Disappointment and awkwardness as ugly feelings
Humanitarian affect in a “Global East”

Čarna Brković

Abstract: What does transnational humanitarianism look like when considered from the perspective of a “Global East”? Ethnographically studying the disappointment and awkwardness generated by two transnational humanitarian projects illuminates a sense of suspended agency among Montenegrin citizens that was developed after the end of the Cold War. Montenegrins are often simultaneously included in the racialized and class-based humanitarian discourses of the Global North and excluded from actual participation in transnational humanitarian projects due to structural constraints. The article suggests that suspended agency emerges when there is both a sense of belonging to a certain humanitarian endeavor that should enable particular kinds of action (e.g., transnational humanitarianism) and a lack of infrastructure capable of sustaining such a sense.

Keywords: affect, class, Eastern European whiteness, emotion, Global Easts, humanitarianism, Montenegro

Moral sentiments, including empathy, sympathy, and compassion, are a constitutive part of many humanitarian projects. In the Western-liberal tradition of humanitarian action, empathy is a powerful feeling that “generates responsibility to protect or intervene on behalf of the person perceived to be suffering” (Weiss 2015: 280). However, humanitarian projects sometimes incite feelings deemed “negative,” including disappointment or awkwardness. Sianne Ngai (2005) calls these “ugly feelings.” Standing in contrast to powerful and dynamic emotions such as anger or rage, ugly feelings present non-cathartic emotional and affective states that indicate situations in which agency is blocked and suspended. In this article, I use the term ugly feelings to refer to constellations of affect/emotion that arise in humanitarian engagements that end up not fostering aid.

Focusing on disappointment and awkwardness as perceived ugly feelings generated during two humanitarian projects in Montenegro, this article asks what humanitarianism looks like as a political formation from the perspective of the Eastern European semi-periphery. It explores what the emergence of disappointment and awkwardness in humanitarianism in a “Global East” tells us about humanitarianism and its diverging forms more broadly. I suggest that placing an ethnographic focus on affect and emotions sheds light on the largely invisible and awkward position of the “Global Easts” within...
what Miriam Ticktin (2014) calls “transnational humanitarianism” as a political and moral formation. That focus demonstrates how actors from these “Global Easts” can be included as potential providers of aid in the racialized and class-based politics of the humanitarian discourses of the Global North while being simultaneously excluded from actual participation in various global humanitarian projects due to structural constraints. Ugly feelings emerging from transnational humanitarian activity in Montenegro indicate how concerned actors relate to the new position they occupy in global geopolitics after the end of the Cold War. These observed and reported feelings represent a sense of suspended agency and immobility and the impossibility of participating fully in globalized humanitarian policies and procedures. Ugly feelings suggest that the “Global Easts” sit oddly alongside humanitarian traditions grounded in colonial history and structured by postcolonial inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

From a theoretical perspective, the article explores how we can understand the notion of “suspended agency.” Ngai (2005: 22) suggests that ugly feelings are useful for diagnosing situations marked by blocked, thwarted and obstructed agency, which she considers characteristic of late modernity. Although Ngai does not define the notion of suspended agency, she explains that ugly feelings diagnose a sense of powerlessness and index suspensions in works of art that both produce and foreground “a failure of emotional release” (9). Yet, it remains unclear what the seemingly paradoxical notion of an “obstructed” or “suspended agency” means in everyday life from a conceptual and ethnographic perspective. I argue that a sense of suspended agency emerges when an individual is invited to join a certain project but cannot participate for structural reasons. Suspended forms of agency emerge when a sense of belonging to a project enabling particular kinds of actions (e.g., transnational humanitarianism) is accompanied by a lack of infrastructures capable of sustaining this sense. Ugly feelings, as the consequent affective-emotional form of such a constellation, serve to reinforce that constellation.

One example of an ugly feeling this article discusses is the disappointment of young people from impoverished, white, middle-class families in Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, who faced heavy restrictions on volunteering abroad. They felt they rightfully belonged to the moral community of transnational humanitarians, who they perceived as cosmopolitan and morally virtuous actors from the Global North. At the same time, coming from a country that was not only impoverished by the postwar and post-socialist transition but also transformed into a periphery in the post–Cold War geopolitical order, they were structurally unable to act on this sense of belonging. Young people who felt invited to join transnational humanitarian projects based on particular racialized and class-based assumptions experienced disappointment upon realizing they were highly unlikely to ever become transnational humanitarian workers. Various structural limitations on life in a postwar, post-socialist European periphery, including a strict visa regime and economic impoverishment, made it relatively rare or unlikely for residents of Montenegro to volunteer abroad. Accordingly, during seven years of ethnographically and historically studying humanitarianism in Montenegro, a country of 650,000 residents, I did not meet any Montenegrin resident who had engaged in humanitarian work outside Europe. There were different ways that my interlocutors addressed this disappointment. Some of them engaged in reinterpreting humanitarianism as a project that involved crossing social boundaries (rather than geopolitical borders). They joined local humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross and engaged in activities they called “humanitarian” (“humanitarne akcije”), which usually meant helping people in need who lived in their vicinity.

Another approach to acting from within disappointment involved employing sarcasm. The second ethnographic case that this article
describes is the surge in sarcastic memes on social media, a popular response to the humanitarian actions of Crnogorski Telekom (Montenegrin Telecom). A satirical Facebook group called Montenegrins in Nepal went viral, with the media describing it as “one of the most popular Facebook groups” in the post-Yugoslav space (B92 2015). These two examples illustrate how different people in Montenegro responded to the disappointment that I understand as an “ugly feeling” produced by transnational humanitarian actions that illuminates the awkward position of the “Global Easts” in relation to the Global North and the Global South.

This article’s key argument is that disappointment, awkwardness, and other such ugly feelings are a constitutive element of the affective-emotional constellation of humanitarianism when considered from the perspective of a Global East. Ugly feelings indicate a sense of suspended agency, understood as the simultaneous inclusion in and exclusion from the discursive practices that enable action. The key conceptual contribution of the article is the notion that a sense of suspended agency emerges when one is interpellated to participate in a certain project but cannot actually do so for structural reasons. The article is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Podgorica, Montenegro, between 2015 and 2018. That research focused on humanitarianism in Montenegro before and after the fall of socialism. I ethnographically followed various settings my interlocutors described as “humanitarian.” This included long-term participant observation at a refugee camp in Podgorica and archival research into the work of the Yugoslav Red Cross in the 1970s and 1980s. During my fieldwork, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with various people engaged in humanitarian practices, including eight Red Cross volunteers aged 17 to 22. Thus, while the argument I develop in this article is informed by my broader research, the empirical material derives from a sustained, long-term collaboration and conversation with various people engaged in humanitarian activities, especially young volunteers.

What is “suspended agency”?

According to Ngai’s framework, one of the main features of what she calls “ugly feelings” is their diagnostic potential to indicate suspended forms of agency. Unlike anger, rage, and other negative feelings that incite the unrestricted action of an unambiguous subject, Ngai uses “ugly feelings” to refer to ignoble, flat, and numbing affective-emotional states that ambivalently blur boundaries between the subject and the object. The “boundary confusions built into the structure of these feelings” (2005: 22) is their defining feature:

My argument is that a systematic problematization of the distinction between subjective and objective enunciation lies at the heart of the Bartlebyan feelings in this book—minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed, and thus more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities, than the passions in the philosophical canon. (20)

Ngai’s choice of “feeling” (rather than “affect” or “emotion”) also conveys profound uncertainty over its subjective or objective status. Straddling the boundaries between “inside/outside, self/world, or psyche/body” (21), ugly feelings challenge the distinction between an emotion and an affect. If emotion requires a clear and unambiguous subject and features a narrative structure and affect refers to a “hidden force emanating from fruitful darkness” (Martin 2013: S150), ugly feelings exist somewhere on a continuum between the two. In Ngai’s (2005: 27) reading, the distinction between affect and emotion is “a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind.” Ngai differentiates eight modalities of ugly feelings: anxiety, animatedness, disgust, irritation, envy, paranoia, stuplimity, and tone. Although each modality operates in a different manner, they are linked by their mutual expression of a sense of thwarted, suspended ability to act.
However, Ngai’s focus on ugly feelings as an aesthetic form of cultural production in the West means that it is not immediately clear how to understand the ambivalence between their “subjective” and “objective” dimensions from an ethnographic perspective. As a literary and cultural critic, Ngai is interested not in the everyday lived experiences of ugly feelings but in studying the aesthetics of subdued emotions in literature. She develops the vocabulary of ugly feelings—as socially and materially shaped elements of particular, historically recognizable “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977)—to analyze the literary worlds of late Western modernity.

Nonetheless, the argument that ugly feelings are indicative of suspended agency is useful for an ethnographically informed analysis focused on ambivalences and complexities surrounding the possibility of acting within existing socio-political and economic orders. This is especially valid in a Southeast European country that found itself ambivalently positioned after the fall of socialism as both a target of international humanitarian interventions (see Bešić and Spasojević 2018; cf. Graan 2016) and a contributor and a participant in global humanitarian projects that grant it equal status as large Western European donor countries in some sense. As we will see, these conditions have indeed produced a sense of suspended agency among my Montenegrin interlocutors with respect to transnational humanitarianism. I suggest that “suspended agency” can be understood as a form of agency that emerges when an individual is interpellated (in an Althusserian sense) to join a certain project, but there are structural constraints on actually participating. Thinking about the notion of “suspended agency” from an ethnographic perspective indicates that the politics of representation and the politics of infrastructure do not always cohere. Here, I draw from Nancy Fraser’s (1997) distinction between cultural recognition and economic redistribution. In her discussion of the grammar of social justice, Fraser distinguishes patterns of recognition of cultural difference articulated on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on from the injustices caused by certain patterns of economic redistribution. Adopting that analytical framework, I suggest that suspended forms of agency become visible if we differentiate the politics of representation from the politics of infrastructure. By “politics of representation,” I refer to the particular ways of producing meaning regarding race, nationality, sex, gender, citizenship, class, or age. Meanwhile, I use “politics of infrastructure” to describe particular ways of organizing the redistribution and circulation of goods, knowledge, meaning (representation), people, and power (Lockrem and Lugo 2023).

This distinction provides clarity on the ambivalent position of Montenegrins within transnational humanitarianism. My interlocutors, who ambivalently occupied the position of white, middle-class Europeans, felt included as providers of aid in the dominant forms of representation of transnational humanitarianism. However, as residents of an impoverished global semi-periphery striving to “catch up” with the West, they were excluded from the infrastructures that enable transnational humanitarian actions. Later sections discuss the complexities and ambivalences of their racialized and class positionality. Although affects and emotions are co-constituted by the politics of representation and those of infrastructure, their workings are not necessarily always synchronized, as in the case of the two humanitarian actions in Montenegro that this article documents. Exploring ugly feelings in transnational humanitarian actions in Montenegro, I suggest that, from an ethnographic perspective, suspended agency describes situations involving a misalignment between the politics of representation and the politics of infrastructure, producing what my interlocutors articulated as disappointment and what I will call, following Ngai, an “ugly feeling.” In my reading, disappointment presents an additional modality of ugly feelings that emerges from a contradiction between being invited to join a certain project and being at the same time structurally prevented from participating (cf. Greenberg and Muir 2022).
Disappointment and awkwardness as ugly feelings

Humanitarian affect and the Global Easts

While there is nothing specifically Eastern European about the misalignment between the politics of representation and infrastructure, this misalignment seems to occur with relative frequency in the humanitarian worlds of the region, likely due to the semi-peripheral position it occupies in both the global capitalist economy and dominant humanitarian representations. In Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) world systems theory, “semi-periphery” is ambivalently positioned between the core and the peripheral countries, mediating the link between them. The term semi-periphery has been rendered useful in the sociology and anthropology of knowledge, too. In Marina Blagojević’s (2009) theoretical framework, “semi-periphery” makes visible the ambivalent position of Eastern Europe in the production of knowledge about global geopolitical and economic processes.

Here, I use “Global Easts” in a similar manner: to point at a blind spot in the anthropological studies of humanitarianism rather than to refer to a region that possesses some traits that would make it clearly distinguishable from other global regions (cf. Parvulescu 2019). This article’s analyses reflect the experiences of people from a former Yugoslav country and are unlikely to apply directly to other Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, as a notion in sociology and the anthropology of knowledge, the “Global Easts” usefully makes visible experiences and forms of affect that are structurally produced by global geopolitical and economic processes but remain invisible in the discourse of the Global North versus the Global South, including within anthropological and historical studies of humanitarianism.

A case in point is Lilie Chouliaraki’s (2013: 2–3) analysis of neoliberal shifts in solidarity, which paints the world as divided between the West and the Global South:

Even though the West cannot be regarded as [a] homogeneous sphere of safety, just as the Global South cannot equally be seen as one single sphere of vulnerability, my use of these terms preserves nonetheless a historical and political distinction that is crucial to my story: the global division of power that, in unequally distributing resources along the West-South axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter.

Chouliaraki’s choice of terms vividly illustrates that the Global Easts are omitted from the story about global solidarities as it is usually told. Consequently, by Global Easts, I understand not simply Eastern Europe as a geographic region, but a bundle of epistemic spaces that have fallen “between the cracks” of the distinctions between the Global North and the Global South (Blagojević 2009; Kušić 2021; see also Müller 2020). To capture this fragmentary character, I follow Jie-Hyun Lim’s (2022: 20) use of the plural form—Global Easts rather than the Global East. As Lim writes, “‘East’ in Global Easts is a neither geographically nor historically fixed entity in Oriental history, or East Asia, or Eastern Europe. The ‘Global East’ is a ‘problem space’ where the East remains a problem.” Global Easts occupy an awkward position here because they are premised on the historical experience of alternative forms of modernity, such as the socialist modernities developed in Eastern Europe during the Cold War (Calic et al. 2011; Erdei 2017). As a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, socialist Yugoslavia experimented with a Non-Aligned reinterpretation of modernity (Miskovic et al. 2014). Socialist and nonaligned forms of modernity presented both a reiteration of and an alternative to the Euro-American nexus of modernity/coloniality. This double status of socialist and nonaligned forms of modernity as both challenging to and reproductive of the global formations of power precludes clearly contextualizing the historical or contemporary experiences of the Global Easts within the Global North (or the Global South).

The ambivalent position of the Global Easts is also visible in the contemporary racial poli-
tics in Europe. For Anca Parvulescu (2015), processes of racialization in Europe must be approached via the perspective of “racial triangulation,” which “is constituted by black Europeans, white Europeans, and Eastern Europeans.” Here, Eastern Europeans are ambivalently positioned as both “victims and agents of racism” (Parvulescu 2019: 472; see also Baker 2018). My distinction between the politics of representation and the politics of infrastructure is also helpful for understanding this ambivalence. While Eastern European whiteness includes clear benefits, it is often coupled with various exclusions and exploitations in dominant forms of the circulation of goods, knowledge, people, meaning, and power (see, e.g., Uhde and Ezzeddine 2020). Similar ambivalences shape humanitarian worlds in the region. The social life of humanitarianism under state socialism has only recently received research attention (Capotescu 2018, 2021; Hachmeister 2019), with emerging scholarship suggesting that “the realities of the humanitarian[ism] were quite different from Western Europe” (Denéchère 2014: 7; cf. Frankl 2014). The claim that the “structural interrelation between [the colonial] metropole and periphery [i]s a constitutive element of humanitarianism itself” (Reid-Henry 2013: 754) must be adjusted in discussions of humanitarianism from an Eastern European perspective. Formations of humanitarian affect, care, and agency in post-socialist worlds are awkwardly positioned with respect to the West-South axis: they are both firmly related to the global divisions of power and labor and often omitted from their theorizations (but see Drazkiewicz 2020).

Ugly feelings are not specific to humanitarianism in Southeast Europe—they can appear in any place where the misalignment between the politics of representation and infrastructure simultaneously invite and prevent people from participating in transnational forms of help. A case in point is what Marie Sandberg and Dorte Andersen (2020) call “volunteer melancholy,” a form of suspended agency that was shaped by both the vision of a Europe-wide civil society and the lack of infrastructure capable of delivering this transnational civic space after 2015, the point at which the sense of a “refugee crisis” had become less pronounced. Still, while a growing body of literature explores the complex motivations of international volunteers from both the working and middle classes (e.g., Judge 2017; McLennan 2014; Prince and Brown 2016; Simpson 2004), as well as the perspectives of host communities toward these volunteers (Muganda et al. 2013; Sullivan 2016), I have not encountered studies discussing the perspective of individuals who want to but cannot participate in existing international networks of help and exchange due to structural factors.

My argument that sarcasm and disappointment are crucial for thinking transnational humanitarianism from the perspective of the Global Easts builds on the invitation of various authors to consider affect in post-socialist settings beyond nostalgia. Nostalgia has been written about as a “typical” post-socialist affect that illuminates the complicated relations people have toward their socialist past and that sometimes serves to criticize failures of the post-socialist present (Berdahl 1999). However, post-socialist conditions have generated other kinds of affect, including joy (Gilbert 2019), hope, anger, fear (Svašek 2006), desire for revenge (Duijzings 2020), humiliation (Jansen 2009), and a sense of mourning for a lost modernity (Petrović 2014). We can recognize disappointment and awkwardness—and the suspended agency they reflect—as typical humanitarian feelings in post-socialism by considering post-socialist countries in relation to other world regions. A transnational perspective illuminates how the Global Easts are simultaneously inscribed into the dominant regimes of representation in the Global North and excluded from various infrastructures of circulation that sustain everyday life in the Global North. The resulting configuration produces a sense of suspended agency that is expressed in the disappointment and sarcasm that the following sections illustrate ethnographically.
Middle-class disappointment: An inability to volunteer abroad

In 2015, a friend from Podgorica asked me to come and talk to her 16-year-old daughter, Ana. Ana was a good student at a local gymnasium who participated in the local theater group and ended up volunteering for a local humanitarian organization after the episode described here. In that moment, Ana was deeply disappointed because she could not go to Lesotho as a volunteer to help build a school. She learned about this opportunity from The Wall, a local NGO that offered young people from Montenegro the chance to apply to volunteer at camps around the world. Browsing the dozens of camps listed in the publication she received from this NGO, Ana noticed the one in Lesotho and began envisioning herself there. Camp volunteers were supposed to stay two to four weeks, during which they would help build a primary school. Accommodation (sleeping bags in a communal area) and meals were offered by the organizers, but volunteers were supposed to pay for their travel and visa expenses.

Ana was initially thrilled. It was simultaneously an adventure, an opportunity to help, and a nice way to spend the summer break. However, once she started researching how she could get to Lesotho, disappointment set in. A return flight cost 1,800 euros, twice her parents’ monthly salaries combined. Furthermore, because there was no diplomatic relationship between Montenegro and Lesotho, she would probably have had to travel to another country to apply for a Lesotho visa, which would cost an additional 300 to 400 euros. It made no sense for her to work part-time when full-time workers in Montenegro earned at that moment an average of 250 to 300 euros per month. Even if her parents, employed in Montenegrin academia, could have raised the money for this humanitarian trip somehow, spending so much just for an opportunity to volunteer made no sense. It even risked Ana being perceived as a “spoiled child” (razmaženo dijete), which she emphatically rejected being. She just wanted to help, she said. It was clear to all three of us that this volunteering opportunity was not for her; the political economy of this “humanitarian recipe” (Haskell 1985) had been designed for other young persons.

In my interviews with young Red Cross volunteers in the city, as well as in conversations I had with my younger sister and her close friends, I heard many similar complaints. These conversations enabled me to become intimately familiar with the broad sense of disappointment among the Montenegrin youth about not being able to travel across the world, particularly as volunteers and humanitarians. These young people all understood themselves to want a “normal life.” In post-socialism, this usually refers to a particular image of life in the “West” or life under Yugoslav socialism. For example, the image of a “normal life” in post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina includes the predictability and stability of everyday small-scale projects such as taking a bus or finding a doctor, a job, or a place to live (Jansen 2015). Although this kind of a “normal life” has become inaccessible for an increasing number of people globally—including in the West—over the last several decades, it remains a strong interpretive marker of a “good life” in the former Yugoslav region. For Montenegrin youth, the repertoire of a “normal life” also included travel abroad.

Given Ana’s mother’s knowledge of both my research theme and my experiences as a Montenegrin citizen living abroad, she hoped that I would be able to convince her daughter that there would be other opportunities to travel/help in the future. While we talked, sitting on her mother’s sofa, Ana’s disposition shifted between resigned acceptance and teenage complaints that she would never travel anywhere (nikad neću nigdje putovati!) or lead an interesting life (niti voditi zanimljiv život!). Although she understood the situation, she felt it to be unjust. At the end of our conversation, I asked Ana if she could imagine choosing another camp, adding that I personally knew people from Montenegro who had attended a volunteer camp in Romania. Ana explained that although
it was a nice idea, it was not what she wanted. As another post-socialist Eastern European country, Romania was not sufficiently global from her perspective; it was “too similar to us” (*suviše slično nama*).

I suggest that Ana’s disappointment was simultaneously shaped by two things: first, globally circulated images of humanitarian work as a means of transforming oneself into a moral person, and second, Ana’s racialized and class positions. Her disappointment reflects the globally present vision of humanitarian engagement as a moral virtue. This reflects not only global middle-class aspirations: as Erica Bornstein (2012: 17) suggests, her students in the US who were “neither worldly nor privileged” would make online donations to “strangers halfway around the planet” or march into her “office each semester and inquire how they can volunteer and eventually work for an NGO overseas,” in this way articulating a claim to moral personhood and global citizenship. Liisa Malkki’s (2015) Finnish humanitarian interlocutors similarly expressed the need to be a part of something greater than oneself by temporarily escaping one’s national belonging and mundane workaday self by traveling abroad to a humanitarian post. All of this was present in Ana’s passionate explanations of why she wanted to go to Lesotho. Growing up in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and hearing about problems caused by ethnic nationalism her whole life, I suggest Ana wanted to carve herself into a moral person who belonged to the world. In my reading, she felt that her peripheral location denied her the possibility of transforming herself into a “global citizen” by volunteering on another continent.

However, in my reading, Ana’s disappointment was also shaped by her racialized and class positions. Ana’s choice of a volunteer camp in Lesotho—and refusal of a camp in Romania as “too similar to us”—reiterated postcolonial racialized visions of help and the related white savior complex, understood as the “symbolic violence of racialized inequality” (Wearing et al. 2018: 501). Her choice of a camp in Africa indicated a desire to become a cosmopolitan who actively works on improving the world; at the same time, it “perpetuate[d] images of the Third World as sites of ‘otherness’ and need” (Prince and Brown 2016: 22). Ana occupied an ambivalent position within this racialized vision of international volunteering. As a young, white European, she felt invited to join it; however, as a citizen of an impoverished Southeast European country who still needed a visa to travel almost anywhere, she was simultaneously excluded from it.

Ana’s desire to travel to Lesotho “to help” and the consequent sense of disappointment reflected her vision of a “normal life,” which implied a certain middle-class stance. Coming from a highly educated family with stable and relatively high salaries for the Montenegrin context, Ana felt invited to reiterate what she saw as the practices of middle-class cosmopolitans from rich Western countries. Humanitarian volunteering was one such practice, ambivalently positioned between a desire for global engagement and a middle-class vision of travel abroad as a way to meet and connect with others (Judge 2017). Other young Red Cross volunteers I talked to also expressed resigned disappointment concerning their inability to travel abroad to help others. During my fieldwork, The Wall was the only NGO in Podgorica that specialized in organizing and promoting volunteering. However, it did not provide any kind of financial support, aid, scholarships, or stipends, instead focusing on circulating information about volunteering possibilities among Montenegrin citizens. Because there are no statistical data on the patterns of volunteering abroad of Montenegrin citizens, I asked the director of The Wall about the organization’s experiences. He told me that, on average, 20 to 30 Montenegrin citizens per year went abroad to volunteer camps, mostly to those organized in nearby countries. In his view, there were several reasons for this preference: cheaper travel costs, appeal of tourism (e.g., in neighboring Italy) and parental bans on traveling to certain places. Consequently, those few Montenegrins who volunteered abroad usually did so in a nearby country.
Various young people in Montenegro saw humanitarianism as something that could potentially allow them to become “cosmopolitan.” However, when cosmopolitan ideals are applied in the former Yugoslav region, they must take a different form:

Dream of an “arrival out of nowhere” is a dream of “Western modernity” which forms the basis for cosmopolitan ideals, but when we apply these ideals in a different context (in a different locality), something about cosmopolitanism is undoubtedly changed. (Simić 2014: 97)

Thus, one thing that clearly distinguishes cosmopolitanism from a middle-class Montenegrin perspective is the need to divorce it from traveling: an aspiration to belong to the world can be pursued predominantly by being firmly rooted in a local context (and often unable to leave it). A good example of this “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Tarrow 2005) can be found among volunteer peace corps and anti-war activists in former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They worked on locally specific issues and drew on their domestic resources to participate in international activist networks, contributing to the creation of a transnational political space (Janković 2012: 233). A similar strategy was employed by middle-class young people in Serbia who saw themselves as cosmopolitans, although their ability to travel was severely restricted by the strict visa regimes imposed by most countries on people with FRY/Serbian passports between the early 1990s and 2009 (Simić 2014). Instead, they claimed a cosmopolitan status based on their musical choices, consumer practices, and some limited tourist travel.

In the case of Ana and the Red Cross volunteers I talked to, the ideas of “humanity” and “humanitarian help” enabled them to interpret their activities as universal and, therefore, global. Although disappointment about being unable to travel abroad to volunteer persisted, young people found other ways to act around it. A few weeks after our conversation, I learned that Ana had decided not to go to a volunteer camp after all. Instead, she joined the local Red Cross. She had not given up her goal of crafting herself into a morally virtuous and cosmopolitan person, instead reimagining her path according to what was available by, for example, participating in humanitarian activities in her local community. If her semi-peripheral location denied Ana the possibility of transforming herself into a “global citizen” by volunteering on another continent, providing humanitarian aid through the Red Cross enabled her to claim belonging to the universalist framework of “humanity.” Ana and my other Red Cross interlocutors saw their activities as “humanitarian” because they were voluntary, informal and directed at people in need simply because they were “human,” presumably regardless of social markers, whether, for example, ethno-national, religious, or age-based. Like Bosnia and Herzegovina, in post-socialist Montenegro, humanitarianism has been redefined as a project that involves crossing social and class boundaries, with a post-Yugoslav perspective imagining humanity (ljudskost) as an apolitical core surrounded by layers of sociopolitical identity. Behaving in a humanitarian manner (humanitarno) means that a person can “go beyond the constraints of particular sociopolitical identities and to treat people of other nationalities, religions, classes, age groups, genders and so forth with basic human decency” (Brković 2016: 102). In Montenegro, this meant that the Red Cross workers and volunteers understood humanitarianism as providing food, clothes, and company to the displaced Roma who lived without a residence or a citizenship in the country, as well as to the elderly and impoverished citizens of Montenegro.

In interpreting these observations, the whiteness and middle-classness of my young interlocutors must be understood as situated in a specific way within the racialized and class constellations of Southeast Europe. Their disappointment can be understood as an ugly feeling that individuals experience on becoming aware of the absence of the infrastructures that they hoped or imagined would support their vision
of a good life. Disappointment is indicative of a sense of suspended agency because it illuminates an ambivalent relationship between the inclusion and exclusion from transnational networks of helpers that shapes the position of people in the Southeast European semi-periphery. This feeling reflects the position of a person invited to participate in a transnational network of helpers who cannot participate due to structural obstacles such as impoverishment or border regimes.

The sense of awkwardness and a sarcastic response to a humanitarian action

In May 2015, the Deutsche Telekom subsidiary Crnogorski Telekom published a post on its social network channels, stating that:

Crnogorski Telekom joined the humanitarian action of the members of the Deutsche Telekom group to provide aid to the population of Nepal, which was recently hit by a catastrophic earthquake. Crnogorski Telekom will not charge for landline calls or for SMSs or mobile calls (postpaid and prepaid) from Montenegro to Nepal or for roaming calls from Nepal made by users who are perhaps helping in the field. (CT 2015)

Advertised in Montenegro as a “humanitarian action” (humanitarna akcija), this initiative had been organized simultaneously in seven countries, including Germany, the United States, and the Netherlands. In Montenegro, it provoked not an increase in calls to Nepal (which had been nonexistent) but a surge in sarcastic memes and cartoons on social media. The post went viral. Although there were no Montenegrins in Nepal, whether as ex-pats or aid workers, the Facebook group Montenegrins in Nepal (Crnogorci u Nepalu) was soon created. Its description stated: “Inspired by Telekom’s generous action, we have decided to create a page to demonstrate to the wider public how many of our citizens are in Nepal.” The group immediately attracted over eight thousand subscribers, who posted hundreds of jokes within a few days.

The invitation from Crnogorski Telekom for Montenegrin citizens to join the humanitarian efforts in Nepal ignored the lack of any infrastructure that would support actual contact between Montenegro and Nepal, such as embassies or flights, which would have created the need for free calls and messages between the two countries. Thus, the absence of any experiential, everyday connection between Montenegro and Nepal enabled the humorous effect of establishing an imaginary social link between the two countries. For instance, one picture published in the Montenegrins in Nepal Facebook group showed a Nepali man asking the well-intentioned but persistent Montenegrin phone callers to let him sleep. In doing so, he used archaic Montenegrin language forms:

Ne zovite do sutra kumimo ve kapicom, e bismo prilegli malo. Svako dobro! [We beg you not to call until tomorrow, because we would like to get some sleep. Thank you!] (Vijesti 2015)

This joke sarcastically suggests that the Montenegrins keep calling the Nepalese because they are so eager to help, an implied critique of the Crnogorski Telekom’s messaging. Notably, the earthquake was very rarely mentioned in the jokes.

A YouTube video soon followed, called “The hymn of the Kingdom of Nepal, sung by a mixed choir of Montenegrin emigrants” (AstraWeb 2015). The video tells an alternative history in which Montenegrins emigrated to Nepal en masse, and they can now call home for free with the help of Crnogorski Telekom. Continuing the joke, a private taxi company publicly promised that it would drive to Nepal all the Montenegrins with family there free of charge. Needless to say, they never got an opportunity to realize this “humanitarian initiative.”

When I started my fieldwork with the Montenegrin Red Cross in Podgorica, I discussed
Crnogorski Telekom’s humanitarian action with friends and family who lived in the city and the Red Cross volunteers I interviewed. My interlocutors almost unanimously said they felt “awkward” (čudno) and “silly” (smiješno) when they were invited to make calls to Nepal, uncertain why they would call anyone there. I understood this “awkwardness” to represent an ugly feeling indicative of a sense of suspended agency. That sense was captured by a post that used rhyming language to express the idea that “everybody would call Nepal if they had anyone there [svi bi Nepal zvali kada bi tamo nekog i imali],” articulating bafflement over the invitation to participate in a transnational “humanitarian initiative” that ignored the specificities of the local Montenegrin context, where people had no relations to the victims. Preexisting social relations between Nepal and Montenegro were necessary for the success of this particular humanitarian action, and it is difficult to understand why anyone would have called Nepal if they had no preexisting relationship with the country or how exactly this humanitarian initiative was intended to help the people there.

Nepal does exist in the everyday geopolitics of my interlocutors as a distant Asian counterpart to Montenegro: a small, mountainous country with a strong experience of socialism. However, there is practically no tangible materialization of this relationship in everyday Montenegrin life. For example, there are no embassies, plane flights, or any sort of cultural, economic, or political exchange. As such, all my interlocutors saw this particular humanitarian action as disingenuous. For instance, according to one young Red Cross volunteer:

Free calls to Nepal? For me, that was one of the biggest shenanigans that happened here—and it is good that it was interpreted as shenanigans, because really . . . why would we call anyone in Nepal? It would be different if it was Chicago—there are a lot of Serbs there, a lot of our people. But in Nepal . . .

This comment succinctly demonstrates how my interlocutors understood Crnogorski Telekom’s action: as a disingenuous PR stunt. Most people I talked to described it as a “pure marketing move,” “hypocritical,” “absurd,” and “unsuitable for our environment.” This humanitarian action could be described as “shenanigans” because it was unsuitable for this peripheral Southeast European country. For my interlocutors, there was nothing humanitarian about it.

For Miloš, a Red Cross volunteer in his twenties, had Crnogorski Telekom really wanted to help Nepal, it would have registered a donation hotline. This—not waiving charges for phone calls and messages—was the most common fundraising model employed by humanitarne akcije in Montenegro. Here, Miloš recognized the importance of a humanitarian recipe, or a “specific sequence of steps that we know we can take to alter the ordinary course of events” (Haskell 1985: 358), with a donation hotline (humanitarni broj) among the most common humanitarian recipes in former Yugoslav countries. This approach represents a convenient way to raise money in countries where credit cards are extremely rare but people typically use two mobile phones. Every text message sent to this number costs approximately one euro, phone companies forego profit from the hotlines, and the messages are tax-free. Furthermore, Miloš suggested that Crnogorski Telekom’s action followed a humanitarian model designed for (and which might have made sense in) wealthy Western European countries with Nepalese immigration. That model was established by Deutsche Telekom in Germany and copied by T-Mobile US, T-Mobile Netherlands, T-Mobile Austria, T-Mobile Czech Republic, Telekom Romania, and T-Mobile Albania (DT 2016). Notably, Nepalese embassies in Berlin, Vienna, and Amsterdam are responsible for Montenegro, Albania, Romania, and the Czech Republic, meaning that this humanitarian action linked the West with the Global South, including the Global Easts in this conversation in a way that precluded actual participation. In this humanitarian action, Crnogorski Telekom
used a “humanitarian recipe” unsuited to life in Montenegro, consequently provoking a sense of suspended agency and sarcasm.

For many of my interlocutors, the sarcasm in the media served a purpose, reminding Crnogorski Telekom of the specificities of the local context in which it operated. In Miloš’s view, this popular response was propelled by:

"a desire to return things to the level where they belong, through this ridicule. Telekom acted as if it were a posh (prefinjen) organization and action, and [the people who laughed] put it back in its place through ridicule."

The word prefinjen (posh) carries connotations of elegance, subtlety, upper-classness, wealth, and worldliness. By using it, Miloš indicated that this major company had ignored the local context, failing to adapt its advertisements to the specificities of Montenegro. The Deutsche Telekom group, and especially Crnogorski Telekom, neglected the need for a preexisting infrastructural connection to Nepal for this humanitarian action to make sense. Such a connection simply did not exist in the case of Montenegro.

Ngai (2005: 10) suggests that there is a special relationship between ugly feelings and irony, which she defines as “a rhetorical attitude with a decidedly affective dimension, if not a ‘feeling’ per se.” This special relationship concerns the fact that ugly feelings are conducive to “producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions, or even the moral emotions associated with sentimental literature, do not.” Although a surge of sarcastic memes closely relates to irony, there are some important differences to consider.

According to Chouliaraki, the neoliberal iteration of capitalism is exemplified in the figure of an ironic spectator who knows they cannot change the world but who finds solace in attempting to make themselves feel good about their role in it. Neoliberal capitalism has brought about a move from an ethics of pity to an ethics of irony, producing “a solidarity without moral certainties but with a continuing commitment to act on human vulnerability” (2013: 14). The solidarity of the ironic spectator “explicitly situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action, thereby rendering solidarity a contingent ethics that no longer aspires to a reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability” (4; see also Sharma 2017).

Thinking about humanitarianism from the perspective of the Global Easts indicates that the “ironic spectator” is the figure of neoliberal capitalist solidarity in the West (see also Vine 2020). In the Global Easts, the neoliberal capitalist version of solidarity can perhaps be better understood through the figure of a sarcastic meme maker and user. This figure sarcastically reflects on their position as an actor both invited to join a transnational humanitarian action and structurally prevented from doing so. Young people in Montenegro were not so much ironic spectators focused on their own feelings but rather sarcastic meme makers and users. Their “awkward” Global East positionality within transnational humanitarian discourses and practices means that their affective configurations were neither a form of resistance against the center nor its simple reproduction. This ambivalent inclusion in the processes and discourses of the Global North—and exclusion from active participation in them—characterizes life and the sense of suspended agency in the Global Easts. My Montenegrin interlocutors were invited to participate in transnational humanitarianism as (white) donors but could not because of structural obstacles. That is, this sarcasm represented an ugly feeling reflecting a sense of suspended agency rather than a critique of the individualized morality of “feel-good activism.”

**Provincial(izing) humanitarianism?**

In this article, I have argued that disappointment and awkwardness are constitutive, if often hidden, components of the global affective-emotional assemblage of humanitarianism from the
perspective of the Global Easts. These ugly feelings indicate a sense of suspended agency, which I have defined as the phenomenon of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the discursive practices that enable action. If some Montenegrins were invited to join transnational humanitarian projects because of the place they occupy as white Europeans in the dominant politics of representation, the lack of appropriate infrastructure prevented them from doing so. This scenario produced disappointment and sarcasm, articulating a profound ambivalence about the geopolitical position of Montenegrins as people who do not clearly belong to either the Global North or the Global South. Hegemonically (auto)perceived as not-quite-Europeans, Montenegrins are ambivalently positioned in transnational humanitarian discursive practices, a position that more generally reflects the complexities of the Global Easts and illuminates how humanitarianism represents a fragmented project with multiple histories.

One obvious reaction to this article might be “So what?” Considering cases of humanitarianism as a response to the death, suffering, and hurt inflicted by formations of contemporary racial capitalism (Besteman 2019; Dunn 2018; Fassin 2012), it might not be clear why we should discuss the emergence of ugly feelings among potential humanitarian donors in the Global Easts. In my view, we should do so because the invisibility of the Global Easts speaks about how transnational humanitarianism enables action, which has implications that extend beyond Eastern Europe. Furthermore, making the Global Easts visible in transnational humanitarianism draws attention to the implicit differentiations and invisible forms of inclusion and exclusion that undergird the notion of humanity itself and claims to act on its behalf.

Thinking about humanitarianism from the perspective of the Global Easts complicates the distinction between, on the one hand, transnational humanitarianism as a cosmopolitan formation and, on the other, local forms of help as provincial and partial. Ethnographic studies of humanitarianism in Eastern Europe illustrate that, for individuals living in a peripheral state, helping people in their vicinity can also be performed in the name of humanity, inspired by frameworks claiming universal applicability (Lučić Krstanović 2013). However, although the sense of suspended agency felt by people in Podgorica is shaped by their position within transnational humanitarianism, it does not convey the whole story of humanitarianism as experienced by my interlocutors in Podgorica. As argued in the introduction to this theme section, multiple local, grassroots forms of helping emerge not only under conditions of emergency and existential needs but also under conditions “beyond crisis,” as in contexts characterized by state absences. In Montenegro, this is grounded in the emic concept of humanness, what I have elsewhere called vernacular humanitarianism (Brković 2016, 2023). If ugly feelings express a sense of suspended agency, vernacular humanitarianism articulates an alternative form of humanitarian agency that includes acting in a humanitarian manner without traveling abroad and helping people in need in one’s vicinity rather than responding to a crisis on the other side of the world.

What was humanitarian about these local forms of help? Several things spring to mind, most obviously a determination to ignore identity boundaries and help neighbors as fellow humans in need. My young Red Cross volunteer interlocutors in Podgorica saw themselves as “proper” humanitarians because they provided help to their neighbors regardless of their ethno-national or religious status or any other form of belonging. They helped “a fellow human” (pomažemo čovjeku), as they said (cf. Kolind 2008). In a state that emerged out of a series of ethno-national wars and violent conflicts, such a claim carried special meaning. This local, vernacular reinterpretation of humanitarianism has produced emotional-affective formations that differ from transnational humanitarianism and illustrate how people and places outside the West try to claim universality by helping others. Nonetheless, although these vernacular recipes for helping have often provided much-needed
support, they have equally often inflicted specific forms of hurt that deserve further critical ethnographic attention.

Čarna Brković is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at the University of Mainz. Her research themes include political imagination; humanitarianism; morality and ethics; gender and sexuality; social change; and histories of ethnology and anthropology. She graduated from the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology at the University of Belgrade and obtained her doctoral degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. She is author of Managing ambiguity: How clientelism, citizenship, and power shape personhood in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017) and coeditor of Negotiating social relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Semiperipheral entanglements (2016). Email: brkovicc@uni-mainz.de | ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4569-6342

Notes

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

1. After the fall of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, residents of Montenegro became citizens of a country called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which included Serbia and Montenegro. Montenegro became an independent country in 2006, following a referendum. Between the early 1990s and 2009, residents of Montenegro could travel visa-free to only 25 countries in the world.

2. Economic impoverishment was caused by various factors, including wars that the Government of Montenegro led in the neighboring former Yugoslav republics in the early 1990s, strict economic sanctions imposed on Serbia and Montenegro by the US, the EU and the UN throughout the 1990s, the restructuring of welfare programs and services, and the (often irregular) post-socialist privatization (Bieber 2003; Seldenieks 2013).

3. Animatedness and stuplimity are terms Ngai coined to capture a particular racialized affect and a paradoxical synthesis of shock and boredom.

4. About 1,070,000 mobile phones are in use in Montenegro, which has approximately 622,000 residents. Source: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/montenegro/#communications

References


Sedlenieks, Klavs. 2013. “‘And burn today whom yesterday they fed’: Citizens and state in Montenegro.” PhD diss., Tallinn University.


