managed to make sense of local people's relations to their surroundings – whilst struggling to keep an 'overview' and to position myself.

Different ways of looking thus not only enhance different ways of knowing but also enable different ways of experiencing and engaging with one's surroundings. Whilst Marko was seeking regular disengagement and intentionally withdrew from the social world, I had no choice but to endeavour an understanding by way of involvement. As an anthropologist, I comprehend vision as an ethnographic technique of enquiry that requires active and immediate engagement. This ethnographic approach – commonly known as 'participant observation' yet probably more accurately describable as experiencing and engaging through shifting ways of looking – was assisted and simultaneously constricted by various audio-visual appliances. My technical equipment – consisting of a DV-camera, a digital photo camera, a reflex camera and a mini-disc player to tape interviews – proved to be useful pictorial and acoustic recording devices. As essential aids to my memory as well as important modes of illustration and (re-)presentation, however, they were all apparatuses of static single-pointed perception. During my fieldwork they served mainly as tools of detachment – in a negative as well as positive sense. Acknowledged as a, if not the, principal trope in modern anthropology, vision and/or observation have still been increasingly criticised for their 'objectifying and dehumanising' stance on reality (cf. Grimshaw 2001: 6). This seeming contradiction corresponds to my own experiences during fieldwork, suggesting that while immediacy and unmediated presence – engaging all our senses, not just vision – are indispensable modes of understanding, constant physical (as well as emotional) proximity can also prove rather counterproductive, and tends to blur one's view. I would thus plead for an ethnographic practice that entails shifting ways of perception, following Christopher Tilley's description of the phenomenological perspective in terms of oscillation between states of being and 'a process of objectivation in which people objectify the world by setting themselves apart from it' (Tilley 1994: 12).

This methodological epistemology of versatile perception is also mirrored in Haraway's notion of a partial perspective whose aim is not to seek closure but to open up (to) the world.

Subjectivity is multidimensional, so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly and *therefore* able to join with another to see together without claiming to be the other. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection. (Haraway 1988: 586)

It is this multidimensional – and, as I would add, multi-sensorial – subjective stance in the shape of objective partiality and situated, embodied knowledge(s) that I have been actively seeking to take on during my fieldwork, as well as in the subsequent process of transforming personal experience into anthropologically relevant information, and finally text.

Drawing on the framework of social phenomenology, visual anthropologists increasingly invert earlier ideas about the all-too-close contact with the object of study and claim that ‘it is through our distance from things that we, as seeing persons, can become close to them. In vision, therefore, distance and proximity are not mutually exclusive, but rather imply one another’ (Willerslev 2007: 26). Taking this analytical position into account and linking it to the perpetual correlation between personal experience and the production of meaning and scientific knowledge about the world, it becomes apparent ‘that it is in the movement between proximity and distance, that empirical data is transformed into anthropological analysis’ (Øien 2007).

Moving between proximity and distance is thus a crucial part of the anthropological endeavour that is necessitated by the transition between being-in and *describing* the world we all inhabit. ‘Perception does not give me truth like geometry but presences’, writes Merleau-Ponty ([1942] 1962: 14), and it is a sequence of these presences in terms of embodied perceptions that have considerably shaped my physical as well as social interactions with my surroundings during fieldwork. It has been my personal experience of changing vision, however, that has facilitated my analytical capacity and eventually enabled me to develop a narrative voice of my own.

### Note

1. Haraway points at the dangers inherent in alternatively ‘romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position’, yet failing to critically acknowledge that such ‘subjugated knowledges’ are not intrinsically ‘innocent’ positions but facilitate rather relativist ‘ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively’ (Haraway 1988: 584).

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*Hvala!*

# Notes on the Text

## Transliteration

The Croatian language (*hrvatski jezik*) is classified as belonging to the Central South Slavic diasystem, also commonly referred to as 'Serbo-Croatian' or 'Croato-Serbian'.

With the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s its languages formally followed suit, and Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian became separate standards. Today, use of the term 'Serbo-Croatian' is highly controversial and the alternative name that has emerged in official usage is Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BHS). BHS spelling is equally phonetic, that is each letter of the alphabet represents the same sound. The following brief guide to pronunciation includes only those letters whose pronunciation is significantly different from English.

C,c	ts as in cats
Č,č	ch as in church
Ć,ć	a soft 'tch'
Đ,đ	g as in gentle
DŽ,dž	j as in Jack (roughly Đ,đ but harder)
G,g	g as in gate
H,h	ch as in loch (pronounced with a Scottish accent)
J,j	y as in yellow
LJ,lj	ll as in million
NJ,nj	n as in news
R,r	r as in rolled
Š,š	sh as in she
Ž,ž	zh as in treasure

## Pseudonyms

I have used pseudonyms for the majority of the people discussed in the text to protect their privacy. Some public officials, politicians, church dignitaries and certain military officers constitute an exception whenever the disclosure of their identity is crucial for the understanding of the context in which they are being discussed.

# Introduction

## Rethinking the B-Word<sup>1</sup>

Whether labelled as *bure baruta*, or the ‘powder keg’ of Europe, whether evoked as Europe’s unconscious (Žižek 1999) or as a geological fracture zone (Winchester 1999), whether depicted as a toxin threatening the health of Europe (Glenny 1999: xxiv) or as Europe’s cesspool (Bjelić 2006), whether unmasked as a site of nested Orientalism (Bakić-Hayden 1995), or whether located between globalisation and fragmentation (Bjelić and Savić 2005a) or treated simply as metaphor (ibid.), the Balkans have a long tradition of being maintained as the constitutive opposite and outside of ‘Western modernity’. It has become increasingly clear, however, that the region threatens the very logic of this modernist dichotomy (Žižek 1997; Todorova 1997; Iveković 2001; Bjelić and Savić 2005a; Green 2005). In the case of the former Yugoslavia, an association of Balkan history with recurrent conflict, instability and fragmentation has often led to its portrayal as something almost constant, as a more or less independent variable. Indeed, ‘the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s ... came to appear as a case of Balkan history repeating itself’ (Brown 2003: 23). It is this perception of the region’s alleged timelessness that reproduces hegemonic concepts of a mythical Balkans as ‘dishevelled’ Europe (Todorova 1997: 14) and consequently confirms the ‘atomistic fractiousness and insubordination of the Oriental within’ (Herzfeld 2005: ix).

Slavoj Žižek, intellectual *enfant terrible* of Balkans philosophy, has termed this cultural hegemony exerted by the West over the Balkans as “‘reflexive”, politically correct racism’. Žižek denounces ‘the liberal, multiculturalist perception of the Balkans as a site of ethnic horrors and intolerance, of primitive, tribal, irrational passions, opposed to the reasonableness of post-nation-state conflict resolution by negotiation and compromise’ (Žižek 1999). He reveals the mechanisms by which the self-proclaimed civilised, democratic West instrumentalises the Balkan Other in an attempt to illustrate and legitimate its own emancipatory project whilst simultaneously celebrating the very same Balkan Other’s exotic authenticity. In other words, nationalist fundamentalism and fervent ethnic and/or religious identification are constructed as

irrational, divisive forces that threaten post-war reconstruction, democratisation and peaceful multiethnic coexistence in the region – and beyond. Further, Žižek also argues that on another equally meta-theoretical level, the same fundamentalisms are often treated by Western commentators as strategies of subversion and insubordination that resourcefully resist discourses of late-capitalist rationality (Žižek 1995, 1999). By then appropriating this dangerous and potentially subversive Balkan otherness to its symbolic universe, definitional hegemonic discourse on the Balkans – either in the guise of political correctness or by way of an assumed impenetrable complexity – generates a hypocritical form of ‘Balkanism’ that is not just deployed by outsiders but by the very people who it is meant to describe. It is in this context that Žižek advocates that ‘[o]ne should resist the temptation to “understand” [i.e. the Yugoslav wars], and accomplish a gesture analogous to turning off the sound of a TV: all of a sudden, the movement of the people on the screen, deprived of their vocal support, look like meaningless, ridiculous, gesticulations’ (Žižek 1997: 62). But however thought-provoking and auspicious this radical device of non-compliance with prevailing Balkanist discourse might appear at first glance, just as disputable is its applicability in view of any attempt to provide a pertinent account of the proliferation of power relations between liberal Western democracies and their peripheries. In contrast to Žižek’s suggestion I have sought not to ‘switch off the sound’ but instead to listen closely to what local actors have to say about their role in the construction of Croatian ‘nationness’ and how they engage in competing claims over history and truth.

The narrative (re-)construction and interconnection of historical memory and national (as well as regional) consciousness counteracts the imputed ‘in-betweenness,’ ambivalence and ‘transitoriness’ that define the Balkans in hegemonic discourse and interventionist rhetoric. Within the context of an ideology of globalisation, the politics of self-depiction as victims or ‘self-victimisation’ and ‘blaming the other’ that are so often associated with the Balkans have thus to be considered in the light of a conflicting and often contradictory self-positioning that oscillates between, on the one hand, a desire to overcome systematic exclusion and achieve alignment with larger geopolitical schemes of power (i.e. the EU) and, on the other hand, radical dismissal of supra-national powers and international organisations. In the following, I attempt to provide an in-depth description of local responses to present processes of the European Union’s ‘integration’ policy and analyse how and where people in post-war rural Dalmatia position themselves within the imaginary cartography of the ‘new Europe’ – and/or its immediate outside. I do so without claiming to fully grasp or explain the preceding outbreak of

violent conflict in the 1990s and/or to capture all aspects of the ongoing strengthening of post-Yugoslav nationalism(s). I am also aware of the danger of over-rationalising or celebrating local strategies of empowerment, insubordination and resistance to a global modernity that tend to subsist in and around marginal places, and I am thus careful not to overrate the political scope of marginality in destabilising central authority. That said, I am convinced that political conceptions of conflicts in the south-eastern peripheries of Europe as struggles against centres (and as triggered by centres), have to be taken seriously. The political involvement of – as well as battles between – ‘Great Powers’ (the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, France, Russia, Britain, the United States, etc.) in the region causes a continual dismemberment that fosters a capacity of the Balkans to appear as a site of both ‘cultural exoticism and cultural exorcism’ in relation to civilised Europe (Bjelić 2005: 10; Blažević 2007: 92). In this sense, Western self-absolution or self-beautification is not only problematised by Balkan fragmentation, self-marginalisation and self-abjection, but also blatantly dependent on images of the latter phenomenon (Herzfeld 2005).

This study can be read in a number of different ways. It is, first of all, an ethnography of a marginal place. Croatia is located at the frontier of the ‘new Europe’ and it is this marginality that, in contrast with conventional understandings, displaces and calls into question oppositions between ‘West’ and ‘East’, ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’. For centuries the country has been the subject of other powers’ longing for colonisation and domination – by actual or symbolic violence – and the instability so closely associated with the region can therefore be understood as part of continual attempts to resolve ambiguities by asserting fixed partitions and borders (Green 2005). The Republic of Croatia in its present shape is in turn divided into several provinces and regions, the southernmost of which is Dalmatia.

This area is one of the poorest regions of Croatia and is characterised by a stony, infertile soil and heavily fragmented landholdings. I conducted fifteen months of stationary anthropological field research (from April 2004 to September 2005, together with several infrequent visits between 2006 and summer 2012), first in the capital Zagreb and later in a rural community in the Dalmatinska Zagora, the Dalmatian hinterland. My major field site, the small town of Sinj, is located on a plateau between the Dinaric mountain range that separates Croatia from Bosnia-Herzegovina and the coastal town of Split. Sinj consists of fourteen rural settlements, encompasses an area of 181 square kilometres, and according to the last population census in 2011 has 24,832 inhabitants (Croatian Bureau of Statistics). The barren landscape, with traditionally

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weak infrastructure and a subsequently high degree of subsistence farming, not only shapes and influences people’s livelihoods and modes of existence but also bears a significant resemblance to other ‘catastrophic’ regions in the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell 2000: 298ff.). As part of the typical small-scale niche structure in the Mediterranean, contemporary Dalmatia holds a strong local footing, yet also has to face constant states of crisis, induced by recurring militant conflict and subsequent poverty. I argue that in such unstable regions, large-scale revitalisations and local inventions of religious and folkloristic tradition are used as



Map of Croatia. © United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations Cartographic Section

strategies of survival and resistance to supra-regional influences. The region is known both as a Catholic stronghold as well as the heartland of Croatian nationalism. Sinj is acclaimed nationwide as a pilgrimage site that not only hosts a renowned Marian shrine but is also home to one of the country's largest and most influential Franciscan monasteries. The area surrounding Sinj witnessed some of the most extreme violence both in the Second World War and in the post-Yugoslav wars (cf. Glennly 1992; Bowman 1994; Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Silber and Little 1995). During Titoism, the region remained a stronghold of Croatian separatism, even while being subjected to severe retaliations by the Socialist government. Many neighbouring villages were deliberately deprived of plumbing and electricity until the 1970s with the intention of breaking the local population's resistance to state politics. This, among other factors, has fuelled a depiction of Yugoslav history that rewrites forty years of multicultural coexistence in terms of a litany of national suffering and Croat victimisation (cf. Jansen 2002: 77). In labelling official history writing as 'a bunch of lies' or as a 'distorted history of the winners,' my interlocutors create a 'subaltern memory' in which they assign themselves the role of the 'eternally cheated.'

My focus is on continual contestations over truth, history and memory and on how these generate narratives of victimhood and shape local identities in the current postsocialist, post-war, and 'pre-EU-accession' scenario. In analysing how the residual affliction of militant conflict (1991–1995) is dealt with at the individual, regional and national level, I am particularly interested in moments of historical transformation as seen and narrated from the perspective of the nation's margin. I attempt to understand ways in which people in the Dalmatinska Zagora engage their marginality by protesting, but also by actively pursuing and reconstructing, their exceptional position. The concept of marginality is tricky in so far as it implies an 'ambivalent relevance to the heart of things' (Green 2005: 1) and is always relational: the marginality of marginal regions and people is prone to increase with growing globalisation and international competition for trade and development (Gurung and Kollmair 2005). In the following, however, I use the term to refer to distinctive and unequal subject positions within common fields of power and knowledge, and to structural disadvantages in the struggle for access to certain resources (Lowenhaupt Tsing 1993: xi; Gurung and Kollmair 2005). For the case of Croatia – as for 'the Balkans' in general – this implies localisation at the margins of Europe. Within the relatively young Republic of Croatia, Dalmatia – particularly rural Dalmatia – is additionally marginalised in its spatial as well as societal (socio-cultural, political and economic) seclusion from the capital Zagreb. Rural Dalma-

tians speak from a perspective that is clearly distinct from those of urban Croatians, by whom they are commonly ridiculed as backward, ultra-traditionalist and anachronistically pious and paternalistic. Understood in this sense, my interlocutors in the Dalmatian hinterland have to come to terms with ‘multiple marginalities’ (Allcock 2000: 226) as they are considered ‘marginal within the marginal’ (Green 2005: 6) and yet are simultaneously ascribed a key role in potentially proliferating insecurity and spreading conflicts elsewhere.

Anthropological research is often criticised for resting too heavily on ‘the examination of obscure, peripheral communities’, as Michael Herzfeld has pointed out with particular reference to his own research in Greece (Herzfeld 1985: xvi). This criticism is nowhere more appropriate than in the context of my specific fieldwork in a small town community in the Dalmatian hinterland. Nevertheless, I also draw on Herzfeld’s own overruling of this criticism, for it is just as true that marginal communities ‘have played a vital role in the formation of national self-stereotypes’ (ibid.). ‘To understand [a country’s] relationship to the world at large,’ Herzfeld notes,

it is necessary to understand the relationship of such ‘eccentric’ communities to the administrative centre ... In that sense, the villager’s view of the matter, rather than that of the critics of anthropological research, offers a better prospect of understanding. And this, in turn, strengthens the case for an ethnographic focus on the rhetoric or discourse of local identity. (ibid.)

My research is based on the observation that people at the margins – the margins of the nation-state [*država*] as well as those of Europe – paradoxically oscillate between rootlessness and simultaneous regional rootedness, and increasingly oppose themselves to a transnational and secular modernity. The local accounts I analyse are characterised by strong scepticism towards centralised and/or international economic and political intervention in the region and are accompanied by a recent redefinition of identities that clearly contradicts any proclaimed notion of multiculturalism.

Based on extensive ethnographic research, my aim is to explore the impact that processes of globalisation and global change have on local people’s efforts to create a sense of certainty, stability and belonging in what is perceived as an insecure and transitory world. My questions are: how do people hold their worlds together in terms of religious beliefs, social cohesion, family relations, gender norms, livelihood practices, and ‘idioms of roots, relatedness and place’ (Lien and Melhuus 2007: ix)?

How are seemingly abstract categories like ‘history’, ‘locality’, ‘economic globalisation’ or ‘transnational political integration’ incorporated into everyday discourses? And how are these categories used by and made meaningful to local actors in rural Dalmatia?

The accelerating process of globalisation threatens to undermine the relevance of area-based knowledge (Driessen 2001: 20). I argue, however, that the significance of globalising processes is best understood as an experiential, imaginary and epistemological dimension in people’s lives, which may not necessarily be linked to transnational movements, mobility or flows (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2004; Lien and Melhuus 2007). I am therefore convinced that the pitfalls of national transition and global integration can best be studied in marginal and seemingly stagnant places like Sinj.

### **From Balkanism to Postsocialism to Euroscepticism**

The *-isms* that ever more densely preoccupy contemporary (critical) theory refer to paradigms, systems of representations or temporal phases that seem awkwardly inadequate when it comes to capturing the current living conditions, or ‘lifeworld’, of my interlocutors in the Dalmatian hinterland – whether these *-isms* be Balkanism, postsocialism, neo- or late capitalism, nationalism, or, of late, Euroscepticism, anti-Europeanism or anti-globalism (see Gilbert et al. 2008a: 10). This shortcoming reflects the complexity and multiplicity of social and historical circumstances in the former Yugoslavia and points towards the need for alternative imaginaries, rooted in social practice and forms of communication, that also take material possibilities into consideration.

Recent analysis of Yugoslavia and its successor states has often been centred on the study of nationalism, ethnic conflict and ‘cultural trauma’, rather than on socialist and postsocialist processes (Gilbert et al. 2008a: 10). The recent history of war and violence continues to encourage political and scholarly narratives that foreground ethnic conflict and democratic failure at the expense sometimes of conceptualisations that focus on, for instance, socialism and postsocialist transformation. Despite this fact, the study of postsocialism has provided a number of valuable starting points, particularly with regard to phenomena such as privatisation, marketisation, civil society and the rise of nationalism(s) – all of these being themes of what is now commonly referred to as ‘transition literature’ (Verdery 1996: 11) – and with regard to the significance of emotional dynamics in political processes (Verdery 1991, 1996, 1999; Bridger and Pine 1998; Creed 1995, 1999; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; Pine et

al. 2004; Svašek 2006). In my study, however, I am particularly interested in the observation that the postsocialist experience is often accompanied by a radical re-evaluation of the socialist past and a concomitant rewriting of historical events and personal narratives in that period. In the course of my fieldwork I noticed that the aim of my interlocutors' recollections was to dramatise the past. For in constantly remembering, re-enacting and emotionally revisiting the past, the people I worked with were not simply reproducing past events but actively performing and reinterpreting them, both in light of certain important subsequent events and experiences, and in anticipation of consequences they imagined might follow in the future. In this sense, their altered views of history informed retrospective accounts of the past just as much as images of the future – the past and the future here being mutually constituted.

I do not claim to be able to develop new discursive frameworks for theorising about the Balkans, but in this work I emphasise creative practices through which people imagine and engage with possible futures and formulate their aspirations. These practices, however, also include expressions of scepticism and occasionally generate pessimistic narratives – mainly in relation to the accession routes of the newly founded nation-states into Europe and their role within international power politics.

Such projected post-millennial futures may include religious salvation, teleologies of market and democracy as well as narratives of chaos, conspiracy and degeneration. Few contexts bring these issues more to the fore than the post-Yugoslav states, with their history of socialist developmentalism (a modernist imaginary par excellence) and its violent disintegration, producing new and reconfigured utopic and dystopic visions. (Gilbert et al. 2008b)<sup>2</sup>

In my view, this assessment throws light on the context in which growing Eurosceptic, anti-Europeanist and anti-globalist sentiment are embedded and currently acted out in underprivileged regions of the former Yugoslavia, such as the Dalmatian hinterland.

I proceed from the assumption that drastic transformation processes since the 1990s have precipitated certain kinds of disambiguation of the past. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, the memory politics involved in contesting the meanings of the past are not only related to negotiations of fixed national and/or regional identities but also considerably shape the meaning of the region's future. The sentiment of continuity with an unambiguous past – which is expected to create stability at times when lifeworlds are fragmented and people

are uprooted – potentially creates a shared sense of a collective outlook. In the following, I will illustrate how the way in which people remember (and envision) their own individual life stories is intimately entwined with how they remember (and envision) the regional and national story (cf. Hodgkin and Radstone 2003b: 170). In this sense, local experience is integrated into a temporal continuum, stretching from the distant past into an anticipated future, and linked to global positioning. I often encountered a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in everyday conversations of my interlocutors. I attribute this to a way in which ‘initial feelings of hope for a better future have, in many cases, been replaced by disillusionment ... Widespread unemployment, new class differences, poverty, corruption scandals, disagreements about the restitution and appropriation of state property, and the economic advantages taken by the old nomenklatura have generated increasing distrust in the new “democratic” states’ – as Maruška Svašek discerns for the postsocialist scenario in general (Svašek 2006: 11; see also Kalb et al. 1999). A feeling of extreme powerlessness is transferred to politics – to state politics and to international political developments – and dominates a situation in which ‘resignation functions as a coping pattern’ (Jansen 2006: 437).

However, in this study I resist a framework of analysis that places too great an emphasis on despair. Instead my concern is to search for alternative spaces that people create in order to actively participate in imagining and shaping their future. Many Croatians do not consider integration into ‘political Europe’ as promising an option as the pattern that Katherine Verdery has described in terms of a form of postsocialist ‘feudalism’ in which personalism and patronage play an increasingly important role (cf. Verdery 1996: 204–28). The alternative ideals I encountered in my fieldwork in rural Dalmatia included a strengthening of the private sphere (i.e. family, patriarchal gender regimes), a striving for economic independence (i.e. subsistence farming and small-scale animal husbandry), anti-liberalism, an emphasis on regional footing, militarism and an explicit reversion to religion. All of these developments are interconnected and have highly elaborate narratives of victimhood as their common denominator.

## Memory, Victimhood and the Claim to Truth

The title of this book, *Narrating Victimhood*, draws on pervasive mythologies of (self-)victimisation in contemporary Croatia. Central to this (self-)victimisation trope are narratives indicating that one’s own *nacija*

(lit. people, nation) has been systematically persecuted, has suffered more than any other, and is consequently innocent of any injustice or war crime. This trope is, however, far from limited to nationalist Croatians. Marko Živković, for instance, persuasively revealed the resemblance to Serbian, Slovenian and Bosnian Muslim narratives and characterised the competing accounts for the all-embracing victim status as a ‘Jewish trope’ (Živković 2000). The assumption that (self-)victimisation provides an important vehicle for nationalist sentiment echoes Iyaylo Ditchev’s laconic remark that victimisation and horror constitute enormous ‘natural’ resources in the Balkans (Ditchev 2005).<sup>3</sup>

The concept of ‘resource’, or rather ‘reserve’ as Thomas Hauschild terms it, turns out to be a very feasible category with which to describe elementary structures of politicisation and (ritualistic) anchorage – often with recourse to ‘old’, rejected or long-lost habits, practices and beliefs (Hauschild 2011: xv, 5–7; see also Gronover 2007). Derived from the Latin verb *reservare*, to keep back, the term reserve or reservation can be understood in terms of the gathering of provisions, as well as in the more familiar sense of ‘guardedness’. ‘Cultural reserves’ thus denote the reserves that people draw on or mobilise for regeneration when facing deprivation, insecurity and powerlessness. Such reserves do not exclusively assume the shape of narratives but equally comprise material as well as ideational goods. In Croatia, and particularly in underprivileged regions such as rural Dalmatia, recourse to such reserves can take manifold forms. Alongside the revitalisation of certain aspects of what is commonly referred to as ‘traditional rural lifestyle’, narratives of (self-)victimisation and suffering are commonly employed as forms of moral assets. This victimary capital is in turn strongly associated with the emergence of ‘new localisms’ of an ethnic, religious and/or regional nature that stress demands over centres (Eriksen 1993: 150) – practices and discourses that Don Kalb calls ‘counter-narratives of nationalism, localism, religion and tradition’ (Kalb 2005: 187).

A number of globalisation theorists have recently acknowledged these phenomena. In the early 1990s Jonathan Friedman tellingly stated that ‘[m]odernity moves east, leaving postmodernity in its wake; religious revival, ethnic renaissance, roots and nationalism are resurgent as modernist identity becomes increasingly futile in the West’ (Friedman 1992: 360). I find Friedman’s seemingly clear-cut distinction between East and West rather disputable, and would, quite to the contrary, argue in the case of the Balkans that it is the region’s ambiguity – and intrinsic postmodern character – that renders clear modernist distinctions inoperative (cf. Green 2005). The ethno-nationalist and religious revivals he describes, however, nonetheless correspond to my empirical findings,

and I therefore argue that the various (and often violent) local strategies of dissociation of ‘multiculturalism’ should rather be seen as ‘part of continual attempts to resolve the ambiguities by imposing fixed separations’ (Green 2005: back cover). In my view, the rhetoric and workings of such attempts can best be explored by closely analysing how, under what circumstances, and with what effect the local (re-)emerges in different niches of the global system.

The narrative element in my work provides the theoretical and analytical framework for interpreting and writing about people’s imaginaries and their representations of memory, experience and vision. The ambivalences and ambiguities entailed in personal as well as collective narratives highlight their constructive character and elucidate their role as ‘vehicles of memory’ through which imagined communities and imagined selves are created (Lambek 1996: 242, 244). Analysing the relationship between narratives of past experiences and imaginative processes that are at work in these narratives seems a feasible way of coming to a closer understanding of how people in a post-war community in Dalmatia ascribe meaning to their lifeworlds. Local narratives of (self-)victimisation are strategies of empowerment and expressions of the attempt to have a say in the determination of official historiography.

In the case of Croatia, the ‘grand narrative’ is one of perceived lack of historical control, subordination and foreign exploitation. The perspective that the country has disproportionately suffered is also contained in the famous saying ‘*mali narod, velika nepravda*’, or ‘small nation, great injustice’ – which evidently refers only to endured injustices and not to committed injustice. Tomislav Z. Longinović interprets this self-assessment as follows:

The destiny of small peoples is thus a symptom of the imaginary hypertrophy of their collective identity, which results from the memory of historical victimization. This unhealed injury is then covered with stories of one’s greatness, which perpetuate the historical imagination and reverberate in the literary and cultural narratives of oppressed peoples. (Longinović 2005: 41f.)

This mechanism constitutes the descriptive centrepiece of the present study. By means of analysing diverse stories of greatness, bravery, the heroic battle against foreign intruders, and divine protection that I encountered during my fieldwork in the Dalmatian hinterland – and that underlie the omnipresent narratives of victimhood – I illustrate the effect such mythical stories have on ethno-nationalist ideas. Furthermore,

I seek to find out what role such narratives play in local explanations and justifications of (war) violence so closely related to the region.

In doing so, I explicitly distance myself from approaches which exclusively draw on concepts of 'cultural trauma' to explain the resurgence and manipulability of post-Yugoslav nationalisms (i.e. Meštrović 1993, 1996; Meštrović et al. 1993; Šuber 2004, 2006). References to Second World War traumas are highly problematic as they constitute 'the Balkans' as an irrevocable site of trauma (Jansen 2006). Recourse to past atrocities, however, is a very widespread strategy for local actors to make their voices heard in terms of their particular memories of historical victimisation. And as described by Longinović above, a number of my Dalmatian interlocutors did indeed seem to imagine themselves under a constant state of threat and victimisation. In order to understand this scepticism from a historical perspective, one must bear in mind that a serious deficit of sovereignty has been a general feature in the region: for centuries Dalmatia has been controlled by transnational economic, political and military interests. Venetian administrative rule and Ottoman intrusion were followed by Habsburg dominance and later replaced by centralised Yugoslav administration. The current monetary and economic constraints of European integration and globalisation are perceived by many as directly continuing longstanding foreign domination and victimisation of Croatia and, even more so, of rural Dalmatia. Local actors' distressing experiences and their exposure to severe injustices, however, should not obscure the fact that narratives of (self-)victimisation are frequently misused as a vehicle for nationalist propaganda and as rhetorical devices for pointing fingers of blame at the crimes of others in order to elude accountability for wrongs of one's own doing.

Significant numbers of Croats, and Dalmatians in particular, understand themselves as guardians of Europe and award Croatia the title of *Antemurale Christianitatis* [Bulwark of Christianity], a phrase that dates from the medieval crusades at the beginning of the Ottoman invasion. Indicating that they and their ancestors have successfully protected, and still protect, the borders of Europe against intruding forces 'from the East', this theme increasingly expresses a complaint that their historic role is not adequately acknowledged in Europe today. Such discourses – alongside alleged inequities during the past decades – stimulate the gradual formation of a self-image that can be called a collective victim identity (Jalušić 2004: 40–67). However, forms of systematic self-victimisation are not only used to reinterpret past events but are simultaneously deployed both in the articulation and rhetorical renegotiation of current political issues and in setting the terrain for future debates and contestations of power. Recent discussions, be

they in relation to the imminent EU membership or assessment of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, are perceived as a continuation of previous ‘wrongs’, whereby the meanings of past, present and future overlap with narratives of historical injustice and strategies of blaming the other.

### Reflections on the Fieldwork Setting

The site of my fieldwork in Dalmatia is relatively cut off from the rest of the country in the sense that the rural–urban divide in present-day Croatia creates a large gap between people’s lifeworlds. Despite being a classic ‘out-of-the-way place’, Sinj is the quasi-urban centre of an area known as Cetinska krajina, a group of settlements situated on the karstic field of Sinjsko polje, through which the River Cetina passes. Most of the mountainous region is stony and marked by a scarcity of productive arable land suitable for cultivation. The majority of the population are employees in the service sector or work as animal breeders, pastoralists or small farmers who produce little beyond their personal needs. The region is still off the beaten tourist track and Sinj is mainly visited as a pilgrimage site. The largest institution of the site is a Franciscan monastery that hosts a famous Marian shrine and an allegedly miraculous painting named *Gospa Sinjska* [Our Lady of Sinj] – a sight for which Sinj is renowned throughout the whole country and beyond.

During my fieldwork I lived partly with a host family from Glavice, an adjunct village, and partly in a one-room apartment in a housing scheme set up for war veterans [*branitelji*] in Sinj. A number of war veterans were given a flat in newly built residential complexes as compensation for their war service. My renter, however, suffered from trauma-related symptoms to such an extent that he could not live by himself and therefore let the apartment to me. To my knowledge, I was the only foreigner living in Sinj at the time and was therefore well known throughout the town, and critically eyed at every turn. The exceedingly cordial reception and support of my host family in Glavice, however, facilitated my access to hard-to-reach people and aided my ability to broach difficult topics. Living with this family as a quasi-permanent guest also considerably influenced the thematic focus of my research in as much as all four sons had voluntarily joined the army during the Homeland War at a very young age and were still suffering from the grisly after-effects. Listening to the narratives (or the portentous silences) of traumatised and/or heavily injured ex-combatants on a daily basis directed my attention to the concerns of these young men and made me conscious of their

struggles to come to terms with the past, their attempts to make a living and establish future perspectives for themselves, as well as their efforts to win public acknowledgement of their veteran status and appreciation of their 'service for the homeland'. Their accounts, concerns and worries further highlighted my interest in issues such as the role of gender, hero worship, narratives of victimisation and continued militarisation in the post-war era.

Doing fieldwork as a woman in a predominantly male environment has clearly shaped my access to the field and influenced my 'body of information'. This factor, however, will hereafter not be specifically emphasised in my text, unless it essentially contributes to my findings in form and content. The same goes for my religious positioning in the field. I shared the same denomination but not the same convictions and beliefs as the people of the congregation I studied. This enabled me to easily 'blend in' in terms of following the Catholic liturgy and emulating the bodily practices involved. Simultaneously, however, I obtained the position of an outsider and could thus keep a critical distance to the miraculous tales of Marian apparitions in the region (Skrbiš 2005: 445).

The language barrier turned out to be another obstacle during my fieldwork in certain respects. Some of the political speeches and sermons that I attended were hard to follow, partly because they were given in a heavy Dalmatian dialect, and partly because in the beginning I did not pick up on all the various allusions. I therefore recorded a number of orations and announcements at public assemblies or at church ceremonies and later transcribed them with the help of native speakers, usually friends of mine from Zagreb. As a general rule, my 'interpreters' were simultaneously amused and upset about the tone and content of my recorded material. They usually started a lengthy discussion on the data I had gathered, which gave me a chance to discuss the material with people who had had quite a different upbringing from that of my interlocutors and who shared different political opinions. I could then take those comments back to 'the field' and contrast them to the lifeworlds of the people in Sinj and adjacencies.

This leads me to my major ethical dilemma. Living and working with people whose political views I do not share posed and continues to pose a number of political, social and ethical predicaments. It has proved to be a highly difficult task to contextualise local narratives – at times entailing radical nationalist, racist, sexist or homophobic positions – without compromising the accounts of the people I had come to like and esteem. Such disagreements caused numerous conflicts during fieldwork and frequent quandaries in the process of writing-up; more than once I found myself troubled in my attempts to record convictions and

beliefs diametrically opposed to my own. Representing my interlocutors' 'lifeworlds' intelligibly without always having to distance myself from their political viewpoints and thereby potentially betraying their trust proved to be quite a tightrope act. In the end, I decided to follow Michael Jackson's assessment entailing that 'compassion and conflict are ... complementary poles of intersubjectivity, the first affirming identity, the second confirming difference' (Jackson 1998: 4). In the case of my fieldwork this means that I took an intersubjective stance in highly respecting and empathising with my interlocutors, while at the same time critically challenging their trope of victimisation and strongly disagreeing with their nationalist and at times openly fascist stance.

Throughout this study I make use of multiple methodological devices, such as participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, 'thick descriptions' and analyses of various forms of written as well as spoken (sometimes even recited or sung) texts, images and events.<sup>4</sup> My conception of anthropological work, however, is grounded in the belief that semiotics (discourse and text) should not be prioritised over phenomenology, and that issues of 'lived experience' and immediacy do not rank behind problems of representation. In this sense, the data I collected are informed by the sensory, imaginary, emotional, moral and intellectual dimensions of my actual experiences during fieldwork. Documenting this process I kept a field diary and wrote extensive field notes, containing everything from detailed conversation and observation minutes – via topographies, personal descriptions, situation analyses, notes on conversations and comments I overheard – through to the copy of inscriptions and random impressions. The excerpts from my field notes that I quote throughout the text acknowledge this synthesis.

## Outline of the Book

Drawing on my reflections on ways of looking and the production of knowledge as described in my Preface, I decided to arrange the ensuing text according to a camera or telescope movement of zooming out. I start with a close-up description of my fieldwork setting, and then broaden my perspective by gradually including more aspects of my interlocutors' lifeworlds. After situating my field site within its temporal or historical and spatial context on local and regional levels, I open the lens and attempt to examine people's everyday practices, narratives and explanatory models with regard to national as well as international political processes – including an analysis of local actors' strategies of situating themselves within a globalising world.

Chapter 1 provides a brief outline of Dalmatian history and introduces the region as an important economic, cultural and religious intersection in the Mediterranean. It further establishes Dalmatia as a metaphorical space that traditionally marks the transition from 'Occident' to 'Orient' and that has inspired a number of travel accounts that simultaneously romanticise the inhabitants of Dalmatia as 'noble savages' of the Adriatic Empire and turn them into a spectacle of anthropological entertainment for the age of Enlightenment. Assessing these discourses together with a rendition and close analysis of local legends and myths, I seek to give a comprehensive picture of both Western Balkanist ascriptions and current modes of local self-perception and self-representation. In this I draw on ethnographic data and mainly focus on a crucial marker of local identity in the small town of Sinj in the Dalmatian hinterland, the Sinjska Alka, a local knight's tournament that dates back to the year 1715 when local defence forces successfully defended the ancient fortress of Sinj against the Ottoman troops. I demonstrate how the mythology surrounding this historic battle has recurrently been revitalised and used to explain and justify recent violence in the region, particularly during the Homeland War (1991–1995).

Closely linked to the Alka tournament is the commemoration of the alleged Marian apparition in 1715 that has turned the Marian shrine in Sinj into a national pilgrimage site. In Chapter 2 I give a detailed account of the annual pilgrimage to this shrine and analyse practices of Marian devotion in the light of its (changing) political role and utility – during and immediately after the Second World War, at the time of Yugoslav state socialism, in connection with Croatia's independence and the years of the Homeland War, and finally in the current postsocialist, post-war times. I place my analysis in the context of the politics of Marian veneration in general, and of the role of Mother Mary as *Kraljica Hrvata* (Queen of the Croats) and patron saint of Croat soldiers in particular. Finally, the portrayal of a visit to a Marian apparition site in Gala, a small village near Sinj that did not develop into an internationally acclaimed pilgrimage site provides a general idea of the mechanisms regarding the politicisation and (prevented) institutionalisation of narratives about Marian apparitions. In analysing the religious imaginary and devout practices of local people, I argue that in the case of the apparition in Gala the repression of religion in the former Yugoslavia has triggered the (re-)appearance of the Virgin Mary as phantasmagoric figure that has the capacity to question the legitimacy of political order, irrespective of the prevalent state power, and functions as a tool of social criticism down to the present day.

Chapter 3 discusses various aspects of space and place, and conceptualises an alternative topography of Sinj and the Dalmatian–Herzegovinian border region as a memorial landscape. I analyse how people in the Dalmatinska Zagora perceive their surroundings in terms of genealogies and territory, and how they constitute their identity in relation to the environment in which they live. Attempting to illustrate how history ‘takes place’, I trace the construction of geographic and sacralised landscapes in a context of ritual commemoration of massacre victims and argue that people’s memory is literally entailed and inscribed in the landscape. The area is full of massacre sites and mass graves – dating from different epochs and conflicts – that had previously been concealed under Tito’s regime. With the unearthing of mass graves in the early 1990s, notions of ancestry and territory were drastically re-evaluated, public resentment about suppressed memories of past atrocities was fuelled, and previously suppressed ethno-national tensions increasingly started to escalate. In this sense, ‘dead body politics’ (Verdery 1999), as Verdery calls the phenomenon of turning the dead into political messengers, are key to understanding how past atrocities were revived and fuelled the (ethno-)political consciousness of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The unearthing of previously unacknowledged massacre sites occurs in the region even now, and the commemoration of ‘victims of communist atrocities’ at a natural pit [*jama*] in the limestone karst mountains that surround Sinj continues to stir strong emotions and connects narratives of ‘historical injustice and concealment’ to specific places and landscapes of victimisation. Focusing on long-neglected spatial aspects of the political in the region, I contend that landscapes constitute mnemonic agents and sites of historic revisions.

In Chapter 4 I focus on discourses on the role of Croatian soldiers during the Homeland War and its aftermath. Exploring the relationship between nationalism, masculinity and militarisation, my aim is to delineate the current challenges that this correlation poses to stability and democratisation in the region. Many nationalist Croatians perceive the Croatian ex-generals who stood accused of war crimes as heroes who fought for the country’s independence. They equate the indictments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague with an attack on the legitimacy of the Homeland War, and until recently feared that guilty verdicts might excite doubts regarding the legitimacy of Croatia as a nation. Thus they continue to understand the extradition or conviction of Croatian former military officers as submission to blackmail and as sacrifices that Croatia was forced to make in order to join the European Union. A fundamental premise of this chapter is that one cannot understand the debates about the role

of combatants during the Homeland War without examining the history and current resurgence of ethno-nationalist sentiment in relation to militarised notions of masculinity. I interpret the continually proclaimed need for (militarised) self-defence as part of a regional refusal to cooperate with political, economic and ideological incorporation into the global arena. Finally, I suggest that masculinity continues to be a central mobilising source for nationalist forces that influences discourses on European integration and attitudes towards globalisation.

Chapter 5 is entitled 'Mobilising Local Reserves' and covers various modes of survival in postsocialist post-war rural Dalmatia, ranging from a revival of traditional family, kinship and gender arrangements over the proliferation of alternative rural economies such as subsistence and backyard farming, to a recent fortification of regionalism, Euroscepticism and anti-globalism. The term 'reserves', as I use it here, describes local perceptions of the exploitation of natural, technological and human resources as well as reactive behaviour towards damaged or lost access to these resources. Furthermore, the (re-)appropriation of local traditions and culture can also be understood as a 'great reserve against a world of purchasability, mercenary goods and services' and 'stocks of knowledge' that can thus be stored for an uncertain future or in case of crisis and collapse (Hauschild 2002: 11, 14, my translation; see Mühlfried 2007: 10). In this chapter I also discuss a possible return to the Mediterranean as an alternative affiliation or 'zone of belonging' by which local actors attempt to link the region directly to classical antiquity – in order to define Dalmatia as the cradle of European civilisation and to avoid any connection with the unpredictability and bloodshed commonly associated with the Balkans. All in all, this study attempts to explore the ways in which rural Dalmatians narrate and dignify their lives in a time and a place where resources are scarce and their status is low.

### Notes

1. This pun was stolen from Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis's essay (1999), p. 58.
2. These ideas emerged in collective discussion among the participants in the workshops of 'Towards an Anthropology of Hope? Comparative Post-Yugoslav Ethnographies' held in Manchester (UK) in November 2007, as well as at the workshop 'Critical Spaces of Hope: Locating Postsocialism and the Future in Post-Yugoslav Anthropology', held at the University of Chicago Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies in October 2008, at both of which I participated.

3. According to Ditchev, this victimary capital constitutes the reverse side of their *joissance* – leisure, cuisine, and exoticism (Ditchev 2005; see also Bjelić 2005: 17).
4. My data are mainly based on continual informal conversations, one-to-one dialogue, attendance of innumerable church services and religious celebrations, and daily participation in family and small-town life. Additionally, I conducted twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews with male and (one) female ex-combatants (*branitelji*), Franciscan priests, therapists working with traumatised ex-combatants, Zagreb peace activists and several members of the local community in Sinj. The interviews lasted between half an hour and five hours. In addition, I studied numerous pamphlets and booklets published by the local monastery in Sinj, as well as publications by the local branch of the cultural institution Matica Hrvatska. Alongside my analysis of graffiti, posters, placards and advertisement campaigns, I also found valuable sources of information in national and regional newspapers and magazines.

## (In-)Subordination at the Margins of Europe

Dalmatia is the land of the past and the land of the future!  
The land of past history, the land of future travel!

— Maude M. Holbach, *Dalmatia:  
The Land where East Meets West*

### Dalmatia – ‘The Land where East Meets West’

On 5 August 2007, then Croatian president Stjepan Mesić visited the small town of Sinj in the Dalmatian hinterland to attend the local folkloristic knights’ tournament ‘Sinjska Alka.’ A game of skill performed in historical costumes, the Sinjska Alka is held annually in commemoration of a victorious battle against the Ottoman Turks of 1715. The tournament, in which each contestant rides his horse down the racetrack at full gallop and tries to hit the Alka ring with his spear, is widely perceived as a celebration of ‘local resistance to intruders’ and a re-enactment of courageous opposition to foreign domination.

On this occasion President Mesić delivered a speech in which he stressed the importance of the festival for the whole Croatian nation. He addressed the citizens of Sinj and declared that the ‘Alka symbolises the freedom-loving spirit of Sinj, the Cetina region as well as of all Croatia, a spirit that we reaffirmed in the anti-fascist struggle and in the Homeland War, and that we are reaffirming today by building a free and democratic Croatia. That is why [the] Sinjska Alka has significance not only for locals, but for all of us, for the Croatian people and for all Croatian citizens.’ The Alka tournament is commonly known as a hotbed of extremist Croatian nationalism and has in the past been criticised and ridiculed by liberal urban Croats for its ‘rural backwardness’ and for its folkloristic display of a coarse combative spirit. The Alka habitually ensures a charged and

politically tense atmosphere. In 2001, for example, the Alka tournament hit the headlines, because it was used as a nationalist platform to support Croatian ex-generals who stood accused of having committed war crimes during the Homeland War (1991–1995).<sup>1</sup> Delegates of President Mesić had been regularly hissed down at this event and publicly insulted as part of a protest against the government's liberal approach to opening the Croatian economy to foreign investment and Mesić's promotion of Croatia's anticipated membership of the EU and NATO.

Mesić and the politics he represented in 2007 stand in stark contrast to the nationalist symbolism of the Alka event, which makes his address and the message it conveys quite surprising at first glance. Despite paying lip service to the Croatian nation, the president was actually using an event highly encoded with nationalist sentiments to launch his pro-European political course. By reaffirming that 'Croatia's future is the united Europe founded on anti-fascism, democracy, tolerance, respect for and exercise of human and minority rights,' Mesić inverted the values that the Alka traditionally stands for. His declaration that 'Croatia's future is Europe, where borders will connect and not separate, a community of equal states and peoples' can thus be understood as a major attempt to re-signify the previous meaning of the festival as a celebration of bulk-heading and essentialist notions of local, regional and national identity. By using the symbolic power of the Alka as a performance of traditionalism and local pride, and by trying to mobilise the tournament's fervent political potential for his leftist pro-European course, he publicly promoted pluralism and the increasing permeability of national borders – the very developments abhorred by radical nationalists.

This incident in August 2007 left me utterly astonished, because the same people who previously raged against the government and official authorities now seemed honoured by the attention and the importance that was ascribed to 'their' tournament. When I mentioned the deprecatory and rancorous remarks about Mesić that I had earlier come across in Sinj, my host Joško simply replied, 'this is all about politics and I am not interested in politics any more, as you know'. This seeming contradiction between people's asserted disenchantment with politics and their highly politicised demeanour was seized upon in Mesić's plea that the tournament should overcome its localised political significance. He stated: 'My sponsorship is a sign that [the] Sinjska Alka is moving away from politics. When I say that, I mean daily politics which used [the] Alka for narrow political interests.' With this tightrope-walk, Mesić pretended to uncouple the Alka from its previous political manipulation and thus to restore the breakdown of ties between the state centre and periphery – whilst at the same time

using this rhetoric on his own political account and under the pretext of broadening people's political awareness. I therefore interpret Mesić's endeavour to make the Alka part of 'building a free and democratic Croatia' as an attempt to create a feasible political vision directed towards a European future that specifically addresses and includes those who hitherto feel most opposed to it.

Drawing on the ethnographic example of the Sinjska Alka, I will, in what follows, analyse the dynamics of local transformation processes particularly with regard to Europeanisation and globalisation. But to fully understand the symbolic significance of this festival for the self-image of the inhabitants of Sinj and the Dalmatian hinterland, as well as for the role that the ritualised commemoration of Croatia's past is to play in the new Europe, it is necessary first to provide a brief outline of the history of the region and to underline the exceptional geopolitical and imaginary position of Dalmatia.

Described as 'the land where East and West meet' by Maude Holbach in her 1908 travelogue, Dalmatia has habitually been constructed as a metaphorical space that marks the transition from Occident to Orient. Not quite associated with the roughness of 'the Balkans' but considered too exotic to belong to Europe proper, a number of Western travellers and writers have been fascinated with this narrow, elongated region on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. The visible traces of the Ottoman legacy, along with traces of various Western colonial cultures, constitute the region as a prototypical 'liminal zone between the situated ethics of exotic peoples and the ordered morality of European culture', as Herzfeld has tellingly characterised prevalent conceptions of the Mediterranean (Herzfeld 1987: 130). Like most Mediterranean regions, Dalmatia has been an important route for merchants and travellers since ancient times and continues to be a popular tourist destination. Encompassing the scenic coastline with its numerous islands as well as the sparsely populated inhospitable hinterland, the region's environmental qualities in conjunction with its multicultural history make Dalmatia not only a long-standing location of the Western imaginary but also an important economic, cultural and religious intersection that is characterised by its highly localised sense of connectedness.

The following synopsis of the complex history of the region is relevant for my analysis in as much as it provides the grounds upon which I attempt to understand the dynamics of regional belonging and the politics of place-making in Dalmatia today. Thus in the following section I present a brief outline of the settlement history of Dalmatia and of Sinj, and demonstrate how the region has been systematically